Glass Ceilings in the Newsroom: The Underrepresentation of Women in Indian Media Leadership

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Abstract

The media industry serves as a powerful societal pillar, shaping narratives and influencing public opinion. However, the sector has long been criticized for gender imbalances in its leadership roles. Despite strides in various sectors, the representation of women in decision-making positions within Indian news media remains insufficient. This underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within the news media industry remains a pressing concern, particularly in India. This paper explores the leadership and managerial roles of women in Indian news media. Drawing on quantitative research, qualitative interviewsro, and secondary data analysis, this study examines the current scenario, identifies challenges, and evaluates opportunities for women leaders in news media. Recommendations for promoting gender equity in Indian newsrooms are also proposed.

Keywords: *Female leaders, women editors, Indian News Media, leadership, female managers, women representations, media industry*

Introduction

In varied leadership roles in the arenas of politics, education, sports, social services, healthcare, hospitality, and business, women have proved their competence. Over the last two decades, the number of women leaders in these fields has shown an upward trend. However, the scenario of women leaders in the media industry is not that encouraging. A study of 200 major online and offline news outlets in four continents of the world revealed that less than one-fourth of the top news editors are females. As per a UNESCO report, 'on the global scale, women make up only 24 % of the people heard, read about or seen in the news and only a few manage to reach decision-making positions within media organizations (UNESCO, 2017). However, it is also true that the participation of women in media varies from nation to nation. A study conducted by Reuters Institute revealed that in Japan, none of the major news outlets studied have women as their top editors whereas 47 % of the top editors in South Africa are women (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020). Women represent only a third (33.3 percent) of the full-time journalism workforce in 522

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companies surveyed by the International Women's Media Foundation in the year 2010 (International Women's Media Foundation, 2011). The report mentions that out of the 82 news companies surveyed in ten nations of Asia and Oceania (including India), there are 9742 women as against 37414 men (approx. 20 percent).

While female journalists represent just 2.7% of the total number of journalists at the district level in India, there are six states and two union territories which have zero percentage of women at the district level (Hindustan Times, 2012). A BBC report referred to an article published by the national English daily newspaper The Hindu, in reputed international media organizations like BBC, female journalists working on the BBC's flagship television news bulletins earn Euro 6500 less than their male counterparts on average (Ravi, 2013). Some encouraging data published based on the analysis of top English newspapers in India revealed that about half (49.5 percent) of the front-page articles published by the Hindustan Times are written by women. It is followed by The Indian Express (40.9 percent), Times of India (31.2 percent), The Hindu (27 percent), and The Telegram (16 percent). However, the same study revealed that all the current editors-in-chief are male (Thomas, 2018).

This study investigates the leadership and managerial roles of women in the Indian news media, focusing on their representation, challenges, and opportunities. Women's leadership in media holds both symbolic and substantive significance. Symbolically, female leaders represent progress toward gender equity. Substantively, diverse leadership leads to inclusive content, representing broader societal perspectives. Despite this, structural barriers persist, limiting women's rise to leadership roles.

The representation of women in news media leadership, both globally and in India, highlights significant gender disparities, reflecting systemic barriers and cultural biases that hinder women's progression to decision-making positions. This review of literature examines global trends, regional differences, and the specific context of India.

Besides, the underrepresentation globally, wage disparities also remain a persistent challenge. For instance, female journalists working on flagship programs at the BBC earn an average of €6,500 less annually than their male counterparts (Ravi, 2013). Structural biases within organizations, coupled with societal norms that impose additional domestic responsibilities on women, exacerbate these inequities (UNESCO, 2017). Additionally, the absence of mentorship and support systems for women in media leadership contributes to their

underrepresentation. A study by North (2016) emphasized the importance of institutional reforms to create gender-sensitive workplaces that support women's professional growth.

