

# Women and Media-Need for Paradigm Shift to Bring in Social Change

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## Abstract

Communication is extremely important for women's development and mass media play significant role in it all spheres of life, whether the controlling of population growth, spread of literacy or improving the quality of life for vast masses, women have a crucial role to play. In this context, women have an important role to create awakening in them to achieve their potential as the prime movers of change in society. In today's world, print and electronic media play a vital role in effectively conveying the message that needs to be conveyed. It is true that media have brought to light, as never before, certain misdemeanors against women but in a very subtle manner, it has also perpetuated the stereotyped image of women as a householder and an inconsequential entity in the traditional value system. By gradually shaping public opinion, personal beliefs and even people's self perceptions, media influences the process of socialization and shapes ideology and thinking. Indian society is full of diversified cultures, traditions and beliefs. Our mass media's role as a social constructor and representative of women has greater responsibility in binding these complexities of culture and processes with the people of the society.

**Keywords :** Media, Impact, Stereotyping, Gender Sensitivity, Empowerment

## 1. Introduction

Media is all pervasive and its functioning is very subtle. Media plays a vital role in dissemination of information. It is called the fourth pillar of democratic polity. The impact of media on our lives is a point which does not have to be labored any longer. Radio, television, films and the printed word reach all of us in this age of information and each strives to perfect its modes of communication to become more effective as a medium. The roles of various media, however, have stretched far beyond the supply of information now, because of the outreach and technological sophistication. In effect, this gives them the power to create reality. By gradually shaping public opinion, personal beliefs and even people's self perceptions, media influences the process of socialization and shapes ideology and thinking. The power of creating media reality is concentrated in the hands of a few people and their biases and their profit motives operate in the creation of a reality which is often distorted.

Indian society is full of diversified cultures, traditions and beliefs. Our mass media's role as a social constructor and representative of people has greater responsibility in binding these complexities of culture and processes with the people of the society. In India, the status of women is undergoing a perceptible change. Women entering the labour market are on the rise, there

is increase in the number of educated women, and heightened awareness of their mobilization to fight discrimination. The role of women in the family life has undergone significant changes. As an educated housewife or as a working woman, she has acquired a respectable place in society.

## 2. Accessibility of Media to Women

The presence of women in media both in terms of numbers, whether absolute or in comparison with men and their status in terms of the position they occupy, is strongly influenced by the scene, not of their choice, but on account of the social and religious taboos which operated as legal sanctions, and even today operate as such, in many regions and communities, the constitution and laws notwithstanding. Poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and male domination keep a vast majority of women away from the print media even as readers. As regards the electronic media, even where the community radio and television are available, either they are crowded out by the men, or on account of social inhibitions, women are unable to view or listen. Media has therefore largely come to be confined to the women in the middle and the higher classes, whether in the rural or urban areas and more particularly in the urban areas whether as passive consumers or as active players. The issue of women and the media can broadly be understood at two levels, both implicating and affecting each other:

- The participation of women in decision-making and expression in the media
- Representation or portrayal of women and gender relations in the media

## 3. Participation and Expression

At the most basic level, women are under-represented in media institutions. Those who are within the field are often not in decision-making positions. Although women are increasingly entering into media, top management is still largely male dominated and the culture of patriarchy is perpetuated through this disparity. There is a gender division of labor that is evident through the way that stories are assigned. 'Soft' issues like fashion, culture, arts and lifestyle are often consigned to women media practitioners, whereas 'hard' and what is considered 'serious' issues like finance, economics and politics are often within the purview of their male counterparts. The criteria of newsworthiness are similarly and consequently understood through this gendered lens. Headline materials often constitute of 'hard issues' whilst 'soft issues' are shunted to 'special' and supplementary segments of the media. Gender stereotyped views and attitudes, such as the attachment of productive incapacity and women's reproductive roles can hinder women's opportunities to assume decision-making positions.

Further, sexual harassment has been particularly cited as one of the methods to control and exclude women from these positions. As media is becoming increasingly privatized and concentrated on a few transnational media giants, this can be a serious cause of concern when individuals within the field are left with little legal recourse to ensure the protection of their right to equal gender status. Government intervention often focuses on licensing and ownership as opposed to structures and practices within the institutions that discriminates against women, or prevents their views from being expressed. This contributes to the continued

marginalization of women's themes in the media, their exclusion from socio-political institutions in the public sphere, and severely curtails media democratization in the promotion of diverse cultural, social and political worldviews.

