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Title

English Print Media Reporting on Domestic Violence Against Women in Pakistan: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Critical Discourse Analysis serves as the research method to examine how Pakistani English print media presents domestic violence against women while evaluating its outcomes regarding public discourse and legal reforms, together with societal norms. A study of domestic violence in Pakistani newspapers evaluates The Express Tribune, The News International, and Dawn through four research themes, including legislative changes, victim portrayal, cultural elements, and community responses. Media reporting shows advancement in legal enforcement of physical assault crimes, but fails to represent abusive behaviors such as emotional and economic abuse due to legal system deficiencies. News coverage about domestic violence victims contains conflicting messages that support both survivor self-empowerment and traditional victim-blaming perspectives through the portrayal of violence as an isolated cultural practice.

Keywords: CDA, Print Media, Domestic Violence, Gender, Stereotypes

Introduction

The global human rights violation known as domestic violence confronts women in every culture and economic condition. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) indicates that three out of every ten women worldwide face physical abuse along with sexual violence, according to Garcia-

Moreno et al. (2015). These experiences result in enduring psychological destruction, economic loss, and abuse transmission from one generation to the next (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2015). Cultural stigmas together with ineffective legal systems and patriarchal societal rules prevent Pakistani married women aged 15-49 from receiving justice when they experience physical abuse (NIPS & ICF, 2019; Zakar et al., 2013).



The media generates opposing impacts on public perceptions about domestic violence because it either reinforces abusive conduct by focusing on victims' blame or helps destroy harmful social attitudes by voicing survivors' experiences (Alat, 2006). The English-language print media operating in Pakistan establishes significant influence through its service to the reform-driven policymakers, educators, and urban elite (Khan, 2017). Research into Pakistani English newspaper reporting of domestic violence has achieved little focus on the linguistic and discursive analysis of patriarchal beliefs within their content.

The way the media discusses domestic violence defines this issue as something that belongs to a private family setting or as a fundamental human rights violation. The use of survivor-centered empathetic reporting methods in media allowed India to gain public attention about domestic violence, which led to needed legal reforms after the 2012 Delhi gang rape (Natarajan, 2016). The use of sensationalized or passive language like "alleged abuse" results in vitalizing victim-blaming issues while making impunity seem acceptable (Carlyle et al., 2008). Mass media stories in Pakistan have the capability to change social traditions because domestic violence continues to remain culturally acceptable, and people fail to officially report it. Public disinterest toward investigating and implementing the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2012 arises from traditional gender beliefs (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Media reporting that upholds ethical standards would drive lawmakers to place domestic violence on the same level as a public health emergency instead of private domestic issues.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Researchers have studied gender portrayal in Pakistani Urdu media publications (Khan, 2017; Zia & Bari, 2017), but investigations into English periodicals are lacking. Research is essential because English newspapers maintain dominance over elite decision-making, thus shaping policy agendas. The majority of Pakistani media research relies on content analysis techniques, even though this methodology fails to explore how language functions to consolidate power

distribution (Fairclough, 2013). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides researchers with an advanced methodological approach to analyze how language sustains political doctrines through its study of media texts (Van Dijk, 2001). The research connects these knowledge gaps through CDA analysis of Pakistani English print media to demonstrate how specific communicative methods, such as lexical options alongside passive verbalization and information selection patterns, construct public ideas about domestic violence.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to:

1. Critically analyze the portrayal of domestic violence against women in Pakistan's English print media.
2. Identify discourse patterns and their implications for public perception and policy.

Research questions:

1. How do Pakistani English newspapers frame domestic violence against women?
2. What discursive strategies are employed in Domestic Violence reporting?

Theoretical Framework

This research explores textual features and discursive practices alongside sociocultural contexts relating to domestic violence in Pakistan using Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional CDA model. A news headline titled "Woman Dies in Kitchen Accident" from Dawn in 2021 utilizes passive voice to hide perpetrators while demonstrating public reluctance to punish abusers. Survivor-centric narratives that include statements from activists and legal experts can challenge prevailing societal messages (Meyers, 1997).

