

## Representation of Asian Women within Male-Dominated Workplaces in *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and *Kill Boksoon* (2023)

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### Abstract

This study investigates the portrayal of Asian women in male-dominated industries through the analysis of the Netflix film *Kill Boksoon* (2023) and the Netflix series *Gadis Kretek* (2023). The primary objective is to explore the representation of Asian women across different media narratives, with a particular focus on occupational environments characterized by male predominance. Furthermore, the study utilizes Van Zoonen's (1985) theory of gender representation in the media, which delineates eleven characteristics of females and males. Focusing on the representation of female characters, the findings identify eight recurring traits in the depiction of Asian women across both texts. These characteristics frequently mirror traditional gender norms; however, they are occasionally challenged by portrayals of women who negotiate, resist, or transcend these constraints. In *Gadis Kretek* (2023), the depiction of female characters aligns closely with Van Zoonen's theoretical framework. Conversely, in *Kill Boksoon* (2023), although certain traditional representations remain, the protagonist challenges and subverts numerous gendered expectations. These portrayals indicate that media not only reflect societal inequalities but also possess the capacity to question and reformulate them. This research contributes to broader discussions on the role of media in shaping gender narratives, illustrating how even within conventional structures, opportunities for resistance, reinterpretation, and change exist.

**Keywords:** Women representation, *Gadis Kretek*, *Kill Boksoon*, Netflix, Male-dominated workplace

### Introduction

Women have a long history of experiencing distinct advantages and disadvantages compared to men in various aspects of life, including economics, society, politics, and health (Bogheiry et al., 2022). Despite an increasing number of women's activists and movements advocating for their rights and gender equality, women continue to face distinct experiences compared to men (Lwamba et al., 2022). Women's particular experiences are the product of patriarchal cultural practices that established male-centered norms, which ensure that men always hold the most important, superior, and dominant position in society; thus, women are still seen as inferior to men (Idrus et al., 2023). This patriarchal

culture constituted gender labeling or societal stereotypes (Tabassum et al., 2021). Gender stereotypes refer to views about what actions or features are considered suitable for men and women, particularly in masculine and feminine categories (Rokhmansyah, 2016). This gender construction influences the positions of men and women in the workplace. The division of labor among specific groups starts with understanding gender roles. According to Rokhmad and Susilo (2017), this division begins with personal transformations influenced by socialization, which individuals absorb during their upbringing. This concept leads to societal beliefs that specific jobs are suited only for men, which

unintentionally highlights women's perceived limitations in those tasks. Consequently, women are often labeled as weak and vulnerable, reinforcing the growth of a patriarchal culture (Idrus et al., 2023).

Men primarily occupy male-dominated workplaces, with women showing minimal participation (WHO, 2019). Globally, females make up 48.7%, while men make up 73.1% of the workforce in 2023. In Asia, over the past three decades and extending to the present, the participation rate of working-age women in the labor force has consistently been markedly lower than that of men throughout the region (World Bank Data, 2022). According to The World Bank, the average female labor force participation rate in Southeast and East Asia is approximately 50%, with Indonesia at 53% and Korea at 55.8% in 2023.

This persistent inequality within the labor force is not only reflected in real-world statistics but also echoed and challenged within contemporary media. As a streaming service that aims to become "your television" (Burroughs, 2019), Netflix has emerged as a major cultural force in shaping and disseminating representations of gender across diverse narratives, including those set in professional spaces. Through its original productions, Netflix plays a pivotal role in amplifying voices and stories that either reinforce or subvert dominant societal norms.

Two such Netflix originals, the Indonesian series *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and the South Korean film *Kill Boksoon* (2023), both center on female protagonists navigating male-dominated workplaces. *Gadis Kretek* (2023), directed by Kamila Andini and Ifa Isfansyah, is a Netflix series adapted from the novel of the same title by Ratih Kumala. The series portrays the main female character, Dasiyah, commonly known as Jeng Yah. It narrates Jeng Yah's journey as she becomes involved in her father's tobacco business, harboring the grand ambition of becoming a *peracik saus* (sauce maker). The series vividly depicts Jeng Yah's struggles as a woman striving to achieve a significant position within an industry predominantly controlled by men. On the other hand, *Kill Boksoon* (2023) is a South Korean film directed by Byun Sung-hyun, available on Netflix. The film explores the challenges faced by its central female

protagonist, Boksoon, an elite assassin and a single parent. Like *Gadis Kretek* (2023), this film highlights a woman's survival in a male-dominated workplace. The portrayals of women in both *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and *Kill Boksoon* (2023) share comparable experiences, despite their differing settings. *Gadis Kretek* (2023) is contextualized within a traditional framework, whereas *Kill Boksoon* (2023) is set in a contemporary environment. The challenges faced by characters such as Jeng Yah and Boksoon are indicative of the genuine difficulties women encounter in male-dominated workplaces. Through their respective storylines, both productions contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender representation and power dynamics within male-dominated industries. Addressing this issue highlights ongoing concerns about the persistent undervaluing of gender representation among working women in the media.

To fully comprehend the representation of Asian women in media, particularly within male-dominated workplace settings, which remain underexplored in academic literature, examining both productions is essential. Previous studies have primarily focused on Western contexts or specific demographic groups concerning media portrayals of women within male-dominated workplaces.

