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Framing Gender: Representation And Reality in Media – A Critical Reflection From Kerala

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Introduction

Gender framing in media refers to how media constructs, represents, and reinforces gender identities and roles through specific patterns, narratives, and visual cues. Framing, a concept rooted in communication theory, refers to how information is selected, emphasized, or omitted, shaping how audiences perceive and understand social reality. In the context of gender, media framing involves selecting and presenting gender-related content in a way that often upholds existing social norms and power structures. This includes stereotypical portrayals of women as caregivers or objects of desire, men as strong and dominant, and the erasure or mockery of non-binary and queer identities. The choices made by media creators—what stories are told, whose voices are heard, and how bodies are shown—profoundly influence societal attitudes toward gender.

In his seminal work *Gender Advertisements* (1979), Erving Goffman was one of the first scholars to analyze how media images shape perceptions of masculinity and femininity. He observed that even seemingly ordinary advertisements subtly encode messages about gender hierarchies—for example, through body language, posture, or the positioning of male and female subjects. Goffman argued that these visual cues are not neutral but are structured to maintain societal gendered power relations. Building on Goffman's insights, media scholars such as Robert Endman and Karen Ross have deepened the theoretical grounding of framing by emphasizing the role of repetition and cultural context. Ross, in *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics* (2010), asserts that media acts not merely as a mirror but as a "cultural storyteller" that systematically excludes or marginalizes women and gender minorities from central narratives, reinforcing what is considered 'normal' or 'acceptable' gender behavior.

In Kerala's media landscape, gender framing manifests in nuanced ways, from melodramatic soap operas that glorify female sacrifice to news reporting that shames women victims of violence, and from heroic male leads in cinema to the marginalization of transgender characters as comic relief. The cumulative

effect is a media culture that often maintains patriarchal binaries while silencing diverse and lived gender realities.

Media in kerala—progressive reputation vs. Underlying patriarchies

Kerala has long been celebrated as a progressive state, known for its high literacy rate, robust public health system, and relatively advanced gender-development indicators. The media in Kerala—particularly the Malayalam press and cinema—have often mirrored this image by addressing socially relevant themes, including women's education, public health, and class struggles. However, beneath this progressive veneer lies a deeply entrenched patriarchal structure that subtly, and at times overtly, governs media narratives. Despite the increasing visibility of women in journalism, filmmaking, and digital platforms, decision-making spaces in media organizations remain overwhelmingly male-dominated in the Philippines.

Mainstream Malayalam cinema, for instance, continues to reinforce hypermasculine heroes and idealized, sacrificial women, often romanticizing control, emotional manipulation, and even violence as love. Films like *Drishyam* (2013) or *Pulimurugan* (2016), while commercially successful, subtly reinforce the idea of male heroism rooted in protectionism, thereby sidelining female agency. Similarly, television serials regularly depict women in domestic spheres, glorifying their suffering and obedience, which reflects the normalization of patriarchal values. Moreover, news coverage in Kerala often sensationalizes gender-based violence without addressing systemic issues or providing survivors with dignity. Media trials and character assassinations of women who defy social norms are not uncommon. This contradiction has been powerfully articulated by feminist collectives like the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), which emerged in response to the sexual assault of a popular actress in 2017 and exposed the film industry's entrenched misogyny. Scholars like J. Devika have noted that Kerala's public sphere, while modern in structure, is steeped in "gendered moralities" that restrict women's autonomy under the guise of cultural preservation. Thus, while Kerala's media has the infrastructure and public support to be a space of progressive gender discourse, it often reinforces traditional gender roles and silences marginalized voices, revealing a persistent gap between representation and lived reality.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the representation of gender in Kerala's media, including cinema, television, print journalism, and digital platforms.
2. To analyze how media narratives construct, reinforce, or challenge gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.
3. To investigate the intersection of gender with caste, class, and sexuality in media representations, with particular attention to marginalized communities.
4. To assess the influence of media portrayals on public perception and societal attitudes toward women, transgender persons, and queer communities.
5. To explore the role of feminist collectives, independent media, and digital activism in challenging patriarchal narratives and promoting inclusive gender representation.
6. To suggest measures for promoting gender-sensitive media practices and strengthening media ethics for equitable representation in Kerala.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that explains how media construct, reproduce, and challenge gender identities within Kerala's socio-cultural context. Rather than viewing media as a neutral institution that simply reflects reality, this study considers media as an active cultural force that shapes public understanding of gender through language, images, symbols, and narratives. To achieve a comprehensive analysis, the study draws upon Framing Theory, Representation Theory, Feminist Media Theory, Gender Performativity Theory, and the concept of Intersectionality. Together, these perspectives provide a strong analytical foundation for understanding the relationship between media representation and gendered social realities.

