
MEDIA AS A PROPELLANT OF FEMINISM IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: The media has been rightly labelled as the Fourth Pillar of the State. It plays a catalytic role in providing a voice to the 'Voiceless'. Media representation of minority groups, particularly representation of women, has been a popular area of research as well as public debate. The main focus of the paper is analyzing the role of media in projecting the 'Ideal Woman' and its impact on women's development. The relation between gender issues and the has held the limelight in public debate for quite some time now. This has led to reservation of seats for women in the Indian Parliament. This paper aims to study the manner in which female characters are portrayed in Indian content juxtaposed with the male counterpart. Further, there is an evident lack of women leadership within the media industry. This paper aims to give a picture of representation of women in film, television and print media on the basis of the Indian literature available on women and mass media. Media through its reach to people at large has been instrumental in promoting women empowerment over the last few decades. The paper will also discuss various achievements attained in the fields women empowerment which can be attributed to the media.

Keywords: Empowerment, indecent representation, media, women.

Introduction: The lives of women have undergone radical changes in the past few decades. The societal role of women has gradually changed since beginning of the previous century. Such changes include acceptance of women's sexuality, women breaking into new industries and professions earlier "reserved" exclusively for the masculine gender, coupled with the acceptance working wives and daughters, and the most importantly, equality with men atleast in law. The ideology of feminism, has played a decisive role in improving the condition of women all around the world. Media as weapon of democracy has also played its role in supporting the feminist movement in India. The media through its outreach to people at large has been instrumental though not to the extent desired in supporting the movement for women emancipation by focusing neglect and marginalization of the position of the women in society.

Many historians have pointed out that the position of women in India was better compared to the rest of the World in ancient era. There was setback in the medieval period leading to enlightened reformers seeking rights for women in the British era. Independence bought with it the rise of the Indian feminist movement. It is quite fascinating how the position of women which was highly dignified during the ancient period has deteriorated to a secondary position. Women in modern India now participate in all activities such as sports, education, politics, media, art, service sectors, science, etc. Mrs Indira Gandhi who served as Prime Minister for 15 years holds the record for the world longest serving woman Prime minister. The Constitution has numerous provisions aimed at improving the plight of women. These have acted as a bulwark for women's rights by providing various guarantees. Few of these are Article

14 (equality before law), article 15(1) (no discrimination by state), Article 16(1) (equality of opportunity), etc. The Constitution has further provided for discrimination in the favour of women [1]. There is an obligation imposed upon the state as well as the masses under Articles 39(4), 42 and 51A(e). The legislature has also played its role by passing numerous acts aimed at the welfare of women, such as the Domestic Violence Act, 2005. But still there exist wide gap between the goals enunciated in the constitution, legislation , policies etc. and the reality of women in India.

To discuss women empowerment it is necessary to deal with the present situation of women in India. Any discussion of such a nature must start with briefly stating certain key aspects which the media should adequately cover.

Gender Inequality: Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender [2]. In considering the dimensions of economic gender inequality, women still make less than men in the formal work sector, and do large share of the household work. A vast majority of women work throughout their lives but are not recognised by any data. The dimensions of political gender inequality include women's lower representation in elected office and lower representation in political and corporate appointments [3]. The dimension of social inequality is adequately represented by the presence of various evils, like domestic violence, sexual assaults, low education attainment etc. According to a survey conducted by NCW covering over 1200 women in both organized and unorganized sector it has been found that 50% experienced gender discrimination by way of physical and mental harassment of women at work. The survey reported discrimination not only in

salary but also in promotions, work distribution and working hours [4]. Promoting gender equality has been identified by the Government as priority strategic goal for the UN System in India under UN Development Assistance Framework. We should not forget that Gender Equality is not just a women's issue as it has adverse impact on the developmental goals and reduces economic growth.

Wage Discrimination: One of the harsh realities of the 21st century is the existence of a gap between the wages of men and women around the globe [5]. Gender disparity and wage discrimination is found across whole India, both in rural as well as urban areas. In India, there is no state where women and men earn equal wage in agriculture. This is equally applicable to other areas of works such as mining, trade, transport services etc. In the various work sectors average wages earned by male is more than the wages earned by female [6].

I would emphasize on the findings of United Nations report which were published as in July 2012 by UN women press release concerning gender equality. The report says, Certain forms of discrimination against women remain widespread. Out of 121 countries covered in the 2012 SIGI, 86 have discriminatory inheritance practices or laws. On average across these countries, around half of women believe domestic violence is justified in certain circumstances [7]. Even as the latest UNDP Report ranks India 119 in the Human Development Index, when it comes to Gender Inequality Index, India ranks 122 at 0.748 [8]. The media can certainly bring some of this bias in to light. This cause should be given much needed priority especially by the women journalists. The Constitutional mandate of equality before law remains elusive. Media along with judiciary and executive should work together to minimize the disparity in wages. Social mobilization is also necessary in this regard.

