



Woman's Cinema on the Sri Lankan Silver Screen and the "Other" Female Filmmakers

Lanka Bandaranayake, Independent Researcher, lankabandaranayake@ymail.com

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a small-scale industry in the Global South. The hegemonic patriarchy of the industry, accelerated by various industrial, socio-political, and cultural matters directly affects the representation of women's cinema in the country. This study aims to look at the female representation throughout the entire evolution of Sri Lankan women's cinema and the state of their filmmaking practices, which is a rare study area. Further, the examination of the historical context and current trends of this paper will further seek to provide insights into the future development of the representation of women in Sri Lankan cinema.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; Woman; Female; filmmaker; short films



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Lanka Bandaranayake

Introduction

As a small-scale industry in the Global South, the agonies of Sri Lankan cinema over various industrial, socio-political, and cultural matters have been directly affecting women's cinema from the beginning to date. The survival of the early female filmmakers in the largely male-dominated industry and their presence in making films at that moment were rarely celebrated, with the perception that their filmmaking made no real contribution to the development of Sri Lankan women's cinema. Contemporary female filmmakers and their contributions to the cinema industry are also rarely taken into account due to various industrial policies and procedures. As a result, the entire evolution of women's cinema and the journey of female filmmakers is vague throughout Sri Lankan cinema history.

This study aims to shed light on how female filmmakers, both female directors and producers, in Sri Lanka survived amidst the hegemonic patriarchy in the industry and society at large, also, how it affects their representation and their filmmaking practice. Further, the examination of the historical context and current cinema trends will further seek to provide insights into the future development of women in Sri Lankan cinema.

Multiple determinants of Sri Lankan women who worked so far in the cinema industry and their filmmaking practices are attempted to discover in this study. Case study methods and in-depth interviews have been used as the study methodology. Secondary data such as formal records released by the Sri Lankan Film Corporation to study cases of Sri Lankan films released by female filmmakers in the local theatres, and interviews and personal conversations used to gather data on other female filmmakers.

The word, “other” is widely used globally to describe the phenomenon of women being framed as “The Other,” while men are the self and subject, since the feminist scholar, Simone de Beauvoir first used the term in her book, *The Second Sex* (Selinger 2004: 2). In this text, the word “Other” is used to explain the wider industry matter of the exclusion of contemporary female filmmakers from recognition as filmmakers and the absence of their filmmaking practices in recorded Sri Lankan history. This will further explain how the globalization of cinema industries impacts those contemporary other female filmmakers, and ultimately how it affects the future of Sri Lankan woman cinema.

A History

It took 32 years since the beginning of Sri Lankan filmmaking history¹ for female filmmakers to mark their opening footprint on the silver screen as filmmakers in the largely male-dominated early

Sri Lankan cinema industry until, in 1957, Rukmani Devi joined as the producer of the film, *Siriyalatha* (1957). Further, it took 40 years for a Sri Lankan woman to direct a film until Florida Jayalath joined as the co-director of *Sweep Ticket* (1965) with Raja Joshua. Even though more women eventually entered the industry, the growth of women's cinema did not suffice to end the persistence of male dominance in the industry due to the slow changes in the larger social, political, and cultural hegemonies of patriarchy in Sri Lankan society.

Female Film Directors in Records

The cases of all female directors from the beginning of Sri Lankan cinema to date reveal that there are three main folds that can be identified during the entire Sri Lankan women's cinema history.

1. Actresses who entered film directing but did not continue their filmmaking practices.
2. Actresses who entered film directing and continued to practice as filmmakers while working as actors.
3. Women who entered film directing, continued to practice filmmaking and other off-camera positions.

The above-mentioned female filmmakers, Rukmani Devi and Florida Jayalath can be included in the first category; actresses who entered film directing but did not continue their filmmaking practices. As there are local traditional barriers that prevented women from entering many sectors of life and society, very few women in any authoritative positions in the early cinema industry other than as actresses (Abeysekera 1989: 57). Therefore, in the early era, women who opened the

path for entering filmmaking were those who were already established as an actress. Both Rukmani and Florida started their careers as actresses and were pioneering actresses in the early Sri Lankan cinema era; Rukmani is the protagonist of the first Sri Lankan talking picture production, *Kadawunu Poronduwa* (1947), and Florida started her acting career in 1951 from the film *Sengawunu Pilitura* (1951). After them, veteran actress Ruby de Mel directed and produced her debut film, *Pipena Kumudu* (1967) and Rohini Jayakody directed her debut, *Hangi Hora* (1968). However, after the mentioned films, the careers of those actresses continued as earlier, and there is no evidence of them making their second film during their lifetime.

According to film scholar and feminist, Sunila Abesekara, these film actresses who have turned to filmmaking have not made any real contribution to the development of Sri Lankan cinema (Abeysekera 1989: 54). However, film scholars such as Denise Lowe said “All the pioneering women were important to the industry” (Lowe 2014: vii). That thought emphasizes the value and need of recognising the early female filmmakers and the state of their filmmaking practices in order to build a historical foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of women’s cinema. The acknowledgement will also allow future filmmakers to learn from the successes and struggles of their predecessors which enabling them to navigate similar challenges and make informed decisions.

The most prominent actress who entered film directing and continued to practice as a filmmaker while working as an actor is Malini Fonseka. She started her acting career in the film, *Punchi Baba* in 1968 and acted in more than 150 feature films to date (Asia Pacific Screen Awards 2023) She entered film directing by directing and producing the film, *Sthree* (1991) and unlike the above-mentioned actresses, she continued directing films parallel to her acting. She owns director credits for her films,

- *Sthree* (1991)
- *Sasara Chethana* (1984)
- *Ahinsa* (1987)
- *Sthree* (1991)
- *Sandamadala* (1994)

However, her glory as an actress is more widely celebrated today than her as a director (Asia Pacific Screen Awards 2023).

