New Spaces, New Choices

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We are watching television with women in a low-income household in Gerua, Savar when a middle aged neighbour walks in. She asks if we are have come '*disher thaike*?' assuming that inquiries about women's viewing patterns could only be of interest to those involved with the cable and media industries. We smile and nod. She immediately voices her demands and requests us to show more programmes on TV that depict women differently and in powerful positions- being a "boss" in the office, riding a Honda motorcycle or working as a RAB police officer and chasing criminals. She wants to see images of women that are different from how she is traditionally depicted and asked us if we could take her message to the media companies.

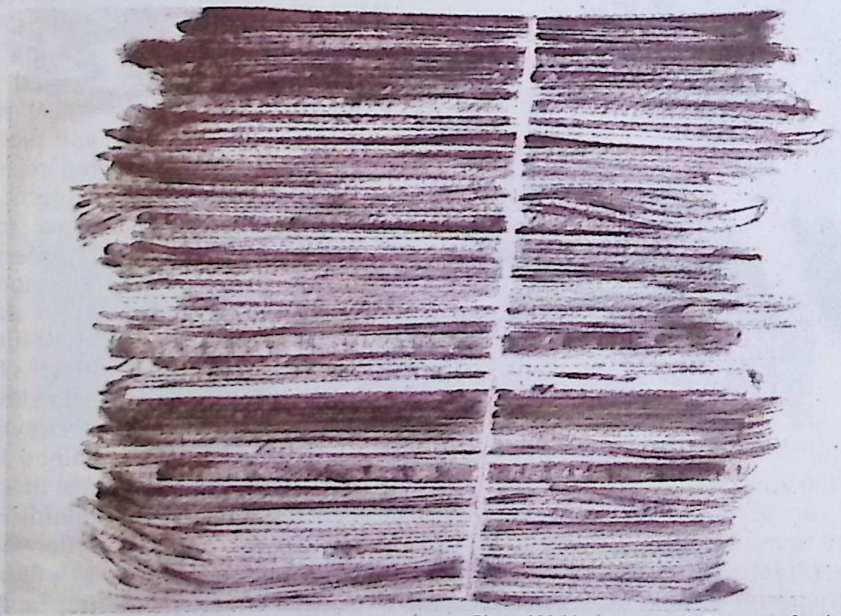


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We were surprised to hear these comments from the woman. We might have expected these remarks from a college educated person, but that these views about showing different representations on television were generated by an illiterate woman barely eking out a living, was eye-opening. How advanced was her thinking that she, whose life is largely circumscribed to the four walls of her house and to the task of looking after her four children, wanted to see women in positions that are not commonly conjured of? She commented that diverse images of women, of women engaging in all manners of job and undertaking different kinds of responsibilities will expand the horizons of women's minds and enable her to imagine the variety of all that she can achieve. She said watching these images will influence younger women and offer them many more roles and aspirations to follow. The woman commented that she may never be able to experience the kind of life that is depicted on television, but just watching these representations enable her to imagine that it is possible.

This is the lure and magic of television- it allows us to not only relate to our own realities but also enables us to relate to other people's realities. The findings from Media and Women research project under the Changing Narratives of Sexuality theme of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme has shown that this envisioning of different ways of existence both for one self and others provides viewers with hope and a promise of different realities. In this way, television offers spaces for its viewers to imagine alternative worlds and incorporate varying subjectivities. Some may say that the media only objectifies women and reinforce existing power structures. While this may hold true, the television also stokes hope and aspirations for new realities and this can lead to a reconfiguring of viewer's own lives. The potentialities of empowerment remain nascent now, but it can be realised through further engagement. For a start, we can begin by fracturing the stereotypes, replacing dominant narratives with a diversity of representations and having media producers create programmes that depict more equitable gender relations. Time and further research might show whether the engagement with television will lead to new ways of being or if it will simply reconfigure the existing parameters of women's lives.