

News Coverage of Child Abuse in Nepal: Comparative Analysis of National and International Medias

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ABSTRACT

This study explores media coverage of child abuse in Nepal by analysing the National and International news articles. The study employs a mixed research approach through news coverage frequency and content analysis. It has extracted 50 English news reports each from national and international news outlets that cover the issue of child abuse over the span of six years (April 2017- April 2023) The content of the news reports was grouped into appropriate fields and analyzed under the several sub-topics such as framing, type of abuse, causes, solutions, perpetrators, geography etc.

This article contributes to media research studies by demonstrating the superficiality of news coverage on child abuse—which have been inadequate because of the journalistic and scholarly emphasis on objectivity—in a non-Western cultural context such as Nepal, which has hitherto received negligible attention in the field of communication. The study revealed that the Nepalese and International media seldom gave coverage to child abuse cases, and when they did, the reporting lacked substantial content. It emphasizes the need for the media to play a proactive role through in-depth analytical news promoting anti-exploitation. Since previous literature has proven the interrelation between media news coverage and action on child abuse, this study recommends more comprehensive coverage to secure public awareness and organizational policies that can promote solutions of the problem.

Keywords: News, Coverage, Children, Abuse, Exploitation, Media

1. Introduction

Media is an interactive method that involves

each nation's governments and their entities and facilitates them to communicate with each other (Poudel, 2019). Today, social media notably plays a major role in shaping media narratives while the traditional media still heavily influences public opinion (Chadwick et al., 2024). Based mainly in the capital Kathmandu, mainstream Nepali television, radio and newspapers constitute a vibrant, crowded and competitive media environment (Bhandari et al, 2016). For national media, a child friendly media directive has been declared by the Press Council Nepal (PCN) in February 2017. However, newspapers or the Nepali media in general have not been found to be proactive in surveillance of the cases related to children. At certain times, the children concerning issues escalate only because of mounting public pressure (Aryal, 2021).

Nepal's ratification of the United Nations Child Rights Convention and the establishment of the plural media system also coincided with the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 (Aryal, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (2006), child abuse includes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and negligent treatment and exploitation. Research on the ways children are presented in the mainstream news media has recently become a focus of attention in Media Studies, stressing news approaches that oscillate between demonizing children and picturing them as a powerful symbol of victimization (Ponte, 2007). For vulnerable populations like children, media coverage is vital if public concern for children is to remain on the political agenda, and if child protection services are to remain accountable (Goddard & Saunders, 2001). Besides press histories and administrative surveys of media growth, scholarly work on Nepal's news media remains sparse (Paul, 2019).

The research paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of national and international media coverage of child abuse in Nepal, with a particular focus on understanding the similarities, differences, and potential biases that may exist. This study fills a significant gap by examining how child abuse is portrayed in media within a non-Western context like Nepal, where reporting often lacks depth and frequency, limiting its impact on public awareness and policy action. By examining news narratives, framing, the geographic scope of coverage, and others, this study sheds light on how child exploitation is portrayed in different media contexts and its implications for addressing the issue comprehensively.

2. Literature Review

This literature review used a comprehensive research strategy, including open access and subscription-based electronic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Nepjol, Tandfonline etc. The literature was selected based on their relevance to the topic and the inclusion of English television bulletins' coverage of child exploitation in Nepal.

Globalisation has led to the events such as terrorism, war and health pandemics gaining international exposure and dominating the attention of the international news

media (Gong & Fidaus, 2024). A recent systematic content analysis by Jules Boykoff (2024) examines media framing of Olympics from both hard news and opinion journalism while engaging in indexing analysis: tracking who journalists turn to for insight and comment and how this affects the discourse bandwidth and the emergence of predominant frames.

In Nepali context, grave societal issues like trafficking are often brought up in media. However, precise children-centric media analysis has not been adequately done. A literature titled “Coverage of Children’s Issues in the Nepali Print and Online Media: Impact of Public Pressure on Media Gatekeeping.” (2021) by Kundan Aryal claims that most of the children-related news stories of Nepal are found to be based on a formal source. It indicates that the news stories are not in-depth in nature. Infrequent and low substantial media coverage has resulted in low public awareness and debate on the matter of social issues including those concerning children. Even though the article ensures better media understanding of child abuse, it only covers the gatekeeping aspect. Aryal’s recent paper titled “Nepali Media in Fulfilling Social Responsibility for Child Rights” (2024) further found that there is a practice of providing editorial instructions on reporting issues of child protection. However, almost all media outlets lack written editorial guidelines in this regard.

