

Television as a Catalyst for Women's Empowerment: Insights from Gampaha District, Sri Lanka

Abstract

In the captivating realm of media influence, television stands as a powerful storyteller, weaving narratives that transcend the boundaries of households. As a pervasive element in households, television has the potential to be more than a source of entertainment it can be a catalyst for societal change. The discussion about empowering women continues to be a significant issue in the development of many countries. Therefore, it is important that women have the capability to make decisions about their own lives. In that context, there is a need for something to enable and empower them. As an efficient tool for women's empowerment, television can be used to raise awareness among women in society. Therefore, this current study investigated the impact of television media on women empowerment in Sri Lanka by following a qualitative approach and conducting in-depth interviews as a data collection method. This study answers two research questions and it targeted women aged above eighteen years as a sample using judgmental sampling technique and a thematic analysis approach was used to interpret findings. The study revealed that although television media's influence in raising awareness about women's rights is limited, it does play a role in empowering women in areas such as physical appearance, nutrition, health, modern lifestyles, education, and employment. To enhance the contribution of television media to women's empowerment, recommendations were put forth, including ensuring the freedom of expression for both women and media entities.

Keywords: Media, Sri Lanka, Television, Women empowerment

Introduction

Women have been playing a noteworthy role in society from the beginning of the world. Women can be considered as the backbone of a country which is essential for accelerating the development of the country. The empowerment of women is a significant topic of discussion in developing societies and remains a central issue in the present era (Moroojo, Shafiq, Abro, & Bhayo, 2021, 22-23). Empowerment is seen as a dynamic journey, and there isn't a universal formula for it. What might empower one woman may not have the same effect on another. Throughout this process, women's external factors like education, health, awareness, mobility, decision-making abilities,

financial security, and their role within the family, as well as internal factors such as confidence and self-awareness, are enhanced, enabling them to lead more fulfilling lives (Johnson, 2023). The women's movement has largely worked towards establishing the social and cultural belief that women possess equal competencies and decision-making capacities as men.

Since the monarchial era in Sri Lanka, women's contribution to the country's economic, political, social, and cultural development has been equally important to society. Sri Lanka presents itself as a country in South Asia that has a set of rich cultural norms and values toward women and their rights. More than half of the Sri Lankan population is dominated by females. Therefore, women have made their existence indispensable to this contemporary society. Even though there are a lot of opportunities for women to achieve their success, still, there is some room for degrading their values in society. This study seeks to address the evolving landscape of women's empowerment in Gampaha District, Sri Lanka, within the context of television media influence. Despite advancements in gender equality and women's rights, persistent challenges such as gender-based violence, limited political representation, and cultural barriers continue to hinder the full realization of women's empowerment in Sri Lanka. Therefore, women must be empowered to conquer these challenges and to establish their role in the development process. Women in society can be empowered in different ways. Among them, mass media holds a significant place. Further, television has become the most influential media in contemporary society as it has a wider audience than other mass media tools. By addressing this gap, the present study aims to contribute to theoretical advancements in the field of media studies and women's empowerment research. Through an exploration of women's lived experiences and perceptions, this study seeks to explain the mechanisms through which television media influences various dimensions of empowerment, including physical appearance, health awareness, education, and employment opportunities.

Research Questions and Objectives

The primary research question of this study is what are the impacts of television media on women empowerment in Gampaha district in Sri Lanka? And the secondary research question is how to improve television media to empower women in Sri Lanka.

The main research objective of the study is to identify the impacts of television media on women empowerment in Gampaha district in Sri Lanka and subsequently, it has another objective which is to provide suggestions to improve television media to empower women in Sri Lanka.

Significance of the Study

Facilitating women empowerment in a country has a direct impact on the development of the country and media is a great tool for achieving this objective. Hence television can change women's lives by raising awareness. Further, as the researcher identified, the literature about women empowerment with television media has not been adequately documented in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this study would be helpful in evaluating the impact of television media on women's empowerment in Sri Lanka and be an inspiration for future researchers. **This study holds significant importance on multiple stakeholders . The findings of the study can guide policymakers and media stakeholders in developing more inclusive and empowering content that reflects the diverse experiences and aspirations of Sri Lankan women. Finally, by hearing the voices and experiences of women in the context of television media , this study aims to advance the cause of women's rights and empowerment in Sri Lanka and beyond.**

Literature Review

Women Empowerment

According to Ojha(2011), women empowerment is considered as a sum of empowerment including political, social, cultural, and other aspects of human life such as physical, moral, and intellectual development while Guptha (2018) has stated in his research that women empowerment refers to providing the necessary rights and responsibilities to women in order to make them self reliant. Further, as stressed by Akhter & Naheed (2014), women empowerment means the power of authority to take control over life and make independent decisions. Batliwala & Sen (2000) have also stated the same by definition, empowerment is a process by which the powerless woman gains greater control over the circumstances in her life. He further elaborated his statement by saying that empowerment leads to a growing self-confidence and an inner transformation that enables women to overcome external obstacles.

