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## **Gender Representation in Pakistani Print Media: A Critical Analysis**

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### ***ABSTARCT***

*The key objective of this study was to examine the representations of men and women in print media in Pakistan. Gender role stereotyping and sexism in print media is not a low-profile gender issue as printed communication and contents still hold an important place in contemporary digital world. Keeping in view the importance of newspapers as the leading source of credible content/messages, this paper examined gender stereotyping and sexism in print media in Pakistan and attempted to highlight whether print media reproduces or challenges gender stereotypes and sexism? Keeping in view the complexity of sexism in print media, content and discourse analyses were performed on four widely read national newspapers. The findings have been placed within the socio-cultural context of Pakistani society and feminists theories. The study's findings indicated that print media in Pakistan reinforces gender stereotypes and provide little challenge to gender stereotyped imagery of males and females.*

**Key Words:** Gender role, gender stenotypes, Sexism, content and discourse analyses

## Introduction

Mass media (TV, movies, social media, magazines and newspapers) reinforces gendered world view of society. It is a fact that today no other source of impacting people's mind can match the impact of electronic media, particularly television. Nevertheless, print media is still believed to be the major agent of attitude formation and change (see Jamel, 2014; Kim and Ward, 2012). Print media delivers messages not only through the written texts, but also through pictures, especially images in advertisements. The daily newspapers rarely highlight and report women's news and their successes. Rather they prefer reporting on rape, atrocities, crime, sexual harassment and abuse of women prominently in their columns. Nevertheless, Saturday and Sunday special glossy editorials on women's leisure, fashion, beauty and other luxurious news items with erotic photographs are issued from time to time by daily newspapers (Dhar & Pattnaik, 1996).

[Stories and] advertisements in print media continue to subject women to traditional, stereotypically defined images of women's lives rather than reflections of their diverse daily experiences and aspirations (Mastin, 2004). Women are generally portrayed in advertisements as homemakers, dependent on men while men were portrayed as dominant, authoritative figures (Das, 2000). Newspapers emphasize men's independent activities and, in fact, define news almost entirely as stories about men. Stories about men focus on work and on their achievements (Turner, 1998). Examining the images of women in newspapers, Collins (1991) argued that women's images are designed to reinforce sexism and make traditional gendered roles appear natural and normal. The economically independent woman is shown as domineering and ruthless. The woman is considered ideal only when she is in her nurturing roles and as a supportive supplement to man (Emerson, 2000). Examining print media from 1955 to 1975, Geise (1979) found that print media, especially women magazines, reinforces traditional gender roles (males as breadwinner/females as homemakers) and women's marriage and family life are portrayed more important than their career. [Print media] continues to advise women how to look better, lose weight, appeal to men, cook nice meals, maintain relationships, keep the home clean and care for families (Kuczynski, 2001). It is claimed that the few stories about women tend to emphasize their roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. Even stories about women who are in the news because of achievements and professional activities are often refer to and beautified

with the stories of their marriages, family life and other aspects of women's traditional roles. For example, when Benazir Bhutto became prime ministers of Pakistan, newspapers repeatedly referred to her as "a housewife", "a good mother" that ignored her long and active role in politics. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher became prime minister of England was represented as "housewife" ignoring her successful political career (Romaine, 1999). The paper accepts that today print media gives comparatively better converge to women's experiences and positions but display a persistent emphasis on women's home roles and sexually objectified images.

