

ROLE OF TELEVISION TO INFLUENCE AND ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIAN SOCIETY: A MEDIA STRATIFICATION CRITIQUE

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Abstract

The role of Television to assess the influence on the aspect of gender equality has the theoretical base in the 'Democratic media participation theory' and 'agenda setting theory' of mass media. Television in India has consistently risen over the years, safely assuring that consumption of these media is prevalent. Media is also an important communicator and influencer to shape social opinions, and by extension, stereotypes. This role has a diverse range of effects because the content is predominantly developed in the 'polished' sects of metropolitan urban centres where notions and lifestyles assumed by genders are different than in semi-urban and rural areas, and therefore the same television content consumed in different tiers of society

The paper investigates whether TV media have a role in how urban women and men are viewed in a different light than women and men from other tiers, and how does it shape the attitudes towards genders and gender equality, are some of the prime areas of interest in this study.

The study infers multiple studies in social psychology, sociology and communication to assess parameters in stereotypes generally and gender stereotypes specifically, and how these can be developed and influenced. Reflective analysis is employed to peruse and comment on how television media can exploit its position of influence to create a fertile environment for gender equality in all regions.

Keywords: Gender sociometer, Television Media, Gender Equality mapping, Social Impact of Media, Socio-cultural communication

Tenets of Gender Equality in Indian Society

Traditional gender norms appear at the very core of how Indian society is structured. This is evident in cultural and institutional conventions that dictate positions and duties of men and women in their respective social environments. Such constructs lead to specific differential treatment of men and women in the communities.

The traditional notion of division of labour itself comes distinct expectations of both cis-genders. A woman is traditionally expected to manage the internal affairs of the household such as housekeeping, cleanliness, food, nurture and care of both children and the elderly, worship, traditions, ceremonies and hospitality. Meanwhile a man is expected to manage external affairs such as income, financial affairs, fulfilling material and security needs of the members of the household, maintenance of social positioning and relations of the family with the outside world/community. However the differential

labours are not limited to mere expectations - they become non-overlapping jurisdictions, where interference of either parties is considered undesirable. If in a traditional household, a woman is expected to not be outgoing and social with outside men, a man is also expected to not interfere with how a kitchen is managed or pick a broom to assist in housekeeping. The disparity in gender roles is often cited as the primary source of the ill-placement of women. In more progressive and non-traditional households, the boundaries tend to vanish as both men and women have greater engagement in both internal and external affairs of the house and would serve as bread-winners and housekeepers in near equal capacities, and such a setting no longer confines women to the boundaries of the home and provides for them an equal opportunity to be social and outgoing, and a right to opinion on matters of finances, possessions and property. (It must be not be ignored that the differential labours tend to minimize in case of economic activity, and in financially weaker sections of the society, where there is a fine understanding that all members of the household must pool in their efforts to sustain the family.) The first tenet of gender equality is equitable sharing of responsibilities and opinions in internal and external affairs of a household.

More often than not, gender norms have been carried out far beyond the stereotypical notion of “Woman’s place is in the home” and “Man is the traditional bread-winner”. Women are also expected to lead and protect household traditions, worships and hospitality amongst other things. Women are also often deemed responsible for nurturing of socially prevalent values and morality in the children. While the burden of execution of such tasks have lied with women, the patriarch tends to offer such roles to men whenever they come with a title and a position of power in the community. Therefore, a male leader of the community is seen as a role model for values and morality (when the onus lies with the mothers and other women in the household to execute them), male leader of the worship sites are designated as protectors of faith, religious values and traditions, even rites and ceremonies, when women of the household are expected to perform these tasks on the daily. Similarly, a virtuous, talented young man or woman is seen as a success of the man of the house, when the mothers are usually held responsible if the same young child exhibits a maleficent character. Therefore, it is notable that the expectations and credit from members of either genders often change with the supplementary perks and titular authority associated with them. Second tenet of gender equality is equitable share of accreditation for similar duties.

