

**FEMINISM AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION: A  
SEARCH FOR EQUITY, FAIRNESS AND EMPOWERMENT**

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## ABSTRACT

Mediarepresentation and feminism have long been linked in conversations about empowerment, justice and equity. The goal of feminism is to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the gender through a variety of sociopolitical movements and ideas. The aim of the study is to situate the interconnectedness of feminism and media representation and the search for equity, fairness and empowerment. This study adopted cultivation media theory; with the use of qualitative methodology while secondary data was utilized. Other academics' studies as well as press articles served as sources. The conclusion of this study is that the exploration of feminism and media representation underscores an ongoing quest for equity, fairness, and empowerment. Across various forms of media, from film and television to advertising and social media, the portrayal of women has evolved over time, yet challenges persist in achieving true gender parity. The study recommends that promoting equity and fairness within feminism involves advocating for gender equality while recognizing and addressing intersecting forms of discrimination and privilege. There is need to embrace an intersectional approach to feminism that acknowledges the interconnected nature of social identities such as race, class, sexuality, disability, and gender.

**Word count: 197**

**Key words:** *Feminism, Media representation, Equity, Fairness, Empowerment.*

## INTRODUCTION

Media representation and feminism have long been linked in conversations about empowerment, justice, and equity (Singh, 2018). Society norms, attitudes, and views are greatly influenced by media, including social media, television, movies, and advertising. As a result, how women are portrayed in the media has a big influence on how society perceives and handles women. In the past, stereotypical and constrained portrayals of women in the media have reinforced negative gender stereotypes and inequality. Women have often been portrayed as objects of want, as men's property, or as fitting only into specific categories as romantic interests or caregivers (Gregory, 2015). These representations reinforce negative stereotypes, which not only reflect the injustices that already exist but also help to keep them that way.

It is worth noting that for a considerable amount of time, feminist movements have worked to contest and modify these portrayals, promoting more varied, authentic, and strong portrayals of women in the media. This includes advocating for representations that are more nuanced and comprehensive, reflecting the range of experiences, identities, and viewpoints held by women. To improve the way women are depicted in the media, efforts must frequently focus on both boosting the number of women in the medium and making sure that their representations defy stereotypes and conventional gender norms. Developing more varied and interesting female characters that possess agency, depth, and complexity outside of their relationships with males is one way to achieve this.

To achieve gender equality across the world, for example, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. CEDAW, through its work, was expected to give women more opportunities to work in different professions and proper portrayal. Again, in 1995, the 189-member States of the UN came together to develop the Beijing Platform for Action. The Beijing treaty identified 12 important areas where immediate action was required to achieve more equality and opportunities for women and girls across the world. The platform outlined a path for governments, international organizations, businesses, civil societies, and—above all—the media to safeguard women's rights and guarantee gender parity in all national, regional, and global policies and initiatives. But are women in the media adequately represented in comparison to their male counterparts?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **FEMINISM**

Feminism seeks to define and establish gender equality in terms of politics, economy, personal life, and society through a range of sociopolitical movements and ideologies. In line with feminism, women are treated unfairly in societies that value the viewpoint of males more than their own. It aims to confront and eliminate the oppressive and unequal structures that have historically disadvantaged and marginalised women as well as other disenfranchised genders. Although feminism embraces a wide range of viewpoints, theories, and methods, its fundamental tenet is that every person, regardless of gender, ought to enjoy the same freedoms, opportunities, and rights (Chambers, 2024). This entails promoting gender parity in fields like healthcare, work, education, reproductive rights, and media and political representation.

Despite the fact that feminism has advanced gender equality significantly, there are still issues that need to be addressed, such as institutional sexism, gender-based violence, reproductive injustice, pay inequality, and underrepresentation in positions of leadership and power. These problems are still being addressed by modern feminist movements, who are working to create a society that is just and equal for people of all genders.

All things considered, feminism continues to be a crucial force for social change, opposing long-standing power structures, standing up for the rights and dignity of every person, and imagining a future in which gender equality is not only feasible but also achievable (Bhatt, 2024).

