

PORTRAYAL OF FEMINISM IN MEDIA: RETHINKING LANGUAGE, REPRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION

Ms. Minu Marydas

Development Practitioner, CARITAS India

Ms. Shashi Shikha

Development Practitioner, PRIA India

Abstract:

The influential capacity of media in shaping mass perspective, opinions and behaviour is well established. Feminism, most simple stated, is the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of equality of sexes. It is critical to understand however, that advocating for equality is not about 'sameness' but recognition of differential needs of sexes. Role of the media, therefore, in portraying feminism is a task of responsibility and cognitive awareness. Largely based on secondary research of newspaper articles, social media posts, television advertisements and experiences of media news, this paper presents a diagnosis of the problem of unfair language used in reporting. It goes on to discuss how the weak representation both in terms of numbers and influential positions within media enterprises affects the portrayal of feminism. The paper concludes with an afterthought on how the language, portrayal and representation of feminism in media can be rephrased for impacting a change in the herd mentality with respect to gender roles, capacities and entitlements.

Keywords: feminism, language of reporting, portrayal of feminism, media and feminism

1. Introduction

The past decade has witnessed the outbreak of the culture of social media and online news portals. With this outbreak, the role of mass media in shaping ideas and practices of feminism is well recognised. While the mass media can promote and break the public stereotypes, it can also continue to produce discriminatory images about all genders and propagate sexism.

Language of reporting in mass media and social media has the capacity to rebuild perceptions on normative thinking surrounding the issues of gender roles and responsibilities. The first section of this paper attempts to build on the evidences of such language use in all forms of media to highlight how the framing of narratives stand to be questioned and some of the ways in which it can be addressed.

Representation of femininity and masculinity differs across cultures, time and societies. They are culturally and socially constructed to a larger extent by the media in addition to family, education and society in general. Media products are mostly created by men, in men's tastes and for men. Even when the contents are created for women, they perpetuate the rules of patriarchy

and unfortunately, all other genders are often neglected or side-lined or stereotyped. The presence of these kinds of discriminatory images in media has been attributed to the fact that men occupy higher positions in media organisations across the world. However, even in countries like the USA, Europe, Uganda and Russia where men and women appear equally in leading positions, the images of gender have remained unchanged. The second section of this paper argues that representation of women in media circles alone is not sufficient to bring a change in how gender is portrayed in media.

Through the above arguments, this paper establishes that the perception of gender issues is linked to representation and language. We are currently residing at the peak of the media revolution brought in by technology and alternative types of new media including social media where we are not just consumers but also producers of information. However, production and consumption of such information is also neatly guarded and clustered. Viewers choose what they want to watch and technological algorithms through artificial intelligence determine what should be suggested that will cater to their taste and interest for viewing. This kind of targeted information bombardment approach limits the reach of alternate media content to a selected, already aware, sensitive and particular kind of ‘educated’ section of people. There seems to be a need to understand how mass media can play a more responsible role in building a positive perception with respect to feminism in a truer sense.

There seems to be an urgent need for feminist reawakening of all kinds of media including traditional mass media, social media, online platforms, entertainment and commercial messaging. This can be achieved through change in the language of reporting, representation of gender roles and responsibilities and change in building positive perceptions.

2. Methodology

The paper has been written based on the primary and secondary research. The design of the paper is such that each argument has been explained with the help of examples and case stories from secondary sources. The examples have been quoted from newspapers articles, social media posts, advertisements, journals and other publications. Some of the examples have also been inspired by the author’s research work in Madhya Pradesh while working with the women around menstrual taboos and rituals. For the statistics, the authors have completely referred to the secondary sources and they have been cited here in the paper. The paper has been written in a prescriptive manner, highlighting the alternative approach and the way forward simultaneously with the research findings for better clarity.

1.3. Portrayal of Feminism in Media: Rethinking Language

Margaret Gallagher emphasises that ‘it is not impossible to produce news stories that are gender sensitive. It just means thinking more creatively about the topic at hand—whom it concerns, who should be included in its coverage, in what way and for what purpose’ (Wood, 2011).¹ Media has an influential role in putting across perception and opinion. When the media produces gender-bias stories, it adds on to the prevailing assumptions and perceptions. For instance, while reporting news one need to have a clarity on who the protagonist is and whether an individual is getting side-lined because of their sex etc. Majority of the dominant perceptions around gender or gender-based roles are due to the language that is used in our daily conversations. For instance, the usage of terms like firemen, policemen, color-coding the advertisements or images according to sexes (pink for girls and blue for boys) etc. by the media add on to the destructive image dominant in the society affiliated to specific sex. Gender-sensitive reporting would mean moving away from the narrow thinking and putting the news across without such added-values.

