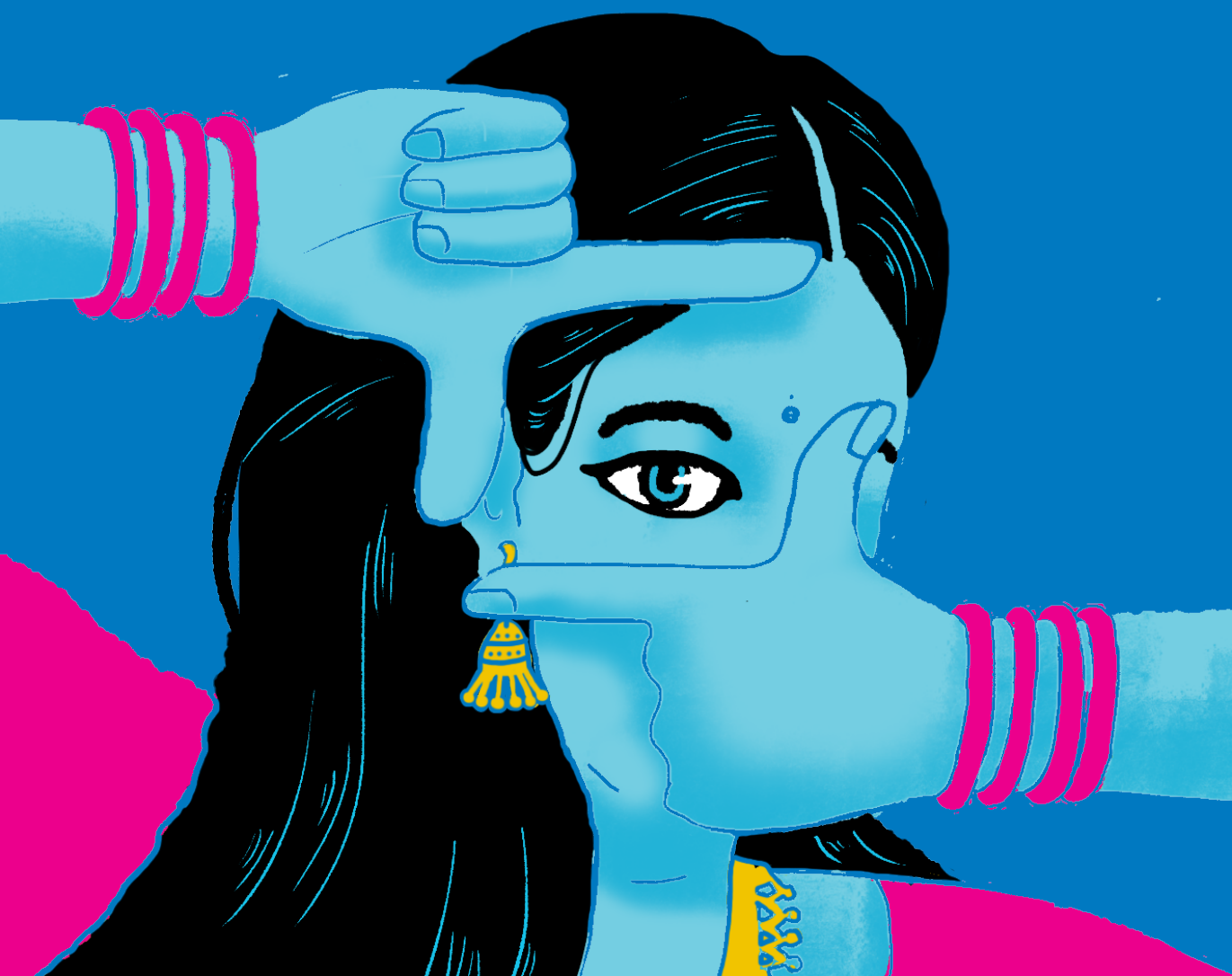


REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NEPAL'S CINEMA

A RESEARCH REPORT



WRITTEN BY

Kshitiz Adhiraj with Abhimanyu Dixit
Docskool

LEAD RESEARCHER

Jyotsna Maskay
Docskool

YOUTH FOCAL PERSON

Pushpa Joshi
Docskool

2020; Kathmandu

Docskool
Plan International Nepal

PROJECT FOCAL PERSONS

Shreejana Bajracharya, Campaign Specialist- Plan International Nepal,
Ashish Lamichhane, MERL Specialist-Plan International Nepal

COPY EDITOR

Shaun Martinez

TEAM MEMBERS (DOCSKOOOL)

Saroj Sapkota, Aarati Subedi, Shrijana Shrestha, Shahin Sunuwar, Ulasha Gurung

PUBLISHER:

Plan International Nepal ,Country Office , Maitri Marga, Bakhundole
Lalitpur, Metropolitan City, Ward no.3
Tel: + 977-1-5535580, 5535560
Fax: +977-1-5536431
www.plan-international.org

CONTRIBUTION SEGMENT BY

Keki Adhikari

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Anish Bajracharya

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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NEPAL'S CINEMA

A RESEARCH REPORT

FOREWORD

The way girls and young women are portrayed in the media, through its various forms; in advertising, on screen, on social media and in other forms of communication bears significant influence in determining how the world perceives girls and how they view themselves. With **GIRLS GET EQUAL** campaign, we are calling for a radical change in the way the world engages girls and young women. The primary objective of the campaign is to create a world where girls are perceived, as equal, heard and valued. Whilst it is critical that changes in policy and legislation are essential to guarantee girls and women's rights and creating a space for more girls to make informed decisions that impact their lives but an equal weightage must be attached to challenge the socio-cultural norms, attitudes and behaviours that hold girls back and perpetuate unequal power dynamics.

In the world of media and entertainment industries it has been almost a norm to stereotype or discriminate against girls and women. Women and girls are mostly portrayed as either weak to their male counterparts. They are represented in ways that do not enhance woman's status in society. Teasing, dependence of women on men, portrayal of women as obedient

wives, abduction, rape, etc. as a tool to dominate them.

Positive representation and role models have a huge effect on girls' ambitions and self-esteem. More girls and women should become content makers and producers, so that more authentic stories about women and girls agencies portraying strong women characters that can raise their voice against injustice, who can rebel in their own way and make their own statement being told. To do this, harassment and discrimination in these industries must be tackled and discouraged.

At Plan International, we strive to break down negative portrayals of girls and young women through various work around our campaigns, programme influencing and work with key stakeholders supporting young women to create their own content, partnering with media platforms and institutions to inject youth perspectives and generate gender transformative material. We also explore the use of innovative technologies to encourage individuals to tackle unconscious bias on a daily basis in their own communications platforms.

Plan International Nepal has been working on theme of girls' representation in the **GIRLS GET EQUAL** Campaign. Therefore, we thought that it was important to look on this subject of women's portrayal in Nepalese Film Industry and talk about it, as movies have a widespread impact on the society. We collaborated with Docskool for the research and came up with, Representation of women and girls in Nepal's Cinema is important for us as it focuses on the specific role of media on shaping girls' and young women's ambitions and aspirations to leadership. It examines 47 films, television content, online materials and visual advertisements and highlights that films are perpetuating harmful stereotypes that prevent girls and young women from fulfilling their potential. Women and girls are rarely presented as leaders, and even when they are in leadership positions they are far more likely than men to be sexually objectified.

As the research points out that only 2.5 % of women in films make independent decisions in these films. These commercially successful films also rely heavily on unequal representation of women as characters with specific traits, and in item songs where choice

of clothing's and women's body displayed play key value. Only 29% of women were shown to have access to political institutions including access to police, courts.

For Plan International, we believe the stories of every girl and young woman should be portrayed and understood as equal to their male peers. Therefore, we are calling especially, the Nepalese storytellers, film makers, producers and directors to put an end to the use of lazy and outdated stereotypes and images that objectify female as sex object in films. The film industry has grown over the decades to the extent that it almost represents our societies. Since we have realised that movies have such a massive impact on our society, we might as well ensure that women are given the respect they deserve, in the movies, so that the same might, in turn, get reflected into real life. Our call to these creative people is to share the truly diverse stories of the power and potential of girls that contribute in breaking the inequalities for just an inclusive and equal society.

Elizabeth Satow
Country Director
Plan International Nepal

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Docskool acknowledges the various women filmmakers we have met and continue to work with as inspiration to undertake this research. Our fellow women filmmakers from across South Asia, who we meet annually and work together, have fuelled many dialogues that found centre-space in this research.

This research builds on several desk studies conducted by Docskool through the Klinik. Kathmandu labs program and the Women in Cinema fellowship. These documentations have been crucial to recognise and support women filmmakers working across mediums in Nepal and the region.

Several research papers written by scholars at Martin Chautari cemented the understanding of how media, namely cinema has interacted with the Nepali psyche. We also thank all young people who gave time and supported this research with their insights.

Numerous filmmakers, feminists, actors, producers, distributors, theatre operators, government workers, representative members of the film development board among others gave us time and perspective to understand various dimensions of this research.

Finally we thank the women reviewers who helped bring the research to life in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis. The time and support many staff members at Plan International in Nepal have put into this research is significant.

Jyotsna, Kshitiz, Abhimanyu
Docskool

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the product of a study done on the representation of women and girls in Nepali films focusing on film content, the filmmakers, and audiences. This research attempts to document some of the challenges on representation of women and girls in Nepali films, establish ground for further study, and analyse the obstacles for diverse expression through cinema in Nepal.

Cinema in Nepal started from 1964 with *Aama* meaning 'Mother, directed by Hira Singh Khatri, the film was produced by the Department of information of the Government of Nepal. Two years later, the first film through private funding- '*Maitighar*', meaning 'the birth home of a girl' was released. *Maitighar* was Directed by B.S. Thapa, and produced by Sumonanjali Films Pvt. Ltd (Film Development Board)¹.

¹ History of Nepali Cinema, Film Development Board, film.gov.np retrieved on 1/19/21

In 1971, after the Government of Nepal established Royal Nepal Film Corporation, the production of Nepali films increased. The film industry has been said to grow and develop rapidly after the introduction of democracy in 1990 (Film Development Board)² as democracy secured people's right to freedom, speech, and broadcasting. This development has been seen through the rapid increase in the production of movies, their distribution and the increase in the number of cinema halls after 1990. A total of 140 movies were released during a period of three years while more than 300 cinema halls were built after the restoration of democracy in Nepal. (Adhikari, 2018)³ However, A decade long violent Maoist insurgency in early 2000s caused major setback. Only 17 films were released during 2003-2007⁴. Today, with digitization and the infiltration of internet⁵, production of Nepali films have increased significantly. During April 2017- April 2018 (calendar year of B.S. 2075)⁶ around 107 feature fiction films have been produced in Nepal⁷.

Even though cinema's production number have significantly in the last five decades, content of Nepali films especially

representation of women in cinema however remained by and large the same. Both early films *Aama* (1964) and *Maitighar* (1966) only depict women in domestic spaces, and portray challenges they face within said spaces. Both films resonate women to the land, with warmth, care and love equating these characteristics to idea of womanhood. (A detail case study of *Maitighar* is available in Case study 2)

Nirmala Adhikari (2018) wrote after analysing three popular romantic movies, 'For a long time, the role of women in cinema has revolved around how physically attractive she is, and Nepali cinema is no different than that.' We add to that through our analysis of 47 films, where we found that the portrayal of women in Nepali films have always been on the basis of socially accepted values, myths, and prevailing moral codes (detailed in Chapter II). Based on the careful study of 47 films, we put forward three templates on how women have been depicted as- a girlfriend/love interest, or a wife, or a mother (detailed in Chapter I). Further film analysis done through tests such as Hero's Journey and Bechdel Test (detailed in Chapter III)

2 History of Nepali Cinema, Film Development Board, film.gov.np retrieved on 1/19/21

3 Nirmala Adhikari, Portrayal of Women in Nepali movies, University of Oslo, 2018

4 Ananda Chandrasekhar, Nepali films ready for the big stage after the civil war retrieved on 1/19/2021 -

https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/maoist-revolution_nepali-films-ready-for-the-big-stage-after-civil-war/42065540

5 70% of the total population in Nepal are internet users. Nepal Telecommunications Authority- nta.gov.np retrieved on 1/19/21

6 Bikram Sambat- Nepal officially follows the Bikram Sambat Calender. It begins in April on the Gregorian Calender

7 Number of Nepali films that have received a censorship certificate in the year 2074-2075 (2018-2019)

show that popular cinema significantly rely on male dominant narratives. The tests suggest that popular cinema has little room for women's individuality.

Representation of women on screen matter as mass media research in various countries⁸ prove how images on movie screens affect the audiences' view of the world⁹. Through our Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the young Nepali audiences, we recognize how Nepali cinema affects Nepali young men, and women, and how ideas of their body, and individuality is shaped by cinema. (detailed in Chapter II)

Early on into the research, we figured a study on cinema would not be thorough without establishing the realities on which Nepali cinema is practiced and the challenges filmmakers face on a daily basis. Analysis of FGDs, and Key Individual Interviews (KIIs) with various filmmakers, film professionals, and film intuitions showcases light to these challenges also clarifying that are very few women writing,

making, and telling women stories (detailed in Chapter IV).

Claire Johnston (1973) asserts the importance of understanding the ideological operations present in actual mainstream film practices to create 'women's cinema'¹⁰. Through most of its history, Nepali Cinema has been used, to limit women's social and political agency¹¹. This regressive practise has defined how women are to be portrayed and consequently how they are to behave in society. Establishing what is and is not acceptable for women through films.

Mainstream Nepali films are known to be laden with stereotypical and restrictive representations of women and people of diverse sexual orientations and genders, along with unjustified treatment of indigenous and minority groups¹². Such depiction limits any women's political and social agency¹³ to domesticity and establishes women as subjects of male gaze¹⁴ (Mulvey 1975). Through this research we interrogate such problematic representation of women in Nepali cinema and bring into

8 Health & Petratis, 1987 'Television viewing and fear of crime: where is the mean world': retrieved 1/19/21
<http://cultivationanalysisirrtvf173.pbworks.com/f/Where+is+the+Mean+World%3F+JW.pdf>

9 Sudha Bhatia, Geetanjali Chandra, 2019, Social Impact of Indian Cinema an Odyssey from reel to Real, retrieved: 1/19/21,
<https://amityuniversity.ae/gmj-ae/journals/Sudha-Bhatia-Geetanjali.pdf>

10 Claire Johnston, Notes on women's cinema, 1973

11 Anubhav Ajit, (2011), जनजाती चलचित्र र भाषिक संस्कृतिक पहिचान, Media Adhyayan 5, Martin Chautari

12 Anubhav Ajit, (2011), जनजाती चलचित्र र भाषिक संस्कृतिक पहिचान, Media Adhyayan 5, Martin Chautari

13 Tanka Uprety (2012) – Media Adhyayan 6, Martin Chautari 2012

14 Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, 1973- Here, Mulvey argues that popular movies are filmed in ways that satisfy masculine scopophilia- the concept is defined as heterosexual masculine gaze where the visual media only responds to masculine voyeurism that tends to sexualise women for a male viewer.

47+
FILMS, TV, ONLINE
& AD CONTENT

22
FILMMAKERS
INTERVIEWED

55%
RESPONDENTS
WERE WOMEN

6
MONTHS
IN ANALYSIS



evidence how the portrayal of women in Nepali films needs a fundamental shift.

We believe this document should help film and media students, film scholars, cinema enthusiasts, policy advisors and social sectors keen to engage with cinema. It will be at hand for filmmakers moving forward as we imagine cinema practice to be respectful of diversity and more acknowledging of contemporary aspirations of a younger Nepali audience.

1. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The study is a part of Plan Nepal's **GIRLS GET EQUAL** Campaign. We are calling for drastic change in the way girls and young women are represented and portrayed by the world's storytellers. We are challenging the harmful stereotypes that are holding girls and young women back.

Youth-led activism on the representation of girls and young women in media is active

on social media, however it is not getting mainstream visibility— the connection with the dominant media power holders is not there making it hard to influence change in how girls and young women are represented in the mainstream. Furthermore, much of the research found on the representation of young people in the media is predominantly global north based, as such there is a need to engage young people from the global south more broadly in this conversation.

In order to bring mainstream visibility to the voices of young people, particularly those in the global south, on the issue of damaging stereotypes of girls and young women in media, we will develop a local to global public mobilisation initiative, leveraging the consciousness and confidence in collective action of young people, and the power of social media.

