

Study finds even positive media coverage of Malala Yousafzai contains sexist assumptions about Muslim women

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Malala Yousafzai in 2015. Credit: Simon Davis - Department for International Development

A new study has found that seemingly positive media coverage of feminist campaigner Malala Yousafzai is actually full of patronising assumptions about women in Muslim countries.

The study analysed more than 140,000 words of coverage of activist Yousafzai in the nine months after she was attacked by the Pakistani Taleban. It found the fearless and eloquent campaigner was reduced to a passive victim by the British media. In some cases, she was simply referred to as "Shot Pakistani Girl."

The study was carried out by Rosie Walters, a postgraduate researcher at the University of Bristol's School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies. She said: "The West has often been guilty of portraying women in Muslim countries as passive and as victims. Malala Yousafzai challenges that stereotype in every way, which is why I wanted to analyse the coverage of her.

"She even said herself that she doesn't want to be portrayed as the young woman who was shot by the Taleban, but rather as the young woman who bravely fought for her rights. Sadly, the findings of this study show that the British media is far from granting that request."

The research, published in the British *Journal of Politics* and *International Relations*, used a form of discourse analysis that analyses the words and terms associated with a particular subject (in this case both Malala Yousafzai and her native Pakistan), the assumptions that have to be made for these associations to make sense, and the way in which these assumptions position subjects in relation to one another.

Walters' research found that in more than 140,000 words in the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Sun* and *The Telegraph*, the word feminist was used just twice, and on neither occasion to refer to Yousafzai, despite her tireless campaigning for the rights of girls and young women. The underlying assumption this demonstrates is that a Pakistani woman cannot be a feminist.

"The coverage positions the UK as inherently superior to Pakistan

because it has supposedly already achieved gender equality," said Walters.

"Yet it simultaneously shows that this is far from true. One article even advised Yousafzai on how to dress and behave in her new school in Birmingham so she doesn't come across as too much of a geek. It seems astonishing that a [young woman](#) who has come within centimetres of losing her life fighting for her right to an education is being advised to tone down her ambition, in case it makes her seem uncool or unattractive to boys.

"If anything, it suggests that Malala Yousafzai has a great deal she could teach us about fighting to be judged on one's intellect and abilities, and not on gender."

Another interesting contradiction the research identified was in [media coverage](#) of Yousafzai's move to the UK, and the medical treatment she received here. While all five newspapers were quick to express pride in the NHS care that she received, they were also keen to emphasise that all her expenses would be met by the Pakistani government.

In fact, just two weeks after an article in *The Sun* proclaimed: "...the NHS should be proud of its success in treating the brave schoolgirl..." the tabloid published another article with a headline "NHS 'too good to migrants'," claiming many doctors were refusing to treat people who weren't British citizens.

Walters said: "The overwhelming outpouring of support and admiration for Malala Yousafzai in the months after the attack represented a real opportunity to re-examine some of the assumptions we make about Muslim women, and also about the kind of people who migrate to the UK in search of safety. Unfortunately, it seems that opportunity was missed."

Although the study focuses on some individual articles to illustrate wider trends, Walters, whose research on girlhood and international politics is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, was keen to emphasise her study is not a criticism of journalists.

"The point of the study is not about individuals and the vocabulary they use. It's about identifying patterns across many different texts, which tell us a great deal about how we as a nation represent ourselves in journalism, and how we represent other cultures and countries.

"In this case, what it clearly shows is that in our society, it is far easier to label Malala Yousafzai a 'victim' than it is to call her powerful, a survivor, or even a feminist."

More information: R. Walters. 'Shot Pakistani girl: The limitations of girls education discourses in UK newspaper coverage of Malala Yousafzai, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/1369148116631274](https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116631274)

Provided by University of Bristol

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