

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN NEWS AND FEATURE PHOTOS: A STUDY ON SELECTED BANGLADESHI DAILIES

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ABSTRACT

Visual representation becomes a mode of comprehending the world and news media are among the major carriers of visual image. How media represent women through texts and images are considered to be a key influence on people's idea of women's position in society. This research anchored on the theoretical lens of feminist media theory, media representation and media objectification theory, investigated how women are represented in news and feature photographs of Bangladeshi newspapers. This study has employed content analysis method for data collection. Two top circulation Bangladeshi national dailies, the Daily Star and the Prothom Alo, were chosen purposively. Newspaper copies of one year, for the period of 1st January to 31st December 2022, were chosen for the study. Following Stempel's (1952) suggestion, researcher decided to scrutiny 24 issues of each newspaper, taking copies dated 2 and 16 of every month as sample. This study found that women are underrepresented and misrepresented in news and feature photographs. Even in the dailies, considered by many as prestige newspapers, women are rarely presented as protagonists in photos. Although improvements are noticeable in some aspects, news and feature photos still present women as negative, trivial and associate mostly with the private sphere (household and family life). Findings of the study validates the observation we found in previous researches that women continue to be marginalized in news and feature photos.

Keyword: News and feature photos, Coverage of women, Feminist media theory, Media representation, Objectification

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1. INTRODUCTION

The negative and imbalanced portrayal of women in media has long been an issue of academic, political and social concern. 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing recognized the prevailing disparities in covering women's issues and called for taking action to redress the problem. All three (many claimed a fourth one) waves of feminism, in their fight to achieve equality, pointed to different dimensions of the issue. The first wave's successful call for voting rights paved the way for the second wave's more elaborate inquiry into the sources of institutional disparity. Examining the negative and stereotyped representation of women in news media through content analysis of written text and photographic images has thought to be an effective technique to expose the gender insensitivity of media, which in turn perpetuates the prevailing gender imbalances in society. More advanced third (and fourth) wave of feminism continuing this trend of feminist media research. According to a UNESCO (2011) document. Women constitute half of the world population and they are an important part of the media consumers. Yet, women still do not constitute half of the media images and voices, nor media messages address half of women's interests and concerns. Modern world is characterized by the supremacy of pictures. As German philosopher Heidegger (1977, p. 134) puts it, "The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word 'picture' (Bild) now means the structured image (Gebild) that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before". Images replace texts as the basis of our understanding of the world. News media are among the major carriers of these pictures and images. The world around us is altogether too large, too distant, and too complicated to comprehend experientially. Media, to be more precise, news media brings the

world to our reach. Media messages, textual or pictorial, reproduce the reality for the masses. It also forms the “hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as reality” (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 21).

Media have the obvious capability to communicate a preferred set of opinion and behavior in any given situation. Visual images are powerful tools to carry out this communication. A plethora of studies support the notion that photos are more effective than texts to convey information. Even people who are not literate can scan images and sometimes photos in newspapers are their only source of knowledge about representation. Zillmann, Gibson and Sargent (1999) suggest that the visual depiction of news events will always be more attractive to people, no matter how lucid the textual description of events are. Blackwood (1983, p. 711) found that, “photos have a greater impact on memory, as they break the monotony of the printed pages”. Photographs are subject to interpretation, value-laden and a representation of reality, as it is impossible to reproduce the reality (Creedon, 1993). The way any specific subject is represented through photos, forms the identity of that subject. As an agent of socialization, news media play a vital role in constructing gender related identities, norms and values. The way media represent women, deeply affects the way we view women’s position and role in society. Wood (1994) stated three themes to describe how all forms of media represent gender. These are underrepresentation, stereotyping and emphasizing traditional roles. If the media continuously portray women as docile, unprofessional, dependent and emotional; it will discourage people from accepting women in strong, independent, authoritative positions. So it is crucial to researching the issue to approximate the situation. This study is an endeavor to inquire about the way Bangladeshi newspapers represent women through news and feature photographs.