The study also builds on the **WOMEN IN CINEMA** (Docskool 2018) support program that emphasizes the need for

concerted effort to encourage and support the work of women filmmakers in Nepal. The program continues to provide annual accompaniment to women filmmakers.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S **GIRLS GET EQUAL** CAMPAIGN

In October 2018, Plan International launched **GIRLS GET EQUAL**, a global game-changing initiative set to transform the very core of what it means to achieve equality for girls and young women. Co-designed by Plan International and young gender activists and advocates from every part of the world, **GIRLS GET EQUAL** is a five year initiative calling for girls' increased power, voice and leadership whilst also promoting the actions of all young people for gender equality.

GIRLS GET EQUAL is not simply a statement of intent. It's our global call for action and how we believe gender equality can only be achieved. For too long, girls have been undervalued, undermined and underestimated. This must change. Through **GIRLS GET EQUAL**, girls and young women everywhere will be valued and supported as leaders, change makers and active contributors to society.

For Plan International, **GIRLS GET EQUAL** is our biggest and boldest invitation to every

young activist, citizen, government, civil society ally, private sector, the media and social influencer – to join with us in the fight to end gender inequality.



15
TELEVISION
SOAPS ANALYSED



20
MUSIC VIDEOS ANALYSED



6.4M
REGISTERED USERS ON
YOUTUBE HAVE ACCESS
TO CONTENT FOR FREE

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study evaluates the representation of women and girls in film and media practice of Nepal. It aims to identify drivers within existing practice and assess its impact on how young girls perceive themselves, their leadership potential, and their overall health and well-being. The study is not limited to conversation on how women are depicted in film or how women are treated and shown in films alone, but it also elaborates the interrelation of Nepal's socio-political context and overall cinematic practice.

3. DATA COLLECTION

This study is built on lived experiences of filmmakers, key figures in Nepalese film industry as well as adolescents and youths (participants) who as the audience are influenced by¹⁵ different forms of media.

The research has employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis tools. Quantitative data analysis of over 47 films, television content, online materials and visual advertisements was conducted over a period of six months, (January to August 2020). Further data collection has been done through qualitative in-depth interviews and group discussions with 22 filmmakers who include producers, directors, writers, actors, exhibitors (cinema hall owners), distributors, cinematographers, and editors. 55 percent of the professional respondents are women. In parallel, representatives of all the primary film associations active in Nepal have also been consulted.

Further, the study collected lived experiences from adolescent girls, boys, and young women from Province 1 (Sunsari), Bagmati Province (Sindhuli, Kathmandu), Lumbini Province (Banke) and Karnali province (Jumla).

4. KEY FINDINGS

Filmmakers and young research participants express how cinema has over the years developed and consolidated a biased perspective of women. Women are still positioned as irrelevant for decision-making in film, be it as creative professionals or characters. Film producers see men as the priority audience for Nepali films, those with expendable income.

The 47 films analysed are projects that have performed well in theatres and have significant online viewership. They have been selected to represent the existing status-quo of women's representation/ participation in Nepal's cinema.

As a predominant Hindu country, Nepal's cinema can be seen foremost a carrier of constrictive belief/taboo based on ethnicity. The chart below analyzes the number of Hindu Aryan to Non-Aryan representation of women in Nepal's cinema.

¹⁵ Just as movies reflect the anxieties, beliefs, and values of the cultures that produce them, they also help to shape and solidify a culture's beliefs. Sometimes the influence is trivial, as in the case of fashion trends or figures of speech. Jack Lule, (2013), *Understanding Media and Culture: an introduction*, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition

KEY FINDINGS

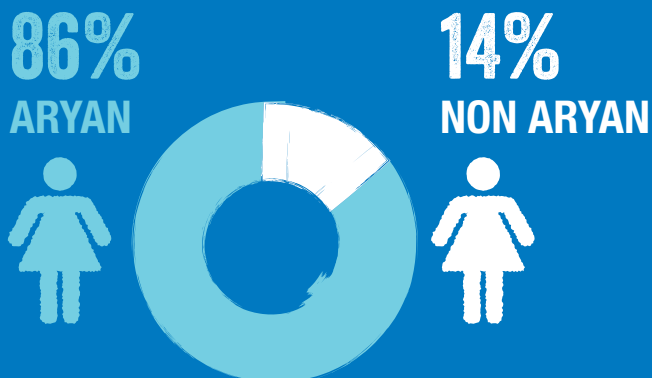


Chart 1. Number of Aryan and Non-Aryan representations of women in films analysed.

Data is deciphered from 47 films studying only women characters- we found that a lot of stories depicted Aryan Hindu women.

1/4 
WERE WOMEN PRODUCERS

a. Number of men & women film producers¹⁶

1/10 
WERE WOMEN WRITERS

b. Number of men & women writers¹⁷

1/17 
WERE WOMEN DIRECTORS

c. Number of men & women directors¹⁸

1/10 
WOMEN WERE CREW MEMBERS

d. Average Number of Men & Woman crew in a given film¹⁹

Chart 2. Comparison on the number of men and women film professionals in Nepali cinema Industry.

Of the 47 films we studied, we found a huge disparity in men and women film professionals working in the said films.

¹⁶ Film Producers are the financial and managerial decision maker of any film.

¹⁷ A Film Writer is a creative decision maker who translates ideas, concepts, and opinions into a written form- usually film scripts

¹⁸ Film Director is the creative decision maker who controls how the film is made. They execute the written script in their vision by supervising actors, and the technical crew.

¹⁹ Film Crew are the technical team who work behind the scenes to help the director execute their vision by working specific technical jobs-lighting, camera, audio, makeup, costume etc.

A. PRODUCTION FINDINGS



75 FILMS

ARE PRODUCED AND EXHIBITED IN
NEPAL ANNUALLY ON AVERAGE

15 WOMEN DIRECTORS

ARE REGISTERED WITH THE DIRECTOR'S GUILD



23 FEATURE FILMS

WERE MADE BY THESE WOMEN (7 OF THEM
MADE MORE THAN 2 FILMS)

90 FEATURE FICTION

MADE BY WOMEN IN TOTAL SO FAR



10% OF THE CREW

WOMEN CREW MEMBERS ARE HELPERS,
HAIRDRESSERS AND MAKEUP ARTISTS.

ONLY 3 FILMS A YEAR

ARE MADE BY WOMEN ON AVERAGE

B. CONTENT FINDINGS

- Women in films rely on men to make decisions. Their decision is questioned, and legitimacy undermined through prominent male presence in the films.
- Violence on women is used as a medium to support male character development. On average a woman is seen abused, even raped 5 times per film.
- Women characters rarely talk to each other beyond matters involving romance, domestic affairs, or solving petty societal problems.
- Women have found to be projected as girlfriend/wives, mothers, or concubines.
- Most women shown are under 35 years.

The two charts analyses the screen space women characters occupy in Nepali films. The first chart presents an average number of women characters to male characters. The second chart presents the number of times a woman speaks in film compared to the male counterpart.²⁰



a. Number of women characters to men in a film



b. Number of times men and women characters speak in a film.

Chart 3: Comparison of men and women characters, their number and the number of times they speak in any given film.

In 47 films, we analyzed the number of women characters to men characters (a). Nepali films featured more men characters to women.

We also counted the instances (scenes) when men and women spoke in a given film (b). Men spoke in more instances than women.

²⁰ Average value derived from review of 47 films

5. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Nepal should ratify the UNESCO Convention on Protection and promotion of diversity in cultural expression (2005) as means to provide specific recognition and support mechanisms for filmmakers.
- Filmmakers and film regulatory bodies must acknowledge that popular cinema tend to send misogynistic message to public. This is believed to contribute to the gender gap and detrimental to Global goal on achieving gender equality. It is recommended that the filmmaker and regulatory bodies take this as a concern and work towards regulating such messages. .
- Women's objectification and reliance on women's sexuality is evident in the Nepali film industry. This has serious impact on the self-esteem of young girls and propagates stereotyping of women as object of sexual desire. It needs to be a concern for all film makers and it is highly recommended that films should move away from this modality of drawing audience.
- Women's roles should no longer be stereotyped. Women characters must have full agency over their choices and on screen decisions.
- Practices within the industry must enable feminist women filmmakers to showcase their talent, develop collaborative work and to access funding. Also, independent bodies should oorganise workshops to sensitize filmmakers on the importance of a more gender equal and just entertainment and that gender is a part of a film much like any other element and that it's a great story that projects the film and not the masculinity.
- Gender sensitization workshops with adolescent and young people with a focus on critical viewing of films. The importance of women led stories that not just project women as survivors of sexual violence but portray women as real and strong people.
- Incentive should be provided to women directors funding opportunities and recognition of their work with awards.
- An informal forum should be constituted as an alliance to influence and advocate gender equity in Nepali films. These should be comprised of civil society representatives, media persons, intelligentsia, artists, politicians, youths, law makers, influencers etc. This forum could also certify a film based on its representation of women.
- Support and fund feminist women filmmakers.

CASE STUDY 1:

15 Gate (१५ गते)

Madan Krishna Shrestha, Hari

Bansha Acharya

(Nepal Television)

Assessing women's portrayal in cinema cannot be limited to scenarios where women are seen abused and dismissed. Popular Nepali cinema's distinct identification with women is widely applicable and its implications are visible in the simplest of scenarios as well as more complex ones where women are treated with misogynist intent.

BRIEF

Hari Bansha Acharya, and Madan Krishna Shrestha's 15 Gate, revolves around a family's quest to find a new bride for their son in 10 days. The film was funded by Nepal Television in late 80s.

The film's easy reading makes evident how male gaze and patriarchal obedience find centre-space in Nepali cinema. It is also a limited but rather unsuccessful play on debunking myths of women's roles in domestic spaces.

SCENARIO

The sequence shows a father desperately seeking a bride for his son within 10 days. The scene takes place in two locations, the second half being an imaginary situation. It subconsciously represents male psyche of a filmmaker and expectation of the audience of a woman on screen.

SHOT DESCRIPTIONS

1. A father roams the streets looking for a potential daughter-in law.
2. The camera (aligned to the father's POV²¹), has no qualms following a stranger, a woman. It establishes her dress, her body, her legs, and eventually takes the viewers to an 'unconventional' space for a woman, a Karate dojo. She is then seen practicing karate.
3. At home, the father while shaving, asks his 'new' daughter in law (shown in limited customary attire) for a second helping of tea. A disagreement prompts the girl to pose a Karate strike with the father left yelling for help.
4. The son now joins the confrontation aligning to support the father. A heated debate leads to the girl punching both men, the patriarchs fallen on the ground.

21 POV= Point of View

FRAMES



1. Bride shopping



2. Male Gaze



3. Retaliation



4. Confrontation

WHAT WE SAW

This scene draws its inspiration from existing social stereotypes of women's roles within domestic spaces primarily confined to serving men. The film emphasizes a man's pursuit of woman and eventually getting what they desire. Its story is premised on a family seeking a new wife for their son 'within 10 days'. As it materialises, the audience is given perspective on the privilege of being a man and how society responds to the man's needs.

This scene is held together by the imagination, and desire of a man. He imagines himself being served and feeling gratified by a new 'imaginary' daughter in law. Unfortunately, as the scene unfolds, the woman has her own ambitions willing to take things in her hands when coerced into something she is unwilling of. In this situation,

it revolves around a cup of tea as asked for in the 'imaginary ego tale' of the father-in-law. A resulting conflict involves both men in the film, fighting a woman to protect their masculinity and patriarchy. The representation of both these characters here is in a cup of tea.

The film's social realism is presented as a 'satire' on the complex problems Nepali society faces. Patriarchy unfortunately is not on the list of issues this film acknowledges. As it builds, the audience have little choice than to accept the journey of the two men, sheltering in the roles and the world of men encountered onscreen.

The use of a 'imaginary sequence' challenges the legitimacy of women in film despite her rebellious nature and prospect to change situations. The humorous backdrop and resort to imagination provides uncertain answers to real challenges. Women continue to face violence based mostly around a 'cup of tea' in domestic situations in Nepal. The premise of the film prohibits the woman character from finding any justice, presenting her situation as a comical undertaking.

During much of the 90's Nepali cinema entertained the narrative of a confident women as one who is physical able, in capacity to stage a fight.

“ Contemporary Nepali films, show women with physical ability to bash up villains. I don't see this as the right way to go forward in terms of representation of women. These are merely roles that men occupied earlier and are now taken up by women. For women to be truly respected, they should have parallel roles as men do in films.”

- FILM DIRECTOR

METHODOLOGY

This study is built on content analysis of 47+ films, television content, online materials and visual advisements as well as lived experiences of filmmakers, key figures in Nepalese film industry, alongside adolescents and youths (participants) who as the audience are influenced by²² different forms of media.

Further, data has been collected through in-depth interviews and group discussions with 22 filmmakers and film professionals who include producers, directors, writers, actors, exhibitors (cinema hall owners), distributors, cinematographers, and editors. 55 percent of the professional respondents are women. In parallel, representatives of all the primary film associations active in Nepal have also been consulted. The report relies on qualitative data gathered through individual and group discussions held with key stakeholders from the industry through the application of rigorous analytical tools to unpack the data available.

Further, the study collected lived experiences from adolescent girls, boys, and young women from Province 1 (Sunsari), Bagmati province (Sindhuli, Kathmandu),

Lumbini Province (Banke) and Karnali province (Jumla).

Both, quantitative and qualitative data collection methods have been employed to gather data in this research.

1. 47 Films (Film Reviews)
2. Project Analysis (Film Analysis)
3. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-Depth Interviews

1. 47 FILMS

The analysis of over 47 films, television content, online materials and visual advertisements has been conducted over a period of six months, (January to August 2020). These films have been selected on the basis of their popularity during the time of release and their current YouTube(online) viewership.

For contemporary significance, specific considerations have been given to films made after 2015. Also, to ascertain structural proximity between early Nepali cinema, and contemporary films, certain projects funded during the Panchayat era (1959-1990) have also been sampled. The sample does not take into account documentaries, short films and other projects as access proved difficult.

²² Just as movies reflect the anxieties, beliefs, and values of the cultures that produce them, they also help to shape and solidify a culture's beliefs. Sometimes the influence is trivial, as in the case of fashion trends or figures of speech. Jack Lule, (2013), *Understanding Media and Culture: an introduction*, University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing edition

2. PROJECT ANALYSIS

15 television soaps from 1990 onwards, 20 music videos and online videos including **Vlogs**, and reality shows have also been sampled. Acknowledging the diversity of cinema in Nepal different languages and regions- Bhojpuri, Gurung and Nepal Bhasa (Newari) films have been assessed with the support of ethnic/indigenous filmmakers. Selection criteria include the importance and influence of current national agendas on cinema at the time.

Post 2012, YouTube has been a popular online platform for showcasing film (with 6.4 million registered users²³). The research has used online sources for film viewing and preliminary analysis of spectator outreach.

A preliminary review team consisted of 5 young women who based their analysis on the following criteria:

- a. Character journeys of women in cinema**
- b. Social roles scheduled for women**
- c. Test of character Agency- (which gender had more leadership potential in the film)**
- d. Study of scenes /situations deemed problematic**

Two prominent tests used by screenwriters have been employed to analyse women's on-screen portrayal, namely Bechdel test²⁴ and inverted Hero's journey²⁵. These tests provide character analysis, and socio-political meaning to the roles scheduled for women and sexual minorities. (further reading in individual chapters)

Questions around identity, design of character and leadership potential (choices) interrogate personal agency of women characters in films. Studies of body image and the "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy have been undertaken during interviews with young people and are presented here.

Also, quantifiable data such as screen-time for women characters, instances of violence against women, number of scenes with misogynist attitudes have also been recorded. From the makers' side, number of woman film makers, number of women film professionals to male professionals among other data have also been recorded in the content analysis.

²³ Digital Nepal Framework, Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2019, Nepal

²⁴ Allison Bechdel (1986), Dykes to watch out for: asks simple questions to test the representation of women in films detailed in later chapter

²⁵ Joseph Campbell(1949), Hero with a thousand faces: a standard of storytelling device which maps the trials and tribulations that a hero needs to go through to achieve his goal with the help of mentors detailed in later chapter

3. GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND PERSONALISED INTERVIEWS (FGD/KII)

FGDs and in-depth interviews provide qualitative data for this research. Group discussions with producers, directors, industry leaders, as well as government representatives working currently in the Nepali cinema industry makes up for the lack of quantitative institutional data for this research; In-depth interviews with film/ cinema industry professionals also supports overall analysis.

Respondents include:

- a. young film audience;**
- b. film professionals and stakeholders, and;**
- c. government representatives/ cinema policy makers**
- d. members of civil society, feminists**



4. LIMITATIONS

A significant part of this research was conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown thereafter. This restricted face to face access to filmmakers. Young participants were met online, limiting the participation of young people to ones with access to the internet or a smart phone. As a way of counteracting the imposed restrictions young participants have been encouraged to take up the **GIRL PHOTO PROJECT**. This allowed the research team an entry point into their daily lived experiences.