It is also seen that men and women have been traditionally treated differently in terms of opportunities of education and professional aspirations. In the most conservative sects, the woman may be declined an opportunity to pursue / continue / complete her education. This either occurs due to a diktat by the leaders of the household or the community, or due to financial reasons experienced by the household where the woman’s dreams are the first to be sacrificed for the sake of the family. Similar dispositions govern allowing the woman to not pursue a career. Many explanations arise: an out-going woman is more likely to loosen her character; is always at risk from predators lurking at every corner; will invariably be romantically or sexually lured by man from the “undesirable” social class; does not need to work if there are men in the house earning enough; will learn to disrespect tradition and culture (gaslight talk for “speaking her own mind”) etc. These limitations occur less frequently for men, who are encouraged, even under a mortgage, to gain education and employment, as the traditional bread winner of the house. Similar divide is seen in the opportunities of engaging in performing arts. More

conservative sects have been reluctant towards allowing women to perform music or dance in public, although this attitude has softened over the years (largely because the traditional arts have always recognized and respected gender distinctions, placing equal merit on both genders). In the more urban contexts, the divide manifests itself in the form of unequal pay for equal work, as well as reluctance in hiring female candidates. This discussion yet yields the Third tenet of Gender Equality: Equality of opportunity for growth, expression and self-fulfillment.

One of the most important areas where gender distinctions are heavily pronounced is the sexual expression and sexual violence. Any act of sexual expression by a woman is seen as vulgar, in poor taste, a low mark in her character, etc. whereas for most men it is given a leeway of a “boy’s talk”. In most conservative settings, any act of sexual misconduct and violence is attributed to the woman victim, where her actions and decisions preceding the event of violence or harassment are scrutinized. In case of men, “boys will be boys” is a common phrase thrown in public. The assumptions of guilt and of innocence are attributed to women and men respectively, the matter has become popular, garnering widespread recognition and scope for criticism for misrepresentation of facts. Similarly, the “boys can do no wrong” prevents male victims of sexual assault to suffer in silence, irrespective of whether they were perpetrated by another man or woman. The assumptions around these scenarios come from primal ideas such as: men are the stronger gender, are morally superior, are more in control of their urges, have the privilege of sexual conduct, may assume the right to fulfil their sexual demands at the cost of others and hence women must exercise caution because men cannot be controlled or disciplined. Women who reveal their experiences of harassment or violence are subjected to ‘Just World Hypothesis’ which is an assumption that “bad things happen to you only if you are on the wrong side” - eroding all onus from the perpetrators and placing it on the victims instead. The prevalence of toxic masculinity in the society is in itself responsible for pushing the expectations of men to over-pronounce their distinction from females and hence engage in actions, social behaviours and psychological reasonings to achieve those ends. In the context of sexual expression, a man expressing his sexuality is not given the same treatment as a woman. Hence a male celebrity in movies and music videos can be portrayed as promiscuous and be celebrated for it, but a women placed in the same scenario is denounced as someone with a “weak character” and is “desperate for attention”. The result of these factors is the both imbalance and displacement in the attribution of guilt and innocence along sexist lines. Fourth tenet of gender equality is Justice in attributions of guilt and innocence in cases of conflict, sexual misconduct and sexual expression.

Gender distinctions have presented themselves in many social, political and civil situations. India has been fortunate to have universal suffrage in its electoral systems since inception, but the female representation in elected bodies has only grown at a slow pace. Representation of women in higher management positions in organizations and in proprietary roles for businesses is lower compared to men. Consensus suggests that safety of women is not guaranteed with the police, in prisons, in residential institutions for women. Public places are not free from eve-teasing and borderline harassments, to which women have also raised concerns about. These factors, and similar ones, collectively alter the public life experience for women, where safety, sense of security, ability to succeed and grow are not the same for men and women. The fifth tenet of gender equality is right of all to experience without limitation and condition, happiness in public and professional spaces .

The sixth tenet of gender equality is non-discrimination along the lines of gender for all. The core of sexism, misogyny, misandry, homophobia, transphobia and chauvinism towards gender lies in the way the society culturally nurtures and trains individuals to treat two genders differently in every situation. While some differences naturally occur in men, women and all other genders, on how they handle emotional, conditional, environmental and situational crises, the exclusivity condition creates an indifference towards the other genders, thereby limiting the abilities of all individuals and groups to competently socialize with other genders, or empathize with them. The segregative social approach is also tied to stronger expectations of masculinity and femininity, which creates a great problem for all individuals that do not fall in the two extreme ends of the gender identity spectrum, i.e., the heterosexual cis-gender individuals. All other gender expressions and sexual orientations that would deviate from the two extremities: stereotypical male and female, is associated with an inferior existence. This cheats trans-persons, gender-queer, androgynous individuals etc. out of respectful treatment as they do not satisfy the gender expectations of the society. Similar analogies apply to sexual orientations that deviate from heterosexuality. Even cis-gender individuals who have personal preferences for things or aesthetics that do not conform with the stereotype of their own gender, they are likely to be ridiculed in the society for not being “man enough” or “lady-like”. The result of this is a deep-seated insecurity and lack of confidence which impedes their personal and professional growth in the long term.

