

# Redefining Her Story: A Study on Strong Female Characters in OTT Media

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## Abstract

The representation of women on screen has taken a turn with the emergence of OTT platforms. Not only are actresses portraying women in challenging professions, but even directors have taken a leap when it comes to storytelling that goes far beyond socially accepted gender standards. It is but natural that women today are seen in powerful roles to be depicted beautifully on OTT screens. Television has given strength to women but OTT has given power to the women portraying the characters of today's women who set an example for many women in the country. The women characters knit on OTT shows like Delhi Crime, Arya, Four More Shots Please, Mai and many more webseries have shown that women is power. This primary research study is an attempt to showcase how the audience of OTT has come a long way and what attributes of these characters can be examined through survey method followed by indepth interviews.

Keywords: Audience, Character Representation, OTT, Web Series, Female Characters, Web Shows

## Introduction

Web shows or web series are released on the internet in episodic form, are series of scripted or non-scripted online videos. Webseries got popularity in the early 2000s. There is a rise in the popularity of the internet and betterment in the ease of use and affordability of high speed broadband and streaming video technology. As compared to TV serials web series are less expensive to produce and has given platform to wider range of creators. It has also allowed people to access it 7 days, 24 hours instead of being aired at a single preset time to specific regions and for a limited period like for 30 mins or 1 hour with lots of advertisements. It is also more easily accessible for commuters, travelers and other people on the go due to the rise in ownership of smartphones, tablets, laptops and other portable devices.

Tv shows are governed by network and broadcasting guidelines. The success of web series has caught an eye of some of the top directors specially the one featuring female characters with a strong image. There are many popular platforms to release a web series like Netflix, YouTube, Voot, ZEE5, Amazon Prime Video, Disney + Hotstar, MX player SONYLiv and many more. It has considered as an ideal platform for narrating female stories, reflecting their realities. Webseries telecast fresh and youthful stories that imitate modern lifestyles and their problems with realism and honesty. Now every Indian consumer has become ready to pay a premium for quality content.

The content of the web series is more relatable to the young audience. The stereotypical image of women which is often portrayed in mainstream media is challenged by the web series. The major shows showcasing female characters like Aarya, Four More Shots, Delhi Crime and Mai are making their identity without depending on the men for their upliftment. Entertainment is the biggest reason behind the use of OTT (Over the Top).

Aarya is a web series directed by Sandeep Modi and Vinod Rawat. It is a crime thriller drama streaming series. The role of Aarya is played by Sushmita Sen who for taking the revenge of her husband's death and seeks to protect her family, she joins mafia gang. The show traces her journey in becoming the mafia queen. This a very challenging role and Sushmita Sen has truly justified her performance in the strong role and received the award for Best Actress Female, at the OTT Filmfare Awards.



Delhi Crime is also an Indian crime drama streaming series directed by a female director Richie Mehta. It is based on the 2012 Nirbhaya Gang Rape Case investigation and the manhunt that follows. The series showcases the role of DCP ( Vartika Chaturvedi), where she is tasked to find the culprits responsible for the mugging.



Four More Shots Please is also directed by two female directors Nupur Asthana and Anu Menon, is an Indian comedy drama streaming online Amazon Prime Video. The series is based on the life of four unremorsefully blemished women (two in their early 20s and two in their 30s). They live, love, make mistakes and discover what really makes them tick through friendship and shots of tequila in millennial Mumbai.



Mai is 2022 Indian Hindi language family thriller drama directed by Anshai Lal streaming on Netflix. It follows a story of a anguished mother who discovers the criminals behind her daughter's heartbreaking death, and transforms from docile to hardhearted to get the real cause behind death. The lead role Mai is played by Sakshi Tanwar who has an image of Saas Bahu drama showcased on television.



The four series released on different OTT platforms and portray a strong and positive image of the women in different shades.

### Objectives:

- To find out if the web is opening up space for female fronted performers and creators.
- To find out the attributes of female characters in webseries.

