

## **Searching for Women in the News: An analysis of coverage given to gender issues in mainstream Indian newspapers from Delhi-NCR**

**Ravi Chaturvedi,  
PhD Scholar, Assam University, India**

“When an actress takes off her clothes onscreen but a nursing mother is told to leave, what message do we send about the roles of women? In some ways we're as committed to the old madonna-whore dichotomy as ever. And the madonna stays home, feeding the baby behind the blinds, a vestige of those days when for a lady to venture out was a flagrant act of public exposure.”

-Anna Quindlen (New York Times Columnist)

### **Introduction**

In the contemporary information-globalised society, the mass-media plays an increasingly important role in the representation of men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. The news media remain the major and most influential sources of information, ideas and opinion for most people around the world. They constitute a key element of the public and private space in which people, nations and societies live. They are in a position to further public understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural environment and to gauge the public mood. The cultural underpinnings of gender inequality are often reinforced through the media across the world. In the developed world, the under-representation of women in the media has been studied extensively. However, gender-based studies on media coverage in the context of developing countries are relatively scarce. This paper, therefore, contributes to the gender literature in the developing world by focusing on the current status of women as subjects in newspaper reports of the leading dailies from New Delhi, the national capital of India.

### **Aims and Objectives**

Media is a powerful tool as its audiences are informed, educated, sensitized and sometimes persuaded on issues. Thus, continuous exploration of programme formats and content formulation needs to be evaluated. This study is an attempt to find out the factors responsible for downgrading conditions of women and the media's efforts in addressing the problem. It will examine the actual performance of print media concerning the coverage of issues related to gender and underpin the newsworthiness of gender issues. This study will also dig deep to understand the perception and editorial orientation of these newspapers towards gender issues. For the purpose of the study, two national newspapers, one English and one Hindi, have been taken as a sample. Selection of the sample has been finalized on the basis of readership. Thereafter, extensive data exploration, content analysis has been done. Such study is quite relevant in a country like India which is still struggling hard to cope with many developmental challenges. This study will come up with newer critical perspectives that would help the future researchers, policy makers, students, media planners and many more.

### **Review of Literature and conceptual framework**

The position of women in the political, economic and social spheres is constantly evolving, and the mass-media need to keep pace with this increasing participation of women in public life. However, In spite of the undeniable progress with regards to the participation and visibility of women in the public sphere, Jaworska and Larrivé (2011) point out that gendered conventions are still reflected in the media and that, in return, media reports are shaped by such conventions.

The few formal studies on the representation of women and coverage of gender issues in the Indian print media suggests that progress, if any, has been slow and unsteady. Sonia Bathla, for example, found the press coverage of women in the course of four years during the period 1981 and 1993 to be predominantly event-oriented, with a major percentage of such stories, (57%) focusing on

violence and crime. Even within the latter category, certain themes such as bride-burning, rape and suicide were more prevalent than others like domestic violence, female infanticide/foeticide and police atrocities against women. The other category of stories that made to the papers obviously had news value because they dealt mainly with the activities of the 'known'. Many issues on the agenda of women's movement, such as property rights, personal laws, the impact of economic, development and population policies on women, women's work and wages, the absence of support structures and services, the impact of fundamentalism and communalism on women, women's participation in politics, and so on, were either missing or minimally present. According to Bathla, the media, by and large, ignored the women's movement.

Several of these findings were corroborated by Sumati Nagrath's study of three English newspapers over a period of six weeks in 2001. The study found that crime against women constituted the highest category of news stories on women and that most of the news items relating to gender issues were straight reports with little or no analysis or comment. According to Nagrath, even after celebrity news and glamour coverage had moved into supplements, the papers failed to report many issues that concern women.

A study tracing reportage on women and gender issues by English and Hindi newspapers over three periods (early 1950s, mid-1970s and 2000-2001) by Shree Venkatram found that women got only about 13% space in English newspapers and 11% in Hindi dailies. Indeed, when glossy supplements were taken out of the reckoning, women occupied a mere 10.3% of the space. Women figured mostly in crime news, especially cases of sexual violence and rape. Beauty queens, models and actresses were the single largest group of women given space in both English and Hindi papers, while politicians and sportsmen dominated among men. According to Venkatram, while the affluent and the famous figured in the news, ordinary people, especially ordinary women, found very little space. Although the Hindi press was in general more inclusive of common people, the common woman found little representation there either.

