

Role of Mainstream Media in Eradicating Gender Bias in Society

Dr Prashant Kumar,

Assistant Professor, Political Science, Tilak Dhari P.G. College, Jaunpur

Abstract

The mainstream media holds unparalleled influence in shaping public perception, cultural norms, and political attitudes. Its role in eradicating gender bias is therefore both powerful and complex. This paper explores how print, broadcast, and digital media can function as transformative tools for promoting gender equality, challenging stereotypes, and empowering women in contemporary society. Drawing upon feminist communication theories, global case studies, and empirical data from organizations such as UNESCO and UN Women, the research analyzes the progress and limitations of media in dismantling gender-based discrimination. It evaluates representations of women in news, entertainment, advertising, and political discourse, focusing particularly on Indian and international contexts. The paper concludes that while media has made significant strides toward gender sensitivity, structural inequality, patriarchal ownership, and commercial pressures continue to restrict its emancipatory potential. To make the media a true vehicle for gender justice, reforms in content creation, ownership patterns, and policy regulation must align with ethical journalism and inclusive storytelling.

Keywords : Media, Gender Biasness, Women, Steriotypes, Mainstream, Social Media, Gender Parity

1. Introduction

The relationship between media and gender equality has long been a subject of critical academic inquiry. The mainstream media—comprising television, newspapers, radio, and online platforms—has the ability not only to mirror social attitudes but also to mold them. Historically, media has often perpetuated gender stereotypes, portraying women as submissive, emotional, and dependent, while glorifying male dominance and authority. However, in recent decades, the rise of feminist consciousness and advocacy for women's rights has pressured media institutions to assume a more active role in dismantling these biases. Globally, the UNESCO Media Development Indicators (2023) emphasize that media can be a catalyst for gender equality by fostering inclusive narratives and amplifying women's voices in public life.¹ The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) also recognized media as one of the twelve critical areas for promoting gender equality.² Despite these frameworks, gender disparities persist in newsroom leadership, representation, and portrayal. Women constitute less than 30% of news subjects worldwide, and only 25% of top editorial positions are held by women.³

In India, where media serves as both a democratic institution and a cultural force, these issues are equally pronounced. Although female journalists and anchors are increasingly visible, their representation in decision-making and policy framing remains limited. Cinema and advertising still reproduce stereotypes of idealized femininity and toxic masculinity. This paper investigates how mainstream media can evolve from being a passive reflector of gender norms to an active instrument of transformation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in three interrelated perspectives: feminist media theory, agenda-setting theory, and social constructionism. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of how media both mirrors and molds gender relations within society. By combining critical feminist inquiry with communication and sociological theories, the paper situates media as a central arena for contesting and transforming gender norms.

Feminist media theory challenges the patriarchal control that historically dominates the production, ownership, and representation of media content. It asserts that media systems have traditionally been shaped by male perspectives, thereby reinforcing structures of power that marginalize women's voices. A seminal contribution to this discourse is Laura Mulvey's "Male Gaze" theory (1975), which argues that cinematic narratives and visual culture are constructed through a masculine lens that objectifies women and denies them agency.⁴ This framework reveals how female characters are often reduced to decorative objects or passive recipients of male desire rather than independent subjects. Mulvey's critique remains highly relevant today, not only in Western cinema but also in Indian visual culture, where advertising and films frequently reproduce similar gendered tropes. Feminist media theory therefore demands both representational reform—how women are depicted—and structural reform—who controls the means of representation.

Complementing this is agenda-setting theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972), which explores the media's power to shape public discourse by determining what issues gain prominence.⁵ While media may not dictate how people think, it significantly influences what they think about. Applied to gender, this means that the visibility of women's rights, gender equality movements, or incidents of gender-based violence within mainstream coverage directly impacts their perceived societal importance. When gender-related topics are sidelined or trivialized, they risk being excluded from policy agendas and public consciousness. Conversely, sustained media attention—such as coverage of the #MeToo movement—can elevate gender justice to a national or global priority.

