



Women in Cinema Collective (WCC)

&

Sakhi Women's Resource Centre

# REPORT

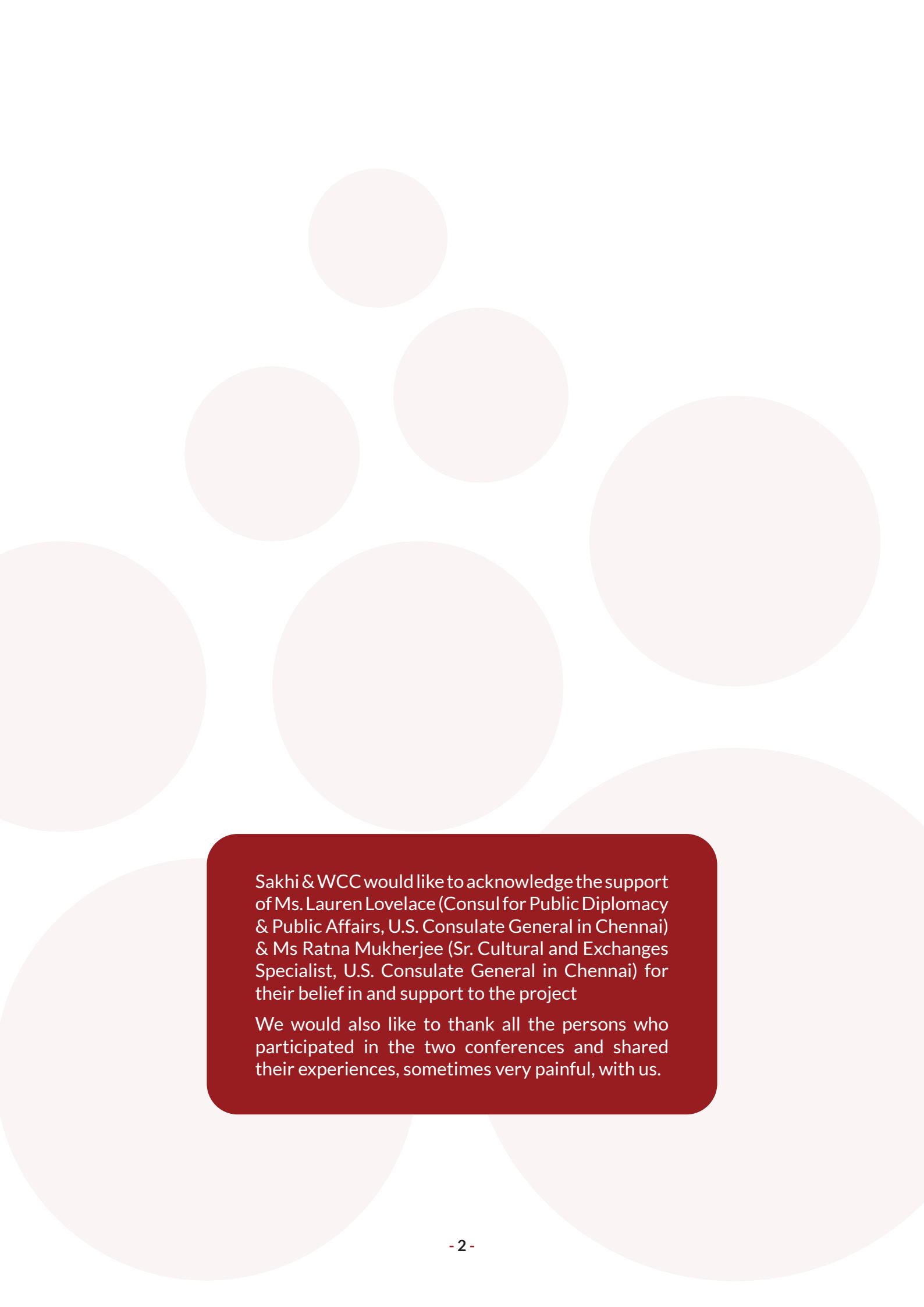
## Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment

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*Supported by the*  
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We would also like to thank all the persons who participated in the two conferences and shared their experiences, sometimes very painful, with us.

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# MESSAGE



*"If she can see it, she can be it."*

**E**ntertainment and Media are among the most immediate and impactful ways to influence our views on societal norms. They have the power to eradicate intersectional gender inequality in our global cultures. If our audiences can see themselves positively portrayed on screen, it can reinforce the message that they matter. It can also influence their long-term views throughout their lives. And yet, as this extensive, ground-breaking report indicates, a significant disparity exists when it comes to diversity and inclusion in global cinema. As content creators and business leaders, why not create fictional worlds in global films that have an abundance of unique, diverse, and equitable portrayals and then let life imitate art? Filmmakers can truly change lives by showcasing stories that are gender-balanced, diverse, and inclusive. We have seen numerous examples of how positive media portrayals have directly influenced and inspired career paths, education and overall self-esteem, proving the relevance of our motto: "If she can see it, she can be it."

**Madeline Di Nonno**

*CEO, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media*

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media  
*If she can see it, she can be it.*



## ***Women First, Prosperity to All!***

I am delighted to greet and support the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in its endeavor to bring out this important report, *Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment*.

WCC is a product of breaking the silence around the sexual harassment faced by women in the film industry. WCC marked its presence in Kerala during the #MeToo movement which began in Hollywood and later spread globally. The politically and socially progressive society of Kerala was shocked when a talented woman artist courageously spoke about the sexual assault she had encountered and her journey to seek justice. WCC stood with her and with all the women exploited at different levels in the industry.

This status report is an eye-opener for all stakeholders in the industry and the state. This initiative will strengthen women's fight to secure their lawful rights as women and as workers in the film industry. Years ago, Clara Zetkin and August Bebel condemned the exploitation of women's labor within the family and in the workplace and called on them to fight for equal and decent pay.

In this patriarchal world, this battle may continue for years. But efforts like this and the constant struggles by women in each workplace around the globe will certainly strengthen and hasten the enterprise.

I believe WCC can lead this process in the film industry in our country and promote good practices in the field.

**M.C. Josephine**

*Chairperson, Kerala State Women's Commission*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The film and entertainment industry is a major contributor to the global economy. The Motion Picture Association has estimated that the film and television industry in the United States supports 2.5 million jobs, which together represent over USD 181 billion in wages annually.<sup>1</sup> The total gross output of the Indian film and television industry is estimated at INR 216,677 crore (USD 33.3 billion), and the industry is believed to have generated employment for a total of 23.6 lakh (2.36 million) people, according to a 2017 report by Deloitte.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past few years, entertainment industries across the world have been compelled to recognize that business as usual is no longer acceptable to women. In the movie industry, well-known female actors have been speaking out strongly and publicly about prevailing gender disparities and calling for gender and pay equity. However, the industry establishment continues to overlook and bypass women's contributions to the field. Many women working in the industry, too, often seem hesitant participants, reluctant or unable to assert their rights, possibly because of the prevailing unfavorable atmosphere and the fact that they still constitute a minority within the cinema workforce.

2. The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), Kochi, and Sakhi Women's Resource Centre, Thiruvananthapuram (both based in Kerala) came together in late 2018 to undertake a project to examine the current status of women and trans persons who identify as women in southern

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1 <https://www.motionpictures.org/what-we-do/driving-economic-growth/>

2 [https://www.mpa-apac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/India-ECR-2017\\_Final-Report.pdf](https://www.mpa-apac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/India-ECR-2017_Final-Report.pdf)

Indian film industries. The project was based on the understanding that diversity among those involved in filmmaking would naturally lead to more diverse, yet commercially viable, movies. The immediate aim of the project, supported by a grant from the U.S Consulate General, Chennai, was to work towards a set of recommendations that would improve the situation of women in these industries.

In view of the low representation of women in film industries at all levels and in most professional fields, the project sought to promote inclusion, parity and security within the industries so that women could be assured of a safe, fair and equal working environment. The project also aimed to advocate better access for women and other disadvantaged sections of the population to the full range of cinema-related occupations, including production, direction, writing, cinematography and other behind-the-scenes fields.

The recommendations are expected to serve as guidelines for producers and other decision-makers in the industry, offering ideas on how to ensure more participation by women in an economically significant industry that could benefit from better utilization of diverse sources of talent and creativity.

3. The primary activities of the project were two conferences, held in Kochi and Chennai in April and October 2019 respectively. In addition, an online perception survey was conducted to gather information from as many women working in the industry as possible. In addition, interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, experts and journalists/researchers.

Both the conferences were attended by women working in different areas of filmmaking, mainly in the industries based in the five states of southern India (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka).

The first conference, held in Kochi, focused on experiential sharing by participants grouped by work categories into five panels. Producers, directors, writers, actors and behind-the-camera professionals and technicians spoke eloquently about their experiences and observations as women functioning in a deeply patriarchal industry.

The second conference, held in Chennai, aimed to move beyond first person stories and focus more on thinking and talking about strategies to make film industries more inclusive, diverse and gender-sensitive. Panels discussed new opportunities, efforts to 'redefine the narrative' and the role of formal associations of cinema workers. Individuals who had made efforts to bring about change in the functioning of film industries in different states shared their experiences and learnings. Group discussions focused on interventions in each craft or category of film work that could help move the industries towards gender inclusivity, equality, equity and justice.

4. Key learnings from the conferences:
  - i. There is a dearth of women working as producers, directors and key technicians. This, in turn, influences both working relationships and content. Most women lack training in fund-raising and financial management.
  - ii. Few women know how to network with trade organizations, financiers and institutions such as Chambers of Commerce. This impedes their ability to access tools and structures of financing.
  - iii. Entrenched 'traditional' notions of women as incapable of dealing with many tasks, both technical and aesthetic, continue to prevail. The deep-seated stereotype is that women are capable of being only hairstylists, costume designers and actors.
  - iv. There is a widespread, persistent perception that 'women's films' – whether they are based on women-oriented themes or women-centered stories and/or films made by women – do not succeed at the box office.
  - v. The prevalence of sexual harassment in the film industry, and its failure to adequately address the problem, discourages the participation of women in the field. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (popularly known as the POSH Act) is rarely acknowledged and barely implemented in the film industry. Gender-sensitive professional contracts that take into account this and other existing laws guaranteeing women workers' rights, safety and security (including maternity leave and childcare facilities and/or allowances) are virtually unknown.
  - vi. There is an urgent need for professionalization in all aspects and levels of the industry, including the recruitment process, job descriptions, transparency in terms of employment and protocols for credits.
  - vii. The 'locker room culture' that prevails on sets – in terms of language, topics of conversation, attitudes and behavior towards women – clearly requires transformation.
  - viii. There is a paucity of facilities for training in various fields of filmmaking, particularly for women.
  - ix. There are no databases or directories of women working in film, which makes it difficult for them to find work and for potential employers to recruit them.
  - x. There is an under-representation of women in the decision-making positions and processes of professional unions and associations. Lack of representation in such forums not only impedes women's bargaining power but also makes these bodies unmindful of working women's rights and concerns.
5. In order to gain a better understanding of certain important areas of concern, the project commissioned four special articles for this report:



- a) **From ‘casting couch’ to recognizing sexual harassment**, by journalist Sowmya Rajendran explores the impact (if any) of the #MeToo moment in South Indian film industries.
  - b) **Rights of women workers in the film industry** by lawyers Rohan Kothari and Jayna Kothari provides an overview of existing laws governing the film industry (in general and with specific reference to female workers) and looks at implementation and enforcement, as well as accountability.
  - c) **Commercial viability of women-centric films** by journalist Prathibha Parameswaran examines the marketability of films made by women and/or on women-oriented themes.
  - d) **Gendered precarity and labor organizing in the South Indian film industry** by scholar Darshana Sreedhar Mini discusses the challenges of establishing gender safety and equity in a largely male-dominated trade-guild environment and the role of women’s collectives in this scenario.
6. Thanks primarily to women working in cinema, there is now more gender awareness and an accompanying demand for gender balance and justice in film industries around the world. This appears to be an ideal time to replace antiquated, patriarchal mindsets with more contemporary, gender-just ways of seeing and doing.

The following set of recommendations has been distilled from discussions during the conferences, insights gained in the course of conducting interviews and further deliberations by the project team. They are meant to serve as guidelines for decision-makers within the industry, the government, professional associations and unions, film scholars and reviewers, labor academics and activists, and interested others, on how to bring about the changes required to update film industries and diversify both their workforce and their output.

A more inclusive industry that provides a fair, secure, congenial and dynamic work environment will enable everyone, irrespective of gender, caste, class, creed, sexuality, age and other markers of identity, to be at their creative and productive best. This will undoubtedly offer the movie-loving public a wider range of enjoyable, quality cinema and, thereby, gain a better reputation while also becoming more profitable.

#### **A. PROMOTION OF WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

- Encourage governments at the central and state levels to introduce policies and incentives to facilitate the production and marketing of films by or on women.
- Enable women to create content for alternative platforms such as the growing number of OTT (over-the-top) platforms and to explore different available means of production and distribution.
- Conduct training programs for women on various aspects of the film business.

- Work towards redefining the matrix of success for films.

## **B. ROLE OF UNIONS/ASSOCIATIONS**

- Actively encourage women to join as members.
- Ensure due representation of women in decision-making positions and bodies.
- Set up women's wings.
- Amend by-laws to specifically address gender concerns.
- Ensure that sexual harassment is addressed seriously, in terms of redressal, prevention and awareness by conducting legal literacy and gender-sensitization programs.

## **C. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POSH ACT**

- Set up redressal mechanisms at and for all levels of the production process.
- Conduct gender-sensitivity training programs.
- Adopt and publicize policies of zero tolerance of sexual harassment applicable to film sets, post-production houses/companies, etc.
- Make sure that information about policies and mechanisms to deal with sexual harassment is conveyed to all workers – full-time, part time, contract, temporary and/or interns – and followed up with regular reminders.
- Establish codes of conduct to be observed by employers and workers in all areas of work and at all levels.
- Include the names of members of the Internal Committee responsible for implementation of the POSH law in the credits at the end of each film.

## **D. MEASURES RELATED TO FILM PRODUCTION**

- Take specific steps to ensure safety at work as well as other legally mandated benefits such as maternity benefits.
- Ensure the availability of clean, secure and well-lit bathrooms and changing rooms, with facilities for disposal of menstrual hygiene products.
- Ensure the availability of childcare facilities and/or allowances.
- Incentivize the employment of more female crew members.
- Discard traditionalist notions of gender-specific jobs – a.k.a. “women's work”.

## **E. PRACTICES RELATED TO FILM CONTENT AND TREATMENT**

- Ensure that 50 percent of the writers in a writing room comprises women.

- Enable women to review scripts to promote gender-sensitive content and treatment.
- Make focused training in gender-aware writing available to women.
- Encourage discussions regarding sexualized dance and song sequences in a film among filmmakers – directors, actors, dance choreographers, lyricists and music directors, so that decisions about such scenes are based on different points of view.
- Launch public service campaigns against sexualized content.
- Encourage film critics, reviewers and historians to point out gender biases and appreciate gender sensitivity in movies.
- Ensure that intimate scenes are filmed on the basis of full disclosure to and consent from the actors involved, and under supervision.

#### **F. FILM SCHOOLS AND FILM INTERNSHIPS**

- Include gender studies as part of the curriculum.
- Implement the POSH Act in film schools.
- Institute gender-friendly codes of conduct.
- Ensure that the selection of students across courses promotes gender diversity.
- Provide subsidies and scholarships for female students.

#### **G. PRACTICES IN RECRUITMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

- Streamline recruitment practices in the industry.
- Ensure that recruitment practices are professional and accountable.
- Improve diversity and inclusion metrics through capacity-building programs, and promotion and reward policies.

#### **H. EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION**

- Discourage “locker room” attitudes and behavior.
- Encourage gender diversity in all informal spaces and interactions.
- Promote legal literacy among women in cinema.
- Discourage sexualized and otherwise inappropriate language and behavior in workplaces.

If the media and entertainment industry is to achieve the goal of “Prosperity for All” it is vital that systemic changes are instituted without any further delay. A traditionalist mode of operation, which does not accept women as equal partners, is no longer acceptable. It is only through the unravelling of these outdated attitudes and structures and the initiation of a concerted, sustained effort to weed out gender bias, discrimination and inequality that change can be brought about.











*“...The film industry is arguably the most high-profile of all the creative industries, with considerable cultural, social as well as economic clout and potential. Film is also a powerful medium that in many ways both reflects and shapes society and culture. Diversity is crucial to the film-making process if cinema is to reflect the experiences and perspectives of different sections of society, including women and persons from LGBTQI communities.*

*The pervasive gender imbalance and stereotyping in cinematic content have received critical attention over several decades. More recently, attention has been drawn to gender inequality within the industry. Women are not only severely under-represented in the workforce, particularly in key creative roles and decision-making positions, but they also have less access to resources and face substantial gender pay gaps. In recent years even top-level stars among female actors – from Hollywood to Bollywood and in between – have publicly spoken out about unequal remuneration. This situation is regrettable in itself and it cannot but have a deleterious impact on content.*

*Fortunately, gender inequality in films appears to be receiving closer attention now. One reason is that data establish beyond doubt the persistence of disturbing disparities based on gender as well as other factors.”<sup>3</sup>*

## **Background**

**C**ultural expressions in various forms – cinema, the performing arts, the visual arts, literature, design – influence perceptions about gender identity and gender relations, and therefore, inevitably, have an impact on gender equality, directly or indirectly. If there is gender imbalance among the creators of culture, there is bound to be gender imbalance in the content

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<sup>3</sup> Ammu Joseph. ‘Gender equality: Missing in action’, in Reshaping cultural policies – Advancing creativity for development. UNESCO Global Report on the 2005 Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions, 2018.

of culture. Uneven representation of men, women and those who identify as other genders in cultural industries and their creative output militates against cultural diversity.

If cultural production is disproportionately controlled by men, the output will naturally tend to reflect male points of view. The resulting skew in the experiences and perspectives mirrored in cultural expressions of various kinds cannot but lead to distorted notions about gender identity, gender relations and, ultimately, gender equality. Cultural diversity in general, and gender diversity in particular, are crucial aspects of the pursuit of not only social equality and justice, but also professional quality and the meaning and relevance of cultural expressions, including cinema.

Over the past few years entertainment industries across the world – India and the United States of America included – have been compelled to recognize that business as usual is no longer acceptable to women. In the movie industry, well-known female actors have been speaking out strongly and publicly about the prevailing gender disparities and calling for gender and pay equity. The #MeToo initiative, sparked off by exposes about sexual harassment in Hollywood in the last quarter of 2017, quickly became a global campaign.

Although the entertainment industry in India was hit by the #MeToo wave only a year later, the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) was in many ways a forerunner. WCC came into being in Kerala in 2017, in response to the sexual assault experienced by an established actress who chose to speak up about it. A group of 18 women from the Malayalam film industry came together to stand by their colleague.

The episode and reactions to it from prominent individuals and organizations in the industry served to underline the stranglehold of patriarchal beliefs and practices within the film industry and highlight the many challenges faced by women seeking to pursue justice. Although the collective came together in response to a case of sexual assault, and has since maintained its focus on sexual harassment within the industry, it has also drawn attention to discriminatory attitudes and behavior, as well as uncongenial and insecure workspaces, that make it difficult for women to function within the film industry.

Women have worked in and contributed to the entertainment industry in India from its earliest days onwards. However, the ecosystem in the film industry remains inhospitable to them. Over the past couple of decades, a large number of women have entered the industry in many parts of the country to take up “off screen” jobs as well. However, in an industry that continues to be notoriously male-dominated – both in India and globally – Indian women involved in filmmaking have seldom been able to voice their concerns, let alone come together to propose systems and practices that are gender-sensitive and, therefore, more conducive to a healthy, safe work environment for everyone.

Although multiple associations and unions of producers, directors, actors and various categories of technicians do exist in several Indian cities and states,

few take up the many issues that affect women workers in the film industry. The emergence of WCC and a few other organizations focusing on gender in the Indian film industry, particularly in South India, in recent years holds out hope that women working in cinema across the country will finally be able to not only highlight the challenges they face but also help identify solutions that will lead to a better atmosphere. This will not only benefit those already working in the industry but also encourage more women to opt for careers in cinema. It will also, no doubt, contribute to expanding the diversity and enhancing the quality of films made in India.

## THE PROJECT

It is in this context that the WCC teamed up with Sakhi, a well-known women's resource center based in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, to work on a project that would address the many issues that confront women working and wishing to work in cinema. The U.S Consulate General, Chennai, came forward to support the initiative as a follow-up to the 27<sup>th</sup> Global Entrepreneurship Summit held in Hyderabad in 2017 on the theme: "Women First: Prosperity for All."

The theme reflected recognition of the fact that women across all areas of work face certain problems, particularly in terms of access to finance, markets, etc., and that such obstacles needed to be removed not only for women's sake but for all-round progress and prosperity. The media and entertainment industry was identified during the Summit as an important field to leverage in the process of promoting women's participation and leadership in the economy, including the creative economy.

A key take-away from the Summit was that an effective way to overcome barriers is to build networks of support among entrepreneurs and others operating in the business ecosystem. WCC and other organizations with similar concerns and goals are ideally placed to initiate and develop such a network in order to bring about change in the world of cinema, beginning with film industries based in the five southern states.

Accordingly, the project aimed to bring together women involved in different fields of work within the film industries of southern India to begin the process of exploring the situation with regard to employment opportunities, terms and conditions of work, gender-related challenges in cinema workspaces, and experiences (both positive and negative) within the industry. The idea was that shared experiences and perspectives would contribute to a better understanding of the prevailing situation and the actions required to bring about the necessary change.

Led by a core team comprising members of WCC and Sakhi, as well as other professionals with an understanding of gender in the context of work, the project envisaged two conferences, with participants from South Indian and other film industries and related fields, as the primary information-gathering activities.



The initial plan was to use the lessons learnt in the process to produce a draft manual on best practices to promote gender balance and justice in the entertainment industry in India and enable all workers to realize their full potential. The understanding was that this, in turn, would benefit the industry and its output and, thereby, eventually, the cinema-loving public.

In view of the vastness and variety of the world of Indian movies, and obvious differences between the film industry and others that are part of the entertainment industry, a decision was made early on to narrow the focus of the project to the film industry and, within that, industries based in the southern states of India, producing movies in languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu.

The original idea was that, once completed, the draft manual would be shared with industry and business associations, as well as film workers' unions, for feedback and inputs. The manual, aiming to set standards and promote good practices in film industries, would then be finalized and circulated widely with the expectation that it would serve to generate similar conversations in film industries in the rest of the country. This in turn, it was hoped, would lead to a nationwide consensus on how to make the world of Indian cinema more inclusive and diverse in the interest of greater creativity and better business.

