REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MASS MEDIA

Ila Patel

The purpose of the Working Paper Series (WPS) is to provide an opportunity to IRMA faculty, visiting fellows, and students to sound out their ideas and research work before publication and to get feedback and comments from their peer group. A Working Paper is not to be considered a formal research publication of the Institute.

Institute of Rural Management Anand 388 001

December 1995
CONTENT

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. FEMINIST APPROACHES TO MEDIA CONTENT 3

3. CONTINUITY AND CHANGES IN PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MASS MEDIA 6
   3.1 Women in Films 7
   3.2 Women in Television 12
   3.3 Women in Print Media 18

4. STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE 20
   4.1 Creating Alternatives 21
   4.2 Interventions in the Mainstream Media 22

5. CONCLUSIONS 27

6. REFERENCES 29
REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MASS MEDIA

Ila Patel

Abstract

With the introduction of new communication technologies, the power of mass media has grown in stature. The mass media shape our perceptions of social reality by presenting only some aspects of reality and by continuous repetition of images and messages. Although the form and content of mass media have changed dramatically over the years, the mass media have played a decisive role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and in reinforcing patriarchal culture by constructing new meanings and images and by setting the agenda for public opinion through selective themes and viewpoints.

This paper attempts to give a global picture of representation of women in the mass media -- films, television and print media (newspapers and magazines) on the basis of available Indian and international research literature on women and mass media. It argues that women and their concerns are no longer invisible in the mass media. However, old sex-stereotypes have continued in new forms. With the growing commercialisation of the mass media, there has been increasing commodification of women in the mass media. On the other hand, progressive discourse on women's issues is often co-opted and re-constructed in the mainstream media to establish the hegemony of dominant social classes. Hence, the task of changing media images of women has become far more difficult in the context of market economy.
REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MASS MEDIA

1. INTRODUCTION

The role and status of women in relation to men have gradually changed since the beginning of this century. The mass media have played a decisive role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and in maintaining the status quo. With the introduction of new communication technologies, the mass media have acquired a global dimension. The very nature of technology enables the projection of uniform transmission of media messages and images across regions. Although the form and content of mass media have changed dramatically in the past few decades, the mass media in modern society have continued to play a significant role in the production and transmission of patriarchal culture. The relationship between modernity, the mass media and patriarchy is, however, far more complex.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the mass media in developing countries were assigned the role of modernising traditional societies. Exposure to mass media was perceived as an important indicator of modernity. Over the years, the power of mass media has grown in stature. The mass media continuously engage in redefinition of modernity and individuals. They influence the cultural domain in two ways. On the one hand, the mass media provide a large population of society with the dominant leisure time activity. On the other hand, the mass media in contemporary society are increasingly responsible for the construction and consumption of social knowledge and meanings which people draw on to make sense of their world and act upon their social reality.

Earlier communication research argued that the way in which men and women are portrayed in the mass media represents reality. The media, however, does not represent reality as it is lived. It draws upon social reality but selectively picks up certain existing attitudes, values, behaviours and images, while

censoring the others. It only chooses some aspects of reality and re-presents it to us such that we become recipients of media's selective interpretation of the social reality. By highlighting only selected aspects of reality in a particular context, by projecting them as larger than life, and by continuous repetition of media images and messages, the media influences reality and shape our perception of reality.

The mass media function in the larger system of patriarchy and capitalism that controls media structures and organisations and represents women as subordinates. The recent debate of mass media vis-a-vis gender produces much more complex understandings of the cultural dimensions of power and equality, and more specifically feminist analyses of the media, culture and society (Gallagher 1992). With the proliferation of 'women's genres' -- soap operas, melodramas, women's magazines and so on -- women have emerged as important consumers of mass entertainment. The mass media also set the agenda for public opinion by selecting themes, items and points of views that tend to reinforce the patriarchal culture. But, the media simply does not reflect the social reality and conditions our values, attitudes and behaviours. They constitute only one side of the construction of women's marginality in culture.

The relationship between the media and reality is, however, dialectical. Culture is not a static system, but an ever evolving process that constantly changes to accommodate emergent alternative and oppositional meanings, values and practices (Williams 1977). The mass media, particularly print and broadcasting media (television and radio), also provide some space for construction of new meanings and images. Although the progressive discourse is often co-opted in the mass media and re-constructed again to establish the hegemony of dominant social classes and reproduce gender relations, women's groups and media professionals continue to challenge them in the context of a larger system of patriarchy and capitalism that controls the mass media and subordinate women.

Although feminist activists and academicians concerned with the women's question have critically analysed negative portrayal of women in media, research literature related to developing countries is uneven across regions. This paper attempts to give a global picture of representation of women in the mass media
of developing countries, however, Indian scholarship has been given far more attention than any other country. Some research is reported from Asian countries, but scholarship from Latin America and Africa is hardly represented. This is partly due to unavailability of international research literature on women and mass media in India and partly due to my familiarity with Indian scholarship and strategies for change. It is assumed that despite apparent differences in societal context within which mass media function, there are striking similarities in the portrayal of women in mass media across divergent media systems in developing countries.

Although the images of women and types of messages transmitted through various mass media, such as print media (newspapers and magazines), electronic media (radio and television), and films, are not very different, it would be worthwhile to examine the specificity of media in reinforcing existing gender ideology. In the context of developing countries, radio is an important medium for communication as it is inexpensive and easily accessible to the vast majority of the illiterate population. However, it is a neglected medium of study among feminist scholars and activists. Hence, radio is not included in the discussion.

Discussion in this chapter is divided into four sections. The first section highlights feminist approaches to the study of media content. Continuity and changes in the portrayal of women in the mass media are examined in the second section. The third section highlights strategies for changing the images of women in the mass media. The final section summarises emerging trends in the portrayal of women in the context of current media developments.

