ROLE OF MEDIA IN COVERING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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Abstract:

The present paper discusses the increase of violence against women in Assam and its presentation by the media. Media plays a significant role in the construction of image of women. The basic purpose of this study is to understand how media should be gender sensitized in the construction and coverage of women's issues. This study highlighted the insensitive attitude of media person in dealing sensitive issues like violence against women. How the news framed on molestation of a girl in Guwahati created a nationwide protest. Nevertheless, the regular coverage of violence against women is presented in conventional patterns that do not help much in perceiving the real situation.

Key Words:
Media, Women issues, violence against women, Gender sensitization.

Objective of the Study:
- To study the media coverage of violence against women.
- Role of media person in dealing with gender sensitive issues.

Women issues are usually not the stuff of which headlines are made. Nor are gender related concerns considered good copy. When such questions do draw the attention of media, they are often sensationalized, trivialized or otherwise distorted. In a nutshell, their coverage can be summed up as a series of hits and misses (Joseph and Sharma, 1991). Over the past two decades there has been a substantial increase in the coverage of women's issues related to crime in media. All crime against women does not receive equal weight age and attention in the news media. The news media representation of criminal victimization is reflective of the perils faced by women in society.

How safe are the women in our country? The question must be haunting every girl/women as the safety of women has become a matter of serious concern. Are they safe at home, schools and in public places? The nerve wrecking incident of crime against women that Assam had witnessed is the one of the worst of its kind. A 23 year old girl was molested in full public view in one of the busiest streets of Guwahati by more than twenty men for forty-five minutes, who stripped her, abused, dragged and groped her private parts. The perpetrators were enjoying every bit of it making videos out of the ‘shameful drama.’ She begged for help but the passerby watched the mortification of the girl, truly leaving behind their moral being. What added to the astonishment was that the entire episode was shot by a cameraperson of Assam’s News Live channel and the incident was telecast within half an hour. Soon, it went viral on the internet and also caught the notice of National televisions. The horrifying footage sparked a nationwide outrage and revulsion against the incident.

Fig. 1: Video Footage of Molestation of a Girl in Guwahati

Source: Internet.
Studies show that crime against women is increasing alarmingly in India and Assam is no exception. According to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB)'s latest report, Assam recorded the highest rate of crime against women. It topped the list with 54.2 percent in 2012 whereas it ranked third with 36.6 percent in 2011. The increase rate of crime against women shatters the moral fabric of the society and the dignity of women at large is very depressing. Reacting to the incident the Assam State Commission chairperson, Meera Barooah said, “The rates of crime against women have not raised abnormally in the recent past. Earlier, women used to keep mum about the crime and did not report them to police. However due to awareness campaigns women are now coming forward and filing cases in police stations.” However, Alka Lamba, member of the National Commission for Women (NCW) team said in the press release that “There are signs of cigarette burns are all over her body besides marks of severe injury ... animal like treatment was meted out to the hapless girl.” The editor of women’s magazine Minti Mahanta, remarked stating the act that “Dalit Ban” mentality is creeping the Indian society.

Fig. ii: Alka Lamba, Member of NCW, Addressing the Press

Courtesy: Eastern Chronicle.

Fig. iii: Protest by Various Organizations Against the Molestation Case

Source: Internet.

Today, media exerts a constant presence in our everyday life. It influences our thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and perception on various issues through the images presented by it. In fact, our perception on gender is also influenced by the media and also influences our behavior in varying degrees. There exists a co-relation between media image, gender based violence and attitudes towards women. Media exerts power to influence and dominate public opinion through their ideological representation of social reality, against the parameters of real world to which it is constantly compared (Harris 2004; Fulton 2005). It can play effective role in minimizing the society’s flight against crime and mitigate violence against women. Studies carried out on media representation shows that women are underrepresented and when they appear in news they are generally shown as victims or passive reactors of the events (Bailey, 1994 and Ross, 1994).

The awareness to fight prejudice against women led to the growth of contemporary women’s movement in India and the sporadic growth of women’s group helped to give women’s issues more prominence in media. It is generally accepted in media that events rather than processes makes news. The relationship between press and women’s movement in India was never smooth. Despite empowerment, education women still are vulnerable towards sexual harassment and violence. Even after getting the constitutional status of equality, incident mentioned above shatters the dignity of women in our society. UN general secretary Ban Ki-moon states “Violence against women must never be accepted, never excused, never tolerated. Every girl and women has the right to be respected, valued and protected.”

But the question is how sensible the media is while covering injustice against women? Sheik (1999) asserts, “Journalists have a special responsibility in shaping the image of women in media due to their role as conveyors of message that contribute to shape people’s opinions and feelings.” The news reportage is an insitutional method of making information reaches the audience or readers; it is gathered by media professionals. The news reflects the form of society, indeed referred as a “mirror of reality” (Tauchman, 1978). The news media conveys information to the audience or readers who have no empirical reference of the event, no idea, no concept and the idea of the event formed is constituted within the existing paradigm of media. The information is conveyed suddenly and dramatically by the media. The case under study triggers at the involvement of the media person in instigating the mob in the molestation of the girl. RTI activist produced footage against accusing the media person as the molestation kingship who instead of informing the police immediately was busy shooting the drama. The Press Council of India

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states that the “fundamental objective of journalism is to serve the people with news, views, comments and information on matters of public interest in a fair, accurate, unbiased and decent manner and language.”

Fig. iv: RTI Activist Akhil Gogoi During a Press Release

Courtesy: Eastern Chronicle.

Media needs to be sensitized while dealing gender issues. Its role should be to expose and create awareness against the social malice and execute its role judiciously and more effectively. In a way it should inculcate more awareness program to sensitize the society of violence against women. The coverage of violence episodes against women in the news media is often depicted as sensationalized and polarized which lacks serious in-depth analysis of the incident. Though the pattern of coverage has changed over the years yet the media shows destructive image of violence (be it rape or other violence) that itself becomes the second assault to the women due to its insensitive portrayal. Rather media should play a proactive role in inculcating gender sensitivity and awareness among members of the society. The Press Council should intervene in the publication of objectionable news related to women. The censor board also be sensitized in the portrayal of women in media and ensure that violence shown is not glorified rather justified so that it does not further injure the image of the women. Every media house should employ an ombudsperson to deal with complaints on the media coverage and render necessary redressal against the violation of media ethics. Since women constitute nearly half the population there protection and development must be of paramount importance of the Government and the nation.

References:


