

Mainstreaming Women in News- Myth or Reality

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Abstract

Women constitute half of the world population but continue to suffer at the hands of male dominated governance, policy, economy, technology and media. Media has not yet recognized the voice of women in news and therefore needs to be sensitized to the gender mainstreaming. The huge presence of media has not made a difference to gender inequality. Paradoxically, media do not care an ounce for the opinion of women on any issue including women's issue. Rape news in media is getting more descriptive and visual and has shamelessly become the staple diet of media. Arushi murder case and Nirbaya gang rape news stories not only shook the conscience of the world but also exposed the vulnerability of the mainstream media. 21st century may be dubiously categorized as the era of women becoming the principal capital of media economy in general and TV economy in particular. The presence of women in news is still on the periphery facing bottlenecks to join the mainstream. Social media may become the new medium of free speech and expression for women. Further, the rural women have become journalists and have shown insight into the breaking of media stereotype.

Keywords: Gender, media, equality, mainstreaming, media culture, social media, public discourse.

Historically, media have framed women as an object of desire and have traded them as a commodity in a male dominated society. The world has transformed from agricultural society to information society and is on the verge of becoming a knowledge society. But the women continue to fight against gender stereotypes, exploitation and inequality despite the presence of media in all hues. Media intervention in objective portrayal of gender issues is still several notches below the realistic graph. There exists a proverbial void between media treatment of women and the expectations of women consequently perpetuating gender stereotypes. 21st century may be dubiously categorized as the era of women becoming the principal capital of media economy in general and TV economy in particular. The presence of women in news is still on the periphery facing bottlenecks to join the mainstream.

Demographic Profile of Women

Women form a significant part of the world population constituting 49.6%, almost to that of 50.4% males. In India the female population is at 48.3%, on par with China's 48.2% driving close to 51.7% (India) and 51.8% (China) of male population. However, women face Herculean problems like early marriage, MMR- Maternal Mortality Rate, IMR- Infant Mortality Rate, crime and sexual harassment that are detrimental to women. According to reports, over 35 % of women worldwide have faced sexual violence and in some nations it is alarmingly over 70%. As per the statistics, more than 64 million girls worldwide are married before they attain the age of 18. India too faces the problem of the huge presence of child brides about 27% and stands 6th in

the world in the prevalence of child marriages and India alone accounts for one third of the global child marriages says the UN report. A 2010 study found in the nation's capital New Delhi over 66% of women have experienced sexual harassment in one form or the other during one year (UN Women Report). Literacy is a vital issue that will be instrumental in the upliftment of women. It is a matter of serious concern that almost three-quarters of the world's 775 million illiterate adults are found in 10 countries where India is placed along with countries like Ethiopia and Congo. A disturbing finding of this report is of all the illiterate adults in the world, two-thirds are women. India has a dubious distinction of having the largest illiterate population in the world with an overall literacy rate of 74.04% consisting of 82.14% of male literates and 65.46 % of female literates. India's sex ratio is an issue that is ingrained in the social, cultural beliefs loaded against girls in the society. India's sex ratio reflects the pathetic gender discrimination still prevalent in large pockets of urban and rural areas. The state of Kerala (1058) and the Union Territory of Puducherry (1038) are the only places in India, which have more females than males obviously attributed to high rate of literacy and high growth rate. India's Infant Mortality Rate is 44 meaning the death rate of infants is 44 for every 1000 births and Maternal Mortality Rate is 212 which is as many deaths of mothers per 1000 lives. Fertility Rate is an average number of children per woman is 2.4 (India) that is comparatively higher than 1.5 (China) children per woman and the latter is attributed to China's one-child policy. The disparity in the sex ratio is bordering on social demand for a male child in a traditional society like India. 'Technology which is at most times an enabling tool can sometimes be a double edged sword, antenatal sex determination has often resulted in gender selective abortions. Advancement and adoption of antenatal sex detection technology have resulted in a skewed sex ratio (Gupta, 2007).'The increasing usage of prenatal sex determination tools and son preference has resulted in a highly masculine sex ratio (Rajan, 1999).