### Representation Theory?

- **Focus on Media Portrayals:** This theory emphasizes how media constructs meaning and represents social realities, making it ideal for analyzing how OTT platforms portray female characters in unconventional, strong roles.
- **Challenges to Stereotypes:** Your study highlights a shift from stereotypical depictions of women (e.g., submissive, dependent) to powerful, independent characters. Representation theory helps unpack how these portrayals influence societal perceptions of gender norms.
- **Audience Interpretation:** Hall's framework also includes the process of encoding and decoding media messages. This aligns with your study's audience-centric focus, allowing you to examine how viewers perceive and interpret the representation of female characters in web series.

### Application in Your Study

1. **Analysis of Content:** Use the theory to explore how female characters are represented in series like *Aarya*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Mai*—focusing on their roles, agency, and departure from traditional norms.
2. **Audience Perception:** Investigate whether audiences accept, negotiate, or oppose these portrayals, based on their cultural and social contexts.
3. **Impact on Gender Norms:** Assess how these representations contribute to reshaping perceptions of women in Indian society.

### Research Methodology

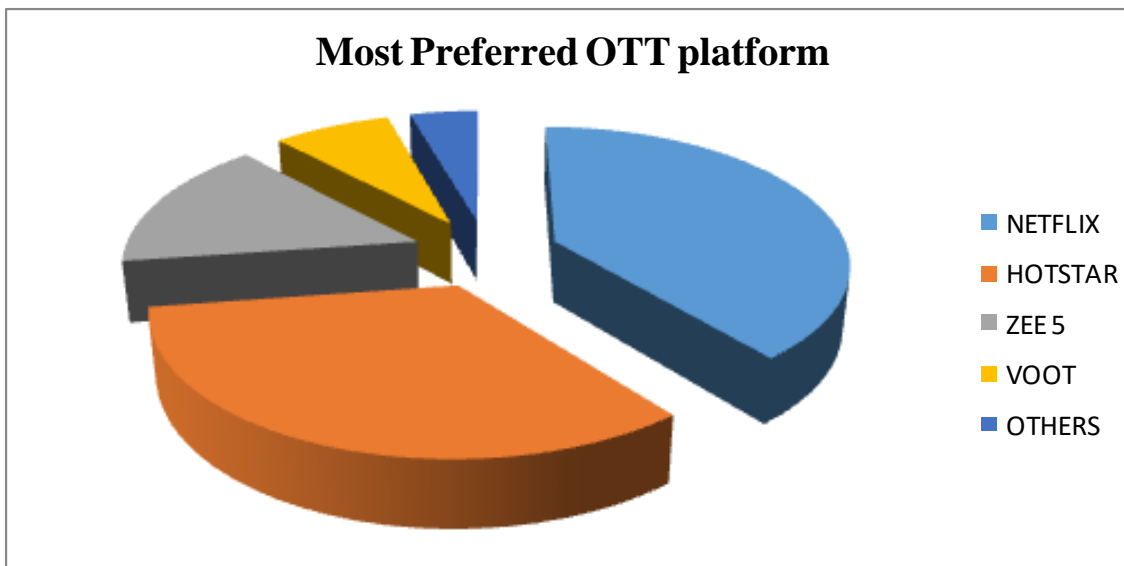
To find out if the web is opening new avenues for female performers and creators and the attributes of the female performers which are most liked by the viewers, quantitative approach was followed. An online survey was conducted through google forms and the responses of the respondents was analysed to understand the research objectives.