Health: India accounts for more than 20% of global maternal and child deaths, and the highest maternal death toll in the world estimated at 138,000 [10]. The national rural health mission launched in 2005 aims at correcting rural inequality in the matter of health. Such a mission has limited success, because the ground realities show the unfair treatment of women in all age groups. 73% of the children between the age of 6 and 59 months, and more than 55% of women, are anaemic, and 40% of the maternal deaths during pregnancy and child-birth relate to anaemia and under-nutrition. Estimates suggest that almost 1,36,000 women in India dies every year due to pregnancy related setbacks [11]. At present, India tops the rate of maternal deaths worldwide, according to UN figures. Majority of women in India are not able to obtain minimum nutritional requirements and go through their life in nutritional stress. Even

financially sound families, spend more on the well-being of men than women.

Inequality in Male-Female Ratio: Indian society is still largely patriarchal. The main cause of this gender gap is due to prevailing practice of female infanticide in many parts of our country especially in UP, Bihar, Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. In the latest gender gap index report released by the World Economic Forum (WEF), India is among the lowest in the World. India was ranked at a despicable 101st place out of 136 countries, indicating huge disparity in access of women to economic, political, educational and healthcare opportunities and their participation in such services [12]. In the Population Census of 2011 it was revealed that the population ratio in India 2011 is 940 females per 1000 of males [13].

The mass media needs to draw more attention to this issue of sex ratio in India. The various programs and policies implemented by the Government require wider coverage in order that women, especially from economically weaker section, can be benefitted from them.

Crime Against Women: The spread of social evils like child marriage, dowry deaths, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, exploitation of women workers are rampant in different parts of India. This is clearly indicative of the fact that women as weaker sex are being dominated and exploited. A total of 2,44,270 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2012. Report states that, a crime against women is recorded every seven minutes in India. Every ninety three minute a girl is being kidnapped, every forty two minute sexual harassment occur, every hour a women is burnt to death for dowry, Every sixty minutes two women are raped in this country and every six hours a girl is subjected to domestic violence [14].

In response to the violence against the women there is need for nationwide campaign to reignite India's core values and traditions that respect and nurture women. Action from courts and police will not suffice, media reporting and coverage has major role to play in this regard.

Under Representation of Women: The status of women in India has been subject to many remarkable changes over the past few decades. In modern India, women have adorned many high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, judges of Supreme Court and High Courts. But they lack adequate representation both in governance and decision making positions. Women have a poor 11% representation in India's Lok Sabha and 10.6% in the Rajya Sabha, making India 108th among 188 countries covered in the annual analysis on statistics of women members of parliament (MPs) conducted by the

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Less than 4% seats in High Courts and Supreme Courts are occupied by women. Less than 3% of administrators are women [15].

Women Education: Education is one of the most important means of empowering women as it gives them the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process [16]. The literacy rate among women continues to be lower than men. The Male literacy rate is 82.14% while the Female literacy rate lags behind at 65.46% The gap of 21.59 percentage points recorded between male and female literacy rates in 2001 census has reduced to 16.68 percentage points in 2011 [17].

According to the 2011 census, since year 2011, 110 million additional women had become literate as compared to 107 million men representing an improvement in ratio. But this current difference in literacy rate has a serious impact on economic development. The female adult literacy rate in other Asian countries, like Malaysia, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam and Indonesia is more than 70%, i.e higher than that in India.

While India has been ranked very high at 9th place globally for political empowerment, it has got second-lowest position (135th) for health and survival. Its rankings for economic participation and opportunity are also low at 124th and for educational attainment at 120th [18].

Media's Role in Empowerment of Women in India: Awareness is extremely important for women's development and mass media play significant role. Media has strong influence over the masses and the technological revolution has further increased its importance. Media plays a very important role in shaping the society at large. It must also be noted that growth of women's education and their increased employment of women has contributed to the growth of media. However, women can be expected to play this role more accurately, if they are conscious about their strength and not discriminated against. In this context, media has an important role to spread awareness in order for women to achieve their potential as the prime movers of social change. Media including the print and electronic media plays an important role in effectively conveying the message to the people.

Potrayal of Women by Media: Portraying women as equals in the society is a subject that has been given low priority by the Indian media. The media has failed to address serious issues about exploitation and in equal treatment to women in different spheres but is keen in reporting sex related incidents by way of sensationalizing news of atrocities against women [19]. They have been interested in conveying to the

public a peculiar kind of message regarding women. One can flip through the pages of popular magazines and news papers, watch television programmes and commercial films to get the content of them loud and clear. The Indian media loves to see women as home-makers and, conveniently, as an avid consumer [20].

