

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE ON FORCED CONVERSIONS IN SINDH

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Abstract

Forced conversions in the rural areas of Sindh has become a common cultural practice. This research study aims to investigate and explore the print media coverage of the news on forced marriages and conversions in Sindh. In order to investigate the coverage patterns of the newspapers, a quantitative approach is employed in the light of agenda setting theory. The primary data were collected through the content analysis of Daily Dawn and Daily Kawish. One month of newspapers i.e. 15th March, 2019 to 15th April, 2019 were analyzed in terms of its front, back and opinion pages. The result reveals that the Daily Dawn published 09 reports, while the Daily Kawish published 25 news reports. Moreover, the Daily Dawn has given space to 01 editorials, 02 articles, and 02 letters to editors, while the Daily Kawish has published 01 articles and 02 letters to editors. Besides, it was found that both the newspapers have covered the force conversion issue in a neutral perspective. Finally, it was observed that the regional newspaper Daily Kawish has given more coverage to the issue in its news reports and the mainstream newspaper Daily Dawn has covered the issue more in its articles, editorials and letters to the editor.

Keywords: *Print Media, Forced Conversions, Comparative Analysis, Sindh*

Introduction

Forced marriages and conversions are the common cultural practices in the rural areas of the country in general and particular in Sindh. These forced marriages and conversions have created a debate in legal corners across the globe. In one of the study conducted by the Home Office of United Kingdom has defined the term “forced marriages” as any marriage that is being held without the mutual consent of both parties which may involve any kind of physical, mental and emotional torture including the social and intense family pressure (INTERRIGHTS et al., 2000, p.1). In Pakistan, the law for marriages differs from religion to religion. These laws are supplemented by the pertinent statutory provisions such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939, and Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961.

The Centre for Legal Aid and Assistance (2011) has categorized the definition of forced conversion in eight different forms which includes willful, fraudulent, for shelter, exploitative, induced, under threat or duress, for greed, forceful. The exact official statistics on forced conversions in Sindh are unavailable because most cases are being unreported. However, some of the present statistics have been compiled on the basis of the news reports and the rate reported in the local and mainstream newspapers.

The monitoring reports of National Commission of Justice and Peace (2000) noted that the total number of conversions during the years of 2000-2012 were 1719 among which 624

of those cases were those where the person was related to the Christianity. However, the freedom of religion or beliefs to profess any religion and to worship any god of their choice is a human need. Under the Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (1948) all states and nations have committed to allow freedom of thought, expression, conscience and beliefs.

The forced marriages and conversion cases are more associated with the minorities living in the country especially in the vicinity of Sindh. According to the census report 2017, the number of non-Muslims in the country is 3.73% of the total population. Among which the Christians are 1.59%, Hindus 1.6%, Ahmadis 0.22%, 0.25% of the people belong to the scheduled caste and the 0.07% are others. The census report 2017 shows that the Muslim population in the province of Sindh is 91.31%/ However the total number of minorities in the vicinity of Sindh is around 8.69% among which the 0.97% is Christians, 6.51% are the Hindus and the rest belongs to the other communities and the scheduled

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castes. Women from the minorities especially those who are economically deprived live in the constant fear of being abducted and forced conversion. The Asian Human Rights Commission report states that each year 1000 Pakistani girls from different religions are forced to marriage and to forcibly convert their religion into Islam (Hadi, 2017).

Among all the reported cases, the Rinkle Kumari case was widely covered and documented in the national and international newspapers. On Feb 24, 2012 Rinkle Kumari was disappeared early in the morning and later in the evening it was reported that the girl has embraced Islam. This forced conversion received great coverage and was widely discussed in all the reported cases. The discussion of the cases can only provide a short overview of the issue which has complexities and nexus with religion, politics and honor (Schaflechner, 2018).

Research questions

RQ1 Which of the selected newspapers has given more coverage to the forced marriages and conversions issue in Sindh?

RQ2 What aspects of the issue have been covered and prioritized by the selected newspapers?

