

# Media portrayal of child abuse in Sri Lanka and the impact of two incidents of child abuse on media coverage

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### Background

Child maltreatment is increasingly being recognised as an important public health issue in Sri Lanka. Most public knowledge in Sri Lanka on this issue, and direction for public policy, originate from mass media, which may sensationalise the issue.

### Aims

This paper evaluates the themes and major discourses present in Sri Lankan print media on child abuse, and aims to determine if content, style and frequency of these news items have been affected by the tragic child abuse-murder incidents in 2015.

### Methods

Articles on child abuse and their readers' comments were manually selected from the websites of the two daily newspapers with highest readership in Sri Lanka during two 3-month periods, before and after the above mentioned incidents. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze the findings.

### Results

The number of articles relating to child abuse increased significantly from 0.6% to 5% of the total articles reviewed in the two periods. The focus of the articles changed from merely reporting facts and highlighting the evil nature of child abuse perpetrators, to inefficiency of law enforcement authorities in finding and punishing perpetrators. Readership and online comments on these articles increased significantly in the post-incident period. Capital punishment for perpetrators was suggested by many readers in the post-incident period.

### Conclusion

The Sri Lankan public is very sensitive to news on child abuse with formation of firm, at times extreme, viewpoints on how to manage this issue. Thus responsible and accurate depiction of child abuse by the media is important.

**Key words:** depiction; child abuse

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## Introduction

Child maltreatment is increasingly being recognised as an important public health issue in Sri Lanka. Available data in Sri Lanka, though limited, suggests the annual incidence of sexual abuse to be more than 6000, and that 40.7% of parents have physically abused their children in the previous month (1). A study done among school boys in Colombo reported that 78.5% students had experienced sexual harassment and 21.9% had experienced sexual abuse (2). While more research is being done about child abuse in the country, for a vast majority of Sri Lankans, knowledge on this issue comes from the mass media. The Sri Lankan media have been essential to the growth of society's awareness of child abuse and to the task of placing this important problem in the minds of the public and on the political agenda in Sri Lanka (3). However, media reports on child abuse have been criticised around the globe for the sensational, superficial, stereotypical and uncritical nature and potential negative consequences of such media portrayal (4). Kitzinger pointed out that media is a 'business of

finding, constructing and selling news, requiring immediacy and drama' which reinforces popular stereotypes and is not necessarily reflective of accurate information (5). This value laden process is highly influenced by popular culture and moral-socio-political values rather than scientific research (6).

Sri Lanka witnessed several children losing their lives and enduring unspeakable physical and emotional anguish as a result of child abuse in the 2015. Two deaths of children secondary to child sexual abuse received round the clock media coverage through print, electronic and web based media. A 17 year old girl from Jaffna (Northern town in Sri Lanka) was abducted on her way to school, gang raped and murdered on 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2015. Four months later, a 5 year old girl was found strangled to death after being sexually assaulted, on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2015, after she was reported missing from her home in Kotadeniyawa (a village in the western part of Sri Lanka) the previous night. The media portrayal of these incidents were described by some as 'sensationalized', and their deleterious consequences have been documented.

Therefore we aimed to evaluate the themes and major discourses present in Sri Lankan print media on child abuse and to determine if content, style and rates of these news items have been affected by the well-known, yet tragic child abuse-murder incidents in 2015. It was hypothesised that the extent and nature of print media reportage would be impacted by these incidents. We also studied how readers have perceived this news by analysing consumption and reader comments.

Scientific research on analysis of media representation of child abuse in non-Western contexts is scarce. To the best of our knowledge this is the first of such studies in South Asia. No study has examined the public perception of media coverage of child abuse.