## **THE PROCESS**

The first brainstorming meeting of the project's core team, along with a few other WCC members, was held on 19 December 2018 at the YMCA International Guesthouse, Ernakulam (Kerala). Highlighting the established fact that greater diversity leads to greater creativity, participants agreed that the film industry would be enriched by the presence of more women in the field. Pointing out that although many women are interested in joining the industry but hesitate to do so, they said it is necessary to figure out what currently stops them from entering the field and what can be done to encourage them to take the plunge. It was, of course, clear that a key step forward would be to make the industry a safer and more conducive space for women to work in.

The proposed manual was to outline the responsibilities of film producers towards gender mainstreaming in the industry, making provisions for the health and safety of women working in cinema, and ensuring that their rights, including the right to fair and equal payment, are secured.

The discussion on the dearth of contracts governing employment in southern Indian film industries was particularly revealing. While the system of signed contracts was introduced in the Mumbai-based Hindi film industry over a decade ago (mainly due to tax laws that mandate contracts for anyone earning more than a certain amount per annum), it was felt that while contracts can promote professionalism, it is also an indication of the corporatization of cinema, which has some negative implications for freedom and creativity. It was also pointed out that at present, contracts, even where they exist, do not protect workers at the lower end of the employment ladder and pay pyramid,

not to mention the large number of daily wage workers. It goes without saying that they rarely, if ever, address the rights, needs and concerns of female workers.

The conversation also highlighted the feudal and patriarchal attitudes and behavior of most traditional producers, the nefarious role often played by the production controller/manager, the tendency to use language that is far from professional on film sets, and the fact that pay parity (equal pay for equal/ equivalent work) was virtually unheard of. Some participants pointed out that film schools and the film industry perpetuate and mutually reinforce a culture that is not women-friendly, with the few female students and fresh recruits often subjected to harassment of various kinds.

Each stage in the film-making process was discussed to highlight some of the existing problems that call for solution-oriented attention. A few points that came up in this initial conversation are highlighted here although they are, of course, more fully discussed in other sections of this document.

### **Scripting**

The role and status of the scriptwriter varies according to the type of production. Writers working under contract with corporate or traditional producers may appear to have some advantages, but the flip side is that they do not have control over their scripts, which are seen as “products” rather than creative works. Those who work in independent cinema have a different experience and celebrity writers are, of course, treated differently. At present there are few female scriptwriters and those who participate in the writing process are often denied credits as co-writers.

Another disadvantage for women is that, as part of the informality and seclusion deemed necessary for the creative writing process, writers tend to work in hotel rooms and apartments. Such venues may be convenient for male networking, but they are inhibiting and intimidating for most women. More neutral workspaces would make scriptwriting more of a professional process and that would make it easier for women to collaborate with writers and eventually become scriptwriters themselves.

### **Casting**

The key players in the casting process were identified as the production controller and the director: the former usually decides on the cast list after discussion with the latter. The solicitation of profiles follows but the mode of selection is not transparent and this increases the vulnerability of female actors. It is clearly necessary to call for the professionalization of casting through fairer and safer practices.

### **Crew Selection**

At present the selection of crew members is arbitrary, often based on personal contacts and preferences. Also, women are currently excluded from certain fields within various film industries. A database of skilled professionals,

including women, in various fields of the industry, would enable and encourage selection based on clear, transparent, professionally determined parameters. This, in turn, would help make more inclusive crew selection possible.

## **Location**

Location hunting involves travel and accommodation. With budget restrictions often necessitating the sharing of rooms, a lone woman on the team is usually eliminated from the process. And this, in turn, leads to the exclusion of women from certain crew positions simply due to logistical reasons. This constraint, which clearly limits women's access to certain functions within the industry, could easily be addressed if the need for fairness and inclusion was acknowledged and factored in.

## **Sets**

The "locker room culture" that prevails on sets in terms of language, topics of conversation, attitudes and behavior towards women, sharing of pornographic material etc., contribute towards making shoots an uncomfortable experience for many women. Anyone who objects is labelled a troublemaker and unlikely to be hired again. The feudal and patriarchal work culture needs to be changed, with a new mantra: "professionalize, modernize and contemporize".

The discussion also identified special conditions, facilities and services that would provide a more conducive work environment for women in the film industry, such as gender-sensitive professional contracts that take into account laws guaranteeing women workers' rights, proper implementation of the law relating to sexual harassment at the workplace, and childcare facilities and/or allowances.

## **THE PUBLICATION**

In view of existing realities, with hardly any good practices – let alone best practices – in evidence, it was proposed that a status report outlining the present situation and recommending action to improve it would be most relevant and doable. It was felt that such a publication would provide the necessary baseline picture to gauge progress towards gender balance and equality, as well as gender-sensitive workplaces and practices.

Conversations about the possible content and structure of the publication continued throughout 2019, over email, Skype as well as physical meetings of the core team scheduled at the end of the two conferences in April and October 2019.

## **THE CONFERENCES**

The two conferences – held in Kochi in April 2019 and Chennai in October 2019 – were ground-breaking events, widely appreciated by almost all participants. Not only did they represent the first gatherings of Indian women working in film industries across disciplines, locations and languages, but

they were also unprecedented in that they specifically focused on the status, experiences and perspectives of women and trans persons who identify as women who contribute to the making of movies in India.

The conferences were conceived and planned to be different yet connected. The first focused on gathering experiences from women working in different aspects of filmmaking: producers, directors, actors, writers, behind the camera professionals and technicians. The second, while acknowledging the significance of experiences, concentrated on the way forward towards making film industries more diverse, inclusive, gender-sensitive and secure workspaces so that everyone, including women, can perform at their creative best. The Chennai conference also highlighted film industries as economic opportunities that women have a right to access and participate in – not only as members of the workforce but also as decision-makers and economic drivers.

The conferences turned out to be extraordinary events in terms of the quantum and quality of information, experiences and perspectives shared by all the participants from their various locations and positions in the film industries based in southern India (a few having also worked in Mumbai). The assemblies were further enriched by the genuine and generous sharing of thoughts and feelings, as well as the animated, empathetic discussion and debate. The revelations and deliberations during the conferences confirmed and amplified many of the issues that had been highlighted during the preliminary planning meeting held in December 2018 but, as anticipated, disclosed and explored more realities, more comprehensively. Both conferences have been documented in detail.

## **ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES**

Enthused by the success of the Kochi conference, the core team was inspired to go beyond the original brief of the project in order to gather more information and insights about the situation of women in film industries, which has evidently not yet received the attention it deserves. A few members undertook to conduct interviews with key individuals in the film industries, particularly in South India, including office-bearers and/or active members of established professional associations/unions, as well as newer organizations formed by women in cinema. A few case studies were planned to highlight some positive experiences reported by women in the industry. A review of literature on the subject of women in film-related occupations was also initiated. Some special articles on key issues by writers with the requisite professional background were commissioned. And an online survey was launched in an attempt to gather more widespread information about the status of women in film industries, especially the experiences and perspectives of many women who work in the field but are not yet connected to the emerging community of female colleagues and ongoing efforts to address the many gender-related problems that persist in the industries. Some of these initiatives are, at present, works in progress.

## FINAL REPORT

This report marks the conclusion of the ‘Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment’ project. It follows and supplements the interim report that included detailed reports on the two conferences. This final report provides an overview of the project, learnings generated through it and observations and recommendations based on insights gained in the course of it. The report also includes the four specially commissioned articles on topics that emerged during the conferences, which the authors felt required further investigation by individuals with the requisite knowledge and experience.

## Learnings

The 'Shift Focus' conference for women in cinema held in Kochi in April 2019 was the first of its kind in India. The two-day event provided an unprecedented opportunity for women contributing in various ways to the creation of movies to share experiences, observations, thoughts and feelings, as well as to build solidarity, with each other. The sessions were arranged by professional function to ensure that the challenges faced by women across the entire spectrum of film workers could find expression: producers, directors, writers, actors and behind the camera professionals and technicians.

The second conference, held in Chennai in October 2019, took the form of a two-day workshop in which artists, technicians and other cinema practitioners, as well as a few journalists and scholars, participated. While the Kochi conference provided a rare, much-needed opportunity to share experiences and build solidarity, the Chennai workshop aimed at identifying strategies and moving towards action to address the pressing issues facing women in the industry and to achieve the larger goal of enhancing opportunities for women in all fields in media and entertainment. While the workshop aimed to be solution-oriented, it also served the purpose of furthering understanding of the problems highlighted during the Kochi conference.

Observations and recommendations culled from these conferences, as well as other conversations before and after the meetings, are presented later in this report. Here the focus is on the current situation, or the status quo, as revealed during the events, together with some insights, examples and contextual commentary to illustrate points. The description of the present state of affairs has been organized by the various disciplines – more commonly known within the industry as 'crafts' – involved in the process of film-making: production, direction, scriptwriting, acting/performing (including junior artists, dancers and singers) and technical occupations (such as cinematography, sound and editing).



## Production

The following points came up during the various panel and open discussions focusing on the experiences, roles and responsibilities of producers. The discussions revolved mainly around three themes: better content, safety and parity at the workplace and access to resources that can enable more women to take up leadership positions such as that of producer.

1. At present the number of female producers is dismally low. There is, therefore, a need to promote the hiring of women as producers as a positive value in the film industry.
2. It is also important to focus on hiring more women writers to ensure more varied content and more women-oriented stories that do not fall into the trap of stereotyping, objectifying and trivializing women.
3. According to panelists the onus to hire more women professionals in film projects is now mainly on the few female producers and directors in the industry. However, there ought to be a platform or mechanism that allows for regular conversations with male producers, too, to explore ways to produce and promote movies directed by women, as well as women-led and themed films, in order to transform the current situation in mainstream cinema.
4. Given the dearth of women producers, steps need to be taken to encourage and empower more women to become producers. In this context, it is necessary to network with trade organizations, financiers and institutions such as Chambers of Commerce in order to create access to tools and structures of financing.
5. There is a widespread perception that “women’s films”, whether they are films on women-oriented themes, films made by women or films with female leads, do not garner adequate box-office returns. This superficial view needs to be countered. It is necessary to re-define the metric of success and shift the focus from absolute numbers to return on investment. Journalists and trade analysts could be encouraged to assess the success of films accordingly.
6. At present there is not enough data to clarify why certain films made by women have been successful at the box office. With more information and analysis such success stories could serve as models for future productions.
7. Film industries based in southern India are currently unorganized and “scattered”. While this lack of structure may contribute to the difficulties faced by many women that have prevented them from making a mark in the field, it could also be looked upon by women producers as an opportunity to institute new and better organized systems of production. Such innovations may help them become market leaders.
8. The few female producers in southern Indian film industries have so far not been able to tap potential revenue sources from the OTT (Over

The Top) media market, which was projected to grow 45 percent by the end of fiscal 2023 in the pre-Covid-19 scenario. The growth rate may be considerably higher than projected due to the widespread and prolonged novel coronavirus-related lockdowns and post-Covid-19 protocols. It has been reported that major global OTT platforms plan to deepen their geographical presence in India and increase Indian language content. Female producers could make use of this shift if they are able to create and produce innovative content, focused on women-oriented themes and/or presenting new perspectives on the complexities of gender identities, roles and relations.

9. At present there is a paucity of coproduction opportunities providing access to finance, and lack of access to information about those that exist. More Film Bazar type models that provide forums for exploring coproduction options are required to make it easier for women to access to finance for films.
10. Women aspiring to be producers often lack fund-raising and financial capabilities. Collaborations between filmmakers and institutes offering training in financial and management skills could help women work on international coproduction deals. A good, stable finance and management plan can guide a producer through the process of raising money and handling budgets for films.
11. There is a need for better applied tools for targeted digital marketing in order to reduce sales budgets. It may be worth exploring the option of working with existing labs in Europe and North America to create new markets and sales platforms which can break the feudal structure of southern Indian film industries and make it easier for independent women producers to market their films.
12. At present most producers do not invest time and effort in structured interaction with film schools to acquire and share knowledge and tools related to finance and other production-related skills. Such networks and pipelines of information and skill sharing, which can be established with Indian as well as top foreign film schools, could be mutually beneficial.
13. Currently the environment in film industries is far from conducive for women. Professional contracts, let alone gender-sensitive ones, that take into account existing laws that guarantee women workers' rights and the need for proper implementation of legislation relating to sexual harassment at the workplace, maternity leave and childcare facilities and/or allowances are almost completely absent.
14. The "locker room culture" that prevails on sets in terms of language, topics of conversation, attitudes and behavior towards women, sharing of pornographic videos and material, inappropriate humor and behavior, etc., contributes towards making shoots an uncomfortable experience for most women. Women who dare to object to such everyday indignities are labelled 'troublemakers' and are unlikely to be hired again. Such



misogynistic work cultures provide fertile ground for more direct and severe sexual harassment, even rape and assault. Sexual harassment in film industries cannot be tackled or addressed, unless the work culture is vastly improved. Women producers are in a position to bring about the required transformation. Two female producers from the Telugu film industry shared their experiences, as individuals, of taking steps to make their sets fair and safe for women.

15. Hardly any production houses in southern India have formed the Internal Committees mandated by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 – commonly known as ICs and/or POSH Committees – in the manner envisaged by the law. However, several female producers mentioned that they have initiated measures to create safer work environments on their sets. Where women producers lead, most appear to take responsibility for eliminating sexual harassment and making the ecosystem more inclusive and fair. Mumbai-based Guneet Monga (international film producer and entrepreneur, founder of Sikhya Entertainment and executive producer of the Oscar-winning short film, ‘Period: End of Sentence’) mentioned that she has a functioning and credible IC in place in her production company, and she personally ensures that regular awareness workshops are conducted. She also plans to have a gender expert or external committee member visit during outdoor shoots to assess whether there are any undercurrents of unhealthy interpersonal interactions in the film workplace which, during a shoot, is not only the set, but also where the cast and crew are accommodated for overnight stay (hotels, apartments, guest houses, etc). Such good practices could be adopted by southern Indian film industries as well as film producers in other parts of India.
16. Gayatri and Pushkar, producers from Wallwatcher Films, agreed that it is the producer’s responsibility to ensure that sexual harassment prevention and redressal measures, including formation of ICs, are instituted. However, most production houses have not yet begun implementing the law. Pushkar suggested that one way to promote compliance with the law could be to influence big production companies to declare that they will sign contracts only with those local producers/ co-producers or production houses which have POSH policies and practices in place. Such big production houses have the advantage of access to money and stars; if they and/or banks that fund film projects insist on compliance, the chances are that smaller outfits will fall in line.
17. Since individual women speaking out or taking action against discriminatory practices, and unsafe conditions of work, etc., are invariably punished with job loss, reputational damage and ostracization, broad based organizations are better placed to promote and facilitate fair and non-discriminatory practices in a non-confrontational manner. Women in cinema need to reach out to the broader community of experts working on diversity, inclusion and organizational effectiveness

to explore how to get specific measures instituted that can promote diversity and a performance and capability-based work culture. Producers can facilitate and learn from this process.

18. Women are currently excluded from several critical production-related functions due to business-as-usual practices that take the easy way out instead of exploring creative solutions to ensure that allocation of work is based on capabilities rather than identities. Location hunting, for instance, involves travel and accommodation. With budget restrictions often necessitating the sharing of rooms, a lone woman on the team is usually eliminated from the process. Such logistics and convenience-based discrimination leads, in turn, to the further exclusion of women from certain crew positions. Access to work and livelihood are thus adversely affected due to lack of gender sensitivity – sometimes unintentional, but oftentimes intentional. This, too, requires attention from producers.
19. At present crew selection tends to be arbitrary, often based on personal preferences, contacts and networks. In addition, there is a general tendency to exclude women from certain fields, with some variation in males-only crafts among different film industries. A database of skilled professionals, including women, in various fields of each industry, would enable and encourage selection based on clear, transparent, professionally determined parameters. This, in turn, would facilitate more inclusive crew selection.

### **Direction**

The following picture of the current status in film industries from the point of view of female directors and director-producers emerged from their contributions to discussions during the conferences:

1. At present film industries are characterized by a reluctance to accept women in leadership positions, such as that of film director. The stereotype of women being suitable only for acting, make-up and hairstyling, costume designing, etc., is well-entrenched. Many directors narrated experiences where they were mistaken for a costume designer or make-up artist by crew members or vendors. Such outdated assumptions need to be challenged and addressed at all levels.
2. Female film directors are still rare in the industry. As a result, they are barely represented in directors' unions and associations and, consequently, have little voice in the decision-making and policy framing processes of these professional organizations.
3. The industry is still largely unorganized. Employees are usually hired without mutually agreed upon work contracts. In the few instances where the system of contracts does exist, agreements do not address female workers' specific rights, needs and concerns. The provision of even basic arrangements and facilities – such as safe travel, safe accommodation during outdoor shoots, secure and clean toilets with

facilities to dispose menstrual hygiene products, maternity benefits, child care systems and access to redressal in case of sexual harassment – are not yet on the agenda of managements or policy makers in unions and associations. It is therefore not surprising that these working conditions are not mentioned in contracts, if any.

4. Under the circumstances there is a pressing need for women's collectives which can support women filmmakers and enable them to counter the feudal and misogynistic nature of the film industry. The more women in film direction the more they can collectively empower themselves and ensure that their cinematic voices are heard.
5. Women who wish to direct films need greater access to film education, particularly story telling or filmmaking strategies, in order to be able to break into and compete in the film industry.
6. Due to the bias against women in film industries, female directors do not have a level playing field on which they can work on equal terms with their male counterparts. Ensuring that they are given more space in film festivals as well as avenues for film production and exhibition can help them overcome this gender-based disadvantage.
7. As in the case of producers, women directors have little access to film financing strategies and tools. It is important to create and publicize platforms that can provide women with information about funding sources and strategies so that they can become more effective in organizing funds for their films. This is particularly important because women directors often have to take on the dual role of director-producers.
8. Directors also highlighted the confusion in the industry regarding the role of the producer. According to them, it is still assumed that the producer is the financier and nothing more. Anjali Menon (award-winning producer, scriptwriter, director and founder-member of WCC) rejected the idea that a producer merely deals with finances. Directors often have to take on the role of producer in India, she said, mainly because of the paucity of real producers who work from script to screen, facilitating the creative process by gathering and deploying resources and thereby insulating directors and other creative professionals from the daily logistical challenges of making a film. Only if producers efficiently manage all the various departments and solve problems as and when they arise can a creative team focus on its skills and perform well, she pointed out. Otherwise directors are forced to take on the producer's job even though they get neither payment nor credit for performing the extra role.

Sunita Tati, a producer working in the Telugu film industry, agreed that the producer's role should not be reduced to just dealing with money, emphasizing that production requires special abilities. According to her, production is also a craft which has to be learnt and practiced. Financiers can certainly take on production if they wish to but they then

need to recognize that their involvement cannot stop with making funds available. There is a difference between financiers and producers, she stressed: financiers fund the project while producers put the project together from inception to conclusion.

9. Directors are among the key players in the casting process, the other being the production controller. At present the solicitation of profiles and the mode of selection is far from transparent. This increases the vulnerability of female actors. It is clearly necessary to call for the professionalization of casting through fairer and safer practices. Accountability for ensuring that no one is exploited through the casting process should rest with the director.
10. Neither directors nor producers appear to have instituted any structured measures to eliminate sexism and sexual harassment in the film industry. The ICs mandated by the 2013 Act have still not been put in place in most film workplaces. Where they exist, the rule that such committees should include at least one credible external member has commonly been flouted. Some directors and producers claim that they are not authorized to set up ICs and take preventive measures since they are not “employers”. This is an incorrect interpretation of the 2013 Act, Section 2(o)(ii) of which clearly mentions that the entertainment industry comes within the purview of the law and that any person or organization overseeing production is accountable.

## Writing

Women screenwriters and lyricists identified the issues below as central to making their discipline more inclusive and fair:

1. For script writers and lyric writers, getting credit for their work of writing is a major issue. At present there is no standardization of writing protocols and the absence of screenwriters’ associations which can represent writers in various film industries makes a bad situation worse.
2. According to song writers they are often not briefed about the script and are expected to write lyrics without knowing much about the story or characters, and only on the basis of a rough idea of the context of the song. To make matters worse, often several song writers are simultaneously asked to write a particular song and only the writer whose song gets selected is paid. The other writers receive no compensation for their time and labor invested in the assignment. Many lyricists pointed out that while the composer may have some power, writers have none.
3. The absence of work contracts and agreements makes the lack of negotiating power and skills among screenwriters and song-writers all the more debilitating.
4. At present writers seem to lack awareness at many levels: awareness of the rules relating to writing scripts and songs for films and television shows, awareness of the number of platforms a film/show can live on

and awareness of the variety of storytelling formats available. In a creative field like screenwriting, rules can be bent or broken but it is important to know what the rules were, and are. On the whole there is lack of understanding among writers of the many existing formats, tools and methods as well as the protocol for pitching story ideas. This is a problem that needs to be urgently addressed through awareness and training programs.

5. Information about new, alternative roles within the media and entertainment industry does not appear to be widespread among writers. For example, the role of a showrunner who has overall responsibility for the management of an entire show/television/OTT series and requires a combination of skills, including writing, is one that writers could explore. The core task of the showrunner may be to tell a story but a number of administrative and business/budgetary responsibilities are involved, too. Such options appear to remain largely unexplored by women writers and producers. Given the growing demand for original and diverse content, and the dearth of such material, this could be an opportunity for women in cinema, provided they develop the required skills and competencies, including negotiation, marketing and business skills.
6. According to a prominent screenplay writer, “It is important to understand the business of “content” in India, which emerges from “a crazy mix of feudal patriarchy and capitalist finances.” She suggested that in order to counter the growing tendency to look upon writing as merely akin to delivering a product, it is also important to refer to “stories” rather than “content”.
7. It was pointed out that women writers need to understand the importance of contracts, while acknowledging both the advantages and limitations of the contract system. Only with contracts in place can copyright violations, plagiarism, non-payment and other violations be legally pursued.
8. As another panelist pointed out, the movie industry is not only about entertainment; it is an intellectual industry which needs to be representative and show solidarity. According to her, choosing to remain ignorant about the social realities around constitutes supporting patriarchy and opposing those trying to bring about justice.
9. Pointing out that women writers are often used to create female characters who are “likeable” because they are submissive, panelists and discussants highlighted the need to break such social molds. They called attention to the need for intersectionality and inclusivity, taking the help of allies to plug certain holes in the way characters are created and, especially, how male and female characters are portrayed.
10. The notion that films on women-oriented stories and films made by women are not successful at the box office invariably leads to fewer women getting work as screenwriters in the industry.