A working paper by the Institution of Development Studies named “A Media Analysis of Changes in International Human Trafficking Routes from Nepal” (2022) examined the media portrayal of different actors involved to understand the reported changes in international routes of human trafficking from Nepal after 2015. Despite its comprehensive content analysis of 480 news articles, it only covers a few child-related cases published in six national newspapers. Another article titled “Media Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse in Nepal: A Content Analysis” assessed the pattern of reporting of news by media precisely on the topic of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in Nepal through articles from online archives of two leading English newspapers of the country. It concluded that there is a gross lack of information about the causes of CSA and steps to prevent them (Sharma et al., 2024).

If we take a look at international research, an article named “Child sexual exploitation: a comparative frame analysis of news-media coverage over time.” (2021) uses frame analysis to news-media discourses about sexual exploitation of children and young people in two time periods (1997–99 & 2014–15). In another research by Wenting Yu, a content analysis of 501 newspaper articles was done. Over that time period, it was found that the Chinese news stories of child sexual abuse were more likely to present individual cause frames but societal solution frames. This provides an Asian representation to the issue, but national representation of Nepal still remains under question.

3. Materials & Methods

The study adopted an explorative approach to explore research questions that have not been studied in depth in the

context of Nepal. The research was conducted in two phases under mixed research: Quantitative and Qualitative. Early thoughts about the value of multiple methods—called mixed methods—resided in the idea that all methods had bias and weaknesses, and the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data neutralized the weaknesses of each form of data. (Creswell, 2018).

3.1 Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to critically examine the media's role in portraying child abuse in Nepal by analyzing the frequency, content, and framing of news articles published in both national and international outlets. It seeks to uncover patterns, trends, and gaps in the reporting of child abuse to understand the priorities and limitations of media coverage in addressing this pervasive social issue. Additionally, the research strives to highlight the shortcomings in media narratives and aspires to bridge the informational gap between local realities and global efforts, highlighting the media's role as an agent for addressing child abuse.

3.2 Sampling

The methodology employed for this research involved a systematic sampling of news articles on child exploitation from both national and international media sources. A total of 50 articles were selected from each category to ensure a comprehensive and representative sample. A combination of keyword searches, archival databases, and news aggregators were utilized to identify the articles. The inclusion criteria for article selection focused on relevance, and coverage of child abuse issues in Nepal. The research then employed textual content analysis to investigate the portrayal of child abuse in 50 national and 50 international news articles.

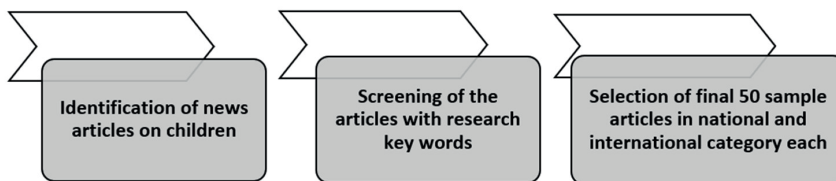


Figure 1: News articles search and screening results

Frequency analysis was employed to examine the presence and distribution of different types of abuse, framing techniques, news types, perpetrators, geographic locations, causes, and potential solutions related to child abuse in Nepal. By quantifying the occurrence of these elements, the study aimed to identify patterns and trends in the news coverage, shedding light on the priorities and gaps within the media discourse surrounding child abuse in Nepal. The analysis revealed that while certain types of

abuse and framing techniques were occasionally highlighted, the overall coverage was inconsistent and lacked a holistic approach, indicating significant gaps in the media’s prioritization and representation of child abuse issues in Nepal.

4. Results

4.1 Types of Abuse

News portrayals of Child Sexual Abuse in a developing country are shaped by the influence of traditional culture, modernization, and new global influences over an extended period of time (Yu, 2021). Defining a given behavior as abusive and harmful varies both and within cultures as well as overtime (Nepal et al., 2010). From the context of health too, child abuse is a complex issue and can be a sensitive topic to discuss during clinical encounters (Harding-Bremner, 2024). Because of the culture specific context of child rearing practices, it is difficult to accurately identify prevalence as well as incidence of child maltreatments (Atteraya et al., 2018).

The data reveals distinct patterns in media coverage of child abuse in Nepal. National news reported 19 cases of pedophilia, 14 of child labor, 9 of child marriage, 8 of trafficking, 9 categorized as "other" forms of abuse, and 6 cases of violence. In contrast, international news covered pedophilia in 15 articles, child labor and marriage similarly but focused more on trafficking with 13 articles. Violence was covered in just 2 international pieces, highlighting differing media priorities. Both emphasize the multidimensional nature of child abuse in the country.