2. FEMINIST APPROACHES TO MEDIA CONTENT

Contemporary women's movements in North America and Western Europe have played an important role in shaping the academic agenda of feminist communication research. A feminist critique of media content and its implications in the construction of gender has been an important part of feminist cultural politics. The first international review of research and action, initiated by the UNESCO, drew our attention to the striking similarities in the negative portrayal of women in mass media (Ceulemans and Fauconnier 1979, and Gallagher 1983),
and women's lack of decision-making power in media organisations throughout the world (Gallagher 1981). A disproportionate volume of research on women and media was, however, found to be from the developed countries.

In developing countries, feminist communication research on media content, images and representation has grown since the early 1980s. It was the United Nations International Decade for Women (1975-85) that provided political impetus worldwide to initiate research and action for changing women's portrayal and participation in the mass media. In comparison to the Western feminist scholarship in the field of communication, however, communication research on Third World women has remained fragmentary and descriptive. Despite proliferation of women-in-development literature in the last two decades, gender in the field of mass communication has remained a marginal area of inquiry among feminist scholars (Steeves 1993). Hence, empirical and theoretical work in the area of women and mass media in developing countries is limited and uneven across regions. As a result, media research on women in developing countries has relied heavily on the feminist paradigm for communication research, developed in the West.

Gallagher (1992:4-7) highlights three strands in feminist research on media content, images and representation. The focus of feminist scholarship in the 1970s, conducted mostly in North America and Asia (Japan, Korea and the Philippines), was on quantitative content analyses of "sex-roles and media stereotypes". This research documented invisibility of women in various media forms and highlighted how media images reinforce negative portrayal of women in terms of behaviours, aspirations, psychological traits and so on. Gallagher argues that such juxtaposition of "positive" and "negative" media images of men and women is problematic. There is a tendency in such an approach to define "positive" images of women in "masculine" terms. For example, showing women as authoritative, autonomous, self-fulfilled and successful, etc. while ignoring the ways in which the audience read and reinterpret media content. Despite limitations of this approach, it condemned and drew our attention to sexism in media and provided impetus to feminist research on media content.
In the 1980s, feminist film criticism, based on qualitative European perspectives and methodology which use psychoanalytical, semiotic, and post-structural frameworks in analysis, contributed to broadening our understanding of how the media construct definitions of femininity and masculinity, and how images of women reflect or distort reality. The focus of this approach is on understanding “representation” of women through the study of text and textual mechanisms. Criticism of this approach is directed towards the neglect of a dialectical relationship between media and culture which construct the notion of “women”. The question is not merely to examine whether the media reflect or distort images of women, but to explore how images and meaning of femininity and masculinity in media are socially constructed within the context of patriarchal social relations.

Furthermore, recent feminist media criticism that has drawn from cultural studies shifts our attention from the text to the context of reception in which the audience plays an active role in producing and negotiating textual meanings. Construction of textual meanings is an integral part of social and power relations in society, which are constantly contested and negotiated by the audience. Gallagher argues that in the recent years feminist media criticism, heavily influenced by post-structuralist and post-modern theory, places far more emphasis on autonomy of audience reading of the text and validating audience “pleasures” and ignores the fact that women as audience are positioned within a cultural system which reproduces particular representations of “femininity” and “masculinity”.

In summary, Gallagher (1992) concludes that recent feminist media research and criticism gives us very useful insights in understanding cultural dimensions of power and equality. However, she expresses caution against the apolitical trend in current feminist media studies that focuses on the micro-level while ignoring the issue of power and broader political and economic concerns. She argues that from the point of view of feminist action and politics, it is also important to situate micro-level work within the political-economic context of media development and examine macro-level forces impinging on media as institutions and structures in society in order to formulate relevant policies and strategic judgements.
What is the relevance of Western feminist media paradigms for media studies on Third World women? As there are some commonalities of women's oppression around the world, and in women's position in relation to culture and communication, analytical and heuristic frameworks developed by Western feminists can be useful to some extent. However, recent discourse on feminist media criticism, based on “post-modern” view of society is conceptually ethnocentric and inappropriate for most of the Third World women, who have not yet experienced the “modern” life (Gallagher 1992: 14). The challenge before the feminists in the Third World is to evolve conceptual frameworks that situate mass media in the changing political-economic context while taking into consideration the feminist agendas of Third World women and differences and specificities of their experiences in a given cultural system. Furthermore, in the changing global context of new communication technologies and rapid commercialisation of mass media, it is far more important to explore the issue of power and critically examine political-economic forces that impinge on media development and media content in developing countries.

3. CONTINUITY AND CHANGES IN PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MASS MEDIA

The reach of mass media among a majority of the third world women is much less due to factors such as illiteracy, inaccessibility, lack of respite from household chores, inconvenient programme timings and traditional restrictions that inhibit their mobility to go out to the theatre or cinema hall. Nevertheless, the role of mass media in perpetuating patriarchal norms and ideology is pervasive across the world.

The ways in which women are portrayed in media has emerged as an important area of research and action among feminist researchers and activists in developing countries since the 1980s. It was the comprehensive study of Gallagher (1983) on the portrayal of women in the mass media that drew our attention to demeaning and derogatory media images of women across the world. The study was conducted in several developed countries such as Australia, Austria, Canada, the Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark, Finland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and developing countries of China, Columbia, Brazil, Iran, Jamaica, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Senegal, and Venezuela.

1. The study was conducted in several developed countries such as Australia, Austria, Canada, the Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark, Finland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and developing countries of China, Columbia, Brazil, Iran, Jamaica, Philippines, Puerto Rico, Senegal, and Venezuela.
study concluded that except in the case of government-controlled media in "socialist" countries (for example China), media underrepresent or misrepresent women and their concerns, use them in advertising as a commodity and present traditional stereotyped images of women as passive, dependent and subordinate to men. Subsequently, how media in different countries portray women have been discussed by women's groups and researchers in various forums in the 1980s.

