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## UNIT 21 MEDIA AND GENDER DISPARITIES

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### Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- Describe the communicative power of the various types of media;
- Define their role in the construction of gender;
- Explain the various forms of media used to create and reinforce gender stereotypes and gender disparities;
- Create a forum for building a democratic space for the expression of ideas and opinions and
- Examine the potential to bring about transformation.

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### 21.1 INTRODUCTION

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We have learnt that gender is a construct and also that gender provides a site for contested identities. The communication channels provided by public media, in whatever form it exists give a means for expression to individuals and groups. Media is consumed in bulk by the larger public and is a source of indoctrination, especially as it has a captivating impact upon the minds of people, especially if the source from which it emanates is powerful. In the twentieth century with the coming of powerful and pervasive visual media like cinema and television, the role of media drew a lot of theoretical attention from social thinkers like Walter Benjamin (1998) and Bertold Brecht (see Benjamin 1998). These scholars saw the media as sites of manipulation and control and also having the potential for democratic interaction and critical thought. Later scholars like Adorno (1991) reflected upon the impact of capitalism on media and how its commodification could affect society. Adorno was more pessimistic than Benjamin and Brecht about the potential of media, especially its commodification to mass-produce culture for consumption by a gullible audience that not only laps it up but wants more of the same, like the soap operas on television that nevertheless get high viewer ratings. Although Habermas (1989) put the public sphere including the media at the centre of

the democratic project, he also recognised that there were in fact several public spheres operating at different levels. While at one level one could discern the role of the economy but at another level, ordinary people retained some of their power of speech and intervention. However, as we see the increasing power of capitalism in the twentieth century, the public sphere is becoming more and more commercialised and controlled by economic consideration than being a platform for the expression of ideas. However, there were parallel forces at work in art, literature and even mass media that strove to put forward the critical voice. In the twentieth century as pointed out by Stevenson (2014: 207) “What becomes significant at this juncture is a critical politics of voice, listening and democratic engagement”. In other words, it is critical in an assessment of the role of media to discern whose voices are being heard, who has the platform to put forward their voice and what impact these voices, even if heard, have on the democratic process whereby right for everyone need to be ensured. Left thinking scholars like Raymond Williams (1962) have been deeply critical of the stranglehold of commercial concerns on the media that enables it to stifle rational and progressive voices and let the regressive values prevail like those shown on commercial television across the world. One needs to only see the soap on Indian television that reinforces the stereotypes of the good and bad woman and where widows are still made to wear pristine white and debarred from remarrying even well into the twenty-first century.

Popular television even in the USA emphasizes women as only sex objects and often engages in inane commercial serials like *Two and a Half Men* and *Desperate Housewives* that denigrate women as unthinking beings existing only for the pleasure of men. The hard selling commercials where all happiness is tied to the owning of goods or having good skin and hair are equally detrimental to the image of people and especially of women who are made to feel that they are only objects that need to be put on display and not citizens or persons in their own right. Raymond Williams (ibid) also recognised that the media was technologically equipped for a centre to periphery transmission of information so that the majority of the audience was mere receivers of information with no agency or participation.

With the advent of the internet and the blogging sites and accessible virtual platforms for a conversation like Twitter, the world changed considerably but not necessarily for the better. The use of such media for the spread of regressive messages and terror has put a question mark on the technology itself. It seems that technology is only a means, and it is deep-seated values, structural inequalities, feelings of deprivation and marginalisation that need to be addressed before we can get a truly democratic world where all beings including men and women can operate as equals. Like all other aspects of society, the media too has its complex impact and has been a powerful source for social transformation and dissemination of critical values. In the next sections, we shall examine the various kinds of media and their impact on gender relations and constructs.

