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Silenced Voices and Acts of Resistance: Investigating Female Agency and the Criminalisation of Casting Couch Practices in Malayalam Cinema

With an emphasis on female agency and the criminalisation process, this article investigates casting couch practices in the Malayalam film industry. Casting couch practices continue to exist despite the casual nature of the entertainment industry. This study examines how women negotiate, oppose, and confront these exploitative relationships using a feminist criminological framework and the availability of existing legal frames to tackle the issue. Data sources include testimonials from industry specialists, media reports, and legal files. The thematic analysis identifies patterns of resistance, agency, and the legal and societal barriers faced by women in reporting harassment. Though female agency manifests through silent resistance, networking, and public testimony, weak legal enforcement and the industry's reluctance to adopt comprehensive behaviour standards perpetuate a culture of silence. This study advocates for enhanced activism and regulatory reforms to establish a safer and more equitable working environment for women in Malayalam cinema.

Schlagwörter: Casting Couch; Criminalisation; Female Agency; Hema Committee Report; Indian Cinema; Malayalam Cinema

Zum Schweigen gebrachte Stimmen und Akte des Widerstands: Untersuchung weiblicher Agency und der Kriminalisierung von Casting-Couch-Praktiken in der Malayalam Filmindustrie

Mit einem Schwerpunkt auf weiblicher agency und dem Kriminalisierungsprozess untersucht dieser Artikel die Praktiken der Besetzungscouch in der Filmindustrie von Malayalam. Trotz der lockeren Atmosphäre der Unterhaltungsindustrie bestehen diese Praktiken weiterhin. Diese Studie untersucht, wie Frauen diese ausbeuterischen Beziehungen aushandeln, bekämpfen und ansprechen. Dabei wird ein feministischer kriminologischer Rahmen und die Verfügbarkeit bestehender rechtlicher Rahmenbedingungen zur Bewältigung des Problems genutzt. Zu den Datenquellen zählen Erfahrungsberichte von Branchenexpert:innen, Medienberichte und Rechtsakten. Die thematische Analyse identifiziert Muster des Widerstands, der agency sowie die rechtlichen und gesellschaftlichen Barrieren, mit denen Frauen bei der Meldung von Belästigung konfrontiert sind. Obwohl sich weibliche agency in stillem Widerstand, Vernetzung und öffentlichen Aussagen manifestiert, führen schwache rechtliche Durchsetzung und die Zurückhaltung der Branche, umfassende Verhaltensstandards zu übernehmen, zu einer Kultur des Schweigens. Diese Studie plädiert für verstärkten Aktivismus und regulatorische Reformen, um ein sichereres und gerechteres Arbeitsumfeld für Frauen in der Filmindustrie von Malayalam zu schaffen.

Keywords: Bericht des Hema-Komitees; Casting-Couch; indisches Kino; Kriminalisierung; Filmindustrie von Malayalam; weibliche Handlungsfähigkeit

1. Introduction

The Kerala government's public release of the Justice Hema committee report in August 2024 triggered significant discussion about critical developments, signalling a probable shift towards accountability and structural transformation in Malayalam cinema. Established in 2017 in response to several accusations of harassment and abuse, the committee, led by Justice Hema, undertook thorough investigations into the issues that women experience in the Malayalam film industry. The committee report represents a significant advancement in the Malayalam cinema industry by suggesting measures to address long-standing systemic concerns such as sexual exploitation, uneven treatment, and insecure working circumstances that disproportionately affect women. The committee also identified casting couch concerns that question the dignity and identity of actors, especially women, limiting their opportunities and career advancement.

The casting couch phenomenon is a forced trade in which people seeking employment or development, usually women, are compelled to provide sexual favours to persons in positions of authority. This exploitative tactic is especially prominent in the global entertainment industry, where access to restricted and highly competitive roles makes aspiring performers more vulnerable. Casting couch tactics have been observed in the Malayalam film industry, echoing similar concerns in India and the world. However, the cultural, economic, and social conditions of Kerala, where the Malayalam industry is situated, give this exploitation a particular dimension.

Regardless of their privileged or underprivileged origins, young female actresses in Malayalam films are particularly vulnerable to abuse due to hierarchical power systems and conventional gender conventions. Casting couch dynamics is still widespread and often ignored, even despite well-known social media campaigns like #MeToo that have brought attention to these practices and inspired victims to come out. The situation is made more difficult by institutional silences, victim stigmatisation, and a lack of legal options. Examining this enduring issue from a sociological and criminological perspective is necessary to comprehend how long-standing cultural and industrial norms facilitate casting couch practices and how female agency subverts these coercive power structures.

