

WOMEN AND MEDIA

* Justice G.N. Ray

“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.”

- Swami Vivekananda

The most significant and longest social movement continuing is movement for emancipation of women. Though the primary goal for women empowerment is to improve the quality of life of women but it has also deep ramifications in social, economic and political scenario of body polity. The media through its reach to people at large has been instrumental though not to the extent desired in supporting the movement for women emancipation by focusing neglect and marginalization of the position of the women in society.

It sounds intriguing how from a highly dignified position in India's mythic history, the woman in India has been relegated to a secondary position. The vested interests of the ruling elite and the male lobby influenced by alien cultures legitimised woman as an individual of little consequence.

It would be a sad commentary on the subordinate role of women in India when woman is ideally viewed as *Shakti* (Power), the origin of power itself but in reality found as helpless, hapless woman without any identity except that of a wife, or the mother who has very little voice in decision making and has very little by way of her own basic choice. Although discrimination against and exploitation of women are global phenomena, their consequences are more tragic in the some parts of the globe particularly in under developed countries where, ignorance, deprivation of the basic

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necessities of life, and the ever-growing pressure of transition from tradition to modernity- all combine to aggravate the inequalities that women suffer to a point at which their existence is reduced to a continuous battle for survival. Improving the status of women is regarded as the key to narrowing the gender gap and achieving a better quality of life.

Women are under great social control and scrutiny which has restricted what they can say and where and to whom. Cultural moves in almost every social set-up determine women's socialization in no uncertain terms. This has an important bearing on their ability to communicate and express their thoughts.

To discuss women empowerment it is necessary to deal with the present situation of women in India. I would like to briefly discuss certain key aspects related to the women which media should adequately cover and facilitate the process of empowerment of women.

Gender Inequality

A vast majority of Indian women work through out their lives but the fact is that it is not officially recognized. Statistics on work force shows low figure of women workers. There is a serious underestimation of women's contribution as workers even though when given a chance they have convincingly proved their ability. Women's workforce participation - the percentage of adult women who are actually working is accepted indicator of women's status and component of the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) used in GNDP Human Development Reports. According to a survey conducted by NCW covering over 1200 women in both organized and unorganized sector it has been found that 50% experienced gender discrimination by way of physical and mental harassment of women at work. The survey reported discrimination not only in salary but also in promotions, work distribution and working hours. Promoting gender equality was identified by the Government as priority strategic goal for the UN System in

India under UN Development Assistance Framework. We should not forget that Gender Equality is not just a women's issue. It is an issue for the nation.

Wage discrimination

Women generally earn a far lower wage than men doing the same work. In no state in India women and men earn equal wage in agriculture. This is equally applicable to other areas of works such as mining, trade, transport services etc. In the various work sectors average wages earned by male is more than the wages earned by female.

I would emphasize on the findings of UNDP which were published as Human Development Report concerning gender equality. It says: "Women's work is greatly undervalued in economic term. The value of household and community work transcends market value."

The media can certainly bring some of these biases in to light. Specially, women journalists must take up this cause. The Indian constitution makes it mandatory to give equal protection to every citizen. Thus sympathetic media, judiciary and executive should stand for this together. Reform movement too is necessary in this regard.

Crime against women

The soaring crime rates and violence against women in the country reflects women as weaker sex who are being dominated and exploited. They face violence inside and outside the family throughout their lives. The Crime Record Bureau of India's website shows that in the year 2006 (latest data available on website) total crime reported against women was 1, 91731. Police record shows that a woman is molested in the country every 20 minutes; a rape occurs every 34 minutes and every 43 minutes an incident of sexual harassment takes place. Every 43 minutes a woman is kidnapped and every 93 minutes, a woman is killed.

Before empowerment of women can be achieved it is necessary to enable women to give voice to their experience, their sufferings, and for society to understand them as human being and respond to them with sensitivity.

Under Representation in important position

Women are under represented in governance and decision making positions. At present women represent approximately 8-9% of Parliamentary seats and less than 6% of cabinet positions. Less than 4% seats in High Courts and Supreme Courts are occupied by women. Less than 3% of administrators are women.