There has been a lack of response to the research from state level entities. Accurate quantitative data on the number of productions, revenue, employment rates among others proves difficult to obtain from Nepal's Film Associations. An absence of secondary sources and studies analysing cinema in Nepal has also impacted the research.



CHAPTER 01

INTRODUCTION: WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN NEPAL'S CINEMA

Between April 2017- April 2018 (B.S. 2075)²⁶ around 107 feature fiction films have been produced in Nepal²⁷. Most of them are released for an average of 5 days at 175 theatres²⁸. Less than 20% of films released perform average to mediocre business, with a total absorption rate of less than 5%²⁹. These theatres mostly located in the central and eastern belts of Nepal³⁰ have reached out to a potential 25% youth population aged 18 – 25.

2075 B.S. IN NEPALI MOVIE INDUSTRY

107

**FEATURE FICTION
FILMS PRODUCED**

5

**DAYS PLAYTIME
ON AVERAGE**

175

**THEATRES COVERED
ON AVERAGE**

²⁶ Bikram Sambat- Nepal officially follows the Bikram Sambat Calender. It begins in April on the Gregorian Calender

²⁷ Number of Nepali films that have received a censorship certificate in the year 2074-2075 (2018-2019)

²⁸ Number of theatres to those in central and eastern region, Film development board (2019)

²⁹ According to Film Development Board (2020)

³⁰ Number of theatres to those in central and eastern region, Film development board (2019)

A discussion on the representation of women in film is closely linked to how cinema is doing business in Nepal. With only **20%** films doing mediocre business, films loose over **NPR 6,00,00,000** (sixty crores) annually. Over the years, film trade has its share of challenges. A decade long violent Maoist insurgency in early 2000s caused a major setback in film trade. Only 17 films were released during 2003-2007³¹ coinciding with Maoist insurgency (1995-2006).

In the years following, Nepali films had difficulty securing audiences- where the impact can be felt today where only **2%-3%**³² of the Nepal's population watches Nepali films in theaters. Though a recently digital-online exhibition has opened some opportunities, they have been largely limited to YouTube where the monetary turnover for the film producer is negligible³³.

Most filmmakers spoken to agree that cinema producers widely acknowledge men are the priority audience due to market instability in Nepal. Top 10 grossing films of 2018 – 2019 saw an average of 5 instances of violence on women per film. Violence was seen as a medium to strengthen male

authority, presenting powerful masculine agenda and voyeuristic impression for the audience. The top 10 grossing films also adhered to a standard format of a story as a hero's journey³⁴, where the male protagonist always showcased agency.

There is unwillingness from producers to change from the way films have been traditionally presented through the male protagonist. Filmmakers continue to have limited roles for women. Less than 5% of primary roles were given to women characters during this period.

“On occasions where films might have women as primary leaders, the stories and the investments are controlled by men. Audiences cheering in theatres where women's victimised portrayal are also men. This is a stark reality we need to accept.”

-- FILM CRITIC

31 Ananda Chandrasekhar, Nepali films ready for the big stage after the civil war retrieved on 1/19/2021 - https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/maoist-revolution_nepali-films-ready-for-the-big-stage-after-civil-war/42065540

32 Focus Group Discussion Interviews with film professionals

33 Focus Group Discussion interviews with film professionals

34 Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey showcases a hero who has to go through trials and tribulations through support of a mentor - is discussed in later chapters.

In 2016, *Chhaka Panja* (Dipa Shree Niraula) with an ensemble cast of popular TV comics was a highly successful project. The film garnered **200 million Nepali rupees (1.6 million USD)**³⁵. Part of the film's success is its use of benign masochism as women were shown abused, gullible, beaten, and powerless in a context of poverty and social ridicule. One plot approached marriage as a conditional arrangement where the man is allowed to slap his wife every day. There were 23 instances of physical and other violence on women shown in the film. Men projected in control of their wives, were shown as saviours of their family, able to bring pride and joy through the obstacles they face. Its enormous success has led to other sequels being made. The 2019 sequel saw women again treated in similar fashion.

1. STATE'S INFLUENCE IN WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Nepali cinema has a history of being governed by state imposed moral and religious codes. The Motion picture Act brought to effect in 1969 introduced further a film censor board which has since been the key link between film practitioners/content and the state.³⁶

“Comedies have always been popular. YouTube comments suggest that Chakka Panja and similar films are popular and well liked. Unfortunately, the common occurrence of violence in these films are naturalizing violence on women, and presenting our society as a masochistic male-controlled domain.”

-- YOUNG WOMAN FILMMAKER

Hilly and Hindu, two key characteristics of cinema in Panchayat era have significant applications in relation to the presentation to women still. In recent films, 85% of leading women were shown as Aryan Hindu (Brahmin, Chhetri) with less than 2% of films acknowledging other communities and religions.

James Monaco (2000)³⁷ discusses the relation between producers and the censorship in USA in the past. He mentions how American producers benefitted working under strict censorship as costs

³⁵ Assumed figure from news reports. Nepali films do not share exact details of their business.

³⁶ Harsha Man Maharjan, (2010) 'Machinery of State Control: History of Cinema Censor Board in Nepal', Bodhi- an Interdisciplinary Journal, 4 (1), 168-190. Kathmandu University

³⁷ James Monaco, How to Read a film. Oxford University Press, 2000

were reduced, remained similar across productions. This analogy is relevant to realizing a close relation between the business of film and state control directly affecting films content. Low return on investment in cinema is a globally accepted challenge. A reluctant film producer looking to secure investment will more likely adhere to contents that appease the censors and are market viable.

The Nepali motion picture act which stays unchanged since introduction in 1965 follows strict moral codes for its 'proposed Nepali Hindu nation state'. In its role as the guiding beacon of Nepali morality, the censor sees cinema's foremost obligation to secure the ideal of the nation state, which is morally guided and fundamentalist in nature.

"A film maker must practice self-censorship. The maker has to review if the presentation weakens our social fabric, and if it challenges our national identity. ."

- MEMBER FILM DEVELOPMENT BOARD, FILMMAKER/
PRODUCER YOUNG WOMAN FILMMAKER

Overtime, state presence has enabled the creation of a specific perception of cinema in Nepal. Nepali cinema is largely Hindu and male dominated in nature. It seems

unbothered of the limited portrayal of women primarily as domestic utilitarian characters. Our review of 47 films suggests that 66% of women were seen in domestic spaces with little onscreen independence.

"Socio-cultural censorship is quite applicable here. There is a lot of censorship in selecting, evaluating, and selecting characters. This directly affects the filmmakers in characters we write, and the decisions the characters make. That's why male protagonists always saves the victim woman and solves problems. "

- PROMINENT FILMMAKER AND FILM CRITIC

Two early films, *Aama* (1964) and *Maitighar* (1966) are concerned with the depiction of women in domestic spaces and the challenges they face within. Both films resonate women to the land, with warmth, care and love equating these characteristics to the traditional idea of womanhood. (A detail case study of *Maitighar* is available in Case study 2)

The government of Nepal prioritizes supporting cinema business as its primary challenge. It is the main problem Nepal's

state film body is looking to address mostly through creation of a box-office and a film city.

“ A box office system has been under testing in Kathmandu for the last two years. Barely 30% of films have been commercially successful during this period, mostly comedies make the mark. ”

- MEMBER FILM DEVELOPMENT BOARD

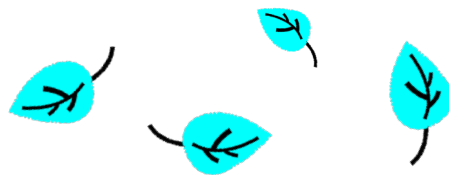
The unstable economy of films despite its role cannot be ruled out as the single influential actor for poor diversity. The Nepali states' presence, limited to licensing and authorizing production, has retained a narrow patriarchal mindset, reminiscence of cinema during Monarchy (1954-1990).³⁸

In discussions with government stakeholders and filmmakers there is reluctance to accept that women have been wrongly represented in Nepali films. Limited stereotyped characterization where women are shown in pseudo control of their situations as teachers, mothers, community workers

etc. are cited as model representations for women very often.

“ I don't see patriarchy in Nepali cinema... We have changed according to our times so have our characters- our mothers wore Gunyu Choli, our wives wear Kurta, and our daughters wear half pants. Women are known to have personally invested to become actors, directors, and so forth. Their involvement has evolved from what used to be. The female character has also changed well in Nepali films. ”

- REPRESENTATIVE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION, NEPAL



³⁸ Film titles and scripts should be registered/verified by the Film Development Board prior to production. Projects upon completion must be certified by the censor board.

CASE STUDY 2:

Maitighar (माईतीघर)

Director: B.S. Thapa/ 1966

This case looks at the representation of women using the Three Act structure principle. The three-act, considered the oldest of narrative structure is the most used around the world.

BRIEF

In 1966 *Maitighar* was produced as Nepal's first commercial film project. Following recent introduction of film in 1964, *Maitighar* followed keen interest from Nepal's monarchy then in power to provide commercially entertaining cinema to the masses³⁹.

Maitighar (1966) was an ambitious project with a star-studded cast mostly invited from India. Eager to reach out to a wider audience while also affirming to the 'nation state' principle, *Maitighar* introduced key elements in the script.

Maitighar's further use of music where song and dance sequences become integral part of the narrative is noteworthy. Elements of national narrative, including national clothing, culture, and other identity made their way in through these musical sequences. The film is setup around a Hindu-Aryan (Brahmin, Chhetri) community as the lead protagonist woman faces obstacles in her life.

³⁹ Clause 1 of the 1964 Media act promulgated by the Panchayat Government talks of promoting Nepali cinema for the masses.

THE 3 ACT

Maitighar has been presented as a personal testimony of an aging woman. Her journey is told in 3 Acts, which individually signify a new identity of the women and heightened drama.

ACT 1 - FIRST IDENTITY – ROMANTIC INTEREST/ WIFE

The first identity established in the film is one of the romantic lead. Here the woman is shown in musical situations as the temptress. Marriage comes soon after but ends with the husband's early death.

ACT 2 - SECOND IDENTITY – ENTERTAINMENT WORKER

Following the death of her husband, Maya escapes from her village with her young son. She finds work in a 'brothel' as an anonymous entertainment worker who sings and dances in sexualised attire for her audiences.

ACT 3 - THIRD IDENTITY – MOTHER

To secure a better future for her son, Maya comes to Kathmandu, seeking work. Her son is able to attend school through sacrifices she has made. The film ends with Maya accepted back into the society and into her dead husband's house.

FRAMES



1. The Heterosexual Romantic Partner



2. The sexualised entertainment worker



3. The Mother following acceptance by society

WHAT WE SAW

In all three acts, it is evident the woman is central to the film's drama. Her dignity, ambitions, and choices throughout are privy to sacrifices she must make 'as a woman'. These sacrifices build tension in the film and support it move forward. All three acts are authoritatively male in nature and project a woman's space as within the domains of man and society.

Her role is not only gendered but utilitarian, where her existence is ensured to benefit her society in some way. Domesticity is a central theme for the film, whose absence leaves the woman rogue on her own. The woman craves for domesticity and domestic recognition throughout the film. It starts with the death of her husband. Her journey outside the domestic sphere is turbulent, 'dangerous', not meant for women of dignity. The film culminates as 'she' is recognised back into the domestic world (family) through mercy and pardon.

2. KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN'S PORTRAYALS IN NEPAL'S CINEMA

Women's portrayal has been impacted by two key factors- influence of a strict censor code, and a wavy market. These factors have underlined film production since early cinema days, and continue to influence.

Portrayal of women based on our desk review of films, can be classified into three inter-relatable yet distinct templates-

- **Women as providers of sexual pleasure (Romance)**
- **Women as gatekeepers of morality and culture (Wife)**
- **Women as providers of warmth (Mother)**

A. WOMEN AS PROVIDERS OF SEXUAL PLEASURE (ROMANCE)

The emphasis on heterosexual romance has been central to the creation of a 'real world' scenario for popular cinema.⁴⁰ Popular cinema emphasizes that the concept of heterosexual romance is male dominated where men decide, and women follow. Further, the conventional

narrative of popular cinema is known to present women as commodities (objects).

Kabaddi (2015), has an archetype portrayal of 'film romance' where a village girl falls easily for a city boy. The boy's ulterior mission is to use the girl as ransom bait; kidnapped against her will. Another man is needed (this time from the village) to free the girl.⁴¹

This example suggests how little decision-making ability a woman holds in her own personal story. This value of romance in cinema is a development of the male character where the woman is part of his romantic/ sexual need. Her personal sexual agency is avoided or completely rejected to emphasize that of a man.

Early cinema institutionalised the notion of a desired woman as bad, immoral and socially objectionable. In this male driven narrative of desire, it is not uncommon for a woman to be forced into love, or raped.

It must be realised that romantic entanglement is predominantly employed as justification for the abuse that women endure to pleasure men. Men are both the primary characters in the film as well as

40 David Bordwell (2015), *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers changed movie storytelling*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

41 Desk review of Nepali Feature film *Kabaddi* (2015), Directed by Ram Babu Gurung

majority of the audience, both of who must be pleased by the film.

Table below demonstrates how frequently women are shown abused and / or raped in Nepali films.

Films analysed	47
Films with violence on women	43
Incidents of abuse in films	164
Films with Rape	14
Instances of Misogyny	96

Table1: Violence faced by women in 47 films

In the 47 films we analyzed, we found that 43 films depicted some form of violence on women- either physical or verbal violence. Only 4 films did not depict any form of violence. When we calculated the average of these incidents, we recorded 164 scenes with abuse or physical harassment faced by women characters per film. 14 films here depicted gross sexual violence (rape). In Instances of Misogyny, we recorded scenes where men were verbally abusive towards woman, or had talked about women in a physically demeaning term, we found an average of 96 such instances per film.

B.WOMEN AS GATEKEEPERS OF MORALITY AND CULTURE (WIVES)

The underlining identity of a woman regardless of her role in the film is seen to fulfil the domestic utilitarian purpose expected of her. The identity of a wife begins early in the life of a woman's character. Nepali cinema show young girls frequently groomed by the family for the 'big day'. Loyalty, obedience, perseverance, tolerance, and acceptance are some of the key qualities expected from a woman for successful domestic life.

***Saino* (1987, Ugyen Chhopel) portrays a hapless widow lusted after by the town's bully. Her life can become 'normal' when another man, a stranger saves her from being raped by the bully. The stranger then lives in her home and becomes a father figure to her child.**⁴²

Throughout the film, as shown mostly through women, the town is abject of the women's morality. The good town's folks even ask the widow to marry the stranger- film's main conflict rests on whether the widow accepts the stranger or continues to be sad.⁴³

⁴² Film/Plot Analysis of *Saino*, directed by Ugyen Chhopel

⁴³ The Lars Von Trier film, *Dogville*/2003, presents a similar situation as a satire on the poor portrayal of women and how they are shown in films

Nepali films in the 90s continue to question the morality of women and their ability to be a wife. A woman's ability to become a wife, based on her social skills, physical appearance and "feminine" qualities have been emphasised time and again.

The character or a 'wife' is not limited to her ability to provide sexual satisfaction but emphasizes the need for distinct social

"Women were shown to be independent on screen in the 90s- but they were eventually domesticated. They were like wild horses waiting to be tamed. "

-- FILM MAKER AND FILM CRITIC

qualities she poses. It shows how she maintains, social hierarchy as an extended female companion supporting patriarchy at home and her society. She is expected to groom the child in proper social manners, consolidate her husband when in need and prey on other women who she things are her contenders.

Three prominent films by Tulsi Ghimire, namely; *Deuta*(1991), *Kusume Rumal*(1985) and *Darpan Chhayan*(2001) feature women characters as accepting of their social environments, male supremacy and gullible with little to no agency.

"It's quite regressive how women (my age) have been portrayed on screen. We're always portrayed as what we mean for our husbands- a typical wife who shouts, and is aggressive towards our husbands, and, we don't have any backstories, or depth to why we do what we do- our characters are what the society has depicted of us. "

-- PROMINENT WOMAN ACTOR

In a classroom scene from the film *Kusume Rumal*, college ragging is attempted on the girl who is rescued by the male hero. The situation gives way to a scuffle between two men.

Deuta features a man who sacrifices himself for the well being of the woman he is in love with.

Darpan Chaayan's primary conflict is between two friends who fall in love with the same girl.⁴⁴

The chart below analyses all the roles assigned to women characters in the films analysed.