There we can identify four females who entered film directing without a career in acting and continued to practice filmmaking and other off-camera positions; Sumitra Peries, Inoka Sathyangani, Sumathi Sivamohan and Najini Dikkovita. Among them, the most prominent director, Sumitra started with an off-camera role as an editor in 1963, working as an editor in *Gamperaliya* (1963). In 1978, Sumitra released her debut film, *Gehenu Lamai*, (Doraiswamy and Padgaonkar eds 2011). Her filmography is filled with 10 credits as a director of films,

- *Gahanu Lamai* (1978)
- *Gaga Addara* (1980)
- *Yahalu Yeheli* (1982)
- *Maya* (1984)
- *Sagara Jalaya Madi Haduwa Oba Handa* (1988)
- *Loku Duwa* (1996)
- *Duwata Mawaka Misa* (1997)
- *Sakman Maluwa* (2003)
- *Yahaluwo* (2007)
- *Vaishnavee* (2018)

She also worked in other off-camera positions such as producing, writing, and in the art department. She produced the film, *Desa Nisa* (1972) and worked as the artistic consultant for *Wekande Walauwa* (2002), both films directed by Lester James Peries. Her contribution to Sri Lankan cinema was largely admired locally and internationally, and even people from the industry and society at large started to address her as the "first woman filmmaker" in the industry (The Morning 2023). This wrong identification prevented the recognition of the equal contribution of other women filmmakers who worked before her and, most importantly, the wider discussion about Sri Lankan women's cinema and its evolution.

Inoka Sathyangani theatrically released her internationally and nationally acclaimed award-winning directorial debut, *Sulang Kirilli*, in 2003 (Sunday Observer 2003 and Welabada 2004). After that, there was a 13-year of silence for Inoka until the release of her commercially successful film, *Cinderella*, in 2016 (Galappathti 2018), and until today, she did not release her next film.

Sumathi Sivamohan is the only Tamil female film director who has released a film in Sri Lanka so far is Sumathi Sivamohan. She released her film, *Ingirunda* (Hera and Now), in 2013 (Galappathti 2018). Even though she made more films after that, she never released those films in Sri Lankan theatres until today.

Najini Dikkovita is the next female director who occupied the Sri Lankan silver screen is Najini Dikkovita with the release of her debut film, *Ruhire*, in 2022. She had been working as an assistant director on films before the release of her debut directorial (Fernando 2023). The memories of Sumithra and Inoka crashing into the existing male-dominated Sri Lankan cinema industry provided a very important insight into the industry and the society of her time.

The memories of Sumithra crashing into the existing male-dominated Sri Lankan cinema industry as below,

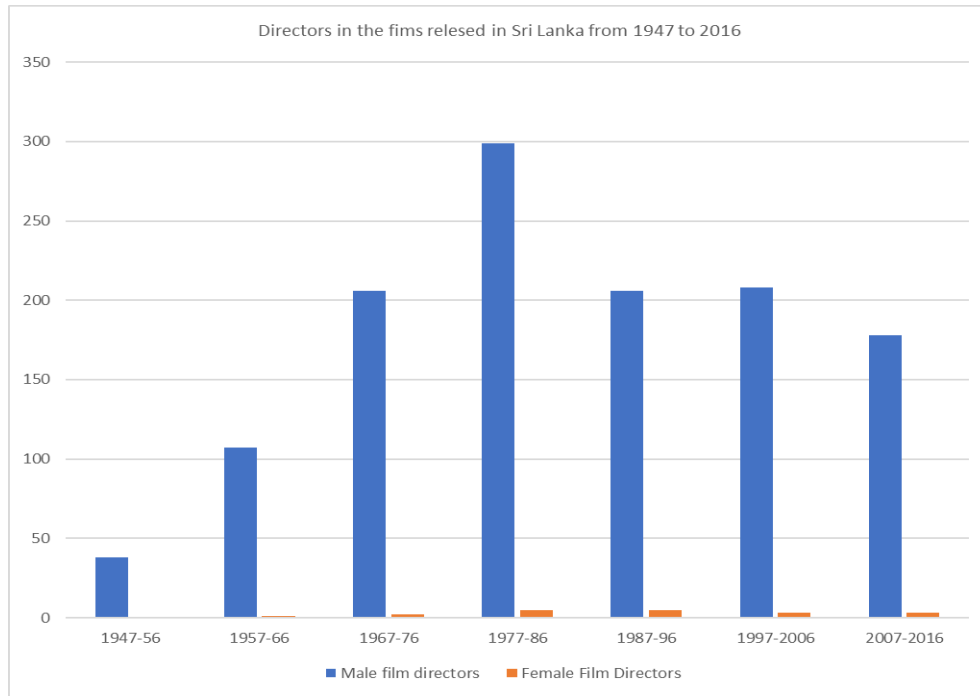
"At the time when I entered the world of films, it was alien to many. People were not keen on sending their daughters to this uncharted world of filmmaking, acting and directing. Having studied filmmaking at the London School of Filmmaking and Conservatoire Independent Du Cinema Francaise in Paris I was determined to put my knowledge into practice...There are limitations that exist both physically and socially when a woman tries her hand at filmmaking. I am happy that I was able to overcome these and I am glad that there are many fifth-generations of filmmakers who are now exploring many innovative avenues for producing and directing films where there were social taboos before" (Peiris 2006)

Inoka Sathyangani shared her below thoughts during one of the interviews,

"I am happy that 28 years after Sumithra Peiris began directing films, I was able to bring out my first film, representing the new women generation of filmmakers. Yet, male artists do not like to consider a young female as a leader. I had to ignore and struggle against such attitudes. If I was not strong-minded enough to make my own decisions regardless of consequences, I would have left the film industry many years ago" (Sathyangani 2003)

The above two thoughts from Sumithra and Inoka conclude the all-time challenges of women in male-dominated Sri Lankan cinema, which further confirms the genuine importance of recognizing all female filmmakers and their works so far in the industry.

The below chart reflects the gender inequity in the Sri Lankan film industry.



(The information was gathered from the book, *The Query of Sri Lankan Movie Catalogue* by Ajith Galappathi, published in 2018 by the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka.)

The number of films directed by men and women that were shown in Sri Lankan theatres between the introduction of talkies in 1947 and 2016 is shown in the aforementioned graph. The data demonstrates that between 1947 and 1986, there was a consistent upward trend in the number of films directed by male filmmakers. They released 38 movies in the first ten years of their careers, from 1947 to 1956, and a maximum of 299 movies from 1977 to 1986. Then, between 2007 and 2016, there were 178 films, a tiny downward trend. Despite growing and fluctuating with male