In the context of the film business, 'casting couch' denotes the practice wherein persons in authoritative positions solicit or suggest sexual favours as a condition for professional advancement. These exploitative dynamics disproportionately affect women, using career aspirations to cultivate coercive connections. In the workplace, female actors frequently face a type of gendered precarity that characterises the insecure, unstable circumstances that women often encounter in such occupations, where opportunities are limited, competition is intense, and gendered expectations further marginalise female employees. It includes the ways that structural injustices and a lack of laws that provide protection make women's personal and professional lives more vulnerable. Female actors must demonstrate significant resilience and autonomy to navigate these daunting challenges and advance their careers. In this milieu, 'female agency' refers to women's ability to act autonomously, resist, or negotiate within oppressive frameworks. Notwithstanding the structural issues raised by casting couch methods, the female agency emphasises women's capacity for decision-making, self-determination, and occasionally aggressive resistance to power disparities in the business.

Casting couch practices are investigated from a criminological standpoint as forms of power exploitation and abuse, connecting with concerns of coercion, gender-based violence, and

workplace harassment. These activities are consistent with criminological theories of power and control, in which those in positions of authority use their influence to exploit susceptible individuals. This conduct is frequently coercive since it puts individuals in a position where denying advances might jeopardise their employment, making compliance a survival strategy rather than a voluntary choice. As a result, casting couch techniques can be considered illegal under frameworks that handle sexual harassment, misuse of authority, and coercion. The criminological approach also addresses how structural elements in the entertainment sector contribute to the perpetuation of these behaviours. The informal recruiting practices, lack of regulatory monitoring, and absence of reporting systems foster an environment prone to exploitation. Furthermore, patriarchal and sexist standards in the workplace normalise and conceal these behaviours, frequently preventing victims from pursuing justice. Criminology consequently calls for institutional reforms and legal tactics to identify and resist the casting couch as a criminal form of exploitative labour. This article aims to investigate the casting couch phenomenon in the Malayalam film industry through a criminological lens, focusing on the intersections of power, exploitation, and female agency. It seeks to examine how casting couch practices exploit vulnerable positions of aspiring female actors and other industry participants, as well as how female agency manifests as resistance to these exploitative practices.

2. Review of Literature

The casting couch issue is a global reflection of long-standing power disparities in the entertainment sector when those in positions of authority take advantage of those looking to progress in their careers. Research has shown that this behaviour disproportionately impacts women, with powerful males using their positions to demand sexual favours, fostering a culture of fear and intimidation (McIntosh & Davis, 2022). For example, high-profile incidents in Hollywood have exposed these dynamics, as seen by reports of the #MeToo movement, which exposed pervasive abuse in the sector (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). A life-size gilded monument of Harvey Weinstein was placed on Hollywood Boulevard in 2018. It showed the disgraced media tycoon and producer sitting on a 'casting couch', clutching an Oscar, and wearing a silky robe. This tableau is evocative of many of the accusations made against him. With allegations ranging from unwelcome approaches to rape, more than 50 women have accused Weinstein of sexual harassment, assault, or misconduct. The producer apologised to Jennifer Lawrence and Meryl Streep for using their names in his defence of a class action lawsuit, despite his denial of any claims of non-consensual sex (Mahanty, 2018).

Similar trends are observed in India as casting couch practices are a long-standing problem in the Indian film industry, which is made worse by informal recruiting, a lack of protective rules, and patriarchal attitudes. Due to stigma and industry silence, Indian actresses, especially those who are new to the business, frequently receive unwelcome approaches under the guise of employment opportunities and have few options for redress (Rajendran, 2019). Several actors have made accusations regarding such incidents in Malayalam cinema in particular, exposing the vulnerable roles that many women have in local film industries (Mini, 2019). It highlights how gendered exploitation is sustained through casting couch practices, which are motivated by ingrained power relations and structural injustices in both Indian and global contexts.

Scholarly interest in female agency in vulnerable occupations has grown, especially in the entertainment sector. Despite the structural hazards they confront, research shows that women negotiating insecure work contexts frequently use tactics to exercise control over their circumstances. For example, female performers in precarious situations use peer solidarity and informal networks to build support networks that enable them to fend off exploitative practices like casting couch dynamics. By encouraging women to exchange tactics and experiences, this camaraderie can strengthen the group's resistance to harassment at work (Duman, 2020).

While they may face coercive situations, women's agency is demonstrated through selective compliance and strategic opposition, as evidenced by the subtle ways they negotiate power in Indian films. To establish their identities and career goals, female actresses must manage the conflicting demands of business and society (Parameswaran, 2001). Alternative channels for expression and resistance are made possible by digital platforms, which provide women in the entertainment sector a platform to oppose patriarchal norms and raise their voices. Together, these studies show how female agency can become a powerful force against exploitation, allowing women to reclaim their stories and pursue professional progression, even in industries that are considered hazardous (Gopal, 2019; Jain, 2020).

