



## **Depiction Of Women In Contemporary Dailies**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper investigates the place and projection of women as represented through photographs in four leading daily newspapers circulated in Chennai. The intention of this study has been to identify any gender stratification or bias in the portrayal of women. In this research an attempt is made to interpret the depiction of woman in newspapers and to identify if the projection of women conform to or break the stereotyping of women. It also seeks to scrutinise gender disparity and locates stereotyped, objectified, commodified representation of women in specific newspapers.*

*Though women are engaged in breaking gender boundaries in numerous fronts, they are often not sufficiently acknowledged or treated equally with men. In addition to being underrepresented in positions of authority, women are stereotyped in certain sections of media and entertainment. This has led to a prejudiced reinforcement of women. The study of four Chennai edition English newspapers namely, The Deccan Chronicle, The Hindu, The New Indian Express and The Times of India for a period of one month has helped gain insight into the representation of women. A quantitative analysis of photographs has been undertaken to accomplish this argument. Photographs of men and women projected under various news headings, features and articles have been counted to evaluate the extent of representation while mediating notions of gender. The total percentage of representation of men and women is found to display underrepresentation of women. The percentage of women displayed under different broad areas has been provided in the paper to elucidate the extent of mainstreaming, stereotyping and objectification of women. To substantiate the conclusion with the extent of projection of women in specific news, the percentage of representation of women has been included in pie charts.*

### **1. Depiction Of Women In Contemporary Dailies**

Conventional assumptions ascertain that men and women have precise character traits and support views that they play specific roles both in society and within the home. While these notions have largely been debated leading to varied levels of modification of views among individuals, deep-rooted beliefs play a momentous part in reinforcing these stereotypes which are manifested in representations of women. Often biological distinction between sexes are described and established to fit into resolute roles that prescribe sets of accepted rules. Through common understanding one would perhaps accept that all men and women do not possess distinctly compartmentalised character traits and that human nature is not homogeneously based on biological distinction of sex. However, these notions of gendered understating still exist in society. The term gender which is a social construct is often equated with the biological difference that distinguishes the male and female sexes. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature”. (1972)<sup>1</sup>

The role of women in social, political, economic and cultural life in India has been greatly repressed down the ages. But today as an increasing number of women are able to emerge as achievers, showing a tremendous amount of discipline and dedication to their work, their position in society has been changing especially in the past two decades. A large amount of discussion on gender equality and the development of women, has taken place in the contemporary world which has initiated positive change. Many women have entered different areas of the public sphere making dynamic and noteworthy contribution to society. This change in perspective witnessed in society is mirrored in newspapers as there are news items recording women’s achievements.

In fields such as science and technology, industry, corporate sector, business, medicine, judiciary and in law and order women are presented as achievers making significant progress. Female politicians feature as leaders and decision makers, while women serving in positions of power, as authors, police officials and at different levels of office receive visible coverage in newspapers. Though these spheres are dominated and correspondingly obtain high representation of men, today the presence of women reflected through photographs is noteworthy and warrants positive recognition. However, the extent to which this notion is disseminated is evident when the percentage of

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<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir, de Simone. *The Second Sex*. Harmondsworth: 1972, [original 1949], 18 : Penguin.

representation of women displayed under these headings is contrasted in comparison with other topics covered in newspapers that cover women. The presence of women with photographs is 16 percent in the above mentioned news topics in the selected newspapers.

Issues relating to women, their achievement in education and various work spheres, as well as the presence and contribution made by women in several aspects of day to day living are featured from time to time in newspapers. Women projected as successful individuals in careers that are normally associated with men are also displayed in newspapers. Representation of photographs of female students, pursuing engineering courses and technical education are presented in these dailies. This is a positive step that presents girl students as being equipped to handle a male dominated world of science and technology. Projecting women in these areas would perhaps impact remarkable change in the minds of its readers that can help transform existing gender notions. Furthermore, the viewpoint that women are meant to belong to the confines of the private sphere and that they are timid and need to be protected is negated. This serves as an indication to readers that the male, female divide held in careers, is meant to be crossed over to bridge the gap between men and women. Newspapers draw attention to women's notable contribution in various spheres displaying their photographs along with the news. These images serve as a reminder that today women excel in several realms which have traditionally been assigned for men. However, photographic presence of women in these news items is found to be only 4 percent when compared to the overall representation of women in all news items in the four selected dailies.

