

Investigation of Working Mother Representation in Tamil Cinema

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ABSTRACT

According to the report given by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, women's contribution significantly improved from 32.8% in 2022 to 37.0% in 2023 (PIB, 2023). The Government consistently exerts efforts to ensure women's empowerment in socio-economic and political development through multiple initiatives (PIB, 2023). While women's participation in working labor is increasing, they also continue doing their role at home in caring for the family, proving not just to be good mothers but better mothers (Jayita Poduval, Jan-Dec, 2009 7(1)). From this, it is clear that women's participation in labor is almost equivalent to men's. Yet movies are narrated as if men are pivotal in society and women are just subordinates. Especially when depicting a mother's role, she is mostly portrayed as a non-working mother, caring for the family alone and having nothing to do outside society. Cinema being only a century art form has engulfed all other art forms surpassing the popularity of all other centuries-old art forms. People are emotionally attached and consume cinema in some form in everyday life. The impact of cinema on society is undeniable.

The arrival of cinema in India is rooted in three main cities, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta, and Madras (Chennai). Though Indian cinema is majorly seen through the lenses of Bollywood southern India collective production that happens to hold Chennai as the base is much higher in number than Bollywood films (Velayutham, 2008). Especially Tamil cinema holds a great legacy of extending its wings into Tamilnadu politics giving six chief ministers who have taken root from cinema to politics. From this, it is clear that cinema directly influences human and cultural values to a greater extent, which is on par with any other region of this world. With this strong view, this research paper intends to explore women in Tamil cinema focusing on working mother representation.

Cinema is crucial in raising awareness of women's empowerment and initiating conversations on gender equality (Prince Prasad, 2023 8(7)). Many research studies unveil the augmented awareness of women-related issues like violence against women, toxic relationships she undergoes, working rights, women's health, and social discrimination are being addressed in movies. However, very few researches are available on working mothers' portrayal in movies. This research identifies the movies that represent the working mother role and the importance given in the films to working mother characters. This research finds the perspectives of male audiences towards placing a working mother character in movies. This research extends to look into the notion of the state of freedom of expression levied in the making of cinema.

KEYWORDS: Motherhood, Societal Reflection in Cinema, Portrayal of Working Mother, Cinema and Society, Mother in Cinema

TAMIL CINEMA – AN INTRODUCTION

Cinema entered Tamilnadu (Madras Presidency) just after two with the arrival of Lumiere brother's celluloid shows that began on 28th December 1895 in Paris. The Governor of Madras Presidency Arthur Havelock screened short reels at Victoria Public Hall near Rippon Building that marked the bloom of cinema in Tamilnadu. It was then taken to other parts of Tamilnadu by Swamikannu Vincent who worked in the Trichy railways. The interest in film glued to Venkiah who tried synchronizing sound from the gramophone to the film projector. He then started an exclusive film screening theater named Madras-Gaiety in 1914, which happened to be the first film theater of Tamilnadu (Baskaran, 1996).

Tamil cinema soon began with the launch of "Keechakavatham" an epic story from Mahabharath produced by Nataraja Muthalaiyar in the year 1916 through his first South India film production company named "India Film Company". Following the success of the film the team continued its venture and released their second film titled

“Droupathy Vasthira Baranam”. Following the foot of Nataraja Muthalaiyar, Ragupathy Prakaha started his venture in cinema producing many films grounding the Tamil film industry with his East Film Company which played a crucial role in the development of Tamil film industry.

The beginning of Tamil cinema witnessed greater difficulty in getting women to act in movies. Few early films men were taking up the women's roles including the role of Sita in Ramayanam. As the medium got popular and people's recognized women started acting in film and started taking up behind-the-camera roles too. Though very few films portrayed centric role to women majority of the movie content was intertwined with men's roles. The late 70s witnessed a few challenging roles of women in film by directors like Balachandra, Balumahendra, and Barathiraja fondly called as 3Bs of Golden Cinema. While stereotype characterization is being portrayed in the second decade of the twenty-first century revolutionized female characters that were never seen before in the history of Tamil cinema (Valarmathi, Aug 2020). Digital technology has flipped the way the film is handled from the conception stage to the consuming stage. Films like Aruvi, Kalki have flipped the stereotypical perception of good girl and bad girl portrayal (Valarmathi, Aug 2020). With the changing climate of women's character portrayal, the research is seeking specific characters “WORKING WOMEN” in the movies.