Media

Akhter & Naheed (2014) has defined media as a channel that is used to express opinion to others. Further Barber & Axinn (2004) also defined media as the transmission channels for information in any form, including television, radio, magazines, and movies. While television is considered as a tool of mass media as well as a tool for women's empowerment, Subhash & Patil (2014) stress

television is an institutional source of information to create awareness about innovations and it is considered as one of the most versatile audio-visual aid.

Television media's impact on women's empowerment can be understood through various theoretical lenses, each offering unique insights into the complex dynamics at play:

Feminist Media Theory: Feminist media theory examines how media representations contribute to the reinforcement of gender inequalities and stereotypes. By analyzing television content from a feminist perspective, researchers uncover the underlying power dynamics and societal challenges to women's empowerment (Gill, 2007).

Cultivation Theory: Cultivation theory posits that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality. In the context of women's empowerment, cultivation theory explains how repeated portrayals of gender roles and stereotypes on television influence societal attitudes towards women (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Social Cognitive Theory: Social cognitive theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, suggests that individuals learn from observing others and imitating their behaviors. Applied to television media, this theory elucidates how women's perceptions of empowerment are influenced by the characters and narratives they encounter on screen (Bandura, 1986).

The Impact of television media on women empowerment

According to Tunio & Shoukat (2015), their study has proved that television has a positive impact on women's empowerment and it increases the awareness of women's rights, especially social and economic rights. Subhash & Patil (2014) and Akhter & Naheed (2014) have also proved that media including television plays a great positive role in promoting social awareness and educating them about their rights and laws. Zia (2007) proved that women's expenditure on personal dressing and appearance has mainly an impact from watching television. Similarly, according to Ward & Aubrey (2017), a study has evidence that exposure to appearance-focused television content has an impact on girl's opinions of their fashions. Further, there is a piece of counter-evidence that television also has a negative impact on women by influencing and imprinting what people regard as an attractive female body as it would affect one's body satisfaction and self-esteem (Jucker, et al., 2017).

According to Rahman, Curtis, Chakraborty, & Jamil (2017), their study has proved that women who watch television practice better reproductive health behaviors than women who do not. Pallikadavath, Sanneh, Mcwhriter, & Stones (2005) showed that being exposed to television raised women's awareness of AIDS considerably in a situation among all electronic media television was the most influential media which had an effect in improving AIDS awareness. Further, Christofolletti, et al. (2019) proved that even if there is a negative impact of excessive television watching which causes psychological health, it also reduces scores of negative moods of women. Akhter & Naheed (2014) have proved that television plays a positive role in giving awareness to women to adopt impressive lifestyles while Subhash & Patil (2014) also stated that if the mass media are effective in a way which lifestyles of women will be improved and developed in day-to-day life. Jin and Jeong (2010) cited in Westoff, Koffman, & Moreau (2011) said that women prefer fewer children for a family and it is because of the emphasis on fewer quality children by television dramas.

Subhash & Patil (2014) also discussed how media has affected positively women's education as it is considered as one of the promising present-day educational sources. But Das (2012) has also emphasized that television programs in the form of entertainment films or film-based programs provide little opportunities for education about new values and skills. Employment and cash earnings are more likely to empower women if women make decisions about their earnings alone or jointly with their husband rather than their husbands alone (Nayak & Mahanta, 2009). As Subhash & Patil (2014) said, economic independence has contributed a lot towards the improvement of women. Akhter & Naheed (2014) have proved that media including television plays a weak role in the professional development of women.

Methodology

The qualitative research approach was chosen to provide a deeper understanding of how television media influences various aspects of women's empowerment within the cultural and societal context of Gampaha District. Further, following the qualitative research approach gives a better understanding of the research area. The study population comprises women residing in Gampaha District, Sri Lanka, representing diverse backgrounds, ages, marital statuses, and occupations. A sample size of 12 women was selected for in-depth interviews to ensure a manageable yet diverse

pool of participants, allowing for in-depth exploration of their experiences and perspectives. The sampling procedure employed a combination of convenience and judgmental sampling methods. By conducting in-depth interviews, this approach allowed for rich data collection, enabling the exploration of participants' lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions related to television media and empowerment. For the study thematic analysis approach was applied where the researcher had to identify themes based on previous literature findings and then analyze the primary data under each identified theme.

Analysis

Background of the Sample

Table 1 shows the composition of the selected respondents of the sample.

