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## Media and Human Rights: An Analysis of Press Coverage of Rape Victims in Pakistan, 2025–2026

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### ABSTRACT

*This article analyses how the Pakistani press covered rape and other forms of sexual violence between January 2025 and August 2026, and asks what that coverage does to the human rights of survivors. Drawing on framing theory and on a human-rights reading of dignity, privacy and equality, it triangulates three kinds of real-time evidence: official and NGO incidence data for 2024–2026; the statutory and self-regulatory rules that already bind Pakistani journalists; and published content analyses, editorials and investigative reports in English- and Urdu-language media. The empirical picture is grim and not invented. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recorded 6,624 registered rapes in 2023, one every 45 minutes. Police data compiled by the Sustainable Social Development Organization show 5,339 rapes in 2024, 4,641 of them in Punjab, with conviction rates below 2 per cent. HRCP's 2025 annual report, launched in May 2026, found a 25 per cent rise in reported gender-based violence over eleven months, including 3,815 rapes. Sahil's newspaper-based Cruel Numbers counted 3,630 child-abuse cases in 2025, an 8 per cent year-on-year increase. Pakistan ranked last of 148 economies in the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Index. Against that backdrop, the press remains both a human-rights actor and a human-rights risk. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021, PEMRA's code of conduct and the Press Council's ethical code all forbid identification of survivors, yet empirical studies of Pakistani electronic and print media document systematic naming, family identification, use of the word "alleged," and victim-blaming frames. The 2025–2026 record shows a dual pattern: constructive, rights-based reporting around Anti-Rape Crisis Cells and child-protection data on the one hand, and sensational, episodic, honor-coded coverage amplified by social media and chilled by PECA and defamation law on the other. The article argues that survivor-centred journalism is not a courtesy. It is a justiciable human-rights duty, and the gap between Pakistan's rules and its newsrooms is itself a rights violation.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan; Rape, Press Ethics, Human Rights; Framing, PEMRA; Anti-Rape Act 2021, Sahil, HRCP, Survivor-Centred Journalism

### 1. Introduction

Sexual violence is among the most serious violations of bodily integrity recognized in international human-rights law. When it is committed, the state's duties to prevent, investigate, prosecute and remedy are triggered under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations, 1979), under customary due-diligence standards, and under Pakistan's own constitutional guarantees of dignity, equality and freedom of expression (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). The press is not a bystander to those duties. News organisation decide which assaults become public facts, which remain private tragedies, and which survivors are made to relive the crime in print, on crawl-tickers and in comment threads. As Tuchman observed, news is a constructed reality, not a mirror (Tuchman, 1978). As Entman later specified, framing selects some aspects of a

perceived reality and makes them more salient, so as to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). In Pakistan that constructive power is exercised in a society that the World Economic Forum placed last among 148 countries on gender parity in 2025, with an overall score of 56.7 per cent down from 57 per cent the year before, and with women's ministerial representation falling to zero (World Economic Forum, 2025; Dawn, 2025). Violence against women and girls, including rape, murder, acid attacks, domestic violence and child marriage, remains "a serious problem throughout Pakistan," and Human Rights Watch concluded that the government has not taken meaningful steps in response (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Amnesty International's Pakistan chapter for 2025 recorded that violence against women "continued unabated," with Sahil documenting a 25 per cent rise in reported cases in the first eleven months of the year (Amnesty International, 2026).

The research problem of this article is therefore precise. How did Pakistani press coverage of rape survivors in 2025–2026 relate to those survivors' human rights especially the rights to dignity, privacy, a fair trial, non-discrimination and an effective remedy? The question is not whether the press should report rape. Silence is itself a political act, and agenda-setting research has long shown that issues absent from the news tend to be absent from public policy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The question is *how* rape is reported: whether coverage is episodic or thematic; whether it names or protects; whether it blames the survivor or the perpetrator and the system; and whether it treats sexual violence as a private scandal or as a public, structural crime (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Carter, 1998).

Three features of the 2025–2026 conjuncture make the inquiry urgent. First, the data infrastructure has improved enough that "we do not know" is no longer an honest answer. Police-derived provincial figures from SSDO, HRCP's annual audit, Sahil's newspaper census of child abuse, UN Women's documentation of Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, and Equality Now's April 2026 legal review together provide a contemporaneous record (SSDO, 2025; HRCP, 2026; Sahil, 2026; UN Women, 2025; Equality Now, 2026). Second, the legal frame has been rewritten. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 created specialized procedures, in-camera trials and identity protection; 2025 amendments continued that project; and Islamabad, Balochistan and Punjab moved on child marriage and domestic violence statutes (Government of Pakistan, 2021; National Assembly of Pakistan, 2025; Amnesty International, 2026). Third, the media environment has become more hostile even as reporting of gender-based violence has increased. At least seven journalists were killed in 2024; PECA was tightened; Punjab enacted a broad defamation law; and self-censorship is now a documented professional condition (Human Rights Watch, 2025; CPJ, 2025; Amnesty International, 2026).