Women are portrayed as sex objects and victims of abuse through the technology of print media. Hifsa Nisar Khan (2010) argued that media in Pakistan objectifies women. Print media, especially women's magazines, positions women in a relation of subordination, passivity and sexual availability (McRobbie, 1996). Advertising in electronic as well as print media portrays males as dominant, sometimes even as rugged and females as submissive and sex objects (see Henslin, 1997). Advertisements for men in magazines continue to portray men's aggressiveness and success in public life as epitome of masculinity (Wood, 2005). The point of concern is that the objectification of women by media has reached the extent that some of the photographs focus on dehumanizing women (Bwewusa, 2008). Syed (2006) argued that men in advertisements are fully clothed; appear confident and dignified while women are presented as glamorous and in traditional roles. It can be asserted here that men are shown dressed up for economy and public domain whereas women for beauty and attraction. Advertisements, especially those embedded into show buzz pages, tell us what products we need if we are to meet cultural expectations of [ideal] women and men (Wood, 2005). These stereotypical images of women make newspapers and magazines marketable/saleable (see Goldman, 1992). The point to be noted here is that print media influenced by capitalist ideology using the display of women's bodies as 'tag' to sell products. McRobbie (1996) argued that female body is consistently the reference point for the persuasion to consume items. Thus, the objectification of women's bodies is promoting the cause of capitalism at the cost of women dignity and respect. Media advertisements have enforced gender stereotypes through printing photographs that portray women as objects.

The use of these stereotypical images of women are of great concern as they are often incorrect, casting women as housewives or sexual objects, and hence are detrimental to gender equality (Goldman, 1992). Douglas Kellner (2008) argued that media images help to shape our view of

the world deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Keeping the importance of print media in contemporary time, this study attempted to know whether print media in Pakistan challenges or reinforces gender stereotypes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is informed by feminist analysis of mass media. Feminist analysis of mass media gained its place in academia during the advent of the second wave of feminism (Shields, 1996; Rakow, 1986). Second wave feminism created conducive environment for liberal feminist discourses. Liberal feminism brought the issue of women equality into public and academic discourses. Liberal feminist theory developed into a perspective that informed research regarding women's equality. Gaining place in academia, liberal feminist theory informs media images research through examining the incorporation of equal representations of men and women, and accurate portrayals of women as equals in politics and business. Liberal feminism asserted that 'equality of women is contingent on equality in representation' (Shields, 1996: 74). In examining equality, media studies examine whether these images portray traditional sex role stereotypes of women as homemakers, mothers, wives, or the images show women engaged in the public domain as independent and successful professionals like men. Assessing sex role stereotyping in print media, content analysis of images of women remained the dominant research approach (see methodology in this study). Content analysis of women's role portrayals in print media revealed that print media depict women's place in the home, women dependent on men for their protection, women least interested in making important decisions or doing important things, women as sexual objects (see Courtney and Lockeretz 1971). Drawing on liberal feminist argument, the paper focused to unpack how many men are presented in relation to women, what role they were portrayed. The concern here was to highlight how print media reproduces and reinforces traditional sex role stereotypes. Nevertheless, liberal feminism met with challenges and severe criticism from feminist poststructuralist. Feminists in the 1980's and 1990's stated that liberal feminist theory, employing quantitative content analysis, is inadequate and incomplete approach for contemporary feminists. Many feminist sociologists of media studies in the 1990's, criticizing liberal feminist approach, focused on the structural and institutional role of media in reproducing unequal gender relations. Their key argument was the understanding of mass media as an ideological state apparatus which not only represents an important site of

social and cultural reproduction but also support a male dominated system of ideological hegemony which all people internalize and ultimately consent to (see Althusser, 1968). In the 1990's, feminists, particularly feminist poststructuralist, were more concern to examine and unpacking the underlying meaning, pattern of power desire created in media discourse. It was this feminist poststructuralists' approach to media text and feminist appropriation of Michel Foucault's concept of 'discourses' to media analysis that give us the lens to look at the constructive power of print media. We deem it important to elucidate the concept of discourse and the way we used it in this study. Foucault used the term discourse to examine how power, language and institutional practices together at historically specific point in time determine models of thought (Foucault, 1977) and action (Ullah and Skelton, 2013). Discourse also consists of 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). Feminist work in the media that has appropriated Foucault's ideas provide an appropriate framework to analyze how bodies are experienced and disciplined as gendered bodies (Howson, 2005 cited in Holmes, 2007). Drawing on the work of Foucault, the paper examined how print media discourse (written texts and pictures) function as 'productive power' (Foucault, 1977) that construct women as sex object and position them within the gendered order. The article has also attempted to highlight how media discourses discipline male and female bodies as masculine and feminine bodies in accordance with current cultural expectation. It is important to emphasize here that using discourse in the Foucauldian sense, the researchers focused on the "exploration of underlying meaning, forms of relationship, metaphor, pattern of power desire created in media text (Wing, 1997; Yeoman, 1999, Skelton, 1997). To truncate the discussion the researchers believe that Foucauldian concept of discourse offers the most potential theoretical framework to explore how print media discourses are used as power/force in the construction of gender identities and disciplining males and females in line with domestic ideology and sex role stereotypes.