11. More opportunities for training in screenplay writing methodologies – both mainstream and alternative – are required so that aspiring female writers can acquire writing skills and knowledge about the different forms that can be explored, such as films, web series, daily soaps, writing for non-fiction films, etc.
12. The role and status of the scriptwriter varies according to the type of production. Writers working under contract with corporate or traditional producers may appear to have some advantages, but the flip side is that they do not have control over their scripts, which are seen as “products” rather than as creative works. Those who work in independent cinema have a different experience and celebrity writers are, of course, treated differently. At present there are only a few independent female scriptwriters and those who participate in the writing process are often denied credit as co-writers.
13. Another disadvantage faced by women is that, as part of the informality and seclusion deemed necessary for the creative writing process, writers in the film industry tend to work in hotel rooms and apartments. Such venues may be convenient for men and male networking/bonding but they are inhibiting and intimidating for most women. More neutral workspaces would make scriptwriting more of a professional process and that would make it easier for women to collaborate with writers and eventually become scriptwriters themselves.
14. According to Aparna Purohit (Head of Creative Development, Amazon Prime, Mumbai), the fact that there are fewer boundaries in the variety of stories that can be told in the digital/OTT era could create more opportunities for women writers and women-centric content. She cited the examples of ‘Made in Heaven’, written and directed by four women: Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, Nitya Mehra and Alankrita Shrivastava, and ‘Four More Shots Please’, written by three women: Devika Bhagar, Ishita Moitra and Rangita Pritish Nandy, and directed by two women: Anu Menon and Nupur Asthana. Responding to questions about the new, emerging stereotype of strong, progressive women (who invariably drink and smoke) popularized by some of these shows, she admitted that was fair criticism but pointed out that the series also highlighted and normalized other aspects of modern women’s lives, such as careers and issues concerning the body and sexuality. Suggesting that such shows could serve as good conversation starters, she pointed out that in a series writers and directors have the option of delving deeper into the characters and situations in subsequent seasons. According to her, women working in south Indian film industries can look forward to more work opportunities with Amazon venturing into Tamil and Telugu content in the near future. Pointing out that digital platforms are, in many ways, a writer’s medium, she said there is now a conscious effort to get more women into the writers’ rooms.
15. Discussions also highlighted the fact that many films made in the post-#MeToo era have tended to belittle and trivialize the movement by

oversimplifying it or focusing on false allegations made by vengeful and immature women. It was pointed out that screenwriters need to be aware of the patriarchal and misogynistic lens that can distort such legitimate movements and try to ensure that what they perceive, interpret and ultimately put on paper is not mediated by such regressive attitudes.

## Acting

The various dimensions of the challenges faced by female actors, junior artists, dancers, singers and other performers are listed below:

1. Male stars as well as character actors are paid higher fees than their female counterparts. In addition, there are differences in how male and female actors are treated on sets. For example, male stars are usually provided with bigger vanity vans and more security personnel. Such visible signs of privilege signal to everyone involved who is placed where in the hierarchy and who enjoys the most power and prestige. And this naturally has a negative impact on the position of female actors in the film industry.
2. Female actors spoke of experiences of being groped by male actors while filming rape or even romantic/sexual scenes. Other humiliations are also not uncommon- one female actor said she was thrown into a garbage dump on the pretext that it was required for the scene.
3. Apart from indignities such as groping during scenes, demands for sex in return for work/roles and even, in one notorious case, abduction and molestation (in the Malayalam film industry), which are unfortunately all too common, female actors talked in detail about the everyday, low-intensity humiliation that they faced constantly.
4. According to actors, various forms of body shaming, including insistence on female actors taking off upper garments during auditions so that their physiques could be inspected and suggestions that they “get work done” to improve facial features and/or figures are common. These and other unacceptable comments and asks are done with such confidence, casualness and entitlement that it becomes difficult to raise objections, especially since any protest is made to look like a grave injustice done to the men making the demands.
5. Female actors are also often asked to make “adjustments” and “cooperate” - code words for giving in to demands for sex, popularly known as “sexual favors”.
6. Women labeled “bold” or “inquisitive”, ask questions or make suggestions are seen as unacceptably aggressive and retaliation usually follows. Outspoken women typically face hostility and humiliation.
7. In what seemed to be an exception, a leading female actor stated during the Kochi conference that she had never faced any problems and has, in fact, felt valued and respected by directors and producers. Others on

the panel suggested that this could be because she started her career as a leading actor and did not have to work her way up. Also, they pointed out, as in every other aspect of life and work, caste, class, socio-economic status and privilege play a role in the way individuals are treated and, to some extent, if and how they are targeted for sexual and other forms of harassment.

8. Female actors also talked about ageism and the consequent paucity of strong, well-etched roles for older women. Colorism is another reality: women with darker skin tones often face derogatory remarks and discrimination on the basis of color in addition to gender.
9. One actor talked about her experience of calling out a male actor for harassing her during a shoot. He reacted by misbehaving on the sets and disrupting the work schedule with his tantrums. Such obnoxious behavior by men who are called out is not uncommon. It is, in fact, one of the reasons for the widespread opinion among industry decision-makers that their misbehavior should be tolerated or overlooked so that work is not disrupted or delayed.
10. The situation of female junior artists and performers is not very different; if anything, it is worse since they are placed lower in the pecking order than female stars. The pressure on them to tolerate misconduct and to not be seen as “troublemakers” is very high.
11. It is evident that the POSH Act is not taken very seriously in the film industry. Actors reported that no briefings are held, and no information about the complaint process, let alone the names and contact details of Internal Committee members, are shared even through the display of posters and notices on the subject. This is despite the fact that there are known instances of the Act being flouted and of producers and directors getting away with disregarding the law.
12. This is the context in which female actors increasingly resort to calling out sexual predators on social media. A few female actors in the panel shared their personal experiences of participating in the #MeToo movement.
13. Well-known actor Swara Bhaskar talked about how in society, and therefore also in the film industry, women are not taught how to recognize harassment and discrimination. As a result, actors and performers often do not even realize that they are facing injustice. What adds to the haziness is the fact that casting offers are seen as good deeds indicating good will. The idea that getting a role is something to be grateful for, not due recognition of talent, is deeply ingrained. As a result, many actors not only normalize mistreatment, but are also unable to even talk about, let alone negotiate, payment.
14. Not only do female actors and performers need to learn how to negotiate, they also need to gather the strength to insist on signed contracts which can protect their rights and interests. A leading actor mentioned that



it is only over time that she has learnt how to negotiate effectively and safeguard her own interests. Female actors need to become more confident about the value they bring to the project and ensure that they are hired on the basis of contracts that specify not only details of the work expected and the remuneration and facilities that will be provided, but also how and where their names will appear in film credits as well as the nature of their participation in the publicity campaigns of films. One actor talked about how, even in a woman-led film in which she played the lead role, she had to negotiate to ensure that her name was mentioned first in the publicity poster.

15. Parvathy Thiruvothu (award-winning actor and founder member of WCC) highlighted issues such as the paucity of basic facilities on sets and the discrimination experienced by junior artists as well as assistants and technicians. According to her, the absence of essential physical protection, as well as health and hygiene facilities, is an urgent matter that needs to be addressed and resolved with immediate effect by the producers' association.
16. Female actors and junior artists face harassment or the threat of harassment even after working hours, in hotels or guest houses where they are accommodated on location. Misbehavior after consumption of alcohol seems to go unnoticed or assumed to be par for the course. Women being disturbed by late night knocks on their doors by male cast and crew members is evidently a common experience. Panelists described such incidents variously as "unsettling", "demeaning", "terrifying" and "traumatizing".
17. Promiscuous behavior and demands for sexual favors appear to be the expected or default male behavior in the film industry. The prevalent thinking seems to be that every woman is available for the pleasure of men. Female actors and junior artists especially seem to have to spend a fair amount of time and energy protecting themselves and each other from the predatory tactics of their own colleagues.
18. According to many actors, there is an unfortunate tendency to take note of problems only after a flare-up instead of anticipating and preventing unpleasant incidents. Producers and directors do not appear to take pre-emptive steps to make it clear that they have zero tolerance for certain types of behavior. It is necessary to create time for interactive briefings on the subject irrespective of how busy the work schedule is.
19. If there is no alternative to casting female actors with male actors who have a reputation for harassment and/or are known or suspected offenders, the former need to be protected and protocols for behavior and boundaries that should not be crossed need to be established right from the start.
20. Tracing the relationship between the star system and remuneration, Swara Bhaskar pointed out that the vulnerability of cinema as an art form is in many ways linked to economic realities. According to her, with

the bulk of the budget being allocated to stars, the burden of balancing the budget finally falls on the character or supporting actors and others who do not have proper representation at the negotiating table. Citing the example of the Screenwriters' Association in Hindi films, which has fixed a minimum guaranteed price for screenplays, she said it was time to start a conversation about fixed minimum wages in the industry. She acknowledged the difficulties of initiating such conversations with unions and producers in order to promote collaboration.

### **Technical professionals**

1. Women face great difficulty in gaining acceptance in technical positions because of the outdated assumption within the film industry that they are incompetent or unsuitable for such jobs. Due to this mindset, women technicians lose out on many work opportunities.
2. Women technicians who do manage to get hired face a lot of hostility and non-cooperation from colleagues such as assistant directors, production team members and others, even if they do have the support of the director and/or the producer.
3. While it is known that there are very few female technicians, the fact that this is primarily due to gender discrimination is not recognized. To make matters worse, there is a widespread perception that diversity and parity are achieved if the team includes one female member.
4. During the film-making process, work often spills over after pack-up time into informal spaces such as bars or hotel rooms, where the "male club" can bond but most female workers feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.
5. Female technicians often have to deal with unwanted attention and sexual overtures, particularly during filming on location. Rebuffing such demands invariably leads to loss of work opportunities as the woman is branded "unfriendly" or "troublesome".
6. Female technicians also often face hostility from male crew members who generally do not like to take instructions from women. If they tone down their communication style in order to avoid conflict, they risk being perceived as too weak to have control over the crew. Such gender-based undercurrents make it exceptionally hard for women technicians to function on a day to day basis. There is clearly a need for workshops on gender inclusion, gender relations, interpersonal communication, work ethics, etc., to address such situations.
7. Since the industry remains largely unorganized, with no system of mutually agreed upon work contracts, let alone gender-sensitive ones, film workplaces often lack basic facilities for female workers. To make matters worse, issues such as safe travel; secure accommodation during location filming; designated toilets with facilities to dispose menstrual hygiene products; access to mechanisms to redress complaints of sexual harassment; maternity benefits; childcare facilities or allowances, etc.,

are not on the agenda of policy makers in professional unions and therefore do not find mention in contracts, if any.

8. According to female technicians, many of them resort to suppressing their femininity by adopting gender-neutral ways of dressing in an effort to desexualize themselves and appear less “womanly” as defined by the mainstream. But these are clearly temporary and not particularly effective ways of dealing with the problem of gender bias. Systemic changes are clearly required to transform the workplace so that everyone is free to be themselves, assured that they will be judged by their work rather than the way they look or dress.
9. There is a pressing need for women’s collectives which can support female technicians in their struggle to get work, function effectively and be judged on the quality of their work.
10. At present there is a paucity of training facilities for female film technicians. The proportion of women in the technical departments of film schools is substantially lower than in other areas of filmmaking. This does not indicate women’s lack of interest in technical work; rather, it is the result of the misogynistic and patriarchal mindset in society and the film industry. There is an urgent need for special focus on women’s access to education in the technical aspects of filmmaking.
11. Female technicians in the industry can play the important role of helping new entrants avoid and call out the routine injustice to which they are often subjected. ICs or POSH Committees can play a pivotal role in unboxing discrimination and the factors leading to it and recommending measures to ensure affirmative action and due representation for women in each craft or discipline.
12. There is an urgent need for a database of women technicians to make it easier for producers and directors to hire technicians with the necessary talent, training and experience, instead of having to resort to recruitment based on internal referrals and past working relationships. Such a directory would also facilitate the mentoring of new entrants to various fields. A system that encourages and facilitates recruitment on the basis of talent and capability is more likely to result in better quality cinema.
13. The widely held belief that women’s films are not successful at the box office also adversely affects employment opportunities for female technicians. In fact, this unproven assumption severely impacts women in all crafts of filmmaking, including technical fields.

According to Senthil Kumar (Co-Founder, Qube Cinema), departments like sound, color grading and visual effects offer good work opportunities for women. Even though many women have been trained in the use of the editing software, Avid, there are very few female editors in India even now, as compared to the rest of the world. It is obvious that this is due to structural and attitudinal obstacles which need to be urgently removed.

## From 'casting couch' to sexual harassment: The story in the south Indian industries

*By Sowmya Rajendran*

**B**ack in 2005, Tamil director Thangar Bachan said during a cassette release event that women who act for money are the same as “prostitutes”. His remarks were supposedly directed at actor Khushbu, and he was subsequently forced to apologize. Khushbu was no novice in the industry at the time; she had been nothing short of a screen goddess all through the 1990s, with fans even building a temple for her. But that did not stop Thangar Bachan from making a distasteful and misogynistic statement.

Cut to 2019, and actor Radha Ravi, who is also the president of the South Indian Cine, Television Artistes and Dubbing Artistes Union, slut-shamed actor Nayanthara, the highest paid woman actor in the south Indian industries, during the trailer launch of her film. As in Thangar Bachan’s case, there was a hue and cry, but Radha Ravi did not apologize.

Both men were back in the game in no time. Thangar Bachan even won the Tamil Nadu State Award for Best Director in 2007 for *Pallikoodam*, and Radha Ravi continues to be part of films and film events to this day.

The reason this story begins with these two incidents is not because there have not been other such instances. It is to illustrate that even the most powerful and prominent women in the film industries, who have fought their way to the top and have gained substantial clout, are subjected to ugly and pervasive misogyny.

## Women as commodities

In both instances there was a furor only because the statements were made publicly. The attitude of the men in question towards their female colleagues represents only the tip of the iceberg. Such comments slip out of them with ease because viewing and speaking of women as commodities who can be exploited and replaced is so normalized within the industries.

The film industries in India, as in most parts of the world, are run mostly by men. The majority of the scriptwriters, directors, producers and technicians are male. As a consequence, most films tell the stories of men; female characters seldom have substantial roles. And so, although almost every film does include women actors, they are considered to be easily replaceable since the film is not being marketed in their name.

Women actors also have a much shorter shelf life than their male counterparts, making it difficult for them to negotiate beyond a point. If they build a reputation for being “difficult” (this can include anything from asking for better pay or toilet facilities or a bound script, and rejecting sexual advances), they run the risk of losing out on work. As actor Remya Nambheessan said in an interview, “When we ask for the remuneration we deserve or if we ask for the script, they feel offended.”

The Women in Cinema Collective was formed in the Malayalam film industry after a prominent woman actor was abducted and sexually assaulted in February 2017. The man who stands accused of being the mastermind behind the crime is Dileep, a male superstar. In the aftermath of the attack, a section of women from the industry banded together to form the WCC in order to stand by their colleague and also address other issues and concerns of women in the industry. Several WCC members have since reported that they have been denied work because of this initiative.

Women in cinema who are not actors – those who work as assistant directors, make-up artistes, costume designers etc. – have it worse because they have even less power than the stars.

It is necessary to know how the industries function in order to understand why sexual harassment at the workplace is pushed under the carpet here, too, despite the fact that women in cinema enjoy relatively more money, power and fame than women employed in many other fields. And why, in October 2018, when the #MeToo movement broke out in the Indian film industries, many women who had been silenced until then chose to speak up.

## The glamorous ‘casting couch’

According to a report in *The Atlantic*, the term ‘casting couch’ originated in Broadway theatrical productions well before Hollywood began to dominate the entertainment industry.

“In his book *The Boys From Syracuse: The Shuberts’ Theatrical Empire*, Foster Hirsch details how Lee Shubert, the eldest of three brothers who helped establish Broadway’s theater district in the first two decades of the 20th



Century, kept ‘an elegantly furnished boudoir, reserved for leading ladies and promising ingenues, and a shabby, spartanly furnished room with a single couch where he met chorus girls and soubrettes,’” the report revealed.

The euphemism used to describe the violent act of asking for sexual favors in return for work became so widespread and normalized that it acquired an air of glamor – mainly because it was associated with the entertainment industry.

According to film historian and senior journalist Bhawana Somaaya, who started her career as a reporter in 1978, “At that time, terms like ‘casting couch’ were very loose words. They were used repeatedly and we lost sensitivity to it. Today, I think that after sexual harassment at the workplace became a big issue in America, the connotations changed all over the globe in different places of work and that includes the film fraternity.”

During and after the #MeToo movement, coverage of sexual harassment allegations made it to front-page headlines and prime-time television in mainstream media. However, Bhawana says that, in the old days, sexual harassment was always brushed under the carpet and nobody wrote about it or even spoke about it openly. The culture was such that even though there were more women film journalists than men, sexual harassment in the industries was not viewed as a crime.

“I don’t remember in my growing years as a journalist in film magazines any explicit details – one or two maybe but not of an important film star. These incidents were never taken seriously and there was always a layer of doubt. All the magazines had 10-12 pages at the beginning devoted to gossip. These stories usually featured there and the fact that it was called gossip made it easily for people to dismiss it as rumor. In a way, that worked well for everybody because the journalists were getting the masala and the stars could always say that the journalists were writing gossip. There was no way of clarifying facts, there was no proof,” she says.

Women actors were considered to be “easy” since the ‘casting couch’ was so common in film industries. Senior film journalist Subha J. Rao remembers a horrifying story about a woman actor being accosted in a hotel, in the middle of the night, by someone influential.

“They had got access to the room key from the reception. That was the kind of flippancy with which the privacy of women actors was treated. Another time, before a woman actor’s manager could react, she was escorted into a vehicle in which no one from her team was present. He had to give chase before he was able to pull out the frazzled actor from the car,” she says.

Subha notes how violence against women who worked in cinema was even romanticized in the media in those days. “Of course, we all grew up hearing stories of directors slapping women actors to get the ‘right emotion’. Magazines and newspapers would gush over how wonderful it was that such effort was taken to get the right shot, little realizing that it went against the individual’s rights,” she says.

## How #MeToo changed reporting

As late as in 2008, when actor Tanushree Dutta objected to Nana Patekar's alleged sexual advances, media reports of the time characterized her as an “unprofessional” and “uncooperative” person. When she spoke about the same incident 10 years later, however, the media was more sensitive, thanks to the changes in the understanding of workplace sexual harassment globally.

Subha says that the shift in the attitude of the media is a “big leap”. Not only is the media more serious about reporting sexual harassment in the film industry, it has also become a practice in some media houses to either refrain from promoting the work of a man accused of sexual harassment or at least mention that the allegation exists whenever they publish an article about him.

“The biggest takeaway, personally, has been that every time there's film-related news to be typed, at least half the writers/editors now think about whether there is an offender's name out there. That's a huge leap from some years ago when this would have been a non-issue. Also, I think, by its very definition, sexual harassment carries an air of seriousness about it, which has resulted in more nuanced writing/reporting. ‘Casting couch’, both the very term and the way it was reported, used to be flippant, like it was a walk in the park, which it was not. Also, the very phrase harassment refers to an act without consent; that nuance, an important one, was missing in ‘casting couch’. The casting couch term invariably laid the onus of choice (which was non-existent) on the women,” she points out.

Unfortunately, though this shift is definitely an improvement, the understanding is yet to permeate to all media houses, especially regional language media. When singer Chinmayi alleged that lyricist and poet Vairamuthu had sexually harassed her, she became the eye of a storm. At a press conference called by a few members of the Tamil film industry to discuss #MeToo, she was forced to stand up and appeal to the journalists present to show some sensitivity in the questions that they were putting to the women.

Even in the English media, reporting on #MeToo came with a fair share of pitfalls. Many media houses themselves did not have Internal Committees (ICs), as mandated by law, when the movement broke out. This is despite the fact that there have been high profile cases of sexual harassment in the media since the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, was passed.

Editors and reporters were suddenly forced to come up with policies and guidelines on reporting allegations. While the underlying principle of the movement is to believe the women who speak out, the media perforce had to exercise due diligence. Anonymous allegations that cannot be independently verified or allegations made without any proof (which does not necessarily mean that the survivor is lying) are tricky to report because of the professional ethics involved. Many media houses framed their own internal guidelines on how they would approach the revelations.

Nevertheless, despite the confusion and even insensitivity, the media's interest in #MeToo exerted considerable pressure on the film industries to react. It also encouraged more women to share their stories.

### **How the industries responded to #MeToo**

Malayalam actor Divya Gopinath allegation of sexual harassment about fellow actor Alencier was initially anonymous. However, when she realized that people were skeptical of the account because it was anonymous, she decided to put her name to it.

According to her, she received a lot of support from the WCC when she spoke up. Allies of the organization, like director Aashiq Abu and scriptwriter Syam Pushkaran, also distanced themselves from Alencier.

“The reason I was able to put my name to the allegation is because I had the belief that I would get support. I didn't speak up immediately after the incident. It was eight months after that. I didn't feel alone when I spoke up. I did face some issues, including with my family, but there were people from the WCC and others who called my parents and explained things to them. There were people who called and asked about my welfare,” she says.

The Malayalam film industry is sharply divided on workplace sexual harassment. While one section is in firm denial that such a thing even exists, others have been asking for redressal mechanisms to be put in place. However, among the four major southern industries, it is the Malayalam industry where conversations on gender justice, misogyny and patriarchy have begun to take place on a regular basis, thanks to the efforts of the WCC and its allies.

Alencier subsequently made a public apology to Divya, accepting that he was at fault. “For about two months after I made the allegation, there was a lull in the number of calls I used to get for work,” says Divya. “But after he apologized I did get more work. In fact, I got work from people I didn't already know. These were people who wanted to cast me as a way of supporting me on this issue,” she says.

However, Divya adds that she's still worried about the old world, long-established members of the industry accepting her. These are the people who more or less run associations like AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists) which have been hostile to the concerns raised by the WCC and others. “If AMMA had done its job of protecting our interests, there would be no need for organizations like the WCC,” Divya points out.

In the Telugu film industry, actor Sri Reddy made a number of allegations and spoke about the alleged rampant exploitation of women in the industry. Although her credibility has since been questioned because of subsequent retractions and apologies, her strip protest before the Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce prompted the industry to set up mechanisms to address sexual harassment. The Telangana government launched a [web portal](#) in July 2019 which requires all employers who have more than 10 employees to register their IC on the site, as mandated by law. Film production companies are required to follow this practice, too.



The women of the Telugu industry also formed a collective called Voice of Women to offer support to and address the concerns of women who work in the industry. They aim to spread awareness about women workers' rights and provide a forum where conversations about sexual harassment and related concerns can take place.

In the Kannada film industry, actor Sruthi Hariharan made a sexual harassment allegation against actor Arjun Sarjaa, who is a big name in the Kannada and Tamil industries. Fortunately, an organization called FIRE (Film Industry for Rights & Equality), set up in March 2017 and based in Bangalore, was prepared to address the rights and grievances of members, including sexual harassment, even before the #MeToo movement happened.

In an interview, actor Chetan Kumar, a key member of FIRE, stressed the fact that each complaint is different and context-sensitive. When a complaint is received it is presented before the IC, which discusses the issue internally and with the survivor or someone associated with her. After further discussions with lawyers, the accused person is contacted and requested to present his side of the story. However, he said, many accused individuals choose not to appear before the committee because they do not want to even acknowledge the complaint or accept that anything happened.

Pointing out that FIRE does not have any compelling force to make them cooperate, Chetan said the organization works in tandem with other associations to apply pressure on the accused to take responsibility for what has happened and take some action – for example, a written undertaking that such behavior will not be repeated. “If harassment does continue, we have the option of going to the police,” he said, while acknowledging that if the accused is a powerful person the situation is quite complicated.

