FSU | FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

FSU UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM
CENTER FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Representation of Women in Female-Directed Bollywood Films

Juan Tuta, Anthony Lee.

Rebecca Peters

College of Arts and Sciences, Department Religion

Background Information

From its origins, Bollywood has been a movie industry that casts men and female characters according to strict gender roles. In the early 20th century, women were typically not allowed to act in films at all (Stuti, 2023). This led to many important/main roles becoming male-dominated within the industry, heavily outweighing their female counterparts. However, with an increase in female directors in Bollywood, they have begun to combat this problem and level the playing field. According to Alankrita Shrivastava, "Indian cinema should not just add more female protagonists but also change the lens and prism through which we look at female characters. Given the ongoing male-dominated nature of Indian society, it is convenient to portray women in a way that continues to feed patriarchy — and all this is done in the name of commerce." This research study aims to analyze the impact that female directors have on their actors by enabling them to earn more powerful roles in the industry while simultaneously receiving greater recognition.

Methods

- Films are viewed multiple times and then analyzed through Qualtrics surveys, looking for specific criteria that determine the portrayal of each speaking female character.
- Each film is initially viewed once or twice, allowing the coders to become familiar with it and count each speaking female character.
- The Qualtrics survey includes questions on each character's demographics (age, religion, etc.), relationships with other women, behaviors, and experiences.
- Multiple coders are used for each film and their characters to ensure the data is accurate.
- Weekly meetings are held to discuss the results and resolve any contrast in criteria the characters may or may not have met.
- The agreed-upon results are then entered into a final survey.

Figure 1. Character's economic class representation

16%   18%
      10%
19%   10%
28%

Can't Tell   Lower Class   Lower Middle Class   Middle Class   Upper Middle Class   Upper Class
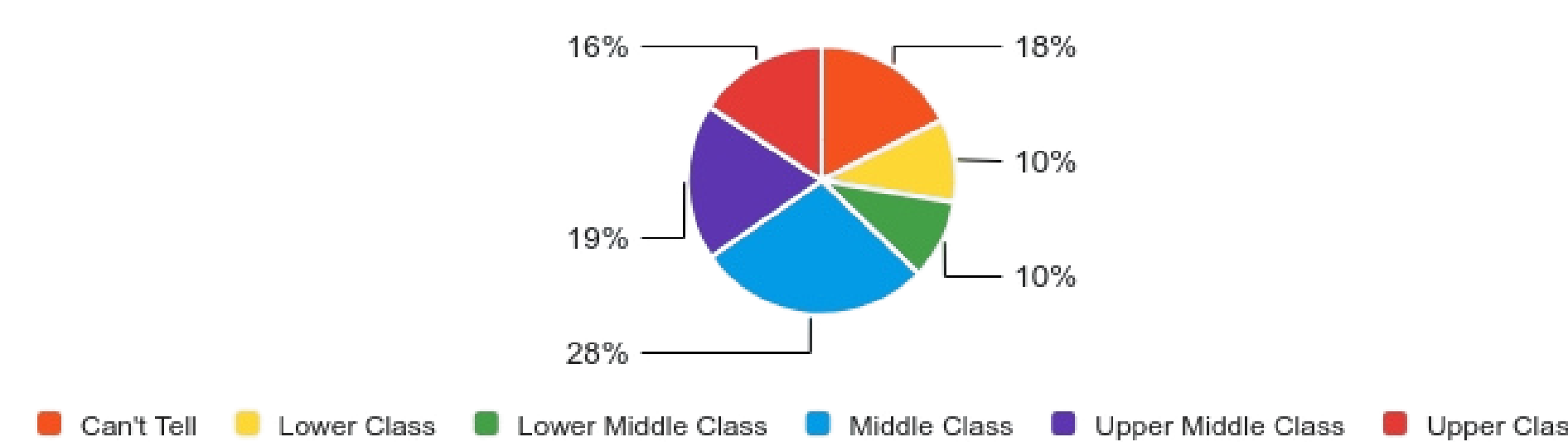
Figure 2. Gendered behavior seen throughout the surveyed characters

