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Gender Violence or Tradition?: Media Coverage of Child/Forced Marriage in US newspapers

Manjusha Gupte* and Sundari Anitha

Abstract

The news media play an important role in influencing public perceptions and raising awareness of an issue. This research analyzes media framing of child/forced marriage through an examination of six US national newspapers over a ten-year period. It probes how narratives are constructed based on issue perception, blame attribution, and protagonist perceptions. It finds that print media has afforded increasing coverage to minimum marriage age legislation in the US. Mediated by advocacy organizations and survivors, the discourse surrounding child marriage has used a thematic frame as a legal issue with the onus on the state to amend laws facilitating child marriage. Forced marriage of adults has been framed as thematic too, but regarded as a cultural imperative. This culturalization of violence prevents forced marriage from being recognized as gender violence. Thus, while the thematic framing is laudable, the type of thematic framing matters, especially concerning blame attribution and the perceptions of protagonists, to fully comprehend this form of gender violence.

Keywords: forced marriage, child marriage, media framing, gender violence.

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Globally, 12 million children below 18 are married annually, predominantly girls, due to poverty, gender inequality, and social norms (UNICEF 2021). While its prevalence is decreasing and girls in the poorest countries are still twice as likely to be married, child marriage remains legal in 43 US states today (UAL 2021). Though the statutory minimum marriage age is 18, states allow exceptions on grounds of pregnancy, parental consent, and judicial consent.[1] 300,000 minors were married between 2000-2018, 86% of those were girls, mostly 16-and 17-year-olds, but more than 1,000 were 14 or younger, and five were only 10 years old (UAL 2021). Nine states have no absolute minimum marriage age. There is no official national-level data and many states do not record these statistics (UAL 2021). Delaware became the first to ban child marriage with no exceptions in 2018, followed by New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Rhode Island, New York, and Massachusetts. Since the early 2010s, there has been increasing media attention as survivors in the US have shared their experiences publicly, social media has disseminated it, and activists have lobbied for legislative change. Yet the American public are ill-informed when it comes to child marriage, believing it to be illegal across the US while overestimating its global prevalence (David Lawson, Rachel Lynes, Addison Morris, Susan Schaffnit 2020). News media help their audience understand social issues by distilling complex information into simpler narratives. Thus, media framing influences popular perceptions, which in turn, affect public policy response (or lack thereof) and thereby resource allocation. Hence, it is important to interrogate media framing given that media reflect dominant discourses in society, both representing and reproducing norms (Vrushali Patil and Bandana Purkayastha 2015).

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[1] The age of majority is 19 in Alabama and Nebraska and 21 in Mississippi, but boys can marry at 17 and girls at 15 with parental consent in Mississippi.

The terms child, early, teen, minor, adolescent and forced marriage have been used interchangeably in the media. A child marriage involves a minor whereas a forced marriage entails duress or the inability to consent (Khatidja Chantler, Gitanjali Gangoli, and Marianne Hester 2009). There is debate among scholars whether all child marriages are forced over minors' capacity to exercise full, free, and informed consent. From a human rights perspective, 18 is regarded as the legal endpoint of childhood (UNICEF 2021). Other scholars view the cut-off as arbitrary, delinked from the construction of childhood, its legal history, and the socio-economic context (Khatidja Chantler 2012; Lawson et al. 2020). While a discussion of these debates is beyond the scope of this paper, we use child/forced marriage together when referring to both, but utilize forced marriage to denote coercive adult marriages and specify child marriage while focusing on minors, keeping in mind that different policy approaches are required to deal with either. For instance, adults facing forced marriage can access a shelter, but minors, in most cases, cannot nor can they sign contracts. Minimum marriage laws can address child marriage, but forced marriage of adults requires options like civil protection orders.

Most research on forced marriage has emanated from the UK, in addition to other European countries, Canada, and Australia. They have also instituted legal safeguards and service provisions for survivors of forced marriage. The US, on the other hand, not only lags in the policy arena, but the nature of forced marriage here is not yet well understood and remains under-researched (Sino Esthappan, Sara Bastomski, Janine Zweig, Meredith Dank, and Hanna Love 2018; Hanna Love, Meredith Dank, Sino Esthappan, and Janine Zweig 2019). However, in this paper, we are not examining the prevalence or nature of forced marriage, but its media framing. By analyzing the language used to construct child/forced marriage in six newspapers, this study contributes to our understanding of how and what type of information the media disseminates on child/forced marriage in the US and what it leaves out. This issue has

contemporary relevance as numerous states are imposing abortion restrictions after the Roe v. Wade reversal, while permitting child marriage. Limiting abortion may increase child/forced marriage as girls are compelled to carry pregnancy to term while pregnancy creates an exception to the minimum marriage age in some states.

The subsequent sections provide an overview of the discourse on child/forced marriage as a form of gender violence, followed by a discussion on media framing in relation to other forms of gender violence such as domestic violence. We then examine news coverage on child/forced marriage in six US dailies between 2011 to 2021 asking the following questions: how is child/forced marriage in the US construed by the US media? Moreover, who are identified as victims and how are they portrayed? Finally, who are the perpetrators and what is their portrayal? The implications of the findings are analyzed in the discussion section, followed by limitations of the study and avenues for future research.

