Print Media Language: Contributing to the Stereotypical Portrayal of Pakistani Women

ZahidaMansoor Assistant Professor Department of Humanities and Social Sciences National University of Computers and Emerging Sciences 852 Faisal Town, B Block Lahore. Pakistan

Abstract

The study examines the perceptions formed through the media texts, in the English print media in Pakistan. Highlighting attitudes towards women, developed in part due to the language content in the newspapers, the relationship between portrayal of women by the print media and existence of gender bias in the language content, in an effort to understand and explain the need to create a foundation for change in the print media language content. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaire, content analysis of selected English language daily Newspapers and face-to-face journalistic interviews. Articles related to women issues published in leading English newspapers were also analyzed. The statistical tools of the Independent Samples Test and Paired Samples Test were used to determine differences in perceptions of males and female readers formed by the language content of the English Newspapers. The data revealed that the issues related to women in Pakistani society remain generally ignored or downplayed. The overwhelming emphasis on Pakistan's patriarchal identity continues to overshadow women. The study is an attempt to trigger a debate and to encourage further research on studies aimed at the critique and revision of gender stereotypes and gender prejudices in the print media.

Introduction

This study investigates the attitudes towards Pakistani women, and their depiction in the print media, in order to create awareness, intended to stimulate discussion in this area as well as, to formalize suggestions and recommendations to bring about structural changes in the way the language is used by the print media to portray women.

Pakistani society is experiencing mixed trends as far as the status of women is concerned. Aspects that could create and promote awareness for gender empowerment among citizens are ignored, portraying an image where men are more equal than women, mirroring the centuries old patriarchal structure in the sub-continent. Representation of women still generates minimal coverage in the mainstream media, reflecting a bias in the news coverage.Pakistani print media frequently indulges in a particular kind of gender-insensitive behavior whereby the remarks and statements continue to victimize women and reinforce already existing negative images.

In examining gender patterns in the print media, we need to analyze the participation and position of women, and the impact of those positions, on women's development and their portrayal in the media, in ways that accurately represent the complexities of their lives. Although, women issues in Pakistan have increasingly begun to make news, largely due to the growth of contemporary women's movements, as well as the women's groups becoming more active. As subjects or sources of news, women are no longer missing from the media; the newspapers are replete with news and images of stars, models, celebrities, controversial or glamorous politicians and socialites. Yet, women rarely appear in positions of powernor are gender related issues considered news worthy.

In Pakistan the lack of formalized structure allows the media to selectively appropriate and represent gender issues contextually in conjunction with the dominant socio-political norms. Thus gender representation in the media is open to the influence of competing tendencies, be it the market, cultural capital, electoral politics or women's empowerment articulations. In the absence of defined and institutionalized policies, procedures and mechanisms guided by gender just concerns and the messages conveyed, fall in the realm of individual attribution of meaning.

Status of Women in Pakistan

"Gender is one of the organizing principles of Pakistani society"; large sections of the population have at least some views about the roles of men and women in society. Negative social biases, and cultural practices; the concept of honor linked with women's sexuality; restrictions on women's mobility; and the internalization of patriarchy by women themselves, becomes, the basis for gender discrimination and disparities in all spheres of life. (ADB)¹

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees two fundamental rights to every citizen: equality of all and no discrimination on the basis of gender². Yet, in clear violation of women's rights the core message continues to be that women are either victims or prone to abuse. Stereotyped and inaccurate images of women are pervasive, placed within a continuum of social violence that shadows women from home to harassment in the public places. In addition, news stories reinforcing women's traditional roles are equally limiting³.

Print Media and the Pakistani Women

In constructing women's images; in orienting collective representations and attitudes toward women the role of the Media is crucial. However, according to Najam, (2007) the role of media in Pakistan has also been lethargic in terms of improving the status of women. The print media reaches an impressive audience in Pakistan, though given the relatively low literacy rate among women; it is a medium whose production and consumption is dominated by men (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2006).

Monitoring the print media's portrayal of women and finding strategies to challenge gender stereotyping in the media have been long standing concerns of gender and media activists throughout the world. The public sphere, as portrayed by the print media, still remains the domain of men, helping perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes that underestimate women. The lack of gender sensitivity is evidenced in the print media's failure to eliminate gender-based stereotyping.