To what degree is the news media democratic, inclusive and participatory from a gender perspective, was explored in 'Who makes the News? Global Media Monitoring Project 2010' by Margaret Gallagher et al. This report presents findings of a survey taken on an 'ordinary' news day to record the portrayal and representation of women and men in the news media. The results are compared with previous surveys, taken every four years since 1995, to illustrate longitudinal trends. The findings summarises that women are underrepresented in news coverage, resulting in an unbalanced representation of the world.

News can influence policy agendas and public debate. Consequently, under-representation, insufficient media coverage and the prevalence of stereotypical information are obstacles to the equal enjoyment of freedom of expression. The report suggests that only 24 per cent of the people heard or read about in print, radio and television news are female. Whilst this is a significant improvement from 17 per cent in 1995, but at this pace, it will take 40 years to reach parity if the rate of change observed since 2000 is maintained. Furthermore, the survey reflected that women were the focus of only 19% of news stories in politics and government in 2010. It had also highlighted that the percentage of stories reported by female reporters on radio, television and newspapers is 37 per cent, a figure which has not increased since 2005. Of the 84 news websites monitored by the Global Media Monitoring Project, women comprise only 23% of news subject in online news stories and sixteen per cent of female online news subjects were depicted as victims, in comparison to only five per cent of male news subjects.

The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced in the failure to eliminate gender stereotyping. Generally, the media do not provide a balanced portrayal of women's diverse lives and their contributions to society in a changing world, often reinforcing stereotyped images of women and their roles in society. It is a common practice additionally to assess the professional success of a woman through questions and claims about her related to being a good mother and a wife. This is exactly the type of writing in the media that undermines the efforts of activists, who aim to establish gender equality in all areas of society.

The prevailing portrayal of women in mainstream daily newspapers has the following characteristics:

- Positive images of women have a narrow scope and are based on new stereotypes of women's success: a pop star, a beauty queen, and a sport's woman with an outstanding result.
- There is an absence of the image of an active, assertive working woman, of a successful businesswoman, or a positive image of a woman politician.
- Average women are nearly always portrayed as victims of poverty, social injustice, domestic violence, and organized crime.
- Misogyny in the form of rude jokes, mockery or open verbal aggression have become an accepted way of a systematic backlash against women activists working for women's political empowerment or individual (freedom of abortion, freedom of sexual orientation) human rights.

### **Sample Design for the study**

The brutal assault on a young woman in Delhi on December 16, 2012 and the protests that followed in its wake spotlighted global attention on the issue of gender-based violence, a malady that manifests itself in myriad forms across the world – sexual violence, war crimes against women, domestic abuse, domestic violence, just to name a few. This heinous gang rape led to a powerful campaign for women's liberty and subsequently Justice J.S.Verma committee made recommendations about different aspects of violence against women, including verbal sexual assault, sexual harassment at workplace etc. In the month of February 2013, the President of India gave his assent to the anti-rape ordinance making voyeurism, stalking, disrobing of women and acid attacks specific offences under IPC. Parliament passed the bill in March 2013, making it the strongest legal protection available to women against sexual violence. It seemed that campaign for women safety has become a movement for 'freedom'.

It therefore becomes significant to study whether the issues of gender sensitivity, equality and women safety remains on the same radar for media, in the following months of this assault. Since the first quarter of the following year i.e. January to March 2013, have reflected ample media space for deliberations on these issues, the researcher thought it prudent to study the media coverage and space given to gender issues in the second and fourth quarter i.e. from April to June and from October to December 2013.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

As the study is purely empirical, for the data collection, similar empirical techniques are adopted. Key method adopted for the study is content analysis in which samples were taken as per the set parameters.

The scope of the study is confined to two newspapers, one each of English and Hindi from National Capital Region (NCR) Delhi. They were selected on the basis of the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) for the last quarter of 2012. According to the Readership Survey, The Times of India was the most read English newspaper in Delhi NCR and Navbharat Times has the tag of most read Hindi newspaper in Delhi NCR. But in some quarters, Hindustan has also emerged as the Number one newspaper of Delhi. Since both The Times of India and Navbharat Times are published by the same media house i.e. Bennett, Coleman & Company, their editorial orientation towards Gender might be similar and may not provide a variation for comparison. Therefore, to get an alternative perspective, the Hindi newspaper Hindustan was chosen for the study.

