

The Characterization of Female Characters in Female-Directed Bollywood Films



References



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Introduction

Only 1 out of 10 directors in Bollywood is a woman.

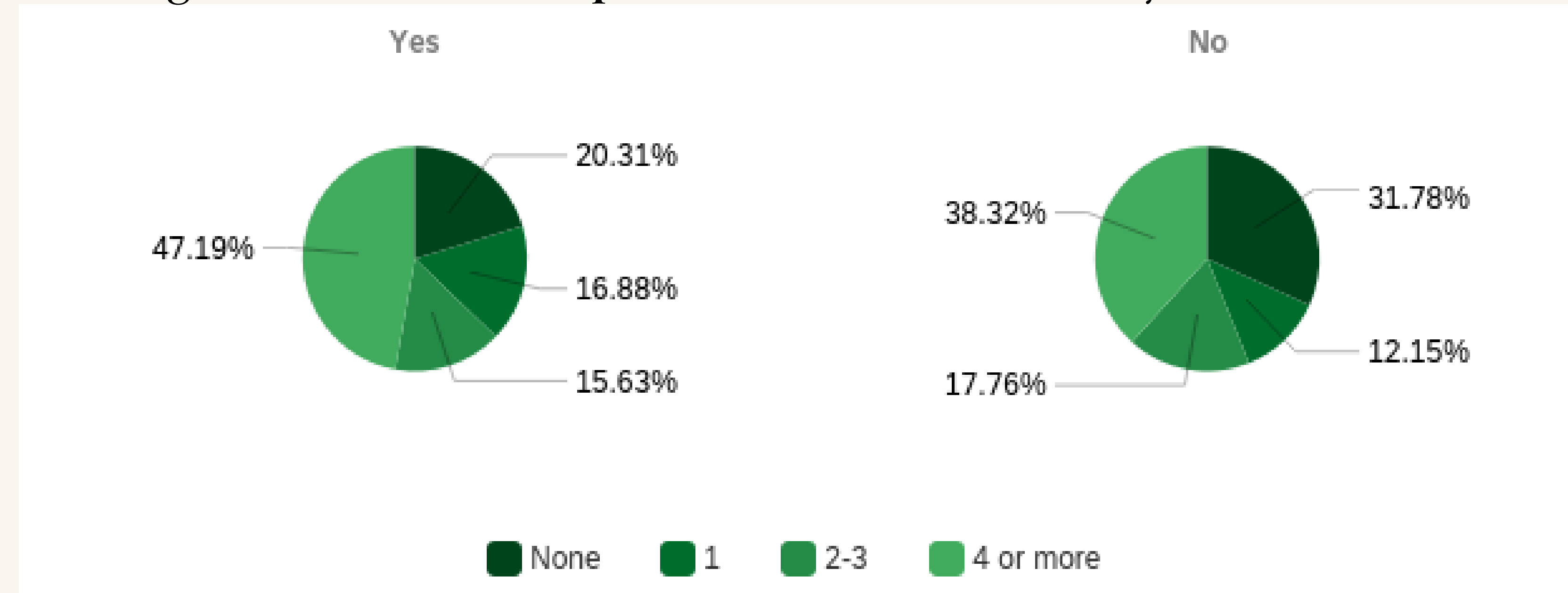
- As a result, many female characters are often depicted through a patriarchal and misogynistic lens. However, despite the low ratio of female to male directors, in the past decade, the presence of Bollywood films directed by women has been on a steady incline.
- Our research examines the portrayal of female characters in Bollywood films directed by women—an essential component for understanding how women are portrayed in Bollywood as a whole.

Methodology

- We watched and analyzed female-directed Bollywood films and were able to materialize our research data through survey coding. At least two trained researchers independently coded each character, and their responses were cross-checked for consistency.
- We used Qualtrics surveys to code each female-speaking character systemically and evaluated each across a series of categories:

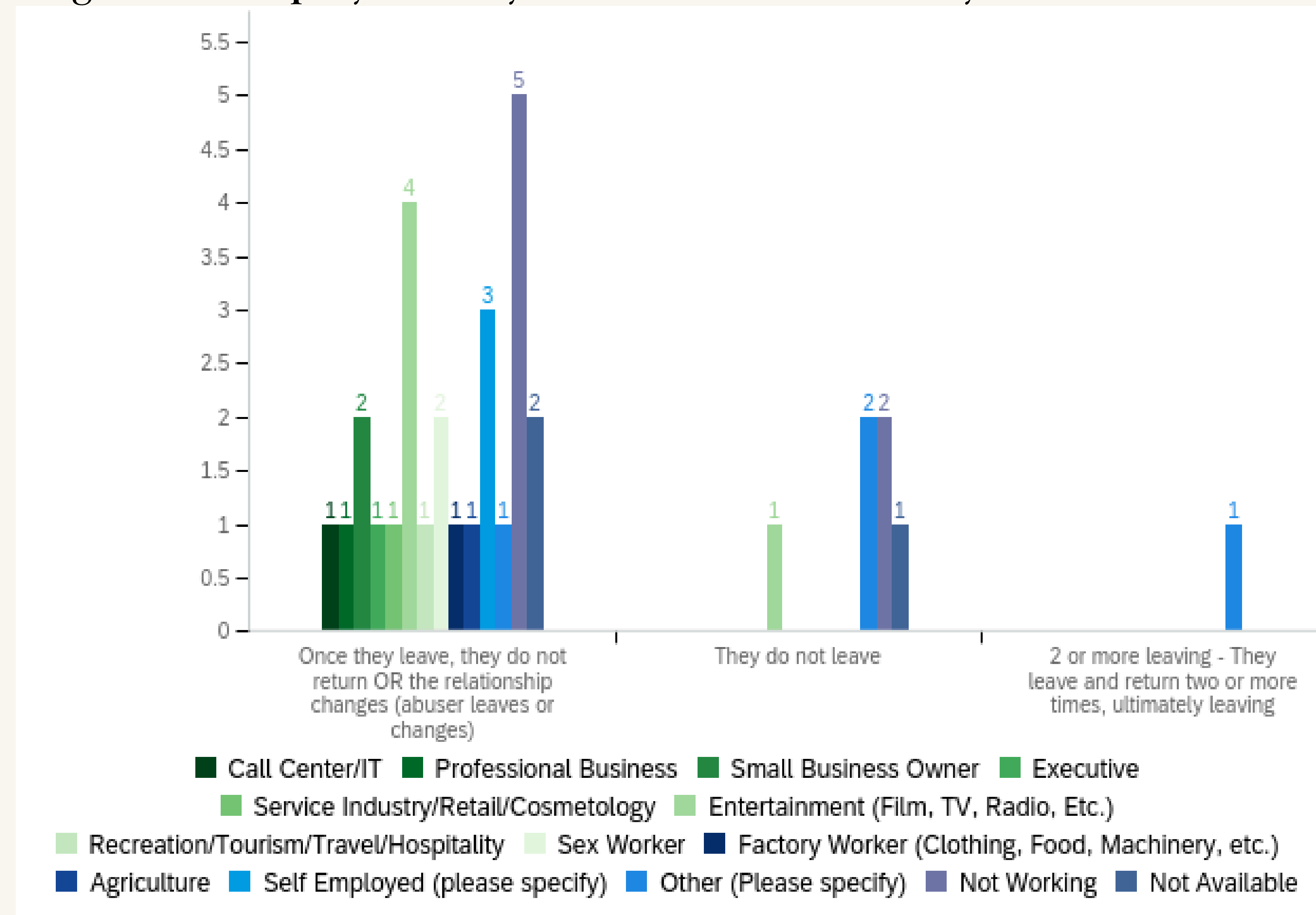
- Behavior
- Narrative Role
- Demographics
- Representation
- Female relationships
- (Passing of) the Bechdel test

Figure I. Relationships with Other Women By Bechdel Test



What is the Bechdel test?: “A measure of gender representation governed by three rules: that there must be at least two characters who are women, who talk to each other, about something other than a man” (Kalia, 2022).

Figure II. Employment by Number of Times They Return to Abuser



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Preliminary Findings

- Bollywood films directed by women appear to shape female representation differently, especially in the number and depth of relationships between women. Even when films failed the Bechdel test, most female characters had four or more relationships with other women.
- As Anjaria notes, “Films centered around the dynamics of female friendships are [rarer] in Bollywood, even as female friendships themselves are quite common.”
- The number of times they return to an abusive relationship also invites further discussion. Only 8% of female characters surveyed are in an abusive relationship—the other 92% are not shown in Figure II.
- While the majority of female characters leave and do not return, or the abuser changes, it is important to note that there is a mix of traditional and non-traditional jobs. However, those who do not leave or leave and return all have non-traditional jobs or are unemployed, relying on their abuser for financial stability.

Implications

As more female directors break into this male-dominated industry, there will be greater female representation in Bollywood—the female experience will be centered—and, slowly, these changes will significantly impact the characterization of female characters on a larger scale.