

Intersecting Silences: Qualitative Content Analysis of News Representations of Sexual Abuse Against Individuals with Disabilities in Türkiye

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Article

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Abstract

This study investigates how sexual abuse against persons with disabilities is represented in the Turkish news media between June 2024 and September 2025. Using the Interpress Media Analysis Report (2025), 209 news items covering 28 cases were purposively selected from national and local outlets. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to explore news frames, discursive patterns, and representational strategies. Coding was carried out by two researchers, achieving an intercoder reliability above 80%. The findings indicate that women and individuals with intellectual disabilities constitute the most frequently represented victims, while perpetrators are often individuals in positions of trust, such as caregivers or public employees. Despite the nationwide occurrence of incidents, 76% of the coverage appeared in local rather than national media, which suggests limited national visibility within our sample. The language used in many reports contained sensationalism, privacy violations, and gendered stereotypes, reproducing structural inequalities. Overall, the study highlights how the intersection of gender, disability, and media discourse reinforces the social marginalization of victims. It calls for rights-based journalism, ethical media guidelines, and accessible justice to ensure the visibility, dignity, and protection of persons with disabilities in Türkiye.

Plain Language Summary (PLS)

This study examines how sexual abuse against individuals with disabilities is represented in the Turkish news media. The research analyzed 209 news articles published between June 2024 and September 2025. The findings reveal that most victims are women and individuals with intellectual disabilities, and that perpetrators are often caregivers or people in positions of trust. Despite incidents occurring across the country, most of the coverage appeared only in local media, making the problem largely invisible at the national level. The language used in many reports included sensational and privacy-violating expressions, which reinforced social stigma and discrimination. By analyzing how gender, disability, and media discourse intersect, this study highlights the urgent need for ethical journalism, rights-based media guidelines, and stronger protections for people with disabilities. It also contributes to global discussions by providing insights from the Global South context.

Introduction

Individuals with disabilities are defined as those who differ from their peers in developmental processes due to differences in physical, cognitive, linguistic, or behavioral domains. These limitations typically manifest in early childhood and directly affect daily living skills, social participation, and learning processes. Furthermore, in many cases, these needs require lifelong support (Zablotsky et al., 2019). The group of individuals with disabilities includes various types of disabilities, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, speech and language disorders, visual impairments, intellectual disability, and autism spectrum disorder (Maenner et al., 2020). Frequently observed limitations in receptive and

expressive language skills, difficulties in initiating and maintaining social interaction, and challenges in understanding verbal and nonverbal social cues complicate communication processes for these individuals. The positioning of individuals with intellectual disabilities as the 'other' in the media has been discussed as a representation practice intertwined with cultural codes (Chen, 2024). These communication difficulties increase the likelihood of individuals with disabilities being exposed to safety risks, making them more vulnerable to traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse (Henault, 2006; Schalock et al., 2010; World Health Organization, 2019). Therefore, policies to protect people with disabilities should include not only educational or medical interventions but also the development of communication skills, social awareness, and safety-oriented behaviors.

Sexual abuse is defined as any act of a sexual nature to which an individual is subjected by another person without consent, through threats, coercion, deception, or the use of force (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Such acts constitute serious violations that cause harm to the physical integrity, psychological well-being, and developmental processes of the victim. According to the classifications of the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2008), sexual abuse encompasses a wide range of behaviors, including genital touching, vaginal or anal penetration or attempts thereof, rape, incest, sodomy, exhibitionism, exposure to sexually explicit images or behaviors without consent, oral-genital or oral-anal contact, exposure of genitals or breasts, masturbation or voyeurism, coercion into sexual acts (such as prostitution), and posing, undressing, or performing nude (including child pornography). Sexual abuse is not limited to physical contact; it may also involve engaging an individual in a sexual process without consent through psychological manipulation, threats, persuasion, or coercion. Particularly for individuals with disabilities, cognitive and communication limitations complicate the processes of recognizing, reporting, and preventing abuse. This highlights the necessity of raising awareness of sexual safety among individuals with disabilities and expanding preventive education practices.