Understanding the institutional mechanisms that permit sexual exploitation and workplace harassment requires a criminological viewpoint. Feminist criminology is an important theory that highlights how gender shapes victimisation and criminal experiences. This viewpoint emphasises how patriarchal power structures foster exploitation-friendly workplaces where women suffer disproportionately (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Furthermore, according to routine activity theory, motivated criminals choose appropriate targets when their capable guardians are absent, leading to crimes like workplace harassment (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Since many women in the film and television industry lack institutional support or protective mechanisms, this paradigm may be used to examine how vulnerable situations generate potential for abuse. Moreover, power control theory demonstrates that power disparities and established gender norms fuel the occurrence of harassment and exploitation (Hagan, 1989). In this regard, male-dominated fields such as entertainment frequently enable power abuses that lead to systematic harassment. Together, these criminological frameworks highlight the necessity of all-encompassing laws and changes to address the systemic injustices that support sexual harassment and exploitation at work.

The Malayalam cinema industry, renowned for its intricate narratives and subtle cultural references, is under intense scrutiny regarding gender dynamics and vulnerabilities. According to reported studies, women in this field tend to negotiate a hostile work environment and institutionalised gender bias. Casting couch practices are one of the many ways that female performers deal with the dual issues of sexual exploitation and cultural expectations (Mannil, 2019). Women are especially susceptible to exploitation because of the industry's informal recruiting practices and the absence of standardised contracts, which further exacerbate this precariousness (Frontline News Desk, 2024).

Research demonstrates how Malayalam film narratives are consistently shaped by patriarchal standards, which restrict the agency and responsibilities of female characters both on and off-screen (Pillai, 2020). In addition, the industry's power structures foster a culture of silence that deters women from speaking out against harassment or defending their rights. Recent research also highlights how digital platforms give women new forums for solidarity and expression, empowering them to question conventional wisdom and claim their agency (Dineshan &

Ramappa, 2021). This collection of works emphasises how urgently the Malayalam cinema industry needs supportive systems and structural changes to address gendered vulnerabilities.

3. Methodology

The present study employs a research methodology of qualitative analysis to investigate the phenomena of casting couch practices and the experiences of female agency and resistance in the Malayalam cinema industry. Understanding the subtleties of human experiences and the subjective interpretations ascribed to them is best accomplished using the qualitative method, particularly in situations where social injustice and power dynamics are prominent. The analytical approach based on feminist criminology looks at crime, deviance, and victimisation through a gendered lens, in light of the study's emphasis on gendered exploitation and agency. Feminist criminology is especially helpful in exposing problems that standard criminological theories frequently ignore, such as how patriarchal norms and societal institutions support gender-based exploitation.

In the context of casting couch practices, feminist criminology provides a framework for interpreting issues of criminalisation, agency, and resistance. It highlights the significance of women's perspectives and lived experiences, focusing on how institutional and societal systems shape women's vulnerabilities and the solutions available to them. Information is gathered from a range of sources to gain a thorough understanding of the casting couch phenomenon in the Malayalam film industry. The intricacies of casting couch techniques are demonstrated through an analysis of case studies, news articles, interviews, industry professional testimonies – particularly from female actors – and investigative reports from reliable media outlets. It includes details on the difficulties in pursuing justice as well as how these events affect women's personal and professional lives. Relevant statutes such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act), legal documents such as the Hema Committee Report, and policy records from film industry organisations are evaluated to analyse the regulatory frameworks and the safeguards provided to women in the industry.

The present study is limited by various constraints inherent in the available data regarding gendered labour relations and regulatory changes within the Malayalam film industry. A significant portion of the existing literature – comprising media articles, public declarations, and partially revealed institutional documents – is fragmented, inconsistently detailed, and influenced by the sensitivities related to ongoing legal matters. The confidentiality limitations tied to the Hema Committee report further restrict access to thorough primary evidence, leading to secondary sources that exhibit editorial bias, selective disclosures, or stakeholder influence. Moreover, survivor accounts presented in public settings are frequently anonymised, incomplete, or subsequently retracted, complicating systematic verification. Notwithstanding these limitations, the thematic analysis is enhanced by the variety of data types, which together provide a multi-faceted perspective on industry dynamics – encompassing the viewpoints of survivors, institutional reactions, policy suggestions, and opposing narratives. The meticulous selection of the data makes it both suitable and ample for recognising key themes pertinent to the study.

The data are analysed using thematic analysis, which is an effective tool for detecting, analysing, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. It enables the researcher to

methodically analyse themes that arise from the data, offering a structured way to investigate how agency, resistance, and criminalisation occur in women's experiences in Malayalam films. Furthermore, issues will be analysed through a criminological lens, highlighting how structural and societal factors contribute to women's vulnerability in the sector. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the realities confronting women in Malayalam films, providing a nuanced understanding of the difficulties in negotiating agency, the limitations of resistance, and the necessity for effective criminalisation of casting couch practices.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Evolution of the Casting Couch in Malayalam Cinema

In the context of historical and cultural forces that define gender relations in the film industry, casting couch practices in Malayalam cinema have evolved over time. Malayalam cinema plots generally reflected societal conventions and gender roles, with women being shown in subservient roles, supporting patriarchal beliefs, though certain changes are visible in the modern era (Gopinath & Raj, 2015). This picture paved the way for exploitative tactics, as the sector became dominated by male power brokers who monopolised roles and chances. The 1980s and 1990s were watershed years for the Malayalam cinema industry, as it developed and diversified. However, despite the creation of more complex female characters, the fundamental power inequities persisted. As the number of women joining the profession grew, so did complaints of coercive behaviour, with prospective actresses frequently being pressured to comply with sexual advances in return for roles (Bhandare, 2024).