We carefully assessed the roles assigned to all existing women characters in 47 films with significant screen-time. We found that

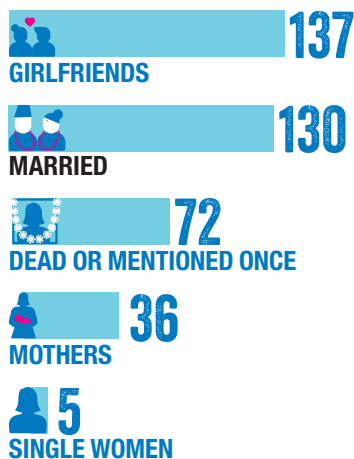


Chart 4: Roles of Women seen in 47 films reviewed

most women characters were assigned adjacent roles to that of the male characters'. They were either girlfriends or wives, or mothers. Many characters (72) were either dead or mentioned only once in the film. We found only 5 single women- not

assigned as girlfriends, or wives, or mother characters in all of 47 films.

C.WOMEN AS PROVIDERS OF WARMTH (MOTHER/ WOMB)

The final reductive template for women is that of mother. Frequently shown as the matriarch with little authority, a mother is a key instrument within family used to uphold patriarchal values.

Pregnancy and childbirth carry a particular significance in Nepali cinema. The noble act and the prospect of a male child have been seen in many Nepali films to save a woman's life. The 2011, lesbian drama *Soongava* concludes with the killing of one lesbian partner, the other shown spared following childbirth.

The portrayal of a mother is a continuation of the role women fulfil as wives, though the mother as older is frequently presented as a matriarch whose influence extends to the family as a whole albeit with limited social recognition given that the father or in his absence the son retain their position within hierarchy. The portrayal of a mother is a continuation of the role women fulfil as wives, though the mother as older is frequently presented as a matriarch whose influence extends to the family as a whole

44 Film/Plot Analysis from desk review of the research of Darpan Chhayana, Deuta, and Kusume Rimal by Director Tulsi Ghimire.

albeit with limited social recognition given that the father or in his absence the son retain their position within hierarchy.

The table below studies the portrayal women characters aged 35+ in the films reviewed.

Total characters in 47 films	5
Politician 1	1
Evil cult figure	1
Avenger against crimes on women	3

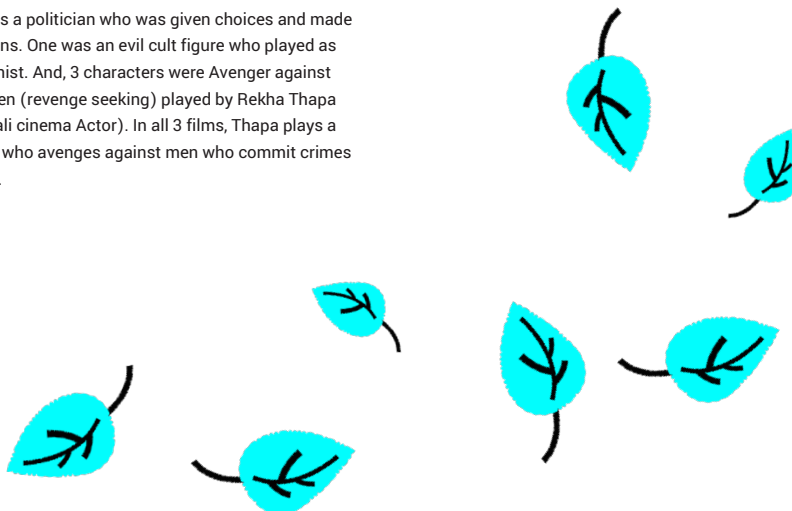
Table 2: Showing 'other' roles attributed to women above 35.

The table above studies the women characters in 47 films who are 35 years and older- and have roles with some agency. These women are not 'just' portrayed as girlfriends, or wives, or mothers- these characters made independent decisions, and made significant impact in the film's plotline. We found only 5 such characters in 47 films.

One of them was a politician who was given choices and made her own decisions. One was an evil cult figure who played as a major antagonist. And, 3 characters were Avenger against crimes on women (revenge seeking) played by Rekha Thapa (a popular Nepali cinema Actor). In all 3 films, Thapa plays a saviour heroine who avenges against men who commit crimes against women.

"Women have to fulfil a mother's role after a certain age- this is a gift given to them by the nature, the gift of motherhood. Whenever our writers write about women above the age of 35, they portray them as mothers, not as a lead but as a character- someone who supports the lead's story. You rarely see a female actor above 35 as a lead.. "

- PROMINENT WOMAN ACTOR





CHAPTER 02

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND FILMS

10 Group discussions were held with young people aged 15 – 25 from different provinces of Nepal during this research. The intention was to understand how young people perceive themselves and their societies in relation to the world depicted by Nepali films. It was important to rationalize how cinema influences young people’s understanding of gender confined roles and social barriers between man, woman, and LGBTQ+.

Specific discussions around the understanding of a woman’s body, and how young people see it being represented in cinema was organized as “body mapping” sessions. Further discussions were held with over 30 fe/male filmmakers, government officials, feminists, actors, film technicians and young people with the aim to understand how women’s bodies are perceived by the society and if cinema has addressed the pre-existing status-quo.1. Good Girl vs. Bad Girl

1. GOOD GIRL VS. BAD GIRL

A general conversation about the portrayal of women could start from how women are depicted as either morally good or bad in Nepali films. It explores how opposite portrayals of women have been on the basis of socially accepted values, myths and prevailing moral codes.

“ I don’t find films expressing women’s sexuality freely. A woman talking about sexuality openly is a radical idea. In film, this radicalisation can be observed as bad people, or under sexual minorities. It is not portrayed as good, as the society will not accept such a character.” When a filmmaker explores such ideas, they are seen as leading the society towards vulgarity.”

- KATHMANDU BASED FEMINIST

A ‘Good Girl’, is obedient. She follows social norms. She will not question and is willing to live under strict moral codes. For her loyalty to social norms, she is worthy of protection, affection, love and respect. Numerous characteristics detailed in the ‘three templates’ embody the good girl concept.



Picture 1: Tripti Nadkar, is a popular actor from the 80’s who frequently featured in roles also seen as a good girl. These were morally correct roles.

“ Nepali cinema has struggled to see women as subjects. Cinema treats women as objects of male desire, for men to attain in the film. Newer filmmakers are finding it harder to acknowledge women characters other than objects in the film.”

- PROMINENT MALE FILMMAKER/ CRITIC

Supporting the prevalence of good girls were filmmakers and government officials who argue that good women are characters who exhibit culturally acceptable roles. Apparent to this paradox, women cited from certain films were portrayed as pious women, community works, teachers, mothers etc.

Such generic characters have long prevailed in Nepali films with little motivation to change the good girl stereotype.

“ We have plenty films that show women as strong characters. There are films like Mukundo, Numafung, Sati (ek-kupratha), *Aama*, and other similar films.”

- MEMBER OF FILM CENSOR BOARD

“ In my last film, I had a role where the character asks for a divorce but there wasn't enough information provided in the script on why the woman wants the divorce. I still feel that my character was meant to be shown as being bitchy, always fighting with the husband for no real reason.”

- FEMALE ACTOR

Films recognized as portraying a good/strong woman characters are all made by men. They adhere to a strict men-driven narrative where the problems and challenges faced by women in the film are not unique to the individuals shown. Their problems belong to the society at large implying that women's problems are always social in Nature, and require the society to play a part in addressing them. Within the film, this logic takes shape as a woman requires men or women with patriarchal mindset to guide and support her undertaking of the obstacles.

“ A female character seen smoking, drinking, who talks filth etc. is a bad person. The same for a male actor is seen as being part of their character. A woman doing the same is stigmatised as a bad girl.”

- FEMALE ACTOR

As a differing perspective, the concept of a “bad girl” presents women as morally corrupt. Society rejects them primarily on the basis of the language they use, their work/occupation, and their social or political agenda namely seducing “good men”.

Nepali film has a unique relationship with bad girl portrayals. More women on screen are shown as bad opposed to good. Bad often means women characters are seen in shorter clothing, dance to “raunchy” songs, beat up their husbands, widows who fall in love, among others. These are characters that do not fit into the ‘three templates’,

instead disturb social harmony creating conflict and therefore drama in the film.

It is worth noting that most “bad girl” characters depicted have secret aspirations to be good; an entertainment worker who wants to become a wife, a teacher etc. Similarly, numerous narratives are developed where women characters are shown lamenting on their ‘destiny’ and for not making affirmative decisions in life.

The following chart looks at women characters portrayed as good or bad in 47 films. Entertainment workers (sex workers, bar dancers, item song dancers) have been separately categorized due to their heavy prevalence in Nepali films.

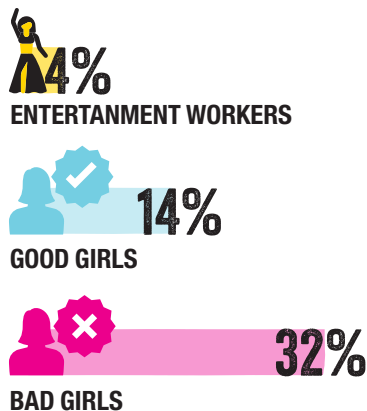


Chart 5: Character Portrayals of women as “Good vs Bad”

In 47 films analyzed, we registered the number of times women were referred to as Good vs Bad. Entertainment workers

appeared only once per film with ample screen time usually in an item song. The remaining percentile comprises of insignificant roles without adequate screen time.

Religious settings are seldom a good example to further understand the interlink between the portrayal of women, religion, and morality. Despite ease of the following situation, the backdrop (perception) of the woman character plays into account what happens on screen.

EXAMPLE:

Situation at a temple

Interaction 1.

Obedient girl is seen offering her prayers – Man sees her, shows respect, drops her home

Interaction 2.

Bad girl is seen offering her prayers – Man sees her, picks her up, has rough sexual intercourse and leaves her alone.

The presentation of “good” or “bad” women characters establish and consolidate patriarchal values. Subsequent problematic presentation is the portrayal of women from marginalized, ethnic and indigenous

communities where negative or bad girl representation is extended to their communities and peoples.

In 2018 a film '*Pandit Baje ko Lauri*' was sued for its negative portrayal of Badi⁴⁵ women, where they were compared to sex workers in Bombay. The case appealed at Supreme Court and was eventually dropped following an arrangement with the Film Development Board.⁴⁶

Dancers in bars or women working in the entertainment sector are frequently portrayed as bad girl characters in Nepali films. Almost all films analysed had women shown as entertainment workers. Influenced by Hindi cinema, these setups are referred to as 'Item songs'⁴⁷. Making their first appearance in Hindi cinema during the 60's whereon they continue to present erotic value to the film. ⁴⁸

The same applications donning skimpy attire, dancing to mostly vulgar lyrics are available for Nepali films. The item numbers

are significant on their portrayal of 'bad girls' as are acceptable in society bridging male fantasy in cinema. Their influence is prominent as men are seen forcing themselves upon women and fondling women's bodies, kissing and touching them.

The interplay of these 'bad' spaces where women perform and men visit is one of particular relevance. These are male spaces where women are seen as mere showcase dummies-Its interplay on establishing male authority while diminishing any social/ political agency of women is particularly important. An item song is played out as a scenario where a man enters a given sequence (space), encounters bad girls perform. Socially, he loses part of his status while at such space. This is altered by the end of the sequence upon which the man will return to his normal respectable self. The woman remains bad/undermined. Women actors seen in Item songs are rarely given a second appearance.

45 Badi are an indigenous/ethnic community from western Nepal. Badi people are known to have been forced to take up entertainment jobs following state compromise on social welfare.

46 Dinesh Kafle (2019) Creative Freedom and Fragile Sentiments, the Kathmandu Post. Retrived October 27, 2020, from: <https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2019/05/09/creative-freedom-and-fragile-sentiments>

47 referring to an attractive girl in skimpy attire as an 'item', these songs have been a sexist and embarrassingly obvious ploy used by Bollywood for decades to attract largely-male audiences to theatres (https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/08/12/bollywood-item-song_n_7976272.html Retrived October 27, 2020)

48 In early Hindi cinema, this meant showing women as cabaret dancers, or as members of nomadic dance troupes and accompanying stereotypes. 'Item songs' or 'item numbers' in contemporary Nepali films are borrowed from Bollywood. 'item numbers' refers to a 'seductive' dance performance by an attractive girl. She dons skimpy attire and dances seductively for the pleasure of men to songs. Item songs are shunned in India for being sexist and overtly misogynistic. Item songs may or may not have relevance to the film.

EXAMPLE :**Dance Bar Situation where a girl performs
(Item songs)****Interaction 1.**

Good Man visits – Drinks – Dances with the girl- Man dancing becomes bad- Next day, Man returns to normal life and is seen to have retained his virtue and morals

Interaction 2.

Bad girl dances in a bar – Man enjoys her company- She enjoys his company too - Next day, the girl is still viewed as having no moral codes and virtue.

CASE STUDY 3:

UDHREKO CHOLI (उद्रेको चोली), LOOT (लूट)

Director: Nischal Basnet/ 2012

Over the years, item songs have played vital roles as promotional materials for most films. The item songs popularity is such it presents women as slutty, vulgar and bad through these videos and songs at social events; proposing a constricted perspective on women and their bodies.

This case study aims to study the visual elements on play in one of the popular item numbers in recent times.

BRIEF

Loot has been celebrated as a widely successful digital era film. It's portrayal of non-mainstream male protagonist as the 'hero' gave headway for a new format of storytelling where common stories have found centre space. A gangster thriller genre, Loot is based on a short lived friendship between five men who rob a bank.

The song, Udhreko Choli (translating to 'Torn Blouse') as most item songs has no significant link to the film, it appears as the boys settle for a drink prior to the robbery. The temptress is only seen in this song, and has no second appearance

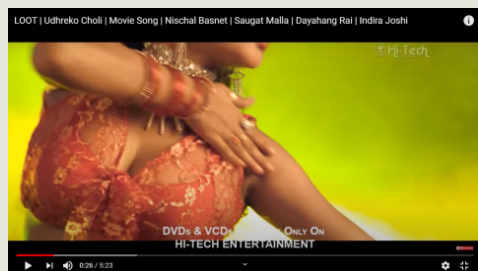
SCENARIO

Item songs are set piece dance numbers.⁴⁹ The sequence features an attractive girl in skimpy clothes dancing at the ramp of a smoky, but well-lit dance bar. Alcohol is abundant and the all male audiences are fixated on the girl as she arrives to give them a thrill.

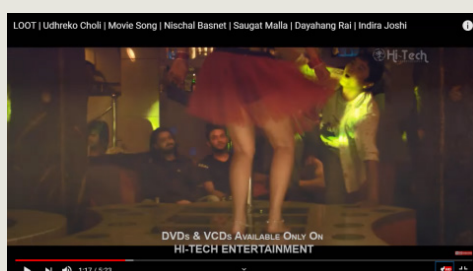
The provided stills are self descriptive of the girls' body on display as priority for the sequence. Her dance moves are provocative and captivating for the male audience and men in the scene.

FRAMES

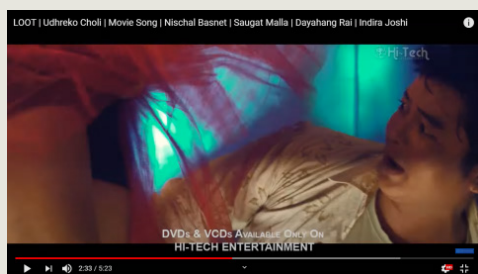
She sings:



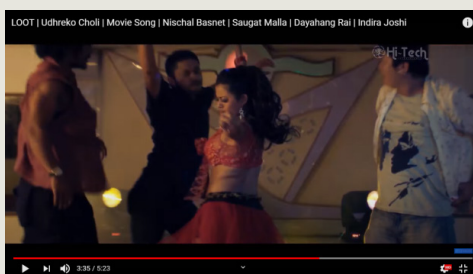
1. Blouse



2. Skirt



3. Male Gaze



4. Surrounded

49 Anupama Chopra (2020), Hindustan Times (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/a-step-out-of-line-anupama-chopra-on-what-s-wrong-with-item-songs-today/story-uA3k9YIOshNZL4vaXduwrO.html>Retrived: October 27, 2020)

छुनलाई होइन, हेर्नचाहीं पाईन्छ, आँखालाई सेक्न जति नि पाईन्छ, उद्रेको चोली छ
है, उद्रेको चोली छ है तै पनि लाईन्छ

You can't touch, you can watch, seek me with your eyes, I'm wearing
a torn blouse.⁵⁰

SHOT DESCRIPTIONS

Song starts with a montage of the girl's body. It focuses on and establishes her dress- titular 'choli' blouse with her skirt, her backside, and her breasts.

The camera is aligned to the viewers' perspective where, the girl's face is less prioritized over her body exposed with a short dress.

The makers have no qualms following the woman's body with evident gaze of the men seen on screen.