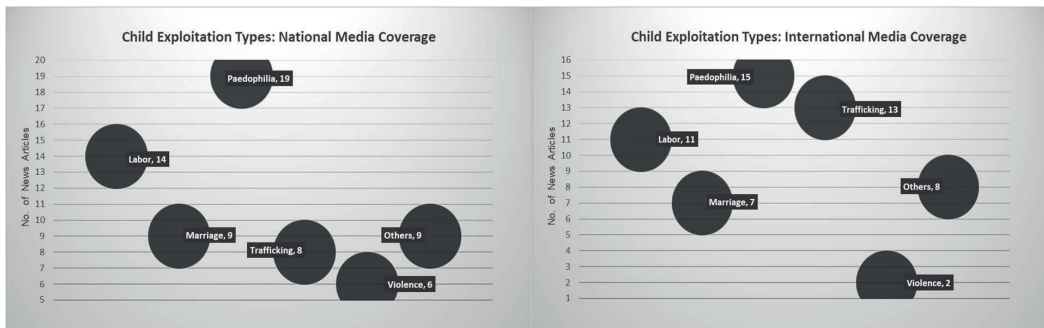


Figure 2: Bubble chart showing types of child abuse covered in national vs international news

4.2 News Coverage

Shoemaker and Reese (2014) argue that news is a thing, a social artifact that can be read, viewed, or interacted with. Deciding what’s newsworthy, on the other hand, is a cognitive exercise, a judgment that any person can make (p.172). As held by Lipmann (1998) ‘in principle news is covered as per one of the five news values such as sensationalism, proximity, relevance, unambiguity and facticity’. Voltmer and Koch-Baumarten (2010) view that the news rarely focuses on an issue over a sustained period, and thus generates only spotlights of attention that hardly leave any traces in

the memory of the audience (p.2). In this context, the dramatic advent of digitization and the internet has further magnified the challenges against professionalization of media, both globally and in Nepal (Acharya & Sharma, 2022).

Despite the explosion in the number of outlets and the liberalization of the landscape, the content, scope, and general approach of most programming rarely covered marginal voices but instead fell into repetitive patterns (Onta, 2008). The extent of not being willing to report child abuse may vary across different countries (Akmatov, 2011). In Nepal, news media coverage and priorities often focus on political activities and politicians rather than being driven by public concerns (Acharya & Chapagain, 2020). Children-related issues are not being given significant coverage in Nepali newspapers and online news portals, nor in mainstream media in the country (Aryal, 2021).

According to the findings, the national media in Nepal provides balanced child abuse coverage, with 50% hard news and 50% soft news, including 34% in-depth articles and 16% opinion pieces. On the other hand, international media shows a slight preference for soft news at 52%, with 36% in-depth articles and 16% opinion pieces, highlighting a focus on diverse perspectives and detailed reporting.

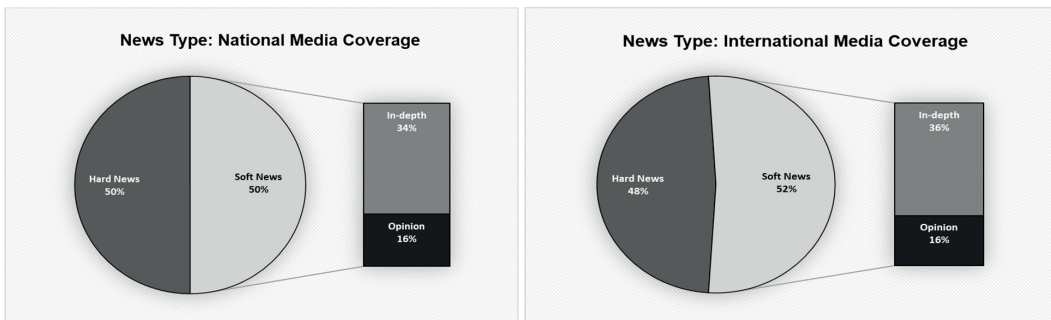


Figure 3: Pie Chart showing the types of news on child abuse covered in national vs international media

4.3 Statement in the news

Current trends of declining newspaper circulation on the one hand and public distrust in the news media on the other stress the need for journalistic texts that the audience finds to be both engaging and credible (van Krieken, 2020.) Mixing up various viewpoints allows readers to consider a wide range of solutions, instead of merely taking easy potshots at the perpetrators (Hancock, 2000).

Quotations confirm a news story's values, evaluate problems, express subjective experiences, or strengthen a news story's truth-value (Grunwald, 2005). Respondents presented with news reports containing 'one-sided' direct personal testimony on an issue perceived it to be less adequate than respondents given the same information in indirect testimony or those presented with no testimony at all (Gibson & Zillmann,

1993). Here, the key word is ‘one-sided’.

The analysis of 50 news articles from national and international media highlights differences in stakeholder representation. In national media, officials and experts dominate with 33 statements, while child victims and their families contribute only 6 and 4 statements, respectively, indicating a gap in amplifying affected voices. International media, however, gives more attention to victims with 15 statements, alongside 6 from families, while still featuring 40 from officials and experts. Both media types offer minimal platforms for perpetrators, with 1 statement in national media and 5 in international coverage, focusing primarily on victims and authorities.