Even more disturbing is the growing trend in media to portray women as victims. Some recent studies of news stories show that sex and sensation is the primary motivation behind the reportage. A study of four main English dailies in India finds that women's issues accounted for little over two percent of the total items in one of the dailies and even less in the other three [21].

The depiction of women in Indian media is sordid and at times, even vulgar. Commodification of women as a sex object has been relentlessly portrayed in audio and visual media. The overtones of sexual equation are much more explicit in our media now. The orthodox presentations and the conventional inhibitions seem to overpower the orientations of media planners. The women in Indian media are depicted generally as scrupulous, religiously intolerant, craving only for their own family, politically naïve and culturally ultra-modern. Some criticism of advertising using women as sex objects can be seen in letters to the editor and very mild criticism of the cheapness and vulgarity in the display of women in advertising can be found in our literature. Often the criticism of the advertising stems out of big business game, believing the advertisements, rising prices and creation of artificial needs [22].

There are many instances of mistreatment of women by Indian media and not much has changed regarding portrayal of women. In vernacular press, the depiction of women gets a share only in coloured pages where there is a lot of gossip about actress of soap serials or film stars along with some hot pin ups. The English press also dwells upon providing snaps of hot babes and erotic photo-gallery of party-mania in multi star hotels. Even the photos of sports stars are also provided in a manner emphasizing on their physical attraction.

The advertisement in the electronic media too is also appalling. The attention of the media planner is required to some portion of the advertisement. Even the women activist give least reaction to these kind of advertisement, where there is gross insult to the dignity of the women in various ways. There is an advertisement of the deodorant spray, the scene shows a man spraying that deodorant in response of which young two piece bikini clad females start craving for the man. In an advertisement of whiskey, a man takes a sip of that whiskey and lady sitting next to him appears to be loosing few inches of her clothes. Another advertisement of a particular brand

of underwear shows that a young man wearing that brand underwear is being kissed on every part of the body by a young infatuated girl in a room. The depiction of women in these kind of advertisement are insult to the dignity of women and requires much concern as respecting the dignity of women is salient feature of our ancient tradition.

Although the Press Council of India has clear guidelines on the way the media should report on an depict women, there is a lot of controversy regarding this and many newspapers are not clear in their own guidelines while tackling such sensitive issues. Some part of the blame can be attributed to the education system, which has played a central role in moulding the process and for widening social fractures in Indian society by creating and reinforcing a social, cultural, economic and discursive divide between the proverbial “English medium” and the majority [23].

Limited Coverage In Media: Amount of press coverage devoted to an issue is representative of the importance implicitly associated with the issue by the media agencies. Lack of appropriate media coverage of an issue tends to imply that the topic is not that important. If the story remains unreported, creation of public awareness becomes illusive. Violence against women is an universal problem and the consequences of media ignorance and bias are horrific. In India, the amount of coverage in mainstream media is inversely proportional to the actual prevalence of the kinds of violence and gives a false impression. Most disturbing is the disproportionate coverage of violence leading to its sensationalization. Invariably, rape stories get far more coverage than domestic violence stories. In all likelihood, this is because rape stories usually focus on one individual woman. If she is attractive, she is a “marketable victim”. It isn’t a coincidence that rape is a frequent theme in pornography. The sexual brutalization of women is a highly marketable business and a profitable story for the news media. For example, the Indian media, be it press or the broadcasters, choose to highlight the rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl rather than to report about the success of women in recent panchayat elections in the country [24]. A study in this regard was conducted in Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Two regional newspapers and two English newspapers were selected for the study. In prominent newspapers only 5% of the articles are of women related issues and 8% are published on main page and remaining are placed inside. Study showed no importance is given to development issues of women [25]. The portrayal of the image of women through the popular daily soap is again an important issue which needs to be addressed. The women in the daily soaps are shown either as “mean queens” who are selfish,

aggressive and sometimes even outrightly sinister; or as the traditional Indian “*sati savitris*” for whom tolerance, patience and sacrifice remained the essence of womanhood. These represent two extremes, leading to a conflicted image of woman. This conflicting image of women had raised a debate prompting the FICCI Ladies Organization comprising wives of leading Indian industrialists, to organize a seminar on Women Empowerment. The Ladies Organization, was fuming over the “*very limited portrayal of women as vamps, doormats and schemers and the impact these serials and cinema would have on the masses.*” [26] There is another new tendency on television now, which is the trend of using music videos to promote new music albums as well as movies. When we think of a music video, one visualizes the image of a woman who is titillating, sensuous and whose sole purpose is to arouse men with the show of almost bare breasts and half naked bodies. The number of music videos entering the market keeps on increasing every week. It is hard to comprehend the pernicious effect of such videos on our minds. The increasing debauchery in the music industry, leaves no doubt that self-regulation on the part of industry is not viable. The adult rating doesn’t prevent the youth from getting their hands on such videos and music. The effect on the youth is even more profound, who may try to imitate such behaviours in their lives. The furore by woman organizations has been limited and targetted against particular artists. Even then, whenever such issues are raised, they are compromised by being labelled as measures ‘restricting individual freedom/creativity’ [27].

