

INDIAN WOMEN: ADVERTISEMENTS AND ECONOMICS

Statement of the Problem

Domesticated, docile and dreamy – the repetitive depiction of the ideal Indian woman on Indian television ads has painted a rigid script for a woman's destiny in the nation. Impediments to female participation in the labor market stem from India's patriarchal system and the gendered media – both of which are important windows into the cultural production of our era. They shape attitudes and build mindsets that penetrate to the Indian subconscious.¹ This is particularly true for the impoverished classes. As a result of this, women are dependent upon their husbands and become more vulnerable to rape and abuse. Furthermore, the Indian economy suffers because it's losing out on the talents of half its potential workforce. In this paper, it will be argued that *India can increase women's participation in the workforce by empowering them through positive media representations. This, in turn, will lead to gains for the whole country. This paper will focus specifically on the advertising industry in India.*²

Situating Women in India's Cultural Context

The population of India is currently estimated at 1.2 billion with women comprising 48.5% of this population. However only 27%³ of the women are included in India's workforce, ranking India as having one of the lowest female labor market participation rates amongst the developing countries. This has led to negative social outcomes for women in the form of discrimination and a never-ending poverty cycle.

In a third-world country like India where 30%⁴ of the people live below the poverty line and a large proportion lives just above it, India needs to utilize all its resources in order to propel growth for the economy as a whole. Christine Lagarde, in a study conducted by the IMF, speaks about how India is losing between 15-30% of its GDP due to gendered labor practices which are preventing women from reaching their economic growth potential.⁵ These include discriminatory labor practices such as unequal pay for the woman, no granting of maternity leave, sexual harassment in the workplace, making women work as sex laborers under contract agreements.

¹ Bose, Priya. 2009. Faces of Indian women in the media: The flawed façade of "India Shining". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

² Romero, Andrea. "Topic: Advertising industry in India." Wwww.statista.com. Accessed April 17, 2017. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2116/advertising-industry-in-india/>.

³ "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15) (modeled ILO estimate)." Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15) (modeled ILO estimate) | Data. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>.

⁴ Biswas, Soutik. "Who are the poor in India?" BBC News. March 23, 2012. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-17455646>.

⁵ Talley, Ian. "'Insidious Conspiracy' Against Women Costs Economies Up to 30% of GDP, Says IMF Chief." The Wall Street Journal. February 23, 2015. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2015/02/23/insidious-conspiracy-against-women-costs-economies-up-to-30-of-gdp-says-imf-chief/>.

Discrimination takes place through multiple forms in India. A poll conducted by Reuters Foundation last year showed that experts ranked India as the world's fourth most dangerous country for a woman, behind Afghanistan, Pakistan and Congo.⁶ A study by The Lancet revealed that 300,000 to 600,000 female fetuses are aborted every year in India. This is due to the strong preference for the male child and an even stronger bias against the female child.⁷ Biases stems from the age-old belief system that views girls as financial liabilities to their parents; at the time of their marriage, they are required to take hefty dowries with them which cost families their life-long savings.

Unfortunately, discrimination doesn't end with marriage. A 2012 UNICEF study further reaffirms the patriarchal mindset of the Indian males since more than half of them thought it was "justifiable to beat their wife up under certain circumstances".⁸ This shows that gender-discrimination is indeed clear and quantifiable in India which begins while she is still in the womb and continues through the rest of her life in the form of domestic violence, rape, deprivation of economic opportunities.

The Role of the Media

Media⁹ is defined as the technological agencies engaged in creation, selection, processing and distribution of messages among the people. Media is in conversation with the daily attitudes of the nation and contributes towards the emergence of a mass society and a mass culture. Movies, television soap operas and advertisements post-India's 2012 digitalization-phase have been viewed by majority of the population. A survey conducted by the Government of India in 2011 found that on an average 60% households across India owned a television.¹⁰ This medium allows for outreach and appeal to citizens in both rural and urban areas nationwide. With such a large viewership across the country, media plays an instrumental role in influencing the socio-cultural norms of society. Women, since the inception of Indian media have been shown in stereotypical roles as the ideal home maker - always inferior to men in social, political and economic aspects. Media in this increasingly digital context has the power to perpetuate or alleviate sexist norms. Unfortunately, the convention of ascribing gender-roles to women has perpetrated these sexist norms.

