

# Women, Media and Democracy: A Correlative Study in Indian Context

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## ABSTRACT

Women have always faced marginalization and exclusion. In the patriarchal social system, men have always been at the centre and women at the periphery. It's true that things are now changing on world scenario. Women are creating a niche in every field but still in India as well as in most of countries of the world, they are facing gender discrimination. Media—electronic and print plays a crucial role in bringing revolution by changing people's opinion, perspective towards anything. It has power to convince or dissuade people on any issue concerned. The image of women as created and presented by media means a lot for men and the entire society. There is wide scope to believe that media supports the stereotyped image of women—women as objects of beauty and having no other identity; slim, gentle, weak women. Such gender discrimination is not acceptable for a democratic system. Democratization process is incomplete if women do not get identity and dignity like men. This paper aims to correlate role and image of woman in media and democracy.

## 1. Introduction

Due respect to all people irrespective of class and caste is one of the prerequisites of a good and balanced society in democracy. Women like men are integral component of society. They need to be recognized as human being with equal rights, dignity and identity like men irrespective of the gender difference. But women often are treated as subordinate to men. This subordination is witnessed in all fields along with media. Media especially visual media can play significant role in creating image of women conducive for democracy. Empowerment of women through Media can work for strengthening of democracy. These three components are correlated to each other. We need to probe in depth how media is perceiving women as human beings and how media can improve the role for betterment of democracy.

## 2. Women in Indian Society: Historical Background

Historically speaking, women have received only the status of subordination in patriarchal social system. Women in most of the human societies in general have suffered from exploitation and exclusion by their male counterparts and the society. In Indian society, women are attributed the status of *Devi* or Goddess on one hand and they are subjected to inhuman treatment on the other. There is a decline in the status of women from ancient to medieval times. *Manusmriti*, the earliest metrical work of Hinduism and which was supposed to be the divine code of conduct for all says: "Girls are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, women must be under custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son as widows. In no circumstances is she allowed to assert herself independently" [1]. Manu rejects the independent existence and identity of women as human beings. In ancient period, women were deprived of the privilege to education whereas men were given all the rights and prerogatives in this field. Women's role was to accompany men in their beds, provide them with emotional and egoistic satiation to reaffirm latter's supremacy from time to time. Women's story has always been a story of passive sufferance, endurance, and forbearance. Age-long suppression and mental and physical tortures have forced them to lift the cudgels and stand up to fight the male

chauvinistic society. Following lines of Alfred Tennyson from his poem *The Princess*, present the picture of society and the marginalized status of women.

Man for the field and woman for the hearth  
Man for the sword and for the needle she  
Man with the head and woman with the heart  
Man to command and woman to obey,  
All else confusion. [2]

This very division of labor and duties itself brings marginalization to women. Women are still facing oppression, sexual assault, molestation and have to fight for their dignity and identity. Shalu Nigam rightly points out the pathetic picture of women's problems in the following words:

Women, irrespective of their hierarchical status, ranking or background, face violence within public and private spaces, they are being doubly discriminated and denied of the basic rights and are often oppressed by norms, culture and customs in a male dominated world where capitalism and globalization commodifies and objectifies women. [3]

With the passage of time, the unnerving scenario regarding sufferance of women is changing. With revolutions, access to education, global awareness, literature produced by women voicing their problems, the society is witnessing a positive change. Literature is a powerful medium of projecting the social problems and bringing awareness. Women's issues have become central concern of many sociologists, researchers and writers.

## 3. Image of women in Media: Stereotyped Presentation

Women have been considered as subaltern in Indian society. Their image in the entire social structure more or less is of a subordinate. What is the image of women as presented in media is a question of paramount significance in this context. Does media present women's image as existed in the psyche of people in society? Does media justify them in presentation?

Media is an umbrella term that comprises Television Advertising, chat shows, serials, newspapers, applications of social media. In most of the TV advertisements, women are assigned domestic roles. They are firmly placed in a domestic sphere talking about cleaning and housework. They are shown as nurturers of family. There are some advertisements where women are shown standing just to fill in the background of the scenery. They are not shown as protagonists unless it for cleaning products. Does man appear as a character in the advertisements of soap, floor washing disinfectants? The answer is negative in most of the cases with few exceptions. Why beauty is often linked with physical features of a woman only. The advertisements of popular soaps often cast women using the products and thereby having a soft and beautiful skin. If soap brings softness to a woman's body as it is shown in the advertisement, can't the advertiser show the impact on a man's body instead of a woman. A man stands for humanity as the women do but advertisements show specifically to do with their gender. It would be very pertinent to consider UNESCO's statement regarding media and image of women:

"Taking into consideration that TV programs give information and reflect on gender roles in real life, it must be stated that women's images are distorted and unrealistic in these programs. All kind of entertainment programs portray women in a dual image. One one hand, they are decorative objects. Yet at the same time they are passive individuals in the household and in marriage who are dependent on men for financial, emotional and physical support." [4]

We need to stop featuring women as peripheral characters making men as the centre. This is deliberately and purposefully done marginalization and exclusion that is rampant in all walks of life in Indian context. The portrayal of women within magazines has been completely in line with what magazine brands have always done and will continue to do. It is customary to present women in the image of sensuality with adorable beauty. Women are objectified. They become objects with their physical features of beauty. The titles of some magazines are gender specific. In Marathi language there are two magazine named *Gruhashobha* (Home Decoration) and *Gruhashobhika* (Home Decorator). Why do we expect that only women should become our home decorator? Is it not a composite responsibility of both husband and wife to decorate the home and to make the home worth living? These are the archetypes which are constantly working in the media that present women as objects of beauty. If we divide the mass media into two categories such as fictional and news reporting, then in the former category, women are often associated with the household or sex objects and in the latter they lack roles as required. Only few news programs present women as main experts or actors. A Study conducted by Lilit Sakaryan on "Image of Armenian Women in Media: From Gender Sensitivity and Gender Stereotypes" shows that

- I. In addition to women's underrepresentation on TV, women are present only 10% of the themes concerning women's issues.
- II. TV circulates stereotypes peculiar to the patriarchal system and women are portrayed as marginalized and often immoral and materialist.

- III. 70% of TV staff is male and only 30% is female even in the shows dedicated to women. [5]

The scenario in India and many other countries is also similar like Armenia. There are some notable exceptions in this regard also but they are few. By and large, women face stereotyped imaging and underrepresentation in media.

#### 4. Media and Democracy: A Correlation

Media works as a fourth pillar of democracy in Indian context and hence it has strong connection with the implementation and sustenance of democratic system. In democracy people assume utmost significance since it is a rule by and for the people. Man and woman are equal contributors of society in all its important works and mechanism. But woman for ages have got subordinate position. Rather the patriarchy and male chauvinistic society has deliberately created this image. In modern period, we cannot consider democracy without considering the role of electronic and print media. Media holds a vast impact on the masses and that too within short time. It can convince as well as change people's opinion. That's why relation between democracy, political campaigns, public opinions and journalistic practices have become focus of great attention among researchers and the intellectual community. Media plays a crucial role of changing people's opinions. Media can propagate certain news or opinions in favor or against the existing government, thus median plays a very important role in the democratic system. The media gives a check on the functionality or non-functionality of existing governments. Hence media plays a very central role vis-à-vis democracy. They have a very strong connection with each other.

#### 5. Women, Media and Democracy

The success of democracy largely depends upon the active participation of people. Since women are integral part of society, they have equal rights, dignity and identity as men. But male dominated society does not approve their status at par with men. Hence they are treated as subaltern in the society. This biased treatment and outlook becomes pervasive in all walks of life. Media that plays a very crucial role in democracy also presents their same image as it exists in society and perceived by majority of members of society. Media makes gender discrimination during presentation of image of women. Media does not present women like men. Men are often shown as strong, decisive, and robust whereas women are shown as young, gentle, and sensual with beauty that meets the accepted standards. In many international and national conventions and conferences the critics and speakers have voice and publicized the need to break public stereotypes through change in the media policy. Mass media however continue to reproduce discriminatory stereotypes about women and portray them in sexist ways. This entire stereotyped portrayal and presentation of women as weaker than men helps in creating and reaffirming the biased perspective and belief that women are mere objects of beauty and they are not at par with men. As long as this biased presentation continues, how can we expect from the society that women will have equal role, status, dignity as human beings like men in democracy. Naturally this attitude reflects in assigning various roles to women in democratic system. In this respect, the long

term change in women's images in media could help change the perceptions and stereotypes women image in a society.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, women, media and democracy have a strong correlation. The stereotyped images of women and such presentation help in strengthening the biased perspective of society. The society with such prejudiced ideology cannot

imagine women equal to men in all respect. As long as the belief sustains in society that women are not equal to men and women are only object of beauty not having other identify as human beings, democracy cannot flourish and strengthen. Women need to be given recognition and identity not less than their male counterpart if all the democratic ideals are to be realized in real sense.

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