For instance, Teixeira, Galvão, and Mota-Santos (2021) conducted research titled "*Women and Work: Film Analysis of The Most Beautiful Thing*", examining the complexity women experience in the film. However, most of the analysis focused on Brazil's cultural dynamics and the Western workplace context. Wang's (2023) research, *Understanding Career Women: A Comparative Analysis of Fatal Attraction and The Devil Wears Prada*, explores two films from different eras to analyze the evolving attitudes and perspectives of working women. In addition, Little's (2023) work, *Stereotypes, Gender, and Humor in Representations of Coders in Silicon Valley*, reviews the TV series *Silicon Valley* (2014-2019), providing valuable insights into the portrayal of female characters in Western films and television. These studies, though valuable, predominantly focus on Western or Latin American contexts, leaving a significant gap in the analysis of

Asian women in male-dominated workplace settings, especially within narratives emerging from non-Western cultures like Indonesia and South Korea. Meanwhile, this paper discusses *Gadis Kretek* (2023), an Indonesian historical drama series, and *Kill Boksoon* (2023), a South Korean contemporary action film. Although these two texts differ in country of origin, temporal setting, and format, this study does not aim to directly compare them in terms of historical progression or national gender development. Instead, the paper seeks to identify recurring representational patterns in how Asian women are portrayed in professional spaces, both historically and contemporarily, across different cultural contexts. These differences are not viewed as barriers, but rather as entry points into a more nuanced analysis of gender dynamics in Asian media. Both *Gadis Kretek* and *Kill Boksoon* center on female protagonists which Dasiyah and Boksoon, who challenge the gendered power structures in their respective male-dominated professions: the traditional kretek industry and a modern assassination agency. The thematic contrast between a tobacco artisan in 1960s Java and a contract killer in modern-day Seoul is not a limitation, but a deliberate approach to explore how gendered resistance manifests under different sociocultural frameworks. Despite the contrast in setting and era, both characters share a common struggle for autonomy, self-expression, and recognition in environments that seek to silence or undermine their capabilities. Their experiences reflect broader questions around gender, agency, and identity that transcend specific cultural or temporal boundaries. By placing these two texts in dialogue, rather than comparing them, this study contributes a fresh perspective to media and gender scholarship, particularly within the Asian context, which is often overshadowed by Western-centric analyses.

Furthermore, no prior study has explored either *Kill Boksoon* or *Gadis Kretek* through Van Zoonen's theory of Gender Representation in Media. This framework enables an in-depth examination of how both characters are constructed within media texts and how their representations address enduring challenges faced by Asian women in gendered power structures,

whether set in the past or present. This study employs Van Zoonen's theoretical framework to examine how the agency, roles, and struggles of Asian women are portrayed in male-dominated work environments in *Gadis Kretek* and *Kill Boksoon*. The research hopes to understand further how Asian women are represented in media narratives, especially in situations where men have historically held a dominant role. Therefore, it offers valuable insights for broader discussions and extensive conversations on gender equality and cultural diversity in media portrayals.

### Research method

This study employed a qualitative research method. Moleong (2020) states that gathering data in words and images is a key component of qualitative research. This study examines how Asian women are portrayed in the media using Van Zoonen's (1985) theory of gender representation. It focuses on eleven characteristics: underrepresented, family context, low-status job, lack of authority, lack of power, related to others, passive, emotional, dependent, and submissive. The primary data in this study are drawn from two Netflix original productions released in 2023: the Indonesian series *Gadis Kretek* (episodes 1-5) and the South Korean film *Kill Boksoon*. Although the two texts differ in format, one being a series and the other a film, they were selected based on their shared characteristics: both are recent Netflix originals featuring Asian female protagonists navigating male-dominated environments. The choice was made not to compare the two works side by side, but rather to explore how each text, within its own cultural and narrative framework, portrays women in the workplace. The selection enables a broader representation of contemporary portrayals of Asian women across various storytelling modes and regional contexts, all within the same release year and distribution platform. In addition to the primary data, supporting data from secondary sources, such as books, research journals, and online articles, were also utilized. Data were collected through two techniques: observation and documentation. Observation involved a close examination of the selected media texts, with a focus on dialogue, character dynamics, and visual

representations that reflected workplace interactions or power structures. Documentation included capturing screenshots of relevant scenes and transcribing significant dialogues for more detailed review. However, the research process went beyond just watching and recording; the collected material was analyzed thematically using Van Zoonen's framework,

with particular attention to specific characteristics frequently associated with gendered representation.

This study draws on Liesbet van Zoonen's (1985) theory of gender representation in media to critically examine how media constructs portrayals of women, particularly in male-dominated environments.

**Table 1** Gender Representation in Media by Van Zoonen

<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Underrepresented	Overrepresented
Family context	Work context
Low-status job	High-status positions
No authority	Authority
No power	Power
Related to others	Individual
Passive	Active
Emotional	Rational
Dependent	Independent
Submissive	Resistant
Indecisive	Resolute

Van Zoonen argues that gender is a discourse shaped by cultural meanings, and the media plays a crucial role in reinforcing these gendered ideologies. Within her framework, women are often portrayed through limited, stereotypical lenses—frequently shown as underrepresented, bound to family contexts, assigned to low-status jobs, and depicted with little or no authority or power. Their identities are often framed in relation to others (such as wives, daughters, or subordinates), and they are characterized as passive, emotional, dependent, submissive, and indecisive. These portrayals reflect patriarchal norms that limit women's agency in professional settings. Conversely, men are predominantly depicted as the central figures in narratives, often overrepresented in roles that occur in work-centered environments, occupying high-status positions with significant authority and power. By contrasting these traits, Van Zoonen's theory exposes the gendered power imbalance perpetuated in media narratives. This framework serves as the analytical foundation for this study, helping to uncover how these

traits are either reinforced or challenged in the representation of Asian women in *Gadis Kretek* and *Kill Boksoon*.