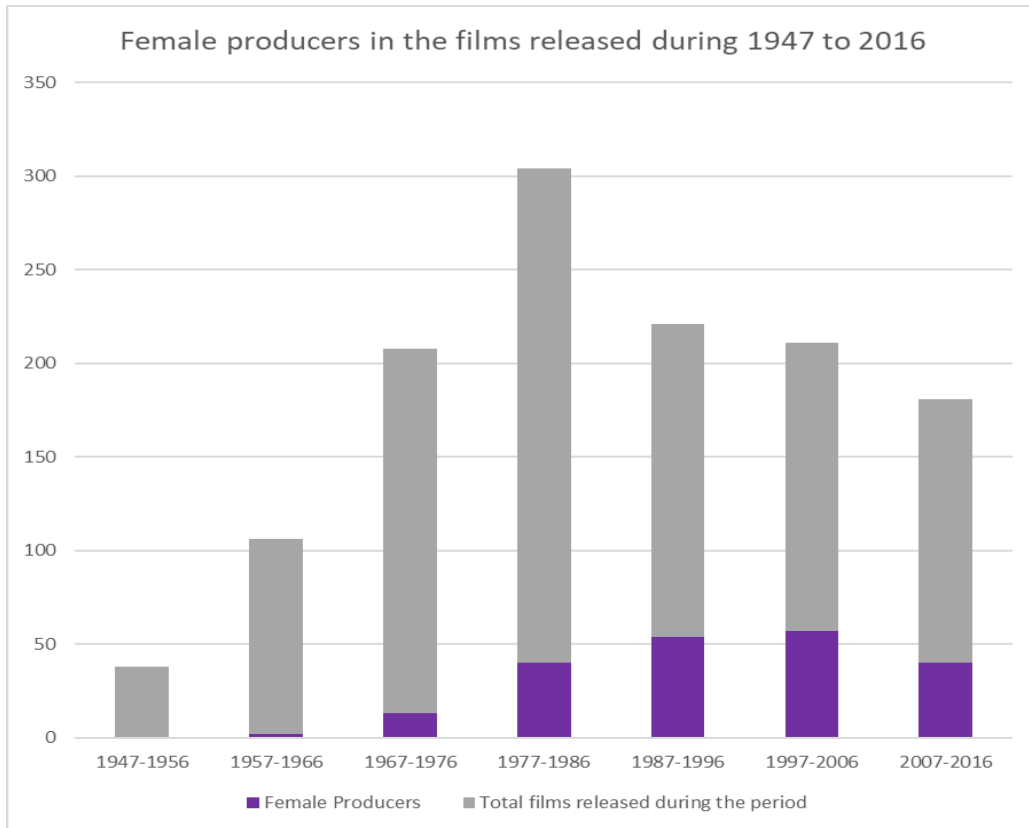
directors, the release of films by female directors was always at a fairly modest level. There was no release of films from women directors in the country in the 1947-1956 period, but by 1977-1986, the number had increased to a maximum of five pictures. Again, five films were directed by women during the 1987-1996 period, however, from 1997-2006 and 2007-2016 periods, only three films were directed by women, following the downward trend of male filmmakers.

Now there is a question of whether they are all the female directors on the Sri Lankan silver screen so far. The answer to such a question is, yes because they are all female filmmakers who have released their films in Sri Lankan theatres. Are they all female directors in Sri Lankan cinema? The answer is a big NO to that question. Sumithra also confirmed that no in her above interview, as she stated to "many fifth generations of filmmakers." Then, where are those women filmmakers, or, in other words, where are those OTHER female filmmakers?

Before jumping into finding answers to that question, let's look at the female film producers in Sri Lankan cinema history and their status in making films.

Cases of Female Producers

In contrast to female film directors, a slightly higher number of female film producers can be found in Sri Lankan cinema history. The below chart reflects the state of female film producers in the Sri Lankan cinema industry.



(The information was gathered from the book, *The Query of Sri Lankan Movie Catalogue* by Ajith Galappathi, published in 2018 by the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka.)

The graph above displays the proportion of women who produced movies that were screened in Sri Lankan theatres between 1947 and 2016. The data show that there was a steady rise in the proportion of women working as producers in the film industry from 1947 to 1996, followed by a modest fall until 2016. There were no female producers in the industry between 1947 and 1956, and the first two produced films between 1957 and 1966. Despite the fall in local movie releases after 1977-1986, there can be seen a steady increase in female producers until 1997-2006 and the maximum number of 57 females joined producing during the period.

That might be because producing is not much more challenging due to local film practice, and that encouraged more women to join as producers than other off-camera roles. For instance, the typical practice of producing a film in the Sri Lankan industry releases producers from physically producing the film in their workflow. Even the producer's presence on the film set during shooting is not considered mandatory. The producer's responsibilities and duties, such as overseeing and involvement in development planning, execution, marketing, distribution, etc., are often mutually shared between the director and/or production manager. However, the absence of the producer's role and physical contribution generates numerous complexities in the production workflow, such as the timely completion and outcome of the film. That is mainly because the directors' focus is divided among creative aspects and overseeing production needs, and production managers are also under pressure from the extra workload. The person who owns the title of producer often plays the executive producer's role. However, that is also the typical financier's role in the film of investing money and sitting back until profit is generated. Since this local practice of producing films does not require much workflow knowledge, locals in various other fields are often interested in investing their extra money in films and/or starting a filmmaking business parallel to their other businesses. The most prominent female producer so far in the Sri Lankan industry, Soma Edirisingha, is the best example to describe the local industry phenomenon.

Soma was one of the top businesswomen and social workers in Sri Lanka. She also owned one of the top film business companies in the country, E.A.P. Films & Theatres Private Limited (Daily News 2015). She produced 20 films, from *Dhawala Pushpaya* (1994) to *Ko Mark No Mark* (2014), most of which earned the highest profit according to local box office records. For instance, her films such as *Rosa Vasanthaya* (2001), directed by Udaya Warnasooriya, became the most profit-earning films of the year, grossing an income of LKR 20,012,492.84 (Sunday Observer 2001). Her commercially successful comedy film, *Ra Daniyel Dawal Migel* (1998) by Roy De Silva, and drama romance film, *Rosa Wasanthaya* (2001) by Ranjan Ramanayaka, won the Most Famous Film Award of the Year at the Sarasaviya Awards in 1999 and 2002 (Sunday Observer 2001). The reporter, Ruwini Jayawardana acknowledged her involvement as a producer as below,

“...She had produced some of the most success Sinhala films and attributes her success to the fact that she discusses the projects in advance with the director and never interferes in between (Jayawardana 2009).”

Even though this statement intends to thank Soma and be grateful for her contribution, it reflects the above-discussed matter; the absence of the procedure's role in the film they produce. Further, it should be highlighted that, even though this example is about Soma, a female producer, that is the typical procedure of most of those who are titled as producers, regardless of gender.

However, that can be seen as a changing phenomenon in contemporary filmmaking, especially with Sri Lankan filmmakers' exposure to international platforms. Yet the practice is still legitimate and widely used in most local filmmaking.

