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## Gendered Portrayals of Domestic Work in Indian Television

By Ruby Jain<sup>1</sup> and Surbhi Pareek<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Despite the entry of women into the labour force in India, women still participate in paid employment at a low rate; the rate even fell recently from 31% to 24% (ILO, 2013). This represents an alarming need for change in gender roles. The present article focuses on how electronic media content portrays men's and women's roles in performing housework. In a study of 30 TV serials that aired from 1990-2016 and 14 old and new TV advertisements, the findings show that mostly women are depicted doing domestic work. Media demonstrates gender disparities between men and women in performing domestic work, which is keeping our society from achieving gender equality. There is a need to reconsider men's and women's roles in the family. So, this study suggests that media content should not show biased gender roles. To avoid gender inequality at the micro level, we need to disseminate idealistic content to our nation's audience. To ensure women's participation in the work force, men's involvement in domestic chores needs to be increased; this can also improve the gross domestic productivity of the country.

*Keywords:* Electronic media, domestic work, gender inequality, television serial, television advertisement, India

### Introduction

The ongoing communications revolution has opened up possibilities of accelerating development, especially for the betterment of women and children. Media structures and systems have also undergone a sea change with privatisation and globalisation. One of the most accessible and influential types of media is electronic media, which is defined as broadcast that takes advantage of electronic technology. This may include television, radio, Internet, fax, CD-ROM, DVD, and any other medium that requires electricity or digital encoding of information. Media has been able to transcend borders and look at issues more holistically rather than in the context of nationalism. The issues of media, identity, and gender have become integral to the discipline of Media Studies. The reason is the popularity and diversity of media as a source of mass consumption and its influence on constructing ideas and generating debate. As we all know, gender is not determined biologically as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially (FAO, 1997). Gender Studies is often misunderstood as being for the promotion of women only. However, as we see from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) definition, gender issues focus on both women and men, as well as on the relationship between men and women, their roles in society, access to and control over resources, division of labour,

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interests and needs, and gender diversity. Gender relations affect household security, family well-being, planning, production, and many other aspects of life (Bravo-Baumann, 2000).

The media scene in India has expanded in recent times as there is a plethora of media choices available to audiences. Women are also major consumers of mass media, and thus the way they are represented in media coverage is a major concern for Media and Gender Studies. Media has the power to portray gender equality and to have an impact on its viewers.

### **Portrayals of Women in Electronic Media**

When we speak of the image a society projects of its women, we have in mind the society's ideal of womanhood or popular stereotypes; the position of women in institutions or the roles they play in the community; or portrayals of women in the visions of poets, artists, and prophets (Shrivastva, 1992). The images portrayed in TV serials have a definite impact on the thought patterns of society. Women in television entertainment programmes are portrayed as non-thinking, self-sacrificing, and suffering beings, while educated and motivated women are seen as the scourge of the patriarchal order of the society (Desai, 1996).

Women are usually under-represented and misrepresented in our Hindi cinema, which is also called Bollywood. Though there is a growing body of work by feminist film-makers in Hindi cinema, the leading lady of Hindi films has played more or less defined roles which conform to the values upheld by Indian society. Women in Hindi cinema have been one dimensional characters who are good or bad, white or black. There are no shades of grey. Films before the 1990s, like *Dahej* (1950), *Gauri* (1968), *Devi* (1970), *Biwiho to Aisi* (1988), *Pati Parmeshwar* (1988), depicted women who were passive, submissive wives as perfect figures and martyrs for their own families. The pattern has changed after the 90s, but not so evidently. In today's society, depictions of the 'man' as the saviour and the 'woman' as the victim are also prominently seen in Hindi cinema discourse. In the poster of the film *Ra-One* (2011), the hero (played by Shahrukh Khan) is shown carrying the fainted heroine (played by Kareena Kapoor) in his arms, which builds up his image as a saviour that is played out in the story. Today, women are used in additional 'item songs' in movies. Examples of famous 'item songs' are *Munni, Shiala and Chikni chameli* from *Dabang*, *Tees mar khan*, and *Agnipath*.

In advertisements, women are always showcased as a matter of their physical attraction. In an advertisement for deodorant, women in short dresses fall from the roof when a boy just sprays his deodorant. Nearly nude girls are used to attract the audience only. So, overall, women are either shown as weak, ready to sacrifice themselves, or vulgar and hardly dressed with no individuality.

