

## Role of Media in Gender Stereotyping



### Social Science

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### ABSTRACT

*Present paper is a scientific study of the representation of women in media. It argues that media, being the forth pillar of the society, has a pivotal role in the attribution of gender stereotyping. The paper attempts to strive an argument that media, through its various gender projections, helps to make women more subjugated.*

### Introduction

Media is an imperative means to articulate information and create awareness in the era of globalization. In fact, the rapid expansion of term and concept of recent form of globalization has been made possible only through the information revolution throughout the world. Therefore, media largely reflects the life styles, socialization patterns, participation levels, cultural boundaries, political maneuverings, religious manifestations, educational standards, social hierarchy, and of course, societal images of any given society.

It has been widely recognized that media can play a substantial role in promoting and propagating information and is a key player in the social and economic development of women. The relationship between media, gender and society is quite crucial (Kataria, 2007). All three are consistent with one another. Media and communications are the central approaches where gender and sexuality remain at the core of how the society constructs, how the media portrays and people assume (Nagori, 2004).

### Depiction of Women in Media

The image of gender in the present times has undergone a significant change from the traditional constructs. However the same value system of the society remains somewhere in women's depiction in the media. Women are being portrayed in a stereotyped way. The women's issues are being suppressed and marginalized. They are supposed to be silent and not to remonstrate against the violence and exploitations they go through (Kataria, 2007). Their talent is being devalued and body is being commodified or commercialized.

Before we consider the media's role further, it is worth establishing the relative position and status of men and women in the present democratic society. "Men and women generally have equal rights in every steps of life according to the law. But our modern westernized society is an odd mix of equality and inequality. Women and men may feel equal, but at the same time are aware that this is a kind of inaccurate" (Mishra, 2007).

The media draws from a ready reservoir of gender differentiating stereotypes, myths, legends and symbols. This becomes more dangerous when it is represented by a media that is considered egalitarian and secular since no filters are used while decoding their message. Subtle stereotyping is more insidious as it is relatively more invisible but nonetheless demeaning and patronizing. The media, as an important agent of socialization in the modern world, either support or contest cultural conceptions, and have a significant impact on the social construction of gender. "The media's effects operate at the level of gender belief systems, affecting individual beliefs and opinions about males and females, and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity. The mass media have been found to play a critical role in maintaining the gender-power imbalance, passing on dominant, patriarchal/sexist values" (Das, 2000). In its malleability to dominant socio-political influences, the media has successfully appropriated the discourse of gender rights and women's

empowerment. While beauty pageants are covered on prime space, the debate veers from cultural imperialism to women's liberation and empowerment. Proponents of the market and cultural gatekeepers relegate the issue of gender rights to either commodity production or cultural protectionism (Nagori, 2004). Thin is beautiful according to the cosmetics, health and diet industries and also according to the fashion. Concern with the way women are represented is not new and informs theories of representation, identity and behavior. Since the 1970s, sexualized or trivializing representation of women were and remain seen as not only degrading but likely to incite even sexual violence.

For young women, media images are implicated increasingly in the phenomenon of the starved self. The argument is that the looks should kill but the looks is one aspect of gendered discourse-for looks to shape ourselves they must comply with other aspects of the feminine and with our willingness to continually monitor and reconstruct that. "The outcry against the media has assumed that the media portray images which suit the interest of both capital (patriarchy, the fashion and diet industries) and patriarchy (in the portrayal of women as frail, young and sexual)" (Das, 2000).

The woman on screen is mute. She functions but cannot express herself. In particular, she cannot express her personal experience in ways readily understandable to others. She suffers in silence for this. She strikes back but cannot explain or defend herself. For this she is in imminent danger to get destroyed. This relates to the issue of silencing of women in the real life. They prefer to keep mum rather than speaking out and revealing their problems which they face. The principle of cultural mutability has immense consequences for gender. The inherited "patriarchal culture", a culture in which power and opportunity is unevenly distributed in favor of males, can and should be changed. The glamour that surrounds the media presentation of the lives and careers of these individuals extends, not surprisingly, to the clothes that they wear and the way that they look. In fact, so much attention is given to celebrity appearances that entire television programs are devoted to little else but visual exploitation of celebrity clothing and their tangible products of their latest fad workouts.

### Women's Movements

One of the most broad-based definitions of feminism that emerged in the 1980s from the activities of diverse groups was that: "Feminism is a movement for the liberation of women which, because women's oppression is deeply embedded in everything must necessarily, then be a movement for the transformation of the whole society" (Berkeley, 1999).

