

Reporting Gender : Key Issues and Debates

Dr. Poarkodi.N¹, Dr. Ansu Elsa Joy², Dr. Lakshmipriya.M³, Klarine Judith.K⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur-603203, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2499-1868>

²Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur-603203, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6785-7801>

³Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur-603203, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9916-4501>

⁴Animation Instructor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur-603203, Tamil Nadu, India.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1055-2067>

KEYWORDS**ABSTRACT**

Gender,
Stereotype,
Media, Policy,
Patriarchy

There have been ample instances in which the media coverage media on gender has been problematic leading to debates and discussions on gender-sensitive media coverage and gender sensitisation training in newsrooms and media houses. The gender bias and prejudices in the society gets echoed in the media chambers irrespective of the code of media ethics and laws. In this context, the paper tries to identify the issues related to gender-based media coverage and recommend the changes required in policies, and organizational and work cultures of media.

Introduction

Everyday, we are exposed to a wide range of media images and narratives. The ever-proliferating media content has ascended to play a major role in shaping our perceptions and lives. Media are potentially powerful agents of socialization and social change - presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviours and encouraging stereotypes (Gallagher, 1979). Our perceptions of beauty, sexuality, agency, roles and identity are often influenced by the media.

As early as 1963, Betty Friedan, in the pathbreaking work *Feminine Mystique*, protested the predominant representation of women in domestic roles in mass media and proclaimed that women were equally capable of doing any work as men. Friedan observed: there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform; the image that I came to call the feminine mystique ... feminine mystique can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination and nurturing maternal love (1963). Media narrativises a certain fiction of femininity that is far from our lived realities and experiences. The media imagery of masculinity too has been problematic. This paper aims to highlight these processes of gendering through media and what it does to our being.

Objectives

The objectives are :

1. To investigate the interlinkages between gender, identity and representation that will aid in producing gender sensitive coverage/programming.
2. To examine the key issues and debates on the role of media in reinforcing gendered social roles and ideology.
3. To trace the gendered patterns of media coverage
4. To explore the gender and its relationship to power
5. To Identify the shifts required in policies, organizational and work cultures of media

Definition of Gender

Let us begin with the famous statement of French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. *One is not born, but rather become a woman.* (1949) Do we agree? Mostly, we disagree. In general, we think gender is natural. So where does this notion of “becoming” arise? Basically, sex and gender are two different things. Sex is biologically determined, i.e., one is born as a male or female, therefore the differences are physical. On the contrary, gender is socially / culturally *constructed*, and *not natural/biological*.

Our roles, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and values as different gender ,therefore, are constructed. These constructs are quite familiar to us. They are stereotypical, i.e., they are preconceived notions of the characteristics or traits of a particular social group. They are ‘pictures in our heads’ as Walter Lipmann puts it. They distort reality. They codify and prescribe what is appropriate behaviour, clothing, attitude etc. for different sexes.

These gender constructs are essentialised as if they were the innate properties of men and women. People who do not conform to these norms or standards are considered deviant and even punishable. These constructs could be constraining and even detrimental to the group or the individuals within the group as it stifles the prospects of diversity. They are positioned as binaries - men are strong, women are weak; men are independent, women are dependent; men are rational, women are emotional.

In our day to day lives, we encounter several arguments that these are natural or as a result of hormones or created by God. They are made to appear as natural/universal in our settings.

However, as Germaine Greer posits these ideas of womanhood or manhood are encultured in us through socialization from our childhood. As children we don’t dare to challenge them out of the fear of admonition and adhere to the norms and internalise them. Quite often, the gendered roles and behaviour become what Judith Butler terms as *performative* than real. According to Butler, for generations such gender performativity or doing gender is transmitted whereby individuals indulge in acts of performing gender that constitutes who they are (Butler, 1990).

Gender, Patriarchy and Power

Then the question is - who constructs the gender and why?

A broader understanding of our society is a pre-requisite to unravel the processes and purposes of gender construction. As we still live in a patriarchal or male dominated society, the key component of this inquiry has to be patriarchy and its interrelations to power and gender.

