

# CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ADVERTISING

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## ABSTRACT

*Much has been written about depiction of women in advertisements. Sometimes it is argued that women are displayed in advertisements as sex objects. They are also portrayed in stereotypical roles as submissive and hardworking homemakers having only job of cooking delicious dishes for husband or making his shirt "whiter than white", or as girl child being a prospective mother who has to do traditional job of nursing babies, cooking, washing and cleaning. But off late, Indian advertising has witnessed a significant transformation in the manner women are shown. Many contemporary advertisements portray women in a more positive way i.e. as independent, assertive, enjoying life and a career woman. Women are now more exposed to education and are increasingly joining workforce, they have greater social and cultural mobility now than their mothers and grandmothers. Since they have now independent purchasing power, they are now being more valued at home. And therefore, they are no more a commodity" or „sex symbol". This article deals with fastly changing role portrayal in Indian commercials by having a look on some representative advertisements. The emphasis is to link role depiction of women in advertisements with the emerging status of women in Indian Society as advertisements are reflection of changes in the societal fabric.*

**Keywords:** *Advertisement, Women, Role, Society, Job, Culture, Mobility*

## INTRODUCTION

Advertising can be defined as a paid form of a non-personal message communicated through the various media by business firms, industry, not or profit organizations or individuals. It is said, "Advertising is telling and selling". It comes from the latin "adverto" which means to turn round. It therefore denotes the means employed to draw attention to any object or purpose. Through an advertisement, an advertiser intends to spread his ideas about his products/ offerings among his customers and products. Hence, it is persuasive and informational and is designed to influence the purchasing power and thought patterns of the audience.

However, the mere transmission of an advertising message by an advertiser does not signify that the advertiser has communicated with his audience. His audience must see the advertisement; they must pay some attention to it. They must also understand and comprehend what is being conveyed; and lastly the purchase behaviour of the target audience should get influenced and shaped in favour of the advertised offer. Only when these requirements are met, the advertiser succeeds in his communication mission. Therefore, an advertiser has to necessarily know the intricacies of buyer behaviour and what type of media will carry his message successfully and economically to wide sections of his target audience.

He should also know the type of message that will appeal to them. He should know the ways and means of capturing the attention of his audience. He must be familiar with the „process of diffusion“-how various messages and ideas get diffused and spread over a specified population. In brief, his task is to break the perception barrier of his target audience and penetrate some of his ideas. Once this task is completed, then the other responsibilities of influencing thought process and behaviour patterns come in. So, for an advertiser, human minds are his work fields, ideas and styles are his tools and he operates from a remote distance.

There are several media and media vehicles (within a media) for advertising. They are so familiar for us that we consider them part of our lives. Among them, television and Internet are most popular and current and they are similar to each other in that both are the creations of the modern technology. The difference between these two is that Internet is newly invented and overcomes both limitations of time and space television has. Now a days, with the increasing impact of media especially television and Internet on our lives, it has become easier for companies to manipulate people's minds through advertisement.

It is nearly impossible to go through a day without being bombarded with advertisements unless we live in the deepest and remotest part of Saharan Africa but even there also, chances are there that we can be spotted by sales representative of any company! Advertising has become so pervasive that no media today goes without it.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Over the years, a very extensive volume of literature has taken shape on the subject of advertising. In last four decades, the expansion in literature on the subject has been so tremendous that advertising has evolved into a separate full-ledged field of study. Research shows that during 1900-1990, around 500 books on the subject have been written covering various dimensions of advertising such as social, economic and psychological ones. These books also examine the communication task involved in advertising as well as ethics of advertising. People engaged in different disciplines wrote on the subject. Works on advertising, treating it exclusively as a commercial or management subject started rather recently, perhaps from 1950s onwards. Authors like Neil Borden, Martin Marshall, Boyd and Newman, and Aaker and Myers, treated the subject essentially as management and marketing tool.

Advertising, it is said is as old as the Christian era. One of the first known methods was outdoor signs (painted on walls and eye catching). Even signs in the ruins of Rome and Pompeii have been found by the archaeologists that advertised travelers to go to a tavern situated in another town. Around 1440s, printing press was invented which was moveable type of advertising. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, some organizations had a trademark with 2 or 3 dimensional picture or sign. Mail order and pamphlets appeared around 1870s.