Speaking softly [4%, 26]
Acting Shy [2%, 9]
Being submissive or docile [4%, ...
Generous [3%, 19]
Naïve [2%, 12]
Polite [5%, 31]
None [58%, 348]
Family-oriented [12%, 74]
Gullible [1%, 3]
Empathetic - Sensitive to others' ...
Eagerness to soothes others ...
Husband-worshipping [2%, 10]
Other [1%, 8]
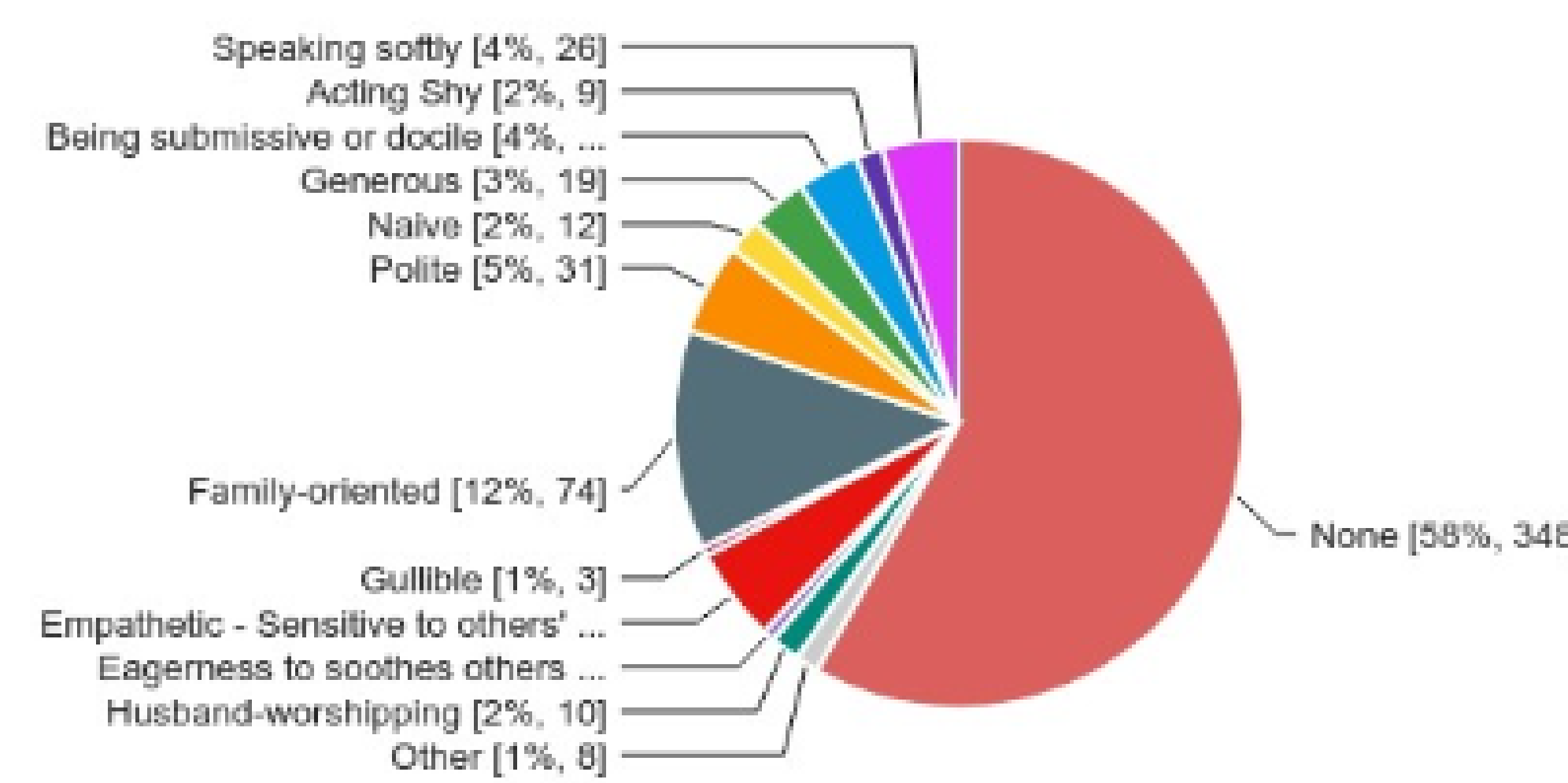
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our wonderful research mentor Ms. Rebecca Peters for all she has done for us throughout our research project. Without her help and guidance, none of this would have been possible.