WHAT WE SAW

Item songs are overtly glamorized and sexual depictions of half nude female bodies. They are essentially aimed at the male audiences who derive pleasure from watching the attractive woman perform. The camera in item songs is always subjectively placed making the (male) audience believe its taking place in his comfort.

A case for item songs is that it is the woman's prerogatives to dance and earn a living. However, the lyrics, "You can't touch, you can watch" is a paradox and may signify that the character has control over her sexuality, despite its use as a male tease.

⁵⁰ Rough Translation

16 out of the 47 films analysed (35%) had item songs that demonstrate the relative ease with which men staring in such sequences return back to their normal lives with little to no consequences or stigma.

This inherently also has a profomay signify that the character has control over her sexuality. The camera is subjective making the audience believe it's taking place in his comfort.

**“ I see women wearing torn clothes (ripped Jeans)
exposing their bodies. Women who do not wear such
clothes are more beautiful and appealing”**

- FEMALE ACTOR

2. NOTIONS OF BODY IMAGE IN FILM

Cinema and visual media's role in establishing societal, gender norms based on the female body is significant. It has an unparalleled impact in influencing young minds.⁵¹ In all its formats, from TV advertisements to film posters, the media reinforces stereotypical presentations of gender casting roles for women based on their physical appearance. Together the media and cinema set and perpetuate beauty standards for women. Fair, pretty faces and body composure favoured by the male gaze encourages an attitude submissive of women.

A. THE POLITICISED BODY

The notion of a Hero/Heroine has been found to be tied to the prevalent political perspectives of the ruling elite and continues to represent Aryan Hindu sensibilities.⁵² A large portion of films reviewed portrayed the male and female protagonists belonging to Aryan Hindu communities, predominantly from Nepal's politically class.

"I do not see myself or my community represented by Nepali films. They're mostly out of my reach. I rarely watch them."

- YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

"Majority of films we watched has an Aryan male protagonist 'hero'. We rarely noticed non-Aryan communities in the leading roles"

- YOUNG FILM REVIEWER

With majority roles occupied by 'Aryan' featured women, there are concerns regarding Non-Aryan indigenous/ethnic women in Nepali films. Women actors voice concerns over the lack of representation of non-Aryan backgrounds in Nepal's cinema.

51 Maddox, K. (2009). The Impact of Mass Media Representations of Body Image on Personal Identity in Lise Tremblay's "La Danse juive". Rocky Mountain Review, 63(1), 60-78. Retrieved October 27, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27670841>

52 Defined by Tribhuvan University's central department of sociology and anthropology, 'Khas Arya' includes the hill communities of Brahmin, Chhetri, Sanyasi and Thakuri.

“ Films have been centred on the hero. For many years, this ‘Hero’ of Nepali cinema is based on the idea of ‘Khas Arya Saundarya Chet’ (beauty as prescribed by the Khas-Aryan conscious)”

- FILMMAKER

“Non-Aryan faces are called upon when the woman needs to beat up her husband, or be violent. Our bodies are highly stereotyped. We only get roles that fit the requirement of the limited scripts where role lasts five whole minutes if we get lucky. Even today very few non-Aryan women actors are working in the industry as there is simply no job for us.)”

- WOMAN FILM ACTOR

Table below studies ethnicity and Religious Background of women characters Nepali films.

Total Women Leads Characters Analysed	102
Women were Aryan	86 %
Women were others/ Non-Aryan	14 %
Films did not feature Hindu leads	4 %

Table 3: Ethnicity and religious background of primary woman characters.

We studied the primary women characters- categorized as woman lead, or the primary love/support system of the leading men. Here, we found that most primary women characters were Aryan, Pahade Hindu.

As a consequence, non-Aryan actors representing different ethnic, indigenous groups in Nepal get secondary supportive character roles. The severely low payment they receive as actors makes the profession unviable for many women actors/ filmmakers.

B. BODY IMAGE, BEAUTY STANDARDS

Body image as a multidimensional construct that refers to one's perception of and attitudes about the size and shape of one's body- It has both a perceptual component that refers to how we see our body size, shape, weight, physical characteristics,



performance, and movement, and an evaluative component, which refers to how we feel about these attributes and how those feelings influence our behaviours.⁵³

“Women actors who look bulkier, whose bodies don’t fit the prejudgement, belonging to non-Aryan backgrounds like us are rarely cast as female leads. Our roles are usually those of the supporting characters, and given little substance if at all.”

- PROMINENT WOMAN FILM AND THEATRE ACTOR

Cinema has influenced us in showing what beauty standards are. The obsession for a perfect body image is fuelled by societal pressures to appear in a certain way, and to have a certain body type. It then connects to an identity, and recognition. Young adolescents and women have been disproportionally affected by it, and damages their confidence, self- worth.

We witnessed similar patterns in Nepali cinema that also set a benchmark for the ideal body image.

EXAMPLE

“Mero figure Coca-Cola” (My figure is that of a Coke Bottle⁵⁴)



Picture 2: Cocacola Figure. Still capture from the original song featuring the female actor who proclaims her body as one of a Coke bottle.

Exoticism on sale over the shape of a coke bottle has existed for long. A song from a 2016 film, Adhkatti (Subrat Acharya) demonstrates how cinema perceives a woman’s body comparing it to other commodities. In this instance a coke bottle is used as reference. It emphasizes the role of a viewer where the value of male gaze is exemplified.

Explored through romance as a central driving narrative where romance is male driven, cinema behaves as a phallogocentric device.⁵⁵ The efficiency of romance is scaled on the woman’s body and measured on her ability to rejoice the male viewer.

⁵³ Martha Levine (2017) Perceptions on Beauty, BoD – Books on Demand: 9535135813, pg. 146

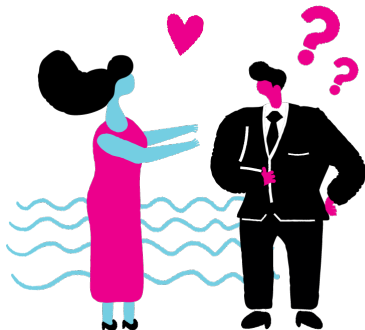
⁵⁴ Rough Translation

⁵⁵ Susan Haywards (1996), Cinema Studies: Key Concepts, London: Routledge

Titles of songs/films that objectify women's bodies and sexuality:

- **Mero Figure Coca Cola (My figure is that of a Coca-Cola)**⁴¹
- **Timrai Chori taruni, Hamlai K ko dosh (Your daughter is young, she is to blame)**⁴¹
- **Ghanti bhanda Tala ta Ramro Nai chhe (She's pretty below the neck)**⁴¹
- **Chhori Bhanda Aama Taruni (Mother seems younger than her daughter)**⁴¹
- **Mero Choli nai Chhoto Bhayo (My blouse so short)**⁴¹

Of the three templates discussed earlier, a young woman's body is of highest value in relation to romance. She is portrayed with potent sexual urgency, a temptress with the ability to lure men. The camera pays special attention to her bosoms, her buttocks and her clothes. Its presentation in the film is to satisfy the male gaze, entrap a man, marry and produce a son.



“We are conditioned to see women actors as slim on screen. It seems to be an unquestionable aspect of their representation. It does not matter if they come from urban or rural settings. If anyone's body is bulky, they are stigmatised as ‘fat people’.”

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

Young people find such portrayal of women as templates for their own societal reference. Consequentially this appears to affect their confidence and self-esteem, eventually their psychological well-being. During the sessions, adolescent girls were vocal about their stands regarding their bodies being less appealing than that of a female actor.c. Body Mapping With Young People

“I do not have good figure”

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“ They are far better and good looking than us.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

C. BODY MAPPING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Body-mapping exercises were conducted with young women participants to explore how they perceive their own bodies in relation with women on screen. Concepts of bodily images and how cinema should project a woman's body were explored. Each group analysed the perceptions on the basis of films that they reviewed.

Most women shared that cinema defined a perfect body as one with almond shaped eyes, black hair and a body that looks pleasurable to men. Young people opinionated that women were possibly offered roles on the basis of whether or not their bodies fit the expectations.

Picture 3- Body mapping drawings



a. A participant's perspective of a woman actor.



b. A participant's perspective of herself

“ Heroine is different from us. They are far better and good looking than us. They have different attitude, behaviour and dress-up. The heroine has a good figure, good height, they are slim.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

The participants were asked to think about their different body parts in comparison to that of women featured in film/heroiness. While the perception towards an ideal female body remains the same, a new generation of young girls no longer accept women's bodies being shown in specific manners.

“ No I do not relate to the heroines of Nepali films. They usually speak differently, and they are very much in fashion.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

A perky music might be influential to a large public appeal at any time; however, every young girl echoed their feelings differently. Young girls felt that portrayal of female bodies in specific manner builds pressure on them and affects their psychological wellbeing.

“ The heroine is chubbier than me, I am thin. I do not have a good figure. The heroine has silky and curly hair; I also have curly hair but my hair is not silky. She has bigger eyes than mine, I have small eyes. The heroine has fair skin; I have darker skin. She is wearing pant and t-shirt and I am wearing a dress.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“ I like my face. I have a problem with my teeth, I think it does not suit me. I am proud of my face as I do not have a single pimple. I am sad that I am short, my friends are taller than me. I wish I could grow a little taller. My eyes are my favourite. I want to correct my teeth but my mother insists that it looks good on me.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

“ (When asked, how satisfied she is with her looks) I don't like it. I don't like my whole face. If I had a chance to change my body, I would increase my height. because her acting skill is good. I like her figure, hair, eyes, lips and her whole face. My current favourite is Suhana Thapa. I like the way she walks, her acting and her dress up.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT

3. REFLECTIONS FROM THE GIRLS' PHOTO PROJECT



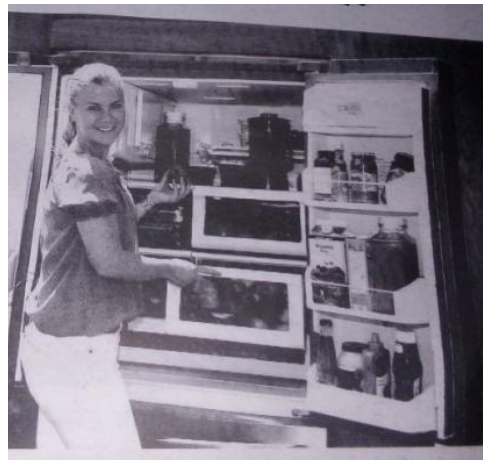
Picture 4: Self portrait (selfie) sent by girl's photo project participant

As part of this study, young women took selfies, frame grabs from television and online mediums (while at home due to the pandemic). The pictures represent a clear distinction between the way women are portrayed on screen and how young women see their personal experiences.



Picture 5: (a) & (b) social media screenshots sent by girl's photo project participant

The majority of the pictures sampled show growing concern amongst young girls on the way violence is portrayed on screen and on social. These images show ways in which women are harassed by men. A young girl pointed out how violence has also been normalised by popular culture and online mediums. The images (Picture 5) show a private photo shoot where two young people are 'having fun'. The respondent found the posture of the man and woman disturbing. The second image is a screen grab she sent from her Facebook.



Picture 6: Magazine picture sent by Girls' photo project participant

Seemingly young girls are prone to understanding the society as one where violence is normalised and accepted. Cinema and visual media with its widespread availability plays a crucial role in affirming this understanding. Specific sampled shared shows a local newspaper article which expects its readers to relate their world with a western concept. The

imposition is not limited to gendered notions of a man versus woman, but a woman from Nepal to women from the west, which for many serves as representing better living standards.

4. SEEING THE OTHER SIDE

The images collected by the young respondents and the consequent discussions would suggest that young people are open to challenging current prejudices and are increasingly aware of the negative impact that a limited portrayal of women in cinema has. When asked how they would like to be portrayed most young women stated that they would like to be portrayed as people with agency and autonomy. They support the idea of strong, capable and confident women on screen.

Sessions with young men also showed dissatisfaction on their part as they see cinema's portrayal of both men and women limited to gender confined roles and mostly urban in nature. Young men also believed that beauty should be less of a deciding factor for films in the future.

The growth of social media platforms with access through mobile phones enables more young women to express themselves. This is a significant and important leap for young women from a general viewer to that of a content creator.

Asked how young women would change the portrayal of women or how they would change the narrative in modern films, the girls suggested that Nepali films should stop portraying women as victims and men as saviours. Participants did not support violence and/or arrogance of the hero or men in general. They want heroes to be presented as empathetic beings, supportive to women. The boys (in independent sessions) agreed, however, few felt the choice and freedom of expression exercised by women in the screen has negatively influences some women. A boy argues that girls in his village wear shorts and "exposing" clothes which he thinks is a bad influence from films. Boys were found to be somewhat affirmative towards the attitude of men. Another participant defended bad attitudes of a hero relating that to youthful rage.

Some of their testimonials:

" I want myself to be portrayed as a helpful, tolerant, sincere, strong person; who can fight for my rights and take my own decisions.

-YOUNG WOMAN PARTICIPANT



Picture 7: Self portrait sent by girls' photo project participant



Picture 8: Self portrait sent by girls' photo project participant



Picture 9: Self portrait with friends sent by girls' photo project participant

“ I would make women even stronger in these films, women who are confident and have the capacity to fight back.”

“ A woman should be represented as a person with equal rights.”

“ If a woman is not interested, it is not ok for a man to force her to love him.”





CHAPTER 03

FURTHER FILM ANALYSIS

Further film analysis shows that popular cinema significantly rely on male dominant narratives. Tests conducted through the study- Hero's Journey, and Bechdel Test mentioned below, have suggested popular cinema has little room for women's individuality.

The tests used here adhere to common film analysis devices used by scriptwriters and storytellers in fiction.

1. LOCATING WOMEN IN THE HERO'S JOURNEY

'The Hero's Journey' (Campbell, 1949) emphasises that stories have conventionally been male dominant and rely on a problem that must be addressed by the lead protagonist. The Hero's Journey based on the journey of the male protagonist is a prime example of how little value women have been given in solving problems, in addressing complex social/political challenges and insists that a man must be available to solve problems. This perspective of story development supported by stereotypical depiction of women governed by social norms and taboos subjugates women characters of much agency in the film.

The hero's journey due to over investment on the male protagonist is also known to be masculine in nature. Cinema's built around the Hero's Journey rely on specific male traits and social behaviour to portray societies where men are the leaders and problem solvers. Specific aspects of the Hero's journey that signify importance for this research include the Hero's call for adventure, where the protagonist is faced by a new adventure. It is this adventure that gives way to provide a character's mission in the film. Another aspect, the 'Mentor' shows a person with the ability to guide and assist the protagonist whose support is crucial to achieving the primary mission. Finally the Hero's Journey also emphasizes each journey as one which ends with a trophy. In mainstream popular cinema, this trophy is usually achieved through fulfilment of a heterosexual romance.⁵⁶

This study was performed accepting the Hero's Journey's narrow space for women. The purpose is to point out aspects of the woman character as seen crucial in the film despite their deployment of the hero's journey. As a method of character study, hero's journey has been applied to ask key questions- of the mission, mentor and trophy in application to women characters in the film.⁵⁷

KEY QUESTIONS-

- **Does the women character have a mission in the film?**
- **Is the woman character independent and free to make her own choices?**
- **What is the value of woman's mission in the film?**
- **What do women get in return at the end of the film?**

A. CONCLUSIONS

I. WOMEN RARELY HAVE A MISSION; THEY RELY ON OTHERS FOR DECISIONS

Out of 102 women characters analysed, only 5 women characters were shown to have a mission beyond romance. Samples suggest a woman's mission is primarily tied to that of the man. Her role is limited to assist the man attain his mission. It is also evident that women rarely make independent decisions, to implicate further this result in women shown as incapable to have their own mission. Women shown as morally obedient, gullible, easy coming, among others support the concept that women are not capable of handling their own mission in the film.

⁵⁶ A central mission for male protagonists in Classical Narrative construct is to find suitable heterosexual romance. American Film theorist David Bordwell (2007) in his essay "Anatomy of Action Pictures" (Davidbordwell.net retrieved: October 27, 2020) writes: 'Typically the goals govern least two lines of action, and at least one of these involves heterosexual romantic love.'

⁵⁷ 95 % of the 47 films reviewed followed the Hero's journey method, the remaining 5% had inconsistent story plotline.

“ A woman’s job is to irritate her husband. She shouts and teases him and the films are focussed on how they are treated by the husbands.