Significance

This investigation adds new knowledge to media research by examining how Pakistani elite media language maintains or challenges gender discrimination through its content presentation. Public officials can use these research findings to build ethical reporting standards, and reporters can use

trauma-sensitive practices to protect individuals affected by violence. Research from this study delivers a model that enables analysis of media contributions to domestic violence debates within Global South countries.

Literature Review

Violence against women is a global problem that affects all cultures, classes, and structures in all societies across the globe. According to the World Health Organization, the proportion of women aged 15 and older who have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime varies across countries; as a whole, however, one in three women has experienced this type of violence in her lifetime, and more than half of this violence is committed by an intimate partner. This violence takes various forms, be it physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual violence, or psychological torture, and it not only causes strong physical and psychological effects in women, but it also has implications on women's status socially and economically. The United Nations has defined domestic violence as not just a domestic affair but a violation of women's human rights (UN Women, 2020).

Domestic abuse of women occurs as a worldwide human rights violation because 1 out of 3 women experience it globally (WHO, 2021). Married women in Pakistan face physical abuse at a rate of 28% due to cultural prejudices, together with legal system failure and male-biased social customs and beliefs (NIPS & ICF, 2019; Zakar et al., 2013). The Domestic Violence Act (2012) has not eliminated enforcement weaknesses because of institutional impediments (Jilani & Ahmed, 2020). The English-language print media sector functions as an essential driver of public understanding about domestic violence in Pakistan, even though researchers have paid limited attention to the subject. This review integrates academic research on media framing and feminist critiques and Critical Discourse Analysis to understand English print media discourse in Pakistan.

Through its power, the media operates to reflect existing social realities and simultaneously construct new social realities that appear in the world. The

ethical way of reporting leads to policy improvements (Natarajan, 2016), yet sensationalism turns domestic violence into isolated occurrences rather than structural issues (Carlyle et al., 2008). English print media in Pakistan, which publishes Dawn and The Express Tribune, directs its content toward policymakers and educated elite groups that steer legal and societal transformation (Khan, 2017). Domestic violence coverage by the media limits its discussion to specific incidents while disregarding systemic influences such as poverty and the dominance of patriarchal structures (Shirazi, 2016). Public attention toward Qandeel Baloch's murder led to legal reforms (Niaz, 2016), but most domestic violence cases remain unreported since media coverage focuses on individual tragedies instead of systemic issues (Akram, 2021).

Researchers can use CDA as a comprehensive analytical method to study the ways in which language maintains power discrepancies. Through his three-dimensional analysis model, Fairclough (2013) shows how media systems naturalize existing ideologies. Universally passive verbalization of incidents (for example, "woman dies in stove burst") seeks to hide perpetrators and thus strengthen impunity (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

According to the literature, framing domestic violence can facilitate or hinder the process of responding to this issue. For example, breaking news stories where the magnitude of domestic violence is brought out, articles that center on the victims and their experiences, as well as articles that assess the available laws and policies on combating domestic violence, can assist in enhancing public understanding and efforts for improvement of legislation (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). However, in Pakistan, what dominates the coverage is that it reports only incidents. When it does so, it tends not to put it into perspective with reference to a pattern of systematic abuse. Top-down interpretations of domestic violence as individual incidents do not foster a collective approach to the issue and, therefore, do not seem to help create a policy change (Khan, 2021). Guiding Policy change is a significant function of the media.

How incidents of domestic violence are framed guides policy directions that are taken. One way is that the light shines on these problems through the media, forcing governments and institutions into action. This has been seen in Pakistan, where the cases of violence against women, especially Qandeel Baloch's murder case, attracted public attention, and people protested, forcing the lawmaker to change the laws (Niaz, 2016). However, such occurrences are still rare, and most women experience violence in their everyday life, but it is not reported and, hence, not well documented. Therefore, the media plays a catalytic role in bringing to society's attention these issues, as well as exerting pressure on institutions and demanding better laws to be passed.

