Representation of Women in Media and Changing Narratives of Empowerment

Aaliya Ahmed[1], Malik Zahra Khalid[2]

Abstract: Women, undoubtedly, have a critical role to play in the development of a country. Nonetheless, women can be expected to play a key role when they recognize their potential and are not ignored and suppressed by society. The most widespread elucidation and description of 'women's empowerment' is the capability to exercise full control over one's actions. The previous decades have observed various essential and crucial transformations in the condition and position of women in our society. There has been modification in policy paradigms from the concept of 'welfare' in the seventies to 'development' in the eighties and now to 'empowerment' in the nineties which continues at different levels. In recent years, media has emerged as a significant tool to present women in different roles and situations where media purports to project the modern, liberated woman. One obvious improvement might be the shift from firmly locating women in the domestic sphere to one that emphasizes an independent career in the world of paid employment, but the gulf between the media representations and reality still exists .This process has been further accelerated with some sections of women becoming increasingly self-conscious of their discrimination in several areas of family and public life. They are also in a position to mobilize themselves on issues that can affect their overall position. It becomes pertinent for the modern media through its diverse content to make women realize and understand their potential as the major arbiter of transformation in society.

Keywords: Media, Empowerment, Representation, Transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

There is an almost tangible, prevalent apprehension about the wellbeing of the world today. Children, women, minorities, immigrants, indigenous people, racially discriminated people, the poor, and so on have become issues of vital concern and need is to focus on these marginalized people in the changing dynamics of the geo-political situation at the global level. This concern seems to have come about because of growing economic and social disparities, the gap between the haves and have-nots, the content and nature of media, self-preoccupation at all levels, from the individual to the nation. The developing countries that have achieved great economic growth and industrialization and those that have not done so well are all facing serious problems of environmental degradation, population growth, gender inequality, urban plight, and economic uncertainties, social and political unrest and rapidly changing moral, ethical values and standards. Women empowerment continues to assume importance as women play a pivotal role in the development of any country.

Gender discrimination and gender bias remains visible in various proportions and many dimensions of life, not only at the national level but at the global level as well, this,

notwithstanding the fact that substantial advances have been made in gender equality in recent decades. Women's status is the best indicator of progress of any nation. Status and development of women influence the development of country, as they not only constitute half of its population, but also influence growth of the remaining half of the nation. The nature and extent of the disparity varies significantly across countries and regions. In no region of the developing world, are women equal to men in legal, social, and economic rights. In a number of countries women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property, conduct business, or even travel without their husband's consent. They lag behind and are not given equal opportunities in many countries. Women obtain land rights chiefly through their husband as long as the marriage endures, and they often lose those rights when they are divorced or widowed. Gender disparities in rights constrain the sets of choices available to women in many aspects of life—often profoundly limiting their ability to participate in or benefit from development.

Gender gaps are prevalent in access to and control of resources, in economic opportunities, in power, and political voice and in social settings. Women bear the burden of these inequities—but the detriments of these gaps cut across the progress and growth of a society. Gender inequalities undermine the effectiveness of development policies in important ways. Yet this is an issue that often lies only at the periphery of policy dialogue and decision making, both in national and international arenas. Part of the neglect comes from policymakers' reluctance to deal with topics that they deem inextricably associated with societal norms, religion, or cultural traditions. Part comes from a belief that gender gaps should be addressed by advocacy, not policy. And part comes from ignorance about the nature of gender disparities and the costs of those disparities to people's well-being and countries' prospects for development. Unfortunately, the costs of this apathy, reluctance and ignorance towards women's issues are high. The term gender equality has been defined in a variety of ways in the context of development. Gender equality is defined in terms of equality under the law, equality of opportunity (including equality of rewards for work and equality in access to human capital and other productive resources that enable opportunity), and equality of voice (the ability to influence and contribute to the development process). It stops short of defining gender equality as equality of outcomes for two reasons. First, different cultures and societies can follow different paths in their pursuit of gender equality. Second, equality implies that women and men are free to choose different (or similar) roles and different (or similar) outcomes in accordance with their preferences and goals (the ability to influence and contribute to the development process).