Objectives of the study

- To examine the extent of coverage given to the forced conversions in Daily Dawn & Daily Kawish newspaper.
- To find out the level of prominence given to the issue through nature, topics, and tone of the news stories.
- To determine the aspects of the print media coverage in Daily Dawn & Daily Kawish.

Literature review

The earlier studies associated with this issue of forced conversion are very less, however the literature review has been carried out on the basis of those few foreign researchers within their paradigm and the rest was on the basis of the news reports, fact finding reports, monitoring reports by the human rights commissions and non-governmental organizations.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has documented that a high number of the forced conversion cases are from the province of Sindh and Southern Punjab (HRCP 2011: 82). They have reported that about 25 cases of forced conversions occur in the country every month. The results reveal that the young girls from the disempowered communities like bheel, kohli, and meghwar are forced to convert their religions as they are subjugated to power.

Toor (2011) conducted a research study and gathered the information through interviews with the victims and the activists which reveals that the crimes which are reported against the Hindu women in the name of culture, norms, traditions, beliefs and religion are the “patriarchal opportunism”. He further argued that without the liberalization of media, there are hundreds of crimes and forced conversion cases that would remain unreported.

The forced conversion of the Hindu girls in the past three decades has led to the migration of the Hindu families from Sindh (Pakistan Today, 2014). A research study conducted on the six districts of the country reveals that the official government figures of kidnapped women for forced marriages are 1261 reported in 2014. Especially, the cases of Hindu girls who are abducted and converted to Islam and then forced to marriage has increased in Sindh in the recent past few years (Zaman, 2014b).

The religious conversion rate has increased from the Post World War II globally which has often its linkages with inter-marriages (Hoge & Ferry, 1981). Lehrer (1998) and Sherkat (2004) have emphasized that the religious conversion rate is more consistent at the ages less than 30 along with its relationship to intermarriages in the conversion process. According to religion module of GSS 1998 in the United States, the causes of the changes of the person's religion has its 37% relationship with the marriage or family, 25% is associated with the friends and location, 18% are of the theology and the rest 19% are of other issues (Barro et. Al, 2010).

The Human Rights Commission report on “working groups on communities vulnerable because of their beliefs” reveals that the courts often decide cases against the girls' families even if the girls are aged 12-13 years (HRCP, 2014). A former legislator, Bherulal Balani reported that “once the girls are abducted and they are forced to convert to Islam, then they are sold to other people and forced to do the illegal and immoral activities” (The News, 2010).

Theoretical framework

This research study is based on its theoretical linkages with the below mentioned theory.

Agenda setting theory

This theory was introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972) during the presidential elections campaign in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. This theory sets the agenda for certain topics and public affairs. The impact of media affects the performance of the report and issues made in the news that affects the public mind. The news reports make it so that when certain news is given more importance and attention than other news the audience will automatically recognize it as the most vital news and information are given to them. The priorities of which news comes first and then the text are set by theme according to how people think and how much influence it will have among the audience.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) noted that media in general do not tell the masses “*what to think*” but rather “*what to think about*”. While covering certain issues especially during the elections, the media can legitimize any story or marginalize the entire story or certain aspects of it. Media by showing an interest in a particular political candidate can lead the situation towards or away from the issues important to the candidate or the general public.

Methodology

This research study is quantitative in nature whereas the content analysis method was employed which was the appropriate method for this kind of research design. The data was collected from the two mainstream and local newspapers i.e. Daily Dawn and Daily Kawish. This research study was based on the analysis of the print media coverage given to the forced marriages and conversions in the vicinity of Sindh. Both the newspapers are widely circulated and credible among the stakeholders, luminaries and policy makers.

The unit of analysis of this research study was one month of consistent period i.e. 15th March, 2019 to 15th April, 2019 which was selected to carry out the content analysis. The front, back, and opinion pages of the newspapers were scrutinized for the analysis. The reason behind choosing this time frame was that a few numbers of incidents were reported during that time which resulted in creating hype on the mainstream and digital mediums.