Furthermore, the lack of formalised institutions and protective legislation allowed casting couch techniques to proliferate, sometimes veiled in secrecy and cooperation (Hariharan S, 2024). The recent #MeToo movement has focused on these concerns, raising talks about the critical need for institutional reforms and increased responsibility in the Malayalam cinema industry (Sharma, 2024). The continuation of casting couch practices in Malayalam films can be attributed to several cultural and industry-specific factors. Gender inequality is embedded in both narrative and production techniques because of the industry's historical connections to old patriarchal standards. Aspiring female actors are made more vulnerable by the film industry's hierarchical structure, where male producers and directors frequently hold substantial influence. They may feel pressured to acquiesce to abusive demands to find career opportunities (McIntosh & Davis, 2022). Exploitative practices are further normalised culturally by the exaltation of male-centric narratives and the stigmatisation of female assertiveness. These social norms may be internalised by women who want to work in the field, making them view the casting couch as an embarrassing but essential barrier to career progression.

4.2 Female Agency and Resistance Against Casting Couch Practices

Movements like #MeToo have accelerated changes in public perceptions and understanding of sexual exploitation in the entertainment sector, especially in Malayalam films. Since its inception in 2017, the worldwide #MeToo movement has enabled people to speak out about

their experiences of harassment and abuse, increasing awareness of and conversation on casting couch practices in a variety of cultural contexts, including India (Pain, 2021). By empowering victims to speak out against their abusers and challenging the prevalent culture of silence, this campaign has significantly increased public awareness of gender-based violence and workplace harassment in India (Naik, 2020). The #MeToo movement in cinema can be analysed through the lens of standpoint feminist criminology, which emphasises the lived experiences and structural positions of women (Smith, 1993). It regards survivor testimonies as a legitimate and crucial source of knowledge that contests institutional silence and reveals the inadequacies of state mechanisms, internal committees, and industry organisations. Consequently, #MeToo disclosures serve as counter-narratives that challenge dominant power structures and disrupt the entrenched culture of impunity within the industry (Crenshaw, 1991). The #MeToo movement in the Malayalam film industry signifies a pivotal moment in the cultural and gender dynamics of Kerala, indicating a transition from silence and stigma to a collective expression of injustice. The impact of this movement on Malayalam cinema was influenced by the region's unique socio-cultural environment, which includes deeply rooted patriarchal values, a star-centric industry structure, and historically restricted opportunities for women to voice their concerns against influential male figures.

The critical turning point occurred in 2017, particularly with the establishment of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), which was a response to the abduction and sexual assault of a well-known Malayalam actress. This event sparked discussions regarding workplace safety, the invisibility of women's contributions, and the absence of institutional protections. The #MeToo movement in Kerala is distinguished by its direct involvement with wider issues such as labour rights, workplace safety, and representational politics. The WCC has been instrumental in formalising these issues by promoting policy changes, gender-sensitisation initiatives, and accountability among industry organisations. This movement has interacted with Kerala's progressive public discourse, fostering frequent debates on feminism, consent, and the politics of voice. Consequently, many women in the Malayalam film industry began speaking out about their experiences of exploitation, bringing the casting-couch practices to the public's attention. Activists and advocates have progressively urged for the successful implementation of laws like the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act. This demand arises from changing legal understandings surrounding workplace harassment, which highlight the necessity for enhanced protections for women within the industry, encompassing established complaint procedures and solid accountability frameworks. These changes provide a more encouraging atmosphere for female performers in the Malayalam cinema industry and reflect a rising social awareness of the need for structural reform to overcome gendered abuse and exploitation (Pragati K. B., 2024). To overcome casting couch practices, women in the Malayalam film sector use a variety of resilience and resistance strategies. Silent resistance is an important tactic, in which female actors quietly reject forceful requests in favour of putting their dignity and self-respect first. Despite not being readily apparent to the public, this type of resistance helps women in the field collectively affirm their autonomy (Gangoli, 2024).

Building a network is essential to promoting female solidarity. Female actors strengthen one another against exploitation by exchanging resources, tactics, and experiences through the establishment of unofficial support networks. Studies show that these networks support women in creating safe spaces to talk about their struggles and strengthen their determination to stop harassment (Lutter, 2015). The culture of silence around casting couch techniques has been challenged in part by public accounts. Many actors have bravely come out to tell their

tales as a result of the #MeToo movement, which has sparked broader conversations about gendered exploitation in the business (Bhrugubanda, 2024). These testimonials demand responsibility from those in positions of power and serve to argue for structural change in addition to highlighting individual experiences.