The sports channels in India have been primarily been devoted to men and games played by them. Cricket and tennis seem to dominate on television, with the occasional revival of Hockey and Football. All these sports tend to inculcate masculine values. Recently, there has been coverage of women players in India. But, one pattern clearly presents itself. The female players who are covered on sports channel, generally have good physical appeal. Others may be reported whenever they win an olympic medal, but are sidelined almost immediately without any future coverage. Recently, there has been a growing trend in Indians wanted to cover gossip of foreign countries and more particularly that of celebrities in USA and UK. This has lead to filtering of foreign news to focus only on scandalizing material.

Obscenity in Media and the Law: The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 provides for the regulation of representation of women in media. Its Statement of Objects reads as “[T]here is a growing body of indecent representation of women or references to women in publications, particularly advertisements, etc. which have the effect

of denigrating women and are derogatory to women. Though there may be no specific intention, these advertisements, publications, etc. have an effect of depraving or corrupting persons."[28] It shows that the Legislature wasn't inactive on the issue and actively sought to restrict such indecent representations. It prohibits the indecent representation of women through advertisements, books, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner. Section 4 prohibits the production, sale, hire, distribution, circulation, sending by post any book, pamphlet, slide, film, writing, drawing, painting etc. which contains indecent representation of women in any form. The most major shortfall of this Act has been non-enforcement by the agencies. Indecent representation in advertisements continues till date unabated. The National Commission of Women has recommended amendments to the Act and various other changes for the proper functioning of the Act. NCW recommended that the Section 2(b) of the Act be modified to read as:

"Derogatory representation of women means the depiction in any manner of the figure of a woman, her form of body or any part thereof in such a way as to have the effect of being derogatory to, or denigrating, women and is also likely to deprive, corrupt or endanger public morality or morals". As per the above definition, depiction of woman, her form or her body or any part thereof would amount to indecent or derogatory representation if it has:

- The tendency to present a woman as a sexual object
- The tendency to present a woman as a sexual commodity for man's pleasure, or
- The tendency to glorify woman's subordination to man as an attribute to womanhood, or
- The tendency to glorify ignoble servility to man as an attribute to womanhood, or
- The effect of being indecent or being derogatory to, or denigrating women; or
- It is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals.

In spite of the law, improper representation of gender in media is a serious concern today. Recently there has been outrage about the issue and few members of the civil society have started speaking against the problem. But such demands have been raised in a lackadaisical manner with greater emphasis being on crimes of sexual violence. It is necessary to understand that sexual violence shall not stop until there is a societal change and the first step towards it would be to restrict such negative influences.

Continued incidents of obscene depiction of women in television and media in general, call for a debate on the need for effective laws against them and proper implementation of the existing legal provisions. There is a section of society which argues that such restriction impedes upon their right to freedom of expression. It is necessary to understand that the complementing duty to the right states that the same should not be abused. Such a misunderstanding is rightly encompassed by the words of John Milton, *"None can love freedom heartily, but good men; the rest love not freedom, but license."* [29]

Conclusion: Though the status of women in India, both historically and socially, has been stated to be highly dignified, but these fail to portray the grim reality. Women are still struggling for their own identity, shouting for their rights, and struggling for their own esteem. Despite the constitutional guarantees, rampant discrimination and exploitation of women in India continues. Media, as the rightly considered fourth pillar of democracy wields immense power which is only expanding and not diminishing, thus the role of has become extremely crucial for women empowerment in India. Media has great potential to make a contribution to the advancement of women. They can create self-regulatory mechanisms that can be effective in eliminating gender based programming which are misleading and misguiding. It is essential that media should devote a good percentage of their programming to create awareness among women and the society at large by creating awareness about women's rights and redressal machineries to approach.

Construction of new gender relations in some of the advertisements must be encouraged. Even the chat-shows and some reality shows projecting new and realistic images of self confident career women should be encouraged. Increasing coverage of mass media in terms of women subscribers, special columns dedicated for women readers in the newspaper and magazines, women's programmes in radio and televisions should be given more priority. As Swami Vivekananda rightly said that *"The nation which doesn't respect women will never become great...."* Therefore, media should go hand in hand with other agents of social change to work towards the empowerment of women, if India ever wants to achieve its dream of becoming a global player

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