A REVIEW

Media portrayal of women

DIPPANJEET KAUR* AND SHEETAL THAPAR

Department of Agriculture Journalism, Languages and Culture, Punjab Agricultural University, LUDHIANA (PUNJAB)
INDIA (Email: sheetal.pau@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This article highlights some structures of social relations which influence the formation of images of women in society in the mass media. Media plays an important and vital role in women's empowerment and its development. Media can create an awakening inspiration to achieve their potential as prime source of change in the society, we live in. Media is considered as an important source in helping the women empowered. The media is considered as the most potent and influential mean in this regard as it has the capacity of persuading and moulding opinion. The relationship of the media and the women is important because whatever image women have in our country is influenced by media.

Key Words : Media portrayal of women, Women in media

View point paper : Kaur, Dippanjeet and Thapar, Sheetal (2014). Media portrayal of women. *Asian Sci.*, **9** (1&2): 63-68.

In India, the media or the advertisers do not provide a balanced picture of women's contribution to the society in the true sense. The commercialisation of media has only led to exclusion of social goals in general and those of women in particular. Indian mass media projects women as one of the following – good housekeeper, submissive daughter, wife and mother, if she is a working woman – a vamp, sufferer both at home and office, neglecting children. The Indian patriarchal norms further bring discrimination against girl child which is the direct outcome of the preference for a male child. The media strengthens it by portraying the typical stereotype image of girl child or woman. Women's portrayals are erotic and soft focus because soft focus is feminist. Feminist is aimed at titillating men. Courtney and Lokeretz (1979) examined imaged of women in magazine advertisements. They reported the following findings: women were rarely shown in out-of-home working roles.

– Not many women were shown as a professional or high level business person.

– Women rarely ventured far from home by themselves or with other women.

– Women were shown as dependent on men's protection.

– Men were shown regarding women as sex objects or as domestic adjuncts.

– Females were most often shown in ads for cleaning products, food products, beauty products, drugs, clothing and home appliances.

– Males were most often shown in ads for cars, travel, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, banks, industrial products, entertainment media and industrial companies.

Sullivan and Connor (1988) found that there has been a 60 per cent increase in advertisements in which women are portrayed in purely decorative roles. They also claimed that the women's role in advertising is sexy and alluring.

* Author for correspondence

Dippanjeet Kaur, Department of Agriculture Journalism, Languages and Culture, Punjab Agricultural University, LUDHIANA (PUNJAB) INDIA (Email: dippanpaul-cobsajlc@pau.edu)

Kibourne (1986) found that exposure to advertisements employing stereotypical sex roles for women resulted in significantly lower perceptions of women's managerial abilities than exposure to advertisements depicting women in professional roles requiring such abilities. Saswati and Soumya (2012) revealed that patriarchal mindset is reflected in the way women are portrayed. Advertisers have cashed on visual appeal of women to attract the attention of the viewers.

In order to promote women's equal participation in the media :

— Encourage and recognize women's media networks;

— Encourage the development of educational and training programmes for women;

— Promote research and implementation of an information strategy for ensuring a balanced portrayal of women;

— Develop balanced and diverse portrayal of women by the media;

— Encourage establishment of media watch groups to monitor the media;

— Train women to make greater use of information technology.

Mass media and women empowering :

Mass media comprises of TV, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines and newsletters and technology such as the Internet and E-mail as well as other media that may not be as obvious such as children's comics and cartoons, theatre, puppetry, dance and song. The media is a vehicle used to inform as well as entertain the public. The media is a carrier of information, ideas, thoughts and opinions. It is a powerful force in influencing people perceptions on a variety of issues. The media can be both positive as well as negative in terms of the position and views of women as well as a powerful mechanism for education and socialisation. Although the media has played an important role in highlighting women's issues, it has also had negative impact, in terms of perpetrating violence against women through pornography and images of women as a female body that can be bought and sold. Overall, the media treatment of women is narrow and continually reinforces stereotyped gender roles and assumptions that women's functions are that of a wife, mother and servant of men. This is especially so in advertising.

