Towards Ethical Journalism

Analysing Media Representation of Sex Workers

NNSW

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

1. Context

Media reporting on sex work in India continues to be shaped by a narrow, crime-centric lens, with little distinction made between consensual adult sex work and the crime of human trafficking. This framing sidelines the voices of sex workers, who are more often portrayed as victims or criminal actors rather than as workers.

The research was conducted in the backdrop of the Supreme Court ruling in the Budhadev Karmaskar Case (May 2022), which recognised the need to uphold sex workers' dignity and rights and called for media reporting guidelines.

2. Research Aims

The study set out to examine how sex work and sex workers are portrayed in Indian media and how these portrayals affect the lives and livelihoods of sex workers. It aimed to assess whether coverage continues to frame sex work within a trafficking and victimhood narrative or shows signs of recognising it as work; to identify who shapes media narratives—police, government, media institutions, or sex workers themselves; to examine how language, visuals, headlines, and framing shape public perception; to understand how reporting affects sex workers' dignity, safety, and livelihoods; to study newsroom editorial processes and decision-making; and, ultimately, to inform guidelines for fairer, more balanced, and ethical coverage.

3. Sample and Scope

This research is based on media analysis conducted across eight languages (Bengali, Hindi, English, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil. and Telugu) and multiple states. The study focusses on media reportage from June 2022 to March 2025. Purposive sampling was used to select samples for each language, focussing on selected media platforms with significant reach and influence. The research aims to identify patterns and trends in reporting, rather than provide an exhaustive review of all media content.

4. Methodology

This study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to understand media representation of sex work. The research centred sex workers at all stages, beginning with an inception workshop involving sex workers, rights activists, and researchers.

4 (a) Quantitative study: Media Monitoring

606 reports coded across print, digital and broadcast platforms (report type, language, headlines/visuals, terminology, framing, sources quoted, tone, identity protection), spanning 8 languages and 7 states plus national coverage. Image analysis looked at the impact of visuals used: whether appropriate, sensational, voyeuristic, and respectful of privacy.

Broadcast media was studied for 'affect' in terms of body language, gestures, tone and overall presentation.

4 (b) Qualitative Methods

(i) Community Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): 6 FGDs with sex worker collectives via NNSW partners (Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu), 2024–2025.
(ii) Media professional Key Informant Interviews: 15 interviews with journalists, editors, and media professionals.
(iii) Case Studies — 13 case studies analysing sensationalism, bias and sensitive reporting.
(iv) Analysis of Visuals in Broadcast and Social Media: television, YouTube and social media assessed for tone, privacy, and sensationalism.

4 (c) Ethical Considerations

The approach was grounded in the NNSW's framework of "Nothing about sex workers without sex workers." These principles included respect for dignity and autonomy, voluntary participation and informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, non-judgemental engagement, and a commitment not to reinforce stigma or harm. Researchers were trained to pose questions sensitively, and skilled facilitation was built into the focus group process to manage the emotional weight of discussing personal experiences of exposure, stigma and police action.

5. Key Findings

The research combined statistical monitoring of extensive coverage with community testimonies and newsroom interviews to build a layered picture of how sex work is represented, and with what consequences.

(a) Disclosure of Identity: Guided by the Supreme Court's May 2022 directive on protecting sex workers' identities, the study found that more than a fourth (28.4%) of stories either violated or only partially met this standard. Strongest protection was in English (86.3%) and Marathi (83.7%) media; weakest was in Telugu (48.5%) media. The 65 identified violations were traced to just 48

pointing to repeat-offender patterns and a lack of systemic internal checks rather than isolated lapses; print media accounted for 41 of these violations and electronic media for 24. Disclosure took several recurring forms, such as exact locations and addresses, names of sex workers or associates, inadequately blurred photographs and videos, unredacted FIR details, and filming during raids without consent. Community testimony linked exposure to family breakdown, housing discrimination, and police harassment and social consequences for themselves and their children.

(b) Criminalisation of Sex Work by the Media: Crime-centric framing dominates Indian media narratives on sex work. As much as 64% of stories frame sex work primarily as crime; police sources dominate while sex workers' own voices appear in only 4% of coverage. Issue-level analysis of 1,459 coded items across the sample found that law enforcement themes—raids, rescues, and arrests—accounted for the largest single category (22.7%), while social and economic themes such as livelihood, family, and eviction together accounted for only 3% of coded issues.

(c) Treatment of News on Sex Work: The data reveal three broad language-based treatment patterns. Sensational framing leads in Bangla (26.2%), Hindi (24.3%) and Tamil (36.0%), with Tamil showing the strongest concentration. Factual treatment leads in English (30.5%), while Malayalam stands out for its high concentration of Negative treatment (41.0%), while Marathi is distinctive for leading with Emotional treatment (21.1%). Across the full sample, Sensational treatment was the most common category (18.6%), followed by Factual (17.0%) and Negative (15.1%), while problematic treatment categories collectively accounted for 44.2% of all treatment tags. Electronic media showed a markedly higher rate (53.3%) of problematic treatment than print (41.5%), suggesting that the pressures of broadcast and digital formats push coverage further toward sensationalism in the race for TRPs.

(d) Source Quoted in News on Sex Work: Sourcing patterns reveal a stark imbalance in whose voices shape media coverage. 59.4% of stories cite police as primary source; only 16.2% quote sex workers directly—approximately six official sources for every community voice. Journalists interviewed for the study noted limited direct access to sex workers, since police-led "rescues" typically remove women to rehabilitation homes before journalists can speak with them, and that NGOs and rights organisations who do have access sometimes restrict what can be shared.

(e) Overall Portrayal of Sex Workers in the Media: Overall, 60.8% of portrayals of sex workers in the sample were negative—as criminals, victims, “vamps” or sexualised figures—against just 17.15% positive portrayals as workers, mothers, activists or businesswomen; 16.04% were neutral and 5.8% portrayed sex workers specifically as survivors. Crime-based short news reports were the single largest driver of negative portrayal, accounting for

roughly four in five negative codes. This pattern indicates that the format of a story, whether it is a crime report or a feature, has a significant bearing on how sex workers are ultimately portrayed.

(f) Terminology Around Sex Work: Language remains a significant vector of stigma: across the 468 print reports analysed, just over half (50.4%) used stigmatising or criminalising terminology such as "prostitute," "flesh trade", or "sex racket", while 56.1% used at least one preferred term such as sex worker or sex work. Despite the growing use of sex worker and sex work, terms such as "prostitute" and "trade" — the latter reducing sex work to a commodity transaction — remain common. Journalists interviewed across languages acknowledged receiving little or no formal training in appropriate terminology, relying instead on convention, deadline pressure and personal judgement.

(g) Episodic and Selective Reporting: Coverage of sex work tends to be episodic rather than sustained. Coverage clusters around designated "awareness" days rather than sustained engagement. Follow-up on rescued/rehabilitated women is largely absent and systemic drivers such as poverty, documentation gaps, partner violence are routinely omitted. Several journalists linked this pattern to newsroom pressures such as space constraints, the demand for short, easily-edited copy, and editorial reluctance to run "sensitive" features except on designated days.

(h) Dual Framing- Victimhood and Vilification: Across 647 substantive portrayal codes, "Victim" (35.1%) dominates, followed by Neutral (15.8%), Citizen (14.4%) and Sexualised (11.3%). Vilifying language (40.8% of coded occurrences) is nearly three times as frequent as victim-framing language (14.0%). Together, these two framings of pity on one hand and moral condemnation on the other leave little space in mainstream media coverage for sex workers to be represented simply as workers, citizens or rights-holders.

6. Terminology and Approach

Sex workers and media professionals interviewed for the study consistently called for respectful, community-approved terminology to replace derogatory or objectifying language. Across languages, participants pointed to terms such as *sex worker* and *sex work* as preferable. "Sex racket" was flagged as a particularly harmful and conflating term that was frequently used interchangeably for adult voluntary sex work and for cases of minor trafficking, with serious consequences for how each is understood by the public.

Sex workers themselves consistently rejected framings that reduce their work to the sale of their bodies, instead describing themselves as service providers earning a livelihood in the same way as workers in any other service industry, and asked, above all, that journalists seek consent before using their images or stories, and take responsibility for how they are portrayed. A list of preferred terms was generated as part of the study.

7. Image Analysis

Because images are processed and retained by readers faster and more enduringly than text, the research paid close attention to how visuals shape the impact of a story.

More than half of assessed print photographs—213 of 384, or 55.5%—were coded as inappropriate, meaning not directly relevant to the report or unsuitable to illustrate it. The most common problem was identity or privacy exposure, present in 40.1% of flagged images, followed by police, raid and crime imagery (26.9%) and faces that were hidden, blurred or masked in ways that could still enable local identification (22.6%).

A closer look at identity protection specifically found that 112 of 468 print reports (23.9%) left sex workers at risk of identification through some combination of names, locations, incomplete blurring or distinctive occupational or personal details, even though no single element alone would have been identifying.

Recurring visual tropes included sexualised stock imagery of women in night-time urban settings alongside crime-signalling visuals such as handcuffs and police vans; the research found that while some outlets, particularly in English-language media, avoid overtly sexualised imagery, they often substitute crime-signalling visuals instead, so that Telugu media tends to sensationalise and stigmatise through images while English media, though less sexualised, still visually reinforces the criminal frame. Sex workers who took part in the research were clear about the alternative they wanted: images that reflect their agency and occupational identity, not their victimhood.

8. Analysis of Broadcast Media

The 138 electronic media clips in the sample were assessed across five dimensions — dominance, aggression, sexism, positive behaviour, and anti-sex-work discourse. Anti-sex work discourse emerged as the most pervasive and severe pattern, , with dismissive language as the leading dimension, present in 65.0% of standard ratings, well above the other risk dimensions; Degrading Language and Gestures (47.1%), Degrading Visuals (29.0%), and

Degrading Audio (19.6%) followed at lower but still notable rates.

In contrast, positive behaviour was present but inconsistent: gender-sensitive language appeared in 34.8% of reports, but active, vocal support for women was present in only 27.5%, and outright opposition to sexist behaviour, the weakest dimension measured, appeared in just 16.7% of reports. The pattern that emerges is one in which broadcast media is more likely to avoid overtly offensive language than to actively challenge stigma, moralistic framing or discriminatory remarks when they occur on air.

Across the dataset, the analysis found that discursive framing—the words, tone and moralising language used—was consistently a stronger driver of harm than overt aggression, visuals or audio, suggesting that the most persistent problem in broadcast coverage is not confrontation but subtle, sustained stigmatisation through language.

9. Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to foster sensitive, dignified, realistic, and affirmative media coverage of sex work and sexual service providers in the Indian media.

1. **Use Respectful Language:** Media outlets must replace derogatory and stigmatizing terms like "flesh trade", "racket", or "immoral activity" with **neutral, terminology** such as *sex worker*, *sex work*, or *sexual service provider*, referencing the Supreme Court's *Handbook to Combat Gender Stereotypes* (2023).

2. **Ensure Rigorous Privacy and Identity Protection**: Adhere to Supreme Court directives by prohibiting the publication of **names, addresses, ages, or identifiable images** of sex workers—even with faces blurred—particularly during raid and rescue operations.

3. **Ensure Ethical Visual Representation**: Avoid the use of sexually suggestive, voyeuristic, or stereotypical stock images and instead use **neutral, non-identifiable visuals** that respect dignity and accurately reflect the story.

4. **Diversify Sources Beyond Police Narratives**: Move away from relying solely on police hand-outs and "saviour" narratives; journalists should **corroborate information** with sex workers, activists, NGOs, and legal experts for balanced and verified stories. Include perspectives from sex workers, not only police, NGOs, politicians, or researchers; avoid speaking about sex workers without consulting them or their representative organisations.

5. **Rethink Reporting Categories:** Shift sex work coverage from the "crime beat" to beats covering **labour, gender, health, and law** to ensure social, economic, and labour issue perspectives rather than the criminal angle alone.

6. **Obtain Informed and Explicit Consent:** Journalists must follow the 'Do no harm' principle by securing **informed consent** before interviews or photography, ensuring the worker is comfortable with how their story and visuals will be presented.

7. **Distinguish Between Consent and Coercion:** Stories must reflect the crucial distinction between **consensual adult sex work** (exchange of sexual services for money or goods) and **human trafficking** (involves force, fraud, coercion, or exploitation) to avoid harmful conflations that strip workers of their agency.

8. **Scrutinise statistics** provided by police, anti-trafficking organisations, and abolitionist advocacy groups. Check original sources of data and methodologies used. Be cautious about repeating claims that have not been independently verified.

9. **Provide Socio-Economic Context:** Narrative framing should move beyond individual "victimhood" to explore **systemic root causes** such as poverty, migration, and the lack of legal or social safeguards, while also highlighting the resilience of the community.

10. **Establish Accountability and Redressal Mechanisms**: Newsrooms should implement policies to **hold the media accountable** for misrepresentation or privacy breaches, including issuing formal apologies and strengthening domestic regulation for social media content creators who violate privacy.

11. **Implement Newsroom Training**: Conduct regular, mandatory **sensitisation workshops** for reporters, editors, copy-editors and photojournalists to address personal biases regarding caste, class, and gender, and to improve legal literacy concerning sex workers' rights.

12. **Evolve a checklist** for sensitive reporting about sex work and sex workers in collaboration with sex workers themselves. Disseminate these guidelines across newsrooms–print, electronic, and digital.

1. Context

Across India, media reporting on sex work continues to be shaped by a narrow and often harmful understanding of the issue. In most cases, sex work is presented through the lens of crime, trafficking, and rescue, with little distinction made between consensual adult sex work and trafficking into the sex trade.

This framing ends up ignoring the agency of sex workers. Adult women, men, and transgender persons who opt for sex work as a livelihood are rarely shown as workers. Instead, they are portrayed as victims, or as part of criminal networks. The voices of sex workers who are in sex work of their own volition are largely missing from these narratives.

Media coverage often relies heavily on police sources, especially during dramatic events such as raids, and tends to reproduce official versions without questioning them. These reports are frequently sensational, focusing on visuals, language, and storytelling that reinforce moral bias and stigma. In many cases, the dignity and privacy of sex workers are compromised, including through exposure of identities or degrading representation.

At the same time, sex workers across the country have been asserting that sex work is work and campaigning for the decriminalisation of sex work and all parties involved. They have been demanding recognition of their labour, access to rights, and protection from violence and exploitation. However, these perspectives are not reflected enough in mainstream media.

The Supreme Court of India, in its May 2022 order in the Budhadev Karmaskar case,[1] recognised the need to uphold the dignity and rights of sex workers and recommended the development of guidelines for responsible media reporting. This creates both an opportunity and a responsibility to examine how the media currently reports on sex work.

In this context, the present research brings together evidence from multiple states to understand how sex work is being represented in the media, and what changes are needed to move towards more fair and accurate reporting. The research monitored and analysed media coverage in the period from June 2022 to March 2025.[2]

2. Research Aims

The overall aim of this study is to examine how sex work and sex workers are portrayed in Indian media and to understand how these portrayals affect the lives and rights of sex workers.

The study has the following aims:

- Analyse whether media coverage continues to frame sex work within a trafficking and victimhood narrative, or whether there are shifts towards recognising sex work as work.
- Identify who shapes media narratives, including the role of police, law enforcement, government, media institutions, and sex workers themselves.
- Examine how language, visuals, headlines, and framing influence public perception of sex workers.
- Understand how media reporting impacts the life, dignity, safety, and livelihoods of sex workers.
- Study how newsrooms report on sex work, including editorial choices and decision-making processes.
- Contribute to the development of guidelines for fair, ethical, and rights-based media coverage.

3. Sample and Scope

This research is based on media analysis conducted across eight languages and multiple states. The study focusses on media reportage in from June 2022 to March 2025.

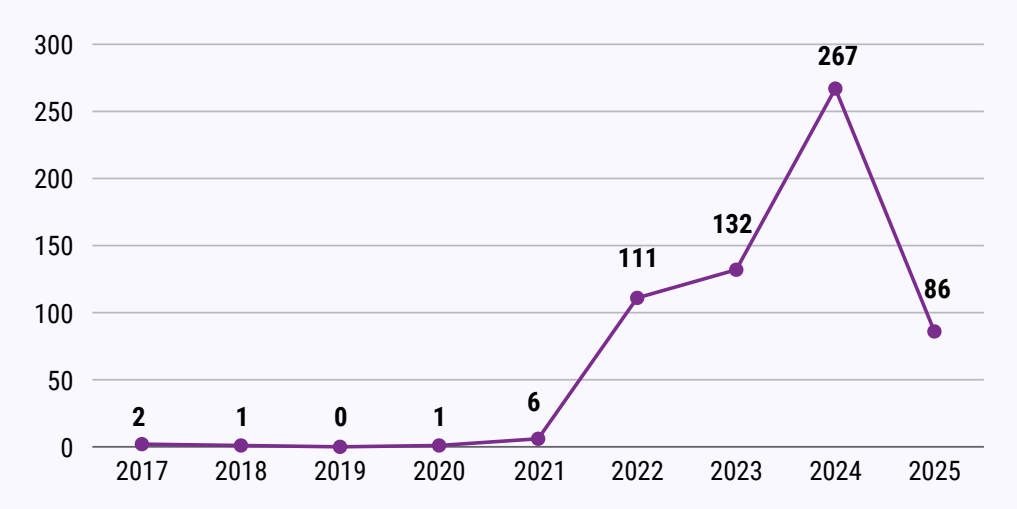


Figure 3.1. Monitoring Years for Selected Samples

The following samples were included in the study:

- Media coverage from print, digital, and television platforms.
- Regional language media and English-language media.
- Different formats of reporting, including news reports, crime reports, feature stories, opinion pieces, and broadcast content.
- Content circulated through digital platforms such as YouTube and social media.

Purposive sampling was used to select samples for each language, focussing on selected media platforms with significant reach and influence. The research aims to identify patterns and trends in reporting, rather than provide an exhaustive review of all media content.

4. Methodology

This study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to understand media representation of sex work. The research centred sex workers at all stages, beginning with an inception workshop involving sex workers, rights activists, and researchers. These discussions helped ground the research in lived experiences and shaped the tools and approach used in the study. Key issues discussed included agency, consent, criminalisation, media portrayal, and rights. Ethical concerns were clearly articulated and standards laid down.

The possibility that discussing topics like adverse impact of media coverage or personal struggles may evoke strong emotions during the focus group discussions (FGDs) was pointed out, and the need for skilled facilitation to manage distress through local partners was discussed.

4. (a) Quantitative Study: Media Monitoring

A systematic media monitoring process was carried out across eight languages: Bengali, English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu. News reports were collected from print, digital, and broadcast platforms using archives and keyword-based searches.

A common data collection format was used to record details such as type of report and platform; language and format; headlines, visuals, and terminology; themes and framing (crime, legal, human rights, etc.); sources quoted, that is, whose voices are represented; tone of reporting and portrayal of sex workers; and whether identities of sex workers were protected.

The research also analysed images used alongside in print and digital media. Some of these images were specific to the incident being reported, others were “representative images”, stock images or illustrations used alongside several news reports. While interventions have been made in trying to make reporting more gender sensitive, there have been fewer interventions in the visual realm. Consequently, even though narratives might be sensitive, the accompanying images could be sensational, inappropriate, voyeuristic, and most often, taken without consent and reinforcing stigma.

A total of 606 media reports was analysed across seven states and national-level coverage. This included 468 print reports and 138 electronic media reports. They included 146 samples in English, 84 samples in Hindi, 92 samples in Marathi, 68 samples in Telugu, 66 samples in Tamil, 61 samples in Kannada, 51 samples in Malayalam, and 38 samples in Bengali. Quantitative data was analysed through pivot analysis using several variables.

Language-wise and State-wise Break up of Samples

A total of 106 news articles were analysed for Maharashtra, which is 17.5% of the total coverage. For Delhi, 94 news articles (15.5%) were analysed, followed by 86 in Andhra Pradesh (14.2%), 84 in Karnataka (13.9%), 83 in Tamil Nadu (13.7%), 72 in Kerala (11.9%), 59 in West Bengal (9.7%), and 22 in English across the country (3.6%) (see Figure 4.1.).

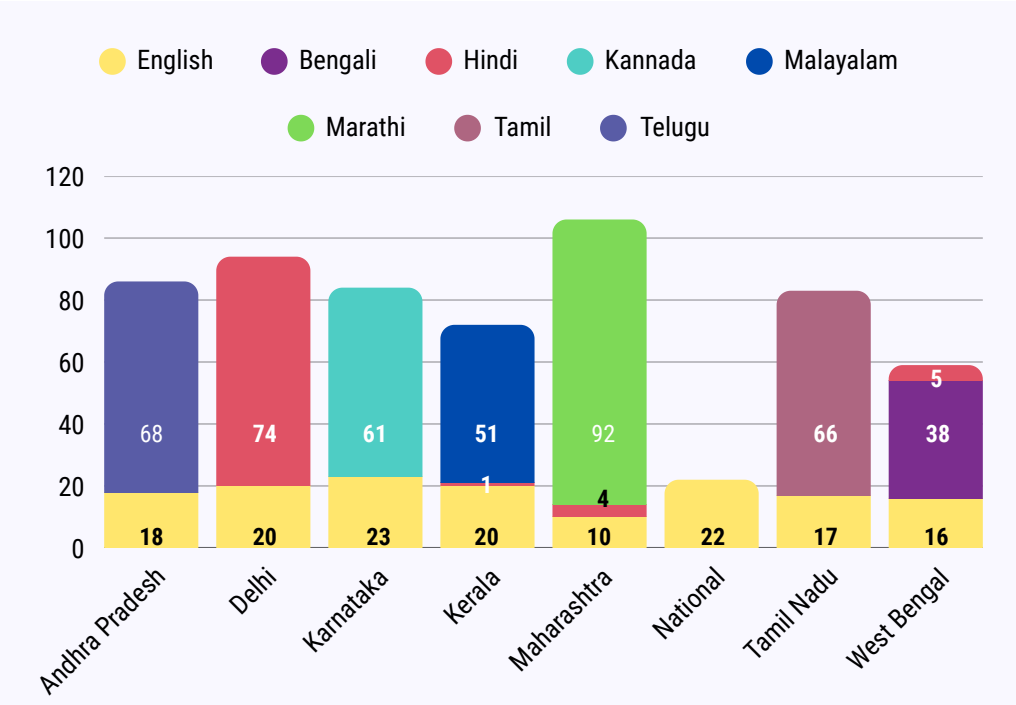
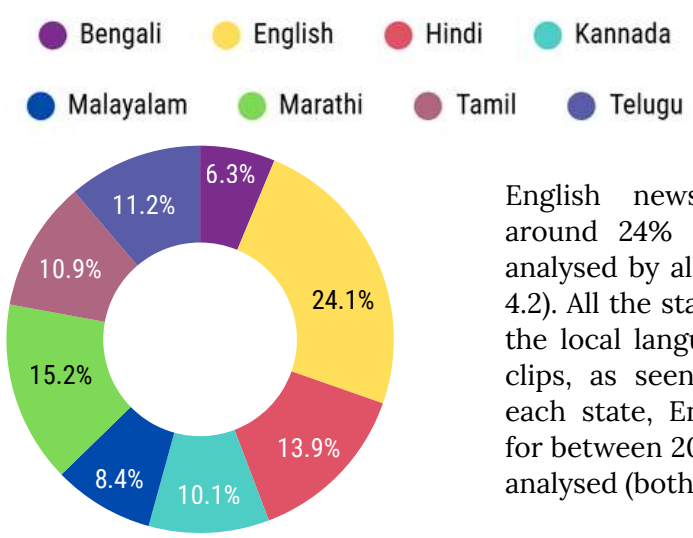


Figure 4.1. State-wise Break Up of Samples



English news clips account for around 24% of the total coverage analysed by all the states (See Figure 4.2). All the states did a split between the local language and English news clips, as seen in Figure 4.1. Within each state, English news accounted for between 20-35% of the total news analysed (both print and electronic).

Figure 4.2. Language-wise Break Up of Samples

4. (b) Qualitative Methods

4 (b) (i) Community Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in collaboration with National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) partners in Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu between 2024 and 2025. Qualitative data was gathered from participants about their perceptions of media coverage and the impact of media reporting on their daily lives and livelihoods, their children, housing, and social standing. The discussions also encompassed their expectations from media coverage. A total of six FGDs were conducted.

The FGDs were chosen as a methodology as they provide in-depth insights into participants' experiences, opinions, and emotions, offering nuanced perspectives. Such discussions capture a range of viewpoints, reflecting varied experiences within the group, such as those of sex workers from different age, caste, class, and regional backgrounds. The group setting, building on trust created by NNSW partner organisations and facilitators, encourages dynamic discussions, where participants build on each other's ideas, revealing shared concerns or contrasting opinions. The FGDs give a platform for participants to voice their concerns, fostering agency and highlighting issues like media bias or identity protection. Discussions reveal cultural, social, and personal contexts from experiences with police raids to children's education, enriching the analysis. Compared to individual interviews, the FGDs gather data from multiple participants in a single session, saving time and resources.

However, the methodology is not without its challenges. Dominant participants may overshadow quieter ones, skewing the discussion and limiting representation of all views. Moreover, the facilitator's approach or questions may unintentionally influence responses. Discussing sensitive topics like personal experiences, police raids, or children's rights in a group setting may inhibit participants from sharing openly due to fear of judgment or breach of confidentiality. Further, it must be kept in mind that findings from a small group (12–15 participants) may not represent the broader population, restricting the scope of conclusions.

Additionally, the qualitative nature of FGDs produces large volumes of unstructured data, requiring meticulous transcription, translation, and thematic analysis.

4. (b) (ii) Media professionals: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

A total of 15 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with journalists, editors, and other media professionals to understand how reporting and editing decisions are made; what the challenges in newsrooms are; how sex

work is understood within newsrooms; and how this translates into editing of text, headlines and selection of visuals.

4. (b) (iii) Case Studies

Selected media reports and broadcasts were analysed in detail to highlight patterns such as sensationalism, bias, ethical concerns, and examples of sensitive reporting. A total of 12 case studies were analysed across states, each highlighting different aspects of media coverage.

4. (b) (iv) Analysis of Visuals in Broadcast and Social Media

Television news, YouTube content, and social media dissemination of news were also analysed. Special attention was given to visuals, tone, and issues such as privacy, identity protection, and sensationalism.

4. (c) Ethical Considerations

The research followed ethical guidelines developed in consultation with sex worker collectives. “Nothing about sex workers without sex workers,” the ethical standards[3] for research and consultation developed by the National Network of Sex Workers was used as a baseline. The standards state, “The National Network of Sex Workers [NNSW] India believes that collective wisdom gives depth to and empowers policy, and that people in sex work have the right to be involved in formulating policies affecting their lives. People in sex work have valuable contributions to make and they have the right to a participative space that is non-judgmental and safe.”

The key principles included are respect for dignity and autonomy; voluntary participation and informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity; non-judgmental and sensitive engagement; and avoiding reinforcement of stigma or harm.

The researchers were trained to ensure that questions in the FGDs were posed sensitively in a non-judgmental manner. The objectives of the research were clearly shared with all participants at the outset. The dignity, privacy, and interests of the sex workers were prioritised. This research, in all forms of discussions, has communicated informed consent. All efforts have been made to translate written, audio, and visual material into languages used by sex worker communities.

5. Key Findings

The research findings reveal significant patterns in how sex work and sex workers are represented, described and discussed across the media landscape. The findings highlight the continued dominance of crime-centred narratives, alongside concerns around stigmatising language, visual representation, identity protection and the limited inclusion of sex workers' own voices. At the same time, the findings reveal important differences across media platforms and languages, as well as the presence of factual, balanced, and more empathetic reporting. Together, these findings illustrate both the challenges in current media representation of sex work and the opportunities for more balanced and fair media reportage.

5. (a) Disclosure of Identity

The analysis is guided by the Supreme Court of India directive of May 28, 2022, on protecting the identity of sex workers and relevant standards of ethical journalism. The research found that nearly a third of stories either fully or partially violated ethical and legal guidelines on protecting identity.