Although periodically efforts are made to highlight the existing trends in the portrayal of women in the mass media, much of the media research literature relating to different countries has remained fragmentary and essentially descriptive in nature. After Gallagher's study, probably no systematic review of literature on media portrayal of women has been undertaken in a large number of developing countries.

It is against this lacuna in systematic and critical media research in developing countries that this section attempts to highlight continuity and changes in the portrayal of women in films, television and the print media (newspapers and magazines). Discussion in this section draws heavily from the Indian literature due to the unavailability of research literature from other countries. It is assumed that despite apparent differences in media development and content in divergent societal context, the Indian situation throws light on how media reinforces gender and social relations, while at times challenging them.

3.1 Women in Films

Cinema is a complex medium of communication that combines sight, sound, motion, drama and messages to capture audience attention. In the milieu of widespread illiteracy, it is the most important medium for entertainment. Popular cinema is an extremely potent medium since it influences us at the subliminal level through powerful images and various successful genres, such as family and social dramas, romance, vendetta sagas, mythological stories, etc., around familiar conflicts and resolution of family and society. These narratives create myths, which infiltrate the unconscious world of collective psyche and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Thus, popular cinema is an integral part of popular culture and reflects the distorted mirror of modern society.
The representation of women in cinema has been a major issue of debate among the western feminist scholars in communication. The feminist film theory has made a significant contribution to understand how the mass media construct definitions of femininity and masculinity (Gallagher 1992:4). Semiotic analysis of films by feminists show that in cinema, a woman is presented as what she represents for men, not in terms of what she actually signifies. Thus, films reinforce myths about women that exist in society. In developing countries, there has been hardly any similar efforts to build a feminist film theory or examine the question of women in cinema through systematic research. In general, analysis is related too closely with specific film narratives. Nevertheless, a closer look at media images of women in Indian films will give us some insights in understanding how the powerful medium of films has attempted to redefine femininity and masculinity in the changing context of modernity.

While tracing down the changing versions of idealised femininity over 75 years in mainstream films and since the 1960s in the “new wave” (art) cinema, Rao (1989) shows that although images of women in films have changed from Goddesses to dream girls to the “new” women, the heroines are still depicted to project patriarchal norms and values. She argues that the form and content of Indian popular films have changed over the years with technological advances in cinematography and social milieu. However, the traditional mythical female characters of the ideal women have continued as archetypes and are reinforced even today in characterisation of “modern” women in Indian cinema in one way or the other.2 Women are continued to be depicted in the roles of caretakers (mothers and wives) in the family.

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Indian popular cinema projected dichotomous images of women. Women were primarily depicted in relationship to men. In the context of gradual transition from traditional to modern society, traditional women were characterised in the “good” role of a mother, wife, sister and daughter and portrayed as demure, submissive, passive and self-

2. Rao (1989:447-48) argues that though the cosmic spirit in ancient Hindu theology was gender neutral, abstract image of divinity in mythologies was separated into the nurturant feminine and the protective masculine forces. However, with the emergence of patriarchal social system, female form became a conventional repository for preserving cultural values and sustaining male and female status differentials.
sacrificing, upholding the traditions and accepting patriarchal norms and authority. While the “modern” women were portrayed in the “bad” role of a vamp, as westernised and highly sexual, displaying independence and initiative in their relationships with men outside marriage. The two apparently contradictory images of women essentially highlight the hero’s masculinity. However, with the increasing trend towards commercialisation of popular Indian films in the 1980s, there has been a significant change in the screen images of men and women.

There is a rising trend towards sex and violence in popular Indian films in the context of growing social unrest. The romantic hero of the 1960s and early 1970s has been replaced by the angry young man who takes up the cause of fighting against the corrupt social system for the downtrodden. Such criminalisation of a hero’s role is often romanticised as a reaction to injustices to women in his life. Thus, wrongs against womanhood provide the pretext for the avenging hero to indulge in gory violence. To build up the macho image of the hero, the heroine’s role is made decorative and secondary. In fact, the vamp who was used in earlier films to represent the dark side of modernity, has more or less disappeared from popular Indian cinema. It is the heroine who is represented as both, a seductive dancer/singer enticing the hero and at the same time a “good” women upholding patriarchal traditions.

Women are increasingly represented as sex objects and there is a growing trend towards pornographic films. Rhetoric of such representation is far more important than the immediate connotation. The body of a woman is constructed on the screen from the eyes of the male “gaze” that objectifies her as a commodity. The depiction of violence against women have moved away from psychological and subtle forms of violence manifest in denial and negation of women’s individuality and identity to the use of direct physical force. Rape or attempted rape scenes are becoming increasingly common in the film narratives, projected to serve as a voyeur’s delight rather than enrage and invite public debate. Thus, illustrating female victimisation has become a new form of exploitation of female body.
Despite increasing participation of men and women in the work force, work is an underdeveloped theme in the commercial Indian films. On the basis of an analysis of several Hindi films, Kishwar and Vanita (1987) highlight diminished importance of women’s work outside the home in film narratives and examine how middle class ideal of a domesticated woman is reinforced in divergent work roles.

In general, the worklife of a hero usually exists to feed to the film narratives of romance, family melodrama and violent conflict. While women are mostly shown as working only when compelled by circumstances. Even educated middle-class women are shown without any occupation. When they do work, they are concentrated in stereotyped jobs such as typist, secretary, school teacher and occasionally as lawyer and doctor. The working middle-class woman, in general, is a young woman, a modern miss, who is doing a job while waiting to get married. But by and large women are shown to work only in the absence of a male breadwinner, a father, a brother or a husband. These women are presented as unfortunate victims sacrificing their own interests to support the family. It is only when she tries to rebel against her role as a wife and a mother or chooses to work to assert her independence, the hostility against a working woman surfaces.

In the case of the poor women, work is represented as economic necessity. Poor women’s worklife is either romanticised or is sensationalised by depicting her as a victim of poverty and sexual harassment. Sexual molestation is presented as a dominating reality of a poor working women’s lives. Such portrayal obscures harsh working conditions and injustices and reinforces the myth that work outside the home exposes women to sexual violence. At the same time, the molestation episodes cater to the voyeuristic impulse of the audience.

