Research paper on gender and violence

Sociology, Violence

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex' has explained how society constitutes a 'woman' by curtailing her freedom from childhood. Women are assumed by the global society " as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally or cross-culturally" (Mohanty 1988). Some stereotypical attributes attached with the essence of women by the society are to a great degree influenced by the contemporary media representation. According to Gerbner, viewers who spend a considerable amount of time watching TV daily are bound to look at the world from the stereotypical perspective indoctrinated by the television content. The stereotyped representation of gender with men and women shown in their clichéd roles by the media leave a gross impact on both men and women in general. This impact creates deep-seated perceptions which culminate in domestic violence within relationships and marriage in which women assuming the passive roles represented by the media put up with the insults and physical torture that their aggressive partners unleash on them. This paper will discuss at length how media using the popular role models of the glamor world contribute to the tolerance and approval of a violent culture.

Gender Stereotyping in Media

Though women strive hard to be on equal footing with men in all respects and women all over the globe are making efforts to come out of their shell and gain ground, the popular mass media continues to exploit women by

objectifying their image as sexualized, powerless, weak and victimized. Media which plays a huge influential role in our daily lives show gender bias in their portrayal of men and women leaving perpetually stereotypical, unrealistic and limiting impressions. Firstly, media underrepresents women sending messages of men being the cultural standard and women inconsequential. Secondly, portrayal of gender entrenches both men and women in a stereotypical image and thirdly the relationship shared by men and women as demonstrated by the media emphasize traditional views of gender normalizing violence against women.

Underrepresentation of women in media is an age old problem with every of the television series or movies having male characters outnumbering female characters by 2 to 1 since 1950. This startling gap between the numbers of roles cast for men vs. women misleads people to believe that men are the cultural standard. Though in recent times some movies have racked up huge success by featuring women as leading characters such as Brave, the Hunger Games and Beasts of the Southern Wild, the overall percentage of women protagonists has dropped from 16 % in 2002 to 11% in 2012. Behind the scenes, the celluloid ceiling is all the more predominant with only 1% increase in the employment of women from 1998 to 2011. As per the statistics of 2012, women constituted only 18% of all the directors, producers, executive producers, cinematographers, writers and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films (Lauzen 2013).

Gender stereotyping by media is another disturbing factor creates a false impression about men and women. The portrayal of men as strong, aggressive, adventurous and powerful is in direct contrast with women

depicted as sexual objects who young, thin, fair-complexioned, beautiful, passive and dependent on men. Female characters are shown as giving primary importance to improving their appearances and housekeeping skills as a homemaker and mother of children. What seems surprising is the fact that men are never shown taking care of children or doing housework as if such mundane tasks would go against the phony image of masculinity created by the media. Even if men are shown doing housework, it will be in a manner of lampoon to show how incompetent men are at look after children or cooking in the kitchen. This sort of representation of men by the media perpetuates a negative stereotypical impression of men as not being involved and indifferent to household duties.

Portrayal of women as sexy, passive, vulnerable, thin and young exist in all sorts of media including the news casting in which women newscasters are expected to be physically attractive, young, less outspoken than men. Further, media has created dual images of women - good and bad. Good women are portrayed as beautiful, fair, subservient and dedicated towards managing household, family and taking care of others. These women are shown as weak victims, loyal wives, martyrs, angels and helpmates. These women are damsels in distress who are shown being rescued by the strong brawny men. The other type of image for women is the evil one who is home breaker, whore, bitch, witch, cold, aggressive and all that is good women are not supposed to be. In children's literature we frequently come across evil characters of wicked witches and despicable step mother like in Cinderella in contrast with their docile and beautiful counterparts like Sleeping Beauty and Snow Whites.

In a similar manner, media has also created the image of good and bad men. But as opposed to bad women being labeled as undesirable and mean, bad men are glamorized and portrayed as more desirable than good men. The advertisements in recent years have been frequently showing depiction of sexual violence and domination over women in a garb of glamor. Examples are galore of advertisements normalizing sexual violence against women to sell perfume, shoes and neckties. These ads in a subtle way encourage male violence giving an insinuation that the sexiest men are dominant and forceful. The controversial ad of Dolce and Gabbana is a classic example of glamorization of rape, showing a woman pinned down to the ground by a man with four others watching closely behind him as if waiting for their turn to rape her. Bad boys are frequently represented as sexy and most desirable regardless of the fact that they are the worst kind to be in relationship with. Some ads encourage men never to accept 'no' for an answer implying that women don't mean it when they say 'no'. The catch lines of a perfume ad " Apply generously to your neck so he can smell the scent as you shake your head ' no' " state this belief only (Bryant 2013). Advertisements of this nature encourage sexual violence leaving a wrong impression on the minds of general public.