Child/forced Marriage in the US

Historically, shotgun weddings in the US involved coercion from family where the couple had engaged in premarital sex or faced an unplanned pregnancy. The age of consent was ten in the US in 1885 under English common law (Leti Volpp 2000). Syrett's seminal work on the history of child marriage in the US showed that marriage was viewed as transformative and as a means for dealing with teenage sexuality, with 11.7% of 15–19-year-olds being wives in 1880 (2016). State laws reflected this cultural context, wherein child marriage was appealing in a rural milieu of differing age norms, regulated sexual activity, circumscribed (sex) education, constricted employment opportunities and traditional gender roles (Syrett 2016, 253-254). These contexts shaped the gendered prevalence of child marriage in the US, whereby it was predominantly teenage girls who chose marriage, often for lack of other options (Syrett 2016). US states lowered their age of majority from 21 to 18 in the 1970s while equalizing marriage age for males

and females and for parental consent, but also increased the number of exceptions, especially due to pregnancy. California, for instance, lowered its minimum age from 21 in 1971 but still sets no age floor for marriage with judicial and parental consent.

The probability of marrying by 18 years is 6 percent for women and 2 per cent for men in the US (Paula Goodwin, Brittany McGill, and Anjani Chandra 2009). The reasons for child marriage in the US include premarital sex, pregnancy, cultural norms, religion, poverty, security and to protect from statutory rape, since marriage circumvents the age-of-consent requirement (Alissa Koski and Jody Heymann 2018). Prevalence of child marriage among US women was 8.9% based on 2001-2 survey data (Yann Le Strat, Caroline Dubertret, and Bernard Le Foll 2011), while another study found that 0.6% children between 2010–2014 had been married (Koski and Heymann 2018). Child marriage is more likely to occur in communities that are poor, Southern, less educated, religious, conservative, rural or immigrant (Xiaohe Xu, Clark Hudspeth, and John Bartkowski 2005; Jeremy Uecker and Charles Stokes 2008; Le Strat, Dubertret, and Foll 2011). Syrett (2016) argues that while child marriage may not be the statistical norm in the US and the overall rate has been declining since the 1950s, it is not uncommon either. It is, nevertheless, associated with higher rates of physical and mental illness, higher divorce rates, higher poverty, and lower educational level attainment (Gordon Dahl 2010; Le Strat, Dubertret, and Foll 2011).

Forced marriage of adults is distinct from arranged marriage, where families are involved in match-making, though the final choice is left to the individuals being married. But these exist along a continuum as opposed to a binary and one can easily morph into the other due to coercive contexts created by gender, sexuality, age, incapacity, disability or the use of physical force or emotional pressure (Sundari Anitha and Aisha Gill 2009; Chantler, Gangoli, and Hester 2009). Forced marriage can entail physical violence, death threats, and kidnapping, however,

more common are emotional blackmail, isolation, social ostracism, and cutting off financial and educational access (TCJ 2017). While forced marriage can be inflicted on any gender at any age, prior research has shown that 80% of those affected are women (Khatidja Chantler and Melanie McCarry 2020). But this needs to be juxtaposed against the fact that men are more reluctant to self-identify as victims for fear of having their masculinity questioned (Yunas Samad 2010). Men typically encounter forced marriage when their gender performance challenges heteronormative norms or their disability requires care (Chantler, Gangoli, and Hester 2009; Rachael Clawson and Rachel Fyson 2017). Control of sexuality and privileging heteronormativity have been some of the drivers of forced marriage that manifest through notions of honor surrounding daughters' premarital virginity or as a "cure" for perceived deviant sexuality of queer individuals (Chantler, Gangoli, and Hester 2009; Chantler and McCarry 2020). Transgender experiences remain hidden as gender presentation can be misconstrued. Emigration via marriage to a citizen is viewed as a means of overcoming poverty, cementing familial ties, and preserving traditional values (Julia Alanen 2016). Thus, while coinciding with other forms of domestic violence, forced marriage has been visualized as a form of gender violence in its own right (Judith McFarlane, Angeles Nava, Heidi Gilroy, and John Maddoux 2016; Love et al. 2019; Esthappan et al. 2018). UNHCR defines gender violence as consisting of sexual, physical, mental and economic harm inflicted in public or private on individuals due to their gender that is rooted in inequities, power relations, and patriarchal gender norms and involves threats of violence, coercion, and manipulation (n.d.). These include intimate partner and family violence, sexual violence, harassment, stalking, human trafficking, child marriage, and genital cutting. The US Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)

2022 reauthorization broadened the scope of gender violence to encompass forced marriage and 9 states view it as a crime.[2]

