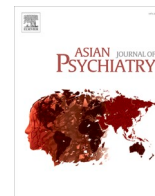




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Letter to the Editor

Role of media in preventing gender-based violence and crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic



Sir,

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an alarming rise in gender-based violence (GBV) and crimes such as rape, molestation, dowry deaths, domestic abuse and cybercrimes (Karthik, 2020; Power, 2020; Roesch et al., 2020; Tandon, 2020). Several strategies have been proposed to respond to the menace of gender-based violence during the pandemic; most of these involve burdening the already overstretched health care system and facilities (Roesch et al., 2020). Further, greater attention has been given to caring and management of women subjected to violence with relatively little focus on preventive strategies.

One such population level strategy to mitigate the risk of GBV may be responsible media reporting. Insensitive and unethical media reporting of GBV has direct ramifications on how the society understands the phenomenon; nevertheless, several violations in reporting have been observed (Ghosh, 2020; Shandilya, 2020).

Given this scenario, we propose a few recommendations with the twin objectives of promoting awareness about the role of media in prevention of GBV and to promote balanced reporting of such incidents:

Suggestions to promote balanced reporting of incidents of GBV

- While reporting GBV, media must avoid the following: mentioning identifying details of the victim (such as age/occupation), location of the incident (such as abandoned buildings, old warehouses), photograph of the location, description of the steps involved in the crime (such as lured the woman on the pretext of marriage) and judgmental language (regarding survivor's history, clothes, whereabouts at the time of the event). Mentioning these details in the report may contribute to victim shaming besides providing clues to perpetrators.
- Focus on providing support service details such as hotlines, shelters and crisis centres and draw attention towards positive stories of resilience and empowerment as survivors often act as agents of change. Additionally, prominent placement of reports (front page) may help in building awareness about the issue.
- Prioritize survivor's safety, right to dignity, confidentiality, protection from retribution or harm and also consider how a media story could potentially violate any of these core principles (International Federation of Journalists, 2014).
- Media reporters can add context to individual incidents by referring to the whole spectrum of sexual violence, reporting data on the prevalence of sexual violence and related issues in that region, counteracting myths and outdated attitudes and also contacting experts to educate the readers/viewers. ("Reporting on Sexual Violence," 2013)
- Frame country specific media guidelines for sensitive reporting of GBV and crimes – Given the positive impact of framing media guidelines for reporting suicide, (McTernan et al., 2018) a similar

approach may be followed with regard to media reporting of GBV; guidelines already available (Global Protection Cluster (GPC), 2014) may be adapted for use by countries.

- Mention about consequences to the perpetrators of violence – Media must highlight the legal and social consequences of the act on the perpetrator(s) and their family members. These include the quantum of punishment mandated by the law for perpetrators of GBV and the legitimate risk of their family being ostracized by the community.
- Monitor television soaps/serials that depict GBV – These may have an inciting effect on GBV as previously shown. Censorship is not necessary; instead, sensitive and responsible depiction is needed. Additionally, broadcasters may consider displaying a prominent static message at the bottom of the screen that highlights the words "gender-based violence is punishable by law", similar to anti-tobacco health warnings.
- News organisations must refrain from posting any breaking news on their online portals, including social media, until all the facts of the case have been ascertained. Also, certain media portals allow online readers to post comments; hence the media organisation should review, monitor and censor comments appropriately. ("Reporting on Sexual Violence," 2013)

Suggestions to promote awareness about the role of media in preventing GBV

- Given the constant pressure on media personnel to create newsworthy content, it is unlikely that framing of guidelines, in isolation, will dramatically improve media reporting of GBV. Rather, a collaborative approach between the government, media and health professionals that takes into account the barriers and perspectives of media. Professionals is needed to develop solutions that are sustainable and have better uptake.
- Make responsible media reporting of GBV a mandatory part of the training curriculum for journalists and editors.
- Television channels may consider hosting periodic talk shows or interviews with experts on various aspects of gender-based violence and crimes against women.
- Constitute a National media monitoring agency - This agency would have two major objectives – first, to monitor the quality of news articles depicting GBV in the media on a daily basis and second, to increase awareness about the role of media as a population level prevention strategy to deal with the menace. This agency may also be tasked with imparting regular training to media personnel in this regard.

To sum up, the media plays a vital role in increasing awareness about GBV and crimes, which has seen a spike during pandemic restrictions. A

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collaborative approach that combines sensitive reporting together with advocacy, sensitization and support for media personnel would contribute in curbing the menace. Further research must evaluate the impact of these recommendations on prevention of GBV and crimes, both within and outside periods of humanitarian crisis.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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