### **Methodology**

The data for this study comes from four newspapers: *The News, Dawn, Express, and Jang*. These widely read newspapers were selected by employing purposive sampling. The reasons for choosing two *English and two Urdu newspapers* were: first, English newspapers are widely read by educated people in the urban and rural areas; second Urdu newspapers are read across

geographical areas, social classes and gender (see Ibrahim, 2011). Examining gender representation in print media in Pakistan we employed two different but related approaches. First, the researchers conducted a content analysis on the selected newspapers. Content analysis refers to the analysis of pictures, symbols, ideas, themes or text which may be documents, interviews transcripts, films, TV programmes and so on (Roberts, 2009). Although content analysis is used in large number of fields (i.e., media studies, cultural studies, political science, psychology, sociology and gender studies), this paper used it as it was used by second wave feminists. Content analysis approach was used by second wave feminists in 1970s/1980 (see Ullah, 2013; Ullah and Skelton 2013; Skelton 2006) for the quantification of images and activities (see Ullah 2013). The aim of content analysis in this study was to highlight the unequal representation of males and females in print media in Pakistan. As referred earlier in this paper and reiterated here that content analysis was deemed inadequate by feminist poststructuralist. Feminist poststructuralists argued that looking simply at number of females and males in the newspaper is inadequate (see Francis 2007; Skelton, 2011). It was this dissatisfaction with content analysis that Hansen (1997) stressed for combining content analysis with [discourses analysis].

Discourse simply means language-in-use (Gee, 2005 cited in Ullah, 2013). Discourse is way of talking and thinking (Roberts, 2009). Using discourse analysis as methodology the researchers tried to investigate the underlying meaning, gender power relation in newspapers images and texts. It is reiterated that the article used discourse in the Foucauldian fashion. Michel Foucault argued that discourses that are available in society govern what can be thought and said. Drawing on Foucault, it is argued that discourses are bedrocks of social reality. It is within discourses that we create objects and types of people and social roles. Discourse analysis, in the Foucauldian sense, challenge ways of thinking about aspects of reality that have come to be viewed as being natural or normal and therefore tend to be taken for granted . It enable the researchers to examine how things have come to be the way they are, how it is that they remain that way, and how else they might have been or could be. Doing Foucauldian discourse analysis, the researchers have tried to explore how newspapers messages (text and pictures) are used as power and ideological tool for reinforcing the existing patriarchal and sexist power structures; how gender identities are constructed and stereotypical understanding of hegemonic masculinity

and idealized femininity is reinforced through print media. The analysis enabled the researchers to come up with the following themes.

### **Key findings of newspapers analysis in Pakistan**

- Male and female coverage in print media: women under representation
- Reinforcing domestic ideology: men for the public and women for the private domains
- Essentializing nurturing as women role
- Objectification of women
- Sexism in Wears: women dress up for leisure men for work

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Male and female coverage in print media: women under representation**

