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Syed, Jawad and Tariq, Memoona

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Paradox of gender and leadership in India: A critical review of Mardaani

Jawad Syed and Memoona Tariq

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the paradoxical and dynamic nature of gender and leadership in India through a critical review of Indian film 'Mardaani' (meaning: mannish). The review shows that masculine stereotypes of leadership are simultaneously reinforced and shattered in the Indian context, and that despite all the odds, women's role in organisations is characterised of dynamism and change. The paper situates this review in the broader context of gender, employment and leadership in India and offers a critical analysis. The analysis has two implications. Firstly, it indicates that women are equally capable of demonstrating worthy leadership. Secondly, it highlights that being a leader, or 'mannish', in the workplace does not mean that women are not responsible for the domestic and caring duties at home. In fact, female leaders in India continue to do the double-shift by struggling to balance their roles in the workplace and their personal lives.

Keywords: Bollywood, femininity, gender, Indian film, leadership, masculinity

Introduction

Previous research has highlighted the importance of context in which leadership is played out and also indicated the pervasive role of gender as a contextual, structural and cultural variable (Eagly & Heilman, 2016; Klenke, 2004; Zimmerman, 2012). Leadership has been generally defined as an influence relationship amongst leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect on their mutual purposes or interests (Rost, 1991). Historically, leadership has been theorised as a trait possessed by ‘great men’ who defined power, authority and knowledge (Denmark, 1993). In contrast, women’s roles and examples of leadership are limited due to historical constraints such as gender stereotypes and lack of equal opportunities for education and employment. Only in recent decades, female leadership has moved into the limelight of media and public interest given that increasing number of women are entering into traditionally male domains of leadership including sectors such as banking and finance, information technology and engineering (Paludi, 2013).

While there has been some progress in women’s participation in leadership positions in organisations in the West, gender gaps remain high in many developing countries (Williams & Gurtoo, 2016). This is also true of India where the historical source of women’s weak position may be traced to traditional cultural and religious practices, and even today societal norms and routines tend to relegate women to positions of invisibility and disempowerment (Kumar, 2015; Pio & Syed, 2013). In fact, more than 90% of female workers in India are estimated to be employed in the informal labour market (Singh & Gupta, 2011). These workers usually work on low wages and in poor conditions (Barnes, 2014). The 2015 Global Gender Gap report offers an overview of gender gap in India in terms of economic participation, political empowerment, education and health. It shows that only 29% of women are part of the workforce (labour force participation rate) in comparison to 83% of men. In terms of wages for similar work, women earn almost one half of men’s wages while in terms of political empowerment, women represent less than 15% of legislators in the parliament. Moreover, literacy rate for Indian women is only 61% compared to 81% for men (WEF, 2015). A recent study reveals that India has a much lower proportion (15%) of business leadership roles held by women, than the global average (22%) (Chengappa, 2015).

In her study of female leadership in India, Spary (2007) argues that gender is an important factor of the path to power as well as the exercise of leadership and sources of legitimacy that leaders draw upon. She notes that structural gender bias and gender-based perceptions and expectations have a significant impact on assessments of behavioural style and performance. Spary further notes that gender stereotypes are often reinforced and legitimised by those in leadership position in exchange for political power.

In this paper, we examine gender and leadership in the Indian context, and for this purpose, review and analyse a Bollywood film titled ‘Mardaani’. The paper presents the paradoxical and dynamic nature of gender and leadership. Directed by Pradeep Sarkar and produced by Aditya Chopra, the 2014 film is mainly focused on the issues of child abduction and human trafficking, and the role of a female police officer Shivani (performed by Rani Mukerji) in chasing and cracking a criminal gang. In particular, it illustrates how Shivani resolves the case of a kidnapped girl that leads her to uncover a much larger threat to the community, i.e., a human trafficking ring. The main character, Shivani, shows commitment, bravery, and perseverance to hunt down the ring operating in various major cities across India.

This film was chosen for review because it (a) depicts a successful female leader in a department (police) which is not only male dominated but also notorious for misconduct and corruption, (b) shows her struggles to balance her work and family life, and, (c) highlights the ongoing gender and leadership stereotypes that she continues to face and shatter. Moreover, the film was chosen not only because of its name (mannish or manlike) but also due to the fact that a successful policewoman has been shown and some of her attributes have been, at least indirectly, attributed to being man-like.