Objectives

The fundamental objective of this research is to investigate how women are represented in news and feature photographs in the national daily newspapers of Bangladesh. Secondary objectives of this research are:

1. To estimate the coverage news and feature photos of women in Bangladeshi press.
2. To assess the prominence Bangladeshi newspapers assigned to news and feature photos of women.
3. To explore the issues covered in news and feature photos of women in Bangladeshi print media.
4. To inquire about the extent of using unnecessary news and feature photos of women in Bangladeshi newspapers.
5. To find out the magnitude of women’s portrayal as vulnerable, in news and feature photos of women, printed in Bangladeshi press.
6. To investigate the degree of women’s positive representation in news and feature photos of women in Bangladeshi print media.

Research Question

To achieve these objectives researcher sought to answer the following research questions:

1. RQ 1: How much coverage did Bangladeshi newspapers provide to the news and feature photos of women?
2. RQ 2: How much prominence Bangladeshi newspapers were given to the women related news and feature photos in terms placement (i.e., first page, last page and inner pages)?
3. RQ 3: What types of subjects have been covered by the women related news and feature photos published in the newspapers?
4. RQ 4: How much of the news and feature photos of women printed in Bangladeshi newspapers were unnecessary?
5. RQ 5: How much of the published news and feature photos represented women as vulnerable?
6. RQ 6: Are the successful women represented in positive ways in the newspapers?

Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by feminist media theory, media representation theory and objectification theory. An offshoot of the second wave of feminism, feminist media theory applies concepts and philosophies of feminist theory to media and focuses on media’s relation to gender. Pioneering works of Friedan (1963), Mulvey (1975), Zoonen (1994) emphasized the need to investigate the representation and portrayal of gender in mass media. Recognized for its’ power to generate and dispense ideologies, mass media are accused of favoring patriarchal values by prescribing: “how to be a perfect mother, lover, wife, homemaker, glamorous accessory, secretary – whatever suits the needs of the system” (Davies et al., 1987, p.4). Media representation is the way how different media platforms portrays certain groups of people and how certain issues (like gender, race) are explained to the audience from a certain ideological or value perspective. Through representation media creates shared meaning by what is present, what is absent, and

what is different (Hall, 1997). Feminist scholars call for an in-depth analysis of mass media content to explore the nature of the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women. Major research method they employed to achieve this goal was quantitative and qualitative content analysis of media texts and images (to measure the frequency of specific types of pictures or text) and measuring effects of media messages. Zoonen (1994, p. 5) described the representation of women in media as a central “battleground” for modern feminism. Tuchman (2000) suggests that through the process of omission, trivialization, and condemnation media erased the presence of some social groups (in this case women) and devalued them. She termed this underrepresentation of women in media as “symbolic annihilation”. Objectification, an idea crucial to feminist theory, can be defined as the process of representing/ seeing/ treating a person, generally a female as an object to be owned and valued for her use by the male rather than as an individual on her own right (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). This theory posits that women are perceived as sex objects, mere aggregate of her body parts and media images play a big role in the creation, propagation and perpetuation of objectification. By exploring women’s visual representation in mainstream films Mulvey (1975) found evidence of objectification which she termed as “male gaze”, portrayals of women in a manner to satisfy the desires of patriarchal society. Following these theoretical orientations and research methods, this study selected a volume of media corpus (newspaper photos) to examine the nature of photographic representation of women by analyzing quantitatively and qualitatively.

Significance of the Study

Researches on media representation of women are not scarce, rather it’s a popular domain of inquiry both at national and international level. But the dominant trend is to focus on film, television and social media. Print media attracts lesser attention (with majority of the work explored representation in newspaper and magazine advertising). Representation of women in news and feature photos didn’t receive the attention it deserve. Only research (Hossen, 2001) we found in Bangladesh that addressed the issue were of more than two decades old. Subsequent decades saw major expansion of media reach and increased awareness of gender issues. This study can help academics to decide if these recent progresses beget any change in the nature of representation of women in news and feature photos.