By applying this layered analytical process, the study seeks to illuminate how narratives from different Southeast and East Asian contexts construct the presence or absence of women's agency in male-centric environments. The approach is not to draw a comparative conclusion, but to map patterns and nuances in gender portrayals that may resonate across or diverge within different cultural and narrative structures.

### Finding and discussion

The section provides an in-depth analysis of the findings on how Asian women are portrayed in the Netflix films *Kill Boksoon* (2023) and the series *Gadis Kretek* (2023). Using Van Zoonen's Theory of Gender Representation in Media as the theoretical framework, this analysis focuses on how women are represented in media, particularly in workplace settings where men are

predominantly represented. This study thoroughly explores specific traits commonly used to depict women in the media: related-to-others, passive, submissive, dependent, emotional, underrepresented, family-oriented, and low-status jobs. This in-depth examination aims to shed light on how these traits are depicted in the representations of Asian women in these two media narratives and how these representations adhere to or diverge from gender representation in media theory, as outlined by Van Zoonen. In this subsection, the findings indicate that portrayals of Asian women in media are not neutral; rather, they are influenced by ideological perspectives and mirror cultural assumptions concerning gender roles. Drawing on Van Zoonen's framework—that gender is a constructed discourse molded by media—this study demonstrates how specific depictions serve to reinforce stereotypical images while others strive to challenge or complicate these norms through the presentation of more nuanced or empowered female characters. This study, therefore, carries significant implications for how audiences may internalize or challenge prevailing gender ideologies, especially within the context of racialized femininities. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of engaging critically with media texts to expose how gendered meanings are culturally constructed, maintained, or contested.

#### **Women's identities in media are often defined by their relationships to others**

Women are frequently portrayed in their relationships with men (Dunbar, 2024). This pattern highlights a recurring issue in the media: women's identities are often presented concerning male characters, overshadowing their initiative and accomplishments. This representation is a reflection of deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that uphold and prioritize traditional roles, casting women in supporting parts that uphold male domination. Van Zoonen's theory of gender representation in media suggests that these narratives typically feature female characters in ways that justify their presence, often through their relationships with others (Zoonen, 1985).

In *Gadis Kretek* (2023), Soeraja's remark to Dasiyah—where he suggests that Mr. Idroes should recognize her as the most outstanding flavor creator in the market (scene: episode 3, 12:53)—illustrates Van Zoonen's theory that women are often depicted in the media through their associations with men. While Soeraja aims to praise Dasiyah, his compliment is indirectly filtered through her father's perspective. Instead of explicitly affirming Dasiyah's talents independently, the dialogue contextualizes her accomplishments within a paternal framework, implying that her recognition holds greater validity or significance when perceived through her father's perspective. This moment subtly suggests that her success is not entirely her own; it is legitimized solely by the acknowledgment of the men surrounding her, especially her father.

The emotional dynamic between Mr. Idroes and Dasiyah in *Gadis Kretek* (2023) becomes even more layered when examined through the lens of family business succession and paternal influence. While Dasiyah exhibits exceptional talent and visionary capacity in kretek flavor creation, her professional identity is constantly filtered through the authority of her father, not just as a parent but as a symbolic “gatekeeper to succession” (Overbeke et al., 2013). Scholars have noted that fathers often act as the key figures in shaping their daughters' choices in education and career paths (Jacobs et al., 2006; Li & Kerpelman, 2007), including the decision to step into leadership roles in family businesses (Barrett & Moores, 2009; Smythe & Sardeshmukh, 2013). Daughters who aspire to lead family enterprises tend to form strong psychological ties with their fathers, as their sense of self-worth and professional identity is closely linked to their fathers' beliefs and expectations (Sentuti et al., 2024). Zia and Ali (2014) further emphasize that the father is often the daughter's first significant male figure, shaping her early understanding of herself as a woman, either as someone valued or diminished, through his emotional responses, presence, and recognition.

Mr. Idroes, while not overtly oppressive, embodies this archetype of the father whose implicit or explicit

approval becomes a prerequisite for succession. Soeraja's remark, that Mr. Idroes should recognize his daughter's excellence, reinforces the idea that Dasiyah's worth must first be seen, validated, and named by her father. Although the compliment appears to celebrate her, it simultaneously reinforces a hierarchy where her brilliance remains subordinate to patriarchal acknowledgment. Prior studies have shown that fathers are often hesitant to see daughters as capable successors, perceiving them as less equipped than sons (Overbeke et al., 2013; Ahrens, 2020). As a result, daughters like Dasiyah must constantly navigate the emotional labor of proving their competence not only to the external world but, most painfully, to the father figures whose recognition anchors their legitimacy.

