

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN PAKISTANI MEDIA

Ahmed Rameez Ul Huda & Roshan Amber Ali
University of Sargodha, Sargodha
PAKISTAN

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the image and portrayal of women in media regarding the biasness, depiction and role providence. Women have had to face pressures that range from domestic to social arenas. Keeping in view historical perspective, Pakistani women have majorly been oppressed. Even after the advent of feminism and social progress in the current era, Pakistani society still retains its identity as a strict one regarding morals, customs and culture. Despite of the fact that women are supposed as the weaker sex, Pakistani women are taking part in media and playing an active role in the progress of media development. Yet women still seem to be objectified in media. The study examines the image of women as presented in Pakistani print, broadcast and social media as well as in advertisements.

Keywords: Gender inequality, portrayal of women, media, Pakistani women.

INTRODUCTION

Media is considered as the agent of social change. It has the power to mesmerize us all alike. Before the rampant surge of feminism, women were excluded from almost all fields of life. Media was not an exception from this list. Although women are the integral and essential part of life the thing that catches our attention is the portrayal of women image in mass media. Where the West managed to step out of the box and give women a chance to flourish about a century ago, Pakistan is a country that is still struggling with gender roles. A minority of the Pakistani population that is educated has managed to remain unbiased regarding gender issues and female under representation. But unfortunately a male-oriented, patriarchal society still prevails where the value of women is close to that of a pet animal.

As far as the participation of women in media is concerned, female models are often seen in advertisements sensually dressed up for the sake of alluring customers. Sometimes the female has nothing to do with the actual product. This is not confined solely to advertisements but extends to media in general where women are objects used to tempt and attract clients and sponsors. Furthermore they are exploited for various reasons that surround this misrepresentation of women's image up to the extent where the content often hints sexual connotations thus being a type of soft porn.

One of the most active and vital tools that are used by the media include her youthful looks and bloomy beauty. Her exterior is used for the purpose of trade where beauty sells like a market item with a price tag. Especially in a country like Pakistan, women who agree to expose themselves from local to national and even international level are considered to be immoral with compromised values.

Role of Women in Pakistani Society

The Pakistani society is fundamentally based on a patriarchal structure for centuries. Men are considered to have superior stance in the society. Women are more submissive and thus they hide themselves behind the veil of domestication. There is a silent understood agreement that men are in charge of the outdoor affairs while women are responsible for the affairs within the household. Only with the recent advent of feminism and its limited rays that penetrate through this thick layer of patriarchy in Pakistan, women have taken the initiative to step out of their houses, seek education and build up a career.

This specific treatment towards women is frowned upon internationally and usually they blame this on the religion of Islam. But the actual reason suggests otherwise as Islam preaches equality of both genders and provides a basis of the attainment of human rights with special emphasis on women's rights.

During his address at Islamia College for Women in 1940 Quaid-E-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah said: "I have always maintained that no nation can ever be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along with the men. No struggle can ever succeed without women, participating side by side with men."

The cultural and traditional roots of Pakistan are very strong. The history of Pakistani culture and tradition goes back centuries even before Pakistan gained independence. When Pakistani, India and Bangladesh were a part of the Sub-continental pre-partition India, the cultural influences of these three now-separate countries influenced and merged with each other. Later on this proved to be one of the basic reasons for separation from India. The culture of India was highly influenced by Hinduism where religious ritual like Sati prevailed where the wife burns herself alive with her husband's dead body. The fierce sense of honor leads to issues like honor killing that still prevails in tribal and remote rural areas.

Due to this deep-rooted history of Pakistan, the media is often plugged in portraying gender intolerance that reinforces the prevailing negative image that inclines towards victimization of women. Even after certain feminist movements and social advancements the issue of women still remains biased.

Before discussing the further fibers of Pakistani media, we need to know the plight, standard and involvement of women and their depiction in media.

Working Women in Media

From news, show business, politics or modelling everything contains a tinge of controversy when it comes to women. In Pakistan, media is influenced by certain cultural and political groups, with no specific policies and procedures for women empowerment and gender insensitivity. Even the Pakistani constitution bestows woman with two basic rights; equality and no gender discrimination.

Regardless women have still been victimized and prone to abuse especially in a work place. Apart from the physical and biological differences, women are apt to retain equal amount of knowledge and competence as men. But she is usually not guaranteed the status that she deserves and even discouraged. They are considered to be inferior and good for nothing due to the social taboo that adheres to them. Hence there is clear violation of the article of Pakistani constitution. In this era, media is the most potent and eminent mean for molding and building opinions. Media's portrayal of women gives an impression that men are more worthy, confident and hardworking than women. Often issues that are lighter in nature like fashion, culture and housekeeping as assigned to women whereas men are given more serious issues like law, crime, robbery, economy and development of the country. This implies the underlying impression of women as the weaker sex.