Although women account for slightly less than half of Pakistan's population, there is considerable disparity between the status of men and women in Pakistan. The traditionally male-dominated, media world has men defining media policies, priorities and agenda including how women are portrayed and presented. Despite growing numbers of women in business, of women parliamentarians and journalists; there has been no significant change in the portrayal of women by the print media. Still worse, exclusion of women from, and by media systems leads to apathetic attitudes towards women.⁴ News media coverage not only reflects the gender bias in positions of influence and power in societies, it also portrays the views and images of men to a much greater extent than women.

Gender and Media

One of the key issues highlighted in theBeijing Platform for Action (BPFA, 1995), was the continual stereotypical portrayal of women in the media with a significant increase in images that perpetuate violence against women, and also women's lack of access to expression and decision-making in and through the media. The traditional polarization of gender roles and identities has been reinforced by still dominant gender stereotypes, also reflected in the media.

Despite twenty-five years of gender equality politics, laws and regulations, women in the Nordic countries are still under-represented in the news media.(Zoonen 1994). Even though the journalistic educational institutions admit equal numbers of women and men, but the dropout rate for women in the newsrooms after a few years remains high. The women and media situations in both Asia and Latin America regions conform to this trend. Women have limited access and participation in decision-making in the media industries and bodies that oversee formulation and implementation of media policies. Rana (2005) stressed that the media is influenced by the trend of the male leadership paradigm and even though women have made significant strides in many areas, the media has been slow to recognize these gains.

¹ Country Briefing Paper—Women In PakistanAsian Development Bank July 2000

² Constitution of Pakistan... Articles 25, 27, 35, 37

³ US Library of Congress report "Pakistan - A Country Study"

⁴ Portrayal of Women in MediaUnited Nations Development Programme1996

While Chopra (2007)identified the relationship between the media and women as a "two way process - the accessibility or the lack of media to women, and the acceptance by the media of the role played by the women". Enforced poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and male domination keep a vast majority of women away from the print media even as readers. In Pakistan, the relatively low literacy rate among women indicates that it is a medium whose production and consumption is dominated by men (PSLM Survey, 2008-09)⁵. In Peshawar, for example, women represent a mere two percent of local journalists, and a survey of 26,303 daily newspaper pages uncovered only 65 specifically addressed to women readers.⁶ (Uks, 2003)

At a UNESCO-sponsored seminar, it was noted that many of the problems women encountered in access to the means of communication and portrayal of women in the media in Africa, and indeed in most parts of the world, are basically the same (Steyn & De Beer, 2004). Women account for 22% of television reporters, 20% of radio reporters and 48% of print reporters.Interviewees in a study by the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) found that women cover "soft" news better than men.

Research findings from both the Global Media Monitoring Project 2005 and studies completed by Gender Links provide a more detailed picture of women's participation and representation in the media in South Africa. The Southern African Gender and Media Baseline Study (GMBS), showed that in South Africa, 30% of women were reporters in television, 44% were reporters in radio and 29% worked as reporters in print media (Made, Lowe Morna & Kwaramba, 2003).

Women are more likely to be identified as victims than men, as well as their family status. Most often women are shown in inferior roles, for example, "male is the doctor and female is the nurse" (Siraj, 2008). Studies of mass media content also argue that media representations of gender are 'misrepresentations' through both what they say and what they don't say – i.e. what they omit, indicating the pervasiveness of stereotypical portrayals of both gender and cultural stereotypes. While exploring expressions and linguistic techniques in the treatment of women and men in Australian newspapers, Stirling (1987) concluded that these served either to exclude women or to define them narrowly and negatively.

Media, Politics and Gender Issues

If the media articulate the political, then the ways, in which women and men are portrayed, their access to media and visibility as political agents in the media certainly matters. The shortage of women in decision-making roles, for instance, is connected to the deficiencies in female politicians' representation in media content (Gallagher 2001). Several U.S. studies have shown that perceptions of female and male candidates are influenced by gender differences in media coverage, resulting in significant disadvantages for women candidates (Kahn 1994).

