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## **A study on the portrayal of the career woman in Tamil films**

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### **Abstract**

Financial independence is one of the basic avenues of women empowerment. The career woman who leaves the confines of the home and looks to seek economic emancipation by making a mark in the world outside is considered a symbol of empowerment.

Indian media especially films has portrayed women in myriad roles-as the sex object, the vamp, the mother, the wife, the daughter and also sometimes as the career woman. Gender portrayal in cinema is an oft discussed issue in Indian cinema. Objectification and commodification of women are routinely analysed. But what happens when a female is portrayed as more than a feast for the male gaze? What happens when she is portrayed as a woman with a mind of her own having a job and a career? Is the 'career woman' portrayed with greater justice and with more semblance to reality in Indian cinema? Or is she a mere sketch drafted to please the feminist? This study aims to seek answers to these questions by analysing the portrayal of career woman in contemporary Tamil cinema.

This is a qualitative study that uses content analysis to understand if a female characters 'career role' is given significance in Tamil movies. It also seeks to study the way in which a career woman is portrayed in Tamil films and its seeks to look at the economic, social and personal perspectives on 'the career woman' roles in Tamil cinema. It also seeks to understand how male characters in the movie view the female character's career.

The study would shed light on the portrayal of career woman and would enable film-makers make discerning choices with the characterization of the career woman.

**Keywords:** Career women, women in Tamil cinema, gender in films

### **1. Introduction**

Tamil Nadu, the land of superstars and demi-gods; where actors are revered in temples and seated in positions of power; where a successful stint in Kollywood equals unrivalled popularity and unparalleled attention. Yes...films hold an undeniable sway in the minds of the masses in Tamil Nadu. They serve as a social index reflective of societal needs and aspirations. Also, they are a major source of opinion creation and have a strong influence on the attitude and mindset of the general populace.

Tamil Nadu is a state with a very high literacy rate and women have, in recent times, come out and have successfully established themselves in career roles despite strong patriarchal leanings in Tamil society. Gender portrayal in films, especially in Tamil films, is oft discussed in research and in media. But what about the new age Tamil woman who is educated, who works outside and who also may work at home? Is she given enough weightage in Tamil films? Are her roles at work and at home justified? How do men view the career roles of women in Tamil films? These are the questions that this study seeks to answer.

### **2. Review of Literature**

While studying gender portrayal in Tamil horror movies, Raja, Rashmi, V.R. (2013) found that women who are seen to be traditional manage to escape the purview or attack of the spirits, whereas modern women face mystery deaths. Also, female characters act outrageous to win the attention of the men.

According to Agarwal, Ruchi (2014) women related easily to female character portrayal in Bollywood or the Hindi film industry. In this way, female actresses actually serve as a caretaker of the society.

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While studying gender reflections in mainstream Hindi cinema, Tere S. Nidhi (2012) states that popular cinema at large and item numbers to be more specific, delve into aspects of the male gaze and voyeurism. Women characters should possess agency to dismantle the existing power structures as well as be able to negotiate their own position within this structure.

According to Chakraborty, Gauri D, women-led narratives in new age Bollywood cinema is still in its embryonic stage. However, this trend would help see socio-politico-economic scenarios from the female perspective.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Several theories and concepts based on feminism and gender studies were used as the basis for this research. The Glass Ceiling (Hymowitz and Schehardt, 1986) talks about an unacknowledged barrier in career advancement that especially pertains to the female gender and gender discrimination. The social theory states that males are achievement-oriented when it comes to careers, while females are emotion-oriented and these are learned differences based on socialization. The role congruity theory states that career orientation undermines femininity. Also, it states that leadership roles for women are detrimental to their personal lives. Also, personal life can weaken women’s ambitions. Social learning theory states that people’s approach to work habits and task approach skills are based on their past experience, genetic make-up and environment. Feminist theories talk about the social and economic equality in the workplace, the interplay between power and labour among both genders. It also talks about sexual and physical harassment at workplaces. It also deals with the most important aspect of unpaid labour at home. When it comes to framing, the dominant representation of women in traditional gender role prescriptions are the norm. American films from 1930s to 1980s talk about how women can be happy only when they relinquish occupational ambitions and give up unfulfilling mannerisms. Key concepts from these theories have been taken and used as a frame of reference to study the portrayal of the career woman in Tamil movies.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Statement of the Problem

While there have been umpteen number of studies that deal with women-related issues in Tamil films, research into

woman’s career roles in Tamil movies are sparse. Hence, this exploratory study analyses popular Tamil films of 2017 to understand how career roles of woman are portrayed in Tamil films.