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## 21.2 PERFORMING ARTS

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In India, the performing arts were dominated by men till the middle of the twentieth century, when women began to make a mark as artists and not merely as dancing girls and temple prostitutes, for it was mostly in these institutions that women could express their talents. In the early twentieth century during the colonial period, all forms of public media like theatre and cinema were dominated by men. Respectable women in that period were mostly debarred from going out of their homes and even participating in

the rustic folk performances that used to be a part of the women's quarters or '*andarmahal*'. Under the impact of colonial rule and the acceptance of Victorian morality as a sign of civilisation, educated and upperclass men banished these art forms, some of them forming effective critiques of conventional gender norms of society, from their own households. Thus, the Bauls of Bengal, the folk theatres of Uttar Pradesh and the dance forms of Southern India were inaccessible to women of good birth and were stigmatised as something that only women of ill repute engaged in (Bannerjee 1989, Channa 2013, Karlekar 1991).

Some pioneering women like Rukmini Devi Arundale and Devika Rani, who came from aristocratic families, made effort to bring performing arts to the women of upper-class families and do establish them as respectable. Thus, Rukmini Devi established the Kalakshetra to bring *Bharatnatyam* out of the precincts of the temple and make it available to girls of upper castes and good families. Devika rani established herself as an actress and tried to raise acting to the level of art along with her husband the legendary filmmaker Himanshu Roy. Slowly women came out to write, perform and make themselves visible in the public sphere and participate in the Independence struggle alongside men. This emergence of women made them rise above the domestic 'goddess image' and break the stereotype of women being only homemakers. The Brahmo-Samaj in Bengal had allowed their women to get a good education and some families, like that of Rabindranath Tagore, encouraged their women to engage in writing and to stage plays, dance and sing, even if within the household quarters.

In Bengal and Kerala, the Left ideology brought out many women into the arena of critical and powerful theatre to spread political ideology; Utpal Dutt and his wife Shobha Sen, Shombhu Mitra and his wife Tripti Mitra, were some of the theatre's well-known personalities who challenged existing social stereotypes and gave women the right to come out and perform. Mrinalini Sarabhai, Sanjukta Panigarahi, Bala Saraswati, Indrani Rehman and Amala Shankar, were some of the pioneering women who led women to become performers and artists on their own.

The very presence of these women in the public arena was a criticism of the existing social norms that dictated that women of respectable families must be confined to the domestic sphere. These performative aspects of gender must however be understood in terms of Judith Butler's (1990) seminal contribution to understanding gender as a performance, where sexed bodies become gendered as they perform according to scripts produced by societies. At the collective level gender can be 'undone', if the individual agency can negotiate the existing structuring of social norms and constraints and this is not possible by a lone individual but must take the form of a collective movement. Munsu (2013) has described the role played by legendary dancer Isadora Duncan in freeing the female body from constraints in dancing, something that the Indian dancers never attempted to do. All dancing was structured and constrained within acceptable social norms by the classical women dancers of India. Rukmini Devi designed the present dress for *Bharatnatyam* making it both respectable and appropriate according to prevailing social norms of modesty and female honour (see Zaman 2013 for similar observations on Odissi dance).

All these performative avenues were elitist and confined to the women of the upper classes and mostly upper castes. It was much later and with the efforts of women like Pupul Jayakar and late prime-minister Indira Gandhi those folk artists and rural performers were allowed to come centre stage and bring their own version of critical performance to the public.

The more avant-garde and contemporary performers also use a more interactive form of theatre that brings the performers in close contact with the audience. Nukkad Natak and folk theatre have been used by social reformers and politically active theatre personalities like Safdar Hashmi and Habib Tanvir to bridge the gap between the elite and the ordinary people.

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### 21.3 PRINT MEDIA: BOOKS, JOURNALS AND NEWSPAPERS

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In the contemporary world, the role of print media has been considerable, and Anderson (1991) ascribes a key role to print media in constructing the 'nation' concept where territories became associated with particular languages. Dalmia (1999:128) describes the role played by the doyen of Hindi literature, Bharatendu Harishchandra, in bringing out the first journal for women. In the nineteenth century, all men of aristocratic families were educated by the Tawaiif (the courtesan) who tutored them in the arts and sense of aesthetics and etiquette. Harishchandra, being the scion of a wealthy merchant family was also a regular visitor to the courtesans of Benaras, where he met the Bengali widow, Mallika, a talented young woman who wrote poetry and novels. Under her influence, he published the first Hindi journal for women named *BalBodhini*, from 1874-1878.