Sexual violence includes any non-consensual sexual activity or contact, ranging from harassment and coercion to assault and rape. Individuals with disabilities—who may have physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional limitations—are at significantly higher risk of experiencing sexual violence than the general population (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2021). Data from 2017–2019 reveal a striking disproportionality in the violent victimization of individuals with disabilities. Although they comprise only 12% of the population, individuals with disabilities account for 26% of all non-fatal violent crimes. Among individuals aged 12 and over, the rate of violent victimization for those with disabilities is 46.2 per 1,000, compared to 12.3 per 1,000 for those without disabilities—nearly four times higher. Individuals with intellectual disabilities, in particular, are at the highest risk, at 83.3 per 1,000.

Violence and Sexual Abuse Against Individuals with Disabilities: An Invisible Reality in Türkiye

In Türkiye, individuals with disabilities face a significantly higher risk of physical and sexual violence compared to the general population. The Monitoring Report on Physical and Sexual Violence, Abuse, and Mistreatment Against Individuals with Disabilities by the Social Rights and Research Association [SRA],

2016) reveals the structural dimensions of this situation. According to the report, violence experienced by individuals with disabilities often remains invisible, unreported, and unpunished. Women and children with intellectual disabilities are subjected to sexual abuse, usually perpetrated by someone from their immediate circle. Such incidents frequently occur within families, in care institutions, or in closed social settings (SRA, 2016).

Findings from the Association for the Prevention and Rehabilitation of Violence (APRV) support this picture. According to the association's report, children with disabilities experience three times more violence, nearly three times more sexual abuse, and four times more neglect than their non-disabled peers. This data indicates that systems designed to protect children with disabilities are inadequate and that public awareness is limited (APRV, 2016). Most sexual abuse cases are revealed only in instances of pregnancy, visible physical harm, or criminal investigation. Victims often remain silent due to communication difficulties, shame, or dependency on the perpetrator. This suggests that abuse is linked not merely to individual deviance but to institutional and structural neglect.

Data from SRA (2016) show that abuse is particularly prevalent among women and individuals with intellectual disabilities, indicating that the intersection of disability and gender increases the risk of victimization. Furthermore, much of the media coverage on such abuse is presented with sexist, privacy-violating, or perpetrator-exonerating language. This suggests that individuals with disabilities may be affected not only by the incidents themselves but also by the surrounding media discourse.

In conclusion, violence against individuals with disabilities in Türkiye is not an individual problem but a systemic one. Inadequate reporting mechanisms, inaccessible justice processes, and deep-seated societal prejudices hinder the protection of victims. Ensuring the safety of individuals with disabilities therefore requires not only criminal sanctions but also the development of rights-based policies, accessible justice mechanisms, and ethical media practices. News reports concerning sexual abuse of individuals with disabilities thus constitute a critical area for both social awareness and media representation. Analyzing such reports is particularly important for understanding the relationship between disability, gender, victimization, and press language. The discrimination experiences of individuals with disabilities support the continuity of structural barriers and the importance of the social model (Irene et al., 2025; Vandenbussche et al., 2023).

In this context, the primary objective of this research is to examine in detail the media coverage of sexual abuse cases involving individuals with disabilities in Türkiye over the past year. By analyzing the language, presentation styles, news frames, and representational strategies of these reports, the study aims to reveal how the victimization of individuals with disabilities is positioned from the perspectives of social perception and justice.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How frequently and in what types of media have sexual abuse cases against individuals with disabilities been reported in Türkiye over the past year?

2. How are the identities of individuals with disabilities, types of disabilities, and forms of victimization presented in these news stories?
3. How are perpetrators, victims, and institutions (justice, health, education, etc.) represented in the news texts?
4. Through what themes, frames, and narrative strategies is the phenomenon of sexual abuse against individuals with disabilities conveyed in media discourse?
5. How are the relationships among the concepts of disability, sexuality, and gender constructed in these reports?

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine media representations of sexual abuse cases involving individuals with disabilities. Qualitative content analysis is a text-based analytical method aimed at understanding how a particular phenomenon is constructed through media, textual, or social discourse (Schreier, 2012). Accordingly, this study sought to explore in depth how individuals with disabilities were represented as victims of sexual abuse in news reports published in Türkiye over the past year.

Data Source and Sample

The research data consist of news articles published in national online newspapers and news portals. The dataset includes articles published between June 2024 and September 2025 that contained the keywords “disabled individual,” “sexual abuse,” “rape,” “assault,” or “victimization.”

News articles were selected using a purposive sampling method, which enables the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). A total of 209 news articles (e.g., 40 items) were examined. Each news item underwent a preliminary screening to eliminate duplicates, ensure source reliability, and confirm accessibility.

Data Collection Process

The research examined news reports published by Türkiye’s leading media organizations, including Doğan News Agency, Anadolu Agency, BBC Turkish, Hürriyet, Sabah, Cumhuriyet, Sözcü, BirGün, and NTV. Due to limited direct access to the archives of these organizations, the news texts were obtained through the Interpress (2025) media monitoring system. The accuracy and diversity of the sources were verified through cross-checking.

The Interpress Media Analysis Report (2025) on Harassment of Individuals with Disabilities (June 2024–June 2025) was used as the primary data source. Prepared by the Interpress Media Monitoring Center (2025), this report systematically compiles and categorizes news reports about the sexual abuse of individuals with disabilities appearing in print media across Türkiye.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014). Each news text was first read carefully, followed by open coding to identify meaningful expressions and categories. The coding process focused on narrative styles, thematic content, representations of perpetrators and victims, and linguistic expressions of othering or normalization.

Themes were created by grouping similar and related codes and then associated with discourse patterns observed in the news. The findings are supported with direct quotations from the analyzed news articles. Two researchers conducted the coding process independently, and comparative (intercoder) coding was used to ensure reliability. Reliability was calculated using the Miles and Huberman (1994) formula, yielding an intercoder agreement rate above 80%.

Findings

This section examines how individuals with disabilities are portrayed in the media as victims of sexual abuse, based on data from the *Interpress Media Analysis Report (2025) on Harassment of Individuals with Disabilities* (June 2024–June 2025). The report includes 209 news stories published in print media, covering 28 different cases that occurred across 21 provinces in Türkiye. The findings reveal a systematic recurrence of specific patterns in media representations of sexual abuse. Analyses were conducted by classifying the news events according to their geographic distribution, victim gender, age group, disability type, perpetrator–victim relationship, and media visibility. Key findings for these subdimensions are presented below in tables and figures.

Geographic Distribution

According to the report, the 28 cases analyzed occurred in 21 different provinces across Türkiye. The highest number of cases was observed in Istanbul (n = 4), while Ankara, Adana, Antalya, and Kocaeli each had two cases. The remaining 16 cases were distributed across various other provinces. This distribution indicates that abuse against individuals with disabilities is not confined to specific regions but that media visibility is higher in metropolitan areas (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Sexual Abuse Cases Against Individuals with Disabilities by Province

Province Name	Number of Cases	Ratio (%)
Istanbul	4	14.3
Ankara	2	7.1
Adana	2	7.1
Antalya	2	7.1
Kocaeli	2	7.1
Other provinces (16 provinces)	16	57.3
Total	28	100

Gender Distribution of Victims

Analysis of the news reports indicates that 79% of the victims were women and 21% were male. This finding shows that women with disabilities experience double marginalization at the intersection of gender and disability. Moreover, the SRA (2016) report similarly emphasizes that women with intellectual disabilities are at the highest risk of sexual abuse (as shown in Figure 1).