Health

Millions of Indian women simply lack the freedom to go out of the house in search of health services they need. According to National Health Survey – 2 only 52% women in India are not even consulted on decision about their own health. The antenatal and postnatal care are beyond the reach of many Indian women. The National Health Survey – 2 estimate mentions that some 1,00,000 to 1,20,000 women die every year due to pregnancy related causes. In some States death rate is quite high and alarming. The rate in India is quite higher than the maternal mortality rate surveyed in Cuba, China, Srilanka and Vietnam.

The majority of women go through life in state of nutritional stress. They are anemic and malnourished. Girls and women face discrimination within the family; eating last and least.

Gap on Male-Female Ratio

Men out number women in India, unlike in many countries where the case is otherwise. The main cause of the gap in the male female ratio is prevailing practice of female fetus killing specially high in Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan. In these states, the ratio is shockingly low as compared to other Indian states. Female infant mortality rates are higher than male infant

mortality rates. Sample Registration System (2000) reveals that female infant mortality rate is 74 per 1000 live birth.

The mass media needs to focus on this health issue of women. The various scheme incorporated by the govt. requires wider coverage so that women especially from economically weaker section can be benefitted from them.

Women Education

Education of women enables them to set their own priorities, seek knowledge and information to make their informed choices. The literacy rate among women continues to be lower than those for men. As per data of 2004-2005 available with the National Sample Survey, literacy rate per 1000 amongst rural women is approximately 450 and amongst urban female is almost 700. If we view overall position, there has been a positive development and female literacy rate has gone up 50% as per the National Sample Survey 1997 report. Despite this progress more than 245 million Indian women can not read and write.

Only 50% of Indian women are literate as compared to 65.5% of men. Far fewer girls than boys go to school. Even if they are enrolled, many of the girl students drop out of the school. The female adult literacy rate in Malaysia, Srilanka, China, Vietnam, and Indonesia is more than 70% and higher than that in India.

Very recently on 13th November, 2008 it had been reported in The Telegraph on the basis of P.T.I. report that " India is among the 20 countries where the gender gap is the widest, the Global Gender Gap Report 2008 has said. It holds the 113th position among 130 countries. India ranks 25th in political empowerment, 116th in educational attainment and 128th in health and survival. In economic participation and opportunity, India has been ranked 125th.

Media's Role in empowerment of women in India

Communication is extremely important for women's development and mass media play significant role. It is to be noted that growth of women's education and their entry into employment have contributed to the growth of media. In all spheres of life whether for controlling population growth, spread of literacy or improving quality of life for vast masses, women have crucial role to play. However, women can be expected to play this role when they become conscious of their strength and are not deliberately marginalised by male domination. In this context, media has an important role to play – to create awakening in women to achieve their potential as the prime movers of change in society. In today's world, print and electronic media play a vital role in effectively conveying message that needs to be conveyed.

Portrayal of women by the Media

By and large the media scene in India is that media does not address serious issues about exploitation and unequal treatment to women in different spheres but is keen in reporting sex related incidents by way of sensationalizing news of atrocities on women. Thus instead of highlighting the exploitation of woman they end up becoming one of the reasons in increase of violence as their coverage more often than not tend to glorify the crime against women. It is true that media has brought to light, as never before, certain misdemeanours against women but in a very subtle manner it also perpetuated the stereotyped image of woman as a householder and an inconsequential entity in the traditional value system. Generally, women's problems never figure on the front page of a newspaper unless it is a gruesome murder or a case of rape. Newspapers even on women's page does not usually address relevant issues for women empowerment but reporting is concerned with beauty tips recipes, fashion syndrome etc.

It is unfortunate that there is lack of sensitivity among the newspapers in general to women and their problems. I would like to refer to the Study conducted by the Media Advocacy Group viz. "Violence against Women: Media Coverage and Representation". The Media Advocacy Group made the following recommendations on reporting violence against the women.

- (i) Media needs to take an extended, broader view of crimes against women. It has to be instrumental in conducting a social audit on factors responsible for increasing crimes, particularly against women and children, including indifferent investigative procedures, miscarriage of justice, and growing social impunity of the perpetrators of crime.
- (ii) It also has to be instrumental in creating an awareness among civil society of the causes and nature of the crime itself, and of the preventive measures.
- (iii) When treating these issues, media has to be extremely factual and empirical.

The study also stated that the only regulation that governs a sensitive reporting on this issue is that the rape victim's name should not be disclosed. Barring this, the study found that everything else is graphically reported. Often the victim's family name and address is cited, making a mockery in the letter and spirit of the regulation. Though much of this violation and malpractice are committed by a small group of publications, others are spurred on to imitate and keep pace with the sensational trend. Therefore, I urge the media to take a serious look on the issue and do self-regulation and self-monitoring with extreme care and caution.

