

Mediated Accountability Beyond the Domestic/Global Divide: A Relational Analysis of Gender-Based Violence Reform in India and South Korea

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Abstract. This article examines how media contribute to state accountability after highly visible cases of gender-based violence. Rather than treating domestic and global media, or media and the state, as separate actors that exert pressure across fixed boundaries, it develops a relational non-dualistic framework. Drawing on agential realism, framing theory, and accountability scholarship, the article conceptualises legal reform as an outcome produced through interactions among journalists, activists, digital platforms, publics, courts, and governments. A comparative qualitative analysis of the 2012 Nirbhaya case in India and the 2018–2020 Nth Room case in South Korea identifies four mechanisms: making harm publicly governable, translating claims across scales, inscribing crisis into law, and closing controversy through symbolic reform. The comparison shows that media influence was substantial in accelerating legal responses but conditional on the architecture of civil society networks and institutional receptivity. India's response was organised around mass protest, a highly personalised national symbol, and contested transnational representation; South Korea's response relied more heavily on investigative coalitions, platform evidence, and petition infrastructures. In both cases, legal change restored a measure of legitimacy while leaving implementation gaps and structural gender inequality intact. Media therefore function less as an external watchdog than as part of the socio-legal relations through which accountability becomes visible, demandable, and temporarily institutionalised.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Media, State Legitimacy, Accountability, Non-Dualism

1. Introduction

Highly visible cases of gender-based violence often produce a familiar political sequence: an incident is reported, public anger intensifies, officials promise action, and legislation follows. This sequence encourages a linear explanation in which media expose a failure, and the state subsequently responds. Such an account captures part of the process, but it reproduces several binaries: domestic versus global media, civil society versus the state, online versus offline politics, and symbolic versus substantive reform. It also risks treating media attention as an independent variable and law as a measurable endpoint, rather than asking how a case becomes recognisable as a failure of governance in the first place.

This article proposes a relational non-dualistic approach. Barad's account of "intra-action" rejects the assumption that actors possess fully formed identities before they encounter one another; boundaries and capacities emerge through relations [1]. Applied to mediated politics, this does not mean that journalists, governments, platforms, and activists are indistinguishable. It means that their political roles are produced through the same controversy: reporting defines what counts as the harm, protest identifies the responsible authority, state statements stabilise an official interpretation, and legal texts translate selected claims into institutional categories. Media are therefore neither merely outside the state nor simply instruments of it. They are part of an assemblage through which responsibility is allocated, and legitimacy is tested.

Conventional media theories remain useful within this framework. Agenda-setting explains how sustained attention increases the public salience of an issue [2], while framing explains how selection and emphasis define causes, victims, responsible actors, and remedies [3]. Yet a relational approach extends these insights by focusing on circulation. Accounts of violence move among newsrooms, hashtags, petitions, documentaries, parliamentary debates, court judgments, and international human-rights language. Merry describes such movement as translation between local claims and transnational norms [4], while Bennett and Segerberg show how digitally networked communication enables personalised claims to become connective action [5]. The object of analysis is thus not "the media" as a single actor, but the changing relations that make a demand for accountability politically consequential.

Accountability is defined here as a process in which public actors are required to explain and justify conduct and may face consequences [6]. Legitimacy concerns whether state action is perceived as appropriate within socially constructed norms [7]. A focusing event can disrupt that perception by concentrating attention on previously normalised risks and opening an agenda for reform [8]. However, visible legislation may also contain controversy by demonstrating responsiveness without transforming implementation, institutional culture, or unequal social relations. The central question is therefore: how do mediated relations transform gender-based violence into a crisis of state legitimacy, and under what conditions does that crisis become legal reform rather than durable structural change?

2. Methods and comparative design

The study uses a paired qualitative case comparison of the 2012 Nirbhaya case in India and the 2018–2020 Nth Room case in South Korea. The cases are comparable because both involved intense national attention, international circulation, and rapid legislative responses, but they differ in the form of violence, the organisation of media investigation, and the institutional channels through which public pressure reached government. The aim is not to estimate a universal media effect. It is to trace mechanisms that connect visibility, legitimacy claims, and legal action.

The analysis draws on a purposive corpus of domestic and international reporting, documentary representations, public petitions, legal changes, and peer-reviewed studies. Materials were read through four questions: how was harm made visible; how were victims, perpetrators, and the state framed; through which networks did claims travel; and which demands were incorporated into law? The comparison follows a structured, focused design, applying these questions to both cases. Causal claims are framed as contribution rather than exclusivity: media attention interacted with prior feminist organising, political opportunity, institutional capacity, and existing legal debates. This design also recognises selection bias. Both cases are exceptional because they became highly visible, so they cannot represent the many incidents that receive little coverage.