In creating new archetypes of modern Indian women, commercial films also use the progressive films and women’s movement. The new woman is shown as a “strong” character -- educated, articulate, independent and capable of taking initiative in a relationship with a man. She signifies “good” modernity. In contrast to the earlier traditional image, her appearance also reflects a kind of freedom moving easily from western clothes to neo-ethnic Indian style of dressing.
However, the bright new image of "modern" women in the popular Indian films is superficial. Her femininity is defined within the boundaries of patriarchy. She continues to need the protection of a macho hero and does not rebel against his dominance.

However, characterisation of women in the women-centred films is ambivalent. Sometimes in the mainstream cinema, a heroine is portrayed in old familiar plots as an avenging angel like a hero (for example, as a dacoit, a fearless police officer, etc.). However, in imitating the role of a macho hero she neither appears credible nor powerful as the "strong" woman character as she continues to be depicted as submissive in her romantic relationships with men.

Furthermore, women who protest against the institution of marriage and patriarchal oppression have been ossified into new stereotypes. They are either depicted as home wreckers in the role of "other" women or as irrational and hysterical wives abandoning their villainous husbands. Even when a woman sets out to find herself as an individual, eventually she is shown as finding solace in motherhood or in another romantic relationship. Occasionally, she takes up career as a consolation prize for the broken marriage or relationship and not for defining her identity. Commercial cinema has created certain gender stereotypes with considerable ambiguity for keeping the audience emotionally involved. However, underlying the spurious concerns for women's oppression in the mainstream cinema, deeply entrenched ideals of femininity are disguised in the glossy images of "liberated" women.

With the emergence of alternative cinema (often known as the "new" wave or art cinema) since the late 1960s, there has been some efforts to bring women at the centre of film narratives.

The new wave or progressive cinema in the two decades of its existence has attempted to move away from the traditional stereotypes of an Indian woman and characterise her as a person with distinct identity by projecting her as a strong and often dominant character. The redefinition of femininity produced and portrayed in cinema under the "new" wave cinema in India, in fact, highlights the tension between "modernity" and "tradition" (Mazumdar 1991).
Women are often used in the new wave films as symbols of resistance and victims of exploitation. The emphasis in the new wave films is on replacing the "myth" in popular films by "reality". However, realistic cinema can also create new myths about women through powerful and controlling narratives and cinematography (Laxmi 1986). To establish visual authenticity of filmic reality, the penetrating gaze of realism often exploits the sensuous female body and use women as ideal symbols to represent a social "issue" (Rao 1989:452-54). Representation of women in the new wave cinema is also constrained by dominant ideological discourses on women that perceive the women's question as only a gender war within the framework of liberal feminism (Mazumdar 1991).

Until recently, commercial and new wave cinema in India has been the exclusive domain of male directors and writers. However, now a few women have entered the field as directors and writers. To what extent they have succeeded in shifting the perspective on women and related topics in films? At one level, women directors have created a much-awaited constructive space in the films for promoting feminist ethos and views. But, the terrain opened up by women directors is still uneven and patchy. In the prevailing economic and cultural context of commercial films, women directors are mostly allowed to deal with "women-oriented" issues such as, the family, romantic relations, maternal relations, etc., which are thought to be traditionally the domain of women (Gupta 1994). Some of the women directors reflect more sympathetic understanding of women characters. However, there has not been a significant shift in the roles assigned to women in the films of women directors who operate within the boundaries of gender stereotypes in the commercial cinema.

In summary, there is an increasing concern with women-centred issues in both art and commercial films since the beginning of the 1980s. However, both kinds of films use images and issues from each other and reinforces mythical portrayal of the new Indian woman in the guise of modernity to ensure mass appeal.

3.2 Women in Television

Television is a medium of entertainment as well as education and information. The penetration of new communication technologies in the 1980s has widened
the access to television in developing countries. With the growing awareness among development planners and media professionals about the women's question, there has been a significant increase over the years in the number of television programmes focusing on women and women's issues. How are women and their concerns reflected on television?

On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of portrayals of women in the mass media across many countries of the world, Gallagher (1983) has shown that women and their concerns are not only misrepresented and underrepresented on television, but women's images on television consistently follow traditional stereotypical patterns and are very often derogatory. The question before us is have things really changed? They have, though not for the better.

In general, a wide range of programmes is shown on television for entertainment, education and information. Very seldom the total output of television is studied in order to understand gender portrayal and the treatment of women's concerns. A pioneering study of the content of television programmes on Indian television revealed that the state-controlled television reflected common sex-role stereotypes, embedded in Indian cultural, religious and political traditions (Krishnan and Dighe 1990). Television affirmed a limited definition of womanhood that confined them to the home, most private of all social spaces and denied them spaces in the public sphere which was the domains of the male. The authors argue that the television's limited representation of women in the state-controlled television in India is a part and parcel of hegemonic process which supports women's subordination in society. Furthermore, television's heavy reliance on commercial films brings all the problems of commercial cinema into television, a medium that is expected to educate and inform.

In the recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in the television programmes where the text provides continuity by way of narrative or characters or themes and situations. An overwhelming number of these are fictional programmes that hook the large audiences through the narrative of the story. Among tele-dramas, soap operas have become one of the most popular forms
Soap opera as a format was first introduced in American commercial radio broadcasting by the Proctor and Gamble, a soap and cooking oil conglomerate, to impart messages about their products to a large number of housewives. The fact that soap operas and their variations were originally designed as advertising vehicles to attract housewives has labelled them as a female genre. In general, the Anglo-American soap operas on television centres around open-ended episodes, interwoven around numerous human interest stories in a complicated manner, on the domestic concerns, hopes and desairs of an average middle class American families. Over the years, the Latin American and other countries have developed their variations of the Anglo/ American soap opera format. In comparison to the Western scholarship, feminist research on soap operas in developing countries is very limited. Telenovela is the Latin American variation of the soap opera. It differs from the Anglo/American soap opera in the narrative structure, and appears to be less rooted in the domestic world. Nevertheless, romance and melodrama are key features of a telenovela. A study of telenovelas in Chile in the 1970s by Maria de la Luz Hurtado reveals that telenovelas follow traditional role models of men and women, endorse a romanticised ideal of motherhood and promote the traditional double moral standards for men and women in sexual matters (Frey-Vor 1990:8). Since then, there has been considerable variations in the form and content of telenovelas in Latin America. However, romance and melodrama have continued to be key features of Latin American telenovelas, which are predominantly associated with the world of women.