The film also has a social message, i.e., it raises awareness about the organised abduction and trafficking of minor females, which plagues many countries and continents, and is particularly acute in India. According to an estimate, 1.2 million children per year are trafficked worldwide for sexual exploitation (Peebles, 2013). Every year, almost 40,000 children are abducted in India, out of which 11,000 remain untraced (Singh, 2014). Owing to the film's social message and its relevance to women, the film was given a tax free status in at least three states in India, namely Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. The film was also released in Europe particularly in Poland, a country tarnished by a high rate of crime against children (Basu, 2015).

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it offers a brief theoretical background of gender and leadership. Then it highlights the issues and challenges that women face in Indian society and leadership. It is followed by a detailed analysis of the film and conclusion.

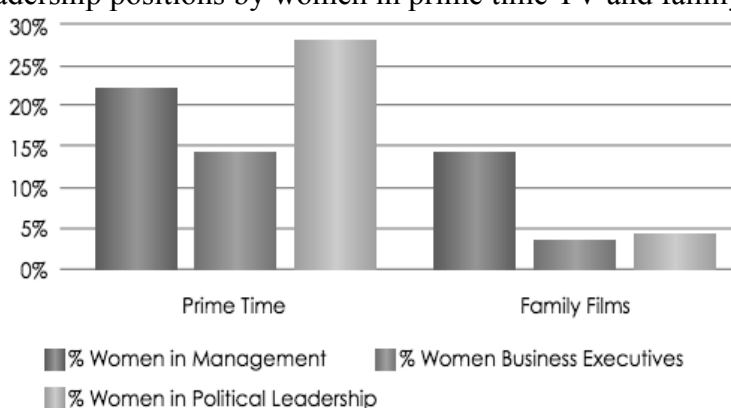
Theoretical background: Gender and leadership

In this section, a theoretical overview of gender and leadership is offered with a specific focus on business and media. Leadership is generally understood as a process that facilitates and influences human organisation towards the achievement of common goals (Gardiner, 2015; Northouse, 2007). In contrast, gender is understood as a socially constructed system of organising meaning (Dietz, 2003; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). These two systems for organising activity and meaning are as intertwined as are their outcomes (Reynolds, 2011). It is, therefore, important to assess the notion of leadership and its practices from a feminist perspective (Gardiner, 2015; Johanson, 2008). While numerous studies point towards gender differences in leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Gardiner, 2015), femininity as an attribute is hardly associated with leadership (Reynolds, 2011).

Chemers (2000) suggests that there are three theoretical explanations for the types of differences between male and female leaders: biological differences (hormones, temperament etc.), cultural differences (socialised for different roles), and structural differences (relative standing in organisational structures). However, gender stereotyping is a major hurdle for women in leadership positions which also explains why only a few women are found in high-status positions (Crocker & McGraw, 1984; Williams & Gurtoo, 2016). For instance, it has been reported that if given the choice between a male or female boss when taking a new job, Americans strongly lean towards men as their preferred choice (Baxter, 2013). In other words, issues with female authority have not gone away. The "great man" theory of leadership prevails in practice heralding male leaders as heroic, charismatic, commanding, competitive, and sometimes just plain quirky (Baxter, 2013). Thus, while biological differences between women and men should not be used for discrimination in social rules (Gatens, 1991), masculinity seems to dominate the world and the workplace while women usually remain in inferior or disempowered positions.

Gender stereotypes are also evident in mainstream media and cinema where women are often, if not always, presented in weak and dependent roles (Harvey, 2014). In fact, media plays a deep influence in portrayal of leadership (Gauntlett, 2008). There is a related issue of women's invisibility and under-representation. A study on gender in U.S. media shows that women in positions of leadership are under-represented in the media. The study reports that male characters outnumber female characters in management roles by more than 3.5 to 1 in prime time shows and over 6 to 1 in family films. Political leadership is similarly skewed where female representation is only 28%. In prime time television shows, the portion of female managers is 22% (Smith *et al.*, 2013, cited in Bhatt *et al.*, 2013; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Leadership positions by women in prime time TV and family films



(Source: Smith *et al.*, 2013)

In terms of female participation in actual businesses, the data is not too promising. Bhatt *et al.* (2013) indicate that, in the U.S., only 4.2% of CEOs, 8.1% of top earners and 16.6% of board members happen to be women while women's participation in the labour force is 46.9%.