Finally, social constructionism emphasizes that media does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it through language, imagery, and narrative framing.⁶ Media texts—news reports, advertisements, films, and social media posts—generate symbols and meanings that define gender roles and expectations. Therefore, combating gender bias requires a conscious reconstruction of these symbolic systems to create inclusive and equitable narratives.

In synthesis, these three theories reveal the dual function of media—as both a product of societal patriarchy and a potential instrument of change. A feminist-constructivist framework thus enables a nuanced understanding of how mainstream media can transition from reinforcing stereotypes to redefining gender equality in public discourse.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative analytical approach, combining content analysis and comparative case studies to examine how mainstream media can reduce gender bias. It draws on UN Women and UNESCO reports (2019–2024), scholarly literature in feminist media studies, case studies from India, the U.S., and Scandinavia, and empirical data from the *Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP)* and national press surveys. By integrating these sources, the research identifies key patterns of gender representation, institutional bias, and strategies for reform in media systems.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Media Representation and Stereotyping

Mainstream media remains one of the most influential sources of gender imagery. The Global Media Monitoring Project (2020) found that only 24% of news subjects worldwide are women.⁷ Moreover, when women appear in news stories, they are often portrayed in domestic, entertainment, or victimhood contexts, while men dominate political, economic, and expert roles. This imbalance reinforces gender hierarchies and restricts women's visibility in positions of power.

In India, a similar pattern exists. Studies show that media coverage of women politicians focuses more on their appearance or family background than on their policies.⁸ Television serials, which reach millions

daily, frequently depict women as homemakers or moral guardians rather than professionals or decision-makers. Advertising, too, commodifies female bodies, promoting unrealistic beauty standards and linking womanhood with domestic servitude.

However, alternative and independent media outlets—such as The Lallantop, along with emerging digital platforms like Khabar Lahariya and Zee News' gender-focused segments—demonstrate how inclusive and gender-sensitive journalism can challenge entrenched patriarchal narratives.⁹ These platforms, through localized reporting, interactive storytelling, and socially conscious content, have begun to amplify women's voices and foreground issues such as workplace inequality, gender-based violence, and representation in politics. By highlighting everyday experiences of women across rural and urban India, and offering perspectives often ignored by mainstream networks, such initiatives reveal the transformative potential of Indian media when it prioritizes diversity, sensitivity, and public accountability in its storytelling.

4.2 Women in Media Workforce

Although women's presence in media organizations has grown, gender parity in leadership remains elusive. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2023), only 22% of the top editors across 240 major news outlets worldwide are women.¹⁰ In India, women make up nearly half of journalism graduates but hold fewer than 15% of editorial leadership positions.¹¹

Structural inequalities—such as gender pay gaps, workplace harassment, and lack of maternity support—contribute to this disparity. Furthermore, the “glass ceiling” effect restricts women's advancement in both newsroom and corporate hierarchies. The absence of women in decision-making roles results in limited diversity in content and framing. Thus, promoting women's leadership in media is essential for transforming institutional culture and editorial priorities.

4.3 Media Campaigns for Gender Equality

Mainstream media has also played a crucial role in awareness campaigns promoting gender equality. Initiatives such as UN Women's “HeForShe” campaign (2014) and India's “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao” (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) harnessed television, radio, and digital platforms to challenge patriarchal attitudes.¹² Advertising agencies increasingly use social marketing to depict empowered women—examples include the Ariel “Share the Load” campaign and the #LikeAGirl campaign by Always, both of which redefined domestic and gender norms.¹³

While these campaigns signal progress, critics argue that corporate-driven activism risks reducing gender equality to a marketing strategy. Real change requires sustained commitment beyond symbolic gestures, including inclusive newsroom policies and gender-sensitive reporting guidelines.