Gender bias disseminated by the media is significant because they can have electoral consequences; at a time when politics is thoroughly mediatized, voters respond to candidates largely in accordance with information received. As Corner (2003) suggests, the media have become the public sphere in which the identity of the politician as a "person of qualities" is constructed and the strength of these media-specific criteria are often such as to disqualify certain candidates either from becoming public political figures at all or at least from competing for high office. According to Clarke and Evans (1983), "reporters bring tricks of the trade, proven ways for gathering news, to their political assignments" and this may affect the stories they choose to cover and the manner in which they cover them, leading to a potential gender bias. Female politicians worldwide face the problem that their media coverage is more negative than that of their male counterparts, focusing more on appearances than on issues, reinforcing stereotypes, as well as constructing a difference between 'feminine soft' news and 'masculine hard' news (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003; Sreberny & Van Zoonen, 2000).

Gender and Suitable Issues

Explaining differences in the quality of coverage between women and men, Norris (1997) noted that the public believes men are better at handling "tough" issues such as the economy and foreign policy while it sees women as better at domestic issues requiring compassion, such as education and welfare. Similar views are reflected in media coverage, where reporters portray men as strong and women as sensitive.

⁵Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM)Survey 2008-09

⁶A National Study On Monitoring And Sensitization Of The Print Media On The Portrayal Of Women (*Changing Images* 2003)

Several studies examining newspaper coverage of female candidates running for election in the U.S. senate and gubernatorial races in 1980s and 1990s show that female candidates receive less issue-related coverage. Female candidates are less likely than men to have their positions on public policy covered by the news media (Kahn 1994; Kahn 1996).

Fountaine (2002) notes that a number of overseas writers provide evidence that gendered news coverage shows the media is shaped by men, serves male interests and confines women to the private realms of 'home and hearth'. However, she remains optimistic that there is still potential for more women in journalism to transform the news from the inside through women reporters 'taking female sources seriously and aiming to include a female perspective where relevant'.

While discussing the disproportionate representation of women in newspapers Swan(1992), also asserts that women are far less often classed as 'newsmakers' than men. The results of one study show the difference between the number of men and women quoted to be more than five times for men than women. (Caldas-Coulthard 1994:307), Overall, the news media demonstrates a glaring deficit globally, when it comes to reflecting women, women's viewpoints and women's perspectives on the world (GMMP 2005)⁷.

Research Methodology

In Pakistan comprehensive research on gender issues and media is rare, although there are some exceptions.⁸Systematic content analysis research projects are generally lacking - only a handful were identified while preparing for this study. It is this lack of systematic and comprehensive research on gender representation in the print media in Pakistan that has acted as the basis for this research. In the hope that it will not only fill the existing gap; at least partly,⁹ butwill also be of use for subsequent research focusing on the relationships, causes and potential consequences of modes of gender representation in the print media content.

The aim of the study was tomake a critical evaluation of genderrepresentations in the language content of the English Language Newspapers, the existence of gender bias, the impact of reporting as well as the extent of coverage accorded to women, in the print media. The study also investigates the stereotype roles, means and strategies of discrimination of women carried out by the print media in Pakistan.

Research design

The study using a multi-method approach combined qualitative and quantitative research design, in order to highlight stereotypical trends in Pakistani print media. Data were collected from a self-administered questionnaire; face-to-face interviews with journalists, and content analysis of a sample of daily English language newspapers. The newspapers chosen for analysis represented a representative spectrum of Pakistani readership.

Research population and sample

One Hundred graduate students and professionals participated in the study examining participants' awareness and perceptions of gender stereotypes in the English Language daily newspapers. The research population (53 females, 47 males) consisted of graduates (N=50) and young professionals (N=50)mean age = 22.50 years. Population selection criteria was based on the assumption that the graduating students and young professional read the newspaper more frequently than the average college students as they are in the process of looking for jobs as soon as they graduate. They are aware of the difference between gender and sex, as well as the bias associated with them, and they are in a position to instigate change in their work or study environments.

⁷ The Global Media Monitoring Project 2005

⁸ an NGO Uks from Islamabad is coordinating (since 2004) a regional project "EQWIVA", - regional action for Equal visibility whose aim is to establish professional gender sensitized media environment

⁹ For Pakistan I found these reports at **Uks** research, resource and publication centre: *Report on the impact of newspaper language on women's status and development*. September 1998; "*Challenging Trends*", (Sept 2003-Sept 2004); '*Changing Images*' a national study on monitoring and sensitization of the print media on the portrayal of women. 2002

Research Instruments and data collection

Adapted from the Newspaper survey Questionnaire developed by Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2005) the questionnaire was used in order to determine the awareness of the current situation vis-à-vis the language content in the print media and gender bias, and identify differences in the perception of men and women.