The time frame of the study is the second and fourth quarter of 2013. The days were selected to cover every month of the quarter and every day of the week evenly and thoroughly during the time period. Newspapers were selected every month in such a way that at least two/ three week days and one each of either Saturday or Sunday got covered over a total of 24 days. Hence, 24 copies each of The Times of India and Hindustan were obtained either from the newspaper files/ libraries or were accessed in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library archives. It was decided to study each and every



news item about gender in the entire newspaper (excluding supplements). Every news item was treated as a separate unit within the newspaper and its accompanying visuals, boxes or graphic elements were also included in the mapping exercise.

For content analysis an elaborate coding sheet was prepared on the basis of a pilot conducted on the same newspapers and before embarking on data collection. The idea of the pilot was to have as many categories of elements to be studied as possible. Many new categories were added on the basis of the issues/topics covered in the news items about gender. Two coders were trained through the pilot and between them all the news item were coded on the sheets. Holsti's (1969) formula to measure inter-coder reliability was applied to the coding outcomes of the trial sessions of both the coders. The Holsti's formula for inter-coder reliability explains,  $2M/N1+N2$ , where M is the number of coding decisions the two coders agree on, and N1 and N2 refer to the number of coding decisions made by each individual coder. An inter-coder reliability of 100% on stories' prominence and placement variables was achieved in two trials. However, an agreement coefficient of 93% was achieved on dominant themes variables. One coding sheet was used for each item studied.

Following are the categories each of which is divided into multiple subcategories: (1) name of the newspaper, (2) content and quantum, which includes prominence and placement (3) story followed by feature/ editorial (4) visuals (accompanying the story), (5) by-lines of male and female journalists or no by-line (6) coverage on crime/violence/oppression against women (7) coverage on legal issues (8) coverage on economics and gender (9) empowerment coverage (10) coverage on social and welfare issues related to women (11) coverage on art, craft and literature related to women (12) coverage on women's position in family and marriage (13) coverage on women and sports, (14) coverage on feminism/politics and women activism (15) coverage on women and education, (16) lighter vein coverage (Fashion/ features). Apart from these categories (a) total number of news item in the newspaper (b) total number of gender related stories in the newspaper (c) total number of photos in the newspaper (male photos/female photos/ photos with male and female/ photos without male and female, (d) letter to the Editor (written by males/females, written on gender issues, was also examined.

These dominant themes of the coding sheet contained quantitative as well as qualitative information about the news items studied. The quantitative heads comprised the size, placement and display of the story while the qualitative heads looked at themes, sources or the setting in which the story has been written. Each question or head contained multiple choices of elements prepared on the basis of a pilot. However, many individual themes were later clubbed under subcategories on the basis of similarities. The subcategories chosen were 'crime' and 'legal issues' themes or 'empowerment' and 'economics and gender' themes in order to create a big picture of the media's selection of themes. A separate category was created for social and welfare issues related to women to check if the media give importance to the new paradigm of human and equity-based development in India.

In all, 583 news items in the two dailies were selected for coding. Each item was marked and then coded separately. (This study did not measure the length of the stories either in column centimetres or in volume. However, the relative size of the stories was determined on the basis of single/double column/half-a-page-or-more display and their importance in placement as first/second lead, etc.) The English newspapers had 328 news items while the Hindi ones had 255 news items. To get an average, the total number of all stories in the individual newspapers was counted to check the proportion of gender related stories. The number varied between 8% to 12% stories approximately, depending on the day of the week and other such factors that determine the thickness of the issues. We also counted the average number of stories in issues of newspapers other than the 24 days picked up for content analysis just to check if there were significant variations in average number of news stories throughout the year, though such a variation was not found.

Specific observations about each story were later noted in the end to record specific peculiarities. The data was analysed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). The frequencies of all the variables were later cross-tabulated to study most consistent patterns. Wherever the numbers were very small, they were not included in broad observations. However, the small variables were clubbed with other similar variables for re-tabulation.