### 4.2 Objectives of the Study

- To understand if the female characters’ ‘career role’ is given significance in Tamil movies
- To study the way in which a career woman is portrayed in Tamil films
- To identify the economic, social and psychological perspectives on ‘the career woman’ roles in Tamil cinema
- To understand how male characters in the movie view the female character’s career.

### 4.3 Research Methodology

This exploratory study uses qualitative methods to understand how the ‘career woman’ is portrayed in Tamil films. The study uses content analysis to understand and interpret how career roles of woman are portrayed in Tamil movies

### 4.4 Sampling

Top 20 Tamil movies of 2017 were chosen based on IMDb ratings, ratings on popular English language newspapers (The Hindu, Times of India and The New Indian Express). Out of which, the top 3 three high scorers with male-dominated themes and top 3 high-scorers with female-dominated themes were chosen through purposive sampling for the purpose of this study. The rationale behind this method of sampling was to factor in how the career woman is portrayed in male and female dominated movies. The movies chosen for this study are:

- Movies with male-dominated themes: Dhruvangal Pathinaru, Theeran Athigaram Onru, Maanagaram
- Movies with female-dominated themes: Aruvi, Aramm, Taramani

## 5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

A content analysis of the films was based on criteria derived from the theories and concepts mentioned above. The analysis and interpretations are presented below.

### 5.1. Job Roles of Female Characters

S. No.	Movie Name	Jobs of Female Characters	Jobs of Male Characters
1.	Aruvi	Tailor Anchors of Television Reality Show Assistant Director of Reality Show Policewomen TV News Anchors/Reporters TV Studio Personnel Medical Support Staff Bureaucrat Doctor	Mid-level government employee TV Show Director TV Cameraman Policemen Bureaucrat
2.	Aramm	District Collector Journalist TV News Panelist Salonist	Superior to the Collector TV Panelist TV News Analysis Show Anchor TV News Panelist
3.	Taramani	HR Manager in IT industry Software Engineer News Anchor BPO employee	BPO Employee
4.	Maanagaram	Human Resource Personnel	BPO Executives

		Executives in BPO	Policemen Rowdy Sheeters Cab Driver Cab Company Owner
5.	Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru	News Anchor Student Housewife Policewomen – Constable Part of the Human Rights Commission	Policemen – DSP and lower cadres Dacoits
6.	Dhruvangal Pathinaaru	Program Executive in an IT Company Maid	Student Police Inspector Constable Policemen Forensic Expert

**Aruvi:** In the movie, Aruvi, the protagonist discontinues her studies due to the fact that she is HIV+ and is shunned by her family members and forced to leave home. As a result, she works as an unskilled labour (tailor) along with another transgender. Shots of her actually working cover just a minute of the entire film, as the movie dwells with a larger societal issue.

Majority of the women characters in the movie work in the media industry as TV anchors or reality TV hosts. There are 10 references to TV anchors in the movie Aruvi. Also, women are portrayed as Television field journalists who run for a *byte* or speak during live news broadcasts. All behind the scene roles (technical roles) in the media industry like TV show Director, Assistant Directors, Cameraman are assigned to men. While it is commended that women are portrayed as media persons, this trend is also suggestive of the fact that women are given in-front-of-the-camera roles as news anchors and journalists, as they are ‘eye candy’ to the news consuming masses.

**Aramm:** The highlight of the movie Aramm is that the protagonist is a female. A woman in power. A district Collector and the movie revolves her and her ability to take quick decisions, fight against the injustice and eventually save the day. No male character is given importance in the movie and only serve in supporting roles. District Collector, Madhivathani is portrayed as strong, upright, honest, daring, humane and one woman standing tall among several men. She is a female superhero if you will, who would stop at nothing to stand by her convictions and help the helpless. This is a big break from the other movies that show women in roles that support the male characters of the film. Other career roles assigned to women include TV journalists, news anchor and TV show panellist.