Indian context of gender and leadership

Since the 1980s, there has been a decline in the workforce participation rate of women in India. For example, between 2005 and 2012, while there was a sluggish growth in employment, a steep fall in female labour force participation was noted, from 37% to 27% (ILO, 2013; World Bank, 2016). In recent years, there is some evidence of stronger employment growth but women's workforce participation in rural areas continues to decline. There is, however, a rise in the share of workers in formal employment. Moreover, there is considerable variation between urban and rural areas (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014).

There is a dominant patriarchal tradition in India, which promotes and reinforces masculine stereotypes of a successful leader (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014). However, there are certain unique contextual differences. For example, instead of typical male vs. female binary, the Indian approach appears to be more hybrid and complementary when it comes to women's role in society and workplaces (Kumar, 2015). In other words, there is an issue of intersection of gender and culture with significant implications for leadership.

Historically, women in India despite their disempowerment have played a complementary role to men in fields such as agriculture, religion, politics and family (Budhwar *et al.*, 2005). As a result, a paradoxical and hybrid approach to gender

equality and leadership is evident which is far from static in the current era characterised of rapid urbanisation, globalisation, and increased awareness of issues of gender equality. The paradoxical approach to gender and leadership creates ambiguity that must be managed by leaders in developing their own traits and crafting models of their success.

The gender gap in India is also reflected in the film industry. In most of the Indian films, women, even the heroines, are usually presented in weak or subordinate positions (Gahlot, 2015). Female directors, writers and producers in Indian film industry are only a minority. Women represent 9.1% of directorship positions, slightly above the global average of 7% while the percentage of female writers is 12.1%, significantly lower than the 19.7% global average. Also female producers are only 15.2%, way below the 22.7% global average (Hindustan times, 2014). Bollywood is still a very male dominated industry where women are not only given insignificant positions, but are also underpaid in comparison to their male counterparts (Gahlot, 2015).

Women's role in broader society still represents a traditional patriarchal order. Even in large cities they are expected to take up domestic duties, whereas men tend to be the breadwinners (Kasbekar, 2006; Shenoy-Packer, 2014; Wollaeger & Eatough, 2012). In traditional families, particularly in rural areas, a common perception is that family honour can be hurt if a woman appears alone without a male chaperone (Hoven & Horschelmann, 2005; Shenoy-Packer, 2014). However, such traditions vary greatly across states and regions in India, and are also shaped by religious and tribal traditions and social class (Connolly & Ward, 2008).

India is a hub of various religious traditions, including but not limited to Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism and Christianity (Nehru, 2015). It is an ancient country with one of the longest surviving cultures, with strong values of humility and abstinence (Atkinson, 2014). While certain religious practices such as gender segregation and seclusion are clearly patriarchal, an emphasis on humility and social service (Pio & Syed, 2014) occasionally reigns in people from indulging in overly masculine or individualistic displays.

Along with economic development in India in recent decades, social thinking about gender is also somewhat changing (Nehru, 2015). Women's status is gradually changing as some females assume leadership roles within and outside the workplace. Interestingly, while women forge ahead as leaders, a few of them have defined their own traits and principles of leadership, thus becoming role models to other aspiring female leaders (Verma & Awasthi, 2010).

Analysis of the film

In this section, a critical analysis of the film is offered with a specific focus on issues of gender and leadership in the Indian context. A critical visual and inductive approach was used to analyse the data. The approach is useful to understand and conceptualise images and dialogues relevant to the study (Belk, 2006). The approach offers researchers an interdisciplinary method for understanding and contextualising visuals of crucial concern, such as due to their cultural centrality (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2015).

Primary data in this study consisted of the film (111 minutes), and the corresponding dialogues (in Hindi with English subtexts), which accompanied each scene. The inductive approach was used to locate recurring ideological themes and patterns related to gender and leadership. Thomas (2006) describes the following key elements of an inductive approach: condensing of raw data into a brief summary; (b)

establishing clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary; and (c) developing a framework of the underlying structure of processes or experiences that are evident in the raw data. Thus we first developed a brief summary of the film relevant to the study's aims and identified key scenes and their themes to explicate the structures of gender and leadership evident in the film. Both authors independently watched the movie, several times, took notes and developed a consensus through critical reflection and discussion to tease out key themes, which were situated in the Indian context. Table 1 provides a summary of the key scenes of the film.

