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From Resistance to Leadership: The Role of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in ‘Voicing the Women’ in the Malayalam Film Industry

By Jimin S Mathew¹, Alna Mariya Isac²

Abstract

On February 17, 2017 a popular film actress in the Malayalam film industry was sexually assaulted and harassed in a running vehicle as she was returning from work. A group of women came together as a collective to support the survivor and to address some of the problems plaguing women in the film industry. The heinous crime was a blow to the conscience of the state of Kerala which is considered the most educated and well governed state with better living conditions, when compared to all the other states in India. It revealed the long silenced and unquestioned reality of gender issues related to the safety of women, pay parity, exploitation, etc., in the Malayalam film industry. Though the inception of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) resulted from the chaotic situation of an unfortunate incident, this was the beginning of a resistance movement against the existing and persistent gender problems in the Malayalam film industry. Attempts were made to encourage discussions and strive to find solutions. Through their vision of “equal spaces and equal opportunities for women in cinema”, the WCC creates a platform to voice issues that women face in workspaces and calls for policy reform at the government level. This article discusses the WCC’s inception as a collective resistance to patriarchal privileges, analyses the limitations and dynamics of cinema workspaces, and looks at how dialogues continue to bring change, urging an investigation into gender issues and the difficulties that women in the industry face.

Keywords: Gender disparity, Resistance, Space, Women in Cinema, Patriarchy, Equality, Malayama, Malayaman film, film industry.

Introduction

According to Woolf, “The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.” (1929: 55). The role of cinema in influencing and transforming society is evident. Cinema has already made an irrefutable presence in determining the ebbs and flows of economics, politics, education, aesthetics, and so on. When it comes to gender disparity, cinema is a medium that has a strong influence on society. Patriarchal norms are reinforced through misogynistic portrayals of women in cinema. Women are often

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depicted as only the love interest of the male hero or there for the pleasure of the male gaze. This rings true in the Malayalam film industry as well. Gender discrimination, disregard for women, denying opportunities for women, disparity in pay, unsafe working conditions, and demand for sexual favours and abuse makes it evidently clear that the industry is male dominated.

The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) is a registered society for women working in the Malayalam cinema industry. The initiation of the society came out at a crucial moment when a popular film actress from the Malayalam industry was sexually assaulted and harassed in a running vehicle on February 17, 2017. Eighteen women from the industry have resolutely made decisions to stand by the survivor and speak up for justice. Three months after the incident, WCC submitted a written appeal to the Kerala Chief Minister, Mr. Pinarayi Vijayan, to address the issues faced by women in workspaces in the Malayalam film industry. As a result, a committee of three-members, headed by former Kerala High Court judge Justice K Hema, was appointed to study the status of women in cinema and their working atmosphere and to provide recommendations and solutions to alleviate difficulties of women in the film industry. With the proclaimed vision, “equal spaces and equal opportunities for women in cinema”, WCC was registered as a Society on 1 November 2017, the first of its kind in India.

In the first two years after its inception, the major focus of the WCC was to deal with issues of sexual harassment within the industry by spreading awareness about legal provisions to protect gender equality and by keeping the cause of the survivor alive in different media platforms. Later on, WCC broadened its position to provide a platform “where untold experiences of women in cinema have found voice, and are being heard.” (WCC).

The society also conducted film screenings in different parts of Kerala under the title Punarvaayana (re-reading) to analyse and discuss gender and misogynistic aspects of classical and contemporary cinema. The society had initiated a campaign, with the hashtag #Avalkoppam (with her), to support the survivor’s journey towards finding legal justice. Similar to the #Me Too Campaign that erupted on a global stage, #Avalkoppam has received social attention, which had led to heated discussions in media and at governmental levels.

Justice Hema Commission, in January 2021, submitted the report after almost three years of critical inquiries in the film industry, and WCC applauded the submission in their official statement by calling it an “incredible New Year gift” (The Hindu, 2019). The statement points out, “[t]his is the first time that a commission of study has been appointed for such purpose in the Indian film industry and is truly a milestone in the history of Indian cinema workspace” (The Hindu, 2019). One of the significant findings in the report is that the casting couch is a reality. The commission also detailed issues faced by women actors in film sets and threw light on gender inequality prevailing in the industry. The commission has put forward many recommendations that include strict measures such as fines and bans on those who do not ensure a safe working place for women in cinema. The following model, the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) aimed to address the issues of women technicians in Malayalam cinema industry. FEFKA women’s wing proposes to shatter the notion of seeing women only as actresses in cinema, and to extend the discussions to other career roles such as dance, music, costume, hairstyling, camera, production, direction, and more.
Defining the Workplace in Cinema

Geocritics perceive space, following the analytical models of poststructuralism and postmodernism, as something created and distributed on the basis of power centres and knowledge discourses. Even the ‘space’, which is being perceived as the manifestation of the ‘real’ world, is nevertheless articulated and created through established cultural and gender discourses. Theda Wrede in her article "Theorizing Space and Gender in the 21st Century" points out the arguments of American Philosopher critic Fredric Jameson, and writes, “…space is never neutral but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the dominant power structures and forms of knowledge” (Wrede, 2015:11). Thus, one cannot free space from a socially mediated perspective. A male-dominated space like cinema is hardly neutral, on the contrary, it is a space of gender inequality based on dominant social precepts.