To reach the wider audiences, telenovelas like soap operas also use many elements of the popular patriarchal culture. Hence, telenovelas are less likely to

3. Refer to the special issues on soap opera by Gerlinde Frey-Vor in the Communication Research Trends, 10: 1 and 2 (1990) for a review of communication research on soap operas.

4. In fact, there is substantial communication research on Latin American soap operas, known as telenovelas. However, as most of the research is in Spanish or Portuguese it is not easily accessible to the wider English-speaking academic community.

5. Though telenovelas are continuous serials, they are not as open-ended as the soap operas. The telenovela is expected to have a happy ending to continue and terminate various plots and sub-plots.
break away from the dominant patterns of representation of women due to the
fear of loosing audience and commercial interests. Recent audience research
on telenovelas reflect on changing patterns of viewing telenovelas in the home
and increasing viewership of men and children in the family (Frey-Vor 1990: 14-
15). However, further research is needed on the changing nature of patriarchal
ideology and portrayal of gender in telenovelas in the recent years.

On the other hand, soap operas are also used in many developing countries for
imparting pro-developmental messages. For example, in Mexico the private
television network Televisa has produced pro-developmental telenovelas on
family planning, adult literacy, child care, women’s equality, adult literacy and
so on. In India, the public television network, Doordarshan introduced the first
development-oriented soap opera Hum Log during 1984-1985 that emphasised
the themes of family planning, the status of women, family harmony and family
welfare. Although there is considerable research on the effects of such soap
operas in attaining their educational-developmental goals, critical analysis of
gender issues in these programmes is very limited. A study of the effect of Hum
Log on the Indian audience reveals that exposure to such pro-social television
soap opera did not make viewers more aware of women’s status issues (Brown

In addition to pro-developmental soap operas, the non-dramatic television
programmes on a wide range of issues such as family planning, health and
hygiene, child care, home care, food and nutrition, and so on are also targeted
at women as general or specific audience. Portrayal of gender roles and activities
in such programmes on Indian television was not found to be radically different
from the fictional television programmes (Krishanan and Dighe 1990).

In general, the content of women-centred fictional tele-serials centred around
women’s life, various forms of women’s oppression along with the body, beauty
and consumerism. At one level, the increasing space for women’s programmes
and women’s issues on television gives us an impression that the media has at
least responded to women’s demands for better representation in television
programmes. However, a closer look at the medium suggests that although
women’s movement has succeeded to some extent in pushing women’s issues
onto the media agenda, they are accommodated within the existing patriarchal discourse. For example, an analysis of the portrayal of women in Pakistan television plays by a Lahore-based Simorgh collective shows that many tele-dramas had replaced the traditional vamp of the cinema with the single working women, who is depicted as a "monster" who could, due to her lack of the qualities of submission and obedience, threaten "male virtue" and the "sanctity of the home". A critique of the content of women-centred tele-serials in India by feminist activists suggests that despite liberal ideology of these programmes, they generally treat the women's question in a superficial manner and fail to challenge unequal power relations in the society.

Television is not merely for entertainment. It also transmits public knowledge and shapes public opinions. In the recent years, television has emerged as an important source of news and visual presentation has become an important area of news coverage. However, feminist media criticism has neglected this important genre of news, current affairs and other information-oriented programmes (Gallagher 1992:14). Research on television news in India shows a quantitative and qualitative underrepresentation of women in the national and regional television news (Krishan and Dighe 1990 and Media Advocacy Group 1994). Due to celebrity orientation of political news, women figured mostly as wives, mothers or daughters of well-known leaders. Otherwise they are depicted as passive audience, victims of calamity or accident or as beneficiaries of various welfare programmes. Similar situation also prevails in the other developing countries. However, there is not enough empirical research to support this conclusion. To understand the complexity of gender issues in television news production and news content, feminist research needs to go beyond the simplistic content analysis of the text and visuals of television news.

With increasing commercialisation of television broadcasting, there has been considerable spurt in television commercials. Many of the gender differences that appear in television programmes also get reflected in television advertising. The impact of advertisements is not just due to their verbal content, but their use of sexual symbols and images. It is the images that we see in advertisements

6. These findings are taken from Impact (an occasional documentation of Asian women's initiative), Vol. 1:2 (September 1993), p. 2.
that provide significance to the product and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Although women's groups and feminists have often raised their voices against images of women in television advertising, systematic research in this area is very limited.

In India, content analysis of roughly 186 television commercials, repeated several times during July 1986 on the public television network, reveals that women were utilised in advertising to sell products to both, male and female consumers through their two dimensional role: as caretakers of the household and the family and at the same time as decorative sex objects (Krishanan and Dighe 1990:58-62). Although women featured in various categories of commercials, they tended to be prominent figures in the commercials on grooming aids, household goods, and food. While men were prominent in the advertisements on medical aids, and agricultural, industrial and electronic goods. Women featured predominantly as housewives. On the other hand, men were either depicted as professionals (scientists, doctors, executives, etc.) or their occupations were unspecified. The activities of male and female characters in advertisements varied according to the type of product being advertised. Women were shown as engaged in cooking, feeding children, serving, caring, etc. Men's activities, on the other hand, were either of an outdoor nature or related to their occupations. On the whole, the latent messages of the commercials were more demeaning than the manifest messages. Commercials urged women to enhance their appeal to men or gain their approval by using the product concerned. Further empirical research could detect similar trends in television advertising in the other developing countries.