The prevalence of couch casting methods and the tenacity shown in reaction are highlighted by case studies and firsthand accounts from female performers and crew members in Malayalam films. Since the Justice Hema Committee's report was made public in August 2024, accusations of rape and assault against prominent Malayalam artists and filmmakers have started flooding in. The Kochi Police Commissioner received a complaint from a Bengali actress who accused a National Film Award winner and seasoned director of sexual assault. Based on her statement that she endured assault in a city hotel, Kochi police have opened a case. According to the actress's accusation, the director invited her to act in the film and then improperly and sexually touched her. The incident took place in 2009 (Kidwai, 2024).

Another case involves a young actress who experienced sexual assault from a prominent actor in the Malayalam industry. She shared,

“I had dreamed big when I came into the film sector. He invited me to a hotel room on the pretext of discussing a film project. I had only a professional approach. But I was trapped and he sexually abused me. It was rape ... He slapped and kicked me. I had to run away from there.” (Philip, 2024)

Furthermore, the Hema Committee report, which was prepared after meeting with and gathering information from various stakeholders in the Malayalam film industry, unequivocally concludes that practices such as casting couch and other forms of sexual harassment are shockingly common and remain unchecked and uncontrolled in the Malayalam film sector (Hema et al., 2019). Radical feminist criminology offers a theoretical lens to explain these casting-couch practices, interpreting them as manifestations of patriarchy and male supremacy. In this context, sexual coercion is perceived not as an anomaly but as a reflection of deep-rooted power imbalances in an industry where employment opportunities are governed by a limited number of powerful male decision-makers. The normalisation of quid pro quo arrangements illustrates the wider patriarchal rationale that treats women's bodies as tradable assets within a male-dominated structure of artistic and economic capital (Burgess-Proctor, 2006).

The report contains several anonymous testimonials from various women who were listened to by the committee. One girl in the film industry explained that a woman must be prepared to comply with demands for sex made by any of the following in the cinema – actors, producers, directors, production controllers, and others. She added that well-known actresses who have achieved success in the business have only succeeded in gaining fame, wealth, and reputation by being prepared to “adjust” and “compromise”. She also mentioned that she would need to make certain “adjustments” and “compromises” if she wanted to have the opportunity to perform in movies and advance in her career (Hema et al., 2019). According to one of the artists who testified before the committee, a woman typically attends an audition after seeing an advertisement on Facebook or another social media platform. If she answers, she might receive a call letting her know that she is selected for the role and that she will also be invited to meet with the director or producer. Additionally, she will be informed that she must “adjust” and “compromise” (Hema et al., 2019). These accounts emphasise the continuous fight for agency in a difficult industry environment, underscoring the intricate relationship between vulnerability and resilience.

Many people in the business are led to believe that having sex with men in the industry is the only reason why any woman enters or is kept in the industry (Hema et al., 2019). This belief serves as a discursive instrument of control, influencing the interpretation of women's presence, skills, and labour within a male-dominated cultural context. By portraying women as either complicit or opportunistic, the discourse undermines their professional accomplishments, obscures structural inequalities, and diverts accountability from those who exploit. Post-structural feminist criminology posits that by depicting women in this manner, the discourse invalidates their professional successes, conceals systemic disparities, and shifts blame away from exploiters (Heidensohn, 1996). It contends that such narratives lack neutrality; they are crafted and disseminated to maintain prevailing power dynamics. In this framework, the notion that women "sleep their way" into the industry acts as a tool for victim-blaming and reputational control, thereby reinforcing patriarchal dominance by diminishing women's credibility and restricting their capacity to confront harassment (Smart, 1989).

The professional and personal lives of female artists and crew members are greatly impacted by the opposition to casting couch methods in the Malayalam film industry. Speaking up can, on the one hand, help women feel more empowered and united, which will raise their social status and draw in networks of support. By actively opposing exploitation, people can gain the respect of their peers and audiences and establish themselves as change agents. For example, performers who have spoken out against harassment frequently gain more recognition and public support, which enables them to use their stories to earn bigger roles and chances (Mathew & Isac, 2021).

However, the sector also responds punitively to resistance, with influential people taking revenge on individuals who question the status quo. When women speak up, their careers are seriously harmed by targeted harassment, limited employment opportunities, or blacklisting. Many women are unwilling to disclose abuses for fear of negative effects on their careers, underscoring the industry's widespread culture of retaliation and secrecy (Hema et al., 2019). This contradiction highlights the nuanced character of resistance; although it might spur constructive change, it also exposes women to possible retaliation, requiring them to exercise caution in their work settings.