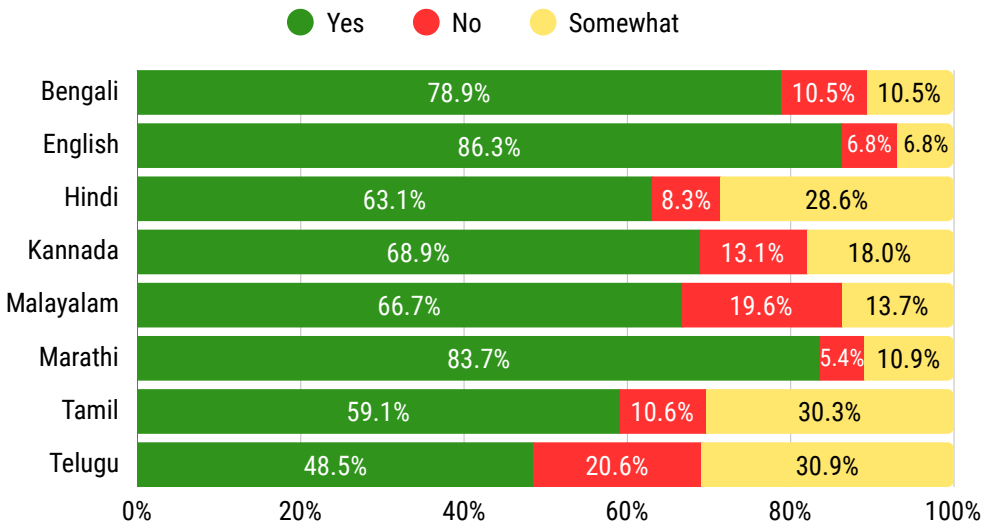


Figure 5.1. Protection of Identity of sex worker by language of outlet

The analysis of a total of 606 news reports found 65 distinct instances where the identity of sex workers was not protected at all. Overall, more than a fourth, that is 172 instances (28.4%), did not or only partially protected identity.

However, the finding that the majority of news reports did protect identity can be linked to the Supreme Court directives. The best instances of identity protection were found in the English media (86.3% *Protected*), followed by

Marathi media (83.7% *Protected*). The poorest identity protection was identified in Telugu media, which revealed that less than half the reports (48.5%) fully or partially protected identity. The highest number of identity violations at 20.6% was in Telugu media. Tamil also shows high partial protection (30.3% were *Somewhat Protected*). Hindi has significant partial protection (28.6% were *Somewhat Protected*).

An analysis of newspapers and channels that did not protect the identity shows that 65 violations reported were by 48 newspaper and channels, indicating that a few media outlets were repeat offenders, pointing to the lack of systemic internal checks. Of this, print media accounted for 41 violations and electronic accounted for 24 violations. The highest instances of violations were monitored in *Sakshi* (4), *Andhra Jyothy* (4), and *Pudhari* (3). Two instances of violations were reported in seven outlets, including *Amar Ujala*, *Manorama Online*, *Deccan Herald*, *Junior Vikatan*, *Dinamalar*, *The Indian Express*, and NTV. An instance of one violation was monitored in 37 newspapers.

Disclosure of identity was of various types, including revelation of names, location, other identifying details, legal documents published without redaction, and photos and videos with faces not blurred or blurred inadequately.

The most common types of identity disclosure are shared in Table 5.1.

No.	Violation Type	Description	Frequency
1	Location Disclosure	Exact address, street name, locality, hotel/spa name, brothel location revealed	Very High
2	Names Revealed	Names of sex workers, agents, customers, brothel owners published	High
3	Photos/Visuals	Faces not properly blurred, women's photos published, raid visuals shown	High
4	FIR Details Published	Name, age, and personal details from police complaints shared publicly	Medium
5	Filming During Raids	Sex workers filmed/photographed during raids without consent	Medium
6	Identifying Details	Profession, nationality, workplace details that enable identification	Medium

Table 5.1. Types of Identity Disclosure and Frequency of Appearance

As described, although identity protection is observed in the majority reports, more than a fourth of stories either fully or partially violated ethical and legal guidelines on protecting identity. This had serious implications on the ground, as qualitative data gathered from the community reveal.

5 (a) (i) Community perspectives on identity protection and consent

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in collaboration with NNSW partners in Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu between 2024 and 2025. Qualitative data was gathered from participants about their perceptions of media coverage, and the impact of revealing identity on their daily lives and livelihoods, their children, housing, and also on their social standing.

Members of collectives in the Vadamalar Federation (a Tamil Nadu-wide network of sex workers' collectives) from various districts said, "When newspapers publish our photos, names and addresses, our life is gone. Our children are affected. We do this work for our children but media reports identifying us impacts our children."

Another spoke of the stigma associated with sex work, "I am doing sex work without my family's knowledge. When I am 'caught' and the media discloses my identity, it becomes a problem and shameful for my family." The fabrication and lack of accuracy was also highlighted, "The media writes false narratives about me/us. It can combine 20 lies to create 10 'facts'."

Participants in the Tamil Nadu FGD described dire consequences of exposure through media, which they said, "ruins lives." "Children and families are ostracised, and some women are driven to suicide. Family members (for instance, a son in the army) may turn against their mothers when they find out about their work." Participants said that above all else, they feared the police and their surveillance, blackmail, and wrongful detention/arrests. Aadhaar-linked surveillance is causing new levels of fear and data vulnerability, for example, during bank or passport procedures. The nexus between the police and the media makes sex workers feel more vulnerable, as journalists gain access to police records, including names and numbers of those arrested, which are then circulated without consent.

In the Andhra Pradesh FGD, sex workers said the media reports on raids are one-sided. Though the media sometimes suppresses their names, news channels report that they are "institutionalised", which is a misleading narrative. They felt media never questions this forced rehabilitation or police insulting them. Participants noted, however, that media reportage of sex work used to be much worse before the relevant Supreme Court guidelines were issued. The group felt that online media hugely sensationalises news and highlighted that they protect customers' names but publish sex workers' names.

They recalled how, five or six years ago, videos exposing their faces were published after almost every raid, without their consent. When they tried covering their faces, the police forced them to lift their scarves, telling the media, "Only if their faces are shown will they leave the profession." Auto-

-rickshaw drivers they regularly travelled with began recognizing them from news broadcasts and asked, “Are you a sex worker? How much do you charge?” New YouTube channels, seeking views and ad revenue, have seemingly discovered sex work as exploitable. They often visit localities where sex workers stand and try capturing interviews, bypassing media ethics. As no stringent body monitors YouTube content, sex workers are highly vulnerable to exposure. Some images in the Telugu media reveal the identity of sex workers and the location, and some show the women looking powerless and weak. One picture is captioned, “secret revealed”. Another discloses the location. In a few photos, the girls have hidden their faces, looking embarrassed and humiliated.

Participants of the FGD in Andhra Pradesh opined that because men dominate media houses, story coverage is impacted. For example, footage of police raids aimed at exposing a politician or celebrity’s involvement in sex work, is repeated on a loop, with the intention of targeting political careers. But this ignores the fact that such exposure also ruins sex workers’ lives.

English media outlets consistently used representative images, whereas Telugu media, particularly Sakshi and Andhra Jyothy often published photographs of brothel owners and sometimes, those considered victims. While the supposed victims’ faces were usually masked, the brothel owners’ were not. This is problematic, especially because many female sex workers who practice sex work can be accused of being brothel owners. Publishing their photos reveals their identity, violating basic ethical standards.

During the FGD in Delhi, it was clear that previous bad experiences with media persons prompted reluctance to share and suggest but their complex lives, work, and diverse views emerged here. “We never trust journalists. The police officers and journalists coming to us have bad attitudes. Our neighbours who suspect we’re doing sex work usually inform media persons,” they said, highlighting the problem of being “outed” in the media. “If they mention that our visuals won’t be used, we’ll be comfortable,” they said, suggesting that a process of gaining trust, ensuring consent, and assuring confidentiality might reduce the trust deficit.

Highlighting the impact on their families, particularly their children, participants said, “Our photos and videos will reveal our identity. We do not want that. Our kids will see our circulated/published news, photos and videos and will be impacted. Many of us have not told our kids, family, or friends. The police will also get a hint about us.”

The participants’ attempt to control their own narrative is revealed in how they approach the process of consent. “If we consent to one journalist, more will try to convince us to let our photos be taken. Journalists cannot force us to allow our photos to be taken. Everything can go viral on social media nowadays. Once a photo or video is published and circulated, we don’t even know who we can contact to remove or hide it.”

Participants of the FGD in Kerala highlighted the hazards of their identity being revealed when occupying public spaces. “A Hindi-speaking person who runs a vlog with stories about sex workers shot a video from around the local bus stand. A client got these visuals, and he sent those to me. Hence, we came to know about the instance. He shot visuals of sex workers waiting at the bus stand, negotiating with the clients, and getting into an autorickshaw with clients. However, visuals of non-sex workers were also shot, including those of college students or bus passengers, but mainly focusing on women.”

The visuals, filmed with a hidden camera, were telecast with a description in Hindi, revealing that the visuals were from Thrissur in Kerala, where the number of sex workers is high. The video contained visuals of women cleaning the bus stand, college students, those relaxing, waiting for the bus, those returning from the market. These women were all described as sex workers in the video. Needless to say, consent was not taken before filming. Participants at the FGD said, “We were in the dark about who shot the video.”

Likewise, the publication of photos and videos of sex workers by Marathi media has profound and far-reaching impacts, as highlighted in the FGDs. Sex workers expressed deep concerns over privacy violations, noting that such media exposure reveals their identities, “Our photos and videos will reveal our identity. We don’t want that,” they bluntly said. They pointed out that it would lead to severe consequences like housing discrimination, “All the landlords will get to know. Nobody will rent us their homes.”

Participants at the FGD in Maharashtra also highlighted a crucial aspect of sex work: consent. “Society often blames us because of the way videos circulate on mobile phones, which influences public perception. Some people say women should not wear certain clothes or do this work. This is completely wrong. We are sex workers; it is not sexual assault. Sex work and rape are two entirely different things.”

They pointed out that even without showing faces, identifiable details like wall colours or contact numbers on walls can expose them, as neighbours recognise their homes. This visibility affects their children, who may learn about their work, leading to disruption in family dynamics, with many having concealed their profession from husbands, in-laws, children, or extended family. They felt that it drew unwanted attention from police and other journalists, who often take photos secretly despite absence of consent, thus exacerbating the issue as content goes viral on social media, leaving sex workers powerless to have it removed, “We don’t even know who we can go to take it down.” This reckless media practice significantly heightens their vulnerability and social exclusion.

Marathi media breaches ethical standards around consent, said participants. Journalists were invasive, they said, “barging into our homes to take photos, not waiting to ask for consent.” “Reporters never took permission for our photographs,” and “Even if faces are blurred… we are still recognizable.”

A *Lokmat* story about a viral audio clip breaches privacy, while another about a "reel star" providing girls exploits data. Reports revealing locations, like a farmhouse where consensual sex was mislabelled as sex work, endanger women. An agent portrayed as "arrogant" in "high-profile sex work" fuels stigma.

5 (a) (ii) Perspectives of Media Professionals on Identity Protection

Interviews with key informants in the media revealed the compulsions and frameworks that media persons work in. Given the TRP (television rating point) driven visual media and hits-and-likes-driven digital and social media platforms, it is not surprising that the primary motive is to attract audiences. Putting it succinctly, an online news platform editor in West Bengal said, "The Supreme Court directive to suppress sex workers' identities is an issue. If reporters cannot identify the person or location they are reporting about, then how will they attract the audience's attention?"

A reporter from Hindi media said, "Editors instruct reporters about the broadcast story, its approach, and visuals needed. We ask the editors if we should disclose the sources' identity. If I just have to get the voice for a story, we first talk to them off camera, and if they are still hesitant to have their voice on camera, we will ask the sources if we can do it to camouflage their identity. There are also ways to shoot visuals without revealing identity, such as using over-the-shoulder shots or shooting sources in the dark to humanise (even if the face is not visible). In broad daylight, you can show the source's back and reporter's face to earn viewers' trust. Generally, TV media is uninterested in covering sex work because portrayal is difficult. While reporting a crime story, we add pictures of police officers working, a building being raided, or a siren hooting. About sex workers, what will we show? That is complex."

Media professionals interviewed felt that Telugu visual media has significantly reduced covering sex work-related stories given the recent implementation of stricter norms around protecting sex workers' identities. Consequently, the sensationalism that dominated such reports has notably declined. Sunil Tingilkar, Inputs Editor (Crime), *TV5*, said, "The biggest challenge is the limitation in visuals: no faces, no identifiable locations. Earlier, we did air sensational visuals, but now we are cautious. Earlier, our headlines were designed to grab attention. For instance, 'Spa centre musugulo vyabhicharam (Prostitution hidden behind a spa centre's facade)', '*Adham matuna andhamyna ammayilu* (pretty girls behind the mirrors)', or 'Spa tho paatu kasa misa (prostitution along with spa)', and 'Sandwich massage ah?' But that style has been discontinued. Now, we rarely report these cases at all. We have moved away from sensationalism, especially in stories related to sex work."

However, mindfulness about privacy is not impossible, given sensitisation and

practice. For example, Sana Amir, a Delhi-based multi-media photojournalist highlighted ways in which journalists can capture photos of stigmatised populations to ensure sensitivity when there are constraints on how freely a visual journalist can capture photos. “I think of other ways I can capture the visuals, like the use of shadows or photographing someone from the back.”

Shrikishan Kale, senior sub-editor with 17 years’ experience at several Marathi dailies—Prabhat, Sakal, and Lokmat—provides insights into the editorial process that results in placement and treatment of stories. “When a story comes to us, we ensure that it does not include the name or location of the sex worker. If photos are used, care is taken to ensure their faces are not visible, or alternative graphics are used. Headlines are crafted to avoid being sensational or provocative. Decisions on where the story is placed often depend on the editor's perspective. Some editors find stories about sex workers inappropriate, while progressive editors may encourage publishing the story prominently, even suggesting anchoring it on page one and focusing on the hardships faced. Editors do not get involved in daily stories but provide overall feedback that desk editors need to understand. Currently, only crime-related stories are being published.”

Despite the Supreme Court’s directions, media personnel covering sex work lack formal training or guidelines on sensitive reporting. As Ashok Kumar Namana, a senior video journalist, admits, “We don’t receive any guidelines or training as such but handle it through our experience and broader understanding.” This sensitisation gap often creates ad-hoc practices like asking women to cover their faces or feigning sympathy to extract soundbites. Such approaches underline the systemic failure to build ethical newsroom standards.

“Despite the Supreme Court’s directions, media personnel covering sex work lack formal training or guidelines on sensitive reporting.”

Case Study

Invasion of Privacy and Lack of Consent: The Social Media Racket (Kannada)

Fifteen Kannada videos[4] by individual content creators and posted on social media between 2022-2024 have been analysed.

With the increasing spread of smartphone use, a phenomenon of male Vloggers and YouTubers has emerged. They videograph sex workers' movements in the city sometimes posing as media persons, police or clients. The video reels uploaded on Facebook and YouTube were hyper-locally circulated with unique hashtags helping men nearby seeking sexual services to locate the women. The channels involved were Cornerside Kannada, Redlightz One, Nammura TV and Viral Kannada with last two being citizens' news channels, which inhabit an unregulated space.

Many of these videos are filmed in public spaces such as markets, bus stands and railway stations, mainly in the Majestic area of Bangalore, a busy transit hub for rail and road traffic. The content creators are familiar with the women's routes, and also sometimes seek their services by asking them for their rates and locations of rooms.

The visuals are of women's whole bodies and faces (identifiable), filmed surreptitiously, and also use emojis in the video to mark women standing on the street. The women are at tea stands, talking amongst themselves, sitting on benches or leaning against walls. It is largely impossible to discern what is being said by the women, and it is unclear if the women are sex workers at all. The videos often have a question or statement – 'Is Majestic underpass a red light area?' or '🚨 Light Area Asking Price' or 'Scammers everywhere be alert' or 'Don't Loose Money'. Several videos come with hashtags such as #nightlife or #scammers, which are not directly to do with sex work. The directly sex work related tags are #Red light area #bangalorecitymajestic #Redlightbangalore #majesticaunty #prostitute. The comments indicate that men routinely engage with the content. The emojis used are 😍, 🤩, 🤤, 🍌.

Consent is a concern as the women are seemingly unaware they are being filmed, and when they find out they tend to resist and ask the man to delete the video from his phone. Often content creators provoke such encounters out and then proclaim that the women attacked them and make proclamations that this is a racket that erodes public safety. The videos often have melodramatic soundtracks and voiceovers asking repeated questions. The videos circulate rapidly in hyperlocal contexts.

For sex workers, the danger is that their families and neighbours will recognise them and realise the nature of their work. This phenomenon of non-consensual videos on social media threatens their privacy, livelihoods, accommodation and daily mobility. Notably, there is no larger legal framework or mechanisms for complaints and redressal.

Screengrab of a YouTube Video

Case Study

YouTube Vlogs and the Dangers of the Night (Hindi)

A new genre of videos has emerged on the social media scene. YouTube vloggers travel to Delhi's GB Road to make videos of sex workers as a form of what they call "travel vlogs" with videos and photos taken secretly from odd angles. The sex workers' faces are visible. The vlogs and their creators have thousands of subscribers, views and comments. This case study will analyse one such vlog published on 30 January 2025 by a verified YouTube channel under the name of Manish Sharma.

The video, titled "GB Road Delhi at Night is Dangerous" starts with black and white footage of women lined up on the street. The videographer films their faces as they look into the camera, shocked and caught off guard. The camera pans their bodies vertically as a mysterious soundtrack plays in the background. The next clip shows a woman talking to a man sitting on his knees in front of her.

The vlogger, Manish Sharma, mic in his hand is interviewing a man on the street. "All the women I have seen here till now, are they here willingly?" Sharma asks. The interviewee replies that they have all come here through force and goes on to add voyeuristic details about sex work. Sharma presents his interviewee as an expert on sex work and the GB Road area.

As Sharma interacts with people on the street, he keeps his mic and camera hidden. Viewers are shown shaky footage of the road and hear the audio without identifying the person or understanding the context of the conversation. Sharma records all his conversations with agents trying to approach him in this manner, the blurry visuals adding a sese of urgency and haste.

The Vlogger is also seen posing as a customer for the video to 'get more footage.' While doing this, he presents himself as a righteous social media influencer who is putting himself in the way of possible harm in a controversial environment. "I am trying to shoot as much as I can, but this is an is an unsafe place with bad people," he says.

Though he is filming without consent, Sharma conveys a sense of being both authoritative and friendly. While his vlog comes across as raw and authentic, he is an outsider recording sex workers, often invading their privacy.

The video ends with Sharma riding the auto out of GB road, claiming that he had to escape the spot because he was pushed away by agents. He adds that filming a video about sex work is very tough and involves risking violence. "I have risked my life to get you this video. I deserve a 'like' from your side," he says.

Sharma is successful in filming, editing and airing in a way that sex work and sex workers look like criminals and societal outcasts only found in hidden corners of Delhi. Manish Sharma has 752K subscribers, and this video has had 304,432 views as of April 1, 2025.

Screengrab of the YouTube Video

5. (b) Criminalisation of Sex Work by the Media

The findings of the research reveal that crime-centric framing dominates Indian media narratives, with 64% of stories in the samples presenting sex work primarily through a criminal lens. Police voices overwhelmingly dominate news sources, while sex workers' own voices appear in only 4% of the coverage, indicating a severe imbalance in representation.

Of the total 606 news reports analysed in print and online, 1,459 issues were reported by the researchers in the 468 print reports. Of these 416 unique and distinct issues were identified. Over 60% of the print reports had more than two issues (369 news reports), over 42% had more than 3 issues (266), over 27% had engaged with more than 4 issues (167) and a small percentage of around 15% of the total reports looked at five more issues (96 reports).

Category	Count	Percentage	Key Issues
Law Enforcement	331	22.70%	Police raid (192), Rescue (99), Arrest (25+)
Crime Related	103	7.10%	Trafficking (67), Crime (36)
Minors	31	2.10%	Minors in sex work (31)
Operations	122	8.40%	Brothel running (90), Soliciting (14+)
Legal/Policy	82	5.60%	Laws ITPA/BNS (53), Policies (20), SC order (9)
Rights & Recognition	69	4.70%	Human Rights (24), Sex worker rights (11), ID docs (9), Others (24+)
Health	20	1.40%	HIV/AIDS (13), Health (7)
Social/Economic	44	3.00%	Eviction (26), Livelihood (10), Family (8)
Rehabilitation, Social workers	28	1.90%	Rehabilitation (20), Social workers (8)
*Out of the 468 news reports carrying 1459 issues, there were only 44 mentions on the social and economic challenges faced by sex workers in their lives.			

Table 5.2. Issues by Thematic category

Out of the 468 news reports carrying 1459 issues, there were only 44 mentions on the social and economic challenges faced by sex workers in their lives.

Language	Total Reports	Number of Issues tracked	Density - Issues/Report	Top Issue	Number of Top Issues	Top Issue Percentage
English	144	454	3.17	Laws (ITPA/ POCSO)*	56	7.70%
Marathi	79	258	3.27	Police Raid	46	17.80%
Tamil	54	172	3.19	Police Raid	24	14.00%
Hindi	60	167	2.78	Police Raid	40	24.00%
Telugu	45	156	3.47	Police Raid	30	19.20%
Bengali	21	127	6.05	Brothel running	6	4.70%
Kannada	40	85	2.13	Police Raid	11	12.90%
Malayalam	25	40	1.6	Police Raid	17	42.50%

*(ITPA [Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956], POCSO [Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012])

Table 5.3. Top issues by language

Issue coverage is dominated by a law-enforcement and criminal-justice frame, with police raids, rescue, brothel running, and trafficking forming the most frequently coded topics. *Police Raid* leads in six of eight languages, indicating that sex work is commonly represented through police intervention or law enforcement, arrest, and control rather than through labour, rights, health, or lived-experience perspectives; Bengali and English are the exceptions, where *Brothel Running* leads in Bengali and *Laws* (ITPA [Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956], POCSO [Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012]). lead in English. English contributes the largest volume and widest range of issue labels, while Bengali has the highest coding density and a diverse profile with no single dominant topic. Malayalam has the lowest volume and narrowest range, with strong concentration around police raids; Hindi and Telugu are also comparatively concentrated, whereas Marathi and Tamil distribute attention more broadly across rescue, trafficking, and related concerns.

Overall, unequal language sample sizes influence raw totals, but standardised rankings consistently reveal a dominant institutional and crime-oriented framing, while structural issues such as rights, welfare, health, livelihood, and stigma appear less prominently and unevenly across languages. Language sample sizes vary substantially, so percentages are more comparable than raw counts.

Overall, the top coverage issues are:

- *Police Raid* leads in six languages; Bengali's leading issue is *Brothel running*, and English's is *Laws* (ITPA/POCSO).
- *Police Raid* prevalence is highest in Malayalam (42.50%), Hindi (24.00%), and Telugu (19.20%), and Marathi (17.80%).
- Telugu has a tie between *Brothel Running* and *Police Raid*.
- English uniquely places *Laws* as its top issue and among its top two issues.
- Tamil uniquely includes *Minors in Sex Work* in its top four.

The pattern of dominance of the crime focus is reflected in all the states where the top three issues for each of the seven states consistently reflect the preoccupation of the media with sex work as a crime and sex workers as criminals and reporting it as such.

Perspective of the news

Crime is the dominant perspective, appearing in 390 of 606 reports (64.4%). More than one perspective is present in 225 reports (37.4%): 133 reports have two perspectives, and 92 have three. Multiple-perspective coverage is far more common in issue-based reporting (55.1%) than incident-based reporting (28.9%), suggesting that thematic reporting broadens the interpretive frame. Marathi has the highest multi-perspective rate (66.3%), followed by English (45.9%), Tamil (40.9%), and Bengali (39.5%); Malayalam has the lowest (12.2%).

The dataset is predominantly crime-led: 390 reports (64.4%) include *Crime*, while *Legal* appears in 124 (20.6%) and *Human Rights* in 106 (17.6%). This means the principal interpretive lens remains policing and criminality, even when other perspectives are added. Marathi is the clear outlier for breadth, averaging 2.05 perspectives per report and assigning multiple perspectives to 66.3% of reports. English averages 1.64; Tamil and Bengali average about 1.52–1.55. Malayalam, Hindi, and Kannada more frequently have a single perspective.

Adult women are the near-universal subject group (410 reports, 90.9%). Adult men appear in 144 reports (31.9%), usually alongside adult women; the Adult women + Adult men pairing alone occurs in 114 reports. Children and gender-diverse people are comparatively marginal: Minor girl appears in 51 reports (11.3%), Minor boy in 4 (0.9%), Transgender in 7 (1.6%), and Adult transgender in one report.

Minor girl and adult women overlap in reports

Measure	Reports	Share of Minor girl reports	Interpretation
All reports containing Minor girl	51	100.00%	Denominator
Also contain Adult women	24	47.10%	Mixed-age female context
Do not contain Adult women	27	52.90%	Minor girl without adult-women context
Mixed with Adult women?	24	47.10%	Yes—substantial, but not the majority

Table 5.4. Reports overlapping the use of the terms Minor Girls and Women

Finding

Minor girls are mixed with adult women in 24 of 51 reports (47.1%). The overlap appears as Adult women + Minor girl (11), Adult men + Adult women + Minor girl (11), Adult women + Minor boy + Minor girl (1), and all four groups (1). The remaining 27 reports (52.9%) mention Minor girl without Adult women. This frequent age-group blending may obscure the distinct safeguarding and legal implications of reporting about minors.

5 (b) (i) Predominance of crime reporting

Out of the 606 reports, 403 (66.5%) focused on highlighting the issue from a crime perspective whether in news reports or features. Of the total sample from Delhi and Kerala, 78% were devoted to crime news as the key focus. A comparison of the crime news covered in print and television shows that 60.9% of the total electronic coverage was devoted to crime related news (84/138) and 68% of the print coverage monitored was crime.

Finding

The graph (see Figure 5.2.) distinguishes volume from concentration. Marathi records the highest top-issue count, *Police Raid*, 46 times. Malayalam has the highest percentage, where *Police Raid* represents 42.5% of all issues tracked. English has a relatively high count of 35 counts of *Police Raid* but a low share of 7.7% on total issues tacked, indicating broader and more diverse issue coverage. Hindi (40; 24.0%) and Telugu (30; 19.2%) show stronger concentration around police raids. Bengali differs: *Brothel Running* is its leading issue, but accounts for only 4.7%, suggesting the most diversified issue profile. Overall, police-raid framing dominates most languages, but its importance varies substantially.

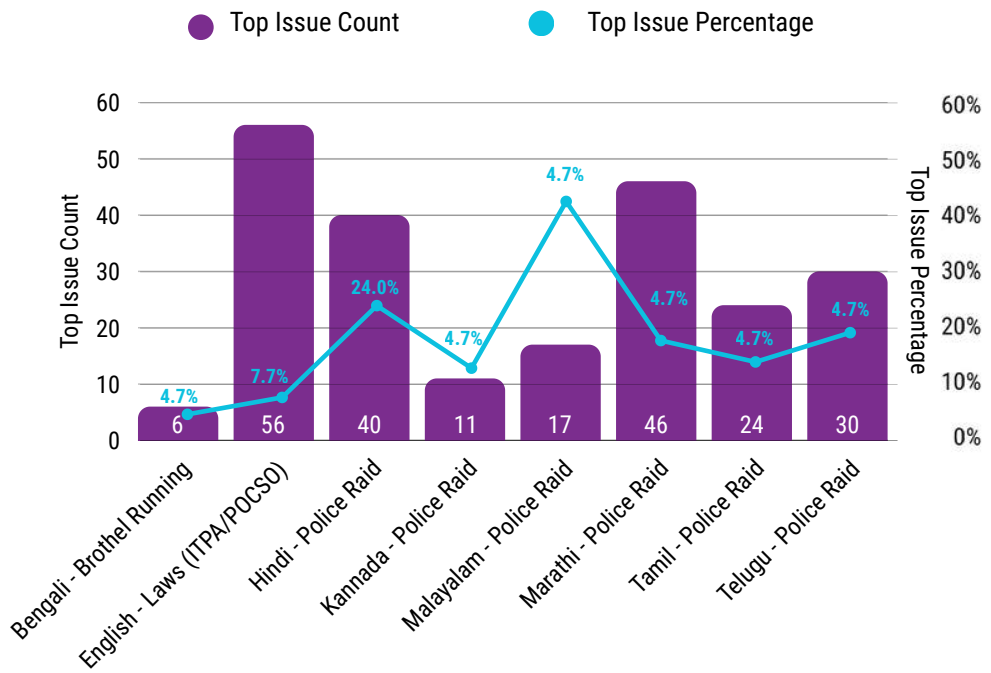


Figure 5.2. Issues tracked and languages

5 (b) (ii) Community perspectives on criminalisation of sex work by the media

Participants at the FGD in Tamil Nadu highlighted the criminalised approach of the media. They pointed out the frequency with which reports appear of a five or six-year-old schoolgirl being abused in an area where sex work is carried out. “Then sex workers are arrested and our lives are being adversely affected. We don’t know whether the news is fake, or media persons are misinformed. But society considers sex work as “wrong” and us as “immoral” or “pitiable” persons who should be rescued and rehabilitated, partly due to media. When they write about family honour, they suppress the man/husband’s identity. We do this work out of our volition. They should not call it (sex work) criminal. I say that writing about or calling it criminal is criminal.”

