

MEDIA

Theme: Image of Women in the Media

Is it day-to-day life events that influence portrayal of women in the media or vice versa? This debate, over the years, has gone around like the did-the-chicken-come-first-or-the-egg conundrum.

“The media is the message and the messenger, and increasingly a powerful one,” says Patricia Mitchell, the former president and CEO of PBS. By the age of 10, a young girl will watch an average of 31 hours of television a week and join other women around the country in comprising 52% of the movie-going population. Unfortunately, the media’s influence on young women has yielded many negative consequences. The media has been associated with causing young girls to have poor body images, exposing them to limited career options, and accepting inferior status to men. (*Gender Equality in the Media: The New Social Movement* by *Melissa McSweeney*)

The Geena Davis Institute on Women in Media supported by UN Women and The Rockefeller Foundation, claimed Indian films top the list in objectifying women on screen. A sample survey showed Indian films have largely depicted women in sexualised roles.

In top-grossing G-rated family films, there is almost a 3:1 ratio of male characters to female characters, giving young female audience members fewer female characters to empathize with. Of the limited female characters in a film, animated female characters still tend to show much more skin than their male counterparts, and are more likely to be portrayed with diminutive waistlines and other exaggerated physical features, and are often sexy in appearance. Even animated, anthropomorphic non-human female characters are sexually objectified in this light. This simultaneously objectifies female characters and sets unrealistic standards of female attractiveness that can lead to body image problems in young girls.

The gender gap is documented in a new research by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University that found that females comprised a paltry 12% of protagonists in the top-grossing films of 2014. Over the past decade, the situation has gotten worse, not better. The latest figures represent a drop of three percentage points from 2013 and a fall of four percentage points from 2002.

A larger percentage of male characters were shown in the workplace — 59% to 41% — while 85% of men had identifiable jobs, compared to 75% of women. Sixty one percent of male

characters were identified only by their professional roles, whereas only 34% of females have that kind of designation. In contrast, 58% of females were identified by the roles they assume in their personal lives such as wives or mothers. That's the case for only 31% of male characters.

Women are also way younger than men on screen; the majority are in their 20s (23%) and 30s (30%). Men over 40 accounted for 53% of characters whereas women that age represented 30%. That has implications for the number of female authority figures onscreen.

Jane Fonda, an Academy Award-winning actress and activist for gender equality in the media, states “Media creates consciousness, and if what gets put out there that creates our consciousness is only determined by men, we’re not going to make any progress.”

In journalism, too, women are underrepresented cutting a sorry figure. Apart from in the English news journalism in India, Hindi and the regional news channels continue along the lines of “conventional wisdom”. Sports, finance and political journalism screams a NO-NO to women journalists both in the print and television media. Women are considered incapable of understanding “serious subjects” as those. Recent studies show that women make up only 2.7 percent of India’s local journalists.

The gang rape of a 22-year-old photojournalist in Mumbai in August 2013 saw a number of female journalists in India coming forward and talking about sexual harassment and violence they have faced while doing their jobs. In their accounts, the women highlight some of their experiences, which are seldom discussed in newsrooms because reporters run the risk of losing an assignment if they come across as weaklings.

As a young journalist with CNN in 1996, Suhasini Haidar was part of the crew that covered the national election that year. It was the first she had covered. Even after 17 years, she cannot forget the experience she went through during an overcrowded public rally she attended outside of Delhi, near the northern Indian state of Haryana.

“We were horrified by the number of times our bottoms got pinched and we were brushed past.”

Ashima Narain, the photo editor of National Geographic Traveller, wrote recently in the national daily The Indian Express, “I think it is time not to be ashamed to talk about fear.”

Fear is what ensures I look back as I walk, it's what makes me look for exits when I enter potentially difficult spaces, it is what keeps me alert and often, alive. I call it other things like discomfort or common sense, because it's weak to be afraid — it might expose me for what I am, a woman.

Advertisements are worse. In the world of advertising, companies tend to use images they believe will help to make their product sell. These images tend to include things such as making the product look like it works far better than its competitors' and everyone being generally happy about using whatever the product may be; but along with these images comes images that reinforce stereotypes such as those about women. Even today, there aren't many ads that don't include either an image of a young attractive woman or a woman that is busy doing housework while her husband is nowhere to be found. These types of images portray women only as sex objects or as subservient housewives to their husbands. Though on the rise, it is still very rare to see a woman portrayed in a position of power in advertisements. Advertisers are still under the impression that "sex sells" meaning that sexy women sell, and also that women are still the only ones doing housework.

The question is, is there an audience open to watching women in the unconventional, flighty, strong, problem-solving, out of the kitchen and into the stock markets or to a man's rescue roles in films? Be it men or women, educated or illiterate among the audiences, the social conditioning is seriously deep-rooted. If those films that are women-centric aren't making money at the box office, there is a bigger issue out there. Our biases and prejudices are like stubborn stains... there is a lot of scrubbing and scraping to do.

The panel will discuss:

Does the portrayal of women in bold roles in films, fail to bring in the money? Why female actors are paid less? Discuss case studies.

Women in journalism not taken seriously?

How does marriage, maternity affect their careers?

How and why does baring a woman sell more products in advertisements, even men's products... men's briefs and toiletries?

Why are female directors declining or are one-film-wonders?

Body image issues created by films and advertisements.