4.3 Criminalisation and Laws Concerning Casting Couch Practices

The legal environment in India that deals with the casting couch is mostly characterised in terms of coercion, sexual exploitation, and workplace harassment. Sexual harassment is defined widely under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (POSH Act), 2013, which includes unwanted sexual approaches, demands for sexual favours, and any other sexually suggestive verbal or physical behaviour that fosters a hostile work environment. This act seeks to provide female employees with a secure workplace. This law requires the creation of internal complaints committees in industries, including movie studios, and provides a structure for submitting complaints (Government of India, 2013). Furthermore, incidents of compulsion and exploitation are covered by portions of the Indian Penal Code, including Section 375 (rape) (Kanoon, n.d.-b) and Section 354 (assault with intent to outrage a woman's modesty) (Kanoon, n.d.-a). When there are major infractions, these legislative measures permit criminal punishment. However, in informal industries like film production, where many agreements lack official contracts or

organisational frameworks, the application of this act is frequently restricted (Singh & Ranjan, 2022). Considering the severe repercussions they would encounter if they voice their complaints about the atrocities in cinema, the women who experience them would rather remain silent (Hema et al., 2019).

The participation of industry organisations and regulatory agencies in the Malayalam film industry has been critical in tackling workplace harassment and the casting couch phenomena. The Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) and the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) are two prominent organisations that are expected to establish frameworks for safety and accountability. However, their efficacy has been criticised. Although AMMA set up a committee to handle harassment allegations after repeated requests from Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an organisation for women working in the Malayalam cinema industry, and other female actors its efforts have frequently been viewed as inadequate and reactive rather than proactive. The organisation received criticism in several high-profile incidents for seemingly shielding well-known individuals who were charged with wrongdoing instead of putting the security of female actresses first. A culture of silence has been maintained by this alleged lack of responsibility, deterring victims from coming forward. Many members of the film actors' body, including high-ranking officials, were accused of sexually abusing and assaulting female actors after the Hema Committee report was released. The organization's elected executive committee also resigned from its position in response to harsh public and media criticism (Fazil & Ramachandran, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Film Employees Federation of Kerala has pushed for the effective implementation of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) act and improved working conditions in movie production environments, but results have been sluggish (TOI Entertainment Desk, 2024). Many workers are at risk since the sector has been hesitant to implement official grievance procedures. The pressure on these organisations to implement significant reforms has increased as society's awareness has grown, suggesting that the Malayalam film industry is at a turning point in its responsible approach to the protection of its workers.

Using the legal system to combat casting couch tactics in the Malayalam film sector is extremely difficult. Lack of proof is a major barrier as many harassment cases take place in private settings with no witnesses, making it challenging for victims to support their allegations. Legal authorities frequently dismiss cases or handle them insufficiently as a result of this lack of solid proof. Furthermore, one of the main factors preventing victims from coming forward is social shame. There is a culture of secrecy surrounding these concerns because women in the film industry are afraid of public humiliation or peer reaction. People are further deterred from reporting their encounters by the belief that if they speak up, they would be blacklisted or lose their career possibilities, among other professional consequences (Joseph et al., 2019). The confluence of these elements thus establishes a strong obstacle to the successful criminalisation of casting couch in Malayalam cinema.

4.4 Social Views and Media Influence

Media portrayals greatly influence public impressions about the casting couch phenomena in the Malayalam film industry. The narrative is frequently dominated by sensationalised tales that emphasise drama and controversy, which can distort the complexity of harassment and

exploitation. Instead of addressing systemic problems, these depictions frequently highlight isolated incidents, which feeds voyeurism rather than comprehension (Rajendran, 2019). The public may become less sensitive to the gravity of the problem as a result of such sensationalism, which portrays victims more as gossip than as people in need of sympathy and assistance.

In-depth exposés and investigative journalism, on the other hand, can promote more nuanced conversation. In-depth investigations that reveal exploitation trends and feature firsthand accounts take the discussion above the level of sensationalism and provide victims with a forum to tell their tales and push for reform. Furthermore, media coverage affects public opinion by either upending preexisting conventions or promoting stereotypes (O’Keefe, 2021). Media organisations can raise awareness of the need for structural change in the industry when they give victims’ voices priority and stress the need for accountability and reform. This changing media environment can better equip the public and industry participants to tackle the realities of casting couch activities.

In Kerala, the #MeToo movement has had a big impact on industry and community perceptions of casting couch procedures, giving victims a forum to share their stories and call for change. Since its beginning, the campaign has challenged the prevalent stigma and culture of silence by empowering women in the Malayalam film industry to speak about their experiences of harassment and exploitation (Ittyerah, 2024). Public support increased as more actresses spoke, sparking a larger conversation about workplace harassment and gender-based violence in the entertainment industry.