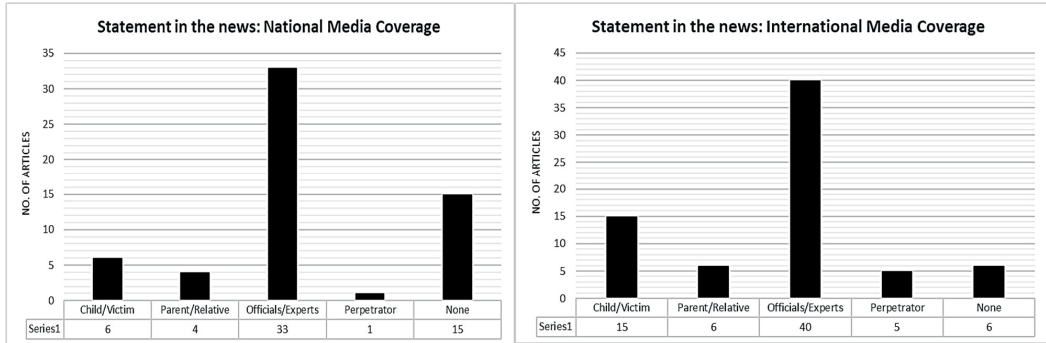


Figure 4: Bar Graph showing the inclusion of statements in the news articles

4.4 News Framing

Framing is the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs an issue. Frames influence citizens' perceptions of the issue and, ultimately, the opinions they express (Nelson et al., 1997).

Episodic vs Thematic

Episodic framing is the new-writing approach with event-centered information that describes issues in terms of “concrete instances” (Iyengar, 1996). Conversely, thematic frames carry abstract information presenting wider ‘themes’ or policies (Aarøe, 2011).

Iyengar (1996) demonstrates how episodic and thematic frames affect how people perceive the cause of a policy problem. Episodic framing leads citizens to attribute responsibility to the individual(s) portrayed in the story. Stories framed thematically lead citizens instead to attribute responsibility to the government and society for the issue at hand. Boukes (2022) provides new evidence that episodic framing negatively affects the attribution of responsibility to individual citizens. The reason is that episodic frames reduce the complexity of social problems (Zillmann, 2006). Moreover, the psychological impact of the news runs parallel to the type of framing. Aarøe (2011) concludes that when there are no or weak emotional reactions, thematic frames are stronger than episodic frames, whereas the relative strength of the two types of frame rhetoric is increasingly reversed when intense emotions are inflamed in the audience.

More frequent thematic stories would help policymakers, parents, and the public to understand child abuse as a social problem (Yu, 2021).

The national media uses thematic framing in 68% of its articles and episodic framing in 32%, indicating a focus on broader issues like systemic factors and policy implications in child abuse coverage. In contrast, international media balances both approaches equally at 50%, addressing both individual cases and broader themes to provide a well-rounded portrayal for a global audience. The balanced approach of international media in news framing may stem from their aim to provide a comprehensive portrayal of the issue to a global audience, ensuring that both specific cases and underlying factors receive adequate attention.

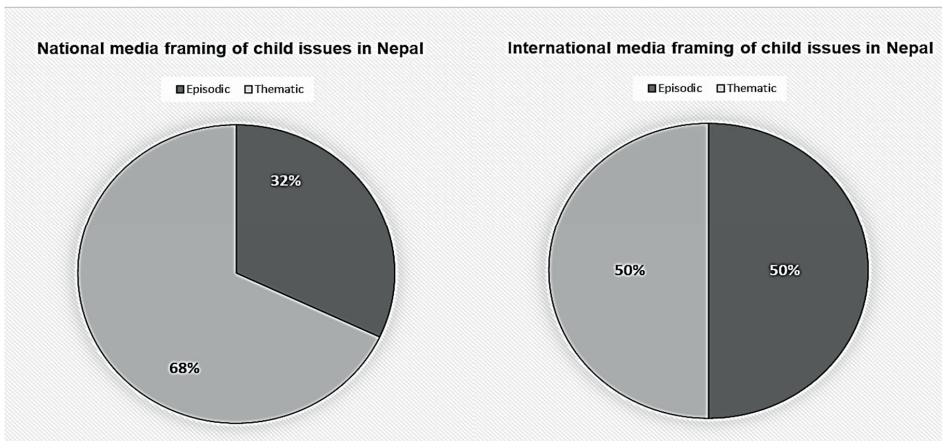


Figure 5: Pie-Chart showing the media framing of child issues in Nepal

4.5 Causes

Cause in news frames assigns who is responsible for a reported event, whether the audience is aware of it or not (Yu, 2021). The issue of violence and children is enormously complicated. The roots of the problem are as varied as the individuals involved, as the communities they come from (Hancock, 2000). Little is known about rates of childhood maltreatment in low-income countries, particularly amongst marginalized sectors of society (Dhakal et al., 2020). Beliefs & Behaviors are closely related to all the above factors. Consistent with cultural practices and norms that endorse physical punishment and verbal humiliation as a way to encourage children to become responsible and competent, (Khanal & Park, 2016) in Nepalese culture, children must be submissive and obedient towards their parents (Atteraya et al., 2018).