Similar in newspapers, most of the sections are covered by news written by male journalists especially the sections that concern sports and politics, including the front page containing the main news. Sections of fashion and entertainment news entangle women journalists. Media is considered to be a profession of males where women are considered incapable because of being an inferior sex and gender biases, men formulate and explain media agendas, rules and mechanisms including depiction of women in Pakistan.

Image of Women in Print and Broadcast Media

If we probe deep down in the history of Pakistani media, then we will be shocked to know that no woman has ever been an editor of a Urdu newspaper other than Maleeha Lodhi . The Herald was the only newspaper that had a female editor.

Tazeen Javed (2005) states "there is a patronizing tone in every printed feature, communicating a feeling of inferiority in women." She considers the image portrayed of women in media as weak, childish, dependent, gullible, irrational and scheming. Regardless their education and aims, their role in the society is that of a housewife who lacks intellect.

In Urdu short stories digest, women are penned down as performing daily house chores like dusting the house, sewing clothes, cooking and nursing children. Her husband is regarded as some divine creature to whom she must remain dutiful. In most of the stories women are presented highly aware of fashion and conscious about beauty. They are not concerned with serious matters and the matter of their main interest is usually matrimony.

Furthermore, the Urdu short stories in magazines like *Khawateen Digest* (Women's Digest), paint the picture of a girl who is submissive and her purpose of life is to get married and to secure her future. After she is married her purpose of life becomes to serve her *patti daive* (hindi word for husband that means *divine/god-like husband*). This service is considered to be labor of love.

A number of dailies and bi-monthlies, like *Akhbar-e-Jahan*, are propagating the stereotypical image of women without preaching that it needs to be improved and relished. Aaliya Khan, co-editor of one of the best-selling digests for women, states "Women is only capable of

propagating love affairs and a source of evil, in the eye of man. What we can do is just wait and watch for the miracle that can change this typical mentality”.

Television broadcasting has expanded its horizons to the extent of hundreds of channels. Many of these channels are owned by private sector organizations. This has created a sense of competition among the channel owners regarding the content they produce. Many women are working behind and in front of the camera beside men. Some of these women are better than women in their field. It is the dream of many girls to embark on the fashionable and glamorous journey of this world of entertainment.

Some of the most beloved TV programs include drama serials and morning shows. They happen to be the favorites of Pakistani viewers and specifically of housewives who happen to take up a majority of Pakistan's female population. The drama serial are mainly concerned with the pre-marital and post-marital situations and conditions of both domestic and working women of Pakistan. Women of these dramas are almost always subjected to some form of violence and hardships. Usually these problems are regarding domestic affairs or external pressure. The characters of Pakistani women can evoke feelings of catharsis with these characters. Whereas morning shows highlight fashion, cooking and interviews of glamorous celebrities that allure these women.

Pakistani Women and Social Media

Facebook is one of the top social media websites on the internet and in social media. It is one of the most commons ways to spend time communicating and socializing with other people. Facebook provides options like *people you may know* where we can relish ourselves by the option to *Add Friend* who you may know, to your friends list in order to interact with them and share their social profiles. Another way is playing the *poke* game where there is an option to poke someone in order to get their attention. A careful estimation shows that Pakistan is on the 28th number in the list of the countries that use Facebook .Other social media websites that are not as popular yet still are used include Twitter and Tumblr. They are starting to gain attention but of a specific type of audience. Thus they are not that common yet.

Such social media websites become a platform for eve teasers to increase the already prevailing insecurity of women. Where not only do they personally approach these women in the most degrading manner but they also invade their privacy by blackmailing and bullying them. The extreme case scenario is when someone makes fake profile using the personal data and information of female users in particular and majority in order to exploit them.

Portrayal of Women in Advertisements

Dickey J. (2006) is of the view that commercials, advertisements and posters only portray women as a *sex object* and they are for sexual pleasure. Most of the commercials are designed in a way that depicts the curves and cuts of the female body.

Hall et al. (2004) highlight a large number of advertisements where women wear swimming costumes and revealing dresses while men are shown in complete and proper dresses. In this way people can exploit the physique of women.

For instance in this ad of English Ubtan Turmeric cream it is shown that in order to get married, you must look beautiful like the girl. The tagline suggests that every girl desires to look beautiful. It is implied that the key to look beautiful is fair skin. In this regard, it does not matter if you use creams with dangerous chemicals as long as you end up with white skin. A model with makeup and most probably a photo-shopped picture is the standard image of beauty.



Simrogh (2003) in *Portrayal of Women* laments “Women are only exploited for unfair illustration and selling commodities and nothing else.” It is considered that the only concern of women is their looks, hair and beauty. They are sexual objects who have no tasks but to please men. Other than that their hobby is to do reveries and dream. Unfortunately, today media is neglecting self-proclaimed morals, customs and respect by violating prevailing norms in society.

METHODOLOGY

The following research has been conducted in the form of a survey research with open-ended questionnaires. The data was collected by simple random sampling technique. 100 questionnaires with open-ended questions were to be filled randomly via internet.