With the emergence of women as an important group of audience, television commercials have exploited women by coopting some of the images of feminism and creating a new cultural “type” of the assertive and ambitious women who are profitable consumers. The liberated women is presented as a sensual person who is primarily involved in the work of purchase of appliances, accessories and cosmetics. This new cultural stereotype of a woman is produced by television commercials essentially to serve the commodity markets of the capitalist economy. However, the changing images of women in television advertising with increasing globalisation of television advertising are not adequately captured in media research.
On the one hand, sustained pressures from the women's movement and concerted action at local, regional and national levels have forced re-packaging of women's images on television. The ideal woman is now an excellent wife and a mother who happens to work. Working women are now-a-days visible in the media, but her success is not gauged by her achievements in the workplace. She is still defined in terms of her relations with men, marriage stability, motherhood, and family relations. This does not imply that no effort is made to present on television an alternative perspective on women's struggles and problems. Feminist media professionals have attempted to use the space within the mainstream television to create new representations of women and project their experiences, struggles and hopes, and voice their concerns. However, such voices are limited and constrained by the existing media structures.

3.3 Women in Print Media

The reach of print media, the newspapers and magazines, is much less in developing countries due to widespread illiteracy. Nevertheless, print media plays an important role in influencing public opinions and setting agenda for what is constructed as news. The Gallagher's study in the early 1980s pointed out that women and women's issues find comparatively little space in newspapers. In general, newspapers and magazines reinforce sex stereotypes. With the increasing feminist critique of the print media and participation of feminist professionals in the print media, the situation has somewhat changed.

In the 1980s, the general apathy among newspapers and periodicals towards women's issues has given way to some awareness and better coverage. Earlier, women and their issues or problems never figured on the front page of a newspaper and women were predominantly depicted as victims of atrocities. Today women are more “visible” in the mainstream print media, where they figure side by side with the old stereotyped sexist images and the back page pin ups. Over the years, feminist pressures on the media have led to a gradual increase in the space devoted to the selected women’s issues and noticeable decline in the overtly sexist and anti-women items and articles. Nevertheless, there is considerable ambiguity in representation of women and women's issues in the newspapers and magazines. A quick review of literature on women in
print media in India by the Women’s Feature Service (1993) throws light on the emerging trend.

On the one hand, a few newspapers that carry a women’s page, popular magazines and women’s magazines continue the tradition of defining the “women’s world” in terms of beauty tips, recipes, fashions, home decoration, etc. Occasionally, some serious articles on the status of women or specific issues are thrown in, but often they are sacrificed due to encroachment of space by advertisements or due to emphasis on “light” articles to attract readers. On the other hand, women are featured in articles as film celebrities or as successful urban professionals. This coverage of high profile women is done such that they are depicted as successful individuals within the existing structures, while keeping their “femininity” intact. Furthermore, women’s magazines through stories, jokes and trivial headings for serious articles contributes to negative representation of feminists and women’s movement. The independent women is often portrayed as an angry woman disruptive to the patriarchal order and projected as anti-family and anti-male. Such negative portrayal marginalises her demands and her viewpoints.

Journalistic articles on advertising and magazines show an interesting accommodation of feminism. In advertising, there is a reference to a “new” woman, who is assertive and independent, who manages a nuclear family and works outside the home. These new archetypes are used to carve niches for specific products in the market. Often film personalities are used to create attractive images of sensuous, independent yet vulnerable women. The new stereotypes of the middle class women in print advertising show how the imagery of the women’s movement (women as articulate, independent and capable) is used by the system to construct new identities.

On the other hand, a cursory look at research on women in the print media indicates that there has been some significant change in presentation of women and their concerns in the Indian press since 1988 (Balasubrahmanyan 1988, Prasad 1992, Joseph and Sharma 1994). The space given to the coverage of women appears to be more than what it was earlier. A study of women’s issues in the English language newspapers indicates that such space for women’s issues
has been carved out as a result of the urban women’s movement and the liberal, reformist stance of the English language newspapers (Joseph and Sharma 1991). Nevertheless, in the hierarchy of news and news values, serious articles on women still form only a small part of the entire coverage. Media still continues to emphasise events rather than processes. Newspapers give selective coverage of women’s issues and often presents distorted feminist views (Balasubrahmanyan 1988).

However, the press coverage of women’s issues over the years has changed significantly with noticeable changes in the presentation of news and views in the context of expansion of electronic media and new consumer-orientations of Indian economy, increasing participation of media women in “hard” news areas of politics and economic, and changing strategy of the women’s movement (Joseph and Sharma 1994). Research studies compiled by Joseph and Sharma (1994) demonstrate that women’s issues are usually given significant coverage only when they fit dominant norms of what constitutes news. With the shift in the strategy of women’s movement from single issue-oriented, highly visible public campaigns centred around atrocities against women to low-key grassroots activism, there has been some dilution in the media’s coverage of women’s issues.

In summary, there is some visible space in the coverage of women and women’s issues in the print media. However, beyond the count of the words, stories, and column spaces, the underlying perspective is often superficial, simplistic and sensational. Nevertheless, progressive media professionals continue to work within these spaces to change the mainstream media.

4. STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Given the wide reach of the mainstream mass media and its structural linkages with the capital through ownership and control, it is not easy to change the subtle and sophisticated ways in which women are portrayed. Nevertheless, the contemporary women’s movement has played an important role in challenging the demeaning images of women in the mass media by creating alternatives and by intervening in and negotiating with the mainstream media.
4.1 Creating Alternatives

It was the Third International Conference on the UN Decade for Women (1985) at Nairobi that provided impetus to changing the portrayal of women in the mass media and increasing women’s participation in media industries. For raising feminist consciousness, women’s movements in the North and South underscored the need for an alternative media, based on the experiences and aspirations of women. Thus, alternative media was conceived to demystify the demeaning representation of women in the mainstream media and to empower women with the tools to project themselves.