The FGD in Bangalore revealed that over the past three or four years, social media misrepresented sex workers, largely through a criminal lens. Some of these were citizens’ news channels.

Participants at the FGD in Kerala highlighted the close alliance between the police and the media, which contributes to pushing a criminalised perspective. “The media will arrive at the raid spot upon being informed by the police. The media should not solely report the police version, and just one side of a story.” The lack of accountability for such unbalanced reporting which impacts real people, was also brought up. The lack of awareness among

journalists about the legal position was also highlighted. “Media persons have no idea of the legal aspects of sex work; they still have the notion that sex work is criminal. They have not been sensitised yet. A sensitisation session will bring a change in the perspective of the police and the media about us. Media persons make news only when sex workers are arrested in raids. There are teachers and other professionals who do sex work, but the media will not care when they are arrested in raids. Diseases are not spread by sex workers, because we are aware. We also guide freshers in the field.”

Participants at the FGD in Maharashtra highlighted a strategy by the police and the media working together, which was extremely damaging to the women. If they could not find anything criminal, the media staged criminality, and manufactured it. “Police and journalists come dressed in civil dress/plain clothes and post everything on Facebook. Last time, to find them (sex workers), the police went house to house. The police wanted to locate them, and in plain clothes, they went to their (sex workers’) homes.” Participants alleged that police planted items considered “suspicious”, like incense and *ganja* (marijuana) in the homes of sex workers, after which. the police picked them up in a “raid”.

The media’s portrayal can sometimes inflict direct harm. A story in Marathi daily Lokmat exposing details of a woman’s flat violates privacy, hampering clients and earnings: “We have to cover our faces…out of fear of recognition,” forcing women to live hidden lives. A case of sex work in a small neighbourhood risked familial harm: “If her family members were unaware…it could harm her relationships.” An agent taking ₹2500 but giving the sex worker ₹500 highlights financial exploitation. Participants at the FGDs noted, “Even with children at home, we are forcibly sent to rehab, disrupting family stability. Children face deprivation of basic rights such as education and care.” They added that debt from legal fees (averaging ₹30,000-₹50,000) compounds vulnerability.

Participants at the FGD in Andhra Pradesh said that the use of distasteful representative images made them look like criminals: women with heads lowered, looking dishonoured and ashamed. Press meets are intrusive, infantilising, uncomfortable and judgmental, but the media does not listen. Even after the Supreme Court guidelines, media organisations continue unethical and dramatic reporting.

5 (b) (iii) Perspectives from media professionals

Shalu Agrawal, a reporter with Hindi daily *Dainik Bhaskar* talks about reporting a three-part series on a police raid of sex workers in Meerut. In the first story, a video was made of a bank officer who went to a salon for a massage. A *honey trap* (a practice of questionable ethics in the media) was laid. When a raid was conducted, nine girls from the Noida-Delhi were “caught”.

In the second story, again, a *honey trap* was laid in a salon in Meerut, which allegedly used to send photos of girls on WhatsApp, and made videos of

customers with hidden cameras without their knowledge or consent. In this raid, 20 individuals were "caught". In the third video, the story reported a case of blackmail by making a secret video of a bank employee at a spa. The spa owner had allegedly demanded Rs 5 lakh from the bank employee, who went on to complain to the police, thus prompting a raid.

Shalu Agrawal recounted, "A complainant told *Dainik Bhaskar* reporters that after a massage at a spa centre, he was blackmailed telephonically for money. He discovered that the spa centre women had intimate videos of him. Shocked, the man gave them money, but when they demanded more, he complained to the police." The reporter verified the story from the FIR and confessions at the police station. "We started following the story once the police decided to open the case and decided to raid the spa centre," the reporter said.

Importantly, Shalu Agrawal said that she was unclear whether the "victim" paid for the sexual service and if there was an agreement between the women at the spa centre and the complainant. "This was a 'Honey Trap', she said. "He goes to the massage to relax. If the customer pays, the women at the centre should not shoot his videos," she added. Upon being asked if the women at the centre were sex workers or massage providers, the reporter said that the women probably were both. The reporter followed the police and covered the raid. "After the raid, we found that this was a common practice at the spa centre where they would keep records of their customers, so they could blackmail them later," the reporter said. Honey trap was a regular occurrence at this centre, she added.

The reporter also mentioned that a whole team reported on the story. One person was dedicated to the victim, another to the actual raid spot, and a different person to interview the police. Many sources were available to dig out the story. However, reporting was generally only from the police and victim's angle.

The reporter's primary sources were the complainant and conversations with the police and videos and photos from social media. The reporter did not verify information with the accused women or interview them. The reporter also sought bystanders' confirmation about seeing people visit the spa. The reporting was thus a crime report style.

At the editorial level, awareness, and intent to report sensitively on sex work might exist, but this rarely translates into actual newsroom practices. "Reporters often do not probe and instead operate negligently. Many treat stories on sex work like gossip," said Sudhakar Reddy Udumula, Editor (Investigations), *Times of India*, Hyderabad. "Access is also challenging–police rarely allow journalists to speak with sex workers and control their responses." He mentioned that newsroom deadlines add pressure, but editors must ensure stories are balanced. "I always ask my team to rework stories when needed. We are sensitised at the newsroom level not to sensationalise.

Reporting should go beyond raids—we should prioritise issues like mental health, physical abuse and relief and rehabilitation access." When asked about sensitively reporting on sex work, he emphasised that journalists must treat sex workers empathetically, portraying them not as raided subjects but as individuals often caught in difficult circumstances. He acknowledged that deadline pressure can sometimes override sensitivity in newsrooms. He stressed the need to avoid glorifying police actions and instead prioritising deeper issues such as systemic challenges and sex workers' vulnerabilities.

Laxman More, a senior Marathi journalist with about 18 years of experience with several Marathi dailies, including *Pudhari*, *Punyanagari*, *Lokmat*, *Daily City*, *Mumbai Tarun Bharat*, and *Civic Mirror*, said, "Police raids dominate coverage because they are easy to report. Most raids are for show." "Police know where sex work happens but conduct raids to meet action quotas or boost their image." Financial factors play a role—bribes and agent fees leave sex workers with little of their earnings. Journalists, viewing sex work as a societal stigma, see raid stories as newsworthy, believing they contribute to social reform. News tips come from police, residents near raid sites, or the Social Security Department, but reporters rarely dig deeper. "They get a police press note and publish it as is," said Laxman More, noting that quoting authorities reduces the need for investigation. Crime or court reporters, who typically cover sex work, prioritise other crimes—murders, robberies—over these stories, treating them as low-priority. Speaking to sex workers could reveal compelling human-interest stories, but journalists seldom make the effort."

Laxman More argues that "raid" is an incorrect term; "action taken" is more accurate. Both emphasise protecting sex workers' identities, warning against hyper-local social media reporting that can reveal names or locations, causing harm. Video interviews should be filmed in neutral settings, and graphics should replace actual photos whenever possible. Words like "body selling" or "flesh trade" are avoided as they are considered inflammatory. In some places, the term "*Warangana*" (an older Marathi term for sex workers) is used, but its comprehension among readers is questionable.

"Video interviews should be filmed in neutral settings, and graphics should replace actual photos whenever possible."

Case Study

Who was Murdered: Sex Worker or Shopkeeper? (Bengali)

The subtle ways media tells a story can render whole communities visible or invisible, worthy or unworthy of collective grief. This insight emerges upon examining coverage of a shooting on 17 December 2024 near a red-light area in Alipurduar, West Bengal. Kaushalya Mahato, 65, lost her life, a teenager was injured, different media outlets seemed to tell a different story about the same human tragedy.[5]

The contrast between the extensive coverage of this incident and the silence around countless other sex worker deaths in West Bengal speaks volumes about who matters in our media landscape. Examining coverage of the Alipurduar shooting in The Telegraph, Millenium Post, Ei Muhurte and Aaro Ananda, reveals disturbing patterns in tone, victim treatment, and the hunger for sensation over substance. These distortions don't just shape news—they shape us, moulding our capacity for empathy toward those society has already pushed to the margins.

The disparities are apparent when Bengali and English coverage are read side by side, with Kaushalya's identity being rewritten. Some reports label the victim "যৌনকর্মী" (sex worker) as her primary identifier, headlines breathlessly emphasising the "red-light area" where her life ended. In another publication she appears as "65-year-old Kaushalya Mahato, a paan shop owner".

Some outlets painted the scene with cinematic flourishes—"ফিল্মি কায়দায় শুটআউট" (film-style shootout)—while others labelled the location "নিষিদ্ধপল্লি" (forbidden area). These aren't neutral descriptors; they're brushstrokes that colour the entire narrative. The terminology transformed a woman's violent end into something resembling entertainment. These editorial choices do not reflect reality alone—they create it in readers' minds.

Speculation flows freely where verification should stand guard. "নিহত মহিলা যৌনকর্মী অভিযুক্তের বিরোধী দলের কাউকে আশ্রয় দিয়েছিলেন" (the deceased woman had sheltered someone from the accused's rival group). This unverified claim substitutes for careful reporting, suggesting that journalistic standards become elastic when covering marginalised lives.

While violence against sex workers is generally unmarked by media attention, selective amplification occurred not because Kaushalya mattered more, but because her death included elements—public shooting, mob justice, an injured teenager—that fit into the mould of what editors consider "newsworthy violence."

Death coverage in Indian media follows an unspoken hierarchy, where certain elements elevate a tragedy from forgettable to newsworthy: The shooting happened publicly in Ward No. 10, where ordinary people could witness it; and a 15-year-old bystander was injured, providing the story with an "innocent" victim.

Kaushalya Mahato's fragmented portrayal across headlines stands as both symptom and symbol of journalism's deepest failings. Her story reminds us that journalism's true measure isn't breaking news first but breaking silence meaningfully—especially for those whose lives society has trained us not to value. Perhaps, in remembering how her humanity was compromised in death, we might learn to better honour the living.

Cover image of the article, Sangbad Pratidin

5. (c) Treatment of News on Sex Work

Language	Leading treatment	Share
Bengali	Sensational	26.20%
English	Factual	30.50%
Hindi	Sensational	24.30%
Kannada	Factual	23.70%
Malayalam	Negative	41.00%
Marathi	Emotional	21.10%
Tamil	Sensational	36.00%
Telugu	Factual	20.80%

Table 5.5. Leading treatment within each language

The leading-treatment patterns (see Table 5.5.) reveal three broad language profiles. *Sensational framing* leads in Bengali (26.2%), Hindi (24.3%) and especially Tamil (36.0%), indicating that Tamil coverage is the most concentrated around dramatic or attention-seeking treatment, while Bengali and Hindi have more distributed mixes despite *Sensational* ranking first. Factual treatment leads in English (30.5%), Kannada (23.7%), and Telugu (20.8%); English shows the clearest factual orientation, whereas the lower Kannada and Telugu shares suggest that no single treatment strongly dominates their coverage.

Malayalam is distinctive for its strong *Negative* treatment concentration (41.0%), the highest leading-category share among all languages, pointing to a particularly adverse framing pattern. Marathi differs from every other language, with *Emotional* (Tragic, Sad, Happy) leading at 21.1%, suggesting greater reliance on personalised or affective storytelling, although the low share indicates a diverse treatment profile.

Overall, the table shows that language affects not only which treatment is most common but also how concentrated the framing is: Malayalam and Tamil have the clearest dominant patterns, while Telugu, Marathi, Kannada, and Hindi exhibit more mixed treatment repertoires.

A significant number of the print and television news items monitored during the period were *Sensational* and/or *Negative* in their treatment of the issue of sex work (see Figure 5.3.)

Of the 606 items, 201 were sensational; 163/606 were negative; 41 articles were blaming the sex workers; and 72 out of the total sample were voyeuristic. The largest segment of negative treatment of the issue came from Delhi and Kerala (41 items each).

In contrast only 59/606 articles were positive and 81 were empathetic.

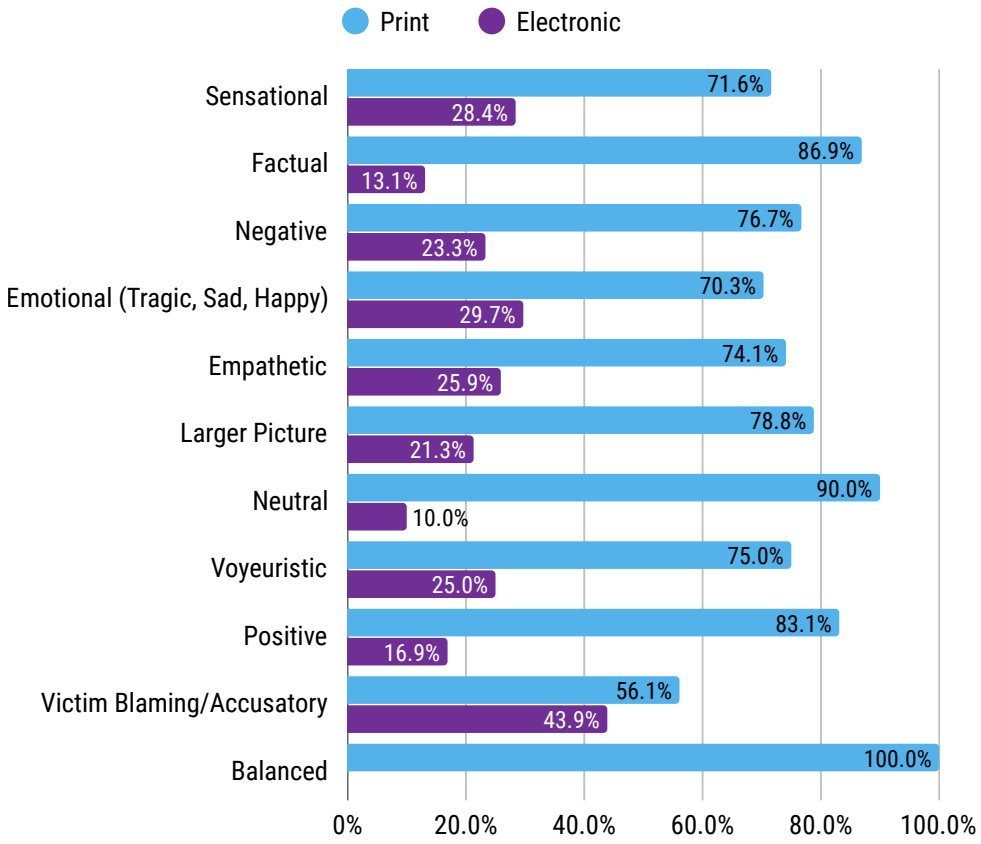


Figure 5.3. Treatment of News Distribution

Sensational (18.6%) is the dominant treatment type, closely followed by *Factual* (17.0%) and *Negative* (15.1%).

a. *Problematic Coverage*: *Combined Sensational + Negative + Voyeuristic + Victim Blaming* = 44.2% of all treatment tags, indicating significant ethical concerns

b. *Positive Coverage*: *Factual + Empathetic + Positive + Neutral + Larger Picture* = 45.2%, indicating some balanced reporting

Medium of the story

Print media demonstrates more balanced and ethical coverage of sex workers, with higher rates of factual reporting. Electronic media shows a tendency toward sensationalism and problematic framing, with over 53% of its treatment being classified as problematic.

- Electronic media shows higher problematic treatment rates (53.3% vs 41.5% in Print media)
- Print media has more ethical/balanced coverage (39.9% vs 29.3% in Electronic media)

Target audiences

An interesting finding was that location matters in determining the slant and perspective of news. The study found that the independent incidents of crime that appear in news media and are associated with sex work are also geographically relevant to a hyperlocal or local audience. For instance, the research found that out of the 79 Hindi stories monitored, 44 were hyperlocally relevant and 27 were locally relevant. Three stories were written for a national audience, and five were covered for a state audience. Within the languages, Hindi coverage included 35 hyperlocal stories, 20 local stories, as well as only two national and two state stories. English reports included nine hyperlocal stories, seven local stories, only one national story and three stories with a state angle.

In order to cater to a local audience, news reports related to sex work often included hotel names or house locations in certain areas, names of specific neighbourhoods, or details of a location specific to that area. Since many stories related to sex work are published as crime stories, the name and location of the local police branch and the police personnel in that jurisdiction are also included in the news reports. Stories related to sex work often hint toward a sense of rising criminal activity in a particular area. For instance, a report in *Amar Ujala*[6] from November 20, 2023, with the headline *Delhi News: Two women involved in prostitution* arrested mentions a particular location in West Delhi. The reports also go on to explain the exact spot where sex workers were working. "Women do obscene acts with the people passing by there, and people are facing a lot of trouble. Given these complaints, police activated informers in that area," the report said. It also emphasises that women were residents of that locality. The report also mentions that the police had to act on these complaints in the area and arrest the women. "Given these complaints, police activated informers in that area," and "the team immediately raided and arrested two women," the report said.

Another report from Hindustan[7] with the headline दिल्ली के इस होटल में सजा था सेक्स बाजार पुलिस के छापे में 3 लड़कियों समेत 6 गिरफ़्तार, ये बड़ा राज खुला (translates to This hotel in Delhi was a sex market, 6 arrested including 3 girls in police raid) mentions a police raid on sex work in a hotel in the southern region of a locality in East Delhi. While mentioning the name of the police station and the police team involved, the report said that the police team too action after a "tip-off". The report also mentioned that a particular hotel in that area "was previously involved in prostitution, and legal action was also taken against the hotel by Delhi Police."

Hyperlocal newspapers in Hindi had sensational or voyeuristic reports using blurred photographs of semi-naked women. Speculation and opinion tended to masquerade as news. The news was largely reported in the States section of newspapers even when a hyperlocal incident was reported. One of the main concerns around even the shorter crime reports on sex workers were the accompanying stock images that were used. While reporting on the

Supreme Court order or crime reports on police raids, photographs of women dressed in short skirts, with only a frame of their legs in urban, night-time settings, were the standard marker of "prostitute". In one picture below, women are pictured in a neighbourhood, and it is unclear who they are or why they are dressed as such – but the accompanying caption talks about a "red light area".

Media professionals' perspectives on sensationalising news

Kannada journalists interviewed for the research said that one of the primary differences in the tone, language, and imagery after 2022 was that reporting became more factual and neutral. Notwithstanding the detail or granularity of a case, there were fewer insinuations, sensationalised claims, or statements. The coverage revealed that some aspects of the Supreme Court ruling had some impact, especially regarding protecting identity of sex workers whether by blurring photographs or using changed names if sex workers were quoted.

So, while the language is becoming less lurid and more neutral than pre-2022 articles, the stock images seem to undercut the attempt at sensitive reporting. They tend to reproduce a sensationalised, sexualised notion of women's bodies as available in the night for solicitation, reinforcing a stereotype of sex workers' possible attire and their work methods. Qualitative observation in news reports Asianet Suvarna Kannada (6/40) revealed that often reports did not substantiate their claims. For example, the term "fake prostitution" is not explained, and there were claims that college students were taking to sex work (called "prostitution") in the context of another report about a couple who used a penthouse to run a service. In the smaller news outlets in Kannada, there are terms like "flesh trade", "immoral", and "high-tech prostitution", even as they protect the privacy of individuals. Very rarely do news reports use the term sex worker or the Kannada term, *laingika karyakartharu*. Additionally, the lack of follow up and complete absence of sex worker voices ensures that there is no clarity about the case and its history and progress. It remains unclear what happens after the raids occurred since journalists do not follow up on such stories unless they are sensational events.

A Bengali journalist-turned-editor remarked that the "cutthroat race" for faster reporting and "hits" in the digital age often sacrifices ethical reporting for sensationalism, preventing journalists from building long-term, trustworthy relationships with marginalised communities. "Exclusive reports do not exist. Faster and spicy reports matter," he said. Journalists interviewed said that they are ethically challenged to protect identities while also honouring an individual's right to disclosure. Demands for sensational content often override responsible reporting. Two women journalists highlighted: "Trust and genuine connection cement human interest stories. Building rapport requires patience, empathy and persistence, and recognizing sex workers and their lives."

Why such sensationalised/voyeuristic portrayals? The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the Bengali media clearly point to a tendency for sensationalizing language and visuals in reports and broadcasts regardless of the reporter's or the anchor's gender. The five journalists who were interviewed all spoke about the competitiveness in the media industry, where quick reporting, getting a higher number of reports and by-lines, lack of specialisation in their area of reporting, and lack of interest in most reporters about the lives of sex workers play a role. The other side of the coin is the media consumer "To gain more views and the attention of media consumers, reporters resort to sensationalizing language in reporting, headlines, and broadcasts. Therefore, reports contain less of the facts and more of the 'spice'," said an editor from the Bengali media.

This trend of sensationalising news seems to be a general trend. Parul Sharma, former editor of Hindi daily *Jansatta* said, "Reporters often gain glory for publishing sex workers' stories that overlook their dignity. Journalists prioritise "tasty" stories over appropriateness and empathy. journalists covering sex work, must practise their vocabulary and glossary, conveying their story's message with dignity." The editor also noted that a newsroom does not have special or different reporter for every topic. Crime reporters or legal reporters are deputed to report on stories about sex work. "But, often, these reporters don't have enough knowledge on this topic," she said. "The reporter will end up using words like "*deh vyapaar*" (flesh trade) or "*vaishyavrati*" (prostitution) since they are not aware of alternatives. While writing the story, reporters add "a little bit of everything," including their legal input and "other general knowledge."

Laxman More notes journalists view sex work as a "stigma," driving sensationalism to "reform" society, reinforcing patriarchal control.

Journalists interviewed pointed out that the local political context also determined the treatment of news on sex workers. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, *Andhra Jyothy*'s coverage was more analytical and often featured longer stories, in contrast to *Sakshi*'s brief crime-report-style entries. But this changed dramatically when a ruling Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) politician was linked to the case. Then, the report became aggressive, sensational, and clearly biased.

Good Practice: Respect is Possible

The instances shared here are of journalists who report on sex workers with respect, using preferred terminology and including sex workers' voices.

Soumya R. Krishna is a broadcast journalist who has worked with Malayalam television channels such as *Asianet News*. In 2022, she did a four-part series on the lives of sex workers for the *Asianet News*, a Malayalam television channel. At the time, she was the channel's Delhi correspondent, and the sex workers she profiled were based in Delhi, though the series was broadcast in Malayalam.

The series was conceived in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's May 2022 verdict that recognised sex work as a profession. It examined whether this landmark judgment would bring tangible changes to the lives of sex workers. Told largely from the perspective of sex workers themselves, the series highlighted their lived realities: how many had turned to sex work to support their children and families; how meagre wages, pay discrimination, and sexual exploitation in other jobs had pushed them into the profession; and how stigma continued to define their everyday experiences.

The series took care to protect identities- faces were blurred and voices altered, though in some visuals the blurring was not entirely effective. Importantly, it included multiple voices, both from sex workers and from activists advocating for their rights.

Soumya R. Krishna said:

> "Finding sex workers willing to talk and convincing them of our intentions took time and sensitivity. Traditionally, sex workers' stories in mainstream media prioritise arrests, police raids, or violence -reinforcing stereotypes and deepening stigma, rarely including sex workers' voices. The Supreme Court verdict helped reframe the conversation. I aimed to amplify sex workers' voices, letting them discuss their lives, struggles and rights. I was trying to shift from voyeurism and moral panic towards dignified, empathetic, and respectful journalism."
>
> "In a society where sex work is stigmatised, my reporting sought to emphasise dignity and respect. Communicating this intent was important for the women I spoke to, and within my newsroom. Tight deadlines added pressure, especially since honest and heartfelt conversations with sex workers could not be rushed. I had to balance between the demands of broadcast journalism and the need to give them space to speak in their own words. Eventually, I prioritised their voices, letting their narratives lead the story. I also carefully verified the legal aspects of the reporting. NGOs provided access to legal advisors and advocates who helped ensure accuracy. I referred to landmark judgments and previous cases to support my coverage. Standard broadcast protocols were followed, including blurring faces and altering voices to protect identities."

Good Practice: Respect is Possible

Varun, sub-editor, *Mathrubhumi* daily's Alappuzha edition, highlights the crucial but often overlooked role of the desk editor in shaping a story. He edited a multi-part series on sex workers written by journalist Athira. The series, titled *Irulvazhiyile Nishagandhikal* (*The Queens of the Night on the Dark Path*), explored sex workers' struggles in Alappuzha district. While it included sex workers' voices, the police, Residents' Associations, and the administration's perspectives were prioritised. He shared:

> "The reporter initially wrote the story highlighting sex workers' lives and experiences. But we could not publish it that way because the Residents' Associations, who even issued press releases after incidents of mistaken identity and sex workers' rights clashed. The Bureau Chief, the News Editor and I decided to balance these. While sex workers' human rights need acknowledging, the newsroom also considered the social issue of women awaiting clients publicly. He recalled the Supreme Court's May 2022 verdict recognising sex work as work and affirming sex workers' dignity and equality before law. The court guidelines were before us, and the police could not book sex workers under existing laws which we remembered while editing. As editors, we should also remember our readership and pass through that lens, whatever our preferences. A viral social media post comparing Alappuzha to Pattaya, Thailand, that around 20 sex workers were seen awaiting clients together, influenced the series. Among the toughest tasks was finding the right headline. We cannot raise our voices loudly, like before - readers and the management pressurise us. As the media is a business, desk editors balance important storytelling delicately.

A senior Hindi newspaper editor outlined the process crime reporters should follow while covering sex work. While reporting on sex work and going through FIRs and police statements, it is the responsibility of the reporter to cross-check these sources and get a second opinion. "Don't just focus on 'crime'," she said. According to her, every police station sends a press release to newsrooms with a list of crimes. If the issue is alarming and sensitive, the journalist must seek a second opinion. Only after cross-checking and investigating will the news copy be accurate. On the issue of photos of sex workers, according to the editor, the reporters should also focus on the *portrayal of women*. "During my time at the desk, we never used images of a vulnerable source to ensure their safety," she said. "Instead, a reporter can use graphics to express what the story is trying to convey. Journalists should avoid using photos if they want to maintain the dignity of the story," she added. According to the editor, guidelines for reporting in any newsroom are not written or fixed. They usually come as part of a journalist's work experience. "In earlier days, that information was hard to access. Today, information is flowing constantly on the web, social media, and even amongst colleagues," she said. "It is up to the reporter to make sure they do not work in a biased way and are careful. If a reporter's conscience is not clear, then the impact of the story will not be very good," she added.

Good Practice: Respect is Possible

The editor also emphasised the need to train crime reporters and legal journalists inside the newsrooms, to ensure accuracy. According to her, this training cannot be done by journalism professors or editors in newsrooms alone. This training has to come from experts in the field. The training should be conducted through workshops by retired judges, advocates, or officers. Media organisations should invite experts from these sectors to panels so that they can talk to working journalists, she felt.

Telugu journalists opined that media coverage on sex work could significantly improve if sex work forums actively engaged with the media through regular press releases. However, deep-rooted mistrust in the media prevents it. Since the Supreme Court issued guidelines on reporting sex work, mainstream media outlets largely avoid naming sex workers or publishing identifiable images. Still, the reporting remains mostly problematic.

Bengali journalists interviewed shared good practices to build rapport the journalists. This included time spent in communities without asking for immediate stories; learning proper terminology through mentorship; recognising sex workers as experts of their own lives; and building relationships beyond immediate story needs.