Content analysis carried out on newspapers revealed that females were underrepresented across a range of aspects. Looking at the representation of female and male figures in the selected newspapers unpacked that males were represented eight times more than women through these newspapers. The findings revealed the presence of one (1) female against eight (8) males. Randomly picked newspapers (May, 16, May 22, June 17, June 26) revealed the presence of 156 females versus 1248males. Examining sports pages in all the sampled newspapers revealed the presence of 473 male players and 52 women players (male 9 times more than women). These findings buttress the argument that [print] media reinforces sport as a masculine hegemonic domain (Davis, 1997; Hardinet, *al.*, 2005). The concern here is that print media through the gendered portrayal of sports help to perpetuate a “masculine hegemonic order in society” (Kian, 2007: 1) which, in turn, communicates a strong message that sport is men prerogative (Ullah and Skelton, 2014).The results indicate that the ratio of women-to-men increased when it comes to ‘showbiz’ and special ‘addition pages’ which are dominated by female images. However, showbiz and special editions pages objectify women (see later part in this paper) by portraying erotic photographs for selling products and beauty creams etc (see Dhar & Pattnaik, 1996). Nevertheless, men cover more newspapers space than women. The assertion here is that the under representation and lack of female characters and their depiction in limited roles throughout

newspapers discriminate females and function as powerful ideological tool to perpetuate males' hegemony.

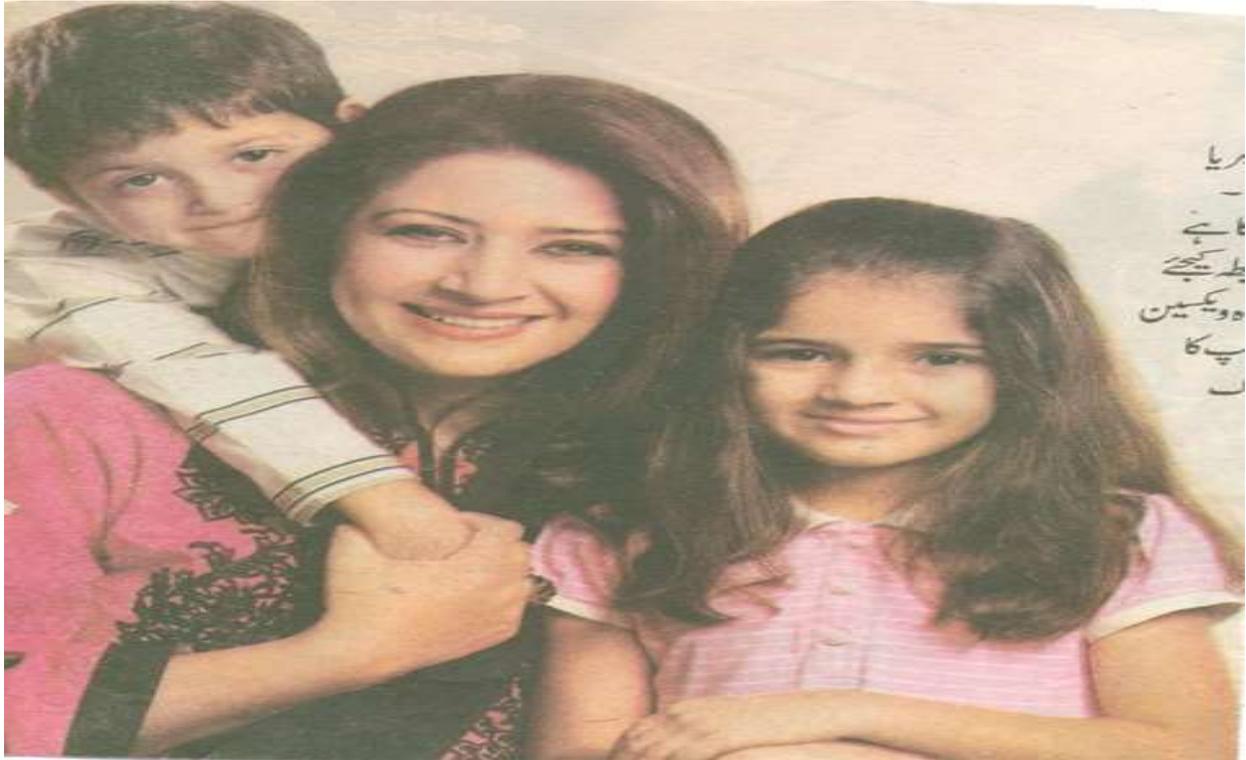
### **Reinforcing domestic ideology: men for the public and women for the private domains**

