

Policy Brief

Using Film Industry Subsidies to Influence Cultural Perceptions of Women in the US and Seoul

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Research has shown that media representations of gender can have a profound impact on the formation of gender stereotypes and the cultural perception of women and their role in society. This policy brief therefore outlines a framework for using film industry subsidies to influence cultural perceptions of women in the Republic of Korea, a country where a staggering gender pay gap and deeply ingrained cultural deterrents to women's inclusiveness have posed a significant challenge to women's empowerment initiatives in the City of Seoul. The policy intervention recommended by this brief is a subsidy that could be implemented by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and other cities with thriving film industries to incentivize the development of feature films that include the following elements: 1) positive portrayals of women in a lead role, 2) portrayals of men and women who are equally responsible for childcare and domestic work, and 3) place women in roles where they are empowered to write, direct, and/or produce feature films. By instituting this policy, Seoul could help break barriers for women in film and encourage media portrayals that show women and the city of Seoul in a positive and inspiring light.

Introduction

Research has shown that media representations of gender matter. They help create cultural stereotypes that influence the creation of gender identity (Cheryan, Plaut, Handron, & Hudson, 2013), which not only influence how we see ourselves, and how we envision our futures; but also influence how we perceive and treat one another (Ferguson, 2012).

The purpose of this policy brief is to establish the rationale for and outline a framework to facilitate the use of film industry subsidies to influence cultural perceptions of women and their role in society. The focus of this brief is the Republic of Korea (ROK), a country on a path of rapid advancements in the political and economic domains, but where a staggering

gender pay gap, and cultural deterrents to women's inclusiveness have posed a significant challenge. For reference, this document also presents a comparative analysis of women's film representations in ROK and the United States, where recent events have caused an uproar over the mistreatment of women in the entertainment industry.

This brief combines two main concepts: changing cultural perceptions of gender and enhancing women's economic participation by

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subsidizing Korean films that feature the following elements: 1) positive portrayals of women in a lead role, 2) portrayals of men and women who are equally responsible for childcare and domestic work, and 3) place women in roles where they are empowered to write, direct, and/or produce feature films.

Recent developments in ROK and the US

The city of Seoul serves as both the political and cultural capital of ROK. In 2015, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) announced a “Comprehensive Plan for Film Culture Development,” which involves expanding support for independent filmmakers, establishing a ₩50 billion fund to support the production of films in Seoul, and becoming an “ideal city for filmmaking” (Seoul to be a “Major Film Capital in Asia”, 2015). The SMG has also declared an intention to transform Seoul into a world leader in gender equality. It acknowledges the importance of challenging cultural norms in achieving gender parity by addressing the concept in its Framework Ordinance on Gender Equality (“Seoul Metropolitan Government Framework Ordinance on Gender Equality,” n.d.). Article 19 (Raising Awareness and Creating a Culture of Gender Equality) proposes changing culture through educational programs (“Seoul Metropolitan Government Framework Ordinance on Gender Equality,” n.d.). Article 16 (Promotion of Participation in Economic Activities), establishes policies to enhance women’s participation in economic activities, including encouraging women’s employment and enhancing workplace equality (“Seoul Metropolitan Government Framework Ordinance on Gender Equality,” n.d.).

To achieve its vision of improving gender equality and promoting the health, safety, and independence of women in the city of Seoul, SMG has designed a series of 10 projects in six major areas to promote a female-friendly sociocultural environment and enhance female residents’ standard of living through empowerment (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2017). The policies generated from these projects serve a concrete purpose of

improving women’s lives and a latent purpose of influencing culture. By enacting policies that prioritize women, the government sends a message to society that women’s needs are important. Such messages are critical to achieving true gender equality by challenging cultural norms and breaking down traditional gender roles.

A cultural shift is also necessary in the United States, which is currently experiencing a moment of awareness regarding sexual harassment and assault committed by men in power. This is particularly evident in the entertainment industry, where Miramax producer Harvey Weinstein allegedly raped, abused, harassed and intimidated numerous women for decades (Farrow, 2017). Allegations have also been made against other Hollywood power players, including Woody Allen (Chval, 2016), Louis C.K. (Buckley, Kantor, & Ryzik, 2017), Bill Cosby (Etehad, Kim, & Littlefield, 2017), Brett Ratner (Kaufman & Miller, 2017), James Toback (Whipp, 2017), Roy Price (Koblin, 2017) and John Lasseter (Barnes, 2017). In response to these revelations, and due to significant public backlash, the ‘#MeToo’, and ‘Time’s Up’ movements have gained significant momentum. The #MeToo hash tag encourages women to share experiences of sexual assault and harassment in order to illustrate how widespread the epidemic of abuse has become. Time’s UP on the other hand, is a legal defense fund created for survivors of harassment and assault.