FIRE's policy is to try and resolve issues within the industry, ensuring confidentiality to the victim as well as the accused, and to not let such matters escalate to finger-pointing and media sensationalism. Even if the accused does not turn up for the committee's meetings, Chetan said, he is aware that his behavior is being watched and questioned.

Chetan pointed out that although the Kannada Film Chamber of Commerce (KFCC) had initially been supportive of the idea of setting up an Internal Committee, they backtracked when women from the industry started speaking up.

“They actually started victim shaming,” he said. “The former head of the film chamber, Sara Govind, would call Sruthi and other women ‘crazy’, say they're from outside the state and speak a different language...without any sense of objectivity or sensitivity about the expression of the struggle that they have gone through. On top of that, there were so many attempts to break our IC. They'd call up members of our IC and tell them to leave. There were rumors at the time that they would start their own IC. I thought it would be very good if the film chamber and other associations would actually take the initiative.”

Another woman actor, Sanjjanaa Galrani, was forced to apologize by the KFCC for alleging that director Ravi Srivatsa had coerced her into doing intimate

scenes to which she had not consented. In a Facebook post on October 17, 2018, Sanjjanaa had alleged that Ravi Srivatsa had forced her to perform scenes that she was not comfortable doing in her debut 2006 film, *Ganda Hendathi*. She also alleged that she was told there would be only one kissing scene when she signed the film but was later asked to do several such scenes in the film. However, Ravi Srivatsa complained to the KFCC and the Kannada Film Directors Association, claiming that Sanjjana was trying to tarnish his image. Although Sanjjana initially refused to apologize, she finally did so owing to pressure from veteran actors like the late Ambareesh, who stepped in as “peacekeeper”. Sanjjana told the media that she had tendered the apology to move on from the controversy but that she stood by her allegations.

In the Tamil industry, most of the top stars remained tight-lipped about the churning that was happening right under their noses. Industry bigwig Kamal Haasan, who has stepped into politics, made all the right noises about #MeToo, but saw no contradiction in inviting lyricist Vairamuthu, about whom multiple allegations of sexual harassment had surfaced, for the launch of his new office in Chennai in November 2019.

A year earlier, in October 2018, an anonymous allegation against Vairamuthu, a prominent Tamil lyricist, was tweeted by journalist Sandhya Menon who was among those involved in helping women speak up about the sexual harassment that they had experienced. The post was retweeted by singer Chinmayi, who then went on to post the anonymous accounts of multiple women who had made similar allegations against Vairamuthu.

Finally, Chinmayi alleged that Vairamuthu had sexually harassed her, too. She said she had been asked by an organizer at a program in Switzerland to visit Vairamuthu in a hotel in Lucerne and “cooperate”. When she refused, she was supposedly told that her career was over. According to Chinmayi, the incident took place in 2005 or 2006.

After the controversy broke out, composer AR Reihana, who is also the sister of Academy Award winning music director AR Rahman (a frequent collaborator with Vairamuthu), had even said that the lyricist’s problematic behavior was an “open secret” in the industry. Nevertheless, among others who shared the dais with Kamal Haasan and Vairamuthu at the November 2019 event were superstar Rajinikanth and acclaimed director Mani Ratnam.

“Many people believe that Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth associating with Vairamuthu automatically means he is innocent,” says Chinmayi. “This absolute refusal to make workplaces safer for women in an industry that they have loved, respected and served for decades, while openly backslapping with those accused of wrongdoing is worrying. If they want to make sure that my accusations aren’t ‘false’ why haven’t they even attempted to set up an IC or conducted an investigation?”

According to her, there has been no progress in the case that she filed with the National Commission for Women. The Tamil film industry, meanwhile, has been passing the buck on setting up an IC, claiming that since the election results of the Nadigar Sangam (a Chennai-based union for film, television, and

stage actors in Tamil Nadu) have been withheld by a court order, they have been unable to set up an IC.

Chinmayi, however, says that there were a few colleagues who stood by her and the movement, too. These include composers Govind Vasantha, Sam CS, Ashwin Vinayagamorthy, singer Vishal Dadlani, directors Milind Rau, Vetrimaaran and Pa Ranjith, who have all publicly expressed support for the movement. Some of them have also given her work opportunities. AR Rahman, who has had a long association with Vairamuthu, gave Chinmayi an opportunity to sing in a big budget film like *Bigil* even after the controversy broke out. She also says that Rahman has set up an IC in his studio and has put up posters against sexual harassment at the workplace.

### **Setting up an IC in film industries**

Workplace sexual harassment happens in every industry, but the way it is normalized in the film industry means that many young women are discouraged from entering the field. Further, despite being a multi-crore industry, much of the business happens in an informal manner and with oral agreements. The temporary nature of film sets complicates matters further as the workplace keeps shifting, as does the employer-employee equation.

The absence of redressal mechanisms compounds the problem, with women feeling that they should not speak out about the harassment and add to the already existing taboos about women entering the cinema industry.

“The issues that happen everywhere else happen here, too. But because people in the film industry are well-known, such problems get highlighted more. And the way it’s normalized here makes the problem worse – the attitude is that if you cannot ‘cooperate’, then you have no place here. That’s why women who come into the industry after crossing so many hurdles are afraid to speak about sexual harassment when it happens to them,” says Divya Gopinath.

Film bodies, which usually negotiate on issues concerning people from the industry, are reluctant to set up ICs because that would invariably involve stepping on the toes of powerful persons. They claim that they cannot set up an IC because they are only associations and not employers. Further, unlike a conventional office setup, the workplace in the film industry keeps shifting.

Madras High Court lawyer Akhila RS says, “The definition of workplace is quite wide in the law itself. So it can include a permanent office kind of setup but it also extends to any place where you work – transport, the sets, outstation... wherever. Where it gets problematic in the film industry is the fact that these are temporary arrangements. The work involved could last for just a day or a week. However, even that is covered by the Act, which includes temporary contracts.”

So, who should take up the responsibility of setting up an IC in film industries? Should it be the production companies or the film bodies?

Akhila says that although film bodies can technically make the argument that they are not a workplace or employer in order to evade setting up an IC, they should assume the moral and ethical responsibility to set up a committee which functions like an IC, in order to ensure the welfare of their members. For instance, the Telugu industry has initiated the process of setting up such a panel with industry and non-industry members from various fields like women's rights NGOs, law, psychology, etc., to study the issues and legalities involved. The idea is to come up with recommendations on how such a panel can be formed in the industry and submit a report to the government.

According to Akhila, "It (setting up an IC) can happen at all levels. If it's an established production house, they would have defined contracts. But even smaller, newer ones or indie film productions can do it. Film bodies like actors' or trade associations should also do it. If the person who has made the allegation and the accused belong to the same organization, they can take action against them. But if, say, one person is an actor and another is a stylist, then they would belong to two different bodies. You can take action against your own member but not against another. But the way it can work, and the law also contemplates this, is that the IC of one body can forward it to the IC of the other body. There is a possibility for this kind of coordination to take place. The production house, of course, would have direct jurisdiction," she says.

Akhila points out that there is also a Local Complaints Committee (LCC), constituted at the district level, to which a survivor can complain if she feels an industry IC will not be impartial (for instance, if the allegation is against the chief of a production company). However, not all districts have an LCC yet and there is low awareness among workers and officials about workplace sexual harassment and how a complainant can approach the LCC, if it exists.

Producers Aashiq Abu and Rima Kallingal set up an IC for their Malayalam production *Virus* when it went on the floors. According to Divya Gopinath, who worked in the film, "Nothing (harassment) happened on the sets, but we did have the panel and we were told who the members were."

Setting up an IC for a film project sends out a strong message about zero tolerance for workplace sexual harassment. Importantly, it can serve as a deterrent and also spread awareness about the issue.

Supriya Yarlagadda, executive director of Annapurna Studios, a prominent production company in the Telugu industry, says that they set up an IC about two years ago. "We also had awareness programs, which conducted as per the requirements. People from outside come and do this. We've registered the IC on the Telangana government's website as required," she says.

She adds that the government has also made it mandatory to file an audit with the Collector. "Originally, there was a misunderstanding that there should be at least 10 (permanent) employees for a company to set up an IC. But if you go through the law carefully, it also mentions contractual employees, even daily workers. As per the law, if the complaint concerns another production house,

we are not entitled to take it up. There's a clear distinction in who you have to approach. If the incident happens on our premises and involves someone we've hired, then we can take it up. But if another producer has hired our facilities, then the complaint will have to be filed with that production house," she explains.

Adding that the IC is also beneficial to the company because it gives them the opportunity to resolve issues internally, Supriya says that the 'dos and don'ts' of workplace behavior as well as a contact number for help is displayed prominently at Annapurna Studios.

"At the end of the day, a company is business. If I have women employees, how do I ensure that they're safe? You can have an IC just to fulfil requirements. But the important thing is the intention. If you're constantly sending out the message, then the intention trickles down," she says.

### **Going forward**

Intention. That is the keyword that film industries must focus on if they are serious about addressing workplace sexual harassment and creating a more equal environment.

The following is a list of recommendations that film industries can implement to prevent and deal with such harassment:

1. Production houses must set up an IC as mandated by law. They must take efforts to ensure that their employees are aware about workplace sexual harassment. Information about what constitutes sexual harassment and how the IC can be contacted should be prominently displayed.
2. Film bodies must frame guidelines and set up panels to address sexual harassment and intervene as they do in other disputes and conflicts between members. Panels across film bodies must cooperate with each other if the complaint involves members from different film bodies.
3. Efforts should be taken to ensure that there is adequate representation of women in leadership roles in film bodies, and that they are allowed to contest elections in a fair manner.
4. Producers' councils should make it mandatory for production houses to issue contracts to all employees, however short the duration of their work period, and ensure that these terms are met.
5. There should be sensitization towards the needs of women employees – this includes safety measures for travel, providing sanitation facilities on sets, etc.
6. There needs to be a push for the inclusion of more women in the cast and crew, and production houses must be cognizant of how such measures can alter the power imbalance in the industries in a positive way.

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# Rights of Women Workers in the Film Industry

*By Rohan Kothari & Jayna Kothari*

**L**abor laws have seldom been able to keep pace with developments that take place in most organized industries. The same applies to cinema. The Indian film industry is no longer made up only of brick and mortar production houses and film studios. It comprises various kinds of corporate entities, some lasting and some ephemeral. Special purpose vehicles (SPVs) seem to have become the norm in the Indian film industry. These are corporate entities set up specifically with the objective of producing, releasing and capitalizing on one motion picture. As with other industries, creative legal devices help those who produce movies to enhance their ability to earn profits; as a corollary they also help limit liabilities. Some of the main liabilities are workers' rights, compensation for workers employed in the creation of films and also damages and reliefs in disputes arising in the context of relationships that such a workforce has with its employers.

The film industry in India, employs a large number of workers, especially women workers, ranging from producers, directors and actors, to writers, make-up artists and hair-dressers. There are, however, very few laws governing their rights. This chapter provides an overview of some of the specific laws relating to cine-workers and some general workplace legislations that are applicable.

## **I. The Cine-workers and Cinema Theatre Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1981**

The rights of those employed in the business of making movies usually become contentious only as one goes lower down the food chain. Leading artistes, directors and musicians of the day are seldom the subject of labor-oriented legislation. But the making of a feature film involves scores of

other individuals, both skilled and semi-skilled. A good proportion of such a workforce could be categorized as blue-collar. It is their emoluments, their conditions of service, and their rights that are focused on here. The State has labelled them collectively as 'cine-workers' and crafted a law aimed particularly at empowering them: the Cine-workers and Cinema Theatre Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1981. When originally drafted, it was aimed at regulating the conditions of employment of cine-workers and theatre workers.

The 1981 Act provides that a cine-worker shall not be employed without an agreement in writing by either the producer of a film or the contractor through whom the cine-worker is employed. Further, the producer of the film must register every such contract with the Competent Authority, as notified under the Act. Each contract should specify the nature of the assignment of the employee, her hours of work, the wages and other benefits to which she may be entitled, besides all other terms and conditions of employment.

The Act also provides for a dispute resolution mechanism (S.5 and S. 7) in respect of such contracts. The first mode of dispute resolution is by approaching statutorily appointed conciliation officers whose duty it is to bring about an amicable settlement of the dispute rather than to adjudicate it. If conciliation fails, then a dispute may be escalated to a specially constituted Tribunal (S. 7). However, the clincher is that the Act defines a cine-worker only as an individual whose pay in connection with the production of a feature film does not exceed INR 1,600 (USD 21.19) per month, or INR 15,000 (USD 198.63) when paid as a lumpsum. By imposing such a low and arbitrary upper limit to the remuneration received by cine workers, the 1981 Act has left a large number of workers unprotected. It would take a minor amendment to increase this remunerative limit to make it more realistic and up to date. However, the Act has remained largely untouched since its promulgation. Its provisions stipulating that all cine-workers should have written contracts and that they can access a dispute resolution mechanism are barely implemented in the film industry. Though this Act does not contain any provision specific to female cine-workers, the 1984 Rules attendant to the Act define "leave" to include maternity leave. This is the only place where the State has found it fit to recognize the difference between the sexes of cine-workers.

An important case from a cine-worker that went up all the way up to the Supreme Court was the case of *Charu Khurana & Ors v. Union of India & Ors.*<sup>4</sup> Here Charu Khurana was a make-up artist who challenged the by-laws of the Cine Costume Make-up Artists and Hair Dressers Association, which issued "make-up artists' cards" only to male members; women could only get cards as hair-dressers and not as make-up artists despite being qualified for the latter. Not having a "make-up artist card" meant not being able to get work as a make-up artist. The Supreme Court held that applications from female make-up artists for membership to the Cine Costume Make-up Artists and Hair Dressers Association could not be rejected only on grounds that they

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4 (2015) 1 SCC 192

were women and directed the Association to issue Charu Khurana a make-up artist card.

This opinion is significant because it held that denial of the card amounted to discrimination on the grounds of gender. The judgment also said it amounted to denial of “her capacity to earn her livelihood, which affects her individual dignity” and was thus a violation of Article 21, or her right to life guaranteed under the Constitution. Although such cine workers’ associations and unions are private bodies and therefore not bound by Constitutional guarantees, the Supreme Court in this case held that any clause in the by-laws of a trade union which calls itself an Association, cannot violate Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. This makes it an especially important precedent for women workers in the film industry.

## **II. Cine-workers’ Welfare Laws**

Besides the Cine-workers Act, there are two other minor pieces of legislation aimed at the welfare of cine-workers. These are the Cine-workers’ Welfare Fund Act, 1981 and Cine-workers’ Welfare Cess Act, 1981. Under the first, the creation of a fund has been mandated, primarily to defray the costs of providing labor-related benefits to cine-workers, and to also provide them with small loans. Under the second Act, each producer is required to pay the Central Government a cess – ranging between INR 1,000 (USD 13.24) and 20,000 (USD 264.84) per film – towards the funding of the Cine-workers’ Welfare Fund.

However, it is sad to note that the Cine-workers’ Welfare Fund Act has an even lower threshold to determine who can be a beneficiary. Absurdly, it defines a cine-worker as anyone earning below INR 1,600 (USD 21.19) per month from employment in connection with a feature film.

For any of these laws to be useful, the definitions and earnings of “cine-workers” have to be expanded. The definition cannot be dependent on any arbitrary wage limit. It should be based on the nature of their work in the film industry and should be broad enough to cover all forms of employment within the industry. Such changes in the legal landscape can only be effected through an amendment of the law. Unless a Bill is introduced to meaningfully amend the Acts in question, the legislation that is supposed to apply to cine-workers will remain largely unused.

## **III. General Labor Legislation**

Apart from the above, women employed in the film industry are also afforded the protection of more general labor laws. Of particular relevance here are the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.

The Maternity Benefit Act, as amended in 2017, mandates employers to provide maternity leave of 26 weeks, as well as the option for a woman to work from home if the nature of work allows it, after availing maternity benefit under the as per S. 5(5) of the Act. Maternity benefits under the Act include claim for the payment of medical bonus (S.8), leave for miscarriage (S.

9) or any illness arising out of the pregnancy (S.10), and a certain amount of daily nursing breaks (S. 11). The Act extends to the legal adoption of a child (S. 5(4)) and prohibits the employer from discharging or dismissing a woman absent from work on maternity leave (S.12).

On paper, the law relating to maternity benefits is one of the more progressive laws in India. How well it is enforced and implemented, especially in the setting of a private movie production, is a different issue altogether. The responsibility for effective enforcement and raising awareness of these laws falls in some measure on the professional guilds and associations set up within the film industry to assist specific groups of cine-workers. Unfortunately, there is no reliable data in the public domain to assess how well these professional guilds or associations function in term of ensuring compliance with labor legislation.

The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 is quite self-explanatory. Its objective is to ensure that men and women are not paid differently for carrying out the same amount of work or for doing work of a similar nature. The Act also mandates that an employer shall not discriminate against women while recruiting. It overrides anything discriminatory or inconsistent with its objectives that may find mention in a contract of service. It prohibits employers from reducing the rate of remuneration of anyone to comply with the Act's provisions, and mandates that where different wages are being paid to different sexes, the higher of the two shall be fixed for all. Complaints arising out of non-compliance with the Act are to be heard by Labor Officers notified by State Governments. Those contravening the Act (including companies and their directors) are punishable with up to a year's imprisonment or a fine extending to INR 20,000 (USD 264.84).

It is open knowledge that in the film industry female workers are paid less than male workers, especially at the top, with female actors, directors and producers being paid far less than their male counterparts. Unfortunately, equal pay legal requirements are rarely enforced since those who complain, usually the women, would be unlikely to get work in the industry again.

As with the Maternity Benefit Act, effective enforcement of provisions of the Equal Remuneration Act has become the responsibility of its beneficiaries. Offices of Labor Commissioners across most states are over-worked and under-staffed. Unless they receive pointed and repeated complaints about flagrant violations of the aforementioned statutes, they are unlikely to take protective or penal action. Those most likely to be positively affected by such legislation are oftentimes those who are least likely to be aware about their existence. The buck therefore does not stop just with parliament or the courts, but rests just as heavily on individuals and groups engaged in ensuring protection of female cine-workers' rights.

None of the above-mentioned laws can really be considered radical or path-breaking. They merely attempt to do the bare minimum, which in this context is giving women time off during and after childbirth, giving women equal pay and, most importantly, ensuring a safe work environment.

## Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

The last of these three functions is served by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (the 'POSH Act'). The POSH Act has the widest and most inclusive definition of what constitutes a *workplace* and who is an *employee*. It encompasses within itself “any private venture, undertaking, enterprise, institution, establishment, society, trust, non-governmental organisation, unit or service provider carrying on commercial, professional, vocational, educational, entertainment, industrial... service”. Correspondingly wide is the definition of employee, which includes a regular, temporary or ad hoc/contractual worker working with or without remuneration, with or without the knowledge of the principal employer. This covers virtually everyone working in any role in the film industry.

Awareness of this law has increased exponentially in the last few years, given the rise of the #MeToo movement (which grew out of the sexual harassment experienced by women in the American film industry). Though the #MeToo movement in India did serve to highlight the sexual harassment faced by women within the film industry in India, it is worth noting that sexual harassment has existed in the industry in a very noticeable way for decades before the arrival of public outrage. Despite the requirements of the POSH Act, few Internal Committees (ICs) have been set up in the industry as required by the law to address sexual harassment at the workplace.

The difficulty is with the peculiar nature of the film industry. Most film bodies, film chambers of commerce and cine-workers' associations have still not set up ICs. The only exceptions are ICs set up by an association of film workers in the Kannada and Telugu film industries, which set up industry-wide sexual harassment redressal panels in 2018 and 2019 respectively. Even when companies and Special Purpose Vehicles are set up for a given project, in several cases ICs are not constituted; nor is there any sensitization or training of staff about sexual harassment at the workplace, as required under the POSH Act.

Although the POSH Act has been around since 2013, its full potential seems to have been explored only over the last two or three years. This again is a result of the rising tide of awareness engendered not by the State and its instrumentalities, but by victims of harassment.

Notwithstanding the extent of a law's reach or the objective behind its enactment, there is a common thread running through the laws described hereinabove: that the burden of securing the guarantees of these statutes remains on the women employed in the film industry. Accountability of employers and enforcement of existing legislation is extremely low. This makes it an uphill task for women cine-workers to enforce their rights of equality in pay and work, to secure better working conditions and have a safe workplace that is free from harassment.

One way to undo the ineffectiveness of laws and lack of accountability is to bring awareness of the content of laws to those who are most likely to need it for their protection and empowerment. Legal literacy, gender sensitization



and awareness workshops have become the norm in several comparable fields, and there is no reason why they cannot be organized for the benefit of cine-workers.

Lobbying by professional guilds to ensure minimum standards of employment, which include the mandatory presence of ICs at workplaces, is another way to ensure equal protection under laws. Setting up of a secretariat to ensure that production houses comply with the provisions of the POSH Act as well as other applicable laws could also prove useful, provided it is backed up with the power to sanction. All of these measures will take time to have a tangible effect on the sensibilities of those involved in the business of cinema. In the meanwhile, vigilance by individuals – at a personal level – and associations of women working in the film industry – at the collective level – cannot be over-emphasized. .

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## Women's Films and the Market

*By Prathibha Parameswaran*

There is perhaps no other film industry in the world that is as diverse and vibrant as the Indian film industry. However, the world's understanding of the Indian film world is limited to the Hindi filmdom, often referred to as Bollywood. What is often missed is the fact that the Indian film universe consists of multiple regional film industries that are prolific and teeming with interesting and varied content in myriad languages. Many of these smaller industries do not adhere to the commercial and creative values of the Hindi film industry and function as independent entities staying true to the culture and ethnicity of the regions they are based in.

South India covers five states: the Telugu speaking states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu – where Tamil is the primary language, the Malayalam-speaking Kerala state and Karnataka – where Kannada is spoken by the local majority. The geographical and cultural similarities of these regions make it easier club them together for any study of the film industries based in these states.

In this scenario, an attempt to understand women technicians (including directors) and their roles, female actors and their commercial value, the function of women film producers and their impact, and so on, would have to be seen and understood in the prevailing cultural, social and political contexts of the states they are based in.

From a commercial standpoint, Bollywood has been a reference point for the other industries in the country. In recent times, the Mumbai-based industry has spawned a small army of female directors like Zoya Akhtar, Farah Khan, Meghna Gulzar, Reema Kagti and Gauri Shinde. The gender ratio in the industry still remains skewed towards men. However, the commercial successes that these women have been able to deliver have forced the industry and critics to view them as formidable forces with the power to affect the careers of newbie artistes, break into newer territories thanks to the freshness of their content and, above all, deliver box office blockbusters that make money even for the last link in the business food chain. In the South, though, the reality remains different.