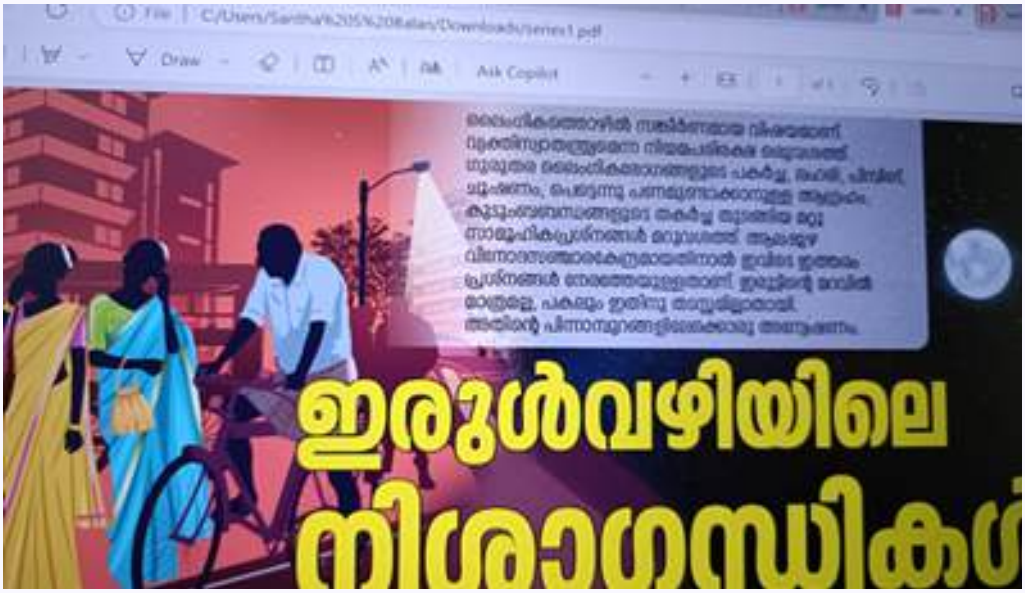
The video format is more intrusive, said photojournalist Sana Amir. With increased phones and social media, people are now more wary of what you are shooting and recording. To build this trust, I do not use my camera in the first meeting, so they can get more comfortable with there being a camera later. If it is a sensitive issue, I will also sometimes show the footage to them. “They deserve it.” Once the story gets published, “I will share the link.” Journalists should also be liable if they have represented someone in a way that makes them uncomfortable. Consent forms are important for this.

Case Study | Whipping up Moral Panic (Malayalam)

A series in *Mathrubhumi* caries a sensational title, *Irulvazhiyile Nishagandhikal (The Queens of Nights on Dark Paths)*. At first glance, the attempt of a conservative daily that seldom breaks taboos, to carry a series on sex workers in itself seemed like a great effort, and the problem appeared to be only with the headline. However, closer reading reveals that due to the tone, the focus is on how the presence of sex workers is a public nuisance.

The first part of the series has a sub-heading '*Pothujanangalkk Salyamayal Nadapadi*' (action will be taken if trouble is caused to the public). The text under the subheading reads[8]: "Anti-social elements thrived near the KSRTC bus station in Alappuzha for over three years. Sex workers would occupy the place when the night falls. To misbehave with the female passengers mistaking them for sex workers and the sex workers as a group canvassing those (men) coming in vehicles were common. The police arrested two agent women for immoral activity last week. Police cannot but take action when sex-workers cause trouble to the public." The word 'anasasyam' (immoral) is a derogatory word to describe sex work in Malayalam. Quotes such as these set the tone of the series, which seems aimed to whip up moral panic.

In the first part of the series, a text highlight reads[9]: "Sex work is a complicated issue. On the one side is the protection given by law for individual freedom. On the other side is the spread of severe sexually transmitted diseases, being not sober, pimping (the English word pimping is also used in Malayalam), exploitation, the desire for sudden money, destruction of family relations etc. Alappuzha is a tourist spot, and such issues existed here in the past, too. There is no hindrance to it, not solely under the cover of darkness but even during daylight." In part one, there is a box with the version of sex workers reads[10]: "The police were beating us. Don't we have freedom even to stand on the road? Whom will we complain to?" Sex workers shared about the police arresting two agents conducting "immoral" activities.



Screengrab of the series

5. (d) Source quoted in news on sex work

Category	Sources Included	Count	Percentage	Assessment
Law Enforcement	Police, FIR/Police complaint	423	59.41%	Over-represented
Legal/Judicial	Court order, Judge	67	9.41%	Moderate
Sex Workers' Voice	Sex worker, Rights activist/Union	115	16.15%	Under-represented
Government	Government official, Politician	43	6.04%	Low
Civil Society - Abolition	Social Worker/CBO, NGO-Abolitionist	32	4.49%	Low
Academic/Expert	Researcher/Academic	9	1.26%	Very Low
Public	Bystander/Public	23	2.90%	Low

Table 5.6. Source Category Analysis

The data reveals a significant imbalance in voice representation. A key finding was the dominance of law enforcement perspectives with 59.41% of all stories quoting police as the primary source. Sex worker voices were marginalised: only 16. 15% of stories quote sex workers directly. For every community voice, there are over six official sources quoted. Electronic media quotes more sex workers (40% of sex worker quotes) compared to print (60% rely on police sources).

Media professionals' perspectives

Providing insights into how stories are reported, journalists from West Bengal said that information often comes from police/investigating officials during raids or violence against a sex worker. In such cases, the reporters cannot access sex workers whom the police probably "rescue" and take away to rehabilitation homes, thereby lowering representation of their voices. A crime beat journalist added that even if they contacted organisations running women's shelters, the organisation often decided which women they could speak with and what they could share with the media. While sex workers' rights advocacy NGOs share information with media, such information is limited to the women's participation in cultural activities, international days of observances, and statements by NGO leaders on critical issues like the rape and murder of a doctor at the R G Kar hospital in August 2024. Sometimes rival groups and people share incriminating information about their competitors like trafficking and not sex workers. direct connections to sex workers are the most authentic source but takes time.

All the journalists interviewed highlighted lack of access to sex workers unless they can walk into the streets and build rapport with the women, or through specific NGOs and sex workers' rights activists. The NGOs' or activists' stance determines whether they will interview sex workers entering the profession willingly or trafficked persons continuing the profession voluntarily. However, even this is inconsistent as most sex workers' NGOs do not know reliable reporters covering their lives and advocacy initiatives. This leaves police, FIRs, and court proceedings as journalists' key information sources on criminal incidents.

Marathi journalists spoke about police-centric narratives and systemic collusion. The media glorifies law enforcement, obscuring complicity. A report listing 14 police officials' names while noting "13 women were rescued" ignores outcomes, while another about a "dummy client" suggests orchestration. Participants at the FGD in Maharashtra revealed, "Police come disguised, directly enter the house," and "If they want to frame someone, they plant drugs." Nowadays, police conduct raids to "be heroes," as Laxman More notes, "Most raids are for show…to meet quotas," with bribes reducing earnings. The FGDs highlight, "Police say, 'He's just eating off your earnings'." The media ignores their problems, like partner violence, perpetuating a one-sided narrative.

In Hindi media monitored, the information in the story, including the identity of sex workers, the reason for arrest, the laws applicable to sex workers, and the broader context for the incident, is often based on police hand-outs. Coverage of sex work from Delhi NCR tends to rely on the police as the main source of information. In this research, out of the 79 print reports, 64 reports included quotes from police personnel or an FIR complaint document provided by the police to the publication as the main source for stories related to sex work. Out of the 64, 50 were in Hindi and 14 were in English. For instance, a report in *Dainik Bhaskar*[i11] with the headline, *Raid on hotels in Ghaziabad on information of sex racket: Three couples found in objectionable condition, three arrested*, is based on police information of a raid. The report mentions that the ACP of an area in Delhi NCR got information "about a sex racket running in two hotels." Further adding details from the police station, the report said, "On this, the police raided these two hotels along with female police personnel." "Also, objectionable items were recovered from the rooms. Police have rescued three women from the spot in this case," the report said. "Also, three people, including a woman running the hotel, have been arrested. According to the police, such action will continue in future as well," the report added.

English outlets in Andhra Pradesh/Telangana like Telangana Today and Deccan Chronicle avoid such voyeuristic images. Sex workers were routinely portrayed as victims, ignoring their perspectives. Most stories assume that they were forced into the profession, despite no such information being provided. Their views were missing, giving a unilateral narrative. For instance, women working at a massage centre were largely called victims though they

were not coerced into the work. Using the word “victim” seemed more habitual than factual. However, most reports about trafficking largely followed anonymity and careful language rules.

An interesting perspective was that while the moral framework is clearly evident in such news reports, Shrikishan Kale points out that some Marathi newspapers go so far as to self-censor news stories related to sex work. He states, “I have experienced this firsthand. According to certain newspapers, their readership consists of discerning, educated, cultured, and respectable individuals. They assume that their readers would have no interest in ‘such’ (sex-work-related) news stories. Moreover, they argue that their newspaper is delivered to family households; publishing such stories in a family-oriented newspaper would have a negative influence on the readers. They categorise such reports as 'B-grade' news—content that might be deemed appropriate for evening tabloids, but which, if published in their own paper (even if it concerns police action), would alienate their readership.”

“According to certain newspapers, their readership consists of discerning, educated, cultured, and respectable individuals. They assume that their readers would have no interest in ‘such’ (sex-work-related) news stories.”

Case Study

The Chopda Raid: No Women's Voices (Marathi)

In Chopda, a small town in Maharashtra's Jalgaon district, on 22 March 2024 the police raided 11 houses, in an action against a suspected sex trafficking ring. By the end of the day, they had pulled 50 women out of their homes. These women were from West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and even Nepal. Eleven other women were also arrested, on the allegation that they were running brothels.

Coverage of the Chopda raid was replete with sensational headlines. *Lokmat*'s "Chopda's Brothels Busted; 50 Women Saved, 11 'Aunties' Arrested!"

The word "aunties" trivialised the arrested women, and the women they "saved" were just numbers. Sakal[12]praised the police for their "big action" and called homes "brothels," making them sound sleazy and immoral. The police held a press conference, bragging about the raid. The police were heroes, the women were victims, and the "aunties" were the bad women. It was a simple story, but it wasn't the whole story.

Sex work had been going on in Chopda for decades, and the police knew but looked the other way. Then, suddenly, they raided the houses and took 61 women away. Fifty were called victims and sent to an institution called Aashadeep Women's Home, even though many said they chose to do this work. At the police station, they begged to go home, worried about their children, but no one listened. They were kept for three and a half months, their lives and livelihoods falling apart in the meanwhile. To get out, they had to pay lawyers ₹30,000 to ₹50,000 each, money they borrowed and fell into debt. A group called Aadhaar tried to help, talking to the police and bringing some food, but it wasn't enough.

The women's children suffered too. Some neighbours looked after them, and later, relatives came to help, but there was not enough food or money. Three women who were living with HIV struggled to get medicines. Those with young children couldn't keep them at the shelter because there was no space. When they were separated, they were heartbroken.

Lokmat's report, "50 women trapped in brothels were rescued and sent for rehabilitation," made it sound like the women were in need of rescue. *Sakal* said, "Police raided illegal brothels running for years in Chopda's Navgharpeth area," giving the report a crime focus. The papers did not talk about poverty or why these women came from faraway places to work in Chopda. Only the women got blamed. Words like "criminal operations" and "brothels" made people think sex work was criminal. The papers said the women would be "rehabilitated," but didn't say what exactly that meant, and notably, no reporter asked the women what they wanted.

In Chopda, the raid changed everything for the affected women. They were put in the spotlight and judged unfavourably. They lost money, their children went hungry, and they carried the shame the newspapers spread. *Lokmat* and *Sakal* told a story of good versus bad, but they omitted the women's story. It was a story of police pride and public anger, brushing aside the bigger problems—poverty, injustice, and a town that looked away for years. The women, deeper in trouble following media attention, stayed in the shadows.

Women protesting the raid (Altered Image)

Case Study

Listening to Sex Workers' Voices in a Digital World

This case study highlights the challenges faced by five journalists in Kolkata while reporting on women sex workers in West Bengal. These journalists share what it takes to listen to and authentically represent sex workers' voices in today's digital world. They highlight obstacles, from communication gaps and barriers to relationship building to policy constraints and audience expectations.
As veteran women journalists and editors pointed out, responsible journalism needs more than coverage of facts—authentic voices must be heard, especially those from marginalised communities. Stories about sex workers often get trapped in stereotypes and sensationalism. The need for responsible journalism becomes clearer due to the power differences between media professionals and the communities they feature.

Today's fast paced digital world has altered reporting priorities. Earlier, journalists specialised in specific beats and developed expertise and source networks over years. Modern newsrooms prefer reporters who can quickly switch between unrelated stories—from budget sessions to crime scenes to celebrity gossip. These reporters do not have the time to build relationships with marginalised communities like sex workers. "There's nothing called exclusive reports anymore," notes one journalist. "It's about who can send it faster, post it faster, and with how much spice."

Information about sex work flows through multiple channels, each raising reliability concerns. Police and investigating officials (reporters must "win the confidence" of officers); NGOs working with sex worker communities; rival gangs or competing agents looking to expose others. A direct connection with sex workers is the most authentic but takes time, patience, empathy, and more persistence than required by routine reporting. The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in Kolkata helps guide access to sex worker communities. These organisations help journalists direct complex social dynamics while also respecting boundaries.

As the experience of the five Kolkata journalists[13] shows, real representation comes through human connection. Even experienced reporters struggle with terminology, showing why continuous learning and sensitivity matter.

Senior editors in traditional newsrooms try to train journalists on appropriate terminology and ethics, but a seasoned reporter observes, "Often that training part gets ignored because there's too much competition—*apne aap seekh lo*, survive or perish" (learn on your own, survive or perish).

Names and identities create the deepest ethical challenge. The media's transformation toward fast publishing makes these issues worse. A senior journalist explains: "Previously we could argue with editors...They gave us a patient hearing because there was time. Now it's whether you hit the report by 9:15 or 9:10. That ethical thinking process is vanishing."

Audience expectations create another challenge that runs through these journalists' stories. The push for sensational content fights against responsible reporting, which creates daily ethical challenges for reporters. Still, the most effective stories come when journalists stay true to authentic human experiences.

Case Study

Telling Her Own Story: Interview with Nalini Jameela

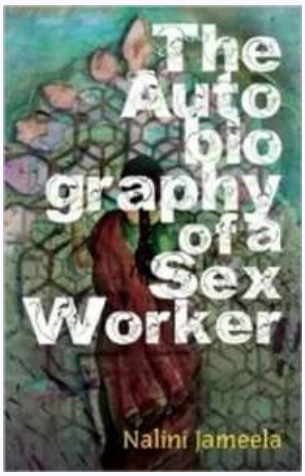
An interview of Nalini Jameela, one of Kerala's most well-known sex worker activists, conducted by YouTuber Deepa Divakar on her program *Unfiltered Coffee Time with Deepa* stands out as an example of positive and respectful reportage of sex work. Nalini Jameela, a former sex worker, is widely known for breaking social taboos by publicly identifying herself as a sex worker and publishing her autobiography *Njan Laingikathozhilali* (*Autobiography of a Sex Worker*). Today, she runs a rehabilitation centre for sex workers. Unlike the dominant narratives of crime, rescue, and stigma, this three-part interview is marked by empathy, patience, and respect.

The YouTube interview illustrates how independent digital platforms can create space for alternative perspectives, free from the constraints and biases often embedded in legacy print or television media. By framing Nalini Jameela as a respected narrator of her own life, rather than as a subject of pity, ridicule, or surveillance, the interview challenges entrenched social norms about sex work and women's agency. Deepa, the anchor, refrains from sensationalism and avoids the voyeuristic tone so common in media coverage of sex work. Instead, she listens attentively, asks informed questions, and ensures that Nalini Jameela's words remain central.

Tone and Body Language: The anchor's expressions consistently reflect admiration and compassion and her gestures suggest a personal connection to Nalini's struggles, as if she were sharing the journey with her. Clearly, the interviewer has closely read the autobiography, recalling details with specificity and care. This not only established credibility but also conveyed respect for Nalini Jameela's narrative. The interview provides multiple examples of how attitude and performance can reshape narratives.

Nalini Jameela herself articulates the resilience that defines her life: "From the stories I heard from my mother since I was three, there has always been a fire in me, which is I must say what I need to say, and do what I must do. That fire has always given me the strength to face anything in life." This encapsulates both her individual courage and the broader theme of sex workers' agency often erased in mainstream narratives. No derogatory or anti–sex worker language was used, nor were there sensational visuals, dramatic graphics or background music. The calm, conversation-led format offered dignity and respect to the subject.

The three-part interview collectively garnered hundreds of thousands of views and thousands of likes. Most comments reflected empathy for Nalini Jameela's life story, though some critical voices were present. This suggests a potential shift in audience perception when narratives are framed with dignity and respect. This interview demonstrates that alternative, empathetic storytelling can reshape how sex workers are seen in public discourse. Instead of framing sex work within crime, morality, or pity, the anchor created space for Nalini Jameela to articulate her life as a woman, activist, and survivor.



5. (e) Overall Portrayal of Sex Workers in the Media

Portrayal	Count	Percentage
POSITIVE (Activist, Businesswoman, Citizen, Factual, Mothers, Workers)	111	17.16%
NEUTRAL	104	16.07%
NEGATIVE (Criminal, Femme Fatale, Vamp, Sexualized, Victim)	394	60.90%
SURVIVOR	38	5.87%

Table 5.7. Portrayal of Sex Workers in the Media

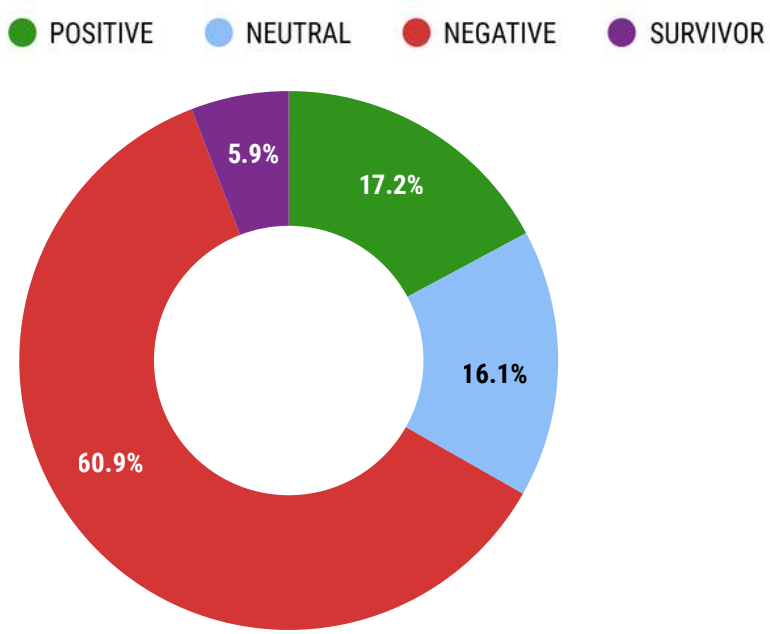


Figure 5.4. Depiction of sex Workers in the Media

Distinct media portrayal instances were monitored in the 468 print clips. The detailed analyses were collated into four categories (Positive, Neutral, Negative and Survivor). Of the total mentions, around 61% (394/647) portray sex workers in a very negative light as criminals, vamps, victims, in a highly sexualised manner or as a femme fatale.

Only around 16% (104) of the portrayal was neutral, without using any judgmental words and keeping it factual. A small portion of the portrayal, around 6% (38) shows sex workers as victims, without agency and in need of rescue or should have a “better” alternatives in life than doing sex work. Of the total mentions, around 17% (111) were positive, where the sex worker was viewed as a worker, mother, activist, or a businesswoman.

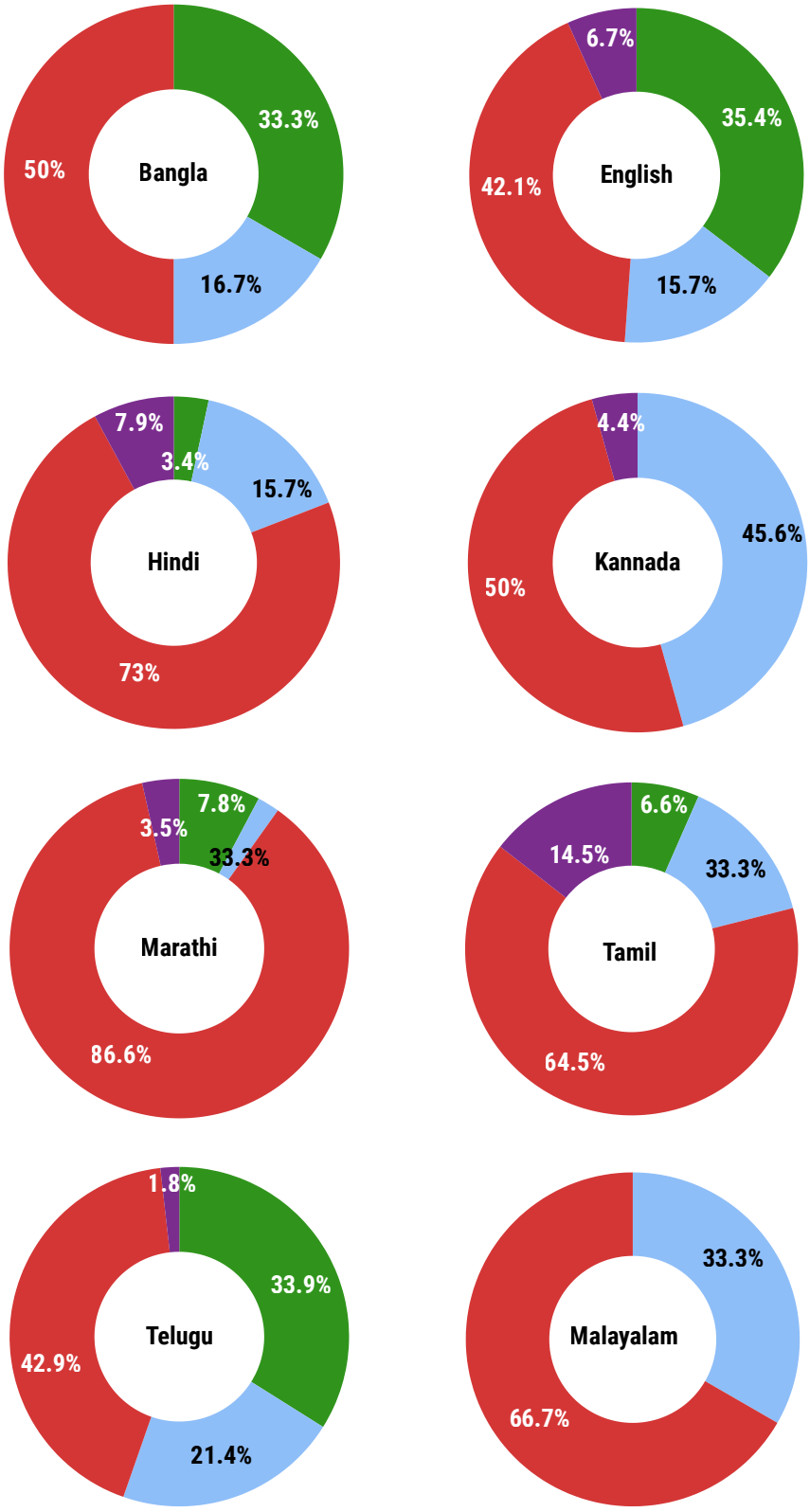


Figure 5.5. Analysis of how the language newspapers portrayed sex workers

How did various categories of news articles portray sex workers?

Category	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Survivor	Total
Editorial/ Op Ed/ Book Review	15 (14%)	3 (1%)	5 (5%)	1 (3%)	**24**
Feature	18 (16%)	29 (7%)	5 (5%)	9 (24%)	**61**
News Report (short)	48 (43%)	44 (11%)	29 (28%)	7 (18%)	**128**
News Report (short), Crime	30 (27%)	318 (81%)	65 (63%)	21 (55%)	**434**
Total	**111**	**394**	**104**	**38**	**647**

Table 5.8. Portrayal of sex workers by categories of news articles

Short news reports contributed 43% (48) of the total *Positive* portrayal of sex workers, followed by 27% (30) from news crime reports, 16% (18) by features, and 14% by editorials and op eds. Predictably, the highest percentage of *Negative* portrayal of sex workers comes from crime based short news reports, with around 81% mentions in that category. The next closest is from short news reports at 11% of the portrayal. Crime news reports also accounts for 55% of the total portrayal as *Survivor* sex workers, with features coming at second place with 24% mentions as *Survivors*.

"Predictably, the highest percentage of Negative portrayal of sex workers comes from crime based short news reports, with around 81% mentions in that category."

Case Study

Voyeurism: When Journalism Crosses the Line (Telugu)

The anchor looks straight into the camera and asks, "You've completed a degree, why choose this profession?" He follows up this question with, "Do they bite you? Do they scratch you?" While most television media clips are short and superficial, this particular video stood out—for its length and for the disturbing level of detail. What begins as a seemingly candid, rare interview quickly unravels into a disturbing display of voyeurism.

Throughout the video, the anchor repeatedly used the word *padaka vruthi*—a crude, demeaning term for sex work that loosely translates to "bed profession." Far from protecting her identity, he asks for her full name, details about her family, and other personal information.

The manner of questioning was invasive, provocative and titillating. He repeatedly brings up her "bad days," asking her to relive her most traumatic experiences. One of his questions, in fact, became the title of the segment: What is it like to have sex during menstruation? She shares that it was so distressing, she once felt like stabbing the customer.

"What happens when multiple clients book you for the same night?" persists the anchor.

"Do they all take turns, or is it at the same time?" She tries to explain how humiliating it felt, but he keeps pushing—driven not by public interest, but by what seemed like his own curiosity.

"Do they burn you with cigarettes?"
"Do they hurt you with fingers?"
"Do they burn cigarettes in your private parts?"

Every question is graphic and callous. There is no pause, no empathy, no attempt to frame the trauma with care or context—just relentless probing, delivered in a tone that bordered on clinical cruelty. The video, hosted on YouTube, had been viewed over 403,000 times at the time of data collection, indicating unsettling realities about what viewers are drawn to, and what kind of content platforms reward.

In the final moments of the video, the anchor shifts gears and delivers a mini-moral sermon. Women, he says, deserve respect—even call girls. But by then, it is too late. The damage has been done. Every word, every question, every frame has already undermined any claim to dignity or sensitivity. It is not a call for respect. It is a performance—staged for clicks.

5. (f) Terminology Around Sex Work

The study analysed various terms used to describe the work, worker, and spaces where sex workers worked and people associated with this work in the print media to understand how terminology contributes to the framing of sex work. Across the 468 print news items, 1393 different terms were tracked.

Key findings

Overall, 263 news items used preferred terminology, and 205 news items used stigmatising, criminalising terminology:

- 173/ 468 (37.0%) news items used stigmatizing terminology such as prostitute, prostitution, immoral, "*anasayam*" (Malayalam for "immoral"), "*patita*" (Bengali for "prostitute"), "*ganda kaam*" (Hindi for "dirty work")
- 128/468 (27.4%) used criminalizing terms such as "sex racket", "prostitution racket", "criminal", "illegal", "illicit", "activities, "gang".
- 236/468 (50.4%) used either stigmatizing or criminalising terminology
- 65/468 (13.9%) used stigmatising and criminalising terms in the same article.

More than half (56.2%) or 263 news items used one or more preferred terminology.[14] The rest of the 205 print news items (43.8%) used other terminology, including stigmatising terms like "prostitution", criminalising terms like "sex racket" or objectifying terms like "flesh trade".

The most used terms are sex worker, sex work, and brothel. The most problematic terminology has been seen in the Delhi and Kerala print media. Despite the emergence of sex work and sex worker as a common usage, "prostitute", "prostitution", and "prostituted woman" (over 100 mentions), which are highly stigmatising terms continue to be used. Similarly, the persistence of the usage "trade" (100) to objectify women and treat sex work as a commodity transaction was noted.

