

ACTRICES
in beeld

ACTRESSES IN THE PICTURE

The working conditions of Dutch actresses remain inferior to those of their male colleagues. This is evident from the study *Put on Heels and Cut Down to Size (Op hakken gezet en klein gemaakt)* by Utrecht University. Researchers conducted group interviews with actresses, asking them about their working conditions – safety and enjoyment in the workplace – as well as the opportunities available to them for professional development.



The picture that emerges from the research is a confronting one. The experiences of actresses regarding objectification, clichéd women's roles and transgressive behaviour make it clear that substantial changes are still needed to improve their position within the film and television sector. We hope that the insights from this study will inspire action, collaboration, and reflection. Everyone working in the sector can contribute to greater gender equality within the acting profession. This will not only benefit actresses but the entire sector: creating stronger stories, better acting performances, healthier working relationships, and a sustainable working environment in which talent can flourish.

The set

'Heels, full stop. As high as possible, please,' is how one of the respondents succinctly sums it up. On set, the focus on actresses is heavily centred on appearance, with the expectation that actresses look 'pretty'. Beauty and sex appeal are often linked to youth and come with an expiration date. Younger actresses are frequently cast in older roles, while older actresses have far fewer meaningful parts available to them. Female performers are also typically cast opposite male co-stars who are significantly older.

Actresses who fall outside dominant beauty standards, such as fat women, are often typecast and not in the role of the 'beautiful' woman. Actresses of colour face similar limitations. They are frequently portrayed in stereotypical, 'exotic' ways: in colourful, ethnic clothing instead of contemporary, neutral or professional attire.

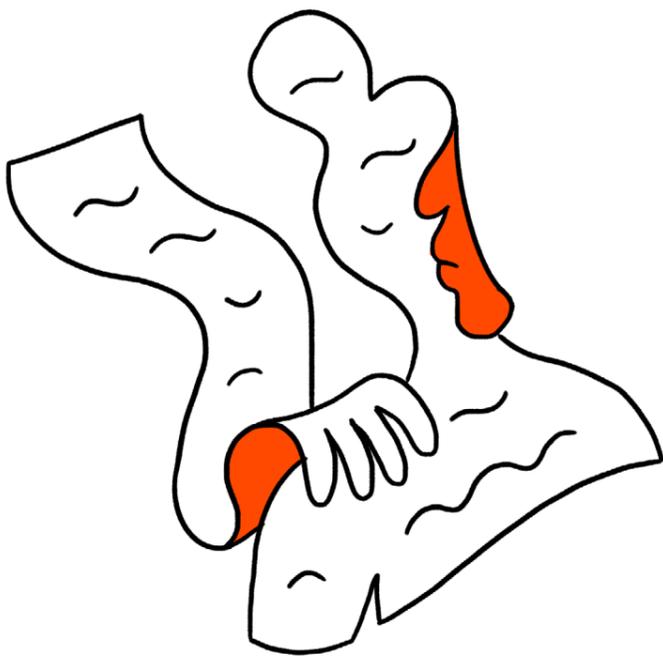
As a result of objectification, female characters must wear 'sexy' outfits, or are placed in intimate and nude scenes that lack clear dramaturgical justification. Scenes in which a woman undresses while her male counterpart remains clothed are a common example. Female characters are furthermore regularly confronted with misogynistic and transgressive behaviour. The constant repetition of violence against women in films and series, such as belittling and rape, has a normalising effect.

* Everyone who identifies as a woman, including transwomen and people who identify as feminine.

It communicates that such behaviour apparently 'just comes with the territory' and we, as a society, consider this type of behaviour normal.

Cut Down to Size Like Little Dolls

Job satisfaction often stems from a certain degree of autonomy that one experiences in their work. This is linked to being treated as an equal, and with respect by colleagues and superiors. Unfortunately, this is not always the case for actresses. Their contributions are routinely undervalued, even when, through lived experience, they have a more-in-depth understanding of their character than the director or screenwriter.