The primary theoretical lens employed in this study is Framing Theory, introduced by Erving Goffman (1974) and further developed by Robert Entman (1993). According to this theory, media organizations selectively emphasize certain aspects of reality while minimizing or ignoring others. Such selective presentation influences how audiences interpret social issues and shapes public opinion. In the context of gender, framing determines the way women, men, and gender minorities are represented in newspapers, cinema, television, and digital platforms. Media often portray women as caregivers, mothers, or victims, whereas men are represented as leaders, protectors, and decision-makers. These recurring frames normalize patriarchal values and contribute to the acceptance of traditional gender roles within society. In Kerala, where media enjoy significant social influence, such framing affects public perceptions of gender equality and social justice.

The study also draws upon Stuart Hall's Representation Theory (1997), which argues that media do not simply mirror reality but actively construct meaning through systems of representation. According to Hall, language, visual images, and cultural symbols create particular understandings of social identities. Gender identities portrayed in media are therefore cultural constructions rather than objective reflections of everyday life. Within Kerala's media landscape, representations of women, transgender persons, and marginalized communities are influenced by dominant social ideologies and institutional power structures. Representation Theory enables this study to examine how media create and reinforce specific ideas of femininity, masculinity, morality, and respectability while marginalizing alternative identities and experiences.

An important dimension of this study is informed by Feminist Media Theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of the Male Gaze (1975). Mulvey argues that mainstream visual media are structured around a masculine perspective that positions women as objects of visual pleasure rather than as independent subjects. Female characters are frequently valued for their appearance, beauty, and emotional support, while male characters occupy positions of authority and action. This theoretical perspective is especially useful in analysing Malayalam cinema and television serials, where women are often portrayed as self-sacrificing wives, mothers, or romantic interests, whereas male protagonists dominate narratives through strength, leadership, and heroism. The Male Gaze therefore provides an important framework for understanding how visual media reproduce patriarchal ideologies and unequal gender relations.

The study further incorporates Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity (1990), which challenges the belief that gender is a fixed biological identity. Butler argues that gender is continuously produced through repeated actions, behaviours, language, and social practices. Individuals learn to perform socially accepted forms of masculinity and femininity through everyday interactions and cultural expectations. Media play a significant role in reinforcing these performances by repeatedly presenting idealized models of gender behaviour. Television programmes, films, advertisements, and social media encourage audiences

to internalize culturally accepted gender norms while marginalizing identities that challenge traditional binary understandings of gender. This theoretical perspective helps explain how media contribute to maintaining gender stereotypes across generations.

The concept of Intersectionality, originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides another important analytical perspective for this study. Intersectionality argues that experiences of discrimination cannot be understood solely through gender because social identities such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality interact to shape individual experiences. In Kerala, gender representation is deeply influenced by these intersecting social identities. Mainstream media often privilege upper-caste and dominant social groups while overlooking or stereotyping the experiences of Dalit women, Muslim women, transgender persons, and queer communities. By adopting an intersectional perspective, this study recognizes that gender inequality operates through multiple structures of power and therefore requires a more inclusive approach to media analysis.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for understanding gender representation in Kerala's media. Framing Theory explains how media select and prioritize specific narratives; Representation Theory demonstrates how meanings and identities are socially constructed; Feminist Media Theory reveals the patriarchal assumptions embedded in visual culture; Gender Performativity explains how media normalize socially accepted gender roles; and Intersectionality highlights the influence of caste, class, religion, and sexuality on media representation. The integration of these theories enables a deeper examination of the complex relationship between media, gender, power, and society in Kerala. This framework ultimately supports the study's objective of critically analysing the gap between media representations of gender and the lived experiences of diverse communities while contributing to discussions on gender-sensitive media practices and inclusive cultural representation.

Stereotypes and silences in kerala's media

Kerala's media, despite its progressive reputation, continues to reproduce deeply entrenched gender, caste, and sexuality-based stereotypes that silence marginalized voices and uphold dominant hierarchies. Women are frequently depicted through archetypes such as the obedient wife, the sacrificial mother, or the sexualized dancer, reinforcing the binary of the "good" versus the "bad" woman. Television serials, for instance, celebrate the virtues of self-effacing women who silently suffer for family unity, while vilifying ambitious, outspoken women as immoral or disruptive. Cinema perpetuates this through characters who find redemption only through marriage, motherhood, or death. Men are predominantly portrayed as emotionally unavailable, dominant figures—heroes who resort to violence to protect or reclaim honor. This not only reinforces toxic masculinity but also sidelines male vulnerability and emotional complexity. The masculine ideal in Malayalam cinema is often shaped by hyper-masculine icons who silence dissent, control female characters, and gain moral legitimacy through aggression.