The early phase of the producer's enthusiasm to produce aesthetic and realistic cinema shifted towards a profit-driven primary motive that produced pure entertaining work. That shift was drastically visible after the launch of the liberal capitalistic strategy, The Open Economy (Jayatilaka 2016 and Senevirathne 2016) because the producers with profit-driven motives decided what kind of films are made in Sri Lanka. This structural and ideological changes in the local cinema industry were termed by Scholer, S.S.A. Senevirathne as "The Paradigm Shift of Sri Lankan Cinema" (Senevirathne 2016. Pp. 52). He explained this cinema industry shift as follows,

"Sri Lanka, in its exposure to the post-industrial, global capital since 1977 when its gates were opened to the external world, underwent great structural and ideological changes which can be termed as a 'paradigm shift' (The Structure of the Scientific Revolutions 1964) as the structure itself was not what it was a decade ago...The aesthetic and the realistic cinema of the pre-open market economy in Sri Lanka were mainly based on the restricted capital provided by local producers whose ideological basement was purely to produce entertaining works but a small number of filmmakers were interested in radical works but with a poor financial background and thereby could hardly reach global esteem" (Senevirathne 2016: 52).

As this paper is about female filmmakers, the case of Soma Edirisingha will again be drawn in as an example of this phenomenon. Her profit-driven motivation over the quality was stated in

Senevirathne's paper, *The paradigm shift of Sri Lankan Cinema: A Study Of Reflections And Repercussions In The Cinema After Introducing The Open Economy In 1977*,

“...Dr Sarath Amunugama who was a front-lined film enthusiastic in Sri Lanka had interpreted this situation as ‘money collecting’(Amunugama 1990). Dr. Amunugama, as the very first chairman of the National Film Corporation, 1972, uses that important two words ‘money collecting’. This situation is rather identical for today merely. In few years ago when film critic Ajith Galappaththi criticized Soma Edirisinghe’s cheap films, on behalf of EAP, Soma Edirisinghe states that “I do not care the film critics for a dead cent (thambasathaya)”. Even today in the globalized society, the capitalist traders do not concern on artistic value or cultural ground rules, but only chasing money...” (Senevirathne 2016: 56)

However, it should be mentioned that even though Soma’s productions were criticized, among all other commercial films, according to Galappaththi, as "cheap films", she produced internationally and nationally acclaimed award-winning arthouse films such as *Ira Madiyama* (2005) by Prasanna Vithanage and *Seliama* (1995) by H.D. Premarathna.

The most important factor that should be highlighted in this paper in regards to the inquiry into Sri Lankan woman cinema is that she never produced any films from female filmmakers, even though she worked a lot for empowering women in her wider social services (Ceylon Business Reporter 2015 and films.lk 2023).

If we move forward to find cases of other female producers, there can find several other motives other than profit among them to produce films. For instance, husbands and wives or

business partners produce films together as a collective investment of the money they earn from their businesses.

Among them, the most prominent producer-partners are Soniya Disanayaka and Sunil T. Together, they produced 16 films, from *Jaya Apatai* (1986) to *Koti Sana* (1999) (Padmasiri 2017 and Galappaththi 2018). Most of them are commercially successful action and romance films. They also produced films in the Adults Only category in which stories dealt with sexual jealousy and revenge that contained nudity and sex acts (Films.lk 2023).

Then it can find wives who produced films of their husbands such as Renuka Balasooriya, Damayanthi Fonseka, and Samanmali Hewamanna. Renuka Balasooriya produced 13 films, from *Saroja* (2000) to *Tsunami* (2020), which were directed by her spouse, Somaratne Dissanayake. Most of their films were stories about children and young adults. However, other than her spouse, Renuka produced two internationally acclaimed arthouse films from other directors: *Sankara* (2007) by Prasanna Jayakody and *Burning Birds* (2016) by Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, both films were internationally acclaimed award-winning arthouse films. She also worked as an executive producer in *Thanha Rathi Ranga* (2014) and *Wherever* (2013), co-producer in *Kusa Paba* (2012), and production manager in *Siri Raja Siri* (2008). In addition to them, Damayanthi Fonseka, who is also an actress, produced two films with her husband, Prasanna Withanage: *Anantha Rathriya*

(2001) and *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (2001). Samanmali Hewamanna produced three films with her husband Bennat Rathnayaka, *Aswasuma* (2001), *Sulanga* (2005), and *Ira Handa Yata* (2010). However, just like Soma, neither of these female producers ever produced female directors' films.

The only prominent female producer who produced female directors' films was, Milina Sumathipala. She only produced four films, and two of them are Sumithra Pieris's films, *Ganga Addara* (1980) and *Duwata Mawaka Misa* (1997). The other two films are *Paththini* (2016) and *Uthpalawanna* (2007), both directed by male director, Sunil Ariyaratne. Even though those two films were directed by a male director, the stories revolved around strong female protagonists. Despite the fact that those films are reflections of existent male dominancy and patriarchal ideologies, her approaches reflect her motive for quality over profit and genuine interest in the development of women's cinema within her capacity and knowledge. As this paper is focused on recognising female filmmakers and the state of their filmmaking practices throughout cinema history rather than an in-depth analysis of the films they made, let us move forward to inquire about the motives of the rest of the female producers: Sri Lankan actresses as film producers.

Below is a list of actresses-producers extracted from the book, *The Query of Sri Lanka's Movie Catalogue* by Ajith Galappaththi, published in 2018 by the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka.

- Sumana Amarasingha
Tom Pachaya (1977), Thana Girau (1982), Sudu Piruwata (1994), Jonson and Gonson (2001)
- Neeta Fernando
Suriyakantha (1981), Pauru Walalu (1999), Nisala Gira (2007), Bambara Walalla (2010)
- Anojaa Weerasingha
Kala Mal (1982), Obata Diwra Kiyannam (1985), Obata Rahasak Kiyannam (1989), Kelimadala (1991), Juliyatge Bhomikawa (1998)
- Geetha Kumarasingha
Chalitha Rangali (1985), Palama Yata (1990), Salambak Hadai (1991), Loku Duwa (1996) Anuragaye Ananthaya (2000)
- Sureni Senarath
Mal Warusa (1986)
- Nadeeka Gunasekara
Ahinsa (1987), Eya Obata Barai (1998)
- Shriyani Amarasena
Dase Mal Pipila (1990), Tharanaya (1997)
- Thalatha Gunasekara
Eya Obata Barai (1998)
- Sanoja Bibile
Alu Yata Gini (2005)
- Sangeetha Weerathna
Sewwandi (2006)
- Sachini Ayendra
Angara Dagara (2011)

All of the above actresses are successful box-office stars in mainstream cinema of the popular genre. The motive of those actresses to becoming producers can be identified as their strategy of investing the economic capital they earned from cinema to earn symbolic value as well as the market value that facilitates their climb to the next level in the industry as actresses. For instance, they put the money they earned from cinema back into producing films that featured

strong female lead characters or at least strong supporting characters played by those actresses. These investments met their need to play their own desired characters, and also, helped them demonstrate their acting capacity by playing challenging as well as multi-dimensional characters. Further, some are arthouse films, which had more or less the potential to fulfil these actresses' ultimate goal of being honored by winning awards at local and global film festivals. The below thoughts of Anojaa Weerasinge and Geetha Kumarasingha reflect their motives for producing films.