For instance, a young actress describes being asked to say a word that no seventeen-year-old would ever use. The response? 'I had to say exactly what the writer had written. Always.'

Not being taken seriously as a colleague with expertise leaves actresses frequently feeling belittled, treated like 'little dolls', and positioned on set to deliver their performance quickly and without contribution.

One way of keeping female characters 'small' is by making them insignificant in the script, with little depth and complexity. Think of repeating stereotypical images of women as whore, mother, or 'wife/daughter/girlfriend of'. The Netherlands still has considerable ground to make up when it comes to creating diverse, rich, layered female roles. Actresses of colour experience these limitations to an even greater extent. They are often confined to their own set of stereotypes, such as the 'strong' angry woman, which at the intersection of race and gender often is reduced into the trope of the angry Black woman. Although screenwriters may intend to create progressive female roles, respondents note that these attempts frequently result in a two-dimensional 'strong woman' who lacks depth and moral complexity.

When actresses raise concerns about issues, such as undesirable behaviour, unjustified nudity, or stereotypical characterisation, their objections are not only ignored, but may also be met with sanctions that shift the responsibility back onto the actress. This is known as *victim blaming*, where those affected are held accountable, rather than those responsible. 'I've so often felt like I'm a bitch,' one respondent shares. 'That people were bothered by me whenever I stood up for something.'

Responses to Unequal Treatment

How do actresses keep the work manageable for themselves? In response to the unequal treatment they face, they opt for either resistance or

acceptance. The study reveals that actresses develop a wide spectrum of tactics to navigate the situations described: speaking up, adapting lines or actions, refusing roles or actions, engaging in collective resistance, or creating their own stories. Finally, there is the option of leaving the profession altogether.

Each of these strategies carry a certain risk. Speaking out about undesirable situations is not self-evident, as actresses are often labelled difficult, accused of complaining, or blamed for slowing down the process.

Actresses often develop their own solutions when confronted with unequal treatment. If they aren't invited to give input, they create their own interpretation of a line or action. If the hair and make-up artist or stylist lacks experience working with a particular size or skin colour, they bring their own make-up and clothing.

If a role is objectifying or superficial, it is mainly successful actresses who can afford to refuse certain roles or scenes as a form of resistance. Collective resistance also occurs: when the crew speak out collectively against, for example, stereotypical clothing (this is known as bystander support). 'We sometimes played a game of cards, deciding "who is going to say what about which thing?"' one respondent recalls. By sharing the burden, it becomes less heavy for any one person to speak out.

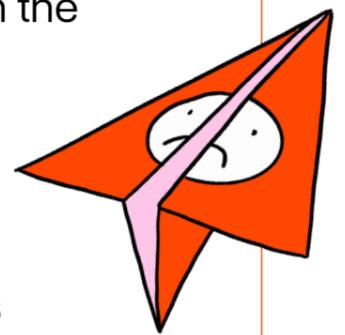
Frustrated by the scarcity of interesting women's roles, some actresses choose to create them by becoming screen-writers. Leaving the profession also occurs. That is, however, the most extreme form of needless loss of talent resulting from gender inequality on set.

Some actresses choose to 'accept' situations. They resign themselves to situations, convinced that 'this is just part of the job', concerned about negative consequences, or determined to focus on their work rather than the surrounding dynamics.

Impact

The impact of being 'put on heels and cut down to size' is considerable. Actresses expend considerable energy on constant vigilance and coping strategies. This applies, for example, to performing intense sex scenes, where mental and physical aftercare is often absent, even though the acting can provoke responses as visceral as those triggered by actual sexual violence. Actresses are left to piece themselves back together. 'It was as if my body really thought it had happened,' one respondent explains about the aftermath. 'I felt like I was nothing afterwards.'

