

Voices on the Screen : Gender Equity and Women's Media Presence in India

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Abstract

Despite constitutional guarantees and existing policy frameworks in India, the media continues to exhibit gender bias. Women remain underrepresented in newsroom leadership, media ownership, and as subjects in news stories. Their portrayal is often stereotypical, reinforcing regressive narratives by limiting women to traditional roles or objectifying them, particularly in television, film, and news reporting. News coverage tends to focus on the character of female victims rather than addressing systemic issues, and female experts in politics, science, and public life rarely receive the same visibility as their male counterparts.

Though some media organizations have introduced editorial guidelines for fair representation, implementation is sporadic and largely unmonitored. The rise of digital and social media platforms has added new challenges, including cyber harassment and the unchecked spread of patriarchal content. Compared to global standards set by institutions like UNESCO and initiatives in Nordic countries or Canada, India lags significantly behind. These international models emphasize transparency, mandatory gender-sensitive training, equitable leadership, and accountability—areas where Indian media remains deficient due to a lack of political will, regulatory enforcement, and industry-wide commitment.

The paper proposes a comprehensive set of measures to bridge these gaps. These include establishing regulatory oversight through a Gender Equality Commission for Media, making gender sensitization training mandatory for media professionals, integrating gender studies into journalism education, and incentivizing content that promotes gender equity. It also recommends increasing women's representation in decision-making roles within media organizations and launching public awareness campaigns to promote media literacy and demand for inclusive content. Further, it calls for independent research bodies to monitor gender representation and collaboration with international agencies for better practices. In the digital space, stricter moderation policies, legal protections against online abuse, and support structures for women content creators are vital.

Introduction

Media as a Transformative Agent in Shaping Gender Narratives in India

The media, often referred to as the fourth pillar of democracy, holds immense power in influencing public opinion, shaping cultural norms, and constructing national discourse. In India, a country with a vast and diverse population, entrenched social hierarchies, and historical legacies of patriarchy, the role of media is not only informative but transformative. It has the potential to either challenge the status quo or reinforce regressive ideologies. As Daya Thussu (2021) highlights, the media's impact on gender representation is a key site for analysis in the quest for a more equitable society.

The Contradiction Between Policy and Practice

India's constitutional vision is rooted in equality, dignity, and non-discrimination. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, while Article 39 calls for the State to ensure that men and women have equal rights to livelihood. Additionally, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has periodically issued advisories to promote gender-sensitivity in media content. However, despite such a legal framework, the Indian media landscape remains riddled with gender biases and structural inequalities.

This disconnect between policy and practice is starkly evident in multiple domains:

- **Newsrooms** remain male-dominated, especially in leadership positions.
- **Cinema and television** often depict women in stereotypical, ornamental, or victimized roles.
- **Digital platforms**, while more democratic, also reflect entrenched societal biases, amplified by algorithmic patterns and user-driven content.

Studies have shown that women are often portrayed as submissive, emotional, or dependent characters, whereas men are assigned dominant, assertive, and decisive roles (Ghosh, 2019). Gender minorities face even greater marginalization, often appearing only in sensationalist or tokenistic narratives.

Persistent Questions and Structural Barriers

Several structural factors contribute to the persistence of gender-insensitive content:

1. **Patriarchal editorial and production cultures:** Decision-making roles are often held by men, shaping narratives through a predominantly male gaze.
2. **Market-driven logic:** Commercial interests sometimes prioritize sensationalism over sensitivity, reinforcing stereotypes that are perceived to attract viewership.
3. **Lack of gender sensitization training:** Journalists, producers, and writers frequently lack formal education on gender equity and inclusive storytelling.
4. **Inadequate representation of gender minorities:** Transgender, queer, and non-binary voices are seldom represented authentically and are often subject to ridicule or erasure.

These systemic barriers ensure that progressive policies remain ineffective unless accompanied by deep institutional reform.

Learning from Global Frameworks and Models

Around the world, several countries have taken concrete steps to promote gender-sensitive programming:

- **Sweden** adopted a “gender equality certification” for films based on the Bechdel Test, which assesses whether a film features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man.
- **BBC’s 50:50 Project** is a global initiative to achieve gender balance in media content by encouraging editorial teams to track and improve women’s representation in programming.
- **UNESCO’s Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM)** provide a comprehensive toolkit for assessing and transforming gender equity across media institutions.

These examples show that measurable goals, institutional support, and leadership commitment can drive meaningful change in how media portrays gender.

