

# Framing Suicide in Afghanistan: A Four-Year Content Analysis of Afghan Newspapers Reports

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In Afghanistan, approximately 80% of national suicides yearly occur among females. Nonetheless, both scholarly research and reliable epidemiological data on the topic remain extremely scarce, leaving the true scale and context of this crisis largely unknown. We aimed to evaluate the quality of suicide reporting in Afghan media by conducting a content analysis of suicide-related articles published between September 2021 and August 2024 in two relevant English-language Afghan newspapers. Employing a predefined set of keywords—“suicide,” “shot herself/himself,” “ended her/his life,” “took her/his life,” “killed herself/himself,” “jumped in front of a train,” “poison,” and “pistol”—we analyzed 73 news reports.

Our findings indicated that most articles provided details on gender, method, location, and purported motives for suicide cases within their headlines. Furthermore, reports frequently disclosed the identities of the deceased, including personal life events, and simplistic, single-cause explanations for suicide. However, most articles lacked reporting essential preventive information, such as suicide helpline resources or an expert recommendation. The portrayal of suicide in Afghan media was found to be markedly problematic, including ethical journalistic concerns and violations of responsible media-reporting guidelines. We discussed how these limitations may adversely impact readers’ perception of suicide news.

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## Keywords

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## Introduction

Suicide is a serious global concern, claiming approximately 726,000 lives annually. Moreover, for every completed suicide, there are up to 25 individuals who attempt suicide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). In 2021, suicide was identified as the third leading cause of death globally among individuals aged 15 to 29, with its impact spanning the entire lifespan (WHO, 2024).

Suicide is not confined to high-income countries; rather, it is prevalent across all regions of the world. In fact, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) accounted for approximately 77% of global suicides in 2021 (WHO, 2019). According to the World Bank's definition, countries classified as low- and middle-income are defined as having a gross national income per capita of \$12,695 or less (The World Bank, 2021). Afghanistan falls among these countries.

In particular, Afghanistan is a South Asian Muslim-majority country that has experienced a significant drop of 30% in per capita income (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). To this end, youth in LMICs may represent a population with a higher prevalence of suicidality. In 2017 alone, Afghanistan recorded 1,800 suicide attempts, 1,400 of which involved women, with 35 of these attempts resulting in death (Safi, 2018). It may be even more alarming that females nearly doubled the number of suicide attempts recorded in 2016 in the country, which was approximately 1,000 (Safi, 2018).

Furthermore, nearly 3,000 individuals in Afghanistan attempt suicide annually, with Herat province being particularly affected by suicidality, accounting for over half of the national total cases (Safi, 2018; Saif, 2017). The Kabul, Herat, and Logar provinces of Afghanistan recorded over 2,000 instances of self-immolation, predominantly among teenage girls. This alarming rise in suicides was attributed mainly to deeply ingrained social norms, underage marriages, and pervasive violence, all of which contributed to the escalating suicide rates in the country (Saif, 2017).

Due to religious misconceptions and social stigmas, women in Afghanistan are denied access to mental health care, effectively depriving them of critical support and contributing to the higher prevalence of female suicide (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi & Synovitz, 2021). In addition to being unable to access medical care, when an Afghan woman attempts to report violence and seek justice, she can face threats and pressure from her family to withdraw the case, thereby obstructing the investigation (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Given the aforementioned factors, the underreporting of suicide cases serves as significant evidence that the actual number of suicides is likely much higher. This highlights the urgent need for further research to gain a deeper understanding of the issue, enabling more effective strategies to address the factors contributing to suicide and ultimately reduce its prevalence in Afghanistan. In light of this issue, one of the most effective preventive strategies at the population level is responsible media reporting (Menon et al., 2018).

Therefore, we conducted this study to examine suicide reporting practices in Afghan English-language newspapers, in accordance with the guidelines established by the Press Council of India (PCI; 2019). The guidelines recommend: a) avoiding placement of suicide stories on the front page(s), b) refraining from repeating such stories, c) avoiding sensationalist language, d) not normalizing suicide coverage, e) omitting details of the suicide method, f) not disclosing the site or location of the incident, g) refraining from using sensational headlines, h) not publishing photographs, and i) avoiding the sharing of social media links or video footage.

It has been discussed that adherence to media reporting guidelines might contribute to a reduction in annual suicide deaths by more than 1% (Arafat et al., 2019; Antebi et al., 2020; Christensen et al., 2016; Kryszynska et al., 2016; McTernan et al., 2018; Zangmo & Zangmo, 2019) in a country like Afghanistan.