The coding sheet had a column for noting the comment on the story about any possible gender bias or those without a bias. The idea was to capture only the manifest biases and not the latent ones. More refined research methods like semiotics or linguistics can lead to a more in-depth study of biases but here we simply noted the most obvious and visible slants.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretations**

The research data suggest the different aspects of the news on gender issues. The total news published in the two newspapers during the study period was 5413. Among them around 10 per cent news appeared on gender issues. Hindustan (a Hindi daily) has 44 per cent of the total coverage of the gender issue while The Times of India published 56 per cent news on the same issue.

The importance of the news depends on the prominence of the content and quantum of the story. To check the prominence of the content and quantum, the current study suggests four categories and ranked them as follows: Single column news, double column news, three and more columns and the half page story.

Research data suggests that 38 per cent stories on gender issues were single column news, 28 per cent were double column news, 33 per cent news have three and more columns and Only 1 per cent news were half pages news. In terms of newspapers, 42 per cent single column news appeared in TOI while in Hindi daily Hindustan, 33 per cent single column news appeared on gender issues. Hindustan has 34 per cent double column news and The Times of India has 23 per cent double column news on gender issue. Three and more column news and half pages news are more or less same in both the news paper. (Table 1, Annexure 1)

To check the placement of the news we studied the different categories and found that only 9 per cent news on gender issues appeared on front page of the newspaper. 3 per cent occupied the place of editorial and opinion page and 87 per cent gender related news appeared on the other pages of the concerned newspaper. Overall the percentage of the gender news as front page was 9 and this ratio is same in both newspapers. Almost similar situation is happening on the placement the gender news on other pages. There was 87 per cent news appeared on other pages and among them 86 per cent in Hindi daily Hindustan and little more 88 per cent in The Times of India. In terms of editorial and opinion pages, Hindustan gave more space than The Times of India. (Table 2, Annexure 1)

There is poor appearance for the news story on gender followed features/editorials/supporting story or box. Only 5% that is 30 out of 583 stories on gender issues are followed by feature/editorial or the supporting story/box. That means majority of the gender related stories were treated as isolated events and no attempts were made by the newspaper to further analyse the issue. TOI fared slightly better as 22 out 328 stories were followed by a supporting story/feature/editorial which comes to 6.7% as compared to Hindustan where only 8 out of 255 stories or 3% stories were followed by a feature or supporting story.

News could be more attractive if it depicts some visuals. The data reveals that 33 per cent news related to gender were accompanied by photographs, only 8 per cent accompanied by cartoons/illustrations while 59 per cent news did not have any visuals. 31 percent news accompanied by photographs appeared in Hindustan and 34 percent in TOI.

Violence against women is the leading debate in the contemporary societies. News on rape is the leading news on the issue of crime against women. Out of the total news related to gender issue, 15 per cent news stories were related to rape. 7 per cent news published was related to harassment by police or authorities. Murder and suicide are the other major issue (Graph 1, Annexure 2) if we look at the linguistic division of the newspaper on the news related to the violence against women the data suggest that Hindi newspaper produced more news on rape. (Table 3, Annexure 1)

Empowerment is the core political issue and women empowerment is the idea which is more relevant for the contemporary India. The data on the coverage of women empowerment is very discouraging and depict no hope whatsoever. There is only 2 per cent news covered on the issue of women achievement. Women reservation is the hot issue in politics but data suggest that only one per cent news covered regarding to the women's representation. Women's participation in decision



making and women's leadership also covered only one per cent of the total news appeared in the both newspaper.

There is mix coverage on social and welfare issues related to women but this figure is not too optimistic. The major coverage by the newspaper on social and welfare issues related to women is women security. The coverage on women security is 3.4 per cent while the second most covered issue is pre-natal and child care. (Graph 2, Annexure 2)

The poor coverage on women related issue is continuing with the issue on women's position in marriage and family. There is only 2 per cent newspaper coverage on this issue. Among them two major issues are Inter caste/intercommunity marriage and widow's issues. (Table 4, Annexure 1). There is fair amount of talk on Feminism in the contemporary world. There is growing demand for the women participation in the public domain. The study tries to locate the condition of the women activism and politics through the lens of newspaper debates and found dismal coverage of 1 per cent or less, as far as issues of women movement and Feminism are concerned. Even the coverage of women politicians was found to be comparatively much less, suggesting some kind of the superfluity and biases involved in reporting on women in active politics.(Graph 3, Annexure 2)

The last category of the research data which studied the coverage on lighter vein like fashion or features also get less space in the media but It has more space than many other important issues related to women. There is 4 per cent coverage given by the newspaper on the same issue and the table below indicates the how they have given the importance and at what level. (Table 5, Annexure 1)

### **Conclusion**

India's highest circulated English and Hindi newspapers devote only a minuscule proportion of their total coverage to gender related issues. Notwithstanding the fact that the recent incidents of gruesome violence against women triggered almost unprecedented public anger forcing the government to formulate stricter laws and widening the definition of gender violence and harassment the newspapers do not seem to reflect the urgency to include gender perspectives and sensitivity in their news reporting.