Results/ Discussion

To date there have been surveys completed for 30 films ranging from 2004 to 2024. The results so far concluded that Bollywood films tend to portray less gendered behavior, 58% of the characters showing none. And a fairer representation of all social classes, 28% of the characters belonging to the middle class, 19% upper-middle class, 16% upper class, 10% middle-lower class, and 10% lower class. Additionally, when keeping record of traumas experienced by female characters, female directors decided to highlight the disregard they faced even when their traumas were acknowledged, as 25% of character victims to forms of sexual assault never received a proper care for their traumas, and neither were 50% of the characters who suffered catcalling or verbal sexual harassment. This represented that women directors do indeed change the treatment women get in their roles in Bollywood films, as this platform was used to both denounce the disregard they suffer for their traumas and convey a more balanced representation of all the members of Indian society without gendered stereotypes. Providing both physical and verbal sexual harassment portrayals signifies a platform for their victims to be heard and brings attention to how terrible their condition is when dealing with it. Similarly, a reduction in gendered behavior fosters a culture more open to the development of female identity outside of patriarchal paradigms. The strength of this research is the easy use of surveys which helps to cover a wide number of productions and makes holding track of characters that otherwise would go unnoticed; however, the study does lack a record of male-directed movies in order to hold a control group to compare how far off representation is between genders. The study is still in progress, and as more movies are being studied more, varying results might be obtained, however, this kind of project helps further communicate the voices of Bollywood directors and bring attention to the culture that produces and consumes them

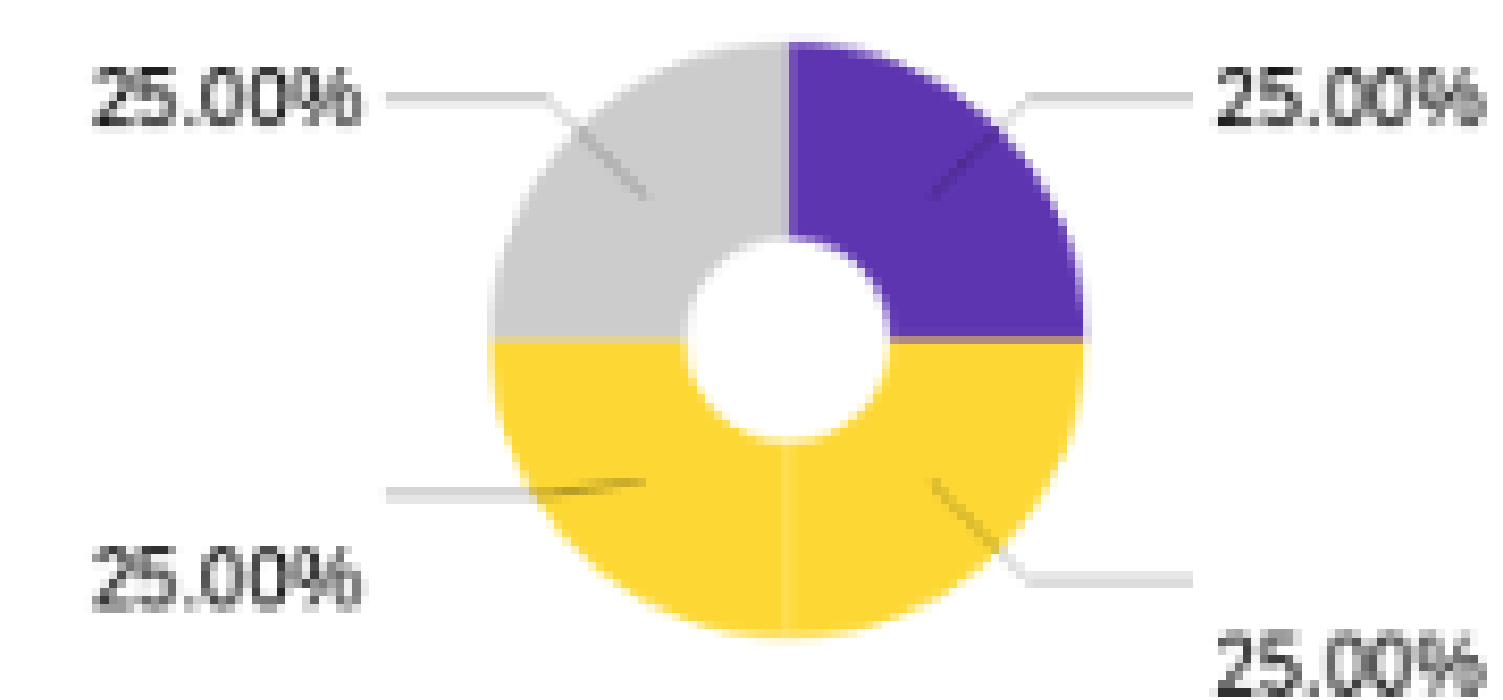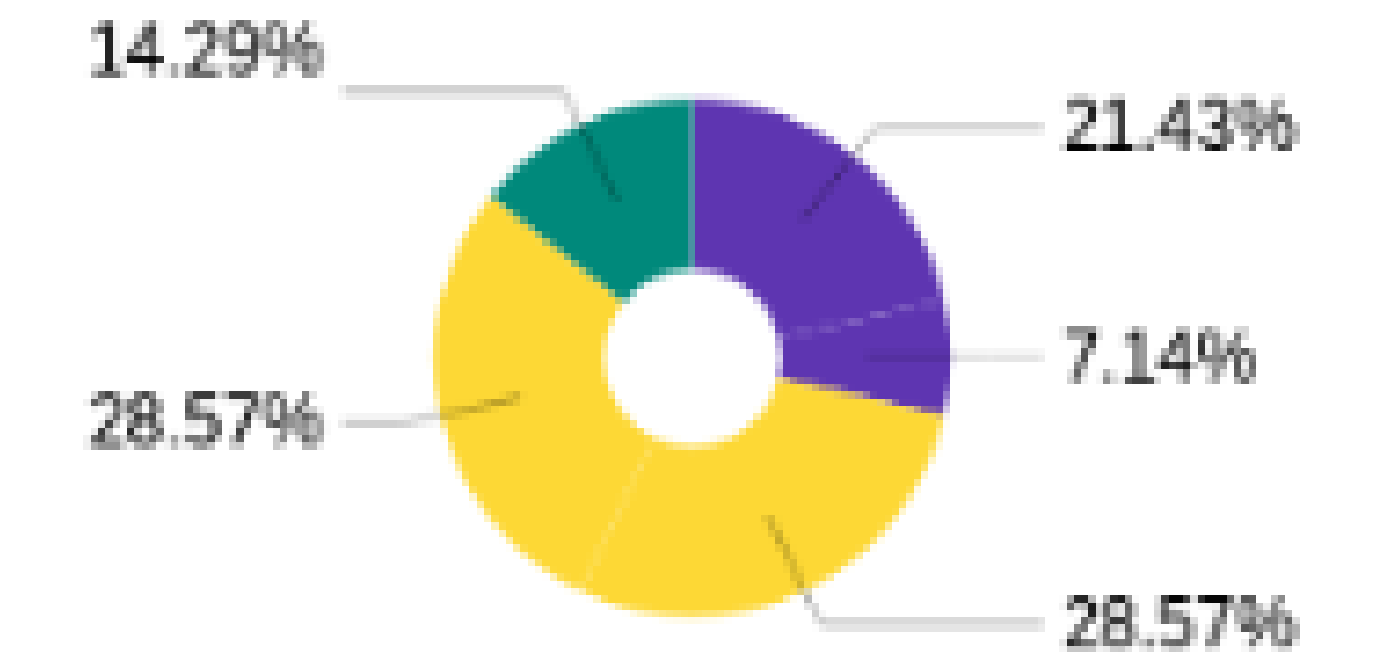Figure 3. Characters exposed to catcalling/ verbal sexual harassment