Equality in Different Tiers of Society and Role of Television

Alongside education and cinema, television media has been playing a role in altering the societal notions affecting women - by exposing the audiences to newer perspectives than they might be otherwise accustomed to: the local cultural systems get converted from *closed systems* to *open systems* due to the exposure. But it is also important to note that people living in different tiers experience a different phase of cultural shift and the attitudes on several matters tend to shift from Progressive to Conservative as we move from metropolitan cities, to townships, all the way to the rural and remote areas. The attitudes would similarly tend to change from Liberal to Conservative as we move down the economic pyramid, however this might not be necessarily true in all instances and for all issues. If we are to presume that these trends hold true, there are possible avenues for television to better propagate ideas of Gender Equality for audiences ranging from metropolitan viewers to rural viewers.

Television media in its present form is responsible for spreading inequalities in gender in acute forms. Mainly in the entertainment wing of the TV media, overwhelmingly portrays women in an inferior light than men, either as less intelligent or less talented. Objectification of women continues to be major problem with Television Media. The #MeToo movement also revealed the various biases and assumptions of guilt placed on women, and media's own inability to comprehend that women can be abused by partners they are romantically involved with, or that workplace harassment is prevalent in entertainment industry. The smear campaigns against women accusers were effective in altering the narrative of the movement, while the media's focus should have been towards establishing facts and encouraging investigation for fact-finding. In most daily soaps, the man tends to be the leading character to whom, the women characters are subordinate. In the few cases where the leading

character is female, she is usually portrayed as a victim of unfair treatment by a man or an enterprise (like family or workplace), which she must cope with. Exceptions to this rule are rare. A woman hence is rarely shown in the same light as the man- strong, in control of situations and of calm and confident composure. The depiction is counterproductive towards elimination of biases against women in society. In entertainment news programmes, women celebrities are stereotyped heavily, often to the point of ridicule and feeble consideration of their rights and liberties as individuals.

It is pertinently imperative to accept that the centres of media production lie in the big urban centres, usually the metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, New Delhi and capitals of the states, where the lifestyle and culture are significantly different from smaller cities, towns and rural areas. The difference is highlighted in the media products in terms of clothing, language, story ideas, logic and reasoning presented in the products, which largely reflects the miasma and calibers of the bigger cities. The media products also hold a special status in the minds of the people due to the exclusivity, barriers of entry and the high skills of the media industry, which places media industry as a specialized subset of the urban culture which is distant from the lives of the regular people. The psychological proxemics of the media industry from common folk affects the mental reception of the messages existing in media exercise / products, and places the lower tiers of the society as 'laggards' in the scale of 'Diffusion of Innovations' (Rogers, E. M.). The 'Diffusion of Innovations' in cultural messaging in media is therefore scaled along the cultural distance from metropolitan areas - with the metropolitans and big cities accepting social change first, and the remotest areas accepting it the last (as a general rule).

Cultural Distance: The people in the different tiers of society understand that the culture in the centres of media production is significantly different from their own, which all by itself may create a reluctance in accepting a message of social change. Therefore, a programme set to convey the concept and benefits surrounding "right of women to work" may work in the bigger cities, but have a conflicting outcome in the rural areas where the input seems to not only contradict existing ideals but also come from a foreign environment. Therefore, the messaging and packaging of media products needs to customize its veneer and appeal for the different tiers. Harold Lasswell's Communication Model also indicates that a successful communication is the one where the exercise of transference of message yields to a desired effect in the audience. This can be achieved via means of localization and adapting the content to the sensibilities of different tiers. Fortunately, many media products and channels have initiated the exercise, and many channels, publications and programmes appeal to specific demographics.

To achieve the six tenets of gender equality, television media can overcome the cultural cross-over barriers and incorporate the virtues of the tenets in their work:

1. Narratives: Media introduces many imitational aspirations amongst their viewers and hence storytelling has a core function in bridging the gender gap. In any setting where men and women do not have differential labours, but shared ones, can be a good starting point, but there is tremendous potential for introduction of storylines, story angles and elements where the ideas of gender equality can be percolated.

However it must be observed that stories by themselves do not create behavioural impact. Relatability (how much a viewer can see themselves in a situation) is a primary threshold for empathetic maneuver and can only arrive from skillful scripting and direction, else the material will translate to 'preach', which is ineffective in most times.