**Taramani:** The female protagonist of the movie, Althea Johnson is a HR Manager with an IT Company, who has worked at her job for ten years. Other career roles assigned to women in the movie are Software Engineer and BPO employee.

**Maanagaram:** Maanagaram is about the connections between random lives in the big, bad city of Chennai. There are very few women characters in the movie. The female lead in the movie is a Human Resource Personnel in an BPO Company. She is smart, beautiful, kind-hearted and lives alone in Chennai. She also has a love interest who keeps following her and troubling her. Here, the concept of ‘no means yes’ forms a part of the storyline. There are a few of her colleagues who are shown in a few scenes but they are

not an integral part of the storyline. The mother of the hero is a housewife.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** This is an action film about cops and dacoits. The protagonist is a male Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) who chases a group of dacoits. The film is loosely based on real-life incidents. Women in this movie take on traditional roles of sister, daughter, wife and mother. Almost all women in key roles are housewives. They are wives of achievement-oriented policemen. Women working in the media as news anchors and a few low-level police constables are the only working woman in the movie. Only one of the three bureaucrats working with the Human Rights Commission is female. Her appearance is very brief. It is a male-dominated film.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** Majority of the characters in the movie are men. All the characters in the police force and in the forensic team are women. Only the victim and her friend are woman. The friend of the victim is a Program Executive in CTS, an IT Company in Chennai.

## 5.2 Career Roles Vs Other Roles of Female Characters

**ARUVI:** Towards the end of the movie, Aruvi, the female Reality TV show host, Shobha Parthasarthy is shown as a mother driving around with her kids. She implies that she is no longer working and will spend all her time with her kids. The scene also shows a much softened and down-to-earth Shobha Parthasarthy, in terms of camera angles and facial expressions. The whole ‘Aruvi experience’ has softened her. It goes on to imply that a woman can fulfil her ‘mother role’ and become more humane only if she gives up a career. It is to be noted that Aruvi’s mother is a housewife who tends to her family and does not have a career role.

**Aramm:** In Aramm, the female protagonist is portrayed primarily in her career role. Her personal life is not delved upon. She is not a daughter, wife, girlfriend or mother. This is a welcome change as the protagonist in the movie is recognised for her career role and not identified in relation to a man/woman/child in the film. However, she is shown to be humane and is shown to cry during several instances. In fact, her superior accuses her to be emotional. But, this does not in any way affect her performance or her decision-making capabilities.

**Taramani:** The female HR Manager is shown to be a single mother of a six-year-old child. She is also shown to have walked out of a bad marriage with a gay husband. She gets into a live-in relationship and is very open about it.

**Maanagaram:** Apart from being a HR Executive, another role attributed is that of the love interest to the hero of the movie. Here, she is shown to be assertive with a soft heart. The romance aspect is highlighted more than her career role.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Woman in key roles in the movie are portrayed as having no careers in most part of the film. The heroine is portrayed as being innocent and beautiful, ready to fall into the hero's arms get married and settle down. She does not seem to have career ambitions of her own, despite being a creative and artistic person.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** There are very few female characters in the movie. One is a female IT Executive who travels alone and lives with a female friend in an apartment. The other, whose career role is not defined, is a rape victim who is also the only love interest in the movie.

### 5.3 Appropriateness of work for women

**Aruvi:** In the movie Aruvi, majority of women take on the roles of media personnel – TV Journalists, TV show anchors and news anchors. The movie suggests that a career in-front-of-the-camera in media is an appropriate career for women.

**Aramm:** Women's role in Civil Services is highlighted in the movie. It should be noted that the majority of the male characters in the movie show a lot of respect to the female Collector, probably because she is in a position of power.

**Taramani:** The female characters in the movie work in the IT and allied industries.

**Maanagaram:** The Career Women in the movie are employed in the IT and IT enabled service industries.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Women are shown to work as constables in the police sector. No high-level position in the police force is assigned to woman. There is also one bureaucrat in the Human Rights Commission. An item song in the movie is about objectification of women.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** One female character is portrayed as an IT professional. No female is part of the police force.

