

# Portrayal of Women Characters in OTT Platforms: A Gendered Analysis

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## **Abstract**

Use of digital platforms accelerated in India much later than the west but gained prominence in a much shorter span of time, transcending various metrics in the world of digitization. The portrayal of women in cinema has always been a point of contention. The participation, performance and portrayal of women through the male gaze has raised questions of concerns time and again. With the advent of streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Zee5 and many others streaming services, along with their original content, web series culture in India is seen as a fresh way of narrating women's stories, showcasing their realities. The emergence of OTT platforms has been able to break gender stereotype notions and have presented a new and refreshing way of presenting women characters and their stories. Women have struggled to find a space for themselves in every field and cinema has been no different. This paper has analysed some of the women-centric web series and parallel cinema through a gendered lens.

**Keywords:** *Women, Media, Representation, OTT, Gender Stereotypes, Cinema*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The way women are portrayed in the media shows how this whole system revolves around objectification of women, is a harsh reality. For the creators in field of media, women are no more than sex object; the reality of women's lives are far away from what has been shown in cinema. Movies can never be seen distinct from society as they do not exist in isolation. Women's representation is a topic of constant debate. The participation of women, their portrayal and performance are concern for many feminist

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thinkers. Classic feminist writers such as Shulamite Firestone, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Gallagher and Betty Friedman argued that the media reinforces the stereotype of women as docile, submissive and inferior, believing that they are only house-wives who lacks the agency of decision making. In context of India, some of the renowned feminist thinkers like Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and Kiran Prasad have spoken against the biased representation of women in visual and print media (Patowary, 2014).

The landscape of movies has witnessed enormous change. With the advent of social media and digital platform, Indian population geared up very soon towards various online platforms and viewership has increased manifold. Over-the-top (OTT) platforms emerged as a new era for telling women's stories with refreshing honesty (Wardhan, 2020). OTT is media streaming service which is offered directly to the viewers via the internet. In contrast to television, the internet allows filmmakers to experiment with forms, styles and narratives since it is less constrained by censorship and budgetary restrictions.

This article has analysed how OTT platforms have been able to break gender stereotypes and prejudices notions about women. It has further analysed some of the women-centric web series and parallel cinema. Online platforms are becoming more and more effective tools for rallying viewers' support. With the advent of streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, Zee5 and others along with their original content, the web series culture in India is reflecting the realities of women from a new perspective (Wardhan, 2020). The media has a significant impact on individuals and it can become a powerful tool for advocating for women's advancement in society and promoting gender equality.

There have been many women centric movies in the past but this does not imply that they fall under the ambit of women empowerment. Women have struggled to find a space for themselves in every field and cinema has been no different. Women were late entrants in this domain as well. The articles has both analysed OTT platforms through a gendered lens while also highlighting the need of emerging and parallel media like the OTT platforms to squash the existing patriarchal stereotypes which dominated how women are portrayed in films.

## **Women and OTT**

Since the emergence of Covid-19 and nationwide lockdown in India, with movie theatres closed, people tend to spend more time on over-the-top platforms. These platforms are liberating filmmakers and content creators from pressure of superhero kind of thing (The Hindu, 2020). OTT is free

from biases such as women in typical submissive roles always needing a 'superhero' who can protect them from the world. The OTT platforms have brought paradigmatic shift in the content which is not limited to female leading roles. Female characters on these OTT platforms are now portrayed nearer to reality instead of the *aadarsh* bahu/beti and the usual saas-bahu drama. Many women centric contents have been produced which have given space for socio-political debates like in the series *Leila* on Netflix. In the series *Leila*, a dystopian world has been portrayed which is marred by problems arising due to climate change and interfaith marriages. In India, the emergence of digital content started in 2014 with web series. In addition to honouring womanhood, these online series address subjects that are not covered by the mainstream media, like dysfunctional relationships, LGBTQ concerns and diversity in caste ensembles. Web series have tried to normalise sexuality, emphasise gender identity and highlights the struggles and stories of women.