Media Representations of Gender

Positive Portrayals of Women

Media portrayals of women can have a profound effect on audiences’ perceptions of themselves and others as well as their behaviors. These ideas are supported by multiple psychological theories (Steinke, 2017). According to Social Cognitive theory, gender identity is formed by observing and imitating the behavior of others, including those portrayed in the media, through a process known as identificatory learning (Bandura, 1969). The Gender Schema theory explains how gender

stereotypes are subconsciously formed at young ages and persist in memory (Bem, 1981). Additionally, the Possible Selves theory explores how media representations of one's gender can motivate future behavior (Steinke, 2017). These theories lend support to the proposition that if young girls only see women portrayed as accessories or subordinates to male characters, they will be less likely to envision themselves in powerful roles.

This theoretical framework has informed the design of multiple studies aimed at exploring the role of media in influencing young women's likelihood of pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering or math (STEM). A 2015 study of 350,000 participants throughout 66 countries found that women's participation in STEM careers strongly correlated with "gender-science stereotypes," defined as the pervasive association of science with one gender (Miller, Eagly, & Linn, 2015). This study showed that if a nation held stereotypes associating men with science, then its female citizens were less likely to be employed in STEM careers. These trends have also been observed in studies conducted in the US, where despite significant increases in women's participation in STEM over the past 50 years, it continues to lag behind that of men's in computer science and engineering (Cheryan, Plaut, Handron, & Hudson, 2013; Miller et al., 2015). A 2015 study found that media portrayals of computer scientists, such as those in *Real Genius*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Silicon Valley*, painted a picture of socially awkward and reclusive young men that tended to subconsciously dissuade college-aged women from pursuing computer science (Cheryan, Master, & Meltzoff, 2015).

Research has also captured how portrayals of women in media can influence viewers' attitudes and behavior towards them. A 2014 study found that men who were exposed to television clips that portrayed women as subordinate sexual objects were more likely to engage in sexually-harassing behavior towards them, compared to men who were exposed to television shows that neutrally portrayed men and women, such as nature documentaries, or

television shows that portrayed women as professionals (Galdi, Maass, & Cadinu, 2014). Likewise, a 2012 study found that a woman's role in the story influenced both male and female reactions to sexual violence inflicted on the character (Ferguson, 2012). If the female character was portrayed as weak or subordinate, then male viewers in the study were more likely to express negative views of women, and female viewers were more likely to express feelings of anxiety (Ferguson, 2012). By contrast, when both men and women in the study viewed sexual violence committed against a strong and powerful female character, they were not likely to express negative or anxious views (Ferguson, 2012). While these widely pervasive trends in media are not easy to change, encouraging positive portrayals of women as a part of the strategy proposed in later sections of this brief is a step in the right direction.

Gender Equity in the Home

Media portrayals of women in predominantly domestic roles also reinforce stereotypes that subvert the idea that men and women are equals in the household, such as when caring for children, completing domestic housework, and participating in the workforce. The Organization for Economic Co-operations and Development (OECD) measured the gender pay gap in 2015 as 18.9% in the United States (U.S.), and a staggering 37.2% in the Republic of Korea (ROK) (OECD, 2018). This means men were being paid wages 18.9% more than women in the U.S. and 37.2% more in the ROK. Some experts believe that a significant contributor to the gender pay gap in the U.S. is the cultural assumption that women will carry the burden of childcare and household duties (Dubner, 2016). It is assumed women will take time off work to care for children and family members, consequently committing less time to their careers. Park (2016) similarly finds that cultural norms are a contributing factor to the pay gap in the ROK.

Survey data collected in the U.S. supports the assertion that employed women devote more time to childcare and domestic work than men.

In response to a 2013 Pew Research Center Survey, 39% of women reported taking a significant amount of time off work to care for a child or family member (compared to 24% of men); 42% reported reducing their work hours (compared to 28% of men); and 27% reported having to quit work entirely (compared to 10% of men) (Brown & Patten, 2017). Furthermore, in response to a 2016 United States Bureau of Labor Statistics survey asking how employed adults spent their time on an average day, 50% of women reported doing housework such as cleaning or laundry, compared to only 35% of men (American Time Use Survey, 2016). The gap increased in relation to food preparation and cleanup, with 70% of women reporting spending time cooking and cleaning up, compared to 45% of men. Women also reported spending 40 minutes longer than their male partners per day providing physical care (including feeding and bathing) to children under six years old. This brief proposes that one way of promoting a more equitable distribution of household labor could be through media portrayals of men and women as equally responsible for household duties.