“...In commercial films, characters are very similar. You find yourself acting out the same situation over and over again. There's nothing to learn from this type of acting...in the three artistic films I mentioned, I feel I have achieved something as an actress...in an artistic film, you find flesh and blood characters. I can always find a similar experience in my life, or in the lives of women I know and observe. When one gets to play such a character, more than the money, it gives you a huge sense of satisfaction. The "make-believe" characters are fun to do, our fans like them, and they make us popular stars; yet, as an actress, I prefer the "real" roles” (Weerasinghe 1989)

“...I was very happy when I won the award for the best actress for my performance as Dotty in Palama Yata. My happiness was unlimited and really thrilling. Thereafter, I won several other awards for my performance...Even if your first attempt is a success, you should not be proud until you repeat it and reach the top...” (Kumarasinghe 2005)

These actresses often widely shared their interest in contributing to the improvement of female society, however, they merely reflected their interest in the development of Sri Lankan women's cinema. For instance, among them, only two of them produced female directors' films:

Geetha Kumarasingha produced *Loku Duwa* (1996) by Sumithra Pieris, who played Punna. Nadeeka Gunasekara co-produced *Ahinsa* (1987) by Malani Fonseka while playing a supporting role. Malini is the other co-producer of the film.

Further, these actresses often contradict their own vision, position, interests, and motives in their careers as actresses as well as producers. In many interviews, they have always spoken of the empathy they feel for the female characters they play in films. Those thoughts also reflect their interest in growing towards a more feminist, and less feminine visual and cinematic interpretation of the reality of Sri Lankan women. Contrary, they often served the existing patriarchal ideologies,

For instance, *Loku Duwa* (1996), produced by Geetha Kumarasingha is about the struggle of an elderly daughter to survive with her mother and siblings after her father, the breadwinner of the family, died suddenly and her lover is discovered to be an impostor (*Loku Duwa* 1996). As such Geetha did several other strong female characters in her career and she won awards for most of them. In one of the interviews, for the question of the interviewer, “I saw your performance in the current film *Ran Diya Dahara* as an excellent portrayal of a typical Sri Lankan woman straining under economic, social and domestic constraints. How do you yourself feel in that role?” Geetha Kumarasingha said,

“The character of Amali was lingering in my mind for some time. It is a character of a true woman. A happy marriage is the dream of every woman. For her, marriage is

sacred. Amali had a baby without a marriage. So, she longed for a marriage; even to be a widow satisfied her desire. It gave her a shadow of marriage in full bridal attire” (Kumarasinghe 2005)

Then again in the same interview, Geetha said,

“Once the cinema fails to entertain the people, the industry will have to suffer. Cinema cannot be reduced to a stage or TV screen. We now underexpose the beauty of the feminine figure which is vital for popular cinema. At the rate we are going, the rest of the world would say that ours is a country where there are no beautiful women” (Kumarasinghe 2005)

It is true that Sri Lankan cinema has lost its glorious era due to industry matters as well as many social, political, and cultural matters, and now, everyone who are in the industry should try to find ways to develop it back. yet, the entertainment factor alone is not enough to attract contemporary audiences to the cinema and it is proven throughout the Sri Lankan cinema history. For instance, as mentioned before in this paper, after the open economy in 1977, producers started to make films only targeting the entertainment factor, and it is considered the start of the decline of the glorious era of Sri Lankan cinema. That could not be recovered until today even after the two decades. Moreover, on one hand, the viewpoint of exposing the beauty of the feminine figure to attract audiences also cannot be justified in this new digital era, because there we can find unlimited videos of a pool of beauty queens on the internet, further, if anyone needed, beauties around the world in various nudity levels with a few clicks away nowadays on our smartphones. On the other

hand, the objectification of women in cinema and the pervasive use of the male gaze has been highly criticized subjects in the global film industry for a long time (Gavazzi and Staff 2022). Further, there are wider and continuous discourses on how to further reduce the presence of women from a heterosexual male perspective, focusing on their appearance and presenting women as objects of desire (Riley 2016). Sri Lankan cinema industry and society at large, are also in vast need of growing awareness and pushing for change for objectification and the male gaze in cinema that perpetuate gender stereotypes, reinforce unequal power dynamics, and limit the representation of women by narrowing down towards the hypersexualized role of woman.

The conclusion of all the Sri Lankan women producers' cases reflects that the enthusiasm of most of them to produce films often interlaced with various other motivations, intentions and requirements, and they co-existed in the shape of professional producer-director collaboration. Further, these cases reflect that the Western knowledge of women decision-makers in cinema has an impact on the development of women in cinema (Layne 2021) is not so true in highly male-dominated industries such as Sri Lanka for main three reasons. The first one is that the slow-changing gender stereotypes in society at large (Priyashantha 2023), produce female leaders who do not believe in gender equity and are unable to understand the contribution and value of equal women representation in their industries. They are further trapped in their own patriarchal paradox

of gender bias, stereotypes and family responsibilities. The second one is females who climbed to the top policy-making or decision-making level, still in their own struggle for survival and/or continuing to fight to secure their position at the top among the male dominance, are not capable of giving much to the other females. Further, being in a leader's position does not always mean being a leader, having leadership qualities and having decision-making power. The third and most paradoxical reason is that some female leaders simply do not have any idea what it means to be equal or inclusive.

Female directors in finding local producers

Among all those long-grown socio-political and cultural matters, female film directors continuously failed to find opportunities to thrive and grow, either giving up the industry or starting to produce their films by themselves.

Gender stereotypes, same-gender preferences, and organizational variation in the hiring of women are common global issues that female filmmakers have suffered from since the beginning of world cinema (Fulford and Hamilton 2023). The hardship of finding producers for Sri Lankan female filmmakers can also be identified as a local version of that global phenomenon. However, when contemporary global discourse adequately pushes industries to decrease gender disparities in representation and power in cinema (Layne 2021), Sri Lanka almost never addresses and/or rarely highlights such issues. Since Sri Lankan discourse on the positive development of twenty-

first-century women's society has not been very effective, the traditional interpretations of Sri Lankan women are widely established in society (Priyashantha 2023). This establishment of gender stereotypes directly affects the representation of Sri Lankan women in all kinds of off-camera positions, including women directing films.