Table 1. Summary of the main scenes

| <i>Scene</i> | <i>Brief description</i> |
|--------------|---|
| 1 | The film scene opens with Rani Mukerji, the lead role player (<i>Shivani</i>), a brave crime branch officer who successfully arrests a criminal, with the support of other police officers. |
| 2 | Pyaari is kidnapped by Karan Rastogi's men who run an organised crime cartel involving child trafficking and drugs. Shivani takes the case personally and aims to hunt him down and rescue the teenage girl. Pyaari is an orphan who <i>Shivani</i> takes care of as a daughter. |
| 3 | <i>Shivani</i> takes the task more seriously and goes beyond her legal duties to nab Karan (villain) and save Pyaari. |
| 4 | Karan is aware that <i>Shivani</i> is continuously monitoring his cartel's activities. He phones her to warn that she does not interrupt his business. Determined to catch him, <i>Shivani</i> uses intelligence inputs to track down his associate in Mumbai, who leads her to Karan's close aide, Wakeel, in Delhi. |
| 5 | <i>Shivani</i> travels to Delhi and sets up a trap involving decoy drug dealers, who pretend to offer very expensive cocaine to Karan and Wakeel. |
| 6 | When the plan becomes a success in terms of trapping them to buy the cocaine, <i>Shivani</i> barges in with other police officers. While Karan escapes, Wakeel realises he will get arrested, which means the police would interrogate him and eventually capture Karan. Therefore, he tries to erase evidence by destroying his mobile phone's SIM card and then shoots himself. |
| 7 | <i>Shivani's</i> continued investigation and information from her sources leads her to Karan's house, where Karan's mother sedates her. Shivani is abducted and brought to a party organised by Karan. |
| 8 | There she meets Pyaari and other girls who are forced to work as sex workers. <i>Shivani</i> singlehandedly confronts the situation, forcing Karan into a small room and rescuing and taking the girls with her. She challenges Karan to fight her when he teases her for being a woman and she beats him badly. |
| 9 | Sensing that he might escape the law, given the corruption in the police and judicial system, she hands Karan over to the girls, who beat him to death. His other gang members are arrested and prosecuted. |

Title

Mardaani as such is an adjective, which means 'like a man' or 'manly', but may also be used more like a noun which would mean 'a brave lady'. The Hindi word

(same word is used in Urdu and Persian) ‘mard’ means man. The film’s title is paradoxical and provocative because of the attribution of masculinity to a successful female leader, thus cleverly pointing towards gender discourses and stereotypes at play.

Historically, the word Mardaani was used by Hindi Poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904-1948) in her poetry for Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi (1828-1858), the Queen of the Maratha-ruled Jhansi State. The Rani of Jhansi was one of the leading figures of the First War of Indian Independence in 1857 and became a symbol of resistance to the British colonial occupation. The word was used because she fought like any *man* would, at the time when women rarely went out of their homes and were not expected to participate in wars.

English translation of Chauhan’s (2012) original poem is provided below.

“The thrones shook and royalties scowled
 Old India was re-invigorated with new youth
 People realised the value of lost freedom
 Everybody was determined to throw the foreigners out
 The old sword glistened again in 1857
 This story we heard from the mouths of Bundel bards
 Like a man she fought, she was the Queen of Jhansi”

Story

In terms of its story, the film stars Rani Mukerji in the lead role, a policewoman (Shivani) whose interest in the case of a kidnapped teenage girl leads her to uncover secrets of sex trafficking by the Indian mafia. Shivani, a dedicated and valiant officer in Mumbai police department, chases a Delhi-based kingpin, Karan Rastogi (aka Walt), who runs an organised crime cartel involving child trafficking and drugs. Karan is an urbane corporate type of person who operates his prostitution racket with the precision of a corporate enterprise. He is leading two lives one where he is seen doing his normal day-to-day routines and the other where he is associated with crime.