This struggle is also deeply internal. Daughters' mental representations of their fathers often shape how they see themselves in leadership and entrepreneurial roles (Sentuti, 2024). For Dasiyah, stepping into her brilliance requires forming a professional identity that is not only authentic to her but also validated, especially by the father who built the empire she hopes to inherit. This mirrors the findings of Bjursell & Melin (2011) and Hytti et al. (2017), who argue that women in family businesses must negotiate a dual process: becoming leaders in their own right while also reconciling their leadership with the legacy and expectations passed down by male predecessors. Without Mr. Idroes' explicit acknowledgment, Dasiyah's success hovers in a liminal space, visible, impactful, but never fully ratified. How women are portrayed by others, sustaining their reliance on male figures for identification and validation, is consistent with Van Zoonen's theory.

In *Kill Boksoon* (2023), the portrayal of Gil Bok Soon initially appears to signify a departure from traditional gender stereotypes. As a skilled assassin, a single mother, and a top performer in an elite, male-dominated organization, Bok Soon embodies the archetype of the independent, self-governing woman. Her identity is not defined by her romantic relationships, nor is it dependent on male approval. Her character navigates complex personal and professional domains with autonomy and authority, suggesting a progressive representation of femininity —one where a woman can

succeed and be central to her narrative without being reduced to supportive or secondary roles. However, a closer reading of Bok Soon's narrative and the metaphors surrounding her complicates this empowered image. Within the MK organization, Bok Soon is often referred to metaphorically as their "knife." This characterization, while ostensibly signifying her efficiency and lethality, also subtly dehumanizes her, reducing her to a tool, an object, a possession within a patriarchal structure. This metaphor invites scrutiny. It implies that her value is instrumental: she is not celebrated for her individuality, but for how effectively she serves the system. Her power, in this view, is not self-determined but system-dependent.

The symbolism of the knife becomes even more telling. According to Berger (1997) in *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life*, long and sharp weapons, such as knives, daggers, and pikes, have been interpreted as symbolic of male organs. This phallic symbolism suggests that Bok Soon's authority and power are only recognized when they resemble masculine-coded forms of dominance. In this view, her strength is not feminine power reimagined, but masculine power appropriated. Rather than redefining the archetype of a strong woman, the film risks reinforcing the idea that to lead, to dominate, or to survive in such a system, a woman must symbolically "become" a man.

In *Kill Boksoon*, the portrayal of Boksoon, as a powerful assassin, relies significantly on masculine-coded attributes, such as violence, dominance, and emotional detachment, implying that power, within this narrative, is a gendered commodity rooted in male conventions. Consequently, her strength is not seen as a reconfiguration of feminine power but instead as an appropriation of masculine authority. This corresponds with Liesbet van Zoonen's assertion that gender is a performative construct influenced by cultural discourses and media portrayals. Van Zoonen asserts that female depiction in media frequently relies on either sexualization or the emulation of male characteristics when assuming positions of authority. Boksoon's character is a reflection of this binary: her dominance is only validated through her compatibility

with traditionally masculine behavior, which reinforces the idea that female agency must conform to male-defined models in order to be considered legitimate. This statement not only limits the portrayal of female identity in media but also perpetuates a restrictive, patriarchal rationale in which femininity is considered incompatible with leadership or authority unless interpreted from a masculine perspective.

#### **Passive, submissive, and dependent: Not all women fit the script**

Women are frequently portrayed as being dependent on other people, being mistreated, being susceptible to outside pressures, being unsure of themselves, passive, and submissive (Bitomsky, 2021). The way women are portrayed in the media reinforces long-standing gender stereotypes that influence how society views and expects women to behave. Additionally, Van Zoonen argues in the Gender Representation in Media theory that women are commonly described as exhibiting a significant dependency on outside assistance or support, and are often portrayed as being passive and behaving in a submissive manner (Zoonen, 1985). Therefore, by maintaining outdated standards regarding women, these representations not only constrain the depiction of women's diverse abilities and capacities but also contribute to the normalization of gender inequality.

In *Gadis Kretek* (2023), a male character named Pak Dibjo holds a sexist view that women's presence in the sauce-making room may affect the sauce and cause it to sour. His viewpoint stands in the way of Dasiyah's drive and determination to make the kretek sauce. This restriction serves as an example of the structural and societal constraints that women face, which uphold traditional gender roles and keep them from reaching their goals on their own. These patriarchal traditions hinder Dasiyah's capacity to succeed. Therefore, Soeraja told Dasiyah he would help her become a flavor maker (Scene ep 1, 23.00). It emphasizes Dasiyah's reliance on male support to get past her challenges. Soeraja's willingness to assist in carrying out her plan is essential for Dasiyah to carry out her plan; with it, she could enter the room and create the sauce herself. This

dynamic emphasizes women's passivity, submissiveness, and dependence on men to overcome societal challenges. It supports the idea that women often need to rely on men to achieve their goals, whether personal or professional. Moreover, Van Zoonen's theory on how gender is portrayed in the media, particularly the portrayal of women as dependent on males, is consistent with this scene. Because Dasiyah's character relies on Soeraja's assistance to achieve her goal, traditional gender dynamics are reinforced. This reliance reduces her perceived strength and independence, thereby enhancing the notion that women require male support to handle challenges, which in turn restricts her autonomy.

In *Kill Boksoon* (2023), on the other hand, the female main character is depicted as neither passive, dependent, nor submissive. The scene in which Bok Soon delivers a bloodied knife to Mr. Cha (Scene 1.52.45) is a compelling illustration of her proactive and strong personality. This gesture is a traditional way of requesting that the recipient arrange a time and place for a fight to the death. The line, "Gill even sent Chairman Cha a bloody knife," along with the image of the bloodied knife shown in the scene before, highlights how daring and profound her behavior was. This is a clear challenge, a declaration of her determination to face and defeat any opponent; it is not the conduct of a submissive, dependent, or passive character. The graphic knife scene strengthens Bok Soon's position in the story as a strong, independent character. By acting fearlessly and boldly, she shows that she will not submit to authority or control.