The Pakistani media uses headlines such as "Woman Killed Over Honor" to blame the victims, as reported by Niaz (2016). The framing technique supports traditional gender perspectives because it presents domestic violence as a domestic matter instead of a public emergency (Meyers, 1997).

Fueling criticism from feminist scholars is the coverage of the media, which maintains gender-related power structures. Gill (2007) explains that victimizing discourse, which focuses on survivors' "provocative" actions, serves to maintain patriarchal authority structures. Similarly, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights how overlapping identities (class, ethnicity) compound marginalization. The media in Pakistan makes rural and low-income women essentially invisible by focusing its content on urban middle-class perspectives (Yasmeen et al., 2014). Moreover, the Feminist Collective and platforms like it serve as examples of feminist media advocacy, which refutes standard narratives by bringing survivors into the spotlight (Byerly & Ross, 2006). The English media of Pakistan has a few examples of these types of initiatives.

Research focuses on gender biases within Urdu media but omits to study these biases in English print media. Research predominantly focuses on sociocultural and legal aspects of domestic violence (Ali et al., 2011) without studying how elite media influences the discourse of policy. In Global North

countries, CDA is widely used for media text analysis (Fairclough, 2013), yet this method remains scarce in Pakistani media text analysis. Charles (2019) points out a significant knowledge gap, which shows Pakistani media continues to use unanalyzed discursive methods, including the secretion of systematic responsibility from societal reports. The research lacks intersectional approaches for analyzing domestic violence coverage, although caste and class differences create stronger vulnerabilities among affected communities (Aurat Foundation, 2019).

The study combines CDA with feminist theory to analyze power structures that exist within media discourse. The detrimental representation of domestic violence cases has prompted a successful feminist strategy: media advocacy aimed at transforming the portrayal of women within the media landscape. This endeavor involves challenging the inaccuracies perpetuated by mainstream media while simultaneously fostering alternative media cultures that empower women to articulate their narratives. According to Fairclough (2013), CDA discloses linguistic elements, including passive forms and lexical choices that establish male dominance, whereas feminist theory challenges patriarchal frameworks, which victimize or create sensationalism (Gill 2007). Media IPPs define important agenda sets through Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) by selecting which topics (such as extreme domestic violence cases) will be widely publicized and affect policy decisions. The English media in Pakistan devotes an excessive amount of coverage to prominent cases of domestic violence while minimizing critical discussion about underlying systems (Akram, 2021). According to framing theory (Entman, 1993), media displays tend to prioritize singular "tragedies" instead of structural inequities, which prevent collective action processes.

Media exists as both a tool for reaffirming patriarchal social norms and a driver of progressive social transformation. English print media in Pakistan has achieved its important role as a policy-making participant for its elite audience, though its fragmented reporting lacks political substance. The study uses CDA to analyze Dawn and The News

International while showcasing how their language either supports or opposes practices that promote gender inequity. Future academic investigation needs to analyze both multi-dimensional vulnerabilities along with digital platforms as tools for boosting underrepresented perspectives.

Methodology

A qualitative method centered on critical discourse analysis was adopted for the project. Interestingly, qualitative research was selected due to its depth in understanding how domestic violence toward women was depicted in English print media throughout Pakistan. This method fits the study's objective, highlighting the stories and linguistic styles newspapers employ.

The evaluation of Pakistan's English print media coverage of domestic violence against women uses Critical Discourse Analysis to study linguistic methods as well as power relations and social beliefs. Analyzing language as a reflection of societal norms and power dynamics was the motivation for choosing CDA as the framework. Using this technique allowed an examination of the framing of domestic violence by the media and the connected ideological influences.

Through the CDA approach, the study aimed to reveal the broader socio-political implications of how domestic violence was reported. It explored how media discourses could contribute to either perpetuating harmful stereotypes or fostering a more informed and empathetic understanding of domestic violence. The findings provided insights into the role of the media as a potential agent of change or a vehicle for maintaining the status quo in societal attitudes toward gender-based violence (Van Dijk, 2008).