Further media frequently presents distorted pictures of the relationship of men and women. Men are always shown as being independent and women dependent. Women are ever sacrificing for the sake of her home and love. For example, in the animation movie ' The Little Mermaid', the female character is shown sacrificing her mermaid identity to win acceptance of her human lover. Further men are shown as competent authorities rescuing

hapless confused women from their incompetence. For example, the ad of Mr. Clean shows a distressed housewife anguishing over greased bathroom fixtures and floors of her house when Mr. Clean pops up to relieve her of distress by showing her ways to keep her house clean. This brings out a disturbing trend seen among advertisers to use male voice 90% of the time to explain the value of the product being sold even if the product is aimed at women customers. It shows how men are considered authorities whom women depend on for guidance (Wood). Not only ads, popular television programs, movies and so much as children's literature all show men as authorities to rescue women from trouble. Also there women magazines and advertisements trying to sell products for women by emphasizing that a woman needs to look good to keep her man. Advertisements tell women how to dye hair to look younger, how to shed weight in order to look attractive to men and how to cook gourmet meals so that their husband feel eager to come back home. All these advertisements reinforce the idea that the central role a woman plays in her relationship with a man is to please him. Some advertisements even carry a veiled caution that a man might leave his woman if she fails to look good. Women are frequently depicted as decorative objects whose sole purpose is to allure and satisfy men sexually. Women are defined by their physical beauty and men's appreciation of that beauty. All the ads of colognes, makeup, hair products and clothes exude this kind of mentality by showing how women become irresistible to men by using these products. The music videos telecast on MTV are the glaring examples of sexual objectification of women who dressed scantily and provocatively try to capture the attention of men. Sexual violence is

condoned in many films, especially the R and X rated films which predominantly use themes of sexual exploitation of women by men. In fact these films depict the sexual scenes of violence and exploitation in such a manner that they look sexy. This kind of media portrayal makes a negative influence on men towards women, normalizing violence.

Colorism and Emphasis on Unnatural Thinness by media

Not only gender bias media also shows color bias giving more importance to light skinned women than dark skinned. Fashion magazines are covered with pictures of light skinned models. Even if a picture of any dark skinned model appears on the page, that model too is relatively fairer than others and this shows how media sets light skin as paradigm of beauty. There are very few models who have made to the top of fashion industry with Tyra Banks, Iman and Naomi Campbell to name a few. However, these three women are exceptions because though they broke the color barrier and established themselves successfully in the modeling industry, black models are yet to become a norm in the world of glamor which views light skin as beauty. Light skinned women get more offers for modeling while dark skinned women are frequently rejected because designers believe that dark women cannot sell their products. Designers look for black models only when the clothes are native and tribal. Not only modeling industry, all sorts of media including television shows, movies and news reading all emphasize women to be fair skinned and that is the reason why most of the leading heroines and leading female characters all are white. Such emphasis on light skin contributes to the society's obsession with color and therefore, many dark skinned women apply bleach or fairness creams to become fairer so that they appear

attractive to the men.

The unhealthy perceptions of thinness being beauty have led to widespread eating disorder like anorexia and bulimia among women around the world. Television shows and TV commercials show good looking skinny and beautiful women and never a size 10 woman is shown as protagonist in any commercial or TV shows, leading to the creation of an unreal perception that thinness is beauty. The fashion magazines like Teen Vogue and TV commercials by showing pretty ultra-thin women creates a surreal world promoting looks and materialism which makes female viewers aspire to look like their role models and male viewers start craving for their girlfriends and wives looking the same. Women and teenage girls in their desperation to look like their favorite onscreen role models go through cosmetic surgeries, Botox without considering the harmful long term side effects. Modern day fashion models walking on the ramp are all dangerously thin. The news of models having died of self-induced starvation is not uncommon. Beauty and sexual desirability are associated with thinness with some renowned apparel brands designing clothes and featuring anorexically thin models to promote their garments. Struggling with the perpetual pressure of losing weight and being thin, many people involved in the fashion and glamour industry turn anorexic. Take the case of Victoria Beckham who admitted of the huge pressure from the management to look thin. Not only her, Melanie C, another spice girl too admitted of battling with eating disorder. All the while when she was with 'Spice Girls', Melanie self-starved herself and exercised immoderately to appear thin. This culture of relating thinness to beauty has influenced many young girls and women to turn anorexic.