A joint study conducted by IBM Research, India, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) Delhi and Delhi Technological University (DTU) that examined, 4000 Bollywood films found that women are never shown as independent characters and are always linked to successful men, whereas men are seen as successful. It has been noticed that in the context of occupation, women are assigned lower-level positions while men are assigned higher-level roles. Similar trends have been seen in centrality, where women play a smaller role in the story than their male counterparts (AAAI, 2018).

OTT platforms are providing relatively more freedom of expression to content creators so that they are now able to bring out female characters from the image of saas-bahu melodrama or vamp vs ideal woman. The content creators are coming up with new and uncensored narratives of women; from their (women's) own perspective Most of the tales are based either on personal or observed experiences. However, the question of representation of Dalit women is still not addressed in these emerging platforms. Thus, as Margaret Caples in *Mary Celeste Kearney* (2006) has rightly said "We need to train our girls to think differently about the media, to think about becoming the director, the person who controls the image."

According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Oppressed groups are usually put in such a situation where they being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups"(Collins, 2019). Stereotypes, myths and dominating imagery are ingrained in cinematic cultural texts. It is crucial

to investigate the existence and popularity of these images to analyse their impact on women's development, as they discourage and suppress women.

The phrase "alternative media" refers to media that are positioned against the hegemonic mass media, to be more precise, as counter-hegemonic. It is described as any form of media that either stands in opposition or serves as an alternate to widely accessible and consumed mass media products. Alternative media, according to Michael Tarber, is media that "change towards a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole in which the individual is not reduced to an object (of the media or the political powers) but is able to find fulfilment as a total human being" (Traber 1985: 3; also, in Atton 2002: 16).

There is a certain stigma attached to women which expects women to write a specific kind of cinema, so you do not look for an action movie written by a woman since women are expected to write a specific genre of films. We still refer to it these as "women's pictures." If the target audience is female, the image of a so-called woman is always somewhat derogatory (Danquah 1994). Sudarsanam, (2005) discusses the crucial issues brought up during the Beijing Conference 1995 on the mass media's responsibility to stop the negative portrayal of women. According to Sudarsanam, women should be empowered by improving their information technology access, knowledge and skill sets. By doing so, it will be able to put an end to the derogatory representation of women around the world and to address instances of power abuse in the mass media, an increasingly important industry. The Beijing Platform of Action calls for the development of the strategies to end gender-biased programming as well as the creation and reinforcement of the media self-regulation mechanisms. It also implies that women should have more access to and involvement in all forms of media and new communication technologies for the sake of expression and decision making.

## **Women's Representation and Key Findings**

A report conducted by *Thumbs Down 2020: Film Critics and Gender, and Why It Matters* gives a glimpse into the status and portrayal of women in U.S. media. This study examines the portrayal of women in U.S. and those employed by print, broadcast and internet between January and March, 2020 are considered in this research (Lauzen, 2020). This study was first conducted in 2007. The key findings of the report were-

- In the U.S., there are still more men than women working as film reviewers. For every female reviewer, there are nearly 2 male reviewers.
- 34% of reviews were written by women, and 66% by men.

- There is more male reviewer in every job title than female reviewer.
- Men predominate among individuals who write reviews of films in all genres, and they exceed female reviewers in all media outlets except television and radio.
- In every genre, most people who write reviews of film are male.
- Both female and male reviewers of colour remain dramatically underrepresented.
- There are more female protagonists in films evaluated by women than men.
- On average, female reviewers award slightly higher ratings than men to films with female protagonists.
- Women direct more than twice as many of the films reviewed by women as by men.

Adding to another report by Lauzen (2019), *Indie Women: Behind the-Scenes Employment of Women in Independent Film*, 2018-19 provides the insights into women's representation in independent films in U.S.