The objective of the study is to explore the biased behavior of media which is effecting the image of women of Pakistan and analyze the presentation of women by Pakistani media and its factors.

Data Analysis

Table No 1: The responses from the table and chart below shows that media has a great role in portraying the displaced image of the women.

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Missing data
Media presents women in an unproductive role.	19.5	66.2	11.4	9.1	1.4	2.5
Newspaper using sensual language for women.	18	60.1	16.2	10.8	3.6	3

Commercials are only depicting female models as eye-candy.	16	58	14.8	16.7	3.6	3.9
Ads should exclude female models.	10.2	47.2	22.4	12	3.6	5.5
Media promotes the gender biases.	12.6	44.6	18.7	17.6	5.5	2.9

Chart 1: Responses on Likert scale

In the chart given above the scales reveals that though a number of people are neutral regarding this statement that media is misrepresenting the image of women yet the scale for media presenting women in unproductive roles is highest above all statements. A large amount of people agree that media is depicting women in a very wrong and unreasonable manner. 40 % of the sample population agrees with the idea that media promotes gender biases while 20% strongly agree and only 9% of the whole population disagrees with it.

No. 2 shows that 60-70% of population considers newspaper language below standard and it uses sensual diction for female that portrays a derogatory image of women in society.

No. 3 shows that 60-65% of the sample population considers that female models in advertisements and TV serials are an eye-candy for men and they are presented in a sexually pleasing manner.

No. 4 shows that 45-50% of population agrees that women should be excluded from vulgar advertisements. In order to maintain their dignity and respect in the Pakistani society, they should not participate in such media activities. It implies the objectification of women in such advertisements.

During an interview, an 18 year old interviewee commented: "It is heartrending that despite being a Muslim state our press and media is not valuing the status of women. Today, we have no boundaries for this so-called freedom-of-expression that we can so readily whosoever we want to. This situation is disgusting as these ads imprint disastrous effect on the minds of our youth and especially immature minds of children".

CONCLUSION

Media has objectified women in all sectors of media. The way they are treated and portrayed in this arena exposes her to sexual harassment. As women are considered weaker than men, it is not expected of them to give a reaction in their defense. Not only are the suffocated in their workplace but also in the show business. Their deteriorated representation does not permit them to flourish beyond stereotypes and change the negative image of woman despite all her personal efforts.

This misrepresentation of women leads to the assumption that any woman involved in media is morally corrupt. This personally permits them target and victimize them. These people are not

outside media but also within the media. Here the directors and producers blackmail women too which demoralize them ever more. Even in print media the news regarding women in media is judgmental and of low standard.

Newspapers should be unbiased and neutral. Media can easily alter the stereotypical image of women. The disgracing of women in media is because some people are only interested in money making through sensuous advertisements. Media is biased as far as the issue of gender inequality is concerned. It is mainly the duty of Government of Pakistan and men of all departments to ensure the security of women for the progress and development of women in media. Their contribution is necessary in order to nationally and internationally create a positive image of women. Women should be provided platforms and opportunities to prove themselves in order to alter the stereotypical image portrayed by the media.

REFERENCES

- Abbas, Z. Resident Editor, daily 'Dawn' (English Newspaper of Pakistan)
Address by Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah at Lahore Session of Muslim League, March, 1940 (Islamabad: Directorate of Films and Publishing, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, 1983), pp. 5-23.
- Amber, S. (2002) *Portrayal of women in media*, Master's thesis, unpublished. Department of Mass communication, University of Punjab, Lahore Pakistan.
- Dickey, J. (2006). Out of Focus. *Journal of the CPBF*. The free Press London: UK
- Hall et al (1994). *Women and "body-isms" in television beer commercials*. *Journal of Sex Roles*: 31: 3: 329-337. Arizona State University West, USA. Springer Netherlands.
- Impact of newspaper language & Reporting on women's status and development by UKS, Islamabad.
- Javed, T. (2005). A gender writer. (writes in national English daily 'The News')
- Kazi, S. & Raza, B. (1991). Duality of Female Employment in Pakistan. *The Pakistan Development Review*. 30(4). pp. 733-743
- Portrayal of Women in Media Project*, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO)
- Simorgh (2003). *Portrayal of women in the media in Pakistan*.
- Shah, S. F. (2012) *Gender Inclusion: A Neglected Aspect of the English Textbooks in Pakistan*. *International Journal. Soc. Sci. & Education*. pp. 2223-4943
- Steven, H. (2000). "Sex Sells", *Sex Appeal: The Art of Allure in Graphic and Advertising Design\ Graphic Design & Reading: Exploration of an Uneasy Relationship*. UK. Allworth Press.
- Zia, A. (2007). *Media And Gender: Pakistani Perspective*, 16th AMIC Annual Conference June 25-28, 2007, Singapore