Although the unfortunate Mallika never got public recognition, as in the case of the performing arts as discussed above, women from upper-class families were also at the forefront of publishing by and for women. In Uttarpradesh, Rameshwari Nehru began publishing the woman's journal *StreeDarpan* to address serious social issues. Similar journals began to be published in Mumbai (then Bombay) Calcutta and Madras, mostly the metropolitan cities where women had begun to get educated and where the impact of the freedom movement and the issues of women's participation were emerging. Vir Bharat Talwar's (1989) incisive essay on women's writings in Hindi during the colonial period sheds light on how gender constructs sanctioned by tradition continued to rule the mind of these relatively emancipated women. Although many of them were against the remarriage of widowers, the question of widow remarriage was not unanimously dealt with. There was hesitation in demanding widow remarriage as upper caste Hindu widows were uplifted to the status of goddesses Devi (see Channa 2013) and few women or men would have liked to see this image demolished.

There was more discussion on the emancipation of women through education and their participation in the public sphere and the issues of sexuality took backstage, primarily because of the goddess-like image that women were supposed to have. Sutapa Bhattachajee's (2011) edited volume, "Reflective Prose: Writings by Bengali women of the Nineteenth century" also foregrounds many of the attempts by women to educate themselves as well as to express their voices, overriding a highly patriarchal society.

Most of these early writings express only the sentiments and problems of upper caste/class women. Issues such as widow remarriage and economic emancipation were never on the agenda of lower caste/class women who worked in the fields and were regularly sexually exploited by upper caste men as a rule. Since education came very late to the lower sections of Indian society, especially to their women, we find expressions of women's writings from the Dalit and marginal sections, only much later.

These writings of Bama (2005) express a completely different set of gender models than those expressed by upper-caste women. Here are stories of exploitation by outside men, the struggle to feed the children, the strength of women who work hard to nurture their families and at the same time have to take care of their bodies against predators (see Channa 2013b).

The print media overall has been powerful in establishing as well as critiquing the existing social order and much of the social criticism of established gender stereotypes has come from the pens of both men and women. In this genre come, playwrights and poets, those whose works from the times of Akkadevi and Meerabai have put question marks on society and its norms.

But print media is limited in its scope that it can address only the educated and the literate sections of the population. In this sense, it has always been viewed as an elitist and limited media for social reform although the world knows the power of words as well.

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## 21.4 ELECTRONIC MEDIA: THE RADIO

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The radio brought about a revolution in the dissemination of knowledge and entertainment as it had universal accessibility and was available to most people across the globe. The power of the word as it was heard was considerable. It was not limited to the elite and even the poor rural household could hear programmes on the radio, even if at the house of the neighbour or the community centre. Because of its immense power of spreading messages and influencing people from all sections of society, the radio took on the character of the dissemination of information from the centre to the periphery as pointed out by Raymond Williams. The state control of radio transmission in India was complete through the agency of the All-India radio or Aakashvani, as it is known. The Indian state could use this media to its advantage and whatever message it wished to be reached to its masses was done through the medium of the radio. Important among them were the messages of family planning in the era of the seventies and also educative skits and plays about education, alcohol prohibition etc, were reached to the public. Another innovation introduced in the seventies was the introduction of a youth channel, YuvVani, that became popular as it provided a platform for young people to have a voice. It also helped the greater public participation of the young people. However, it assumed the character of an entertainment channel more than one that took any responsibility for social transformation. These were not also the times of gender consciousness and such was not reflected particularly in the programs. Those pertaining to women focused on household matters, children, cooking and domesticity. Only recently after the early nineties, was the radio opened up for private players who now have dedicated channels of their own. Again, with more commercialisation of the radio, it has become more commodified and as feared by Adorno, most people are accustomed to having the same kind of fare doled out to them, and the radio despite its immense reach to millions of people, never became a vehicle for sending our radical messages or attempting any social transformation in India. Happy families, heterosexual relations and the sanctity of marriage are regularly propagated on the radio, by both state-owned and private channels.