Shivani’s aim is to hunt him down and rescue a teenage girl, Pyaari. Pyaari is an orphan who is kidnapped by Karan’s men. She takes the task more personally and goes beyond her legal duties to nab Karan and save Pyaari. Karan is aware that Shivani is continually monitoring his cartel’s activities, threatens her to *mind her own business*. Determined to catch him, Shivani uses intelligence inputs to track down his associate in Mumbai, who leads her to Karan’s close aide, Wakeel, in Delhi. Karan, as a warning to Shivani, dismembers one of Pyaari’s fingers and sends it to Shivani’s house wrapped in a gift box. He also gets Shivani’s husband insulted and thrashed. Shivani travels to Delhi and sets up a trap involving decoy drug dealers, who pretend to offer very expensive cocaine to Karan and Wakeel. As the decoy drug dealers are negotiating the deal with Wakeel, Shivani barges in with other police officers and intercepts the area. While Karan escapes, Wakeel realises he will get arrested, destroys his mobile phone’s SIM card, and then shoots himself. However, Shivani’s continued investigation and information from her sources leads her to Karan’s house, where Karan’s mother manages to sedate her. Shivani is abducted and brought to a party organised by Karan. There, she meets Pyaari and other girls who are forced to work as sex workers. Shivani singlehandedly confronts the situation, rescuing and the abducted girls. She challenges Karan to fight her when he scolds her for being a woman, and she beats him badly. Sensing that he might escape the law, given the

corruption in the police and judicial system, she hands Karan over to the girls, who beat him to death. Although this type of behaviour cannot be commended (it is not okay to beat a 'villain' to death) but due to the nature of the situation, these girls seem to have no choice but stand up for their rights and dignity. However, his other gang members are arrested and prosecuted. It may be noted that as per data from National Crime Records Bureau, the number of registered human trafficking cases increased by 38.3% over five years from 2,848 in 2009 to 3,940 in 2013 while the conviction rate for such cases declined by 45%, from 1,279 in 2009 to 702 in 2013 (Saha, 2015).

Out of the vast expanses of the film's sensitivities, there emerges an engaging thriller, demonstrating the harsh reality of child abduction and exploitation. The film shows that girl children are sold for sexual gratification to men old enough to be their grandfathers while the piped music plays in the background. Viewers are inescapably drawn in to Shivani's desperate mission. One cannot come away unaffected by the brutal world that she cracks after a girl she loves goes missing (Jha, 2014).

Overall, Shivani plays the role of a hard-bitten cop with a mission to set things right. She is not afraid to bend the rules to nab criminals and is respected by other members of her department. The film is unique because it is rare to see a gangster film with a lead female actor as the protagonist. Shivani outperforms her male counterparts in her role and acting. She is upright and does not show any fear when facing danger. She takes personal and family related risks and eradicates the gang of traffickers. She physically as well as intellectually fights with the villains, thus indicating that not unlike men, women too possess immense force.

Rani Mukerji's preparation and perspectives

In terms of background information, media reports suggest that Rani Mukerji studied the police department and its various employees including a senior female police officer as a part of her preparation for this role (Chouhan, 2014; Kalra, 2014). She met the Mumbai Police Crime Branch chief, Himanshu Roy, to understand how a crime branch officer functions, ways in which officer probes various cases, officer's body language and lifestyle. She also dug into the dangers faced by police officers during operations. Moreover, she also visited Pune where she met the Police Commissioner Meeran Borwankar, who was also an investigation officer in the Mumbai 26/11 case. Another similar example is Kiran Bedi, who joined the Indian Police Service in 1972, and remained in service for 35 years before taking voluntary retirement in 2007 as Director General, Bureau of Police Research and Development (The Economic Times, 2007).

In her interviews with the media, Rani Mukerji offers her views on Shivani's role and the film in general. References to gender and leadership in her interviews are of specific relevance to this paper. For example, Rani says:

“There are many women officers who are as brave and as courageous and as fearless as the male officers. There is nothing that they don't do. The job of the police officer is the same, irrespective of the gender. That's what as a woman I have tried to portray through this role” (cited in Chouhan, 2014).

“It's about time that women did something to protect their dignity, leave prejudices aside and kindle the spirit to fight back. Throughout the promotion of my film, I kept telling every journalist to inspire parents to send their daughters to self-defence classes. Martial arts is something that should be made compulsory in schools and colleges today, so that women can

confidently face the world. I've been a Mardaani since my childhood. So this role was not new to me. I confess, that I absolutely enjoyed slapping and kicking those that were disrespectful" (cited in The Indian Express, 2014).

"Our films have not tried much to break the stereotypes while depicting female cops on screen. While researching the character, I learnt that there is no gender bias in Police Training Academy. Irrespective of the gender, a cop is identified by his or her skills and talent. I tried to ooze out a raw anger that drives a hard core cop to eliminate injustice. The anger in society has increased manifolds, and it is time we bring out the Mardaani in our girls" (cited in Srivastava, 2014).