The data shows that national media offers a relatively balanced portrayal of child abuse causes, with 16 articles addressing small-scale factors (e.g., family dynamics) and 20 articles focusing on larger systemic issues, though 14 omit causes altogether. In contrast, international media places greater emphasis on large-scale causes, with 26 articles discussing systemic or cultural factors, only 7 focusing on smaller localized

causes, and 17 excluding causes. This suggests that international outlets prioritize broader societal issues over localized aspects in their coverage of child abuse in Nepal.

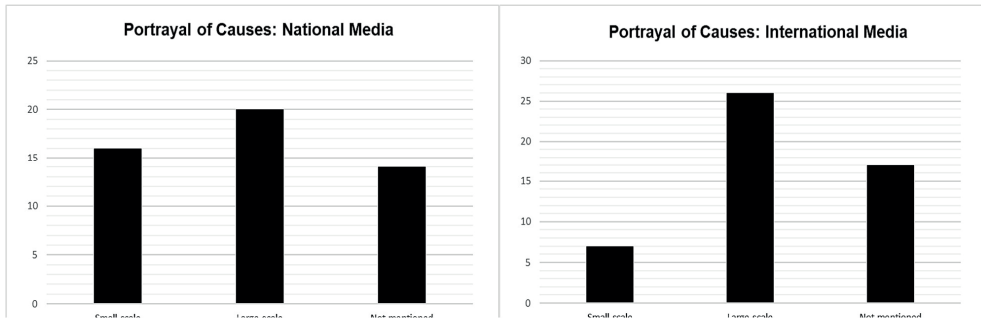


Figure 6: Bar Graph showing the media portrayal of child abuse causes

4.6 Victims

4.6.1 Gender & Ethnicity

Gender bias in which a male child is favored over a female child is a widespread phenomenon, and could be more severe in girls than in boys in South Asia, including Nepal (Atteraya et al., 2018). Female children are especially vulnerable due to limited economic opportunities, illiteracy or low education, and low socioeconomic and cultural status (Stallard, 2013). Similarly, indigenous children disproportionately experience discrimination in public education, poverty, and high dropout rates (Cultural Survival, 2016). News editors also tend to recognise the shortcomings and areas for news improvement more often when nonminority children are involved (Hancock, 2000).

The findings indicate that national media predominantly reports on multiple-victim child abuse cases, which account for 80% of analyzed articles. Singular-victim cases make up 14%, with female victims represented in 10% of articles and male victims in 4%. Additionally, 6% of articles do not provide information on victims. Meanwhile, international media features multiple-victim cases in 64% of articles, while singular-victim cases comprise 36%. In this category, female victims are highlighted in 22% of articles, and male victims in 14%, suggesting a greater emphasis on individual experiences in international coverage.

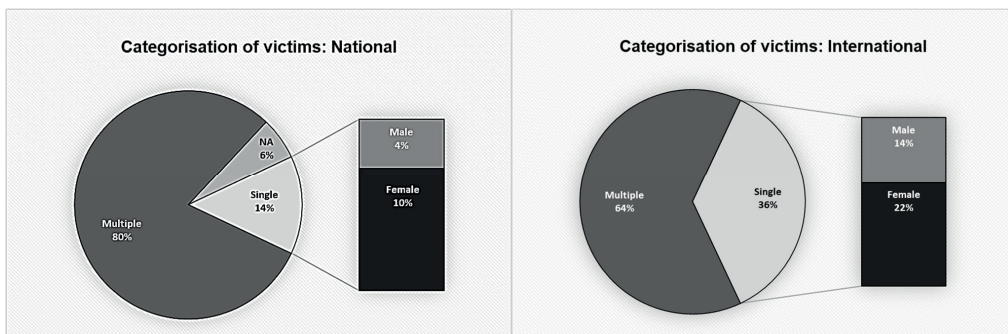


Figure 7: Mixed Pie-Chart showing the categorization of child abuse victims

The analysis of national media articles reveals a troubling trend in the reporting of child abuse victims' ethnicity. Among the articles reviewed, 11 cases involved victims from ethnic minority groups, while only 3 reported on non-minority victims, indicating a disparity that may hinder public awareness. Additionally, 36 cases lacked information on victims' ethnicity, limiting a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Similarly, international media reported 8 cases of ethnic minority victims and 3 cases of non-minority victims, reflecting consistency in coverage. However, 39 articles did not disclose the victims' ethnicity, restricting the ability to analyze potential disparities in international reporting.