The Indian news media landscape mirrors global trends, albeit with unique socio-cultural nuances. Women constitute only 2.7% of the total number of journalists at the district level in India, with six states and two union territories reporting no female journalists at this level (Hindustan Times, 2012). These figures highlight the lack of representation, particularly in rural and regional media.

An analysis of bylines in leading Indian newspapers revealed some progress in urban-centric English-language media. For instance, nearly 49.5% of front-page articles in Hindustan Times were authored by women, followed by The Indian Express (40.9%) and Times of India (31.2%). However, none of the editors-in-chief at these newspapers were women (Thomas, 2018). This disparity indicates that while women contribute significantly as reporters and writers, they rarely ascend to leadership positions.

Several factors hinder women's advancement in Indian news media. Women in Indian newsrooms often face gender stereotypes that question their competence and suitability for leadership roles. This bias discourages women from pursuing or being considered for decision-making positions (Rao & Ranganathan, 2020). Societal norms and familial responsibilities disproportionately affect women in India, making it challenging for them to balance professional and personal commitments (Banerjee & Roy, 2019). Studies show significant pay gaps between male and female journalists in India, with women often earning less for equivalent roles and responsibilities (Thomas, 2018).

However, despite the challenges, there are signs of progress and opportunities for women in media leadership. Mentorship programs, organizational policies supporting work-life balance, and advocacy for equal pay have begun to address systemic issues. Notably, some regional media outlets have adopted progressive policies to promote gender diversity. For instance, initiatives like The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) provide platforms for women journalists to network, share experiences, and advocate for equitable policies (NWMI, 2021). Additionally, global movements like #MeToo have had ripple effects in India, prompting media organizations to address harassment and create safer work environments for women (Jain, 2020). These developments are critical for encouraging a more inclusive media landscape.

If we compare the scenario of India with the world, the representation of women in Indian news media shares similarities with global trends, such as wage disparities and the prevalence of workplace biases. However, the socio-cultural context in India adds unique challenges, including a pronounced urban-rural divide and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms (Banerjee & Roy, 2019). Globally, countries with progressive policies and gender-sensitive organizational cultures, such as South Africa and the Nordic nations, demonstrate higher representation of women in media leadership. Lessons from these regions underscore the importance of systemic reforms, including transparent hiring practices, mentorship programs, and equal pay legislation.

Aim, Methods, and Tools

The leadership and managerial role of women in news media hold special significance both substantially as well as symbolically, but this area has not been researched much. This study aims to study the leadership and managerial roles of women in the Indian news media. The study will be based on the gender breakdown of top editors/managers in a sample of 50 online and offline news outlets in the country. Besides, employing quantitative research techniques, interviews of female journalists and editors are to be conducted to understand the challenges and the prospects of the women leaders in Indian News media. The focus of the paper will be to understand the current scenario of women's leadership in Indian news media, identify the challenges, opportunities, and prospects of women's leadership in the Indian news media

A mixed-methods approach is employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Quantitative analysis is utilized to assess the gender breakdown of leadership roles in 50 Indian news outlets, both online and offline, as well as to evaluate trends in wage disparity and career progression. These quantitative insights establish a baseline for understanding the extent of gender disparities within the industry. In addition, qualitative methods are adopted, including semi-structured interviews with 10 female journalists and editors. These interviews delve into the personal experiences of participants, uncovering the nuanced challenges they face, such as workplace biases, societal expectations, and wage inequalities. They also explore strategies used by women to overcome these barriers and advance in their careers.

The study further incorporates secondary data analysis, reviewing existing literature and reports from global organizations such as UNESCO (2017) and the International Women's Media Foundation. These sources provide comparative perspectives on global and regional

trends, helping contextualize the findings within broader frameworks of media and gender studies. By combining quantitative data, qualitative insights, and secondary analyses, the study offers a holistic perspective on the systemic barriers and opportunities for women's leadership in Indian news media.