3. Comparative findings

3.1. Making harm publicly governable

In India, the assault and death of Jyoti Singh received nation-wide focus because reporting, street protest, and visual symbols repeatedly linked an individual crime to failures of public safety, policing, and patriarchal governance. A systematic study of English-language coverage found that reports concentrated strongly on protest and government failure, while victim-supportive and victim-blaming narratives coexisted [9]. This unevenness matters. The case did not simply reveal a pre-existing public meaning; media practices helped construct "Nirbhaya" as both a protected identity and a national symbol. Later films and documentaries extended that symbolic life, but they also risked simplifying structural violence through exceptional tragedy and culturally familiar victimhood [10].

The Nth Room case followed a different route. The violence was initially dispersed across encrypted platforms and difficult to perceive as a single public event. Student investigators, journalists, activists, and victim-support networks assembled screenshots, testimonies, payment traces, and platform practices into evidence of a patterned system. Here, media did not merely amplify an already visible crime; investigative work produced the case as an object that police, legislators, and publics could recognise. Research on Korean digital sex crime emphasises that such violence is sociotechnical: coercion, distribution, storage, monetisation, and repeated circulation are connected across online and offline settings [11, 12]. The boundary between "media coverage" and "crime evidence" was consequently unstable.

The contrast supports the non-dualistic argument. In India, a public event was made governable by converting mass grief and protest into a narrative of national failure. In South Korea, a hidden network was made governable by assembling fragmented digital traces. In both, visibility was an achievement produced by relations among victims, journalists, technologies, activists, and audiences, not a neutral transmission of facts.

3.2. Circulation beyond the domestic/global binary

The original distinction between domestic pressure and international reputational pressure is analytically useful but too rigid. In the Nirbhaya case, domestic protests supplied images, slogans, and claims that international outlets translated into a wider human-rights narrative. International documentaries then re-entered Indian debate, including through controversy over representation and state restrictions. The "global" narrative was therefore not external to domestic politics; it was built from domestic materials and subsequently reshaped the terms on which India's legitimacy was discussed. This resembles Merry's model of vernacularization, although the translation was contested because international attention could universalise women's rights while also reproducing a civilizational story in which India appeared uniquely violent [4, 10].

In South Korea, domestic investigative reporting and feminist activism were more clearly prior to international coverage. Yet international circulation still mattered by locating the Nth Room within wider debates about platform governance and technology-facilitated sexual violence. South Korea's existing digital feminist field had already expanded the sites and repertoires of gender activism [13]. The Blue House petition system then converted networked attention into a visible numerical claim addressed directly to the executive. Research on Korean online petitions shows that successful petitions depend not only on grievance intensity but also on attention networks that connect social media, news coverage, and formal political channels [14]. Thus, petitions were neither purely

grassroots expression nor state-controlled participation; they were hybrid infrastructures of mediated accountability.

Across both cases, scale was produced through circulation. A case became "global" when claims, images, and norms moved across media systems, not simply when foreign outlets reported it. Domestic and international media should therefore be understood as mutually constitutive layers of a network rather than separate sources of pressure.

3.3. Legal reform as institutional inscription

The Indian government's 2013 legal response broadened the recognition of sexual offences and increased penalties. The speed and visibility of reform demonstrated that the state accepted the case as a legitimacy crisis. However, scholarship on the post-Nirbhaya law warns that punitive expansion can coexist with weak survivor support, uneven policing, low institutional capacity, and the persistence of patriarchal reasoning [15, 16]. The reform was therefore not the post-Nirbhaya implementation of public demands into law. It selected some demands—especially broader offences and harsher punishment—while marginalising others concerning policing, health services, education, and social inequality.

South Korea's 2020 reforms similarly expanded criminal liability for the possession, purchase, storage, and viewing of exploitative material and strengthened responses to digital coercion. Public petitions, investigative reporting, and feminist advocacy made inaction reputationally costly, while the technical architecture of the case exposed gaps in laws designed around discrete acts of filming or distribution marginalising Korean digital sex crime, showing that the reforms improved legal recognition but did not eliminate problems of platform migration, repeated dissemination, prevention, and victim recovery [11, 12, 17]. Legal inscription made the harm more legible under criminal law, but the harm's networked nature continued to exceed territorial and institutional boundaries.