5 (f) (i) News items using stigmatizing / criminalising terminology

Type of Report	Terms (Percentage)	Type of Terms
Reports with stigmatizing terms	173 (12.41%)	Prostitution, Immoral
Reports with criminalising terms	128 (9.18%)	Racket, Criminal, illegal, etc.
Reports with both types	65 (4.66%)	Criminalizing, Stigmatizing
Reports with either type	236 (16.9%)	Criminalising or Stigmatising

Table 5.9. News items using stigmatizing / criminalising terminology

Out of the 1393 terms recorded from 468 newsprint articles, 344 (24.6%) were stigmatizing terms such as "fallen woman", "*gandi aurat*" (dirty woman), "prostitute", "immoral", and "pimps". 128 (9.18%) terms had the impact of criminalising including "sex rackets", "illegal prostitution", "criminals"; 105 terms that objectified including "flesh trade", "sex trade", "sex bazar". 653 (46.8%) terms were acceptable when reporting on sex work and workers including sex worker, sex work, brothel, clients, customers, agents.

Terminology categories by language

Language	Stigmatising	Objectifying	Criminalising	Preferred terms	Total
Hindi	39 **(16.32%)**	5 (4.76%)	50 (21.55%)	52 (7.96%)	146
English	74 (30.96%)	21 (20.00%)	70 (30.17%)	198 (30.32%)	363
Telugu	10 (4.18%)	26 (24.76%)	25 (10.78%)	86 (13.17%)	147
Malayalam	39 (16.32%)	5 (4.76%)	6 (2.59%)	11 (1.68%)	61
Tamil	18 (7.53%)	11 (10.48%)	12 (5.17%)	64 (9.80%)	105
Bengali	19 (7.95%)	5 (4.76%)	5 (2.16%)	53 (8.12%)	82
Marathi	21 (8.79%)	27 (25.71%)	45 (19.40%)	165 (25.27%)	258
Kannada	19 (7.95%)	5 (4.76%)	19 (8.19%)	24 (3.68%)	67
Total	239	105	232	653	**1,229**

Table 5.10. Terminology Category by Language

Findings

The terminology table contains 1,229 coded terms across 4 major categories, of which *Preferred* terms form the largest category with 653 codes (53.1%). However, problematic terminology remains substantial: *Stigmatising* terms account for 239 codes (19.4%); *Criminalising* terms for 232 (18.9%), and *Objectifying* terms for 105 (8.5%); together these three categories represent 46.9% of all terminology codes. The language patterns vary considerably. Bengali has the highest proportion of *Preferred* terms at 64.6%, closely followed by Marathi at 64.0%, Tamil at 61.0%, and Telugu at 58.5%, suggesting that preferred vocabulary is the dominant mode in these languages.

English also has a majority of *Preferred* terms (54.5%), although its high volume means it still contributes the largest absolute number of *Stigmatising* codes (74) and a large number of *Criminalising* codes (70). Malayalam shows the most concerning profile: only 18.0% of its terminology is *Preferred*, while 63.9% is *Stigmatising*, making stigma its overwhelmingly dominant category.

Hindi is also weighted toward problematic terminology, with *Preferred* terms at 35.6% and *Criminalising* terms alone at 34.2%; when *Stigmatising* and *Objectifying* language are added, 64.4% of Hindi terminology is problematic. Kannada follows a similar pattern, with only 35.8% *Preferred* terms and equal concentrations of *Stigmatising* and *Criminalising* language at 28.4% each. Telugu stands out for the highest relative use of *Objectifying* terminology (17.7%), despite its overall preference for recommended terms. Marathi combines a strong *Preferred* terms majority with the largest absolute *Objectifying* count (27) and a sizeable *Criminalising* count (45), showing that positive and problematic vocabularies can coexist within the same language.

Overall, the findings indicate progress toward preferred terminology in most languages, but stigmatising and criminalising frames remain deeply embedded —especially in Malayalam, Hindi, and Kannada—and the results should be interpreted alongside unequal language totals.

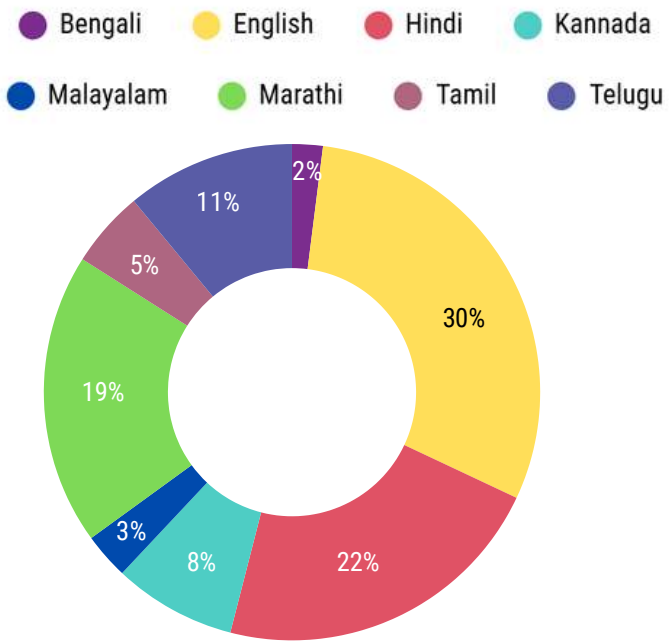


Figure 5.6. Criminalising Terms used in Different languages

Television news in Kannada were predominantly *crime* stories (13/19; 68.4%) that were largely sourced from the police (12/19, 63.1%) told in less than 15 minutes, reported during the cycles of breaking news. The visuals of the reporting were largely repetitive videos of the crime scene, focusing on the arrest or capture of brothel-owners or the male managers of the locations, and blurred images of women (presumably sex workers) escorted away into vans. As with news reporting, the sensationalising aspect of the news reports were in the tone and manner of delivery of the TV reporter, and the use of terms such as "*daari thappida hengasu*" which means "a woman who has lost her way" and ideas of flesh trade, prostitution rackets, rates per hour and the mention of "high-tech prostitution."

The conflation of sex work and trafficking leads to a widespread use of the term "sex racket" to encompass everything from trafficking minors to adult women earning a living, without delving into their "lived realities". The "rescue operations" often place adult women in shelter homes against their will, separating them from support networks and income, leading to deeper economic vulnerability. Law enforcement prioritises "high-profile raids that generate headlines over addressing the conditions that make exploitation possible." Legal ambiguity, because the ITPA creates a paradox where sex work is not technically illegal but is surrounded by criminalised activities, allowing authorities to shift between treating women as criminals or helpless victims, "never as adults with agency and rights."

Not surprisingly, since sex workers are treated as criminals, crimes against them go unrecognised and unpunished. This is despite the reality that sex workers face various forms of violence and exploitation from multiple sources. There are instances of blackmail, such as a client in Digha (West Bengal), who took photos during an intimate moment and later used them to extort money.

5 (f) (ii) Media professionals' perspectives

Arun Ezhuthachan, a journalist with the legacy Malayalam daily *Malayala Manorama* and author, *Vishudhapapangalude India (The India of Sacred Sins*), a Malayalam travelogue on the Devadasi system in India, said: "When approaching stories around sex work sensitively, a widespread stigma that sex work is inherently wrong, exists. It's worth questioning how many media persons lack stigma. The mainstream media rarely believes that sex workers also have rights. Unfortunately, many stories prioritising rehabilitation glorify it unnecessarily. Some media professionals believe that revealing sex workers' clients' names is a journalistic scoop. However, sex work also has professional ethics. Media persons need sensitivity about these nuances for more ethical and respectful storytelling."

Laxman More said, "Most raids are conducted for show. Police are well aware of where sex work is happening but conduct raids to meet their action quotas." He highlighted the financial factors involved: after deducting police bribes and agent fees, sex workers receive very little money. Why is it that only news of raids gets reported? "Journalists often view sex work as a stigma. They believe that raids contribute to social reform, making them newsworthy," he said, also highlighting the changing nature of journalism today. "Reporters aim to publish as many stories as possible. If they receive a press note or tip from the police, they tend to report it as is, without delving deeper. Quoting the police or mentioning them as the source reduces the need for in-depth investigation. Police provide ready-made information through raids, fulfilling immediate news requirements. Journalists often lack time to go beyond this and focus on other 'important' topics. Crime or court reporters usually cover sex worker stories, but they prioritise other crimes over sex work. Speaking to sex workers often reveals human-interest stories, but journalists rarely reach

out to them."

The eight most-used negative terms which together have 332 mentions which is around 24% of the total terms monitored, include "immoral" (5), "prostitution (74)", "prostitute" (24), "sex trade" (57), "flesh trade" (34), "sex racket" (58), "prostitution racket" (18), and "criminals" (17).

The most used preferred terms are *sex work* (170), *sex worker* (160), *client/ customer* (69) and *brothel*, *brothel running*, *and brothel owner* (92)

The sex worker rights movement recognises four pillars of their work: the worker, the work, location, and third parties. It is interesting to note how these pillars have been described using various terms by the print media.

Terms describing sex workers

Nineteen terms were monitored depicting sex workers with 387 mentions. The highest usage of terms continues to be sex worker (162 mentions. The largest use of this term was found in the English news items (52) followed by a direct rendering ("सेक्स वर्कर") Marathi (43), and lower usage in Telugu (25), Tamil (13), Bengali (12), and Kannada (8).

The most negative and stigmatizing terms used to describe sex workers were prostitute or prostituted women or prostitute gang (28 occurrences). Other derogatory references including locally used terms call "girl", "*gandi aurat*" (Hindi for "dirty woman"), "half-naked prostitutes", "immoral", "*patita*" (Bengali for "whore/prostitute"), "*penvanibham*" (Malayalam for "sex racket"), "*vehsyavriti giroh*" (Hindi for "prostitution ring"), "untouchable", "seductress", "*anaitik/aneetiche*" (Marathi for "immoral").

Terms describing sex work

Fifty-three unique terms were monitored with 493 mentions describing work. The highest usage of a preferred term is sex work (170 mentions). These were mentioned in Marathi (57), followed by English (33), Telugu (32), Tamil (22). Kannada (10), Bengali (8), Hindi (6), and Malayalam (2) had the lowest in the use of the preferred term *sex work*. Apart from this there is *sex service* (2), *sex business* (1), *labour* (1), *profession* (6), and *commercial sexual activity* (1).

Many negative and stigmatizing terms have been used to describe the work of sex workers. These include sex trade (65 mentions), sex work racket (65), prostitution (73), flesh trade (34). Local terms that have been used include "*Veshya vriti*" (Hindi for "prostitution"), "unrighteous activity", "*Penvanibham Kendra*" (Malayalam for "hub for sex trafficking"), slavery, "*vibachaaram*" (Tamil for "prostitution"), "veshya vruthi" (Malayalam for "prostitution"), "*vesyavatike*" (Kannada for "prostitution"), "*patititabriti*" (Bengali for "prostitution"), "*veshya vrutti*" (Telugu for "prostitution"), "*deh vyapaar*" (Hindi for "body selling"), "*gandaa kaam*" (Hindi for "dirty work"), and "*paliyal vanikam*" (Tamil for "prostitution").

Terms describing third parties

Fifteen unique terms had 180 mentions describing third parties who are agents in the conduct of sex work. The most common usage in the monitoring has been *Agent or middleman* (73), perhaps the most neutral term to describe third party agents. Similarly, *clients/customer* have been the most neutral term for the person receiving sexual services (77). *Brothel head and brothel owner* are some other neutral terms used.

The most negative term used to describe third parties or intermediaries are "Pimp", "kingpin", "ringleader", "*idapdukaaran*" (Malayalam for "dealer").

Terms describing location where sex work happens

There were 9 unique terms with 107 mentions describing the locations where sex work is done. Over 80% of the mentions were of the term, "brothel" (89). Other places include Hotel (2), spa (2), massage centres (2) where sex work was happening.

Some of the problematic references include "*Kotha*" (Hindi for "brothel"), brothel mentioned as "Hell", "City's underbelly", and "red light area".

5 (f) (iii) Community perspectives around terminology

Focus group discussions (FGDs) in the research sites revealed how sex workers perceive what the media says about them, thus influencing public discourse and policy. Discussions also revealed the deep impact the use of negative and disrespectful terminology had on them, their families, especially children.

Participants at the FGD in Delhi said, "Daily, the media uses [Hindi] words for sex workers like '*Dhanda*' (business), '*Baazaru aurat*' (woman of loose morals), and '*Kaam karne waali*' (woman who works) and call our homes '*randi khaana*' (whore house). If the media wants to report on us, they should term sex work as "work," us as "workers" and our houses "workplaces" like other jobs."

Referencing the Supreme Court guidelines, participants in Tamil Nadu said, "We should petition the Supreme Court what we need and not to use words such as "prostitute" and "whore" for us. This should have a positive impact on us (sex workers) over the next 10 years."

At the FGD in Kerala, participants listed objectionable words: They (the media) do not use terms like sex workers, instead use terms like "*veshyalayam niruthanam*" (stop prostitution centres). The media blatantly use the term "*veshyalayam*" (prostitution centres). I happen to see such terms. By publishing our visuals with the tag lines as "*veshyakal*" (prostitutes), "*pottapennungal*" (bad women), or "*mashakal*" (bad women), the media are pointing us out to others. "*Anasasyam*" (immoral), "*anasasya pravarthanam*" (immoral activity), "*veshyavruthi cheyyunnu*" (engaged in prostitution),

"*veshyavruthi*" (prostitution), "*laimgikathozhilalikalude Azhinjattam*" (revelry of sex workers), "*nishasundarimar*" (night beauties), "*veshyakal*" (prostitutes), "*vedikal*" (repulsive term for sex workers), "*vedi veykkan nadakkunnavar*" (women engaged in prostitution), "*ammayimar*" (used as a derogatory term in some contexts).

The Malayalam media often uses three words "*Veshyavruthiyil erppedunna sthreekal*"/ "*laimgika thozhilalikal*" (women engaged in prostitution), and "*anasasyam*" (immoral). "*Veshyakal*" (prostitutes), and "*anasayam cheyyunnavar*" (engaged in immoral activities) have appeared on television.

The media used "*nisha sundarimar*" (night beauties) in the past; it gradually became sex worker. It was "*Nisha Sundarimar*" in the beginning, no one (sex workers) came to daylight in those days, it (sex work) happened in the night only. A channel once used "*sandhya kazhinjal veshya vruthikk irangunnavar*" (those engaging in prostitution in the evening) about sex workers in Ernakulam.

Marathi media monitored was found to employ a sensational, moralistic tone, prioritizing scandal and police action over nuance. A *Lokmat* story framing sex work in residential areas as a "stir throughout the city" uses terms like "कुंटणखाना" (brothel) to evoke moral panic. Another labels a lodge owner a "bad man" for a "sex trade," embedding judgment. There's an emphasis on numbers and action—how many rescued, arrested, or how long the activity ran—shifting focus from individual stories to the police narrative, as seen in a report listing 14 police officials' names while noting "13 women were rescued," ignoring their outcomes. Participants in FGDs remarked, "Just as the police use "*dhandewali*" (businesswoman), journalists do too…this term is derogatory."

5 (f) (iv) Media professionals' perspectives on terminology

Senior Kannada reporters Kalavati Baichbal and Preethi Nagaraj said that media and newsroom language changed, in the backdrop of international NGOs and civil society activism the past two decades. Analysing Kannada and English print news and TV reports and panels from 2022-2025 in Karnataka demonstrated differences in language and discourse around sex work after 2022. This was discernible by contrasting news monitored with news in media report from before 2022, using the same digital search keywords search: "prostitution", "sex racket", "sex work", "lodge", and "raid". Before the Supreme Court order, the media used sensationalised language (like prostitution) and lurid photography while reporting on sex work to question the morality of people featured in diverse reportage.

They pointed out that unlike "*veishye*" (prostitute), *karmikaru* (workers), identifies with labour. Yet the media resisted this shift. But reporters humanising and contextualizing minority identities and groups, working on social acceptance and mindsets through human interest stories changed

newsrooms. Usages like "step-motherly treatment" continue in patriarchal society which we should change. Even prostitution occurs because of patriarchy as men seek it while denying their role. Such language symbolises a male dominated society."

Zee News Kannada uses a term commonly mentioned on TV reports, "high-tech prostitution", which seems to imply the use of smartphones for provision of sexual services for payment, and the term is used to stir scandal. "High tech prostitution" is an undefined phenomenon that is narrated and talked about as a threat to morality and social order seems to mean the use of apps and social media platforms for interactions around sex work, whether it is to determine location of meeting or cost. The paranoia and sensationalism around it emerge from the notion that women engaged in such sex work earn more money than they deserve, over and above what normal jobs they may have, and that it is greed for money that drives them to do this activity.

The language of reporting in Kannada (translated here for this report) often spoke of the sex workers as "*yuvathigalu*", which implies a young lady, girl, or maiden. "Girls, aged between 26 and 30" or "sending girl to customer" or "supply girls"[15], or "rescued 6 people, including a girl", "women who work like call girls"[16], "Young girls are being removed from the lodge"[17] or "The Vinoba Nagar police have raided a shop in the name of a spa and rescued seven girls"[18]. In one case discussing a High Court case that explained how only those soliciting sex work can be punished but not the sex worker, sex workers were described as "some girls being taken from Udupi to Goa illegally to get involved in prostitution. The other girls, including the petitioner, were given Rs 10 lakh each". The age of the persons being discussed is either left out or even if mentioned and the persons are not minors, those rescued are described as "girls" or "*yuvati*" to emphasise the point of "innocence", trafficking, and victimisation. In English papers, the words to highlight victimising and trafficking are "lured women from different states", "take the girls to resorts", "transport the girls for sex parties"[19]. Only in English reporting in *The Deccan Herald* were women or minors described accurately as such, and if the word 'girls' was used, to clarify it in terms of POCSO and in terms of the language used by the accused or police.[20]

The need to cater to their audiences was at the forefront of choice of terminology. For instance, Nilesh Shukla, Broadcast journalist, *Times Now* said, "Journalists help connect with the media. We cannot talk in jargon with our viewers. A tea seller and CEO consume news. So, we should catch a term between them both." Generally, when discussing where sex workers reside, we say, 'red light area'. We should also sell our news considering the customer's likes." Sometimes, to highlight our reports, we say, "trade of bodies" or "*jism ka dhanda*" on both print and TV." In the news, your presentation is your vocabulary.

Media headlines, often as 'clickbait' use terms like "prostitution rackets" and "flesh trade", which reduce complex experiences to "lurid spectacle", ignoring

the perspectives of sex worker collectives fighting for decriminalisation and labour protections. Sexual assault allegations against TMC leader Sheik Shahjahan in Sandeshkhali led to TMC accusing BJP leader Sabyasachi Ghosh (arrested for allegedly running a prostitution network) of being a "Pimp", with BJP denying the affiliation and accusing TMC of distraction. TMC's social media campaign used inflammatory language: "@BJP4Bengal leader Sabyasachi Ghosh was caught running a PROSTITUTION RACKET of MINOR GIRLS... THIS IS BJP. They do not protect BETIS, they protect PIMPS!" BJP countered by denying Ghosh's party position and calling it a "desperate attempt by WB police to distract from rape and torture in Sandeshkhali."

All the five Bengali journalists interviewed said that journalists lack training on the appropriate terms for sex workers, instead of using derogatory terms like "flesh trade". However, for the interested, online sources, seniors and activists are available, but time pressure and deadlines for filing daily news reports are constraints to be overcome. But only changing terminologies legally is inadequate without changing societal attitudes. A salacious report for readers and viewers is possible with "appropriate" terms. Don't responsible journos avoid salacious reports?

Likewise, in Marathi media, Shrikishan Kale gives younger journalists the benefit of the doubt, "New journalists often do not know that they should avoid naming sex workers or using photos where their face is visible. Such rules should ideally be taught as part of media ethics."

On language used in Telugu media, Sudhakar Reddy Udumula said, "Terms like 'prostitute', 'immoral', 'brothel', 'arrested', and 'pimp' reflect moral policing and reinforce stigma. Sex worker is more appropriate. Even in Telugu, using the English term is better than words like '*vyabhichari*' (debauched) or '*veshya*' (prostitute). How about '*laingika karmikulu*' (sex worker)? Even '*dadi*' (raid) is problematic—we prefer inspection or search. The law itself should evolve to drop such outdated, derogatory terms."

Soumya R. Krishna said, "I am unsure about whether the terminology used in reporting on sex work or sex workers is adequate or appropriate. Working in Malayalam was both a challenge and a strength. I found that the language itself had evolved, with more inclusive and respectful terminology now available to describe sex workers and their lives. This made it easier to frame their stories sensitively."

Case Study

"High-tech" Fear Mongering (Kannada)

This case study focuses on Kannada news channels that repeatedly use the term "international high-tech prostitution networks". This is an unexplained term that is spoken in loud tones during the course of breaking news stories at prime time. There seems to be a new vocabulary about sex work trending on mainstream television.

These videos[21] have the tonality of angry TV debates with lurid visuals and dramatic sound. While the videos do not defy the Supreme Court orders prohibiting the disclosure of private information and sharing photographs of sex workers, they create a sense of threat, immorality and danger. The sense of threat seems to be emerging from the possibility of high-income earnings of sex workers via the use of smartphones, apps and platforms (which could also afford a measure of privacy for women).

In these videos, there are repetitive statements made around the same incident and footage, and the same commentary is made across news channels, such as TV9, *Kahale*, *Zee Kannada News*, and *Asianet Kannada*.

The phrase "international high-tech network" is used repeatedly, with no explanation of what exactly is the technology being used beyond WhatsApp on Smartphones, and what the network is. These videos use the terms "flesh trade", "Thai beauty", "rates per hour" and "high-tech prostitution racket", and do not talk about the women involved except to suggest that they are victims. The stories do not present verification or corroboration.

Many of the videos do not have any more than a news ticker and voiceover and show lurid visuals and repetitive loops of the same information which includes mildly blurred image of women in semi-naked form. In view of these videos, one can draw a parallel with fluff pieces on *Asianet* and TV9 that talk about how women in colleges are using their smart phones to conduct prostitution rackets, and the claim that they are not interested in hard work but want quick money. Sex work is framed as a lazy and profitable shortcut for women, or it is framed as a trap where women have no agency and require rescue. This idea is also persistent in videos that claim, "she left her government job for this racket". The constant focus is on the use of smartphones and social media apps for solicitation and services.

There is no evidence of how these reports are affecting women, especially younger college students who live by themselves in cities in PGs or flats, which is where the attention is trained by the media. It is also unclear how these raids actually take place, as there are no corresponding news reports in print media that corroborate any details. The reporting claims to be based on police raids but even interviews with "on the ground" reporters appear to be unsubstantiated claims that do not quote sources.

Screengrab of the videos (Altered Image)

Screengrab of the videos (Altered Image)

5. (g) Episodic and Selective Reporting

A Telugu media article claimed sex workers choose the profession due to poor mental health. The media prioritises sex workers only on days like *Sex Workers' Day* or *AIDS Day* avoiding sustained, analytical reporting on gender or sexuality. Many journalists ignore the difference between sex work and trafficking and root causes such as poverty, domestic violence, and alcoholic husbands. Sex workers' pain is trivialised, and their struggles are reported through the HIV lens, sidelining human rights.

As regards follow-up stories on "rescued" women sent to rehabilitation centres, Laxman More pointed out that journalists show little interest. Earlier, rehabilitation centre stories were reported, but now they are almost non-existent. News only mentions that the police rescued and sent the women to centres. He said that priorities have shifted and work pressure on journalists has increased, making time-consuming topics challenging. Apathy and insensitivity might also play a role. If sex work is seen as a stigma, journalists might feel indifferent about women improving in rehabilitation centres. Journalists' backgrounds influence their perspectives. Factors like religion, caste, class, and social status shape their views on sex worker. Not all journalists are willing to understand the pain, suffering, or anger of sex workers.

A compulsion of the news cycle, said Laxman More, is that desk editors often work rigidly, focusing on filling pages. They demand single or double-column stories, sometimes diminishing the essence of the news.

Shrikishan Kale commented on the type of stories that make it to Page 1. "Only special stories or series related to sex workers are placed on Page One. Two types of stories are common: crime-related stories about raids and special features. However, special features are rare and, typically, only appear on significant days related to sex workers. Most stories revolve around raids, and, occasionally, stories about assaults or murders are published. Consequently, the scope for stories about sex work appearing on Page One is minimal. Some newspapers outright avoid special features, focusing only on crime or police-provided news. I have personally experienced this. Some publications feel such stories should not be shared with their readers, as their newspapers are read by families, and such stories might have a negative influence. They also believe their educated readers may not be interested in these topics. There is also a fear that publishing such stories might alienate readers. For these reasons, stories about sex workers rarely make it to page one unless it is something extremely serious."

After raids, Marathi media fails to follow up on sex workers' perspectives, exacerbating marginalisation. Participants in the FGDs lament: "After a raid, no journalist comes to hear our side of the story." This absence, as seen in a story noting "13 women were rescued" without outcomes, leaves narratives

incomplete, ignoring struggles—like that of the Bangladeshi woman who died post-rescue—or their agency as many work voluntarily. There is no inclusion of testimonies from rescued women, NGOs, or human rights advocates, thus denying them a platform to challenge victimhood tropes and perpetuating stigma.

The study found that the media often overlooks systemic factors like poverty and lack of documentation. A *Lokmat* story notes a woman forced her daughter into sex work "due to weak economic conditions," but lacks depth, focusing on guilt. There is no exploration of poverty, migration, or gender-based vulnerabilities, reflecting a lack of socio-political analysis. Alongside, participants at the FGD revealed, "We face problems with documentation… many lack ration cards or Aadhaar cards." Reports framing sex work as a "threat" in "*sabhya*" (cultured) small cities reflect moral policing, ignoring structural issues like housing discrimination: "Landlords refuse to rent to us if our photos go viral."

Likewise, the media underreports issues like partner violence, silencing lived realities. Participants in FGD: "If a partner abuses or harasses us, such incidents are never reported in the news." This omission, alongside unreported struggles like lack of documentation or survival during the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritises raid stories over systemic violence. A *Lokmat* story of a woman beaten to death over a religious book hints at client violence, but such cases are rare in coverage. This selective reporting denies sex workers a platform to seek justice, reinforcing their vulnerability.

5. (h) Dual Framing: Victimhood and Vilification

Samples across languages analysed various portrayal codes to see how media coverage consistently portrays sex workers and sex work through the lens of victimhood, stripping them of agency, while simultaneously vilifying them and creating a damaging narrative.

Findings

Among the 647 substantive codes, *Victim* is overwhelmingly the most common portrayal with 227 codes (35.1%), followed by *Neutral* with 102 (15.8%), *Citizen* with 93 (14.4%), *Sexualised* with 73 (11.3%) and *Femme fatale/vamp* with 55 (8.5%). This hierarchy suggests that media coverage most often defines sex workers through harm, vulnerability, and rescue rather than through occupational identity, autonomy, or collective agency. The presence of *Citizen* as the third-largest category provides some evidence of rights-based recognition but *Sexualised* and *Femme fatale/vamp portrayals* together remain substantial, reinforcing stereotypes based on sexuality, danger, and moral judgement (see Table 5.11.)

