



## Abysmal representation of women in media and the way forward

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### ABSTRACT

*Even though the country's media scene has gone through a massive change in recent years, the gender gap is still appalling. While the media has an important role to empower women, it has unfortunately failed to do away with gender inequalities within its own ambit. Women's portrayal in Indian media is nothing more than a showpiece or an icon of glamour or that of a householder. The broader aim of this paper is to dwell on the participation, performance, portrayal and unequal representation of women in Indian media and the steps that can be taken to bring them to an equal status as men in the same field.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Women, Media, Low representation*

### Introduction

Post-independence Indian media has evolved, re-aligned and re-invented itself. From being dominated by morning newspapers, radio broadcasts and some solo telecasts on Doordarshan, today it is much more dazzling with sharp debates and has many ways to shape, mould and influence public opinion.

Despite all the above developments, the status of women in the media is bleak as ever, very little progress has been made. While it has improved from what it used to be five decades ago, not much progress has been made in the last two decades. There is a difference between the idea of colleagues and equals in the work sphere and their actual projection. This is particularly true when it comes to women's participation, performance and portrayal in the media.

### Under-representation of women across different media platforms

One can watch a film, tune in to radio, switch on the TV, turn the pages of magazine or newspapers or surf the web. Regardless of your choice of media, you would have a good chance of encountering stereotypes that perpetuate gender discrimination. Women in all types of media tend to be thin and sexualized. They talk less than men. They have fewer opinions and they are less likely to play the roles of leaders or professionals in the entertainment industry.

Research spanning more than 100 countries found that 46 percent of news stories uphold gender stereotypes. Only 6 percent highlight gender equality. Another global study spanning 522 media organizations found that men still occupy 37 percent of top media management positions.

The Global Media Monitoring project 2015 has found that only 37% of all the stories in the television and print media were reported by women. Not much has changed since then. However at 42 percent, the representation of women in the online media is still better.

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Another report by the International Federation of Journalists found that although the presence of women in the Asia-Pacific region doubled in the last two decades but they still comprised just 28.6 percent of the total workforce.

One of the reasons of such minute representation of women is the gender inequality and discrimination. This lack of gender sensitivity is apparent from the very fact that the media has failed to exterminate gender based stereotyping. Women's portrayal in the media, be it electronic, print, audio or visual is most of the time accompanied with some negative and degrading images.

Gender bias is prevalent not in reporting or in the selection of news but in the selection of reporters to cover the news. It is not that the women themselves lag behind. They have been on the frontline, be it in the coverage of stories related to war, negotiations, protests etc. They have often set the agenda. Yet it is a fact that female journalists are always offered the softer roles like that of covering lifestyle, health, culture, fashion and entertainment stories. One can still find women journalists in the desk section, magazine or the feature department but very few can be found on the field covering crucial beats like politics, crime, technology, sports, business etc.

In terms of ultimate power, men are still pulling the strings in television and newspapers. Women rarely have the decision making power and are nowhere close to becoming equal curators or creators of news. Unless this problem of unequal labor is addressed, nothing can be changed.

In terms of participation, female characters are the most preferred on the television due to their good looks because their presence on screen can increase TRPs.

In the print media too, fewer females write for the opinion pages of the newspapers. According to a survey by 'Newslaundry', men accounted for most of the by lines on the Edit and Op-ed pages.

Even if some women make it to the top, it becomes difficult for them to work in the inflexible hours and unsafe conditions as they have to maintain a balance between the household chores and late night shifts.

### **Think tanks at the International and National level**

Almost twenty years ago, 189 UN **member states** recognized the central role of media in shifting the gender stereotypes that influence how we think and act. They made women and media one of 12 critical areas of the **Beijing Platform for Action** and called on media everywhere to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women.

They agreed that the number of women in media must increase including in the decision making process. More should be done to present women as leaders and role models and the stereotypes should be abandoned. Encouraging women's training, adopting professional guidelines to reduce discrimination and establishing media watch groups for monitoring were among measures to move forward. Women's involvement in information and communication technologies and



various media networks were also highlighted as a means of strengthening women's role in democratic process.

There has been some progress since the Beijing conference. The percentage of stories reported by women had edged up and women are among the most active social media users but even a cursory look at media content and platforms show that there is still a long way to go to call the conference a successful one.

**The Network of Women in Media**, India, is an association which aims to provide a forum for women in media professions to share information and resources, exchange ideas, promote media awareness and ethics and work for gender equality and justice within the media and society. Local groups linked to the NWMI are currently functioning in 16 centres across the country.

### **Conclusion**

In order to empower women as leaders and to eradicate the existent gender gap, it is essential that they be given the decision making power. Women should be better trained, skilled, knowledgeable and accessibility to information technology should be encouraged so that they adopt professional guidelines.

More media watch groups like the Indian Women's Press Corps should be established for the protection of women journalists. The powerful and positive role that the media can play in empowering women and gender equality should be supported and further explored.

Women have an equal right to participate in public debate and offer insights and ideas that must be heard. Everyone deserves to live free from the burden of harmful gender stereotypes.

The media shapes our world but so do women, as powerful agents of change in all areas of society. It is time for media to reflect this reality.

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