After the portrayal of women in media, this paper's prime focus is on how media has portrayed domestic work. Domestic work researchers have typically examined a set of tasks: cooking, cleaning, washing dishes, house and garden maintenance, shopping, laundry, ironing, paying bills, and caring for children and the elderly. Simply put, household labor is unpaid work done by family or household members to keep the family and home operating efficiently (Shelton and John, 1993). Interest in the equal division of domestic work has been ignited by the massive entry of women in the paid labour force. While women with children are performing well in the paid labour market, men are still lagging behind in participating in domestic work. In the last few decades, domestic work and the division of domestic work between dual earners has been a topic of research. A proper and equal division of domestic work leads to an increase in the participation of women in the paid labour force and the well-being of marital relationships.

Studies have proven that, whether employed or not, women continue to do the majority of the housework (Brines, 1993; Marini and Shelton, 1993; Robinson, 1988). Wives perform two-thirds of the total household labour and 80% of the daily repetitive and routine indoor tasks (Thompson and Walker, 1989). In India, only 16% of men perform an equal or greater share of household work (ICRW, 2011).

This unequal division of domestic work has left women double burdened in our society. After completion of their paid work, they have to do a second shift of work at home. So, this gender inequality at the micro level needs to be addressed if we want gender equality at the household level.

## **Methodology**

At present, Indian television is comprised of 830 channels airing different genres of television series, from soap operas to reality shows. For the present study, Hindi language channels with the highest Television Rating Points (TRPs) have been selected, and repeat shows aired on these channels have been excluded. To analyse trends in TV serials, all those serials which were aired from 1990 to 2016 on prime time between 7pm and 11pm were reviewed. From these, the researchers selected serials for in-depth analysis based on content: only those serials that had family content were selected, while reality shows and action/thriller shows were excluded. In the selection of TV advertisements, those that were telecasted between the selected serials and featured domestic appliances and cleaning products were analysed.

## **Portrayals of Domestic Work in Indian Television**

As a market, India is the fourth largest economy in the world and has a sizeable middle class of over 300 million people; it also has the third largest television viewing market in the world (Bowman, 2004; Forrester, 2007). The number of television channels has grown from six in 1991 to more than 230 in 2006 (Bowman, 2004) and 830 in 2015. The Indian media and entertainment sector is expected to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 13.9% year-on-year to reach Rs 196,400 crore (US\$ 29.11 billion) by 2019. India's Digital Advertising market has grown at a fast pace of 33% annually between 2010 and 2015, while the expenditure as a percentage of total advertising increased to 13% or nearly US\$ 1 billion in 2015. In 2015, the overall media and entertainment industry grew 11.7% over 2014. The largest segment, India's television industry, is expected to maintain its strong growth momentum led by subscription revenues, representing a year-on-year growth of about 13.2%, i.e. Rs 60,000 crore (US\$ 8.89 billion), in 2015. The Indian media and entertainment sector continues to develop rapidly and reach more viewers every year. The present article focuses on how these influential media production companies portray domestic work to a growing audience.

## **TV Serials**

The most popular television shows in India are serials. They usually portray women as commanders of all the domestic work. The TV channels selected on the basis of their TRPs given by Broadcast Audience Research Council India (BARC, 2016) were Star Plus, Colors TV, Zee TV, and Sony Television, which have the first, second, third, and ninth positions, respectively. In order to document the portrayal of domestic work over time, serials that aired since 1990 were

analysed. The serials are listed in Table 1 by channel and decade that they aired (1990-1999, 2000-2009, and after 2010).

### *Star Plus*

The comedy serial *Tu tu main main*, which aired in the 1990s, was very famous and had a large audience. The content of the show was based on fights between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law taunted her daughter-in-law for her poor cooking and cleaning skills and made fun of her. In the whole serial, these two played the role of domestic worker and no one else. *Kyunki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi* aired from 2000 to 2008 with 1833 episodes. The story revolved around a main female lead character and her idealistic daughter-in-law, Tulsi, and their family. In its long span, various characters were added and left from time to time. All the female characters were shown cooking and taking care of their children. Despite the variety of male characters, this serial never showed any of them working in the kitchen. With similar content, *Kahani ghar ghar ki* aired from 2000 to 2008 with 1661 episodes. This serial also almost never depicted its male characters performing any domestic tasks. In 2002, the comedy serial *Khichdi* was a super hit. One of the lead male characters named Himanshu was always shown preparing meals out of his clumsiness. The context of this serial was very different, but still this was the only show of that era that ever showed a male character cooking regularly in the kitchen. Even in the shows of recent years, like *Diya or bati hum* or *Yeh hai mohabbatein*, female characters were shown cooking and cleaning in the house, regardless of their employment status.