## Materials and Methods

### *Newspaper Selection*

For this study, we selected two prominent English-language Afghan newspapers: *TOLOnews* and *Hasht-e Subh Daily*. While we explored additional publications, they did not contain relevant information on suicidal occurrences in Afghanistan. Of all the newspapers examined, only Pajhwok Afghan News provided in-depth coverage of suicide-related incidents in Afghanistan. However, since all identified articles were accessible only via subscription, we ultimately excluded them from our analysis. We chose to include English-language newspapers specifically because they offer greater readability and consistent, internationally available data, which was essential for maintaining clarity, transparency, and reproducibility across our analysis.

### *Search Strategy*

RK and AF, the contributing authors, conducted an extensive and meticulous search of news reports on suicide published by the selected newspapers within the designated period. To enhance the search process, they utilized the electronic editions of the chosen news outlets, employing key terms such as *suicide*, *killed him/herself*, *shot him/herself*, *poisoned*, *ended his life*, *took his life*, *pistol*, and related expressions.

### *Data Extraction*

After compiling the relevant news reports, RK and AF independently extracted data from the available articles. They identified and analyzed 144 news reports, isolating the most critical information pertaining to suicide in Afghanistan. Finally, the authors resolved any ambiguities or complexities encountered during the rigorous data extraction process, ensuring accuracy and consistency in their findings.

### *Content Analysis*

Content analysis is widely regarded as one of the most effective methods for examining the characteristics and effects of media reporting (Neuman, 2005). Therefore, we employed content analysis to gain a deeper understanding of suicide in Afghanistan by examining four years of media coverage on suicide in two English-language Afghan newspapers. We inspected articles written between September 1, 2021, and August 31, 2024, encompassing a critical period within the third decade of the 21st century. Through a careful review of the available newspaper articles, we identified and catalogued those reporting on suicide incidents. We specifically aimed to collect detailed information on suicide frequency, recurring characteristics, as well as the social and cultural contexts in which they occurred, limited to what was reported and made available by the selected newspapers.

Additionally, we not only examined the prevalence and geographic distribution of these events but also evaluated how the press covered them—specifically in terms of the level of detail provided and adherence to recommended reporting guidelines.

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

After retrieving 144 newspaper articles, we applied a set of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure a targeted and relevant selection of suicide-related news reports. News reports concerning incidents outside Afghanistan or involving non-Afghan citizens were excluded from the study ( $n = 39$ ). Furthermore, we excluded other types of newspaper content, such as opinion pieces ( $n = 8$ ), editorials ( $n = 4$ ), interviews ( $n = 10$ ), book reviews ( $n = 2$ ), letters to the editor ( $n = 2$ ), and feature stories ( $n = 2$ ). Finally, reports appearing in the entertainment section, particularly those depicting suicidal incidents in television dramas or movies, were also excluded from the analysis ( $n = 4$ ). Ultimately, we included 73 reports explicitly focused on suicide.

## Results

A total of 73 English-language online news articles were accessible as of the search date. Most of these reports originated from *Hasht-e Subh Daily* ( $n = 71$ ), while *TOLOnews* contributed a smaller portion ( $n = 2$ ). The publication timeframe spanned from September 2021 to August 2024. All included reports were published in English, with most appearing as brief reports in the supplement section of the respective newspapers (Table 1).

Most news articles provided details regarding the gender (95.8%) of people committing suicide, the employed method (61.6%), the location (78.0%) of the suicide, as well as the underlying reasons (60.2%) for the act, all of which were included in the article titles (Table 2). Information about the identity of the deceased (52.0%), life events, and mono-causal explanations (52.0%) for the suicide were also frequently reported in these articles (Table 2). However, crucial content such as the impact on the bereaved (4.11%), information on prevention (0%), expert opinions, and details of available sources of help, was notably absent in most of the reports (Table 2). Additionally, only 12.3% of the articles made any connection between suicide and mental health.

As shown in Table 3, a significant proportion of suicide-related news articles (23.29%) were prominently featured on the first three pages of the newspapers. Many articles (34.25%) consisted of repeated stories, intended as a follow-up on suicides previously reported in the news. Approximately 15.0% of articles employed sensational language, and nearly half (41.0%) included details about the location or site of the suicide. Furthermore, around 12.3% of the articles used sensationalized headlines, and 10.9% included photographs, all of which violated the guidelines set forth by the PCI (Vijayakumar, 2019; Table 3).