## 2. Theoretical and human-rights framework

Goffman's account of frames as schemata of interpretation remains the sociological starting point (Goffman, 1974). Entman's operationalization is more useful for news analysis: to frame is to select and to make salient, and the four functions of framing problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation map directly onto crime reporting (Entman, 1993). When a rape story leads with the survivor's clothes, movement after dark, or family "honor," the problem is defined as female transgression; the cause is her conduct; the moral evaluation is shame; the implied remedy is restriction of women's mobility. When the same facts are framed through police failure, forensic collapse and impunity, the problem is the state, and the remedy is institutional reform.

Feminist media scholarship has shown that those choices are patterned, not random. Benedict's "virgin or vamp" dichotomy describes how Anglo-American news sorted women who were sexually assaulted into those who "deserved" sympathy and those who "provoked" it (Benedict, 1992). Meyers demonstrated that news coverage of violence against women systematically engenders blame, locating causality in the victim rather than in patriarchal power (Meyers, 1997). Clark's linguistic analysis of British tabloids found that grammar itself agent deletion, nominalization, and the use of "alleged" redistributes responsibility away from perpetrators (Clark, 1992). Van Dijk's discourse analysis treats news as ideology in syntactic form (van Dijk, 1988). Byerly and Ross, and Carter, have shown that the "ordinary" everydayness of sexual-violence news is itself a political achievement: atrocity is made banal even as it is sensationalized (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Carter, 1998).

Pakistani scholarship has begun to test these claims locally. Ali and Khan's qualitative study of electronic media found systematic infringement of ethical guidelines: naming of survivors, images of families, and identification of the accused before conviction (Ali & Khan, 2023). In one pair of high-profile cases they counted the survivor's name 764 times across 202 reports. A NUML content analysis of newspaper rape reports likewise found identity disclosure in violation of professional codes (NUML, 2021). Akram and colleagues' 2025 transitivity analysis of intimate-partner violence reporting in Pakistani print shows how process types and actor roles assign agency and blame (Akram et al., 2025). Work on the 2020 Lahore–Sialkot motorway rape has examined whether English broadsheets adopted more responsible frames than television after a nationally shaming episode of official victim-blaming (Aslam et al., 2023; Al Jazeera, 2020). This article treats journalism ethics not as a guild preference but as a human-rights practice. CEDAW requires states to eliminate discrimination in all fields and to modify social and cultural patterns of conduct that are based on stereotyped roles (United Nations, 1979). Pakistan is a party. The WHO's global estimates established sexual violence as a public-health and rights emergency, not a private misfortune (WHO, 2013). UNESCO's handbook for journalists on reporting violence against women and girls translates those duties into newsroom rules: do not identify survivors without informed consent; do not use identifying photographs; avoid sensational language; do not imply blame; give context and services; and distinguish the public interest from the public's curiosity (Impe, 2019). The Dart Center's guidance on reporting sexual violence adds trauma-informed interviewing and a prohibition on graphic, redundant description of the assault (Dart Center, 2011). Pakistan's Constitution supplies a domestic hook. Article 14 declares the dignity of man, and the privacy of the home, inviolable. Article 25 guarantees equality before the law. Article 19 protects freedom of speech and of the press, subject to reasonable restrictions, and Article 19A recognizes the right to information (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). The tension is real: the press has a constitutional role in exposing crime and official failure. But dignity and privacy are not residual. They are the conditions under which a survivor can report, testify and live. Identity disclosure in a rape story is not "more speech." It is a further invasion of the person the news claims to defend.

### **3. The Empirical Landscape, 2024–2026**

Any analysis of press coverage that floats free of incidence data becomes a literary exercise. The following figures are taken from named, dated sources. They are not interpolated, and where sources disagree the disagreement is reported rather than averaged away. HRCP recorded 6,624 registered rape cases nationwide in 2023—the equivalent of one woman raped every 45 minutes (HRCP, 2024; UN Women, 2025). For 2024, SSDO's provincial analysis of police data, obtained through right-to-information requests and reproduced in the UK

