INCREASING SPATE OF SEXUAL OFFENCES AGAINST CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA IN SRI LANKA

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Child abuse on the rise?

2012 Police reports:
Rape 1759
Abuse 1194
Sexual harassment 547

(Colombopage, 2013; BBC, 2012)
Context: Sri Lanka

- Population: 20 million
- Child population: 25.8%
- 30 years of civil war
- Post conflict stage
- Political instability
- Violence

(Census 2012)
Media and child abuse

• A complicated relationship
The role of the media

• Social mobilization
• Publishing stories- a catalyst for more adversities?
• Media representation affecting societal views of child abuse and rape?
Methodology

• Mainstream print newspapers published in Sri Lanka from January – December 2012
• In the 3 national languages English, Sinhalese and Tamil
• 48 articles
• 12 duplicates of same event
• 1 incomplete
• 35 reports identified and analyzed
• Qualitative content analysis methods applied
• Meaning units, condensed meaning units and codes identified
• Codes categorized into themes
Findings

• Themes
  - Misrepresentation through the use of language
  - Misrepresentation through cultural lenses
  - Lost opportunities
Misrepresentation through the use of language

Making headlines:
1. Headlines that name the offences
   “Father rapes his own daughter”

2. Headlines that ignore the offences
   “Pregnant by a stranger”

3. Headlines that redefine or reframe the offences
   “Love affair gone wrong”
Misrepresentation through the use of language

Choice of language and words

• Ambiguous terms
  * Molesting/ sexual acts

• Sensationalization
  “girl molested by mother’s paramour”
  “Septugenarian remanded for sexually molesting 12 year old”

Limiting scope and gravity of the crime
Misrepresentation through the use of language

• Bias towards abuser
  “Disabled soldier sentenced for rape”

Shaping public opinion in a post conflict situation
Exoneration of perpetrator
Misrepresentation through the cultural lens

• “Five arrested for raping 15 year old girl;
  The victim had gone to the Galewala Town after she had fallen out with her parents”

Traditional patriarchic views
Filial responsibility
Victim blaming
Lost opportunities

• “A four year old was sexually molested by an elderly uncle while at play with a girl of the same age at a friend’s place. The mother of the victim had requested her daughter to go and play on another day but the small girl had been adamant”.

• “Septuagenarian remanded for sexually molesting 12 year old”.

• Failing to use vital information to:
  Educate
  Shape public opinion
  Social deterrents
  Advocate
Media role in child abuse

- Misrepresentation of events
- Reducing gravity and pervasiveness of the crime
- Exonerating perpetrator
- Blaming victim
- Lost opportunities
More questions

• Increasing incidence of child abuse? Vs Increased reporting?

• Empirical research vs Ethical issues?
  -Lack of supportive services

• Does media shape public opinion?
Lack of public outcry ??
Is it due to media reporting ?
Conclusions/Recommendations

• Advocacy ? As for violence against women
• Research ?? Methodological and ethical concerns to be addressed
• Media reporting
  – Standard guidelines in local languages
  – References to laws
  – Mandatory inclusion of National Child Protection Authority hotline