The core variables of this research study for the data analysis were its frequency, tone and the aspects which were covered during the time frame in the selected newspapers. The topics and themes were identified in order to know the aspects of the covered themes on forced marriages and conversions that have been prioritized during the time period. Frequency counting was conducted to find the prominence level of the issue in the concerned newspapers. The tone of the news stories, editorials and articles were analyzed to draw the conclusions about the news reporting patterns of the newspapers towards the forced conversions issue.

Results/findings

The reporting and covering patterns of both the selected newspapers were entirely different. The result indicates that the regional newspaper was more inclined towards the issue while the mainstream and national newspaper was less inclined. It shows that the Daily Kawish has given more space towards the issue of forced marriages and conversions in terms of its news reports, editorials and the articles as compared to the Daily Dawn. It was also observed that the coverage being provided in terms of editorial is very low and having minimal ratio. On the other end the coverage on the editorial is very important for any newspaper and considered as a narrative and viewpoint of any newspaper.

Table No.1

Frequencies of News Reports & Editorial

Newspapers	News Reports	Editorials
Daily Dawn	09 (26.47%)	01 (100%)
Daily Kawish	25 (73.53%)	00 (100%)
Total	34 (100%)	01 (100%)

The results of the research study reveals that the Daily Dawn has covered 09 (26.47%) news reports along with 01 (100%) editorial towards the issue of forced marriages and conversions in Sindh while the regional newspaper Daily Kawish was more vibrant towards the issue whereas 25 news reports published in the respective time frame. Despite publishing 25 (73.53%) news reports, the Daily Kawish has not published a single editorial on the issue; however, the editorial is considered as the narrative and viewpoint of the concerned newspaper.

Table No. 02

Tone of the News Reports & Editorials

Newspaper	Tone	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Daily Dawn	News Reports	01 (11.11%)	01 (11.11%)	07 (77.78%)	09 (100%)
	Editorials	01 (100%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	01 (100%)
Daily Kawish	News Reports	05 (20%)	01 (4%)	19 (76%)	25 (100%)
	Editorials	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)

As far as the tone of the news reports and editorial are concerned, most of the news reports were coded as neutral news in both the newspapers. However, some of the news reports and editorials were positive and negative as well. It was found that the Daily Dawn published 01 (11.11%) positive news reports, 01 (11.11%) negative and the rest 07 (77.78%) of the total news reports were neutral. Moreover, 01 (100%) editorial which was published in the Daily Dawn was coded as positive.

The results of the regional level newspaper of Daily Kawish reveals that the total number of the positive news reports published in the newspaper were 05 (20%) and the negative news reports were 01 (04%). However, the rest of the news reports 19 (76%) were coded as neutral reports.

Table No. 03

Placement of News Reports

News Reports	Front Page	Back Pages
Daily Dawn	04 (25%)	05 (27.77%)
Daily Kawish	12(75%)	13 (72.23%)
Total	16 (100%)	18 (100%)

The data shows that the regional newspaper i.e. Daily Kawish has covered the issue more vibrantly as compared to the Daily Dawn whereas the front page published news reports in the Daily Dawn were 04 (25%) and the back page stories were 05 (27.77%) while the Daily Kawish has covered 12 (75%) on front page and the rest of the news reports were on the back pages which were 13 (72.23%).

Table No. 04

Frequencies of Articles and Letter to Editors

Newspapers	Article	Letter to Editor
Daily Dawn	2 (66.66%)	2 (50%)
Daily Kawish	1 (44.44%)	2 (50%)
Total	3 (100%)	4 (100%)

The editorial page reveals the policy of the newspaper in the light of agenda setting by analyzing the frequency, placement and the space given to the concerned issues. The results show that the Daily Dawn published 2 (66.44%) articles while the regional newspaper which was covering the issue vibrantly in its news reports just published 01 (44.44%) in the whole month.