### **EQUITY AND FAIRNESS**

In order to guarantee that everyone has access to the same opportunities, resources, and treatment, equity refers to the trait of being unbiased and fair, while treating everyone equally, with decency, and respect regardless of their gender, identity, or other characteristics is what it means to be fair. It is crucial to guarantee that women are fairly and equally represented in the media in order to advance gender equality, dispel misconceptions, and encourage inclusivity.

Gender equity and fairness also entails putting into action initiatives, policies, and practices that address gender inequality and advance equality across a range of fields. Waves of feminism and equality have arisen throughout history, with some of the earliest initiatives taking place in the early 1700s. According to Martha Rampton, a professor and director at Pacific University, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 saw 300 men and women unite in support of women's equality,

marking the official start of the wave (Rampton, 2015). Yet, some forms of equality and feminism had been successful in getting laws passed; the 19th Amendment gave all American women the right to vote when it was passed on August 18, 1920.

The Nigerian government also formulated the National Policy on Women in 2000 and the National Gender Policy in 2006. The significant objective of the policy is to establish gender equality in political participation and representation, as well as to develop mechanisms for women's political empowerment. The policy also described how gender disparity interferes with the achievement of local, national, regional, and global policy outcomes by incorporating gender policy statements into all national goals and sectoral objectives.

Priscillia, for example, is mentioned multiple times in the New Testament of the Bible, frequently with her husband, Aquila. They are shown as teaching and mentoring others in the early Christian community, working together in ministry. In their common goal, this partnership emphasises that man and woman should be treated equally and with respect. This biblical example demonstrates times when, in spite of the patriarchal traditions of the day, a woman was cherished, respected and treated decently and equally, as her male counterpart. This acts as a reminder of how crucial equity, justice, and women's dignity are in modern settings.

### **Representations of the female gender in the media**

There are many different aspects of women's representation in the media, including the volume and caliber of these portrayals. Across a wide range of media, including film, television, news, and advertising, women are frequently underrepresented. Women are often portrayed in characters that perpetuate traditional gender norms, such as the damsel in distress, the seductive femme fatale, or the loving mother(Onyenankeya et al., 2019). Rather than being portrayed as leaders or professionals, they are frequently portrayed as submissive or supportive roles, which reinforces gender bias.

Women are frequently objectified and sexualised, with more emphasis placed on their sexuality and outward beauty than on their personal qualities and aptitudes. The media regularly promotes unachievable beauty standards, which exacerbates body image problems and maintains limited notions of what constitutes pretty(Xie, 2024). In the media sector, women are also underrepresented in important creative and decision-making positions including CEOs, directors, producers, and writers. The kind of content that is created is impacted by this lack of representation.

In order to ensure that women are portrayed as diverse, nuanced, and independent individuals, it is important to both increase the number of women in various roles and enhance the quality of those depictions. This can be accomplished by media organisations, content producers, and consumers working together to question preexisting biases and advance gender equity.

### **How have women been misrepresented in modern media?**

Nigerian women are now more celebrated and acknowledged by businesses and organisations than they were a few years ago since they are "known" to be devoted mothers and caretakers who can improve society without sacrificing their personal or family life (Ayo-Obiremi et al., 2022).

Women's underrepresentation in a limited range of social functions is connected to Gaye Tuchman's concept of symbolic annihilation developed in 1978. In addition, there are many different social and professional roles that men can be found in. In Tuchman's view:

1. Women's achievements are overlooked, frequently trivialised, or simply not recorded, and are given less weight than other elements, such as their appearances.
2. Women are primarily depicted by stereotyped gender roles, such as doing housework and work, being spouses and mothers, and so on.
3. Women are frequently seen in detergent advertisements as mothers washing clothes alongside their young daughters. Men and young boys, on the other hand, are shown in advertisements playing outdoors or working together. For instance, women with small daughters doing laundry together are frequently shown in detergent advertisements. Conversely, advertisements show men and young boys working or playing together outside.

Seluman et al. (2024) came to the conclusion in their study that the media representations of femininity were heavily centred around stereotypical gender roles and goals, such as being devoted to one's family, infatuated, married, and self-conscious of looks. They pointed out that varied female representation is provided by adolescent magazines with a young female readership. The media perpetuates the "beauty myth" by idealising thinness and conventional appearance, particularly in female characters. It emphasises the pressure that women endure to comply to unattainable beauty standards, as well as the role that modern technologies play in producing and sustaining them.