Print media continues to reinforce the domestic ideology (man as breadwinner and woman as homemaker) by portraying men and women in stereotypical gender roles. The results of this study indicate that print media depicts women as homemakers (busy in looking after children, spending time with children, cleaning, washing dresses, and other domestic chores) and men as breadwinners and leaders of the public domain. Both texts and pictures show men engaged in businesses, signing business agreements and contracts; transporting goods from one place to another; making political speeches etc. They (men) are demonstrated as owners, managers and labourers of factories. On the contrary, women are portrayed in pink collar jobs, i.e. as secretary and assistant, lady health workers. *Dawn July 3, The News June 19, Jung June 3, and Express May 13*, were randomly picked for checking women presence in business and related fields. A very dismaying picture was found as there was only one woman depicted on the business page, except *Dawn July 3, 2011* where two females (Benazir Bhutto and Firdous Ashiq Awan) were shown in the advertisement posted by Ministry of Information Government of Pakistan. It is argued that print media portrays politics as men's prerogative. Pictographic analysis of the selected newspapers in the specified time revealed that there were 351 men political character as compared to women who were only 47 which means men are seven (7) times more than women. Interestingly, the 47 female political characters were actually 22 (i.e. Benazir Bhutto, Firdous Ashiq Awan, and Hillary Clinton etc) were presented more than one time in a single newspaper on the same day. Moreover, the main page of all the selected newspapers portrayed men political leaders with considerable big pictures with rarely depicting any woman political leader. For strengthening the argument four newspapers (*Dawn July 2, the News July 3, Express June 3, and Jung July 27*) were randomly picked for analysis. The few women political figures who were present were very selective and elitist representation, i.e. most of the pictures were of Benazir, her daughters and a female minister of Media and Culture during Pakistan People Party Government. The key finding to be emphasized here is that all selected newspapers depicted men political leaders more than women political leaders. The only exception was *Express July 3, 2011* where the British interior minister along with her delegation is having meeting with

President of Pakistan. However, the focus here was also President of Pakistan not the entire group as only his face was identifiable. This makes it safe to argue that print media reinforces the stereotype that politics in Pakistan is men's prerogative and exclusive domain. Drawing on liberal feminist, the paper argues that if women are given equal coverage and appropriate representation as that of men in holding political positions they will achieve autonomy in society (see Tong, 1998). The concern thus is that gender biases in coverage of female politician and political figures are important to be pointed out as they have electoral consequences. Women enthusiasm, political motivation and electoral behaviour are influenced and affected by gender differences of media coverage, resulting significant disadvantage for women who wish to participate in politics. The presence of these gender biased representation may hurt the inspiration of young women who have the ability and motivation to join politics. It stops them from coming forward due to absence of role model. The nub of discussion then is that the 'monolithic way in which print media portrays the social world is what Antonio Gramsci called 'common sense' that organizes citizen 'thoughts and actions' (Gramsci, 1971 cited in Ullah & Ali, 2012).

### **Essentializing nurturing as women's role**

As evident from the preceding discussion, print media in Pakistan reinforces stereotypical gender roles in line with the essentialists' argument, i.e., women are kind by nature and fit for nurturing and homemaking and men for the public domain (see Francis, 2006). Portraying women with the titles as "super mom", *mamta ka payar* (mother love) *Jaha mamta waha Dalda* banks upon the notion of essentialists' claim that women are kind hearted, caring by nature and therefore they are the best for nurturing role (See Ullah, 2013; 2007). Following picture is one of the several pictures from the print media that demonstrates nurturing as women's natural role.