4.4 Political Communication and Gender

Political media coverage significantly shapes gender perceptions in leadership. Female politicians often face double scrutiny—judged both for their competence and for conforming to gendered expectations. In India, leaders like Indira Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, and Mamata Banerjee have been portrayed alternately as “strong mothers” or “iron ladies,” emphasizing personal traits over policy agendas.¹⁴ In Western media, similar trends were observed during the coverage of Hillary Clinton (2016) and Jacinda Ardern (2023).¹⁵

To counteract such biases, several media organizations have introduced gender-sensitive election coverage manuals and training programs for journalists. These interventions encourage balanced reporting, discourage sexist language, and promote equal visibility for female candidates.

4.5 Social Media and the Digital Shift

The rise of digital media and citizen journalism has provided women new platforms for expression and activism. Movements like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #BringBackOurGirls demonstrate how social media can bypass traditional gatekeepers and mobilize global awareness on gender issues.¹⁶ In India, digital platforms such as SheThePeople.TV and Feminism in India have emerged as powerful spaces for intersectional feminist discourse.¹⁷

However, online spaces also expose women to cyber-harassment, trolling, and misinformation campaigns. The Amnesty International Online Violence Report (2022) found that 23% of women journalists experience targeted abuse online.¹⁸ Therefore, while social media democratizes speech, it also necessitates stronger regulatory frameworks to safeguard digital rights and gender equity.

5. Policy Recommendations

1. Promote Gender Parity in Media Leadership

Achieving gender equality in media begins with representation at the top. When women occupy leadership and editorial positions, content naturally reflects more inclusive perspectives. Media organizations should adopt affirmative policies such as gender quotas, equitable promotion criteria, and transparent hiring systems to close the leadership gap. Mentorship and capacity-building programs are vital to empower women journalists and editors to ascend into decision-making roles. The inclusion of diverse voices not only enriches newsroom culture but also ensures that issues affecting women and marginalized groups receive balanced and fair coverage. Without equitable leadership, gender bias continues to permeate editorial judgment and storytelling.

2. Establish Gender-Sensitive Media Codes

Creating gender-sensitive newsroom policies is essential for transforming the media from a space of stereotype reproduction to one of equality. These codes should prohibit sexist language, objectification, and discriminatory depictions while promoting ethical and balanced journalism. Regular training and gender-sensitivity workshops for reporters, editors, and content producers should be institutionalized. Moreover, internal monitoring bodies must ensure that editorial guidelines align with principles of equality, diversity, and respect.

3. Support Independent Women-Led Media

Independent women-led outlets—such as *Khabar Lahariya* in India—play a transformative role in democratizing the media landscape. They provide alternative narratives that challenge patriarchal and class-based hierarchies. Governments, NGOs, and international donors must support such initiatives through grants, visibility campaigns, and capacity-building partnerships. Sustaining these voices helps decentralize media power and ensures diverse representation in public discourse.

4. Safeguard Digital Spaces

As digital platforms become the primary arena for communication, protecting women online is a human-rights imperative. Cyber-harassment, doxxing, and gendered hate speech discourage women from participating freely in online debates. Stronger legislation against online abuse, accountability mechanisms for tech companies, and effective reporting systems are essential to guarantee women's digital freedom and safety.

5. Encourage Inclusive and Responsible Advertising

Advertising shapes cultural values as powerfully as journalism or entertainment. Brands and creative agencies should commit to producing campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes, portray women in diverse professional and social roles, and promote equality. Inclusive advertising can normalize gender-neutral behavior, dismantle traditional biases, and influence consumer perceptions toward social progress. Public-private partnerships can further institutionalize gender ethics in media marketing.

6. Conclusion

Mainstream media wields immense potential to dismantle gender bias and promote equality, but realizing this potential requires both institutional reform and cultural transformation. From newsroom hierarchies to public representation, media systems remain deeply influenced by patriarchal power structures. While notable progress has been made through awareness campaigns, feminist journalism, and social media movements, persistent disparities in ownership, policy, and content production continue to limit progress. For media to serve as a true vehicle of social change, it must commit to ethical storytelling, inclusive leadership, and accountable governance. Governments, civil-society organizations, and media professionals must collaborate to create platforms where women's voices are not merely heard but centered in public discourse. Ultimately, a gender-just media environment is not only vital for women's empowerment—it is fundamental to the health of democracy itself.

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