Distribution by Disability Type

Among the reports specifying disability type, most victims were individuals with intellectual disabilities. Other types, such as physical, visual, and hearing impairments, appeared at considerably lower rates. This finding suggests that cognitive limitations make it more difficult for individuals to recognize, report, and defend themselves against abuse (see Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Victims by Disability Type

Disability Type	Number of Cases	Ratio (%)
Intellectual disability	17	60.7
Physical disability	3	10.7
Visual impairment	2	7.1
Hearing impairment	1	3.6
Unspecified	5	17.9
Total	28	100

Perpetrator–Victim Relationship

In 18% of the cases, the perpetrator was identified as a family member of the victim (e.g., father, uncle, or sibling), while in 82% of cases, the perpetrator was a non-family member. Caregivers, neighbors,

employers, and public officials were among the most frequent perpetrator profiles. This pattern indicates how relationships of care and trust can turn into contexts of exploitation and abuse (as shown in Figure 2).

Age Distribution

Thirty-nine percent of the victims were under the age of 18, another 39% were 18 years or older, and 22% were of unspecified age. The high number of child victims, particularly those aged between 9 and 17, underscores the severe vulnerability of children with disabilities to sexual abuse (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of Victims by Age Group

Age Group	Number of Cases	Ratio (%)
Under 18	11	39.3
18 years and older	11	39.3
Unspecified	6	21.4
Total	28	100

Media Visibility

Of the 209 news stories analyzed, only 24% were published in the national press, whereas 76% appeared in local media outlets. This distribution indicates that incidents of abuse against individuals with disabilities remain largely invisible in the national media and are mostly confined to regional coverage (see Table 4).

This finding is consistent with the emphasis on “media invisibility” in the SRA (2016) report.

Table 4. Type of Media in Which the News Was Published

Media Type	Number of News Stories	Ratio (%)
National Press	51	24.4
Local Press	158	75.6
Total	209	100

General Evaluation

Interpress (2025) data show that individuals with disabilities are portrayed in sexual abuse news reports primarily through the themes of femininity, intellectual disability, and social fragility.

These representations appear to point toward concerns about institutional gaps and weaknesses, systemic deficiencies in the justice system, and the ethical responsibilities of the media. Consequently, a

rights-based, respectful, and privacy-focused media language is essential for reporting cases of sexual abuse involving individuals with disabilities.

Discussion

The findings of this research indicate that the risk of sexual abuse against individuals with disabilities in Türkiye is a serious social issue at both individual and structural levels. According to Interpress (2025) data, the media visibility of sexual abuse cases involving individuals with disabilities is considerably limited; the majority of incidents are reported only in the local press and are rarely brought to the national public agenda. This is consistent with characterizations of violence against individuals with disabilities as a relatively ‘invisible’ issue within the media landscape, as emphasized by the Social Rights and Research Association (SRA, 2016)

Disability, Gender, and Intersecting Inequalities

The research findings reveal that women and individuals with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse. According to Interpress (2025) data, women constitute 79% of victims, indicating that sexual abuse is a phenomenon closely tied to gender. Similarly, reports from SRA (2016) and the Association for the Prevention and Rehabilitation of Violence [APRV], (2016) show that women and children with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately represented in sexual abuse cases.

When considered through the lens of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), these findings illustrate that individuals situated at the intersection of disability and gender experience multiple and overlapping forms of vulnerability. In Türkiye, prevailing prejudices against both disability and female identity make it difficult for women with disabilities to report abuse and access justice. Therefore, women with disabilities constitute a systematically marginalized group due to both their identity as women and their disability status (Kırcaali-İftar, 2017; WHO, 2019).

The Structural Nature of the Perpetrator–Victim Relationship and Abuse of Trust

The findings also indicate that in a significant number of sexual abuse cases, the perpetrator is someone from the victim’s immediate environment or someone with a caregiving role. This aligns with the SRA (2016) report, which states that “the perpetrator is usually a family member or a caregiver.” It is particularly noteworthy that, for individuals with intellectual disabilities, the perpetrator is often someone with whom the victim has a trusting relationship — such as a caregiver, teacher, neighbor, or healthcare worker.

This finding points to a structural risk arising from the fact that care and support services for individuals with disabilities in Türkiye rely heavily on families and immediate social circles (Altuntaş & Yıldız, 2020). The lack of institutional oversight within the family-based care system leaves women and children especially vulnerable to violence. This issue should therefore be addressed not only as a matter of

individual misconduct but also as a reflection of institutional neglect and insufficient social policy (Schalock et al., 2010).