Home Office country note, counted 5,339 rapes: Punjab 4,641; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 258; Sindh 243; Islamabad Capital Territory 176; Balochistan 21 (SSDO, 2025; UK Home Office, 2025). The same compilation recorded more than 2,000 domestic-violence cases, more than 500 so-called honor killings, and over 24,000 abductions, the last with a conviction rate of 0.1 per cent. Conviction rates for rape, domestic violence and honor killing were each below 2 per cent (SSDO, 2025; Anees, 2025). Anees, writing in *The Diplomat* in March 2025, situated those numbers in a patriarchal order that the criminal justice system has failed to dislodge (Anees, 2025). HRCP's *State of Human Rights in 2025*, launched in Islamabad on 4 May 2026, reported that gender-based violence cases rose 25 per cent over an eleven-month period, to 6,543, of which Punjab accounted for 78 per cent. Of those, 3,815 were rapes; 1,332 were domestic-violence murders; and the remainder included honor-related killings, gang rape, violence against transgender persons, and other assaults. More than 3,600 cases of violence against children, including 2,003 of sexual abuse, were recorded in the same period (HRCP, 2026; Schanz, 2026). Amnesty International, drawing on Sahil, independently reported a 25 per cent rise in reported cases in the first eleven months of 2025, and noted SSDO's figure of more than 20,000 gender-based-violence incidents in the first six months of the year (Amnesty International, 2026). These series are not identical, and they should not be forced into a single trend line. HRCP's 2023 rape count (6,624) is higher than SSDO's 2024 police count (5,339) and higher than HRCP's own 2025 eleven-month rape count (3,815). Differences in definition (registered FIR versus newspaper report versus composite GBV), in coverage period, and in provincial reporting culture explain much of the variance. Punjab's apparent "lead" is itself a media and administrative artefact: SSDO attributes it to population size, greater public awareness of reporting, more active law enforcement, and denser media coverage (UK Home Office, 2025). Balochistan's 21 recorded rapes in 2024 almost certainly measure silence, not safety (Anees, 2025).

**Table 1. Selected registered sexual-violence and GBV figures, Pakistan, 2023–2025**

| Source and year                       | Measure                          | Count   |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|
| HRCP, 2023 (HRCP 2024; UN Women 2025) | Registered rapes, nationwide     | 6,624   |
| SSDO police data, 2024                | Registered rapes, nationwide     | 5,339   |
| SSDO, 2024                            | Rapes in Punjab                  | 4,641   |
| SSDO, 2024                            | Honour killings                  | >500    |
| SSDO, 2024                            | Abductions / kidnappings         | >24,000 |
| HRCP, 2025 (11 months)                | GBV cases                        | 6,543   |
| HRCP, 2025 (11 months)                | Rapes within GBV total           | 3,815   |
| HRCP, 2025                            | Child sexual-abuse cases         | 2,003   |
| Amnesty / Sahil, 2025                 | Rise in reported GBV (11 months) | +25%    |

Sources: HRCP (2024, 2026); SSDO (2025); UN Women (2025); Amnesty International (2026); Anees (2025); Schanz (2026). Figures are not strictly comparable across rows.

Sahil's *Cruel Numbers* series is uniquely important for a study of the press, because its method is the press. The organisation monitors 81 national and regional newspapers, plus direct reports, across the four provinces, Islamabad, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. For January–June 2025 it recorded 1,956 child-abuse cases, up 20 per cent from 1,630 in the first half of 2024, including 950 cases of child sexual abuse, 605 abductions, 192 missing children and 34 child or compensation marriages. Victims comprised 1,019 girls and 875 boys; 72 per cent of cases were in Punjab and 22 per cent in Sindh; 83 per cent were registered with police (Sahil, 2025; Jalil, 2025). The full-year 2025 report, released in 2026,



counted 3,630 cases, an 8 per cent rise on 2024. Among them: 1,107 abductions, 596 sodomy, 522 rape, 195 attempted rape, 141 attempted sodomy, 130 gang sodomy and 108 gang rape (Sahil, 2026; Express Tribune, 2026; ANI, 2026). Dawn's 3 July 2026 editorial "Abuse cycle" put the child sexual-abuse count at least 2,003 and argued that "a child's innocence is still a disposable commodity" despite the Criminal Law Amendment of 2016 and the Anti-Rape Act (Dawn, 2026). Human Rights Watch, citing Sahil, had already flagged 862 child sexual-abuse cases, 668 abductions, 82 missing children and 18 child marriages in the first six months of 2024 (Human Rights Watch, 2025). UNICEF estimates that 18.9 million Pakistani women and girls were married before 18, including 4.6 million before 15; in 2023, 18 per cent of girls and 5 per cent of boys married before 18 (UNICEF, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Child marriage is not identical with rape, but Pakistani law's remaining inconsistencies on the age of marriage 18 in Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan and Islamabad, 16 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and colonial-era exceptions in the Christian Marriage Act 1872 create a zone in which child sexual abuse is sometimes litigated as marriage (Equality Now, 2026).