In the field of sports and games, women achievers are commended for the accolades they win highlighting their skill and talent. Caught in moments of active action, they are glorified for their exceptional display of talent in the game. Often their face is frozen in moments of intense concentration as they engage in the game and emerge triumphant in the event. Performance of female sports stars are displayed in photographs that project them as strong and energetic individuals and at times with their award and in some instances during casual interviews. A total of 5 percent of photographs have been recorded in news that reports women in sports.

Typecast construct of men and women include a range of assumptions that stem from a primarily patriarchal perspective leading to depictions that further reinforce these ideas in newspapers. Conditioned to be submissive and to give in easily, women are often expected to be subjugated to patriarchal dominance. In addition, the view that women

should cook, and take care of activities within the home is supported by some articles. Though many women pursue careers that are challenging and tough involving great amount of physical activity and intellectual ability, there are frequent representations that reinforce existing stereotypes by highlighting women's role as caregiver and homemaker.

As men are expected to provide for the family, it is accepted that they will continue to pursue their career after marriage while, in a large number of Indian societies, social ingraining of women to take on filial responsibilities after marriage has been a customary practice that is projected to emphasise the same. Female stars and celebrities are applauded for having given up their career after marriage in order to be able to raise and nurture their children, underlining the notion that these are essential feminine character traits. Frequent messages reaffirm the notion that women acquire meaning and satisfaction only by performing their role as a good wife, daughter-in-law, mother or sister which often expects them to sacrifice their creative urges on the altar of effective homemaking. Childcare involving nurturing, caring and supervision especially for younger ones is a task that is habitually assigned as women's responsibility and as a continuation process of pregnancy and childbirth. This is a crucial area that professes gender stereotyping. Many photographs reinforce parental role as exclusively associated with women. Conversely, some candid photographs of men engaged in childcare and parental activity is displayed in some newspapers. This helps break traditional views that confine women with parental responsibilities. Photographs that cover women in these tradition roles are found to be at 2 percent

.Increased awareness on good health, promoting exercise, nutrition and good eating habits have led to many reports, exercise instruction, diet plans, obesity and related health hazards, accompanied by a sizeable number of photographs in newspapers. The fitness and cosmetic industries promote fit, fair and attractive women, reinforcing a desire for a specific body image and appearance. Projected models and celebrity with a picture perfect figure, appearance and complexion further enhance the desire to acquire the same among readers. When health and fitness topics are covered images of women are incorporated in substantial numbers.

A number of beauty products, treatments and beautification processes, involving an overall makeover of a person's appearance, hairstyle and cosmetics, arbitrating the need for one to be concerned about one's self image are often featured in newspapers. Photographs display youngsters and middle aged women undergoing a make-over to

enhance their physical appearance which are shown as 'Before' and 'After' images. Stages of the process of a make-over are covered with three to five photographs and the final image portrays a satisfied customer.

Attractive models with a fit body image are used to promote the sales of many commodities. Numerous photographs of slim, fair complexioned beauties on the ramps, at Beauty pageant contests, award winning contestants who attract the limelight in beauty contests are projected and glorified in newspapers. The concept of a beautiful woman idealized as slim, fair and tall is reinforced by photographs of women who endorse a range of products beginning from cosmetics to clothes, accessories and numerous other consumer durables. Those who do not conform to these lofty goals are consciously or unconsciously, conveyed the impression that they are not beautiful and desirable. Excessive demands on body image and fitness promoted as a requirement to be desirable and loveable, increases the pressure on many women. This further underlies the viewpoint that women must concentrate on outward appearance rather than to focus on enhancing other critical faculty such as strengthening their intellectual capacity, skills or technical abilities.

In the present scenario, though women are endorsed as independent and equal citizens with men in the public sphere, the idea that women are to be gazed through photographs is widespread. Photographs of models, actors, brand ambassadors, celebrities and socialites are periodically projected in newspapers. Television and movie celebrities, fashion models and sports figures are often portrayed in glamorous ways catering to the gaze of desiring audience. Women dressed in minimum clothes, glamorized with attractive make up, are captured and displayed in newspapers to offer visual satisfaction. Women are often projected as a subject meant to be consumed like a product by both male and female spectators. Women are represented in a derogatory manner where they are seen exposing much of their body to attract attention for gaze. In today's consumer driven culture the woman's body is frequently seen as a marketable commodity. Positioned as the point of focus in provocative poses, total emphasis is dedicated to the female body.