Literature Review

Following Foucault’s philosophy Butler (1990) believes that representation, particularly media representation is a major source of gender identity formation. Media first sets the rules and roles for women and then obliges them to follow those rules as standard. A leading figure in feminist film theory Kuhn (1985) thinks that there is a relationship between how we represent women in photographs, how we view someone as a woman and how we consume the images of women. Photography not only uses women as subject matter, but also constructs a set of ideas on what it means to be a woman. These ideas or meanings then flow through social, cultural, economic spheres and are normalized. In a pioneering study on how news photographs represent women in newspapers, Miller (1975) investigated two of America’s large circulation influential dailies, The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times. She found that except lifestyle pages, every section of the dailies published far more photos of men than women. Women were portrayed mostly as spouses, socialites and entertainers and men were as politicians, professionals and sports figures. They observed that defying the women’s employment scenario in Washington and Los Angeles these newspapers rarely showed women in professional positions. Tuchman (1978) reviewed a large corpus of mass media content and observed that all forms of media including newspapers portrayed women in traditional roles like homemakers and mothers. She found that print media like newspapers and magazines, by using photographs and other journalistic tools, tend to present women as dependent and incapable of living without male support. Borrowing Tuchman’s words, through the process of omission, diminution, and denunciation, mass media not only ignores women (and other minority groups), but also symbolically annihilates them from public consciousness.

Blackwood (1979) analyzed 2,039 news photos from three U.S newspapers. By comparing how women and men are represented in various pages in different role categories researchers observed that men’s photos get three times more coverage than women’s. Only a quarter of women’s pictures made it to the front pages. Eighty percent of women images were presented as spouses. Leubke (1989) studied four Connecticut newspapers to scrutinize the roles represented by men and women in news photos. Sample issues generated 8960 representations. In most category of roles female representation is far lesser than male. More significantly, research findings showed stereotypical cluster for both gender: professional and sports for males and spouse for females. DeLouth, Person, Hitchcock and Rienzi (1995) investigated news photographs in national and sports pages of three California newspapers to explore gender and ethnic role portrayals. Their findings indicated that women are under-represented in comparison to California population gender

ratio and generally pictured as victims. Grounding their research on feminist cultural hegemony theory Len-Rios, Rodgers, Thorson and Yoon (2005) examined the news content and photographs printed in one medium sized and one larger American newspaper to explore the representation of women. Upon surveying news workers and readers and content analyzing news items and photos, their study found that men occupied three quarters of news text and two-thirds of news photographs.

In their seminal volume “Women in Mass Communication”, Creedon and Cramer (2007) scrutinized feminist theory’s amalgamation to mass communication. To inspect the position of women in society in general and in mass communication industries in particular, they emphasized the need to examine the depiction of women’s image in media and mental image it produces. Focusing more on exploring gender-based power distribution through visual representation, Breen and O’Sullivan (2009) studied three Irish national newspapers. They found that out of 7099 representations only 2715 (38%) are of women. Sample newspapers continued to show this disparity in every aspect of representation like providing occupational details, naming in caption and heading, offering dresses or appearance particulars, defining independently or about to others etc. Researchers concluded that Irish news photographs unanimously favored patriarchy and marginalized women. Hossen (2001) studied two popular Bangladeshi newspapers Daily Ittefaq and Daily Manab Zamin to investigate the representation of women in press photographs. Her findings supported the worldwide trend of underrepresentation of women, trivializing women’s issues and overrepresentation as just eye candy. We can see that, for over half a century, women’s portrayal and representation in mass media attracted researchers from diversified fields and produced a rich knowledge base. But not many studies focused on photographic representation in print media. This research was particularly curious to find out that, if women’s increased presence in the socio-economic-political-cultural sphere in the following decades, begets any better photographic representation.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study has employed content analysis method for data collection. Content analysis has been used extensively in the examination of printed texts and communication media in particular. Two national daily newspapers of Bangladesh, Daily Star and Daily Prothom Alo, which are among the highest circulated dailies published from the capital city Dhaka (DFP, 2023) were chosen purposively. To determine the sample size, the researcher followed Stempel’s (1952) suggestion to choose between 12, 18, 24 or 48 numbers of newspapers for an entire year. Though Stempel observed that samples larger than 12 did not produce a significantly different result, this research decided to follow a middle path and selected 24 issues of each newspaper as the sample. Newspaper copies of one year, for the period of 1st January to 31st December 2022, were chosen for the study. Issues dated 2 and 16 of every month were scrutinized to identify all news and feature photographs of women published in all pages of the newspapers. In case of non-publication of an issue on the specified date, next available issues were treated as samples.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To explore the patterns of representation this research inquired into total number of news photographs, placement, subjects of photos, number of photographs deemed unnecessary, and portrayal of vulnerability and successes.