In this study's context, CDA and feminist theory are complementary and vital for analysis. While examining women's identities in domestic abuse, feminist theory serves as a guiding framework in the media context, while CDA concentrates on the examination of power and communication. This method clarifies how media communication reflects different gender dynamics and why it has these effects.

Research Design and Data Collection

The research uses qualitative CDA methods to evaluate textual practices within three major English newspapers operating in Pakistan, namely Dawn, The News International, and The Express Tribune. The selected media outlets received their choice because they held substantial authority over policy-making and high societal influence (Khan et al., 2020). A selection of 18 articles was used for this research, consisting of 10 articles from Dawn and 5 from The News International, in addition to 3 articles from The Express Tribune. These articles were published during the time period from 2018 to 2023. The time period examined how domestic violence discourses evolved during legal system changes and growing awareness about domestic violence following the emergence of the #MeToo movement.

Articles were sourced from the newspapers' online archives using keywords: "*domestic violence*," "*gender-based violence*," and "*violence against women*." Inclusion criteria prioritized:

1. Detailed reports (excluding brief mentions).
2. Focus on domestic violence against women in Pakistan.
3. Representation of diverse regions and socioeconomic contexts.

Sample Selection

The sample emphasized depth over breadth, selecting investigative reports and opinion pieces that offered nuanced perspectives. Articles were excluded if they:

- Addressed domestic violence outside Pakistan.
- Lacked substantive analysis (e.g., short news briefs).
- Superficially mentioned domestic violence without contextualizing systemic issues.

Analytical Framework

CDA was motivated by its usefulness in media studies, where language is crucial for understanding social topics. This model worked well in the setting of Pakistan, where cultural and societal practices regarding domestic violence regularly appeared in media coverage.

Fairclough’s (2013) three-dimensional CDA model guided the analysis:

1. Textual Analysis: Examined linguistic features (e.g., lexical choices, passive voice, metaphors)
2. Example: Headlines like “Woman Dies in Kitchen Accident” (passive voice obscuring perpetrators).
3. Discursive Practices: Explored framing techniques (e.g., episodic vs. thematic framing).
4. Example: Framing domestic violence as isolated incidents versus structural gender inequality.
5. Sociocultural Context: Linked media narratives to patriarchal norms and legal gaps.

Coding Process

- Deductive Codes: Derived from prior literature (e.g., victim-blaming, empathy gaps).
- Inductive Codes: Emerged during analysis (e.g., religious justifications, economic dependency tropes).

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) contextualized how media emphasis on specific elements (e.g., victim agency vs. perpetrator accountability) shaped public perception.

Ethical Considerations

This study implemented strict ethical measures to handle the demanding nature of domestic violence investigations. The research protecting participants and sources from experiencing trauma involved erasing explicit information while hiding victim identities, except when dealing with already revealed facts. Anonymity applied to all non-public subjects mentioned in media publications to maintain their private information, which created necessary

safeguards for their protection against exposure. The researcher employed reflexivity strategies to maintain objective analysis by keeping records of their pre-existing expectations and performing self-reflection on individual beliefs across the entire examination period. The study avoided the use of sensationalist terms such as "honor killing" and cultural language that could normalize or simplify cases of violence because researchers chose to employ neutral language with respect.

Limitations

The research methodology included specific limitations that affected the study. Examining only three media organizations reduced the total number of samples, which might have led to missing regional perspectives on domestic violence coverage throughout various local media industries. The research period from 2018 to 2023 did not take into account previous changes in domestic violence reporting, which restricted the investigation of extended trends. The identified research boundaries should be overcome by future investigations that broaden temporal coverage and geographical areas to enhance knowledge about media perspectives on domestic violence.

Analysis & Discussion

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how Pakistan’s English print media frames domestic violence across four themes: legal reforms, victim portrayal, cultural implications, and societal responses. The analysis reveals how media narratives reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms, shaping public perception and policy.