India has taken measures to improve school enrollment of girls in rural India. RTE Act of 2009 intends to provide free and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6-14. Though the government claims to have achieved 98% primary school enrollment owing to RTE Act, among children aged 6-14, the dropout rate is still high among girls. Girls constitute 62% of those who drop out in primary school level, thus adding to illiterate females in 15-24 age group. These girls from marginalized class suffer owing to economic and social reasons like historic oppression in the society and are deprived of education as families can ill afford to send them to schools and are forced to drop out either to help family earn income or to get married as child brides. Obviously these girls suffer from malnutrition, physical abuse and sexual exploitation at home or at work. The rights of girl children are violated unabashedly despite government giving top priority to saving girl child and girl education issues. The school dropout rate amongst adolescent girls is high at 63.5% (Ministry of Statistics and programme implementation, 2012). One of the reasons is lack of public toilets for girls in schools as 56% of government schools do not have separate toilet for girls says Annual Economic Survey, 2011-12.

Women in India have got the opportunity to participate in the political process with the enactment of Panchayat Raj Institutions Act. The legislation establishes local government in which ordinary people who are even poor and illiterate can contest elections and govern the village or taluk level administration. Women have got elected in big numbers as there is 50% of reservation for women in PRIs. Today 34% means 1.1 million of India's 3.5 million village legislators are women.

<i>Global Gender Profile in News Media (in percentage)</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Total workforce of media professionals	64.9	35.1
Governing boards	74.1	25.9
Top management	72.7	27.3
Director of news/Bureau chiefs/managing editors	61.3	38.7
Senior editors/chief correspondents	71.3	28.7
Reporter, sub-editor, correspondent, producer	63.9	36.1
Technical posts	73.2	26.8

Women in News

Study after study has endorsed the premise that the stereotypical portrayal of women in news has not changed in media. According to the survey by the Global Media Monitoring Project 2005, the ratio of female to male news subjects in Indian media is 21:79 as against global status of 24:76. The report says that more than 3 out of 4 of the people in the news are male despite female population on par with that of males (GMMP,2010). Over 28 percent of news portrays women as victims in Indian media compared to global figures of 19 percent. The news analysis by Uks Research Centre reveals that electronic media just devoted 7% of its total time on news about women. In print media, 72% of women's news was buried in the inside pages of newspaper with only 9% of news making it to the front page establishing that women's news view with politics, crime and advertisements to earn space or time in the media (Uks Research Centre).

The pertinent issue is lack of women's presence in media decisions. Globally women account for 35.1% in the total workforce of media occupying variety of positions ranging from low presence in management posts and editorial responsibilities. In a survey, 88.46% of women journalists have agreed affirmatively when they were posed with a question on whether presence of more women at every level will change stereotypical portray of women and replace it with more positive attitude towards women and human rights issue (Ibid). In India the women's presence in media is comparatively lower than global figures in management and editorial positions. The gender profile of Indian media shows that an average of 20 percent of women are found in jobs like editors, sub editors and reporters who form the core of journalism.

<i>Gender profile of Indian media (In Percentage)</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
Governance/company board of directors	79	21
Publishers/chief executive officers	86.2	13.8
News directors/editors-in-chief	76.7	23.3
Chief correspondents/news administrators	81.7	18.3
Junior News writers/Reporters/News producers/sub editors	74.5	25.5
Senior news writers/reporters/news producers/editorial producer	71.6	28.4
Technical posts	93	7
<i>Gender Profile of Media in India</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Hindi Print media	86	14
English Print media	84	16
Hindi Electronic media	89	11
English Electronic media	68	32
Total	83	17

Woman's presence in print and electronic media in India shows a dismal picture with 14% and 16% of women working in Hindi and English language newspapers and magazines respectively, whereas 11% of women are employed in Hindi electronic media against 32% in English electronic media which is the highest level of women's participation. The GMMP report (2010) states that on an average globally, '52% of stories on television and 45% of those in radio are presented by women'. In India, only 12% of news stories had women as the central focus and nearly 30% of female news subjects got coverage on the basis of their family status in contrast to 5% of males identified on similar grounds revealing the gender perception of the media. The report states that Indian media featured a very high percentage of men (78%) as news subjects, men as experts/spokespersons/commentators (over 80%), men as news sources (78%) and used men to get popular opinion on the streets (54%). Sadly, 5 percent of news stories touched upon gender issues in their content as an overwhelming percentage of the stories were on politics, government, sports and crime (GMMP, 2010). Stereotypical treatment of gender issues has been reinforced in over 63 percent of news stories in Indian media against global figures of 46 percent establishing the need for gender sensitization of media (Ibid).