- For independent films, the proportion of women directors, writers, producers, executive producers and editors hit all-time highs in 2018-19.
- Overall, 32% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers involved in independent filmmaking in 2018-19 were women.
- The proportion of female writers, editors and cinematographers was far higher in films with at least one female director.

In comparison to films with only male directors, films featuring at least one female director had much greater percentages of women working as writers, editors and cinematographers. On films with at least one-woman director, women comprised 72 % of writers. Women made up 11% of the writers who worked on films with just male (Lauzen, 2019).

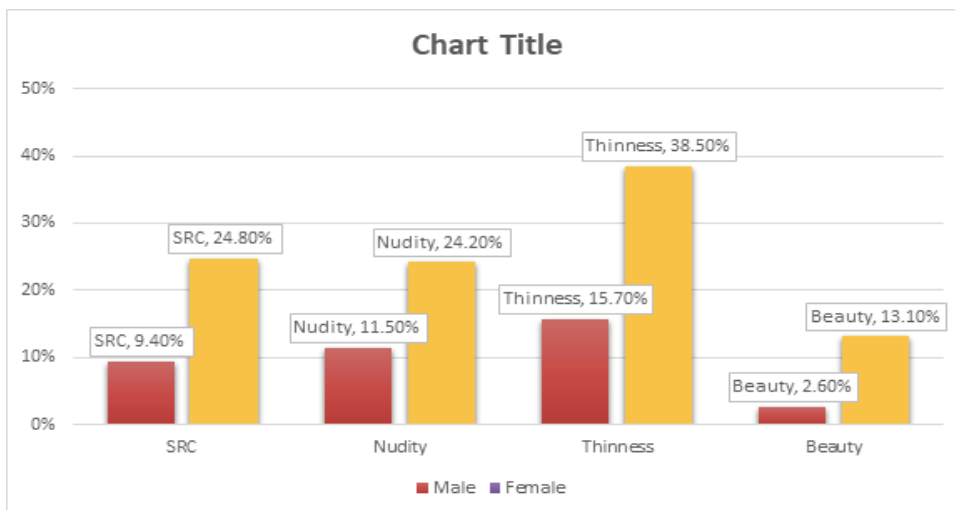
**Table 1: Character Gender Prevalence by Country**

Country	Per cent of Female Character	Per cent of Female Leads/Co Leads	Per cent with Balanced Casts	Total Number of Characters
Australia	29.8	40	0	386
Brazil	37.1	20	20	423
China	35	40	30	514

France	28.7	0	0	526
Germany	35.2	20	20	443
India	24.9	0	0	493
Japan	26.6	40	0	575
Korea	35.9	50	20	409
Russia	30.3	10	10	522
U.K.	37.9	30	20	454
U.S./U.K.	23.6	0	0	522
U.S.	29.3	30	0	502

**Source:** Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)

The data in Table 1 is taken from the report *Gender Bias Without Borders* (2014). Of the 5,799 speaking or named characters that were assessed, 30.9% were female and 69.1% were male. This translates into a 2.24 male to one female gender ratio. Considering that women make up 49.6% of the global population, this result is a little unexpected. The gender preponderance on screen throughout the sample territories is shown in the above table. The proportion of girls and women in films from the United Kingdom (37.9%), Brazil (37.1), and Korea (34.9%) was significantly greater than the general percentage of females in the sample (30.9%). The films from India (24.9%) and the United States/United Kingdom (23.6%) had the lowest percentages of women and girls on screen.