### Women in creative roles

Many female filmmakers have been victims of inherent societal biases and patriarchal perceptions that women are capable of shouldering only domestic responsibilities. Yet it has been heartening to note the rise of some smart, successful filmmakers who have claimed their space in the southern cinematic universe. Of these two notable names are Anjali Menon, the writer of *Ustad Hotel* and the director of *Bangalore Days* and *Koode* – all box office hits that astounded industry and trade experts alike. *Bangalore Days* reportedly made on a budget of INR 9 crores, went on to rake in a whopping INR 50 crores at the box office, rendering Menon a force to reckon with in the Malayalam film circuit. But the climb to the top was never easy, she says.

Based in Mumbai, Menon was viewed as an outsider in the Malayalam film industry. She broke into the industry with a period film, *Manjadikkuru*, featuring an ensemble cast. Although the movie received critical acclaim, it was only screened in 60 theatres in Kerala and could not enjoy commercial success. But her talent prompted Malayalam film director Ranjith to offer her a segment in his anthology, *Kerala Café*.

Malayalam director Anwar Rasheed, who she met on the sets of that film, then roped her in to write the screenplay for *Ustad Hotel*, which went on to become a box office hit. Following its success, many other screenwriting work opportunities came her way, but she was still overlooked as a director, with almost no one willing to entrust her with the job. “It hit me then that if I were to be successful, I needed to make something more commercial,” she recounts. Her one-line plot for *Bangalore Days* interested Rasheed enough for him to turn producer for the film.

Menon is keenly aware of the gender-based perception of women that prevails in the industry. “Since I do not view the world through a gender lens, I’m often late in discovering that a problem that I am facing may be because of my gender,” she says. “I’m very particular about the way I do things. I have been told ‘You’re not an Anwar Rasheed or Amal Neerad. Why do you insist on these shots?’ I have had technicians who did not have problems working with others but did have problems with me.” She attributes this to their lack of exposure and an inherent bias that sometimes disappears after successful collaborations with women.

Men refusing to take instructions from women in positions of power appears to be a common issue. According to Lakshmi Ramakrishnan, a Tamil film director, “Fortunately, most actors wanted to work with me. But I had a lot of problems in other departments. When you’re a woman, you have to prove that you know what you’re saying. When you do something nice, they show their surprise, as if it’s not expected from you.”

Women directors in the South have been able to bring refreshing sensibilities and strongly etched, relatable female characters to the screen. Menon emphasizes that women are central to her screenplays. “My attempt in *Koode* was to see Prithviraj playing a character that’s vulnerable. Male characters can be cool, flawed, confused characters who’ve lost their way. They don’t have to be toxically masculine,” she points out. Her Malayalam films, like *Manjadikkuru*, *Bangalore Days* and *Koode*, all feature normal, everyday women who play important characters. Ramakrishnan’s Tamil films, like *Aarohanam*, *Ammani* and *House Owner*, made on shoestring budgets, also have interesting female characters whose stories are told sensitively.

Ramakrishnan’s struggles to make some headway in the film industry have been under-estimated. Her debut film, *Aarohanam*, made on a INR 36 lakh budget, returned her investment in no time, with the theatrical collections touching INR 40 lakhs. Her subsequent project, *Nerungi Vaa Muthamidathe*, a road film<sup>5</sup>, was also able to recover production costs, and *Ammani*, the story of an elderly rag-picker, struck a chord with many viewers and critics. It was with her latest outing, *House Owner*, that she exuded the confidence of a seasoned filmmaker and received acclaim from peers and critics alike. Having made the film on a budget of INR 1.2 crores, she is yet to recover her investment after selling the dubbing and remake rights.

The four-film-old director is already disgruntled. “When you are an independent filmmaker, you try to get rid of your film rights as soon as possible. So commercial success eludes you. If a big production house backs you, as in Halitha’s case, they market it well and they know how to hold on to the product for the right price. If I’d sold the film after the Indian Panorama, I could have secured a better price,” she explains. Halitha Sameem, another woman director, delivered *Sillu Karupatti*, a commercial success backed by 2D Entertainment, a renowned production house in Tamil.

A while ago, many called out the Academy Awards in the United States for snubbing *Little Women* director Greta Gerwig, who they felt deserved a nomination. The situation in South Indian cinema, too, is no different. Producers, distributors and theatre owners, who control the trade and financial prospects of films, often decide that subjects chosen by women directors do not work commercially. Consequently, such movies suffer from lack of proper funding, marketing and screen count, the factors that ensure the success of any film – that is, unless they are backed by a reputed production house.

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5 A genre in which the main characters leave home on a road trip, typically altering the perspective from their everyday lives.

According to Ramakrishnan, “The industry berates lady directors and the subjects of their films. Producers and actors have pre-conceived notions that the subjects they pick may not be commercially accepted. There’s a need to open the doors for women and create a conducive marketing system where our types of films are also promoted.”

“People think the kinds of stories that we are pitching may not be suitable for the bigger canvas because Tamil cinema has so far been hero-centric,” says V. Priya, another Tamil film director. “But see what Sudha (Sudha Kongara) has done, she has been able to break into the field.” Director Sudha tasted success in Tamil after her successful outing, *Irudhi Suttru* (released in Hindi as *Saala Khadoos*), featuring R. Madhavan, a recognizable hero in Tamil films. Her upcoming project features Suriya, an A-list actor in Tamil films. “It’s problematic to say that women only make a certain kind of films. Some women even make sexist films,” Menon points out.

Many women disappear from the scene after their first flop since the industry is not accommodative of women’s failure. “Can you imagine my career trajectory if *Bangalore Days* had not worked as a film?” Menon asks. Ramakrishnan agrees. “We have lost many talented filmmakers because the struggle is too much. There’s no doubt that there’s less space for women to make mistakes,” she says.

While film schools and workshops do seem to churn out a fair share of women technicians, lack of safe work environments, prejudice, family and societal pressure often prevent them from following their dreams. “The life of a woman assistant director is a very tough one. Going a step ahead and making your first film is a better risk to take. The whole growing in the ranks thing is really difficult,” Menon observes. “We need to celebrate women technicians. There are many young women who want to be like (actors) Trisha or Nayanthara. When they see technicians also celebrated, more women will take up direction as well,” Ramakrishnan says.

### **Women as heroes**

Performances by female stars are closely watched and critically judged, box office figures are strictly monitored, the brand worth of women stars are exploited by advertisers, both online and offline. The vacuum created by the lack of quality films from the younger crop of male actors reliant on mass entertainers, too, is cited as a reason for the opening up of space for content-rich, women-centric scripts, especially in the Tamil and Telugu film industries. These two industries represent the major revenue spinners in the Southern film realm; yet, in the over 400 movies made annually in these industries, only a small fraction features women in pivotal roles.

To trace the rise of recent women-centric cinema in Telugu, it is necessary to hark back to 2009, when a young and upcoming Anushka Shetty was cast in a fantasy, horror movie, *Arundhathi*. Producer Shyam Prasad Reddy invested INR 13 crores in the film that eventually earned over INR 40 crores worldwide. Shetty went on to act in several commercial entertainers, including

the magnum opus, *Baahubali*, which cemented her stature as a sought-after actress. She also took center stage in films like *Rudhramadevi*, *Size Zero* and *Bhagamathie*. Although not all these films have fared well in the theatres, she remains in the top spot as the most commercially valuable South Indian female actor.

*Rudhramadevi* (which also featured top Telugu male heroes like Allu Arjun and Rana Daggubati) cost over INR 70 crores to make but raked in around INR 86 crores. *Bhagamathie* was made at about INR 30 crores and earned around INR 34 crores. Both represent enviable investment figures that actresses in other film industries have not been able to match.

The 2014 Malayalam release *How Old Are You?* catapulted 36-year-old Manju Warrier into commercial stardom again after a long absence from the screen. "The script came to us at a time when my team had delivered successive hits (*Traffic*, *Chaapa Kurishu* and *Ustad Hotel*). Bobby-Sanjay, Rosshan Andrews and I each had made a name in the industry. There was also a lot of excitement around Manju's return, and we capitalized on it," says Listin Stephen, a leading Malayalam film producer. The film, made at around INR 5.35 crore, earned a tidy INR 15 crores for Stephen, inclusive of all the rights. Having tested the waters once, the film was remade in Tamil and served as a second launch vehicle for Tamil actress Jyothika who, too, was returning to the screen after a while. Made at around INR 3 crores by 2D Entertainment, a production house run by her husband and actor Suriya, the film was a success and fetched the team a marginal profit. Two actresses in their late 30s, with a fair share of hits to their name during their first innings, were now being welcomed back by audiences, thanks to relevant scripts and support from reputed production houses.

In Tamil many more producers came forward to support women-centric stories although the investments in them were far lower than in most middle-rank hero-oriented projects. Potential Studios, helmed by S.R. Prabhu and S.R. Prakashbabu, came out with *Maya*, with actress Nayanthara in the lead. Budgeted at INR 6 crores, the film grossed INR 30 crores post release. "Financiers hesitate to fund production houses that do a business of less than INR 15 crore. They shell out money based either on the credibility of the production house or on the star value of the actors involved," Prabhu explains. He has subsequently released *Aruvi* and *Raatchasi*, two other films with strong female leads. *Aruvi* starred debutante actress Aditi Balan in the lead role and was an important film that boldly tackled issues of gender, consumerism and abuse. "We had a vague confidence that the film would be talked about. Sometimes it's not just money that producers look for, but also credibility and recognition," he points out. The INR 2.5 crore budget project made around INR 12 crores at the box office. *Raatchasi*, made at INR 6 crores, was an average grosser that recovered the investment. "Besides theatrical revenues, producers sell dubbing, remake and OTT platform rights. There are different avenues that you can exploit," he says.

S. Sashikumar of Y Not Studios, who has produced Tamil hit *Irudhi Suttru* and the bilingual (Tamil and Hindi) *Game Over* adds, "Once you pick a film, you



figure out a way to make it work: decide on the cost of the film and make a financial structure which ensures that the film does not fail at the box office. This is how we have managed.”

Interestingly, he chose to produce Sudha Kongara’s *Irudhi Suttru*, the story of a female boxer from North Chennai and her irreverent coach. Director Sudha’s 2010 debut film, *Drohi*, had fared miserably at the box office. According to Sashikanth, “We loved the fact that it was a great underdog story with an anti-establishment guy going against the grain. Neither the fact that the director was a woman nor that the central character was a girl was an obstacle since we just felt that the script was perfect for us.” The bets paid off when the close to INR 13 crore project made upwards of INR 20 crores.

Filmmaker couple Pushkar and Gayathri, too, delivered a flop for Y Not with *Va* in 2010, but Sashikanth trusted them enough to fund their next project, *Vikram Vedha*, in 2017, which turned out to be an astounding commercial success. “It is more critical and, at the same time, difficult to pick people purely on the basis of their talent when they have had failures,” he admits.

As Ramakrishnan and Menon, too, point out, the longevity and career paths of female creators depend on their own inventiveness, support from like-minded producers and a mind-set that looks beyond initial shortcomings, all of which are rare in the film industry.

### **Women and commercial viability**

Casting a female lead in a film is not a result of an instinctive decision, except in rare cases like the Tamil film, *Imaikkaa Nodigal*, where Nayanthara was signed on when a hero backed out of the project. Nayanthara’s brand value is comparable to a second rung hero in terms of the trade and, since the star was cheaper, the financial viability of the project increased.

However, in the majority of the cases, content is the key that determines a woman’s access to lead roles. Malayalam film, *Uyare*, an inspirational story of an acid attack survivor, was a classic example. “We thought of Parvathy as she was the best fit for the role. She did a lot of legwork before the film started. If a subject is interesting enough, audiences will watch a film regardless of the star cast,” says Sherga Sandeep of S Cube films, which produced *Uyare*. “The movie may not have been a hit if we had cast new-comers. We wanted the film to be a commercial success while delivering a socially relevant message. In a way this was a big risk. But the content was so strong that we thought the audience would accept it,” she adds. At an investment of INR 8.5 crores, the film fetched the makers a gross collection of INR 15 crores.

Keerthi Suresh, another rising star on the horizon, delivered a hit with the Telugu big-budget biopic, *Mahanati*. “There were no commercial considerations when the movie got made. There were no benchmarks for a film like this. It was a passion-driven project. Who would have thought a Keerthy Suresh could take a INR 35-40 crore film into the market and make it a success? Her viability depended on the film. Many more actresses could do the same if the film is essentially good,” says Swapna Dutt, daughter of veteran



Telugu producer Ashwini Dutt, who backed the project. The film reportedly grossed around INR 60 crores at the box office.

When it comes to women-centric films, producers sometimes tend to 'de-risk' their projects, adding a saleable male actor to the cast. "The presence of stars like Tovino Thomas and Asif Ali lent a certain extra value to a film like *Uyare*. Just as a Mohanlal cameo did for *Kayamkulam Kochunni*. Though their screen time may be limited, the fact they came on board added a lot of business value," Listin Stephen said, explaining the business model.

"It worked with *How Old Are You?*, too, when Kunchacko Boban agreed to do the film. Manju Warrier is the woman actor with the most brand value in the Malayalam film industry. A lot of marketing and public relations goes into creating such an image. There is just one Nayanthara in Tamil cinema, who gets small-budget films with meaty roles. No producer picks a movie based on the star value of women leads alone; they look for other de-risking factors," he reveals.

While many producers subscribe to this logic, Sashikanth has his own methods of eliminating risks. "We took a conscious call to make it a bilingual film since Madhavan is a familiar face in the Hindi film industry as well. The actor did not take his salary upfront. Rajkumar Hirani came in as a co-producer for the Hindi version. Since the rights were sold to UTV, they came in to distribute the Tamil version as well," he explains.

*Game Over*, hailed as a non-generic thriller, also returned a gross of INR 20 crores over an investment of INR 8.5 crores. "We intentionally picked Bollywood actress Tapsee Pannu (who earlier worked in Tamil films like *Aadukalam* and *Vandhan Vendraan*) because she would give us a little bit of the Hindi market. Once you pick a film, you figure out a way to make it work. When the script is fully developed, you make a financial structure that tries to ensure that the film does not fail at the box office," he says.

In the southern film industries, actresses Anushka, Jyothika and Nayanthara grace the top of the business viability charts. Samantha Akkineni, Tapsee, Trisha and Amala Paul, too, have some traction. "There's a small audience that comes in to watch films based on the star value of the heroines alone. The size of the audience is not comparable to that attracted by any male hero though," says Sanjay Wadhwa of AP International, overseas distributor for many women-oriented films in Tamil like *Jackpot*, *Magalir Mattum*, *House Owner*, *Game Over* and *Raatchasi*. He puts the overseas market value for heroine-driven Tamil films anywhere between INR 15 lakhs to INR 1.25 crores.

"The film industry is illusory and reliant on hype. If women-centric films are capable of working magic at the box office, why are so few such scripts getting written? It's because they have a far more limited potential than perceived," Listin Stephen counters. However, Stephen's logic could equally apply to male stars whose market values are blatantly exaggerated at times.

While producers go on a marketing overdrive at times, distributors emphasize the need for stars to actively promote their films in order to keep their

commercial value intact. Complacency on the part of women stars could well cost them their hard-earned positions, they caution. According to Sanjay Wadhwa, “Most actors don’t realize that marketing impacts collections, which often see a 5-10 per cent increment when they interact with a star. This benefits the star whose brand value, too, increases proportionally.” Male actors are also reluctant to endorse their own films, but their huge fan bases come in handy and the hero-centric industry is generally more forgiving of male stars.

### **Status of women**

Despite the apparent proliferation of women-driven content, films with central women characters still do not constitute a sizeable percentage in industries that churn out hundreds of films a year. Nor is the stature of the women leads in any sense comparable to that of their male peers. For instance, in the Tamil film industry, although Nayanthara enjoys an enviable position, her commercial viability and apparent market strength would not be comparable even to a minor hero like Siva Karthikeyan, a relatively new entrant into feature films. “Nayanthara started a trend where she played central characters in a series of films like *Maya*, *Dora*, *Aramm* and *Airaa*. When a movie doesn’t work, it is not she who fails, it is the content that fails,” Sashikanth states.

As in the case of hero-oriented films, a woman-oriented film’s performance, too, depends as much on content as an individual’s star value. A film’s mediocre box office performance does not automatically place a question mark over the talent of an actress; it could just as well be a comment on the inability of the script to interest the audience.

“Women are being widely welcomed in the film industry, not just in fashion designing and acting. Many women are coming in for technical work as assistant directors and editors,” says producer Dutt. “Right now, we are in a very good space in the Telugu film industry as far as women working in films are concerned.”

According to S.R. Prabhu, going by his own experience, “The earlier hesitation on the part of producers to cast women in lead roles is slowly disappearing. Audiences have been always accepting. A few friends of mine tell me that they are in the process of making high-octane action entertainers with women in the lead. We may shortly be able to see female Rambo movies from South India!”

“The script doesn’t need to be male or female centric, but if you give equal weightage to women, it works. Any good film will have women with well-fleshed out roles,” says Sashikanth. “Films are absolute levelers. Most of the biases prevalent in society could be eliminated in a film. I have no problems with a women actor or filmmaker,” he adds, opening the door for future female filmmakers.

As women are slowly but surely claiming their space in the South Indian film industry, more writers and directors are coming up with content catering to

this segment. “After *Uyare*, we have been listening to a lot of female-oriented subjects. We want to do something different but now, as producers, we are being perceived as women-centric film producers,” producer Sandeep complains. “Some women tell us that only we, as women, can take such a film to the screen. That’s not true. Anybody can make a female-centric film.”

Main roles for women are not equally distributed and remain few and far between. Stressing the need for inclusion, Sashikanth says, “If you are talking about content that has women at the center of it, a lot of the time it fails because there is an inherent bias when a man tells a woman’s story. It will invariably have some generic issues. If you have more filmmakers, producers and distributors who are women, then you’ll have more women-centric films.”

Generations of male film directors have come up through the ranks after working on the sets for years assisting the greats in the industry, watching and learning from them at close quarters. Women technicians still do not have such forerunners or role models to look up to. Women filmmakers struggle to pitch their stories and make them heard. Their stories are still brushed off as soft subjects not worthy of a large canvas, while heroes are hoisted up on pedestals and crores are invested in their films even if they deliver flops without the slightest accountability.

Women’s achievements are not amplified and celebrated in most forums, where they are overshadowed by their male counterparts. Women actors tolerate biased treatment and endure “casting couch” advances to carve a niche for themselves – only to be mercilessly trolled online for their appearance and life choices. Yet, as Anjali Menon shares, based on her experience, “People forget gender when your films start making money for them. Gender stops mattering. Doors open the minute your film makes money.” Well, give them a chance!

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# Gendered Precarity and Labor Organizing in the South Indian Film Industries

*By Darshana Sreedhar Mini*

In what ways does “gender” enter conversations about labor organizing in Indian film industries? How equipped are film trade guilds in southern India to address the needs of all members of its constituency, including women and trans persons, and to resolve conflicts? Have grievance redressal mechanisms been instituted by trade guilds to ensure the safety of women and gender queer community? What gaps and fissures restrict the implementation of such mechanisms, if any? Examining such questions, this chapter locates the challenges involved in establishing gender safety and equity in a largely male-dominated trade-guild environment that offers little more than token representation for women in organizational structures and processes.

There has been strong trade-guild organizing in Indian cinema. One of the first cinema trade organizations was the Bombay Cinema and Theatres Trade Association formed during the colonial era in 1926.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by the Madras Cinema and Theatre League in 1929 and the Motion Picture Society of India in Bombay in 1932.<sup>7</sup> While the initial film-related organizations supported the interests of producers, distributors and exhibitors, the Film Artistes’ Association of India, formed in Bombay in 1939, focused exclusively

6 [http://wiki.phalkefactory.net/index.php?title=Indian\\_Film\\_History](http://wiki.phalkefactory.net/index.php?title=Indian_Film_History)

7 Opendar Chanana, *The Missing 3 in Bollywood: Safety Security Shelter*. Switzerland: UNI Global Union, 2011, pp 9.



on film actors.<sup>8</sup> In 1956, seven craft unions came together to form the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE).<sup>9</sup>

A number of committees and reports – including the Film Enquiry Committee of 1951, the Tripartite Committee of 1968 and the report of the Working Group on National Film Policy instituted by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting in 1980 – have highlighted the need for a democratic space of engagement where workers’ rights are protected through legislative mechanisms. In 1969, the Committee for Employees in Film Production Industry, appointed by the Government of Maharashtra and headed by P.G. Kher, submitted its report. The committee’s recommendations included the formation of a “casting committee of the Employment Bureau” that could undertake the recruitment, employment and retirement of junior artistes, movie stunt artists and dancers; a wage board on an all-India basis to remove regional wage imbalances; and payment by film producers towards a production workers employment benefit fund, among others.<sup>10</sup>

The regulatory framework within which safety and equity were discussed in these reports assumes new relevance in the contemporary moment, especially in terms of how these reports considered the figure of the cine-worker as a unified category with common, shared class afflictions and vulnerabilities, while glossing over gender altogether.

The 2017 assault on a Malayalam film actress led to widespread demands for a responsible mechanism to ensure safety for women and gender queer persons working in the film industry. More than the silence of the trade guilds following the attack, what came across as a rude shock was the decision of the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) to stand by the accused until he was pronounced guilty. The accused, who was also a film producer and exhibitor, held an official position in the association at the time of the attack, as the President of the Film Exhibitors United Organization of Kerala (FEUOK). Although he had to be removed from the post when he was sent to prison, on being released on bail, he was reinstated as the President.<sup>11</sup>

While the investigation was ongoing, the film fraternity rallied around the actor in various ways, including through jail visits by other actors, in order to gather public support for him. All this while, the survivor who had filed the complaint did not get any support from AMMA even though she was a member of the association. This led to the resignation of four actresses from the organization, citing exclusionary practices that are “protective” of the accused party, and unfair and alienating to the survivor.<sup>12</sup> Their resignations

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8 Film Artistes’ Association changed its name to Film Artistes’ Guild in 1954 and in 1958 it became “Character Artistes’ Association” and was affiliated to Federation of Western Indian Cine Employees the same year. <http://cintaa.net/about-us/>

9 Chanana, *The Missing 3 in Bollywood*, 10.

10 Report on the Working Group on National Film Policy, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1980, pp 87.

11 “Dileep reinstated as president of Film Exhibitors United Organization of Kerala,” *The India Today*, October 5, 2017. <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/celebrities/story/dileep-released-on-bail-reinstated-as-feuok-president-1058179-2017-10-05>

12 “Four Malayalam Actresses resign from AMMA over Dileep Row,” *News18*, June 29, 2018. <https://www.news18.com/news/movies/four-malayalam-actresses-resign-from-amma-over-dileep->

were also in response to AMMA's intolerance of dissent of all kinds, labelling any opposition to its stand as a breach of the organization's collective interests.<sup>13</sup>

The formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) was, thus, an organized response to conditions of gendered precarity and unequal labor rights in the film industry. As a collective statement on how trade guilds had failed to protect the interests of female workers by refusing to support them, WCC pitched its intervention as part of an overhaul of ingrained attitudes towards gender difference. While there is a culture of trade guild formation in India that caters to the collective interests of the communities they represent, gender is at the most an add-on in such organizations and their understanding of labor. The term "cine-worker" has typically signified a normatively male worker who is addressed and scripted as the recipient and beneficiary of the system. Despite the occasional eruption of protests from below-the-line labor units, such dissent has usually been suppressed through show-cause notices and punitive measures.

