

REPORTAGE OF UNNATURAL DEATHS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SRI LANKAN NEWSPAPERS

The Issue

The unnatural deaths of women and girl children are often a subject of speculation on the part of the general public, especially when they are due to external causes such as injury or trauma or when the manner or circumstances of death involve homicides, suicides, accidents, or cannot be determined. A key channel of disseminating knowledge about such deaths is via the media, especially via newspaper reportage. Today, Sri Lanka has a total of 25 registered newspapers spanning both the private and state media (Sinhala 11, Tamil 5, and English 9). Media coverage is assumed to expedite investigative and legal action on unnatural deaths and to deliver messages for prevention.

The Penal Code and other legislation in the country as well as Codes of Ethics and Guidelines, have provided the frames and limitations within which the media in the country, especially journalists, are expected to function. For instance, the publication of material identifying victims of sexual harassment, kidnapping and abduction, child sexual abuse, rape and incest, unnatural offences and grave sexual abuse, and gross indecency is a punishable offence under the Penal Code. However, there are exceptions: such as when a police officer in charge of the police station or the investigation acts 'in good faith for the purposes of the investigation'; or when there is written consent from the victim; or the written

authorization from the next of kin of a deceased victim, or from the parent/guardian of a victim who is underage or of unsound mind.¹

While newspaper coverage in all three languages are problematic, very often reportage of unnatural deaths in the Sinhala newspapers do not conform to ethical guidelines or accepted ethical standards of reportage. Almost all news items in both Sinhala and Tamil newspapers identify victims by their names and addresses, exposing them and their families to visibility and speculation not only within their own neighborhoods, but throughout the nation, notwithstanding the trauma that they would have undergone. The alleged perpetrators and suspects are also named, subjecting them to social scrutiny and repugnance even before they have been proven guilty. Moreover, there is a high degree of sensationalism and emotiveness in the writing, photography, headlines, colouring, details, spacing and positioning of articles in the Sinhala newspapers. Innuendo and embellishment are found to distort information.

¹ Penal Code (Amendment) [31 St October, 1995] <[http://www.hrcsl.lk/PFF/Library_Domestic_Laws/Legislations_related_to_Employment/Penal_Code_\(Amendment\)_Act_No_22_of_1995.pdf](http://www.hrcsl.lk/PFF/Library_Domestic_Laws/Legislations_related_to_Employment/Penal_Code_(Amendment)_Act_No_22_of_1995.pdf)> [accessed 6 November 2017].

The Code of Ethics for Journalists Rules (under Sri Lanka Press Council Law)² require that journalists respect the reputation and privacy of individuals in reportage and desist from commenting on the content of articles. They are also expected to refrain from distorting the truth by any act of commission or willful omission; and not report material that would offend or lower the standards of public taste and morality.

It is possible to prosecute those who violate and endanger the life of a victim or witness or informant of crime under the Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witness Act, No 4 of 2015,³ by publishing and disseminating information regarding his or her identity.



Yet, despite these legal standards and policy guides, very rarely have authorities acted on these daily violations in newspaper reportage.

Internationally, there is debate and disagreement regarding the extent to which exposure to violence in the media can influence the behaviour of viewers and readers, with a number of studies around the world providing evidence of varying degrees of effect.⁵

A meta-analysis by Paik and Comstock in 1994 revealed that viewing media violence consistently was associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior ranging from the trivial (imitative violence directed against toys) to the serious (criminal violence).⁴ This includes consequential outcomes from the acceptance of violence as a solution to problems, increased feelings of hostility, and the apparent delivery of painful stimulation to another person.