### Results and Discussion:

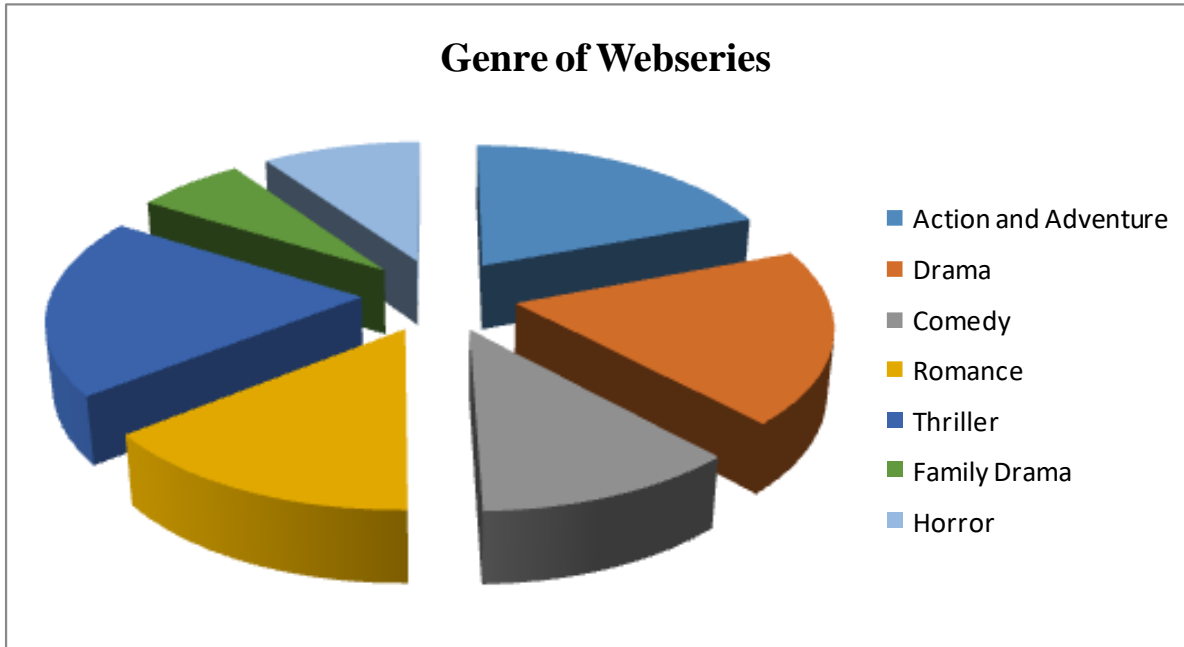
Based on the responses collected through the online survey, the age group chosen was between 20- 35. Total sample of 80 was taken, among which 40 were male and 40 were female, consisted of college going as well as working class. Some famous webseries showcased on different OTT platforms were selected for better results

like AARYA from Disney+ Hotstar, MAI from NETFLIX, Delhi Crime from Netflix and Four More Shots from Amazon Prime.

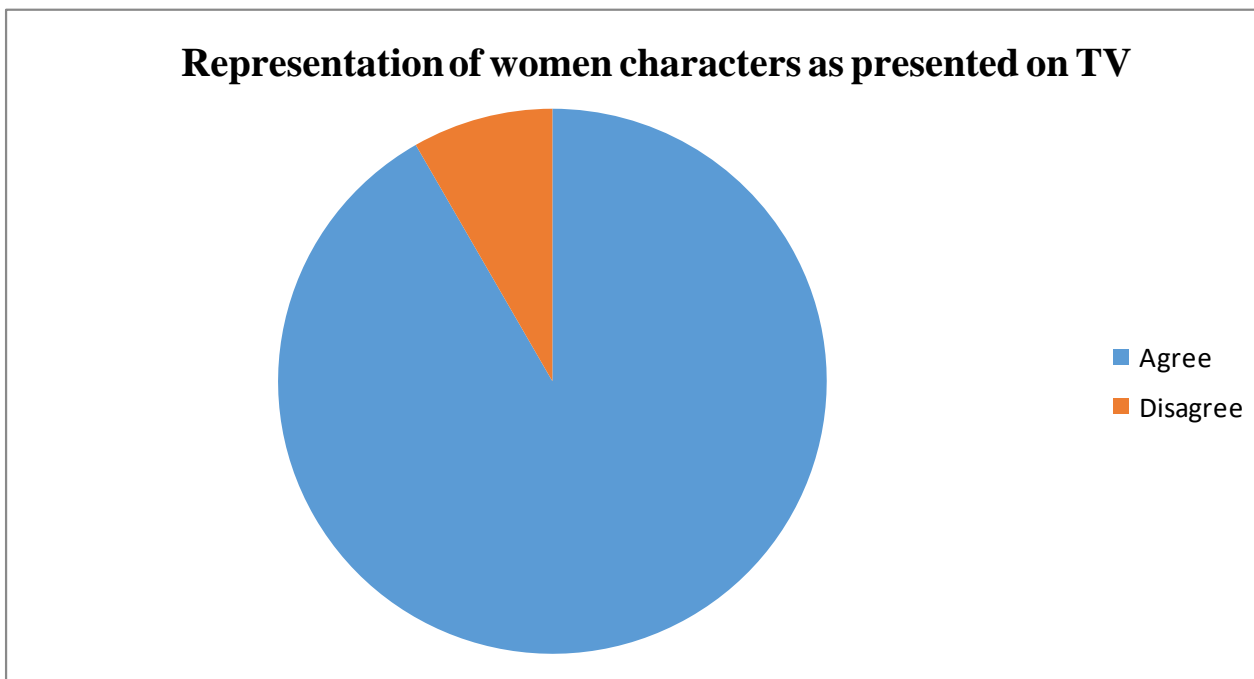
**Most Preferred OTT platform:** When asked about the choice of OTT platform, 39.2 % respondents preferred to watch NETFLIX while 33.5 prefer to watch HOTSTAR, 15.3 ZEE 5, 7.6 prefer to watch Voot and 4.4 watch others.



