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The Portrayal Of Women In The Media:
Who Are The Change Makers And
How Much Has Been Achieved So Far?

By

Shailaja Ganguly
A brief analysis of THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

WHO ARE THE CHANGE MAKERS AND HOW MUCH HAS BEEN ACHIEVED SO FAR?

A highly personal but deeply felt viewpoint

By - SHAILAJA GANGULY

(INDIA)

A visually ravishing but ideologically contradictory sanitaryware ad currently doing the glossy circuit in India says this:

"When you have time to yourself in a Parryware bathroom, you can reassure yourself of things close to your heart.

Like changing out of the role of efficient homemaker to slip into the grace of a dancer.

Like being able to call a beautiful poem to mind despite a decade of aprons and dusters.

Like discovering that a simple rearrangement of hairpins can turn a mother of two into a cover girl.

Parryware bathrooms let you paint your picture of happiness."

Attesting beyond doubt that once you have cramped your style by producing two children and cooking or dusting your only hope of escape is in a wet dream in a gleaming bath. Reeking of patronising benevolence, the ad is, albeit discreetly so, just one more nail pinning down today's multi-channeled woman into a hollow meaningless stereotype. Why couldn't the same product be plugged differently with deference to the moving times and aim at a working couple who need to frolic and fantasise after a gruelling day at home and desk? In fact, there would be more opportunity there for serving a heady peg of soft porn, if that's the only stimulus to set the copywriter's fingers flying. But no, why look for fresh angles when the hackneyed formula pays off? After all how many judicious agencies can we boast of which are also headed by women or level-headed men?

Besides, like most fence-sitters would argue, it is not as damning as draping a woman over a boiler or a stereo equipment. It is definitely better, they would argue, than the ghastly R agent's cigarettes one that had a
teaser campaign with the backview of a woman in a zippered dress with the
zip going lower every day, all to announce the slash in price! This ad, was
carried prominently in almost all the leading dailies. Such sexist ads which
peddle the female anatomy to sell products that bear no relation either to
their physique or sometimes to their needs, are just one more smog curtain,
India's growing band of independent thinking women are trying to lift eith­
er through singlehanded crusades or through like-minded groups or through
a systematic revamping of edit editorial policies as is being done through a
magazine like Femina.

Admittedly, within a commercial format, a journal however progressive in
content, has to rely on the advertising revenue to keep it from winding up.
But the picture is not completely bleak. With the growing demand for honest
advertising, a non-profit body of ad and marketing personnel comprising agencye's reps and clients, plus media and allied
trades and professions has been formed, known as the Advertising Standards
Council of India (ASCI), this body has adopted a code for self regulation
in advertising briefly with the following objectives:

* to ensure the truthfulness and honesty of representations and claims
  made by ads and to safeguard against misleading ads.

* to ensure that ads are not offensive to generally accepted standards of
  public decency.

* to safeguard against the indiscriminate use of advertising for the promo­
tion of products which are regarded as hazardous to society or to individu­
duals to a degree or of a type which is unacceptable to society at large,
and

* to ensure that ads observe fairness in competition so that the consumer's
  need to be informed about choices in the marketplace and the canons of gene­
  rally accepted competitive behaviour in business are both served.

If these objectives join hands with the women's decade's goals of freedom
equality and development, all quarrels of helpless editorial teams forever
wrestling with the colourful and conniving bogeys on the ad pages, will cease.
WOMEN IN MEDIA...3

The ASCI is also willing to lend its ear to any complaint about the contravention of the code. Any consumer can, if he or she finds an advertisement offensive write to the ASCI explaining why, with a cutting of the ad. The code extends to include ads on radio, TV, radio, cinema, hoardings, posters, shop windows and so on. The ASCI will forward the complaint to the Consumer Complaints Council, an independent body consisting of high credibility individuals from the media and academia, plus consumer activists. After adequate investigation the Council prepares a report after which the ASCI seeks an assurance from the advertiser to withdraw the ad. Claims Pradeep GPha, a right thinking ad manager of the Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd., claims that this soft protest method of putting pressure on the advertiser has yielded results and nine out of the 14 undertrial ads were voluntarily withdrawn while the remaining five were considered not objectionable by the Council. "Get involved" says GPha in his media column in a Bombay eveninger, "The movement for truthful fair and clean advertising needs you."