Media organizations are required to implement gender mainstreaming policy to ensure gender perspective in news in mainstream media. Gender mainstreaming policy evolved during Beijing 1995 conference, *Platform for Action*, is a global strategy for promoting gender equality, required in all the critical areas of concern (UN Women). The implementation of the gender mainstreaming policy by the Inter Press Service, a global news agency which claims its services in Human rights and gender issues apart from globalization and development has been studied by researchers to understand the implications of the policy. The study has found lack of gender perspective in the implementation of the policy in the international news agency based in Africa. Critics are of the opinion that even globalization failed to give importance to gender debate with

the world stage dominated by politics and economics (Freeman, 2001). Feminists have pointed out that women were excluded from globalization debates (Sreberny, 2001).

Similarly, women were not taken into account either by the media or the political parties in the general elections of India in May 2014. In India traditionally, public perception of the mainstream electorate consists of powerful men, a sign of patriarchal society which do not consider women as serious, life changing electorate. Women were ignored and the media did not bother to find out the gender agenda of the political parties. It is widely believed that men constitute a mainstream group in the elections and create women's group from their perspective to promote their interests in politics. In the process women lose their identity and toe the line of dominant groups to gain power. Women in Indian elections exercise their franchise as per the whims and fancies of the male members of the family than by their choice. Traditionally, women have never behaved aggressively and asserted their right to vote, making a mockery of the democratic process. Media has failed to sensitize women about their right to vote as individual opinion and identity have never been associated with women electorate. This is despite the fact that in 2014 elections women (66%) have voted on par with men (67%) and political candidates gaining more support from women voters who are emerging as an important voter segment that no political party can afford to ignore. However, the media did not portray women voters as the important electorate in national politics in India's six decades of democratic elections. Political parties and media have invariably given priority to *Dalits*, Muslims and backward class in the election manifesto but have never articulated women's issues like gender discrimination, crime against women and gender equality in their election campaigns, debates or manifesto.

Media and Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity (Raewyn Connell, 1987) reflects even in media content says Peter J.Kareithi. Media content portrays men as physically and mentally strong and superior to women. News is also categorized as hard or masculine or soft or feminine news. The perception of men as 'real men' meaning aggressive and in control of their work (Harry Brod, 1987) is reinforced by the media, which frames women as vulnerable, dependent and identifies them as the weaker sex. The physical superiority of men bolstered in both text and visuals interpret that masculinity is something that is daring and therefore men are capable of committing physical violence and women are physically weak and cannot do daring acts and are incapable of defending themselves against physical attack. Media content portrays women as people who surrender after suffering, pain and fears and are supposed to wait for men to rescue them. In the case of Delhi gang rape nicknamed as *Nirbhaya* case committed on December 16, 2012 where a young 23 year old female was gang raped in a moving private bus by six men. The woman later died in the hospital after battling for life for 13 days and the case generated widespread condemnation across the world for the barbarism and ghastly nature of the crime. In the incident, the girl was accompanied by her male friend and unlike the masculinity projected in the media about men, the girl could not be saved by the man. Physicality is portrayed as gender specific while in reality, people defend themselves against assault based on their individual capability. Masculinity has been ingrained as cultural and social attribute in the minds of women for centuries and therefore one finds media perpetuating it despite changes to the contrary. The fact that both men and women are equally strong both physically and mentally has escaped the attention of the media, which continues to harp on masculinity in media content including

advertisements. Men derive the power of authority owing to economic freedom given by the job or property that they inherit and assert their manliness since time immemorial. Today, women have education, job and the right to property and have become assertive, aggressive and wield power in workplace. The hegemonic masculinity perpetuated by patriarchic society also finds reflected in the media without any rationale underlining the need to shatter the tainted masculinity myth in the media culture.