According the Jensen and Oster (2003) cable television was impacting the attitudes of women and the authors find an increase in the female school enrolment and decrease in fertility. Pandey and Charu (2012) studies the position of women and their status is an index of its civilization are to be considered as equal partners in the process of development. But exploited and subjugated for centuries, women have remained at the receiving end. Women empowerment demands a life cycle approach where empowerment is viewed as a process and not as an event. Although a unique creation of nature, women are suffers in society under the domination of men. They are much behind men in socioeconomic and cultural matters. Murthy and Padmaja (2010) revealed that the television serials influences the lifestyle and also influences their family customs like celebration of family functions, dresses of wedding couples, decoration of wedding place, engagements customs. Manoj (2010) analysed the content of different media like radio, television, newspaper, e-paper and portals. Some of the media has welcomed the historic right to education act describing it as the beginning of a new morning. Others raised the eyebrows regarding hurdles and complication in implementing the act. Media works differently sometimes they are right with the right and wrong with the right.

Women in print media :

Woman is armoured under traditions, customs and mass media of the society. With the coming of electronic media the print media has become more sensational and commercialised. The importance of print media can be gauged back to India's struggle for independence, when it played a major role in initiating the fire of freedom struggle in the society. Present day newspapers have some space for women on weekly basis. It is assumed that women are not interested in general happenings and they are more inclined towards their own interests such as recipes, beauty tips, latest fashion, relations, furnishings, luxurious items, new women products. Out of the total coverage on women issues, maximum news reporting is related to violence against women. Such news items are sensationalised to get more readerships. Women in newspapers make their visibility on the first page only if they are politicians, raped, murdered, if they commit suicide, or if there is a case of domestic violence. Besides this, stories on glamour and sex can never be missed out on the last pages. The print media has portrayed her sporadically, as it was the sexiest bias and in complete disregard of her reality, and when the reality was ever the subject of exploration for the press, it always presented a glamorised version of her situation. The picture that emerged was that of a woman who never produced knowledge or wealth, but always consumed a sort of hanger on to her male. The issues affecting women, women encouraging stories, information on rights that every woman in India should know, women building their careers from scratch are rarely ever published. Due to which sex stereotype images of being dependent, passive and homemaker is only presented in the print media. Sensationalism is the key word in the media. Newspapers give catchy headlines to make it more and more sensational. Often such stories are exaggerated and the blame

is put on woman without proper investigation. This is all done to increase the circulation of the newspaper. Such reporters don't even give a second thought as what they are actually doing. Women issues are just taken for granted and not considered a serious reporting. It results in complete distortion of image of women. The stories of working class women are rarely published but articles on film stars, their fashion statement, sexy photographs predominate women spaces.

The images of women in advertisements do not symbolise women at all in a correct manner, these images are demeaning and are simply as a selling object. Though, the print media in last one decade has seen a gush of growth. So have women issues increased as compared to the 90s. The credit goes to women journalists, women movements brought by the Government, women groups and NGO's that have become more active concerning women issues and development and they all make sure that their voices are heard. Today one can find a lead story, article or a news analysis published on women issues. But still a lot needs to be done; whatever coverage the print media is giving is very less as compared to the population of women – being almost half in the country. The need is to address more positive women related stories for this half population, so that they can contribute at all fronts in the progress of the country. Women journalists are trying to change the sexy distorted image of women in print media but until and unless developmental stories are given preference and the readership profile changes, it's a difficult task ahead and much remains to be achieved.

