

LEGALFOXES LAW TIMES

WOMEN AND REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA

By Ayesha Gupta

ABSTRACT

Media nowadays plays a very crucial role in our lives. It influences almost every part of our lives and thoughts these days. Despite all the efforts done in the direction of women empowerment, the representation of women in Indian media is still questionable. The media having such a reach can play a huge role in improving the status of women. This paper deals with the issues connected with the representation of women in the Indian media. Media can be a powerful tool in this journey of women's empowerment. But even after so many movements and debates over the condition of women in Indian society, the media which forms the basis of so many thought systems chose to depict the same old beliefs about women.

Keywords- *Women, media, representation, women empowerment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Media has now become an inevitable part of our lives. Globalization and multifold development in technology made the already powerful media even stronger. Media can play an active role in promoting and disseminating information and are key players in the social and economic development of women. Media largely reflects the lifestyles, socialization patterns, participation levels, cultural boundaries, religious manifestations, educational standards, social hierarchy and most importantly it impacts the thought system in such a powerful way. In fact, media can play a significant role in either perpetuating or challenging social norms, practices and behaviors that are harmful for protection of women.

2. WOMEN AND MEDIA

2.1. Body shaming

Research shows that women's magazines have ten and one-half times more ads and articles promoting weight loss than men's magazines. Television and movies reinforce the importance of a thin body as a measure of a women's worth¹.

Women are always portrayed with slim and toned bodies and being this is shown as a symbol of 'perfection' in media. There are almost nil representation of imperfect bodies and almost all the actress in TV, movies, or print media are always slim. This is where the stereotype of having a perfect body bloom.

The message that Indian media send through these gestures is that women who are different from their 'standard size' are problematic. It spreads a wrong message and promotes the culture of unhealthy dieting and techniques of drastic weight loss. Doing something for your own body out of your own wish is great but doing something under the pressure of fitting into the boxes that the society made is not correct.

It is important to normalize having cellulite or being overweight because of the illness. It is important to spread the message that being darker skin tone or heavier legs doesn't decide the worth of a woman and this representation of 'perfect women' in Indian media is absolutely imperfect. Gone are the days where women need some fairness cream to prove their worth.

2.2. Women in movies

In the past few years, there has been little progress and we could see a few of the women centric films. But there's still a huge gap in what we need and what actually happened. Most of the movies till date, shows male actor as the 'hero' of the film and women are just portrayed as 'eye candy' to lure and seek attention. Hindi cinema has influenced people to an extent that they start taking it as a reflection. The concept of having an 'item number' and then portraying that woman as a piece of flesh is something that promotes rape culture.

¹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284431132_PORTRAYAL_OF_WOMEN_IN_MEDIA, visited on 30 December 2020

Another questionable practice was always having the name of the hero first and then the actress. There are very few movies that broke this stereotype but still, there are a lot more people who haven't moved away from this concept. Why can't the name of the actor and the actress can be shown together if they contributed equally to a movie and not one after the other?

Nowadays, a slight shift has been seen in the movies where we can see women saving themselves otherwise, for past so many years, women were shown as 'weak characters' who always needed some male to save them from all the troubles of the world. Why can't a woman save herself or another woman can save her?

The message that such movies pass on is that a female is not enough for herself and this is where the seeds of patriarchal society are sown into because this is where men start believing that they have some authority over females.

2.2.1. Wage difference in Bollywood

Despite, there being so many successful actresses in the film industry but how many times we have heard actresses getting more pay than their male counterparts? The so called accepting and modern film industry still cannot handle giving more pay than the male actor even if their contribution is more in that particular film.

According to several surveys, leading female actresses are paid almost 40%-50% of what their male counterparts take for the same amount of work. This is what leads to people thinking that the work done by women is not so important.²

2.3. Women and advertisement

Advertisements are the buzz word these days. From television to a number of social media platforms, advertisements occupy a great part of our thoughts and screens.

²<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/03/pay-parity-in-bollywood-what-needs-to-change-2/#:~:text=When%20it%20comes%20to%20gender,what%20their%20male%20counterparts%20make.>, visited on 30th December 2020

Advertisements have always been an important factor in shaping the thought system, choices, and beliefs of people. But some of the companies have left no stone unturned for their own selfish motives and even moved to a point where they are objectifying and hurting the dignity of a woman.

The advertisements like women running to a man with certain deodorant or perfume are so disrespectful and objectify women. Why the director or writer of such advertisements does not understand that women are not so stupid to run after a guy just because of a deodorant. The depiction of women as 'easy to catch' then turns into rape culture because men cannot accept the fact that the same thing is not happening with them which was shown in the advertisement.