Women in Film

Research has shown women are underrepresented in the film industry worldwide. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media studied a sample of 120 feature films released between 2010 and 2013 that were produced by industries located in 10 countries, including the Republic of Korea, and the United States (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2014). Globally, the study determined the following:

- 31% of speaking roles were played by women;
- 23% of the films featured a female protagonist;
- 7% of the films were directed by women;
- 20% of the films were written by women and;
- 23% of the films were produced by women.

Encouragingly, out of all countries in the study, ROK released the highest percentage of films with a female lead or co-lead, and the third-highest percentage of women in speaking roles. By contrast, the U.S. ranked seventh in films with speaking roles for women and in the middle for female leads and co-leads². Table 1 provides a complete list.

Country	% of Characters w/ Speaking Roles	% of Female Leads/Co-Leads	% with Balanced Casts	Total # of Characters
Australia	29.8%	40%	0	386
Brazil	37.1%	20%	20%	423
China	35%	40%	30%	514
France	28.7%	0	0	526
Germany	35.2%	20%	20%	443
India	24.9%	0	0	493
Japan	26.6%	40%	0	575
ROK	35.9%	50%	20%	409
Russia	30.3%	10%	10%	522
U.K.	37.9%	30%	20%	454
U.S./U.K.	23.6%	0	0	552
U.S.	29.3%	30%	0	502

Table 1. Prevalence of Female Characters by Country

Source: Adapted from Smith et al., (2014) "Gender Bias without Borders," pg. 3

² The researchers limited their sample to films rated G to PG-13 by the Motion Picture Academy of America (MPAA), and films that were considered appropriate for audiences 16-years-old and younger. They reasoned that

such films would be more likely to be seen by children and young people, who are more vulnerable to subliminal messaging and stereotyping. The study therefore missed five films directed by Korean women.

Country	Directors	Writers	Producers	Gender Ratio
Australia	8.3%	33.3%	29.4%	2.5 to 1
Brazil	9.1%	30.8%	47.2%	1.7 to 1
China	16.7%	21.4%	25.3%	3.1 to 1
France	0	6.7%	13.6%	9.6 to 1
Germany	7.1%	22.2%	23.8%	3.7 to 1
India	9.1%	12.1%	15.2%	6.2 to 1
Japan	0	22.7%	7.5%	9.5 to 1
ROK	0	15.4%	20%	5.2 to 1
Russia	0	13.6%	17.7%	6.3 to 1
U.K.	27.3%	58.8%	21.8%	2.7 to 1
U.S./U.K.	9.1%	9.1%	21.6%	4.7 to 1
U.S.	0	11.8%	30.2%	3.4 to 1

Table 2. Prevalence of Women behind the Camera

Source: Adapted from Smith et al., (2014) "Gender Bias without Borders," pg. 5

Both countries performed worse when considering the percentage of women behind the camera. Women directed none of the American or Korean films in the study, and both countries ranked near the bottom of group better when observing writers and producers (Smith et al., 2014). Figure 2 shows how the two countries compare globally.

As noted by the British Film Institute (BFI), the Republic of Korea is home to many talented female directors (Paquet, 2017). According to some of the female directors interviewed by the BFI following the London Korean Film Festival this year, it can be difficult to break through in the Korean film industry (Paquet, 2017). BFI notes that many of the breakthroughs made by female Korean directors have emerged under the guidance of powerful female producers (Paquet, 2017). In recent years, more films are being made by mega-studios such as CJ and Lotte, and, as a result, independent female producers are losing their clout (Paquet, 2017). In the BFI interview, internationally acclaimed director Lee Hyun-joo said that large studios are often hesitant to entrust female directors with the large budgets needed for so-called 'genre films', an umbrella term referring to projects laden with expensive special effects, such as action, adventure, fantasy, and superhero movies. Therefore, women are often relegated to making lower-budget melodramas (Paquet,

2017).

In the United States, women are also rarely given the reins to major genre films. Acclaimed female directors, such as Sofia Coppola and Jane Campion, are often known for high-profile melodramas, such as *The Piano* and *The Beguiled*. Others, such as Nancy Meyers and Nora Ephron, are associated with romantic comedies, such as *It's Complicated* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. While genre films are very rarely directed by women, Patty Jenkins recently defied expectations with her adaptation of *Wonder Woman*, which cost \$149 million to make and reaped approximately \$821 million worldwide during its theatrical release. As of November 2017, it was the second-highest grossing film of the year. *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume II*, were also amongst the top three films and also featured female leads or co-leads (2017 Domestic Grosses, n.d.).