MOTHER CHARACTERS IN TAMIL CINEMA

Ever since the advent of cinema the moving images and glam of society have not toned down even in the era of a fast-paced digital world where the visual mediums and contents are in abundance in the palm of a hand. Tamilnadu, rich in literature ventured its first movie ‘Keechakavatham in 1918 soon after India's first film Raja Harichandra was released in the year 1913. From the very first movie, Tamil audiences have become inseparable from cinema. The impact of cinema on the people of Tamilnadu could be understood by the consequent chief ministers associated either as dialogue writers or as an artist in the film industry (Baskaran, 1996).

One of the notable woman actresses turned politician and became chief minister of Tamilnadu, the late Dr. J. Jayalalitha is an iconic person in the history of Tamilnadu both in cinema and politics. The iconic leader entered Tamil cinema in her teenage age with the arrival of the movie “VENIRA AADAI (1965)”. She held strong characters since her first film and has taken up challenging roles covering almost one hundred and forty films with nearly one hundred and twenty films being blockbuster hits in Tamilnadu. In a movie titled “Chandra (1967), Jayalalitha played strong courageous standing up for what believed was right and defying stereotypical societal norms of women's roles. Though she did not play a mother character in movies later in her political career, her loyalists fondly started calling her “AMMA (Mother)” which continued as her name even after her death. She is an example of the value given by people to mothers. Mother is adored respected cherished by the people and by calling the chief minister a mother we can understand the value given to mother's character. But whether the film gives that value to the mother character in a movie as the powerful woman is a question that remains unanswered.

Even in the globalized digital era, cinema marks its dominant place in penetrating into politics. People believe the artists as their opinion leaders which is clear when seeing the advertisements that are cast with film artists. The character portrayal influences people in their sociocultural aspects. Hence it is important to examine the character portrayal of women in cinema.

Women are represented in many roles like lovers, wives, sisters, friends, sex workers, entertainers by singing or dancing, professional roles, and mothers. Representation of the mother character in Tamil cinema is vital to the film's narrative structure. Though the importance and screen presence time vary almost 80 percent of Tamil cinema carries a mother character in the plot (India Glitz, 2016). Whether significant or insignificant, the majority of the films portray the mother role. Before getting into the insights of working mother characters in Tamil cinema let us get insights on famous mother characters of Tamil cinema.

Kalyani character in the movie ‘Thalapathy, 1991’ performed by actress Srividhya, epitomizes the earnest love of a mother. Indira character in the movie ‘Kanathil Muthamittaal, 2002’ performed by actress Simran, highlights the limitless potential of a mother's heart to nurture and safeguard her children. Mahalakshmi character in the movie ‘M Kumaran Son of Mahalakshmi 2004’ performed by actress Nathiya, portrays the obstacles of a single mother and the perseverance of motherhood. Chandra character in the movie ‘Vaanam Kottatum, 2020’ performed by actress Radhika, embodies the dual commitment of a devoted mother and supportive wife. Alagamma character in the movie ‘Adaimazai Kaalam, 2023’ performed by actress Evarani, illustrates an unwavering bond between mother and children defying social conventions and physical barriers (Anand, 2024).

Of all the mother characters the most popular mother character in Tamil cinema is Mahalakshmi played by the veteran heroin of 1980's Tamil cinema Nadhiya took up the mother role in the movie ‘Son of Mahalakshmi (2004).’ The story revolves around a separated couple because of family obstacles in getting a professional uplift. Mother raises her son being single and dies due to a health ailment. The grown-up son searches for his father, where he finds him living with a second wife and a daughter. The story moves on in revealing blood bonds despite differences and finally

ending with a bonded happy family. Though the plot is a stereotypical story move that has been narrated again and again in Tamil cinema (Bragadesh, 2008), the portrayal of the mother is different from the conventional portrayal. The director of this movie Raja recalls this movie as one of his most satisfactory projects in his career. He also expresses that he is overjoyed and proud on given a project that celebrates motherhood (TNN, 2020).