Women continue to have systematically poorer command over a range of productive resources, including education, land, information, and financial resources. In South Asia women have only about half as many years of schooling as men, on average, and girls' enrollment rates at the secondary level are still only two-thirds of boys'. Many women cannot own land, and those who do generally command smaller landholdings than men. And in most developing regions, female-run enterprises tend to be undercapitalized, having poorer access to machinery, fertilizer, extension information, and credit than male-run enterprises. Such disparities, whether in education or other productive resources, hurt women's ability to participate in development and to contribute to higher living standards for their families. Those disparities also translate into greater risk and vulner-

ability in the face of personal or family crises, in old age, and during economic shocks. Despite the links between economic development and gender equality, women's representation in parliaments remains minimal. A few low-income countries, such as China and Uganda, have made special efforts to open parliamentary seats to women, achieving levels of female representation even higher than those in high-income countries. They demonstrate the potential impact of a social mandate for gender equality.

For these reasons, gender equality is a core development issue. Promoting gender equality is thus an important part of a development strategy that seeks to enable *all people*—women and men alike—to escape poverty and improve their standard of living and usher in development in all sections of society. At the same time, themes such as diversity, human welfare, community-oriented participatory initiatives, and transparent modes of collective action reflect the new priorities (Honadle, 1999). The political and developmental realities of today call for a new set of institutional arrangements based on the conditions and priorities that exist in the new century. Studies aptly indicate that women are suffering from various types of problems due to lack of education and information. Thus, women's empowerment is necessary. Women's empowerment is one of the key factors in determining success of development.

2.   UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERMENT

A re-conceptualization of development as empowerment has remained in widespread use. Empowerment is incorporated as an important objective within the development framework. A major goal of development as empowerment is to move the locus of control from outsiders to the individuals and groups affected directly. Empowerment is the mechanism by which individuals, organizations, and communities gain control and mastery over social and economic conditions, over political processes, and over their own stories. (Melkote Rao, 2001) Empowerment involves not merely increased influence over external forces but also over internal impediments to change.

The factors that contribute to women's powerlessness are both structural and ideological. In India, a patriarchy perspective values the ideologies that support women subordination. It therefore, becomes essential and imperative that women's empowerment challenge patriarchal ideologies, values and structures. As victims of subordination and subjugation, women may not recognize the pitiable conditions and causes of oppression. The process of empowerment initiated by external change agents is based on a number of principles of empowerment approach. On the basis of this approach, oppression is considered destructive, is based on a holistic vision, is people centered; should take place in an environment of collective movement toward agreed upon goals and objectives; women should be enabled in changing their roles as victims to one who are in control of their circumstances (Dr.M.Koteswara Rao, 2005).

The toll on human lives is a toll on development—since improving the quality of people's lives is development's ultimate goal. But gender inequalities also impose costs on productivity, efficiency, and economic progress. By hindering the accumulation of human capital in the home and the labor market, and by systematically excluding women or men from access to resources, public services, or productive activities, gender discrimination

diminishes an economy's capacity to grow and to raise living standards.

Rappaport (1987:121) describes empowerment as "a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighborhoods.Empowerment is a process which changes existing power relations by addressing itself to the three dimensions - material, human and intellectual resources. It is a process which must challenge and change ideology, the set of ideas, attitudes, beliefs and practices in which gender bias or social bias like caste, class, regionalism and communalism are embedded. The failure to address the ideology makes many empowerment programs ineffective in changing gender relations in the long term. Empowerment processes must also change power relations through redistribution of resources, by giving people much more equal access and control over resources. As a process, empowerment may have different outcomes. For some it could lead to a perception of control over their lives while for others it may mean actual control (Rappaport 1987);it could be an internalized attitude or an externally observable behavior; it could be an individual achievement (Rappaport 1987), a community experience (Chavis and Wandersman 1990), or a professional intervention using strategies that are informed by local realities Addressing transformation of ideological environment, in the way people think is a very integrated and critical task of the empowerment process. However, it is not hard to do with women, as people who are oppressed always somehow know that they are oppressed, they only need a social environment which permits them to articulate the oppression. The process itself defies easy definition and the starting point is a realization on the part of an individual, group, or community of its inequitable position, its powerlessness in the system, or the relative neglect of its needs by the larger society.

An empowered woman would be one who is self-confident, who critically analyses her environment and who exercises control over decisions that affect her life. The process of empowerment of women requires transformation of structures of sub ordinance, control over material and intellectual resources, gaining decisions, making authority and reduction of gender inequality and also assigning them responsibilities. This requires that women must recognize their strategic needs, their social position and understand how coercive it is. Women's strategic needs are here defined as to increase the women's bargaining capacity, reduce violence against women and make them gain more influence over decision-making. Programmes for women's empowerment failed as they overlooked the structural factors that perpetuated the oppression and exploitation. The fulfillment of practical needs such as food, health care and education can not empower women unless the long-term strategic needs are met.