Workplaces in cinema conventionally have not been perceived as feminine workplaces. Film sets are created for a limited period of time, shifting from one location to another, working at odd hours, most often overlook the private rooms and proper toilet facilities as avoidable luxuries. However, the mobile nature of film sets should not be an excuse to neglect women’s needs. All industries should ensure safe and healthy working conditions according to the labour laws. The Indian film industry does not follow labour laws of the country, as it has a fluid organisational structure that discharges the present legal frameworks. Employees in cinema are also hired mostly on a contract basis for a short span of time. The workplace, working hours, and basic amenities for such a space are not defined because of the volatile nature of the workspace. These spaces often overlook the basic needs of the women, who form a minority in this field. In cinema workplaces, the spaces are gendered, permitting agency for one gender while restricting it for the other. The industry carries on the cultural and gender biases of the society, and the workplaces confine women to such tendencies. This deprives women of their basic rights of security, opportunity, and freedom.

There is a huge disparity in the remuneration of an actress and an actor. Existing patriarchal culture accords men higher value, thereby undermining the role of women in the industry. The reasons for this could be the insignificant portrayal of women in film, misogyny, and normalising oppression of women in the films being made. Ramya Nambisan, an actor and member of the WCC says, “When we ask for the remuneration we deserve or if we ask for the script, they feel offended. These are things which I've experienced even before I was there” (News Minute, 2018). Women technicians and others in the crew have also been side-lined because of their gender. Make-up Artists Association of Indian cinema never issued membership cards to women. It was after Charu Khurana, a woman make-up artist, challenged gender bias in the make-up artist association, the Supreme Court lifted the ban on female make-up artists (Ramanathan, 2014).

There is a lack of involvement in policy-making on the part of film organisations and the government to enforce safety measures and basic conditions. In an address to The Hindu, the veteran director and producer Anjali Menon opined, “…organisations must come together to formulate safe working conditions. The government must put out a policy that henceforth these safety measures and these basic conditions must be put in place on all sets” (The Hindu, 2019). She provides an appropriate account of the workplaces in the cinema industry. Her critical eye finds fault with the indolence of the film industry in addressing the rights of the workers, while it is prompt when it comes to appropriating newer technologies. She emphasises the need for a united and healthy dialogue between the government bodies and film industry organisations to protect the fundamental rights of women in their workspaces. She says:
“in the case of the film industry, the definition of workplaces and teams are fluid since they work for long hours in multiple spaces and with different teams. The film industry has been quick in adapting to technological changes but extremely slow in adapting to the basic rights of workers. However, contracts, which are common now, came about when many film bodies sat together and discussed how best to tackle certain situations. In the same way, organisations must come together to formulate safe working conditions. The government must put out a policy that henceforth these safety measures and these basic conditions must be put in place on all sets.” (The Hindu, 2019)

The problem of ‘casting couch’ is that it is a euphemistic phrase to denote the sexual advances of people in power in the film industry to young or defenceless aspirants in return for a role in the film industry or for nominating them for a more authoritative person for a better position. Many women in cinema have voiced that this is a real issue. Justice Hema Commission, appointed to study issues faced by women in the Malayalam film industry, in their report submitted to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, found that ‘casting couch’ is a reality in the Malayalam film industry (The Hindu, 2019). News channels, social media handles, and print media so often discuss the authoritative presence of strong lobbies in the Malayalam cinema industry, which decides the undercurrent of all that happens in cinema. Justice Hema commission report also reveals that the lobbies impose unofficial bans on certain actors and professionals who move against their hegemonic presence. Women in cinema are also concerned about the lack of women-centric cinema and tokenism in cinema and cinema organisations. For appearance’s sake, or to create a falsified notion of gender non-discrimination, a few typical roles are given to women, such as women as the love interest of men lead actors, dance choreographers, or make-up artists. The number of women in leading roles like directors or producers are far less even today in the Malayalam film industry.

The WCC—A Collective Resistance

Michel Foucault claims “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (95-96). Since the film industry is essentially male-dominated and society patriarchal, individual resistance to abuse, oppression, or discrimination has always been silenced. An unfortunate incident of a co-worker triggered a group of women to come forward to voice resistance as a collective. It engaged society to think. Members of the collective voiced personal experiences of physical and verbal abuse and discrimination that was brushed under the rug for quite some time. This created a subculture that made society realise that gender discrimination was a reality and that women are silenced through conditioned gender norms. Thus, the formation of the WCC constituted a subversive relationship to forms of domination and inequality. They create a discourse that opposes the dominant culture and its hegemonic practices. The dominating culture is patriarchal and has conditioned society to believe the gender norms that are constructed by various agencies. The WCC and their collective resistance become a subculture that contradicts what the society agrees upon as ‘normal’. A subculture group of resistance becomes a space of women’s actualisation and breaking away from constraints. According to various feminists theories, space itself offers resistance to gender hierarchies.