Besides, engligh and hindi newspapers, selected television and digital platforms were included in the study that included The Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, The Telegraph, Business Standard, The Indian Express, Hindi Newspapers, Dainik Jagran, Dainik Bhaskar, Hindustan, Amar Ujala, Rajasthan Patrika, Prabhat Khabar, Punjab Kesari, EastMojo, Scroll, Newslaundry, The News Minute, The Quint, The Wire, NDTV, India Today, Republic TV, and some vernacular media organizations.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Gendered Organization Theory and the Intersectionality Framework to analyze the systemic barriers and cultural dynamics influencing women's leadership in Indian news media. Gendered Organization Theory, developed by Acker (1990), posits that workplaces are inherently gendered, with power imbalances and hierarchical structures that often privilege men over women. Newsrooms, especially in a patriarchal cultural context like India, are no exception. This theory provides a framework for understanding how organizational culture and structural inequalities contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Women journalists face implicit biases, wage disparities, and limited access to mentorship, all of which hinder their advancement to decision-making positions.

Complementing this is the Intersectionality Framework, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), which emphasizes the interplay of multiple social categorizations, such as gender, caste, class, and ethnicity. Intersectionality is particularly relevant in India, where these identities significantly shape women's experiences in the workplace. Women journalists from marginalized communities, vernacular media, or rural areas face compounded challenges due to the intersection of their identities. This framework helps to illuminate the unique and layered forms of oppression faced by women in the media industry, beyond the barriers of gender alone.

The objectives of this study align with these theoretical perspectives. First, it seeks to understand the current scenario of women's leadership in Indian news media by analyzing their representation in decision-making roles. Second, it aims to identify the challenges and

barriers, such as workplace bias, wage gaps, and societal expectations, that impede women's advancement. Third, it highlights opportunities and best practices, including mentorship programs, equitable hiring practices, and policies that promote work-life balance. Finally, the study provides actionable recommendations to address gender disparities, focusing on systemic reforms and cultural shifts needed to promote an inclusive media environment. Together, these theoretical frameworks offer a comprehensive lens to examine the underrepresentation of women in media leadership while paving the way for strategies to achieve gender equity.

Findings and Analysis

A survey of Indian news media organizations reveals significant gender disparity across various roles, particularly in leadership and editorial positions. Preliminary analysis of leadership roles in 50 sampled Indian news outlets reveals that women hold less than 15% of these positions. The representation is relatively better in urban-centric and English-language media compared to regional and vernacular outlets, reflecting a skewed access to leadership opportunities in favor of metropolitan and globalized newsrooms. This disparity underlines structural inequities, with regional outlets, which cater to a vast audience, being particularly bereft of female voices in decision-making roles (UNESCO, 2017)..

In leadership roles, women remain underrepresented. A 2022 report by Newslaundry and UN Women found that 87% of editors and proprietors in Indian news media are men, leaving just 13% of these roles to women. Hindi newspapers exhibit greater disparity, with fewer than 10% of women in senior positions, while English newspapers fare slightly better at 15%. *The Telegraph* showcases relatively equitable leadership, whereas *The Indian Express* and *The Statesman* are predominantly male-led (Newslaundry & UN Women, 2022). Byline counts reflect the gender disparity in newsroom roles. Men author approximately 75% of articles in major Hindi and English newspapers, according to a 2021 Newslaundry report. Similarly, television news panels comprise over 80% male participants, demonstrating a lack of female voices in broadcast journalism (Newslaundry, 2021).

Digital platforms show better representation, with women occupying 37.5% of leadership roles. For instance, *EastMojo* and *The News Minute* have 66.67% female representation in editorial and proprietorial positions, indicating that digital media is leading the shift towards inclusivity (Newslaundry & UN Women, 2022). While specific data on desk and field roles is less extensive, the male dominance in byline counts suggests similar trends in reporting roles.

Women are underrepresented in both field reporting and desk operations, which impacts their visibility and contribution to news narratives (Newslaundry, 2021).