### *Zee Tv*

*Banegi apni baat* aired from 1993 to 1997. At first, the focus of this serial was college life and the characters were various college students. After some time, those characters entered into professional life. Many female characters were shown struggling with their roles as housewives or working wives. *Hum paanch*, which aired from 1995 to 2006, is one of the best comedy serials of Indian television. The story revolved around a family with five daughters and their parents. In the very different chemistry of this family, the mother or a few daughters were always depicted preparing meals for the family or cleaning the house. So, whenever a scene portrayed a character doing domestic work, only female characters were selected for the role.

After the year 2000, in the serial *Koshish ek aasha*, the protagonist was doomed by her in-laws and married to a man who is mentally challenged. The show revolved around how she managed her mentally challenged husband and raised him as her own child. *Aati rahengi baharein* aired from 2002 to 2003. The plot of this serial was about the bond between two lead characters that have different social backgrounds. This serial showed many societal taboos. In the year 2002, a serial named *Astitva* debuted. This serial was about a woman who was a gynaecologist by profession and married to a man 10 years younger than her. Despite the different story lines, whether they were about a struggling daughter-in-law or a love story, the domestic worker's role always fell into the laps of female characters. The currently airing serial *Kumkum Bhagya*, which has the highest Target Rating Points of all Indian television worldwide, tells the story of a woman named Pragya and her husband, Abhi, having a troubled marriage. Though Pragya was an independent and working woman before her wedding, now she is only seen taking care of her husband and her in-laws. In other serials, like *Sarojini* and *Jamai Raja*, they all show this similar content. So, it is very clear that when it comes to portraying domestic work on screen, choosing women is the only option director has.

### *Sony TV*

The serial *Hip hip hurray* aired in the year 1998. The story was based on the lives of 12th grade high school students and their adventures. This serial addressed problems of youth in a light-hearted manner. *Heena* aired in the same year and was based on a Muslim family. Heena, the protagonist of the serial, was married to Sameer, but her marriage was doomed from the wedding night itself when Sameer proclaimed his undying love for another woman. A similar show, *Shaheen*, tells a tale of a Muslim woman whose life takes a different turn post-marriage and revolves around the changes she faces from then on. In the above serials, directors chose to show only women characters doing domestic work. In 2001, a serial called *Kutumb*, which means 'family,' told the story of Pratham and Gauri and their interactions with their joint-family. This show was based on the Aggrawal family and depicted only women performing household tasks. In a similar serial of that era, *Gharekmandir*, which aired from 2000 to 2002, told the story of a middle-class family which consists of a husband-wife pair, their three sons, and one daughter. Even with the different plot content, the writer or director did not try to show any male characters when shooting a scene in the kitchen. In a very recent serial, *Kuch rang pyar ke aise bhi* (2016), the writer tried to portray the feelings of a possessive single mother of a son. She tried to keep her son from getting married or involved in his only love affair. Even after a male domestic helper is hired, the character's mother always does domestic chores on her own. In *Ek duje ke vaste* (2016), which is a love story, female characters do all the domestic work.

### *Colors TV*

Colors TV started its broadcast in the year 2008. The serial *Meri Aashiqui Tumse Hi* was the story of a girl named Ishani who fell in love with a manager's son. Eventually, a cruel twist forced them apart several times. The very famous soap opera *Sasural Simar Ka* was a story of two sisters who married into the same family. The plot of each episode always ends with both of the sisters saving their family from any type of damage and harm while the male members were shown watching helplessly. Even with the depiction of two strong lead female characters, no man was shown helping in any domestic work. They can go into the kitchen and watch their wives cooking with love in their eyes, but they never dare to pick up a knife to help chop. *Balika Vadhu* was a very daring initiative to portray the practice of child marriage and its consequences; even after the changes in storyline, this serial never showed gender equality in performing household chores. This gives a biased impression about a woman's role: that she is only supposed to work for her home and family without any other emotional attachments. The women in any family are only caretakers of children and elderly relatives.