The data shows that the newspaper does not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. Much remains to be done with regard to the participation, portrayal and access of women to the media and its impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women.

It has also been observed by researcher that women also got least preference in readers mind i.e. letters to editor. Likewise, very few informative pieces or feature columns are published for women informing them about their legal rights, or about their potential for political activity.

There is very little difference between the Hindi and English newspapers when it comes to the selection of either themes or sources. All the ones studied by the researcher preferred violence-related themes over education, economics or empowerment related themes. This indicates that the priorities of the Hindi and English newspapers are determined by the same set of ideological judgments. The English paper tended to have comparatively greater coverage of women empowerment and issues of women representation in decision making than the Hindi ones which had more stories on social and welfare issues related to women.

### **References**

- Association of Women Journalists <http://www.femmes-journalistes.asso.fr/>
- Bathla, Sonia, 1998. Women, Democracy and the Media: Cultural and Political Representation in the Indian press: Sage
- Brewer, J., & Hunter, A. 1989. Multi-method research: A synthesis of styles. Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Buysse, M. A. J., & Embser-Herbert, M. S. (2004). Constructions of gender in sports: An analysis of intercollegiate media guide cover photographs. *Gender & Society*, 18(1), 66–81.



- Cotter, C. 2011. Women's place at the fourth estate: Constraint on Voice, text, and topic. *Journal of Pragmatics* Vol 43 Pp 2519-2533
  - Children Now. 1999. "Study shows that media reinforces gender straitjacket".  
Duncan, M. C., and C. A. Hasbrook. 1988. Denial of power in televised women's sports. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1): 1-21.
  - Cuneen, J., & Sidwell, M. J. (1998). Gender portrayals in Sports Illustrated for Kids advertisements: A content analysis of prominent and supporting models. *Journal of Sport Management*, 12, 39–50.
  - Etling, L., & R. Young 2007. "Sexism and authoritativeness of female sportscasters," *Communication research reports*, 121- 130.
  - Gallagher, Margaret. Who makes the news? Global media monitoring project 2010.
  - Gidengil, E., Everitt, J. 2000. Filtering the female: television news coverage of the 1993 Canadian leaders' debates. *Women and Politics* Vol 21 (4), pp105–131.
  - Joseph Ammu, Sharma Kalpana. 2006. *Whose News? The media and women's issues*. Sage publication
  - Kahn, K F. 1996. *The Political Consequences of Being a Woman: How Stereotypes Influence the Conduct and Consequences of Political Campaigns*. Columbia University Press, New York.
  - Lasswell, H. D. 1948. Attention structure and social structure. In *The communication of ideas*, edited by L. Bryson. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press
  - Nagrath, Sumati. 2001. The Bottom Line: Keeping the women out, inter/sections: *The journal of global communication and culture*, Vol. 1, no. 2
  - Robinson, G., Saint-Jean, Armande. 1995. The portrayal of women politicians in the media: political implications. In: Gingras, Francois-Pierre (Ed.), *Gender and Politics in Contemporary Canada*. Oxford University Press, Toronto, pp. 176–190.
  - Scharrer, E. 2002. An "improbable leap": a content analysis of newspaper coverage of Hillary Clinton's transition from first lady to Senate candidate. *Journalism Studies* Vol 3 (3), pp 393–406.
  - Shivdas, M. 2000. *Alternative Assessment of Women and Media based on NGO Reviews of Section J, Beijing Platform of Action*
  - Venkatram, Shree. *Women in print: The change over the last half century in reporting on women and gender issues by Indian newspaper*.
  - Wann, D. L., Schrader, M. P., Allison, J. A., & McGeorge, K. K. (1998). The inequitable newspaper coverage of men's and women's athletics at small, medium and large universities. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 22(1), 79-87.
- .....