The 2017 abduction and attack put pressure on the Government of Kerala to institute a mechanism to ensure the implementation of laws relating to sexual harassment at the workplace by the entertainment industries. The Vishaka Guidelines were procedural guidelines issued by the Supreme Court of India in 1997 to prevent, address and redress the problem of sexual harassment of women in places and processes of work. In 2013, the guidelines were superseded by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act.<sup>14</sup> According to this legislation, all firms/offices with more than ten employees were obliged to constitute Internal Committees to deal with sexual harassment.

The legal requirement of Internal Committees (ICs) was raised by WCC when it approached the state Chief Minister with a demand for the constitution of a committee to address the problems faced by women artists in the film industry. In response, in 2017, the state government constituted a three-member Commission headed by retired Justice Hema to explore "options for improving women's safety, security, a better salary package, service conditions and creation of a conducive working environment."<sup>15</sup> Since women's participation in cinema has mostly been in the realm of acting, the Commission also explored possible avenues to boost opportunities for women in the technical and production aspects of film-making. The Commission submitted their final, 300-page report on 31 December 2019. According to Justice Hema, the Commission received testimonies that pointed to the presence of "casting couch" practices. "If a woman refuses to oblige or expresses her resentment

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row-1793329.html

13 There have been instances when actors were suspended from AMMA for speaking against the organization. A prime example would be the suspension of Thilakan in 2010 for criticizing AMMA.

14 "Vishaka Guidelines against Sexual harassment at Workplace," Guidelines by Supreme Court in Vishaka and Others Vs. State of Rajasthan and Others)JT 1997 (7) SC 384. <http://www.nitc.ac.in/app/webroot/img/upload/546896605.pdf>

15 N.J Nair, "Terms of reference for K. Hema Panel issued," The Hindu, December 3, 2017. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/terms-of-reference-for-k-hema-panel-issued/article21254438.ece>

against sexual harassment at the workplace, she is banned from cinema for no fault of hers,” she said.<sup>16</sup>

The larger demands for safety were also mediated via the need for strong, legally mandated regulation, especially since the film industry conducts itself as part of the “unorganized sector”, with minimal attention to labor concerns, let alone gender justice. The formation of WCC also coincided with the #MeToo revelations following the multiple allegations against Harvey Weinstein in Hollywood that amassed more recognition of and support for survivors of sexual harassment than ever before. The issue of the ‘casting couch’ as a normalized way of asserting rights over female bodies for work opportunities was openly raised by many women working in the Indian film industry, too, following the #MeToo outpouring across the globe. For instance, Kannada actors Priyanka Jain and Sruthi Hariharan spoke about their experiences as newcomers and how sexual favors were demanded in return for film roles.<sup>17</sup>

While responses to the #MeToo movement have been seen in other work arenas in India – for instance, the crowd-sourced List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA), that aimed to “out” sexual harassers and warn against predatory behavior in academia – there has not been a similar move in the Indian film industry. Even though trade organizations such as the Federation of Western Indian Cinema Employees (FWICE) and the Cinema and Television Artist’s Association (CINTAA) came forward to support survivors, there were no tangible interventions other than the “outing” of a few individuals who, despite being tainted by #MeToo, went ahead with their careers unhindered.

In the renewed momentum created by #MeToo, actor Tanushree Dutta’s ten-year-old revelations about senior actor Nana Patekar’s behavior on a film set did belatedly gather support from co-actors in Bollywood. However, ultimately, despite the support, Patekar was given a clean chit by the police, citing lack of evidence and implying that it was a case of “malicious intent”.<sup>18</sup> In the Tamil film industry, singer Chinmayi Sripaada, who accused lyricist Vairamuthu of sexual misconduct, was removed from membership of the South Indian Cine and Television Artistes and Dubbing Artistes Union (SICTADU) and was denied opportunities to take up work.<sup>19</sup>

In 2018, TV presenter turned Telugu actress Sri Reddy stripped and

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16 Anjana George, “Will Hema Commission report shake up the cinema industry,” The Times of India, January 5, 2020 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/malayalam/movies/news/will-hema-commission-report-shake-up-the-cinema-industry/articleshow/73098311.cms>

17 Nischith N, “Revealed: Actress opens up about casting couch,” The Times of India, January 4, 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/kannada/movies/news/Actress-opens-up-about-casting-couch/articleshow/54025223.cms>; “Sruthi Hariharan shares casting couch experience,” The Times of India, January 20, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/tamil/movies/news/sruthi-hariharan-shares-casting-couch-experince/articleshow/62579462.cms>

18 “#MeToo movement: Police give clean chit to Nana Patekar in sexual harassment case filed by Tanushree Dutta,” The Times of India, June 13, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/entertainment/hindi/metoo-movement-police-gives-clean-chit-to-nana-patekar-in-sexual-harassment-case-filed-by-tanushree-dutta/videoshow/69772856.cms>

19 “#MeToo: Chinmayi removed from dubbing union,” The Hindu, November 18, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/chinmayi-removed-from-dubbing-union/article25528913.ece>

protested bare-chested in front of the Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce, which houses the Movie Artistes' Association (MAA), to protest against the organization's apathy towards her complaints of harassment. She alleged that she was denied a membership card despite fulfilling the eligibility clause of three films. Sri Reddy spoke openly about how she was forced to sleep with men in exchange for film roles. Citing this disclosure as a disheartening moment for its members, MAA dismissed her protest as a "cheap publicity stunt," and warned action against artistes who would still share screen space with her.<sup>20</sup> The MAA's response to Sri Reddy's protest reiterates the dominant tendency among trade guilds to trivialize protests against discrimination and harassment as "blackmail" and/or to deflect all responsibility for the gender sensitive handling of complaints to the organization's "female committee members."<sup>21</sup>

The same pattern was seen in Malayalam cinema as well, when KPAC Lalitha, an AMMA member, appeared on behalf of the organization to vouch that women do not face any problems within it. Lalitha invoked the metaphor of AMMA as *family*. By asking the female actors who had resigned to render unconditional apologies and return to the organization, AMMA basically reinforced the notion that trade guilds could only be male-dominated workspaces.<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to note here that Lalitha herself had spoken about the harassment meted out to her by actor Adoor Basi early in her career and about how her complaints, filed with the officials of the Madras-based Malayala Chalachitra Parishad, did not amount to much.<sup>23</sup>

In the Indian film industry, the history of public protest by female actors to make their demands heard goes back to the 1930s when Shanta Apte, who worked at Prabhat Studios, raised her concerns regarding studio contracts that shackled artistes and made them, in effect, salaried slaves. Although not specifically related to sexual harassment, Apte's assertion of her right to be released from the stranglehold of the studio so that she could freelance was the first instance of an Indian actress raising her voice against the powers that be. But the press dismissed her hunger strike outside Prabhat Film Studios in Pune, accompanied by her brother and lawyer, as a "publicity stunt."<sup>24</sup> The dismissal of Sri Reddy's protests or, for that matter, Chinmayi Sripaada's complaints, as conduct unbecoming of artistes is, thus, part of a long tradition

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20 Nitin. B, "Our Members will not act with Sri Reddy: MAA Flexes muscle after actor's semi nude protest," The News Minute, April 8, 2018. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/our-members-will-not-act-sri-reddy-maa-flexes-muscle-after-actors-semi-nude-protest-79232>; "Sexual Harassment in Tollywood: Ban on actor Sri Reddy by MAA lifted," The News Minute, April 13, 2018. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/sexual-harassment-tollywood-ban-actor-sri-reddy-maa-lifted-79490>

21 Nitin, "Our Members will not act with Sri Reddy," 2018

22 "AMMA to fight; The seven points that Siddique said," Manorama News, October 15, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcwCEq9nLU0>

23 "I had bad experience from Bhasi: KPAC Lalitha Joins 'Me Too'," Mathrubhumi. October 4, 2018. <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/movies-music/movie-news/i-had-bad-experience-from-bhasi-kpac-lalitha-joins-me-too-campaign-1.3195107>

24 Neepa Majumdar, "Gossip, Labor, and Female Stardom in Pre-Independence Indian Cinema: The Case of Shanta Apte" in Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (eds) *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press. 2015), pp 181-192.



of labelling the assertions of female cine-workers' rights as tantrums and publicity stunts.

When film organizations and trade guilds decry protest and decide that it violates the socially accepted decorum that ought to surround the arbitration of differences of opinion within the industry, they reveal themselves to be indifferent to the structural inequalities as well as power and hierarchy differentials in the system. Even a cursory reading of the by-laws of a few organizations and trade guilds makes it evident that the arbitration clause is the only means by which the organization takes up responsibility to resolve conflicts. But there are few details about what such conflicts might entail. The general impression provided is that such conflicts are “interpersonal” and/or accrue out of “unfair, illegal or unscrupulous practices that might discredit the industry,” rather than systemic discrimination and entrenched sexism.<sup>25</sup>

The unmarked identity abstracted in the figure of the “member” is construed as a law-abiding, membership fee paying party who enters a level playing field. By erasing the gender, class and caste inequalities that already prefigure the constitutive relationships these personnel have in the overall arc of the film production process, such “conflicts” are always couched as extraordinary scenarios. In other words, cases of sexual harassment and gender discrimination are seen as *not* the norm in an otherwise fair system. Instead, such issues are framed as the responsibility of individual agents rather than the system itself.

The core question that the instances mentioned above raise is the need to accommodate a more expansive definition of “workspace” in the context of the film industry, where pre-production, production and post-production aspects are organized in different schedules. Thus, the workplace could encompass various processes and spaces – including auditions, dubbing, principal photography as well as hotel stay in between shoots. Further, maternity benefits and medical insurance for female employees have also not been addressed by trade guilds. While unemployment benefits have been discussed by them, other benefits such as maternity leave, childcare facilities or allowances and mobile restrooms have not attracted attention.

What would gender justice look like in the film industry, especially in a culture where women who voice their political opinion or criticize the high-handedness of the establishment face physical attack, rape threats and trolling from fans' associations?<sup>26</sup> In Malayalam cinema, as a follow-up to conversations on gender justice, there has been a state-led initiative to support films made by women filmmakers. An amount of INR 3 crore (USD 393,431) was allotted for films made by women and the Kerala State Film Development Corporation facilitated selection for funding by a three-member jury. While there have

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25 By-laws of Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce

26 Devika, J. Chithira Vijayakumar, Darshana Sreedhar Mini, Resmi P S, Elizabeth Alexander. “Walking on Eggshells in Cyberspace: A Report on Gender Justice, Law Enforcement, and Women's Struggles and Negotiations in Malayali Cyberspace.” Research as part of the project “Righting Gender Wrongs: A Study of Law Enforcement Responses to Online Violence Against Women,” led by IT for Change, Bangalore. 2019.



been misgivings about the lack of clarity and transparency regarding what constitutes “women’s cinema” for the selection committee, the initiative can indeed be seen as an initial policy level decision that responds to the lack of representation of women in creative capacities in the industry.<sup>27</sup>

### Trade Guilds’ Responses to Questions of Gendered Precarity

Responses to the Report of the Hema Commission are indicative of the actors’ association’s non-committal stance towards allegations regarding the “casting couch” syndrome. For instance, AMMA secretary Edavela Babu deflected the core concerns by casting “compromise and adjustment” as “individual decisions.” According to him, “If one decides to resist it, they won’t succumb to it [...] however if the Commission says that it happened to nearly every woman in the industry, it is an insult.”<sup>28</sup> The passive-aggressive undertones of such a statement are evident when Babu demands that the Commission reveal the name(s) of accusers and harassers. This propensity to push the survivors to name the accused was evident in a press conference (addressed later in this chapter) where a masculinist entitlement in taking WCC to task for not having the names of the accusers was in evidence.

On the other hand, B. Unnikrishnan, General Secretary of the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA), sees the Commission’s findings as a first step towards building a “constructive dialogue” to remedy the situation.<sup>29</sup> What this “constructive dialogue” would entail has not been discussed yet, but his stepping in as a co-producer for *Stand-Up* (2019), a film exploring the story of a rape survivor, directed by Vidhu Vincent, a WCC member, is a case in point. Unnikrishnan agreed to serve as a co-producer at a time when Vincent was facing difficulties in finding a producer. He later conferred that this financing was part of the “co-existence” that is a prerequisite for the survival of entertainment sector – in other words, to move along, despite differences in [political] approach.<sup>30</sup>

The lukewarm response of most film trade guilds is not an isolated occurrence. Forging a space for critical debate on the allegations raised by WCC has also led to hostile responses from some segments of the media fraternity. This is a crucial indicator of a concerted strategy to discredit WCC. In fact, such an effort was evident in initial news reports that portrayed them as a break-away faction of AMMA (presenting the rage and outburst of members as instances of emotional outrage as opposed to a rational deliberation). These attacks on WCC were routed through masculinist critiques of “feminism” by the popular press, often claiming that the collective was a conglomeration of “feminists” who do not represent the true positions of women in the industry.

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27 N.J Nair, “Terms of reference for K. Hema Panel issued,” *The Hindu*, December 3, 2017. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/terms-of-reference-for-k-hema-panel-issued/article21254438.ece>

28 George, “Will Hema Commission report shake up the cinema industry,” 2020

29 Ibid.

30 Saraswathy Nagarajan, “Vidhu Vincent’s Malayalam film ‘Stand Up’ exhort women to speak up,” *The Hindu*, November 1, 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/vidhu-vincent-stand-up-is-about-the-ups-and-downs-in-the-life-of-a-group-of-friends/article29853702.ece>

One prime example that showcased the media's bullying tactics was the aforementioned press conference called by WCC in 2018 during which reporters demanded that the collective reveal the names of harassers if they had any complaints against any member of the film fraternity. The pressure tactics used by media persons on WCC members were a far cry from the manner in which they usually deal with AMMA's press conferences.<sup>31</sup> When WCC was asked if there was a single person who would come forward with an instance of abuse, actress Archana Padmini narrated her experience: no action was taken when she reported sexual misconduct from a production controller to the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA).<sup>32</sup>

Amidst these debates, FEFKA constituted what they referred to as their Women's Core Committee, comprising female members of unions of writers, directors, costume designers, dancers and dubbing artistes.<sup>33</sup> The committee comprises eight core members and is currently chaired by dubbing artist Bhagyalakshmi, with lyricist Jayageetha as vice-chairperson.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, AMMA, the actors' association, also constituted an Internal Committee after WCC filed a writ petition in the Kerala High Court demanding that AMMA follow the law.<sup>35</sup> According to the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013, half the members of the IC should be women and there has to be an external member with gender awareness, drawn from among social workers or non-governmental organizations. AMMA initially refused to constitute an IC, stating that they already had a Women's Cell Grievance Forum and they are not legally bound to constitute an IC as they are not an employer or a workplace. However, since the stage shows that AMMA organizes make it a sole employer, they were left with no option but to constitute an IC.<sup>36</sup>

How effective these committees are is another question, considering that commitment to gender parity has to be a political stance that can then evolve through concrete measures to address systemic inequalities. In this case, the film industry is not an exception, but a space that reflects social dynamics, stereotypes and inequality like any other work establishment. The formation of an IC and the implementation of the law, as announced by the Producers Guild of India in November 2018, was a first step towards acknowledging that there is a need for revamping the current framework followed for complaint-

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31 For a personal experience of witnessing the press meet, see Dhanya Rajendran's Facebook Post, Oct 14, 2018. [https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dhanya%20rajendran\\*WCC&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=dhanya%20rajendran*WCC&epa=SEARCH_BOX)

32 "Malayalam actor assault case: Enough is enough, tired of apathy by Mohanlal and A.M.M.A; WCC ups ante," New Indian Express, October 14, 2018.

33 "Kerala: After WCC, yet another organization of women in Malayalam cinema comes into force," New Indian Express, February 4, 2018. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/malayalam/2018/feb/04/kerala-after-wcc-yet-another-organisation-of-women-in-malayalam-cinema-comes-into-force-1767960.html>

34 Asha Prakash, "FEFKA Women's wing aims to address the issues of women technicians in Malayalam cinema," Times of India, February 5, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/fefka-womens-wing-aims-to-address-the-issues-of-women-technicians-in-malayalam-cinema/articleshow/62777013.cms>

35 Cris, "After WCC goes to court, AMMA hurriedly puts together anti-sexual harassment panel," The News Minute. November 27, 2018. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/after-wcc-goes-court-amma-hurriedly-puts-together-anti-sexual-harassment-panel-92318>

36 Ibid

filing procedures. The Producers Guild of India's notification squarely puts the responsibility on Indian production houses to implement and enforce the POSH Act.<sup>37</sup> The special committee constituted by the Guild to draft a document on sexual harassment in workplaces is headed by Sneha Rajani, Head of Sony Pictures.

In April 2019, The South Indian Artiste's Association (SIAA), or the Nadigar Sangam, constituted an IC with actors Suhasini Maniratnam, Rohini Krishnamoorthy and Karthik Sivakumar, among others, as members to "safeguard and protect the self-respect, public life evaluation and self-esteem of artistes."<sup>38</sup> The timing of the public announcement regarding the new IC coincided with actress Nayanthara's demand for such a forum after actor-politician Radha Ravi slut-shamed her during the trailer launch of *Kolaiyuthir Kaalam*. Many of her co-actors supported her and the President of the political party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), M.K Stalin, temporarily suspended Ravi from his party position on account of his misogynistic statement.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the newly formed organization, Film Industry for Rights and Equality (FIRE), has appealed to the Karnataka Chamber of Commerce to refer to its IC any sexual harassment complaints the Chamber receives.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to note that the building of allies and support networks are crucial ways to enable survivors to get back on their feet after emotional duress and trauma. Often such alliances are built over vulnerabilities shared by different groups. As a safe space that reduces possible hierarchies by adopting a horizontal process of community building, such alliances offer the right conditions to discuss concerns and anxieties about negotiating personal and professional lives and navigating the uncertainties of precarious labor situations. WCC has played exactly this role in the Malayalam film industry.

At the 2018 Kerala State Film Award ceremony, WCC distributed gender equity badges and initiated a signature campaign titled *Avalkoppam* ("With Her") to support survivors. In her contemporary dance performed at the Award ceremony, Rima Kallingal, a WCC member, incorporated a banner with the text "With Her" as a supportive gesture.<sup>41</sup> However, in an evident response, AMMA included a comic show as part of its Silver Jubilee celebrations, which portrayed a confused group of women whose empowerment was reduced to shorthand depictions of "society ladies." By using hand-bags, sunglasses and

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37 Adithya Narayan, "Producers Guild of India Forms A Committee to Ensure a Safe Working Space for everyone," Silverscreen, October 11, 2018. <https://silverscreen.in/movies/news/producers-guild-of-india-committee-safe-working-me-too/>

38 Priyanka Thirumurthy, "Months after #MeToo allegations hit Tamil film industry, Nadigar Sangam to form ICC," The News Minute, April 24, 2019. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/months-after-metoo-allegations-hit-tamil-film-industry-nadigar-sangam-form-icc-100642>

39 "DMK Temporarily suspends actor Radha Ravi over derogatory remarks," Hindustan Times, March 25, 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/dmk-temporarily-suspends-actor-radha-ravi-for-derogatory-remarks/story-65zYQ6QnxeAOmlu5NNnV3K.html>

40 Theja Ram, "Refer sexual harassment complaints to our ICC: Fire tells Kannada film body," The News Minute, October 14, 2018. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/refer-sexual-harassment-complaints-our-icc-fire-tells-kannada-film-body-89951>

41 "Kallingal raised voice against Dileep supporters through her dance," Manorama Online, September 12, 2017. <https://english.manoramaonline.com/entertainment/entertainment-news/2017/09/12/rima-kallingal-on-dileep-supporters-at-film-awards-dance.html>

lipstick to portray women activists – particularly feminists – the idea was conveyed that they are “modern” women who are far removed from the lived realities of most fellow women and society as a whole.

In AMMA’s skit, the president of the women’s group is shown as being hesitant about public speaking; her welcome speech turns into a vote of thanks as the speaker blurts out hard-to-chew words that have neither rhyme nor reason. Contrasting the common thread of women’s empowerment that unites the group with the supposed reality, one member is shown negotiating an abusive marriage and physical violence – clearly a tactical inclusion that casts doubts on the political awareness that led to the constitution of WCC in the first place. As if to tone down the attack on WCC through the skit, the final scene showcases the Chief Guest, shown to be abusing his wife over the phone in midst of a speech on women’s empowerment and has the women present beating him up for his duplicitous behavior.

However, this derogatory portrayal did receive a bit of blowback, highlighting the accountability that many in the audience expected from an organization such as AMMA. In an article titled “Star Patriarchs, Your Skin is Resistant to Everything! It’s about the vulgar skit at Amma Mazhavillu Stage Show,” Ribin Karim wrote about the event as a heavily misogynistic portrayal of women’s collectives that appeared to be basically suggesting that, if women had to form a collective, it had better be for cooking classes or getting updated on fashion trends. According to him, AMMA’s stance seemed to postulate that women’s collectives could not be good for anything other than “gossip” sessions.<sup>42</sup>

The formation of WCC and the events that it has organized under its umbrella constitute an important indicator of how coalitional activism can be a way forward to amass the momentum required to bring marginal groups together. In 2019, WCC collaborated with Queerala, a Queer rights organization, for “Q-Loid,” a queer documentary and short film festival. This was pitched as an intervention that can contribute to facilitating “positive social change in favor of securing the rights and better media portrayals of sexual and gender minority groups in Kerala.”<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, they also initiated the P.K. Rosy Film Society, in memory of P.K. Rosy, the first female actor of Malayalam cinema, who had to face the ire of upper caste communities for her Dalit identity and was forced to leave the state. While the film society movement in Kerala was in the forefront of the process of democratizing film viewing practices (especially in terms of introducing international cinema to rural audiences), it was also mostly male-dominated and lacked female participation. As a corrective, the inauguration of the P.K. Rosy Film Society brought Dalit, feminist and civil society groups together,

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42 Ribin Karim “Thara Madambikale, ningalude charmaseshsi aparam...! Amma Mazhavillu stage showyile Abhasa Skitine kurichuthanne” (Star Patriarchs, Your Skin is resistant to everything! It’s about the vulgar skit at Amma Mazhavillu Stage Show), Azhimukham, June 2, 2018. [https://www.azhimukham.com/film-amma-mazhavil-show-skit-against-wcc-criticised-ribinkareem/?fbclid=IwAR2OXLRa9UT6PDAQXaA3oj89kiKDs\\_RHms4DQX86pNmxGqPF7pLXtt3MQDw](https://www.azhimukham.com/film-amma-mazhavil-show-skit-against-wcc-criticised-ribinkareem/?fbclid=IwAR2OXLRa9UT6PDAQXaA3oj89kiKDs_RHms4DQX86pNmxGqPF7pLXtt3MQDw)

43 <https://www.facebook.com/WomeninCinemaCollectiveOfficial/photos/a.1328510703923770/2331603316947832/?type=3&theater>



leveraging the potentialities inherent in a coalitional movement to counter heteropatriarchy.