Female characters in these serials are portrayed as either stronger than anyone else, enduring any kind of pain; or weak and dependent. They typically are not shown earning money working outside the home, but instead they stay home performing all the household chores alone. When they do have jobs outside the home, they are still supposed to do all the domestic tasks alone with an even broader smile. The female characters in these serials are happy to bear any load of work, but that cannot be true in the real world. In reality, if any woman performs all the domestic tasks alone along with her paid employment, then it will definitely affect her body and soul. This unequal domestic work affects a wife's happiness in her marriage. Media is a place where people can slip into a fantasy and enjoy themselves. This fantasy world is a good place to escape into, but if it is giving a message that is harmful to society, then it should be monitored immediately.

## **The New Arena**

As shown in Graph 1, Star Plus has given us hope for change. A new television serial telecasting in prime time, *Sumit sambhal lega*, sometimes shows the husband named Sumit performing domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, and even taking care of his child. A very popular and expensive serial called *Ishqbaaz* is currently airing. It tells a story of three sons of a big tycoon family, and it shows the eldest son, a big business man named Shivaay, cooking multi-cuisines in their kitchen. *Bhabhi ji Ghar Par Hain*, a serial currently airing on the channel &TV, is a very famous comedy genre soap opera. The story revolves around two couples whose husbands fell in love with each other's wives. This serial portrays a young lady running a grooming class and taking care of the finances of the family successfully while her husband is shown doing all of the domestic work on his own. Although this show falls under the comedy genre and has lots of jokes in every scene, it still leaves a hint to all the men in the society to change.

## **TV Advertisements**

Advertising has a major influence on our lives and plays a significant role in creating and disseminating a number of stereotypes, including gender stereotypes (Fowles, 1996; Jhally, 1987; Leiss et al., 1986). The manner in which men and women are portrayed in advertising may also serve to maintain and reinforce existing stereotypes of men and women (Allan and Coltrane, 1996; Furnham and Mak, 1999; Manstead and McCulloch, 1981). It is critical to analyse what impact these advertisements have on men, women, and children. For example, social learning theory suggests that media images can influence the behaviour of men and women. Cultivation theory suggests that consumers' perceptions of social reality may be influenced by how they see themselves and others portrayed in media (Shrum, 1996; Tapper, 1995).

Previous studies on gender stereotyping in television commercials indicate that gender differences are very prevalent in television advertisements. Such stereotyping has been found in ads from many different countries including several from Asia—for example, Japan (Arima, 2003), Hong Kong (Furnham and Chan, 2004; Furnham et al., 2000), Korea (An and Kim 2007; Kim and Lowry, 2005), Indonesia (Furnham et al., 2000), Malaysia (Bresnahan et al., 2001), and Singapore (Siu and Au, 1997; Tan et al., 2002; Wee et al., 1995). However, there is a huge lack of studies carried out on gendered portrayals of performing domestic work in Indian television advertisements.

## **Previous Advertisements**

In a very old advertisement of Prestige non-stick pan, a girl was shown struggling to make pancakes with an old style tava/pan. In another advertisement, a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law were shown discussing the qualities of the latest Prestige mixer and grinder. Advertisements for products related to hygiene (e.g. Hamam soap), house cleaning (brands like Colin & Lizol), dish washing (brands like Vim & Pril), or laundry (e.g. Ariel detergent) all show women using these domestic products, but in the advertisement of Bajaj scooters, all the male members of the family were shown enjoying the rides.

## **Recent Advertisements**

After the gendered advertisement of Ariel detergent in the 1990s, the company stuck with the concept in the first decade of 2000 also. A wife is shown as struggling to manage laundry and her husband at the same time. TV advertisements also portray women performing household chores single-handed. Nirma detergent powder is very famous for its jingle, 'Hema, Rekha, Jaya or Sushma sab ki pasand Nirma,' that clearly shows who washes the clothes and who buys the detergent. In the posters for Vim liquid dishwasher, a woman is holding it in her hand and appealing to others to buy it. In an advertisement for Harpic toilet cleaner, an actor goes to people's homes and asks them to take the challenge of trying out the product. It is always a woman who takes the challenge and buys it; never ever is a man shown doing so. An actor named Hussain is the product ambassador, but the buyer is always a female. Similarly, in advertisements for other detergent soaps, liquids, and even Scotch Brite scrubbers, women are shown as the buyers.