Table 1: Total numbers of news and feature photographs of women in the sample newspapers

Name of the newspapers	Prothom Alo	Daily Star
Total numbers (Single photo)	176	85
Total numbers (Group photo)	229	130
Total	405	215

By analyzing the sample newspapers, a total of 405 and 215 photographs were found, in the two different dailies in selected days. Of them, Daily Prothom Alo published a total of 405 single and group photos of women. There were 176 single photos and 229 group photos. In the Daily Star total 215 images of women have been published. Among these images, 85 were single photos and 130 were women group photos.

Table 2: Placement of news and feature photographs of women and it's percentage in the sample newspapers

Prothom Alo			Daily Star		
Page	Numbers of photographs	Percentage	Page	Numbers of photographs	Percentage
First Page	23	5.68%	First Page	22	10.23%
Last Page	26	6.42%	Last Page	17	7.91%
Inner Page	356	87.90%	Inner Page	176	81.86%
Total	405	100	Total	215	100

Placement indicates the importance of the specific photograph or news. It also designates the treatment of news or images. The extremely worthy photographs are published in the first page of the newspaper and sequentially the photos are placed on the last page and inner pages in order of their priority and significance. Photographs also specify the momentous of specific news. By analyzing the photographs of sample the newspaper daily Prothom Alo, it was revealed that only 23 photographs out of 405 have been published on the first page which indicates the 5.68% of total pictures. 26 photographs of women were found in the last page of Prothom Alo's selected issues that specifies the 6.42% of total images. By scrutinizing the inner page, it was disclosed that, the vast majority of the photographs were published in the middle pages. Inner pages accommodate 356 out of 405 total photos which indicates 87.9% of the total photographs of women. Upon examining the news photographs of Daily Star, it was revealed that, 22 photos of women were published on the first page out of total 215 numbers that specifies 10.23% of total published photos in the selected days. There were 17 photographs in the last page of the Daily Star which indicates 7.91% of total photos. A large portion of the news photographs, 176 to be precise, were placed on the inner pages that was 81.86% of total photographs on the selected days.

Table: 3 Subjects of news and feature photographs of women and it's percentage in sample newspapers

Prothom Alo			Daily Star		
Subject	Numbers of News	Percentage	Subject	Numbers of News	Percentage
Political	44	10.87%	Political	34	15.81%
Celebrity	129	31.85%	Celebrity	52	24.19%
Others	232	57.28%	Others	129	60%
Total	405	100	Total	215	100

Most of the women related photographs found in both of the sample dailies, which focused solely on women subjects, were about political figures or celebrity women. The rest of the photos presented women as victims, pedestrians, caregivers, inactive audience or part of a crowd and so on. Active, empowered, responsible, decision maker women were almost invisible in the dailies. In political photos only the prime minister's images are found in the news while other female political figures from different position of different political parties were invisible in the sample newspapers. By analyzing the photographs of the sample newspaper Daily Prothom Alo, it was revealed that, 44 numbers of political photographs had been published and its percentage was 10.87%. Daily Prothom Alo published 129 news photographs of celebrity women that refers to 31.85% of total photos of the sample newspaper in selected days. Apart from these two categories other photographs were published in other subjects like victimized women, women as caregivers, pedestrians, inactive audiences, examinees and so on. Spell out of these photos were categorized as others, found places on different pages of the sample newspaper equal to 57.28% of total photos. By scrutinizing the sample newspaper Daily Star, it was found that, 34 photographs were published about female political figures and its' percentage was 15.81%. Daily Star had published 52 photos of celebrity women specified 24.19% of total photographs on selected days. In the sample newspaper, 129 other news photographs represented women as victimized women, women as caregivers, pedestrians, passengers, inactive audiences (60%).