Aarushi murder case is another prime example of irresponsible and sensational reporting by the Media. The gruesome murder of a teenage girl for days have been the sound basis of increased TRPs of the News Channels. The media both electronic and print are morally and legally bound to avoid sensationalisation of news relating to victims of crimes. The Press Council of

India had already drawn guidelines on the subject and appeals to media to follow them meticulously while reporting atrocities on women/child.

It is important for me to refer at this point of time to, also an important issue that greatly and gravely impacts women in overt as well as covert manner, the HIV/AIDS reportage by the media. The Press Council had focused on the issue way back in 1993 when the AIDS was treated as an incurable 'epidemic' and anyone who contacted it was pariah. The prime sufferers of such ostracization were the women, being treated as an important cause and carrier of the so-called disease.

Much water has flown down the Ganges, since then and with medical advances, it has become necessary for the media to focus on the issue with not just a proactive but positive approach. Therefore, the Press Council has in consultation with the UNDP and the activists of the field redrawn the guidelines for media reportage that find place in the souvenir that is to be shortly released. I hope that guidelines, in the form of easy to refer 'Dos' and 'Don'ts' and detailed ones for in-depth understanding of the issue, will find place on the desk of every media person and their coverage of the HIV/AIDS stories will help the world handle the issue with greater sensitivity.

Limited coverage in Media

Newspapers cover women's problems drawing the attention of policymakers to issues requiring immediate attention such as the adverse sex ratio, infant and maternal mortality, crime against women and the effects of poverty on women and their families. But this coverage is very limited with the rest of the space occupied by cinema actresses, models, video jockeys (veejays) and the rich women and their hobbies. Many of the women's magazines are devoted to fashion, glamour, beauty aids, weight reduction, cookery and how to sharpen 'feminine instincts' to keep men and their in-laws happy. There are comparatively fewer articles on career opportunities, health awareness, entrepreneurship, legal aid, counseling services, childcare

services and financial management. A study in this regard was conducted in Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Two regional newspapers and two English newspapers were selected for the study. Prominent newspapers only publish 5% of women related issues and 8% are published on main page and remaining are placed inside. Study showed no importance is given to development issues of women. In the television serials women are the central characters, but they are portrayed largely as tormentors or the victims while the men very often take sideline and just seem caught in a web of unfavourable circumstances. Television culture has portrayed a breed of weak, indecisive men ensnared by sexy women when in reality men also play an active role in oppressing women in various ways including subjecting them to physical assault, rape, pushing them into the sex trade and even abandoning them. It is only desirable that serials should be close to reality and give message to the viewers where and how the society is going wrong.

This portrayal of women in media has led the National Commission for Women to recommend amendment in the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition Act), 1986. The NCW wants to include new technologies like MMS and the electronic media and some which were left out side the ambit of the Act like posters and TV serials which perpetuate stereotypes of women. Explaining the reason for including soaps in proposed amendment in the Act, National Commission for Women has stated that "women are either being portrayed as Sita (Ramayana) or as Kaikayee (Ramayana) and there seems to be nothing in between the two extreme characters being shown in Soaps. Divorces, adultery are highlighted frequently in Soaps where characters break the law without repercussion."

Negative images or just portraying reality is not enough. Infact, it can often be harmful. It has been observed that sheer duplication of the dark side of life can often lead to apathy and passivity. This can be avoided by

depicting the positive images or success stories of women in whatever sphere they happen.

There is need to produce programmes that talk about income generating schemes for women. Unfortunately, in these kinds of ventures typical “womanly jobs” like papad-making, sewing, embroidery, pickles making etc. are propagated. Stress should be given on non-traditional skills which can break the myth that women are suited to certain kinds of jobs only. A systematic survey of the existing schemes (Government/non-Government) and presentation of the analysis and changes needed to upgrade the schemes which would make them more purposeful is essential.

The distance between women and media not only deprives the women of their right to information and knowledge but also keeps the women in the dark regarding the blatant misuse of the female and the distortion of the truth. Although the images of women as reflected by the different mass media in the country are not very different, it will be an interesting exercise to study how these images feed and reinforce the stereotypes.