Visibility, Discourse, and Ethical Issues in the Media

Another key finding of the research is that reports of sexual abuse against individuals with disabilities often receive limited attention in the local press. National media outlets either ignore these incidents entirely or report them using sensational and privacy-violating language. According to Interpress (2025), the total reach of 209 news reports covering 28 cases was approximately 13 million people – a relatively low level of visibility for a nationwide issue. Studies showing that sexual violence is discursively constructed in online environments indicate that sensational and privacy-violating narratives in the media can contribute to normalization (Sham, 2024; Fontanella et al., 2024; Anciones-Anguita et al., 2024).

The emotional, dramatic, or privacy-infringing narratives frequently used by the media (e.g., “a painful story,” “a horrific event”) create a discourse that marginalizes individuals with disabilities. The SRA (2016) report similarly notes that unethical practices such as revealing victims’ identities, softening the depiction of perpetrators, or eroticizing incidents are common in media coverage.

These findings highlight ongoing challenges in media ethics in Türkiye, particularly regarding reports of disability- and gender-based violence. Reports by the World Health Organization (2019) and the Council of Europe (2020) emphasize that media should adopt a rights-based approach when addressing violence against individuals with disabilities – one that upholds principles of privacy, dignity, and equality. In the Turkish context, however, despite legal frameworks, the practical implementation of such ethical standards remains limited.

Systematic Invisibility and Policy Deficits in the Turkish Context

Overall, the research findings indicate that sexual abuse of individuals with disabilities is a structural issue that cannot be explained solely by individual vulnerability. Although legal regulations exist to protect individuals with disabilities (e.g., Law No. 5378 on Disabled Persons), there are serious shortcomings in accessible justice mechanisms, independent monitoring systems, and sexual safety education programs (Turkish Human Rights and Equality Institution [THREI], 2023). As seen in the #YesAllWomen example, digital activism can increase the visibility of sexual violence and mobilize support networks (Kaufman et al., 2025).

Furthermore, communication barriers, credibility issues, and institutional indifference are among the major obstacles preventing individuals with disabilities from reporting experiences of sexual violence (Henault, 2006). As a result, individuals with disabilities in Türkiye often become victims not only of violence but also of systemic marginalization within the justice process. When the findings of Interpress (2025), SRA (2016), and APRV (2016) are considered together, it can be argued that sexual abuse

against individuals with disabilities in Türkiye has been systematically rendered invisible through gender inequality, societal prejudice, and unethical media representation.

Therefore, the protection of individuals with disabilities in Türkiye should be supported not only by criminal sanctions and penalties but also by rights-based media policies, accessible justice mechanisms, institutional oversight systems, and sexual safety education initiatives. Only through such comprehensive and inclusive measures can the safety, dignity, and visibility of individuals with disabilities be strengthened in Turkish society. This study contributes to the global scholarship on disability, gender, and media by offering a perspective from the Global South context. By situating the analysis within Türkiye's sociocultural and institutional structures, it expands the scope of existing theories beyond Global North settings.

Declarations

Ethical Principles

This study is based solely on publicly available news articles and does not involve direct research with human participants. No personal or identifying information was collected. Any references to victims or their family members in the news reports were anonymized, and all quotations were presented to ensure privacy and ethical compliance. This article does not contain any studies with human participants conducted by the authors. All materials were analyzed in accordance with established ethical research standards, and the study complies with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

AI tools and assistance

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to support language refinement and structural clarity, and Grammarly to check grammar, spelling, and stylistic consistency. All tool-assisted outputs were reviewed, verified, and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of the final manuscript.

Data availability

All original data supporting the findings of this study are included within the article. Because the research involves a small and vulnerable community, additional materials cannot be openly shared in order to protect privacy. The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Author contributions

The author conceptualized the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, or professional competing interests that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Figures

Gender	Ratio %
Male	21%
Female	79%

Figure 1

Distribution of Victims by Gender



Figure 2

Type of Relationship Between the Perpetrator and the Victim