As far as the letters to the editor are concerned, both the newspapers Daily Dawn and Daily Kawish have published 02 (50%) letters. Moreover, the tone of the articles and letter to editors shows that all the articles and letters to editors were coded as positive in both mainstream and regional newspapers.

Table No. 05

Tone of the Articles & Letter to Editor

Newspaper	Segment	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Daily Dawn	Articles	02 (100%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	02 (100%)
	Letter to Editor	02 (100%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	02 (100%)
Daily Kawish	Article	01 (100%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	1 (100%)
	Letter to Editor	02 (100%)	00 (0%)	00 (0%)	2 (100%)

Table No. 06

Content Categories & Themes Covered in Both Newspapers

Categories/Themes	Daily Dawn	Daily Kawish	Total
Protest	01 (17.7%)	05 (83.3%)	06(100%)
Kidnapping	00 (0%)	01 (100%)	01(100%)
Statements	02 (25%)	06 (75%)	08(100%)
Court/Parliament Follow ups	04 (40%)	06 (60%)	10(100%)
Appeals	01 (50%)	01 (50%)	02(100%)
Forced Conversion	04 (57.15%)	03 (42.85%)	07(100%)
Solution	00 (0%)	01 (100%)	01(100%)
Protection of Minorities	00 (0%)	01 (100%)	01(100%)
Other	01 (25%)	03 (75%)	04(100%)
Total	13 (32.5%)	27 (67.5%)	40 (100%)

This research study has found that the content categories and the themes that are under discourse and addressed in both the newspapers are protests, kidnappings, solutions to proper issues, protection of the minorities, forced conversion reports, statements, and follow ups.

Conclusion

This research study was conducted to comparatively analyze the coverage and the patterns of the selected i.e. Daily Dawn and Daily Kawish in the light of agenda setting theory. The data which was collected through the content analysis reveals that both the newspapers have covered the same forced conversion issue but the regional newspaper due to its proximity was more inclined towards that. However, the mainstream media was reluctant in covering the issues related to forced conversion.

The data set revealed that the regional newspaper Daily Kawish published more news reports 25 (73.53%) than the mainstream newspaper Daily Dawn (26.47%) but it was also found that the regional newspaper gave less space in terms of its editorial, article and letter to editor as compared to the mainstream newspaper. The Daily Dawn published 02 (100%) articles while the Kawish just published 01 (100%). Moreover, the issue was less covered in the editorial section in both the newspapers. Daily Kawish didn't publish a single editorial while the Dawn published 01 (100%) in that month.

It was identified that most of the news reports, editorials, articles and letters to editors were either neutral or positive. However, there were a few news reports which were coded as negative by the researcher. Comparatively, it was revealed and exposed that the Daily Kawish gave more coverage to the forced conversion issue in its news reports and in neutral perspective while the Daily Dawn gave more coverage to the issue in its articles, editorials and letter to editors.

Limitation of the Study

This research study has its potential limitations within which the literature review and our findings have been carefully interpreted and made. The findings of the study are based on the data collected through the quantitative content analysis of the newspapers within the time constraints.

Due to the nature of the research study, the earlier studies associated with the print media and the forced marriages and conversions are very less. However, the literature reviews have been made on the basis of the published official fact finding reports by the government of Pakistan and different human rights monitoring commissions and legal aid organizations.

The time constraint was another limitation of this research study because it was nearly impossible to analyze the newspapers of the large time scale, the researcher limited its unit of analysis keeping the time constraints in mind to the month of the reported cases only.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this research study following recommendations have been made for further understanding of the problem and the concerned issue of forced conversion and the print media coverage in Sindh.

- As the mainstream newspapers including Daily Dawn have wide circulation and are preferred by the stakeholders and luminaries as well so they should give more priority to the regional issues as well as compared to other issues.
- It is suggested that the regional newspapers should review their editorial policies and viewpoints to prioritize the regional issues not only as news reports but also as editorials, articles and letters to the editor.
- It is recommended that the minorities and the cultural issues like forced conversions should be addressed and discoursed in the print media newspapers in such a way so it may be beneficial and resolved.

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