Table1

Thematic Analysis

Theme	Article Title	Article Excerpt	Interpretation
Legal Issues	KP finally legislates to criminalise domestic violence	Legal changes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for criminalizing domestic violence.	Reflects legislative progress and the state's response to domestic violence.

Theme	Article Title	Article Excerpt	Interpretation
Victim Portrayal	The menace of emotional abuse and why a domestic violence bill	Discussion on the need for a comprehensive domestic violence bill.	Highlights gaps in existing laws and the need for stronger protections.
	Women seeking divorce	Increased divorce filings due to heightened domestic issues during COVID-19.	Showing victims taking legal action against abusers indicates increased awareness or desperation.
	Silent pandemic	Report on underreported and surged domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Victims are portrayed as largely helpless, suffering due to systemic failures and crisis situations.
Cultural Implications	Tharparkar's suicide crisis	High suicide rates are linked to domestic issues and societal pressures in Tharparkar.	Cultural and social pressures exacerbate domestic violence outcomes.
	Economic violence Against women in Pakistan	Focus on the economic Dimensions of domestic violence.	Cultural norms and economic dependency play significant roles in sustaining abusive relationships.
Response to Domestic Violence	Steps sought to stop a possible rise in domestic violence	Advocacy for governmental action to prevent domestic Violence during lockdowns.	Indicates proactive community and governmental responses, though effectiveness is variable.
	Stakeholders address the rise in incidents of domestic violence	Discussion on collaboration among stakeholders to tackle domestic violence.	Showcases a multi-stakeholder approach to address and mitigate domestic violence effectively.

Legal Reforms

Media coverage highlights legislative efforts to criminalize domestic violence, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's 2021 law (Dawn, [2021](#)). Articles like "KP Finally Legislates to Criminalise Domestic Violence" frame such reforms as milestones, stating:

"The law marks a significant step forward in the legal battle against gender-based violence" (Dawn, [2021](#)).

However, gaps persist. Opinion pieces (e.g., "The Menace of Emotional Abuse") critique the stalled *Domestic Violence Bill 2021*, noting:

“Vulnerable members of society remain at risk of myriad abuses physical, economic, emotional, and sexual”.

Key Insight: This legislative action is significant because it gives victims legal options and sets an example for other states. How this law change is reported in the media is very important because it shows people that the government is doing something to fix significant societal issues. This can also change how people think about it, which could make people more aware of and supportive of similar steps in other areas.

While the media applauds legislative progress, it underscores the need for comprehensive laws addressing non-physical abuse. This aligns with feminist critiques that legal frameworks often neglect intersectional vulnerabilities (Gill, [2007](#)).

Victim Portrayal

The way victims are portrayed in the media has a big effect on how people think about and react to domestic abuse. Stories in the media can either give victims strength by showing their battles and stories, or they can unintentionally reinforce victim-blaming attitudes and stereotypes. This in-depth study looks at how victims of domestic violence are shown in Pakistani media, using information from several pieces.

Media narratives oscillate between depicting victims as *agentic* (e.g., pursuing legal action) and *vulnerable* (e.g., “helpless” during crises). During COVID-19, *Dawn* reported a 72% surge in divorce filings in Sindh, framing it as:

“A desperate measure by women escaping abuse” (Dawn, 2021).

Conversely, articles like *“Silent Pandemic”* emphasize systemic failures:

“Domestic violence often hidden surged in the shadow of COVID-19” (Dawn, 2023).

Key Insight: Media’s dual framing reflects tension between empowerment narratives and structural critique. Victim-blaming is minimized, but episodic reporting risks reducing domestic violence to “crisis-driven” incidents rather than systemic issues (Entman, [1993](#)).

Cultural Implications

Cultural norms and societal standards have an important effect on how often and how people think about domestic violence. The way the media portrays domestic abuse in different cultural settings in Pakistan has a big impact on how people act in public. It can either reinforce traditional norms or question them to bring about change. The cultural consequences of domestic violence are examined in this extensive research of Pakistani media. Articles that describe the junction of culture and abuse are the primary focus.