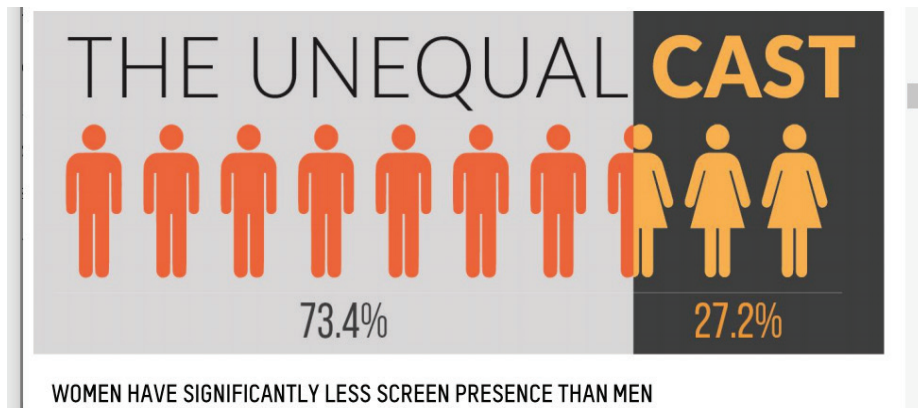
**Figure 1:** Sexualisation Indicators by Character Gender Worldwide

**Source:** Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)

Concern over the objectification of people is growing on a global scale. The extent to which women and girls are portrayed in the media in an inappropriate and possibly demeaning manner has received a lot of attention. This data, which focusses on four important characteristics—sexually provocative clothing (SRC), nudity, thinness, and beauty—was gathered from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Germany, and Japan for the publication *Gender Bias Without Borders* (2014). There were gender differences in each of these sexualisation markers. Compared to men, women were more than twice as likely to be slender (38.5% vs. 15.7%), partially or completely nude (24.2% vs. 11.5%), and displayed in SRC (24.8% vs. 9.4%). Comments on appearance were made about women (13.1%) five times more often than about men (2.6%).

Similar situation is seen in the Indian media. The proportion of female speaking roles in the highest-grossing films has remained constant over the past 50 years, according to the 2014 report *Gender Bias Without Borders*. A significant portion of entertainment media, the film industry, and advertising campaigns are occupied by female actresses, indicating their apparent prominence. Nevertheless, this frequently does not result in fair and non-objectified portrayal in the movie's plot. According to the survey, out of over 1300 characters, 73.4% are portrayed by male actors, while just 27.2% are portrayed by female actors.

*Image 1: Unequal Cast in Indian Cinema*



**Source:** Indian Cinema and Young Viewers' Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women (2018)

According to the 2018 report *Indian Cinema and Young Viewers' Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women*, women play the lead in 23% of films. Women play a romantic part in 76.7% of films, either as a romantic interest (38.5%) or as a co-lead in a romantic role (37.2%). Approximately 48% of women in leading positions were deemed

to contribute in some way to the plot’s advancement. Plots are driven by revenge, retaliation against violence, and romantic roles in around one-third of films.

*Image 2: Type of Roles Played by Female Actors*



**Source:** Indian Cinema and Young Viewers’ Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women (2018)

Only 24.9% of Indian films have female leads or co-leads, according to another survey, *Cinema and Society: Shaping our Worldview Beyond the Lens* (2015). Additionally, none of the top 10 highest grossing films of 2014 had a female lead or co-lead. Women are frequently not portrayed in films in positions of authority. Women are hyper-sexualised in Indian films.

*Image 3: Objectification of Women Characters*



**Source:** Indian Cinema and Young Viewers Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women (2018)

According to the 2018 research *Indian Cinema and Young Viewers Responses to Gender and Violence Against Women*, 88% of the films examined objectified women. According to at least one of the indicators created for this study, all of the highest grossing films, especially those

with a predominantly male cast, such as *3 Idiots* (2009), *Dabangg 2* (2012), *Student of the Year* (2012), *Dhoom 3* (2013), *Chennai Express* (2013), *Krrish 3* (2013), *Kick* (2014), *Happy New Year* (2014), and *Sultan* (2016), objectified women. This included sexist depictions of women wearing skimpy attire, as well as gestures and behaviours that resemble sexual aggression, assault, and harassment. Nearly all these films reinforce ideas of the traditional good woman.