WCC also launched its year-long series titled *Punarvayana* (re-reading), a public-facing endeavor meant to create awareness about exclusionary workspaces and gender discrimination. WCC's formation and its interventions are in many ways shaped and influenced by a culture of trade union activism and women's participation in labor movements, as seen in the cashew workers' movement and in the case of *Pembilai Orumai*, an all-women trade collective that actively mobilized support for the Munnar plantation strike in 2015.

The building of allies is a crucial node that connects WCC to like-minded organizations such as the South Indian Film Women's Association (SIFWA), which brings together women who work in southern Indian film industries across twenty-four departments. SIFWA's political commitment is inspired by the foregrounding of the work done by organizations that brought women workers in cinema together, like the one formed in 1978 by Ganthammal to address the welfare of women employees.<sup>44</sup> SIFWA also found support in directors such as Pa Ranjith, whose anti-caste films and political commitment, especially to Dalit causes, have been successful in mobilizing conversations on the discriminatory practices that exist in the film industry. SIFWA brings out a quarterly magazine called *Thiraiyaal* that aims to provide visibility to the women workforce in cinema.<sup>45</sup>

There are other organizations led by women in South Indian cinema that address the needs and concerns of women working in the movies, such as Film Industry for Right and Equality (FIRE) in Kannada cinema and Voice of Women (VOW) in Telugu cinema.<sup>46</sup>

One of the main concerns for any conversation on gender and labor in South Indian cinema at this point is the lack of empirical data that can promote better knowledge and understanding of the salary and other benefits women employees have to negotiate and the discriminatory hiring practices that evade the radar. The workshop titled "Towards Recognition, Parity and Security," held in Chennai in October 2019 as part of the 'Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment' project led by WCC and Sakhi - Women's Resource Centre, represented a crucial moment that has initiated a sustained dialogue on best practices on gender equality, safety and work opportunities for women.

The ongoing online survey launched to gather information on women's experiences and perspectives on labor practices in southern Indian film industries is a first step towards building up a data set that can be used as a baseline for an extensive qualitative study on labor practices in the film industry. The inclusion of questions that address safety, labor contracts,

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44 Anjana Sekhar, "With a mandate for equality, South Indian Film Women's Association launched in Chennai," *The News Minute*, May 3, 2018. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/mandate-equality-south-indian-film-women-s-association-launched-chennai-80619>

45 Ibid

46 For more on women's organizations in South Indian film industry, see interviews conducted by Asiya Shervani (forthcoming)



gender representation in unions and use of gender-specific clauses is crucial in foregrounding an intersectional understanding of gendered precarity. Alongside the findings of Hema Commission, the findings of the survey have the potential to help develop concrete strategies to foster conversations on gender as a crucial vector in understanding labor.

## Conclusion

By showcasing the need for working together with allies to shape work culture and secure institutional guarantees, the organizing efforts of women cine-workers encourages reflection on questions of privilege and positionality. By destabilizing normative gender binaries and improvising tactics for equalizing a primarily male-centric playing field, the formative moments of WCC have been marked by introspective gestures that allow for deeper conversations about shared experiences that bring the participants together. In this case, terms such as “feminism” and “agency” are actively forged *on the field* through fraught negotiations and struggles that define the shape of feminist action.

The formation of WCC can be seen as a response to the cumulative effect of years of precarious working conditions for women in India’s film industries. In the context of Kerala, where the WCC was formed, there has been a long history of suicides by female actors, as well as narratives of the exploitation of below-the-line women’s labor – as for instance in the dubbing and body-double professions. If precarity refers to a “set of concerns about relations of production and the quality of social life,”<sup>47</sup> then instances such as the formation of WCC offer us a way of understanding the productive power of feminist dissent in times of crisis.

The example of WCC is not an isolated one and must be seen as part of larger, global challenges to heteropatriarchy. The backdrop of #MeToo, for instance, has been important in building conversations about institutional responses to women’s safety in the entertainment sector. The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), the largest American labor union in the media and entertainment sector comprising around 160,000 workers, came up with a document titled “A Call to Action: Ensuring Safe and Equitable Workplaces” in February 2018, not long after the #MeToo allegations surfaced, to address gender justice in the entertainment sector.<sup>48</sup>

The document outlines the groundwork required to support and advance the film industry’s commitment to work on sustainable improvements that can lead to equitable workspaces. Using the idea of equity as the core point to discuss the vulnerabilities of the members, they also offer best practices that include laying out codes of conduct, as well as scenario-specific guidance on how to handle situations that might come under the definition of workplace harassment. Working alongside allies such as ReFrame, Time’s Up, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

47 Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson. Eds. *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 6.

48 <https://www.sagaftra.org/call-action-ensuring-safe-and-equitable-workplaces>

(AFL-CIO), and the International Federation of Actors, they also recommend the setting up of a “trauma hotline” that can help with clinical referrals for those who are struggling with assault-related mental health issues.

In this regard, WCC’s efforts to work towards a “best practices manual” and to professionalize cinema by emphasizing the need for regulations that protect women in workspaces offers a platform for collaboration with like-minded organizations that include grassroots level organizations, women’s groups and LGBTQ groups.<sup>49</sup>

Coalition building can offer a platform for organizations such as WCC or FIRE to foreground their politics as part and parcel of the larger structural realities within which they intervene. This collective negotiation of rights posits them as cine-workers who are aware of the pernicious power of capital to institute exploitative relations. The main takeaway for trade guilds in engaging with gender, therefore, would be to see it not as an isolated and abstract category that applies equally to everyone (unmarked gender), but as a space of gender difference that can have different manifestations for vulnerable sections who are doubly marginalized in their access to resources.

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49 Saraswathy Nagarajan, “WCC to empower, educate and enrich women in cinema,” *The Hindu*, April 25, 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/women-in-cinema-collectives-plan-of-action-to-empower-women-in-cinema-as-it-completes-two-years/article26942714.ece>

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## Observations and Recommendations

**T**he film industry in India is on the cusp of change. The century-old business model of film production is being replaced with new models and varied revenue streams. This is an ideal time to replace antiquated, patriarchal mindsets with newer, more gender-just ways of seeing and doing.

This segment of the report on the 'Shift Focus' project summarizes observations based on information and insights gathered in the course of two intensive conferences, an online survey, interviews with a number of film professionals, and interactions with several relatively new associations of women working in cinema as well as some older professional organizations in the film industry, including unions. It also incorporates perceptions drawn from the combined professional experiences of the project team, which included film directors and producers, actors, a film editor and festival director, film institute and university faculty, a journalist and author, as well as an organizational effectiveness consultant.

The coming decade is likely to see gender-just practices becoming common in the film industry. They are already becoming the norm in some production houses which are predicted to be the major players in the emerging, diverse and competitive cinema landscape. The observations have been organized into categories based on subject area. Each set of observations is accompanied by recommendations.

## **WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE BUSINESS OF FILM**

### ***Observations***

1. There are not enough women in spearheading roles such as film producer or distributor. It is when women take on such roles that they can create a different power dynamic in the industry and begin to influence funding, budgets, contracts, etc., and ensure that they are non-discriminatory in terms of gender and other factors.
2. There is a deep-seated belief in the Indian film industry that movies based on women-oriented stories, with female leads and/or made by women, do not fare well at the box office.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Introduce training programs aimed at enabling more women to become film producers – both mainstream and indie (independent) – who will be well-placed to boost women-oriented and gender-sensitive production practices as well as film content.
2. Create content for alternative film distribution avenues such as the variety of new OTT (over the top) platforms which are relatively free from the constraints imposed by traditional, commercial, movie theatre-based distribution and therefore allow greater diversity in terms of themes, stories and characters. Already OTT platforms appear to have considerably more women-oriented stories than theatrical films. OTT content is also varied in form – features, shorts, series, docuseries, etc. – and can therefore offer a wider range of options to both female filmmakers and female audiences. As relatively new platforms, they are also likely to be less entrenched in patriarchal attitudes and behavior as well as related structures and systems.
3. Encourage the creation of global pipelines that could help women in cinema rise above existing constraints. For instance, indie filmmakers in India can be matched with producers, writers and other creative/business talent in the US to develop content suitable for both markets. The U.S. Consulate General could play a lead role in facilitating a system to encourage and enable collaboration between Indian and American film professionals. This could lead to more diversity and enhanced quality of film content, production and distribution in both countries.
4. Redefine the metric of success to challenge the myth that women-oriented or women-driven films are not commercially successful. The definition of success needs to go beyond big box office numbers and take into account the ratio of spending to earning. For instance, a box office return figure of INR 60 crores may not be considered a big hit in the usual scheme of things. However, if the film was made on a modest INR 7 crore budget, it has clearly punched above its weight in monetary terms as well and deserves to be seen as a commercially successful film.
5. Encourage the Producers Guild of India to set up training programs for women that can help them develop skills in finance and marketing

strategies. At present women in the film industry are concentrated in the artistic departments of filmmaking, especially acting/performing. Encouraging and training women to work in film financing, production, marketing and distribution would provide them with more access to decision-making power and opportunities to make the kinds of films they want to make.

6. Encourage governments at the central and state levels to introduce policies and incentives to facilitate the production and marketing of films by or about women. Such measures could take the form of production subsidies, special categories/slots in state-sponsored film festivals, special categories for film awards, and so on. Government policy driven incentives are required to support women-made or women-led films until gender equality becomes the norm in the industry.

## **THE ROLE OF UNIONS/ASSOCIATIONS**

### ***Observations***

1. The role and responsibilities of the unions that exist in film industries are not clearly defined.
2. Film-related unions have very few women among their members and almost no women in executive or leadership positions.
3. Unions address issues concerning work contracts, working conditions, security, etc., in a general way, paying little attention to female workers' rights, needs and concerns. The absence of women's voices in decision-making processes in the unions exacerbates the problem.
4. Some (though not all) unions are commonly known to be strongholds of older, patriarchal men with traditional, if not misogynistic, mindsets. Most of them have not made any efforts to increase the visibility and decision-making power of women.
5. Few unions have paid attention to gender-based inequality in the film industry. Fewer still have initiated action towards the prevention and redressal of sexual and other gender-based forms of harassment and discrimination. In fact, most unions seem to lack an understanding of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which women are kept out of various fields, deprived of opportunities, victimized and exploited in the industry.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Introduce reservation for women in all elected/nominated positions in unions. This will strengthen women's voices in policy and decision-making processes. It will also encourage more women to join unions.
2. Make special efforts to recruit women in the industry belonging to the younger working age group (35 and below) into union membership so that fresh, contemporary views on gender equality inform union activities and priorities. Unions themselves would benefit from not



being perceived as fortresses dominated by older, patriarchal men with antiquated ideas about women and their roles in society as well as the industry.

3. Modify union by-laws to ensure that gender concerns are adequately addressed. Among these are pay parity, the inclusion of gender-specific rights and protections mandated by existing laws in contracts, safety and security in broadly defined industry workplaces (including sets and shooting locations, travel and accommodation), adequate facilities for women at the workplace, implementation of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition & Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), etc.
4. Encourage women to organize themselves into women's wings within unions that can become effective lobby groups that champion gender-sensitive policies and practices.
5. Conduct regular, interactive, inclusive legal literacy, gender awareness and sensitization programs for all genders. If production houses undertake such programs unions should ensure that they are properly conducted and effective. Attendance should be appropriately incentivized.
6. Set up Internal Committees (ICs, also known as POSH Committees) within unions, ensuring the inclusion of a credible external member as mandated by the law. In case a woman complainant does not wish to approach the POSH committee set up by a producer or director, she should be able to address her complaint to the IC of the union of which she is a member.
7. Appoint female external advisors with an understanding of gender as well as organizations in general and the film/music/entertainment industries in particular to guide unions on matters pertaining to female workers' rights and concerns, including sexual harassment prevention.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POSH ACT**

### ***Observations***

1. There is confusion within the film industry regarding the implementation of the POSH Act in view of the nature of work in the industry, which is largely contractual in nature and involves workers from 24 different craft categories coming together for a temporary period to work on a film and then dispersing.
2. Sexual harassment can occur during any stage of the filmmaking process, from the development stage to the release and distribution of the film. During the course of the project, female film professionals shared many experiences of such harassment. Instances included harassment during travel and hotel stays necessitated by shooting locations and schedules and in informal workspaces. The problem is exacerbated by the vulnerability of junior artists, makeup and hair artists, assistants in

all departments and several other categories of workers who are more or less invisible both within and outside the industry. In almost all the reported cases the absence of an IC the women could approach for redressal made matters worse.

3. Women complainants invariably find it difficult to obtain justice in cases where big stars, money and power are involved even when an IC is ostensibly in place. Production houses, directors and line producers need to ensure that the ICs are properly constituted and approachable and that every woman – irrespective of her position in the film hierarchy – feels safe to make a complaint.
4. Women who dare to complain are almost always seen as trouble-makers and they are usually ostracized, deprived of future work opportunities and victimized in other ways. Unchecked sexual harassment in the film industry gives rise to additional discrimination against women in the workplace.
5. Many IC members themselves are not well informed about what constitutes sexual harassment and what their own role and responsibilities are. Most do not have the knowledge and skills necessary to conduct credible investigations. Their conduct prior to, during and after the investigation is often not appropriate. Many women do not trust IC members and are reluctant to discuss their situation or complaint with them for fear of being judged, shamed or even betrayed.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Every production house is obliged to establish an IC in accordance with the POSH Act. ICs can be set up for each project/film with a mandate to function from the development phase onwards until six months after the film is released.
2. Each film union, too, must constitute an IC which can address complaints from members. They should also set up gender committees that support members facing gender bias or harassment related issues.
3. Film festivals also need to set up an IC to address possible complaints related to harassment that occurs on the festival premises.
4. The mandatory posters and notices with details of the POSH Act and its implementation must be prominently displayed in every office as well as other key locations such as sets/outdoor locations, vanity vans and even hotels where the cast and crew stay during shoots. They should also be displayed at the venues of wrap-up and after parties since it is well known that a large number of sexual harassment incidents occur during these semi- social gatherings.
5. Call sheets and other such documents should include instructions on how to complain about sexual or gender-based harassment.
6. It is important to promote awareness among all workers of the fact that sexual harassment includes verbal harassment. It is necessary to

clarify that sexual jokes, inquiries about the target's sex life, talk about the harasser's own sex life, double entendre humor, objectification of women, remarks intended to humiliate or demean women, etc., also constitute sexual harassment. Retaliation against women who do not reciprocate sexual advances qualifies as sexual harassment, too.

7. Every production house and union should frame a Code of Conduct as well as a Sexual Harassment Prevention and Redressal Policy.
8. The entire cast and crew should undergo POSH Awareness training at the start of a film project. The names and contact details of IC members, including the external member, should be communicated to all workers.
9. ICs should be formed in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Act. It is mandatory to include at least one external committee member who has expertise and experience in gender justice in general and sexual harassment in particular. It is important to note that the law does not require the external member to be a lawyer. A few film companies have included a lawyer as an external member of their ICs and that has actually dissuaded many complainants from approaching such committees. ICs are meant to be alternative justice forums. They are not meant to be conducted like courts, with lawyers and judges. It is also inappropriate to include a famous film personality or the family member of one as the external member. Such choices undermine the credibility, trustworthiness and neutrality of the external member. The responsibility for setting up ICs, training members and ensuring that they function properly lies jointly with producers and directors. ICs must perform and not remain merely notional. The presiding officer and other members need take their roles seriously and make efforts to acquire the skills and expertise required for the position.
10. ICs need to be sensitized to the mental and emotional trauma that gender-based discrimination, harassment and bullying have on women. Committee members must undergo regular, thorough training at least once a year. ICs are not supposed to conduct investigations without members having received due training. Every investigation needs to be conducted using the principles of natural justice and properly documented. IC members require procedural training as well as training in investigation skills, arriving at a verdict and writing detailed reports which can be submitted to the court in case of escalation or an appeal by either the complainant or the respondent. Without ongoing training of members, ICs will not be able to conduct investigations in accordance with the law and arrive at verdicts and decisions on disciplinary action that are fair and in keeping with the severity of the misconduct.
11. It is important to recognize that ICs do not exist solely for redressal of harassment after the fact. They are supposed to design and execute interventions to raise awareness and prevent inappropriate conduct, especially of a sexual nature. They should be able to detect insidious and normalized gender-based harassment and take steps to eliminate

- it. They should be functional even when there is no complaint or case – organizing regular, customized and impactful awareness raising workshops, keeping up with policy updates and influencing workplace practices to ensure diversity, inclusion and professionalism across various kinds of workspaces at various stages of the making of a film.
12. The composition of the concerned IC should be transparent, with names included in the end credits of each film. The seriousness of the issue would be underlined if unions, associations and/or other industry bodies decide not to allow the release of films made without constituting an IC for the duration of the project.
  13. The POSH Act needs to be interpreted on the basis of a feminist perspective. Women in cinema must be involved in how it is implemented. Dialogue, debate and decisions must be led by women in the industry, preferably without the unnecessary involvement of legal experts or men in the industry, particularly those responsible for perpetuating patriarchy and enabling misogyny. Gender-sensitive implementation of the POSH Act could be a major contribution of the various unions and collectives that exist in southern Indian film industries. Other industries could learn from them.
  14. All the various regional film industries could consider setting up an apex IC involving members from across different language industries to address cases where the complainant is not happy with the intervention of local ICs. This could be done at least in cases where the complainant is pitted against very powerful male stars/producers/directors capable of scuttling a proper inquiry conducted by IC members within their own industry.
  15. Retaliation against women who complain by either the respondent and his fans/supporters or, indeed, other observers/bystanders should be dealt with seriously. Ensuring that there is no retaliation against the complainant or witnesses is the responsibility of the producer and director who should be held accountable in case of any retaliation.
  16. ICs are duty-bound to maintain strict confidentiality. Any members who flout the confidentiality requirement should be immediately censured and removed from the committee.

## **FILM PRODUCTION RELATED MEASURES**

### ***Observations***

1. The percentage of women professionals in most film crews is abysmally low. The film production process generally works in ways that are convenient for men, often with no consideration for women's convenience and no measures to address their particular needs and concerns.
2. The reluctance on the part of film industry employers to provide maternity benefits and childcare facilities or allowances results in many

women being forced to drop out of the profession during their most productive years.

3. No system is typically in place while filming on location to ensure safe travel and accommodation, clean and secure bathrooms with facility for disposal of sanitary napkins, etc.
4. To make matters worse there is an unfortunate association between outdoor locations and heavy drinking, inappropriate behavior, and unwanted overtures from male colleagues in the hotel or guest house at night, all of which have been 'normalized' over the years.

### **Recommendations**

1. Film unions must address issues such as safety at work (including shoot locations, travel and accommodation) and availability of clean bathrooms with facilities for the disposal of menstrual hygiene products. Production houses must be made accountable for ensuring such basic facilities.
2. Unions should also ensure that all existing laws pertaining to workers in general and female workers in particular are properly implemented by production houses. They should also initiate schemes to enable maternity benefits and childcare allowances for women who have been actively working before and after their pregnancy.
3. Unions should set up work protocols to ensure safe workplaces and practices and to counter problems encountered by women during filming, especially those related to unwanted sexual attention. The implementation of these protocols should be made mandatory for production houses.
4. Unions should ensure that inclusion riders are taken seriously in every film production. Data on the representation of genders other than male among crew members should be included in the credits of the film. Recruitment of more female crew could be incentivized in imaginative and effective ways.

## **FILM CONTENT AND FILM TREATMENT RELATED PRACTICES**

### **a. Script Writing and Film Related Scholarship and Journalism**

#### **Observations**

1. There is a paucity of films exploring women-oriented subjects. Apart from women-centered stories being assumed to be "unsuccessful" at the box office, the rarity of such films is also due to the fact that there are few female writers working in the film industry.
2. Due at least in part to the lack of adequate representation of women in the writing process, female characters often tend to be trivialized, objectified and sexualized.
3. Work done during the script-writing stage of filmmaking is not always



given due credit. Women writers often lose out on recognition and acknowledgement of their work.

4. Film journalism, including reviewing, that engages with gender issues while writing about popular South Indian cinema remains rare.
5. There is also a dearth of film scholarship with a gender perspective that looks deeper into the portrayal of women and the handling of female characters and themes in South Indian cinema.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Producers should ensure that there is at least 50 percent representation of women in the screenwriters' team. Efforts are also required to promote diversity in terms of caste, class, creed and sexual orientation among writers. Scripts need to be reviewed to ensure that female and LGBTQI characters are not unnecessarily sexualized, objectified or trivialized.
2. Producers should give script-writing and script-writers the credit and compensation they deserve to encourage better researched and better-quality scripts and screenplays.
3. Training in script-writing should be made more widely available, particularly for women, in an attempt to redress the prevailing skewed gender ratio. Having greater control over the writing of scripts directly translates into more women-friendly cinema content. The goal should be to raise the gender consciousness of people across genders.

### **b. Male Gaze**

#### ***Observations***

“Male gaze” is a familiar cultural term coined by film critic Laura Mulvey to describe the cinematic angle at which a heterosexual male views a female character. The pervasive male gaze in cinema involves substantial, often damaging, psychological costs for women. The male gaze is so deeply embedded within the subconscious mind that most individuals are not even aware of it unless and until their gender consciousness is raised and they can understand how harmful it is.

#### ***Recommendations***

1. “Item numbers” in Indian commercial cinema reveal the male gaze in its most explicit form. It is important to discuss and understand the social and psychological impact of such depictions of women so that filmmakers – including directors, lyricists and dance choreographers – can rethink the shooting of sexualized dance and song sequences and the use of such material in the film.
2. The portrayal and stereotyping of female characters in movies has been in focus for a long time. It is important to collate available material and present insights from it to directors, producers and screenwriters in a bid to encourage greater gender sensitivity in cinema in terms of both content and treatment.

3. Information and analysis of the male and female gaze need to be more widely disseminated through inclusion in film school and journalism school curricula, as well as in academic disciplines such as gender, media and cultural studies. The possibility of seminars and online forums focusing on this aspect of films aimed at the larger movie-going public can also be explored.
4. Film journalism is often assumed to be about the private and social lives of film stars. At present only a few film journalists develop a deeper understanding of cinema and even fewer include a gender perspective in their analysis of movies. This needs to change.
5. Public service/awareness campaigns anchored by celebrities and stars and drawing attention to the objectification and stereotyping of women in cinema would enable audiences to view films more critically.