Female cheerleaders wearing skimpy clothes are seen cheering male players to perform well in sports events. Their well toned, flexible fair complexioned bodies are utilised to cheer male players and are also used as a source of entertainment for spectators. Bikini clad models and stars are seen in many photographs underlining the fact that from time immemorial women's bodies are treated as an object of desire meant for gaze. Draped in

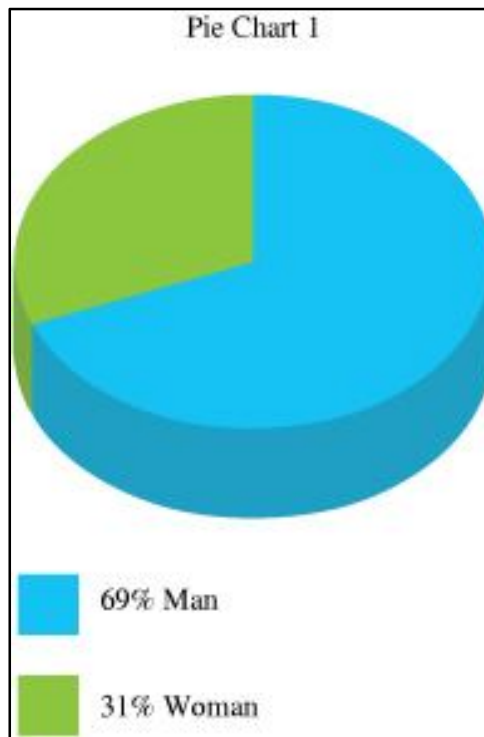
well fitting fashionably designed attire, cut and stitched to reveal the body to voyeuristic gaze, they are presented like attractive objects meant to be consumed. Though media can exercise their choice to crop photographs to avoid that which creates a derogatory, objectified and commodified depiction of women, often they use them to enhance readership. Of the total representation of photographs of women in all the four newspapers, 73 percent are found to comprise various topics such as appearance, fashion, glamour and entertainment. However, the extent of objectification of women in each newspaper is varied.

Though media claims to and does project the modern, liberated woman, it often presents derogatory images, endorsing stereotyping and discrimination of women. Deep-rooted attitudes concerning gender that governs human perception manifests itself in a patriarchal approach which sets the standard of day to day living and functioning of people. This notion is transmitted to the way in which news items are presented in the media. Gendered viewing of male and female as masculine and feminine reinforces the differences between the two sexes widening prevailing inequality, further reinforcing differences.

Parallel positive and negative representations of women are seen in newspapers however the extent of objectification and commodification of women is found to be high. The extent of objectification was found to be varied in the four selected newspapers. While on one hand recognition of women as decision makers, powerful and notable personalities, as trend setters in various fields and as excellent achievers are present, on the other hand, there is extensive emphasise on projecting women as consumable commodities.

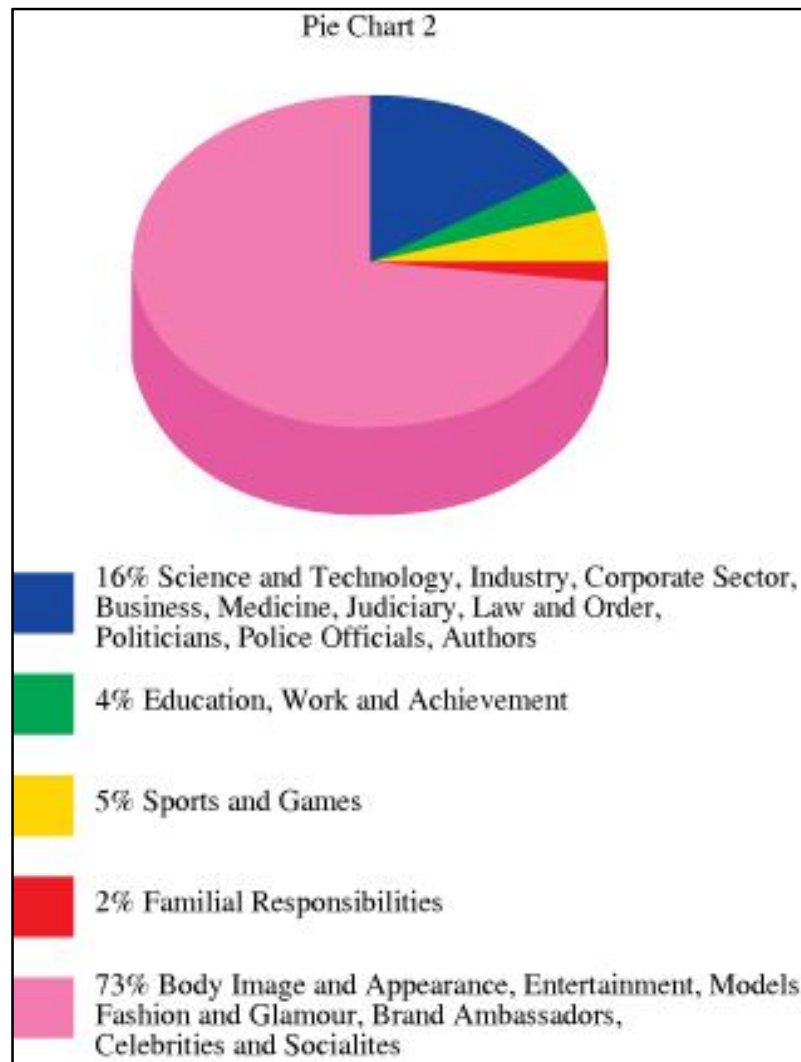
Over the past two decades the depictions of men and women have undergone considerable change. Men are also found to be put through the stress of fitting into gendered roles which is problematic for those who do not fit these rigid compartments. Yet the extent of stereotyping and commodification of women is found to be much higher for women.