The data in Table 2 is taken from *Gender Bias Without Border* (2014). Of the 1452 filmmakers who could be identified by their gender, 79.5% were men and 20.5% were women. This equates to a 3.9 male to 1 female gender proportion behind the camera. Across the sample, women made up 22.7% of producers, 19.7% of writers, and 7% of directors. The table provides a breakdown of directors, writers, and producers by country.

**Table 2: Gender Prevalence Behind the Camera by Country**

Country	Directors	Writers	Producers	Gender Ratio
Australia	8.3%	33.3%	29.4%	2.5 to 1
Brazil	9.1%	30.8%	47.2%	1.7 to 1
China	16.7%	21.4%	25.3%	3.1 to 1
France	0%	6.7%	13.6%	9.6 to 1
Germany	7.1%	22.2%	23.8%	3.7 to 1
India	9.1%	12.1%	15.2%	6.2 to 1
Japan	0%	22.7%	7.5%	9.5 to 1
Korea	0%	15.4%	20%	5.2 to 1
Russia	0%	13.6%	17.7%	6.3 to 1
U.K.	27.3%	58.8%	21.8%	2.7 to 1
U.S./U.K.	9.1%	9.1%	21.6%	4.7 to 1
U.S.	0%	11.8%	30.2%	3.4 to 1
Total	7%	19.7%	22.7%	3.9 to 1

**Source:** Gender Bias Without Borders (2014)

In India, there are just 15% female producers, 12% female writers, and 9% female directors. These are below average for the world. This also affects how women are portrayed on screen, as studies show that films with female directors or writers feature a disproportionately high number of women. Indian cinema has a significant impact on patriarchal views, the legitimisation of violence against women, and sexist behaviour in all spheres of life and society, according to the 2015 research *Cinema and Society: Shaping our Worldview Beyond the Lens*.

## Creative Heads of OTT

With the changing times, women started leaving their footmark everywhere in media industry. In the era of digital media with a boom of shows and series on over-the-top platforms, women start to hold positions in form of content creators, creative directors, content head, film producer, etc. To start with Aparna Purohit who is better known as ‘The Woman behind Amazon Prime Videos.’

Aparna is always drawn to stories and storytellers. In an interview Aparna said, when it comes to folk artists, she tended to talk strongly. Stories that were honestly grounded sparked her curiosity. Although Aparna acknowledges that her gender has a significant impact on her artistic choices, she stated that she did not encounter any discrimination because she is a woman. She said, “when I am reading a script, I look at how the women characters are being portrayed. Is this part written by a man who is not understanding the woman’s point of view at all? Does she have agency? Women in this country have fought too hard to raise a certain narrative. I’ve a sense of tremendous responsibility towards that” (Pathak, 2020).

Monika Shergil who was earlier content head of Viacom 18 (Voot) is currently in charge of Netflix India as the director of international originals. She claims that compared to many organizations; Netflix has a higher proportion of female executives in senior positions. She stays motivated at Netflix because of the relaxed and enthusiastic environment surrounding a talented woman and her suitable position (Roy, 2019).

Shailja Kejriwal is an accomplished name in the field of Indian media and entertainment. Kejriwal is the first Indian producer to have produced films by Pakistani filmmakers through Zeal for Unity – Zee Entertainment’s apolitical platform to bring together Indian and Pakistani filmmakers. Her vision of non-formulaic storytelling, the medium notwithstanding, is further seen through her ventures such as Zee Theatre – the biggest initiative to revive and catalogue Indian theatre, and films such as Madaari and Qarib-Qarib Single.

Ridhima Lulla- CCO (Eros Group), as CCO, in the face of 70-100 % increase in viewing, Lulla is driving originals. At Eros Group, Riddhima Lulla overseas content strategy and makes sure that a growing audience sees original content. Adding on Poonam Sahay- Creative Director (Enterr10), Monika Shergil- Content head Viacom 18 (Voot), Tanuja Chandra- Director and Writer, Sucheta Shah- Creative Director (Youth Entertainment-MTV|Viacom18) are some of the prominent women who are bringing change by breaking stereotypical notions around gender and

cinema. These women are the driving force behind surge in viewership (Balakrishnan, 2020).