Further, even when social movements and awareness campaigns such as MeToo have been motivating many individuals and organizations to take action to address these sexual misconducts and unfair opportunity share (Dockterman 2015 and Constable 2019), Sri Lankan female filmmakers did not gain much from such movements as well. For instance, while the MeToo movement has been widely pushing to include more women's participation in the cinema industry until today (Layne 2021), it has not had any lasting effects in Sri Lanka (Devana 2022) other than launching a ceremony with the Sri Lanka visit of the Hollywood actress, Ashley Judd (Colombo Gazette 2018), and few local females revealing their experiences under the MeToo hashtag (The Moring 2021).

Four out of the eight female directors, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, entered film directing either by producing their debut films by themselves or by their spouses. Sumitra Peries's debut film, *Gahanu Lamai* (1978), was produced by her spouse, Lester James Peries. The first two films by Malani Fonseka were produced by her. All the films so far released were of

Inoka Sathyangani and Sumathi Sivamohan produced by themselves. Those statuses reflect the struggle of most Sri Lankan female directors to find producers at their entry-level and at different stages in their careers as directors.

Another aspect of the female film directors' challenges is that most of them are passionate about the films they make, and their primary motive is cinematic quality over profit. Therefore, the majority of profit-driven Sri Lankan producers do not attract them unless these filmmakers, by themselves, find ways to prove that their films can also make profits, or at least they will not be flopped, either nationally or internationally. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Sumitra Peiris's husband is the producer of her debut film, *Gahanu Lamai* (1978). The film was highly acclaimed both nationally and internationally and her aesthetic quality in filmmaking had been a signature of her as a director. Her achievements in the early stages of her career became a motivation for producers to work on her next projects. Later she had become a successful award-winning film director both nationally and internationally and even she was nicknamed the "Poetess of Sinhala Cinema" (Tampoe-Hautin 2011)

Among other film directors, Malani Fonseka is one of the most privileged directors in Sri Lankan cinema. That is because, as one of the top actresses and the biggest brand name in the Sri Lankan cinema industry who is nicknamed "The Queen of Sinhala cinema" (Uvais 2020), she already had a reputation, industry network, and most importantly, a fan base when she came to

film directing. However, despite this background, she produced the first two films by herself. She shared her struggle with making her debut film, *Sasara Chethana* in 1984 as below,

“When producers moved away from making films, I took a huge risk in the early eighties and made ‘*Sasara Chethana*’. I got a loan from the Peoples’ Bank and settled the loan up to the last cent because the film did well at the box office. This actually motivated so many people to produce films and among them were my film world colleagues. Even Peoples’ Bank started giving loans to filmmakers after the success of my film. We have made umpteen sacrifices for the welfare of our industry” (Fonseka 2020)

Later, after the success of her films, Malani worked with two other producers for her next two films. However, one other motive can be seen in her making those films other than just coming to a directing. That is to play the roles that she desired because she played the main roles in all those four films while directing them.

Even after a successful entry into the industry with her debut film which led to attracting producers for her next films, Inoka Sathyangani ended up producing her next film again by herself, because she decided not to compromise her way of filmmaking, creative freedom, and vision in order to work with a producer.

Inoka’s debut directorial film, *Sulang Kirilli* (2003), became an international success, receiving several official selections at major international film festivals, and she won the FIPRESCI Prize and Jury Prize for Best Asian Film at the Dhaka International Film Festival in

2004. The protagonist, Damitha Abeyratne, also won the Jury Prize for Best Actress at the same festival. Again, Inoka was nominated for the Golden Precolumbian Circle award for Best Film at the Bogota Film Festival in 2003 and for the Tokyo Grand Prix award at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 2002. Even though her success became a motivation for local producers to work with her, she ended up deciding to keep full creative freedom and waited years until she was financially strong enough to produce the next film by herself. Inoka shared her experience during an interview and said,

“Three local filmmakers requested me to make a movie during the past eight years. I even wrote a script for a producer but soon realised that I cannot do what I really have in mind for the movie. My personal satisfaction is important to me. I should be able to enjoy making the film as well as watching it. I need to be honest to my creation rather than use it as a mere money-making machine. I engaged in making documentaries during the past few years and decided to stay away from cinema till I get a chance to make a movie the way I want” (Sathyangani 2011).

That seems like an easy way out for filmmakers like Inoka, who has a very strong and clear vision for her film and also has some financial freedom to produce films by herself. Further, it saves the extra energy that would be consumed in finding a producer who is a perfect match and/or the nightmare of altering the original vision to fit the producer’s needs. However, her case is a loud alarm that reminds us of the need to overcome the broader local industrial matters from which most Sri Lankan filmmakers suffer, regardless of gender. That is the absence of a proper local

support system or mechanism that facilitates producer-director collaborations such as film markets, pitching events and industry network gatherings.

Further, the cases of all these female directors and producers so far on the silver screen emphasize the long journey of contemporary female filmmakers in order to end this historical marginalization of female filmmakers in Sri Lankan cinema. These cases further make the ground to emphasise the importance of recognising the contemporary female filmmakers who are absent in the local records, hence, mentioned as “others” in this paper.

Other females as filmmakers

Several major factors should be considered from a creative as well as an administrative standpoint in recognizing those “others” as “filmmakers,” many, once again, is a fundamental issue that is common to any local filmmaker, regardless of gender.

One of the major factors that should be looked at in this other female filmmaker’s case is the issue of not updating industrial policies according to contemporary industry changes. To formally identify someone as a filmmaker, the film should be registered with the National Film Corporation and screened in local theatres. Although it seems like a sophisticated method that has been followed from the beginning until today, the policy excludes many filmmakers who have not theatrically released their films.

With contemporary local industry issues such as declining audiences during the last two decades due to various industrial, socio-political and cultural matters (Robinson 2018), and with the local theatres beginning to close down or be abandoned due to the loss of local audiences (Editor 2021) most filmmakers started to look for other distribution methods to reach audiences. Further, there is a local industry issue where filmmakers must wait years in line for their theatrical releases (Fernando 2018). Those seem to accelerate the growth of alternative distribution methods such as VOD platforms, YouTube, and social media among contemporary filmmakers (Buthgumwa 2022). Those online methods are attractive because of their capability to reach mass audiences by transcending geographical barriers. Further, they are advantageous for small-scale industries such as Sri Lanka, specifically in reaching diasporic audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated online film releases as traditional cinema halls remained closed in many parts of the world, making VOD platforms and social media an even more important avenue for film distribution. This trend is continuing even after the pandemic subsides, as audiences have become more accustomed to consuming content online (Buthgumwa 2022 and Weerasooriya 2022). Therefore, most contemporary filmmakers nowadays release their films on such platforms, instead of releasing them in the theatres. Then according to the above government identification procedure, those films and filmmakers are unable to be included in their records, hence, no formal identification as filmmakers.