The extra, invisible labour that actresses perform, such as devising their own solutions or (collectively) speaking out, comes at the expense of the quality of their work and their enjoyment of it. Their mental space for professional development is diminished



The sector

To better understand how actresses are 'put on heels' and 'cut down to size', it is necessary to zoom out to the film and television sector as a whole. It is characterised as individualistic, hierarchical, hurried, and complex.



First of all, many people working in the sector are freelancers who are not affiliated with unions or professional organisations. This makes the sector highly individualistic. 'I honestly don't know who I can talk to about it,' one respondent notes. This makes actresses vulnerable and leaves them feeling that they are often on their own.

Secondly, the researchers point to earlier findings from *Better is Not Yet Good* (*Beter is nog niet goed*, Sanders, 2022), which shows that men are overrepresented in leadership positions in the sector. As a result, men often occupy higher branches of the hierarchy. Combined with the industry's individualism, this overrepresentation leaves little room for men to be challenged or held accountable for misogynistic behaviour.

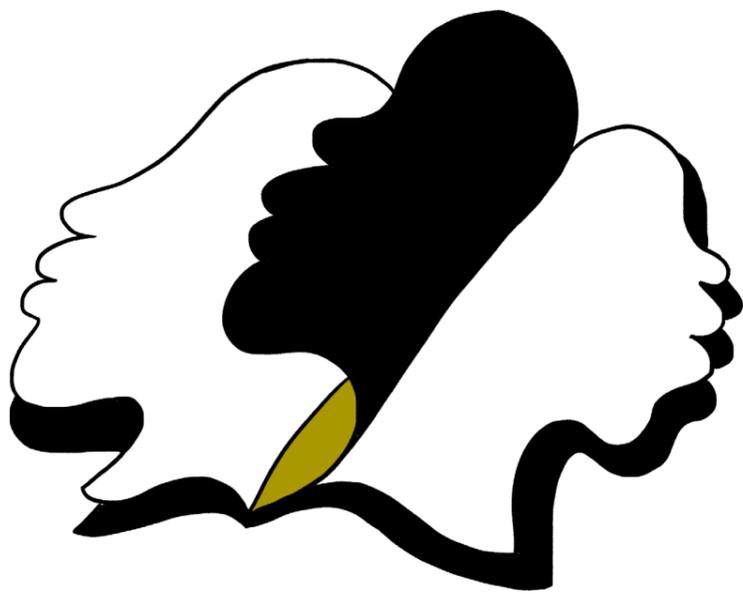
Additionally, the lack of transparency, time, and resources in the film sector often work to the disadvantage of actresses. This is reflected, among other things, in the unfinished scripts that actresses are given, on the basis of which they must commit to a project. This makes it difficult for actresses to oversee what they agree to, and they only learn the full implications of their role at a later stage. At that point, there might be no possibility left to offer their vision and input on the role.

Interviewed actresses are surprised by how rarely women are involved in shaping female characters and storylines. This creates blind spots and allows clichés about women to persist. Even though there may be no malicious intent, in practice the sector still fails to create space for women and include them in the creative process.

Finally, the sector is a complex system in which agents, casting directors, broadcasters and streamers are important gatekeepers with whom actresses must engage.

Because agents and casting directors act as matchmakers between filmmakers and actresses, they can play a crucial role in increasing equal opportunities for actresses. The research shows that typecasting and a lack of insight into the ambitions and abilities of actresses currently restrict their chances of being considered for larger or leading roles.

Casting directors sometimes also go along with the demands coming from the sector. Actresses are given an unsolicited label, such as ‘the fat actress’, ‘beautiful actress’, or ‘actress of colour’, which partially determines the roles actresses are deemed suitable for.



As for decision-makers such as funds, broadcasters and streamers, they are perceived by actresses as having little awareness of what happens on the work floor, as concerns rarely reach the top. Because of this lack of knowledge at the top, investments continue to flow into productions, in which the focus on appearance, the lack of layered women's roles and the limited input of actresses are perpetuated.