## Methodology

Two daily newspapers with highest readership in Sri Lanka, *Lankadeepa* and *Divaina* websites were examined for coverage of child abuse (7). Circulation of these two Sinhala language newspapers surpasses combined circulation of all their competitors taken together. Articles on the subject of child abuse and children's issues were manually selected from the newspaper websites during 6 months in 2015. The time frame of the study was two 3-month blocks, selected to provide a comparative period of 3 months either side of the above mentioned incidents, from 13/02/2015 to 12/05/2015 and from 14/09/2015 to 13/12/2015. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology was used to analyse the coverage. The *Lankadeepa* website allows readers to comment about the article and the site shows how many times it has been read. Thematic analysis was performed on news items and readers' comments (only on the *Lankadeepa* website) by grouping them and then identifying themes by repeated reading, recording of detailed analytical notes and discussion between the two authors throughout the data coding process. Discourse or media framing analysis was performed on the coverage by analysing the manifest content of each item, which was then categorised and coded in terms of: headline, visual display of information, number of photos, tone, and information in the article. This framework for coding was modified from previous similar research.

## Results

A total of 6841 newspaper articles (3027 and 3814 in the *Lankadeepa* and *Divaina* websites respectively) during the first 3 months, and 5905 articles (2819 and 3076 in the *Lankadeepa* and *Divaina* websites respectively) during the second 3 months were studied. Out of these 12746 newspaper articles, 339 articles were related to child abuse (Table 1). There was a clear increase in the extent of the media coverage in both papers concerned, during the second 3-months. While most of the news articles were directly or indirectly related to the child abuse-

murder incidents, unrelated articles on child abuse almost doubled (78%). Change in public perception was also marked, with more than 30 fold and 3 fold increase in readership and comments, respectively.

Table 1. Media coverage on child abuse before and after the child abuse-murder incidents

	First 3 months (% of total articles)	Second 3 months
Lankadeepa	14 (0.5%)	120 (4.3%)
Divaina	29 (0.8%)	176 (5.7%)
Total	43 (0.6%)	296 (5.0%)
Average times an article was accessed	115.7	5483
Number of comments	2.4	12.2

## Thematic analysis

There were significant changes in the predominant themes of news coverage following the incidents (Table 2). There was a marked increase in themes of 'inefficiency of law enforcement authorities to find perpetrators', 'increasing threat towards Sri Lankan children than ever before', 'community reaction towards child abuse' and 'poor parenting makes children vulnerable'; while in comparison, the proportion of themes related to 'reporting of mere facts', 'evil nature of the perpetrators' and 'contribution of victim towards being subjected to abuse' were reduced. Similar changes have been seen in the readers' comments (Table 2). The most striking change following the incidents was a large number of readers commenting on giving capital punishment to the perpetrator, while only one did so prior to these two incidents.

## Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis demonstrated a marked increase in the prominence given to the news coverage following the incidents, in terms of inclusion of pictures and featuring of an editorial and top story. Increase in catchy headlines and use of pejorative or harsh language indicated more sensational media coverage in the second 3 months of the study.

## Discussion

It is clear that after the incident the extent of media coverage changed significantly, and there was a marked difference in the nature of news articles. Discourse analysis demonstrated increase in sensationalism, with more attention-grabbing presentation of news items.

Table 2. Thematic analysis of the media coverage on child abuse

	First 3 months (n=43)	Second 3 months (n=296)
1. Reporting of mere facts	23 (53.5%)	50 (16.9%)
2. Inefficiency of the law enforcement authorities/ government to find the perpetrators	1 (2.3%)	67 (22.6%)
3. Increasing threat towards Sri Lankan children / Sri Lankan children are at risk more than ever before	2 (4.6%)	30 (10.1%)
4. Community reaction towards child abuse	0	28 (9.5%)
5. Inadequacy of punishment against child abuse perpetrators	0	28 (9.5%)
6. Evil nature of child abuse perpetrators	12 (27.9%)	25 (8.4%)
7. Poor parenting makes child vulnerable to child abuse	0	17 (5.7%)
8. Contribution of the victim towards being subjected to abuse	2 (4.6%)	9 (3.0%)

Table 3. Thematic analysis of the readers' comments the media coverage on child abuse