## 4. Women's Portrayal in the Media

Throughout Asia, women have been portrayed in the media as victims, subservient, nurturing, sacrificing and objectified sexualized beings. This not only inaccurately represents the diversity of women's lives, roles and experiences within this complex and rich region, women's contributions to the socio-political and economic development of society are often neglected. The perpetuation of stereotypes in images and representation solidifies women's traditional roles and unequal gender relations in multiple ways. Most visibly, women are seen as mourners at tragedies or as victims of violence. The Global Media Monitoring Project found that out of the small number of women who were interviewees in news stories (14%), 29% of them were as victims of accidents, crimes or other events. This does not only represent women as helpless subjects without agency, it also fails to emphasize men's role as perpetrators in instances of violence against women. Further, the dissemination of these messages affects women's self-confidence, mobility and subsequently access and participation in public spaces for fear of assault. There are many more examples, such as women's portrayals in an increasingly consumer-driven culture and the commodification of women's bodies in advertising, pornography and conflict situations that can be cited and raised. These are two strategic objectives that have been outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action adopted by State governments at the Fourth World Conference for Women in 1995. They address broadly the two levels of discrimination which are to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication and promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

The various types of media are:

1. Electronic (Radio, Television etc.)
2. Print

## 5. Electronic Media

Radio and Television combined with satellite channels provide wide coverage on almost important aspects of life. Doordarshan & All India Radio have captured good audience size not only in cities but even in semi-urban and rural areas. The program contents of both All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan give priority mainly to entertainment-based programmes. Women issues and their development programmes are reflected poorly in both the media. Lack of adequate planning and importance to women's programmes loses the target audience group. The Indian television programmes on women are generally based on the lives and cultures of urban society. In quantity there have been very few, in quality very poor programmes are concerned with the problems of women in rural areas. The main reason behind this is the commercial nature of Doordarshan, commercial sponsors and advertisers do not prefer women issue programmes, which they think are not very popular and or are liked by few audience. Television has been called the most real form of media. It is the real representation of women in TV and it

affects the mindset of those who watch the television, specially the negative and debasing image of women as represented through money-spinning advertisements and serials. The systematic oppression of women by men is being projected by television. Many argue against the current trend of female TV characters opting to give up their career. Sex stereotype is also very much evident in television portrayal of men and women in their appointed roles. Various Tv. channels show women characters dominating the serials and are either shown as silently suffering characters or as vindictive, revenge seeking, glamorous vamps.

## 6. Print Media

The print media which include newspapers, periodicals, newsletters and other channels are relied upon by the people as credible source of information, education and entertainment. The print media are known for fearless criticism and service. The media reflects events taking place in society and provides a platform for dialogue and debate on issues which can generate social changes. While electronic media carries more immediate weight on focusing attention on various issues, it is print media which has more persistent and lasting effect. It is felt that the way women are being projected in the print and electronic media is a reflection on the whole society. Though there is no authentic research done in this area, it is estimated by those working in this field that print media, both daily and weekly, that only about 7 to 10 % of the total coverage is on women's issues and about half of these are related to sex, prostitution, glamour, entertainment and crime. In the past few years, there has been an improved and increased reportage of issues related to women in the media, particularly in the print. News related to women though still marginal have started to occasionally occupy important slots like the editorial, feature news, front-page news etc. However, women's visibility in the news is still dominated by sensational stories of glamour, sex, domestic violence and other forms of violence. Stories like women coping with adversity or building their lives are largely missing. Issues affecting women, their vast experiences and their lives, barely find their way into the mainstream media. Likewise, very few informative pieces or feature columns are published for women informing them about their legal rights, or about their potential for political activity. Many other studies have also established that when women appear in the news, they are mostly projected as passive victims or passive reactors to public events in news media. They hardly appear as speakers or participants in public event.

## 7. Newspapers

The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced in the failure to eliminate gender-based stereotyping. Generally, the media do not provide a balanced portrayal of women's diverse lives and their contributions to society in a changing world, often reinforcing stereotyped images of women and their roles in society. It is a common practice additionally to assess the professional success of a woman through questions and claims about her related to being a good mother and a wife. This is exactly the type of writing in the media that undermines the efforts of activists, who aim to establish gender equality in all areas of society. The prevailing portrayal of women in mainstream daily newspapers has the following characteristics:

- Positive images of women have a narrow scope and are

based on new stereotypes of women's success like a pop star, a beauty queen, and a sport's woman with an outstanding result.

- There is an absence of the image of an active, assertive workingwoman, of a successful businesswoman, or a positive image of a woman politician.
- Average women are nearly always portrayed as victims of poverty, social injustice, domestic violence and organized crime.
- Misogyny in the form of rude jokes, mockery or open verbal aggression have become an accepted way of a systematic backlash against women activists working for women's political empowerment consisting of issues like freedom of abortion, freedom of sexual orientation, human rights.