### 5.4 Framing of the Career Woman

**ARUVI:** One female TV Show Host who hosts a show on 'medical show on sexual Issues' speaks in innuendos on mainstream TV and is encouraged to do the same, in order to keep the TRP ratings up. The narrative of the female host of this particular show is meant to titillate the male audience. This is reflective of the trend in Tamil Nadu, where such shows are a norm on mainstream Television. Another female Reality TV show host, Shobha Parthasarthy, who hosts a confessional-type of reality show, Solvathellam Unmai is shown to be extremely frivolous and narcissistic. She is shown to obsess about her looks and throws tantrums about the fit of her blouse. She is shown to abuse her power and ill-treat all her subordinates. She feigns empathy for the participants of the reality show and is shown to be cold and selfish.

The movie depicts women in media careers as being driven, narcissist who are drunk in their own sense of self-importance. The policewomen in the movie are shown to deliver on their jobs and have limited roles. The medical

support staff who takes care of the very ill, Aruvi, the protagonist and the female doctor in charge of the AIDS camp are shown to be kind and considerate.

**Aramm:** The female protagonist, who is a Collector is strong, driven, fearless and forceful, capable of quick decisions. She is also emotional and humane.

**Taramani:** She is portrayed as the urban, upper-middle class woman who is stylish, smart and lives life on her own terms. She walks out of a bad marriage, walks out of her mother's home, enters a live-in relationship, manages sexual harassment at the workplace very effectively, walks out of the live-in relationship and is unapologetic about any of it. She fights back when required, smokes, drinks and uses profanities. She does not hide her past or the fact that she is in a live-in relationship with anyone at the workplace. She does not hesitate to shame her boss in front of the entire office when he sends sexually-explicit text to her. The female Software Engineer is shown to be extremely sensitive and an opportunist.

**Maanagaram:** The female HR Executive in the movie, Managaram is smart, well-dressed, successful and is the final signing authority for new recruits in a BPO. She is shown to win the 'Star Performer' Award.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Career Women are under-represented in the movie and so no major framing can be perceived.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** The career woman is shown to live alone with a female friend and travel alone.

### 5.5 The Glass Ceiling Effect

**Aruvi:** When it comes to the police department, the Commissioner of Police, Saqueel Wahab and the upper cadre of the police force are men. Women are not shown in leadership roles. In the case of media, the on-field journalists and news anchors are women, while the panellists on a news discussion are men. There are no clear leadership roles here. However, the bankability of the reality TV anchor gives her a certain edge over the men in the studio. Out of the three bureaucrats who make a brief appearance in the movie, only one of them is a woman.

**Aramm:** District Collector, Madhivathani is in a powerful, leadership position and she uses the power for the benefit of the people. She is shown to have strong leadership skills and a strong sense of ethics, as well. There is no talk of her being a woman or lesser than any man in the movie. In fact, towards the end of the movie, it is hinted that she may even join politics to achieve her goals.

**Taramani:** The female protagonist has a stable job and is a mid-level HR Manager who has worked at her job for ten years. No leadership role is assigned to her at the workplace.

**Maanagaram:** Women are equally represented in IT- allied industries like the BPO. Women are portrayed to have successful careers in the above mentioned industry.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Career Women are under-represented in the movie. The Glass Ceiling is visible as no key roles in the police force are assigned to women.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** Woman in career roles are under-represented and this aspect cannot be studied.

### 5.6 Career Women – Psychological Perspective

**ARUVI:** Women in Media are shown to be extremely vain, self-indulgent, narcissist who throw tantrums because they are financially bankable celebrities. While women in medicine-related careers are empathetic. The psychological aspects of the career woman are not delved into in the movie Aruvi.

**Aramm:** The female Collector has a very strong mental make-up. She is a tough-as-nails woman who can take on politicians and the media with firmness; who is even willing to give up her career to serve the public. At the same time, she feels for the people as her own. She cries and is shown to be emotional and humane.