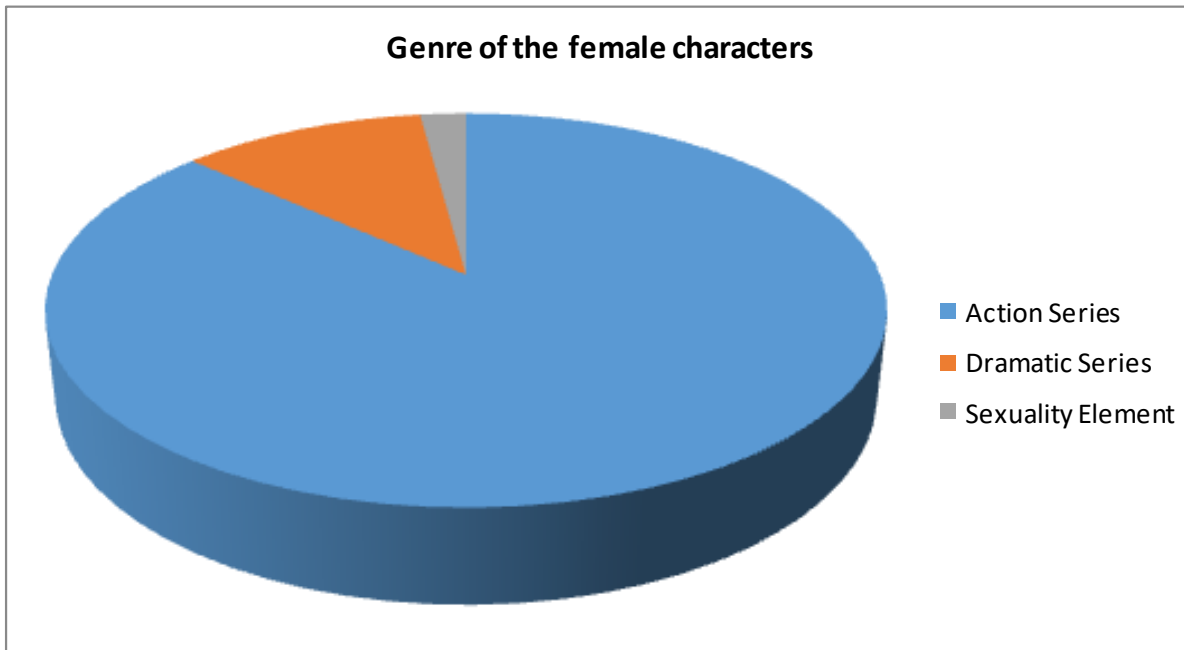
**Genre of Webseries:** Respondents prefer to watch Action and Adventure 59.3%, Drama 58.4%, Comedy 35.7%, Romance 45.2%, Thriller 60.4%, Family Drama 20.2%, Horror 29.7%. The majority preference was given to the action, adventure and drama.