-WOMAN ACTOR

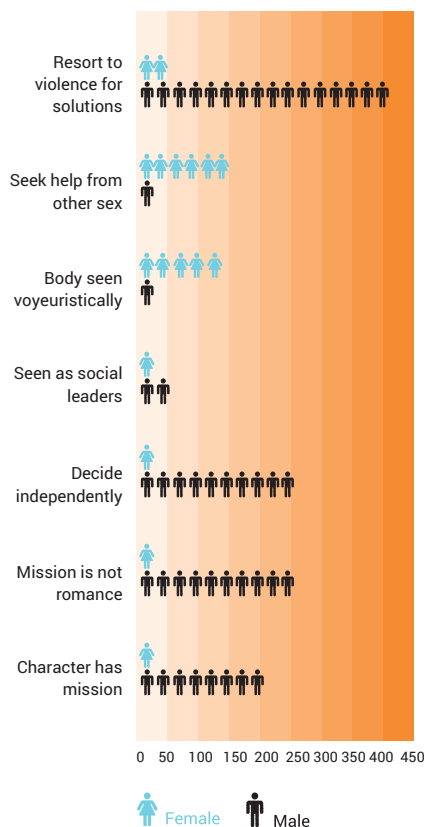


Chart 7: Comparison between Women's and Men's character roles.

The chart compares how each men and women characters' roles play out in context to the story of the film. We noticed similar situations, and recorded instances/ scenes from the men, and women characters' point of view in their stories. We found that women characters' had their body seen voyeuristically, and were seeking help from men. While men characters' usually resorted to violence, had a mission in the story, and had more agency when compared to women characters.

The following sample elaborates how women's ability to have her own mission is affected by various aspects of her representation in the film. Most of these aspects shown are suspicious on the woman's ability to make self-decision and to solve problems independently. The number of instances where women decided independently is affected by how often they are seen with voyeuristic intentions and the number of times violence was used to solve problems.

Nepali films have abundance of husbands, boyfriends, fathers who influence, decide on a woman's behalf. Women relied on men 132 times in 47 films. While men were only shown to seek support from women 28 times during the same projects.

Women characters seeking support from another woman is negligible in Nepali films. Few existing characters seen were stereotypical mostly as mothers, teachers, social workers and so forth. Their support was shown necessary to help young characters understand their place in the society.

II. WOMEN CHARACTERS ARE DISPOSABLE

The unavailability of a mission for women implies the character's journey is incomplete with no formidable foundation. The secondary nature of their roles has

often meant women are seen on screen in correlation to the male characters, with limited roles. In 235 instances women characters were shown only in relation to romance; women were seen in a 5:1 ratio compared to men.

2. OTHER ANALYSIS

A. VIOLENCE AS A CURRENCY OF MASCULINITY

Physical violence, social harassment, and other forms of objectification are frequently observed in Nepali films. These cruel forms of discrimination can be noticed as a process of naturalising violence on women. Women and girls were shown abused in some form of violence (an average of) 5 times per film in 38 out of the 47 films analysed.

The frequency of physical and other forms of violence is used as a means to build male authority in most films available. Violence is also found to be used as a way to justify male choices in lack of other creative interpretations. In most part, frequent use of violence is a result of poor judgement from the filmmakers. There have been plenty recent films where women are shown being

violent so as to justify more severe form of violence from their male counterparts.

Chakka Panja's (2016) features a husband/wife duo shown hitting each other. To justify violence faced by the woman, the film creates a setup where the woman is shown vocal whorougs up the husband for not meeting her life's expectations. In responsethe husband after much coaxing from his friends brutally beats up his wife. Its worthy noting the situation takes place in a 'Mongolian ethnic' family and is not Aryan⁵⁸.



58 Alongside indigenous people, Aryan Hindu's and Mongolian ethnic groups form majority communities in Nepal.

CASE STUDY 4:

BADALAA BARILAI (बदला बरीलै)

Director: Prakash Saput (2020)

The 2020 music video, “Badla Barilai”, is a monologue of a woman describing the discrimination she faces in Nepali society. She is shown raped, and killed in the video.

Presented as a three -act structure, the filmmaker diligently follows the narrative of popular Nepali cinema as it explores violence, sex, and revenge through a stereotyped treatment. The video has been widely popular with over 6.5 million views on YouTube as of August 2020.

SCENARIO

Badla Barilai is a 15 minute music video meant for online audiences. During its span, the video emphasises that women live a horrid life filled with miseries mostly involving men.

It plays out as a flashback encountering the experience of a young girl picked up to be raped and killed. Its key creative interpretation comes in the form of mythical meets reality where the molested girl is seen returning to revenge as a ghost (Boksi).

Much of the film relies on genre play as it revisits key elements of popular drama and television PSA⁵⁹. This interpretation keeps intellectual/emotional interactions at bay emphasizing a singular narrative where the film asks women to be seen constantly as victims.

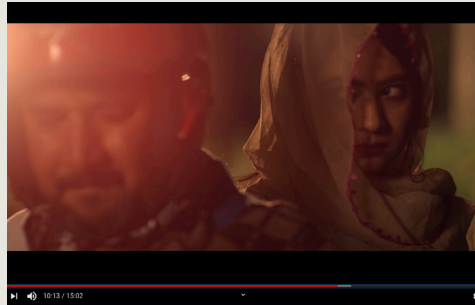
SEQUENCE 1: INTRODUCTION OF MALE INTENT



SEQUENCE 2: RAPE



SEQUENCE 3: REVENGE



SEQUENCE DESCRIPTION

Three sequences played out in the three- act structure which establishes the male intent, subjugation of a woman with rape and murder, and reprisal of the woman as a metaphysical ghost/ Boksi⁶⁰.

The first sequence is played out entirely through a male perspective presenting the woman as a feeble victim. The video frames her in isolation being gazed upon by onlookers. There is constant presence of a powerful male gaze as a man in authority is presented looking. It is further amplified with him publicly molesting her.

⁶⁰ Bokshi- is generally a female defined as a person having alleged supernatural powers to control people or events by the use of magic. It is commonly believed that Boksies come after men. Alleging someone as a Boksi is illegal. Source: UNITED NATIONS NEPAL (January 2020) Harmful practices in Nepal: Report on community perceptions: http://un.org.np/sites/default/files/HP_perception_survey.pdf

The short video's key conflict lies in the rape played out in the second sequence. The film's treatment of rape is non exemplary as a popular narrative is employed to show how men are in control. The rape shot in close frame shows a woman in pain, a dominant man on top with frames in slow motion to exaggerate the violence. Throughout, music changes to a background tone suggestive of violence that benefits the portrayal of male authority. The sequence ends with the woman ruthlessly killed.

The song's continuation in the third sequence depicts a woman seeking revenge in her afterlife. Shown as a ghost/boksi she lures her perpetrator into the jungle and kills him in much the same way as before.

WHAT WE SAW

The video is laced with multiple aspects keen to victimise women, whose use of stereotyped narrative exemplifies the discrimination women encounter. The rape sequence in the video can be taken as a sample observed in numerous Nepali films.

Despite the video aiming to advocate on problems women face, the film relies on a man led narrative where the woman is secondary and is witness to the man's actions. The girl is seen in control only when she is a ghost and is no longer part of the natural realm. Implying perhaps that women have little to no agency in the real world and they could depend on metaphysical powers to claim justice.

A constant objectification of women despite the counter argument presented has contrary effect. As a man led, masculine drama it is difficult to tell if the film reinforces or objectifies rape. With time spent to exhibit rape, explore masculinity and the man's prowess, it is closer guess that the music video does more harm than any good.

3. APPLYING THE BECHDEL TEST IN NEPALI FILMS

Screen time presence of women at just 5:1 against men is contradictory to those who believe that women have been paid equal attention in Nepali films. With dialogues given much importance in popular cinema, it becomes important that self-decisive, independent women characters use dialogues to their advantage. Although over 32% of the time, women did not speak in most films. They were seen as characters who either witness to some other happenings or chose to be quiet in situations that concern them.

5:1

**MEN OCCUPY
MORE SCREENTIME
THAN WOMEN; 5
TIMES MORE**

32%

**OF THE TIME,
WOMEN DID
NOT SPEAK IN
MOST FILMS**

49 % of women speaking to one another were limited to talk of men or romance. Illustrating how little role women have in the films apart from that to support romantic mission.

The rarity of women characters in general support why and how women talk so little. Only 10% roles from films analysed were given to women, leaving the other 90%

to men. Such nominal presentation of women in the films is further testimony to how cinema is based on a man's world and women are their secondary.

The Bechdel Test, published in 1986 by Alison Bechdel⁶¹ asks three basic questions:

- **Does the film have two or more women characters?**
- **Do these women talk to each other?**
- **If so, does the avenue of the conversation cover grounds other than it just centring around men?**

When put to test, 80% of films analysed fail the test. It shows

Total Films Analysed	47
Total Women Characters Analysed	102
Women talk only about men/romance	49%
Women don't talk to each other	32%
Film with more than two women	10%

Table 4: Bechdel Test of Contemporary Nepali films.

The table above analyzes all the questions from the Bechdel test to the 47 films. Only women characters with speaking roles were analyzed for this test. Only 20% films passed the Bechdel test. Out of the 80% films that failed the bechdel test, 49% had women only talking about men/romance, the rest either didn't talk to each other, or had only one woman in the film. 35% of films had more than one woman, but they never talked to each other. 10% of the films had more than two women.

⁶¹ Allison Bechdel first introduced the test in her 1985 comic strip, 'Dykes to watch out for'. Because of its simplicity the test is quite popular in the contemporary age of social media. Bechdel test videos on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLF6sAAMb4s>) have over 1 Million views.



4. LGBTIQ+ REPRESENTATION IN NEPAL'S FILMS

According to our desk review, the representation of LGBTIQ+ characters has been nominal. Limited portrayal is laden with stigma and stereotype. The practise of introducing LGBTIQ+ characters in mainstream film is new to Nepali films and correlates with recent legal recognition of the LGBTIQ+ community in Nepal. Their representation is inherently problematic and is similar to how women are portrayed.

LGBTIQ+ characters, like women, are reduced to mere objects of desire, to be gazed upon by men, guided and to some extent protected. LGBTIQ+ characters are commonly represented as victims, as sexually deprived people, individuals incapable of making choices and as social outcasts. It is rare to see a LGBTIQ+ character with agency in films.

The two charts below analyze the LGBTIQ+ characters and their representation in Nepali films. The first chart studies the number of films where LGBTIQ+ characters are featured- and the second chart compares the LGBTIQ+ characters to the heterosexual characters in films where they were featured.



a. No of films with LGBTIQ+ characters



b. No. of characters to LGBTIQ+ Characters *Includes Queer coded trans mimic characters⁶²

Chart 8: LGBTIQ+ characters representation in Nepali cinema.

We analysed the number of films with LGBTIQ+ characters. Only 5 in 47 films depicted LGBTIQ+ characters. In comparing the number of LGBTIQ+ to heterosexual characters, we found that there were 337 heterosexual characters, and only 8 LGBTIQ+ characters. Many of the LGBTIQ+ characters were only queer coded for particular scenes or for purpose of humor.

⁶² Queer coded or trans mimic characters- subtextual portrayal of queer characters that only encapsulates queer traits rather than faithful representation.

A. KEY ASPECTS OF LGBTIQ+ REPRESENTATION INCLUDES:

I. INFLUENCED BY HINDU MYTHOLOGY

Hindu Scriptures like Mahabharata⁶³, and Ramayana⁶⁴ alongside other Hindu religious Mythology⁶⁵ act as primary bases to explain and establish trans-people. The mythologies cement the existence of the trans-people in ancient times. However, contemporary interpretation of the texts through non-trans population working in films, and TV in the south Asian region (where the Hindu mythology is revered as sacred texts) is stigmatizing to the trans-population. Hindi Cinema's depiction of trans-women has been with a close proximity to the Hijra sub-culture in South Asia. While the subculture is often mocked in Indian cinema, Nepali cinema all through



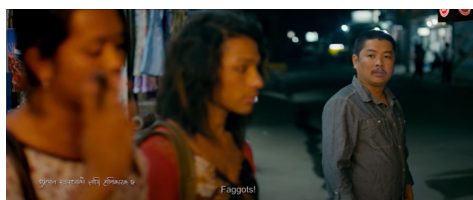
Picture 10: film Shakuntala,

The film was marketed as a popular superstar of Nepal, 'Rajesh Hamal' playing a trans-woman's role.

the 90's followed these footsteps. In doing so, all LGBTIQ+ were used as a comic relief.

Limited depiction of the LGBTIQ+ community revolved around the false generalisation that all LGBTIQ+ people are Hijras identifying and behaving in a similar manner. Prejudice towards the Hijras has implied LGBTIQ+ characters shown often as beggars, underclass individuals wholly on others for survival.

II. BASED ON STEREOTYPE AND STIGMA



Picture 11: film Chhadke.

The protagonist is shown looking at Trans entertainment workers, who derogatively calls them, "Faggots"

LGBTIQ+ characters when portrayed are depicted with stereotypes. Demeaning language is frequently used and people with diverse sexual orientations are tagged as the 'Society's filth'. It has been accepted in popular narrative that LGBTIQ+ people should be outcast and ridiculed. Male characters are often the source of this ridicule and abuse. The masculinity of the character is often contingent on such behaviour establishing maleness.

63 Arjun one of the heroes of Ved Vyas' Hindu religious text, Mahabharat, lived as a Trans-woman in hiding from his enemies.

64 In religious text Balmiki's Ramayana, the primary hero Ram, grants hijras the boon to confer blessings on people during auspicious occasions like childbirth and weddings.

65 The Ardhanari is a complex merge of both the Hindu male diety 'Shiva' and female diety 'Parvati'.

III. LGBTIQ+ PEOPLE ARE WEAK

In the presence of masculine characters within the film, LGBTIQ+ characters were portrayed as defenceless in the face of crisis. The portrayal of LGBTIQ+ characters as weak is similar to the portrayal of women who also need constant protection and support in films. Their roles, ambitions, relevance and actions are defined by heterosexual, cis-gendered men and largely dictated by the societal norms of acceptability. Only 8 LGBTIQ+ characters were noticed against a total of 337 heterosexual, cis-gendered characters upon analysis in 47 films.



Picture 12: film *Timi Sanga*

The image depicts two distinct portrayals of the LGBTIQ+ in Nepali films. The Hilly identity symbolized by the 'Dhaka Topi' and the LGBTIQ+ representation portrayed via a stereotypical character who behaves and acts feminine and belongs to the transgender community.

***Eh Mero Hajur 2 (2017)*, features a tokenised gay mimic character. He is shown coming onto other people during all appearances. During a physical confrontation involving the female lead,**

he is seen screaming in fear. The male lead fights off the villain, protecting both the gay character and the female lead.

In addition cinema's depiction of LGBTIQ+ people as fearful, immoral and the "exotic" other entrenches existing discrimination satisfying a hetero-normative, conservative Hindu/ hilly mentality.⁶⁶

IV. LESBIANS ARE NOT RECOGNISED

Only 1 film in the last 10 years had homosexual woman characters⁶⁷. The inability of films to introduce other identities including homosexual women extends to what is and what is not acceptable for women within the scope of Nepali films. The tendency to recognise certain identities and alienate others shows how gender identities and 'sexual orientations' are again subject of the male supremacy.

LGBTIQ+ representation in films primarily focuses on transgender women and homosexual men. Homosexuality is recognised only in relation to the sexuality of a "real man" and the effeminate homosexual man that desires him. Transgender women's bodies are subject to the same objectification by the same "real man" as other women. Homosexual women are outside and not necessarily concerned with

⁶⁶ Laxminarayan Tripathi, 'Me Hijra, me Laxmi', 2015, Oxford University Press

⁶⁷ 'Soongava' (2012) directed by Subarna Thapa is the only lesbian drama released so far.

the limitation imposed by the male gaze and therefore taboo subjects.



Picture 13: Film Soongava.

This is the only film that depicts lesbian romance in the last 10+ years.

Soongava's (2012) depiction of women has been seen as 'liberal', is still limited to a hetero-normative justification. The film's portrayal of lesbian romance is largely male gaze oriented as it suggestively speaks what a woman can and cannot do with the film's climax. *Soongava* ends as one of the couple murdered by her family member (following social stigma), the other woman is spared in relation to child birth.⁶⁸

5. WHAT WE SEE ARE WRITTEN BY MEN

Filmmakers have raised concerns that most of the scriptwriters in Nepali cinema are hetero normative, cis-gendered men. The women, LGBTIQ+ community and the society we see represented by Nepali cinema is one assumed by these men and are based on their narrative, it reflects their sense of the world. Less than 17 women work as writers and only 15 women have made films in Nepal so far. Only 2% of filmmakers are women.

“ All our screenwriters have been men, female writers are quite new phenomenon. If you look at Nepali cinema's history, writers have always been men. And their screenplay reflected the way they viewed the world. Directors and producers who are also men, just followed the writers' vision of the world. The audiences who didn't see anything different just accepted it, and that's how our society was structured. Women have always been the subordinate or supporting characters.