Patriarchy is a social system in which men exercise primary authority over the family, social organization and politics. The word patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the ‘patriarch’ in a family, i.e., the eldest male is the head of the family and controls his wife, children and other members of the family. It can be inferred that the patriarchal ideology is founded on unequal power relations between sexes, privileging men and subordinating women. Men are the decision-makers. They are the inheritors of the lineage. They control property, production and reproduction. The centrality of men is ensured in private and public domains. Male domination reigns in every sphere – be it politics, economics, culture, religion or family.

On the other hand, women are discriminated, marginalized and oppressed. They are treated as inferior to men. They are relegated to secondary social status. They are deprived of autonomy. They are denied access to resources. They are excluded from activities that belong to the “male domain”. Overall, gender is stratified, i.e, there is unequal access to prestige, authority, power, rights and economic resources.

The gender hierarchy or power relation that forms the basis of patriarchy is to be established, safeguarded and propagated through the construction of gendered identities and creation of gendered social structures. The gender identities are thus constructed to legitimize or ‘naturalize’ the inequalities, oppression and exploitation of women. Biological differences and providence provide the fertile ground to masquerade the ideological construction as natural and universal.

In order to survive and ascertain itself, the patriarchy not only constructs these notions of gender but sustains it over generations, with minor changes and variations necessitated by the changes within the society. This is transmitted to the society through ideological state apparatus and mass media. The ideological state apparatus includes family, religious institutions, schools, courts, arts and economic and medical systems.

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci brings in the concept of hegemony – the cultural, moral and ideological leadership of a dominant group over allied or subaltern groups, for example elite vs. subaltern, capitalist vs. worker, men vs. women, to understand how power structures are maintained, while French Philosopher Michel Foucault in his exploration of the relationship between power, body and sexuality illuminates at body and sexuality as cultural constructs than natural phenomena.

Further, Foucault provides another frame to understand the normalization of gender roles. He talks about a new form of bio-power that is synthesized around two poles – one that concerns with government focusing the management of life processes – the birth, death, disease, sexual relations and so on and the other, which is ‘disciplinary power’ targeting the human body and, in turn, mind, by setting up standards of normalcy and deviance on various aspects of life, including the regulation of sexual behaviour.

Gender Stereotype

Earlier, we have taken note of the ideological underpinnings and workings of gender constructs and the myth or fiction of the dichotomous divisions between the constitution of femininity and masculinity - that which constitutes manhood is in opposition to that which constitutes womanhood. They seem to be mutually exclusive and hence, cannot have any overlapping or intersections. These rigid homogenous distinctions built on binary opposition pose obstacles and eventually hamper the possibilities of variation in gender identities and roles even as we experience and witness multiplicities in our quotidian lives.

Both men and women struggle to embody the ideals of the gendered identities that are too high in expectations for individuals to actually accomplish, often creating a sense of inadequacy and insecurity, lack of self-worth and depression when unable to fulfill them. Women, in particular, have more stakes as they are subjugated, devalued and disempowered whereas men are entitled and privileged. The gender stereotypes create certain biases and prejudices in favor of or against the individuals who follow or defy these norms respectively. Such prejudices and discriminations based on a person's sex are labelled as sexism. Sexism promotes the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. In many cultures, language itself becomes a tool for sexism. There may be similarities as well as particularities in the manifestation of sexism in different languages. A set of examples of sexist expressions in English language is provided in the box.

Sexism in Language is evident in

- Using male expressions generically to refer to females: ‘the history of mankind’, ‘chairman’, ‘spokesman’
- Using the masculine pronoun ‘he’ to refer to females in a generic context, for example ‘a writer must ensure that he is not libellous’ : on the other hand, prejudicial use of ‘she’ is common, for example ‘a cook must keep her kitchen clean’
- Using marked expressions, usually diminutives, to refer to females as different, irregular, ‘other’, for example poetess, actress, lady doctor. Male equivalents (like ‘male nurse’) are rare.
- Using diminutive or juvenile forms to refer to or address women : sweetie, office girl, girlie
- The over-lexicalisation of women. There are many more terms for women than for men, indicating that the culture regards women as having an abnormal status. Many of these terms are sexually abusive (slut, whore’), dehumanising (skirt, piece, bimbo), trivialising (pet), chick) or signify possession by male (wife, mistress)
- Some of the most offensive abusive terms (the ‘four letter words’) have origins or overtones in obscene references to females.