WORKING MOTHER AND NON-WORKING MOTHER

In actual reality, all mothers are working mothers only. From early morning bed coffee preparation to food preparation and packing for lunch to cleaning and house management, to child care and emotional support, the housewives extend to the family is undeniable. But these efforts are not valued and not acknowledged. Because domestic work and care don't come under paid labor. The domestic work of a woman is considered a labor of love. The woman is expected to perform all the home care duties because she is imposed upon with the assumption of nurturers and natural caregivers (BSA Yeoh, 2012). Hence mothers who are not earning money from external sources are assumed as non-working mothers. Mothers who earn money and give additional financial support to the family are working mothers.

Though women were cited as a working class after World War I in foreign countries (McCarthy, 2020) in India the scenario is different. The social system in India was based on family professionals where everyone belonging to that family would be engaged in family-related work. Hence women were equally participating in all the work. One of the major jobs women were involved in was agricultural work for which they were also paid similarly to men. Women who were not engaged in agricultural work were doing other forms of work like, laundry, cattle grazing, et cetera were also a kind of work-from-home type. The difference from Western countries is, that there is no demand for timing while doing agriculture or any other family-bound work like In and Out timing of a factory or an office where a woman rushes to work after her household work. Hence, doing work did not add pressure on women to balance their home care and work life.

Technology invention of the 21st century reduced manual labor in agriculture. Adding to this, women's education and empowerment opened up jobs other than the agriculture field. In addition to this demands compelled due to lifestyle changes and globalization lead to women's participation in outside jobs. Colonial rule shifted many social life systems of which education and the added workforce posed a different kind of work culture. Hence the work-from-home system shifted to work at a place for said time duration. Since these jobs are time-bound women need to balance their household work as a duty imposed on them and outside work as a financial supporter or ambition-driven reasons. But men continue being earning members and having their time at home. Only very few men share household work. In most of the family, women are stuck in both responsibilities. The pressure of managing dual responsibility exerts mental and physical stress on women.

With the understanding of working mothers and non-working mothers, the research explores the portrayal of working mothers and the perception of both the audience and the filmmakers on the status and importance of women's portrayal as working mothers. The majority of women's lives surround home and work-life balance, this research study aims to find the importance given by the media.

A null hypothesis (HN0) is proposed stating ***“There is a pressing need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil cinema”***

METHODOLOGY

The research aims to identify the prevailing scenario of working mother character representation in Tamil Movies. To identify the problems and solutions the quantitative research method has been selected along with qualitative in-depth interviews with selected women directors from Tamil film industry. The process involved identifying samples, data collection, data validation, and data analysis. The purposive sample method was chosen by identifying media and non-media populations related directly or indirectly in defining the media content. The samples were identified through the snowball method until the minimum required samples were collected. An equal number of males and females have been collected from the non-media-defined sample population of 500. Whereas, only 80 male samples and 20 female samples have been collected from film-related people. Since the Tamil film industry is dominantly engaged with the male gender even distribution of samples based on gender could not be achieved. And the population ration of gender in media justifies the one female for five male ratio stands balanced. Samples are based on availability and reachability. Since the media population is much lesser when compared to the non-media

population, total samples of 100 from media and 500 from non-media samples were collected. A survey method has been adopted followed by framing close-ended question that helps to get a perspective of the selected random population with a probability of including various sets of people. Questions are framed based on the research objective on identifying a need for working mother character portrayal. Five questions on personal data like name, gender, age, socio and economic background, and interest in films. From the first level of information, an eidetic reduction method has been applied to select the sample that shows interest in films.

Survey questions were circulated in both printed sheet and Google form at special screening sessions to get responses from the media population. The non-media population samples were collected from theaters, malls, and organizations using both Google Forms and printed sheets. Variables taken are gender, age group, and Media and non-Media. The collected data is then analyzed using both T-test and ANOVA wherever applicable.