During late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many US firms began to market packaged goods under brand names. The first product that had brand names was soap. In 1880s, a few brands in USA came out and they were Ivory, Pears, Kirks American Family and packer's. It was once said, "the person who saves money by not advertising is like the man who stops the clock to save time." Advertising is one of the most important and the most expensive functions of marketing. According to Mike T Bendixen (1993), advertising represents an important means by which organizations communicate with their customers, both current and potential. It is meant that advertising helps the companies to send message regarding the product to the target market.

## DIFFERENT ADVERTISING MEDIA

There are several categories of advertising listed below.

1. Broadcast media e.g. TV, Film, Radio, Internet and Screen sliders,
2. Print Media e.g. Magazines, Trade Journals, Technical Publications and Periodicals,
3. Outdoor or Mural e.g. Poster hoardings, Display Boards, Electric signs etc,
4. Transit Railways, Buses, Aircrafts, subways etc,
5. Direct Mail Advertising, and
6. Other forms like Window Display, Point of purchase material, Exhibitions etc.

Now a word about each.

1. **Broadcast Advertising-** It is a very popular medium of advertising and includes TV, Radio, and Internet etc. TV advertisements have become very popular from the day they have been introduced. Many factors are taken into consideration to ascertain the cost of advertising. Like time of telecast of ad e.g. prime time or non-peak time, duration of the ad, popularity of TV channel etc (e.g. airing of ad on Colors channel may be more expensive than on Star Utsav). Radio lost its charm few years back but now it is fast picking up because of introduction of FM channels in nearly all big cities. Small-scale advertisers also prefer the radio.

2. **Print Advertising-** Print media is another popular mode of advertising. Nearly every magazine or newspaper is filled with advertisements. Print media also offers options like promotional brochures and fliers for advertising purposes. The advertising space in newspapers and magazines are sold according to the area occupied by the advertisement, the position of advertisement (front page/middle page), as well as the readership of the publications. Like the case of broadcast advertising, in print advertising also an advertisement in a relatively new and less popular newspaper would cost less than placing an advertisement in a popular newspaper with a high readership. The price of print ads also depend on the supplement in which they appear, e.g. an advertisement in the glossy supplement costs higher than that in the newspaper supplement which uses a mediocre quality paper.
3. **Outdoor Advertising-** Outdoor advertising is also a very popular form of advertising that makes use of several tools and techniques to attract customers outdoors. The most common examples are billboards, kiosks, events and trade shows organized by companies.
4. **Transit Advertising-** It consists of card advertising that is located within buses, subways, and railways and outside display that appear on the front's sides and backs of buses and other public transports, vehicles and terminals etc. It is the lowest cost media and allows geographic and seasonal selectivity. It has high leadership and can reach pedestrian and traveling public. However, it is limited in quantity by the number of public vehicles in operation.
5. **Direct Mail-** It is any advertising sent in mail including sales letters, folders, pamphlets, booklets, catalogues, and the like. It is the most personal and selective media and reaches only desired prospects and has minimum waste in circulation. The effectiveness of direct mail advertising is measurable and can be timed as per advertiser's will. It can take any size, shape or form permitted by the post office. But direct mail is costly as the receiver may consider it as junk mail as it may not have an entertainment value. Therefore, it is not a very good means of mass communication.
6. **Other forms-** There are other forms of advertising as well. Let us have a brief overview.

***I. Covert Advertising-*** It is a unique kind of advertising in which a product or a particular brand is incorporated in some entertainment and media channels like movies, television shows or even sports. There is no commercial in the entertainment but the brand or the product is subtly (or sometimes evidently) showcased in the entertainment show. A

famous example is of the song „*mere rang mein rangne waali*“ of the movie “*Maine Pyaar Kiya*” in which „*Mafatlal*“ logo is seen in the background during the song.

**II Surrogate Advertising-** It is prominently seen in cases where advertising a particular product is banned by law. Advertisement for products like cigarettes or alcohol which are injurious to health are prohibited by law in several countries and hence these companies have to come up with several other products that might have the same brand name and indirectly remind people of the cigarettes or beer bottles of the same brand e.g. Bagpiper soda.

**III Celebrity Advertising-** Using celebrities for advertising involves signing up celebrities or advertising campaigns which consists of all sorts of advertising including TV advertisements or even print advertisements. After winning the Cricket World Cup 2011, members of the Indian cricket team are in great demand by the companies for endorsement of their products. However, since modern day audience is getting smarter and smarter and so less likely to believe on exaggerated claims made by advertisements vetted by the celebrities, this advertising is losing its shine.