In order to develop a significant insight about the empowerment of women, control and power is the most vital manifestation from which explanation and characterization have to step aside. The power structure in which to intervene to empower women must be known to be able to create a sustainable change. Invariably access and domination over resources do not explain control over power relations. It is necessary to go beyond the resources themselves to the more complex dimension called ideology in order to understand the power relations. Ideology is a broad term used to signify the value systems, attitudes and beliefs which surround power relations (Mcquail, 1983). The term ideology

can make us understand why changes in resources do not necessarily lead to changes in for instance gender relations. The whole element of ideology seems to explain why even when women are bringing in the bulk of resources, they continued to uphold male power and continued to participate in their own subordination. The ideology is deeply embedded in the consciousness of women. Empowerment is well suited to deal with social change in general and with inequitable structures in particular. It provides individuals, communities, and organizations with the necessary skills, confidence, and countervailing power to deal effectively with social change in a world that distributes needs, resources, and power unequally. However, empowerment facilitates sharing of knowledge and solution alternatives among the participants in the process.

3.   SAGA OF WOMEN'S EMPO WERMENT

On participation of women in development generally, there are no concrete measures or recommendations beyond the stipulation that there should be increased numbers in decision making at all levels. Equal participation of women is envisaged within existing national institutions and structures by introducing specific policy measures. 33% reservation in parliament for women is an issue that is yet to be resolved. NGO's and other organizations have made efforts at "enhancing women's autonomy" in development.

Majority of women are struggling to improve their immediate conditions by constantly modifying the adverse impact of governmental policies, demographic and economic, as well as social and fiscal. The developing countries are faced with numerous problems related to the provision of basic needs which has become worse due to the global economic situation and cannot be resolved unless there is the participation of all members of society, both at the conceptual and implementation stage.

Women support a large part of the world economy by 'free services' in the home and the community. Women have always been at work. In the period of dynamic economic and social change during the last two centuries questions relating to the size, nature and value of women's work were left to sociological speculation. Mainstream research provides historical data and empirical evidence that tend to lean on the 'traditional roles' of women in society. This has led to the analysis of women's status and workload in the economics of the third world. However, the primary conclusion from the data reflects the basic link between the large-scale economic structural change and social perspective on women's work and cultural value system. In order to identify women's place in the processes, which contribute to development, it is essential to consider evidence from the social movements whose size and depth vary around the world. The changing relationship between women and development are not easily discernible from present trends. Social change is a complex phenomenon and no change is uni-linear. In effect, women's struggle during the last thirty years for their rights is closely linked to the survival of humanity itself.

It is important to recognize that despite cultural differences, the historical legacy of women's rights would have common threads. These are concerned to their low status and the consequences need to re-evaluate their work and performance. For this very reason, most women are often motivated to take practical action rather than focus on theory.

They seek equal opportunities within the system and work towards equal opportunities in 'employment',' education' and 'health'. Radical feminists consider the division of labour between men and women as the primary contradiction of society, whereas Marxist feminists see women's oppression as inevitable and consequence of capitalism.(N.J.Usha Rao,1983) They emphasize that essential changes for example in health are not possible without fundamental social and economic changes.

Women's contribution to economic progress is increasingly acknowledged throughout the world. Yet in many societies their control over their own lives remains relatively limited. For practical purposes, they are still at a disadvantage in getting the information and resources that they need to work more productively. Women still lag behind in educational attainment-learning capacity and other respects. Traditional constraints not only tend to limit the opportunities for women. They also limit, directly or indirectly, women's own demand for such opportunities. Majority of the women are illiterate and most of them live in the remote part of the country. They are not even aware of the rights to which they are entitled. As a result they do not demand the enforcement of their rights within the family, community or nation. Though women nearly constitute half of our population, without education; they can hardly became partners in the development around them. But women have left home and managed to venture into the outer world. A literate woman can break the barriers of superstition and evil customs, which is so prevalent in our society, that they can help create a new society where women power can play a very important role. Women, undoubtedly, can play a complementary role to men in the progress of a nation as well as in other areas of life.

4.   DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN IN MEDIA

Media is central to how people understand themselves and those around them. Media is a social institution that ultimately reflects power relations in that society. In exploring the relationship between media and society, pertinent questions include whether media are molders or reflectors of social structures, and whether media are agents of social change or reinforcers of the status quo (Rosengren, 1981; Glasser, 1997).

The mirror approach employs the metaphor of the mirror to describe the role of media in society (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1982). It assumes that the media provide a truthful and objective portrait of social reality. The null effects approach also suggests that media content reflects reality with little or no distortion, but sees this reality as the result of compromises between those who sell information to the media and those who buy it (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991).