-PROMINENT FEMALE FILM MAKER

⁶⁸ Desk Review of *Soongava* directed by Subarna Thapa



CHAPTER 04

WOMEN OF CINEMA

1. WOMEN IN NEPAL'S FILM INDUSTRY

Docskool conducted a desk study on situation of Nepali Cinema in 2014. The study suggests that 1 woman to 9 men participate in film productions. This research further justifies that women's participation in Nepal's cinema has been consistently low. Only 12% of the total registered film workforce in Nepal are women⁶⁹, given gendered roles of hairdressers, makeup artists, costume designers.

Cinema's opulence as a male driven format implies that the male is in control. Aside from a gender issue, this scenario also suggests that a large part of lived experiences of women and LGBTIQ+ people have not been made into films. Such experiences have been shelved and undervalued. With more men currently at film schools⁷⁰, and working as key assistants to prominent male filmmakers, it is evident without specific measures taken that men will continue to be at the helm of filmmaking in years to follow. Women will continue to be portrayed from a masculine lens in absence of a positive external influence.⁷¹

69 Suggested from Chart 10 – Representation of women at various film associations

70 Oscar Film School in Kathmandu mentions a male to female enrollment rate of 10%

71 Ever since Laura Mulvey introduced 'Male Gaze' in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema', first published in Screen Magazine in 1975. She mentions how the female form is subject to gaze from the male-controlled medium, as well as the technology.

'Your work is good for a woman',

The very compliment for a man would centre on their work and not their gender. Being a man is a privilege in films.

Any work must be seen on the basis of talent and creativity, and not gender, colour, body, or a pretty face. The title 'female director', 'female writer', shows how men and women in the same profession are seen differently. A male is referred to as a 'director' and a female has the tag of 'female' added before her title. This shows us where the divide is

- PASHUPATI RAI, ACTOR



Only 23 films in last 10 years (810 films total FDB) had women as a lead creative-cinematographer, editor, writer, or producer. Women only accounted to 3% of creative jobs during this period (2011-2020). The chart below looks at the disproportionate number of women directors and producers to men in the last decade.

The chart below looks at the number of directors and producers (creative leaders) credited in the past 10 years.

IN LAST 10 YEARS

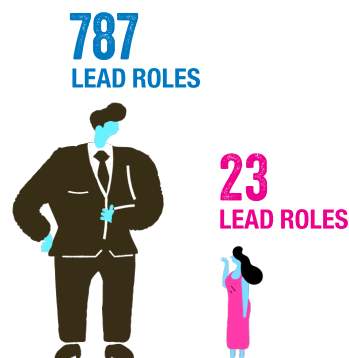


Chart 9: Number of women in lead creative roles in the last 10 years⁷²

72 Source: Film Development Board

“ There are 14 women film makers registered at the director’s guild. Most have only made their first film and stopped. Only 2-4 have make a second film. The physical toll of making a film followed by a male driven distribution and exhibition process is highly taxing for a filmmakers who does not have links. This affects filmmakers further who are new and if s/he happens to be a woman.

- FEMALE FILM MAKER (MEMBER DIRECTORS GUILD)

funding is available for women, how little they are considered for professional work, and how women’s work are not recognised professionally.

“People think twice before hiring a female film maker, or giving money to a female film maker. And as expected, we’re only offered jobs according to our gender. For example- it is assumed that we women cannot do hard labor work, so we’re rejected work as an art director, because they have a preconceived notion that we are not strong enough to carry things, or build sets..” – YOUNG WOMAN FILMMAKER

Docskool’s Women in Cinema program during inception suggested that, ‘more women are deprived of work in cinemas, on the basis of their gender’. This challenge cannot be limited to directors and writers alone rather are present across several areas of technical expertise.

There is little evidence of support available for women filmmakers in contemporary practise. Besides film festivals, and a few script/project labs women have limited access to alternative funding and development support in Nepal. The absence of long term support schemes further implies that available supports are mostly short-lived. This affects how little

The biggest hurdle a woman filmmaker must surpass, is finding acceptance in her family and society. Women working in films are perceived negatively by their society. Their choices as film makers are questioned and decided by others is a continuation of challenge women face in their private spaces. Most filmmakers interviewed saw barriers with family, and minimal respect alongside job insecurity as a major hurdle to become fulltime filmmakers.

It was also suggested that women depicted as vamps (bad girls) predominantly in Nepali films has a spill over effect as women filmmakers are perceived to be trashy, face unwanted sexual advances, and disrespected at film sets and in society.

“For a woman filmmaker, it is important to build trust amongst our family members. They need to be reaffirmed that we are on the right track and doing good work. This probably might not have happened if I was a son.

— YOUNG WOMAN FILMMAKER

2. FILM ASSOCIATIONS AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Four of Nepal's main film associations⁷³, say they have no mechanism dedicated to support / encourage women in cinema. It is best explained by the mere 12% registration of women at various bodies. This leaves recognition and contribution of a large number of women working as informal contributors in the film business. It also applies that women are more at risk of abuse, economic disparity, sexual

mistreatment and harassment at film sets without any protection/preventive system conventionally provided by associations.

The prevalence of sexual harassment on women at film sets have been reported at various accounts in Nepal⁷⁴. Yet film associations and film development board of Nepal have done little to encourage women's participation. They have been unable to create women specific support mechanisms.

ONLY 2% OF FILMMAKERS ARE WOMEN.



LESS THAN 17
WOMEN WORK AS WRITERS



ONLY 15
WOMEN HAVE MADE
FILMS IN NEPAL SO FAR

⁷³ Directors Guild, Producers Association, Technicians Associations, Artists associations (of Nepal)

⁷⁴ A leading actress opened up about sexual violence she faced as a young actor aged 17 by a popular male actor. (Ankit Khadgi (2020) 'Harassment is pervasive in the film industry and anyone who speaks out is blacklisted' The Kathmandu Post retrieved (10/27/2020) <https://tkpo.st/38l6r9H>)



Chart 10: Women professionals registered at various film bodies in Nepal⁷⁵

Women filmmakers have no formal associations in Nepal. Its absence limits the possibility of advocacy for and support to women in film. Existing associations apart from being male dominated, have limited legitimacy amongst young filmmakers. Young filmmakers (male & female) find affiliations with associations either meaningless or minimally supportive. There is concern on the lack of avenues to promote work, meet new people and network. This presents a sense of isolation furthermore challenging for young women filmmakers.

An informal group of female filmmakers meeting frequently in Kathmandu over some time are the closest to a women run film organisation in Kathmandu. They have a promising prospect of becoming an

inclusive, advocacy and lobbying based body for women filmmakers.

3. UNACCOUNTED WOMEN'S LABOUR

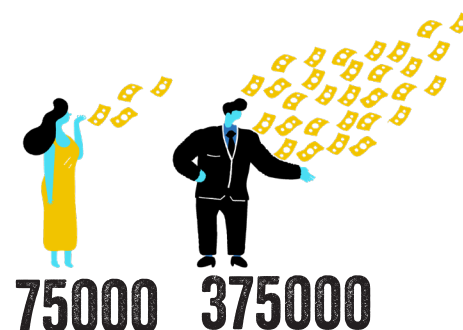


Chart 10: Payment difference between men and women actors on debut projects⁷⁶.

Derived from FGD and KII interviews, we discovered that the average payment for the first time women actors is significantly lesser than the average payment a male first time actor receives. The data is also correlated by members of the listed associations- Director's Guild.

"Paying a hero 50 lakhs is a matter of pride for everyone- the distributor and producers publicize it as an achievement. It will be disastrous if a woman asks for 15lakhs."

- MEMBER OF DIRECTOR'S GUILD

⁷⁵ Source: Official data provided by the listed associations. Directors guild: 11 of 204 (5.4%)Nepal Film Technician Association:86 of 1237 (6.9%), Film Artists Association Of Nepal: 164 of 730 (22.5%)

⁷⁶ Focus Group Discussions

Women actors are paid 1/5th of what a man gets for the same film. This disparity in payment is cited to be a key reason why women actors have short lived careers. The issue of underpaying women is not limited to actors since not many women are available as creative leaders, but includes hairdressers, makeup artists who work as daily wage labour. Women not registered with an association who work as informal workers depend on the willingness of the producers for their payment.

As a group women are among the least paid in feature film production. This comparative map shows the payment disparity between men and women in film production.

4. POLICY SUPPORT FOR WOMEN FILMMAKERS

Women filmmakers have found little to no policy level support. In 2012, a women's empowerment committee was formed at the Film Development Board. The primary role of this committee so far is to distribute scholarships to young women students and host workshops. Based on the graveness of the issue where women filmmakers seem isolated, marginalised and mostly out of job, there is need for more efforts to be made by the government and concerned film associations.

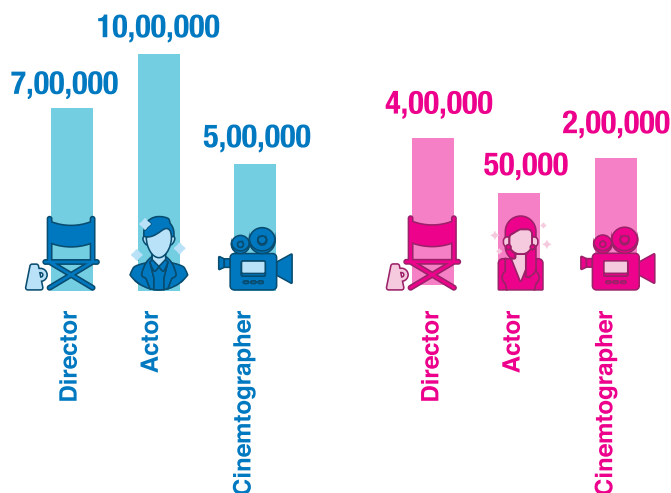


Chart 11: Comparison of Aggregated payment for women and men professionals-

The aggregated figures are based on standard payment as described during FGD/KII with film professionals.



“ We don’t have provisions of specific working hours for technicians. Is it 8 hours a day like other offices, or is it 10 hours a day or with a higher day rate work for 12 hours a day? When a project starts, technicians do not know when they will be going back. It’s not uncommon for shoots to extend all day and night and a wrap is called after 24 hours of work. This is the same for student projects or those helmed by seasoned producers. A woman film maker in situations will find it difficult not because of her gender but because spending prolonged hours away from home comes with an attached stigma .

- SHAILENDRA DHOJ KARKI, CINEMATOGRAPHER

5. CHALLENGES SPECIFIC TO WOMEN AND YOUNG FILMMAKERS

This segment features respondent testimonies with eight young women filmmakers during a focus group discussion. The group of female filmmakers have been meeting regularly at the Human Rights Film centre in Kathmandu (mentioned above).

A. WOMEN FILMMAKERS FIND IT DIFFICULT TO BUILD NETWORKS IN THE FILM TRADE

There aren’t a lot of women filmmakers in Nepal, but we ourselves are not aware of each-others work and don’t know one another. Better networking opportunities would help filmmakers meet and work on projects together.

B. WOMEN FILMMAKERS DO NOT FIND FUNDS FOR THEIR FILMS. THEIR INTELLECT AND CAPACITY IS UNDER-ESTIMATED.

We struggled to get a project off last year. As the project started, I realised how little help there actually is available. Producers are more willing to add what they believe would work leaving little room to listen to what we intend on doing. There is a need to accept everything to succeed, for us to bend over and ask for mercy almost.

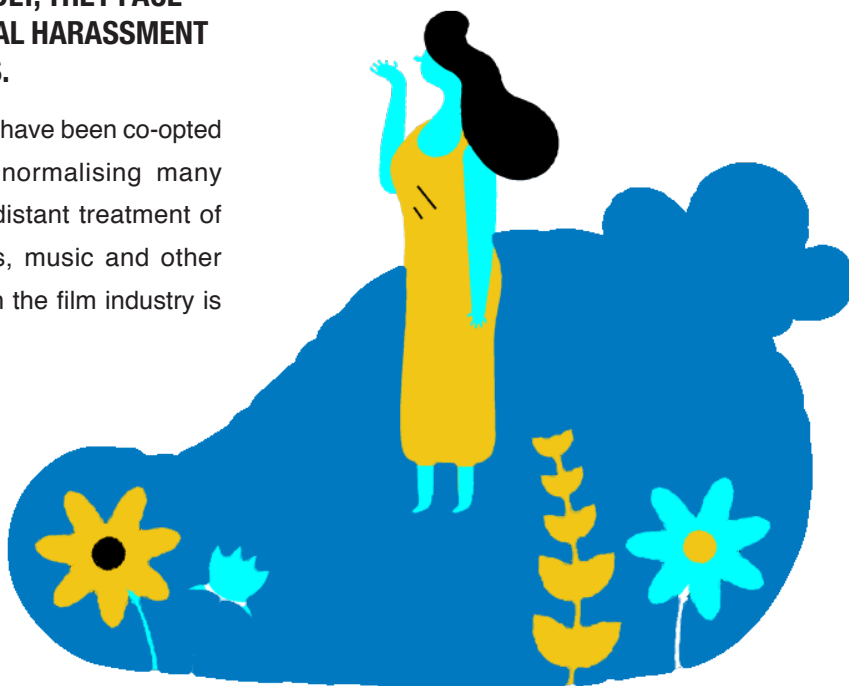
**C. PRODUCERS AND DIRECTORS
ARE NOT EASILY OPEN TO HAVING A
WOMAN ON BOARD- WOMEN LOSE
JOBS WHERE SHOTS ARE HELD
OUTDOORS OR IN THE COUNTRYSIDE.**

I think there are 5 – 10 times more male actors than women. There are so few roles dedicated to women and they get less than half of what a man earns in the same project. This deeply demoralises a woman from working in cinema.



**D. WORKING ENVIRONMENTS ARE
NOT WOMEN FRIENDLY, THEY FACE
STIGMA, AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT
BY TEAM MEMBERS.**

I think we as a society have been co-opted into accepting and normalising many forms of abuse and distant treatment of women through films, music and other media. Working within the film industry is no different.



CASE STUDY 5:

All eyes on Her!

by Keki Adhikari

Keki Adhikari is an actor and producer

Media has always fascinated me. I had a strong passion for the arts since my childhood. Growing up, I heard my father's stories about his struggle in the film industry; they were inspiring and profoundly encouraging. With stable grades, I was under pressure to become a doctor, an engineer, to study science as a major. I decided otherwise. I am an actor and it started with my childhood somewhere in my father's stories.

When I first started my journey in the film industry, women's representation was a far cry from being respectable. It was much worse than what we see today. Most roles for women were similar portrayed as frail, vulnerable, and feeble. This has been and will continue to be a challenging course to change. Though few things have changed in the last decade primarily with the alarmed focus we as filmmakers now have.

I had limited resources when I joined the film industry. There were limited schools to learn acting. It continues to be practical experiences of the actual film where we learn much of the acting. Nir Shah directed me in his film, *Masaan*, based on a play by Gopal Prasad Rimal. The film brought in some attention to my work. The audience noticed me as an actor.

I cannot say all roles offered were motivating. I believe we are at a phase as new audiences and films are still finding ways to connect further. The gap between the audiences and the industry is high and the bridging is slow. I ensured my best with what I was offered, I can say I was lucky to get good roles but of course I wish I could have done better. I am delighted to be working in bridging and reducing the gap that exists. It was not only me, but my whole generation of actors who are challenging the gap of how cinema has conventionally been perceived.

I took a leap from being an actor to producer. My first film as a producer was 'Kohalpur Express', it has a female in a leading role. Many believed, this jump would be costly and I would be offered fewer roles now after being a producer.

As a producer, I discover there are still so many things to learn. Women's involvement in the industry is limited to actors and hairdressers. There is less or almost no involvement of women in most of the pre and post-production sides to film. Living in a patriarchal society where male privilege orchestrates the economy and marketing, a woman trying to make room for herself is certainly challenging. All eyes on her! Being a producer feels like stepping into outer space; a world unknown to my kind-At least not one where women make creative decisions.

Things are changing, and will change, we just need to have patience and find more aggressive means to break the wall of divide that continues to exist. My next project is a film titled 'Kanya Kumari' (Virgin Girl).



CHAPTER 05

CONCLUDING CHAPTER

Films continue to present women in subordinate status, in recent times putting people of preferred sexual orientation under similar turf. Our study of 47 films from different periods, suggest little has changed in the portrayal of women from early cinema. Cinema's treatment of women on screen can by far be seen as a continuation of the treatment, of violence and male gaze women are subjugated to in physical environments.

“ Our society continues to have an issue where we do not recognise women in the same capacity as men. Regardless of the industry, we see this trend almost everywhere. We will not move forward without acknowledging this disparity.”

