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Climbing Different Ladders: Gender, Storytelling, and Creative Expression in Korean Film

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ABSTRACT

Despite making up over half of film school graduates, less than 3% of commercial films are directed by women in Korea. While previous research has documented structural barriers facing Korean female filmmakers, little attention has been paid to how gender exclusion shapes the stories that reach audiences. This study examines how women filmmakers in Korea describe the role of gender in shaping their storytelling and creative processes. Using a multimethod qualitative approach, this paper combines interviews with three Korean female filmmakers with content analysis of 61 posts and 151 comments from Filmmakers, Korea's primary online filmmaking community, collected between 2022-2025. The findings reveal three key dynamics: systemic barriers including preferential male recruitment, male-centered networking, and discrimination based on driving skills create a gendered pipeline; gender identity influences creative expression through emotional storytelling, focus on marginalized narratives, and genre segregation particularly excluding women from action films; and alternative pathways including women's film festivals and emerging AI technologies both challenge and potentially reinforce industry gatekeeping. This study reveals that the celluloid ceiling operates not only as an employment barrier, but as a force determining which narratives are valued and told, illuminating how structural exclusion shapes creative expression in Korean cinema, and Korean culture more.

Keywords: celluloid-ceiling; creativity; filmmaking; qualitative; women