And what a difference it makes to read a truthful fair and clean ad...Like the one floated by the Life Insurance Corporation of India which had a woman in the vixus visual and a copy which read: You may be the breadwinner of your family. Insure yourself. " So evocative of the today's women who often supports singlehanded the family financially due to death disability or plain unwillingness of the spouse. And so different in motive from the bathroom fittings ad which is promising but a fanciful pipedream. Another forward looking ad, which seems appreciative of a woman's productivity outside the home two jells on two accounts: it does not use her as a passive objet d'art to draw reader attention. Plus the copy reads: You'll just love coming home to the excitement of Special Effects day after day. Even if one masochistically presumes that the visualiser had a man in mind the copy is mercifully ambiguous and hence a step in the right direction. Of course one is more indulgent towards ads which may use a female in the visual but only to generate some harmless fun as in the Amul Chocolates ad, where the girlfriend who "won't talk and yet can't forget" her Galahji is placated with the candy bar.
In consistence with its identification with the educated, intelligent and aware women, the Femina editorial has, on many occasions, refused highly objectionable ads. For instance, an ad for a fairness cream which showed a girl telling her younger sister that using it would fetch her a good match was rejected. So also a bust expander ad. And another one which was ostensibly for a talcum powder but had a very suggestive visual and the provocative brand name of Climax! A State Bank of India ad saying "Your wife is not the only pick pocket" (implying her total financial dependence and need for sly moves to have spending money) was also not accepted.

An interesting case was the visual campaign of the Family planning induce-drive which showed a couple with two children (predictably one boy and one literal girl) and the tag line of 'Hum do, hamare do' (in translation: We two and our two) The campaign seemed like wilful blindness on the part of the policy planner that it is a desire to balance the family in this manner and more particularly to produce that male child (because couples with two sons would rarely try again for a daughter) that creates unwieldy families. Successful protests from Femina seem to have been partially responsible for a rethink because the campaign now shows a one child family or a unit with two daughters.

But to only blame the adworld for perpetuating ugly and unwholesome stereotypes would be a shortsighted assessment. Yes, consumer goods can be peddled attractively without implying that the article has been shopped for to add to a bride’s merit chart in her husband’s (include in-laws’) home. But when the same cooker has to be aimed at both the myopic and complacent housewife of Gossipville as much as at the working woman forever fighting the clock, it probably seems easier to run to formula than diversify or try a fresh sales pitch. But let’s face it, the roots of this malaise run much deeper.

Besides, it is not only the ads that are guilty of sexist role defining. Take the films. Barring a fractional but significant minority that stress that women can be as strong and capable if not better than men in coping crises, the larger percentage of pulp bonanzas glorify sacrifice and con gullible women...
into believing that to give up is to elevate one's status in the eyes of society. There are infinite kaleidoscope variations of this theme where the woman as wife or mother is ready or is forced to give up an independent interest bound by the syrupy bonds of a son's or husband's dominating adoration. Just this evening I saw a snatch of film where this accomplished dancer girlfriend tells her fiance that she will give it up after marriage if he should disapprove. Last Sunday was a TV serial episode where the scheming husband with the complete cooperation of his depraved family inflicts horrifying physical and mental torture on a wife who continues to whimper, "Do what you like but please don't send me back to my parents."

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Are we to blame the media for cashing in on life in the larger unenlightened quarter, or are we to blame the grisly second page reports of bride burnings that continue and dowry deaths that newspapers and our support systems and acknowledge who is to blame when yet another innocent young woman's murder is labelled as an accident or wilful suicide? In a country which does boast of progressive laws like the Prohibition of Dowry Act 1976, and the Supreme Court's ruling that all gifts given to a bride at the time of her wedding and thereafter are her property, women continue to face harassment and if they do not succumb to it, are often sent back empty handed giving women's organisations a hard time before they are able to recover at least part of the unfortunate victims belongings. Isn't the entire community and its indifference to the alarming status of the larger percentage of women responsible for the deterioration of laws into paper tigers? When injustice continues to thrive, and so long as all women are denied the right to dignity and equality and mental independence, why limit persecution to the identifying of a woman's needs not seeking beyond as kitchen cabinets or exotic textiles?
In a country where there are only about 435 literate women to 1,000 literate men, the role of the stage, particularly folk theatre, in influencing change in attitudes, can be crucial. A lot of women's activist groups in Maharashtra are doing a lot of constructive work in this direction. One play whose title in translation reads *Who Is Guilty* leaves behind a disturbed audience because it asks this question following the death of a bride: Is it her spineless husband, her greedy in-laws who would stop at nothing, her prestige conscious parents who sent her back in spite of her repeated pleas that she wanted to stay behind at her parents' house, or you in the audience who play the part of the unconcerned passive observer when you see a woman being handed a raw deal? *Who is to blame for her death?*

Another Bombay city group called *Stree Mukti Sanghatana* (in translation means the Union for Women's Liberation) has written a clever farce called *Mulgi Zhali Ho* (meaning *A girl child is born*) to drive home the point that no woman should feel inferior for having been born or for having given birth to a female child. The play operates on two levels and the form used is that of a typical village burlesque with plenty of movement, music and some robust singing. This play has had an outstanding run in the entire rural belt in many states of India. Establishing beyond doubt both the rural women's need to have a real relationship with her urban sister who has the power and the fire to spell out her problems and the urban educated and enlightened woman's duty to concern herself with and stress through her media apparatus the lacunae in the development of her rural counterpart.