**What is Body Positivity?** The notion of "Body Positivity" posits that an unapologetic woman can be incredibly beautiful when she embraces and cherishes her physical "imperfections." Women

are frequently portrayed in unrealistic ideals in the media, with photographs airbrushed and manipulated to achieve unreachable beauty standards. This practice not only fosters women's body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, but it also reinforces negative assumptions about beauty and worth. Body positivity advocates for accepting and promoting bodies of different forms, sizes, and appearances, while rejecting the media's restrictive standards.

Body positivity in the media encourages authenticity and embraces the variety of human bodies. It promotes the representation of diverse body shapes, skin tones, ages, abilities, and genders, challenging the concept that just one narrow ideal of beauty is desirable or valuable. The way that males are portrayed as superior and women as submissive in the media perpetuates a dominant (hegemonic) worldview, which makes gender representation important. The term "symbolic annihilation" describes how women are underrepresented in a certain range of social positions while men are represented in a wider variety of social and occupational activities. Feminism aims to address issues such as unequal access to resources, opportunities, and power, as well as damaging gender stereotypes and practices that perpetuate inequality and restrict women's and marginalised genders' rights and freedoms.

## **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND MEDIA**

The media and women's empowerment are closely related since media sources have a significant influence on public opinion, social norms, and conceptions of gender roles and women's rights. Media has a significant impact on how women in media are viewed and treated in society, as well as reflecting and shaping views on women's empowerment. Strong role models can be provided by positive media portrayals of strong, independent women, encouraging young girls and women to go after their dreams, confront prejudices, and stand up for what is right (Ravikumar, 2020). It can help shift cultural conceptions of women's worth and skills when media channels feature women in leadership roles, pursuing non-traditional jobs, fighting for social justice, or claiming agency in their personal lives.

Furthermore, women's views, experiences, and accomplishments are highlighted in large part through media portrayal. Media outlets have the power to elevate the voices of women and facilitate wider discussions on women's rights and gender equality by giving them a forum to express their views and experiences.

On the other hand, negative preconceptions can also be reinforced by the media, undermining women's empowerment. A culture of sexism and misogyny is fostered by negative representations of women, such as objectification, sexualisation, or victimisation, which perpetuate gender

inequity. Media-pushed unrealistic beauty standards can limit women's feelings of agency and empowerment, in addition to having a negative impact on women's self-esteem and body image (Nisar, 2016). In addition, women are frequently portrayed inaccurately or underrepresented in media, especially when they hold positions of authority and power. The marginalisation of women's perspectives and experiences can be exacerbated by a lack of nuanced and varied representations of women, which impedes the advancement of gender equality.

It is crucial to push for more inclusive, authentic, and diverse depictions of women in the media in order to advance women's empowerment through that medium. This entails having more women in positions of production and decision-making in the media, making sure that representations of women in the media defy stereotypes and highlight their diversity and agency, and holding the media responsible for advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment. Furthermore, in order for viewers to identify and question damaging media representations and storylines, they must possess media literacy and critical thinking abilities (Tamuli & Mishra, 2022). People may help create a media landscape that empowers and uplifts women by critically and actively engaging with the media, which will ultimately generate more gender equality and social justice.

## **CULTIVATION MEDIA THEORY**

Cultivation theory, also known as the cultivation hypothesis, posits that, like all things, too much exposure can be harmful. Gerbner proposed that extended exposure to four or more hours of television per day could lead to a shift in perspective. He stated that viewers who spend lengthy periods of time watching television would come to feel that what they see is an accurate reflection of reality. People who watch more TV are more likely to believe that women used in brand advertisements, for example, should be more physically fit in terms of body size, complexion, height, and so on.

According to Potter (2014), the two major assumptions of Cultivation theory are: (a) Television gives a distorted perspective of reality, and (b) continuous exposure to these messages can lead to social attitudes aligned with content shown. Watching television that perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes increases the likelihood that viewers will internalise them and use them in their own lives. The media frequently reinforces old gender norms and stereotypes, depicting women as passive, emotional, and submissive, while males are portrayed as powerful, forceful, and in control. Extended exposure to media content that emphasizes thinness as the ideal body type might cause viewers to perceive thinness as the norm and idealise it as the standard of beauty.