25.00%   25.00%
25.00%   25.00%

Figure 4. Percentage of characters exposed to sexual assault /rape

14.29%   21.43%
28.57%   7.14%
         28.57%

For both of these graphs, purple represents identified then acknowledged by either family or non-family members, green represents identified then acknowledged by police authorities, and blue means identified and disregarded by police authorities, and yellow means identified but disregarded by both family and non-family members

References

Tiwari, Anupama. "How Female Filmmakers Are Transforming Indian Cinema." The Hollywood Reporter, 6 July 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/how-female-filmmakers-are-transforming-indian-cinema-1006036/.

"Changing Face of Women's Representation in Hindi Cinema." Hindu College Gazette, https://www.hinducollegegazette.com/post/changing-face-of-women-s-representation-in-hindi-cinema.

Khan, Subuhi, and Laramie D Taylor. "Gender Policing in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: A Decade of Central Female Characters in Top-Grossing Bollywood Movies." International Journal of Communication (Online) (2018): 3641–3662. Print.

Bielby, Denise D. "Gender Inequality in Culture Industries: Women and Men Writers in Film and Television / L'inégalité de genre dans les industries culturelles : Les femmes et les hommes scénaristes de films au cinéma et à la télévision." Sociologie du travail, vol. 51, no. 2, 2009, pp. 237-252. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/xxxxxxxxxx.