**Image 1**

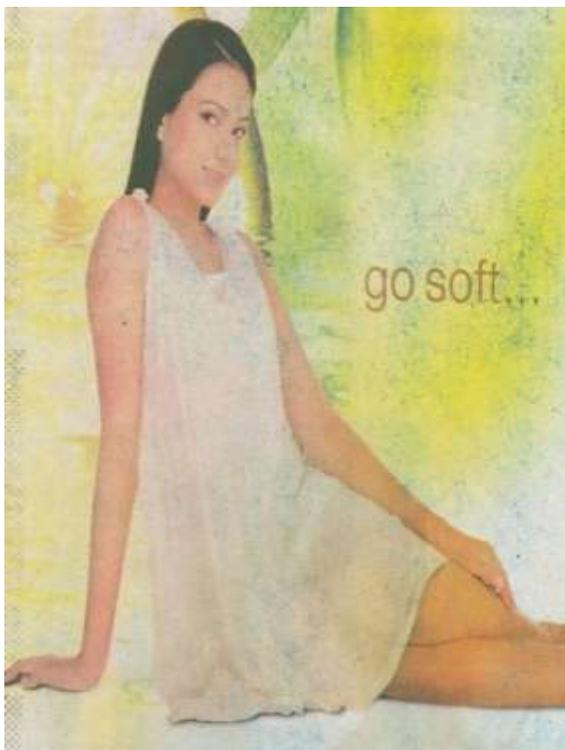
*Image # 1* is one of the several pictures in the print media that reinforces the stereotypical belief that what role(s) a woman should play in family/society. The portrayal of woman in the traditional nurturing role and physical contact with the children reinforces the belief that mother is the best nurturing figure and nurturing is something that resides in a woman's nature. The text in the same image gives a message of the responsible mother and 'super mom'. Such stereotypical portrayals "essentialize women and associate motherhood with biological difference between the sexes, which are "modeled on practical gender role expectation... which, in turn, shapes male and female "behaviour to confirm to gender distinction derived from biological essentialism" (Dillabough, 2006: 48). The researchers acknowledge the findings of many research studies (i.e., Miller and Commons, 2010) that mother's love and physical intimacy have positive effects on hippocampus (the brain region or memory and learning), emotional health and even school attainment, but physical closeness of fathers with children are also highly desirable and stressed by numerous psychological studies (see Miller and Commons, 2010; Klein, 2010). A second look at the image enables us to argue that the picture conveys a

powerful message about masculinity and femininity. The image shows the mother and the little daughter with smiling faces while the boy at the back is depicted with a serious expression. This reinforces the traditional characteristics of males as serious and thoughtful and women as causal and outgoing (see figure 3). The picture also objectifies the little girl. The girl is dressed in half-sleeves whereas the boy wears full-sleeves. The message being communicated here is that female body has to be exposed as source of attraction. Mary Holmes, quoting Young (1990), argues that “girls are socialized to a bodily timidity....They also become used to the ideal that their bodies are there to be looked at” (Holmes, 2007: 106). This means that boys’ and girls’ adulthood is influenced by what they have learned about femininity and masculinity in early socialization (see Sharpe 1976; 1994).

### **Objectification of women**

Print media reinforces gender stereotypes through printing photographs that objectify and glamorize women’s bodies. Photographs of seductively dressed young women are printed throughout newspapers, especially on front and showbiz pages. Some of the pictures focus on dehumanizing women and tend to undermine the dignity of the rest of women (see Bwewusa, 2008). Image 2 and 3 are among the several pictures that objectify women by limiting their value to their physical characteristics.