It is the culture pages that help to round out the portrayal through the reviews of exhibitions by women artists, performances by female musicians, critiques of plays produced or acted by women, but here too are the seductive Swapnasundaris and Mallika Shehrawats or the sexy silk Smithas and the razzle dazzle Kareena who the camera and the pen focus on. Only the sports pages carry some positive news of the achievements of women athletes and players like Sania Mirza. Yet even here, when women achieve positive or even spectacular results, men find ways of undermining or ridiculing their success. The presence of women in media both in terms of numbers, whether absolute or in comparison with men, and their status in terms of the position they occupy is strongly influenced by the scene, not of their choice, but on account of the social and religious taboos which operated as legal sanctions, and even today operate as such, in many regions and communities. Even in those regions and communities where the social and religious taboos can no longer be enforced, poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and male domination keep a vast majority of women away from the print media even as readers. The positive side of women's progress and their contribution for national development has not been adequately discussed in the print media. The emphasis on stories about women, about their struggle for recognition is only the surface trimming. The actual message to audience still is that society opposes the liberation of women.

## 8. Magazines and Journals

Magazines differ markedly from newspapers in content, time element and methods of operation. In contrast to daily newspapers with its hurry-up headlines, magazines are published weekly, fortnightly, monthly or sometimes quarterly, because these publications usually deal with subjects in greater depth than newspapers do. Magazines fulfill four major purposes in our lives. They inform, guide and entertain the average reader. They also assist commerce through advertising. Information is imparted chiefly by printing news, while in depth articles and features help to give the reader the background necessary to understand intelligently current events and ideas. Entertainment is provided through numerous articles, jokes and cartoon strips. A newspaper is designed for family reading while magazines, in most instances, aim carefully at special interest audience. Indian magazines contain primarily and predominantly volumes of advertisements and sexist writings. A vast majority of Indian magazines are known for the portrayal of women as sex objects, consumers and slaves. Women journals

are mostly elitist and sexist. They are not in a position to advocate the cause of women and rejuvenate our socio-political economic and cultural orders. The targeted readerships of these magazines are the upper and lower middle classes living in cities. Most of women's journals consistently seek to direct women's energies into a narrow channel to define their concerns, pre-occupations and aspirations with an arbitrarily imposed feminine framework. The impression created is that the outside world belongs to men and the issues which arise there do not affect women except indirectly through the men related to them. Women's magazines confer status on women as a group and make womanly things a serious business. They provide a public platform and a symbolic social order which consistently offers a woman cheap and accessible source of positive evaluation alongside practical directions for fulfilling her potential as a consumer. They also preach the ideal of a woman's power of self determination by their overwhelming emphasis on self-help.

Indecent posters and boardings displayed everywhere are the crude reminders of distorted images and attitudes to women. Popular magazines with large circulations flash vulgar and obscene glossy photographs on their cover pages. The advertising world continues to use women to peddle its products and to present women as sexual objects. The image of the educated woman is typecast as insensitive, self-centered and uncaring. The economically independent woman is shown as domineering and ruthless. The woman is considered ideal only when she is in her nurturing roles and as a supportive supplement to man.

The coverage of women issues in the English print media and in the Indian language press differs in a number of ways. This is quite expected due to the very difference of readership profiles and other characteristics. The regional language press has its compulsions to be biased, inflammatory, sensational, communal and partisan. This is so as it serves only a small segment of readers who are conservative and traditional and read such papers only to replenish and refresh their established beliefs.

There have been several studies of print media with regard to women which have found the print media guilty of sexism, distortion of image of women and propagation of sex stereotypes like mothers, housewives, dependant, passive, etc. The other side of such misinterpretation is that in most popular print media women are seldom shown as working women who are capable professionals, labourers, farmers. Rather the predominant image is that of the self-sacrificing housewife. The analysis done of the 60 educational media like children's books, adult literacy primers for women shows that they are sexist and they perpetuate sex-stereotypes.

The Print Media has also seen a growth spurt in the recent years particularly with regard to women and development magazines. The journals are mostly qualified for modern society and could be said to be positively harmful to the development of women as conscious individuals aware of themselves and aware of the society around them. If a woman wins a beauty contest, magazines or newspapers in particular give much importance to the news and even take her photographs on cover page but, at the same time, if a woman gets the Nobel Prize she gets limited coverage. Here the difference of judgment in women's issues is quite marked in our media.

