

ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING THE IMAGE OF WOMEN

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There was a time when media represented the society, it mirrored the reality. But then we had only the radio and the print media. Gradually came the age of television one of the most effective means of audio-visual communication that became a toy in the hands of people whose intentions were truly commercial. Now this media, the most prominent one, is consumer oriented. It can forcefully and effectively converge and motivate the masses to the benefit of profit oriented organizations. With this change true art got replaced by ephemeral entertainment and artist by brand promoters. The aim of the television shows has never been to shape or influence the women's image. The "reality shows" the "soap operas" or the advertisements that we watch normally do not intend to distort or highlight the image of a woman. Yet they do affect the women's image unconsciously. Our attempt is to create an atmosphere of positive criticism which would hopefully inspire the T V channels in particular, to fore think the image of the women which their programmes might affect in due course. Keeping this in mind let us examine the various classes of the T V programmes.

T V Serials: T V Serials like 'Kyoki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thee' on Star Plus, 'Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki' on Star Utsav, Raja Ki Aayegi Barat on Star Plus, 'Mayaka' and 'Saat Phere' on Zee TV or Hum Ladkiyan on Sony entertainment are depicting women as socially unproductive idlers who remain all their lives preoccupied in family intrigues. These serials create an image of a woman whose sole aim is to deck up gorgeously and display her jewelries all the time. The modern working woman-the woman who can take valuable decisions, the woman who can bring about considerable change in the society, is nowhere to be seen in these serials. If ever a Goddess appears on the screen, she also looks like advertising products and jewelries. These woman images are far away from the images of the serials of 1980's: Hum Log, Neem ka Ped and Buniyad of Doordarshan do not match the modern marketing strategies.

Reality Shows: Coming to the reality shows, we find the same distortion of the female image. The sole aim of these shows is to generate TRP, may it be Indian Idol, Laughter Challenge, Dancing Queen or Rowdies. All of them use women as commodities. In the name of talent hunt, they seem to be hunting for women who can be used for advertising the desired brands. Which talent are they looking for? Which quality of a woman does the global market aspires for? Those simple innocent girls from small towns, who come for these reality talent shows, are groomed to give a cosmopolitan look by the organizers. They, in a very subtle way, are transformed to appease the viewers through their body language. What happens to the image of the woman is out of question. Because the women who take our media as a profession are as unmindful of the woman's image as are the big companies.

Advertisements: Advertisements have damaged the women's image the most. And they are least to be blamed as they openly advertise their brands. Their intentions are overt, not hidden. Women who accept to do anything and to go to any extent for the so called fame and easy money, are mainly to be blamed. They not only disgrace themselves but shatter the dignity of women as a whole. Advertisements like "press the call bell to stop domestic violence" sometimes bring us a positive surprise but they are rare. Likewise there are serials like 'Balika Vadhu' on Colors and 'Stree Teri Kahani' on DDI that contribute towards a positive and purposeful image of woman. A few live shows like 'Aapki Kutichery' by Kiran Bedi are definitely contributing towards appositve and healthy image. However, if we make an analysis, we find that the media's influence on the image of women is mostly negative and distorting and rarely otherwise. This is happening not only in India, but around the globe.

As we reach the completion of the first decade of twenty first century, there is little evidence that the world's communication media have a great deal of commitment to advancing the cause of women in their communities. Although the presence of women working within the media has increased in all world regions over the past two decades, real power is still very much a male monopoly (see Gallagher 1995). And while it is relatively easy to make proposals for the implementation of equality in the area of employment - and to measure progress - the issue of media content is much more problematic. Who is to decide what is acceptable in this domain? What criteria should be used to evaluate progress?

Research (and experience) has shown that purely quantitative measures are completely inadequate to describe gender portrayal in the media, much less to interpret its meaning or significance. There may be fairly widespread agreement that certain types of media content - for example, violent pornography or child pornography - are completely unacceptable and degrading to women, and should be strictly regulated. But what about the routine trivialisation and objectification of women in advertisements, the popular press, and the entertainment media? What about the prime-time television shows, watched by millions, in which women are regularly paraded as the mute and partly-clothed background scenery against which speaking and fully-clothed men take centre-stage? And how many women feel uneasy, or downright fearful, if they are alone at night in a taxi which stops at traffic lights beside an advertising poster adorned with a semi-naked, pouting female image? There are important rights and responsibilities involved here, and the conflicts are obvious. We have hardly begun to address them, much less find ways of reconciling them.

In terms of strategies for change, there are perhaps five broad areas in which simultaneous and coordinated activity could bring results. Within each of these, we will merely indicate the types of action which seem particularly important, rather than explore the many approaches and initiatives which have already been tried.