Since then, considerable efforts have gone into creating alternative media systems as part of the global networking for consciousness-raising. Over the last two decades, women individually and collectively, have captured a large space that has opened up in an alternative media and have made a significant contribution in providing an ongoing critique of the mainstream media. On the other hand, the creation of innovations and alternative means for self-expression has been an empowering experience, both for the women developing and using them, and also for the audiences and groups they reach and interact with while creating the communication. Alternative communications for empowerment have taken through a variety of media forms (modern and traditional), ranging from films, video, and print material to story-telling, street theatre, folk dances, songs, puppetry, etc.7

In addition, communication and documentation centres, women’s news agencies, feature services, newsletters, cooperatives and organisations have emerged in the last two decades to produce and distribute women’s work in the alternative media. In recent years, feminist publishing houses have also come up in the Third World to make visible the feminist work and concerns. For example, Cuarto Propio in Chile, Kali for women in India, Kalayanamitra in Indonesia, Tigress Press and Genderpress in Thailand, and so on.

7. See Bhasin and Agarwal (1984) and Kapoor and Anuradha (1986) for discussion on alternative practices in various media in South Asia. Also refer to a special issue on “Women and Communication: The Power to Change,” of the Voices (Volume 2:1, 1994), which documents some experiences of women in using alternative media for empowerment and development in India.
In the mainstream media women are generally depicted as victims of atrocities or as protagonists in their traditional gender roles. The majority of the underprivileged women are treated as passive recipients of development messages. In alternative media, there have been some efforts by individuals and organisations in India and elsewhere to evolve successful communication that makes people subjects and participants rather than objects or targets of communication. Several experiments are undertaken in India to demystify communication technology and to empower women at the grassroots with the tools to project their issues and problems in their own voices.8

The alternative media has made a significant contribution in demystifying the mainstream media and in creating a space and environment for women to voice their views and concerns in their own words and images. The built-in interactivity of the alternative media allows a “privileged communication” with the audience. However, the reach of the alternative media is limited. Audio-visual and print material developed in the alternative media is not for mass distribution or the mass market. The alternative media is used primarily by progressive groups and individuals who are already sympathetic to women’s issues. It has not yet succeeded in bringing profound changes in media policies or altering drastically existing gender bias in the mainstream mass media. Thus, the challenge facing the alternative media in the 1990s is that of “marginality”.

4.2 Interventions in the Mainstream Media

Left to itself the mainstream media will continue to pay lip service to women’s issues and reinforce gender stereotypes. For a gender perspective to permeate through the mainstream media, it is also crucial to negotiate a space within the existing media system. Women, collectively and individually, have used various strategies to intervene in the mainstream media. An overview of some of the strategies used by women’s groups and activists, particularly in the Indian context, offers us useful pointers to similar initiatives in the other developing countries.

8. For example, Centre for the Development of Instructional Technology in India has organised several training workshops with women in participatory video production. Video unit of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India also trains women workers of the urban informal sector in video production, and uses their programs to educate, organise and train other women workers and mobilise public opinion.
In general, very few developing countries have well articulated media policies. Within media policies very seldom attention is given to gender issues. The UNESCO report on the end-of-decade international conference on Women in Development at Nairobi shows that only half of the 95 member states had formulated specific policies and guidelines requiring media to promote advancement of women and that their effectiveness was very doubtful or yet to be evaluated (Krishnan and Dighe 1990:13). As critical media policy research is a neglected area of inquiry in feminist communication research in developing countries, it is difficult to assess the extent to which media policies pay attention to gender issues. Nevertheless, the women’s groups, activists and academicians have played an important role in challenging the existing media policies that reinforce gender stereotypes, and pressuring the government to formulate regulations concerning the portrayal of women in the mass media.

In the early 1980s, efforts to change the portrayal of women in the mainstream media in India were in the form of direct protest actions against specific instances of sexism and obscenity in the mainstream media (print, films and television), and public consciousness raising through the general media critique (see Bhasin and Agarwal, 1984 and Balasubrahmanyan 1988:64-70). For example, in India a few media monitoring groups, such as the Committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, Ahmedabad Women’s Action Group, Forum against Oppressed Women, and the other women’s groups organised some protests and campaigns against specific pornographic films and magazines, vulgar hoardings, obscene advertisements, etc. Protest actions were wide ranged including writing letters to the editors of national dailies against offensive advertisements, television programmes, and films, writing to the advertising agencies promoting offensive advertisements, holding street demonstrations against pornographic films and film hoardings, initiating legal action against pornographic magazines and so on. (Agarwal and Bhasin 1984). While the general critique of the mainstream media in the form of reports, seminars, research papers, feature articles, etc., attempted to mobilise public opinion against the prevailing sex-role stereotypes and the lack of women’s concerns and perspective in the mass media.

However, some of the national commissions and committees on women also took up the issue of sexism in the mass media and attempted to pressure the
government to change media policies and regulate the mass media. For example, the Committee on the Portrayal of Women in Media, constituted in New Delhi in 1983 by women and men from different walks of life in New Delhi, played an important role in monitoring and analysing the depiction of women in the mass media and mobilising public opinion by disseminating its views and recommendations through seminars and newspapers. In collaboration with the Centre for Women's Development Studies (New Delhi), a leading women's studies centre, it drew up the guidelines for non-sexist portrayal of women in television images and presented it to the government-appointed panel on devising a software policy for television.

In response to the growing volume of criticism directed at sexism in the mass media, the Government of India enacted the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986. Subsequently, it formulated a bill, based on this Act, that prohibits indecent portrayal of women in any form through commercial advertisements, publications, writings, or any other manner. However, these two measures are full of loopholes. The concepts of “indecent” and “obscenity” are value laden and cannot be clearly defined. Hence, interpretation of these terms is open to misuse and controversy. On the other hand, the new bill was primarily concerned about “indecent representation” of women in commercial advertisements and did not express the same concern about sexism and violence against women in the contents of television serials, films and film-based programmes that are shown on the public television.