Cultivation theory is highly relevant to the study because it offers a useful framework for comprehending how cultural perceptions of gender roles and conventions, particularly those pertaining to feminism, justice, fairness, and empowerment, can be influenced by media depictions. Feminist analyses are able to recognise and challenge harmful stereotypes, prejudices, and injustices that are perpetuated by media representations by acknowledging the power of the media to shape attitudes.

Cultivation theory supports campaigns to promote more varied, truthful, and powerful representations of women in the media, so advancing the goal of gender equity, justice, and empowerment. Therefore, cultivation theory can be helpful in discussing these problems in relation to media portrayal and feminism.

## **STEPS TO BE TAKEN TO ENSURE EQUITY, FAIRNESS AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA**

Ensuring the fairness, equity and empowerment of women in the media necessitates thoughtful efforts by a range of stakeholders, including people, advocacy groups, legislators, and media organisations. The following actions can be made to encourage media representation of gender equity and empowerment:

- **Promote Gender Diversity in Leadership:** Gender parity in leadership roles, such as CEO positions, editorial boards, and decision-making bodies, should be a goal for media organisations. Proactive hiring, mentoring programs, and female leadership development activities can help achieve this.
- **Combat Gender Bias and Stereotypes:** Media companies should aggressively combat prejudice and stereotypes in their editorial choices, working cultures, and content. Urge journalists and content producers to avoid reinforcing negative preconceptions and to show women in varied, non-stereotypical roles.
- **Provide Training and Professional Development:** To support women's professional growth, leadership abilities, and possibilities for career promotion, a variety of organisations should provide training courses, workshops, and skill-building activities.
- **Advocate for Policy Change:** Promote legislation that prohibits discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence, as well as initiatives to support gender parity in media ownership and governance, in order to achieve gender equality and empowerment for women in organisations. They serve as the watchdogs that we depend on to expose

mistakes and wrongdoings by the people we choose to put in positions of authority. Once more, the media has the power to reinforce and mould people's attitudes and behaviours inside society. The media accomplishes this by illustrating the consequences of actions that defy society norms. In this way, the media has the power to alter a country's destiny.

- **Collaborate with Stakeholders and Monitor Progress:** Collaboration between government agencies, industry groups, civil society organizations, and other relevant parties is necessary to advance women's empowerment and gender equality in the media. Every business should regularly track and assess its progress toward the goals of empowerment and gender fairness. To monitor trends and pinpoint areas that require improvement, gather information on workplace diversity, gender representation, pay equity, and other pertinent indicators.

Media organisations and stakeholders can help create a more just, equal, and powerful environment for women in the media by implementing these actions, which will ultimately increase gender diversity, inclusivity, and representation. The media serve as the watchdogs that we depend on to expose mistakes and wrongdoings by the people we choose to put in positions of authority who treat women unequally. Once more, the media has the power to reinforce and mould people's attitudes and behaviours inside society. The media accomplishes this by illustrating the consequences of actions that defy society norms (Sanusi&Adelabu, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of feminism and media representation underscores an ongoing quest for equity, fairness, and empowerment across various forms of media, from film and television to advertising and social media, the portrayal of women has evolved over time, yet challenges persist in achieving true gender parity.

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions and reinforcing stereotypes, making it imperative for feminist perspectives to be accurately and inclusively depicted. The pursuit for equity, fairness, and empowerment in media representation is not only essential for advancing feminist goals but also for fostering a more just and inclusive society. It requires ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and activism across various sectors to dismantle entrenched power structures and create space for marginalised voices to thrive.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that:

1. Advocates and activists can promote equity and fairness within feminism by recognising and addressing intersecting forms of discrimination and privilege. There is need to embrace an intersectional approach to feminism that acknowledges the interconnected nature of social identities such as race, class, sexuality, disability, and gender.
2. Also, government should ensure that feminist movements and organizations are inclusive and representative of diverse voices, experiences, and perspectives.
3. Government should ensure that there is a body in place that would critically examine systems of oppression that perpetuate inequalities and marginalise certain groups within feminist movements.

By implementing these recommendations, feminists can work towards building a more inclusive, equitable, and fair society where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive regardless of their gender or intersecting identities.

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