Studies show that the "pictures" we get from the media differ from the world outside (e.g., Giltlin, 1980; Lang & Lang, 1971). Media content does not simply reflect the world, but represents it by highlighting certain elements over others (Devereaux, 2003). Traditional Marxists believe that the images and definitions provided by the media are "distorted or 'false' accounts of an objective reality" which are molded by the ruling political and economic groups (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1982, p. 22). By providing a particular set of representations, media feeds off and feeds into social assumptions and practices that ultimately undermine the advancement of women. There is also a possibility that

media representations of such star figures like Madonna and Spice Girls have resulted in women becoming increasingly empowered and liberated from the shackles of male domination. One way of to address these possibilities is to look at the employment prospects and projected wages of women in different societies (Carter et al., 1998). Another is to consider media representations where claims for liberation and empowerment are made (Fiske,1989).The former will undoubtedly confirm that gender relations are significantly molded through economic inequalities. The latter provide a series of important textual bases for analysis as well as data for audience research.

Many feminist studies on media and society focus on the relationship between media portrayals of women and social reality. Much attention has been given to the gender-role messages in television programs (e.g., Ferri & Keller, 1986; Matelski, 1985), newspaper and magazine content (e.g., List, 1986; Silver, 1986), and advertising (e.g., Lysonski, 1985; Whipple & Courtney, 1980). These studies found that women are often underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed as playing passive, submissive and dependent roles. The media are hypothesized to fulfill the structural needs of a patriarchal and capitalist society by reinforcing gender differences and inequalities (Van Zoonen, 1996). As media content becomes ever glamorous, it appears that attention to constitutional imperatives for gender equality is reduced to official platitudes.

The female images constructed by the media are not fixed entities and have changed over time in response to both the feminist movement and the broader socioeconomic changes (Rhode, 1995). One obvious improvement might be the shift from firmly locating women in the domestic sphere to one that emphasizes an independent career in the world of paid employment, but the gulf between the media representations and reality still exists (Devereaux, 2003). If power relations can remain either unchallenged or better tolerated because certain genres of media representations make oppression more bearable, then such representations could be said to have therapeutic as well as ideological significance (Ferguson, 2004).

Cross-cultural studies show that media portrayals of women are influenced by sociocultural factors. For instance, Sengupta (1995) found that women in U.S. advertisements are more likely to appear in working roles as high-level business executives and be shown relaxing at home, while women in Japanese advertisements are more likely to be portrayed as entertainers and be shown cooking, cleaning and doing other household chores. Gallagher (1981) suggests that in countries such as China and the socialist states of Eastern Europe, the government-controlled media with a strong commitment to the emancipation of women seem to "offer exceptionally positive images of women and lay stress on women's contribution to economic and social development" (Gallagher, 1981, pp. 70-71).

In general, past studies show that the media portrayal of women is related to the broad socio-economic, political and cultural context of a society. Images of women in the media are more likely to be the results of a social-construction of reality than the products of media reflection or distortion (Glasser, 1997). Any meaningful examination of media portrayals of women has to be based on specific social, economic, political and cultural conditions of a given country within a particular period of time (Ceulemans & Faucon-

nier, 1979).

In 1984, Joshi committee presented their report, in which the women's representation in media was studied. Joshi committee had to base Doordarshan for their studies because back then that was the only media channel with a decisive influence over people. Joshi committee emerged with the opinion that most of the feature films and filmy programmes on Doordarshan were exploitative of women. The committee felt that the channel was trivialising womanhood. They argued for including more programmes targeting women audience. They also spoke about the need for focusing on women's issues. According to them, image of womanhood had to be positively portrayed in Indian media. They said that to achieve this goal, the number of male-oriented programmes had to be reduced considerably for this.

Prabha Krishnan and Anita Dighe (1990) conducted a quantitative study about the construction of femininity in Indian television. They also had to base their study on Doordarshan because that was the only influential channel then. Unlike the Joshi committee, this study focused on news programmes. They realised that only 10% of the news time carried news about women. Even though there were many women newsmakers, women oriented news was very less. Another concern of this study was the commercials. The study reported that the commercials and ads were portraying women negatively. A woman's voice in an ad was 'seductive' whereas a man's words were 'authoritative' .

Drawing from different research data, Tuchman shows that at present the media fail to pass on the dominant values which may be needed at the times of rapid social change. While significant social transformation has taken place with more women going for employment, media shows hardly anything of the kind. Media, particularly television annihilates women, according to Tuchman and tells society women are not important. Only in soap operas do women dominate the screen. Not only does television tell us that women don't matter except as housewives and mothers, but also it symbolically denigrates them by portraying them as incompetent, inferior and always subservient to men endangering social development (Van Zoonen1996).