References to physical strength of women, their leadership skills and the need to break gender stereotypes in the above extracts highlight the significance of these issues in the Indian context. While in view of social and institutional sexism, one may not completely agree with Rani that 'irrespective of the gender, a cop is identified by his or her skills and talent', her attempts to emphasise Indian women's self-confidence and leadership skills are commendable.

In enacting the part of a tough-talking cop who pursues a sex trafficking ring, Rani strikes a true to life, forceful character lending it the much-needed intensity, strength and dignity. The agony that drives her forward is visible on her face and is a key strength of the film and her own acting.

Shattering the gender stereotypes

Crime investigation is usually considered to be man's work (Nicol *et al.*, 2011). However, Shivani does not give the image of a strong "tomboy" in the film. In fact, at the opening of the scene she is seen in a *sari*. This suggests that she is not reluctant to dress in a way she deems suitable for herself. Further, she is also shown taking care of some of the household chores, such as cooking breakfast and dinner and organising her niece's birthday. Clearly, the film shows that Shivani is not only an able leader but also a family person who seeks to balance her family and work.

Not unlike many other countries in Asia and elsewhere, women in India are often stereotyped and expected to be weak, shy, helpless, disempowered, and victimised (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014). They are considered to be born to serve or please men which is also seen in the film, where girls were sexually abused and sold like items.

In the film, Karan (villain) kept on calling Shivani "ma'am" but there was not an iota of respect in his style or tone, which shows hypocrisy and double standards within the society when it comes to accepting and interacting with women in positions of power. Most of the higher posts in India are taken up by men and some of them misuse their power (Deer *et al.*, 2008). For example, a recent global study found that glass ceiling is still in place; within more than 38, 000 companies that participated in the research, female representation at the board level was only 6.9% (The Economic Times, 2016).

In terms of her role, it may be argued that Shivani is imitating or pretending to be as strong as a man (hence the film's title), which reinforces the leader stereotype of dominant and powerful men. However, on the contrary, it may also be argued that there is not a single scene showing where she tried to imitate as a man. She herself clarifies that she was brought up in a village near a dense forest which was full of

wild animals. And that from a young age, she was aware of ways to deal with the “beasts” who in the context of this film may be represented by the child traffickers.

Indeed, bravery is not a personality trait that could be associated with men only, it is also found in women. Shivani is bold and at times somewhat indulges in abusive language, which may also show that her behaviour is influenced by an environment surrounded by male colleagues and criminals. As she works in a department (police) dominated by men, her behaviour and language indicate typically masculine attitude. Of course, the very title of the film ‘Mardaani’ shows a gender stereotype to call a bold and daring woman ‘mannish’ assuming that only men could hold these qualities. However, any woman behaving differently from the traditional female role deserves to be accepted and respected equally without prejudice.

Stereotypes of leadership and gender are also evident in the attitude of politicians and Shivani’s own bosses. For example, in the beginning while she manages to trap a criminal tactfully, instead of getting appreciation, her male boss admonishes her in these words, “Your job is to take orders not to take risks”. It seems that her male bosses are afraid of risking both their job and life while she, in contrast, is ready to take daring steps. She also shows good leadership and team management skills throughout the film.

In terms of leadership style, Shivani seems to be transformational in the sense that her leadership role and practices are not limited by her followers' perception. Her main objective or achievement is to work to change or transform her team members’ (followers’) and redirect their thinking (Foster, 2002). She thus challenges and inspires her followers with a sense of purpose and excitement. However, she also demonstrates a democratic style of leadership and consults and involves her team members in decision-making and also promotes their interest in the shared objective.

These traits enable her to occasionally lead her subordinates to risky operations. She seems to be an efficient manager who delegates responsibilities and trusts her team members. For example, her team members actively offer to perform some of the tedious work. In the film, different religious groups have been shown working together to find the abducted minor girl Pyaari. Examples include the Muslim informer who provided reports related to Pyaari’s disappearance and the Sikh police officer who supported Shivani even by going out of his way.