There is increasing evidence in medical literature on the association of suicide reportage with an increase in suicide incidence in the community known as 'Werther effect'⁶ especially in the subscription to a particular method, and a specific time.⁷

Extensive newspaper reportage has been implicated in the copying and multiplying of Yellow Oleander poisoning as a method of self-harm and suicide in Sri Lanka from the early 1980s onwards.⁸ Suh S, Chang Y, Kim N in 2014 report a general increase in suicide rates within a week or so of celebrity suicide reportage.⁹



There is increasing evidence that the mass media can also be used to prevent suicide ideation which is known as 'Papageno effect'.^{10 11 12 13}

Currently the WHO is promoting specific guidelines for suicide reportage that are designed to deter and discourage suicide ideation.¹⁴

2 'Ethics Code | Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association' <<http://www.slwja.lk/ethics.php>> [accessed 6 November 2017].

3 'Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act., No. 4 OF 2015' <[http://www.srilankalaw.lk/gazette/2015_pdf/4 of 2015.pdf](http://www.srilankalaw.lk/gazette/2015_pdf/4%20of%202015.pdf)> [accessed 6 November 2017].

4 Huesmann LR, Taylor LD. The Role of Media Violence in Violent Behavior. *Annu Rev Public Health.* 2006;27(1):393-415. doi:10.1146/annurev.publhealth.26.021304.144640.

5 Cantor J. Media violence. In: *Journal of Adolescent Health.* Vol 27. ; 2000:30-34. doi:10.1016/S1054-139X(00)00129-4.

6 Niederkrotenthaler T, Herberth A, Sonneck G. The "Werther-effect" legend or reality? *Neuropsychiatr.* 2007;21(4):284-290.

7 Chen Y-Y, Chen F, Yip PSF. The impact of media reporting of suicide on actual suicides in Taiwan, 2002-05. *J Epidemiol Community Heal.* 2011;65(10):934-940. doi:10.1136/jech.2010.117903.

8 Eddleston M, Ariaratnam CA, Meyer WP, et al. Epidemic of self-poisoning with seeds of the yellow oleander tree (*Thevetia peruviana*) in northern Sri Lanka. *Trop Med Int Heal.* 1999;4(4):266-273. doi:10.1046/j.1365-3156.1999.00397.x.

9 Suh S, Chang Y, Kim N. Quantitative exponential modelling of copycat suicides: association with mass media effect in South Korea. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci.* 2015;24(2):150-157. doi:10.1017/S204579601400002X.

11 Niederkrotenthaler T, Voracek M, Herberth A, et al. Role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide: Werther v. Papageno effects. *Br J Psychiatry.* 2010;197(3):234-243. doi:10.1192/bjp.bp.109.074633.

12 Sisask M, Värnik A. Media roles in suicide prevention: A systematic review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health.* 2012;9(1):123-138. doi:10.3390/ijerph9010123.

13 Niederkrotenthaler T, Reidenberg DJ, Till B, Gould MS. Increasing help-seeking and referrals for individuals at risk for suicide by decreasing stigma: The role of mass media. *Am J Prev Med.* 2014;47(3 SUPPL. 2). doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2014.06.010.

14 WHO | Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals - update 2017. WHO. 2017. http://www.who.int/mental_health/suicideprevention/resource_booklet_2017/en/. Accessed November 6, 2017

What is an Unnatural Death?

An unnatural death is a death that is not a result of disease or aging but one that is caused by external reasons such as injury or trauma or poisoning. The manner and circumstances of such a death could be homicidal, suicidal, accidental or undetermined.

About the Study

In December 2015, the UNFPA commissioned a national study on unnatural female deaths in Sri Lanka with the following objectives:

- examine the types, injury patterns, and factors associated with unnatural deaths of women and girls in selected Sri Lankan newspapers,
- describe the newspaper coverage of unnatural deaths, and
- provide policy inputs and guidelines for ethical newspaper reportage.

The rationale for selecting the individual newspapers was based on national coverage as the Sinhala paper attests to a circulation of 150,000, the Tamil paper 120,000 and the English 88,000.