Redefining perceptions has also been greatly aided by advocacy initiatives. To safeguard women and advance better working conditions, organisations and activists have banded together to advocate for fundamental changes within the sector. Industry organisations, including the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA), have been forced to reevaluate their rules and put in place procedures for reporting harassment as a result of the growing awareness of these problems. The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) was established in the Malayalam cinema industry following the abduction and sexual assault of a notable female actor in February 2017. The individual accused of masterminding the crime was a male superstar. Following the incident, women in the business formed the WCC to support their colleagues and address their concerns (Rajendran, 2019). Through activism and legislative reform, WCC seeks to provide a safe, non-discriminatory, and professional work environment for women in film. It strives to raise awareness of gender inequality and exploitation of women in the film industry, both on and off-screen. WCC has evolved from a support group to a powerful forum where hidden stories about women in film have found voice and are being heard (Women in Cinema Collective, n.d.).

Significant cultural changes have been sparked by the #MeToo movement’s aftereffects, which have also encouraged critical discussion about power imbalances, gendered exploitation, and the pressing need for structural change. Calls for reform in Kerala’s film industry have been accelerated due to this momentum, as industry stakeholders and the general public alike increasingly understand how critical it is to confront and eradicate casting couch abuses. A larger dedication to upending long-standing customs and advancing gender parity in the sector is shown in the increased knowledge and activism surrounding these concerns. At this point, the Kerala government has made a significant step by appointing a committee to study concerns of sexual assault and gender equality in the Malayalam movie industry and provide remedies. This is the first time a state government in India has taken on a fresh responsibility

related to the film industry. Justice Hema, a former Kerala High Court judge, chaired the three-member committee (Hema et al., 2019).

Social prejudices and victim-blaming inclinations frequently characterise public responses to accusations of the casting couch in Kerala, which present serious risks to individuals who decide to come out. Victim-blaming, in which the victims are held accountable for wrongdoing instead of the offenders, is still a widespread problem. This tendency may deter people from coming forward because they worry about being judged for their decisions, actions, or even their career goals. Furthermore, victims' difficulties are made worse by cultural prejudices associated with gender roles. Public narratives usually portray women who speak out against harassment as troublemakers rather than fearless change agents, and they are generally stigmatised and shunned. The stigma is especially prominent in a traditional community such as Kerala, where cultural traditions frequently favour silence over confrontation.

The informal and interwoven character of the film sector, where influential people might take revenge on individuals who reveal misconduct, increases the possibility of a backlash. Blacklisting or unfavourable media representations are examples of such retribution, which strengthens the culture of fear and silence. In addition to undermining personal bravery, this intricate web of social attitudes impedes the larger push for responsibility and change in the Malayalam film enterprise (Shrivastava, 2022).

4.5 Challenges and Implication

The disparity between female agency and vulnerability is especially visible in the exploitative milieu of the Malayalam cinema industry. On the one hand, women have autonomy that allows them to pursue opportunities, establish their identities, and negotiate the challenges of their employment. This agency may take many forms, including networking, forming partnerships, and using social media to share their harassment experiences (Ajikumar & Sircar, 2024). Many female actresses have taken back their tales by publicising them, fighting against the taboo of casting couch practices and pushing for structural change. This agency, however, frequently contrasts sharply with the vulnerabilities that women encounter in a field characterised by exploitation and power imbalances. Women can be forced into precarious positions to get opportunities or advance in their professions; therefore the very systems that offer opportunity can also pose serious hazards (Nair & Vinayakaselvi, 2023). Many women are afraid to speak up because of the climate created by the fear of reprisals, public outrage, and social shame, which makes it possible for exercising agency to have negative effects.

This dichotomy emphasises how unstable female agency is in exploitative situations; although women strive to express their authority and defy repressive conventions, a deeply ingrained patriarchal system continuously takes advantage of their weaknesses. Therefore, a critical analysis of how social attitudes and industry practices can change to promote women's empowerment and safety is necessary, since the continuous battle for agency in the face of vulnerability remains a major subject in the conversation around casting couch practices in Kerala.

The success of current legislation and industry initiatives to stop casting couch in Malayalam cinema is still a controversial topic with both notable advancements and serious flaws. A legal foundation for tackling sexual harassment is provided by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act); nonetheless, its

application has been uneven, particularly in the unofficial film industry structures (Arundhati, 2023). The absence of official complaint-handling procedures in many production companies frequently results in underreporting and a persistent culture of silence among victims. Critics point out that male-dominated industry associations like the Malayalam Cine Technicians Association (MACTA), the Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA), and the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) have not given enough attention to establishing safe working conditions for women or holding perpetrators accountable. Notwithstanding current legislative frameworks, attempts to successfully restrict casting couch activities in the Malayalam film business are seriously hampered by a combination of insufficient enforcement, industry opposition, and social prejudices.

Several important measures are required to strengthen legislative safeguards, implement industry rules of conduct, and boost support for women to address casting couch practices in the Malayalam film industry successfully. Primarily, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act of 2013 has to be better implemented. This might entail creating stronger Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) within production companies and requiring industry members to get training on identifying and handling harassment (Singh & Ranjan, 2022). Similarly, the establishment of a centralised regulating authority for the film industry can aid in enforcing uniform codes of behaviour for all organisations, guaranteeing that all participants in the sector follow moral standards. This body ought to have the authority to look into complaints and punish offenders (Gupta & Garg, 2020).