Shivani is ever ready to take initiatives. For example, when her co-worker said, “We are from the crime branch, so there is no need to interfere in civil affairs”, she replied, “Crime branch is a part of police; it’s not separate from it.” In the developing countries, the boundaries between law and practice are often blurry, so sometimes she goes beyond her legal duties to fight crime. She is thus quite pragmatic in her approach to leadership and seems to be driven. In her words, “If you are always willing to work legally, then you will not be able to get success.” She also says, “To achieve something, we don’t need principles, we just need dedication.”

It is, however, a fact that women are often mocked for being too emotional and nurturing in the workplace (Nicolas, Lariosa & Terencio, 2015). Even in Mardaani, Shivani is admonished for being emotional, as her senior colleague makes the following remark, “You know what, Shivani, you are being unnecessarily emotional.” However, she responds back by saying, “The day our police force gets emotional and works for these girls, nobody will dare to harm them.” In that sense, it is refreshing to see a female leader proudly bringing her feminine attributes into the workplace (Syed & Murray 2008) to develop herself as a leader and also to help achieve the organisational goals.

Usually female leaders are evaluated less favourably than their male counterparts, and may also be penalised for adopting the masculine leadership styles (Muhr, 2011; Patton, 2013). Primarily, the bias against female leaders is thought to stem from the discrepancy between the traditional female gender stereotypes and the characteristics of a leader (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). According to Eagly's (1987) social-role theory, gender stereotypes emerge from observing people in gender-typical roles (Rudman & Glick, 2008). In other words, women are perceived as homemakers, childcare providers and caretakers, and therefore gender stereotypes of women tend to be more communal. In contrast, males are perceived to be better suited for leadership roles as they are seen to be aggressive, ambitious, assertive and direct (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). For example, in the film, remarks were made which referred to Shivani's gender, such as, "There is a lot of anger in you, ma'am, it doesn't suit you."

Feminism in Indian context and the paradox

The film indicates the perils of double shift that usually confront working women in all countries and cultures. It shows that being a female leader in the workplace does not mean that women's traditional caring and nurturing roles are completely diminished. Caring for children and other family members still remains the main responsibility of women (Faraj & Al-Hadad, 2015). The film thus paints a realistic picture of these complementary forces of the self (Raina, 2014).

But at the same time, women continue to enhance and demonstrate their ability to work and lead in a professional manner. The film shows that women are not always weaker than men even in the work roles such as the police force which are usually stereotyped for men. The film not only shows a woman's courage, it also encourages all women to become self-reliant, and raises the audience's awareness of women's status.

The notion of double shift is also evident in the film. From the first scene, Shivani appears to be a diligent professional woman and a wife. She knows how to create balance her life at work and home. On some occasions, she is shown busy in cooking while wearing her uniform. At the same time, her spouse has been shown as a supportive person. In the South Asian context, family is highly valued, treated as the first and fundamental unit of society (Danico & Ocampo, 2014). So if family stops supporting, it will become difficult for women and men to perform well in their workplace roles. Shivani's husband never criticises her if she comes home late or leaves early, rather he tries to facilitate her by being less demanding. On one occasion, he encourages her to go after the gangster by saying "Don't leave the rascal, no matter what happens." This kind of supporting attitude is not common in many societies. In reality, men are often more demanding and expect their working wives to manage their work schedule according to their (men's) needs (Danico & Ocampo, 2014).

There are other important scenes and statements in the film. For example, in the organisation of forced sex trafficking, a woman is shown as a supervisor. A sentence she says to the newly abducted young girls is noteworthy, "I was just like you trying to get out, but finally I caved and accepted my fate." Her argument not only reflects a feeling of resignation but is also akin to the Stockholm syndrome, i.e., feelings of trust or affection in some cases of kidnapping or hostage-taking by a victim towards a captor (Lohnes, 2016).

Stereotypically, Shivani may be seen as having a mixture of feminine and masculine traits. Displaying exemplary economy of expression, the film's narrative

puts forward Shivani's very articulate attitude to home, profession and leadership through brief but lucid encounters with various characters.

In terms of the film's message to wider society, while more women in India are taking leadership roles than before, they still continue to face adverse gender stereotypes in the workplace (Wollaeger & Eatough, 2012). The role congruity theory suggests that problems arise for individuals who behave in a way that is, stereotypically, inconsistent with their gender (Goethals & Sorenson, 2006). Individuals who act in a way that is incongruent with their gender tend to be evaluated negatively in the society and workplace (Wilcox, 2011).