**Taramani:** The female HR Manager is free-spirited; dresses up and lives on her own terms. Despite life being unkind to her in many ways, she manages to pull up her sleeves and move on. She is fearless and takes life head on. She is shown to be a woman with a strong mental make-up and an easy-going attitude.

**Maanagaram:** The successful HR Executive who takes calm decisions on recruitment and stands up for herself is also shown to cry in the workplace due to a personal issue. She takes decisions on what is best for her life at the personal level but is also the traditional heroine who cries when her man gets into trouble.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Career Women are under-represented in the movie and are not delved into deeply. Hence, psychological perspective cannot be studied.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** Woman in career roles are under-represented and this aspect cannot be studied.

### 5.7 Career Women - Economic Perspective

**Aruvi:** Aruvi, the protagonist, who works as a tailor is shown to borrow money to handle her Father's health issues. The Reality TV Show Anchor is shown to be economically stable. The economic perspective on other career women in the movie are not shown.

**Aramm:** The female Collector is in a position of power and there is no mention of financial dependency in the film.

**Taramani:** The female HR Manager is economically well-off and earns Rs.80, 000 per month. In fact, she supports the male character in the film The female Software Engineer has financially issues which are resolved towards the middle of the film.

**Maanagaram:** The female HR Executive stays in a hostel and fend for herself. She is portrayed to be economically stable, living alone in a big city.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Majority of the women characters in the movie do not have careers and hence depend on the men economically.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** Woman in career roles are under-represented and this aspect cannot be studied.

### 5.8 Career Women – Societal Perspective

**Aruvi:** Women in media are shown to have a greater social status in the movie, Aruvi. Women who are part of the unskilled labour force – the protagonist is a tailor – are shown to struggle economically.

**Aramm:** The female Collector is treated with a lot of respect and has strong social acceptance.

**Taramani:** The female HR Manager is a part of the upper-middle class urban population and is shown to have a high social status in the movie. She is able to live life on her own terms partly because of her financial independence and the social status that her jobs accords to her.

**Maanagaram:** Women working in IT and IT-enabled services industry are shown to have a high social status in the movie. The idea of the educated, working girl living alone in a big city is highlighted in the movie.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Career Women are under-represented in the movie and are not delved into deeply. Hence, societal perspective cannot be studied.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** Woman in career roles are under-represented and this aspect cannot be studied.

### 5.9 Workplace Discrimination and Harassment

**ARUVI:** Workplace harassment of Aruvi, the protagonist at the hands of her Supervisor in an unskilled labour set-up is mentioned. The Supervisor sexually assaults her. The sexual assault is implied and Aruvi asks for 'forgiveness' from the perpetrator of the crime. Women are treated as eye candy and are expected to speak provocatively into the camera (Reality Medical Show Host) in order to keep the TRP ratings up.

**Aramm:** There is no portrayal of workplace discrimination on the basis of gender in the movie.

**Taramani:** Sexual harassment in the corporate workspace is highlighted in the movie. The female HR Manager receives lingerie as her birthday gift and text messages propositioning her. Her Manager who is in a position of power is the perpetrator of the crime. He also justifies his actions by saying that the female HR Manager is sexy, alone and wears short skirts. She does not report the harassment charges. Instead, she embarrasses him in front of colleagues. Furthermore, she threatens him with compromising pictures and forces him to get a transfer. The film portrays her as a strong woman capable of handling harassment, however, she does not take the legal route to address them, despite working in HR.

**Maanagaram:** According to the portrayal in this movie, workplace discrimination is not an issue in IT-enabled industries. There is no workplace harassment, as well.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Career Women are under-represented in the movie and workplace discrimination or harassment are not portrayed. However, from the portrayal

in the movie, it seems that almost the entire police force in Tamil Nadu is a male-dominated sector.

**Dhruvangal Pathinaaru:** Woman in career roles are under-represented and this aspect cannot be studied.

### 5.10 Career Orientation and Femininity

**Aruvi:** Women in Media are shown to be extremely feminine, but are as good as the man in doing their jobs. Policewomen are not shown to be feminine.

**Aramm:** The female Collector is extremely feminine. She wears crisp, cotton sarees and carries herself with extreme grace and composure.