Further, commercial films are often taking advantage of profit-driven private sector distribution monopolies and arthouse films are pushed back with the belief of no local market. With the absence of any specific local theatres dedicated to arthouse films, locally vulnerable arthouse filmmakers turn towards international audiences around international film festivals (Dodangoda and Hettiarachchi 2019), overlooking the national cinema market. Those films only manage to make a few screenings locally at specific events, such as private screenings organized by the filmmakers themselves, universities, cultural groups, and monthly screenings of organizations such as the Goethe Institution. In most cases, the films are exposed to selected audiences mainly around the main city, Colombo, or the suburbs. As these films locally did not screen in theatres, even though they are international award-winning films, those filmmakers will not be included in the local records, hence, will not be formally identified as filmmakers. Mostly, even very few people in the local industry know those filmmakers. For instance, the film *Talking With the Wind* (2017), directed by Jayashika Padmasiri, premiered at the 2017 Montreal World Film Festival under the category “Focusing on World Cinema”. Filmmaker and film scholar, Sumathi Sivamohan’s award-winning debut film, *Sons and Fathers* (2017), was distributed internationally in 2017 through international film festivals. The debut film of Suba Sivakumaran, *House of My Fathers* (2018), was screened at festivals, such as the International Film Festival

Rotterdam in 2019, where it was part of its “Bright Future” section. Any of those films and filmmakers were not included in local records as they had not yet been screened in Sri Lankan theatres.

Throughout local cinema history, there is no record of the release of documentaries in theatres (Galappaththi 2018). The most notable Sri Lankan female documentary filmmaker, Anomaa Rakajaruna highlighted this issue as follows,

“Country without documentary filmmaking is like a home without a family album...Due to the lack of documentary understanding, the country is losing the opportunity to record its audio-visual history” (Rajakaruna 2011).

Even though, this lack of local attention to documentary films led to a belief that no local audience for documentaries, which is problematic because local documentaries that had been distributed on television and/or VOD, YouTube, and social media and some of them reached very good mass audiences. Some documentary filmmakers target the outside market by mainly going through the international film festival circuit. The filmmaking journey of Anomaa is the best example to look at the issue. Her directorial debut is the 1983 telefilm *Sonduriya*, which was broadcast on national television, Rupavahini. Since then, she has been making many international award-winning documentaries in the country, including her recent film, *Our Mother, Grandmother, Prime Minister: SIRIMAVO* (2023), which won best documentary film in the

women's category at the 21st Dhaka International Film Festival. By joining an interview in 2011,

Anomaa said,

“Having participated in the festival where the documentary reached the finals Anoma's horizon was widened and this encouraged her to take up a career as a documentary filmmaker. Having long suffered, firstly in the infancy of my career and then as a woman in an industry dominated by men, Anomaa realised that documentary films would give her more independence to express herself which made the turning point in her life...I was glad that there was no political interference or censorship for documentaries and there was also a market outside” (Rajakaruna 2011).

Even though she has been making documentaries since 1983, she never released any of her films in theatres by following the formal film release method. She often used television to release her documentaries, and social media as alternative ways of finding local audiences. As she never screened her documentary films in theatres, her name is not included in any local records as a filmmaker.

Further, there are no feature-length animation films made by female filmmakers in Sri Lankan cinema history. However, that can be identified as an issue due to a lack of technological, financial, and personnel infrastructure, which is more a regional issue of South Asia than of the Sri Lankan industry (Lent 2009).

Regardless of all those above-mentioned industrial, social and political issues, there are many award-winning short filmmakers in Sri Lanka now because digital media technology is

accessible and affordable for them to produce films with relatively lower budgets compared to feature-length films (Nimalachandra 2008). This affordability factor also made it easier for female filmmakers, who may face additional financial challenges or barriers, to bring their creative ideas to life and gain exposure (Nimalachandra 2008). Moreover, short films are a valuable medium for experimenting with storytelling techniques, showcasing directorial skills, and demonstrating creative vision in a concise format (Rea and Irving 2015). Yet, since there are very few venues for short filmmakers to locally distribute their short films, online releases through VOD, social media, and film festivals are popular distribution methods among them.

However, there had been a procedure to screen short films parallel to feature films in the local theatres in the early years (Galappaththi 2018: 12), and that was considered to display the potential of future feature filmmakers, hence, a good opportunity to draw the attraction of producers. That is not in practice anymore and there is no formal recognition of the short filmmakers.

The exclusion of short filmmakers from records results in limited opportunities for emerging filmmakers to highlight their work and gain exposure, which in turn hinders the growth and development of the Sri Lankan film industry as a whole. However, in contrast to the continuous decrease of local opportunities for those emerging female filmmakers, the transnational industry practices of mass-scale industries such as the USA, UK, and Europe seem to be opening

new venues to grow, bypassing the local cinema industry challenges. In addition to their concern for profit, global producers often look for promising talent and fresh voices in the industry (Film Producers 2023), short films become an effective way for filmmakers to make their mark and gain recognition, which serves as a calling card for future projects. In recent years, Sri Lankan female filmmakers participated various film festivals and industry events and gained industry support from international professionals, increasing their chances of finding support for their future projects.

For instance, filmmaker Bhavanitha Loganathan made several short films, including her award-winning debut short film, *By the Sea* (2017), and most of her films were screened in international film festivals. She eventually started to release her short stories, such as *Red Balloon*, *Ghost Doctor*, and several *Island Story* chapters, as motion graphic novels on YouTube (Big Eyes 2021). She had opportunities to participate in one of the major development programs and networking platforms for independent filmmakers at the Berlin International Film Festival in Germany, Berlinale Talents 2020 (Berlinale Talents 2023). She is selected for a development program at the Busan Asian Film School in Korea for her work as an emerging producer (Busan Asian Film School 2023). Lanka Bandaranayake has been making short films since her award-winning debut short film, *Tradition* (2016). She received international opportunities, such as a

development fellowship at Global Media Makers—Film Independent in the USA in 2022, for her debut feature film, *The Hail* (The Leader 2022). In addition to them, there is a long list of award-winning female filmmakers over the last few years and among them below filmmakers and films gained much local and international recognition: *The Image* (2016) by Chathumi Vidhushika, *Hope* (2017) by Fathima Zanas, *Let Her Fly...* (2015) by Fathima Nafla, *The Extinction Has Begun* (2017) by Nipunika Fernando, *Pottu* (2021) by Navayuga Kugarajah, and animation films and filmmakers such as *The Girl in the Rainwater Tree* (2023) by Yoshitha Perera and *Animate Her* (2022) series by Irushi Tennekoon.