The comparison suggests that media did not directly "cause" legislation. Rather, mediated relations altered the field in which legal action became the most credible performance of responsiveness. Governments faced a narrowed range of legitimate responses: silence or delay could be framed as complicity, while visible reform offered a means to reassert authority. Law was therefore both an accountability mechanism and a communicative act.

3.4. Symbolic closure and structural persistence

A central limitation of media-driven reform is temporal. Focusing events compress complex histories into urgent moments, which favours measures that are rapid, visible, and narratively clear [8]. Harsher punishment is easier to announce than long-term investment in survivor services, gender-sensitive policing, platform regulation, education, or institutional monitoring. The media can sustain attention through follow-up reporting and documentary storytelling, but the same attention economy can also encourage sensationalism, exceptionalism, and the repetitive exposure of victims.

In India, post-reform assessments identify substantial gaps between legal change and everyday access to justice [15, 16]. In South Korea, later research documents continuing technology-facilitated sexual violence and the severe burdens created by persistent digital circulation [17, 18]. These outcomes do not prove that reform was meaningless; reporting may rise when recognition and reporting mechanisms improve. They do show that legislative output is an insufficient measure of accountability. A state may answer the immediate public question—"what law will change?"—while avoiding the harder question of whether institutions can prevent harm and support those affected.

From a relational perspective, symbolic and substantive reform are not opposites. Symbolic action can change legal categories, expectations, and future mobilisation, while substantive statutes also communicate legitimacy. The key issue is whether the accountability network survives after the event: whether journalists continue scrutiny, activists retain access, platforms cooperate, agencies publish implementation data, and victims can obtain remedies without renewed publicity.

4. Discussion: two architectures of mediated accountability

The cases reveal two different architectures. India's architecture was protest-centred and symbolically concentrated. A single case became a national moral crisis through mass demonstrations, intensive news coverage, and transnational representation. This generated a powerful but unstable legitimacy shock. The state responded rapidly in law while also contesting some media narratives, especially those that portrayed Indian society through a generalised culture of misogyny. The central symbolic figure enabled mobilisation but could narrow attention to exceptional brutality and respectable victimhood.

South Korea's architecture was investigation-centred and infrastructurally distributed. Student investigators, feminist groups, news organisations, petition platforms, police units, and digital evidence formed a chain through which hidden abuse became publicly actionable. The state's response was more visibly integrated with these channels, including executive acknowledgement and legislative packages. Yet this apparently responsive configuration did not overcome the adaptability of digital networks or the broader context of misogyny and anti-feminist backlash. Korean feminist scholarship emphasises that digital media expand both feminist mobilisation and gendered hostility [13].

The explanatory difference is therefore not that international media were decisive in India while domestic media were decisive in South Korea. It lies in the structure of relations: who could generate credible evidence, which channels converted attention into institutional claims, how governments positioned themselves within the narrative, and whether accountability persisted after legislation. This reframing also clarifies state legitimacy. Legitimacy was not simply damaged by media and repaired by law. It was continuously negotiated as states, media, and publics defined what counted as an adequate response.

The article contributes a more cautious account of media power. Media are powerful when they help create a durable accountability forum: an identifiable authority must answer, evidence circulates, claims are translated across communities, and consequences remain observable. Media are weaker when attention is individualised, episodic, or disconnected from implementation. Non-dualistic analysis therefore shifts evaluation from the volume of coverage to the quality and durability of relations linking visibility to remedy.

5. Conclusion

Domestic and global media contributed substantially to legal reform after the Nirbhaya and Nth Room cases, but their influence was indirect, relational, and conditional. In both cases, mediated visibility transformed gender-based violence from an individual offence into a judgment about state capacity and moral authority. Yet the transformation did not occur through a one-way chain from coverage to pressure to law. Journalists, activists, platforms, publics, and state institutions jointly produced the categories, evidence, scales, and remedies through which accountability became possible.

The relational comparison explains why similar levels of outrage generated different political pathways. India's case relied on mass protest, symbolic personalisation, and contested transnational translation; South Korea's case relied on investigative coalitions, digital evidence, feminist networks, and petition infrastructures. Both produced rapid legal inscription, and both exposed the limits of treating legislation as the completion of accountability. Persistent violence, uneven enforcement, and survivor burdens show that reform can simultaneously alter institutions and close public controversy.

A stronger standard of accountability must therefore extend beyond whether the state enacted a law. It should ask whether the mediated network continues to monitor enforcement, supports affected people, constrains sensationalism, and adapts to changing technologies and forms of violence. Media cannot replace public institutions, but neither are they simply external watchdogs. They are part of the relations through which state responsibility is defined, demanded, and judged.

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