Recently a survey comprising 318 randomized English and Hindi ads in India found a common prevalence of gender stereotypes. Males were used to advertise the credibility of products outside the domestic sphere which depicted them in important decision making roles, while women

⁶ Udas, Sumnima. "Challenges of being a woman in India." CNN. January 12, 2013. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/12/world/asia/india-women-challenge/>.

⁷ Udas, Sumnima. "Challenges of being a woman in India." CNN. January 12, 2013. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/12/world/asia/india-women-challenge/>.

⁸ Sachdev, Chhavi. "Rape Is A Crime In India - But There Are Exceptions." NPR. April 13, 2016. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/04/13/473966857/rape-is-a-crime-in-india-with-one-exception>.

⁹ comprises of the Print media and Electronic media which are composed of the Radio, the Television, the Film, the Press, Publication and Advertising.

¹⁰ Orgi. "Houselisting and Housing Census Data Highlights - 2011." Census of India : Houselisting and Housing Census Data Highlights - 2011. Accessed April 17, 2017. http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/hlo/hlo_highlights.html.

were usually portrayed in domestic relationship roles.¹¹ Most brands choose not to celebrate the empowerment of the modern woman since it can be seen as a threat to the male-dominated status quo and adversely impact the sales of their products. Majority of the advertisement campaigns that use women's faces or body images in an attempt to capture the consumer's attention ultimately reinforce gender stereotypes and distort reality. The manner in which they choose to represent women and the roles they choose to confine them to sets patriarchal standard for society.

Whether it's ads pertaining to men's shaving cream, men's fragrances, men's shampoo, men's soap or it's ads pertaining to rice, oil, detergent, women's beauty products – women are inevitably reduced to either a domestic caretaker or a sexual object. Either way, they play an inactive role in the backseat and care for the well-being of these men who drive the economy forward with their business acumen and financial prudence. One strong example is the titillating *Wild Stone Deodorant* ad for men. It shows a woman entering the huge house to sniff the strong scent of the deodorant on the man. This instantly arouses her and makes her lust for him. The sought after man is a well-built masculine businessman who seduces her with his touch making her want him even more. The scenes continue to show her incited sexual desires stimulated by the power of the deodorant. This, alongside many other men's products show the female in sexually feeble positions at the disposal of the male.

Another ad reinforcing these stereotypes is for a fairness cream called *Fair&Lovely*. In India, there is an aspiration to have lighter skin since it is considered more beautiful amongst girls. The slightly dark-skinned woman in the ad is searching for a husband and the only way that societal norms make this possible for her is through the application of this cream. After Applying the cream, she is fairer and more confident. Her dad remarks at this transformation saying “Where were you hiding this whole time?” This statement itself reinforces the shallow standards of beauty that makes the woman an ideal wife. Many women continue to buy this cream daily in the hopes that this transition will help them find their dream husband.

Furthermore, advertisements regarding life insurances, health insurances, banking and other services are dependent on the male characters to confirm their product values. Thus, while male-centric products objectify women in sexual roles, other domestic products objectify women in submissive and docile roles.

Changing Media Perceptions

Media is an important reflection of our society that communicates to us daily through ads, t.v. shows and movies the status quo of women's identity. Thus, they need to gradually represent the modern Indian woman that is dodging the gender stereotype. They can play an active role in creating a progressive society where the woman's empowered avatar is equal to her male counterpart. There are currently only few ads that are trying to repaint national imagination and the new 21st century Indian woman.

Three decades ago, *Nirma* washing powder released an advertisement that depicted a woman doing laundry. In the ad, this ordinary job emphasized the responsibility of women as

¹¹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225498063_Gender_Role_Portrayals_in_Indian_Television_Ads

homemakers. Doing this job well, the three women in the ad wore the whitest, cleanest and most perfect of clothes and so did their family. This made everyone in the ad extremely happy – as though that was the highest satisfaction for the women. Her world was perfect with the completion of this feat. Through this, *Nirma* appealed to the psyche of women as being a quintessential aid to making them perfect homemakers.