Interviews from journalists were conducted to solicit opinions concerning issues, whichcreate and influence gender bias in the language content of the English language Newspapers, and assess current trends on women-related issues. The type of data collected is nominal in that it consists of semi-structured responses to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were used because specific work place factors had not been identified for this population. In the current study interview protocols were treated as data, as the subjects were cognitively mature to articulate their ideas.

For the content analysis, reports on women-related issues published in major national/local English dailies, their language content, their format, source and placement was collected and studied in order to identify possible patterns noted from the quantitative data. For the sake of consistency and to avoid any likely biases of these newspapers, only the columns released on the national circuit were analyzed.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analyses of the open-ended interview questions. Systematic stratified sampling was used for the content analysis; thirty issues (every second issue published) from each paper were studied to locate the articles related to the women issues were included in the research, during the period of two months (from 15.03.2008-15.05.2008), which made a total of 145 issues. Within each sampled issue six (6) sections were selected: (1) Current Affairs /Politics (2) Economy and Business (3) Crime news /Accidents (4) Entertainment (5) 'Sport' and (6) Front page. A total of six (6) pages from each selected issue were monitored. The unit of analysis was an individual text/article within selected pages. All articles on selected pages that included female subjects (as subjects or objects of a story) were coded. Throughout the coding process coders and newspapers were continuously rotated in order to avoid any systematic errors.

Research Results

While examining the gender differences in the perception of gender stereotypes and the awareness of its presence in the media, the respondents were asked to answer a series of questions, regarding their perceptions of these differences. Their perceptions on presence of texts portraying patriarchal ideology in the print media, as well as the media trivializing gender inequality were also studied. The results showed no significant difference in the respondents' awareness that the coverage of women issues was underreported in the print media, and their awareness that women issues, when reported by the print media are often trivialized. (**Table 1**)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	/	Mean Difference		of the l Lower	dence Interval Difference Upper
	Equal variances assumed	1.539	.218	222	98	.824	10317	.46380	-1.02357	.81723
	Equal variances not assumed			221	93.430	.825	10317	.46663	-1.02976	.82342

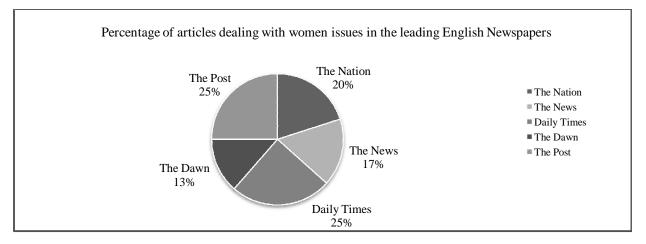
Independent Samples Test of Trivialization of Women Issues in reporting

The respondents' understanding regarding the presence of gender stereotyping of women issues in the print media's coverage were similar among men and women showing no significant difference. The awareness that reported texts on women issues portray patriarchal ideology also indicated that there was no significant difference in the perceptions of men and women. The results show no significant difference between the male and female respondents' awareness of the presence of gender stereotypes in the English print media.

Gender differences were noted in respondents' level of awareness toward the presence of media gender stereotypes, with women being more sensitive than men to the stereotypic descriptions of women by the media. Data analysis indicated that there is no significant difference in the perceptions of men and women thatthe print media tends to discriminate more against women than men, and plays a significant role in reinforcing certain negative stereotypes of women.

Content Analysis

Emphasis was on Coverage of Women's Issues as a Percentage of Total and Percentage of articles dealing with women. In total 9,194 reported news items (7619 texts from inside pages, plus 1475 articles from the front pages) were coded.



Articles on Women in Leading English Newspapers

Figure1

In articles reporting on women issues, the highest number of articles were reported by 'The Post' (25%), followed by the 'Daily Times' reporting (24%). Representation of women issues in the "Nation" was (20%), while 'The News' reported 17% articles dealing with women. The least number (14%) of articles related to women were reported by 'The Dawn'. In the representation of women on the pages of daily newspapers, the largest percentage remained in articles on entertainment (53%), followed by articles on the sports pages (16%) and politics (12%), while the number of women reported in articles related to crime was (8%). The smallest percentage of women representation was in Economy related articles (5%), followed by (6%) in articles on the main page.