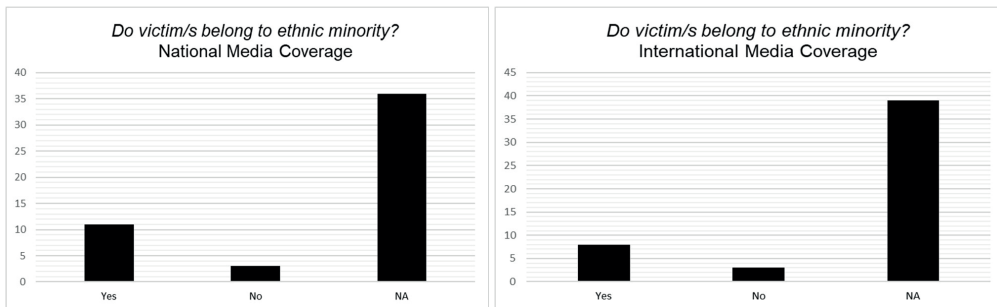


Figure 8: Bar Graph showing the ethnicity data on child abuse victims

4.6.2 Geography

When it comes to general news coverage, geographic proximity plays an outsized role on the coverage of stories by a given news outlet (Leetaru, 2018). News stories tend to prioritize and receive greater visibility when instances of abuse take place in well-known or affluent areas. As a result, abuse cases that happen in marginalized or underprivileged regions may receive less coverage, perpetuating an unequal representation of the problem. Data from a United States study shows child maltreatment reports higher in rural than urban areas (Sedlak et al., 2010). Rural population have certain characteristics and cultural patterns requiring sensitivity and understanding (Evans-Thompson et al., 2017). However, even in rural areas, local journalists are drawn to sources and “news” in locations where power is concentrated (Gutsche Jr & Rafikova, 2018). This geographic bias in news coverage can have serious consequences, as it may contribute to a lack of awareness and a limited understanding of the full extent of child abuse across different communities.

This study examines the geographic distribution of child abuse victims in news articles from Nepal. National media reports show 14 cases in urban areas and 15 in rural areas, with 10 cases reported in both settings, indicating that child abuse affects both populations. However, data on geographic distribution was unavailable for 11 cases, suggesting gaps in reporting. Meanwhile, international media reported 8 urban cases and 22 rural cases, reflecting a stronger focus on rural child abuse. Additionally,

20 cases lacked information on geographic distribution, indicating that international media may not always provide detailed context in their coverage.

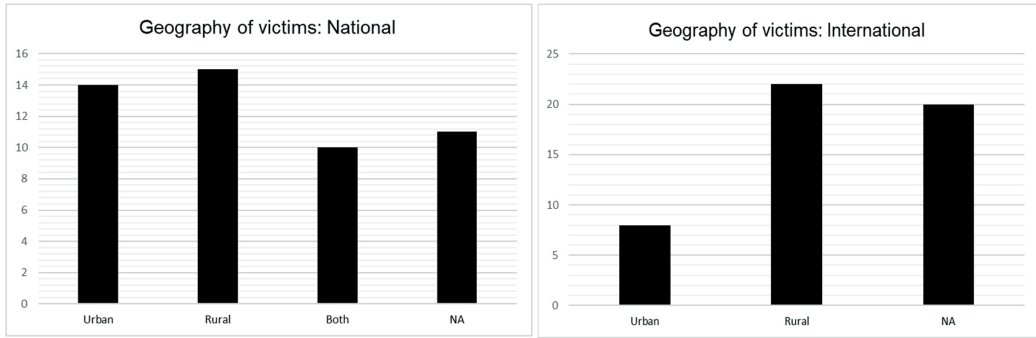


Figure 9: Bar Graph showing the data on geography of child abuse victims

4.6.3 Education

To children, education strengthens the knowledge and self-protection skills to prevent child abuse (Daro & Donnelly, 2002). There is also evidence that children who were trained to prevent child abuse become more active in preventing child abuse than who have not been trained (Do et al., 2020). When news stories highlight the educational aspect of child abuse, they contribute to raising awareness about the long-term consequences and challenges faced by these children. By shedding light on the educational barriers and opportunities for abused children, news stories can prompt discussions on the need for specialized support systems within educational institutions and the broader community.