Transgender and queer identities have historically been marginalized or ridiculed in mainstream Malayalam media. They were either completely invisible or caricatured in comical or villainous roles, contributing to societal stigma. However, there has been a marginal shift in recent years, especially after the release of the 2018 film Njan Marykutty, which offered a relatively dignified portrayal of a transgender woman. Yet, such representation remains an exception rather than the norm, and trans voices are rarely authored by trans individuals themselves. The intersection of caste and gender, especially the lived realities of Dalit women, remains largely invisible in Kerala's media narratives. Dalit women are either erased or

shown through a Savarna lens, often reduced to domestic workers or victims without agency. Their struggles—ranging from systemic exclusion to sexual violence—are rarely centered, reflecting a broader Savarna bias in both content and production houses. the near absence of Dalit journalists, screenwriters, and media producers perpetuates this erasure, leaving the media landscape dominated by upper-caste perspectives.

Negotiating gender, public morality, and digital resistance in kerala

The relationship between media and public morality in Kerala reflects a complex interaction between cultural traditions, social expectations, and changing forms of communication. Although Kerala is widely recognized for its high literacy rate and progressive social development, media narratives often continue to reinforce conventional ideas about gender, respectability, and acceptable behaviour. Through news reporting, entertainment media, and online platforms, the media not only communicate information but also influence public opinion by defining what is considered socially appropriate. As a result, gender identities are frequently evaluated within moral frameworks that privilege conformity over individuality.

Women, in particular, experience greater scrutiny within these media narratives. Public discussions surrounding women's clothing, personal relationships, career choices, and participation in public spaces are often framed as matters of morality rather than individual rights. This tendency encourages public judgement of women's behaviour while diverting attention from broader concerns such as discrimination, unequal opportunities, workplace harassment, and gender-based violence. Consequently, media discourse contributes to the social regulation of women's lives by reinforcing traditional expectations regarding femininity and family responsibilities.

The rapid expansion of digital media has transformed this landscape by creating new opportunities as well as new challenges. Social networking platforms have enabled women, gender minorities, and civil society organizations to share experiences, build support networks, and participate in public debates that were previously inaccessible. Digital spaces have become important forums for discussing gender justice, workplace discrimination, and media accountability. Campaigns led by activists, journalists, and feminist organizations have successfully challenged biased reporting, questioned sexist portrayals in cinema and television, and encouraged public conversations about equality and inclusion.

At the same time, digital communication has also intensified gender-based hostility. Women who express independent opinions or challenge dominant social norms frequently become targets of online abuse, character assassination, misinformation, and cyber harassment. Such attacks are often intended to discourage women and marginalized communities from participating in public discourse. The anonymity and rapid spread of digital content allow discriminatory narratives to circulate widely, creating new forms of social control that extend beyond traditional media institutions.

The emergence of digital feminism has further strengthened this process of resistance by connecting local struggles with broader national and global movements for gender justice. Online campaigns have demonstrated the power of collective action in challenging institutional inequalities, demanding accountability, and amplifying marginalized voices. Although structural inequalities continue to shape media representation, the growing participation of women, LGBTQIA+ communities, and independent media practitioners indicates a gradual shift towards more democratic and inclusive forms of communication.

Therefore, the interaction between media, morality, and resistance in Kerala should not be understood simply as a conflict between tradition and modernity. Instead, it represents an ongoing process through which competing ideas about gender, culture, identity, and social justice are continuously negotiated. Media remain both a site where gender stereotypes are reproduced and a platform through which these stereotypes are increasingly challenged. The future of gender representation in Kerala will largely depend on the ability of media institutions, policymakers, educators, and civil society to promote ethical, inclusive, and socially responsible communication.

Case studies: media, gender, and power in kerala

The media's treatment of actress Manju Warriar following her divorce from actor Dileep in 2015 is emblematic of how women's autonomy is scrutinized in Kerala's public discourse. Despite being a celebrated actor and classical dancer, Warriar was subjected to moral surveillance by both mainstream media and online platforms, which portrayed her decision as disruptive to traditional family values. This framing contributed to a broader narrative that valorised Dileep's silence and vilified Manju's agency, illustrating how female subjectivity is often interpreted through patriarchal lenses of duty and sacrifice. Her later association with the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) further challenged these narratives, positioning her as a symbol of resistance against male-dominated power structures in the industry.

The MeToo movement in Malayalam cinema, particularly the Dileep case, brought to the forefront the deep-rooted misogyny within Kerala's film industry. After a popular actress was abducted and assaulted in 2017—allegedly orchestrated by Dileep—the response from the industry was split. A significant number of powerful men rallied around Dileep, citing his innocence, while a group of women actors formed the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) to demand structural reforms and gender justice. Media coverage was polarized, with some outlets trivializing the survivors' claims and others giving voice to the feminist resurgence.

