

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE.

2.1 INTRODUCTION.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First we will view mass media and its effects on culture and society; next, the portrayal of women in the media and finally the concept of language in the media.

2.2. MASS MEDIA AND ITS EFFECTS.

One of the dominant structures of our economic, social and political systems is the mass media. The mass media refers to the channels used to transmit mass communication and they include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies, books and recordings. According to Biagi (1992) as quoted by Parameswary (1999), mass communication is the communication that takes place from one person or group of people to a large audience through the use of a transmitting device.

Debates on the effects of mass media have produced differing views. Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) (1982) considers the mass media to be the most powerful tool in the shaping of our beliefs, values and life-style. Because it is a 'one-way' communication, CAP states that the mass media has the ability to 'process, filter and unify information' for passive audiences who are 'mere vessels of information'. It is this ability that makes mass media so powerful, CAP (1982) as quoted by Parameswary (1999).

Gallagher (1981) and Baehr (1980) as quoted by Parameswary (1999), however, state that there are two opposing views on the effects of the mass media. The first view,

according to Gallagher, is that media is a potentially powerful agent of social change. Similarly, Baehr (1980:30) states that the audience is conditioned and manipulated by the media. The media exerts a major influence by choosing the themes, structuring the dialogues and controlling the debate, 'a process which involves crucial omissions' (Baehr, 1980:30). She adds that the power of the media lies in the central position it occupies in one's culture. The second view on the media's effects, according to Gallagher (1981), is that the mass media systems reflect the distribution of power and control in real life. In a world where very few women hold top positions, the media reflects their limited status and role. Thus Gallagher (1981:30) states that media's role is primarily to 'reinforce definitions and identities set in a framework constructed for and by men'.

Changes, thus have to come not only through society but also from women themselves. Women do not control the cultural, political and economic domains of the world. Changes in their status cannot take place unless there are changes in this field. When more women are included in this 'framework', the media will reflect it. Similarly, Baehr (1980) states that media simply reflects society's values and representation of women in that society.

2.3 PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA.

Besides discrimination in the social, economic and political field, women are also negatively portrayed in the media. The magazine is part of the media. The following deals with the media's portrayal of women.

2.3.1 IN THE MEDIA.

Although women all over the world differ in terms of lifestyle, social class and cultural background, there are striking similarities in mass media's portrayal and employment of them. News about women center around their looks, sexuality and their roles in the domestic front. Besides this, feminist research reveals that women are shown to be passive and submissive whilst men are portrayed as 'dominant, active and authoritative' (Tuckman et. al 1978) as quoted in Baehr (1980:30).

CAP (1982:4) holds a similar view about women in our media. It states that:

[women are depicted] 'as vain and seductive, as sex commodities, dull witted, in constant need of approval (almost always by men) and ultimately best left in the kitchen or home'.

According to Gallagher (1981), mass media all over the world consistently present women in a few dominant images. The most important one is the 'non-image' absence of women in the media output. Next is the 'under-representation of women', whereby women occupy fewer roles than men.

The other dominant image of women is that of 'wife and mother'. This image presents women within the four walls of their homes whilst men are often portrayed working in the outside world. Besides those mentioned, women are often portrayed as the 'sex object and glamour girls'. This usually happens in the field of advertising where women are used as baits to sell products. Besides these dominant roles, women are usually characterized as passive, indecisive and emotionally dependent, unlike men.

Changing the gender imbalance in the mass media is not going to be an easy task. The media's portrayal of women does not reflect reality. It is still conservative in nature, reinforcing a traditional image of women.

2.4. LANGUAGE.

This section will look at language and its relationship with gender as well as the role of language which will be based upon the terms used to describe women in the media.

Language and its relationship with gender has been the focus of discussion among linguists and feminists for some time now. In their studies of language and gender, they have extensively documented the existence of linguistic sexism. "As a broad umbrella term, 'linguistics sexism', covers a wide range of verbal practices including not only how women are labeled and referred to, but also how realised language strategies in mixed sex interactions may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants" Atkinson (1993:403).

2.4.1 THE LANGUAGE OF MEDIA.

Society is surrounded by media language. According to Bell (1991:1), 'it is the few talking to the many'. The media dominates the presentation of language in modern society and therefore a lot of research has been carried out on media language. Bell (1991) gives various reasons for this. Firstly, it is interesting to see how the media uses language. Secondly the media uses language that is often heard in society. This has sparked a lot of debates and criticism among the public. Thirdly, language is an essential ingredient in media messages. It has an effect on the way the content is conveyed. It is a lot easier to collect data from media language than from face to face conversations. The final reason is the accessibility of media language. It is easily available and collected. Thus, language plays an important role in imparting values and it is this aspect that is of interest in the present study.

2.4.2 TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE WOMEN

Cameron (1990) gives two examples of words that were originally neutral but take on sexually negative connotations when used on women. These words are: 'professional' or 'pro' and 'tramp'. They do not have the same connotations when used on men. Cameron adds that female terms such as 'mistress', 'hostess' and 'dame' have been 'devalued' having taken on sexual connotations that they did not have originally. Mills (1995:113) gives other examples such as 'tart', 'slut', 'nymphomaniac' and 'whore'. She adds that such terms degrade women while male terms such as 'gigolo', 'Casanova', and 'stud' do more to improve the male image rather than degrade it.

Cameron (1990) also states that the involvement of men and women in sexual intercourse are differently described in terms of the language used. Terms such as

'screwing' and 'penetration' allude to male activity whereas women 'get laid' implying passivity.

Besides sexual connotations, some words portray women as stupid. Mills (1995:114), gives examples like 'bimbo', 'dumb blonde', 'bird', 'chick', 'doll' and 'scatty'. There are also words associated with looks such as 'hag', 'dog', 'cow', and 'bag'.

Interestingly, according to Mills, the term 'nag' does not have any male equivalent.

Even what appear to be terms of endearment do not carry positive connotations. Mills (1995:117) gives examples that refer to women as something good to eat. They include the words such as 'honey', 'sweetie', 'sugar', 'cupcake' and 'honeybun'.

At times, insults intended for men completely or partially implicate women. Miller and Smith (1979:132), gives two such examples as 'son of a bitch' and 'bastard'. One of the newer terms, according to them, is 'motherfucker'. Thus, even derogatory terms for men implicate women.

As far as this study is concerned, an overview of the data showed that no positive terms were associated with women. As such, the study focused on the derogatory labels that were used on women.