Same as them, female filmmaker, Sumudu Malalagama has been working as a short filmmaker for some years and was awarded the second annual grant from the Torino Film Lab at the Open Door event at the 2018 Locarno film festival in Switzerland for her feature film project, *Heli The Daughter* (Fernando 2021 and The Sunday Times 2018). She, as a young creative producer, shared her standpoint on contemporary filmmakers looking for international opportunities, as she said,

“...At the same time, you can create content for the whole world. So, I really believe getting international exposure for your film or for yourself is something some filmmakers need. Or that recognition is what they are looking for...So again it is a personal choice. Getting international exposure for your film or not. But as a country or as an industry I believe getting international exposure for the projects adds value. It creates a reputation for the country. Your country's name will be on the top of the list if your film won an award. And this will lead the next generations to have more opportunities” (Malalagama 2021).

Most importantly, some of these young female filmmakers have been showing their potential to improve women's participation in Sri Lankan cinema within their capacity, further, in the wider context, building future women's society in Sri Lanka. For instance, Sumudu started a film development program called, The Movement Lab; a space created for encouraging young filmmakers to tell their stories through the cinema medium (Malalagama 2021). She shared her vision of what has been done, along with her colleagues, to develop the future cinema industry as below,

“...As a team, we always wanted to create a platform for the next generation. Being young ourselves it is not natural trying to create a platform for the next generation. But that is what we did. We wanted the next generation to move ahead of us, make short films and reach out to the entire world. We wanted them to know that there are these kinds of platforms in the international arena. At the same time, it was created so the youth in Sri Lanka can be part of the country. They can create their stories and be a voice. All the films are related to different themes of reconciliation and co-existence. Their voice matters and their story matters” (Malalagama 2021).

Sumudu also has been conducting various training workshops for young female filmmakers all over the country which reflects her genuine interest in developing future woman's society through the medium she is into filmmaking. The journalist, Gayanga Dissanayaka shared her thoughts on one of the workshops which were conducted by Sumudu and its impact on the participating women as follows,

“It is important to train women in filmmaking. No doubt that the art of making films empowers women...During both training sessions, the young girls learned how to produce short films to address issues such as economic inequality, GBV, climate injustice, digital misogyny, a lack of gender-responsive, political and civic participation” (Disanayaka 2022)

Her involvement is very important in the means of future development of the Sri Lankan cinema industry, especially because she is filling the long-driven wider local cinema industry gaps such as the absence of mentorship and networking opportunities, exclusive industry practices, no support for female-led projects and collaborating with industry stakeholders.

In addition to such involvement in evolving future generations, the existence of all these contemporary female filmmakers sheds light on the future development of the Sri Lanka cinema industry because most of them show the potential to grow as future filmmakers in the future. Also, it can predict that their films will drastically change the dominant monotonous local narratives and offer fresh perspectives on various issues, which is important in the means of attracting contemporary audiences back to the local cinema.

This study concludes the importance of the contemporary Sri Lankan industry’s need for female leadership and works towards creating an inclusive and supportive environment that allows women to thrive in the local cinema. These include the form of supportive networks and platforms that bring together female filmmakers, aspiring talents, and industry professionals. These spaces can provide opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, and knowledge sharing, fostering a sense of community and support. That includes,

- Provide training and skill development specifically tailored to female filmmakers which focused on building technical skills, enhancing storytelling abilities, and developing leadership and management capabilities.

- Ensure equitable access to funding and production resources for female filmmakers. Establish grants, funds, and schemes that specifically target and support women in the industry. Encourage production houses, investors, and government agencies to allocate resources to projects helmed by female filmmakers.
- Encourage collaborations between established filmmakers and emerging female talents. Promote partnerships between production companies, film schools, and organizations working towards gender equality in cinema. Such collaborations can provide opportunities for exposure, learning, and the sharing of resources and expertise.
- Recognize and address the systemic biases and barriers that hinder female participation in the industry. Encourage fair hiring practices, equal pay, and opportunities for career advancement. Create policies and initiatives that ensure a safe and inclusive working environment, free from discrimination and harassment.
- Promote the visibility and recognition of female filmmakers through film festivals, screenings, and awards. Encourage programmers and curators to include a diverse range of films by women in their lineups. Celebrate and amplify the achievements of female filmmakers to inspire others and create role models.
- Incorporate film education and media literacy programs that highlight gender equality, diversity, and the importance of representation. By nurturing an understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives from a young age, it can help shape a more inclusive and equitable future for the industry.

It is important to note that these steps should be taken in collaboration with the film industry, government bodies, educational institutions, and relevant stakeholders to ensure comprehensive and sustainable change. By addressing the systemic challenges and promoting equal opportunities, it is possible to create an environment where female participation in Sri Lankan cinema can flourish.

It also emphasizes the need of breaking down the hegemonic patriarchal barriers of wider Sri Lankan society to foster opportunities that can enable more female leaders to emerge and

contribute their unique voices and perspectives to the world of filmmaking. Especially since the lack of representation of females in Sri Lankan cinema throughout all these years in history emphasizes the need for more diversity in the Sri Lankan film industry. Further, it should be underlined that the discourse of representation in the Sri Lankan cinema industry should not only be limited in terms of gender but also of race and ethnicity to encourage more diverse perspectives in storytelling and to ensure a wider range of stories are told in the Sri Lankan cinema.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ The Sinhalese film made in 1925, *Rajakiya Wikramaya Nohoth Kantha* is considered the first Sri Lankan film in the book, *The Query of Sri Lanka movie Catalogue* (Galappaththi 2018, pp.31). That is one of two films made during the silent cinema era, however, it didn't screen in Sri Lankan theatres. The Cine Dictionary published in 2020 identifies only the first Sri Lankan talking picture, *Kadawunu Poronduwa* (1947) (The Broken Promise), as the first Sri Lankan film (The Cine Directory 2020). Both are published by National Film Corporation Sri Lanka. This paper identifies *Rajakiya Wikramaya Nohoth Kantha* (1925) as the first film of Sri Lankan cinema.