This study also examined how the educational background of child abuse victims is represented in news articles. National media reports indicate that approximately 22% of victims were in or had attended school, suggesting many cases involve children within the formal education system. Conversely, 4% of victims were identified as not attending school, highlighting potential vulnerabilities among out-of-school children. However, data on victims' educational backgrounds was missing for 74% of cases, raising concerns about reporting comprehensiveness.

International media presents a different picture, with only 10% of victims reported as attending school and 14% identified as not attending, indicating a higher vulnerability among out-of-school children. Similar to national media, 76% of cases in international coverage lacked educational background information, limiting the understanding of the context surrounding child abuse incidents and highlighting the need for more thorough reporting practices.

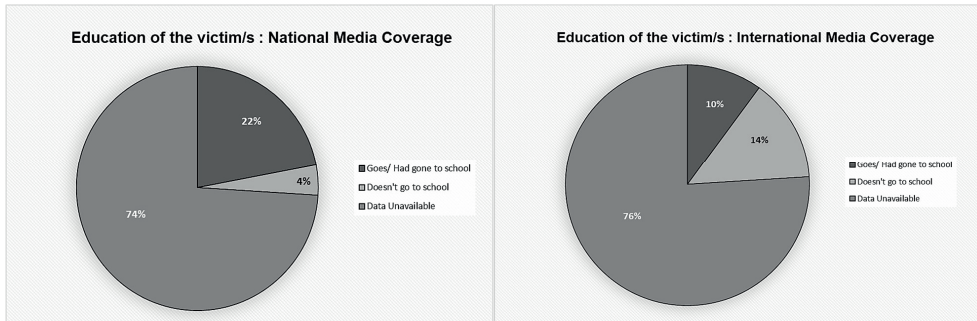


Figure 10: Pie-Chart showing the data on education of child abuse victims

4.7 Perpetrators and Medium

It would take a considerable amount of time and energy to identify perpetrators and write about them in newspaper reports (Kharel et al., 2022). Thus, journalists are often found skipping the intense investigative approach of finding out about the perpetrators. However, mentioning perpetrators in a news story about child abuse serves several important purposes.

Firstly, it provides transparency and accountability by identifying those responsible for the abusive actions. The biggest myth is that the dangers come from strangers but in most of the cases the abuser is someone the parents or child knows and is often trusted by parents or family (Nepal et.al, 2010). Naming perpetrators holds them responsible for their actions and helps to create a public record of their behavior, which can be important for legal proceedings and future investigations. However, it is important to handle this information responsibly and ethically, ensuring that the due process of law is respected and that the privacy and safety of victims are protected. Journalistic standards and legal considerations should be taken into account when mentioning perpetrators, aiming to strike a balance between the need for public awareness and the well-being of the victims involved.

The national media analysis reveals a diverse range of perpetrators in child abuse cases, with parents/guardians cited most frequently at 10 instances, indicating prevalence within familial contexts. Teachers (7) and strangers (17) are also common perpetrators, along with peers (6) and neighbors (3). However, 20 cases lack information on perpetrators, suggesting reporting limitations.

In international media, parents/guardians are reported most often, with 13 instances, aligning with national findings. However, teachers are not mentioned as perpetrators, and strangers are more frequently identified, with 24 cases highlighting a focus on unknown individuals. Peers and neighbors are each mentioned in 4 cases. Similar to national media, 11 cases in international coverage do not specify perpetrators, indicating potential reporting gaps.

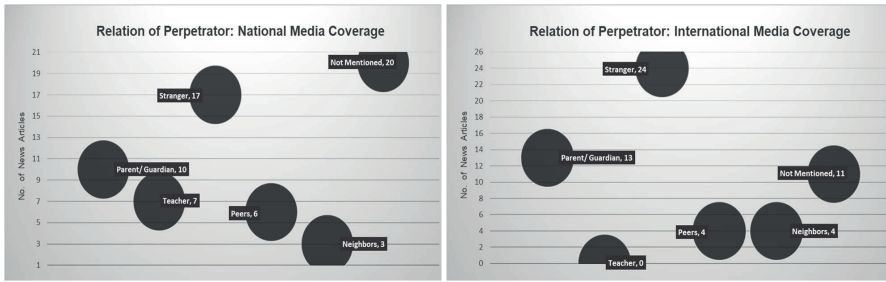


Figure 11: Bubble diagram on the relation of perpetrators

This study also compares the mediums of exploitation in child abuse cases reported by national and international media. National media highlights community settings as the most frequent medium of exploitation, with 38 cases reported, indicating significant attention to societal contexts. Additionally, 13 cases occurred within the home, underscoring domestic abuse concerns.

In contrast, international media primarily focuses on abuse within the home, with 16 reported cases, suggesting an interest in familial dynamics specific to Nepal. Notably, there were no reports of school-related abuse in international coverage, indicating a potential lack of emphasis on this issue compared to national media. However, the absence of reports does not imply that school-related abuse does not occur. Both national and international media reported 2 cases of online exploitation each, reflecting a shared concern about child abuse facilitated through online platforms in Nepal.