Portrayal	Bengali	English	Hindi	Kannada	Malayalam	Marathi	Tamil	Telugu
Victim	30.0%	33.1%	41.6%	28.3%	26.7%	36.6%	34.2%	41.1%
Neutral	16.7%	15.7%	15.7%	45.7%	26.7%	2.1%	14.5%	21.4%
Citizen	23.3%	27.6%	3.4%	0.0%	0.0%	7.0%	6.6%	33.9%
Sexualized	3.3%	2.2%	20.2%	8.7%	26.6%	21.1%	9.2%	1.8%
Femme fatale/vamp	3.3%	2.2%	4.5%	4.3%	3.3%	21.8%	15.8%	0.0%
Survivor	0.0%	6.8%	7.9%	4.3%	0.0%	3.5%	14.5%	1.8%
Criminal	13.3%	3.9%	5.6%	2.2%	6.7%	0.7%	1.3%	0.0%
Home wrecker	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	6.5%	0.0%	6.5%	3.9%	0.0%
Worker	3.3%	5.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Activist	6.8%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Factual	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Immoral	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Businesswo man	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Mothers	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 5.11. Substantive portrayal shares within each language

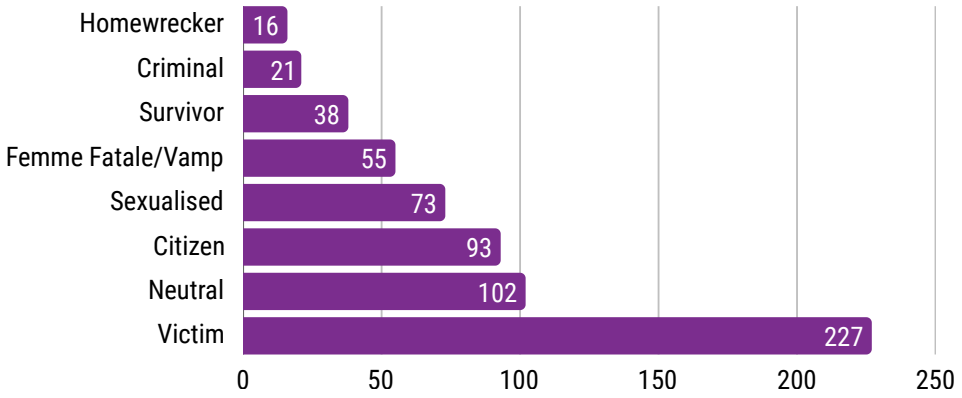


Figure 5.7. Top Substantive Portrayal

Language patterns show both commonality and variation. Victim is the leading substantive portrayal in English, Marathi, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Bengali, and is especially concentrated in Hindi (41.6%) and Telugu (41.1%). English and Marathi contribute the largest absolute number of *Victim* codes because of their larger samples, while Bengali has a more dispersed profile, with its leading portrayal accounting for only 30.0% of substantive codes. Kannada and Malayalam differ from the other languages because Neutral is their leading portrayal, representing 45.7% and 26.7% respectively; however, a neutral label does not necessarily indicate agency or positive representation, only the absence of a stronger coded stereotype. The relatively low substantive shares in Kannada, English, Telugu, and Malayalam—around 38% to 42% of all portrayal slots—also mean that conclusions for these languages rely on a smaller coded base. Overall, the findings point to an imbalance: passive and stereotypical portrayals are more prominent than *Worker*, *Survivor*, *Activist* or other agency-centred identities. Editorial recommendations should therefore prioritise portraying sex workers as workers, citizens, rights-holders and sources with their own perspectives, while reducing victim-only, sexualised, criminal and femme-fatale framing.

Vilification appears in 569 coded occurrences (40.8%), nearly 2.9 times the 195 victim-framing occurrences (14.0%). Neutral and rights-based language accounts for 629 occurrences (45.2%), led by sex work and sex worker (329 combined). The five leading vilifying terms, leading to a total 330 occurrences, are "brothel", "prostitution", "sex trade", "sex racket", and "immoral". vilification operates through three linked moves: criminalisation ("sex racket", "criminal", "illegal"), moral condemnation ("immoral", "dirty work", "fallen women" "*gandi aurat*" "*ganda kaam*", "*patita*"), and commodification ("flesh trade", "sex trade", "women trade", "sex racket", "selling bodies", "hush hush manner"). Together they shift attention from people and labour rights to policing, shame, and market imagery.

Victim-framing is narrower and led by "victim" (75), followed by "trafficking", "rescue," "exploitation," and "child/minor" language. Malayalam has the highest vilification share (73.8%), followed by Kannada (55.6%), and Hindi (49.5%). Percentage shares, not raw counts, are the fairer cross-language comparison.

Editorially, the clearest intervention is to prefer sex worker and sex work; specify trafficking, coercion, exploitation, or child abuse only when evidence supports those conditions; and avoid moralizing or market metaphors that stigmatise adults and locations.

News reports of women "lured and forced into prostitution" frame the women as helpless, ignoring economic motivations. On the other hand, participants at FGDs assert, "We come willingly into this work, the media casts them as morally corrupt, as in a story where a woman running a brothel was sentenced for "luring young girls with money," emphasizing her criminality without context. A stand-up comedian's portrayal of sex work as "easy money"

mocks the profession, reflecting biases. Alongside, FGDs highlight, "The media views us with a bad eye, writing 'dirty' things, underscoring a failure to recognise sex work as a profession, with participants insisting, this is our profession."

Marathi media reflects a heavy reliance on the saviour complex, hailing police as heroic rescuers, as in a report glorifying police while noting "13 women were rescued." Moralistic sentiment dominates, with no nuanced discussion of whether women were trafficked, coerced, or willingly involved due to lack of opportunities. An underlying misogynistic sentiment emerges, especially in portraying female brothel runners as primary villains ("आंटी" (aunty), while male customers or traffickers are absent from narratives. Sex work is portrayed as inherently immoral or criminal, with no mention of it as labour or legal frameworks, dehumanizing sex workers as either victims or criminals, ignoring structural issues like trafficking, poverty, and caste/gender discrimination.

Popular films and their portrayal of sex workers further distort reality and create a significant disconnect between cinematic depictions and their actual lives, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, as pointed out by participants at FGDs. Movies, including high-profile ones like *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, often portray sex workers as either glamorous money diggers living lavish lifestyles or powerful figures with political connections, suggesting they amass wealth and influence, distributing money and property to others. This fictional narrative starkly contrasts with the realities shared by women in FGDs, who strongly oppose such portrayals, emphasizing their struggles with poverty, stigma, and survival rather than opulence. They assert, "We work to eat," highlighting the economic necessity driving their profession, not a life of luxury. These cinematic exaggerations mislead the public into believing sex workers are either exploitative profiteers or untouchable power brokers, overshadowing the truth of their daily hardships—such as housing discrimination, client harassment, and financial instability—as revealed in FGDs. This gap reinforces societal misconceptions, further marginalizing them and undermining efforts to recognise their work as legitimate labour.

In Bengali media, a look at five major outlets' coverage of the shooting of a sex worker in Alipurduar reveals disturbing patterns in tone, victim treatment, and the hunger for sensation over substance. Though journalism carries an ethical mandate to amplify marginalised voices, social media often magnifies these problematic narratives instead, leaving us collectively blind to the complex human realities beneath simplified headlines. These distortions do not just shape news, they shape the reader, moulding their capacities for empathy toward those society has already pushed to the margins. Indeed, the legal system itself creates a cruel paradox. Under India's Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, sex work lives in a grey zone—not technically illegal, yet surrounded by criminalised activities. This ambiguity traps sex workers in a limbo where they are neither fully protected as workers nor fully acknowledged as victims. Authorities conveniently shift between treating

them as criminals or as helpless victims, never as adults with agency and rights.

Participants at the FGD in Delhi spoke about their deep distrust of the Hindi media, which they experienced as intrusive and violative of their privacy. They felt that TV news anchors and channels perpetuate the angle of victimhood toward sex workers in Delhi NCR and alongside, highlighting the police as their saviour.

In Kannada media, the notion of coercion, violation of freedom, and victimisation dominates the media through the notion that the place of sex work is necessarily a crime scene. When sex workers are viewed primarily as victims, the saviour narrative goes alongside. Paternalistic notions of rescue and rehabilitation seem to be the singular framework of narrative description.

"When sex workers are viewed primarily as victims, the saviour narrative goes alongside. Paternalistic notions of rescue and rehabilitation seem to be the singular framework of narrative description."

Case Study

How Hand-Held Cameras Heighten Criminalisation (Hindi)

A significant part of the coverage on Hindi broadcast channels consists of arrests and police raids on brothels, brothel owners, agents, sex workers, and clients of sex workers. News channels show footage collected by journalists who are following the police around the brothel during the raid and often feature geographical location, police personnel and people detained. The clips also convey a sense of urgency as the reporter runs around, trying to capture glimpses of the brothel and the men and women present on the site.

The videos and photos from these raids are unsteady and unclear, suggesting the journalists' use of a handheld or a mobile phone camera. Reporters thus position themselves as a conduit for audiences to peek into the lives of sex workers and their workplace. They also try getting sensational clips from aspects related to sex work, which are considered "immoral", like condom wrappers, or clothes lying around the floor. We see clips of women trying to hide their faces with their clothes, face masks or even their hands, as journalists force cameras into their faces. This framing furthers harmful notions about sex workers as criminals.

Examples of such reporting in *Zee News*, a flagship Hindi news channel in Delhi NCR were analysed. A news bulletin by *Zee News* published on 25 May 2023 titled '*Baat Pate Ki: Sex racket busted in this mall*[22]' carries a one-minute report on a police raid against sex work at a mall in Ghaziabad. Even though the story is the last in the series, the news package, which is also shared on YouTube, highlights sex work as the main topic for the day. The anchor opens with, "Sex racket busted in a mall after police conducted a raid on a spa centre."

The first video is a shaky clip of the outside of the mall taken from a distance; the second is a vertically shot from a mobile phone showing people lining up in the mall as police detain them. In the subsequent clip, there is a shaky video of men hastily trying to hide their faces as the journalist tries to get close to them trying to photograph their faces, in a clear violation of privacy. The scene where the journalist is trying to record the detainees with a mobile phone as they try to hide from the camera represents, a sense of shame and stigma commonly associated with sex work.

These clips, taken from different angles overriding clarity or camera position, contribute to the stereotype that sex work is sensational and criminal and can only be hurriedly covered. The clips of the mall and raid are different have no credits, making it hard to tell if the visuals have been captured by a staff reporter or by a bystander or a social media site.

The rushed background music and voiceover, depict sex work as a criminal and socially disgraceful activity simultaneously glorifying the role of the police in uncovering this "offence". The comments under the video suggest that the news channel has been successful in voyeuristically covering sex work and using it as clickbait to engage viewers.

Interestingly, the same videos are also used in another broadcast story titled from September 19, 2023, with the headline "Sex racket busted in Ghaziabad's famous mall, prostitution under the guise of spa centre, video goes viral"[23]. Even though the video is a stand-alone story with a different byline, the visuals included are the same.

Case Study

When "Sex Work" is Hurled as Abuse (Tamil)

On April 6, 2025, Tamil Nadu's Forest Minister K. Ponmudy in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government, spoke at a public meeting organised by the Thanthai Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam in Chennai. Ponmudy drew an analogy, comparing the tilaks of Shaivites and Vaishnavites to sexual positions preferred by men during encounters with sex workers. This speech was delivered in a context of increasing political tension in Tamil Nadu ahead of elections, with caste and religious identities being regularly mobilised for political gain. The use of sex work as a metaphor to insult religious traditions added a new layer of offence, drawing widespread condemnation from political opponents, religious groups, civil society, and the judiciary.

Coverage in both national and regional media — including *The Hindu*, *The New Indian Express*, *Frontline*, *Dinamalar*, *Kumudham*, *Polimer*, *Bar and Bench*, and social media platforms — was swift and extensive. Print and digital platforms reported Ponmudy's remarks verbatim, with headlines focusing on the "crass", "obscene", and "insulting" nature of the speech. The framing largely condemned the minister's statements for being disrespectful to religion, but few went beyond that to the deeper misogyny and anti–sex worker sentiment embedded in the analogy.

Television and online media shared video clips from the event. Some news channels bleeped out the offending remarks, some broadcast it without any alterations or warnings/notices. The fall out of the incident was that Ponmudy was swiftly removed from his party post, and the Madras High Court initiated suo motu proceedings against him. Religious groups, such as the VHP and Hindu Munnani, protested statewide. He was later sacked from his ministerial post.

The journalistic tone in many articles remained sensational, repeating the offensive remarks in bold or quotes, often without adequate analysis of the underlying prejudice, normalising the implicit assumption that sex workers are shameful, dirty, or laughable.

Kumudham's YouTube channels used the term "vilai madhargal" - women on sale, or women for a price, to report on the event. This suggests a media ecosystem where sex workers are either invisible or used symbolically, as figures of scorn.

Social media amplified the speech, with many users sharing the clip alongside commentary mocking both the minister and sex workers. Hashtags linked to the event were seen for several days, further circulating the derogatory content.

A few reports covered the responses made by singer and activist Chinmayi Sripada and DMK's own MP Kanimozhi, who condemned the speech. Most mainstream coverage failed to identify or critique the core issue of sex work being used as a derogatory metaphor.
The Bar and Bench article stood out for quoting the Madras High Court's observation that the speech demeaned the "moral worth of sex workers" and amounted to hate speech. However, this analysis emerged from the judiciary, not from journalistic initiative.

No interviews with sex workers were featured in the coverage, and no reports highlighted community reaction. However, the public nature of the remarks and the widespread circulation likely contributed to reinforcing stigma and public shame toward women in sex work, deepening fear around public representation and associating sex work with religious and cultural taboo in a way that affects both visibility and safety.

Case Study

Thane Raid: Reinforcing the Saviour Narrative

In October 2024, two Marathi newspapers, *Pudhari* and *Sakal*, reported on a police raid at Sitara Lodge in Ulhasnagar, Thane. According to Pudhari, the raid, led by Assistant Inspector Vishal Gaikwad, involved a sting operation with a decoy customer. The police arrested 23 people, including 4 women and 19 customers, and discovered that the lodge had been involved in the business for two months, earning around ₹19 lakh. Each customer paid ₹2000, but the women received only ₹500-₹600. *Sakal*'s report[11] described a similar situation, focusing on the rescue of the 15 women from Thailand and the arrest of 14 individuals, including the lodge manager, two staff members, and 11 customers. The women were sent to a rehabilitation home in Chembur, Mumbai, as part of the police's anti-human trafficking efforts.

Both newspapers framed the event as a major victory for the police, portraying them as heroes who had dismantled a criminal "sex racket." The stories emphasised the success of law enforcement, highlighting the number of arrests and the money involved, while presenting the women as helpless victims. Neither report explored whether the women might have been involved consensually or what circumstances led them to the lodge. The women's voices were absent, and their stories were reduced to numbers and police actions, with no mention of their personal experiences or challenges.

The language in both reports was dramatic and judgmental, using terms like "sex racket" and "human trafficking" to paint the situation as a moral crime. *Pudhari* described the police operation as "excellent," while *Sakal* called it a significant anti-trafficking effort. The tone celebrated the police as saviours, but it ignored deeper issues like poverty or migration that might drive women into such situations. The women were described as "rescued" objects, not individuals with their own perspectives. Neither newspaper included quotes from the women, NGOs, or human rights advocates, focusing instead on the police's tactics and the financial scale of the operation.

The reports revealed a clear bias against sex work, treating it as inherently wrong and criminal. *Pudhari* noted the women's low earnings but did not dig into the exploitation or systemic factors behind it. Sakal assumed all sex work was trafficking, sending the women to a rehabilitation home without questioning whether they wanted or needed it.

The focus on police heroism and moral outrage overshadowed the women's lives, ignoring structural issues like gender inequality or economic hardship. By leaving out the women's voices and relying on a saviour narrative, the reports reinforced harmful stereotypes, stigmatising sex work and undermining the dignity of those involved. This approach stripped the women of agency, portraying them as either victims or criminals, and showed little empathy for their realities. It is situations like that the judgement of the Supreme Court in the Prajwala matter, delivered on 29 May , 2026 is relevant to establish whether the women were pursuing this livelihood of their own volition.

The image carried in Sakal (Altered Image)

6. Terminology and Approach

Participants at the FGDs and media professionals interviewed for the study called for respectful, community-approved terminology to replace derogatory or objectifying language. Across languages, participants pointed to terms such as sex worker and sex work as preferable to overtly derogatory alternatives.

In Tamil media, *thirunangai* replaced slurs used for transgender women. Instead of derogatory language, such as "*vesi*", "*thevidiya*", and "*vibachara azhagigal*" ("whore", "prostitute", and "sex worker beauties") participants suggested using words that dignify, not degrade. Some suggestions were *thozhigal* (comrades), *saga thozhigal* (fellow comrades), *uravinargal* (relatives/companions), and *saga malargal* (flowers/blossoms). Reportage should include context, for example, "a woman abandoned by family and without other livelihood options was arrested while engaging in consensual sex work" instead of simply "sex worker arrested." In Bengali media, the term "sex racket" was used to refer to sex work that was taking place outside of a designated "red-light area". It could be someone's private residence where men and women were seen to be visiting, or hotels, tourist spots, or a spa. The term was also frequently used to refer to cases of human trafficking involving minors, thus conflating adult women voluntarily engaging in sex work with trafficked minors. The impact of using the term "sex racket" is manifold. Perhaps the question of who has access to a specific language and a specific news media outlet (often allied with specific political parties and ideologies) also has an impact. English reports were seen to be using appropriate language and photos more often than Bengali news media outlets. The majority of rights-focused articles were in English.

Sex workers advocate for their portrayal as service providers to reclaim agency and dignity, emphasizing their work as a legitimate profession driven by choice and economic necessity. The FGD participants assert, "We are service providers…just like others in the service industry who provide services and earn a salary," rejecting terms like "*deh vikri*" (Marathi for body-selling), adding "आम्ही काय आमचे हात, पाय, योनी किंवा शरीराचा भाग तोडून देत नाही" (We are not selling our hands, feet, vagina, or body parts). This shift challenges the victimhood trope and aligns with their call to be recognised as workers, fostering respect and labour rights over pity or moral judgment.

Participants across the board called for an approach that also included care, rather than only a career or profit motive. Sex workers want journalists to care about their well-being rather than solely focus on publishing news, "Journalists only care about publishing news; they don't care about what happens to us." They want journalists to inform them upfront that their photos and videos will not be used without permission, which would increase their comfort, "If they first tell us that our video, photo will not be used, we will be more comfortable," thus ensuring trust and ethical reporting practices.

Glossary of Preferred Terminology

BENGALI

- Agent/ Pimp: দালাল (Dalal)
- Brothel: যৌন পল্লী (Jouno polli)
- Business: ব্যবসা (byabsha)
- Client: বাবু (babu)
- Sex Work: যৌন কাজ (Jouno Kaaj)
- Sex Worker: যৌন কর্মী (Jouno Kormi)
- Sexual Provision: no direct Bengali term or phrase.
- Sexual Service Providers no direct Bengali term or phrase.
- Sexual Service: যৌন কাজ/সার্ভিস (Jouno service)
- Transgender: রূপান্তর কামী (Rupantor kami)

HINDI

- Agent/ Pimp: एजंट/ दलाल (agent, dalal)
- Brothel: धंधे का घर (dhande ka ghar)
- Business: धंदा (dhanda)
- Client: ग्राहक (grahak)
- Sex Work: धंदा, यौनकर्म (dhanda, youn karm)
- Sex Worker: धंदा करने वाली व्यक्ति, यौन कर्मी (dhanda karne wali vyakti, youn karmi)
- Sexual Service provider: लैंगिक सेवा प्रदाता (laingik seva pradata)
- Sexual Service provision: लैंगिक सेवा (laingik seva)
- Sexual Service: यौन सेवा (youn seva)
- Transgender: तृतीय पंथी, किन्नर (third gender, kinnar)

KANNADA

- Agent /Pimp: ಏಜೆಂಟ್ / ದಲ್ಲಾಳ (Agent, dalala)
- Brothel: ಬ್ರೋಥೆಲ್/ ದಂಧಾ ಮನೆ (brothel, dandin mane)
- Business: ವ್ಯವಹಾರ (Vyavahāra)
- Client: ಕ್ಲೈಂಟ್/ ಗಿರಾಕಿ (Client, giraki)
- Sex Work: ಲೈಂಗಿಕ ಕೆಲಸ (Laiṅgika kelasa)
- Sex Worker: ಲೈಂಗಿಕ ಕಾರ್ಮಿಕರು (Laiṅgika kārmikaru)
- Sexual Provision: ಲೈಂಗಿಕ ಸೇವೆ ಒದಗಿಸುವಿಕೆ (Laiṅgika sēve odagisuvike)
- Sexual Service: ಲೈಂಗಿಕ ಸೇವೆ (Laiṅgika sēve)
- Sexual Service Providers: ಲೈಂಗಿಕ ಸೇವೆ ಒದಗಿಸುವವರು (Laiṅgika sēve odagisuvavaru)
- Transgender: ಟ್ರಾನ್ಸ್‌ಜೆಂಡರ್ / ಲಿಂಗತ್ವ ಅಲ್ಪಸಂಖ್ಯಾತರು(Ṭrangender/ liṅgatva alpasaṅkhyātaru)

Glossary of Preferred Terminology

MALAYALAM

- Agent / Pimp: ഏജന്റ് / ഇടനിലക്കാരൻ (agentu/edanilakkaran)
- Brothel: ബ്റോതൽ (brothel)
- Business: വ്യാപാരം / ബിസിനസ് (vyapaaram/business)
- Client: ഉപഭോക്താവ് (upabokthaavu)
- Sex work: ലൈംഗിക തൊഴിൽ (laingika thozhil)
- Sex worker: ലൈംഗിക തൊഴിലാളി (laingika thozhilaali)
- Sexual Service Provision: ലൈംഗിക സേവന ലഭ്യത / ലൈംഗിക സേവനം നൽകൽ (laingika sevana labhyatha /laingika sevanam nalkal)
- Sexual Service Providers: ലൈംഗിക സേവന ദാതാക്കൾ (laingika sevana daathaakkal)
- Sexual Service: ലൈംഗിക സേവനം (laingika sevanam)
- Transgender: ട്രാൻസ്ജെൻഡർ (transgender)

MARATHI

- Agent/ Pimp: दलाल /एजंट (dalal/agent)
- Brothel: धंद्याचे घर (dhandyacha ghar)
- Business: व्यवसाय /धंदा (vyavasay/dhanda)
- Client: ग्राहक /गिर्हाईक (grahak/girhaiyak)
- Sex Worker: लैंगिक कामगार /धंदा करणारी व्यक्ती (laingik kamgaar/dhanda karnari vyakti)
- Sex Work: लैंगिक काम /धंदा (laingik kaam/dhanda)
- Sexual Provision: लैंगिक सेवा (laingik seva)
- Sexual Service Provider: लैंगिक सेवा प्रदाता (laingik seva pradata)
- Sexual Service: लैंगिक सेवा (laingik seva)
- Transgender: पारलिंगी व्यक्ती (parlaingi vyakti)

TELUGU

- Agent / Pimp: ఏజెంట్/దళారీ (agent/dalari)
- Brothel: బ్రోతల్ (brothel)
- Business: వ్యాపారం (vyaparam)
- Client: క్లయింట్(client)
- Sex Work: లైంగిక వృత్తి (laingika vrutti)
- Sex Worker: లైంగిక కార్యకర్త (laingika karyakarta)
- Sexual Service Provision: లైంగిక సేవల కల్పన (laingika sevala Kalpana)
- Sexual Service: లైంగిక సేవ (laingika seva)
- Sexual Service Providers: లైంగిక సేవా ప్రదాతలు (laingika seva pradaatalu)
- Transgender: ట్రాన్స్‌జెండర్ (transgender)

Glossary of Preferred Terminology

TAMIL

- Agent / Pimp: இடைத்தரகர் (idaiththaragar)
- Brothel: பாலியல் தொழில் நடைபெறும் இடம் (paaliyal thozhil nadaiperum idam)
- Business: தொழில் / வணிகம் (thozhil / vanigam)
- Client: வாடிக்கையாளர் (vaadikkaiyaalar)
- Sex Work: பாலியல் தொழில் (paaliyal thozhil)
- Sex Worker: பாலியல் தொழிலாளர் (paaliyal thozhilaalar)
- Sexual Service Providers: பாலியல் சேவை வழங்குநர்கள் (paaliyal sevai vazhangkunargal)
- Sexual Service Provision: பாலியல் சேவை வழங்கக்கூடியமை (paaliyal sevai vazhangkakoodiyamai)
- Sexual Service: பாலியல் சேவை (paaliyal sevai)
- Transgender: திருநங்கை / திருநம்பி / திருநர் (சூழலுக்கேற்ப) (thirunangai / thirunambi / thirunar)

7. Image Analysis

Images are a powerful medium of mass communication. The human brain processes and retains images faster and longer than text. The impact of an image is also more immediate, emotive, and memorable. As media sensitisation has been consciously carried out over the decades, there has been some improvement to framing a story, terminology used, sources quoted, gender balance, and so on. There have, however, been fewer interventions in the visual media, which is now gaining ground in print and digital spaces.

The following analysis of visuals in print and digital media attempted to capture the manner in which accompanying images affect the impact of the stories. The evidence shows that accompanying images spanned the range from inappropriate and irrelevant to sensationalised, voyeuristic, stereotyped, and perpetuating victimhood. A key factor underlying the use of images was lack of consent, invasion of privacy and potentially causing harm.

Note on Altered Images: *This report ran photographs through AI and/or blurred the images to protect women's identities. The original image structure is retained to show how garments, hairstyles, and surroundings can still give away identities in local media.*

7. (a) Inappropriate Images

The print-only analysis shows that inappropriate visual representation is widespread. More than half of the images, 213 of 384 assessed print records (55.5%), were coded No, meaning the photograph was judged inappropriate, while only 171 (44.5%) were considered appropriate.

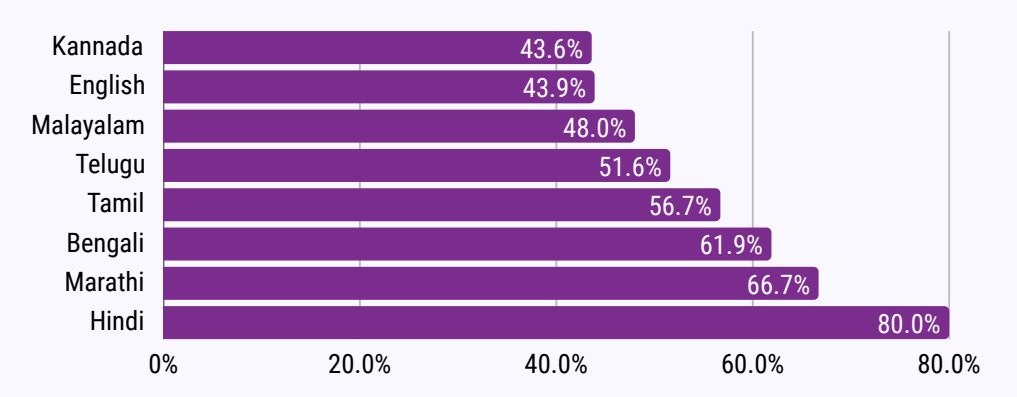


Figure 7.1. Inappropriate-Photo Rate in Assessed Print Records by Language

Inappropriate photo is one that is not directly relevant to the report and may not be suitable to illustrate a point. Hindi has the highest inappropriate-photo rate (80.0%; 44 of 55 assessed records) (see Figure 7.1.). The most frequently detected concern in No details is Identity / privacy exposure (85 records).

Language	Assessed	Appropriate	Not Appropriate	Not Appropriate Percentage
Hindi	55	11	44	80.00%
Marathi	60	20	40	66.70%
Bengali	21	8	13	61.90%
Tamil	30	13	17	56.70%
Telugu	31	15	16	51.60%
Malayalam	25	13	12	48.00%
English	123	69	54	43.90%
Kannada	39	22	17	43.60%

Table 7.1. Assessed photos by language

Findings

While more than half of the images were considered inappropriate, the problem is particularly severe in Hindi, where 80% of the assessed records were inappropriate. This is followed by Marathi at 66.7% and Bengali at 61.9% (see Table 7.1.). Tamil (56.7%) and Telugu (51.6%) also record inappropriate images in more than half of assessed reports. Malayalam is closer to balance at 48.0%, while English and Kannada have the lowest rates at 43.9% and 43.6%; nevertheless, even these lower figures indicate that more than two in five assessed photographs raise concerns.

The written details reveal several overlapping forms of harm (see Table 7.2.). Identity exposure or violation of privacy is the most frequently detected theme, appearing in 85 inappropriate-photo records (40.1%), including visible faces, incomplete blurring of names, locations, or other details that may enable identification. Police, Raid, and Crime Imagery appear in 57 records (26.9%), reinforcing the tendency to frame sex work primarily through criminality, arrest, and law-enforcement action. Forty-eight records (22.6%) refer to women hiding their faces or being blurred or masked; while concealment can protect identity, repeated images of women covering their faces can reproduce shame, victimhood, and spectacle, particularly when anonymisation is incomplete. Irrelevant or Misleading Images appear in 35 records (16.5%), Caption Problems in 31 (14.6%), and Sexualised, Voyeuristic, or Stereotypical Imagery in 21 (9.9%). Because these themes are keyword-based and can overlap, they should be understood as recurring warning signals rather than mutually exclusive categories.

Theme	Reports	Not Appropriate
Identity / Privacy Exposure	85	39.90%
Police / Raid / Crime Imagery	57	26.80%
Faces Hidden / Blurred / Masked	48	22.50%
Irrelevant / Misleading Image	35	16.40%
Caption Problem Or Missing Caption	31	14.60%
Sexualized / Voyeuristic / Stereotyped	21	9.90%
No Photo Available	9	4.20%

Table 7.2. Recurring Themes in Inappropriate Photos

Overall, the evidence suggests that print-media visual practices frequently compromise dignity, privacy, and contextual accuracy. Editorial improvement should prioritise informed consent, complete anonymisation, relevant non-stereotypical images, accurate captions, avoidance of stock sexualised imagery, and reduced dependence on police-raid visuals, while using photographs that represent sex workers as workers, citizens, and rights-holders with agency.