Further challenging traditional gender expectations, a scene at 23:55 in *Kill Boksoon* depicts Boksoon engaging in a sexual relationship with her male colleague, Han Hee-Sung, without emotional dependence or the need for romantic validation. This interaction diverges significantly from the conventional gender norms where men are typically expected to take the lead in sexual situations. At the same time, women are often seen as passive, submissive, and merely responsive (Endendijk et al., 2019). In the mentioned scene, Hee-Sung refers to Boksoon as *sunbae*, a Korean term denoting a senior or someone with a higher status

within a shared professional or academic environment (Aisyah & Jin, 2017). His use of this term not only reflects her superior rank within the workplace but also establishes the power imbalance between them, in which Boksoon occupies the dominant position both professionally and personally.

During the sexual encounter, when Hee-Sung says, "I'm getting so close. Can we change positions?" Boksoon assertively replies, "No, wait a minute, I'm enjoying this," all while maintaining a 'woman on top' position, a deliberate visual that reinforces her physical and psychological dominance. This scene functions as a symbolic reversal of traditional gendered sexual scripts, in which males typically initiate and control sexual activity; meanwhile, females are expected to be passive, receptive, or emotionally invested (Seabrook et al., 2016). Instead, Boksoon's pleasure is prioritized, her agency emphasized, and her control maintained throughout the interaction. Her refusal to relinquish physical control signifies a broader assertion of autonomy over her body, pleasure, and choices. In this scene, Boksoon's pleasure is not secondary to the man's desire, nor is it portrayed as contingent upon male

approval or emotional connection. Instead, her enjoyment is central, explicitly prioritized, and asserted.

At this point, the portrayals of both female protagonists illustrate the intricate methods by which media perpetuates and explores women's identities within a patriarchal framework. In each narrative, the characters Dasiyah and Boksoon are influenced by gendered expectations, either through the subtle reinforcement of reliance or the exercise of autonomy that remains aligned with male codes of authority. Dasiyah's trajectory highlights how structural and societal constraints limit women's autonomy and sustain dependency. In contrast, Boksoon's character complicates this narrative by exhibiting dominance and agency that challenge submissive stereotypes, while still relying on traditionally masculine power dynamics. These portrayals pinpoint that even robust female characters in contemporary media are subject to entrenched gender stereotypes. The portrayal of women in both works illustrates enduring tensions related to the representation, negotiation, and occasional reimaging of female identity, autonomy, and authority.



**Figure 1** Scene in *Gadis Kretek* episode 2

**Source:** Netflix Original *Gadis Kretek* (2023)

### Emotionality as a gendered expectation: Reproducing and resisting stereotypes in female representation

Cultural and societal gender stereotypes are frequently exposed through the discourse surrounding emotions (Shields, 2013). These prejudices are contained in what are known as gendered emotional

stereotypes, a broad classification that establishes expectations for how people should display their emotions depending on their gender (Plaza-Del-Arco et al., 2024). Primarily, a widespread stereotype implies that "women are emotional", meaning that women should be expected to exhibit more overt emotional reactions than men. Van Zoonen (1985) asserts that

women are frequently portrayed as having a high emotionality compared to men. When Dasiyah is caught

Pak Dibyo rejects Dasiyah's offer for an innovative sauce, which not only demonstrates her emotional value for her work but also her investment in her abilities. Dasiyah is a character devoted to her work, and her identity and value are entwined with her capacity for creativity and invention, particularly in the development of the cigarette sauce. Dasiyah reacts clearly when her suggestion is rejected; her glaring eyes and wrinkled brows show her instant emotional response, which combines disappointment and annoyance. This raw feeling shows how much it hurts for her to have her sauce's inventiveness disregarded. Furthermore, when Pak Dibyo and her father ask Soeraja to clean her sauce, it symbolizes a disregard for her knowledge and a symbolic assumption of control over her creation. It suppresses her emotional attachment to her abilities by emphasizing the dominance of male authority in deciding the worth and direction of her efforts.

leaving the sauce room after creating her recipe by Mr. Dibyo, her emotional response is obvious.

Dasiyah's obvious irritation and reluctance to give up the sauce highlight her emotional agony. This emotional reaction results from her concept being rejected, but it also has more profound consequences for her character and position in the power structure. It demonstrates the emotional depth of her commitment to her work by highlighting her devotion to the creative process and her need for recognition. Her response is a moving illustration of the emotional struggles women encounter in male-dominated fields, where their knowledge and contributions are frequently ignored or exploited without permission. This moment exemplifies Van Zoonen's argument that women in media are often portrayed through emotional responses. It emphasizes how male power over Dasiyah's creative efforts and rejecting her ideas influence her emotional responses.

Unlike Dasiyah's intensely emotional depiction in *Gadis Kretek* (2023), Boksoon's emotionally detached portrayal in *Kill Boksoon* (2023) marks a notable departure from conventional gender norms.