## Discussion

Our study provides a comprehensive analysis of suicide-related media coverage in Afghanistan, a topic previously underexplored. We examined reports from two major English-language newspapers published between September 2021 and August 2024. The findings reveal several concerning patterns in media reporting that align with practices observed in other regions, particularly South Asia.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Newspaper Reports on Suicide in Afghanistan.

Variable	Newspaper Reports, <i>n</i> (%)
Language of the newspaper report	
• English	73 (100%)
Section of the newspaper publishing the suicide report	
• Main section	14 (19.1%)
• Supplement	59 (80.8%)
Number of sentences in the newspaper report	
• <11	48 (65.7%)
• 11–20	22 (30.1%)
• > 20	3 (4.11%)
Density of reporting (more than one suicide-related article reported on the same day)	
• Yes	11 (15.0%)
• No	62 (84.9%)
Highly prominent placement (front page or first three pages)	
• Yes	8 (10.9%)
• No	65 (89.0%)
Suicide related to protest	
• Yes	0 (0%)
• Maybe	4 (5.48%)
• No	6 (8.22%)
• Not Mentioned	63 (86.3%)

**Table 2.** Quality of Suicide Reporting in Afghanistan Newspaper Reports.

Variable	Newspapers Reports, <i>n</i> (%)
Mention in the title of the newspaper article	
• Name	33 (45.2%)
• Age	33 (45.2%)
• Gender	70 (95.8%)
• Method of suicide	45 (61.6%)
• Location of suicide	57 (78.0%)
• Reason of suicide	44 (60.2%)
• Occupation	15 (20.5%)
• Life events	17 (23.2%)

(Contd.)

Variable	Newspapers Reports, <i>n</i> (%)
Mention of specific details regarding the identity of the individual involved	
• Name	39 (53.4%)
• Age	39 (53.4%)
• Gender	68 (93.1%)
• Occupation	9 (12.3%)
Mention about details of suicidal attempt	
• Name of method of suicide	54 (73.9%)
• Details/steps of suicide	11 (15.0%)
• Location of suicide	18 (24.6%)
Life events mentioned	38 (52.0%)
Mono-causal explanation implied	38 (52.0%)
Mention of suicide associated with homicide	0 (0%)
Mention about suicide pact	0 (0%)
Mention about suicide note	0 (0%)
Photo	
• Photo of the victim	2 (2.74%)
• Photo of the location	18 (24.6%)
Mention about the details of bereaved	
• Effects on bereaved	3 (4.11%)
• Interview of bereaved	5 (6.85%)
• Comments of bereaved	14 (19.1%)
Mention about warning signs/indications	
• Warning signs	2 (2.74%)
• Social media post indicating suicide	1 (1.37%)
• Text message/phone calls indicating suicide	0 (0%)
Mentioned association with mental health issues	9 (12.3%)
Mentioned association with substance use	0 (0%)
Mention about evidence and preventive measures	
• Mention about expert opinion	0 (0%)
• Mention about research finding	1 (1.37%)
• Mention about any statistics related to suicide	23 (31.5%)
• Mention about any educative/preventive information	0 (0%)
• Mention about any support service contact details	0 (0%)

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Suicide Reporting That Do Not Align with the Media Guidelines Established by the PCI.

Variable	Newspapers Reports, <i>n</i> (%)
Prominent placement of suicide report (front page or first three pages)	17 (23.2%)
Repeating stories	25 (34.2%)
Use of sensationalizing language	11 (15.0%)
Normalization of suicide (presents suicide as a constructive solution to problems)	4 (5.48%)
Explicit description of method used	5 (6.85%)
Details about site/location	30 (41.0%)
Sensational headlines	9 (12.3%)
Used photographs	8 (10.9%)
Used video footage or social media links	1 (1.37%)

A significant proportion of suicide-related articles (80.8%) were published in the supplement sections of the newspapers. This practice mirrors findings from a Pakistani study, which also reported a similar trend (Mahesar, 2018; Mahesar et al., 2021; Mahesar et al., 2023). The consistent placement of such reports in supplementary sections across both countries may reflect shared historical, cultural, and social contexts that influence journalistic norms and editorial decisions.

Regarding the content of the reports, 65.7% included detailed descriptions of suicidal methods. This is concerning, as numerous studies have highlighted the risks associated with such detailed reporting, including the potential for imitative suicides among vulnerable individuals (Arafat et al., 2022; Armstrong et al., 2018; Ayub et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2011; Marthoenis et al., 2021; Nisa et al., 2020; Pitman & Stevenson, 2015; Wu et al., 2021; Yang & Victor, 2023). The inclusion of critical details such as the method of suicide, risk factors, the identity of the individual involved, and the location of the incident can inadvertently encourage others to emulate the act (Fink et al., 2018).