7. (b) Detailed Analysis of Select Cateogories

7 (b) (i) Identity protection

Of the 468 print reports, 112 (23.9%) were at risk of identification because protection was reported as *Somewhat* or No; 41 reports (8.8%) were coded No. Among languages, Telugu has the highest at-risk rate (46.7%; 21 of 45 reports). The most frequently detected disclosure themes in at-risk explanations are name, age, or direct personal identifier (59 explanations). Theme counts are keyword-based and can overlap.

Findings

The print-media identity-protection analysis shows that most reports were coded as fully protecting identity, but a substantial percentage still exposed sex workers or related individuals to identification risk. Of 468 print reports, 356 (76.1%) were fully protected, 71 (15.2%) were only somewhat protected, and 41 (8.8%) were not protected; combining partial and failed protection, 112 reports (23.9%) were at risk.

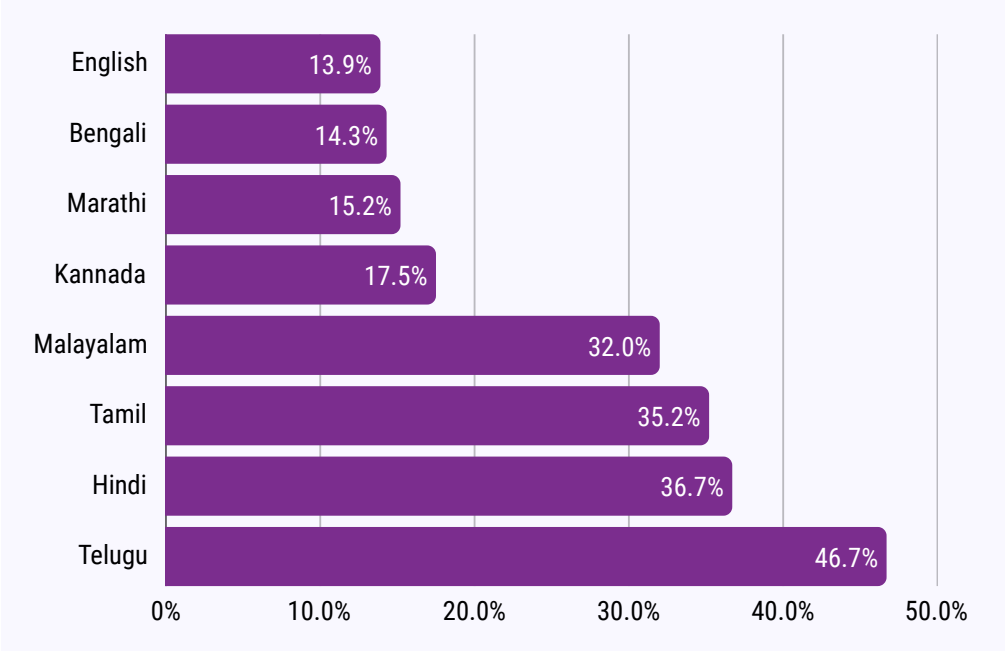


Figure 7.2. Identity protection risks in print reports

The evidence reveals that risk commonly arises through combinations of identifiers rather than the publication of a name alone. Names, ages, or other direct personal identifiers appear in 59 at-risk explanations; locations, addresses or workplaces appear in 50; and photos, visible faces or incomplete visual anonymisation appear in 32. Profession, nationality, organisational role, or other distinctive description appears in 22 explanations and can make a person identifiable even when a name is omitted.

In several cases, family relationships, associates, police-station details, villages, hotels, brothels, or exact workplaces provide enough contextual information for local identification. These overlapping disclosures illustrate why *Somewhat* protection remains ethically significant: removing a name does not ensure anonymity when photographs, precise locations, occupations, and relationships are retained. Overall, the findings indicate that identity protection should be treated as a cumulative risk assessment rather than a single-field check. Editorial safeguards should require removal or generalisation of names, ages, precise locations and distinctive roles; complete blurring or non-use of identifiable images; protection of family and associates; explicit consent where identification is necessary; and a final re-identification review that asks whether a reader from the local community could identify the person from the combined details.

The lack of effort to retain privacy and avoid disclosure of identity is reflected in the photographs and videos in news about sex work. Many photos carried along with text stories, especially about raids are inappropriate and humiliating, showing women hiding their faces from the camera as journalists try to capture them from different angles, visibly without consent.

Participants in the FGD in Delhi said, "Journalists, irrespective of gender, take our photos secretly, even after we refuse. Journalists sometimes invade our houses, entering rooms without permission. Journalists also try shooting photos of any condoms and alcohol bottles lying around. Sometimes, we also have our contact numbers on the wall; if you click a photo of our house, our contact numbers will be leaked."

Likewise, hyperlocal Kannada newspapers had sensational or voyeuristic reports using blurred photographs of semi-naked women. Between 2-3 articles were pure speculation and opinion masquerading as news. The news was largely reported in the *States* section of newspapers even when a hyperlocal incident was reported. One of the main concerns around even the shorter crime reports on sex workers were the accompanying stock images that were used. While reporting on the Supreme Court order or crime reports on police raids, photographs of women dressed in short skirts, with only a frame of their legs in urban, nighttime settings, were the standard marker of "prostitute". In one picture below, women are pictured in a neighbourhood and it is unclear who they are or why they are dressed as such, but the accompanying caption talks about a "red light area".

So, while the language is becoming less lurid and more neutral than pre-2022 articles, the stock images seem to undercut the attempt at sensitive reporting. They tend to reproduce a sensationalised, sexualised notion of women's bodies as available in the night for solicitation, reinforcing a stereotype of sex workers' possible attire might and their work methods.

Deccan Chronicle (Andhra Pradesh) has used images of sex workers hiding themselves on the street. They have also used visuals such as handcuffs, police vans, blurred crowds, or buildings. While this avoids overt sexualisation, the framing is still problematic. By foregrounding symbols of crime and law enforcement, the photos criminalise sex workers. In Telugu media, photographs sensationalise and stigmatise; in English media, they desexualise but still criminalise.

YouTube vlogs in Hindi were analysed to understand societal conceptions of sex work and sex workers and assess privacy concerns related to coverage of sex work on social media platforms. Elements including the number of views, likes and comments on the video, its title, the gender of the vlogger, the terminology used, body language, and content in the video were analysed.

Hindi TV news channel, *Zee News*, was also analysed for its use of handheld cameras while covering police raids on sex workers and brothels in Delhi NCR. Researchers observed the connotations and the impact of using such shooting processes and analysed their impact on the broadcast story. [Ethical consideration: As the YouTube vlog analysed violated the privacy of sex workers by capturing images and videos of sex workers, the researcher blurred the photos and videos while including them in the study.]

7 (b) (ii) Failure to Protect Identity

There was only a mechanistic adherence to the Supreme Court directives of May 2022 against publishing pictures of sex workers during raids and rescues to protect their right to a dignified life under Article 21. Broadcast media interpreted the guideline by recording video clips where the women's faces were covered, but details of locations (see Image 7.1.) or revealing their body or clothing could easily lead to identification. In such videos, it is unclear how it was determined that the women were indeed engaging in sex work, except for allegations made by local people or police informants.

Violations include publishing images of arrested women with black coverings over their eyes alongside text captions revealing their names, ages, and places of residence. Even when faces were covered, probing questions from anchors made identification possible.

The practice of parading women in front of cameras (see Image 7.2.), even with faces covered, amounts to a violation of their dignity.

In a report[25] report covering a crime incident at GB road, Amar Ujala (see Image 7.3) used this photo with the caption, Beware of these lanes. It is a representative image, but the faces of the women are visible.

A representative image by Telangana Today (see Image 7.4.) has been used for at least 10 articles since 2025. The location is identifiable, as is the woman.

Image 7.1. Identifiable location, *Dainik Bhaskar* (Altered Image)

Image 7.2. *Kairali*, Malayalam (Altered Image)

Image 7.3. Caption and Image, *Amar Ujala,* Hindi (Altered Image)

Image 7.4. Image by *Telangana Today* (Altered Image)

7 (b) (iii) Stigmatisation through Images

Many photos carried along with text stories are inappropriate and humiliating, showing women hiding their face from the camera as journalists try to capture them from different angles, visibly without consent. Many images, taken from stock photo banks, also show women in a sexualised manner irrespective of the theme of the story. The photos play a major role in treating stories related to sex work as sensational and voyeuristic crime stories.

In a photo published[26] by *Amar Ujala* (see Image 7.5.) in a report from February 2023, women and men are covering their faces, looking down. The caption reads: *Women caught in the raid*. The women's body language is uncomfortable, and the photo adds to a sense of stigma about sex work.

Image 7.5. Image from *Amar Ujala* (Altered Image)

All the other photos (see Images 7.6. and 7.7.) in the report are "representative images/File photos," taken from online stock image banks. They are not specific to the incident being covered but end up perpetuating the stigma around sex work.

Image 7.6. Stock Photo from *Amar Ujala* (Hindi) (Altered Image)

Image 7.7. Stock Photo from Amar Ujala (Hindi) (Altered Image)

7 (b) (iv) Criminalisation through photographs

Images of obvious criminality, such as handcuffs (see Image 7.8.), jail bars, or police line-up mug shots for "Wanted" (see Image 7.9.) posters are used to underline the criminality of sex work.

Even if the news report is positive, the stock image,[28] without adequately anonymizing faces (see Images 7.10. and 7.11.), reinforces the perspective of sex work as criminal.

Image 7.8. Image from *Amar Ujala* (Hindi)

Image 7.9. Image from *Malayalam Manorama* (Malayalam) (Altered Image)

Image 7.10. Image from *News18* (Tamil) (Altered Image)

Image 7.11. Image from West Bengal Police (Altered Image)

7 (b) (v) Stereotypes: The Vamp

Images meant to symbolise glamour, decadence, or immorality associated with sex work are repeatedly used from stock image banks to fill in news reports, irrespective of context. For example, this report[29] in *Amar Ujala* uses this "representative photo" of women in high heels (see Images 7.12. and 7.13.) that is irrelevant to the incident being covered. This photo is supposed to portray sex workers. The same photo is used in another report.[30]

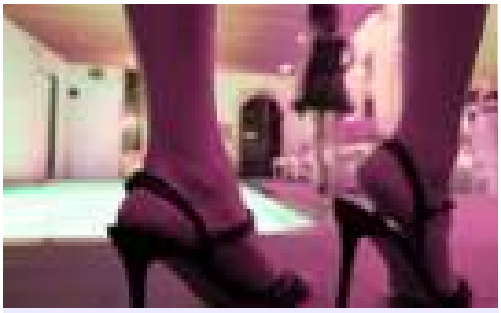


Image 7.12. Representative photo from *Amar Ujala* (Hindi) (Altered Image)

Another photo in *Hindustan*[31] (see Image 7.1.4) uses an image of women in short dresses to portray sex workers, which is irrelevant to the story but promotes the image of a "westernised" woman of loose morals.

Ironically, Image 7.1.4 was used in a report (TV9, Kannada) about the Supreme Court of India directing that sex workers should be issued Aadhar cards.

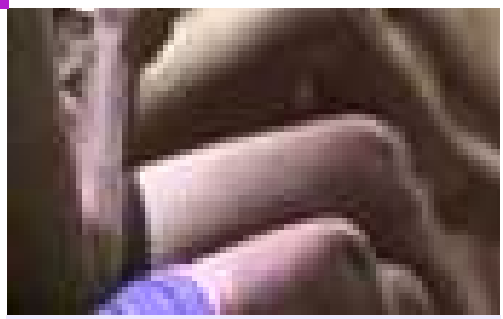


Image 7.13. Representative photo from *Amar Ujala* (Hindi) (Altered Image)

Image 7.14. Image from *Hindustan* (Hindi) (Altered Image)

One of the main concerns around even the shorter crime reports on sex workers were the accompanying stock images that were used. Whether it was reporting on the Supreme Court order, or crime reports on police raids, photographs of women dressed in short skirts, with only a frame of their legs in urban, nighttime settings, were the standard marker of "prostitute". The suggestion was of women at night, with red light and heels seeming to suggest a line of work. In Images 7.15. and 7.16., women are pictured in a neighbourhood, and it is not clear who they are or why they are dressed as they are – but the accompanying caption talks about a "red light area".

Image 7.15. Representative photo from Kannada media (Altered Image)

Image 7.16. Representative photo from Kannada media (Altered Image)

While the language is moving in a direction that is much less lurid and more neutral than pre-2022 articles, the stock images seem to undercut the attempt at sensitive reporting. They tend to reproduce a sensationalised, sexualised notion of women's bodies as available in the night for solicitation, and reinforcing a certain idea of what clothes sex workers might wear and present themselves.

In Telugu, YouTube's algorithms (as in other languages) actively reward sensationalism. provocative headlines, and imagery to increase reach, hence pushing creators to violate ethics for visibility. Second, unlike traditional media, digital platforms lack built-in safeguards like newsroom editors or professional codes of conduct, minimising accountability when sex workers' dignity is compromised.

Image 7.17. Image from Telugu media (Altered Image)

Image 7.18. Image from Telugu media (Altered Image)

Image 7.19. Image from Telugu media (Altered Image)

Image 7.20. Image from Telugu media (Altered Image)

While it is not surprising to find a bed, a bathtub, or a washbasin in a spa centre, the sight of a bathtub or bed serves to construct a particular image in the public imagination, an inherently sexualised image. This serves to underscore the association between "luxury" and "sexuality" that already exists in the minds of readers.

7 (b) (vi) Reinforcing Victimhood

The use of specific images—such as stock illustrations of cowering, helpless women, cringing and fearful—reinforces victimhood and shame (see Images 7.21. and 7.22.). Interestingly, many of these photographs are sourced from police sources.

Image 7.21. Stock Illustration

Image 7.22. Image from Telugu media

Image 7.23. *Amar Ujala* (Hindi) further victimises women "caught" in a raid, and renders them as cowering and helpless, trying to protect their faces from identification.

The visual impact of such images is to reinforce the stigma around sex work and portray sex workers as criminals.

Image 7.23. Image from *Amar Ujala* (Hindi) (Altered Image)

7 (b) (vii) Dehumanisation and Sexualisation

News and feature reports often use images that are inappropriate or overly sexualised and focussed on specific body parts. Examples include a woman's legs from knee downwards, wearing stiletto heels, being in the process of undressing, or images of bloodied knives, dead bodies, or police vans.

The images used often portray sex workers in stereotypical or voyeuristic ways, such as blurred women in corridors, women standing near poles, or photos meant to convey soliciting. The consistent use of such visuals reduces complex human experiences to a lurid spectacle.

Kerala Kaumudi Online (see Image 7.25.) blurred faces but framed women's bodies in sexualised ways.

The photographs used in Telugu media like Andhra Jyothy and Sakshi, clearly intend to sensationalise rather than to inform. Stock visuals of dimly lit rooms, women's silhouttes, and sexualisd poses are routinely inserted, even when they have no connection to the case. In coverage of raids, women are paraded with dupattas pulled over their faces, a gesture that is meant to hide their identity but, in fact, makes them identifiable within their communities, adding another layer of stigma.

Image 7.25. Image from *Kerala Kaumudi Online* (Altered Image)

The photographs used in Telugu media like *Andhra Jyothy* and *Sakshi*, clearly intend to sensationalise rather than to inform. Stock visuals of dimly lit rooms, women's silhouettes, and sexualised poses are routinely inserted, even when they have no connection to the case. In coverage of raids, women

are paraded with dupattas pulled over their faces, a gesture that is meant to hide their identity but, in fact, makes them identifiable within their communities, adding another layer of stigma.

English outlets such as *Telangana Today* and *Deccan Chronicle* do not rely on such voyeuristic images. But Deccan Chronicle has used images of sex workers hiding themselves on the street. They have also used neutral visuals such as handcuffs, police vans, blurred crowds, or buildings. While this avoids overt sexualisation, the framing is still problematic. By foregrounding symbols of crime and law enforcement, the photos send the message that the women are criminals. In Telugu media (see Image 7.26.), photographs sensationalise and stigmatise; in English media, they sanitise but still criminalise.

In both cases, the media strays from the Supreme Court direction: the dignity and identity of sex workers must be protected.

Image 7.26. Representative Image from Telugu media (Altered Image)

7 (b) (viii) Positive Portrayal: We Are Workers

Sex workers assert that they should be portrayed as workers earning their livelihoods. They believe that if the media adopts this specific framing, it will help uphold their self-respect and validate their autonomy in making personal choices. During FGDs, participants asserted agency over their own bodies, stating, "We provide sexual services. Just as there are individuals in the service sector who provide various other services and receive remuneration or a salary in return, this, too, is our profession." They also reject the term "prostitution" and "*deh vikri*" (literally, "selling of the body")—a term frequently used in news reports. They argue they do not physically detach and sell their bodies. We do not want pity."

Once this assertion of agency is reflected in images (see Images 7.27 to 7.30.) as well as text, the portrayal of sex workers in the media might undergo a transformation.

Image 7.27. Campaign Against the Trafficking Bill, Vadamalar Federation (2020)

Image 7.28. No Minor Campagin, Saheli HIV/AIDS Karyakarta Sangh, Pune (2019)

Restoring dignity of sex worker

Acting on SC norms, NGO holds awareness session with cops, lawyers, other stakeholder

Image 7.29. Media report on the Supreme Court Guidelines Advocacy Workshop (2024)

Images 7.30. Sex Workers Advocating for Trade Union Rights, May Day Rally (2019)National Network of Sex Workers

Case Study

Bengali media: What do these photographs mean?

Image Description
A representative photo of handcuffs

What makes the image inappropriate?
Implies criminality by association. The news story was of arrests made in a "raid".

(Altered Image)

Image Description
The image is inappropriate. It shows a woman from her shoulders downwards, wearing a pair of short pants and bikini top, leaning against a pillar, with her thumbs hooked into the waistband of the pants. There is no caption.

What makes the image inappropriate?
Not contextualised with the news that discussed Indian sex workers' struggles with stigma. The image is used for its sensational value.

Image Description
The image depicts the back of a police van, where one man is seen standing inside the van with his face covered with a white handkerchief, and 6 other men standing below looking up at him, out of which, three men are wearing police uniforms. The caption states eight people have been arrested.

What makes the image inappropriate?
Actual photograph from a "raid". These men were not confirmed to have committed any crime. Implies criminality of potential clients for sex workers, thus impacting sex workers' livelihood, and harassment of clients.

Case Study

Bengali media: What do these photographs mean?

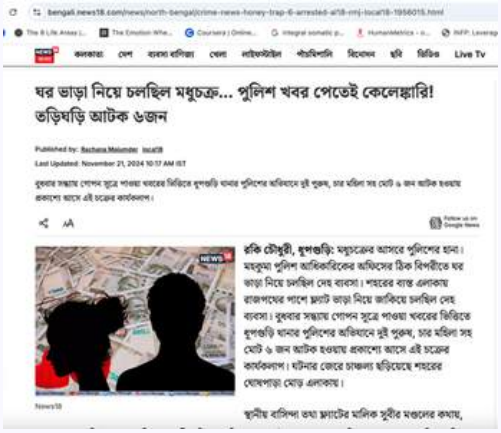


Image Description
The photo depicts the outline of a woman's face and a man's face; the backdrop shows 500 rupee notes being scattered around. No caption is given for the image.

What makes the image inappropriate?
The story is that of a raid. The image is not contextualised and seems to have been used for its sensational value.

Image Description
The image shows a person waist down, walking down a street wearing black fishnet stockings and purple high heels, and a black skirt or a short dress. The caption states "Adult sex workers have the right to migrate, says court" and mentions the image is representative.

What makes the image inappropriate?
Sensational image, not in context with actual subject matter of the report.

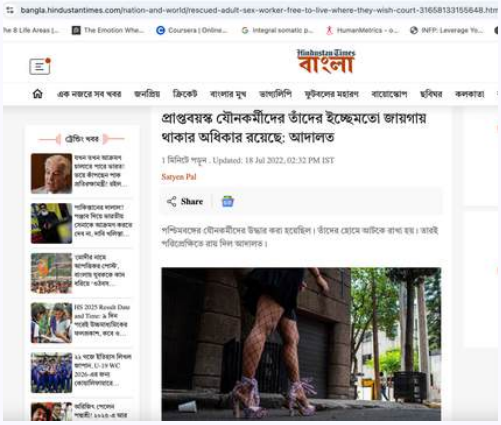


Image Description
The photo is inappropriate - it depicts high heel-wearing bare legs of a person sitting on a couch, and another pair of bare legs standing in front of them, with a red overtone. Caption states "symbolic image".

What makes the image inappropriate?
Sensationalising image used – not in context of the actual report which is about a raid in a hotel.

8. Analysis of Broadcast Media

Television news and talk shows have an immediate and lasting impact on viewers, shaping perspectives in a powerful way. It was deemed necessary to study selected samples of the electronic media but assess it through additional parameters than that used for print and digital media.

The electronic media monitoring covered 138 clips/news reports. The content of the electronic reports was also analysed along five parameters of aggression, dominance, sexism, behaviour and attitudes, and anti-sex work (anti-SW) discourse.

8. (a) Integrated analysis of variables: Anti-sex work, positive behaviour, sexism, aggression, and dominance

The strongest adverse pattern is anti-SW discourse, driven especially by dismissive language. Aggression, sexism, and dominance are lower on average, but all show a common mechanism: words, tone, and moralistic framing are stronger than overt interpersonal conduct, visuals, or audio. Respectful language appears more often than proactive or vocal support for women or explicit opposition to sexism, indicating that avoiding harmful language is more common than actively challenging discriminatory framing.

Language patterns are not uniform. The Hindi sample rated highest for anti-SW discourse; the Malayalam sample rated highest for sexism; the Bengali sample leads aggression and dominance and also has the strongest positive-behaviour profile among languages with substantial samples. English often appears at the extremes but has very small electronic samples, so its estimates are unstable.

Across qualitative evidence, the recurring risks are criminalising terminology, paternalism, rescue-only narratives, judgemental questioning, suspenseful production, repeated raid imagery, and visual exposure. The combined evidence shows a newsroom response that treats terminology, agency, sourcing, tone, and visuals as one integrated ethical system rather than isolated checks.

Observations on Table 8.1.

The quantitative domain comparison shows that *Anti*-SW discourse is the most prominent adverse pattern in the electronic-media sample. Across 551 standard ratings, its average presence rate is 40.2%, and average intensity is 0.82 on the 0–3 scale, placing it above *Aggression* (33.7%; 0.59), *Sexism* (28.5%; 0.54), and *Dominance* (22.1%; 0.41). This indicates that hostility toward sex work—especially dismissive and moralizing language—is more common and severe than overt dominance or sexism considered separately. *Aggression* is

Domain	Structured ratings	Mean presence	Mean intensity (0–3)	Leading dimension	Direction
Anti-SW	551	40.20%	0.82	Dismissive language	Risk
Positive Behaviour	414	26.30%	0.58	Gender-sensitive language	Positive
Sexism	414	28.50%	0.54	Dismissive language	Risk
Aggression	828	33.70%	0.59	Words used	Risk
Dominance	1104	22.10%	0.41	Words used	Risk

Table 8.1. Quantitative domain comparison

the second-strongest adverse domain and is driven mainly by words used, showing that hostile energy is communicated more through vocabulary, tone, and production than physical confrontation. *Sexism* is close to *Aggression* in intensity but lower in prevalence; its leading dimension is also *Dismissive Language*, demonstrating that gendered harm often takes subtle paternalistic or agency-denying forms. *Dominance* has the largest evidence base at 1,104 ratings but the lowest adverse intensity and prevalence, strengthening the conclusion that overt power assertion is less common than discursive stigma.

Positive Behaviour must be interpreted in the opposite direction: its 0.58 intensity and 26.3% presence rate represent beneficial gender-sensitive practice, not risk. Its intensity is similar to *Aggression*, but *Positive Behaviour* appears in only about a quarter of ratings, leaving considerable room for more active support, affirmative framing, and opposition to sexism. Overall, adverse *Anti-SW* framing is both more frequent and stronger than *Positive Behaviour*, and harmful language is the leading mechanism across nearly every risk domain.

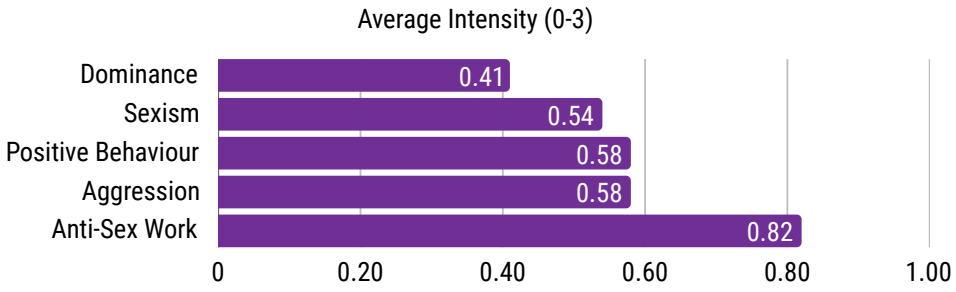


Figure 8.1. Mean intensity by domain

Observations on Figure 8.1.

The mean-intensity chart compares the average strength of each domain on the same 0–3 rating scale. *Anti-SW* discourse is the highest bar at 0.82, showing that dismissive, degrading, or hostile framing of sex work is the strongest recurring pattern. *Aggression* follows at 0.59 and *Sexism* at 0.54;

their proximity indicates that hostile delivery and gendered dismissal occur at similar severity, although *Aggression* is slightly stronger. *Positive Behaviour* is 0.58, but this bar has the opposite meaning from the risk domains: it measures beneficial gender-sensitive conduct rather than harm. Its similarity to *Aggression*, therefore, does not cancel *Aggression*; instead, it shows that positive elements can coexist with harmful framing across different reports or dimensions.

Dominance is the lowest adverse domain at 0.41, indicating that overt assertion of power is generally weaker than stigma, *Aggression*, or *Sexism*. All bars remain below 1.0, meaning the average rating across the full sample lies between *Absent* and *Minimally Present*. However, averaging includes many absent ratings and can conceal smaller groups of strongly harmful reports, so the chart should be read together with presence rates and *Highly Present* counts. It can be concluded that the most persistent problem is not overt confrontation but discursive framing, especially dismissive language. Meanwhile, positive practice remains insufficiently consistent and is more likely to involve respectful wording than active support or opposition to sexism.

The integrated analysis of electronic media thus shows that harmful framing in electronic-media coverage is multidimensional but consistently centred on language and narrative positioning.

Anti-SW discourse is the strongest adverse domain, with a mean intensity of 0.82 and a presence of 40.2%, demonstrating that dismissive, moralizing and degrading attitudes toward sex work are more prevalent than the other measured risks. Dimension rankings of *Aggression* and *Dominance* reveal a common pattern: words used, vocal tone and dismissive language are stronger than overt body language, interpersonal confrontation, visuals or audio. This suggests that bias often appears through routine journalistic choices rather than explicit hostility. *Sexism* operates similarly, with subtle dismissal and paternalism more common than openly degrading speech or images. *Positive Behaviour* provides an important counterpoint but remains limited with an average intensity is 0.58 and presence rate of 26.3%.