1. First, there needs to be pressure from within the media themselves. More women must be employed - at all levels and in all types of work - in the media, so that we do finally achieve the critical mass of female creative and decision-making executives who could change media output. Numbers are important, if long-established media practices and routines are to be challenged. To quote the veteran American journalist, Kay Mills: 'A story conference changes when half the participants are female ... There is indeed security in numbers. Women become more willing to speak up in page-one meetings about a story they know concerns many readers' (Mills 1990, p. 349). There is evidence that, when they do constitute a reasonable numerical force, women can and do make a difference. For instance, in the United States a 1992 survey of managing editors of the largest 100 daily newspapers found that 84% of responding editors agreed that women have made a difference, both in defining the news, and in expanding the range of topics considered newsworthy - women's health, family and child care, sexual harassment and discrimination, rape and battering, homeless mothers, quality of life and other social issues were all cited as having moved up the hierarchy of news values because of pressure from women journalists (Marzolf, 1993). In their study of press coverage in our own country during the 1980s, Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (1994) conclude that female journalists played an important role in focusing attention on issues of crucial importance to women: dowry-related deaths, rape, the right to maintenance after divorce, the misuse of sex determination tests, and the re-emergence of sati. But it is not just a question of introducing 'new' topics (though they are age-old concerns for women) on to the news agenda. As we know from the example of war reporting in the former Yugoslavia, women have also succeeded in changing the way in which 'established' issues are covered. Similarly, in the Asian context, Joseph and Sharma note a qualitative difference in reporting of the conflict in Sri Lanka by Indian women journalists who 'focused on the human tragedy unfolding in that country while also dealing with the obvious geopolitical aspects of the ethnic strife. By contrast, the latter was the sole preoccupation of most of the male journalists covering the conflict' (op. cit., p. 296).

2. The second need is for pressure from outside the media, in the form of consumer action and lobbying. One of the many paradoxes of the move towards the market-led media systems that are developing all around the world is that in some respects it places more power in the hands of the consumer. Not surprisingly, this was recognized long ago in North America, where strong media lobby groups already exist. In Canada for instance, MediaWatch - established in the early 1980s - has secured the removal of numerous sexist advertisements, has worked with national broadcasters and advertising associations to develop guidelines on gender portrayal, and has effectively lobbied to secure a strongly worded equality clause in Canada's 1991 Broadcasting Act. Elsewhere the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA), Women's Media Watch in Jamaica, and the Media Advocacy Group in India have all made an impact with both the media and the public. In Europe initiatives of this sort have barely started. In Spain the Observatorio de la Publicidad (created in early 1994 by the Instituto de la Mujer), and in Italy the Sportello Immagine Donna (established in 1991 by the Commissione Nazionale per la Parità) have begun to provide mechanisms through

which complaints can be organized and channelized. However, these are rare examples. Strong women's media associations do exist in many countries, but often their primary purpose is to defend women's professional interests as media workers. There is a real need to develop monitoring and lobby groups which could organize effective campaigns and protests on a national and - when necessary - a regional and even on the global level.

3. The third area is media education. It is astonishing how little the public in general, and even media professionals themselves, understand the subtle mechanisms which lead to patterns of gender stereotyping in media content. This emerged clearly from recent research by the Broadcasting Standards Council in the United Kingdom. For instance, they found that women viewers had even 'no concept of the scriptwriter developing characters in a particular way and accepted with little question the presentation of what they were offered' (Hargrave 1994, p. 21) There is a great deal of talk - particularly in academic and political circles - about the portrayal of women in the media. But abstract discussions about 'sexist stereotyping' and 'negative images of women' are unlikely to promote true understanding of what is involved, much less lead to real change. What is needed are effective, practical workshops built around specific media examples. In this sense, the NOS Portrayal Department in the Netherlands is exemplary. It was launched as a five-year project in 1991, and has built up a unique collection of audio-visual examples - as well as specially produced material - which are used in training sessions and workshops with programme-makers. Media education is a key strategy. The development of national and regional banks of examples and materials, which illustrate the many ways in which gender stereotyping occurs, would be a tremendous contribution to its success.

4. The fourth need is for pressure from above so that, for example, media organisations are encouraged to adopt guidelines and codes of conduct on the fair portrayal of women. The media in most countries already have guidelines that govern particular aspects of their output such as the portrayal of violence, or the regulation of advertising. In some countries - for instance Canada, the United Kingdom - certain media organizations also have guidelines covering the ways in which women are portrayed (see Mariani 1994, for a review of relevant European regulations). These guidelines have been made to work, and they could work in other organizations too. Given the development of trans border and global communication systems, there is also an urgent need for regional and international codes of practice. This is a delicate matter, which would undoubtedly provoke immediate and vociferous objections from the media communities. For example, in 1995 the European Union adopted a Resolution on the image of women and men portrayed in advertising and media. As a result of fierce lobbying by the media industry, the final text is very much weaker than the initial draft. However, it is still a useful document. Despite the inevitable opposition, it is important to work towards the development of regulatory texts and codes of conduct in all countries and regions.

5. The final need is for international debate aimed at a reinterpretation of 'freedom of expression' within the framework of a women's human rights perspective, and the subsequent development of a global code of ethics based on this new interpretation. Such an undertaking would certainly provoke controversy. Cees Hamelink points out that the pursuit of democracy in world communication has been all but abandoned because 'the gospel of privatization ... declares that the world's resources are basically private property, that public affairs should be regulated by private parties on free markets' (Hamelink 1995, p. 33). Moreover the belief that a free market guarantees the optimal delivery of ideas and information means that - in a bizarre way - the terms 'free market' and 'free speech' have become almost interchangeable. With more and more communication channels in the control of fewer and fewer hands, it is surely time for a fundamental reinterpretation of the doctrine of freedom of speech, and the search for a new definition of this 'freedom' which takes full account of the contemporary global economic, information and communication system and of women's place within it. The 1995 report of the World Commission on Culture and Development provides a lead here. The Commission points out that the airwaves and space are part of a 'global commons' - a collective asset that belongs to all humankind, but which is at present used free of charge by those who possess resources and technology. It goes on to suggest that 'the time may have come for commercial regional or international satellite radio and television interests which now use the global commons free of charge to contribute to the financing of a more plural media system' (World Commission on

Culture and Development 1995, p. 278).

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