In an advertisement for MTR ready-to-eat foods, a woman with six hands cooks all six South Indian recipes for breakfast at once. All the family members ask her to cook a different breakfast, so she suddenly has six hands. Even in an advertisement for Maggi, which can be cooked in just two minutes, a father is never shown cooking it for his children. Always a mother is shown appealing to all the mothers to buy the product. In an advertisement for a detergent like Tide, a husband shows his concern for the rough hands of his wife by washing many clothes in a day. He asks his wife to change the detergent bar, but is not shown washing clothes with his wife. The content of these advertisements is made as though all the buyers of products related to domestic work are women, so they are targeting women by showing them using the products.

In advertisements for beverages like Thumbs Up, Pepsi, and Coca Cola, mostly men are shown as the buyers. That clearly shows that, in our society, fun drinks are only awarded to men and not women.

The brand ambassadors for Prestige, the biggest stovetop and cookware company in India, are the celebrity couple Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Abhishek Bachchan. In the advertisement, both of them are in the kitchen talking about Prestige. The advertisement ends with the tag line 'Jo biwi se kare pyarwo Prestige se kaise kare inkar', which means, 'A person who loves their wife cannot deny buying her a Prestige product.' That implies that all the kitchen tasks are women's tasks. In an advertisement for Pigeon Mixer Grinder, two old women are shown discussing the power of its machinery. In an advertisement for a refrigerator, a few mothers are shown discussing the advantages of the product and how they can make their kids healthy by using this product. So, it can be concluded that every role in using products related to domestic work is given to women only.

## **The New Arena**

Recently, since 2015, there has been a change in the content of advertisements that shows us a hint of change. In an advertisement for Lloyd washing machines, the tag line is, 'It's so simple that even sir can do it.' As shown in Table 2, an advertisement for Ariel detergent powder uses the tag line 'Share the load.' Since both husband and wife are working, a husband should share the load of domestic work, like sharing the laundry. Similarly, in an advertisement for Pril dish washing gel, a husband is shown washing dishes. Even Amul Milk is also attacking the stereotype mentality in its recent advertisement by showing a father getting his son ready for school and his wife having milk and going jogging. That shows that media has started to change, but really just a beginning: media needs a massive revolution to make a difference.

## **Conclusion**

It is a fact that Indian society sees women as submissive, dependent, vulnerable, and weak. As a result, women undergo lots of trauma from birth to death. This negative attitude towards women is also reflected in media. In Hindi cinema, women are misrepresented. Real women are hardly seen in Hindi cinema. Women are always shown as performing all the domestic tasks alone in all the commercials, socially-oriented and realistic films. In TV serials, women are portrayed as housewives and fashionable. Women in TV serials are extra caring and very thick skinned in order to tolerate all the unfair things that happen to them. All the women in these serials are found doing household chores for their family. In advertisements, this gendered domestic work is clearly shown. In nearly all the advertisements related to domestic chores and domestic appliances, the target is the female members of the families. Women are shown using all of the products, and while they are also shown buying smaller items, like toilet cleaners, advertisements imply that men have the decision-making power for larger appliances. Recently, a few advertisers have been changing their content by showing men sharing domestic work.

So, media producers should realize that the aim is not only to entertain, but also to educate. They must begin a quest for social change through entertainment, because they can accelerate the process of social change through media production. Media producers should foster broad ethical content with better roles for women. TV serials should represent the real transformations of women of our society instead of stereotypes. The content of media should show the changing roles of men and women in 21<sup>st</sup> century families. Media should show women not only as the users of home appliances, but also as the buyers who are independent decision makers of the family. Such portrayals will do justice to women and their roles in the present society. India is behind in the race towards gender equality, so in order to take a step ahead, media should understand its responsibilities and make a difference.