Media Framing and Gender Violence

Robert Entman (1993) argues that framing entails selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (52). The news media play an important role in influencing public opinion by endowing legitimacy to some perceptions through inclusion and marginalizing others by exclusion (Lane Gillespie, Tara Richards, Eugena Givens, and Dwayne Smith 2013). So framing is not just what material is shared, but how, when, through which means, and importantly, what is left out (Patil and Purkayastha 2015). Thus, popular understanding and public opinions are shaped by the selection and presentation of information, the repetition of frames consequently affect agenda setting and public policy response, and thereby resource allotment. But individuals also self-select news sources or are fed confirmation bias through social media algorithms, thus using the media to validate their views. Furthermore, pressures of revenue, market share, the 24/7 news cycle, and competition with social media have propelled contemporary media towards reflecting popular or viral trends. Shanto Iyengar (1990) demonstrates how issue framing influences people's views on social issues such as poverty, and how frame selection influences responsibility attribution. By focusing on discrete events, anecdotes, and personal stories, episodic framing attributes responsibility to individuals. In contrast, thematic framing takes a longitudinal and contextual approach, focusing on systemic issues and recommending societal and institutional solutions. Iyengar (1990) further argues that most news stories are rarely purely

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[2] While this is a momentous step forward, Congress can close the loop further by setting 18 as the minimum age for marriage-based immigration; currently there is none.

episodic or thematic, instead may reflect a dominant frame. Thus, framing selection matters as it influences whether readers view the issue as personal or social.

Domestic violence, as a form of gender violence, illustrates the effects of episodic versus thematic framing. Kellie Carlyle, Michael Slater, & Jennifer Chakroff (2008) found that newspaper framing of IPV tends to be heavily skewed toward episodic framing. Framing domestic violence as episodic, one-off incidences results in blame attribution towards victims (Georgina Sutherland, Patricia Easteal, Kate Holland, and Cathy Vaughan 2019). Thus, the media construct domestic violence as individual pathology or aberration rather than a systemic social problem (Meda Chesney-Lind and Nicholas Chagnon 2017). The onus of ending the violence then rests on the victim, while slotting it as a private matter, not requiring state intervention (Patricia Easteal, Kate Holland, and Keziah Judd 2015). However, there is some evidence of thematic framing of domestic violence as a social issue (Gillespie et al. 2013). Increased media reporting over the years has contributed to law, services, and funding for shelters, but by focusing on victims and excluding perpetrator accountability, it has not facilitated a public understanding of family violence (Nancy Berns 2004; (Gillespie et al. 2013; Georgina Sutherland, Angus McCormack, Patricia Easteal, Kate Holland, and Jane Pirkis 2016).

The common themes in media coverage of domestic violence have been sensationalism, focus on severe instances, ignoring the context, victim blaming, erasure of victims' voices and predominance of the criminal justice perspective (Sutherland et al. 2016). Research on UK tabloids reveals that women represent the "perfect victim" (after children), more so if they display characteristics of being young, female, White, middle-class, respectable, and physically attractive, traits that increase newsworthiness and circulation figures (Anna Gekoski, Jacqueline Gray, and Joana Adler 2012). Conversely, "ideal offenders" are often depicted as animals, strangers, and extremely violent (Berns 2004). Race, class, and gender intersect to influence

media portrayal of victims and perpetrators, ascribing criminal propensity to lower classes and men of color (Patil and Purkayastha 2015). Framing thus shapes political perceptions of societal groups by reinforcing stereotypes and associating that particular group with the problem (Sundari Anitha and Aisha Gill 2015).

Media discourse on gender violence has focused on domestic violence, compared to specific forms like forced marriage, which can be explained by the dearth of empirical data on its prevalence, its categorization as a hidden cultural phenomenon and lack of awareness about the topic (Chloe Patton 2018). While there has been an increase in media coverage of forced marriage in the last decade, its media representation has been the center of academic attention in only two scholarly articles. Anitha and Gill found that British media reporting on forced marriage constituted a moral panic by constructing it as a cultural problem threatening Britain's social order (2015). Similarly, Patton's forced marriage study of Australian newspapers revealed racialized orientalist representations that situated it within political ideology, privileging punitive policy over service measures (2018). Thus, in both the UK and Australia, forced marriage framing was understood in cultural terms as opposed to gender violence. This research addresses the gap in empirical studies on child/forced marriage by addressing the following questions: 1) How is child/forced marriage in the US construed by the US media? 2) Who are identified as victims and how are they portrayed? 3) Who are the perpetrators and what is their portrayal?