Source : Sexism in Language (Fowler, 1991)

Images of Women in Media

At the beginning of this paper, we discussed why we need to understand gender and media. In continuation of it, in this part, we will look at some areas concerning gender and media – representation of femininity and masculinity, media workforce and ownership pattern.

Media representation of gender can be addressed in two folds : the scale/magnitude of representation and the kind of representation of particular sexes. Before we delve on this, let us take a quick look at the gender stereotypes given in the below table :

Gender Stereotype

Men	Women
Strong	Weak
Aggressive	Submissive
Bold	Timid
Independent	Dependent
Rational	Emotional
Competitive	Uncompetitive
Active	Passive

By and large, these stereotypes are introduced by our parents, relatives, friends, neighbors or teachers. Our mythologies, our folklore, our legends, our performative arts and so on vividly depict them. Our television channels, radio, advertisements, newspapers and magazines portray them.

Media with a huge potential to reach masses becomes a key instrument in producing and disseminating the dominant patriarchal narratives. Media subverts them to a very least extent. It, rather, creates, reinforces and upholds the deeply entrenched patriarchal order. Media achieves this by either producing disproportionately less images of women or reproducing gendered roles and identities.

Under-representation of Women

In 1970s, George Gerbner theorized the under-representation of women in media as ‘symbolic annihilation,’ where in women’s lives and issues are trivialized through absence, meagre presence and condemnation. Even the few that were represented were highly emotional, weak or manipulative. While over-representation of men asserts their supremacy in the world, the under-representation of women makes them invisible.

Decades after Gerbner’s postulation, the representation of women in media today is far better. However, the limited representation of women's roles as homemakers, mothers, or sexual objects for male pleasure hasn’t changed much limiting women’s horizons and according them little social status as Journalist Gloria Steinem had rightly pointed out. It cannot be discounted that images of women as workers are also appearing on the media owing to their emergence as a huge workforce. New Media is challenging the gendered modes of address and representation in a greater way. Apart from propagating images of domesticity and maternalism, commodification and sexual objectification of female bodies, the media produces polarized images of women as virgins and whores, women as dependents in man-woman relationships and negative coverages of sexual violence.

Women Media Workers

In the period between 1960s and 80s, feminist scholarship identified the low levels of women workforce across all mass media as a major area of concern that required intervention as dominant share of male workforce rendered media as a male preserve and privileged male perspective in media. The ratio of male female workforce is a lot improved now but promotions to top positions are still far-fetched, pay gaps and distribution of roles within the organisation are other areas that

reflect gender disparities. Emphasis on women's appearance, problems of sexual harassment and hostility, laxity in adhering to labour welfare measures like maternity benefits, crèche facility are rampant in Indian media industry.

Media Ownership

Media ownership patterns have been changing from agglomeration to conglomeration. What has not changed much is the gender of ownership. Men remain to be holding the sole proprietorship of the entire media industry, barring a few exceptions. As ownership plays a pivotal role in framing the organizational policy, structure and setting up production priorities more women at the ownership level could influence major decisions.

Conclusion

To conclude, sexism and misogyny is pervasive in media representation. While a segment of audience is trying to negotiate the stereotypes with their own interpretations the other is getting hypersexualized and objectified as a dire consequence of them. The valorization of women's bodies is leading to women opting for surgical interventions to attain perfect bodies or engaging in extreme dieting and starvation leading to health disorders like anorexia and bulimia in order to be the object of male desire. Paradigm shifts are necessary in every aspect of the media environment as well as perceptions of gender to foster a just and unbiased coverage of gender.

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