Table: 4 Unnecessary Representation of women in the news and feature photographs and it's percentage in sample newspapers

Prothom Alo			Daily Star		
	Numbers of News	Percentage		Numbers of News	Percentage
Unnecessary Images	130	32.1%	Unnecessary Images	77	35.81%

Uses of unnecessary photos (i.e., photographs, that is not relevant to the news story or don't have real news value as stand-alone item) express that the media is not adequately cautious about publishing the pictures of women and media does not give appropriate consideration and treatment to women. Sex appealing and irrelevant photographs of celebrities, expresses women as passive audiences instead of participants, passengers, pedestrians, presenting them as mere eye candy, making them more valueless, despicable, ignoring the contribution of women in society and impeding women's path of advancement. By analyzing the sample daily Prothom Alo, it was found that, 130 photos were published on different pages which were very unnecessary and irrelevant to the news. The percentage of these photos is 32.1% of total photographs. The Daily Star published 77 unnecessary photographs of women in different pages in selected days and it refers to 35.81% of total pictures.

Table: 5 Vulnerable Representation of women in the news and feature photographs and it's percentage in sample newspapers

Prothom Alo			Daily Star		
	Numbers of News	Percentage		Numbers of News	Percentage
Vulnerable Images	55	13.54%	Vulnerable Images	41	19.07%

Vulnerability represents women as helpless, feeble, weak, dependent on males economically and mentally, dominated by males and defenseless. It gives a notion to the society that women are vulnerable, powerless, incapable, impotent, resource-less and so on that depicts a negative image of women in the society that also obstructs women's empowerment and way to advancing. By scrutinizing the daily Prothom Alo, it was revealed that, 55 photographs of vulnerable women had been published that specifies 13.54% of total the number of pictures on selected days. By analyzing the Daily Star, it was found that, 41 numbers of vulnerable women images published in selected days that indicates 19.07% of total photographs.

Table: 6 Success of women in the news and feature photographs and it's percentage in sample newspapers

Prothom Alo			Daily Star		
	Numbers of News	Percentage		Numbers of News	Percentage
Successful women Images	40	9.87%	Successful women Images	8	3.72%

Success stories or photographs of women inspire other women to look forward and to be empowered. It can reduce the inequalities between men and women in society. This type of positive portrayal of women can diminish the prevailing stereotyped notion, give courage to other women and enhance the visibility of women's contribution to society. Daily Prothom Alo printed 40 photographs of successful women in the selected days which equals 9.87% of the total images. By analyzing the Daily Star, it was found that, only 8 photos of successful women were published in the selected days which indicates 3.72% of the total photographs. By investigating how two of the country's highly circulated, prestige newspapers represented women in news and feature photographs, this research detected that Bangladeshi newspapers still tend to publish pictures of women in stereotyping roles where women are mostly caregivers, inactive audience, vulnerable, dependent on male, feeble, helpless and victim. Newspapers didn't pay much attention to the women's issues and their claim to news spaces mostly resulted in a few photos in the inner pages without proper treatment. Newspapers seemed to find women fit for the front pages only when they are victims of

any incident or any political figure. Victimized, vulnerable photos of women were displayed prominently on the most important pages of the sample newspapers. Women's immense contribution to the economy of Bangladesh, and their vital role in the society is largely invisible in newspapers. Whenever women got some recognition, instead of presenting it as a contribution to agriculture and the economy news media framed it as women's struggle. A photo published on 2nd November 2022 on third page of the Daily Star was about a woman is going to sell strainer, winnowing-fan made of bamboo to maintain her family. This independence, hard-work and contribution to the economy turned into mere life struggle and helplessness. The caption expressed it in this way 'Chondona Rani makes winnowing-fan and strainer by bamboo. She sells those on foot from village to villages with her own. Her family lives in hardship with four children. At Sukhanpukur of gabtali Upazila in Bogura yesterday.' Her capabilities to maintain her family without any help from a male and her self-reliance didn't get due appreciation as the caption choose to focus only on her sufferings.