The results suggest that in most texts men remain customarily identified, perceived and valued more as independent individuals, while women only make the news through their associations with family life. This tendency to situate women in the context of family could lead to stereotyping and suggestion that women's real status is determined by her family relations, rather than in terms of professional criteria, maintain the traditional symbolic polarization of gender roles that attributes the productive tasks to men and the reproductive to women.

The study showed that (in)sensitiveness in newspapers is mostly gained by the usage of the masculine form, a generic 'he' for a specific woman's title or profession. The most frequent mistakes included: "director"," president", " minister", "lawyer", "artist", " judge" many positions related to the performing arts and " consultant" etc. Other forms of gender discrimination include language asymmetry; for example, when saying "Mrs. 'X' and her husband, doctor 'X'.

The use of gender (in)sensitive language in texts is an important indicator of the positions, roles and relations assigned to different gender groups by newspapers and their audiences. Apart from factors connected to the nature and structure of the press influence of the coverage of women's issues, some of the divergence in coverage can be attributed to differences in approach and character of the five selected newspapers. For example, *The Dawn* rarely trivialized or sensationalized any of the reported news. But by the same token, it did not often go beyond the straightforward, clinical reporting of these events either. *The News* also downplayed news about events, like rape, with potentially sensationalized overtones. The same restrained tone is characteristic of *The Nation*.

In contrast, papers like *TheDaily Times* and *The Post* pride themselves on being forthright and display news about violent events more explicitly than the other three. The difference in the photographs and the words used in the headlines, even for routine crimes stories or reports about a road accident or acts of terrorism also displays the difference in their approach.

In the portrayal of the women, the Pakistani press often uses terms such as Doctor vs. woman doctor, Lawyer vs. women lawyer, MPA vs. female MPA, which has the function of polarizing caricatures of real people in order to justify the maintenance of unequal role relations between them. The story of a "female MPA" appeared under the headlines: "Female MPA's strive to be heard in the men's club' (Daily Times 13.4.2008), highlighting the 'helplessness' faced by women MPA's. *The News* printed a report on the "The Begums of Islamabad and Lahore have been nominated the party for the reserved seats." where begum is used as a derogatory reference to women who have neither the qualification nor the experience to join the politics. Another reference questions not only the eligibility but also the character of the nominated candidate "The most interesting inclusion in the list is PalwashaBehram, who emerged on the political scene hardly two years back but soon got popular among the party leaders and is set to reach parliament". (*The News on* 22.2.2008)

The newspapers tend to over lexicalize *women* relative to *men*, indicating a cultural bias towards the status of women. Women are more likely to be modified by items describing physical appearance. However, few articles or reports on women question the fundamentally patriarchal structure of the Pakistani society or the family, which is the source of some of the problems faced by women. Issues considered less 'newsy' continue to be ignored, and largely conform to what can be termed as the 'male view' of news. Rape cases are underreported, as they are not considered news worthy. Emphasis is mainly on aspects that would presumably interest those considered the primary readers of the print media i.e. males.

In addition, women dominated in reports on the entertainment pages, which is also symbolic of their position in society and are thus marginalized within the news. This is achieved through the systematic positioning of women into "marginal" stories, pushing them from the front pages to the end pages and "soft issues". As far as their positioning within the newspaper is concerned, women rarely have the central role in an article, and are seldom its main source of information. The gender biases that inform our thinking and behavior at the multiple levels of our lives are apparent in how women are represented in the print media.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six journalists from selected Newspapers. However, questions were left open-ended and were not slanted in an attempt to reinforce the notion of male dominance. Among the interviewees, three were males and three were females, with exposure ranging from writers with minimal amount of professional experience through internships and as writers and editors at college newspapers, to veteran writers who have worked for several newspapers.

From reoccurring patterns in the responses, the emerging themes included an awareness of the presence of bias in the language content of the newspapers, attitudinal and societal factors responsible for creating stereotypes as well as the possibility of a gender tolerant print media language. These themes also reinforced the notion that female and male writers work in a masculine world and this dominance remains prevalent throughout their journalistic careers.