**Representation of women characters:** when asked about the strong representation of women characters on OTT platforms as compared to Television, the results were one sided as majority people agree that there is a huge difference in the presentation of female characters on OTT platforms which are mostly liked by the audience. 91. 7% respondents agree to the point and rest 8.3 % doesn't find any difference in the presentation.

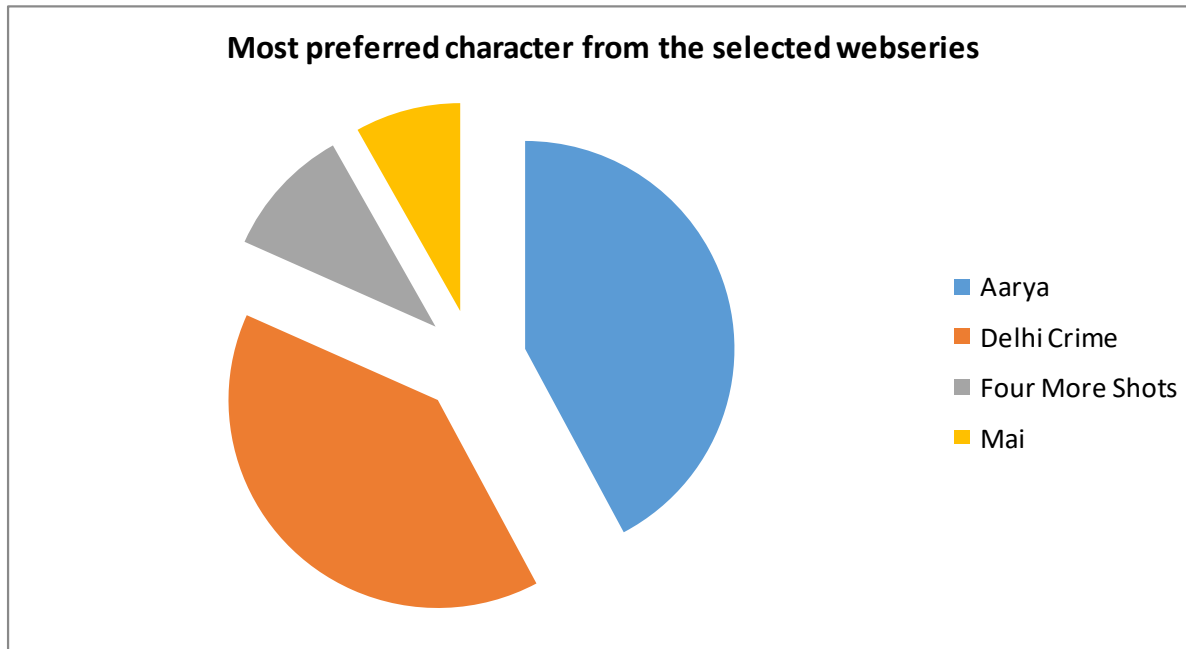


**Genre of the female characters:** Respondents prefer to watch female in action and thriller image as compared to the family image of drama and women portrayed as sexuality element. 86.7 % respondents prefer the role of women in action series like Aarya, Delhi Crime, 11. 2 prefer to watch female in dramatic characters and the rest 2.1 as sexuality element.



**Most preferred character from the selected webseries:** 42.4 % respondent's choice was Aarya, 39.7 % respondent's choice was Delhi Crime, 10.2 % Four More Shots and 8.2 % respondent's choice was Mai.