It is the women's decade that, for the first time, gave many otherwise educated and articulate women the courage to look at their own socio-economic position and to demand the right to develop a special niche under the sun. Women who had been content with cooking and rearing babies became eager to polish up their academic skills, their entrepreneurship, any talent that could be translated into economic and thereby psychological independence. It is the confidence that she felt that there is a growing community of women all over the world thinking like her and discovering themselves with her
that gave her struggle fresh impetus each time she came up against a wall 
built by social prejudice, insufficient resources or her own diffidence. Slowly all this began to be reflected in the contents of Femina which is today, editorial contentwise a faithful representative of the changing and challenging life of the Indian superwoman, whose prowess in excelling in known and unknown areas of experience.

Since economic independence is a must before a woman can think of asserting herself successfully (since very few Indian households would grant her the freedom to be herself, otherwise) Femina has launched a new series not just with the success stories of women entrepreneurs but with relevant information for other women who are so inclined to venture into a private enterprise. Besides this, the magazine also portrays the life of the less privileged woman, who has not let a physical or material handicap come in her way. To counteract at least partially the charge that has been levelled against its cookery or craft or childrearing pages, the magazine has also introduced a regular cookery column by men male achievers from different walks of life and all parenting features highlight equally the role of the father.

No magazine or society can afford to discard any tradition that adds some emotional grace or meaning to life till enlightenment has permeated every section of the community. If a woman is a conscientious and productive worker at her job can you deny her the need to be equally concerned about her role as a mother? When it is not mandatory for every office premise to have a creche for women employees' infants is it not inevitable that magazines will carry articles on how to make and keep peace with your mother-in-law. When a woman who walks out of her husband's home and does not have parents who can afford to keep her finds that there are so very few hostels that will accommodate a divorcée (and also that her children will not be allowed to stay with her) will she not feel she made a mistake and attempt once again to patch up a burnt out marriage? These are just a couple of confrontations that deter some of the women's magazines from taking a totally reactionary stand, because the zeal of its crusading effort is not matched by the support systems available.
To return to advertisements, the Committee on Portrayal of Women in Media based in New Delhi and the more recent Women in Media Group of Bombay have done vociferous campaigning to remove the distorted fancies that plague ad men into slotting women as only thing buyers, who enjoy not having a moment to themselves and moreover who enjoy encouraging the same divide in their children. The Champ bike is for the son who will ride it uphill to bust the monster on top with his toy gun. The Central Bank savings is for the girl whose marriage hangs like a sword of Damocles over a salaried household. The other equally unrealistic image is of the jean clad carefree woman freaking out on serf boards on speedboats with the latest fizz drink in her hand, glorying in the tender glances of an equally mythical young man. It is bad enough for an urban woman trying to shed her shackles to be told that all is worth it only if she uses a certain detergent or the judgement to pick the right brand of tea. But imagine the more disastrous confusion stirred up in a rural woman’s mind (grappling with nutritional anaemia) if she chances to see the high-flying young woman in the soda ad who seems to still seek approval to survive?

With the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Bill 1986 (courtesy Margaret Alva, Minister of Women’s Affairs) which was passed by the Rajya Sabha in November, the confusion has been further compounded. For it is neither clear what is actually meant by “obscene” “vulgar” or “indecent” nor is it clear who will determine this. In spite of the three sections of the IPC (the Indian Penal Code) relating to obscenity the Bill states that “there is a growing body of indecent representation of women or references to women in publications, particularly advertisements which are denigratory to women.” But the term indecent representation of women is inadequate. Particularly so, when it gives sweeping powers to gazetted officers to “enter and search at all reasonable times with such assistance, if any as he considers necessary, any place in which he has reason to believe that an offence under this act has been committed or is being committed and to seize any advertisement, or book or pamphlet or paper slide, film, writing drawing which he has reason to believe contravenes the provisions of this act.”

What is a reasonable time? How accountable will the officers themselves be?
When indecent representation includes the phrase saying this means all that "is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals of any person or persons of any class or age group" how can you assure that every officer will be able to distinguish between what is art and what is immoral between insidious and blatant discrimination? All the desired targets could have been achieved by amending the existing provisions in the IPC over obscenity indecent representation in in print and visual media to include advertisements and the Cinematography Act which covers films could cover TV and ad presentations too. What is required is not new laws therefore but more effective implementation and more severe reprimanding when offences continue.

In every area of social concern whether it is the lack of equal opportunity or child labour or the provisions for a woman who is deserted or wishes to end her marriage, the rapid decline in the environment due to abuse of natural resources indiscriminate use of drugs, it is ultimately the upswing of effective and continuous protest, from individuals, groups and every walk of life that can make laws reality and pave the way for a meaningful change in attitude. Otherwise periodic focus or a lackadasical application of laws can only do more damage than good.

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SHAILAJA GANGULY