Towards Gender-Sensitive Indian Media: Recommendations

To transform Indian media into a gender-sensitive and inclusive space, the following steps are essential:

1. **Institutional Policy Reforms**
 - Mandate internal gender audits within media houses.
 - Enforce gender diversity quotas for newsroom leadership and creative teams.
2. **Capacity Building and Training**
 - Introduce compulsory gender-sensitization workshops in journalism schools and media organizations.
 - Partner with civil society groups to develop inclusive editorial guidelines.
3. **Monitoring and Accountability**
 - Establish independent regulatory bodies or ombudspersons to monitor sexist, misogynistic, or exclusionary content.
 - Encourage citizen reporting and media watchdog initiatives.
4. **Content Innovation and Inclusion**
 - Support content that foregrounds women’s voices, agency, and diversity of experiences.
 - Offer funding or awards for productions that break gender norms and highlight intersectionality.

5. Representation Beyond Tokenism

- Ensure meaningful roles for women and gender minorities behind the camera—in scripting, directing, editing, and management.
- Promote intersectional representation, focusing on rural women, Dalit and Adivasi women, disabled individuals, and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Media is not merely a reflector of society; it is also a creator of consciousness. In India, the challenge is to harness this power to advance the cause of gender justice rather than hinder it. While legal and policy frameworks lay the foundation, the true transformation lies in changing institutional cultures, creating space for diverse voices, and fostering narratives that empower rather than objectify.

By learning from successful international models and aligning with frameworks such as UNESCO's GSIM, India can move toward a media landscape that not only entertains but educates, challenges, and liberates. This research underscores the urgent need to reimagine Indian media as a force for gender equity—grounded in inclusivity, responsibility, and progressive representation.

1. The Indian Media Landscape: Gendered Realities

1.1. Underrepresentation in Newsrooms

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2021) found that women make up only 21% of subjects and sources in Indian news stories, and they are even less visible in leadership positions. According to the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI, 2019), women journalists are often excluded from decision-making roles and underrepresented in newsroom hierarchies, especially in regional and vernacular media.

Women journalists frequently report discrimination in assignments, with men dominating hard news beats such as politics and crime (Roy & Joseph, 2017). The lack of mentorship and the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes create an environment that impedes career growth for female journalists.

1.2. Gender Bias in News Coverage

The content of Indian media reflects deep-rooted gender biases. In coverage of crimes against women, sensationalism often trumps sensitivity, focusing on the victim's behavior or clothing rather than the perpetrator's accountability (Ghosh, 2020). Similarly, women are underrepresented as experts in fields like politics, economics, or science. A 2015 report by UN Women India revealed that women experts constituted only 14% of those quoted in television debates.

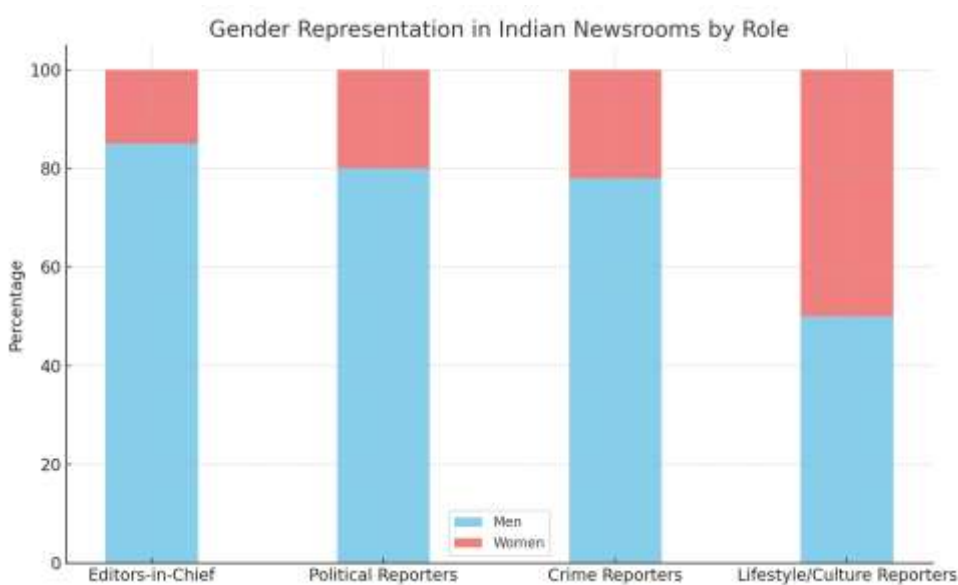
This skewed visibility impacts public perceptions of authority and marginalizes women's contributions to public discourse.