In the USA and western countries, the concept of community radio exists, but it is not popular in India, largely because of the illiteracy of its population.

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## 21.5 THE MOVING IMAGE: CINEMA AND TELEVISION

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Of all forms of public media, the moving images are the most powerful. The audience shut up for a few hours in the cinema hall, or even watching television at home from the living room couch are transported into another world of the vicarious living where they often believe that they are living the life of the characters they are seeing on screen. It is for this reason that powerful figures on the screen especially actors can become stars and play a key role in the collective public imagination. In India cinema played a key role in disseminating gender roles and stereotypes. Popular cinema has always boosted the goddess and especially the mother goddess image of the Indian psyche, and movies like *Mother India* and later the ones with Nirupa Roy in the role of superstar Amitabh Bachchan's mother reaffirmed the Indian male's engagement with the mother figure. Most importantly the Devi image of the ideal Indian woman was never deconstructed in most popular cinema. Most of them continue to bolster the upper caste image of women where she is regarded as pure and virginal and later as an ideal wife and as an ascetic widow. Most Indian cinema is focused upon urban or rural Hindu or Muslim populations, that are mainstream and rarely has a movie been made that depicts the life of the Dalit, marginal or untouchable of Indian society. Few parallel cinemas have attempted to throw light on the lives of the exploited women like *Mandi* and *Bazaar*, but such exploitation and its stark realities have never for part of commercial cinema. Thus, Adorno's contention that commercialisation robs the media of agency and makes it only a tool of economic gain with no attempts to play any political or social role seems quite real. Most viewers engage with cinema as consumers and not as citizens. Patriarchy is taken for granted in most of these cinemas, especially the big-budget ones where the producer cannot take any risks with his money.

Only a few filmmakers have dared to deal with topics such as women's sexuality with any degree of candour and one of the best examples of such a movie is *Fire* which deals with the sexual frustration of married women and the insensitivity of patriarchal husbands to the needs of their wives. This is also one of the few movies where lesbian relations have been shown with a degree of realism as well as sensitivity. But such cinema has never found favour with the general public as they are seen to violate the patriarchal norms of society.

At the same time the audience laps up the vulgar display of female bodies and blatant sexual displays in dance and songs, and there is hardly any public outcry over the 'dance items' that objectify women and make them out to be sex toys for the pleasure of men. Very few women-centric films are made and hardly any are bold enough to show the woman as an agent of her own fate. There are still few writers as liberated as Rabindranath Tagore whose heroine is able to reject two men in her life to walk out as free and liberated to live her life on her own terms, as in *Chokher Bali*. However, Tagore follows the idealism of his times to show that sexuality is bondage for women and that the widowed Binodini is able to make her own life meaningful only when she opts to live alone and as an ascetic.

For most filmmakers, the rejection of patriarchy means the rejection of men, and the woman can lead her own life only on her own. In this sense, there is the pessimism with respect to society that filmmakers find as a depiction of reality.

Television is an even more powerful tool than cinema, for it is something that has entered one's home and become a part of everyday life. The power of television has

been recognised globally as anything shown there has an instant viewership of millions of people. In India television was owned by the state like radio, for a long time and when it followed the idealism of the state. It was a time when propagation of ideas was more important than making money and the state focused on providing meaningful entertainment as well as educational programs for the public. Some of the popular programs like *Humlog* managed to provide critical insight into the lives of ordinary people and the gender constructs that were depicted were realistic if not revolutionary. The state-owned television was driven by the idealism of maintaining the moral fabric of society and also to disseminating traditional values to the public. It certainly strove to provide meaningful and 'clean' entertainment. Some of the programs like eminent theatre personality Habib Tanvir's story about the life of a community of Nats (village performers) was a poignant depiction of class and caste-based exploitation and also showed some realistic glimpses of gender relations among both lower and upper castes of Indian society. Thus, while television was not seen as an instrument of social transformation it was certainly seen as a media for reaffirming the good values of society and showing some of the ill effects of caste and class and the general problems of patriarchy and marginalisation.