Politics is considered to be the bread earner of the newspapers. Women politicians are rarely given preference over male counterparts. It is only on the last few pages that performances by female artists, female dancers or painting exhibitions by women artists, hot and sizzling models with erotic photographs are focused on. *The Tribune* publishes one page in Sunday supplement to women development stories. *The Hindustan Times* publishes a page to women issues once a week. Beside this, once in a while, sports page publishes news on Serena Williams, Venus William or Sania Mirza. With half the population of women, our media planners and editors are giving a single page once a week to women issues.

Women in electronic media :

The United Nations (UNESCO) study in 1978 on portrayal and participation of women in media found that globally women were portrayed in a poor manner. There was totally underrepresentation of women in media with earning less than their male colleagues. Analyses of several of these programs prove that prime-time serials, dramas, film-based programs reveal women and their subject in a poor manner.

The treatment met to women is mostly presented as docile homemaker, caregivers, compassionate listeners and objects of male desire. The programs on women are mostly based on lives and customs of urban society which are strongly dominated by male chauvinists. The stress is laid on being equal partners in life, as the two wheels of a cart. More often, women are portrayed as patient sufferers, decked up all the time and excluded from intricacies of human emotions; while the other half is allowed to express their anguish and ordeal. The image of women as sex stereotype for male's lust is well centred. Middle-class women are best shown as dependents, homemakers taking care of children and old ones in the house, listening to husband in youth and doing as ordered by their sons in old age.

Women's freedom is curbed and she is forced to witness social ills of the society. Very few programs concerning rural women's problems and plights are shown. Till date they seem to have been completely ignored. On the other hand, the role of new modern woman as an agriculturist, industrialist or educationist is rarely shown and highlighted. A woman in these roles is only shown during circumstances in the story, like on death of father or husband, wherein she's forced to take up the responsibility; but never shown as a career oriented woman, working with her own will and desire. She is more often shown as an extrovert, headstrong, extremely sex stereotype with short hair, short dress, and ready to do anything to reach at the top position for her career. Her character as a demoralised individual is often represented without a second thought as what effect it could leave on young minds. The film-based programs also completely underestimate the image of woman. The subjugation met by her is often highlighted in the movies and programs. The true feelings of a woman are not reflected on the screen, they are just the acquiescent receivers of their fate. Electronic media does give perfect coverage of women but the way it projects women is pathetic. No balanced image is ever presented for the audience and the women force is also never shown as economic contributors to the nation.

On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of portrayals of women in the mass media across many countries of the world, Gallagher (1983) has shown that women and their concerns are not only misrepresented and underrepresented on television, but women's images on television consistently follow traditional stereotypical patterns and are very often derogatory. The question before us is have things really changed? They have, though not for the better. On the other hand, soap operas are also used in many developing countries for imparting pro-developmental messages. For example, in Mexico the private television network Televista has produced pro-developmental telenovelas on family planning, adult literacy, child care, women's equality, adult literacy and so on. In India, the public television network, Doordarshan

introduced the first development-oriented soap opera Hum Log during 1984-1985 that emphasised the themes of family planning, the status of women, family harmony and family welfare. Although there is considerable research on the effects of such soap operas in attaining their educational-developmental goals, critical analysis of gender issues in these programmes is very limited. A study of the effect of Hum log on the Indian audience reveals that exposure to such pro-social television soap opera did not make viewers more aware of women' status issues (Brown and Cody, 1991).

Women in films :

Cinema is a complex medium of communication that combines sight, sound, motion, drama and messages to capture audience attention. In the milieu of widespread illiteracy, it is the most important medium for entertainment. Popular cinema is an extremely potent medium since it influences us at the subliminal level through powerful images and various successful genres, such as family, and social dramas, romance, vendetta sagas, mythological stories, etc., around familiar conflicts and resolution of family and society. These narratives create a myth, which infiltrate the unconscious world of collective psyche and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Thus, popular cinema is an integral part of popular culture and reflects the distorted mirror of modern society.