1.3. Stereotypes and Objectification in Popular Media

Indian television and cinema often portray women in reductive roles—either as sacrificial mothers, glamorous objects, or submissive wives (Khan & Taylor, 2018). While some films and shows have attempted to subvert these tropes, the dominant narrative continues to reinforce heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies.

The 2022 "Status of Women in Indian Media" report by the Observer Research Foundation noted that female characters in TV shows are more likely to be portrayed in family settings or involved in romantic subplots, while male characters dominate action, science, and leadership roles.

Chart: Gender Representation in Indian Newsrooms



Source: Compiled from GMMP (2021), NWMI (2019), and related studies.

2. Digital Media: A Double-Edged Sword

Digital media has transformed the landscape of communication, storytelling, and representation—especially for women. It provides unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, activism, and entrepreneurship. However, it simultaneously presents complex challenges rooted in systemic gender biases that have merely shifted form in the online space.

Empowerment Through Access and Voice

Digital platforms have significantly democratized content creation. Unlike traditional media, where editorial control often rested in the hands of a few, digital media allows anyone with an internet connection to become a creator, influencer, or journalist. This has led to the rise of independent women content creators, many of whom are shaping public discourse in fields such as fashion, politics, health, education, and feminism.

Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and podcasts have enabled women to craft alternative narratives, challenge beauty norms, and present regional and intersectional perspectives. For example:

- Prajakta Koli, through her YouTube channel “MostlySane,” discusses not only humor and lifestyle but also tackles topics like body positivity and gender stereotypes.
- Faye D’Souza, a former television journalist, now runs an independent digital news platform focused on civic issues, rights, and gender equity.

Digital activism, or hashtag feminism, has also seen success. Campaigns like #MeTooIndia, #PinjraTod, and #DalitLivesMatter have emerged from social media and sparked national conversations.

Digital Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

Despite the promise of empowerment, online spaces are not gender-neutral. They often replicate and magnify offline inequalities.

According to a 2020 Amnesty International India report, female journalists, especially those from marginalized communities, are subjected to relentless online abuse, including:

- Threats of rape and murder.
- Doxxing (publishing private information online).
- Targeted smear campaigns and disinformation.

Barkha Dutt, Rana Ayyub, and Swati Chaturvedi are some of the prominent Indian women journalists who have publicly spoken about coordinated abuse campaigns meant to silence their voices. Such attacks not only affect the mental well-being of victims but also contribute to self-censorship among women online.

Algorithmic Bias and Monetization of Misogyny

Digital platforms are driven by algorithms that reward engagement—often privileging sensationalism over substance. This dynamic leads to:

- Viral misogyny: Sexist content disguised as comedy or commentary garners massive views.
- Male-centric content ecosystems: Influencer networks sometimes promote hyper-masculine and patriarchal narratives, limiting space for nuanced gender discourse.

The lack of transparency in platform policies, especially regarding moderation of hate speech or harassment, makes it difficult for women to find meaningful recourse. The case of Instagram and Facebook failing to act on reported abuse or delaying responses to flagged content illustrates this gap.

The Role of Legislation and Civil Society

Although India has laws such as the IT Act (Section 66A, now struck down) and POSH (Sexual Harassment Act), their application in online cases remains limited. Enforcement is weak, and law enforcement agencies are often untrained in dealing with digital gender-based violence.

Civil society and NGOs are attempting to bridge the gap. Organizations like Internet Freedom Foundation, Point of View, and Breakthrough India are pushing for gender-sensitive digital literacy, stronger reporting mechanisms, and user-centered platform design.

Digital media is both an enabler and a battleground. While it provides tools for women to reimagine identity and agency, it also exposes them to old prejudices in new forms. The key lies in making digital spaces safer and more accountable—through better regulation, algorithmic transparency, gender-inclusive tech design, and continued feminist advocacy.

To harness the full potential of digital media for gender justice, we must go beyond access and look at who controls, who profits, and who speaks freely in the digital public sphere.

3. Comparing Global Frameworks: Learning from the Best

3.1. UNESCO's Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM)

UNESCO's GSIM (2012) provides a comprehensive framework to assess and enhance gender equality in media organizations and content. Key indicators include:

- Gender balance in staffing and decision-making
- Gender-sensitive editorial policies
- Regular monitoring and reporting of gender representation
- Training and capacity-building for journalists

Some Indian media outlets have voluntarily adopted components of GSIM, but there is no mandated or systematized implementation (Singh, 2022).