Data and Methods

This study examined articles from six US newspapers—five broadsheets and one tabloid—*the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the Los Angeles Times, USA Today*, *the Wall Street Journal*, and *the New York Post*. Print media was selected since it continues to provide the most original investigative journalism compared to TV and radio. *The New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, and *the Wall Street Journal* are considered national newspapers of record,

reflecting nation-wide views. In the age of social media and clickbait journalism, the traditional distinction between broadsheets and tabloids is fast eroding as many broadsheets have shifted to compact sizes or an online-only presence with more catchy headlines, more color photography, and more non-news features, thus providing the rationale for the inclusion of *the New York Post*. Based on circulation data, *the Wall Street Journal* is ranked at the top, followed by *the New York Times*, *USA Today, the Washington Post*, *the Los Angeles Times*, and *the New York Post* (William Turvill 2020). But these numbers do not include digital subscribers which are increasing while print sales are plummeting (Turvill 2020). News articles were examined from 2011 to 2021 to get an insight into media trends and capture the shift in coverage over the years. There was increasing awareness about child/forced marriage in the US in the early 2010s as several European countries began enacting child/forced marriage policy while advocacy organizations highlighted lacunae in US state marriage laws. The Tahirih Justice Center published the first extensive survey on child/forced marriage in 2011 and the same year saw the launch of the organization Unchained At Last, working to end child/forced marriage. Several states passed minimum marriage age legislation in the last four years and state legislatures continue to debate child marriage bills, thus providing the rationale for the ten-year time-period. The newspapers reflected ideological variation ranging from *the New York Times* (center-left), *the Washington Post* (center-left), *Los Angeles Times* (center-left), *USA Today* (moderate), *the Wall Street Journal* (center-right), to *the New York Post* (right) (Allsides Media Bias Ratings n.d.). The US Major Dailies newspaper database provided access to *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times,* and *the Wall Street Journal* whilst *USA Today* and *the New York Post* were retrieved via the news archive America's News. While the databases provided easy access in the era of paywalls, the absence of accompanying photographs and graphics meant a lack of visual representation.

The flowchart shows the data collection process based on search terms and the exclusion and inclusion criteria (see Figure 1). First, the databases were searched for the keywords *child marriage*, *forced marriage*, *child bride* (the historic term used in the US), *forced to marry*, *forced into marriage*, *early marriage*, and *underage marriage,* which yielded 1,921 results. *Adolescent marriage* and *minor marriage* did not produce any hits, so were dropped from the search. Second, articles that were obituaries, duplicates, or focused on corporate or sporting mergers were excluded from the collection. The total number of articles focusing on child/forced marriage globally was 660. From these, only those focusing on the US were selected in the final dataset, which came to 172. Some articles were repeated across search terms, so in such cases, only one rendition was used. The results did not include items on forced marriage that were reported solely as arranged marriage as it is hard to discern consent from media reports.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The study entailed a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to parse the data. Quantitative analysis of frames provided the bigger picture while qualitative content analysis enabled a deeper exploration of issue construction and language used in the communication process, as opposed to statistical generalization (Yan Zhang and Barbara Wildemuth 2009). The articles were classified by year, search term, and content (news, feature or op-ed column). Opinion pieces, while not necessarily reflecting the editorial stance of the paper, were included in the analysis, since the aim was to analyze frames and many op-eds, while contributing a distinct voice from journalists, also provided the first ever in-depth discussion of child/forced marriage in the US. All the news articles were read as a whole first. The content of the full text of each article was then coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software by the first author and the data analysis was reviewed by both the authors. Initial codes, derived from the literature, were primary framing (episodic or thematic), construction of child/forced marriage, portrayal of

victims, and portrayal of perpetrators, including explanations for victim and perpetrator behavior and responsibility attribution. The remaining codes were developed inductively from the data, for example, culture, immigrants, religion, gender abuse, etc. Multiple careful readings of the text data with close attention to the context and constant comparison helped discern patterns of accountability and blame, and illuminated the connections between codes. Overlapping codes were submerged into existing ones while outliers were set aside. Grouping codes lead to categories and further to themes, for instance, the construction of child/forced marriage was an overarching theme containing the categories of choice, gender abuse, social issue, religious or cultural tradition, legal issue and immigration problem.

Findings

The following sections unpack media construction of child/forced marriage in the US and the representation of victims and perpetrators.

Framing of child/forced marriage

Child/forced marriage has been framed as both episodic and thematic (see Table 1). Episodic framing focused on police and legal cases or individuals and one-off incidences (44% of articles). Thematic framing was issue-focused and provided contextual information (56% of articles). *USA Today* and *the New York Post* overwhelmingly adopted episodic framing while the remaining four leaned thematic.

<div align="center">Insert Table 1 about here</div>

The media have played a laudable role in creating awareness of state laws permitting child marriage in the US and provided coverage of minimum marriage age campaigns, alongside the efforts of advocacy organizations, survivors, and op-ed writers. The perception of child/forced marriage varied across newspapers and between staff journalists and op-ed writers, with the latter providing more comprehensive treatment by grounding the phenomena contextually. Op-ed

columnists and guest writers characterized child/forced marriage as a thematic, multi-dimensional issue with roots in religion, culture, conservative traditions, poverty, and immigration. Some writers were survivors themselves and shared their personal experiences. The regular columnists interviewed and gave voice to survivors; their columns featured victims of all backgrounds, highlighting that this happens in all communities and religions. The cases discussed included child marriages contracted to cover up rape, to legitimize pregnancy, and to avoid future pregnancy. The ages of the victims (11-17 years) were juxtaposed against those of their adult partners (26-32 years) to underscore the gendered nature of the abuse. This narrative recognized child marriage in the US as a manifestation of patriarchy (control of girls' bodies and sexuality), poverty, and social norms (pregnancy, childbirth within marriage).