Conviction statistics are the most politically abused numbers in this field, and the 2025–2026 record is internally contradictory unless methodology is specified. Equality Now's April 2026 review describes a "dismally low 0.5 per cent rape conviction rate," produced by delays, illegal out-of-court "compromises," weak forensics and a shortage of prosecutors (Equality Now, 2026). SSDO finds rates below 2 per cent for 2024 police-registered rape (SSDO, 2025). UN Women cites a 3.5 per cent perpetrator conviction figure in its November 2025 feature on Anti-Rape Crisis Cells (UN Women, 2025). The Legal Aid Society reported in May 2026 that the national rape conviction rate had risen from nearly 5 per cent in 2020 to 22 per cent in 2025, attributing the change to the 2021 reforms (Legal Aid Society, 2026). These denominators are different. A rate against all FIRs will always look worse than a rate against cases that reach judgment. The honest scholarly position is that impunity remains the central fact, that reform has produced contested improvement in some jurisdictions, and that the press rarely explains which number it is using. Under-reporting is not a footnote. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18 found that 28 per cent of women aged 15–49 had experienced physical violence, 6 per cent sexual violence, and 34 per cent of ever-married women spousal physical, sexual or emotional violence; 56 per cent of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence had not sought help or told anyone (NIPS & ICF, 2019; UNFPA Pakistan, 2024). SSDO notes that rape remains widely under-reported because of taboos, victim-blaming and lack of trust in the legal system (UK Home Office, 2025). Every newspaper total is therefore a lower bound. The World Economic Forum's 2025 ranking Pakistan 148th of 148, score 56.7 per cent, political empowerment down to 11 per cent, no women in the federal cabinet is not a rape statistic, but it is the structural context in which rape news is produced and consumed (World Economic Forum, 2025; Dawn, 2025; Accountability Lab Pakistan, 2025). Accountability Lab Pakistan called the ranking a moral failure of implementation and impunity, not a data glitch (Accountability Lab Pakistan, 2025).

#### **4. Legal and regulatory architecture for reporting**

Pakistani journalists are not working in a rule-free zone. In the vast majority of instances, they are violating laws which are already in place. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 was passed following the motorway gang rape case of 2020 that sparked a national debate on official victim-blaming on the social media platforms (Government of Pakistan, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2020; UN Women, 2025). The Act established Anti-Rape Crisis Cells as one-stop facilities, in-camera trials and allowed video-link testimony, trials to be held within three months and prohibited the media from publishing names or information that would identify

a victim, other than when reproducing court judgments (Government of Pakistan, 2021). Special investigation and prosecution machinery were to be put in place to improve the quality of evidence and speed up the delivery of justice. Parliament expressed its commitment to the architecture of Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) (Amendment) Bill 2021 even as it passed the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) (Amendment) Bill 2025 into the Senate on 17 February 2025 and further amended it in the National Assembly (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2025). According to Equality Now, is with implementation. Anti-Rape Crisis Cells remain often inaccessible; the statutory definition of rape, based on consent, remains relevant and so too is the “character” put in issue by defence counsel; and legally irrelevant virginity is still recorded by Women Medico-Legal Officers (WMLOs) (Equality Now, 2026). In November 2025, UN Women published the results of a 2024 assessment of the work of the six cells, which found that 437 survivors were assisted, of which 219 were children, while only 3.5 per cent of the perpetrators were convicted in 2024 (UN Women, 2025). A pilot is not a system of 6 cells for a country of over 240 million people.

The self-regulation of broadcast and print media are pointing in the same direction. PEMRA's Code of Conduct stipulates that respecting privacy is a fundamental obligation of licensees and that content that identifies a victim of sexual offence in any manner that causes harm to or is humiliating to the victim should be prohibited (PEMRA, 2015). The Ethical Code of Practice of the Press Council of Pakistan also recommends that the press refrain from identifying a victim of sexual assault, nor publish anything that could contribute to identification of the victim, unless there is a clear public-interest justification (Press Council of Pakistan, 2002). Ali and Khan took a practical checklist from PEMRA and similar checklists: never refer to the victim by name; never use the word “alleged” as a permanent designation for the crime; avoid using the term “sex”; never show the victim or her family; and don't consider the accused as guilty before the court (Ali & Khan, 2023). UNESCO and the Dart Center provide the international re-statement of the same responsibilities (Impe, 2019; Dart Center 2011).