Contribution of Media to Violence Against Women

In the context of such stereotyped presentation of men in the role an aggressor and women a hapless creature dependent on men, it is important to ask if the messages projected by the media contribute to the increasing violence and abuse of women or not. There are ample evidence to show how exposure to sexual violence and portrayal of women as defenseless creatures are linked to the approval and tolerance of violence. The portrayal of sexual violence as normalized phenomenon in television programs, music videos, pornographic films and even ads sends the message to women that sexual violence is normative in a relationship with men and therefore, the more women observe this kind of false representation, the less likely they are to defend themselves from sexual violence perpetrated against them. Heavy exposure to sexual violence by the media tends to normalize its existence within relationships making violence and abuse natural in love and sex.

When the media portrays women as submissive and vulnerable, it sends a negative message about the overall image of a woman to both general men and women who misled by such ideas try to act those images in real life. Studies show that the portrayal of sexual violence to submissive women characters on TV shows creates negative impression among men towards women in general. On the other hand, portrayal of the same sexual violence towards strong female characters who are capable of fighting the violence and defending themselves create less negative influence on both men and women. The study conducted on 150 students shows that passive and powerless women characters that can be found in television series like The

Tudors in which women characters are manhandled and humiliated after or during sex scenes create a more sexist attitude in men towards women and women themselves experience more anxiety after viewing such scenes whereas strong female character like Buffy in Buffy the Vampire make a more positive impression on both male and female viewers. Prof Malcolm Parks observes that " while it is commonly assumed that viewing sexually violent TV involving women causes men to think negative of women, the results of this carefully designed study demonstrate that they do so only when are portrayed as weak or submissive" (Collins 2012).

How the false stereotypical representation of women as being beautiful, fair and powerless leads to violence on general women is apparent what Sofia and Juana, two Latino women experienced in their life. The projection of women in advertisements by the media as epitomes of beauty with fairness, thinness and perfection of features and body associated with physical appeal has developed certain standards for the measurement of beauty. One has to be light-skinned and thin to be beautiful. Dark complexioned women without perfect physical features are considered unbeautiful and they are made to feel worthless about their looks by their husbands and boyfriends who influenced by the improper representation of women by the media crave for their girlfriends and wives to look similar to the models shown on TV. Sofia was subjected to constant criticism on her appearance by the man she loved with all her heart. He called her " gorda, fea, vieja, mensa [fat, ugly, old, dumb]" (Flores-Ortiz 2001, p 4). She would be constantly reminded that Mexican women stood nowhere in comparison with white women in terms of beauty. Juana though light skinned in Latina standard was constantly bullied

for her appearance by her white classmates who called her 'beaner, greaser' with the teacher constantly referring her as 'the Mexican kid' (5).

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that media is a powerful tool to disseminate information and influence the minds of viewers. The indoctrination of stereotyped perceptions related to the roles of gender has formed certain standard for both men and women who in order to fit into the roles defined by the media need to act in accordance with certain norms. Media by objectifying women as sexualized, passive and weak creatures leave a negative impression on the minds of male viewers who begin to see women as objects who can be easily overpowered while women viewers start believing that passivity, thinness, fairness and physical beauty are feminine charm which makes them acceptable to the society. The condoning and normalization of violence by the media contributes to the creation of a culture in which masculinity is associated with aggressiveness and femininity with subservience and therefore, violence becomes normative in a relationship between men and women. Many women bear with their abusive partners passively taking the abuse to be a part of their intimate relationship with their partners. Taking into consideration the negative influence media leaves on general population by the stereotyped representation of gender, it is about time when media needs to get rid of the clichéd concepts and instead of taking the audience into a make believe surreal world show them the reality of things that a woman does not need to be thin and fair to look beautiful and a man does not need to be aggressive to be considered masculine.

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