Five out of the six newspapers in our study covered minimum marriage age legislation. These lay on either side of the political spectrum, showing that it was of interest to both the left and the right. This could be explained by the fact that all the newspapers were headquartered on both the coasts, which are traditionally more liberal than the heartland, as well as the states of New York and Virginia tightening their minimum marriage age laws. *USA Today* provided no coverage at all. Journalistic reporting in *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *the Los Angeles Times* and *the New York Post* discussed the negative effects of child marriage, how it adversely affected girls' life chances and health, and its co-relation to forced marriage, domestic violence, and trafficking. The predominant framing was one of a legal issue due to lack of legislative action to update state marriage laws that facilitated child marriage by not setting a floor or setting it low or permitting pregnancy to make exceptions. *The New York Times* most clearly articulated a position in favor of child marriage legislation, but both *the Washington Post* and *the New York Post* acknowledged it as "forced marriage of children," underscoring that children cannot give true consent. *The Los Angeles Times* alluded to cultural traditions of

immigrants and pregnancy in the domestic population as reasons behind child marriage while acknowledging that "child marriage in the U.S. has escaped intensive scrutiny" (*the Los Angeles Times*, Feb 28, 2016). Ironically, the newspaper did not provide coverage of California's failed 2018 attempt to ban marriage under 18, which was opposed by the ACLU, Planned Parenthood and the Children's Law Center of California. *The Wall Street Journal*'s underpinning editorial position was that child marriage was rare in the US, but setting a minimum marriage age was a commendable goal "to protect children from forced marriages" (*Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2017). The opponents of the legislation and their views were given coverage in *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post* and *the Wall Street Journal*. Overall, the emphasis remained on legislative change and the wider discussion supportive of legislative change (refer to Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Child marriage was highlighted by the media predominantly as child abuse affecting young girls. The child abuse angle was explicit in the reporting on the FLDS trial across news sources, with care being taken to clearly demarcate the FLDS from the Mormon Church.[3] Discussions on the domestic practice of child marriage centered on premarital sex, pregnancy, and the social expectation to raise a child in wedlock. In the wake of the Roy Moore controversy in 2017, a *Washington Post* feature discussed the history and acceptance of older men dating teenage girls in the American South and subsequently allowing minors to wed (November 13, 2017). It interviewed various stakeholders and situated the practice within patriarchy, wherein fathers controlled their daughters' lives (and sexuality) by making decisions for them on dating and marriage. It also analyzed rural economics undergirding the decision to marry daughters off early while men achieved financial stability at a later age, consequently leading to an age gap

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[3] The FLDS is a break-away religious sect of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) or the Mormon Church. It split over the practice of polygamy and its leader Warren Jeffs was convicted of child sexual assault in 2011.

between minors and their adult partners. Thus, the structural origins of child marriage were deemed to lie in patriarchal religious traditions as well as the presence of archaic state laws that allowed minors to marry. *The Los Angeles Times* provided extensive coverage on the topic in the form of op-eds by faith leaders and individuals from religious fundamentalist backgrounds discussing consent, grooming, and the dangers of parent-sanctioned courtships between adult men and teenage girls. By controlling and shaping the narrative to hold states accountable for outdated laws, the onus was placed on the state to fix the problem through legislation that closed these loopholes. This thematic framing of child marriage can be traced back to the visibility afforded to child marriage and the cues provided by advocacy organizations that worked with survivors and political representatives to effect policy change.

Newspaper coverage of forced marriage of adults highlighted sensationalism, fixated on homicide and honor-based violence, and ignored the context, similar to reporting on domestic violence (Sutherland et al. 2016). Forced marriage received prominence typically for visibility in the criminal justice system for ancillary crimes of murder or kidnapping, like in the Amina Ajmal case.[4] The crime highlighted the case and subsequently the existence of underlying forced marriage was discovered. The criminal lens is not surprising given that, similar to domestic violence, sensational crimes are viewed as newsworthy (Carlyle et al., 2008).

The media also paradoxically reiterated the alien character of forced marriage by emphasizing the exotic nature of forced marriage in minority communities. This framing of othered ethnic minorities was found across the six dailies. *The New York Times* and *the Washington Post* grounded forced marriage in the structural context of a multicultural/ethnic society, while *USA Today* and *the New York Post* focused solely on its practice amongst

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[4] Amina Ajmal of Brooklyn, NY, was held prisoner in Pakistan for three years and forced to marry against her will. After she escaped and returned to the US, her father ordered the murders of two individuals who helped her, for which he was sentenced to life imprisonment for conspiracy to commit honor killings in 2015 (US Attorney General's Office 2015).