The overall projection of men using photographs for a period of one month was found to be 69 percent while the total projection of women with photographs was at 31 percent. This is projected in Pie Chart 1.



*Figure 1*

The obvious asymmetry in the overall representation of men and women itself shows disparity in the projection of both sexes. The fact that the percentage is not equal is a clear pointer to the underrepresentation of women. In addition to the underrepresentation of women, the extent of projection of photographs of women while covering specific topics further underlines the disparity between the two sexes. 73 percent representation in the field of entertainment, as cheerleaders, as socialites, as models, beauty pageants, fashion and glamour models, as brand ambassadors indicates that women are largely projected in matters concerning their physical appearance, as entertainers, as being associated with the promotion of sales at different levels and in supporting male players to win. Pie Chart 2 shows the percentage of photographs of women found in each broad category.



*Figure 2*

A large representation of women in such areas can lead to negative stereotyping of women underlining the notion that they should be concerned with physical appearance in order to be able to take on a career and be appreciated. Extensive objectification of women has been identified in some newspapers. Hence it has been observed that the representation of men is higher and is found to be in a better position when compared to women even in the changing period. This transformation should be more radical, keeping pace with the advancement and developments in society. Only then can we eliminate the fetters of inequality that imprison people's view-point, and aim at witnessing a just society.

By studying the portrayal of women in the four dailies it has been possible to interpret the inequality in the projection of the women and through the process of interrogation



and inference, become aware of the flaws that create such recurrent patterns in society and thereby correct them.

## **2. Conclusion**

This research has been able to explore the presence of male centeredness and the patriarchal ideology that exists in society. Print media plays a crucial role in reflecting gender roles and stereotypes and is capable of shaping public opinion in any society, therefore it is important to ensure gender mainstreaming in this sector. This research, which is based on a qualitative analysis of the data of photographs in the selected dailies, did identify many instances of gendered representation, stratification, stereotyping and commodification, while there are also some instances of mainstreaming and positive representation in the media.

Any society should strive to obtain gender equality as it is fundamental to ensure that women who play a key role in its progress are not suppressed and discriminated. Any effort to develop a society will not be complete if efforts are not taken to create awareness of gender issues among policy makers, educators and researchers. It is significant to be attentive about negative gender representation in the visual culture of our country, which has a strong patriarchal mind set. Hence commitment to fostering gender equity and gender mainstreaming is the need of contemporary India. Measures have to be taken to prevent sexist depiction of women in order to impede the perpetuation of negative and unequal representations of gender in media circles.

While policy makers within a democracy should not control the freedom of expression of the media, they can take efforts to promote gender mainstreaming within media. This should include a set of policy prescriptions and laws which cover issues of representation through visuals and text in the media that are sexist. In addition, concrete social actions taken against the use of derogatory and negative imaging, and stereotyping should be initiated. Added to this is the persuasion and urgency of designing and implementing gender based literacy programmes that educate both men and women about gender equity and equality which will lead to building an equitable society.

We need researchers to write in order to give a balanced perspective on gender representation in the media especially in the context of the existing powerful patriarchal dominance of Indian culture. It is only through the creation of awareness about equitable representation of genders to the contemporary generation, that the position of women in Indian society can be elevated.

Hence it can be concluded that the representation of women while being predominantly low has also been biased in most of the print media. Recurrent negative representation of women will have an effect of naturalising the way of seeing them and driving the wedge of disparity deeper in society. This analysis has been a means to bring gender issues into the mainstream of society by examining gender mediation in the print media towards understanding inequality with specificity in order to promote sensitisation that can sequentially lead to gender equality.

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