Information in the print reinforces the stereotype and traditional roles of women in society. In order to enhance the status and position of women in society the information messages should portray women in career oriented lead roles and in a holistic image, which is truly representative of Indian culture and ethos. Media is related to all women's issues and it affects not only urban women but all women and all men. By reinforcing sex stereotypes and constantly glorifying motherhood and subservient wifehood the print media makes it difficult for women to break out of these prescribed roles, norms and behaviour patterns. Such conservative depictions reduce the few statements about sex equality and equal participation of women contained in the Constitution to mere window dressing. This is not a plea of literary writing for women to be scoured but to redress the enormous harm done by existing portrayals and images in print media. Women must resist being sold in this manner and it is time they took the power of this medium in their own hands to create truth in their idiom or the pressures of the mass market will make their struggle for change increasingly difficult. The status of women has not improved noticeably despite the government's and the media's claim about social justice towards women. What is needed is a wider change in the social outlook.

Clearly, the media does not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. Much remains to be done with regard to the participation, portrayal and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women. What our country needs in the present context are minimum regulation and more enablement. Media reinforces the conservative view of women and ignores their economic participation and contribution, especially that of rural women, over 50% of whom are directly involved in economic activities, in addition to housework and childcare. All this means that media, instead of challenging the view that women are inferior, subservient, unimportant, reinforces it and it establishes man as the active force, the doer, the one who matters. The needs and concerns, the problems they face are not articulated publicly, no public thinking and debates are initiated on their real concerns. Because their concerns and interests remain unarticulated in the print, women also remain neglected.

## 9. Conclusion

Independent code of ethics that specifically addresses gender issues within this field can be developed and implemented. These codes can be further modified to ensure that sexist and stereotyped coverage of women are considered ethically unacceptable within the industry. Self-regulatory mechanisms such as adoption of sexual harassment policies within media institutions can dismantle one of the real obstacles that hinder women's full participation in media. Consistent and sustained capacity building of all members within media institutions whether male or female, reporters, editors or producers on gender issues can not only raise awareness on the complexities and implications of gender dynamics and power relations within this field, but also broaden the base of experts that are able to work with these issues meaningfully. More airtime can be allocated to issues related to women that break away from the usual areas traditionally considered as women's issues. One concrete example would be to increase the portrayal of women as

significant contributors to society as leaders, workers and thinkers, not just as carers, sex objects or victims. The development of appropriate alternative and community media can also enable the dissemination of diverse expressions and experiences, particularly from marginalized groups who are better able to own and manage them at the community level. Media has immense power in this process. It is one of the primary institutions which help shape the world. Taking accountability in this role and interrogating its own practices, perceptions, expectations and visions is crucial to imagine a society that is abundant in diversity, critical of inequality and resistant to marginalisation.

The issue of gender should be at the forefront of discussions concerning freedom of expression. International commitments such as the WSIS Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action need to be aligned to understand women's rights and gender equality as a cross cutting principle. Particularly in light of the development of digital information and communication technologies in media that have the capacity to transcend national boundaries and enable proliferation of discourses at unprecedented breadth and speed, gender dimensions crucially need to be surfaced and addressed. Otherwise, the move towards building Information Societies for economic, social and political development will be one that is substantively impoverished for want of principles in equality and non-discrimination. On the other hand, media can be utilized for projecting the true and positive image of women and to wipe out her traditional passive image that has been imprinted on the mind of the society as a whole, including the women. The potentiality of media as a powerful instrument of social change has first to be used to restore 50% of the humanity to its proper pedestal. Change has to be brought about not only in the status of women but in the attitude of the society towards them. Priority has therefore necessarily to be given to changing image of women, from a passive onlooker and recipient, to that of a positive doer and achiever.

However, the scenario is not so depressing with the advent of women reporters and the presence of some senior women journalists in positions of responsibility. That has made a significant difference to the coverage of women's issues in the press. They have observed that in the past ten years, women's issues have increasingly, though sporadically begun to make news and to be considered worthy of comment. This is due to the growth of the contemporary women's movement in India, with women's groups becoming steadily more active and vocal. The English press and the other language papers in India have been doing well as far as the coverage of women is concerned. Lead reports, articles, editorials, features and news analysis have been

published on women's issues. For media to promote balanced and non-stereotype portrayal of women in their multiple roles, it is imperative that government, media, NGOs and private sector should come together and forge joint strategies to promote gender equality and gender justice. In its new-found expansive role, media should foster a broad ethical content and moralizing impulse in the society so essential for the emergence of a civil society. Moreover, for the society's abiding benefit media must nurture and transmit humane values of civilization. They must take upon themselves the proactive role of a protector and a promoter of human rights, gender justice and democratic order.

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