Two of the male journalists felt that since conventions are deeply ingrained into the general culture, gender insensitive usage is unconscious. "If the user is not intentionally discriminating against a particular sex then there is nothing to be perturbed about." while the majority expressed concern that gender was a misunderstood word and in most cases taken to represent the 'fairer sex'.

On the more positive side, the responses called for a language in tune with the changing times. Regarding specific role descriptions, all females are aware that the media portrays women as dependent on men, and the family as the best place for women. On the other hand, the males agree that the media often describes men as belonging to the workplace, protecting women, and capable of making important decisions. Preferential treatment in assignments and promotions, traditional gender hierarchies, as well as lack of support mechanisms for working women pose as obstacles, that hinder women from joining the media or assuming decision-making positions. Late working hours still carry a social stigma for women. The threats that journalists working in certain sensitive areas face – also dampen the enthusiasm of women to take up more challenging journalistic reporting and investigations.

There was virtually no evidence in this study to support any notion that there are attitudinal differences toward women, between female and male writers. However, like most qualitative research, results from this study should not be generalized, particularly since a major limitation of this study was that only six journalists were interviewed, at the daily newspapers.

Conclusion

When we consider the coverage of women and issues related to women, the response to the question on the role of the print media in promoting a more positive and realistic portrayal of women, depends in part on the perceived purpose of the print media. If we think, that the print media exists to provide entertainment, then we must agree that the newspapers are doing a fine job. However this is too simple a position, since a bias against women is clearly present. Much of the so called 'entertainment' is provided with women as the focus. There can be no claim to 'neutral' or 'objective' coverage if women are referred to and represented in negative terms- i.e. in terms where negative and unrealistic images of women outnumber positive, real representations by the print media.Representations of women in a sexual context rather than women as mothers, professionals, valued community members etc. presents women only as passive objects and not as agents of thoughtful and independent action.

Some of the print media's negative portrayal and representation of women have become quite subtle in the last few years due to the increased voices and protests from active women's groups. However, the focus remains on a predominately domesticated and submissive image, and it is still rare that women are presented as contributors to the development process or as professionals in their own field, by the media. The lack of a truly gender-sensitive appreciation and analysis of women's issues by both men and women in media, has allowed exploitative and derogatory images of women in media to continue unabated. Deeply rooted in traditional social practices and interpretations, these images of women help the print media in constructing these representations.

Even though the perception of traditional roles for men and women is changing, male dominance in our society is still maintained through a set of conservative values, essentially patriarchal in nature, whose bearers are not necessarily just men, but women as well. The unquestioning acceptance of such norms by the majority of journalists also affects the way the coverage of women issues is handled.

The study is an effort to identify the ways our print media represents women. It argues that the language used in the headlines and the news content, representing women, further legitimizes the already present negative perceptions and images of women. The findings indicate that the readers of the daily English language newspapers are aware that a bias is present in the language content of the events that are reported. The findings also confirm that women are at best marginalized and at worst exploited by much of the print media coverage. The sex stereotype, in the print portrayal of men and women in their appointed roles is also very much evident. Masculine personality attributes are emphasized and women are portrayed as submissive and suffering types, engrossed in common family affections and duties. In the coverage of news, women portrayal is substantially less than men. Such portrayals illustrate the ongoing tendency of newspapers to paint women in the broadest of gender strokes. Any attempt to challenge the accepted stereotype image of a woman, whose success and achievement depend upon her working with men, does not find favor with conventional audience.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm, that there are two dimensions to the issue of women and media. The first is a stereotypical re-enforcement of the traditional role of women in the media and the second is the dearth of sensitized professionals in this field. It is clear that the stereotypes which exist in the print media's portrayal of women do not generally originate there. They arise from beliefs widespread in society as whole. A change in the thinking pattern is required to change the existing notion of power.

Gender needs to be defined, interpreted and applied in a purely Pakistani context. And, the first step toward transforming a biased society may be to transform the language itself into a de(gendered) language. The print media performs a special role of creating opinions; therefore, it must create transformation of women's images by using a more positive and gender sensitive language, as it embodies and disseminates cultural assumptions and relations of power. Moreover, self-restraint is a must, particularly on women's issues. The need is not simply to empower one gender over the other but create a balance between the two, which would not only require a coherent plan of action, but firm commitment of the print media along with governmental support, in order to move towards developing a gender tolerant code of ethics.

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