Cultural norms are scrutinized in coverage of regions like Tharparkar, where Dawn links high suicide rates to:

“Cultural pressures related to marital practices and stigma” (Dawn, 2023).

Economic abuse is framed as culturally sanctioned, with articles noting:

“Financial control remains an unaddressed issue, normalized within marriages” (The News International, 2023).

Key Insight

As a result of this coverage, not only are the bad effects of strict cultural norms brought to light, but also the need for cultural sensitivity and change is discussed. The media is very important because it shows the often-hidden connections between cultural practices and domestic abuse. This pushes for needed changes in society.

Media challenges cultural fatalism by highlighting how norms perpetuate abuse. However, rural and low-income women remain underrepresented, echoing intersectional gaps in feminist media scholarship (Crenshaw, [1989](#)).

Societal Responses: COVID-19 and Stakeholder Collaboration

The response to domestic violence encompasses a wide range of actions, from individual interventions to collective policy efforts. The way the media reports on these responses can significantly influence public awareness, societal attitudes, and the effectiveness of

these interventions. This analysis explores how Pakistani media covers various responses to domestic violence, highlighting both the strengths and shortcomings of these efforts.

During the pandemic, the media amplified advocacy for preventive measures. Dawn cited the Women Action Forum's demand for:

"Government action to curb lockdown-induced domestic violence" (Dawn, 2020).

Collaborative efforts, like the National Commission for Human Rights' stakeholder consultations, are framed as progress:

"Multi-sectoral approaches are critical for sustainable solutions" (Dawn, 2023).

Key Insight: Media's emphasis on collaboration aligns with agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), positioning domestic violence as a policy priority. Yet, coverage rarely evaluates intervention efficacy, reflecting a need for longitudinal analysis.

Synthesis and Implications

1. **Media as a Double-Edged Sword:** The media can either further victimization or perpetuate the toxic portrayals. Stereotypical representations often narrate standardized temporalities of events, and domestic violence does not spare the physiological, psychological, and economic aspects. Such representations are not very informative with regard to the nature of domestic violence. While Pakistani English media advances domestic violence discourse through legislative advocacy and victim-centered narratives, it often prioritizes elite, urban perspectives, marginalizing rural and low-income voices.
2. **Policy Impact:** By framing domestic violence as a legal and public health crisis, media pressures policymakers evident in post-COVID coverage. However, episodic reporting risks oversimplifying structural issues.

The real-world research demonstrates how media frames legal reform affects people's perceptions towards authoritative measures that involve changes

or are reliant on the legal system. When the state media takes the lead in the legal transition towards the criminalization of Domestic Violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, public support could increase. This backing can influence rulemaking as it puts pressure on legislators to call for more reforms or ensure that existing ones are complied with. Positive media coverage helps to build a story that legal improvements are necessary and beneficial for their promotion and implementation. On the other hand, the media focuses on the breakdown of the law reforms without realizing the actual benefits, which creates doubts among the public. If the media is to report on mistakes without focus on background factors, trust in institutions will be reduced and valuable legal reforms restricted, based on the information from Gottlieb (2017). Reporting this type may demotivate the community from supporting legal change, thus stagnating continuous legislative progress.

Cultural Change: Articles challenging patriarchal norms (e.g., economic abuse critiques) demonstrate the media's potential to disrupt hegemonic discourses, though sustained focus is needed. According to Wilcox (2008), treatment-focused media alter the manner in which society perceives victims, transforming the latter from powerless victims into active agents. Contrary to the media messages, concern with stereotypes may increase prejudice and prolong a climate that incriminates victims.

In conclusion, the media job includes more than basic news coverage; they must challenge negative cultural elements and support advancements. This involves several key practices: It should provide the public with knowledge about the facts of domestic violence and its warning signs, and the legal and social support systems for victims; to powerfully address the often-gendered and raced notion of domestic violence as a relatively isolated issue that concerns only select communities' members, stories from different backgrounds can help. Engaging social workers and legal specialists in the media production process means that coverage will be enhanced with the ideas rooted in the effective data on combating domestic violence.

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