Respondents	Name (pseudonymous)	Age Category	Marital Status	Employability
G01	Nayana	30-40 years	Married	Dressmaker
G02	Kamala	20-30 years	Married	Crafter
G03	Thamara	30-40 years	Single Parent	Run a grocery
G04	Wimala	30-40 years	Single	Laborer
G05	Naduni	20-30 years	Single	Student, Content Writer
G06	Maduni	20-30 years	Married	Housewife
G07	Sanduni	20-30 years	Single	Works in a studio
G08	Amara	20-30 years	Married	Works in a bank
G09	Upuli	20-30 years	Single	School Teacher
G10	Supuni	30-40 years	Married	Run a flower yard
G11	Dilma	30-40 years	Single	Unemployed
G12	Ganga	20-30 years	Married	Housewife

(Source: Field Data)

Factors Affecting Women's Empowerment

Women's Right

Respondents expressed varying views on the effectiveness of television in disseminating knowledge about women's rights. Upuli (pseudonymous) (G09) emphasized that television mainly covers women's rights issues during incidents like rape cases, sexual harassment, and murders related to women. After a few days, these issues receive less attention. Ganga (pseudonymous) (G12) and Maduni (pseudonymous) (G06) confirmed this sentiment, suggesting that television provides limited opportunities to acquire awareness about women's rights.

Physical Appearance

The majority of the respondents acknowledged that television had a substantial impact on their dressing choices. TV programs such as 'Nuga Sewana,' 'Seda Mawatha,' and 'Ayubowan Sri Lanka' were mentioned for providing information on cosmetics, clothing, and jewelry. Respondents like Nayana (pseudonymous) (G 01), Naduni (pseudonymous) (G 05), and Amara (pseudonymous) (G 08) noted that teledramas and reality shows highlighted women's beauty in terms of clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles. The influence of television on women's dressing patterns was widely recognized, as nearly all respondents shared similar views. Television media also had a notable impact on women's perceptions of their body size. Ten out of twelve respondents expressed that television influenced their body image. Advertisements and actresses in teledramas were identified as motivators for maintaining a good figure. Some shared personal experiences, such as Ganga (Pseudonymous) (G 12), who mentioned calling a TV channel to inquire about a weight loss product. Amara (Pseudonymous) (G 08) admitted being tempted by advertisements for products like green tea that promised weight loss and beauty. Kamala (Pseudonymous) (G 02) highlighted how the younger generation often prioritizes appearance over values, attributing this shift to television media and social platforms. However, two respondents, Upuli (pseudonymous) (G 09) and Wimala (pseudonymous) (G 04) raised concerns about the negative effects of portraying unrealistic beauty ideals on television and the resulting mental and health issues.

Nutrition and Health

The majority of the respondents expressed the view that television media is useful in increasing awareness about diseases and health behavior. Thamara (pseudonymous) (G 03) shared a personal experience of how a specific program during her pregnancy had been helpful. Wimala (pseudonymous) (G 03) mentioned that TV programs on traditional Ayurveda medicine provided valuable information on maintaining a healthy lifestyle through advice on healthy food, medicine,

and habits. Some respondents, however, felt that television media did not provide enough opportunities to enhance their awareness about diseases and health behavior. Nayana (Pseudonymous) (G 01) explained that her busy schedule led to the habit of self-medicating even for minor health issues, as she often missed health-related programs. Upuli (Pseudonymous) (G 09) emphasized the need for more programs focused on women's health in Sri Lanka and highlighted the challenges of busy schedules. Naduni (Pseudonymous) (G 05) mentioned that while she had seen brief advertisements about yearly checkups for women's health issues like cervical and breast cancers, longer and more informative programs were lacking. Dilma (Pseudonymous) (G 11) also noted that weekends often lacked health-related programming.

Modern Lifestyle

Respondents largely shared similar views that television, especially through teledramas and advertisements, frequently promotes aspects of modernity. For instance, Dilma (Pseudonymous) (G 11) highlighted that television emphasizes the use of smartphones, high-tech gadgets, expensive clothing, and English language proficiency as symbols of being modern. Thamara (pseudonymous) (G 03) expressed her fascination with certain advertised products that she couldn't afford but desired. Upuli (pseudonymous) (G 09) pointed out that while modern lifestyle patterns ease daily tasks, they can also negatively impact women's health and make them more sedentary. She shared an example of purchasing a product she saw on TV. Naduni (pseudonymous) (G 05) mentioned how television exposes viewers to experiences they may never encounter in their lives, such as nightclubs. Some respondents recognized the educational value of television in providing awareness about modern living, even if they couldn't necessarily adopt these lifestyles themselves. Amara (pseudonymous) (G 08) shared an example of learning table manners from a television program.