**Figure 2** Scene in *Kill Boksoon* movie

**Source:** Netflix Original *Kill Boksoon* (2023)

One scene that most portrays Boksoon's calm and stoic nature is when she smiles in the middle of a chaotic

struggle with other assassins, as captured in the picture above. The slow-motion and blurry background

effectively capture the harsh and violent atmosphere, with debris flying everywhere, while focusing on Boksoon's composed and unwavering smile further supports the portrayal. This portrayal challenges traditional gender conventions on several levels. First, Boksoon's emotional distance contradicts the common belief that women are naturally more sensitive to stress in high- stress circumstances. Boksoon maintains a composed appearance while displaying perseverance and mental toughness, typically associated with masculine heroes in action genres, refusing to succumb to fear or terror. Her smile, even amid chaos, conveys a sense of authority and control over her surroundings, emphasizing her professionalism and ability to handle high-risk situations with ease.

Moreover, Boksoon's career as an assassin emphasizes her detached emotions even more. In contrast to traditional female protagonists, who are frequently depicted as gentle, sensitive, or emotionally fragile, Boksoon works in a setting where taking lives is just another day at the office. Her ability to carry out these duties without displaying any overt signs of regret contradicts the notion that women should prioritize emotional intelligence or empathy over productivity or professional obligations. By showing a complex and ethically nuanced character, this representation not only challenges conventional gender stereotypes but also expands the narrative possibilities for female characters.

The emotional portrayals of Dasiyah and Boksoon demonstrate how gendered norms continue to influence the depiction of women in the media. Van Zoonen (1985) asserts that women are frequently perceived as more emotional than men, a view that sustains longstanding prejudices surrounding femininity. Dasiyah's passionate responses align with conventional stereotypes suggesting emotional fragility in women, whereas Boksoon's deliberate detachment challenges this notion and offers an alternative perspective on women's emotional expression. These representations suggest that emotionality remains a significant factor in the construction of gender within media narratives. This remains true whether traditional tropes are employed or they are subverted through complex portrayals that are

still tied to broader cultural narratives concerning gender and power.

### **Women remain outnumbered and undervalued in male-dominated professional spaces**

Van Zoonen (1985) argues that women are often underrepresented in the media. They are typically portrayed within domestic roles and are rarely shown in professional environments. This underrepresentation is evident in both *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and *Kill Boksoon* (2023), particularly within male-dominated workplaces. In *Gadis Kretek*, the cigarette company is overwhelmingly male- centric and in *Kill Boksoon* female assassins are few and far between, reflecting societal views of these fields as inherently masculine.

Dasiyah, the main protagonist, works at a cigarette company owned by his father. The cigarette industry is traditionally viewed as a male- dominated workplace, largely due to the differing rates of smoking prevalence between genders. The cigarette industry being male-dominated leads to the underrepresentation of women in the series. In the Kretek Merdeka company, women were only allowed to fill the cigarette roller (*pelinting*) position (Scene Ep 1, 06:43). Cigarette roller (*pelinting*) derived from the word linting or *melinting* refers to the traditional method of making cigarettes by rolling tobacco and cloves in a wrapper. Initially, the wrapper was made from corn husks, but modern versions use special cigarette paper called *garet*. The cigarette, called *tingwe* in Javanese, involves placing the ingredients on the paper and rolling them by hand (Hendrik, 2023). Dasiyah's remark, "My dream is to create the best kretek. But in the world of kretek, women can only be rollers," strengthened the notion that women can only fill the cigarette roller (*pelinting*) position. This remark ultimately highlighted a limitation in the positions that women can occupy within the industry.

There were other roles in the industry where Dasiyah is depicted as handling the management of employee stipends and monitoring employee performance (Scene Ep 1, 38: 00). However, these positions represent only a small number of women beyond the cigarette roller (*pelinting*) role. Nevertheless, Dasiyah's position was primarily due to

her being the daughter of the company's owner. Unlike Dasiyah, who enjoyed a degree of privilege that allowed her to obtain a more prominent position, other women employees did not have the same opportunities. They were limited to roles such as cigarette roller (*pelinting*). Despite facing stereotypes and prejudices that deemed them inappropriate for working with cigarettes, these women face significant barriers and biases that limit their opportunities unless they are afforded certain privileges other than their gender. This disparity arises because the majority of the workforce in these companies consists of men, who are capable of filling any position, from the owner and technical laborer to tobacco supplier and flavor cook (Scene Ep 1, 06: 59; Scene Ep 1, 29: 10). This highlights the significant underrepresentation of women across the cigarette industry, as they are predominantly limited to cigarette roller (*pelinting*) roles and only occasionally occupy other positions if they possess certain privileges. This situation shows that even when women are represented in the workplace, their roles are quite limited.

Another instance of women's underrepresentation in male-dominated workplaces is illustrated at the market where Dasiyah and her father conducted transactions for tobacco supplies. Dasiyah was noted to be the sole woman participating in these transactions, an area overwhelmingly dominated by men who congregated to converse and smoke cigarettes (Ep 1, 19:56). The overwhelming predominance of men in the setting underscores a discernible underrepresentation of women demonstrating active participation in the cigarette field. The disparity not only emphasizes the lack of diversity but also reinforces traditional gender norms that limit opportunities for women in this field. Furthermore, despite her expertise in assessing tobacco quality, Dasiyah faced discrimination for her involvement in the industry (Ep 1, 21:28). Soedjagad's remark about women who play with cigarettes will not be wanted by men exemplifies this bias, highlighting the pervasive stereotype that women are unsuitable for working with cigarettes. In contrast, men are readily accepted in these roles and face no societal prejudice for their involvement. This highlights the broader issue of

the underrepresentation of women within the tobacco industry.