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Daily News

Survey of newspaper articles reporting unnatural female deaths for period of six months from September 2016 to March 2017

The survey consisted of

88
Sinhala
articles

31
Tamil
articles

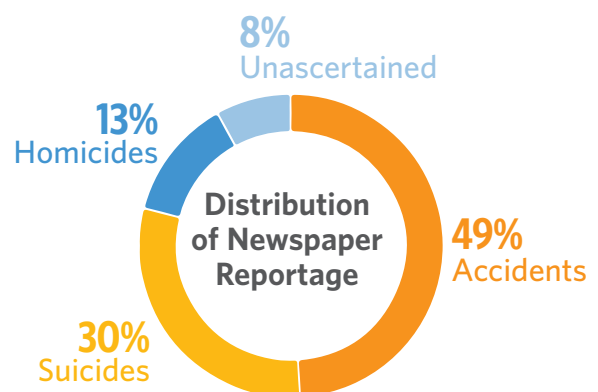
33
English
articles

The articles were further studied from a journalistic framework focusing on visual presentation and language as well as for factuality, opinion, embellishments, emotiveness and sensationalism. The total of 152 articles from 3 newspapers were then analyzed thematically for their qualitative content.

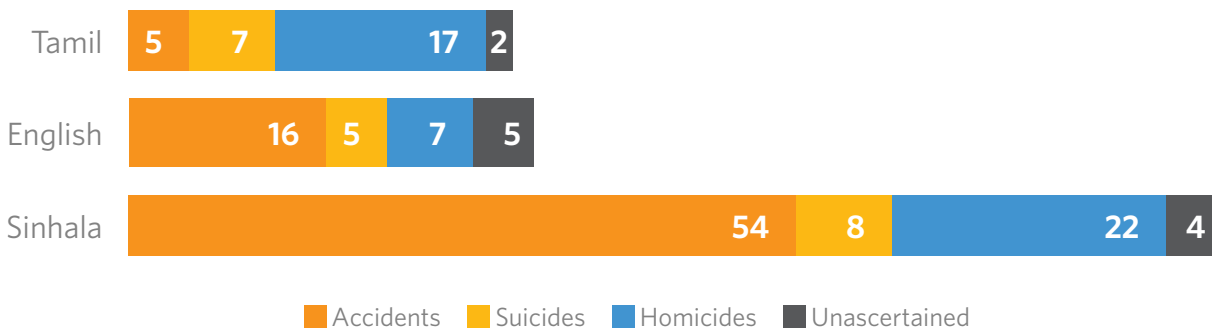
Some data was triangulated with evidence from interviews conducted with relatives of victims for the parallel research study "Retrospective, Descriptive Study of Unnatural Deaths among Females in Five Selected Provinces of Sri Lanka."

English reportage were short and entitled 'Police Logs'. In general, the total word count of the articles in the English papers was around 50 -100 words. However, in the Sinhala and Tamil papers, it ranged from 100 words to half a page. Sinhala articles were lengthy based on details gathered from inquests. The investigating officers were identified by name along with their badge numbers. The English articles provided information from which readers could draw their own conclusions. In contrast, both Sinhala and Tamil articles included statements and opinions from concerned parties.

Key Findings



Distribution of Cases among Newspaper Reportage



Analysis of Type of Accident

	RTA	Train	Burn	Crush Injuries	Other
Sinhala	34	7	4	4	5
English	13	1	1	-	1
Tamil	4	-	-	-	1
Total	51	8	5	4	7

 Death by road traffic accidents are the most commonly reported among accidents.

Analysis of Type of Suicide

	Hanging	Self-emolition	Drowning	Other
Sinhala	4	1	-	3
English	3	1	-	1
Tamil	5	-	2	-
Total	12	2	2	4

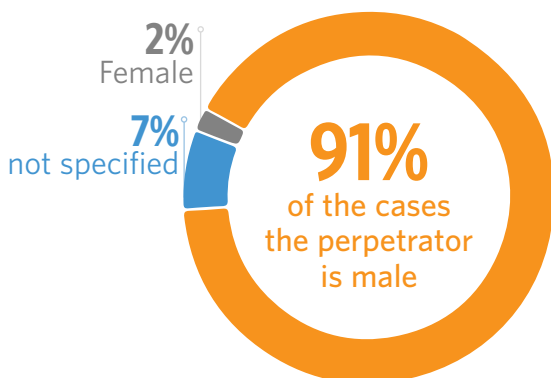
 Death by hanging is the most commonly reported form of suicide.