**Taramamni:** The female HR Manager and the female Software Engineer in the movie look and act feminine but are also tough-as-nails when the situation arises.

**Maanagaram:** Woman in IT and IT-enabled industries are portrayed as feminine, in terms of dress sense and other behavioural aspects. However, the woman is capable of standing up for herself and protecting her self-interests. She is no damsel-in-distress.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Women without any careers are feminine and home-bound. Career Women are under-represented in the movie and this aspect cannot be studied.

### 5.11 Perception of Men towards Career Woman

**Aruvi:** In Aruvi, the men in media are shown to talk about career women in the same industry in a degrading manner. They are shown to proposition women. Similarly in the unskilled sector also, women are treated as objectified and sexually abused. The woman is eye candy and a sex object in both industries. Women who are bureaucrats are treated with a lot of respect.

**Aramm:** Men treat her with a lot of respect due to her position and the power she holds. There is no bias on account of her being a woman.

**Taramani:** The female HR Manager is objectified by her Manager who tries to sexually harass her. The female HR Manager and the female Software Engineer are both victims of several instances of the male gaze. Her Manager feels that it is his prerogative to make a pass at her as she is stylish, sexy, alone and wears short skirts.

**Maanagaram:** Men view women working in the IT and IT-enabled industry in a positive manner. The female HR executive is in a commanding position, wins awards and is appreciated by her male superior.

**Theeran Adhigaaram Ondru:** Career Women are under-represented in the movie and this aspect cannot be studied.  
**DHRUVANGAL PATHINAARU:** Woman in career roles are under-represented and this aspect cannot be studied.

## 6. Findings

- The career roles assigned to women in Tamil movies pertain mainly to the media and IT industry.
- Majority of the career roles assigned to women are TV Journalist, TV News Anchor, HR Manager and IT

employee. Women can also be seen in bureaucratic and medical professions. Very few women are in the police force and there is no portrayal of women in traditional professions like teaching. Women who are mothers are housewives.

- Men are policemen, forensic experts and politicians.
- In almost all movies, the career woman has a man as his superior who keeps a track on her career-related activities. Although the women have broken the glass ceiling to a great extent, they are still portrayed in mid-level positions and not in leadership roles.
- The career woman is also portrayed as a mother and the romantic interest of the protagonist.
- Women in media are portrayed as being self-indulgent narcissist who abuse the fame that they are accustomed to.
- Women in IT industry are portrayed as strong, self-reliant and financially independent women living alone and taking control of their life. IT woman dress stylishly, smoke, drink and visit pubs. They are also comfortable with live-in relationships and single motherhood.
- Women in bureaucratic roles are portrayed as strong, fearless and powerful women who have strong ethics. However, they do not have personal lives and live for the well-being of the public.
- All the career women are mentally strong and weather lives ups and downs with ease. They are shown to stand up for themselves and speak their mind. Even when the career woman is emotional or breaks down; she is shown to pick herself up and move on.
- The career woman are economically independent and in fact at times, support the male characters in the movies.
- Majority of the career woman have a high social status. Women working in bureaucratic positions and IT industry have a higher social status than women in media.
- Both women who work in the unskilled sector and woman who work in blue collar jobs are subject to the male gaze, objectification and sexual harassment in the movies.
- Career Women are also portrayed to be extremely feminine, irrespective of their career choice. Policewomen are portrayed to be less feminine than women from other careers
- Women in bureaucratic positions are viewed with a lot of respect by men, while women in IT and unskilled labour sector are objectified and harassed by men in Tamil movies.
- In Tamil movies with male-dominated themes, the career role of women is undermined; whereas in Tamil movies with female-dominated themes, the career role of women is given due significance.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The career woman is portrayed to be strong, self-reliant and financially independent in Tamil movies. However, she is also sexually harassed and victim of constant male gaze. It is to be noted that new age Tamil movies have gone beyond housewife and teacher roles for women and talk of women in IT and media industry. A healthier portrayal of women in career roles and greater portrayal of the acceptance of the career woman by men in movies would help with a more

positive perception of career woman among the Tamil movie-going audience.

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