## Indian Web Series through Gendered Lens

### Made in Heaven

This is a well acclaimed series streaming on amazon prime video directed by Zoya Akhtar. The web series, Made In heaven was a conglomerate of all the heavy topics we witness in our social circles but choose to ignore openly. This show entails a combination of 9 stories ranging from homosexuality to dowry to mid-age marriage. It's an ugly reality of urban families. The content creators of this series dare to make such stories where women gender is playing dominant role. Be it calling off wedding for dowry or re-marriage of a mid-age widow or a middle-class girl's struggle in elite workspace and drug abuse of her elder brother or a gay couple's love story and their struggle. The show makers are trying to show these realities on screen. The OTT platforms allow the makers of this content to touch upon contemporary issues of homosexuality as well.

### Soni

This series is a tale of two women police officers in Delhi which is streaming on Netflix directed by Ivan Ayr. The series highlights the patriarchal setup within police forces where police trains about gender sensitisation but fail to conform to it. Despite major personal and professional failures, a young Delhi police officer is trying to address the growing problem of violent crimes against women. Soni is a tale not usually told in Indian cinema. This movie uncovers the struggle and hardships of women in police forces. It highlights the fact that no matter how independent or masculine a woman can be on her duty, in home she has to adhere those patriarchal norms which keeps her on subordinate position. Netflix's another brainstorming series based on the Delhi Police investigation into the Delhi Gang Rape Case, "Delhi Crime" which was headed by a woman, DCP Vartika Chaturvedi. This series also investigated the lives & struggles of women police officers.

### Nude

*Nude* is a Marathi movie web streaming on Zee5 directed by Ravi Jadhav. *Nude's* journey mirrors the very societal double standards. This movie uncovers the struggle faced by "Nude Artists" and their role in art and sculpture. It requires unimaginable courage to naked your soul. This movie revolves around the protagonist struggles against poverty, patriarchy and conservatism. This movie has multiple layers as it deals with the role

of mother and multiple hardships of a woman. The director tries to make demarcation that being 'nude' doesn't always associate with vulgarity. It shows that taking off clothes do not connote any sexual aspect. Lust does not form any important part in this movie. This movie was stopped from screening in a film festival and it reflects the lack of artistic freedom among people. They fear that artists might uncover the ugly truth of society.

## **Bulbbul**

This film is streaming on Netflix produced by Anushka Sharma, written and directed by Anvita Dutt. *Bulbbul* is a classic horror reorganised to make a solid statement about gender abuse. A child bride named *Bulbbul* develops into a mysterious woman who runs her home while concealing her traumatic history as her community is plagued by unexplained male homicides. The word *Vash* (control) and an image of *bichhua* (toe ring) at beginning of the movie conveys it all about the irony of young girls who were feeding patriarchal notions since their childhood. The story gripping dark tale of 18<sup>th</sup> century India, when people believed in '*chudails*'. *Bulbbul* is story of a woman who was married as child bride and being raped by her husband's mentally retracted twin brother. She was a survivor of domestic violence. The protagonist is stunning and talks volumes with her eyes, transforming from the weak and naive to the mysterious tease. This movie strikes at the putrid core of patriarchy.

## **Critical Analysis**

In previous films, women were shown as being subservient, self-sacrificing and chaste. Though with the rise of online platforms, it is only in independent films and parallel cinemas audience witness strong female characters. These platforms give women's voices to a new rise. Women are claiming their spaces and came up with their own narratives which is beyond male gaze. Over the top platforms provide space and freedom to filmmakers and it help them to come up with some raw and real image of women. A space where woman can fit into world of imperfection while breaking the typical "good-woman" notion.