immigrants and other minorities. *The Los Angeles Times* did not explicitly address forced marriage of adults but one feature examined successful immigrant integration in the face of new refugee influx and a second article touched upon arranged versus forced marriage in the context of a streaming reality series. *The Wall Street Journal* provided no coverage of the issue other than one op-ed discussing anti-immigration feelings in the context of national identity, border control, and assimilation. Thus, in the reporting across news sources, forced marriage was viewed as a tradition in and from the global South, predominantly affecting Asian, African and Middle Eastern immigrant girls in the United States, as seen here— "Though the practice [of forced marriage] is most common in developing countries" and "In the United States, some immigrant families have retained those traditions of child marriage" (The New York Times, February 20, 2016). Forced marriage was portrayed as thematic too, but in a different way than child marriage, where blame attribution lay in a stagnant culture. While there was mention of advocacy organizations and service challenges faced by survivors, there was not much attention devoted to prevention, outreach, and education in the reporting.

Arranged marriage and forced marriage, as manifestations of cultural and religious traditions of minorities, were conflated numerous times across newspapers and used interchangeably, as seen in *the New York Times* "A reliable estimate of arranged marriages is difficult because the definition is inexact. But the Tahirih Justice Center, an advocacy group for immigrant women, reported that about 3,000 cases of 'forced marriage' took place in the United States from 2009 through 2011" (March 21, 2015). The binary of arranged (family) versus love (choice) was used to explicate the practice in *The Washington Post* "Many traditional societies observe the custom of arranged marriage, in which family relationships matter more than individual choice" (May 22, 2015). While discussing the Amina Ajmal honor killing, it was variously reported as an arranged marriage and a forced marriage (*The New York Post*, June 27,

2014). Similarly, while examining polygamy practices of the FLDS, arranged was used to denote forced or child marriage (*USA Today*, August 1, 2011). *The New York Times* profiled women escaping arranged marriages in the Ultra- Orthodox community on "the contested crossroad between the modern secular concept of marriage for love between consenting adults and longstanding ethnic or communal customs of arranged marriage," denoting lack of consent in the latter (*The New York Times*, March 21, 2015). *The Wall Street Journal* described the organization Unchained At Last as "advocating against arranged marriages" (March 7, 2017). The issue of consent and consultation, which distinguishes an arranged marriage from a forced one, was obfuscated in the reporting.

The next sections discuss the representation of victims and perpetrators, one of the key issues underpinning the framing of gender violence. The choice of words and use of language influence public perceptions of the perpetrators and victims, sending both positive and negative reinforcements.

Framing of victims

The majority of accounts featured female-passing victims, both children and adults (see Table 3). The only mention of males was in the contexts of "leavers" from religious cults. While this is reflective of the data that shows a majority of victims are women (Chantler and McCarry 2020), it also highlights the fact that experiences of males or trans individuals are rarely featured. Thus, there was no mention of child/forced marriage with regards to LGBTQIA+ individuals and those differently abled, findings similar to those from the UK and Australia (Anitha and Gill 2015; Patton 2018).

<div align="center">Insert Table 3 about here</div>

All news reporting on minimum marriage age legislation included advocate and political sponsor statements. But child marriage survivors, those with direct lived experience, were not

always given a voice in that narrative. Not including victim voices results in effacing their victimhood while contributing to the notion that child marriage is not a serious domestic issue. *The New York Post* and *the New York Times* both featured one survivor statement each while *the Wall Street Journal* incorporated none. *The Washington Post* carried a lengthy feature profiling an underage bride, her choice portrayed as a tough decision under exigent circumstances of rural poverty (October 7, 2018). There was no mention of race or religion of the protagonists in this case. Romantic love was centered from the protagonists' vantage point— "I'd caught feelings,"—surreal— "a force bigger than ourselves,"—and divine— "saving each other." The article ended by hailing the young girl as "the child bride who didn't drop out" (*The Washington Post*, October 7, 2018).

Forced marriage adult victims belonged to racialized communities and received visibility where they had left the community, thus centering on group exit. It is plausible that due to safety issues, those still living with their family may find it hard to speak out or speak to the media. So, this could be an issue of self-selection to an extent. But the identities highlighting their religion, ethnicity, and country of origin were salient in the reporting across news sources— "some Hasidic, others Yeshivish;" "Palestinian Muslim ancestry;" and "a Hindu woman," highlighting cultural differences or an immigrant identity as seen in "Family of Murdered Immigrant Was in Crisis" (*The New York Times*, April 6, 2012). The women were portrayed as submissive— "an outlier for choosing to speak out" (*The Washington Post*, September 28, 2015). A piece in *the Washington Post* featuring a British forced marriage activist mentioned that "forced marriage of female minors among some Asian and African immigrant communities is also a growing problem in the United States," wrongly attributing it to a TCJ survey (*The Washington Post*, May 2, 2012). A second article on forced marriage in *the Washington Post* profiled a survivor, but adopted a nuanced take by explaining the difference between arranged marriage and forced

marriage, the surrounding circumstances, and the role of coercion (March 22, 2015). It, nevertheless, laid the blame at the doorstep of the deviant culture—from her "native Pakistan," where a rebellion was "an unthinkable act in her culture" (March 22, 2015). Thus (South Asian) culture got assigned the final blame for the custom— "the practice is found in many immigrant communities, especially among South Asians, from the Washington suburbs to ethnic enclaves in cities including Houston, New York and San Francisco" (*The Washington Post*, May 22, 2015). The most extensive reporting on forced marriage was a feature in *the New York Times* on an immigrant abuse victim that shed light on an invisible group faced with deportation or risking family ties (April 14, 2019). The article discussed challenges faced by religious minorities in terms of access to services and shelters against the background of xenophobia.