The representation of women in cinema has been a major issue of debate among the western feminist scholars in communication. The feminist film theory has made a significant contribution to understand how the mass media construct definitions of femininity and masculinity (Gallagher, 1992). Semiotic analysis of films by feminists show that in cinema, a woman is presented as what she - represents for men, not in terms of what she actually signifies. Thus, films reinforce myths about women that exist in society.

In developing countries, there has been hardly any similar effort to build a feminist film theory or examine the question of women in cinema through systematic research. In general, analysis is related too closely with specific film narratives. Nevertheless, a closer look at media images of women in Indian films will give us some insights in understanding how the powerful medium of films has attempted to redefine femininity and masculinity in the changing context of modernity. While tracing down the changing versions of idealised femininity over 75 years in mainstream films and since the 1960s in the "new wave" (art) cinema, Rao (1989) shows that although images of women in films have changed from Goddesses to dream girls to the "new" women, the heroines are still depicted to project patriarchal norms and values. She argues that the form and content of Indian popular films have changed over the years with technological advancement in cinematography and

social milieu. However, the traditional mythical female characters of the ideal women have continued as archetypes and are reinforced even today in characterisation of "modem" women in Indian cinema in one way or the other. Women are continued to be depicted in the roles of caretakers (mothers and wives) in the family. Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Indian popular cinema projected dichotomous images of women. Women were primarily depicted in relationship to men.

Despite increasing participation of men and women in the work force, work is an underdeveloped theme in the commercial Indian films. On the basis of an analysis of several Hindi films, Kishwar and Vanita (1987) highlight diminished importance of women's work outside the home in film narratives and examined how middle class ideal of a domesticated woman is reinforced in divergent work roles.

In general, the work life of a hero usually exists to feed to the film narratives of romance, family melodrama and violent conflict. While women are mostly shown as working only when compelled by circumstances. Even educated middleclass women are shown without any occupation. When they do work, they are concentrated in stereotyped jobs such as typist, secretary, school teacher and occasionally are lawyer and doctor. The working middle-class woman, in general, is a young woman, a modem miss, who is doing a job while waiting to get married. But, by and large, women are shown to work only in the absence of a male breadwinner, a father, a brother or a husband. These women are presented as unfortunate victims sacrificing their own interests to support the family. It is only when she tries to rebel against her role as a wife and a mother or chooses to work to assert her independence, the hostility against a working woman surfaces.

In the case of the poor women, work is represented as economic necessity. Poor women's work life is either romanticised or is sensationalised by depicting her as a victim of poverty and sexual harassment. Sexual molestation is presented as a dominating reality of poor working women's lives. Such portrayal obscures harsh working conditions and injustices and reinforces the myth that work outside the home exposes women to sexual violence. At the same time, the molestation episodes cater to the voyeuristic impulse of the audience. In creating new archetypes of modem Indian women, commercial films also use the progressive films and women's movement. The new woman is shown as a "strong" character – educated, articulate, independent and capable of taking initiative in a relationship with a man. She signifies "good" modernity. In contrast to the earlier traditional image, her appearance also reflects a kind of freedom moving easily from western clothes to neo-ethnic Indian style of dressing.

However, the bright new image of "modern" women in the popular Indian films is superficial. Her femininity is

defined within the boundaries of patriarchy. She continues to need the protection of a macho hero and does not rebel against his dominance. However, characterisation of women in the women-centred films is ambivalent. Sometimes in the mainstream cinema, a heroine is portrayed in old familiar plots as an avenging angel like a hero (for example, as a dacoit, a fearless police officer, etc.). However, in imitating the role of a macho hero she neither appears credible nor powerful as the "strong" woman character as she continues to be depicted as submissive in her romantic relationships with men. Furthermore, women who protest against the institution of marriage and patriarchal oppression have been ossified into new stereotypes. They are either depicted as home wreckers in the role of "other" women or as irrational and hysterical wives abandoning their villainous husbands. Even when a woman sets out to find herself as an individual, eventually she is shown as finding solace in motherhood or in another romantic relationship.