Another issue is private companies setting 'standard goals' just for selling their products such as fairness creams and hair removal creams. Such advertisements have set a standard of women having fair complexion and hairless body. It has now become a duty for a woman to be fair and hairless more than her wish in order to be accepted by society.

2.4. Women and daily soaps

Most people have access to Indian television. Daily soaps have a reach to crores of people in India. Such shows which reach so many people on a daily basis become an important factor in framing the opinions and influencing thoughts of those people.

But what these daily soaps do is that portray women as the weakest individual who spends most of her time in the household chores or planning plotting against other females. Such depiction is the reason why women think that they are always in competition with other women. It is important to know that women have much more in their lives to do than just planning plotting against each other. It is high time to stop showing that women are jealous of each other because now they are supporting each other in every walk of life.

Another wrong portrayal is women being the scared or submissive one and the husband being the dominant one. The scene of the husband slapping his wife and wife

still apologizing to him is not new in Indian television shows. Such a crap mentality should not be accepted because this is what makes men think that their wives or daughters or their property.

In the name of modernization, women are shown as smoking cigarettes or using cuss words and this passes on the message that this is what 'modern women' looks like. Why can't a woman be shown as a financially independent person who knows to stand for herself and support other females? There is no need to depict 'modern woman' as 'bad' or 'negative'. It is often shown that 'modern women' cannot adjust in a family and end up having a broken family. But the fact is that this is not what 'modern woman' looks like. The fact is that she knows to set her boundaries and knows where to adjust and where to stand for herself.

2.5.Representation of women in the news

News channels are somewhat the source that sets the standard of a nation. But the lines in reporting the news related to crimes are like 'x was raped'. This is called victim blaming. The name of the accused should be highlighted and the victim should not be portrayed as someone who did wrong by 'wearing a short dress' or 'going out with guys.' We don't have to put the burden of being raped on the victim. By using such a statement, it is portraying that something was wrong on the part of that woman because of which she got raped.

3. EFFECTS OF SUCH MEDIA PRACTICES

There are so many wrong depictions till date in the media about women and this is what becomes the basis of thoughts of people and then thoughts become things. Women empowerment is often shown in an 'ill way' and this is what creates fear in the minds of people about women empowerment.

There are so many instances of what women empowerment looks like, from simply standing and speaking for your rights to women flying planes, sailing ships, being financially independent, taking care of themselves is what women empowerment actually looks like.

Being such a powerful instrument, the message passed on by media is questionable in so many ways. All these things promote rape culture and a patriarchal society where women are often treated as a piece of flesh or property.

These things also create an impression in minds of young girls to have perfect bodies and looks and then they try to change themselves to fit in the 'perfect boxes' created by society. This is kind of an additional pressure which no individual should bear.

4. CHANGING DYNAMICS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has now become one of the most used forms of media these days. The youth of the world is especially influenced way too much by social media platforms. These platforms have become places where people can share their life stories.

One of the very positive changes which are seen through the emergence of the social media platform is that women are giving voice to their opinions on these platforms. There are so many virtual communities on these platforms where women support each other. Earlier people used to be scared and they never had access to raise their voices because not every person can expect to go to a news channel and give an interview regarding his/her problem. But with the increase in the use of these platforms, every common person has access to the platform where their opinion can reach people at large.

There are many trends such as #metoo which gave women a platform to raise their issues against such big names. There are many bloggers or influencers who share about body positivity, mental health, walking out of emotional or physical abuse, and what not. Such platforms have given women the confidence to embrace their natural beauty and have also given them a sense of acceptance.

Such platforms are now turning into communities where women support each other, talk about each other's struggles, learn coping mechanisms and much more. The rise in social media has also resulted in more awareness about the rights of women and now women can collectively raise the issues such as menstrual health, trafficking in humans and other topics that are of concern for women globally.

5. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

After so many years of independence, it is high time to use such powerful sources in the right way. Where media can be an important medium of reforming the thought system of society, the role media is playing is still questionable in certain aspects.

Women empowerment looks like choosing not to engage with or talk to abusive family members even if they are respected elders, choosing to break the cycles of body shaming by informing your family that you are not okay with them talking about your body, not lying about their sexuality because of fear and this is what Indian media should come up with.

The author believes that only laws cannot control the crimes against women and no laws can improve the condition of women in Indian society. The most important step in this direction is the shift in the thought process and media being such a powerful platform to spread the message to the masses can play a huge role in bringing the change we all dream of.

It is high time for a better picture of women in Indian media and being naive, weak or underconfident is not what defines a woman anymore. It is happy to see that social media platforms have become the real voice in movements like women empowerment because they have become the platform where women can give voice to their opinions and embrace their perfect imperfections. When we say that change in thought process is the biggest step that we need to curb the crimes against women in India, then the respectable depiction of women in media can be the first step in that direction.