**IV Point of Purchase Advertising-** Point of purchase advertising covers the display material used in the advertising programmes. This may include advertising on package, window banners, shelf talkers, package stuffers, information folders and booklets, merchandise tags and similar type of displaying material.

**V. Public Service Advertising-** Public Service Advertising makes use of advertising as an effective communication medium to convey socially relevant messages about important matters and social welfare causes like family planning, AIDS, deforestation, illiteracy, poverty etc. David Ogilvy who is considered to be an authority on the subject had once said, “Advertising justifies its existence when used in the public interest-it is much too powerful a tool to use solely for commercial purposes.” In India, quite in tune with the socio-economic realities of the country, the Government is the largest advertiser in the country. The Government has widely harnessed advertising for the successful discharge of social renovation tasks. India is one of the few countries, where the Government has used advertising in a massive way for furthering its societal responsibility. In India, in the hands of the Government, advertising has become a powerful instrument of social and economic growth. The money spent by the Government in communicating with the people has been enormous.

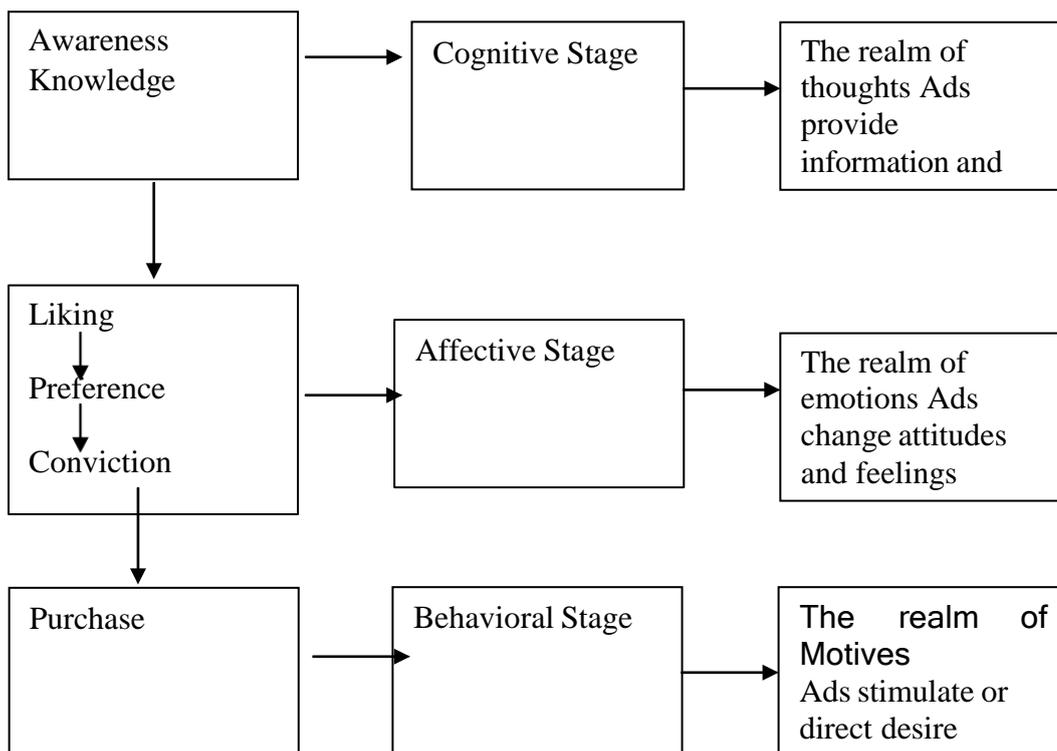
**Advertising Specialties-** These include a wide variety of items such as calendars, books, matches, pens, pencils, knives, key rings, diaries, cigarettes, lighters, blotters, paper weights, electronic clocks, purses, rain hats etc. Advertiser’s names, address, phone number and short sales message are imprinted on the items. The advertiser can choose from among 5,000 specialties in the markets. However, they have limited spaces available for sales message. They are also costly

## HIERARCHY OF EFFECTS MODEL

Lavidge and Steiner created a model to measure advertising effectiveness based on a classic psychological model that classifies behaviour into three categories-

- a. *The cognitive component is the intellectual, mental or „rational states“.*
- b. *The affective component is „emotional“ or „feeling“ states.*
- c. *The motivational component is the striving status, relating to the tendency to treat objects as positive or negative goals.*

The cognitive component involves both aspects of awareness and perceptions relative to the dimensions of recall, information, believability, and comprehension. The affective component deals with consumers’ feelings toward a product. The motivational component relates to consumers’ convictions and buying intentions.