Tragedies and sufferings are integral parts of human life and we grieve our share of misery irrespective of gender. But going through the newspaper pages, especially through the news photographs, someone would get the impression that only women are vulnerable and helpless, who are not capable enough to protect themselves. Severe lack of photos presenting any strong women on the one hand and abundant supply of images containing wailing women on the other reinforces society's position to treat women as the 'second sex'. Repeated photographs of helpless women published in the newspapers strengthen this notion to the society decisively. A significant photo published in the 'International' page of daily Prothom Alo on 2nd March 2022 with a news titled '*Russia ke bicchinno korte uddog*' (Initiatives to isolate Russia) where the news was about Russia's attack on Ukraine and to propose the draft proposal against Russia in the general council of United Nations while the photo depicted that a Ukrainian woman was gathering her home appliances and leftover essentials after the attack of Russian forces. The caption of this photo was 'The house has been demolished by bomb attack of Russian armies. A woman is gathering by picking up the leftover in scare of more attack. In the Brovary city of the suburb of Kiev at yesterday. Photo: AFP (*'Russiar senabahinir boma hamlay tochhnochh hoye gechhe ghor. Aro hamlar ashongkay ja kichhu beche ache, ta kuriye joro korchhen ek nari. Gotokal Kiev er upokontho Brovary shohore.'* Chhobi: AFP). In the same fashion, a noteworthy photo had been published in third page of the Daily Prothom Alo on 2nd July 2022 with a news titled '*Trainer ogrim ticket Purushder counter 9ti, narider jonno matro Iti*' (Advance train ticket, 9 counters for male, only one for female) where the news focused on the hassle of women for buying ticket from just one counter. The photo showed that women were queuing in a very stuffy and overcrowded line and impatiently waiting for a ticket. In the midst of them one woman was drinking water from a bottle to quench her thirst. The caption of the photo was 'Selling advance ticket has started on occasion of Eid. A long duration awaiting in the crowd turns into last-gasp of ticket-hoping people. In the Kamalapur railway station of the capital at yesterday. Photo: Ashraful Alam' (*'Eid upolokkhe trainer ogrim ticket bikri shuru hoyechhe. Dirgho somoy dhore virer moddhe opekha kore ticketprottashider navishash. Gotokal rajdhanir kamalapur railstatione.'* Chhobi: Ashraful Alam). Women's photos had repeatedly been highlighted in vulnerable situations, in comparison to male counterparts, as if it's only women who suffered these tragedies.

In both of the sample newspapers, one-third of the news photographs of women were deemed unnecessary. In these cases, women's presence in photos was not based on their essentialness or relevance to the reported events or issues. Conforming the objectification theory women were depicted as sex objects in the newspaper. Women in sex appealing gestures was a vital issue to allure male readers of the newspapers. In the 'Entertainment' pages of both newspapers, the celebrity women were the focal point of objectification by representing them as sex objects. Female body shape and physical appearance were used to attract especially male audience. A photo was published on 16th August 2022 in 'Entertainment' page of daily Prothom Alo with a news titled 'Luck favored of being 'great queen' (*Moharani hoye kopal khullo*). In this photo Bollywood actress Huma Qureshi was sitting in a provocative pose and the camera focused on her uncovered thigh which titillate male desire. Women's short clothes and sex appeal were focused frequently in the newspaper with less important news where female body appearance is the vital point of that news. A similar photo published on 16th January 2022 in the daily Prothom Alo, with a news titled 'I am very emotional' (*Ami khub-e abegprobon*) depicts another Bollywood actress Parineeti Chopra in a revealing tight-fitting top exposing a good part of the chest and back area of her body. On the contrary, women's accomplishments and achievements were downplayed, as evident in the fact that a meager number of successful women got photographic coverage in sample newspapers. Even when they did, their claim to news space was restricted to a stamp size photo, oftentimes without any caption.

4. CONCLUSION

Almost three-quarters of a century has passed since Beauvoir (1989, English Translation) in 1949 pointed to the inferior position society has reserved for women and termed them as the 'second sex'. Since

then, women's contribution to the society has increased by many times. In every arena, be it political, social, cultural, technological or academic, women have a vibrant presence. But unfortunately, even the most recent researches still shows a pathetic disregard of this reality in news media. The most comprehensive inquiry into women's representation in world media, the Global Media Monitoring Project's latest report of 2020 opined that mainstream media are only halfway to achieving gender equality. By investigating the representation of women in news photographs in Bangladeshi dailies, the present research found support for this world-wide trend. In our country women are half of our population (and almost half of them are participating in the labor force). It's only logical to create a positive environment, favorable to the equal participation of all genders. To achieve this goal, this research recommended that newspapers should provide more space for photographs that highlight women's contribution to the economy, publish photos of successful women in various sectors to project them as role models and refrain from using women's photos for commercial gains only.

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