The distortion of realities by the media has increased the gap of understanding between the different sections of society. Effective informative communication is one of the most important channels for the growth and development of women in the informal or unorganized sector, as without information regarding services and benefits available through legislation, government schemes, banks and voluntary organizations, women can hardly take advantage of them. Thus the media should take into consideration the following points.

- (i) The media must project the working women in the unorganized sector as worker and not merely as performing the duties of wife/daughter. They being major earners, they must be projected as producers and not merely consumers.

- (ii) The media should make deliberate attempts to not only project the problems of women in poverty, but should monitor in such a way that conflicting role models are not depicted, nor derogatory references to their work are made.
- (iii) To improve content and coverage, coordinated efforts for increased interaction between NGO's, women's social action group, research organizations, institutes of mass communication, and the media personnel should be developed.

There are quite a few Reports findings on the complex issues relating to women empowerment. Very often the media come up with study on women related subjects which more often than not are driven by market forces. One study claims that women prefer men with hybrid cars while another says women are genetically devised to shop. Then there is a study which says women are more attracted to bad boy types. This reveals that women have become new research subject mostly in less significant areas. In fact, research is necessary to understand women in its potentiality to usher in a new era. It is difficult to distinguish between genuine research and studies that are gimmicks more so when news reports do not identify where these studies are coming from. A large proportion of the research findings published in major news outlets today is sensationally packaged to draw attention. This is where the media must step in to help readers to know relevant facts concerning women empowerment. It will be only appropriate if in the interests of full disclosure, they should make clear in their reports who was funding the study and which scientific journal published it. This information can help readers to decide for themselves which pieces of research are closer to the truth and which are not. Various studies were undertaken on the women and media to ascertain how the media portrays women and how the women related issues are presented, how much significance is given to them. Such study has revealed that issues pertaining

to development of women are never emphasized adequately. Women are portrayed not for feminine beauty and artistic portrayal but for infusing sex appeal more often than not entering the arena of obscenity. It is necessary to have dispassionate in-depth study by social activists and media to ascertain why obscenity has risen so much in media. Unless there is any change in the social perception of women, it will be difficult to curtail obscenity in media.

Women Journalist in Media

In such a rapidly changing environment, women in media have a large responsibility in not only changing attitude towards women but also shaping public opinion. With women holding responsible position in newspapers or electronic media, their competency should extend to a wider area and a range of issues. More importantly, a woman journalist is expected to show more sensitivity to issues relating to women and to more meaningful insights and perspectives.

Like most professions, in the media too, women have struck out boldly, beating a path, which is both impressive and inspiring. The last five years have seen them pouring out into the mainstream, acquiring hitherto unattainable positions and proving their mettle, be it the print or the television media. In short, women have become indispensable in the field. Women's organizations and media groups must play an active role in promoting this change. It is heartening that a wide variety of women's media initiatives are making a positive impact.

Women have been latecomers in media profession owing to social, religious taboos which operated as social sanctions. The employment of women in media assumes crucial importance at this juncture of our economic development. Beside Independent Public Corporation of Media (DD&AIR),

the private owners of TV channels with ownership of Terrestrial outlets and satellite up linking facilities in country itself have flourished. This has brought a boom in employment thereby increasing the percentage of women media professionals.

The rough estimates however show that although the number of women in both the media has increased in absolute terms, their ratio to men has more or less remained static. A deliberate policy for ensuring adequate representation of women both in the public and private sectors of the media is therefore a must, not only for giving women a source of livelihood but also to ensure their adequate and effective representation, and to make the media truly national and representative in character.

A significant number of women journalists are very successful in magazines dealing with various problems of women and child. With sensitivity and skill for analyzing events in depth, issues such as women abuse and exploitation, harassment of women at workplace and the trauma of HIV infected women, female infanticide in rural areas find a prominent place in such magazines. The magazines deal with the issues more in depth compared to newspapers and women are considered competent to handle such stories. As per a study in the NCR there are around 900 women journalists and even in cities like Chennai the number is impressive 200. Journalism is no more a male domain. This new trend has also led to a change in the portrayal of women in the media in general and newspaper in particular. It will not be out of context to mention here the success of 'Khabar Lahariya'. A group of eight women belonging to backward class bring out this paper from the Bundelkhand region. This paper which is being funded by an NGO was started with an aim to encourage women to fight for their own rights. such kind of initiative are required in every nook and corner of our country, so as to empower the women at grass root level.