	First 3 months (n=104)	Second 3 months (n=1466)
1. Giving capital punishment for perpetrators	1 (1%)	403 (27.5%)
2. Giving severe punishment for perpetrators (No specific mention of capital punishment)	47 (45.2%)	299 (20.4%)
3. Inefficiency of law enforcement authorities	2 (1.9%)	207 (14.1%)
4. Evil nature of child abuse perpetrators	33 (31.7%)	180 (12.3%)
5. Feeling sorry for victims / family	10 (9.6%)	111 (7.6%)
6. Blaming political culture for child abuse	2 (1.9%)	95 (6.5%)
7. Cultural apocalypse	0	43 (2.9%)
8. Blaming parents for child abuse	1 (1%)	32 (2.2%)

Table 4. Discourse analysis of the media coverage on child abuse

	First 3 months (n=43)	Second 3 months (n=296)
With pictures / photos	3 (7%)	121 (40.9%)
With more multiple pictures / photos	1 (2.3%)	84 (28.4%)
More than 5 pictures / photos	0	32 (10.8%)
Top story of the day	0	5 (1.7%)
More than one article per day	0	26 (8.8%)
Editorial	0	4 (1.3%)
Catchy headlines	9 (20.9%)	99 (33.4%)
Use of pejorative words / harsh tone in the body of article	11 (25.6%)	122 (41.2%)

Following the incident, almost half of the articles included picture/s, which is in keeping with the media framing theory. Many of the pictures were of victims smiling innocently or of the mother crying incessantly. This was presented in combination with the frequent use of dramatic and pejorative language, such as “evil”, “inhumane” and “monster” which may result in a disproportionate fear and increased sense vulnerability. This may contribute to increased anxiety related disorders among children, decreased community tolerance toward people who are alleged to have been involved in child abuse and a sense of urgency in punishing the perpetrators. This phenomena was further illustrated by the uncritical reporting of details of the alleged involvement of three people, who were later cleared of any wrongdoing related to the crime; it appeared to be a declaration of a ‘guilty verdict by media’ (8). The media portrayal of the victim’s father was also biased and stereotypical, which is likely to have further influenced public misconceptions.

The findings of this study demonstrate that print media has a tendency to report child abuse of severe nature without providing details of the social context within which the abuse occurs. It is therefore not surprising that the main image painted of abusers in the media was as evil or bad individuals. Media coverage also concentrated on the more atypical and sensational cases which highlighted the ‘irony’ and ‘incongruity’ (6,8). Newsworthiness of the articles was based on stranger cases or extra-familial abusers in socially respectable positions such as teachers abusing students (9). This was significantly overrepresented in media coverage, when compared to the established fact that a majority of perpetrators are often known to the victims. Diversion of attention away from the actuality in this manner, and provision of little or no coverage of underlying social causes of child abuse, limits the ability and opportunity to provide accurate information and education about this important issue.

There appeared to be a clear connection between increased prominence on media coverage on evil nature of perpetrators, as well as lack of trust on authorities in bringing the perpetrators to justice, and the readers’ comments on giving capital or severe punishment to perpetrators. While media may simply reflect societal views, it has the capacity to form and change such views (10). This power is misused in distorted, sensational, superficial, and stereotypical media coverage.

Our findings also show that details and pictures of victims and families were widely used in the print media. The freedom of the press to publish is the freedom of the people to be informed. At the same time media should not misuse the liberty to invade people’s privacy. Revealing a child victim’s identity in the media and using their photographs can be equally, if not more damaging than abuse itself, especially considering the stigma attached to abuse in Sri Lanka.

## Limitations

Our study provided an analysis of the media portrayal of child abuse and public perception of it using the impact of two important child abuse tragedies on same. This study was limited to two Sinhalese newspapers and study period was limited to 6 months. This restricted focus excludes significant proportion of Sri Lankan people and may limit generalisability of the findings.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that the Sri Lankan public is very sensitive to news related to child abuse; therefore the media has an important influence on setting and changing policy agendas, through mobilisation of the public and public opinion. Researchers and journalists have a central role and responsibility in the provision of more accurate and less sensationalized depictions of child abuse, thus minimizing any further harm to victims of abuse, and creating a safer Sri Lanka for children.

## Conflicts of interest

None declared

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