#### c. **Filming of Intimate Scenes**

##### ***Observations***

1. Intimate scenes included in films are often not included in scripts or are inadequately described in them. Female actors are then taken by surprise on the set when they are told to shed clothes and/or participate in intimate actions.
2. Intimate scenes also provide opportunities for sexual harassment, including physical forms such as groping. If and when an actress plucks up the courage to complain about such inappropriate behavior, the customary response of those in a position to deal with it is to blur the lines between acting and harassment and ignore or trivialize the complaint.
3. The depiction of intimate scenes in films need to take into account how women experience romance as well as sexual desire and pleasure.

##### ***Recommendations***

1. All scenes involving sexual intimacy, nudity and/or violence must be properly detailed in scripts and the actors involved should be requested to sign informed consent forms while accepting the assignment and signing work contracts (if any) with the producer. The responsibility for ensuring that this is done must lie with the producer.
2. The producer should appoint a special coordinator for intimate scenes through whom the actor can convey any discomfort to the director, choreographer, cinematographer, etc. Intimate scene coordinators must understand that their role is to ensure that the actors are at no risk of harassment or do not feel violated in any way. They should be familiar with gender issues and concepts such as the male gaze and different ways of seeing and filming the female body and receive training on how to guide/comfort/reassure actors. While producers bear responsibility for hiring intimate scene coordinators, directors needs to work with coordinators to ensure that the film deals with such scenes in a

respectful, gender-sensitive manner, ensuring that human bodies, sex, sexuality, intimacy and nudity are handled with due care.

3. The intimacy coordinator should be present during the filming. The contract signed with actors before the shooting, which should include details the content and treatment of intimate scenes and carry the consent of the actors involved, should serve as the guide to what can and cannot be filmed and how. It is important to note that the coordinator is not expected or authorized to assume the role of censor or moral police. To ensure that such over-reach does not happen the selection of such coordinators must be based on proven knowledge of feminist principles and experience in dealing with gender issues.

## **FILM SCHOOLS AND FILM INTERNSHIPS**

### ***Observations***

1. Film schools and film courses represent a significant source of diverse talent for the film industry. Gender advocacy, gender sensitive practices, and the proper implementation of the POSH Act in film schools would naturally be carried forward by students into the wider world of the film industry. Currently these measures are not in place in a conscious and structured fashion in most film schools and courses. If they are in place at all, they tend to be implemented more in letter than in spirit.
2. Having traditionally been male bastions, many film schools are characterized by “boys’ club” attitudes and practices that normalize cultism, sexism and misogyny, sometimes in the garb of a “woke”, “liberal” and “artistic” subculture.

### ***Recommendations***

1. All film institutes, both state-managed and private, need to put in place policies and practices in accordance with the POSH Act. They should set up fully functional, capable ICs that include at least one credible external member with knowledge and experience in gender issues, who can provide an outside-in perspective and an understanding of what it takes to create a safe, secure environment for students, faculty and others in the institution.
2. All faculty, including guest lecturers, must be briefed on the institute’s POSH policies and practices and about their responsibility and accountability to ensure that gender discrimination, sexual harassment and even casual sexism are not tolerated on or off the campus.
3. Gender awareness should be incorporated in the curricula of film schools, within all disciplines. In addition, a special, foundational course on gender, incorporating a gender-aware reading of films, should be introduced to ensure that all students are equipped with at least a basic understanding of gender equality and justice.
4. According to popular Indian actress Amala Akkineni, who was recently appointed to the Gender Committee set up by CILECT (the International

Association of Film and Television Schools), the organization is currently working on a gender-friendly code of conduct for film schools. The CILECT initiative can inform a similar exercise to draft such a code that would cover all media and cinema related departments and schools in India.

5. The government and/or philanthropists should consider subsidizing media and film education for female students until there is some balance in the representation of women across crafts in Indian film industries.
6. Film journalism needs to be given more status in media circles and become more mature and credible. This branch of journalism is not meant to be limited to gossipy reports in glossy magazines, newspaper supplements, blogs and TV shows. Film journalists with an interest in investigative journalism, literature, the arts and/or social sciences, including gender, should be encouraged to write columns and in-depth articles which explore gender in films and in the film industry. Coverage of the #MeToo movement also needs to evolve and become more inclusive, focusing not only on celebrities, well-known actors and/or personalities visible on social media but equally, if not more, on women across all crafts and ranks of the film industry, many of them extremely vulnerable to sexual harassment. If journalists also make it a point to cover the few employers and workplaces in the industry that have attempted to implement the POSH Act meaningfully and put in place effective sexual harassment prevention practices, while also exposing the organizations and institutions that are still flouting the law and ignoring or belittling the issue, they could encourage more compliance which, in turn, would make women in the industry feel more safe and secure.

## **EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION**

### ***Observations***

1. Many women in cinema talk about the small, everyday interactions which make them feel demeaned. Often it is difficult for them to clearly label these situations and identify precisely what made them uncomfortable. Such interactions range from comments about the body, skin color or facial features to actions that are taken for granted – for instance, the fact that the bigger caravan is always given to the male star. One young female assistant mentioned that she was made fun of because of her shrill voice. These kinds of everyday belittlement or humiliation are not commonly viewed by most people as examples of unfairness or discrimination since this is how things have always been done in the industry.
2. Female actors report habitually hearing disparaging personal comments about themselves or other women, like “Your upper arms are too big” or “Her thighs are looking ugly”. Judging women by unrealistically high standards of beauty is a form of gender-based harassment. Women

are also often expected to adhere to unrealistic standards of behavior. Many said they were often told to not look “grumpy” and to “be more pleasant”. Men are not given such negative feedback about their demeanor. Women are expected to be pleasing, nurturing and tolerant of everything, including “boys will be boys” kind of behavior.

3. A particular form of male predatory behavior – older men who prey on younger, vulnerable women – is common on film sets and outdoor locations. Many women talk about unwanted compliments, uncomfortable sexist humor, over-familiarity, pressure to consume alcohol and stay up late socializing as examples of everyday sexism and unnecessary, unwelcome, behavior that makes them feel uncomfortable and insecure. Women also pointed out that there should be no place for derogatory slang and abuse referring to women’s body parts and relationships at the workplace.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Directors and producers should attend specialized gender awareness workshops which not only discuss gross violations of the principles of gender equality and justice but also highlight the many subtle, sometimes unconscious, forms of bias and discrimination that are not considered serious but have a cumulative negative effect on women. For example, when makers of ads for skin lightening products can expect to be heavily fined, the film industry should be putting a stop to making darker skinned actresses appear paler on screen.
2. Production houses and/or ad agencies engaged by them should be obliged to regularly make at least some films in which they challenge or discard sexist and discriminatory notions of beauty and avoid over-sexualizing women. Distributed and screened widely, such films could contribute to changing public perceptions of women and female beauty as well as sexuality.
3. Body shaming and everyday sexism on sets, during location shoots, at after-parties, etc. should be called out. Everyone should know that they can report everyday sexism and demeaning work environments to the Internal or POSH Committee. Complaints to the IC need not be against a particular person or even a group of people. They can highlight the hostile “culture” that prevails in the workplace/shoot location. Women can talk to the POSH committee in case they are feeling demeaned, targeted or isolated in the workplace. The IC needs to be trained to recognize subtle, everyday sexism and understand the devastating, long-term impact it can have on the emotional health and careers of women.
4. It is the responsibility of directors and producers to notice any unhealthy, non-consensual “romantic” or sexual dynamic between older men and younger women in the workplace. If a younger woman attempts to provide feedback about inappropriate behavior from a senior man, her experiences should not be brushed aside; nor should she be seen



as “over-sensitive”, “too stern” or “too serious”, as women who rebuff such overtures are often labelled. Instead of blaming victims and trying to correct them, the focus needs to be on the actions of perpetrators. Women who complain about such behavior need to be informed about their rights and told that they can contact the Internal/POSH Committee at any point of time without any fear of reprisal.

5. It is important to convey to everyone working on a film that abusive language is not acceptable and that it is possible to be artistic and creative without using language that is derogatory to women and/or any other social group. Even commonly used insults, many of them demeaning to women, must be discouraged at the workplace.
6. Training to promote an understanding of sexual harassment and ways to combat it, conducted by an experienced consultant, would include raising awareness about everyday sexism in the form of unwanted compliments, unsavory humor and other such seemingly trivial behavior that is actually misconduct, especially in a work setting.
7. Misogynistic humor and jokes about hooking up with interns or preying on younger cast and crew members or boasts about sexual conquests, sexual prowess, etc., should be eliminated from the workplace, including informal settings where colleagues may gather after work, especially on location. Narcissistic, boastful, aggressive, bullying behavior should not be tolerated from any cast or crew member, even if the guilty party happens to be a star or celebrity. This can only happen if directors and producers make it clear that they will not work with anyone who indulges in obnoxious, disruptive, unproductive and undesirable behavior.

## **RECRUITMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS PRACTICES**

### ***Observations***

1. No standard recruitment and selection practices appear to exist in the industry. Recruitment of cast and crew seems to be carried out via word of mouth and personal referrals. Such casual, unprofessional practices may well be preventing the best talent from accessing work opportunities. That, in turn, would naturally have a negative impact on the quality of the films produced.
2. Diversity and inclusion policies and practices are lacking in most film companies. The number of female and LGBTQI directors and producers need to be increased without further delay.
3. No training is provided to film employees on communication/feedback skills and the setting of boundaries. Meetings are often not outcome-driven and tend to be derailed by a few individuals. Over-sharing of personal information and digressing from the task at hand encourages an environment in which gossip and rumor flourish.
4. Clear policies are required to guide behavior during on-location shoots, both during and after working hours. Guidelines are required to ensure

that the allocation and sharing of rooms, consumption of alcohol, etc., are sensitive to the needs and concerns of everyone involved. It is important to recognize that sexual harassment often takes place in ambiguous, semi-social spaces or during quasi-social conversations gone wrong.

### **Recommendations**

1. Recruitment practices need to be streamlined for this sector. A web portal with professional information about the diverse talent available across the 24 crafts involved in filmmaking, as well as allied skills and functions, could make recruitment not only easier but also more inclusive. To provide an incentive to production houses that follow acceptable norms of payment, contracts and sexual harassment prevention and redressal, they should get priority access to such a valuable database.
2. Talent managers and consultants can support the recruitment process with scoping work and fair, ethical negotiation of compensation.
3. Production houses need to take the initiative to improve their diversity and inclusion metrics. By sponsoring conferences and capacity-building workshops for women and gender minorities to promote and improve skill development in marketing, financing and coproducing strategies they can contribute to boosting diversity and inclusion.
4. Annual conferences and other such forums can provide platforms for creative people to come together and learn from each other. A structured mentoring program should be designed to ensure that under-represented groups are encouraged and supported to participate in such events and gain from them. Producers can play a leadership role in improving the gender balance in the film industry and making it a safe, dynamic space that attracts diverse talent from across India and even the world.

The Women Shaping the Narrative in Media & Industry project was made possible by a grant from the United States Consulate General in Chennai (India).

## Partner Organizations

### **Sakhi Women's Resource Centre**

Sakhi was set up as a feminist organization in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala (India) in 1996. Propelled by a vision of a gender-just society, it was initiated with the support of the MacArthur Foundation and aimed to mainstream gender in the socio-political and cultural milieu of Kerala. Sakhi's work includes knowledge collection and dissemination, the strengthening of existing women's groups, networking with a variety of organizations and agencies working on a range of challenges faced by women and children at different levels of society.

Over the past 24 years, Sakhi has organized numerous capacity-building programs, workshops and seminars on issues affecting women. Activities range from offering short-term courses and training trainers to knowledge dissemination programs, including national and international seminars. In the cultural sphere, Sakhi has organized feminist film festivals and a workshop to develop feminist songs. The organization continues to be engaged in action research projects and in developing gender-sensitive methodologies for data collection in areas of particular concern to women.

Sakhi collaborates with organizations doing similar work in other parts of India and has built a strong network across the country. Its partners in various projects include Jagori, New Delhi; UN Women; and King's College, London (for studies on the Safety of Women in Public Places). Sakhi also collaborates with a number of state government departments through studies, capacity-building programs, etc. Among these are: a study to understand the prevalence

of domestic violence in Kerala for the State Department of Health Services; studies on the effectiveness of projects implemented by the Kerala State Women's Development Corporation; and capacity building programs for the staff of the Kerala State Department of Local Self Government.

Sakhi regularly brings out publications in English and local languages to bridge the gender gap in knowledge accessibility. Among these are: the Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Sexual Harassment in Workplaces Act (2013), methodology for studying women's status at the local government level (2006, 2019), etc.

[www.sakhikerala.org](http://www.sakhikerala.org)

## **Women in Cinema Collective (WCC)**

WCC was formed in 2017 as a non-profit organization registered in Kochi, Kerala with the aim of educating the public at large about the issues faced by women in the Indian film industry and to bring about positive change through collective action.

The main objectives of the organization are to:

- Create awareness in society about the importance of renouncing misogyny and gender stereotyping in movies (from the script stage onwards).
- Promote the changes required in film workplaces to end gender-based discrimination in recruitment, remuneration, career choices and advancement, etc.
- Promote better workplace standards and facilities so that more women are encouraged to actively work in Malayalam cinema.
- Improve the overall participation of women across all areas and aspects of creating, disseminating and promoting cinema.

WCC members include leading women actors, directors, script-writers and technicians from the film industries of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

[www.wccollective.org](http://www.wccollective.org)

[https://twitter.com/wcc\\_cinema?lang=en](https://twitter.com/wcc_cinema?lang=en)

<https://www.facebook.com/WomeninCinemaCollectiveOfficial>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_Cinema\\_Collective](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Cinema_Collective)

## **Collaborator**

**The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University, USA**

The Geena Davis Institute works collaboratively within the entertainment and media industries to reduce negative stereotyping and to achieve cultural equity and inclusion onscreen, with a special focus on content targeting children 11 and under. It is the only research-based organization in the US examining representation of six identities: gender, race, LGBTQ+, disability, age, and body size.

[www.seejane.org](http://www.seejane.org)

## Core Team

### Co-Chairs

Ammu Joseph (Journalist & Author)

Bina Paul (Film Editor, Vice Chairperson - Kerala State Chalachitra Academy & Founder Member, WCC)

### Members

- Asiya Shervani (Diversity, Inclusion & Organizational Effectiveness Consultant)
- Putul Mahmood (Faculty - Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Kolkata, & Filmmaker/Producer)
- Vidhu Vincent (Filmmaker & Founder Member, WCC)
- Mini Sukumar (Department of Women's Studies, Calicut University, Kerala)
- Padmapriya Janakiraman (Film Actor & Founder Member, WCC)
- Aleyamma Vijayan (Secretary, Sakhi Women's Resource Centre)

### Project Coordinator

Rejitha G (Sakhi Women's Resource Centre)

### Research Assistant

Kshema Varghese

### Conference Coordinators

Kochi: Archana Padmini (WCC)

Chennai: Angel Samraj (SIFWA) & Easwari (SIFWA)

### Draft Conference Reports

Kochi Conference Summary: Aswathy Senan

Rapporteurs (Kochi): Merab Manu, Mydhily M.S., Deepti N.,

Asha Shankar, Susanna Joseph, Heshu Yousaf

Chennai Conference Rapporteur & Summary: Meghna Sukumar

### Report Authors

**Ammu Joseph** is an independent journalist and author, writing primarily on issues relating to gender, human development, the media and culture. Among her publications are six books related to gender & media, gender & literature and gender & terror. She has also contributed to several other books and publications, both Indian and international, including two UNESCO global reports on the diversity of cultural expressions (2015, 2018). She has been on the visiting faculty of several institutions of media education and conducted trainings on using a gender lens to cover a range of events and issues, both in India and overseas. She is a founder-member of the Network of Women in Media, India, as well as Media Watch Bengaluru. With degrees in English



Literature (Madras University) and Public Communications (Syracuse University), she began her career with Eve's Weekly in Bombay in 1977. In her last full-time job within the press she was editor of the Sunday magazine of *The Indian Post*, Bombay.

**Bina Paul** graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) with a specialization in editing. She has edited over 40 feature films and has worked with illustrious directors like G Aravindan, John Abraham and P N Menon. She is a recipient of two National Awards and numerous State Awards for editing. She is the artistic director of the International Film Festival of Kerala & the International Documentary & Short Film Festival of Kerala. She has been instrumental in shaping both these festivals into important international events. She has served on the juries of various international film festivals, including those held in Locarno, Durban, Morocco and Berlin. Bina is a regular faculty member at the FTII and CDIT (Science & Development Documentary Course). She is currently Vice Chairperson of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy and Vice President, NETPAC, Trustee of the India Foundation for the Arts and Board Member, International Association of Women in Radio & TV (IAWRT), India Chapter. She has also directed & produced documentary films. Her latest film, 'The Sound of Silence,' has been screened at numerous national and international festivals.

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**Asiya Shervani** is an organizational effectiveness and change management consultant. She partners with a diverse range of organizations, including some in the entertainment industry, to strengthen diversity, inclusion and behavioral competencies. She designs and implements policies, practices and learning interventions focused on interpersonal relationships, personal ethics, organizational dynamics and leadership. She facilitates tailored master-classes and interactive workshops to help unpack sexual and gender-based harassment. She has a good understanding of work environments in which sexual harassment flourishes and her solutions and strategies involve changing mindsets, systems and structures that enable sexism, gender discrimination and sexual harassment. She is an external member on POSH committees at film companies like Sikhya Entertainment, Roy Kapur Films as well as the Producers Guild of India and has been the primary investigator in several cases of sexual harassment. She conducts capacity-building training for employers, producers, directors, cast, crews and POSH Committee members. She works on novel strategies to implement sexual harassment prevention mechanisms in semi-structured creative spaces like film festivals, art events and theater workshops. Her goal is to ensure that no kind of workplace, whether formal or informal, permanent or temporary, is unsafe, demeaning or discriminatory for women. Asiya curates film festivals on masculinity and gender in higher education institutions and works extensively with youth. Asiya has a Master's degree in the social sciences and is certified to coach leaders on personal effectiveness, communication and collaboration.

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**Putul Mahmood**, an alumna of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), is a producer, filmmaker and teacher. She is the producer of the Bengali indie feature film, *Cosmic Sex*, which premiered at the Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema in 2012 and received the award for Best Actress. Putul has directed short fiction films, including *You Who Never Arrived*, featuring actors Irrfan Khan and Geetanjali Kulkarni. The film screened at various national and international film festivals and was part of International Competition at the prestigious Tampere Film Festival in Finland. She has directed several documentary films, including *Man of Silence*, *I Shoot U*, *Three Sisters* and *Atasi*. *Atasi* was awarded the best documentary film under 60 mins at the Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films, MIFF 2020. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Direction and Screenplay Writing Department, at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata and has served two terms as the Presiding Officer in the Internal Committee (POSH) of the institute.

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**Mini Sukumar** has been teaching Women's Studies at the Department Women's Studies of the University of Calicut since 2005. Actively involved in the women's movement in Kerala from the early 1990s and associated with, Sthree Padana Kendram, the first women's collective that raised cultural/social issues relating to the women's question in Kerala. She was State Programme Director of the Kerala Mahila Samakhya Society, a national women's empowerment project. She contributes articles, book reviews and columns to various publications, presents television programs and is a founder member of Women's Imprint, a feminist publishing house. She was a jury member for the state Film and TV awards in 2008, the Signs Documentary Film Festival organized by FFSI India, Kerala Chapter, in 2010, and the Kudumbasree Women's Network's social reality show, *Ini Njangal Parayaam* (Let's Speak now), telecast by Doordarshan Kendra, Thiruvananthapuram, in 2015. She is currently a member of the governing body of the Gender Park-Kerala, promoted by the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of Kerala.

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#### **Research Assistant**

**Kshema Varghese** is a research aspirant and freelance creative collaborator. She holds a master's degree in development and looks forward to continuing her research and practice in arts and culture management. She was research associate to this project.


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Godfrey's Graphics



**CC:** Women in Cinema Collective ( WCC) & Sakhi Womens Resource Centre

**Disclaimer:** All opinions and views expressed in the Report are those of the Authors and not of the U.S Consulate General, Chennai.

# ANNEXURE

## Concept Note on Conferences

### **Conference 1: Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment**

St. Teresa's College, Kochi, April 26-27, 2019

### **Conference 2: Into the Future: Towards Recognition, Parity and Security**

Hotel Savera, Chennai, October 16-17, 2019

**T**he Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an association of creative women working in Malayalam cinema, aims to revitalize the film industry with women's creative energies, voices and perspectives. They believe the time has come for equal opportunities and spaces within the industry so that anyone of any gender willing to work towards creating and shaping diverse cinematic narratives can contribute to and thereby enrich the domain of cinema. Given a level playing field, they believe, women and members of the LGBTQI community can and will make a world of difference to cinema and broaden the range of options available to the movie-loving public.

As WCC began working towards bringing about positive change within the industry, it became clear that the challenges faced by women in Malayalam and, indeed, Indian cinema are not substantially different from those confronting colleagues in film industries elsewhere in the world.

The persistent gender gap in remuneration is only one of the many injustices that women in cinema face even today virtually across the globe. Lack of representation in key aspects of film making, lack of access to funding for film projects, lack of gender sensitivity in the prevailing work culture and work space facilities, and so on, are among the several other hurdles in their path. In the Malayalam film industry, ingrained patriarchal attitudes and the related absence of gender-friendly work environments create roadblocks that prevent many women from entering the profession and/or inhibit their participation in the field.

Planned as part of the 'Shift Focus: Women Shaping the Narrative in Media and Entertainment' project undertaken by WCC in partnership with Sakhi

Women's Resource Centre with the support of the US Consulate, Chennai, the two conferences aimed to bring women already working in the Indian film industry together to share experiences, observations and ideas, and to plan action that can lead to a more equitable and productive future.

The focus of the conferences was, therefore, to collate information about the prevailing situation in order to plan for a future in which women working in cinema can perform at their creative best. The conferences were also meant to point the way forward towards enabling more women to become aware of the media and entertainment industry, particularly film, as an economic opportunity that they have a right to access and participate in. The underlying understanding was that women must not only be able to participate in the industry as members of the workforce but also to take their rightful place as decision-makers and economic drivers within the industry.

**The conferences focused on three parallel objectives:**

1. Identifying opportunities for women's entrepreneurial participation in the industry beyond gender stereotypes.
2. Understanding how women themselves can become drivers of change by organizing, becoming familiar with applicable laws and available legal protections, and taking collective action.
3. Formulating a set of recommendations highlighting gender-sensitive practices within the profession that can lead to a more level playing field for women already in the industry, which in turn could encourage more women to enter the field.

**The conferences were expected to explore the following themes:**

1. Sourcing work, with new job opportunities becoming available with evolving changes in the production and distribution scenario.
2. Content creation and the need for an environment that enables multiple, diverse narratives.
3. Organizing as a key element for mutual support and collective action to bring about change.
4. Specific recommendations for improvements in film industry work spaces.
5. Forums and mechanisms for addressing sexual harassment in terms of both preventive and corrective action.
6. Elimination of negative gender stereotypes in all areas of the film-making process.
7. Evolution of language (in film texts and work transactions) and work culture (currently defined by toxic masculine values) to create an inclusive and conducive work environment.