5. REFLECTING EMPOWERMENT IN MEDIA

Advancement of women's education and their entry into employment have contributed to the growth of media. Women, undoubtedly, have a critical role to play in the development of a country. Nonetheless, women can be expected to play a key role when they recognize their potential and are not ignored and suppressed by society. It becomes pertinent for the modern media through its diverse content to make women realize and understand their potential as the major arbiter of transformation in society. In today's world, print and electronic media play a vital role in effectively conveying message that needs to be conveyed.

The media in India does not generally give adequate attention to serious issues about exploitation and inequal 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. (G.N Ray)

It is unfortunate that there is lack of sensitivity among the newspapers in general to women and their problems. A study carried out by Research, Reference and Training Division, information and Broadcasting Ministry, Government of India (2009) reveals:

i. More coverage is given to violence related issues. Family rights, health, education and inheritance related rights are neglected as these are the issues which will lead to the real empowerment of women.

ii. Gender coverage can be more forceful if interpretative or analytical reporting is done.

iii. When covering gender issues, objectivity and fairness should be adopted in order to minimize the social biases.

Contemporary media is profit and market oriented. Sensational and gossip sells. Media have been accepted as the watchdog of society and this puts on them the onus of playing their role in a responsible manner and give direction to change and development. There is no denying the fact that media is a very powerful agent of change. With proliferation of media and availability of 24x7 channels, the media have become more concerned with the TRP's rather than focus on more important issues concerning society including issues of women. Media has to be socially committed and target relevant. In order to have better coverage of women, there is a need for strict regulations to be imposed so that the media take their responsibilities towards society seriously.

6.   NATURE OF COVERAGE IN MEDIA

Contemporary media is obsessed with 4 c's: cricket, crime, corruption and cinema. Most of the media content revolves around these themes. The glamorous and glitzy is popular. The main reason: being the commercial aspects of the media. The content now is more event driven than issues driven. For the media to accurately mirror our societies, to produce coverage that is complete and diverse, it is critical that the news reflects the world as seen through the eyes of women as well as men. All journalists, male and female, can help to change attitudes by portraying women as they really are rather than re-enforcing gender-based stereotypes.

Media is an institution with deep social foundation and is massive in its appeal with a profound impact. Media determines what can be thought, said and done in a social context through its agenda setting function. This discursive power of media develops media culture which helps us not only in the construction of reality but also in the construction of our identities. Media play a significant role in shaping social values, attitudes, per-

ception and behavior. The exposure of women to mass media content designed to promote balanced and responsible role portrayal by men and women can aid the process of women's empowerment. India's first soap opera Hum Log promoted small families and an equal status for women. Media is expected to enhance the decision-making power of women and give more access to information, education and other resources (Ramachandran, Subbiah and Ravishankar, 2004). But there has be no exclusive focus on women's problems and their development. In the absence of a a comprehensive media policy in India, television content emphasizing entertainment has grown to such an extent that today media are oriented towards commercialization with not even a semblance of public education or service. The present day media have done more damage to the cause of women's development by regressing to highly negative values that impede women's empowerment (Kiran Prasad, 2005).

7. CONCLUSION

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.(G.N.Ray)

How media represents women has been a question of debate since media became a popular factor in the life of Indians. Throughout the culture of every country, women were given a secondary status, branding them as the 'weaker sex'. With the arrival of modern thought, a new feeling has rouse that women are not secondary compared to men and both are equal. Media has a great hold on any society nowadays that their perceptions of a particular group indeed influence their status in the society. Hence how media interprets women is very much important. The ultimate goal is education-enabling and motivating more people into thinking, talking and participating in collective decisions about for e.g what to do about development of women The need is to address the under representation of issues related to women. The question is how best to do that. Journalists have a responsibility to report on the needs of the women as they struggle to understand

and navigate with their problems and concerns. Media reinforces attitudes and produce some change in beliefs. All social institutions, including the media, need to change to play a different and more transformative role in which issues of gender equality are mainstreamed and not ghettoized.

8.   REFERENCES

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[1]Sr. Asst Professor Media Education Research Centre University of Kashmir Email:aaliyahmed@gmail.com P.O Box:833 G.P.O Srinagar-190001 J&K India
[2]Sr. Asst Professor Media Education Research Centre University of Kashmir Email:zaramlk94@gmail.com P.O.Box:833 G.P.O Srinagar-190001 J&K India