*Adapted from: George E Belch & Michael A Belch, 2001*

## WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

Throughout the planet, cable/satellite television has grown at a very fast pace and among all popular means of mass media, Television has naturally the greatest mass appeal as well as acceptance. From the year 1991 when the satellite television was introduced, the idiot box of 1980s turned into a new world full of magic and hundreds of channels. It is a fact that all developments lead to unexpected changes. Similarly, television too has transformed its viewing as a fragmented exercise. Now the whole family does not watch programmes together like in the decade of 1980; but there are different programmes for different target audience like housewives, youth, businessmen, elderly people and children.

The advertisers too have recognized their specific target groups and have started making advertisements according to target viewers of the serials. Television has a very powerful impact as it creates a world that seems very real and viewers are unable to differentiate between the contrived world and the real one. Particularly the young children and teenagers are more affected as they are exposed to a new outside world and therefore the advertisements being shown shape their thinking whether it is representation of women or other things.

Gender and media is the subject that is being discussed frequently. The portrayal of gender as a product and the accompanying body politic in the media is well documented. Media can act as both a perpetrator and as a protagonist. It can either be an accomplice to gender based discrimination by portraying stereotypical sensational images of women or it can provide balanced coverage that empowers women while exposing acts of gender bias. Now, different aspects of television would be analyzed from a gender perspective under the following heads.

- (a) *Serials,*
- (b) *News channels,*
- (c) *Music videos,*
- (d) *Advertisements, and*
- (e) *Other programmes.*

(a) **Serials:** During past 15 years the TV serials have undergone huge transformation. Serials have moved a great deal from portraying strong women characters like Rajni, and Kalyani (Udaan) of 1980s, which inspired middle class women and challenged the mainstream ideology. During the decade of 2000, there was an overdose of serials like popularly watched K-serials on Star Plus (Kasauti Zindagi Ki, Kyonki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki, Kahin Kisi Roz, Kahin to Hoga, Kavyanjali) to Zee TV (Teen Bahuraniyan, Har Ghar Kuch Kehta Hai, Ghar ki Laaxmi Betiyan, Meri Doli Tere Angna) and Sony TV (Kkusum, Thodi Khushi Thoda Gam and Khwaish). Now there are

various serials like *Balika Vadhu*, *Is Des Na Ana Meri Lado*, *Utran*, *Phulwa*, *Lagi Tujhse Lagan*, *Rishton Se Badi Pratha* etc on a very popular channel Colors which depict the changing role of women in Indian Society.

The other channels are also full of women dominated serials. A few examples are *Pratigya & Gulaal* (Star Plus), *Baba Aiso Var Dhoondo* (NDTV Imagine), *Ganga Ki Dheej* (Sahara One), *Saas Binaa Sasuraal* (Sony), *Choti Bahu & Ram Milaye Jodi* (Zee TV) etc. However most serials are found to be re-enforcing and strengthening the gender stereotypes already present in Indian society. Women are mostly portrayed in the light of approval and disapproval. These role stereotypes reflect the typical patriarchal mindset; where house wife is favored while women in power are often shown as vamps (playing negative roles) that are an antithesis of the lead/title role. They are being depicted as hyper modern, mostly professionals (the boardroom women), with a deep neckline, short hair, bold, shrewd, merciless, heartless, ruthless, hyper competitive who have no problem in fulfilling their objectives by hook or by crook and are absolute seductresses. Also nearly all women (except the cases where the role demands otherwise) in the serials are shown in heavy makeup, wearing expensive jewelry and attire, as if they queens of any empire!

All married women in serials are shown wearing mangalsutras and vermilion/ sindoor. (However, this trend was more visible in Ekta Kapoor's serials which were later adopted by others as well). Men characters are shown by and large secondary and inconsequential (even in terms of remuneration, female actors are believed, in some cases, to out earn their male counterparts as female characters are more significant than male characters). Serials are also showing unrealistic super women. She is super wife, super mother, super employee and even „even daughter in law”. She has the solution for every problem which her family might face. She is so witty that can foresee the problems and find solutions in a fraction of a second. The image portrayed is larger than life.