This overview shows that individualism, hierarchy, haste and complexity within the film sector work to the disadvantage of actresses. Respondents see a responsibility here for funds, broadcasters and streamers to bring about change. For example, by using conscious policies to create more space for female makers and stories, and by requiring applicants to demonstrate relevant expertise in funding submissions.

The System

If we zoom out even further, the film and television sector is part of a Western patriarchal culture. Patriarchy refers to a society in which men hold a dominant position. This position of power is maintained because men (particularly white, non-disabled, heterosexual cisgender men of middle age) favour themselves and one another, frequently without conscious intent. Awareness of one's own prejudice is therefore an important first step.

The portrayal of actresses and their characters through a male gaze often occurs unconsciously. However, that does not make the harmful consequences any less severe. A collective effort is required to advance gender equality across the sector as a whole. The outcome will be more realistic characters and films in which both actresses and diverse audiences can better see themselves represented.

As one of the actresses observes: ‘More stories are made about men than about women, dominated by male characters with scripts written from a male perspective, with male leads, shaped by “harmful masculinity”, and at the same time [...] the same message is constantly reinforced: “the woman, the girl is not allowed to join in”’.

Patriarchy also results in limited knowledge (or acquired knowledge about the female body. There is, for example, little understanding of menstruation, pregnancy and

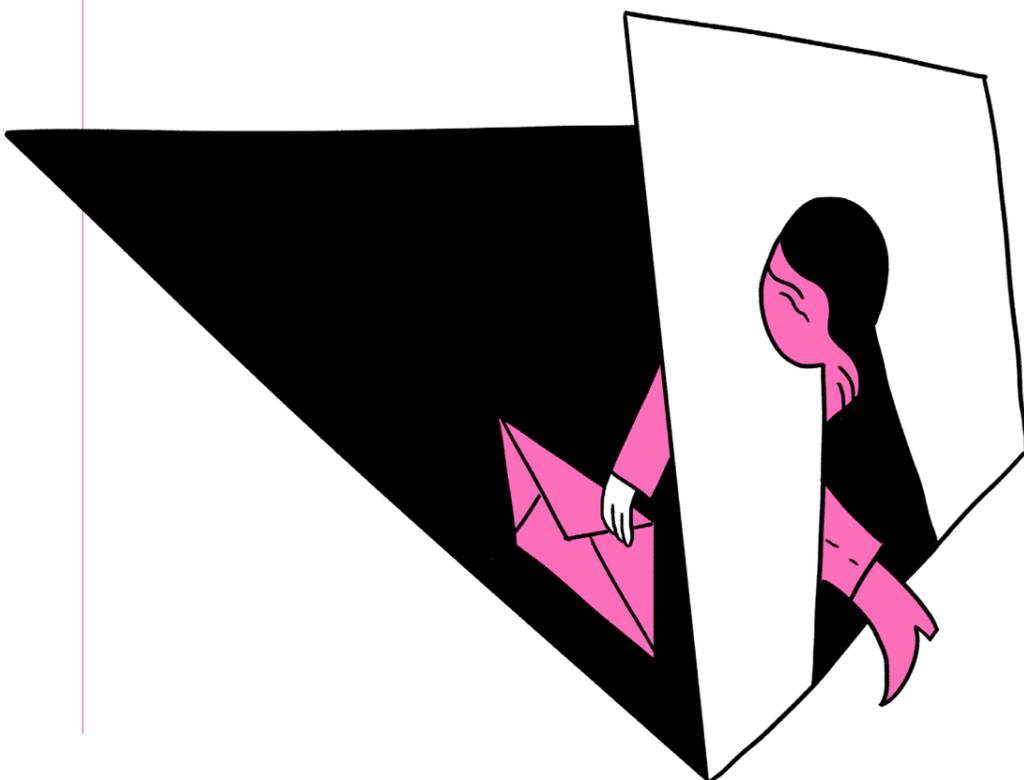
menopausal symptoms. On set, this results in a lack of bins for menstrual products or lockable spaces for expressing breast milk, among other things.