The risks women in the media face, both in the urban and rural areas, have also to be seriously considered. As we move down, from the

metropolitan towns and the state capitals, the risks increase. At the district and taluk levels, from where the bulk of the print media is published, and which are more news-worthy places for the local and regional news contents, there is more conservatism, more rigid social outlook and greater resistance to social change and new trends. In these areas women join new professions like journalism sparingly. In remoter rural areas a woman journalist and particularly a reporter is a novelty not easily accepted and assimilated in the social milieu. The result is media women have to work almost in isolation particularly at the ground levels, if they are at all employed. The cases of sexual assault and harassment of women reporters are very often reported. Women in such cases have to take a calculated risk in joining the profession. Odd hours of job make the women journalists vulnerable. Recent murder of Ms. Soumya Vishwanathan, Producer of News TV channel in Delhi shows women journalist workers are more exposed to the risk of physical assault, even their life.

It is noticed that more and more young graduates are joining the journalism degree and diploma courses, with an ambition to make a mark in the profession, and quite a good proportion of them are girls. With the rapid expansion, almost a proliferation of the electronic media through satellite channels, with the popularity of the FM on the radio and with the growth of the print media, notwithstanding the electronic media, now there is a good scope for absorption of both men and women qualified journalists in various media outlets. Women, young and old, are prepared to weather the risks. The society, therefore, must make arrangements to provide adequate security to the vulnerable section of women in the media to promote their participation at all levels.

I find extremely appropriate here to refer to the recommendations made by the Joshi Committee regarding positive portrayal of women on Doordarshan. But these recommendations are equally relevant to all form of media. These recommendations, if followed in letter and spirit would certainly

go in long way in enhancement of women's empowerment and facilitate drastic reduction in cultural biases as well as gender biases. They are

1. The women's issue one of the utmost significance to the country as a whole and there is need for a widespread understanding that the nation cannot progress, as long as women are left behind as the lesser half of society. Therefore, the improvement of women's conditions, status and image must be defined to be a major objective for media channels.
2. The Government must at the earliest formulate clear guidelines regarding the positive portrayal of women on television. This portrayal must take note of women in all facts of their lives: as workers and significant contributions to family survival and the national economy: it must further endeavour to integrate women on terms of equality in all sectors of national life and the development process. These guidelines must emphasis that the "women's dimension" must from an integral part of all programmes and not be merely confined to Women's Programmes, nor to isolated attempts to discuss women's issues.
3. The number of commercial formula films screened must be drastically reduced, the cheap song-and-dance sequence totally eliminated and the content of such programmes carefully scrutinized in terms of their portrayal of women.
4. Women must not be portrayed in stereotyped images that emphasis passive, submissive qualities and encourage them to play a subordinate secondary role in the family and society. Both men and women should be portrayed in ways that encourage mutual respect and a spirit of give and take between the sexes.
5. The foreign exchange resource should be spent on importing worthwhile educative programmes, particularly those that show the roles, lives and struggles of women in neighbouring and other Third World countries so that a greater understanding and a shared perspective on problems is built.

6. It is necessary to ensure that a large number of rural women gain access to TV. Therefore, in the placement of community TV sets preference should be given to the meeting place of Mandals; Mahila Mandals should also be involved in the community viewing arrangement.”

Everywhere the media has the potential to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. They can create self-regulatory mechanisms that can help to eliminate misleading and improper gender based programming.

Media, which wields immense power in a democracy - a power which is only expanding and not diminishing, needs carrying out a focused attention about women- related issues and the portrayal of women. It is, perhaps, necessary that the stabilizing force of women must be brought home to the Indian people. In every family and society, there is an ethical and spiritual space, which has been traditionally dominated by women. The principal character in Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion bemoans, ‘why can’t woman be like man!’ The media can play a salutary and a liberating role to give to the women the distinctive and the exclusive space, which must belong to them to enable them to generate the ethical and moralizing impulses for the entire society.

The subject Women and Media is quite relevant in the present day context. From this platform the discussion on the subject is being initiated. The debate on this issue is being proposed to be discussed at the State level and the Press Council is keen that seminars and workshops on this subject are organised at different States and at different levels. I sincerely hope that this initiative will be fruitful. Let this beginning be auspicious (Aiomaramba Subhaya Bhabatu).

Namaskar