Occasionally, she takes up career as a consolation prize for the broken marriage or relationship and not for defining her identity. Commercial cinema has created certain gender stereotypes with considerable ambiguity for keeping the audience emotionally involved. However, underlying the spurious concerns for women's oppression in the mainstream cinema, deeply entrenched ideals of femininity are disguised in the glossy images of "liberated" women. With the emergence of alternative cinema (often known as the "new" wave or art cinema) since the late 1960s, there has been some efforts to bring women at the centre of film narratives. The new wave or progressive cinema in the two decades of its existence has attempted to move away from the traditional stereotypes of an Indian woman' and characterise her as a person with distinct identity by projecting her as a strong and often dominant character. The redefinition of femininity produced and portrayed in cinema under the "new" wave cinema in India, in fact, highlights the tension between "modernity" and "tradition" (Mazumdar, 1991).

Women are often used in the new wave films as symbols of resistance and victims of exploitation. The emphasis in the new wave films is on replacing the "myth" in popular films by "reality". However, realistic cinema can also create new myths about women through powerful and controlling narratives and cinematography (Laxmi, 1986). To establish visual authenticity of filmic reality, the penetrating gaze of realism often exploits the sensuous female body and use women as ideal symbols to represent a social "issue" (Rao, 1989 : 452-54). Representation of women in the new wave cinema is also constrained by dominant ideological discourses on women that perceive the women's question as only a gender war within the framework of liberal feminism (Mazumdar, 1991).

Until recently, commercial and new wave cinema in India has been the exclusive domain of male directors and writers. However, now a few women have entered the field as directors and writers. To what extent they have succeeded in shifting the perspective on women and related topics in films? At one level, women directors have created a much-awaited constructive space in the films for promoting feminist ethos and views. But, the terrain opened up by women directors is still uneven and patchy. In the prevailing economic and cultural context of commercial films, women directors are mostly allowed to deal with "women-oriented" issues such as, the family, romantic relations, maternal relations, etc., which are thought to be traditionally the domain of women (Gupta, 1994). Some of the women directors reflect more sympathetic understanding of women characters. However, there has not been a significant shift in the roles assigned to women in the films of women directors who operate within the boundaries of gender stereotypes in the commercial cinema. In summary, there is an increasing concern with women-centred issues in both art and commercial films since the beginning of the 1980s. However, both kinds of films use images and issues from each other and reinforce mythical portrayal of the new Indian woman in the guise of modernity to ensure mass appeal.

REFERENCES

Berberick, S.N. (2010). The objectification of women in mass media: female self image in misogynist culture. *J. The New York Sociologist,* **5**: 15.

Chaudhary, G. (2009). Empowerment of women: A sociological inquiry. Phd Thesis, Ch. Charan Singh University, Meerut, U.P. (INDIA).

Chung, B., Kantachote, K., Mallick, A., Polster, R. and Roets, K. (2013). *Indicators of women empowerment in developing nations.* La Follette School of public affairs, Madison.

Davis, A.C. (2008). *Media Language- A study.* (Ph.d.) Thesis, Calicut University, THRISSUR (INDIA).

Devi, L.M. (2010). Empowering women through alternative media. International conference on interplay of economic politics and society for inclusive growth.

Guleria, N. (2012). *Print Media and Women empowerment.* Ph.d. Thesis, Punjabi University, Patiala, PUNJAB (INDIA).

Khan, E.A. and Moin, A. (2013). Women empowerment: role of new media. *Excellence Internat. J. Educa. & Res.,* **1**(3): 206-216.

Khiar, R., Sadik, M. and Ali, N.A. (2012). A Report on Women empowerment.

Manoj, D. (2010). Right to education act and role of media. *Media Watch,* **1**(2).

Murthy, D.V.R. and Padmaja, S. (2010). Culture and impact of television serials perceptions of television viewers. *Media Watch,* **1**(2).

Patel, B.P. (2011). *Role of Law on economic empowerment of women*. Phd. thesis, Saurashtra University Rajkot, RAJASTHAN (INDIA).

Patel, I. (1995) *Representation of women in mass media*. Garland, NEW YORK (U.S.A.).

Saswati, G. and Soumya, D. (2012). Women in internet advertising. *Media watch,* **2**(2): 24-27.

Shailashree, B. (2013). Media and political empowerment of women in Kolar district of Karnataka- a study. *Internat. J. Humanities & Soc. Sci. Inven.,* **2**(9): 55-59.

Sharma, A. (2010). Portrayal of women in mass media. *Media Watch* (online available).

Singh, R. (1986). *Status of Indian women: A sociological study of women in Delhi.* (Ph.d.) Thesis. Jawaharlal Nehru University, NEW DELHI (INDIA).

Tamakuwala, S.J. (2010). *Gender stereotypes in media: A study of the impact of television serials and advertisement on college students.* (Ph.d.) Thesis, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat, GUJARAT (INDIA).

Zurbriggen, E.L., Collins, R.L., Lamb, S., Roberts, T.A., Tolman, D.L., Ward, L.M. and Blake, J. (2007) *Sexualization of girls.* American Psychological Association, Washington.

WEBLIOGRAPHY

Ceulemans, M. and Fauconnier, G. (1979). Mass media: The image, role, and social conditions of women. UNESCO, Paris. *http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0003/000370/037077eo.pdf*

Chakravarty, R. (2013). Indian cinema@100: 40 Firsts in Indian cinema, New Delhi (online available) *http://movies.ndtv.com/bollywood/indian-cinema-100-40-firsts-in-indian-cinema-362362*

Hari, H. (2014). Role of mass media in empowerment of women. (online available) *http://www.slideshare.net/harishhari58760608/role-of-mass-media-in-women-empowerment.*

Kothari, G. (2004). The duty to social justice. Vidura, July-Sep. Women in Media. Available at *www.peerpapers.com/essays/ Media-Influences-Women/topic, last accessed on 22 Dec 2007.*

Mcsweeney, H.R. (2014) Women and the media: Who do they think you are? (Online available) *http://www.communities.wa. gov.au/Documents/Women/Women%20in%20the%20Media% 20Discussion%20Paper%20FINAL.pdf*

Mushi, S.S. (2007). A conceptual framework to guide research on empowerment *http://www.redet.udsm.ac.tz/documents_storage/ 2008-3-28-8-23-12_empowerment%20study%202007.pdf*

Mwendamseke, N. (1989). The female image in the mass media: The reality and possible remedies. WACC congress, Philipines. *http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/African%20Journals/pdfs/ africa%20media%20review/vol4no2/jamr004002007.pdf*

Online available report of United Nations entity for gender equality and empowerment of women (2014). *http://www.unwomen.org/co/ w h a t - w e - d o / e c o n o m i c - e m p o w e r m e n t / f a c t s - a n d - figures#sthash.gOqmpBUa.dpuf*

Pandey, G.P. and Charu, J. (2012). Traditional media for the empowerment of rural women. *Media watch,* **3**(1): 43-50. (online available) *http://indianjournals.com/ijor.aspx?target=ijor:mw &volume=3&issue=1&article=008*

Pozzi, G. (2012). Women and mass media (online available) *http:/ /www.amazone.be/IMG/pdf/women_and_mass_media-gpozzi.pdf*

Washington, N. Director of Global Programs in the State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues,Washington(online available) *http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/federal_ government/empowering-women-and-girls-in-developing-nations/ 2014/02/21/b64008aa-9b1c-11e3-ad71-e03637a299c0_story.html*

Whang, D. (2013). Justice Starts with Empowering Women in Developing Countries, *http://sojo.net/blogs/2013/03/04/justice-starts-empowering-women-developing-countries*