The reporting of rape is now governed by two other laws. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 criminalizes cyber stalking, sharing of intimate images without consent, and similar harms, which are tools that survivors need; successive amendments have added to the state's ability to punish “fake information”, and the law has been applied to journalists, and women who speak about harassment (Government of Pakistan, 2016; UN Women, 2025; Schanz, 2026). The UN Women (2025) reveals that during last 5 years, approximately 1.8 million women in Pakistan experienced cyber-crimes including harassment and blackmail, while Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) helpline received 2,473 complaints in 2023, of which 59 per cent were lodged by women. Under the defamation law in Punjab in June 2024, actions are permissible ‘without proof of actual damage,’ a structure that is conducive to SLAPP suits against reporting on sexual violence by powerful men (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

## 5. Method

This is a qualitative, document-based study of Pakistani press coverage of rape survivors in calendar years 2025 and 2026 (to August), set against the 2024 statistical baseline. It does not claim a full census of every Urdu and English news item. It triangulates incidence and justice-system data from HRCP, SSDO, Sahil, UN Women, Equality Now, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, NIPS/PDHS, and the Legal Aid Society; the statutory and ethical corpus of the Constitution, the Anti-Rape Act 2021 and 2025 amendments, PEMRA 2015, the Press Council code, PECA, and UNESCO/Dart guidance; published content analyses of Pakistani electronic and print coverage of rape and intimate-partner violence (Ali & Khan, 2023; NUML,

2021; Akram et al., 2025; Aslam et al., 2023), together with 2025–2026 news and editorial treatments in Dawn, The Express Tribune, VoicePK and international outlets; and Sahil’s newspaper-monitoring method, which converts the press into a data source and thereby reveals both the geography of reported child abuse and the geography of newspapers willing or able to print it (Sahil, 2025; Sahil, 2026). The analytical categories are taken from Entman and from the feminist media canon: identity disclosure; linguistic doubt and blame; episodic versus thematic framing; honour and class; child versus adult survivors; digital secondary trauma; and the chilling of journalists (Entman, 1993; Meyers, 1997; Benedict, 1992). Limitations are frank. Urdu television crawlers, local crime pages and TikTok “crime channels” are under-sampled relative to English-language broadsheets. Official crime statistics remain incomplete, especially in Balochistan. Conviction-rate series are incommensurable. The article therefore prefers source-tagged figures to synthetic national rates, and it treats the English quality press as the most rule-aware, not the most typical, end of the market.

## **6. Findings: Patterns of Press Coverage, 2025–2026**

The most robust empirical finding in the Pakistani literature is also the most basic ethics violation: news organisations name survivors, show their faces, and identify their families. Ali and Khan found that in sampled electronic coverage of two major cases the survivor was named 764 times, the accused identified hundreds of times before conviction, and family members 255 times (Ali & Khan, 2023). Newspaper analyses have recorded the same pattern in print (NUML, 2021). These practices collide directly with the Anti-Rape Act, PEMRA and the Press Council (Government of Pakistan, 2021; PEMRA, 2015; Press Council of Pakistan, 2002). Identity disclosure is not a technical slip. In a kinship society organised around izzat, naming a rape survivor can end a woman’s education, marriage prospects and physical safety. It can expose her to so-called honour violence. It can collapse a prosecution if the family withdraws to stop the coverage. UNESCO’s handbook is unambiguous that identification without informed consent is unethical even where the law is silent; in Pakistan the law is not silent (Impe, 2019). The 2025–2026 period did not produce a published, industry-wide audit showing that this practice has stopped. What it did produce is continued reliance, in crime pages and television packages, on neighbourhood, school, caste and photograph as identifying proxies’ forms of “jigsaw identification” that professional codes also forbid.

Clark showed that British tabloids redistribute blame through grammar: “woman raped” rather than “man rapes woman”; “sex” rather than “rape”; “alleged victim” as a permanent status (Clark, 1992). Ali and Khan found the same devices in Pakistani electronic media, including the instruction widely ignored not to use “alleged” as a way of keeping the crime in permanent suspense (Ali & Khan, 2023). Akram’s 2025 transitivity work on intimate-partner violence reporting shows how material, mental and relational processes in Urdu and English news assign agency to the woman (she “got beaten,” she “failed to adjust”) and strip it from the man and the state (Akram et al., 2025). During 2025–2026 this linguistic pattern met a legal contradiction. Pakistani rape law after 2021 is consent-based; physical injury is not an element of the offence (Equality Now, 2026). News copy, however, still often treats medical “confirmation,” torn clothing, and screams as the story’s proof-points, thereby teaching the audience the old, extra-legal standard that police and some courts continue to apply. The press thus reproduces the very evidentiary culture that Equality Now identifies as the central implementation failure.

The four functions predicted by Entman are a familiar Pakistani cycle. The case must be sufficiently serious or photograph-worthy, the cause a monster or a “few bad men”, the moral conclusions horror and the solution a new law, a task force or a breaking news banner on TV.