Analysis of Type of Homicide

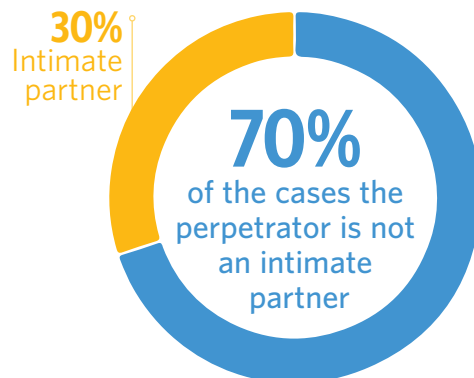
	Strangulation	Sharp Force	Blunt Force	Burn	Gunshot	Other
Sinhala	3	11	2	1	2	3
English	1	1	2	-	1	2
Tamil	6	2	3	2	-	4
Total	10	14	7	3	3	9

 Death by sharp force is the most commonly reported form of homicide.

Gender of the Perpetrator



Profile of Perpetrator



- Barring unidentified deaths, almost all the news items identified victims by their full names and addresses along with reference to the police officer in charge of the police station or investigation. It would seem that the press is, as a journalistic practice, repeatedly misinterpreting the exemption in the Penal Code which allows for the identification of victims 'by or under the order of the investigating police' to mean the publication of the names and even addresses of victims as long as they are attributed to the police. The stipulation that the police should act 'in good faith for the purpose of the investigation' in publicizing the identity of victims seem to be ignored.
- Similarly, details of the alleged perpetrator / responsible person were also more frequently reported in Sinhala newspapers as opposed to Tamil and English newspapers.
- Even though Police investigations had not been completed, many news reports relating to suicidal and homicidal circumstances included conclusions on contributory factors. In fact, there were rarely any reports on suicides and instances of undetermined causal circumstances.
- Often, there were misleading disjuncts between the sensationalist headlines and the content of an article, particularly in Sinhala newspapers. The lack of information and social analysis were camouflaged by sensationalist wording, graphics in technicolor and lurid photographs. The inclusion of gory details, colloquialisms, a moral tone, dramatic and emotive writing and the emphasis on the tragic were common notwithstanding the gravity of the content.

Examples of Sensationalist Headlines

(translated from Sinhala)

“Eighteen-year-old mother chopped to death”

“The body pieces of one woman wedged in a tree strewn all over, while her one-year-old child thrown in a drain”

“Bare legs of a young white woman land on the platform and slides in-between the train”

“Illegal wife killed for jewelry as money not given for drugs”

“Mother's neck cut while breastfeeding by the illicit lover”

Sensationalization of Unnatural Deaths through Triviality

The frequent attribution of a singular and trivial reason as the trigger for murder can justify murder for trivia and make such reasoning acceptable.

“Son kills 73-year-old mother with a pole due to delay in breakfast”

Language play in headlines further belittled unnatural deaths

“Father-of-two (Dedaru Piya) Caught After Murdering Mother-of-three (Thidaru Mawa) While Sleeping on a Mat”

“Personification of death (Truckmaraya / Ginirakusa / Punchi Samanaliya)”

Innuendo

Innuendo in reportage (especially in headlines) were frequently suggestive of a sexual subtext of illicit relationships between men and women. Moreover, there were frequent insinuations that women were irresponsible in their behaviour or that they were responsible for their own demise.