Framing of Perpetrators

The perpetrators were less visible in the narrative on child marriage, rather laws, legislators, judges, clerks and thus the state, were assigned responsibility for allowing and facilitating child marriage (see Table 3). When present in the form of parents, religious leaders or an older partner, the perpetrators were constructed as aberrant, pathological individuals. But the rendering also conveyed autonomy, implying that choice and circumstances of pregnancy or falling in love led to the outcome, for instance, "He'd married a child, yes. But he wasn't a bad guy" (*The Washington Post*, October 7, 2018).

The perpetrators from out-groups were hyper-visible in the narrative and when the reporting related to a criminal case. The perpetrator, a Mexican immigrant, was variously described as "the creep," "the beast," and "the sadistic captor" in *the New York Post* (May 22, 2014). The parents, especially the father, were depicted as traditional and backward, with their children wanting to live modern lives— "she was a child of the West" and "the shifting cultures that these immigrants and their American children inhabit" (*The New York Times*, May 23,

2013), thus highlighting the space between foreign parents and their Western children. The male migrant subject was portrayed as angry and impulsive, described as "furious," and "seethed." The insinuation was that immigrants were "trapped by abusive families or foreign customs," and could not get rid of "conservative customs that have followed them to lives in Western society" (*The Washington Post*, May 2, 2012). The perpetrators were very much located within their ethnic community— "Iraqi-born mother of five"— and religion — "her strict Muslim parents" (*The New York Times*, April 6, 2012; *The New York Times*, March 14, 2017), with their pathology ascribed to their culture. Thus, religion and culture became perpetrators too, referred to as "death by culture," when cultural explanations are used to elucidate fatal forms of gender violence (Uma Narayan 1997).

Discussion

The media play an important role in raising awareness about gender violence and influence how it is perceived by lay audiences (Berns 2004). This study examining media framing of child/forced marriage in six US newspapers found that child marriage was of interest to both the liberal and conservative print media, with press coverage helping advance minimum marriage age legislation. Advocacy organizations and opinion writers played a critical role in shaping the media narrative by giving voice to survivors and highlighting their experiences. The narrative encompassed farm economics in the South, religiosity, and social norms against unwed teenage pregnancy and out-of-wedlock children and its persistence across rural communities in the US.

Forced marriage received more contextualized reporting in the liberal media compared to the conservative outlets, but overall, forced marriage was conceptualized as a cultural imperative, endemic to immigrant communities and their traditional practices. This theme of culturalization of violence, rather than viewing it as gender violence, is similar to findings from studies conducted in the UK and Australia (Anitha and Gill 2015; Patton 2018). By framing

forced marriage as an external import, US media contributes to disseminating misconceptions among the public, as borne out by Lawson et al.'s 2020 study. While culture and religion impose patriarchal practices, as feminist scholars have argued, forced marriage is "less about culture or religion and more about patriarchal privilege" (Chantler and McCarry 2020, 106), which manifests itself across communities in various ways (Volpp 2000). Thus, slotting forced marriage under the cultural realm misses the gender implications underlying the violence.

The limitations of this study include a sole focus on print media, which has a distinct upper- and middle-class tilt. The Pew Center contends that most Americans prefer watching news rather than reading it (Amy Mitchell 2018), though that is changing as social media, news websites and apps become the norm. To fully capture the framing connotations, future research needs to parse television and radio news content, which tend conservative. While this study examined national newspapers, all six are headquartered on the cosmopolitan and relatively liberal coasts. The inclusion of *the Chicago Tribune* or *the Houston Chronicle* would give representation to the Mid-West or the South. Given that marriage laws are legislated by states, further research could examine state-specific coverage in local newspapers. To facilitate statistical inference, future research could compare US media framing of domestic versus global child marriage, thereby generating a robust probability sample.

This study contributes to the debates on media framing of gender violence by shedding light on issue construction and perception of the protagonists. It shows the predominance of thematic framing concerning child marriage. Taking a cue from advocacy organizations, the media have constructed child marriage as a legal issue where the lack of laws banning child marriage constitutes harm. This framing steers clear of the victim-blaming narrative and construes child marriage as a social issue requiring legislative action. Forced marriage of adults receives thematic framing as well, but with culture becoming the explanatory variable. The

difference in the type of thematic framing highlights the fact that mere thematic framing of gender violence is not enough (though it is a good start), but equally important is to understand blame attribution and issue construction, which determines the solutions adopted to fix the problem. Future reporting needs to create more awareness about child/forced marriage, include more coverage of victims' voices, provide Mobilizing Information (MI) on services available, how victims can seek help and get in touch with organizations, with their websites and contact details readily available at the end of the article, and focus on education and outreach as sustainable strategies to address this issue.