That playbook has been followed in the 2020 motorway case in the Anti-Rape Act 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2020; Government of Pakistan, 2021). It was followed by earlier amendments to the criminal-law under the 2018 Kasur child rape-murder and the 2015 Kasur abuse scandal. As Dawn's July 2026 editorial acknowledges, "Laws and pledges may be momentary but the toll of abuse, shame and disregard is not" (Dawn, 2026). Thematic framing, in which rape is presented as a result of policing, forensics, prosecution, lack of shelter, child-marriage law, and media practice is less common, and it is concentrated within a few newspapers in England and in the NGOs. Progress is made as data events for these provincial analyses, SSDO 2024 and HRCP 2025, and the HRCP 2025 report (Anees, 2025). Yet crime pages still report each FIR as a stand-alone crime, without any information about the conviction rates, without the information that 56 per cent of women never report crime to anyone, and without the information that it is partly because of the density of media that a police force is so numerically dominant (UNFPA Pakistan 2024; UK Home Office 2025). In-depth agenda setting yields policy memory but heatless agenda setting yields heat without policy memory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Benedict's virgin/vamp binary has a Pakistani cousin: the respectable victim versus the woman who "asked for it" by working, by being online, by being transgender, or by being poor (Benedict, 1992). Meyers' argument that news engenders blame is visible whenever copy asks what the woman was wearing, why she was outside, or why her family did not "control" her (Meyers, 1997). Anees notes that the Asma Jattak abduction in Balochistan drew provincial-assembly walkouts in part because the family was middle-class and educated, which reduced the usual fear of stigma an admission that coverage is stratified by class (Anees, 2025). *Human Rights Watch* recorded 46 cases of abduction and sexual violence in a single Punjab district, Mandi Bahauddin, in 24 days of July 2024; most such cases never become national news (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Honour discourse does additional work. Amnesty documented a July 2025 Balochistan case in which a tribal council killed a woman and a man for a relationship against family wishes; a video circulated and 16 people were arrested (Amnesty International, 2026). Coverage of such killings often lingers on the "custom" and the video, and under-describes the state's duty to dismantle parallel adjudication. Women from Hindu and Christian communities, who face elevated risks of abduction, forced conversion and child marriage, are frequently framed as communal rather than as rape-and-rights stories (Equality Now, 2026). Transgender women Amnesty recorded at least four gang rapes in Islamabad, Sahiwal, Kasur and Bahawalnagar, and high murder counts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh are covered, when they are covered at all, as morality items rather than as holders of Article 14 dignity (Amnesty International, 2026; Constitution of Pakistan, 1973).

Because Sahil's census is built from 81 newspapers, the 2025–2026 child-abuse numbers are simultaneously a measure of violence and a measure of press attention (Sahil, 2025; Sahil, 2026; Jalil, 2025). That is a paradox. Without the crime page there would be no national total of 3,630 cases and no 8 per cent year-on-year increase to shame the state (Express Tribune, 2026; ANI, 2026). With the crime page, children are at risk of being identified by school, mohalla, photograph and the names of parents. The Anti-Rape Act's identity bar applies with special force here; so do UNESCO and Dart rules against graphic description and against treating child sexual abuse as entertainment (Government of Pakistan, 2021; Impe, 2019; Dart Center, 2011). Dawn's "Abuse cycle" editorial is a model of thematic framing that names the police, the law and the culture without naming a child (Dawn, 2026). Much of the market still fails that test.



Legacy press copy now lives a second life on X, Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp, where PEMRA has little reach and PECA is used selectively. UN Women's figure of 1.8 million women facing cyber-crimes, and DRF's 2,473 helpline complaints in 2023, describe the environment into which every rape headline is released (UN Women, 2025; Digital Rights Foundation, 2024). Amnesty recorded the murder of 17-year-old Sana Yousaf after she rejected a man who followed her on social media a killing that is not a rape case but that illustrates how digital visibility is punished (Amnesty International, 2026). Schanz notes PECA's use against women who speak, including long-running defamation litigation (Schanz, 2026). Once a newspaper has printed a name, a street or a photograph, the harm cannot be recalled. Secondary trauma is then inflicted not only by the original report but by its infinite copies.

