

Exploring Media Exposure and Perception of Married Urban Women about their Empowerment in Lahore, Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Media is considered an effective tool for the socialization of women. It has become an integral part of society and also responsible in bringing outer world into home through its variety of contents. This research was an effort to explore that how women belong to diverse socio-economic background understand and interpret their empowerment. The objective of the study was to know the perception of married urban women about their rights. For data collection purpose qualitative research methodology was used. Seven focus groups were conducted to know the perception of women about their rights. Each group has seven participants (women) aged 18-49 years. Emergent themes derived from the qualitative data that were aligned with few of previous studies that women get information from media about their rights but practically there is no visible change in their actions after media exposure. The results of the study indicated the urgency of eradicating discrimination against women through proper legislation. This research concluded that women empowerment is greatly affected by mindset of society. Though media exposure has its role in bringing awareness among women to their empowerment yet media needs to play a very crucial role in changing mindset of men towards women.

KEYWORDS

Media Exposure, Women Empowerment, Perception, Societal values

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INTRODUCTION

Media has captured the attention of audience by providing a variety of contents through informal channels such as television, cinema, newspaper, and social media all play an important role in bringing about greater awareness (Dasgupta, 2019). Similarly, another study claimed that media is an important agent of change for women specially to gain their rights that leads to empower them in order to avoid exploitation. Media Exposure educates the audience, give them understanding of the issues (Kishor & Gupta, 2004). In this regard women are considered heavy viewers of media, consuming a lot of time in the mediated reality coming through mass media. Likewise, Zeeshan et. Al. (2021) said that women who watched television almost every day had higher capacity to take decisions, compared to those who did not watch television at all. Women Empowerment (WE) is crucial to the development of society, women having awareness of their rights, contributing something significant to the family and society (Arestoff & Djemai, 2016). Akhter and Naheed (2014) described that women belong to under developing countries are mostly not empowered in various fields. Essentially, education through media can play a positive role to promote awareness to empower women in society.

Similarly, the concept of the empowerment of women has got huge consideration among policymakers, social scientists and specially in the low income countries. This is evidently said that the growth of empirical studies improving the status of women in communities such as reduced fertility and child mortality (Jesmin & Amin, 2017), and better focus on the well-being of the marginalized segment of society particularly women (Doss, 2013; Duflo, 2012; Smith et al., 2003). The empowerment of women has been well-defined as "Acquiring the ability to make choices" (Kabeer, 1999) or "The ability to access the components of development such as health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation" (Duflo, 2012). Similarly, a variety of factors have been applied to check the extent of empowerment within women including resources, freedom of mobility, education, decision making, cultural norms. (Afridi, 2010; Doss, 2013; Rahman & Rao, 2004).

Economic empowerment is another very important factor for the sustainable growth and improved status of women in Pakistan. Despite the significant development in the access of education, participation in community matters, and health facilities, many women in the society still face hurdles accessing economic liberty (Dasgupta, 2019). Societal values reinforce the prevailing stereotypes, reduce women's movement outside the home and also affects the agency of them. In the same way Khan and Hussain (2008) believed that laws are made but the actual situation of implementation needs to be improved. Laws which are meant to improve women's security, safety and give them trust to think for themselves. Consequently, the unsupportive environment around women discourage them to pursue their choices and be part of vast range of economic opportunities especially that prospectus which are modern, nontraditional income-generating choices (Afridi, 2010).

Broadly speaking, empowerment is a process by which the powerless gain greater control of lives to achieve their goals (Kishor & Gupta, 2004) but at the same time cultural norms restricts women to get their rights (Khan & Hussain, 2008). WE is essential to measure in this era where media usage by women has considerably increased. Moreover, Media helps women to think about the powerful roles, treat themselves as more valuable to society, and create ideal characters that urge them to imitate empowered roles in their real lives (Leahey & Crowther, 2008). Hence in this study, some gaps have been identified in the existing literature on WE that most of the work have completed on working women and students. Second, inadequate attention is paid to the first hand collected data directly from respondents, specially from married women in many studies secondary data which was collected for another purpose was used. Third, there is lack of research to explore the empowerment of housewives who do not do paid work, stay home and have plenty of time to spend on media.