Subsequently, some of the government-appointed national commissions on women in the late 1980s attempted to influence the communication and media policy of the government.9 However, women activists and womens' groups could hardly make a dent in promoting gender-sensitive approach in the

9. The National Commission of the Self-Employed Women appointed by the government in 1987 to study the conditions of women in the informal sector also drew attention of the government to invisibility of the poor, self-employed women and suggested to make concerted efforts to improve content and coverage of women's work and their problems in the informal sector (National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector 1988). Finally, the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000 A.D. also recommended the government to make a conscious strategic change in the communication policy to regulate portrayal of women in the mainstream media (Department of Women and Child Welfare, 1988).
government-controlled broadcasting media or the commercial media. Although protest actions and diffused critique of the mainstream media in 1980s contributed to an increasing awareness about sexism in the mass media among media planners and the general public, such efforts in media-monitoring remained sporadic and could not be sustained without drawing more people from the public and from the other progressive groups.

Over the years, more women media professionals have entered the mainstream mass media, particularly print, films and television. Women's entry into the media industry and organisations by itself does not mean that they succeed in changing mainstream media's approach and treatment of gender issues and concerns. Similar to other professions, women in the mass media are by and large low profile, undervalued and conspicuous by their absence in the decision-making positions. Nevertheless, progressive men and women have been working within the mainstream media system towards promoting gender-sensitive approach in media productions. Although women media professionals, particularly producers and writers, are often confined to dealing with "women's issues" (for example, marriage, divorce, rape, dowry, family violence and so on) and are constrained by the organisational structures of media organisations, a few women have attempted to use this space given to them in the mainstream media by treating their subjects with feminist awareness (Balasubrahmanyan 1988, Anand 1993). Interventions in the popular mainstream media, print, television and films, also enable them to establish a direct link with the large audience. Thus, despite the possibility of cooptation of their voices in a mainstream media context, media professionals are increasingly taking the risk of working within the constraints of the media organisations to promote an alternative perspective on gender issues. Nevertheless, the task of the women's groups and activists in the 1990s is made much more difficult and challenging by the subtle and sophisticated ways in which images of "new" modern women are re-packaged in the films, television and print media. At one level, mainstream media has devoted some space for the selected women's issues and promoted the images of working women, single women and high achievers along with the traditional images of women as caretakers in the family. However, the underlying perspective on women has remained sensational, superficial and simplistic.
Since the late 1980s, there have been some changes in the strategy of women’s movement in India to promote women’s concerns and perspective in the mainstream media (Anand 1993, 1994). In the 1990s, media professionals and activists are receptive to the idea of regular and sustained monitoring of the mainstream media in order to intervene in the mainstream media. There is more openness among the media advocacy groups to build new alliances and reframe strategies in a manner that enables them to influence policy formulation and media practitioners. The focus of media monitoring is not just on singling out negative portrayal of women, but lot more on documenting and strengthening positive trends and contributions within the mainstream media. For example, the Delhi-based Media Advocacy Group in India is working towards building vibrant advocacy on the basis of collective monitoring that can be linked with concrete lobbying or networking at regional and national levels.

Thus, the mainstream media has the power to reach wider audiences. Interventions in the mainstream media can go a long way in changing media content, in using media to influence the public opinion on the women’s question, and in giving wider exposure to alternatives and innovations in communication. Working with or within the mainstream media can go against the grain of women’s movement as engagement in the mainstream media can co-opt feminist voices into the discourse of dominant culture. However, these are risks that we need to take now to penetrate the mainstream media through deliberate and planned efforts. Otherwise, new representations of women in the mainstream media will remain an elusive dream.

In summary, the long struggle by women’s groups and concerned media professionals inside and outside the mainstream media system has succeeded to some extent in raising public consciousness about the negative portrayal of women in the mass media and in promoting enlightened perspective on the women’s question. The challenge facing the women’s movement is not about choosing to work for alternative media or mainstream media, but devising appropriate strategies to explore the political space available in alternative and mainstream media for making a difference.
5. CONCLUSIONS

Women and their concerns are no longer invisible in the mass media. However, the task of changing the media images of women is made far more difficult by the subtle changes in the way mass media portray women.

At one level, old sex-role stereotypes have continued in new forms. With the growing commercialisation of the mass media there has been increasing commodification of women in the mass media. Often, the mass media has played a role in accommodating and delegitimising feminism and feminist issues through their construction of a stereotype of the “liberated” men and women, which is emptied of progressive meanings. Moreover, stereotypes images of women (old and new) are not confined to one medium, but re-packaged and reinforced through all the media -- films, television, advertising, magazines, newspapers, and so on. The ideological construction of women in multi-media and commonalities in the images indicate the way in which media structures are linked to market forces.

Nevertheless, women’s groups and activists have continued to work towards changing the media images of women and voice their concerns. Progressive women’s groups and media professionals have often intervened in the mainstream mass media to contest the dominant ideology in order to redefine existing social and gender relations. However, progressive world views are often co-opted and re-constructed to establish the hegemony of dominant social classes. Although efforts are made to change media policies and create alternatives, the means of producing and disseminating the alternative media and changing the mainstream media policies are severely limited within the context of media structures, which are heavily influenced and determined by the market economy.

The mass media can serve as a major source of education and information about progressive ideas and issues central to any progressive social movements. However, it is against this pessimist context of “tokenism” to women and their concerns in the mass media, all those concerned about improving the status of women need to be vigilant and struggle against cooption and marginalisation of women’s issues in the mass media. It remains to be seen whether positive
changes taking place in the portrayal of women in the mass media in developing countries are simply cosmetic or part of a substantial transformation at the level of consciousness.
6. REFERENCES