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Databases	US Major Dailies	America's News
	NYT, WP, LAT, WSJ	USAT, NYP

Search terms	NYT	WP	LAT	USAT	WSJ	NYP	
Child marriage	317	168	46	11	38	12	
Forced marriage	246	145	29	15	61	21	
Child bride	111	70	19	2	23	26	
Forced into marriage	82	42	20	7	27	4	
Forced to marry	178	101	30	14	29	27	
Underage marriage	16	22	8	0	3	2	
Adolescent	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Early marriage	262	162	38	13	56	2	
Minor marriage	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Total	934	526	144	49	178	90	1921

Exclusions: Duplicates, obituaries, mergers, sporting teams

Global	NYT	WP	LAT	USAT	WSJ	NYP	
Child marriage	118	76	16	3	11	4	
Forced marriage	79	42	12	1	22	3	
Child bride	14	10	4	0	4	2	
Forced into marriage	24	22	10	2	9	3	
Forced to marry	48	28	13	4	7	3	
Underage marriage	8	5	2	0	0	0	
Early marriage	19	23	7	1	1	0	
Total	310	206	64	11	54	15	660

US focus	NYT	WP	LAT	USAT	WSJ	NYP	
Child marriage	25	15	9	3	8	5	
Forced marriage	8	14	2	2	6	4	
Child bride	3	3	0	0	2	3	
Forced into marriage	1	0	1	1	2	1	
Forced to marry	4	3	4	2	1	6	
Underage marriage	0	5	3	0	0	1	
Early marriage	10	11	4	0	0	0	
Total	51	51	23	8	19	20	172

Figure 1. Flowchart representing data collection.

Table 1: Framing Type

Framing (n=172)	NYT	WP	LAT	USAT	WSJ	NYP	Total
Episodic (%)	17 (33.3)	21 (41.2)	6 (26.1)	6 (75)	7 (36.8)	18 (90)	75 (43.6)
Thematic (%)	34 (66.7)	30 (58.8)	17 (73.9)	2 (25)	12(63.2)	2 (10)	97 (56.4)

Table 2: Issue Framing

	NYT	WP	LAT	USAT	WSJ	NYP	Total
Cultural/religious tradition	36	33	15	3	10	12	109
(%)	(70.6)	(64.7)	(65.2)	(37.5)	(52.6)	(60)	(63.4)
Gender abuse	15	20	11	1	7	2	56
(%)	(29.4)	(39.2)	(45.4)	(12.5)	(36.8)	(10)	(43.6)
Social issue	14	17	2	4	2	3	42
(%)	(27.5)	(33.3)	(3.9)	(50)	(10.5)	(15)	(35.5)
Immigration	16	10	7	1	7	2	43
(%)	(31.4)	(19.6)	(30.4)	(12.5)	(36.8)	(10)	(25)
Legal	19	12	3	0	4	2	40
(%)	(37.3)	(23.5)	(13)	(0)	(21.1)	(10)	(23.3)
Choice	2	6	1	1	0	3	13
(%)	(3.9)	(11.8)	(4.3)	(12.5)	(0)	(15)	(7.6)

Percentages sum up to more than 100% since articles contained multiple frames.

Table 3: Victim and Perpetrator Framing

	NYT	WP	LAT	USAT	WSJ	NYP	Total
Victims							
Male (%)	0	0	1 (4.3)	0	0	1 (5)	2 (1.2)
Female (%)	29 (56.9)	36 (70.6)	10 (43.5)	3 (37.5)	12 (63.2)	6 (30)	96 (55.8)
Children (%)	26 (51)	27 (52.9)	14 (60.9)	3 (37.5)	7 (36.8)	12 (60)	89 (51.7)
Non-binary/trans	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
All (%)	11 (21.6)	7 (13.7)	0	2 (25)	2 (10.5)	2 (10)	24 (14)
Perpetrators							
Culture/religion (%)	18 (35.3)	20 (39.2)	13 (56.5)	4 (17.4)	13 (68.4)	14 (70)	82 (47.7)
State (%)	26 (51)	20 (39.2)	3 (13)	2 (8.7)	5 (26.3)	2 (10)	58 (33.7)
Family (%)	19.6 (35.3)	6 (11.8)	9 (39.1)	1 (4.3)	1 (5.3)	6 (30)	33 (19.2)
Deviancy (%)	1 (2)	8 (15.7)	4 (17.4)	1 (4.3)	1 (5.3)	5 (25)	20 (11.6)
Choice (%)	2 (3.9)	7 (13.7)	3 (13)	0	0	0	12 (7)
None (%)	7 (13.7)	3 (5.9)	2 (8.7)	1 (4.3)	1 (5.3)	0	14 (8.1)