Today our serials are also showing a rising trend in extra marital relationships. [The serial “Swabhimaan” was the first one to show relationship of a concubine openly.] A pertinent question arises as to what message TV is trying to give? Does it want to prove that our society is readily accepting such relationships? Are we blindly following the western culture without imagining consequences? And how right or wrong is to be an unmarried mother or to bear child of another man while still being married? The point is what kind of ideals/ role models that we want our young generation to emulate? Do we want our young girls to be like *Kalpana Chawla*, *Sunita Williams*, *Mrs Sonia Gandhi*, *Ms Mamta Banerjee*, *Mrs Indira Gandhi*, *Madam Curie* or to inculcate negative values of being unreliable, malicious and cunning in our relationship? There is a need for a serious analysis of the issue.

(b) **News Channels**; the number of news channel in India is increasing day by day. They are offering their services 24X7 and hence they are vying with each other for public attention and improving their television rating points. They are also doing sting operations to create sensational news. However, gender and related issues are totally ignored by the

news channels that often depend on Bollywood for survival. It has been observed that covering gender issues for most TV channels means sensationalizing the news of rape cases, kidnapping, honour killing etc. they keep on searching spicy topics and dish out soap-opera style stories on them. Now, a pertinent question arises here as to how credible is the media? What portion of news is devoted to women's issues or to men? What about news on laws related to women, awareness generation on women issues in India-educational, health, work related issues, domestic violence, sexual harassment, portraying successful career women in different, innovative segments of work? Can we find any one news channel wholly devoted to women issues? Sadly, the core issues concerning women are not addressed.

(c) **Music Videos-** There is yet another side to Television i.e. music videos. When we think of a music video, we visualize image of a woman who is titillating (i.e. making someone feel mildly interested/sexually excited) and sensuous. The only objective of these women, it seems, is arousal of men by showing cleavage and semi nude bodies. The music industry (particularly Bhojpuri music videos and films) is attacking women's dignity and right to privacy with lyrics, dialogues, scenes that touch dangerously low level of degradation and sexual abuse. They can, to some extent be said as „soft porn“, which may mislead our youth and teen agers. It seems that music companies are using woman's body as an object to maximize their profits and promoting obscenity. This is something that is of grave concern.

(d) **Advertisements-** Advertisement is a form of communication intended to persuade an audience (viewers, readers or listeners) to purchase or take some action upon products, ideas or services. They are a prominent and very significant part of television viewing. It informs, persuades and motivates the consumer about the advertised products, services or ideas. In our caste conscious, superstitious, feudal and intensely patriarchal society, portrayal of women has always varied from one stereotype to another-such as a girl child being a prospective mother, a woman as a sex object or an eye catcher; a woman as homemaker whose only aim in life is to serve her husband with mouth watering dishes or making him proud by providing him with the whitest shirt. But times have changed and so has the women in advertising. Women are now no longer confined to four walls of the house; they are moving out and are also supported by her male family members.

Advertisements, which are a careful blend of verbal and visual components, are meant to render an effective selling message. Women in Indian advertising are being seen in a different way now, as they are reflective of changes in the society. Can anybody forget *Lalitaji*, dressed in white sari with a blue border uttering, „surf ki kharidaari mein hi samajhdaari hai“. This advertisement from the mid-1980s was a landmark in Indian advertising history, as it presented a hitherto unseen image of the Indian housewife, as a discerning individual making intelligent choices. Around the same time came the

advertisement for Liril, which shows a girl in bikini in Indian TV for the first time and also the suggestive Kamasutra advertisement modeled by Pooja Bedi (interestingly, all these advertisements were designed by Alyque Padamsee, India's renowned ad guru). Women are now depicted in numerous contexts like as a girl child, prospective mother, a career woman or as a person who enhances the appeal of the advertisement. Now modern advertisements are presenting a more realistic and balanced picture of Indian women. Let us have a glimpse on some of the advertisements being shown on Indian Television.

1. *HERO HONDA PLEASURE (Why should boys have all the fun)*- This advertisement advocates women empowerment. Here a flock of girls is shown which epitomizes group will and freedom of movement. Today women have stepped out; realizing their potential in fulfilling their dreams and for them, driving a vehicle is one of the symbols of liberty and fun. This ad completely breaks the notion that outdoor fun is only a domain of men.

2. *ICICI PRUDENTIAL LIFE INSURANCE (Jeetey Raho)*- In this advertisement, a young couple is seen where a wife asks husband to sign the life insurance papers. In the next frame, she cleverly and logically explains the benefits of taking insurance. This advertisement projects a progressive change in our society where the woman is accepted as the chief catalyst in taking financial decisions.