Breaking Media Stereotype – New Media As A Tool

The migration of news from traditional bastion to non linear social media territory besides influencing civil society movements has unconsciously given a public forum for women's participation. New media considered as alternative media is basically a democratized channel of communication that is free from government, editorial and management control to a greater extent with public access to infinite space and time coupled with opportunities to own a blog or a website. The experience of getting heard/ read/noticed gave visibility to the voice of the voiceless in traditional societies like India where patriarchy had oppressed women from participating in public discourse. New social media like Facebook, Twitter and online newspapers and TV channels are getting different shades of perspectives from less heard quarters like women. In the age of Internet women have experienced the joy of freedom of speech and expression and find themselves liberated with free access to information on any subject. Women have realized the power of Internet and have taken to blogging and are emboldened enough to share private space in public sphere. During *Nirbhaya's* gang rape incident college girls in thousands could organize protests through Facebook and Twitter demonstrating the power of social media in shaping public support to social causes. These new media could connect with the women breaking all psychological barriers. Interestingly, there has been total disconnect between conventional mass media and the women where public opinion does not reflect the public mind as women constitute over half of the total population. Social media has changed the social order and norms for women. Women are going to read news either in print or digital edition but they are going to call the shots by choosing the device as well as the content as mobile technology has made news and views more accessible. Women are already using interactive technologies to have global conversation on local issues. New media intervention will transform the conventional news from impersonal to interactive mode with more women getting visibility in the new devices. The fact that Blogs have broken the media stereotype by facilitating owning media, infinite space and airing unedited views and comments on public events without government or editorial control and not dictated by market has facilitated women's participation in public discourse. The attribute of inclusiveness of Internet will empower women to produce diverse information, to communicate and to form an opinion on public issues in public interest.

Rural Women Journalists

Many organizations have established a decentralized and democratized alternative model of media to promote gender, media and information literacy to increase media access and reach to grassroots groups. Some of the initiatives undertaken by rural women in India are making waves in rural communities because of the bottom up approach of the model as against the stereotypical top down approach in communication with the rural people. Some of the pioneering rural women journalists and journalism initiatives are as follows;

Navodayam of Andhra Pradesh; This newspaper is reported and edited solely by rural women. A highly successful rural intervention, this paper focuses on development, self help groups, rural banking, poverty eradication and other related issues. The newspaper has given voice to the voiceless rural poor women of Andhra Pradesh, which is reeling under the onslaught of Naxalism and political conflict in the formation of separate statehood.

Khabar Lehariya: This newspaper published by the State of Uttar Pradesh is run by a group of *Dalit* and Tribal women. Recently the paper won national award for rural journalism. The paper focuses on development, politics, elections, government programmes, social evils like alcoholism, superstition and others. The newspaper has found recognition and has become the voice of the poorest of the poor in the villages.

More and more organizations are adopting the SEWA – Self Employed Women’s Association media model evolved by social activist, Illa Bhat of Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat. The model has introduced an alternative to the top down approach in the production and dissemination of media content. It has ‘mainstreamed news’ (Namrata Bali, SEWA) of marginalized women, highlighting their grievances and achievements . The model has potential to empower women through information literacy. It has successfully imparted media production skills to poor, illiterate women like vegetable vendors, farm labourers and others who have successfully learnt the art of making news bulletins using video equipments and broadcast their own programs or video stream or send the recorded news bulletins to the authorities. The model has also broken ‘linguistic hegemony’ (Ibid) by disseminating information in the language of the masses rather than that of elites besides ensuring freedom of expression to marginalized women to participate in public discourse. The novel way of giving victim’s perspective in the news has solved many civic issues in Gujarat and is replicated in many communities to reach the unreachable. The rural women, voicing the concerns of marginalized poor, disadvantaged communities will never become the priority of the news media in India despite its omnipresence as news flow is selective and linear due to gatekeeping. However, the spread of literacy has motivated more and more women to become journalists and serve their communities by mainstreaming news. Perhaps these rural women with their small initiatives have succeeded in breaking media stereotype and have given new meaning to journalism.

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