Cut to 2015. A new generation of *Nirma* washing powder ads challenges the antiquated (though still commonly accepted) notion that an Indian woman's place is in the home. Three decades later, the most recent *Nirma* ad has four women pulling an ambulance out from a ditch. The men in this ad are shown as lazy and reluctant to get their clothes dirty in the soil. Women here have the advantage – they know the secret powers of *Nirma* and how it will clean their clothes perfectly. This time around, *Nirma* is trying to appeal to the psyche of the modern Indian woman by acknowledging that she is equally capable of performing physical tasks and walking shoulder to shoulder with men. These four women were shown as professionals on their way to work. *Nirma* acknowledged that these women were responsible citizens and home-makers. *Nirma* wasn't trying to make their world perfect, simply adding to her efficiency in being a homemaker with its reliability. In this way, ads have changed and can impact the thought processes of its audience as well as set the precedence for women to be equal to men.

Another such advertisement is the *Tanishq* (jewelry) advertisement. It shows a single mother, in her twilight years, getting remarried in full celebration of the Indian rituals. This is atypical because not only is remarriage a novel concept in India but the idea of a woman no longer being a pariah and making decisions in the absence of her husband is unpopular. This breaks away from our typical representation of women as dependents.¹²

In addition, the *Google* ad sets a strong example of women empowerment. In this ad, the granddaughter takes the initiative to reunite her grandfather with his long-lost childhood friend from Pakistan. She makes cross-border communication through her empowerment via technology. The message was implicit but an important one – the benefits of technology are accessible and useful across both genders. The men are shown typically working on the laptop while the women are clueless. However, enabling a woman to make such a bold move of reuniting her grandfather and bringing him immense joy speaks to the viewers about the equality that technology has brought to patriarchal societies like India. These ads have had a large impact on breaking away from the sexist advertising standards and moving on to much more progressive ads.

The ad campaigns of *Nirma*, *Tanishq* and *Google* are good example of simple products trying to revolutionize the way in which women are no longer the 80s docile homemakers, content with doing laundry and providing their family with clean clothing. The 21st century women are confident and fearless. This evolution is symbolic of the new forward-thinking psyche that the educated 21st century woman bears.

Future Initiatives

¹² "Indian woman in TV advertising." Indian women's transformation in TV advertising. April 18, 2017. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://www.outlookmoney.com/spend/others/indian-woman-in-tv-advertising-494>.

Why is there a need to repaint the picture? Experts say that India will be the fifth largest consumer in the world market by 2025 and women will be the most important decision makers in this segment. This means that brands have to change their ad campaigns to cater to the manner that appeals to the sensibilities, lifestyle and outlook of these modern women. Given that India is extremely diverse in its cultural preferences, norms and beliefs – for every modern woman with a successful woman with a high income there exists an equally qualified woman who spends her life either in the kitchen or in fear of domestic violence. All these women can be equal participants in the economy, they all have the same economic potential which can help India reach its optimal GDP. The media can be pivotal in pushing the traditional woman outside her boundaries towards the accessible job market.

In a world where our culture and norms are shaped by our interactions, the media plays an important role in setting the precedence. The Indian Film industry, Bollywood is one of the largest in the world – both in terms of the films produced as well as cinema goers.¹³ People have built temples for the actors and worshiped them as deities – allowing the actors to have a big impact on their psyche. Thus these actors that are also depicted in advertisements can provide inspirations for the society, a trend commonly observed in India with people talking and dressing like their on-screen models. These actors can also engage their viewers on social issues such as the question of gender equality. They should make active efforts to communicate with the viewers on these matters through posters, video messages and public speeches. Their facebook, twitter and Instagram accounts should regularly post about this issue to spread awareness. This is a powerful tool since people regularly check their newsfeed to remain up to date with the lifestyle and thoughts of these celebrities. The celebrities could hashtag women empowerment and gender equality quotes promoted by specific products which would not only generate large publicity for the product, but also the message they are trying to sell. Such collaborative efforts would bring gains to all participants.

With the ability to impact such a large proportion of the population, media should act as the watchdog of society – keeping in mind the social responsibility to mirror and guide the process of social change. However, the media has failed to represent the actual problems faced by women. There has been a persistent tendency on behalf of the media to play a dual role through two kinds of ads; it can both present oppressive cultural norms uncritically, thereby more deeply entrenching them in society, or challenge those norms and, in doing so, expand society's notions of what a woman can be and do. In the past decade, studies have shown that including women in the work force can increase the economic growth for the entire country. The OECD studies showed that by following a package of pro-growth and pro-women policies the overall growth rate can increase by 1.5-2.4%¹⁴ overtime. For this, media can play a crucial role in changing the way we perceive existing socio-cultural norms.