Women's Education

Most respondents expressed that when they see educated and talented women on television, they feel inspired to become like them. For an example, Naduni (Pseudonymous) (G 05) wished to participate in programs like "Sirasa Lakshpathi" after watching them. Others mentioned how seeing high achievers in exams or differently-abled individuals excel on TV motivated them to work harder. However, respondents also noted that there aren't enough educational programs on Sri Lankan television. They mentioned barriers such as financial difficulties and busy work

schedules. Some resorted to using YouTube for learning when they couldn't find suitable programs on TV. While a few respondents believed that television indirectly provided educational information, others, like Upuli (Pseudonymous) (G 09), emphasized the need for television channels and the government to make better use of this medium to improve women's education.

Women's Employment

Many respondents found television media to be a valuable resource for their employment. Nayana (Pseudonymous) (G 01) mentioned that outfit designs and fashion shows on television were helpful for her sewing work. Kamala (Pseudonymous) (G 02) shared how a TV program, specifically "Nuga Sewana," inspired her to start a self-employment venture to support her family. Naduni (Pseudonymous) (G 05) described how she stumbled upon a discussion about e-business opportunities on television during the pandemic, leading her to register with a company. Others also cited instances where they or their friends found self-employment opportunities after watching relevant TV programs. While some respondents believed that television media provided valuable self-employment opportunities, others, like Ganga (Pseudonymous) (G 12), expressed frustration with the predominance of entertainment and comedy shows on television.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal multifaceted impacts of television media on women's empowerment in Gampaha District, Sri Lanka. Television serves as a significant source of information and influence, shaping women's perceptions, behaviors, and aspirations in various domains of life.

The study found that television media plays a limited role in disseminating knowledge about women's rights. While incidents like rape cases and sexual harassment receive attention, sustained coverage of women's rights issues is lacking. This aligns with the findings of Akhter & Naheed (2014), who emphasized the need for greater attention from television channels to have a more substantial impact on women's empowerment. Further, television significantly influences women's perceptions of beauty standards and body image. Programs and advertisements often promote unrealistic beauty ideals, impacting women's self-esteem and body satisfaction. This corroborates the findings of Jucker et al. (2017) and Ward & Aubrey (2017), highlighting the detrimental effects of appearance-focused television content on women's mental and physical well-being. Television

media contributes to increasing awareness about diseases and health behaviors among women. However, there is a need for more comprehensive programming focused on women's health issues to address gaps in knowledge and promote healthier lifestyles. This finding is consistent with Rahman et al. (2017) and Pallikadavath et al. (2005), who emphasized the importance of television in raising awareness about reproductive health and diseases. Moreover, Television often portrays aspects of modernity, influencing women's aspirations and lifestyles. While exposure to modern living through television can be educational, it also poses challenges, such as promoting consumerism and sedentary behavior. This finding resonates with Subhash & Patil (2014) and Christofolletti et al. (2019), who discussed the dual impact of television on promoting modern lifestyles and its potential negative effects on women's health. Television media serves as a source of inspiration and information for women's education and employment. Educational programs and success stories showcased on television motivate women to pursue higher education and explore self-employment opportunities. However, there is a need for more targeted programming and resources to address barriers to women's education and employment. This finding is supported by Nayak & Mahanta (2009) and Tunio & Shoukat (2015), who emphasized the role of media in empowering women through education and employment opportunities.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to identify the impact of television media on women's empowerment in Lanka. The key findings of this study are the impact of television media on giving awareness about women's rights is still lacking. It hence further required attention from television channels to have a greater impact on women's empowerment in Sri Lanka. Further, it resulted that there is an impact on women's empowerment in terms of physical appearance and there is an impact of television media on giving awareness to adopt impressive lifestyles to women in Sri Lanka. Then, it says even though the attention of television media regarding this topic is less, there is an impact of existing and previous programs of television media on awareness about diseases and health behaviors. Moreover, it was found although there is a lack of TV programs directly focusing women's education, up to some extent television media has a fewer impact on women's education indirectly. Finally, it found that television media has an impact on women's empowerment in terms of women's employment. This study suggests for media organizations and sponsors in this field to

introduce more programs to empower women in Sri Lanka.. Despite this limitation, the findings underscore the potential of television media to empower women by providing valuable information and resources.

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, comprising 12 women from Gampaha District, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the use of convenience and judgmental sampling methods may have introduced selection bias, potentially skewing the perspectives represented in the study. Moreover, the qualitative nature of the research limits the ability to establish causal relationships between television media exposure and women's empowerment outcomes. Moving forward, future research in this area could benefit from larger and more diverse samples, encompassing a wider range of demographic characteristics and geographic locations within Sri Lanka. Employing longitudinal designs could also provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of television media exposure on women's empowerment trajectories. Furthermore, exploring the role of social media and digital platforms alongside traditional television media could offer a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary media influences on women's empowerment.

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