There are many instances where the media failed to be gender sensitive. It is not rocket science. It requires one to be neutral. This paper tries to highlight the ways in which reporting could be gender-sensitive by giving various instances and factual data:

- **Avoiding unnecessary details and giving due importance:** It is essential to know the main character(s) of your story and give due importance, without any bias, while reporting. Also, one could refrain from describing an individual based on their physical, marital and/or family status, unless it is required for the story. It is very common to find an adjective or description, mostly irrelevant to the story, while reporting a news involving women. The same doesn’t usually go for men. The individuality of a woman is usually not recognised. For example, recently, in one of the leading newspapers, one saw the headline – Indian-American MIT Prof Abhijit Banerjee and wife wins Nobel in Economics – here, the woman was not given her own title. Her title was in reference to her marital relation with the counterpart.
- **Being inclusive:** In a panel discussion, one mostly witnesses a male-dominated group. Media could be gender-sensitive in this regard and try to be more inclusive. With regard to the third gender, one sees them only during the news related to the LGBTQ+. Media need to explore and widen their contacts to be more inclusive. A recent advertisement of a

¹Wood, J.T. (2013). Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender.

toothpaste showed various love stories showing the power of love. These stories involved that of a gay couple, couple belonging to different faith, amongst others. Now, this is a step towards being inclusive and moving away from the stereotypical portrayal of love. There are many other such examples as well of recent advertisements and reporting which is a break-away. There are still miles to go.

- **Avoiding stereotypical descriptions:** Portrayal of an individual in a stereotypical manner by the media affirms and encourages the views prevailing in the society dominantly. Describing women in relation to their family, or assigning roles based on the sex, such as male nurse or female driver are not only sexist remarks but also diminish the status and individuality of a person. Being gender-sensitive would mean describing a person as a whole human being and not limiting the individual based on their sexes or gender.
- **Being sensitive and maintaining confidentiality:** This applies especially in the cases where violence against an individual is being reported. Such cases are anyways under-reported, especially the cases related to sexual violence and abuse. ‘Reporting on such a sensitive issue cannot be improvised. It requires professionalism, humanity and respect. A failure to apply the highest standards in dealing with those affected such as poor conduct of interviews can compound the trauma and may even add to the suffering and worsen the long-term impact of the ordeal on survivors’ (UNESCO, 2009).²One needs to maintain confidentiality of the witness or the individual involved in the cases, especially related to the sexual violence. While interviewing the individuals, one should maintain their confidentiality as per their wish and should not expose them to further violence.
- **Being accurate and non-judgemental:** The language of reporting should be accurate, sensitive and non-judgemental. For instance, trafficking in women cannot be linked with prostitution, character of an individual should never be judged based on assumptions. Also, while reporting, one need to be sensitive and cautious that the individuals who went through sexual assault or rape are not victims. The term ‘survivors’ would be more sensitive.
- **Breaking the barrier/shell:** Media should not shy away and should be open and influence the society in coming out of their shell. For instance, in all the advertisements related to sanitary pads, there is a secrecy that is adopted for no reason. It usually involves a blue liquid, women wearing white pants and jumping around with no tension of leakage. One wonders which woman in the world bleeds blue and jumps around during the periods. On

²UNESCO. (2009). *Getting the Balance Right: Gender Equality in Journalism*. Belgium: International Federation of Journalists.

one side, the media portrays ‘*DaagAcche Hain*’ (stains are good), and on the other hand one stresses on the ‘*leakage ki tension*’ (tension regarding stains), which is an added burden put on women. It stresses that the women should feel ashamed if they get stained on their ‘white’ pants, while jumping around which women normally do (according to such advertisements) while enduring menstrual pain! The same platform could be used by the media in a far greater impactful way and break the barriers and shyness existing in the society around menstruation.

Thus, one might now notice that being gender-sensitive doesn’t mean being sensitive to only women. This is a usual perception. However, the media needs to be sensitive and inclusive to women, men, third gender and to those who do not identify themselves with any of the three. Media, being an influential platform, cannot be biased on such matters. It needs to come out of the stereotype and break the shell dominant in the society.

II.4. Representation of Gender in Media

Being gender-sensitive does not only mean to be cautious about the use of language while reporting. It also requires being cautious and sensitive towards equal representation of gender in media. Women are under-represented in media and when it comes to the third gender, they are invisible or not given deserving importance. Representation could mean to be in the news, to be part of a discussion or an interview or to be at the higher positions in the media.

Media has been a patriarchal field ever since the beginning and it remained so till the first quarter of twenty-first century. This applies both in the case of the representation and the end product. The number of women as media administrators or journalists is still lower than that of their male counterparts, while the language and wording of the media are still far from ideal. Even when the articles are written by women, one could still find an element of unintentional bias or discrimination. This happens as patriarchy is deeply rooted in us and we have become so normalised in it that it becomes difficult to come out of the loop.