With the commercialisation of television, however, all this changed. Instead of an instrument for disseminating social messages, television became a money-spinning instrument for the vested interests of the capitalist monetary economy. The socially meaningful and less glamorous programs were replaced by crass commodification of entertainment directed to keeping the maximum number of people glued to their sofas. Women's bodies were commodified and became saleable objects to the extent that even cricket and sports commentaries having nothing to do with women, were compelled to rope in a scantily dressed woman to entertain the public with her 'inexpert' comments.

Women as bodies were highly visible on television when it became commercialised, but they ceased to be represented as persons. Instead, caricatures of gender stereotypes began to flood the screen in what came to be known as the 'saas-bahu' serials that ruled the mindset of people till they outlived their appeal.

However, as pointed out by Habermas, the public is not one but exists at many levels. The critical issue of voice and representation can be raised as the public itself rejected some of the values and stereotypes as society changed in a couple of decades. Today the more educated and enlightened public is drawn to programs like Aamir Khan's programs on contemporary issues of Indian society, *Satyamev Jayate*. Some of the episodes focused on themes that directly addressed gender constructs and made appeals against female foeticide and child abuse.

Yet at the commercial level, few serials are addressing directly themes that directly address the gender concerns like female foeticide and the neglect and marginalisation of female children. There is no attempt to make positive use of the powerful television media to transform social values or to foreground the voices of the weak and the marginal. Such attempts like that of the noted transsexual Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh in his film *Chitrangada*, where he foregrounds the voice of homosexuality and transgender persons, is totally missing from the most popular media.

At the same time, the commercials that dominate the small screen are highly regressive as they make use of the most sexist and racist values such as fair skin, to promote their products. Even persons with high star value are seen endorsing products that promote fairness of skin as a highly desirable quality and a qualification for everything from

getting a job to winning a cycle race. How commodification of aesthetic works can be understood by the propagation of the opposite character in a predominantly light-skinned population, where skin creams for tanning are advertised with equal fervour. In other words, the same companies who are global companies making skin creams advertise fairness products in a dark-skinned population and tanning products in a fair-skinned population with similar incentives for changing one's skin colour. In all cases, the human body is delinked from the personhood and inner characters to be projected only as surface qualities of skin colour, hair and also weight. In most cases, the ideals projected are least attainable by that particular population and so the advantage is taken of the gap that persists between aspiration and reality to continue to sell products to attain these impossible dreams.

Women and even men are just reduced to their bodies and the real person is obscured and marginalised to something of no consequence. Thus, television is more regressive and less committed to creating any values because of its greater mass availability. The cinema makers are still guided by the need for creative expressions and values as they accept the limited appeal of their products, but for television, the TRP is the real thing. Debord (1999) identifies this as another process of alienation, the alienation that is suffered by the masses as the images on the screen appear to have a life of their own and give an illusion of reality that is not grounded in any real life. Thus, phantom-like appearances of men and women who are highly made up and have unrealistic homes and relationships, serve to alienate the viewers from their real-life situations. "In this respect, the spectacle is not the effect of technology but is the product of a centralised capitalist society that institutes an 'essentially one-way flow of information (Debord 1999:19)" (Stevenson 2014:210). Thus, people are also alienated from their real needs and driven towards these pseudo-needs that are simply the result of this spectacle that they are constantly witnessing. The escape into the unreal world also becomes addictive so people wish to return to it again and again.