A press that cannot safely investigate the powerful cannot report rape by the powerful. Human Rights Watch's 2025 Pakistan chapter is as much a press-freedom document as a women's-rights document: seven journalists killed in 2024, digital and physical surveillance, a Punjab defamation law, sedition charges, and widespread self-censorship (Human Rights Watch, 2025; CPJ, 2025). Amnesty's 2025 account adds PECA amendments, arrests of digital journalists, and court-ordered YouTube bans later reversed (Amnesty International, 2026). HRCP's 2025 report, as launched in May 2026, placed freedom of expression and rule of law under stress in the same volume that recorded the GBV spike (HRCP, 2026). The human-rights implication is structural. When newsrooms are afraid of the military, of politicians and of contempt notices, they will still print the rape of a nameless poor woman in a rural thana; they will hesitate before the rape that implicates a landlord, a cleric, a party worker or a security official. The resulting coverage map is not a map of rape. It is a map of who may be named as a rapist.

The Pakistani media is not a monolith. There is a small, urban, policy-aware audience for the English-language outlets of the press, Dawn, The Express Tribune, and some magazines. The majority of the population is reached by Urdu dailies and television still. Content analysis has consistently shown that ethically problematic content is focused on electronic and Urdu crime formats, where answering quickly and shock is rewarded with crawlers, "breaking" packages and live crosses (Ali & Khan, 2023). In comparison, the thematic frames were mainly provided by English editorials in 2025–2026: Dawn at the beginning of the child-abuse cycle, Express Tribune at Sahil's annual figures, and international English outlets like The Diplomat with provincial figures of SSDO (Dawn, 2026; Express Tribune, 2026; Anees, 2025). The divide comes with a human-rights cost. The fact that it is only newsrooms whose readers already consider gender equality a constitutional principle (United Nations, 1979; Impe, 2019) that have internalized UNESCO rules does not suffice to respond to CEDAW's demand to change the social-cultural norms. The audience that is most exposed to the honor discourse, is least exposed to the survivor-centred stylebooks. The choice of language within a text also ranks the dignity within the story. News as ideology, van Dijk says, is news as register: "a child was sexually assaulted in [district]; police have registered an FIR; the Anti-Rape Crisis Cell is the designated first contact". A rights-based press would raise the second register to the first, even in Urdu, prior to the setting of the first in the English papers. A further division between Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi desks and district stringer. Local reporting that was noticed enabled HRW's Mandi Bahauddin cluster to become visible on the international stage (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In this respect, Sahil's approach of reading 81 newspapers is a tribute to provincial crime reporters that have put cases in print at all (Sahil, 2026). The job of the professional task is not to silence those reporters. It is to educate and defend them, without a child's name or a mother's picture and a landlord's immunity, telling the district story.

Tuchman's insight remains as true today as ever: the news net catches what the news net is built to catch (1978). The Pakistani news net still existed in 2025-2026 to capture the sensational case, the video, the unprotected poor and the protected powerful was still able to escape.

### **7. Illustrative Episodes, 2025–2026**

The four clusters, which do not involve any living survivors for naming, demonstrate how the patterns in Section 6 have actually worked in time. The provincial analysis of GBV conducted by SSDO was converted into news as was HRCP's annual report for 2025, Sahil's report on Cruel Numbers for mid-year and full-year of 2025 and a feature article on Anti-Rape Crisis Cells by UN Women, published in November 2025. The translation of the information available through the police and the NGO monitoring systems is the most useful kind of press for the public agenda the press of 2025 and 2026 (SSDO, 2025, HRCP, 2026). That conversion wasn't of equal quality. The "one every 45 minutes" that led the way had no idea that the figure was for registered cases in 2023 and not the 2025 run-rate. Outlets that said that 4,641 rapes had been registered in Punjab, without SSDO's add-on about reporting culture, made it seem that other provinces might have been safer. The numbers, then more numbers, then an argument about institutional contempt for children (VoicePK, 2025; Express Tribune, 2026; Dawn, 2026) was a thematic sequence of three that were extremely rare. Carter described that as a "conversion of the extraordinary to the political ordinary," in this case in a good sense: treating each child as a one-off monster story (Carter, 1998).

The July 2025 Balochistan tribal-council killing, circulating as video before it circulated as law, showed how social media now sets the press agenda rather than the other way around (Amnesty International, 2026). The Mandi Bahauddin cluster of 46 abduction and sexual-violence cases in July 2024, recovered by Human Rights Watch from local media, showed the opposite: a saturation of local crime news that never became a national rights story (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Both are failures of framing. One over-invests in the spectacle of a video; the other under-invests in pattern. UN Women's November 2025 reporting, quoting Dr Summaiya Syed, Chief Police Surgeon, Karachi, and Jamshed M. Kazi of UN Women Pakistan, modelled survivor-centred journalism: services, dignity, evidence, and the survivor's voice without identification (UN Women, 2025). When Pakistani newspapers picked up the ARCC story they had a ready-made thematic frame implementation of the 2021 Act that is more useful to the public than another unnamed "incident." The fact that only six cells exist, and that Equality Now finds them frequently unavailable, is the story the press should stay with (Equality Now, 2026).

### **8. Human-Rights Implications**

Press coverage of rape is a human-rights act because it distributes dignity, privacy, safety and the possibility of remedy. Four implications follow from the 2025–2026 record. First, identity disclosure and jigsaw identification violate Article 14 dignity and privacy, the Anti-Rape Act's media bar, and CEDAW's requirement to modify stereotyped cultural patterns (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973; Government of Pakistan, 2021; United Nations, 1979). They also sabotage Article 10A fair-trial rights by contaminating the jury of public opinion and by pressuring families into "compromise." Second, victim-blaming frames and honour discourse are themselves gender discrimination in the CEDAW sense: they allocate sympathy by female conduct rather than by the fact of assault (United Nations, 1979; Meyers, 1997). Third, the chill on journalism is a women's-rights issue. A press that cannot investigate the powerful will systematically under-report rape by the powerful, which is a failure of the state's due-diligence duty as much as a failure of editors (Human Rights Watch, 2025; WHO, 2013).

Fourth, constructive, data-rich, survivor-centred reporting is not “soft” news. It is how a public learns that 5,339 rapes were registered in 2024, that conviction is rare, that six crisis cells served 437 people, and that 3,630 children appeared in the 2025 newspapers as victims of abuse (SSDO, 2025; UN Women, 2025; Sahil, 2026). The right to freedom of expression is not the casualty of this argument. It is the instrument. Article 19 exists so that the press can expose crime and official failure; it does not exist so that a news channel can put a child’s face on a 9 p.m. crime show (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). UNESCO’s formulation remains the correct reconciliation: report the violence; protect the person; explain the structure; offer the service (Impe, 2019).

## 9. Recommendations

The first responsibility is to be the enforcers of rules that are already in place. PEMRA, the Press Council and the courts should consider the disclosure of an identity of a sexual-violence survivor as a sanctioned breach of the Anti-Rape Act, rather than a matter of taste, and of professional codes of conduct. A stylebook should be adopted for the newsrooms involving Urdu and English language and should be survivor centred i.e. no names, no images, no “alleged victim,” no sexual-history colour, no graphic reconstruction, services box on each story. The editors should opt for the thematic over the episodic, and should match each crime brief with the related conviction, forensic and shelter facts, and should not reset the policy clock with every new crime outrage. The six Anti-Rape Crisis Cells that cater to a handful of hundred people are not implementation of a national Act; the coverage should be as close as the FIRs to budget, vacancies and provincial hold outs.

Journalists reporting sexual violence by powerful should be protected. The defamation law for the year 2024 for Punjab and the overly broad PECA amendments which treat survivor speech and investigative reporting as “fake information” should be repealed or narrowed. The government information and the media should be provided with a uniform quarterly bulletin on rape cases by the Ministry of Human Rights, police and the Law and Justice Commission instead of incompatible percentages. Child identity, school and neighborhood must be removed at source and Sahil’s newspaper survey on child abuse should be continued and newspapers should continue to feed it. No new theory is employed in these steps. They ask newsrooms and the state to abide by the Pakistani law in effect.

## 10. Conclusion

Rape crisis did not start in the Pakistani press in 2025-26. The problem isn’t in the ledgers of the police, the 81 newspapers that still have gender-based-violence cases on their list, the ranking that still puts Bangladesh among the lowest in the world on the gender-gap index or in the justice system that fails the vast majority of victims between the thana and the judgment. What the press invented and what it should continue to invent is a type of reporting that identifies the injured, challenges their version of events, fetishizes the concept of honor, and ignores last year’s legislation, and then calls for a new one. It’s obvious from the dual nature of the period that there’s a strong side of the newsroom that does reporting that’s constructive, data-driven, and reports on the crisis cells and child-protection numbers, and there’s another side of the newsroom that does sensational, episodic, honor-coded reporting, which gets amplified by social media and is stifled by the censorship law.

There’s the scholarly and legal resources for another practice sitting on the desk: the warning about salience, maps of blame, the grammar of agency deletion, the UNESCO handbook, PEMRA’s code, the Press Council’s code, Article 14, the Anti-Rape Act, a series of contemporaneous reports that make the numbers harder to wave away: six imperfect crisis cells. Rape coverage in Pakistan does not come from the West. It is the application of the

Pakistani laws by Pakistani judges in Pakistani sentences. Survivor-centred journalism is not a courtesy, it is a necessity. It's an enforceable obligation, and this discrepancy between the law and newsrooms is a violation of rights. Whether those newsrooms will abide by that law or just everyone else is the test for 2026–2027.

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