Father-of-two (Dedaru Piya) caught after murdering Mother-of-three (Thidaru Mawa) while sleeping on a mat

(impression of an affair between the victim and alleged perpetrator)

Burnt body of woman found in Kirikitte room

(impression of a hotel room as opposed to her own bedroom)

Chinese girl taking selfies killed by falling off train

Wall built by father tumbles and kills eight-year-old child

(despite being a mason, the father could not build a wall)

A majority of articles in Sinhala newspapers referred to women according to their gender roles (as mothers, wives, daughters, grandmothers, 'illegal wives' etc.). In contrast, English Newspapers used the term "Woman" to identify the females. At times, the victims were sexualized through both language and graphics. The age of those involved was invariably mentioned as well as the number of offspring (even if the woman concerned was 86 years old). The dead women were identified by their respective professions only in two instances.

Description of Coverage in the Sinhala Newspaper

- Often reports had outsized, conspicuous titles or subtitles on colorful backgrounds which sometimes covered more than half the space of the article.
- Accidents were frequently accompanied by an emotive photograph either of the vehicle or the victim.
- Other graphics included grieving mothers, blood splatter, wrecked vehicles, and images of both victims and alleged perpetrators

Examples:



Only three articles (in Lankadeepa) during the survey period carried messages of social responsibility (covering social protests related to incidents and advocating preventive measures for suicides and murders).

Interviews with relatives of victims conveyed that often journalists had interviewed them under false pretenses and during situations of distress. They further claimed that they had been misquoted in reportage.

The Debate

The debate on newspaper reportage is complex due to competing rights and interests. The paramount consideration of society is to ensure that victim families secure justice as far as possible and that perpetrators are punished. Consequently, legal and ethical safeguards have been instituted to protect the identity, reputation and dignity of victims (and their families) even in death.

Sri Lankan law is expected to protect the privacy of victims and relatives except in given instances. Yet there are exceptions that allow the press to divulge the identities of the victims, their families, and alleged perpetrators as a journalistic norm. Moreover, it is argued that intense competition amongst newspapers (as well as amongst mainstream and social media) has led to increasingly irresponsible and unethical reportage. For instance, women victims are portrayed negatively while the predominant objective of articles seem to be in sensationalism, to the detriment of facts. Consequently, issues such as women's rights, victim rights, and the rights of alleged perpetrators have come to the forefront. Furthermore, the role of the media, in this instance, the press, to influence human behaviour to the extent of violence is constantly debated.

On the other hand, the public has the right to be informed of news. It is also possible that extensive and sustained media coverage may expedite some of the legal processes pertaining to these cases. However, it has been argued (by the Press Council of India, for example) that the intrusion of the press into the privacy of individuals should be motivated by genuine overriding public interest as opposed to morbid curiosity. On the other hand, while some matters would remain sub judice, the right to privacy becomes subsisted when a matter becomes of public record.

The protection and assistance that may be provided under subsection (1), may include:

The adoption of appropriate measures to prevent disclosure of the identity and the entirety or part of the testimony of such victim of crime or witness, to persons other than the accused concerned and his legal representative.

The measures adopted shall include the power to direct media institutions, media personnel and other specified persons from publishing, broadcasting, telecasting or otherwise disseminating information pertaining to the identity of the victim of crime or the witness concerned.

Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act, No. 4 of 2015

Media Responsibility

- Intruding and exploiting grief during times of stress is an ethical issue. Avoid interviewing family members under false pretenses and during times of stress.
- Remember that families may be in shock and experiencing trauma. Avoid identifying victims, perpetrators, and their families through direct or indirect references or details (do not provide names and addresses).
- In particular, avoid the practice of implying that victims are being identified by the police for the benefit of the investigation.
- Avoid a speculative reconstruction of the incident in reportage before the forensic conclusion is made available, as this could interfere with the investigation and cause confusion.

- Desist from insinuations in reportage (including headlines) regarding the sexual behavior of victims as this may augment the suffering of family members.
- Newspaper reportage should adhere to the 'do no harm' principle. Do not misquote or distort or misrepresent the words of interviewees.
- Keep in mind that there may be vulnerable people who maybe affected by shallow news coverage. Do not speculate on or trivialize the cause of unnatural deaths.
- As per standard ethical practice, ensure that newspaper headlines / contents that include allegations are identified through appropriate punctuation.
- Make a difference. Inform the general public of available means and resources that can offer some form of redress such as counselling centers, legal remedies, support groups, hotlines and helplines, etcetera.
- Remember, there may be people vulnerable to the negative coverage of unnatural deaths. Include messages relating to prevention when it comes to accidents and suicides.
- Publicize messages relating to prevention, protection, redress, and protest against homicides.
- Above all, strive for excellence in journalism.