The aim of this research is to evaluate role of media exposure in women empowerment as an indicator contributing to the empowerment of women in Pakistan. The major focus is on specific aspects of WE in house as the domestic circle: empowerment of housewives This study is an attempts to contribute the specified research gaps. The exposure to different kinds of media which includes electronic media, print media, and social media is used as media exposure. Previous research work indicates that there is a lot more to do in media exposure. Therefore, considering the high importance of media exposure in the daily life of women including the effects of media on their empowerment has been explored. The objective of this research is to explore the perception of married women about the effectiveness of media exposure in their empowerment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To explore the impact of media exposure on women empowerment
2. To know the perception of married women about their empowerment

RESEARCH QUESTION OF THE STUDY

RQ1. How do the married women perceive the role of media exposure in their empowerment?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature was reviewed for the narrative analysis to explore the relationship between media exposure and women empowerment. Media exposure is declared in positive and negative ways in previous studies. This study has synthesized the relevant material to media exposure and women empowerment. Empowerment is defined in various aspects; power to make decisions about one's life (Rahman & Rao, 2004). It can bring change in the circle of power from powerless to powerful (Batliwala, 1993) the effective contributing elements in empowerment are better participation, better control and clear transformative change in action (Jamison, 2013). Empowerment of the women from gender perspective is a recognized notion throughout the world. Similarly, women from across the world have been challenged the gender discrimination since the very beginning of feminist movement.

The main purpose of the empowerment of women is primarily to nurture power in women in order to give them respect in their society. Furthermore, women emancipation can reduce the political, social, and economic gender based inequalities (Batliwala, 1993). Women are often marginalized and discriminated for their gender. They have been an object of biased attitude, victim of violence by their counterparts not specifically in one area but across the world. They time and again get fewer opportunities to improve their status, not only they have lesser chances but also they are given less appreciation and wages. They are compelled to live in the environment where they face physical and emotional abuse by their counterparts and they have to survive at the same environment with predefined duties set by society. Such environment does not let them flourish with their skills, also have bad impact on their performance (Jesmin & Amin, 2017).

Although, there is a vast coverage of traditional roles in the media about women yet some of media practitioners are trying to bring unconventional roles by using different creative ideas and their acceptance by audience in community. The culturally big defined differences in gender roles are changing gradually. It is also dependent on the skills set of individuals in few cases (Matthews, 2007). Conversely, women empowerment is greatly influenced by norms, social values, and customs of society. Women represents certain personality traits, attributes, social roles and physical attributes which are associated to them naturally (Khan & Noreen, 2012; Malik & Courtney, 2011).

However, gender based roles are influenced by media representation. They are represented as submissive, lower status, and dependent to fulfill their needs on men. Less females' roles are shown are professional characters, well-educated and independent (Parvez & Roshan, 2010). It has been evidently found that some of the moderating variables i.e. family, feminist believes and medical practitioners lessen the effects of media exposure that lead to increase of women's self-respect (Moreno et al., 2019). Women with great exposure to media have tendency to make good decisions as compared to other women. Gupta and Yesudian (2006) suggested that If women are intrinsically empowered in an equal way, they can contribute a lot in the development of society.

Similarly, an increasing body of literature on empowerment has recognized various factors and determinants for the improvement of status of women. Such as demanding right in inheritance, laws of marriage, ownership of land, house, employment, effort to know the societal structure and norms of community are some of the examples of the determinants (Duflo 2012). Media exposure has a great impact on people and it also changes their habits and attitudes. Ashfaq and Shafiq (2018) stated in their study that Pakistan dramas play a major role in shaping, behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of the society especially

of women. Conversely, Gattino et al. (2018) stated that high feminist beliefs led to lower levels of thin-ideal internalization at higher levels of media awareness. Further, the mediators of the relationship between thin-ideal internalization through media and body dissatisfaction in the natural environment. Media have strong effects on women about their perception of body.

Although, women's improved image can be seen in media with different few strong roles, but the element of subjugation presents in the Pakistani media. Bushra and Wajiha (2013) stated that the weak and submissive roles are still existing in media's content because these elements are present in society. Sometimes, the image of women on media is the reflection of society. It is not just because of media that women are having difficulties in getting their rights. But the prevailing system of norms are so dominant which demands time to change the whole structure. Moreover, WE is also dependent on their activeness, role in decision making in household. It can further be enhanced through providing them real characters as prominent, self-independent and strong (Arestoff & Djemai, 2016; Sathar & Kazi, 2000). So in a nutshell. The previous studies indicated the relationship between media and perception of various characters of women made from the information provided by media.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH METHOD

This study implied a qualitative research methodology using seven Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This FGDs method was used to know deeply the experiences of women and the kind of hurdles they faced while struggling for their rights. The Purposive sampling technique from non-probability sampling method was used for the selection of women. All the participants were housewives, with great media exposure including TV, radio, print media and social media from Lahore.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Seven FGDs were conducted, seven participants were in each group. Four FGDs were conducted at four different participants' homes and three were conducted at eating spots in Lahore. Participants were from different socio-economic background, some of them were highly educated and some were not educated at all. FGDs were conducted in Urdu and Punjabi languages, duration of FGDs ranged from 60-90 minutes.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION OF THE STUDY

All the participants were briefed about the nature of study, time duration, place, purpose of research. Their consent was got before the discussion. The researcher made sure the confidentiality and privacy of the information.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study has some limitations. It has included only married women 18-49, housewives not working ladies. Since, it is qualitative research, it does not claim to generalize the findings to large population.