Various appeals traditionally applied to advertising: namely emotional appeal and logical appeal can be effective tools to direct the perspective on gender issues, largely because there is good scope for relatability as well as potential action. A more impactful 'Class Appeal' can break through cultural barriers in reception - by portraying the ideals of gender equality not just in the 'posh', urban upper class, but in all sections of society.

A common flaw of the television is to trivialize every situation for "spicing up the script". While the trivialization serves for better entertainment, it diminishes relatability as regular lives often do not constitute such trivia, and people understand that their reactions in regular situations and critical situations are not exactly the same. Hence, a "not all crisis" approach is more effective for cultural shifts.

2. Production Aesthetics: Television follows a "larger than life", polished look which is visually appealing and artful at best, but due to the very sleekness, it separates itself from the regular lives of people. Relatability may achieved from "realism where it matters", balancing simplicity and artistic instincts in aesthetics, including design, settings and costumes.

3. Personnel Selection: A long term reorganization effort in media industry can begin if the selection criteria for personnel includes the candidates being empathetic towards the cause of equality for all, which can yield subtle subjective changes in how media products are shaped over time. In case of performers, relatability can arrive from inclusion of various dialects, languages, class appeals and members capable of appealing to different strata of society - working towards breaking the perception of barriers of entry to media.

4. Injection and Normalization of Ideas: Opposed to common perception, not every issue needs to be the focal point of a programme or a narrative for its essence to enter public conscience. A focal point issue engages the audience in a tedious mental exercise, making them review all pros and cons of the matter. Similar mental exercises do not take place if a proposition is simply assumed to be true and valid in the course of the narrative and conveyed subtly. The assumption of normalcy can be applied to normalize a lot of concepts like equitable treatment of genders, overlapping behavioural masculinity and femininity in all people, inclusion of individuals of all sexual orientations and gender identities etc. Assumption of normalcy makes it easier to gain complacency, however it does not rule out the prospect of programming focused on these issues.

5. Resolving gender bias in cases of conflict and violence: Television as a medium can not only raise issues, but direct them. Given the diversity and spread of production centres, gender sensitivity can come through an institutional policy to prevent a premature attribution of guilt and innocence along the lines of gender. This can apply to both women whose decisions to wear something or be at a place ought not to justify her being subject to violence, and men accused of violent crimes who maybe

declared “guilty until proven innocent”. The call is not for absolution of responsibilities, but to emphasize on mature deliberation and establishing facts valuable to a formal unbiased investigation. In case of conflict and violence, the finer details usually emerge upon investigation and details reported in first 24 hours may be untrue. A “fog of war” warning can be declared in these situations as newer information is presented. Some matters like changing the upbringing of boys so they grow up to be more respectful and sensitive towards women is of trivial importance as it is driver of a major cultural shift, and can help normalize gender equality in the long run.

6. Happy Stories: Programmes which are specifically aligned to discuss success stories of gender equality and progress in equality, instead of treating the issue solely as a matter needing social change, can also yield a change in perspective. If a certain perspective (i.e. gender equality) is celebrated (given a positive incentive), it is normalized easier.

Conclusion

For Television media to be able to fruitfully capitalize on its position of influence with regards to gender equality, it must employ tools that enable different tiers of society to fully absorb the notions of gender equality in its different forms, by using methods to increase relatability, injection and normalization of ideas and draft policies to address best practices to report issues that concern violence and conflict including members of different genders. Some practices of the television media need to be altered and modified so that it reshapes the perception of different genders and helps dissolve the institutions of toxic masculinity and patriarchal approach of culture, which establishes a gender gap. Furthermore, the television media must take into cognizance the fact that different tiers of society exhibit a different culture from the centres of media production in big urban areas, and the cultural distance all by itself may introduce hurdles in how effective the messages relayed by media will be. Hence, an emphasis on localization is important. The television media must work towards progressing gender equality by incorporating in their principle, the six tenets of gender equality in Indian society:

- 1) Equitable sharing of responsibilities and opinions in internal and external affairs of a household;
- 2) Equitable share of accreditation for similar duties;
- 3) Equality of opportunity for growth, expression and self-fulfillment;
- 4) Justice in attributions of guilt and innocence in cases of conflict, sexual misconduct and sexual expression;
- 5) Right of all to experience without limitation and condition, happiness in public and professional spaces, and
- 6) Non-discrimination along the lines of gender for all.

Being faithful to these tenets can insure that the television media shall maximize its impact in directing socio-cultural change in favour of gender equity.

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