Legal and Policy

- There have been new developments worldwide on sensitive and responsible media reportage. Be informed of new ethical guidelines on reporting suicides, homicides and accidents.
- Prepare / implement guidelines for ethical newspaper reportage within media institutions.

- The police and the judicial system should implement or conform to the existing laws pertaining to newspaper reportage.
- Ensure that the Press Complaints Commission, the Editors' Guild, Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, etc. take up the cause of ethical journalism.

Respectful and Sensitive Reportage

- Despite the heavy competition between newspaper agencies, avoid sensationalist and provocative headlines when it comes to unnatural deaths.
- Make sure that news content justifies news headings so as to safeguard the integrity of the newspaper.
- The bereaved are especially vulnerable to negative coverage. Refrain from publishing pictures of mangled corpses or other images that may create terror, or revulsion or ignite communal hatred.
- Avoid sensationalism through newspaper layouts and graphics as this could easily lead to the glorification of unnatural deaths.
- There is strong possibility that the sensationalist reportage of media violence can lead to the perpetuation of similar violence. Avoid sensationalism. This involves:
 - ◆ emotionalism by emphasizing the dramatic and tragic,
 - ◆ glorification through the exaggeration of graphic and gory details,
 - ◆ trivialization through the emphasis of inconsequential details,
 - ◆ colloquialisms that are disrespectful,
 - ◆ innuendo and insinuations that provide a false impression with regard to the incidents or the people concerned, and
 - ◆ sexism and sexualization of victims

- It is also important to desist from glorifying acts of violence, armed robberies and terrorist activities and their perpetrators through articles and interviews.
- Actively maintain high journalistic standards by abstaining from reportage that is obscene, vulgar or offensive to public good taste.
- Avoid references and images that stereotype men and women so as to provide depth to reportage.
- People are composite human beings. Avoid identifying men and women in relation to their gender roles, age, relationships and family details.
- Good journalism involves being gender aware. Avoid attributing irresponsible behavior to women or insinuating that the victims are responsible for their deaths.
- Avoid taking a moral line that condemns the victims – women and girls.

Educational

- Ensure that monitoring agencies (such as the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission / Editors' Guild etc.) re-train and train journalists on sensitive, responsible and ethical newspaper reportage (including gender sensitivity).
- Re-train and train police officers on the relevant laws and on media interactions
- Include topics such as gender, ethics and media responsibility in journalism courses at all levels.

Key Stakeholders

- Government and Private Media Institutions
- Owners of Newspaper Organizations
- Editors and Sub-editors
- Court Reporters / Provincial and Area Correspondents
- Professional Guilds (Editors, Reporters, Newspaper Owners)
- Teachers of Journalism Courses
- The Media Ministry
- The Ministry of Law and Order
- National Authority for The Protection of Victims of Crimes and Witnesses
- Police Investigators
- Forensic Experts
- Judges
- Lawyers

Laws and Policies on Newspaper Reportage

- The Penal Code Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act, No. 4 of 2015
- Code of Professional Practice (Code of Ethics) - The Editors Guild of Sri Lanka.
- The Code of Ethics for Journalists Rules - Sri Lanka Press Council.
- The Right to Information Act.

Guidelines on Newspaper Reportage

- Guideline for Media Personnel who report facts relating to child victims and children in contact with the criminal justice process. (Child Protection Authority)
- Reporting on Child Abuse (handbook for Journalists-National Child Protection Authority) in National Guideline for the Management of Child Abuse and Neglect A Multi-Sectoral Approach
- Code of Professional Practice (Code of Ethics) of The Editors Guild of Sri Lanka adopted by the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka

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