The in-depth interviews from selected five women directors of Tamil cinema have been verified using ATLAS.ti tools. The samples were chosen based on working mother characters displayed in their films. The interviews were transcript by the application, followed by manual error correction of the transcribed language.

GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER IN MOVIES

Sharing 49.7% of the world's population by female sex (Knoema, 2022), their representation in almost all matters of decision making both at family and national level is not been taken seriously. We even witness a few countries that are considering women as a tool of human reproduction and have not been considered women in any social participation other than just being a homemaker and child bearers (Ezatullah Omerzai, 2022). According to UN statement, "Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world (UN, 2022)

In the process of achieving the goal of gender equality, women are encouraged to get educated and expand their horizons from just confining themselves at home to outside society at large. The lifestyle changes demand multiple income sources to run a family following the globalization phenomenon. Of these two reasons, the need to meet up demands of lifestyle pushes the female gender to add income to the family and seems to be the major reason rather than the notion of gender equality. Hence most of the female gender undergoes dual responsibility of taking up both home care and being a source of income.

In the life cycle of a woman, she undergoes like being a daughter, being a wife, and being a mother, her role of being a mother is imperative after which her priority becomes motherhood which elicits challenges at all levels of her life whether being at home or being in office. While the reality is this the media especially cinema reflects human emotion and seems to ignore representing conflicts faced by working mothers. Often working mothers are depicted as neglecting their responsibility and facing societal disapprovals which perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about working mothers. Hence it is decisive to peep into real world working mother opinion on the stated problem in this research. An exclusive research question on women's perspective on working mother character portrayal has been laid to female samples. The in-depth interview from selected five Tamil film women directors revealed the following perspective regarding the working mother character portrayal in Tamil films. Women directors tend to design working mother characters as grappling with the obstacles at the workplace balancing their personal life by holding complex individuality (Gayathri, 2024). From the interviews taken with the selected women directors of Tamil cinema, it is inferred that they try to bring the emotional complexity of a working mother exploring the internal conflicts she undergoes while sacrificing her personal space (Prasad, 2024). Women film director Lakshmy Ramakrishnan states that in general when a woman directs she tries to challenge the stereotypical portrayal by contributing inclusive representation of women (Ramakrishnan, 2024). Women directors inspire and empower their audience by portraying positive role models (Shameem, 2024). The collective data from the Tamil film Women Directors infers that women directors represent working mothers more accurately and authentically trying to bring social change inspiring young women to pursue their goals without compromising the motherhood experiences.

A null hypothesis, one (HN1) is been proposed as **"Perspective on the need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil Cinema vary with gender factor"**

EXPECTATIONS OF CHARACTER PORTRAYAL INFLUENCED BY AGE FACTOR

Change that remains unchanged pushes human evolution to the next level constantly. Thirty years before people would have never imagined that the camera could be in everyone's hand and easily accessible. The freedom of expression is significantly enhanced to share their views anywhere. Media consumption continuously increasing due to the increasing number of available sources of information from both expanding authorized press and unauthorized social media content. The culture of watching a program is changing from group viewing of the whole family to

independent viewing using a smartphone. This leads to cultural and family value perspective changes among the young generation creating huge generation gaps. Age factors play a vital role in differing viewpoints among young and elder people.

At the outset, the perspective variance among the age group seemed to possess lesser variance until the OTT platforms brought global movies to niche audiences. Television is a restrictive medium where family members would consume similar content. Whereas the social media content on smartphones is personalized and varies for every individual. With the launch of OTT platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix, the younger generation is fed on foreign country movie content rather than their native country's movie content. This variance in movie consumption is reflected in perspective differences towards content and character portrayal. Gen Z is getting exposed to multifaceted ambitious effortlessly juggling mother characters working at different capacity levels including normalized gender role participation. Their expectation expands to see working mothers as inclusive representatives of an equitable society.

The increasing financial support demand from women of the family in the twenty-first century led to the embrace of an egalitarian view on mothers by their children. The Family's financial stability significantly improves with the mother's contribution leading to better living conditions with good living space, better educational places, and other opportunities for the children. Witnessing these scenarios the young generation certainly holds varied perspectives when looking at mother character when compared to their previous generation. On the outset, Gen Z realizes the importance of diverse portrayals of working mothers such as celebrating the strength of working mothers, resilience, and multifaceted super woman in movies.

