**Introduction**

I attended the Media Literacy Course organised by the Media Watch Organisation in Mauritius in May 2008. The course included submitting a project at the end of the course with case studies using the modules covered during the training programme. As I am involved in projects relating to women empowerment, I decided to see how media portrays men and women, using new skills learned in this course on reading newspaper and advertisements with a gender lens.

**Objectives**

The objectives were to:

- see whether men and women are treated equally as far as media coverage is concerned; and
- find out how men and women are portrayed on the internet.

**Targets**

The case study aims to be a learning tool for Media Watch Organisation and GEMSA as well as help educate other people about gender and media.

**Process**

The following outlines the general steps in developing the case study.

- choose topic;
Outputs and Outcomes

I examined two advertisements in the *African Business Magazine* published in May 2008. The first advert (Fig. 1) shows a man while the second one (Fig. 2) is that of a woman.

The first advert depicts the image of a respectable man wearing a nice shirt, tie and a watch. The image conveys a handsome man with self-confidence. Obviously, this man holds a post of responsibility in his workplace. Furthermore, the advert uses different parts of the man’s body to show a positive image of him. For instance, his heart indicates that he is a man of passion and that he uses his mouth to advise and his ears to listen to others. We also learn that he is someone who shoulders responsibilities.

The overall message that we get from this advert is that this person is a good communicator who knows how to listen to others and advise them. He is also someone on whom one can count since he is passionate and responsible. The man is portrayed as daring, enterprising, powerful, master of his destiny who is surfing in an area different from the traditional one. He is at sea this time, not in his real element, but still the situation is under control.

In the same magazine, we have the advert of the Global Fund that funds programmes to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The image that is projected is one of an image of frailty, precariousness of women’s situation. There is no smile on the woman’s face. Emphasis is on women’s traditional role – giving birth to children and shouldering the responsibility of the child is subtly underlined as “their” duty. We have the image of a woman with an expression of apprehensiveness with no sense of purpose and direction. The woman looks vulnerable with her looks lost in her thoughts. We have a symbolical representation of a woman in darkness whose only hope rests on the appearance from “above” of a shroud or veil.
of protection that may cast some light on her and save her from the sad plight. The woman is targeted as the one who is victim of the natural and social scourges, dependant and helpless in her lonely prayers. Her image is exploited to attract compassion, the eternal helpless and unfortunate creature who cannot rise up on her feet.

Searching the internet with online search engines for the terms “images of women” and “images of men” result in very different search returns.

**Women’s image of the internet**

Images of men and women on the internet vary significantly. Many internet images are of women either semi-nude or dressed in a provocative way.
Men’s images

On the other hand, men tend to be portrayed also from a selective, but very different point of view. Much emphasis is placed on western characters and less emphasis on general conditions of men. Men are portrayed fully dressed. They use the latest technologies such as mobile phone. They seem to be active and busy in intellectual activities. They give the image of strength and power. Men are usually portrayed as “doing things” while women are shown as passive.

A snap survey on how people perceive men and women in the media

For the purpose of this project, I also interviewed 20 men and women on how they see the portrayal of men and women in the media. 67% of the respondents feel that media does not treat men and women equally. They noted that when media reports women, they are projected as dependent beings that are in need of support. The image that is projected is one of vulnerability and despair, or as homemakers, whereas media presents men as sportsmen and high achievers.
Challenges and way forward

All these images ignore women as intellectual beings as well as leaders, politicians, decision-makers, business women and academics. This is a serious matter for women. These images affect their self-confidence and place a restriction on their aspirations. There is a need to challenge stereotypes against women. These stereotypes have enormous power over us especially the way we read them. The framing of a picture affects how we see it.

It is imperative to deconstruct the stereotype images of men and women in the media and reconstruct more universal images, which comprehend women of all cultures and civilisations and in different social roles. There should be an effort on the part of the media agents to come out of their prejudices and their entrenched points of view. They must be able to present women under new lights. It is important to educate the public on how to read the newspaper with a gender lens. They must be sensitised on the need to express their concern when media exploits women’s images.

Replication

This process can be replicated in other countries. However, it is important first to sensitise opinion leaders, students in secondary schools, men and women at grassroots levels on the absence of equality in the portrayal of men and women in the media. It is only then that the public can start to read newspapers and advertisements with gender lenses.

Conclusion

To conclude, I leave you with the words of Aase Smedler, ex-United Nations Resident Coordinator in Mauritius who said in 2004, “There is a need for media to promote a respectful and nuanced image of women’s roles in society and celebrate achievements of successful women to promote role models.”

References


www.google.com

Writers Bio

Allia Syed Hossen-Gooljar is a homemaker, social worker and part-time lecturer at the University of Mauritius. Since 1982, she has been very active in voluntary social work in Mauritius. She is a founding member of the Cercle des Dames Mourides (CDM) – a non-profit and non-governmental organisation which promotes women’s and children empowerment. The CDM has a Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC/UN) and is an elected member of the Permanent General Assembly of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (ECOSOCC/AU). Hossen-Gooljar is also an Executive Member of the Mauritius Council of Social Service (MACOSS) – an umbrella organisation which is the focal point of NGOs in Mauritius, chairs the committee on Human Rights within MACOSS, and is the charperson of the Mauritian Branch of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council of the African Union (MAU/ECOSOCC/AU).