DATA ANALYSIS

To get comprehensive and uninterrupted details of discussion during FGDs, a digital voice recorder and a diary were used. Transcription and translation did in a careful manner to understand the main codes, potential themes. Coded data put into various groups to develop categories for subthemes and major themes for the detailed analysis of qualitative data through FGDs as presented in Table 1. Thematic analysis was used as technique to analyze collected data.

Table 1: LIST OF THEMES, SUB- THEMES AND MAJOR CODES

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub- Themes</i>	<i>Major Codes</i>
The dynamics of women empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of family and peer • Financial stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family is crucial in playing primary role, and peer group influences in negative or positive way. Education makes difference in women's choices. • Socio-economic status of family is important for women's emancipation. • Age is an important determinant of empowerment. After 50 years, a number of women have no issue of mobility. • Women need financial stability in order to secure their future.

Emerging trends on media and women preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of media exposure • Materialistic approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a tendency to wish to participate in household decisions after the exposure of strong characters through media. • Women get motivated to change but ground realities are bitter to resist them. • Women are more inclined towards personality grooming and material things rather than positive effects on their cognition from media. • Women are encouraged to follow the trends of media. • Despite knowing the good examples to follow on media women are forced to live in the same condition as reality is more bitter than inspired characters.
Cultural norms and mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid mindset of society • Inadequate knowledge about rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family values are very important to follow; women are discouraged to challenge the existing family setup. Society does not forgive women easily. It has rigid attitude towards them. • Housewives' primary responsibility is to take care of home. Family does not want to spend for their learning activities. • Women are not aware of their legal rights. Ignorance to existing laws make able to be exploited.

FINDINGS

The participants of the study highlighted different factors indicators that played a dominant role in determining their empowerment and developing the basic understanding of effects of media exposure on their awareness. Media exposure includes electronic media: TV, Radio, print media: newspapers and social media.

THE DYNAMICS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

More or less all of the participants understood that media could be one the most influential tool to bring change in their awareness. It can show strong roles to be followed in society with no clash to the norms.

ROLE OF FAMILY AND PEER

It is evident that family and peer group are significant agents for the socialization of women. Empowerment of married women gets effected from their parental family to in-law's family, it changes when they communicate with their friends, one of the women in FGDs mentioned,

“My family is always with me in every situation, I had confidence in my decisions, my small contribution was welcomed. I had traveled a lot alone before I get married. My parents had no issue in my

driving routine. After marriage I am bound to wait for my husband to go anywhere. I have more restrictions of mobility now. My mother in law is always concerned about my private matters.”

The married women have to face this transition before and after marriage. Families are more supportive and helpful to their daughters instead of daughter-in-law. They have trust deficit in each other. Supportive families give confidence to their women to move fearlessly in society. Similarly, the role of peers is very important in bringing awareness about rights of women. One of the women in FGDs described,

“My husband used to beat me a lot before moving to abroad, upon complaining about this issue to friend, I was told to be patient and wait for the good time. I was reminded this advice time and again until I thought in the same way.”

The study found that women empowerment is more likely to be greatly influenced by their family and peers in terms of accepting or rejecting things. one the women in FGDs mentioned,

“My mother-in-law spends a lot of time on media and has very biased attitude towards me. She thinks I am not fair with her and I manipulate the situation to be a best wife and daughter-in-law to my husband and other male members of my family. She suspects my actions, gives me tough time, and tries to make my life miserable for no reason.”

FINANCIAL STABILITY

During the FGDs, the participants described a number of different reasons that increase the acceptability of women’s presence in a new family. One of the women in FGDs mentioned,

“I have four acres’ land and two plots registered on my name. My brother lives abroad and sends me regular pocket money which is enough to spend good life. Although, my husband is very cooperative and bears all my expenditures but having property gives me a sense of security.”

Conversely, another participant explained,

“My husband never feels that I am his responsibility, he argues to take money from my parents. Neither he allows me to work outside the home nor he spends happily. I wish I could have something on my name as property so I could have respect from my husband. I cannot argue with him for money. It is his choice to spend the way he wants to spend.”

EMERGING TRENDS ON MEDIA AND WOMEN PREFERENCES

ROLE OF MEDIA EXPOSURE

The research found that the media exposure is also another important agent for the socialization of women. Media provides information, entertainment and educate the audience through a variety of contents. One of the participants said,

“I feel good to spend time in watching dramas, videos on YouTube and having conversation with my friends on Facebook. I do my catharsis while talking to friends online. Nobody knows in my family about the conversation, I try to complete my household chores as early as I can do to watch more content on social media. I have come to know many new things and my family appreciate my knowledge of these things. This appreciation motivates me to get more and more information of world.”