*Image 2*



*Image 3*



*Image # 2* carries several messages, i.e. *go soft* and *Give your skin the freshness...*The arms of the model in image 2 are perfectly shaped, with no imperfections or marks, they have no skin spots, and they appear to be perfectly symmetrical. The discourses of *go soft*, *soft skin*, *fresh skin* are powerful discourses that encourage women to police their bodies and shape them in accordance with the sexist cultural expectation. All these, amongst other uncountable things, are not achievable for the majority of women. The discourses of ‘go soft’ and ‘Give your skin the freshness’ also serve a specific disciplinary power that pushes women into what Naomi Wolf called the iron ‘cage of beautifications’ (see Wolf, 1990). Wolf considers “these practices as part of the ‘beauty myth,’ whereby women’s obsession with attaining [ideal skin] results from patriarchal oppression” (Wolf 1990 cited in Abravanel, 2007: 8). The message being communicated here is that women’s real worth exists in their soft and fresh skin. Similarly, *Image 3* is about facial wash. The advertisement shows girls with smiling faces and white teeth. Smiling is positively correlated with femininity and physical attractiveness for females but not for males. It is believed that a smile can easily win over a male heart. The traditional belief as well as some researches (i.e. Alert, 2011) claim that if a girl has a smiling face she is more likely to be approached by guys than when she has a smug, or frowning, face. Men like smiling ladies and are least attracted to those who looked proud whereas women like men with serious faces and thoughtfulness (see Ullah and Khan, 2014). “These sexist discourses objectify female bodies, which by proxy declare male bodies as symbols of power and superior over female bodies” (Ullah, 2013: 266).The messages being communicated here is that smile and white teeth are depicted as feminine capitals and potential sources of attraction upon which women have to gain recognition (see Skeggs, 2002). Thus, encouraging and cajoling women to conform to male developed ideals of body (Holmes, 2007) vividly trivializes the women’s brain and intellectual capability. Our assertion is that this discriminates women as it creates a limited standard of beauty that is impossible for most women to attain.

*Image 4* is a dress advertisement which we have chosen from among many that objectify women. The

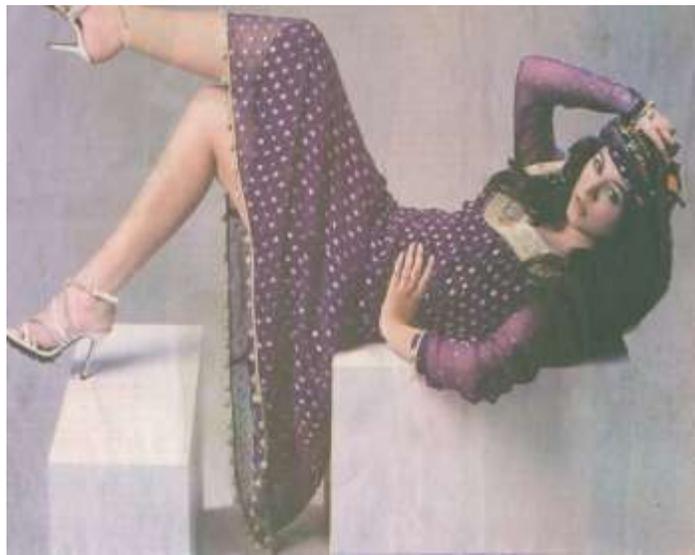
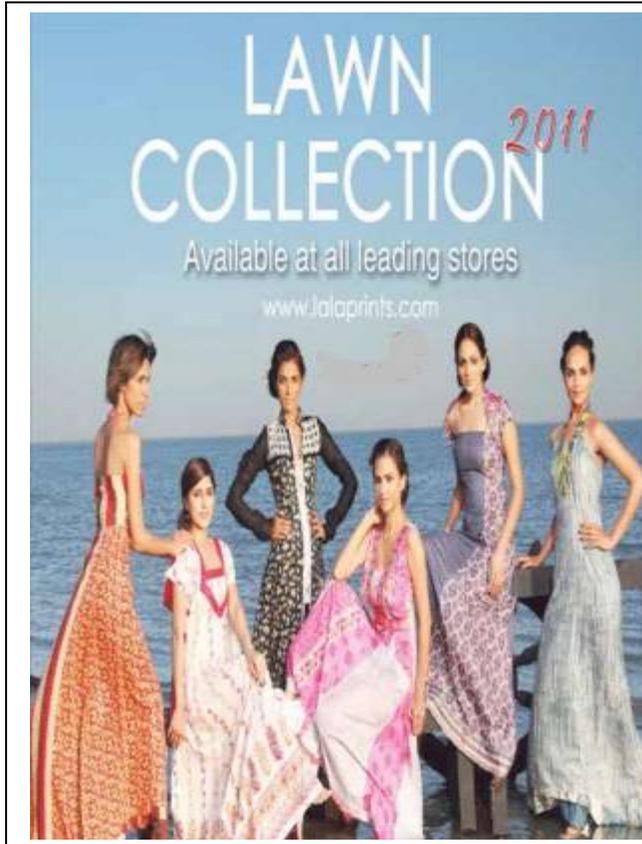