A similar pattern appears in *Kill Boksoon*, where Boksoon is one of the very few female assassins. Men dominate the professional environment, a fact repeatedly illustrated through her placement at male-dominated tables (Scenes 18:24 & 32:23). Her surprise upon meeting a female trainee further emphasizes the rarity of women in the field, highlighting how male exclusivity has become normalized.

Moreover, highlighting the underrepresentation of women in the assassin profession, Gil Jae-Young, Boksoon's daughter, notably advocated for Nongae, a woman, amidst a debate dominated by male candidates vying for inclusion in the 100,000-won. She pointed out that while the candidates were predominantly male and all shared the characteristic of having killed someone, she favored a woman, suggesting that she believed the act of killing was not quickly undertaken by women (Scene 28: 48). This underscores the enduring stereotype that assassins are perceived as a role challenging for women to fulfill.

The portrayal of women in *Gadis Kretek* and *Kill Boksoon* highlights the persistent problem of female underrepresentation in male-dominated professional environments, as posited by Van Zoonen. Her assertion that women are frequently relegated to domestic tasks and seldom portrayed in positions of professional power is apparent in both storylines. Although Dasiyah enjoys restricted mobility within the tobacco industry due to her familial affluence, the majority of women in her surroundings are relegated to subordinate positions, illustrating systemic gender obstacles. Similarly, Boksoon operates within a highly masculine environment where women are considered anomalies rather than equals. These representations not only reflect actual gender inequalities in access, opportunity, and acknowledgment but also reinforce the societal belief that specific professions are intrinsically masculine. The media perpetuates and solidifies the limits of female involvement in public and professional spheres, corroborating Van Zoonen's claim that

gendered media portrayal is crucial in sustaining uneven power dynamics.

### **Female characters are often framed through familial roles**

According to Van Zoonen (1985), women are often portrayed as primarily family-oriented, with an emphasis on their roles as caregivers and nurturers within the domestic sphere. This portrayal suggests that women are socially expected to embrace a family-oriented identity. In many Asian societies, such depictions align with prevailing cultural norms. A rapid review of Indonesian women in public service found that women with reproductive responsibilities are often overlooked for promotions and are expected to manage the career-family trade-offs on their own, with minimal institutional support (McLaren et al., 2019). Similarly, comparative research across East Asian countries found that child-rearing is widely regarded as a woman's central role, with many women identifying strongly with caregiving responsibilities, even when they are engaged in paid professional work (Hori, 2017). These findings underscore the persistence of traditional gender expectations across the region, which often position women's identities in close alignment with domestic and familial roles. This family-oriented issue is evident in *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and *Kill Boksoon* (2023), where female characters are portrayed as inclined to prioritize family responsibilities over their professional ambitions.

In *Gadis Kretek* (2023), Dasiyah's mother, Roemaisa, her sister, Rukayah, and her sister's friend, Purwanti, exhibited a greater inclination toward family-oriented roles. They were depicted as less involved in the tobacco industry, unlike Dasiyah, who was resolute in demonstrating her capabilities in the cigarette industry and thriving beyond the traditional roles typically ascribed to women. Roemaisa chose to be a traditional housewife and did not participate directly in the tobacco industry. She upheld conventional values and believed that her daughter should conform to the established gender roles, which envisioned a woman's future primarily in terms of marriage and homemaking. This perspective is evident in Roemaisa's persistent

efforts to find a husband for Dasiyah; despite her daughter's repeated rejections of these marriage proposals, Roemaisa remained undeterred in her quest to secure a husband for Dasiyah (Ep 1, 10: 29). Roemaisa also pressured Dasiyah to participate in more traditionally feminine activities, such as arranging flowers.

Moreover, Rukayah and Purwanti were portrayed as lacking ambition within the cigarette industry, instead opting to engage in typical leisure activities of ordinary teenagers. While Dasiyah was often depicted as industrious and focused on her work, Rukayah and Purwanti were depicted as spending their time playing or socializing with their surroundings (Ep 1, 38: 25). Although their family-oriented tendencies were not extensively depicted, their limited involvement in the industry suggested a preference for traditional women's roles. Eventually, the preference strengthened as they transitioned into motherhood, becoming adults who dedicated themselves to family care and household responsibilities.

While Dasiyah was initially portrayed as highly work-oriented, demonstrating significant devotion to her professional responsibilities in the cigarette company, her character underwent a notable transformation upon developing romantic feelings for Soeraja, as seen when she kneeled to beg her parents to approve her relationship with Soeraja (Scene Ep 3, 28: 57). This newfound emotional condition led her to contemplate marriage, a shift that starkly contrasted with her previously established work-centric demeanor. This narrative progression highlights a recurring notion wherein females, despite their initial portrayal as immersed in professional pursuits, ultimately prioritize familial and romantic relationships upon encountering male counterparts. Such representations echo traditional gender norms and perpetuate the idea that women derive primary fulfillment from domestic roles and romantic partnerships, often overshadowing their professional aspirations.

In *Kill Boksoon* (2023), Boksoon, as a mother, exhibits care and tenderness towards her daughter, which starkly contrasts with her aggressive and violent demeanor in her professional life (51:06). This dynamic

is portrayed in how Boksoon handles her daughter thoughtfully, even when her daughter is stubborn and challenging. Despite these difficulties, she remains affectionate and nurturing.