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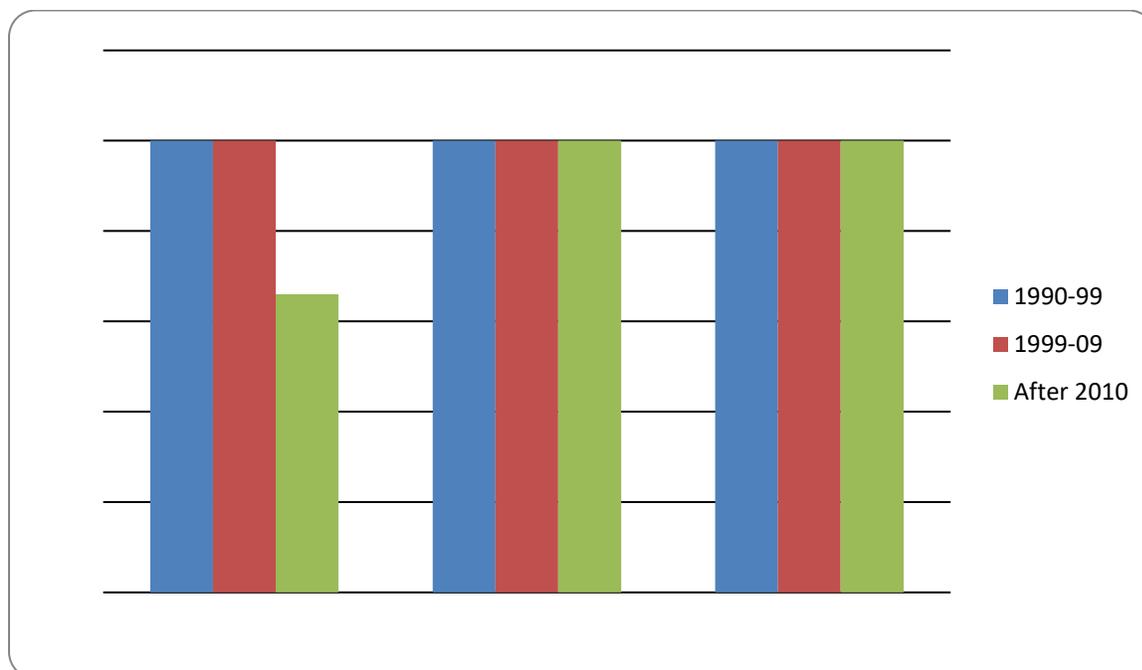
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**Table 1. List of Selected TV Serials for the Study**

S. No.	Channels	Serials		Gender biased content	Gender biased content	Gender biased content	Gender biased content
		1990-1999	2000-2009				
1	Star Plus	TuTu Mein Mein	Yes	Kyunkisaasbhikabhibahuthi	Yes	Ishqbaaz	No
		Desh Mein NiklaHoga Chand	Yes	KahaniGharGharki	Yes	Diya AurBati Hum	Yes
				Khichdi	Yes	SumitSambhalLega	No
2	Zee TV	BanegiApniBaat	Yes	KoshishEkAasha	Yes	KumkumBhagya	Yes
		DekhhaiDekh	Yes	AatiRahengiBaharein	Yes	Sarojini	Yes
		Hum Paanch	Yes	Astitva	Yes	Jamai Raja	Yes
3	Sony TV	Buniyad	Yes	Alpviram	Yes	Kuch rang PyarKeAiseBhi	Yes
		Hip Hip Hurray	Yes	Kutumbh	Yes	EkDoojeKeVaste	Yes
		Heena	Yes	GharEkMandir	Yes	ItnaKaro Na MujePyar	Yes

**Graph 1. Percentage of Serials Portraying Gender Biased Content in Depicting Domestic Work over the Past Three Decades**



**Table 2. Distribution of TV Advertisements Showing Gender Biasness While Depicting Domestic Work**

<b>S. No.</b>	<b>Brand</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Old</b>	<b>New</b>
1	Prestige	Kitchen appliance	√	√
2	Bajaj	Scooter	√	√
3	Hamam	Soap	√	×
4	Dhara	Cooking oil	√	√
5	Wheel	Detergent powder	√	√
6	Arial	Detergent powder	√	×
7	Nirma	Detergent powder	√	√
8	Maggi	Noodles	√	√
9	Amul	Milk	√	×
10	Pril	Dish washing gel	√	×
11	Colin	Cleaning gel	√	√
12	Harpic	Toilet cleaner	√	√
13	Vim gel	Dish washing gel	√	√
14	Lizol	Floor cleaner	√	√