An intriguing pattern emerged when examining the timing of the reports. Approximately 15.0% of the 73 identified articles were published on the same day or within a short time frame. This clustering could indicate a genuine surge in suicide incidents or may reflect a pattern of imitative reporting, where one media outlet's coverage prompts others to publish similar stories, potentially leading to a concentration of such reports on the same day. Additionally, this pattern may suggest deficiencies in editorial planning or the absence of robust policies guiding responsible and sensitive suicide reporting.

A positive aspect of the media coverage was the avoidance of prominently featuring suicide-related events on the front pages. In our study, most reports (89.0%) were not published on the front pages of the selected media outlets. This finding aligns with the results of two previous studies (Fu et al., 2011; Mahesar, 2018). However, several other studies have reported findings that are inconsistent with those of the present research (Chiang et al., 2016; Michel et al., 2000).

Regarding the portrayal of suicidal individuals, our analysis revealed that news reports frequently included excessive details about the deceased in their headlines. Nearly half (45.2%) of the reports disclosed the names and ages of those who died by suicide, while almost all (95.8%)

specified their gender. Additionally, the occupations of victims were mentioned in 20.5% of the reports. While occupational details can provide valuable insights into risk factors and help identify emerging workplace issues contributing to suicide, their inclusion should be carefully balanced with ethical reporting guidelines to prevent potential harm.

Concerning the reporting of suicidal acts, we found that nearly three-quarters (73.9%) of the news articles included details about the methods of suicide, followed by descriptions of the steps involved (15.0%) and the location of the incidents (24.6%). Similar patterns were observed in several prior studies conducted in Asian countries (Kamboh & Ittefaq, 2019; Menon et al., 2020). Furthermore, other details, such as life events and mono-causal explanations, were excessively included in more than half (52.0%) of the news reports. The excessive emphasis on these factors is positively associated with an increased potential for imitative suicides (Fink et al., 2018).

Regarding the visual representation of the events, photos of the victims were rarely included (2.74%) alongside the news articles; however, images of the locations were featured in 24.6% of the reports. Additionally, the effects of suicidality on the bereaved were seldom highlighted (4.11%), while interviews with the bereaved were included in 6.85% of the news, with their comments appearing in up to 20% of the articles.

A deeper analysis of the news revealed that several key features were almost entirely absent. For instance, warning signs were inadequately presented and in only 2.74% of the reports. Moreover, just 12.3% of the articles made a connection between suicide and mental health issues, which may suggest that suicidal incidents in Afghanistan are rooted in a lack of awareness, a complex web of cultural taboos, an underdeveloped mental health infrastructure, and pervasive societal stigma (Hall, 2014). These factors contribute to situations where mental health struggles often go untreated, unrecognized, and unaddressed in relation to suicide. As a result, suicide is primarily linked to external factors such as familial pressures or economic instability, rather than underlying mental health issues (Paiman, 2024).

Regarding suicidal statistics, only 31.51% of the news reports included such data. The inclusion of suicide statistics in news reports can have both harmful and beneficial consequences, depending on how the media constructs the narrative. When reported responsibly, it can help inform policy, raise awareness, and foster constructive debates about mental health. However, irresponsible reporting may exacerbate stigma, encourage copycat behaviors, and cause distress among populations more vulnerable to suicidality (Niederkrötenenthaler et al., 2014).

In accordance with the media reporting guidelines established by the PCI (Chandra et al., 2014; Vijayakumar, 2019), we conducted a final examination of the news reports to determine their alignment with these guidelines. The guidelines recommend: a) avoiding the placement of suicide stories on the front pages, b) refraining from repeating stories, c) avoiding sensational language, d) not normalizing suicide news, e) not disclosing the method of suicide, f) not providing details of the site or location, g) refraining from using sensational headlines, h) not publishing photos, and i) avoiding the inclusion of social media links or video footage. In this regard, we found that 23.2% of the news stories were prominently placed, 34.2% consisted of repeated stories, 5.48% presented suicide as a solution to problems, and 6.85% explicitly mentioned suicidal methods. Additionally, details about the site or location of the suicide were included in 41.0% of the news reports, while 12.3% featured sensational headlines. Only 10.9% of the reports included photographs, and video footage was rarely used (1.37%).