In the film, Shivani deals with several complex situations and performs work usually done by men. However, instead of appreciation, she is viewed negatively. For example, in one situation, as she is carrying out her duties in a professional manner, she faces the following sarcastic and sexist remark: "That's why we men climb to the top and you women just stare at the ceiling."

Interestingly, Shivani does not hesitate to adopt the 'stereotypical' masculine traits in performing her job. The film shows that she is not afraid of being physically fit by taking karate and self-defence lessons. In hostile or sexist situations, women are viewed negatively or called inappropriate names if they are seen to be taking such activities or are physically muscular. However, the film indicates that depending on the nature of the job, there may be situations where women need to be physically stronger (Patton, 2013).

In fact, the film also shows a situation of reverse stereotype where Shivani refuses to back down, and the organised crime gang arranges for her husband to be publicly humiliated in which she comes to her husband's rescue. This shatters the stereotypical image and expectation that a male protects his family (Shenoy-Packer, 2014).

Overall, the film sends out a powerful message stating that women can also be as successful as men in the workplace. This is illustrated by a quote at the end which states that "every woman needs to discover her own Mardaani." The quote may be interpreted to mean that being a leader does not mean to be like a man, it simply means to find out, develop and utilise leadership traits such as self-confidence and valour within every female.

While Mardaani encourages women to become strong individuals, it also suggests that men need to be more respectful and inclusive towards women, particularly in the workplace. Further, it highlights that women can be successful within and outside the workplace, rather than having to choose either their career or family.

Conclusion

Mardaani may be seen as an attempt to awaken women's and men's consciousness not only about a social issue, sex trafficking of female minors, it also encourages a change in societal and organisational approach to gender and leadership. While the film highlights some of the issues that young girls face in India, it also reveals that women are not really weak. It demonstrates their resilience and encourages them towards self-reliance and confidence in leadership.

The film illustrates the ability of a leader to use her courage and team skills to deal with gender stereotypes and organised crime at the same time while levelling one's principles with actions. It presents Shivani's personality to uplift the image of women working in a male dominated profession. She is not afraid of showing her strong side as she is tasked to rescue vulnerable girls abducted and trafficked by an

organised criminal group. A strong sense of female leadership is portrayed in the film as it shows the capability of women to dominate and prove themselves in a world that is usually ruled by men.

Dialogues in the film suggest that if one is really committed, then one should always keep one's principles and vision in mind to accomplish the intended goals. As a law-enforcement professional, Shivani shows how to pursue and capitalise on organisational objectives and employ innovative ways to achieve outcomes. While she works in an environment that is full of threats and bent on degrading women, she is able to maintain her dignity and prove her leadership skills.

The learning insight of the film concerns the hidden capabilities of women who can outperform men, even in male dominated professions, with their unique talents and skills. Shivani offers a role model that could change a viewer's perceptions about the role and status of women in the workplace and society.

However, as Baxter (2013) notes, there may not be much room for women to fit into masculine archetypes of leadership. It is therefore no surprise that female leaders are seen as an exception or socially and professionally deviant. As argued in this paper, women do not have to be and must not be expected to be like men in order to be accepted and included as leaders. Rather, societal and organisational norms and routines need to be made more inclusive, instead of masculine, to provide equal opportunities to and enable female and male leaders. Indeed, Indian society, not unlike many other societies, does not expect women to be like men. However, the film exposes and challenge the usual attribution of leadership traits to men, and instead offers a worthy female role model who is not only an assertive and goal-oriented leader but also ably manages her professional role and family role at the same time.

The analysis offered in this paper may contribute to our understanding of leadership in terms of how gender and culture intersect and how the typical masculine approach to leadership along with its constituent traits is shattered. The film and the analysis may thus encourage policy makers and academics alike to value and acknowledge women's leadership styles while also considering the fact that realistically speaking, women, more than men, are confronted with the challenge of balancing work and personal lives. In the absence of such a balance, they may not be able to pay full attention to their work and may lose out on important career opportunities.

Overall, the film shows that notwithstanding adverse gender stereotypes, women can have excellent leadership skills. However, being a female leader in the workplace does not mean that they are not responsible for domestic and caring duties at home. The film nevertheless suggests that women and men deserve similar treatment in the workplace without negative stereotypes and discrimination. The film thus appeals to ordinary people to value women and improve women's social status, rather than discriminate and stigmatise against them.

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