One of the most explosive issues debated within the women's movement in the 1980s was pornography. In 1978 a conference on feminist perspectives on pornography was organized by women against violence in pornography and media to address violence against women through sexual and violent images. In 1979, Andrea Dworkin's book Pornography was published and

'Women against Pornography' (WAP) were formed in New York City. Anti-pornography activists took the stand that "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice". The 1990s confronted the women's movement with continued economic insecurity and the challenges of social practices of exclusion and hierarchy based on gender and other social characteristics of race, class, ethnicity and religion embedded in women's lives (Berkeley, 1999).

One advertising scholar, Eving Goffman, did much to explain the stereotypical images depicted in advertising in *Gender Advertisements* (1979). Goffman deconstructed advertisements by considering the gendered images that appear in them: the feminine touch, function ranking, family reutilization of subordination (lowering oneself physically as a stereotype of deference), and licensed withdrawal (women drifting psychologically from the scene). His analysis of bits of behavior captured in advertisements revealed much about the social relationships they depicted. For examples, women were often shown as smaller than and subordinate to men. "While Freidan focused on the portrayal of the housewife in society and found that this image was communicated in part by the media, Goffman extended the examination of women beyond the housewife to reveal the kinds of stereotypes of women that the gender displays reflected what occurred in social situations" (Goffman, 1979).

Author and lecturer Jean Kilbourne has vigorously criticized advertising. Kilbourne recognized that advertising sells much more than the product. She argued that because advertising is so pervasive, it has an immense cultural impact, especially on women and girls. She said advertising creates problems because it "corrupts relationships and then offers us products, both as solace and as substitutes for the intimate human connection we all long for and need" (Kilbourne, 1999).

#### Media as a Propagator of violence against Women

The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. National Organization for Women is unique in its approach to the issue of violence against women, emphasizing that there are many inter-related aspects to the issue -- domestic violence; sexual assault; sexual harassment; hate crimes across lines of gender, sexuality and race; the gender bias in our judicial system that further victimizes survivors of violence; and the violence of poverty emphasized by the radical right's attacks on poor women and children -- all of which result from society's attitudes toward women and efforts to "keep women in their place" (Kataria, 2007).

Systematic sexual abuse in conflict situations is another form of violence against women" (Kataria, 2007). As much as violence against women is a global pandemic, the consequences of this ignorance and bias are corrigible. "In November, 2003, UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) published a report stating that one out three women is likely to be sexually assaulted during their lifetimes. In this country alone, 588,490 women were victims of non-fatal intimate partner violence in 2001 and in March, 2004, Amnesty International mounted a global campaign to end violence against women. One would think that when violence of this magnitude terrorizes half of the world's population, it would be front page news" (Nagori, 2004).

Rape is without doubt the most titillating crime there is. It is no accident that rape is a frequent theme in pornography. The sexual brutalization of women is a highly marketable business. As lucrative as the portrayal of rape is in the adult entertainment industry, it stands to reason that it is also a profitable story for the news. The kind of violent and vulgar pornographies showed in media are a clear example of power issues in media. Rape is a crime of control and domination. Sexualizing it in intent of arousal sometimes encourage the viewer to accept this type of violence as acceptable. Women in this kind of pornographic material are dehumanized on a much deeper level than those in advertisements.

Media had been exhibiting the morals and ethics of a particular incident in an underemphasized and the acts of violence in an overemphasized way. Media had still not played effective roles in minimizing domestic violence against women even whereas it can play a lead role in the society's fight against violence against women. As media is the eye, ear and limbs of the society they could help a great deal in mitigating violence against women. The media's role should be to expose and generate awareness against society's ills and evils, therefore their role should be still more effective. The media has to be more aware of violence against women. Even, many women activists have said that the media coverage (of rape or other violence) was like a second assault all over again, because of their insensitivity in using pictures, publishing names, and other violations of privacy.

#### Conclusion

Media projects women are cornered in the world of beauty and in the house hold space. The intensifying and insensible impact of these media messages, or lack thereof, can very often worsen gender discrimination/ stereotyping. Media held a mirror that exposed the ills of society. Though cases of violence against women have always existed, the media is one of the major tools to play an important role in taking up the issues. The role of media is crucial to the issue of violence against women; both in terms of how media cover the issue and how media may be used as a tool to help activists and governments raise awareness and implement programs on this issue.

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