This problem does not have a simple solution, as the discrimination cannot be solved simply by refraining from using certain phrases or words. What we have is a problem of representation. Women are either being ignored by our media or they are being misrepresented with faulty and biased assumptions and information. At the end of the day, both the representation of women in media positions and the media's portrayal of women in news articles remains far from ideal.

And, responsible journalism would mean being cautious of this reality and striving towards achieving the ideal.

At global level major study was done known as Global Media Monitoring Project in 2005. This study was conducted in 76 countries across the globe. The GMMP is the largest and most extensive monitoring project of media representation of women in the world today. The 2005 GMMP report pointed at the marginalization of women who make up 21% of people featured in the news. The report states that the women are more likely to be featured in the news related to arts and culture (28%) rather the news related to politics, governance and economy(UNESCO, 2009).³

In a recent report of 2015, it was emphasised that 19% of women were invited as experts for panel discussions and featured in news stories and only 37% of women were reporting stories globally. (Aneeta Rattan, June 2019)⁴ Such under-representation of women and other gender aggravate the gender stereotypes in the society. Even though we are well-aware that media has a strong influence in perpetuating or changing an opinion in the society, the bigger question is how can the media change itself?

On these lines, an initiative has been started by the journalists and producers across the BBC, called Project 50:50. It's aim is to tackle the gender representation issue by rethinking whom they put in front of the camera, with the goal of achieving 50:50 gender representation every month. As a result, by April 2019, 74% of the English language programmes that had been involved in Project 50:50 for a year or more, reached more than 50% female contributors on their shows (Aneeta Rattan, June 2019).⁵

Lack of women and third gender representation in media is often linked with the lack of women and the third gender in the higher positions in the media circle. Even though part of it stands true, it cannot be accepted completely. Not being a man, is not the eligibility criteria of being gender sensitive. Yes, women and the third gender should be there in higher positions. However, that

³UNESCO. (2009). *Getting the Balance Right: Gender Equality in Journalism*. Belgium: International Federation of Journalists.

⁴Aneeta Rattan, S. C. (June 2019). Tackling the Underrepresentation of Women in Media. *Harvard Business Review*.

⁵Aneeta Rattan, S. C. (June 2019). Tackling the Underrepresentation of Women in Media. *Harvard Business Review*.

could not be projected as a reason for their under-representation in the media. Project 50:50 is one such example.

Thus, first step towards bringing a change and moving towards the ideal situation is to start with oneself. Responsible journalism and gender-sensitive journalism would mean shifting out of the sense that “things should be different” to asking “what can I do differently”. It simply means to be a confronter rather than being a bystander. Bystanders observe a wrong but tend to be relatively unlikely to address it because they question whether they are the right person to act, whether it is the right time, or whether someone else will step up. Those who confront, on the other hand, act on the wrongs they see.

5. Conclusion

An infant does not exhibit gender or racial biases. It is the exposures that shape one’s perceptions and biases. Media plays a significant role in such exposures, especially in the current period. According to a study conducted in 2002, by high school graduation, a child starts spending on average more time watching television than in school classrooms. This was the case almost two decades ago. Today, with the rise of social media and other entertainment channels like Netflix etc, the teens have started spending an average of nine hours a day on the media platforms. (Lee, 2018)⁶ Hence, it is not surprising that media such as advertising, social media, online news etc. would play a major role in shaping up the ideology on various matters in the society.

So, it becomes essential for the media to be responsible and sensitive while doing its job. Instead of adding on to the existing plethora of patriarchal perception and portrayal of gender-based issues and news, media could focus on highlighting the positive role models in the media that can help the under-represented and discriminated gender to be more ambitious and assertive.

References

⁶Lee, B. Y. (2018, March 13). *How Media Portrayal Affects Women, And What Geena Davis Is Doing About It*. Retrieved from Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2018/03/13/how-media-portrayal-affects-women-and-what-geena-davis-is-doing-about-it/#584622c62962>

Aneeta Rattan, S. C. (June 2019). Tackling the Underrepresentation of Women in Media.
Harvard Business Review.

Lee, B. Y. (2018, March 13). *How Media Portrayal Affects Women, And What Geena Davis Is Doing About It*. Retrieved from Forbes:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2018/03/13/how-media-portrayal-affects-women-and-what-geena-davis-is-doing-about-it/#584622c62962>

UNESCO. (2009). *Getting the Balance Right: Gender Equality in Journalism*. Belgium: International Federation of Journalists.

Wood, J.T. (2013). *Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender*.