Female respondents consistently reported encountering implicit and explicit biases that questioned their competence and authority. These biases ranged from doubts about their ability to handle complex political stories to being overlooked for high-stakes leadership assignments, a trend corroborated by international studies. Pay disparity continues to undermine gender equity. Female journalists and editors in India report earning significantly less than their male counterparts for equivalent roles, mirroring trends observed globally (Ravi, 2013).

Many respondents pointed to the absence of senior female mentors as a critical challenge. The lack of representation at the top creates a vacuum in mentorship opportunities, leaving aspiring women journalists without role models to guide them. Besides, societal norms and expectations around domestic responsibilities disproportionately affect women in leadership roles. Balancing demanding newsroom schedules with personal responsibilities remains a significant barrier, as noted in prior studies.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings of this study underscore a persistent and troubling gender imbalance in Indian news media leadership. Despite incremental progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making roles, particularly in regional and vernacular outlets. Gender biases, wage disparities, lack of mentorship, and societal expectations create formidable barriers to women's advancement in this field. While digital media is paving the way for better gender representation, traditional print and television newsrooms still have significant ground to cover. Achieving gender equity requires systemic reforms, including policy initiatives and efforts to foster diverse newsroom cultures.

However, the potential for transformative change is evident. Transparent policies, targeted training programs, and inclusive organizational cultures can pave the way for greater gender diversity in media leadership. The role of women leaders in shaping media narratives is critical, both substantively and symbolically, for a society striving toward gender inclusivity and equality. Addressing these issues requires a multi-stakeholder approach. Policymakers must implement regulatory measures to ensure equitable hiring and promotion practices. Media organizations need to adopt gender-sensitive policies and actively create an

environment that supports female leaders. Finally, the broader societal discourse must challenge and dismantle stereotypes that restrict women's roles in professional settings.

By leveraging these opportunities for change, the Indian news media industry can not only bridge its gender gap but also enhance its credibility and relevance in a rapidly evolving landscape. The active participation of women in leadership roles is not just a matter of equity; it is a strategic imperative for the industry to remain vibrant and make the mission of VikshitBharat a success.

The underrepresentation of women in Indian news media leadership reflects deeply entrenched societal and institutional barriers. This issue is not unique to India but resonates with global trends, as highlighted by UNESCO (2017), which indicates that women hold less than a quarter of top editorial positions worldwide. However, India's socio-cultural context adds unique dimensions to this problem, necessitating context-specific interventions. The presence of women in leadership roles is not merely symbolic; it is substantively transformative. Female leaders bring diverse perspectives to newsroom decision-making, shaping narratives that are more inclusive and representative. However, systemic biases and structural impediments continue to limit their participation. Gender bias in newsrooms, ranging from stereotypical role assignments to exclusion from high-profile stories, reinforces male dominance in leadership roles. Similarly, wage disparities and the lack of mentorship networks exacerbate existing inequalities, as noted by studies such as those by the International Women's Media Foundation (2011).

Cultural expectations further compound these challenges. Women are often expected to conform to traditional family roles, limiting their ability to take on demanding leadership responsibilities. This dual burden is especially pronounced in Indian society, where conservative norms prevail in many regions. Yet, urban-centric newsrooms show promise, with comparatively higher female representation in leadership roles. Such disparities underscore the need for targeted efforts to bridge the urban-rural divide in media leadership.

Encouragingly, several opportunities for change have emerged. Transparent hiring practices and gender-sensitive workplace policies can dismantle some barriers women face. Mentorship and training programs tailored to the unique challenges of women in media leadership can empower aspiring female journalists and editors. Additionally, having an inclusive organizational culture that values diverse perspectives is crucial for achieving gender equity.

India can draw lessons from countries with higher female representation in media leadership, such as South Africa, where nearly half of top editorial positions are held by women (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020). Collaborative efforts between policymakers, media organizations, and advocacy groups can drive systemic change. Media watchdogs and gender-focused NGOs must play an active role in monitoring and advocating for equitable practices.

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