3.2. The Nordic Model

Nordic countries like Sweden and Norway are global leaders in gender-equitable media. Public broadcasters are required to ensure gender balance in programming, and financial subsidies to private media are conditional on compliance with equality norms (Byerly, 2013). Gender representation is regularly audited, and journalists receive structured training in gender-sensitive reporting. Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is another noteworthy model that evaluates how policies, programs, and initiatives impact diverse groups based on gender and intersectional identities (Government of Canada, 2021).

4. Challenges Specific to the Indian Context

India's pluralistic and stratified society adds layers of complexity to gender equity in media:

- **Linguistic and Regional Diversity:** With over 20 recognized languages and hundreds of regional outlets, implementing standardized gender-sensitive norms is a logistical challenge.
- **Caste and Intersectionality:** Women from Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalized communities are vastly underrepresented. Their narratives are often filtered through an upper-caste, urban lens (Paik, 2014).
- **Ownership Patterns:** Media ownership is concentrated among a few political and corporate entities. These vested interests discourage disruptive or feminist editorial agendas.
- **Weak Regulatory Oversight:** Bodies like the Press Council of India lack enforcement powers. There is no centralized mechanism to monitor or penalize gender-biased content.

5. Pathways to Reform: Recommendations

5.1. Institutional and Regulatory Reforms

- **Establish a Gender Equality Commission for Media** to oversee compliance with gender norms, audit representation, and recommend penalties or incentives.
- **Mandatory Gender Sensitization Training** for journalists, editors, and media owners to embed gender ethics in newsroom culture.
- **Annual Gender Audits** to be published by all major media organizations, benchmarking progress and accountability.

5.2. Journalism Education and Curriculum Reform

- **Integrate Gender and Media Studies** into undergraduate and postgraduate journalism courses.
- **Faculty Training** in gender pedagogy and inclusive storytelling through workshops and exchange programs with institutions in countries leading in media equity.

5.3. Content Support and Incentivization

- **Public Funding for Inclusive Content** via a Gender Equity Media Fund that supports content creators working on gender justice.
- **Recognition and Awards** for journalists and filmmakers who create transformative and equitable narratives.

5.4. Digital Policy and Protection

- **Collaborate with Social Media Platforms** to create stronger, culturally relevant moderation policies.
- **Legal Protection and Fast-track Mechanisms** for prosecuting online harassment.
- **Creator Safety Funds and Helplines** for women and gender-diverse content creators.

5.5. Public Awareness and Media Literacy

- **Nationwide Media Literacy Campaigns** to educate audiences on recognizing and challenging gender bias.
- **Partnerships with Community Radio and NGOs** to promote local storytelling by women in rural and semi-urban settings.

6. Research and Civil Society Engagement

Independent research organizations must be empowered to collect data, monitor trends, and build public pressure for reform. Collaboration with international agencies such as UN Women, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and UNESCO can help contextualize best practices and tailor them to India's social landscape.

Initiatives like the Media Gender Equality Scorecard, jointly implemented by Indian civil society groups and academic institutions, can serve as a credible metric of media performance.

Conclusion

The closing section of this paper drives home a simple yet profound truth: gender-sensitive programming is not an optional add-on, but rather a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. By positioning equitable media representation as a “democratic necessity,” we remind ourselves that the stories our channels choose to tell—and whose voices they amplify—shape public opinion, social norms, and even policy. In India’s complex, pluralistic society, where media reach extends from prime-time television to regional online news portals and social-media influencers, the stakes could not be higher.

1. Structural Reform

- **Organizational Policies:** Media houses must embed gender sensitivity into mission statements, editorial guidelines, hiring practices, and content-review processes. This goes beyond

token hiring of women in front of the camera; it requires systemic auditing of story selection, sourcing practices, and promotional pathways for female journalists and producers.

- Regulatory Frameworks: Self-regulatory bodies (e.g., Press Council of India, Advertising Standards Council) and statutory regulators (e.g., Ministry of Information & Broadcasting) should issue clear, enforceable codes of conduct that reward gender-balanced programming and penalize overt stereotyping or exclusion.

2. Educational Interventions

- Journalism Curricula: Universities and training institutes must integrate modules on gender theory, unconscious bias, and inclusive storytelling. Case-based learning—drawing on both successful global initiatives (e.g., Australia’s “Watch Your Language” campaign) and innovative Indian pilots—can help students translate theory into practice.
- Continued Professional Development: Veteran reporters and editors should have access to regular workshops, peer-review forums, and gender audits that keep them abreast of best practices and emerging challenges (for instance, the rise of deepfakes and online harassment).