Whereas another participant said,

“I like strong, powerful women characters on media. I try to imitate them. I have tendency to compare myself with different females’ roles of films. The detective female leading role inspire me to work differently in real life. I always happy to read the top 10 most influential women of the world.”

The study found that housewives are inspired from different powerful characters, they motivate to do something good, different but they face resistance from society to do so.

MATERIALISTIC APPROACH

It is considered that women are being more materialistic after exposing media’s content. Their expectations are high, they have more information now about latest things they want to spend time, money on their physical appearance, and on their home decore. They are in competition with other women to look better and have more material things around them. One of the participants argued,

“I prefer to invest on my skills so I can learn something new. Women are more concerned for their physical look rather than cognition. Media just give fancy look to real issues for rating and women follow the trends set by media.”

CULTURAL NORMS AND MINDSET

RIGID MINDSET OF SOCIETY

A majority of participants highlighted the very important issue regarding the acceptance of liberty of women. One of the participants described,

“I do not understand what is wrong with society, when women want to do something, they face harsh criticism even in their close circle. Being different does not mean we will do something against our family values, or we are rebellion.”

Women have restrictions to their motivation, the rigid mindset of society needs to be changed.

INADEQUATE KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHTS

An overwhelming number of participants discussed that housewives are not well aware of their rights. There are a number of laws to protect women and give them opportunity to spend a good life but the problem is they do not know about those laws. One participant from FGDs said,

“My father had diverse sources of income. He had property in terms of land and a chain of schools. I was denied to get any right from inheritance. My brothers communicated that you have already taken a lot in your dowry, you have taken your right. I contacted concerned government authority and received my right from inheritance according to the law.”

They further explained that unless women know their rights they can be misled by their family members. Knowing their rights can prevent them from any kind of exploitation.

DISCUSSION

In line with many existing previous studies, this research indicates that there are multiple factors included in the empowerment of women, helping them in making choices, and decisions for themselves (Mahmud, Shah, & Becker, 2012). The factors included peer group, family, socio-economic status of women, financial stability, education, age and most importantly level of media exposure. The findings of this research complement some of previous studies (Kishor & Gupta, 2004; Njoh & Akiwumi, 2012), by highlighting the role of family, peer group in influencing the choices of married women about their lives. The prime responsibility is to educate the housewives about their rights lies with media and government. Hence, women age is considered a factor to be empowered or not. It is on the society as well to provide secure environment for women. However, the role of family in influencing the empowerment process of women is great. Similarly, there is a substantial data that indicates a positive impact of media exposure on women when they see strong, powerful roles being played by women. They tend to learn from them and apply in real life. On the other hand, Sharma (2012) attributed although women have potential to contribute a lot in their families but societal rules are so dominant that restrict them to imitate what they learn from media. It could be against the values of family and society (Marston, Renedo, McGowan, & Portela, 2013). Likewise, the findings show that liberty, independence portray on media is not given to women in real life. Media needs rating and present ideal situation which is difficult to follow in real life (Malhotra, Schuler & Boender, 2003). On the other hand, data also indicated that misery is showed in dramas, movies, articles where message is minor, and the pathetic condition of women with submissive roles are prominent (Gupta & Yesudian, 2006). It has been argued that society never accept rebel women and never easily forgive their mistakes.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that women are more inclined towards their good look and spend time to improve their physical appearance. The cognitive changes that should be part of their rationality is not so common. Though women empowerment is dependent on multiple factors that filter the effects of media's impact yet media exposure is responsible in bringing change to smaller extent. Women with high exposure to media tend to accept the mediated reality and a bit aware about their rights. They are influenced by the content provided through media where they can express their concerns and more vocal for their rights. It has found that women get great level of awareness of their rights but societal norms very dominant. They have to face consequences if they oppose the mindset of society. Married women who are specially staying home and not doing anything outside the homes are dependent on their families for their rights. The perception of women selected for the study indicates that they are not fully empowered, not even aware of their rights. They spend leisure time on media for entertainment, to get information, to educate themselves. Despite that they have information about some of their rights through media but still that information does not change their behavior as society is more dominant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women empowerment is key to the development of society and country at large. Media practitioners need to see the policy for the content as it has significant effect on the audience. Dramas, films, talk shows, newspapers, and eventually social media's platform are providing enough information to users to get information, entertainment and informal ways to educate themselves. The study recommends that more dimensions related to media exposure and women empowerment should be explored. The effects of media on rural women should be measured.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Ayesha Sadiqa: Conceptualization, Methodology, Thematic Analysis, Writing- Original draft preparation. **Noshina Saleem:** Supervision and Reviewing.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS:

It is declare that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. It is also declare that this article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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