image shows that print media portrays women in sexual way (by degree of dress, facial expression and body pose). The woman in image 4 is scantily dressed and lying in disrespectful body pose. There is nothing unusual about this image; in fact, it's a cliché. Pakistani newspapers are embedded with images just like it. These images construct a world view, to think of women as objects. The image sends audience contrasting messages, i.e. this woman is not in control of the situation and is unable to put up any resistance, whatever someone decide to do; she is lying down in a very erotic pose; her legs perfectly shaped and spotless; gazing at audience directly with seduction; the heavy eyelids also suggest sleepiness and docility. The message being communicated is that women have to invest a great deal in the appearance. If they dress themselves seductively and pose their bodies erotically they could get appreciation (see Holmes, 2007). The point to be stressed here is that women serve themselves up as a sex object. Women objectify themselves by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance (see Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). It is important to point out that the representation of women in these advertisements is distorted. It gives the image of women that do not really exist; and, consequently, diminishes the true concept of woman, the one that really exists.

### **Sexism in Wears: women dress up for leisure men for work**

As discussed earlier and reiterated here that the showbiz page in each newspaper is dominated by women representation. Nevertheless, this does not elevate the status of women. Women, dominantly young, are glamorized and objectified. Advertisements of various products and services agencies represent men and women in line with sexist and traditional gender stereotypes which objectify women by portraying them as cultural sites and object of males' gaze. Contrary to women representation, men are presented as serious, thoughtful and focused on successes in the public domain. The concern that this paper voiced here can be illustrated by the following pictures that the researchers have selected from *The News*. These two illustrations, presented here to substantiate our argument, are among the several sexist pictures that newspapers publish.

*Image 5**Image 6*

In *image 5* a Pakistani summer Lawn Collection is marketized with the portrayal of 6 young women. This image sends numerous stereotypical messages to the audience. For example, it communicates that women have nothing productive but to dress up and wait for people gaze; they have to invest their energy to dress up seductively to attract men; they have to expose their bodies for other people gratification; they don't have any destination and are lost. This reinforces the gender stereotypes that women, whether indoor and outdoor, are to dress up, beautify themselves and wait for men not for any other purpose. Contrary to the advertisement of women dresses, men's suits and dresses are marketed and advertised in a quite gentle manner. The man in *image 6* reinforces gender roles ideology. The picture very vividly tells the readers that public domain/ work in the public domain is men's exclusive right. The man in picture is formally dressed with an executive hand bag, getting into an executive car, serious and thoughtful. The message being communicated here is that men dress up for the public domain whereas women dress up for leisure and attraction.

## Conclusion

The findings provided interesting insights into gender role stereotypes across different newspapers in Pakistan. The results indicate that women in Pakistani print media were mainly portrayed in stereotypical gender roles. The stereotypical images of women such as least interested in politics, becoming super mom, more concerned with physical attractiveness may develop a false-self among to become more feminine along the standards set by men. On the basis of study's findings, it can be asserted that the stereotypical representation of men and women in line with essentialist belief ignores the fact that these stereotypical notions are context, time and space specific and have no relevance in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ullah & Skelton, 2013). Thus, the overall claim that we make here is that print media is used by patriarchal social structure as an instrument for perpetuating male's hegemony on the public domain as well as their control of the private sphere. The possible ways of improving the image of women in print media can be fulfilled only when women themselves try hard for it and change the stereotypical images in all spheres. Female journalists and feminist media can be utilized to improve women representation in print media and challenge stereotypical gender roles.

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