Both Bollywood and television will have to alter their ways because it appears that the internet is setting precedent of how women ought to be represented. One of the most popular digital entertainment organisations in India, The Viral Fever, started a channel called *Girliyapa* to share new, unfiltered stories about women from a female point of view. Most of the stories are based on either firsthand or observed events. These independent spaces do have some major drawbacks.

It is also important to note that OTT platforms have also been marred by the long existing sexually objectified portrayal of women in cinema, digital platform like ALT Balaji has taken objectification of women to the next level. In the name of bold stories of female sexuality from rural India in *Gandi Baat* series, the web series has made every possible attempt to commoditise the female body.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The power of the media has grown exponentially since the arrival of new communication technologies. Our perceptions of the world around us are shaped by the mass media's constant repetition of images and messages and its portrayal of only certain aspects of reality. Mass media have played a crucial role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and patriarchal culture by creating new meanings and images and by influencing public opinion through chosen themes and points of view, even though their form and content have changed significantly over the past year. By emphasising on woman's physical appearance, Hindi films diminish her sense of individuality and intellect. With the commencement of digital platforms, these stereotypical images have been challenged by independent filmmakers and content creators.

It has been a wonderful year for women-oriented Media on Demand on OTT platforms, with the majority breaking gender preconceptions. Over the past year, the platform has created and disseminated more content centred on women than mainstream film has done over the previous five years. Online platforms are steadily growing in strength as tools for rallying public support. People are greatly influenced by the media, which can also be a powerful tool for promoting gender equality and improving women's current standing in society. Globally, print and visual media have exposed female bodies to the greatest degree conceivable. In the context of feminist discourse, "doing gender" or "performing gender" are some examples of the complicated interplay that exists between power, ideology, language, and its practice within its sociocultural milieu. The print and visual media present a stereotypical picture, an imposition that "women" must internalise and display their "beauty" to conform to the prevailing and popular view of the broader population. Feminist scholars have often questioned the male gaze. They have also highlighted media as a powerful form of gender socialisation. Feminist scholars have often questioned the male gaze. They have also highlighted media as a powerful form of gender socialisation.

The meagre representation of Dalit women and near absence of Adivasi women also needs to be questioned and portrayal of women from

marginalised section as lustful exotic women similar to the white men claim over black women's body during apartheid. These questions are still not addressed in these emerging platforms. Thus, as Margaret Caples in Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) has rightly said "We need to train our girls to think differently about the media, to think about becoming the director, the person who controls the image."

Women's participation in media seems to be increasing however the question remains, whether the participation alone can make any difference in their lives. Participation alone cannot bring any change in one's life until and unless they are provided with enough room to choose the subject matter on which they are working or in decision-making process. In the period of information explosion, OTT platforms provide more opportunities for film makers to work with their content independently. Censorship issue is not there. They are free from budget constraints and it allows them to experiment with their content without spending too much amount.

Restraining the films in the name of "Public Interest" is going to affect online platforms also. Web platforms like Netflix, amazon prime earlier lacks censorship and viewers have the option to select such content based on social issues thereby giving the viewers an alternative to mainstream media. But, with the latest announcement of government on censorship of OTT platforms, it will be interesting to see how this going to affect the independent creation. It is to be seen whether OTT remains untouched after this aforesaid law will pass.

Gender-sensitive characters in the mass media are usually hegemonized representations of elite class and upper cast women. However, media intervention must take an intersectional approach to communicate the ways various inequalities emergently intersect. LGBTQIA issues are inseparable issues with gender-sensitivity issues as well. In relation to legal exclusion, cultural and social exclusion, exclusions at workplace, it calls for a stringent critical analysis of portrayal of sexual minority groups in the India media. Workshops that would bring together diverse sections—feminists, media producers, writers, and other stakeholders—would generate new ideas that could shift gender representations in popular media and orient media houses towards representations that have the potential to spark conversations about gender roles and stereotypes.

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