Overall, the evidence indicates that improvement of ethical reporting cannot rely on correcting terminology alone. Newsrooms need an integrated review of wording, tone, sourcing, agency, treatment, visuals, audio, identity protection, and context. Reporting should clearly distinguish consensual sex work from trafficking, include sex workers as authoritative sources, avoid rescue-only and police-centred narratives, challenge sexist claims, remove voyeuristic or humiliating visuals, and ensure that respectful language is supported by genuinely human-centred framing throughout the story

8. (b) Individual Variable Analysis

8 (b) (i) Dominance

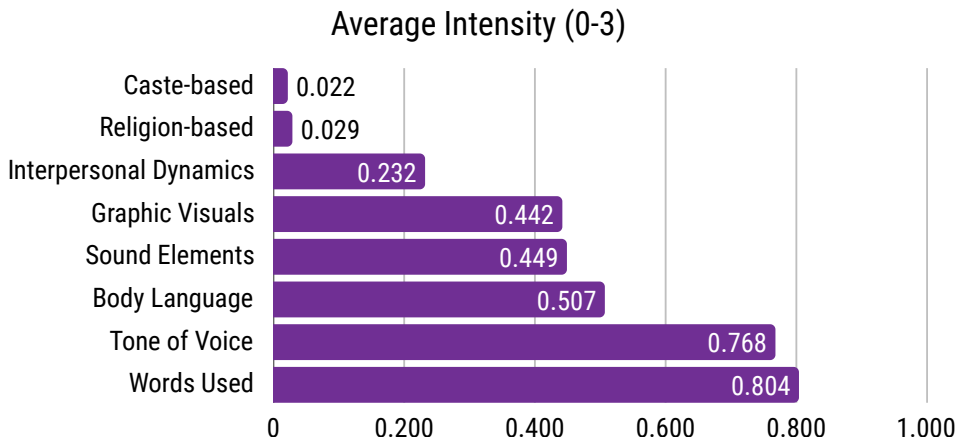


Figure 8.2. Dominance Intensity by Dimension

Qualitative interpretation:

Dominance in the sampled electronic coverage is expressed most consistently through language and vocal framing rather than through overt body language or interpersonal confrontation. The narrative responses repeatedly identify moralising terms for sex work—such as "immoral activity" and "women's trade —along with metaphors of people being "caught in a net", which position sex workers as deviant or criminal subjects. Several reports reinforce this hierarchy through suspenseful music, crime-style graphics, repeated arrest visuals, judgemental questioning, and images that foreground women, while obscuring their agency or risking their identification. However, the evidence is not uniform: multiple coders describe calm delivery and ordinary news presentation with no observable dominance, indicating that problematic framing can persist even when tone and visuals appear restrained. Overall, the qualitative evidence supports the quantitative result that *Words Used* and *Tone of Voice* are the strongest dominance channels, while religion- and caste-based dominance are rare and context-specific.

Detailed qualitative interpretation: Crime report coverage is slightly more dominant overall than non-crime coverage, but the difference is driven less by interpersonal behaviour and more by production and framing choices. Crime stories show substantially higher dominance through suspenseful sound, crime-oriented graphics and visuals, loaded terminology, and assertive tone, suggesting that the genre itself intensifies portrayals by dramatizing raids, arrests, and alleged wrongdoing. Non-crime stories, in contrast, show more dominance through body language and interpersonal dynamics, which

may arise in interviews, discussions, and features, where hosts or participants directly question, judge, or position sex workers.

Overall, crime framing tends to amplify dominance through audiovisual sensationalism and criminalising language, but language-specific journalistic conventions determine whether dominance is stronger in crime reports or in broader discussion and feature coverage.

8 (b) (ii) Aggression

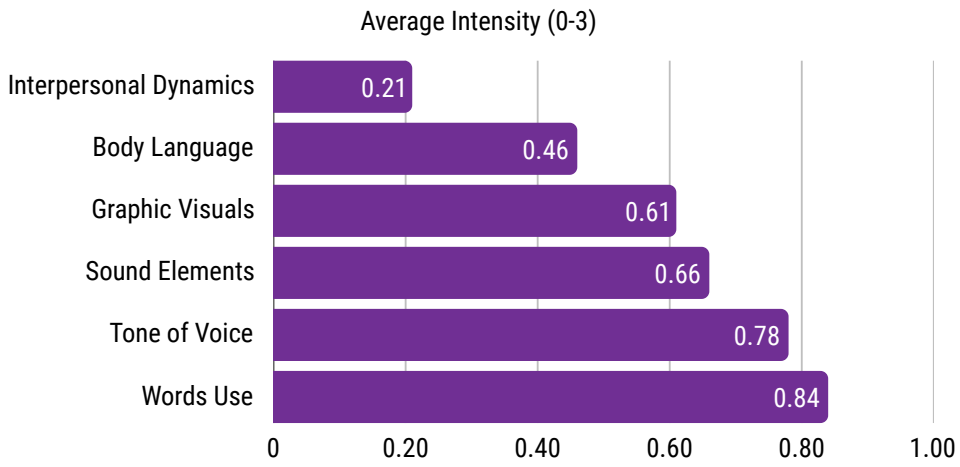


Figure 8.3. Aggression Intensity by Dominance

Aggression is expressed most strongly through verbal and auditory framing rather than through direct interpersonal behaviour. *Words Used* has the highest average intensity at 0.84 on a 0–3 scale, followed by *Tone of Voice* at 0.78/3, indicating that loaded vocabulary, derogatory expressions, emphasis, and vocal delivery are the principal channels through which aggressive reporting is communicated. *Sound Elements* (0.66/3) and *Graphics/Visuals* (0.61/3) form a second tier, suggesting that suspenseful music, dramatic effects, repetition, and crime-oriented visuals reinforce the aggression created by language. *Body Language* is lower at 0.46/3, while *Interpersonal Dynamics* is the weakest dimension at 0.21/3, showing that aggression is less often conveyed through direct exchanges, confrontation, or relationships between participants. The free-text observations support this pattern through references to terms such as “immoral”, “flesh trade”, and “sex racket”, judgemental or sarcastic delivery, suspenseful music, slow-motion repetition, and raid imagery. Importantly, every dimension averages below 1.0 on the 0–3 scale, so *Aggression* is generally absent or minimal across the full sample rather than consistently severe. Nevertheless, the ranking demonstrates that when aggression does occur, it is most likely to be embedded in word choice, vocal tone, and production techniques rather than overt physical conduct.

8 (b) (iii) Sexism

Dimension	Dismissive Language Towards Women Other Gender	Degrading Language Towards Women Other Gender	Visuals Degrading Women Other Gender
Ratings*	138	138	138
Absent	83	103	110
Minimally Present	23	10	10
Somewhat Present	20	12	12
Highly Present	12	13	6
Non-Absent	55	35	28
Non-Absent Rate	39.90%	25.40%	20.30%
Intensity (0–3)	0.72	0.53	0.38
*Ratings show the sample size behind each result			

Table 8.2. Sexism Dimension Distribution Rating

Dismissive Language Towards Women or Other Gender has the highest structured sexism intensity (0.72 on a 0–3 scale; 39.9% non-absent). Across languages, Malayalam has the highest combined intensity (0.94/3; 39.7% non-absent).

The sexism analysis indicates that sexist framing is expressed most frequently through Dismissive Language rather than through explicitly Degrading Language or Visuals. Dismissive Language is non-absent in 55 of 138 reports (39.9%) and has the highest intensity score at 0.72 on the 0–3 scale, suggesting that sexism often operates through minimising women's agency,

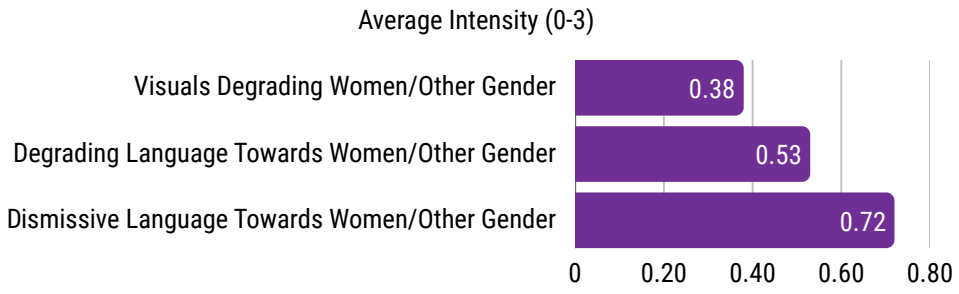


Figure 8.5. Sexism Intensity by Dimension

treating sex work as inherently undesirable, questioning women's choices, or speaking about them paternalistically. *Degrading Language* is present in 25.4% of reports with an intensity of 0.53/3, while *Degrading Visuals* occur in 20.3% with an intensity of 0.38/3; these lower averages do not imply that the harms are unimportant, but that they are less consistently observed across the sample. The language comparison shows substantial variation in both frequency and severity.

8 (b) (iv) Positive Behaviour, Attitude

Language has the highest positive-behaviour intensity (0.75 on a 0–3 scale; 34.8% present). Across languages, English has the highest combined intensity (1.50 on a 0-3 scale; 50.0% present). Any Other narratives are excluded from scoring and listed separately. Rates and intensity should be interpreted alongside each language's number of ratings.

Dimension	Language	Vocal Support Women	Vocal Opposition Sexist Behaviour
Ratings	138	138	138
Absent	90	100	115
Minimally Present	15	10	4
Somewhat Present	11	10	7
Highly Present	22	18	12
Present	48	38	23
Presence Rate	34.80%	27.50%	16.70%
Intensity (0–3)	0.75	0.61	0.39

Table 8.3. Positive Behaviour Distribution by Dimension

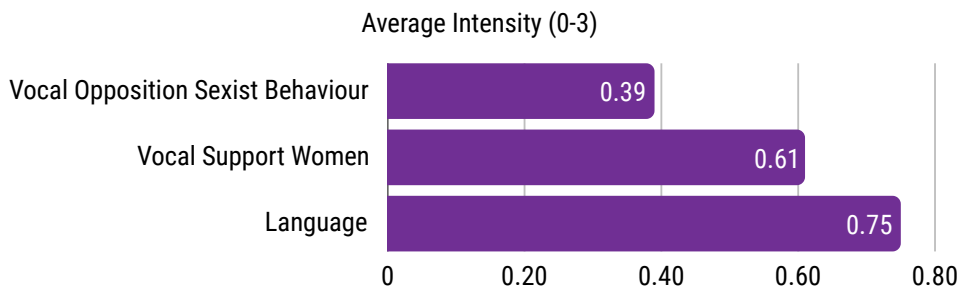


Figure 8.6. Positive Behaviour Intensity by Dimension

- Gender-sensitive language is strongest: 34.8% present, intensity 0.75/3.
- Vocal support for women: 27.5%, intensity 0.61/3.
- Vocal opposition to sexist behaviour is weakest: 16.7%, intensity 0.39/3.
- English has the highest measured intensity: (1.5/3) but only six ratings.
- Other larger samples of intensity: Bengali (1.04/3), and Telugu (0.88/3) lead.
- Limited Positive Behaviour: Hindi (0.26/3), Malayalam (0.29/3), and Kannada (0.30/3)

The *Positive Behaviour* analysis shows that gender sensitivity is present but uneven and generally limited across the electronic-media sample. Gender-sensitive language is the strongest dimension, while explicit vocal opposition to sexist behaviour is the weakest dimension. The hierarchy suggests that reporters and presenters are more likely to use comparatively respectful language than to actively defend women, challenge discriminatory claims, or confront sexism during coverage.

The free-text evidence also shows that apparent empathy does not always equal gender sensitivity. Some reports use sympathetic or charitable framing while still presenting sex workers as helpless, undesirable, or lacking agency. Conversely, rights-based stories that use respectful terminology, foreground sex workers' voices, protect identity, and support legal or occupational rights demonstrate stronger positive behaviour.

Overall, the findings suggest that editorial improvement should move beyond avoiding offensive language and towards active gender-sensitive journalism: using preferred terminology, recognising agency and consent, including women and sex workers as authoritative sources, challenging sexist remarks, supporting rights-based perspectives, and ensuring that tone, visuals and interaction reinforce rather than undermine the respectful language used in the report.

8 (b) (v) Anti-Sex Work Discourse

The Anti-SW discourse analysis (see Table 8.4.) shows that *Dismissive Language* is the central and most pervasive form of hostility in the electronic-media sample. It is present at some level in 89 of 137 standard ratings (65.0%) and has an average intensity of 1.31 on the 0–3 scale, indicating that reports frequently minimise sex workers' agency, treat the profession as inherently undesirable, or discuss workers in moralising and paternalistic terms. *Degrading Language and Gestures* form the second-strongest dimension, present in 47.1% of ratings with an intensity of 0.97, while *Degrading Visuals* occur in 29.0% with an intensity of 0.57. *Degrading Audio* is least frequent at 19.6% and 0.41, suggesting that Anti-SW discourse is conveyed primarily through words and interpersonal presentation, although images and sound can reinforce the framing.

Dimension	Dismissive Language	Degrading Language Gestures	Degrading Visuals	Degrading Audio
Ratings	137	138	138	138
Absent	48	73	98	111
Minimally Present	28	19	14	8
Somewhat Present	31	23	13	8
Highly Present	30	23	13	11
Non-absent	89	65	40	27
Non-absent rate	65.00%	47.10%	29.00%	19.60%
Intensity (0–3)	1.31	0.97	0.57	0.41

Table 8.4. Anti-Sex Work Discourse by Dimension

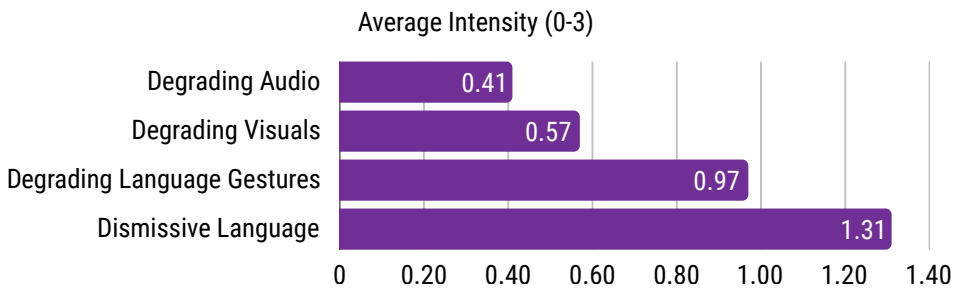


Figure 8.7. Anti-Sex Work Discourse Intensity

The qualitative examples suggest that dismissiveness can appear without openly abusive vocabulary. Speakers describe sex work as a "social ill", a "sinkhole", or an "undesirable" profession; portray workers as "poor things" without choice; use non-preferred terminology; and frame charitable or rescue-oriented interventions in ways that erase agency. Degrading language, gestures, repeated raid visuals, and exposure-focused presentation further reinforce shame and social distance. Overall, the findings suggest that editorial reform should focus first on eliminating dismissive and moralising framing; recognising sex work as work where appropriate; using preferred terminology, including sex workers as authoritative sources; distinguishing consensual sex work from trafficking; and reviewing language, gestures, visuals and audio together for subtle anti-sex-work bias.

The analysis in this section draws from the framework developed by Usha Raman for a research study 'Staging Aggressive Masculinity: Report of a Media Monitoring Project'. Network of Women in Media, India, 2022.

9. Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to foster sensitive, dignified, realistic, and affirmative media coverage of sex work and sex workers in the Indian media. These guidelines represent a collective effort by sex workers, allied organisations, and media researchers to move away from sensationalist reporting toward a human-centred approach in line with established journalistic principles and the Supreme Court's directives.

Recognising that media narratives continue to be dominated by crime-centric reports and stigmatising language, these recommendations advocate for a fundamental shift that prioritises the privacy, dignity, and agency of adult sex workers. By adhering to the 'Do no harm' principle and ensuring informed consent, journalists can navigate the complexities of this beat while protecting the lives and livelihoods of their subjects.

The goal is to institutionalise rights-based terminology, ethical visual representation, and gender-sensitive reporting across newsrooms. Ultimately, these measures seek to ensure that sex workers are portrayed not as criminals, social outcasts, or objects of voyeurism, but as workers with professional identity and complex lived realities.

Recommendations:

1. **Use Respectful Language:** Media outlets must replace derogatory and stigmatizing terms like "flesh trade", "racket", or "immoral activity" with **neutral, terminology** such as *sex worker*, *sex work*, or *sexual service provider*, referencing the Supreme Court's *Handbook to Combat Gender Stereotypes* (2023).

2. **Ensure Rigorous Privacy and Identity Protection**: Adhere to Supreme Court directives by prohibiting the publication of **names, addresses, ages, or identifiable images** of sex workers—even with faces blurred—particularly during raid and rescue operations.

3. **Ensure Ethical Visual Representation**: Avoid the use of sexually suggestive, voyeuristic, or stereotypical stock images and instead use **neutral, non-identifiable visuals** that respect dignity and accurately reflect the story.

4. **Diversify Sources Beyond Police Narratives**: Move away from relying solely on police hand-outs and "saviour" narratives; journalists should **corroborate information** with sex workers, activists, NGOs, and legal experts for balanced and verified stories. Include perspectives from sex workers, not only police, NGOs, politicians, or researchers; avoid speaking about sex workers without consulting them or their representative organisations.

5. **Rethink Reporting Categories:** Shift sex work coverage from the "crime beat" to beats covering **labour, gender, health, and law** to ensure social, economic, and labour issue perspectives rather than the criminal angle alone.

6. **Obtain Informed and Explicit Consent:** Journalists must follow the 'Do no harm' principle by securing **informed consent** before interviews or photography, ensuring the worker is comfortable with how their story and visuals will be presented.

7. **Distinguish Between Consent and Coercion**: Stories must reflect the crucial distinction between **consensual adult sex work** (exchange of sexual services for money or goods) and **human trafficking** (involves force, fraud, coercion, or exploitation) to avoid harmful conflations that strip workers of their agency.

8. **Scrutinise statistics** provided by police, anti-trafficking organisations, and abolitionist advocacy groups. Check original sources of data and methodologies used. Be cautious about repeating claims that have not been independently verified.

9. **Provide Socio-Economic Context:** Narrative framing should move beyond individual "victimhood" to explore **systemic root causes** such as poverty, migration, and the lack of legal or social safeguards, while also highlighting the resilience of the community.

10. **Establish Accountability and Redressal Mechanisms**: Newsrooms should implement policies to **hold the media accountable** for misrepresentation or privacy breaches, including issuing formal apologies and strengthening domestic regulation for social media content creators who violate privacy.

11. **Implement Newsroom Training**: Conduct regular, mandatory **sensitisation workshops** for reporters, editors, copy-editors and photojournalists to address personal biases regarding caste, class, and gender, and to improve legal literacy concerning sex workers' rights.

12. **Evolve a checklist** for sensitive reporting about sex work and sex workers in collaboration with sex workers themselves. Disseminate these guidelines across newsrooms–print, electronic, and digital.

Endnotes

[1] In the Supreme Court of India. Criminal Appeal No. 135/2010 Date of Order: 19.05.2022 Budhadev Karmaskar Vs. The State of West Bengal and Ors.

[2] On 29 May 2026, the Supreme Court of India delivered a landmark judgement in the Prajwala vs Union of India case, clarifying that trafficking involves coercion, force, fraud, deception, abuse of vulnerability, or exploitation, whereas adult voluntary sex work involves informed consent by an adult acting of their own free will and the two must not be treated as the same under law. This judgement is likely to have implications for media reportage in the years to come.

[3] https://nnswindia.org/upload/resources/2016/Ethical-Standards-for-an-Inclusive-Consultation-with-Sex-Workers.pdf

[**4]** https://youtu.be/tU3P7n36SzY?feature=shared, https://youtu.be/-GvzrvmTHtQ?feature=shared
https://youtu.be/pqQfvBQXCy0?feature=shared, https://www.youtube.com/@redlightzone3941
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[5] https://www.millenniumpost.in/nation/shootout-in-alipurduar-one-dead-1-injured-accused-succumbs-to-injuries-after-mob-attack-591058
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[6] https://www.amarujala.com/delhi/two-women-involved-in-prostitution-arrested-ashram-news-c-340-1-del1011-31095-2023-11-20

[7] https://www.livehindustan.com/ncr/story-sex-bazar-is-running-in-delhi-hotel-police-bust-sex-racket-in-ganesh-nagar-6-people-arrested-including-3-girls-8723810.html

[8] ആലപ്പുഴ നഗരത്തിൽ കെ എസ് ആർ ടി സി ബസ് സ്റ്റാൻഡിന് സമീപം മൂന്ന് വർഷത്തിലേറെയായി സാമൂഹിക വിരുദ്ധരുടെ ശല്യം രൂക്ഷമായിരുന്നു. നേരം ഇരുട്ടിയാൽ ഇവിടമാകെ ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിലാളികൾ സ്ഥാനം പിടിക്കും. ഇവരാണെന്ന് ധരിച്ച് യാത്രക്കാരായ സ്ത്രീകളോട് മോശമായി പെരുമാറുന്നതും വാഹനങ്ങളിലെത്തുന്നവരെ ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിലാളികൾ കൂട്ടമായിച്ചെന്നു ക്യാൻവാസ് ചെയ്യുന്നതും പതിവായിരുന്നു. അനാശാസ്യ പ്രവർത്തനത്തിന്റെ പേരിൽ ഇടനിലക്കാരായ രണ്ടു സ്ത്രീകളെ കഴിഞ്ഞയാഴ്ച പോലീസ് അറസ്റ്റ് ചെയ്തു. ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിൽ പൊതുജനങ്ങൾക്ക് ശല്യമായി മാറുമ്പോൾ പോലീസിന് നടപടിയെടുക്കാതിരിക്കാൻ കഴിയില്ല.

[9] ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിൽ സങ്കീർണമായ വിഷയമാണ്. വ്യക്തിസ്വാതന്ത്ര്യമെന്ന നിയമ പരിരക്ഷ ഒരുവശത്ത്. ഗുരുതര ലൈംഗിക രോഗങ്ങളുടെ പകർച്ച, ലഹരി, പിമ്പിങ്, ചൂഷണം, പെട്ടെന്നു പണമുണ്ടാക്കാനുള്ള ആഗ്രഹം, കുടുംബബന്ധങ്ങളുടെ തകർച്ച തുടങ്ങിയ മറ്റു സാമൂഹികപ്രശ്നങ്ങൾ മറുവശത്ത്. ആലപ്പുഴ വിനോദസഞ്ചാര

[കേന്ദ്രമായതിനാൽ ഇവിടെ ഇത്തരം പ്രശ്നങ്ങൾ നേരത്തേയുള്ളതാണ്. ഇരുട്ടിന്റെ മറവിൽ മാത്രമല്ല, പകലും ഇതിനു തടസ്സമില്ലാതായി.

[10] അന്ന് പോലീസ് ഞങ്ങളെ അടിച്ചോടിക്കുകയായിരുന്നു. റോഡിൽ നിൽക്കാനുള്ള സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യം പോലുമില്ലേ? ആരോട് പരാതി പറയും. പരാതി കേൾക്കേണ്ടവരാണ് ഇങ്ങനെ ചെയ്യുന്നത്.' ആലപ്പുഴ കെഎസ്ആർടിസി സ്റ്റാൻഡിനു സമീപം അനാശാസ്യ പ്രവർത്തനങ്ങൾ നടത്തിയതിന് ഇടനിലക്കാരായ രണ്ടു പേരെ പോലീസ് അറസ്റ്റ് ചെയ്ത സംഭവത്തിൽ ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിലാളികൾ പറയുന്നതിതാണ്. പക്ഷേ എന്തു വന്നാലും ഇതുപേക്ഷിക്കാൻ തയ്യാറാല്ലെന്നാണ് ഇവർ പറയുന്നത്. ഞങ്ങൾക്കൊക്കെ ആര് ജോലി തരാനാണ്. നേരത്തെ ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിലാളിയായിരുന്നുവെന്നറിഞ്ഞാൽ ആരും അതിനു തയ്യാറാകില്ല. ജോലി കിട്ടിയാലും ഇവർ പോകാൻ ഒരുക്കമല്ല. ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിലിൽ നിന്നു കിട്ടുന്ന വരുമാനം മറ്റെവിടെയും കിട്ടില്ലെന്നതാണ് കാര്യം. ലൈംഗികത്തൊഴിലാളികൾ വലിയൊരു വിഭാഗവും ഇതിലെ വരുമാനം കണ്ടു വരുന്നവരാണെന്നാണ് അവരോടു സംസാരിച്ചപ്പോൾ വ്യക്തമായത്...
പണം മാത്രമല്ല ലൈംഗികതയോടുള്ള താത്പര്യം കൊണ്ട് ഈ ജോലി സ്വീകരിച്ചവരുമുണ്ട്. ലൈംഗിക ബന്ധത്തിൽ ഏർപ്പെടുന്നത് ഇഷ്ടമായതിനാലാണ് അതു ചെയ്യുന്നതെന്ന് വർഷങ്ങളായി ഇവർക്കിടയിൽ പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നവർ പറഞ്ഞു.

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[12] Sakal – Jalgaon Crime News : चोपड्यात 11 कुंटणखान्यातून 50 तरुणींची सुटका | Jalgaon Crime Rescue of 50 young women from 11 brothel in Chopda marathi news | jalgaon news | marathi news

[13] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/bjp-leader-arrested-on-charge-of-running-sex-racket-in-west-bengal/article67878516.ece
https://www.facebook.com/IndiaToday/posts/pictures-of-shweta-khan-accused-of-running-a-pornographic-racket-in-west-bengals/1265813822248830/

[14] Preferred terminology includes terms like sex worker, sex work, transgender, sex worker rights, human rights, consent, women in sex work, profession, dignified life. The preferred terminology count of 369 mentions the total term occurrences, while 263 reports is the count of news articles that used at least one preferred term.

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[16] https://kannada.asianetnews.com/crime/police-raid-on-lodges-for-prostitution-in-the-name-of-spa-at-mudhol-in-bagalkot-grg-sghwi2

[17] https://zeenews.india.com/kannada/karnataka/police-busted-hospet-high-tech-prostitution-ring-182750

[18] https://www.etvbharat.com/kannada/karnataka/state/shimoga/shivamogga-police-bust-prostitution-racket-at-spa-7-women-rescued/ka20230625105326761761431

[19] https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/inter-state-prostitution-racket-busted/article68746284.ece

[20] https://www.deccanherald.com/india/karnataka/bengaluru/police-rescue-2-minors-from-prostitution-ring-techie-two-others-booked-3174327

[21] https://youtu.be/jsbFHMCUj7I?si=BVzamonff1FLyiZI, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqRtLS5zXwM
https://youtu.be/uTlZoEBHSMg?si=4QjxBz54Vo7nccsa
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[22] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQm3lYss94Q

[23] https://zeenews.india.com/hindi/india/up-uttarakhand/video/sex-racket-in-ghaziabad-busted-in-guise-of-spa-center-pacific-mall/1709735%23google_vignette

[24] https://www.esakal.com/mumbai/thane-police-rescue-15-thailand-women-from-sex-human-trafficking-in-ulasnagars-sitara-lodge-asb02

[25] https://www.amarujala.com/delhi-ncr/two-brothers-were-robbed-and-assaulted-in-delhi-red-light-area-gb-road-2024-09-05

[26] https://www.amarujala.com/photo-gallery/delhi-ncr/police-caught-prostitution-by-raiding-house-100-meters-away-from-kavinagar-police-station-in-ghaziabad-2023-02-15?pageId=7

[27] https://www.amarujala.com/delhi-ncr/police-arrested-two-women-engaged-in-prostitution-2023-04-08

[28] https://tamil.news18.com/news/tamil-nadu/avoid-taking-action-against-adult-individuals-who-engage-in-sexual-activity-on-a-voluntary-basis-says-chennai-hc-hrp-760128.html

[29] https://www.amarujala.com/photo-gallery/delhi-ncr/prostitution-gang-under-guise-of-spa-center-in-dayanand-vihar-in-posh-areas-across-yamuna?pageId=3

[30] https://www.amarujala.com/delhi-ncr/noida/prostitution-racket-busted-in-noida-sector-63-2024-04-11

[31] https://www.livehindustan.com/ncr/story-delhi-sex-racket-busted-at-spa-center-of-cross-river-mall-12-including-11-girls-arrested-6527608.html

SANGRAM

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WOMEN'S INITIATIVES

வாடா மலர்

SREE SHAKTHI SANGAM

Saheli AIDS/HIV Karyakarta Sangh
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DMWS

स्वाधार संघ
अमळनेर

"VESHYA ANYAY MUKTI PARISHAD"
VAMP

SADHANA MAHILA SANGHA

SANGAMITHRA

This report offers a critical exploration of how media narratives shape public understanding of sex work and sex workers in India. Drawing on original research across eight languages, including media analysis, discussions with sex workers, interviews with journalists and media professionals, case studies, and image analysis, it examines the ways in which language, sources, images and journalistic practices influence representation. Challenging crime-centred, sensational, and stereotypical portrayals, the report offers fresh insights into privacy, consent, agency, and the ethics of reporting and newsroom practices. It provides an important resource for journalists, media professionals, researchers, advocates, and readers seeking to understand and rethink how sex workers are represented in the media.