The 2022 Malayalam film *Malikappuram* offers a case study in how cinema can deploy gendered Hindu iconography to reinforce nationalist sentiment. The film centers around a young girl's journey to the Sabarimala temple, portraying her devotion in a way that aligns with right-wing discourses on purity, faith, and womanhood. Despite its artistic merit, the film subtly supports patriarchal and casteist ideologies by valorizing Brahminical patriarchy and positioning Hindu religiosity as a moral compass, implicitly excluding Muslim and Christian narratives. This reflects a growing trend in Kerala's cultural productions, where nationalist iconography and gendered symbolism intersect to promote a homogenized vision of womanhood that erases dissenting voices.

Policy, education, and way forward: moving toward a gender-equitable media landscape

As Kerala continues its journey towards social, economic, and cultural modernization, there is an urgent need to address persistent gender biases in the media. While the media can be a powerful tool for empowerment and social change, its current role often reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Therefore, a comprehensive approach that incorporates gender-sensitive media policies, education, and inclusive storytelling practices is essential to address these issues and create a more equitable media ecosystem in Kerala.

Need for Gender-Sensitive Media Policies: Implementing gender-sensitive media policies is a primary step in dismantling gender stereotypes and biases. Both traditional and digital media outlets in Kerala should be guided by frameworks that enforce gender equality in content creation and its representation. These policies could mandate the equal representation of women and marginalized genders in newsrooms, production teams, and on-screen roles. For instance, they should regulate the portrayal of women's bodies, their roles in the family and society, and their emotional experiences, ensuring that they are not reduced to mere objects of desire or passive figures in domestic settings. Additionally, media watchdogs and regulatory bodies must create standards for ethical reporting on gender-based violence, making it mandatory for outlets to follow sensitive, survivor-centered reporting guidelines. This would ensure a shift from sensationalism to responsible reporting.

Media Literacy Programs in Schools and Colleges: A vital area for long-term change is the introduction of media literacy programs in schools and colleges in Kerala. Media literacy empowers students to critically engage with media content, recognize biased representations, and challenge gender stereotypes. By incorporating media literacy into the educational curriculum, Kerala can cultivate a generation of young people who are not only aware of the gendered dimensions of the media but are also active in demanding inclusive and fair portrayals. Furthermore, universities and colleges can offer courses or workshops that delve into how the media perpetuates patriarchal values and stereotypes, with a focus on the intersectionality of gender, caste, class, and religion. Educational institutions should also actively promote gender studies programs to equip future media professionals with the tools necessary to create content that reflects social justice and gender equality.

Encourage Inclusive Storytelling and Diverse Newsroom Representation: Inclusive storytelling is crucial for breaking away from the limitations imposed by patriarchal frameworks. Media houses in Kerala must encourage narratives that reflect a broader spectrum of gender identities, sexual orientations, and social classes. This means prioritizing stories about women, LGBTQ+ individuals, Dalits, and other marginalized groups that are rarely seen in mainstream media. These stories should not only focus on oppression but also celebrate resilience, resistance, and agency. Importantly, media organizations should make concerted efforts to ensure diverse newsroom representation, including women and gender minorities in leadership roles, as they bring unique perspectives that influence editorial decisions and content production. Diverse teams are more likely to produce well-rounded and inclusive content that reflects the lives and experiences of all sections of society. By enacting gender-sensitive media policies, fostering media literacy, and encouraging inclusive storytelling and newsroom diversity, Kerala can create a more just and equitable media landscape. These steps are essential to combating the entrenched gender biases that continue to shape public perception and perpetuate social inequalities.

Conclusion

Media plays a vital role in shaping public understanding of gender by influencing how individuals and communities perceive identity, roles, and social expectations. In Kerala, despite its progressive social indicators, media representations often continue to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, limiting the visibility and agency of women, transgender persons, and other marginalized groups. Such portrayals influence public attitudes and contribute to the continuation of unequal gender relations.

, the emergence of digital media, feminist activism, and independent journalism has created new opportunities to challenge these dominant narratives. Social media campaigns, alternative media platforms, and civil society initiatives have encouraged more inclusive discussions on gender equality, representation,

and media ethics. These developments demonstrate that media can function not only as a medium of cultural reproduction but also as a catalyst for social transformation.

Creating a gender-inclusive media environment requires responsible journalism, diverse representation in media institutions, and ethical storytelling that respects the dignity and experiences of all communities. By promoting balanced and inclusive narratives, Kerala's media can contribute to reducing gender discrimination and strengthening democratic values. Future media practices should therefore prioritize equality, diversity, and social responsibility to ensure that media truly reflects the realities of an inclusive society.

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