What makes Boksoon's case especially significant is her conscious decision to resign from her company to prioritize her daughter's well-being. Despite the prestige, power, and success she holds in her career, Boksoon ultimately chooses motherhood over continued professional dominance. Her decision to leave the organization symbolizes a full-circle transformation, from being a woman who compartmentalizes her dual roles to one who fully embraces the domestic sphere at the cost of her professional identity. This narrative reinforces a recurring ideological frame: regardless of a woman's competence or authority in her career, motherhood is portrayed as her most essential and defining role.

#### **Gendered labor hierarchies persist, limiting women's access to high-status roles in male male-dominated workplace**

The low-status job or position is also portrayed in both the series and the film. Van Zoonen (1985) argues that women frequently find themselves in subordinate positions to men in the workplace. In *Gadis Kretek* (2023), despite Dasiyah's involvement in her father's company, she was not permitted to become a flavor maker like her father. She was prohibited from creating cigarette flavors or accessing the flavor room, as women were deemed unqualified for such positions, which could negatively impact taste quality (scene at 34:43). In the tobacco industry, women are typically assigned roles in production areas that do not require specialized skills for most of them only completed low level of education and mostly under unwritten contract, with many occupying the cigarette roller (*pelinting*) position (Yuwastina, 2023). This reflects a broader pattern of women being relegated to lower-status jobs, especially in male-dominated industries such as the cigarette industry.

Meanwhile, in *Kill Boksoon* (2023), Boksoon is showcased as the most accomplished female assassin within MK, embodying exceptional skills and expertise.

Despite her high status and proficiency that align with upper roles, she remains subordinate to Chairman Cha. It became evident that Boksoon's skills did not challenge the entrenched gender hierarchy rooted in patriarchal systems. Despite her expertise, men were consistently prioritized in positions of power and made the major decisions. This was depicted as she wanted to end her contract as an assassin, but ended up extending it due to Chairman Cha's decision (Scene 37:00). This hierarchy remains intact, regardless of a woman's abilities, with men holding superior positions. Consequently, the contributions of women still need to be recognized, and their positions remain lower than those of men in this male-dominated field.

The two women under analysis face systemic barriers that confine them to subordinate roles, reinforcing stereotypes of lower workplace positions. Dasiyah's exclusion from becoming a flavor maker in her father's company exemplifies how women are relegated to lower-status jobs, such as cigarette roller (*pelinting*), within the male-dominated tobacco industry. This reflects the stereotype that women are unqualified for high-status roles, perpetuating traditional hierarchies and limiting advancement opportunities. In *Kill Boksoon* (2023), Boksoon, despite being the most skilled female assassin, remains subordinate to Chairman Cha, illustrating how her expertise does not challenge entrenched patriarchal structures. Men retain decision-making power, as shown by Chairman Cha's control over her contract. This highlights the persistence of male dominance in leadership roles, reinforcing the stereotype that women, regardless of their capabilities, are best suited for supportive positions.

The portrayals of Dasiyah and Boksoon corroborate Van Zoonen's (1985) claim that women in media are often depicted in lower positions within professional hierarchies. Notwithstanding their abilities and accomplishments, both characters are limited by patriarchal structures that hinder access to prestigious positions. Dasiyah's exclusion from the flavor-making role—despite her creativity and active involvement in her father's business—illustrates the common view of women as unqualified for specialized or leadership

roles, especially in traditionally male industries. Likewise, Boksoon's remarkable abilities as an assassin do not confer upon her any decision-making authority; she remains submissive to a male authority figure, Chairman Cha, whose dominance over her contract highlights the enduring nature of gendered power differences. These depictions illustrate how labor hierarchies in media narratives replicate real-world arrangements that diminish women's knowledge and perpetuate the notion that ultimate authority and leadership are intrinsically masculine. The media perpetuates unequal gender dynamics, as postulated by Van Zoonen, by standardizing women's roles as subordinate, despite their capability to lead.

## Conclusion

This study explored how gender representations are constructed and contested in *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and *Kill Boksoon* (2023), employing Van Zoonen's Gender Representation in Media theory as a critical lens. The findings reveal recurring patterns of gendered portrayals in Netflix originals, showcasing Asian women still reinforcing traditional gender expectations. However, some representations showcase moments of resistance and complexity that challenge these norms, showing women navigating and at times subverting the boundaries imposed upon them. Despite these nuances, the structural imbalance persists: women remain underrepresented and undervalued in male-dominated spaces, both in the domestic and professional spheres. The narratives reveal how familial roles are used as framing devices that limit women's identity, and how emotionality is coded as a feminine trait to delegitimize women's authority.

These findings contribute to broader conversations about how media continues to mirror and reinforce societal gender inequalities, while also presenting spaces for critical engagement and disruption. Future research could expand on this study by analyzing a broader range of Southeast and East Asian media texts across genres to investigate whether such patterns persist or evolve. Additionally, comparative studies between male and female character arcs in similarly structured narratives may uncover

deeper insights into how media language constructs gender power dynamics. A deeper dive into audience reception studies could also enrich understanding of how these portrayals are internalized or resisted by viewers, especially by women in similar cultural contexts. Ultimately, both *Gadis Kretek* (2023) and *Kill Boksoon* (2023) exemplify that while media can serve as a platform for cultural reinforcement, it also possesses the capacity to reflect the intricacies and contradictions inherent in women's lived experiences within patriarchal societies.

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