The collective’s initiative is not only to create a platform to resist oppression, but it aims to ensure dialogues that address the issues pertaining to women in cinema, supporting victims of
sexual abuse or abuse on social media. Of late, when one of the actresses faced a backlash on social media for posting a photograph of her in short pants on her Instagram handle, it was that took the initiative to extend support by a campaign #womenhavelegs. The women who resist or voice their opinions have always been side-lined by denying work. Speaking to TNM, Remya Nambeessan, a prominent voice in WCC says that she has been denied work in the Malayalam film industry since she voiced out the discrimination and issues faced by women. The disparity in remuneration and their inferior status in the workspace are everyday experiences for women. She opines that the WCC is here to restructure cinema and to create a safe workplace for all women—not just actors but also technicians.

The collective works as a lateral structure, unlike the gender hierarchy in an essentially patriarchal power structure. The expertise of each member is utilised through teamwork. Members of the WCC is a talent pool that has been ever-expanding since its inception. Padmapriya in policy administration, Revathi in social work, and scriptwriter Deedi Damodaran, actor-director Sajitha Madathil, directors Vidhu Vincent, and Asha Joseph in gender activism, and many socially conscious members shape their expertise.

The WCC’s aim is to create a better workplace for women. A collective brings identity and space to women through discourses of resistance. An Internal Complaints Committees within movie production units was formed for the first time as per the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, or POSH guidelines. The WCC has been keen to file Public Interest Litigations (PILs) in the Kerala High Court “seeking the implementation of the POSH Act at all levels in the industry” (Vogue, 2019). As the famous saying goes, “Personal is Political”; resistance does not merely pertain to individuals, it is political. The group works to empower the survivors by creating a network of counsellors to address the needs of survivors who have experienced disturbing situations in the industry. Through conducting conferences and gathering opinions from women across the industry, the group has created a best practices manual. There is also a socio-cultural impact of WCC outreach events, like screenings, women/LGBTQIA+ film festivals, and charitable efforts.

In February, when the Kerala government announced a 3-crore fund to support women filmmakers, it was evident that the group was heard loud and clear. State Finance Minister, TM Thomas Isaac, tweeted: “Emergence of a women’s (sic) collective has been an important turning point in the struggle for gender equality in Malayalam film world.” However, WCC’s goal to ensure justice to the survivor is yet elusive.

Mission of the WCC

The WCC has a proclaimed mission for creating a more equitable and gender unbiased working ecosystem for women in cinema. Their mission can be summarized in a nutshell as follows: Through proper “advocacy and policy change”, the WCC aims at creating “a safe, non-discriminatory and professional workspace for women in cinema”. It also reassures “more women to be a part of the industry” by extending “outreach initiatives for craft enrichment opportunities, industry support, and mentorship opportunities for its members.” It encourages more women to showcase their “creative acumen” by “curating films and bodies of work by women”. Creating awareness about “gender bias and exploitation” that women face both onscreen and off-screen in the film industry is another critical mission of the WCC. It also facilitates “responsible filmmaking practices accelerating the work culture transformations required for gender-just film industry and cinema” (WCC).
Contributions of the WWC

Lack of representation of women in the governing bodies of the film industry is a major reason for the existing misogyny. The WCC considers it imperative to have women representatives in policymaking. The constitution of the Justice Hema Commission is a result of the WCC’s constant call for policymaking and pressing the government to do this.

The WCC initiates platforms for dialogues and dissent. Through Punarvayana (re-reading) the representation of women in cinema is re-read. Through many social campaigns, the collective extends support to women in their endeavours. As an organisation, they aim to empower women through career advancement programmes. WCC believes “that any artist is only as relevant as their work and it is important to constantly evolve and update our skills in the field of cinema” (WCC, n.d). So they extend their support and encouragement to their fellow women workers in the arenas of craft enrichment, shadow training, internships or mentorship programmes, skill-related support for young filmmakers, and industry support.

Conclusion—Remarks and Findings

The Women in Cinema Collective is a pioneering organization for women, the first of its kind in India. The formation of this collective encouraged women to speak out and voice the gender disparity prevailing in the industry. Since its formation in 2017, it has already caused a sea of change in attitudes and approaches of the whole society. The focus is on actual industry practice and empowering women who want to come into the industry. According to the founding member, Anjali Menon, mentoring and knowledge sharing are essential components of the WCC. Unlike other organizations, the WCC is open to discussions and disagreements, as dissent is a part of progress and democracy. The WCC has fought for women’s rights in the industry, from creating platforms for discussion to voicing issues like casting couch, sexual abuse, and gender discrimination in the industry. The WCC is on its way to scripting change in the Malayalam film industry by giving opportunities for women to shape their narratives in the media and entertainment industry. Though a relatively new organization, the WCC has already offered a plethora of opportunities to discuss, challenge, and dissent against the exploitation of women in the Malayalam film industry. Their initiatives also made a positive change in the industry by making the ‘unheard voices heard’ through the popular media of cinema.
References