A null hypothesis, one (HN2) is been proposed as **“Perspective on the need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil Cinema vary with age factor”**

VANTAGE POINT OF MEDIA AND NON-MEDIA POPULATION

Media professionals are any person or entity that uses mediums such as text, photographs, videos, or voice recordings to convey information and is, in any way, remunerated for its creative work (Lawinsider, 2022). People who consume media but do not associate themselves with any media-related production or creation activities are assumed as non-media population in this research. Since the media is directly involved in content creation, their opinion is directly related to the research problem.

Tamil film personalities often find difficulties in intertwining reality into film character portrayal especially when portraying working mothers. The constraints in the form of marketable content that demands a hero-centric plot challenge the accurate complexities of working mother character portrayal. There is always a dilemma of whether the audience follows the media content or whether the media depicts the audience's expectations. Though the potential of cinema to influence societal perceptions is crucial, considering the commercial viability of Tamil cinema conforms to stereotype character design in the movie (Valarmathi, Aug 2020).

Prioritizing commercial success over the reflection of society may not be appealing to the mass audience as film is not meant for focus groups rather it's for the mass audience. The relatable truth is there is a scarcity of writers to bring in challenging characters especially working mothers in movies (Peter, 2018). Those involved in script development belong to a generation of mothers who are homemakers and seem to lack personal experiences of witnessing working mothers, making it difficult to create compelling narratives by including working mothers (R, 2021).

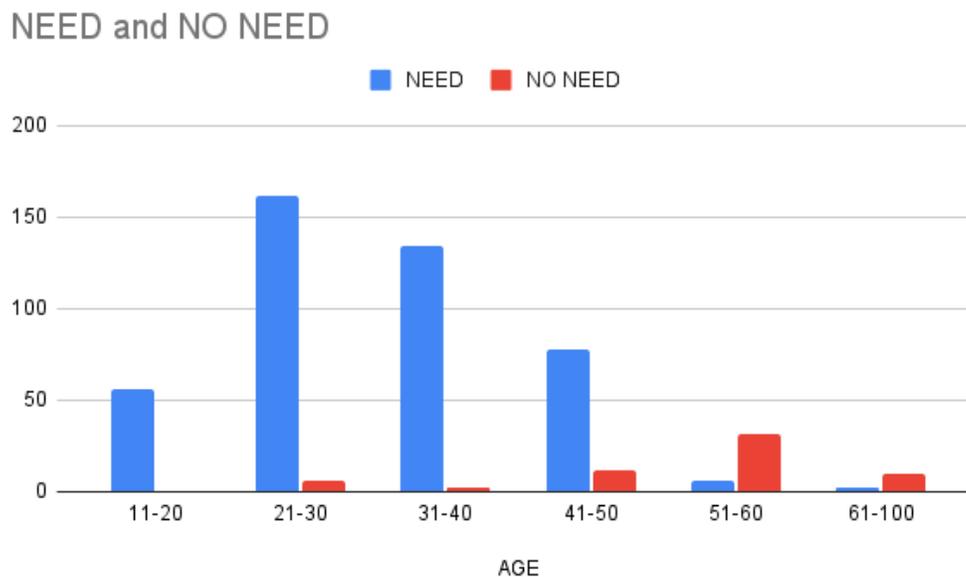
On considering non-media people the varied responses as the sample included gender, varied age groups, and other socioeconomic cultural factors. The portrayal of working mothers in Tamil films elicits varied reactions across different age groups and between rural and urban populations. Despite collective public expression revealing expectations of authentic and diverse representations of working mothers in Tamil cinema, there is a long way to go in terms of breaking stereotype character depiction in the movies. There are varying views on how to depict working mother in Tamil cinema: should filmmakers depict the harsh realities of hardship they face, or focus solely on the positive, aspirational, and happy side of their lives? .

Non-media people indirectly influence the content shown in media. Their opinion is to be compared with the media-related people.