Policy Recommendations

The Seoul Film Commission (SFC) currently offers subsidies up to 25% of production cost of internationally co-produced movies and foreign movies filmed in Seoul. SMG, which funds these subsidies, endeavors to promote the city and support the local film industry. This strategy could also be used to promote the empowerment of women in the ROK; funds from the "Women's Development

Fund” established by the Framework Ordinance on Gender Equality could potentially finance a subsidy based on production costs for domestic movies filmed in Seoul that 1) show positive portrayals of women in a lead role, 2) show portrayals of men and women who are equally responsible for childcare and domestic work, and 3) are written, directed, and/or produced by Korean women.

Before developing a rubric to determine whether a project should receive a subsidy, it is important to define the concept of “positive portrayal.” SMG has a stated goal of increasing women’s economic participation and establishing gender equality in overall employment (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2017). Therefore, a definition of “positive portrayal” would reasonably include portrayals of women who are employed outside the home, especially in the traditionally male-dominated and profitable STEM fields. Furthermore, for reasons defined above, it is important that the women portrayed be employed in decision-making roles, rather than simply in subordinate or clerical positions. Finally, because gender stereotypes are formed at a relatively young age, it is particularly important that these portrayals be included in films likely to be seen by younger audiences.

A definition of “positive portrayal” could also conform to the so-called “Bechdel Test,” which was popularized by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in 1985 and is now often used by movie aficionados and critics to determine whether a movie has adequate representation of women (Garber, 2017). Its standards are as follows: (i) Are there at least two women in the film who have names? (ii) Do they talk to each other? (iii) Do they talk to each other about something other than a man?

These standards are incorporated into the rubric provided below in Table 3. If a proposed project scores at least 28 out of a possible 40 points, then the project would qualify for a subsidy. This scoring allows for a film to still

receive a subsidy if it does not portray domestic life, an important allowance due to many higher-budget genre films not including scenes of domesticity, and if the film is not appropriate for audiences under 12-years-old. Although positive messaging would be most valuable to those under 12, it is still important for older audiences.

In the United States, many cities and states offer subsidies to production companies who film movies in their jurisdictions in an effort to promote local economic development and tourism. However, two recent University of Southern California studies found that these subsidies have had little effect on local wages and employment growth (Thom, 2016). Additionally, they provide little return on investment for states (Thom & An, 2017). If this is also the case in Seoul, the money currently being spent on foreign subsidies could be repurposed for the new domestic, gender-based subsidy. This approach would also be salient to American states and cities who may be considering discontinuing their film subsidy programs. If a state or city were looking to help proliferate positive portrayals of women and enhance opportunities for female filmmakers, then the subsidy would still be a worthwhile investment.

Two cities in the United States have declared an interest in promoting gender equality. The first, San Francisco, became a “City for CEDAW” in 1998 by enacting an ordinance institutionalizing the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Cities for CEDAW, n.d.). The second, Boston, works toward achieving gender equality through its Office of Women’s Advancement (Women’s Advancement, n.d.). Both cities have a rich cinematic history, with films such as *Bullet*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *48 Hours*, and *Dirty Harry* filmed in San Francisco, and *The Departed*, *Good Will Hunting* and *The Social Network* filmed in Boston. Each of the above-listed films stars a male protagonist. As part of their women’s initiatives, these cities may wish to become associated with

Criteria	Rating			Points
Roles	Does the script have a female lead or co-lead? (4 pts.)		Does the female lead have a conversation with another woman about something other than a man? (4 pts.)	8 possible
Employment	Is the female lead employed outside the home? (1 pt.)	Is she a decision-maker or person in power? (2 pts.)	Is she a decision-maker or person in power employed in a STEM field? (3 pts.)	5 possible
Target Age Group	Is the film appropriate for audiences under the age of 12? (2 pts)			2 possible
Domestic Equity	If domestic life is portrayed, are men shown equally participating in tasks such as cleaning and cooking? (5 pts.)		If domestic life is portrayed, are men shown participating in the physical care of children, such as feeding, bathing, attending doctor's appointments, taking the child to school, etc.? (5 pts.)	10 possible
Women behind the Camera	Will the film be directed by a woman? (5 pts.)	Was the script written or co-written by a woman? (5 pts.)	Is the film being produced or co-produced by a woman? (5 pts.)	15 possible
Total:				40 possible

Table 3. Rubric for Determining the Distribution of Domestic Subsidies

female-centric narratives.

The city of Seoul has made remarkable strides toward achieving gender equality. However, true change must come from within the hearts and minds of its citizens. The proposed policy in this brief could help enact such a change by shifting cultural perceptions of gender roles and encouraging female participation in the economy. The recommendations proposed here would also be relatively cost-effective and easily implemented. The framework for offering film subsidies is already in place, as is the funding source - the Women's Development Fund or repurposed funds currently used to subsidize foreign films. By instituting this policy, Seoul could help break barriers for women in film and encourage media portrayals that show women and the city of Seoul in a positive and inspiring light.

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