Patriarchy does not only benefit men over women. Other intersections such as cultural background, ableism, religion and sexual preference also play a role. When it comes to cultural background, one initial step is casting actresses of colour. One actress expresses appreciation that a Black family appears in a popular series, but she adds: 'It's a shame that, in the end, it's really only the skin colour that's different, because everything else is white. [...]. What issues are, for example, affecting the grandparents?'

The actress's reaction highlights that the Black family does seem as realistic, because the grandparents are absent. This reinforces a white family norm, overlooking bicultural family structures. To portray a bicultural family convincingly, cultural representation is essential in to tokenism.

Support and Reporting Points

Returning to the concrete working conditions of actresses, who can they turn to in cases of transgressive behaviour or sexual violence in the workplace? Although support and reporting structures exist, these are not always considered helpful. Actresses often refrain from reporting incidents because they lack confidence that they will be supported and protected. Moreover, these organisations can only offer advice and are not permitted to act on anonymous reports.



Recommendations

From objectification to a lack of clear agreements and social safety: there is still much to be gained in terms of the working conditions and opportunities for professional development of actresses. A cultural shift is needed to reverse the structural inequality that actresses face in the film and television sector. Whether you are a producer, director, camera operator, dramaturg, or hair and make-up artist: everyone in the sector has a role to play. The following recommendations offer an initial direction for change.

1. Input and Expertise

Strengthen the quality of scripts by involving actresses or paid (external) experts in the writing process. Their input contributes to a sense of autonomy, ensures more diverse perspectives, and enhances authenticity and acting performances.

2. Physical Integrity on Set

Establish concrete agreements before the shooting period. This lowers the threshold for addressing concerns. Appoint an external contact person on set in advance for undesirable behaviour. The use of a codeword, as done in stunt coordination, helps to make undesirable situations immediately open to discussion. A safe working environment with concrete agreements improves the working conditions of actresses and leads to better, more effective acting performances.

Ensure the presence of an independent intimacy coordinator who can focus exclusively on this work (without having to take on other work to make ends meet). For a safe working environment, adequate knowledge about intimate or (highly) physical scenes and about aftercare is essential. This increases women's autonomy and leads to better, more effective acting performances. Facilitate the functioning of women's bodies on set. Examples include toilets with mandatory waste bins, lockable spaces for expressing breast milk, and taking menstruation and pregnancy into account. A sector-wide plan for pregnancy and care responsibilities (including for children) is necessary.

3. Support and Reporting Points

Provide support and reporting points, such as Mores¹, the ability to act on anonymous or confidential reports. This could include investigating such reports and developing frameworks for follow-up steps.

4. Evaluation and Reflection

Make evaluation a standard part of shooting periods. Each department should reflect on what went well and what are the areas for improvement. This prevents future issues and improves working conditions. Exchanging (un)desirable experiences and collaborations between professionals not only builds mutual knowledge and fosters understanding, but also helps to develop a language for discussing these (un)desirable experiences.

¹ Mores is a Dutch organization offering support and advice on addressing transgressive behaviour in the cultural, creative, and media sector.

5. Training and Knowledge Development

Promote the importance of training, such as positionality training, resilience training, bystander training, training on stereotypes, and training on the impact of transgressive behaviour. These help professionals to determine their own position, express themselves about their position, and support colleagues who face undesirable behaviour. To avoid placing responsibility solely on individuals in this recommendation, it is advisable to follow training sessions as a team or group.



For this study, researchers from Utrecht University spoke with a diverse group of actresses of different ages and levels of experience, cultural backgrounds, physical characteristics, and sexual orientations. The study was conducted on behalf of Stichting Vrouwen in Beeld and in cooperation with the Inclusivity Committee of ACT Acteursbelangen.

vrouweninbeeld.nl

SOURCE: *Put on Heels and Cut Down to Size – Research into the Work of Actresses and Opportunities for Professional Development*. Utrecht University, Dr Willemien Sanders and Noortje Post, MA, March 2025.

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