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## 21.6 THE INTERNET AND OTHER FORMS OF GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

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There has perhaps been no technology that has affected the daily lives of people more than that of the internet that has in a sense truly served to create a global community by facilitating instant communication and also by providing a platform for the exchange of ideas that can be linked from the actual presence of persons. Now people can occupy a disembodied virtual space that is in a sense both democratic and constraining. It is democratic because it is accessible to almost everyone on the globe today. Even if one does not possess a computer one can always walk down to the nearest internet café to access it. One does not need a high level of education to be able to use the internet and one also does not need to be highly intelligent. It requires very basic literacy and skills, and even small children can use it. At the same time its very accessibility and the fact that a wide range of people, even of very young age and with limited intellectual capabilities can use it, makes it a dangerous tool for misuse.

One drawback of the internet is also that it does not provide any safety net for viewers' discretion and there is no censorship or any way of authenticating the information that it may provide. While on one hand, it has democratised education by making information available to everyone and making the institutionalisation of education almost redundant,



it does not guide the use of this information. In a school system, the teacher can provide face to face guidance, but any kind of information can be picked up from the internet without verification. Since the internet represents high technology a lot of people take the information from the internet to be highly authentic without feeling the need for verification. Thus, any kind of value or information can pass through the internet, and it is very often used to create sites that may be highly detrimental to women and to promote the healthy development of the tender psyche of children if they get exposed to the wrong kind of material. The internet is the medium for serious cyber-crimes, promotes pornography and also popular internet games are often the types that have a high content of violence and project very regressive pictures of women. Most children who are addicted to internet games are prone to internalising very negative images of women as sex objects and as legitimate receivers of violence.

On the positive side, the internet provides a truly democratic space where people who feel isolated and marginalised can come together and share ideas and experiences. Thus, women who have suffered sexual violence, LGTB communities, abused children and all kinds of people who may otherwise feel isolated in their own spatial situations, may come together in the virtual space.

Similarly, the virtual space is providing a space to initiate collective action at a global level and many movements good or bad are made possible through the internet and phone applications; thus, terrorist groups are putting forward their propaganda and enticing many young people including women into their folds. Thus, we find that technology can be used as a two-way sword for good and bad, but what modern technology is making possible is the communication of ideas on a very wide scale and very quickly.

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## 21.7 SUMMARY

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As we have seen in this lesson, media is a forum that provides a voice, can make representation possible for all sections of society and as the technology is developing, the use of media is passing from the elite and educated to the hands of the ordinary and marginal people as well. Women's position has been affected greatly through the use of media and from performative traditional art forms to the modern-day virtual space created by the internet; gender equations have been created, reproduced, regressed and improved by the use of media. In the end, media is only a tool, its use depends on the social and political equations of power. But the ultimate use of media in the present day is its democratisation and its use to give voice to the largest possible section of people. Thus, binary constructs of gender have been deconstructed from another point of view and many marginal voices including that of women from the most marginal groups have found expression. At the same time, there are many regressive and dangerous inputs too. So, media needs to be handled with discretion and ultimately the question remains as to which voices are foregrounded and which voices are heard and understood and finally acted upon.

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### **Suggested Readings**

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) What is the relationship between public media and the democratic process. Discuss in light of the centre to periphery model.
- 2) In what ways does public media affect the thinking of the masses? Critically discuss.
- 3) What has been the effect of commercialisation on the perpetuation of gender stereotypes?
- 4) How have advertisements contributed to the commodification of women's bodies?

- 5) How did women's publications in the nineteenth century reflect the social position of women?
- 6) How have Dalit women expressed themselves in recent times?
- 7) Discuss some of the recent programs on television that have had an impact (positive or negative) on the construction of gender in the public mind.
- 8) What are the limitations and possibilities of the internet and smartphones on the public participation of women and their movements?
- 9) What alternative models of gender are emerging in society and what is the role of public media like cinema in this? Discuss giving examples.



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