Hence a null hypothesis, two (HN2) is been proposed as **“Perspective on the need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil Cinema vary among Media and Non- Media groups”**

1. Results and Discussion

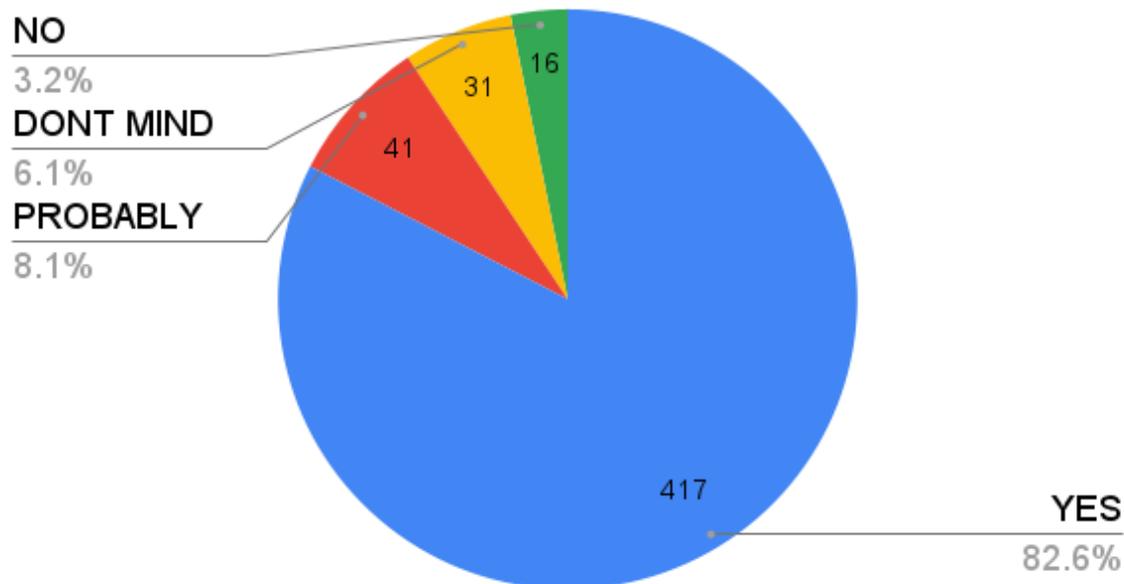
The research results clearly indicate that there is a need for the portrayal of working mother characters in movies.



While age does not significantly influence opinions on embracing working mother characters, there are notable differences across age groups regarding the perceived need for their portrayal in movies. Individuals of up to forty exhibit a consistent viewpoint, likely valuing the representation of working mothers on this matter. However, a notable shift in perception occurs among respondents aged sixty and above, who might have witnessed shifting societal norms of motherhood holding a significant divergence in opinion from younger demographics. This could be because of the gender gap and the bounded social scenarios around that age group. Yet distinguished research could identify the scientific reasons why elderly people are not showing interest in the need for a working mother character portrayal. The resultant p-value of 0.39 from ANOVA tests indicates weak shreds of evidence against the null hypothesis.

Hence the proposed null hypothesis (HN0) *“There is a pressing need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil cinema”* has been proved.

EMBRACING WORKING MOTHER CHARACTER



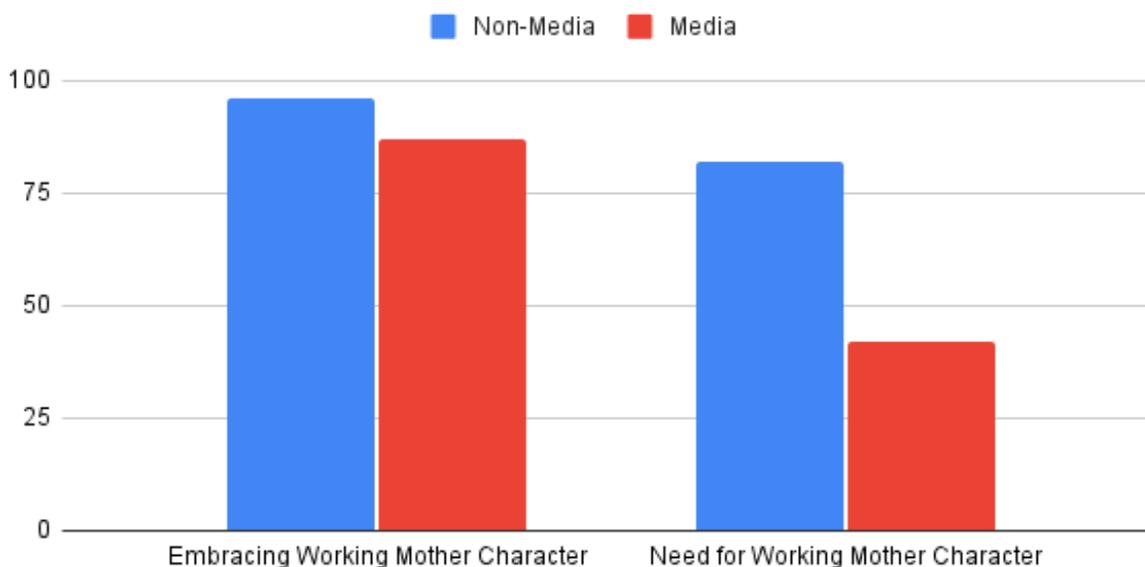
The research data on gender's influence on perspectives regarding the need for working mother characters in Tamil cinema reveals minimal differences between male and female opinions. While the obtained p-value of 0.03 initially suggests a statistically minimal difference, further analysis, and contextual considerations warrant a nuanced interpretation.

Despite the statistically significant p-value, and the noted differences among age groups, the gender opinions seem practically insignificant. There could be notable differences in opinion concerning the sample size and larger demographic samples that cover both rural and urban, which may reveal a different pattern. Another factor that could be pointed out is the research design might not have captured all the nuances of the gender-based perspective. These are just speculations on the derived p-value not to be considered as the determinants of the p-value.

The null hypothesis HN1 **“Perspective on the need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil Cinema vary with gender factor”** is rejected.

Moving on to the next variable the media and non-media population, the research finds notable differences in preferences related to the need for the portrayal of working mother characters. Research studies indicate that women are still underrepresented in film (Elsesser, 2023). People who are not part of the media industry exhibit their preference for relatable portrayal of working mother characters in Tamil movies. Those who work in the film industry such as writers, directors, technicians, and producers differ in their views on working mother character portrayal. Factors such as creative choices, trends in the industry, and self-reflection biases seem to influence the perspective towards the need for working mothers portrayal. The disparity between the general audience perspective and the media population could lead to dissatisfaction among the audience if not adapted for a longer time.

Embracing Working Mother Character and Need for Working Mother Character



The proposed null hypothesis, HN2 “**Perspective on the need for working mother character portrayal in Tamil Cinema vary among Media and Non- Media groups**” is accepted as the p-value shows 0.16 when testing using the ANOVA tool.

CONCLUSION

The research suggests that the movie industry should look into the possibilities of making movies with strong roles on women characters, especially working mother characters. Few films portray strong women characters either glorify or depict in pathetic conditions. Character portrayal in the film must be based on societal reflection with the real experiences of women in diverse fields. There is a pressing need for the normalization of female roles in films with an inclusive approach toward depicting the major role she endured as a woman: the working mother. Films can contribute to a broader understanding by society of the contributions women make towards society and their families.

While examining the perspectives of both media and non-media populations both express the need and interest for working mother characters in general. At the same time while examining the box-office hits like Jailer, Vikram movies, the mass preferences is driven towards male-centric stereotype representations alone. Hence filmmakers continue to repeat the success formula rather than something new. Cinema being the most powerful medium on societal impact, both media and non-media populations should start changing their preferences.

Depiction of women in films on what they achieve impacts the societal attitude toward gender roles. The behavior of an individual changes with mass behavior observed in society. Since film is believed to reflect the behavior of mass society the research concludes with the statement to start portraying working mothers in films and start supporting the movies that portray working mother characters.

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