It appears that, of the nine key recommendations of the PCI, Afghan media outlets violated several guidelines, primarily by placing suicide stories prominently (23.2%), providing details about the suicide location or site (41.0%), using sensational headlines (12.3%), and featuring photographs (10.9%). However, the remaining five recommendations were largely adhered to, with only minor violations: suicides were not normalized in 94.5% of the reports, suicidal

methods were not explicitly mentioned in 93.1% of the stories, and video footage or social media links were excluded in 98.6% of the reports.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to explore how the media reports on suicidality in Afghanistan. We analyzed 73 newspaper reports published by two major English-language newspapers and coded all the items in the PCI reporting guidelines to minimize bias. In conclusion, our study revealed a poor adherence to PCI media reporting guidelines for suicidal behaviors in Afghanistan, highlighting a potentially erroneous media reporting practice. These findings underscore the need to promote responsible media practices when covering suicidal events, representing a critical and impactful strategy for large-scale suicide prevention.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

The strengths of our study include the selection of two major English-language newspapers in Afghanistan to assess media reporting on suicide. We fully acknowledge, however, that this criterion limits insights into nationally published material. In future work, we aim to broaden the corpus by integrating non-English media to address this gap. Secondly, we analyzed three years of media coverage on suicide, providing a comprehensive dataset on this sensitive issue. Thirdly, we assessed the data in accordance with the media reporting guidelines set by the PCI, whose guidelines and the archives of the media outlets are publicly accessible, making our analysis replicable.

The weaknesses of our study stem from the reliance on only two media outlets, which limited the scope of understanding media practices in Afghanistan. Additionally, the three-year time-frame of the data restricted our ability to gain a broader perspective on suicidality in the country. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted with caution and not generalized too broadly.

## **Conclusion**

This content analysis assessed the quality of suicide reporting by major Afghan newspapers. Our findings indicated that while most news articles provided detailed information about suicide cases, they lacked critical content, such as the emotional and psychological impact on the bereaved, comprehensive information on suicide prevention, expert opinions, and specific details about available sources of help and support. Additionally, newspapers showed poor adherence to authoritative media reporting guidelines. Given the significance of suicide as a public health issue in Afghanistan, further research is crucial to address these gaps and enhance media reporting practices in the country.

## **Highlights**

- Suicide is a global issue affecting approximately 726,000 lives annually, with up to 25 suicide attempts for each completed suicide (WHO, 2024).
- Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) account for 77% of suicides, with Afghanistan being a particularly affected country due to economic issues, social norms, and gender-based violence.
- Women in Afghanistan are disproportionately affected, with nearly 1,400 out of 1,800 suicide attempts in 2017 involving women. This number nearly doubled from 2016.

- Herat province is the most impacted, accounting for over half of the national suicide cases, while Kabul, Herat, and Logar provinces have reported over 2,000 cases of self-immolation among teenage girls.
- Barriers to mental health care and social stigma prevent Afghan women from seeking support, further increasing suicide rates among them.
- The underreporting of suicide cases suggests the actual number may be significantly higher, emphasizing the need for further research and intervention strategies.
- Responsible media reporting is a key preventive strategy, as adherence to reporting guidelines may reduce suicide rates by more than 1% annually.
- The study analyzed suicide reporting in Afghan English-language newspapers (TOLONews and Hasht-e Subh Daily), following the Press Council of India's guidelines for responsible media reporting.
- A total of 73 suicide-related articles were analysed, with most reports (80.8%) published in the supplement section rather than the main pages of newspapers.
- Suicide details were often excessively reported, including the gender (95.8%), method (61.6%), location (78.0%), and reasons (60.2%) for suicide.
- Crucial aspects like the impact on bereaved families (4.11%) and prevention strategies (0%) were largely absent from the reports.
- Only 12.3% of the articles mentioned a link between suicide and mental health, highlighting a gap in awareness and responsible reporting.
- Many reports violated media reporting guidelines, with 23.2% published on the front pages, 34.2% being repeated stories, and 15.0% using sensational language.
- Reporting practices may contribute to imitative suicides, as 65.7% of articles contained detailed descriptions of suicide methods, which could influence vulnerable individuals.
- Despite some positive aspects (such as avoiding front-page placement in most cases), the reporting of suicide in Afghanistan lacks adherence to international guidelines, underscoring the need for improved journalistic practices to prevent harmful effects.

## Authors' Contributions

Rimsha Kiran (RK) and Amna Fazail (AF) performed the content analysis. All authors contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript and provided the final approval of the manuscript.

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