3. Cultural Change

- Audience Engagement: Shifting audience expectations is as important as changing newsroom mindsets. Media outlets can run “gender literacies” campaigns—inviting viewers to critique and co-create content, participate in panel discussions, or submit user-generated stories that challenge stereotypes.
- Role Models & Mentorship: Elevating women in leadership positions—both on-screen and behind the scenes—provides visible proof that inclusive practices enrich storytelling and business outcomes alike. Mentorship networks (e.g., Women in News India) can nurture emerging talent and build solidarity across regions.

4. Leveraging New Platforms

- Digital Media & Social Networks: As audiences migrate online, platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and emerging vernacular-language apps become critical sites for intervention. Algorithms should be audited for gender bias, and content creators encouraged—through grants, grants, or platform features—to produce nuanced, woman-centric narratives.
- Data Analytics: Real-time monitoring of viewership patterns, sentiment analysis, and diversity metrics can help media managers track progress, identify gaps, and iteratively refine content strategies.

5. Global Models, Local Realities

- **Adaptation Over Adoption:** While frameworks like the Global Media Monitoring Project provide valuable benchmarks, India needs locally calibrated indices—sensitive to caste, class, language, and regional diversity—to measure representation.
- **Cross-Border Collaboration:** Exchanges with media organizations in South Africa, Brazil, or Scandinavia can spark innovation, but must be paired with pilot projects on the ground to test cultural resonance and operational feasibility.

6. Pathways Forward

- **Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:** Civil-society organizations, women’s rights groups, academia, and media companies must form consortia that pool expertise, share resources, and hold one another accountable.
- **Research & Evaluation:** Future studies should explore the long-term social impact of gender-sensitive programming on issues like political participation, violence reduction, and economic empowerment. Rigorous evaluation will build the evidence base needed to sustain reforms.

True media inclusion means listening to, valuing, and reflecting the multiplicity of women’s experiences in India—across regions, religions, and socio-economic strata. By undertaking structural reform, regulatory action, educational outreach, and cultural engagement—all tailored to India’s evolving media landscape—we can transform outlets of exclusion into engines of democratic participation. Only then will Indian media fulfill its promise of giving every voice—notably those of women—the platform, prominence, and respect it so richly deserves.

Case Studies and Examples

Case Study 1: Khabar Lahariya – A Model of Inclusive Journalism

Overview:

Khabar Lahariya is a rural, women-led digital news platform operating in remote districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Founded in 2002, it employs Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women reporters—many of whom had no prior media experience.

Impact:

- The platform reports on issues ignored by mainstream media—such as caste violence, gender-based discrimination, and rural development.
- It uses mobile journalism and vernacular languages to connect with grassroots audiences.

- Reporters have uncovered illegal mining rackets and exposed government failures in healthcare and education delivery.

Takeaway:

Khabar Lahariya demonstrates how media can empower marginalized women and provide alternative narratives when editorial independence and gender equity are embedded in its structure.

"In the mainstream, stories are edited by people far removed from the community. Here, women like me decide what's news." – Kavita Bundelkhadi, Editor, Khabar Lahariya

Case Study 2: Gender Sensitization at NDTV**Overview:**

NDTV is one of the few major Indian networks to introduce an internal **gender sensitivity code** for its staff. It provides editorial guidelines to avoid stereotyping, ensures sensitive reporting on gender-based violence, and includes gender parity in panel discussions.

Examples:

- NDTV covered the 2012 Nirbhaya case with an emphasis on systemic reform and victim dignity, rather than sensationalism.
- The newsroom maintains gender balance in on-screen panels and frequently features women experts on topics like climate, politics, and health.

Takeaway:

Institutional policies on gender ethics—when implemented effectively—can significantly improve fair and accurate representation.

Case Study 3: Online Harassment of Rana Ayyub**Overview:**

Rana Ayyub, a Muslim investigative journalist, has been a frequent target of online abuse, including deepfake videos, doxxing, and rape threats, especially after her exposés on communal violence and political corruption.

Repercussions:

- A UN Special Rapporteur raised concerns about the Indian government's inaction in protecting her.
- Twitter and Facebook were slow in removing offensive content despite multiple reports.

Takeaway:

This case illustrates the urgent need for stricter digital policy, legal protection, and global platform accountability to protect women journalists from targeted harassment.

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