-PROMINENT FILMMAKER

Susan Haywards⁷⁷ (1996) elaborates how from a psychoanalytical perspective, film plays the role of fulfilling patriarchal observations for male characters and audiences. Her example establishes the need of narratives to rely on Oedipal Trajectory⁷⁸ that explores the 'Mirror Stage'⁷⁹ as spoken of by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1936). She writes,

“ Narratives that embrace the Oedipal trajectory articulate how the threat of castration (as represented by the woman who lacks a penis) is dispelled and the masculine role of the patriarch is assumed. Two strategies are employed to contain the threat: voyeurism and fetishism. These strategies form part of the narrative.

For Nepal's cinema and filmmaker's identification of masculinity is not limited to patriarchy alone but a cultural imposition that also includes ideas of the nation, religion and cultural superiority.⁸⁰

The Panchayat in Nepal (1959-1990), established and used several media forms, art and artists to promote a singular identity which favoured hilly (pahade), Hindu identity in Nepal.

“ The Royal Nepal film academy was created to favour policies of the Panchayat. This also included promulgation of the pahade identity. Following disposition of the Panchayat, Nepali cinema opened to a larger market, though as it evolved it continued to embrace certain existing principles...”

MEMBER OF FILM DEVELOPMENT BOARD

Panchayat's role in establishing cinema in Nepal was significant, it helped develop a unique cinematic language favoured further an idea of constricted policing and role for the media. In 1977, the National Media Plan was ordained, its objectives included –

77 Susan Haywards, Cinema Studies: Key Concepts, 1996, Routledge

78 Oedipal trajectory is based in Sigmund Freud's conception of the Oedipal Complex or crisis and Jacques Lacan's account of the mirror stage...When a male child is held up to a mirror by his mother, the child is surprised to see the difference between him and the other/mother. How else would the woman/mother lack a penis? So he now moves to identify with the father and sets about to complete his socio-sexual trajectory by finding a female m(other) – that is someone who is just like his mother. The Oedipal Trajectory thus involves identification with the father and objectification of the mother. The male child can now move towards social stability by becoming like his father.

79 Explores the idea of how a male child sees the mother as an alien once recognizing she lacks a penis, the child then assumes closeness with the dominant father.

80 Anubhav Ajit, (2012) जनजाती चलचित्र र भाषिक सांस्कृतिक पहिचान, Media Adhyayan 5 – Martin Chautari

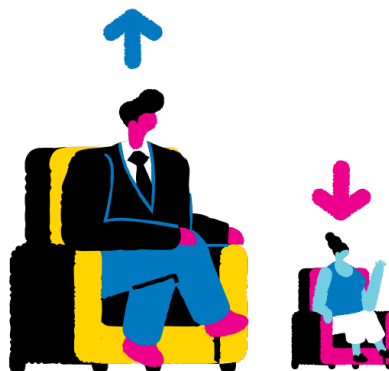
A closer analysis of these three points from a total of 9 clauses show how Nepali state's take on cinema is still redundant, conservationist and echo's the Panchayat era policy on cinema. The emphasis on religious and cultural values signify how patriarchal obedience, embedded in customary myths is accepted as national heritage.

Films rarely present societies that are non-Hindu. Hindu festivities, including those with critical features linked to social taboos about women continue to be well favoured, their value is not purely representative but also imposing in nature.

Teej a festival celebrated by Hindu Brahmin, Chhetri(Aryan) women for longevity of their husbands health, is frequently seen in films. In 2020 a life threat was issued against a singer whose song asked women not to drink water from their husband's feet during the festival. The 'nationalist hindu' groups claimed Teej was a National festival and the song attacked Nepal's culture. There was no response from the government.⁸⁴

Anubhav Ajit⁸⁵ talks from Sherchan (2004) and Tamang (B.S. 2065) on how Hindu festivities, gods/goddesses, cultural symbols have been imposed upon, legitimising a peculiar concept of nation and its people.

This flexible inter-changeability between cultural codes and symbolism in medium such as film profoundly affects cinema language and the audiences it finds shelter in. Men don't just control the production behaviours of film, but the concept of cinema in its entirety in Nepal based on its proximity to patriarchal nature where cinema is controlled by the idea of a nation. It is in this interaction between patriarchy and nation⁸⁶ where a uniquely disturbing attribute of disparity on women is issued. This closely related aspect of patriarchal subordination profoundly impacts cinema and yet is rarely spoken of.



⁸⁴ Retrived from "How teej songs have evolved and what they mean for women" on 1/19/2021: <https://kathmandupost.com/art-culture/2020/08/21/how-teej-songs-have-evolved-and-what-they-mean-for-women>

⁸⁵ Anubhav Ajit, (2012) जनजाती चलचित्र र भाषिक सांस्कृतिक पहिचान- Media Adhyayan 5 – Martin Chautari

⁸⁶ Gender and Nation, Nira Yuval Davis; SAGE 1997

1.CLOSING RECOMMENDATIONS

A. GOVERNMENT OF NEPAL SHOULD RATIFY UNESCO CONVENTION ON PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF DIVERSITY IN CULTURAL EXPRESSION

According to the 2005 Convention on Protection and promotion of diversity in cultural expression- “is a legally-binding international agreement that ensures artists, cultural professionals, practitioners and citizens worldwide can create, produce, disseminate and enjoy a broad range of cultural goods, services and activities, including their own.” It was adopted because the international community signalled the urgency for the implementation of international law that would recognise:

- **The distinctive nature of cultural goods, services and activities as vehicles of identity, values and meaning;**
- **That while cultural goods, services and activities have important economic value, they are not mere commodities or consumer goods that can only be regarded as objects of trade.”**

Artists in Nepal fail to be recognized as cultural agents. The state of Nepal has never recognized cinema as an independent cultural product. Consequently, there is significant emphasis on the trade value of cinema and its related byproducts. The need for specific policies that protect and grant filmmakers’ right to mobility, to have unhinged access to funds, trainings etc. from the prospective of cultural practitioners remain unaddressed. As Nepal emphasizes coproduction in films as its priority⁸⁷, there is an opportunity to break preexisting stereotypes on cultural practice on cinema in Nepal. This will affect how women have conventionally accessed films as practitioners and the audience outreach of diverse materials in Nepal.

We call upon the government of Nepal to ratify the UNESCO convention on protection and promotion of diversity in cultural expression. Cinema’s ongoing challenge to recognize the issues pertaining representation of women and girls is by large a cultural phenomenon which cannot be addressed without seeing cinema as a cultural product where film products regardless of their sex, gender, medium of choice get full access in the making, distribution, and exhibition of their materials.

87 राष्ट्रिय चलचित्र नीति २०७०- मस्यौदा प्रतिवेदन-चलचित्र विकास बोर्ड- National Film Policy 2012, (DRAFT), Film Development Board

B. WOMEN FILMMAKERS NEED ASSOCIATIONS

Existing film associations have played limited roles in securing support and opportunities for young and women filmmakers. Associations specific to women filmmakers can play crucial roles to promote young women filmmakers also to devise ways to bridge existing practices with capacity of younger women filmmakers. Such associations can play key role in advocating for the rights and wellbeing of women filmmakers and film collaborators.

C. FUND WOMEN FILMMAKERS MORE

Women directed films representing 1% of films made annually shows women have little access to funding and fund enabling mechanisms. In order to ensure women filmmakers are treated in par with men, it is important there are consistent funds available to women filmmakers for prolonged period. Such funds can come in the form of full and partial funding involving mechanisms of the state, private practitioners, associations and several foundations. Globally the practice of slate financing⁸⁸ has proven successful for supporting numerous projects with a selective budget.

D. PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN PLAY THEIR PART

As Nepal goes through a state building process with local and state governments forming new film bodies, it is important to assess the roles such support can play in the local development of film. Local governments including municipalities can support organizing film festivals, provide seed grants to films and help organise development workshops for filmmakers. State bodies who in recent practice have been more concerned about heritage cultural identity through arts, should be more open in approaching cinema to accept it as a form engaging intellectual democratic dialogue.

E. FILM FESTIVALS NEED TO RE-PROGRAM THEIR APPROACHES

Over the last decade few Nepali film festivals have attempted at re-programming their approaches, reaching out to filmmakers through development labs, masterclasses, seed grants etc. Festivals can continue doing so with more participation from local governments and foundations needed in the sector. Festivals with their vast network of film professionals from around the world can bring much needed exposure and link support to filmmakers who practice in Nepal.

⁸⁸ Process of film financing that involves providing fund through a company to a number of films over a period of time. Such funds can be provided as full or partial funding in collaboration with other companies.

F. FOUNDATIONS CAN HELP

Foundations play a key part to recognize women filmmakers as advocates of human rights. Funds should be regularly prioritized in form of travel grants, production grants, support grants among others.

Women filmmakers play a crucial role to break phallo-centric narratives, amplify concurrent issues of human rights, discrimination and inequality, and advocate against misogyny and sexism.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

Jyotsna Maskay - Lead Researcher

Jyotsna is an intersectional feminist. She draws her knowledge and experiences from the feminist movement in Nepal. Jyotsna is founding chair of LOOM, a feminist collective that adopts a multi-generational activism working on the intersection of gender, sexuality freedom of expression and movement building. She also runs the “Women in Cinema Fellowship South Asia” for women filmmakers and those who identify as women. Jyotsna also runs an arts residency space. Her four dogs own her, and saving up for trips with friends is her bliss.

Kshitiz Adhiraj– Researcher, Writer

Kshitiz Adhiraj is the founding director of Docskool. He works with the Klinik. Kathmandu labs as principal advisor and coordinator, working with South Asian filmmakers on project development. Since 2008, Kshitiz has univocally promoted with Docskool the need to recognize contemporary role of cinema and need of newer mechanisms to support filmmakers. As a filmmaker her works with fiction and non fiction, focusing more as a producer. He works as an advisor and designer of festival

and lab strategies for several programs in and out of Nepal.

Abhimanyu Dixit - Researcher, Writer

Abhimanyu Dixit is a filmmaker, film campaigner and film educator. He actively writes, directs and produces films through his company, Gauthali Entertainment. He believes there needs to more discussions and debates on cinema and is constantly looking for ways to foster that – as a faculty for film studies in media studies at Kathmandu University and as a film critic in the Kathmandu Post with a focus on Nepali films.

Pushpa Joshi – Researcher, Youth focal Person

Pushpa Joshi is a young feminist activist with more than five years of experience in the field of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), Safe Abortion rights, gender, sexuality, and young women’s leadership. She is the co-founder of YoSHAN, a youth-led organization working for SRHR and abortion rights in Nepal. She is also a Women Deliver young leader.

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FILM CENSOR BOARD RULES AND REGULATIONS, 1951

1. Do not pass cinema that promotes communal feeling and disturbs tranquillity of the society.
2. Do not pass cinema if it is obscene and vulgar (But if presentation is artistic it is not deemed obscene)
3. Do not pass cinema if it propagates superstition and checks modern and progressive ideology.
4. Do not pass cinema if it promotes feudalism, imperialism and regressive ideology.
5. If cinema needs to cut few scenes, do it if it does not hamper the story of cinema.
6. Do not pass cinema if its quality is poor that can damage audiences' eyes.
7. Besides above rules, the board can decide the fate of the cinema in different occasions.
8. Now on, while screening cinema, it must contain film number provided by the board in the beginning. (Nepal Sarkar, 1951)

MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, EXHIBITION ACT, 1965

The Act mentions four criteria for certifying and not certifying movies:

- a. Permit the said motion picture to exhibit publicly without prescribing any condition.
- b. Permit to exhibit publicly subject to any alteration, modification or abiding by any other conditions and restrictions.
- c. Permit prescribing the condition that the said motion picture shall be exhibited publicly for the adults above the age of sixteen years or
- d. Refuse to give permission to the motion picture for public exhibition.

GURUNG FILMS SCENARIO IN NEPAL

**Based on interview sessions with
Maotse Gurung**

The first Gurung film "Pate" was produced in 2052 B.S. and there have been few Gurung language films made every year after that. Gurung Film Association Nepal was officially registered with the government of Nepal in 2065 B.S.. It currently has about 350 members.

Gurung film doesn't enjoy the same distribution exhibition channel as a Nepali film. Ever since the first film was made, it's largely based on invitation on a personal level. They organize special screenings and charity shows in different stations within Nepal such as Pokhara, Butwal, Syangja, Dulegaunda, Damauli, Beshisahar, Gorkha, Kathmandu, Narayanghat and other places which have large concentrations of Gurung population. The people who watch these films are also predominantly Gurungs.

Outside Nepal, Gurung films have good market in Hong Kong, Australia, UK, Europe, Japan, Korea and USA. Past experiences have shown that Gurung films haven't done too well in countries of the Middle East and Malaysia where Nepali's go for foreign employment.

The audiences are predominantly females and people of older age. It has been seen in recent times that Gurung films haven't been able to attract the younger audience of both

sexes. The audience are mostly people who see their own village life on the screen.

Typically, a Gurung film is made with an investment of about 10-30 lakhs. Some have been able to make money over 30 lakhs but most of them are able to just recuperate their investment only.

Most of the films have a women centric story line. Even the names of the film are directly from the name or relationship of a woman.

While this all is true, the women characters are not too far from the ones we see in the regular Nepali films. While the women's sentiments are being exploited these films have not gone far in raising the issues of women, they don't talk about women rights per se, It's mostly about their hardship and tears.

There are no special provisions to protect these women at the workplace.

BHOJPURI FILM SCENARIO IN NEPAL

based on an interview with Pardeshi Shah "
Pardeshia"

Situation of Bhojpuri Film before Covid-19 was very good compared to the Nepali Film industry. They had many blockbusters. The Bhojpuri films are shown extensively in the terai belt of Nepal, huge part of northern India, few in Delhi and Mumbai as well as in all the foreign countries like Qatar, Kuwait, Malaysia, UAE where migrant worker population is significant from the Terai.

There are few shows in Kathmandu once in a while but Bhojpuri filmmakers are not keen to exhibit in Kathmandu as there are too many Nepali films releasing each week. The Bhojpuri industry has an unwritten rule of letting a film earn some money for at least a week and not clash among themselves with the release of film. Moreover, the cost of production of Bhojpuri films is much higher compared to Nepali films. An average Bhojpuri film cost around 2-2.5 crore Indian currency to make. It doesn't make sense to compete with Nepali films made with lower budget in Kathmandu where more people are bound to go watch Nepali language film.

The Indian government provides subsidies to regional language films. Therefore most of the Nepali filmmakers making Bhojpuri films tend to go to India for shooting to enjoy the subsidy. Government in India also provides shooting locations for free. There

are no such provisions given by the Nepali Government.

Most of the technicians used in Bhojpuri films are Nepali. Biraj Bhatta and Nikhil Uprety are some of the biggest stars of Bhojpuri films. Biraj Bhatta is still considered one of the most bankable stars of the industry.

Some Nepali film actresses have also played in Bhojpuri films. Rekha Thapa also played in some.

When it comes to the audience, both the male and female are almost in the same numbers. may be 10 percent more on each side depending on the type of films. While action films tend to do well with male audiences. films with religious inclinations and family values tend to attract more females as well as the whole family to the theatres.

Nandu Shrivastav, Pardeshi shah, Puspa Pandey (died few months ago), Dolly Sarkar, Raman Basnet are few Nepalis who have made their names in Bhojpuri film industry as a big makers.

There are no such provisions to protect women in Bhojpuri films and the makers are frustrated by indifference from the center government, provincial government as well as local government towards making good working environment for filmmakers.

The industry is primarily driven by entertainment. Introducing Biraj Bhatta to the Bhojpuri Industry was a conscious business decision to appease Nepali audience of the terai region.

One of the major requirements for a Bhojpuri hero is to be able to sing. The hero needs to be a fighter, singer and a family man. Some films with such story lines are Mirewa Hindustani, Mirewa Rikshawala, Jiddi Aashik and S.P Kharel the Real hero, which was made in Bhojpuri based on SP Ramesh Kharel of Nepal Police and was a mega hit.

For a long time, women were portrayed as wives, girlfriends and mothers. There were many films based on religious beliefs where women were portrayed as devout Hindu women. But lately, the trend has been changing. There was a super hit film Naagin where the main villain was a woman, not just a vamp but a badass villain. There have been films made on various campaigns such as beti-bachao, beti-padhao where women are portrayed as agents of change.

In the past few years, women have been seen in roles of Dabang police officers, professors and in various other professions.

The good thing is the audience has embraced the changes in the portrayal of women and there is no resistance towards this change from the industry as well.

Glamour songs or item songs are the staple of Bhojpuri films but there have been changes where some filmmakers are making films without such songs and doing good business.

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