3. *ARIEL DETERGENT (Ariel ki safai do khusboo mein aaye)*- This ad uses the slice of life concept where he has returned home from work and comes across a message from his wife that she would be late from work. He then prepares dinner and drops some curry on his shirt and washes it himself. This advertisement has broken the myth that only women are supposed to do household work.

4. *ASMI DIAMOND JEWELLERY (I believe in me)* - Kajol is viewed as a woman who is traditional yet fully capable of participating in the modern world. Her modernity does not necessarily mean divorce from traditional ethos. She is the brand ambassador of Asmi and provides assurance to the target audience that wants to do things differently without breaking from the past. Here she says she does not believe in stars, talking parrots and crystal balls but believes in herself.

5. *FEMINA (Believe)*- "I am dark, fair, 14, fat, 40, I love..." If we go through this advertisement, an emphatic „I is revealed. Today's woman is confident and comfortable with what she is and is unapologetic about carrying the weight of her „self". This ad makes minimum use of visual imagery-just the face of protagonist infusing confidence and warmth.

These are some advertisements, which depict the changing face of women in Indian advertising. There are many more ads and everyday one new ad is surfacing which clearly depict the increasing influence of women in Indian Television and society.

**(e) Other Programmes-**

- (i) *Comedy/Reality Shows-* It was observed in the great Indian laughter show and other related programmes like comedy circus etc that male participants cut jokes about women. This is an indecent representation of women. Women have been seen losing the race in winning, singing competitions or comedy competitions. Why men are generally winners? Are they really good or is there biasness? This has to be answered.
- (ii) *Sports Channels-* Sports channels are primarily devoted to men and the games they play. They tend to inculcate masculine values. Only one sportswoman has received maximum media coverage and she is Ms Sania Mirza. But again, she is a catchy object because of her dexterity in the game or because of her visual appeal? Why women from other sports are not getting that much media attention?
- (iii) *Cartoon Programmes-* In cartoon programmes displayed on Hungama TV, Pogo, cartoon Network etc, male characters are shown as witty, aggressive, assertive, independent, risk taking etc. On the contrary, female characters are shown as affectionate, gentle, sympathetic, emotional and nurturing.

**DEPICTION OF WOMEN AND LAW**

The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986 provides for the regulation of representation of women in India and prohibits the indecent representation of women through advertisements, books, writings, paintings, and figures or in any other manner. Section 4 of the Act prohibits the production, sale, hire, distribution, circulation, sending by post any book, pamphlet, slide, film writing, drawing, painting etc which contains indecent representation of women in any form. The depiction in any manner of the figure of a woman, her form, her body or any part thereof would amount to indecent or derogatory representation if it has-

- (a) *the tendency to present a woman as a sexual object; or*
- (b) *the tendency to present a woman as a sexual commodity for man's pleasure; or*
- (c) *the tendency to glorify woman's subordination to man as an attribute to womanhood;*  
*or*
- (d) *the tendency to glorify ignoble servility to man as an attribute to womanhood; or*
- (e) *the effect of being indecent or being derogatory to, or denigrating women; or*
- (f) *It is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals.*

However, in spite of law, women portrayal in media sometimes is of great concern that needs to be addressed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women in India are increasingly exposed to education and participate in workforce; gender demarcations are undergoing rapid change. They have now greater physical, cultural and social mobility than what their mothers and grandmothers used to have. Today's woman has the freedom to explore new ways of living, peer bonding, handling relationships, and so on. Since they are getting monetarily independent, their value at home is also increasing. This has reduced the „commodity“ status of women and their portrayal as sex objects in advertisements has witnessed a key change.

However, there are some programmes where still stereotypical image is being shown. Television can be used as a forum for advocacy, challenging stereotypes, information dissemination that will enable in taking necessary legal action, enactment of appropriate laws, sensitizing the authorities and creating public dialogue. A multi pronged strategy for awareness and mobilization of public opinion is needed for developing a positive image of women in media. It is also necessary to draw a fine line as to what constitutes morality and what is obscenity. In advertising, there has been a sea change in the depiction of women in India during past two decades. They have kept pace with the changes in the society. One prominent example is role reversal. While it is common to use women in advertisements to attract men, the reverse is also happening in few cases, Though in a subtle way. Roda Mehta, former Media Director of O&M India once said,“ Advertising does not seek to change society, it just holds up a mirror.”

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