¹³ Singh, Pooja. "Positive Psychology in the Indian Film Industry: A Promising Area of Research." *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*. September 01, 2014. Accessed April 17, 2017. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-3513172251/positive-psychology-in-the-indian-film-industry-a>.

¹⁴ "India's female economic participation." *India's female economic participation | VOX, CEPR's Policy Portal*. Accessed April 17, 2017. <http://voxeu.org/article/india-s-female-economic-participation>.

The Ministry of information and Broadcasting, which is a branch of the Government of India, should be responsible for starting a campaign that promotes and encourages women to be a part of professional and legal institutions.

In 2011, The Ministry of Broadcasting in collaboration with the Ministry of Health passed a compulsory law that made every theatre broadcasting the use of tobacco in films include an anti-smoking ad that contained vivid images of health warnings against the use of tobacco. This was shown in both Hindi and in English to target both urban and rural audiences. These infomercials used an interesting technique - one that I would urge them to adopt to promote gender inequality. The infomercials portray the worst-case scenario of smoking: cancer, disfigurement, and death! Along those same lines, the proposed ad could portray the worst-case (and best-case) scenarios when it comes to women's participation in the workforce. The audiences – which would be the family of the woman and the woman herself should be clearly benefiting in the best case scenario and losing in the worst. What's vital is that the ad make the point that a woman entering the workforce will *not* be a negative for her family.

For the worst case scenario they could portray an educated housewife who is confined to the home, forcing her husband to be the sole breadwinner. As a result, the family lives in diminished circumstances struggling to make ends meet, and the children are not able to see their mother as a role model because her identity is confined as their cook and caretaker. Parallel to this perhaps we also see a company that is struggling financially; they need new ideas and a new point of view. In the second part of the ad, they could show how dramatically the whole family's situation has improved as a result of the mother entering the workforce. Not only are they now living in a much nicer house, it's clear that domestic harmony has been maintained as the children begin to seek important educational advice from their mother. They can now truly look up to and appreciate her talents which makes the marriage stronger, and the children are thriving. Meanwhile, at work, the woman has infused the formerly struggling company with fresh energy. Thanks to her great ideas and hard work, they have achieved success. When the woman wins, the family and economy also win; when she loses vice-versa.

The message that this ad would hopefully get across is that the economy and the domestic sphere are *both* impoverished by keeping women out of the workforce. Giving women greater access to jobs would benefit everyone.

Media can be used creatively to bring women at the vanguard of the world of politics and economics in order to expand and redefine their roles beyond the domestic sphere. The past decades have seen the impact of global communication networks transcend national boundaries and impact public policy, attitudes and behaviors. Women in India and other developing countries are unable to access this increasing job market due to gender-based programming. The media in this case can play a crucial role in the growth and mobilization of resources to promote a visible policy of a gender-neutral perspective. Women in Indian society are considered to be a 'burden' on the family because of their supposedly weak and inferior nature, a perception the media can work on changing by portraying women in diverse roles. The media should promote positive images of strong Indian women in high leadership positions like Barkha Dutt - a top Indian journalist, Karan Bedi – an influential retired police officer, Tessa Thomas – a pioneering scientist, Indra Nooyi – CEO of PepsiCo or Chitra Ramakrishna – head of the Indian stock exchange to

serve as role models for society. These examples show that don't need to manufacture new models, the cloth already exists. Media should shift to covering these women's perspectives.

Conclusion

Media needs to be honest in its approach to the women's problem – they need portray it as it is actually happening. They need to give women's daily struggles of rape, violence in home and the work place and illiteracy a platform for them to speak out against. Media actors – from journalists to movie stars can all play an active role in disseminating information to focus on problems that need to be heard. They can host collective debates and discussions on solutions to advocate their rights by bringing these issues to the forefront. Overall, these advertisements can have a powerful impact on the psyche of both men and women nationwide. **In this way, media can give women the freedom to contribute to gains for the economy as a whole since there is a current lack thereof.**