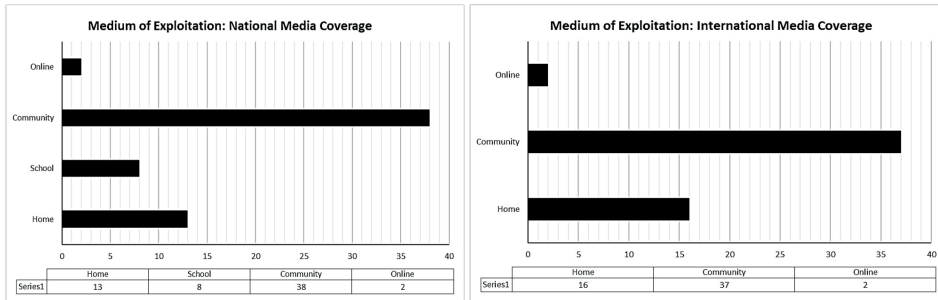


Figure 12: Bar Graph showing the medium of child exploitation

4.8 Solutions

Solutions to child abuse must be prominently featured in news stories to raise awareness, promote action, and protect vulnerable children. By highlighting effective strategies and initiatives, news outlets can educate the public about the importance of preventing and addressing child abuse. Research by the Reuters Institute suggests audiences may avoid the news because it negatively affects their mood or because they feel unable to act. Solutions journalism, which takes an in-depth look at a response to a problem and at the effectiveness and limitations of this response, could directly address

this root cause.

In this context, the study finally examines the inclusion of solutions in news articles about child abuse, comparing national and international media coverage. National media shows a slightly higher inclination to include solutions, with 23 articles featuring them compared to 27 that do not. International media has a similar trend, with 24 articles incorporating solutions and 26 lacking them. These findings underscore the importance of including solutions in reporting on child abuse, as it raises awareness and offers potential measures for prevention. By highlighting solutions, media can enhance public engagement and empower communities to address this pervasive issue.

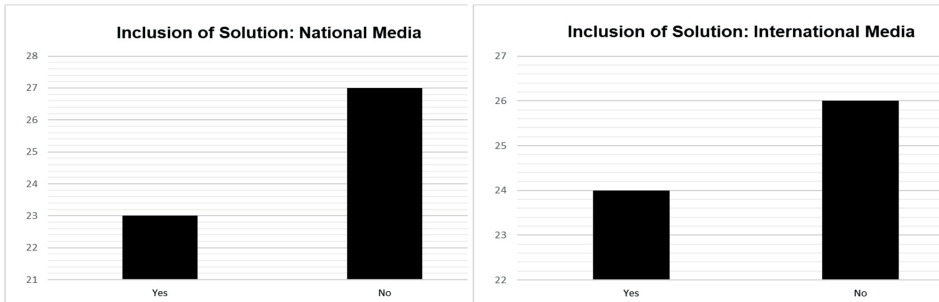


Figure 13: Bar Graph showing the inclusion of solutions in news articles on child abuse

5. Discussion

The findings from the comparative analysis of national and international media coverage of child abuse in Nepal shed light on the representation of this critical issue in the media landscape. The research discussion aims to delve deeper into the implications of the data and highlight important considerations for future reporting and advocacy efforts. The higher prevalence of articles without solutions in national and international media highlights an area requiring improvement. This discrepancy raises questions about the factors contributing to the omission of solutions in news coverage. It may be attributed to various factors such as the limited availability of comprehensive strategies to address child abuse, editorial decision-making, or the lack of coordination between media organizations and relevant stakeholders in the field. Future research could explore these factors in detail to better understand the reasons behind the imbalance in reporting practices.

Another significant aspect to consider is the impact of media coverage on public perception and action. The inclusion of solutions in news articles has the potential to shape public discourse and inspire individuals and communities to take proactive measures against child abuse. When readers are presented with viable solutions, they are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to engage in efforts aimed at prevention, intervention, and support for victims. Therefore, media outlets have a responsibility to provide not only an accurate representation of child abuse but also a pathway toward positive change. Furthermore, the study's focus on national and international media

outlets highlights the need for collaboration and knowledge-sharing across borders. By examining the similarities and differences in reporting practices, media organizations can learn from each other's experiences and adopt best practices.

In conclusion, the research findings underline the need for continued efforts to improve reporting practices, promote responsible journalism, and engage media outlets in fostering awareness, prevention, and intervention strategies. Collaborative initiatives and knowledge-sharing among media organizations can contribute to a more effective and influential portrayal of child abuse in the media, ultimately leading to positive societal change and the protection of children's rights in Nepal and beyond.

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