Providing victims with extensive support networks, including counselling and legal assistance, is essential. To assist women in successfully traversing the industry, mentorship programs that connect prospective female actors with seasoned professionals are required. Furthermore, media efforts that raise public knowledge of women's rights at work and the significance of reporting harassment can change cultural perceptions and create an atmosphere that supports victims rather than stigmatizes them.

4.6 Reforms Post Hema Committee Report

Following the Hema Committee's shocking findings about widespread sexual harassment and exploitation, both the state and industry leaders rolled out a range of regulatory reforms designed to professionalise the industry and create safer working environments for everyone involved. A significant structural modification was implemented by the Kerala Film Producers' Association (KFPA), which stipulated that any payment surpassing one lakh rupees must be accompanied by a formal, stamped legal agreement since October 2024. These agreements are required to explicitly incorporate provisions concerning sexual harassment and the prohibition of drug or alcohol consumption on film sets – directly tackling issues raised by the Hema Committee (*Kerala Film Producers' Association Mandates Remuneration Contracts for Payments Exceeding Rs 1 Lakh*, 2024).

During the Kerala Film Policy Conclave held in August 2025, various stakeholders – including producers, technicians, independent filmmakers, and women's organizations – engaged in discussions aimed at formalizing standards regarding working hours, overtime pay, safe lodging during filming, maternity leave, childcare on set, and the establishment of guidelines for Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) applicable to all film sets. The conclave is intended to

produce a policy draft that will formalise labour rights, frameworks for gender safety, mechanisms for grievance resolution, and systems of institutional oversight (Cinema Express Desk, 2025). At the policy level, the state government plans to create a specialised tribunal to address grievances within the film industry, encompassing issues such as sexual harassment, contract disputes, wrongful termination, or blacklisting – designed similarly to a judicial entity. This initiative aligns with the Committee’s suggestion for an independent, gender-sensitive mechanism for redress.

5. Conclusion

The examination of female agency and the criminalisation of casting couch methods shows a complex interaction between vulnerability and empowerment in the Malayalam cinema industry. Although women in the industry have agency, which allows them to manage their careers and express their experiences, this article has shown how systemic barriers stemming from power dynamics, societal stigma, and the informal nature of work in the entertainment industry seriously impede their efforts. In addition to exploiting women, the casting couch phenomenon feeds a culture of fear and silence that discourages victims from pursuing justice. Although the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and other existing legal frameworks offer a basis for tackling harassment, their efficacy is still hindered by uneven implementation and insufficient organisational reactions. Despite their efforts to be more accountable, industry organisations frequently fail in their obligation to industry participants to provide settings that actively deter harassment and assist victims.

It is crucial to acknowledge that advancing gender equity and safety in Malayalam films necessitates a multidimensional strategy, underscoring the significance of legislative and societal initiatives. Creating a safer and more equal workplace requires strong legislative norms, standard rules of industry behaviour, and support networks for women. Furthermore, to combat victim-blaming mindsets and enable women to speak out against exploitation without worrying about reprisals, public discourse and society's understanding must change. It is vital to prioritise victims’ views and critically assess their experiences to inform legislative reforms and business practices. Sustained participation in feminist organisations and awareness programs can assist in fostering a culture that helps victims and holds abusers accountable. In conclusion, the fight against casting couch practices goes beyond individual incidents; it is a larger campaign for gender justice that necessitates collective action and a commitment to reform the Malayalam film industry. Persistent research and efforts are required to handle the intricacies of casting couch practices successfully. The regulatory changes prompted by the Hema Committee report create numerous opportunities for future research regarding labour practices, gender equity, and institutional responsibility within the Malayalam film sector. Some important suggestions are as follows:

- Future research ought to assess the impact of regulatory reforms enacted on the evolution of labour practices over time. Longitudinal studies can investigate whether the introduction of formal contracts, grievance procedures, and suggested tribunals effectively enhances workplace safety and professional transparency.
- A significant gap persists in comprehending how harassment survivors traverse institutional avenues, such as ICCs, law enforcement procedures, and informal

networks within the industry. Ethnographic or narrative-driven research could shed light on the socio-psychological obstacles that influence reporting behaviours.

- The majority of current analyses concentrate on actors; however, there is limited knowledge regarding the working conditions of technicians, junior artists, production assistants, costume designers, and dubbing artists. Research may investigate wage structures, contractual practices, and gender-specific vulnerabilities within these groups.
- A systematic assessment of unions, guilds, and collectives can provide insights into their representativeness, their approach to negotiating gender issues, and the extent to which they truly democratize labour relations within the film industry.
- A comparative analysis involving Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Bollywood uncovers whether the regulatory reforms in Kerala are an anomaly, a paradigm, or indicative of a broader structural transformation within Indian screen industries following the #MeToo movement.

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