## Findings:

Aahana Kumar says in an interview with TOI that “OTT has given a breathe of fresh air to female artists. It has given us a voice. OTT has ensured that stories are far more powerful now. Thanks to these platforms across languages, incredible female roles are now being written across the globe. I don’t need to wear layers of makeup and look pretty always. I can look realistic.” The study has revealed several significant insights into the representation of strong female characters in OTT web series and the audience’s perception of these portrayals:

1. OTT platforms have created an opportunity for female artists to step into roles that are not only central to the story but also break away from traditional, stereotypical depictions. Women are portrayed as independent, ambitious, and resilient individuals, capable of making bold decisions and handling complex situations. This shift is evident in web series like *Aarya*, where Sushmita Sen portrays a woman balancing family responsibilities and becoming a mafia queen to protect her loved ones.
2. The study shows that the audience overwhelmingly prefers female characters in action and thriller genres over traditional family dramas or roles where women are objectified. Approximately 86.7% of respondents favored women in strong and action-oriented roles, such as Shefali Shah in *Delhi Crime* or



Sushmita Sen in *Aarya*. These characters challenge patriarchal norms and inspire audiences by displaying strength and decisiveness.

3. While lead characters have received widespread appreciation, supporting female characters have also been portrayed as bold and empowered. For example, Sushmita Sen's daughter in *Aarya* is depicted as a determined and strong-willed individual, further reinforcing the trend of breaking stereotypes in storytelling.

4. The study highlights that OTT platforms are not only empowering female performers but also providing opportunities for female creators, including directors and writers. Shows like *Four More Shots Please* and *Delhi Crime*, directed by female creators, showcase nuanced, relatable, and realistic narratives about women. These platforms allow female storytellers to craft narratives that resonate with women across different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

5. The portrayal of women in OTT web series starkly contrasts with the clichéd depictions seen in traditional Indian television. The typical "saas-bahu" dynamic, which often reduces women to secondary, dependent roles, is replaced by characters who are fearless, independent, and capable of taking control of their lives. This change aligns with the evolving role of women in modern society.

6. Audiences are increasingly receptive to bold and unconventional themes presented in OTT series. Shows like *Four More Shots Please* explore themes of female friendship, sexuality, and independence, while *Mai* portrays a mother's journey from grief to vengeance, highlighting the depth and diversity of female-centric storytelling.

7. Among the series studied, *Aarya* emerged as the most preferred choice, with 42.4% of respondents identifying it as their favorite. *Delhi Crime* followed closely with 39.7%, while *Four More Shots Please* and *Mai* received 10.2% and 8.2% of the preference, respectively. This preference further emphasizes the audience's inclination toward action-oriented and impactful narratives featuring strong female leads.

8. Another key finding is the portrayal of female characters as decision-makers who are independent and self-reliant. Whether it is Shefali Shah's portrayal of DCP Vartika Chaturvedi in *Delhi Crime* or Sakshi Tanwar's character in *Mai*, these women are depicted as capable of making tough decisions without relying on male counterparts.

9. Respondents have expressed appreciation for the realistic depiction of female characters on OTT platforms. Female characters are no longer bound by conventional beauty standards; instead, they are

celebrated for their authenticity and relatability. This resonates strongly with viewers, especially younger audiences who seek content that reflects real-world struggles and triumphs.

10. The findings suggest that the changing portrayal of women on OTT platforms is influencing societal perceptions. These series challenge deep-rooted gender biases by presenting women in roles that exemplify leadership, strength, and independence. Such portrayals encourage audiences to rethink traditional gender roles and foster a more progressive mindset.

11. The audience's preference for female-centric content is directly tied to the accessibility and diversity of OTT platforms. With platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, and others offering a wide array of female-driven narratives, audiences are increasingly gravitating toward these platforms for high-quality, relatable content.

## Conclusion:

The entertainment industry is undergoing a significant transformation, with the advent of OTT platforms fundamentally reshaping the way content is created, consumed, and experienced. The shift from traditional television to web series on OTT platforms has been accelerated by advancements in technology, increased internet accessibility, and changing audience preferences. As this transition unfolds, it is becoming evident that OTT platforms are not merely an alternative to television but a revolutionary space for diverse storytelling that challenges societal norms and conventions.

One of the most notable shifts in this evolving landscape is the portrayal of women. Unlike the stereotypical, one-dimensional roles often seen in traditional television—such as the submissive housewife or the scheming antagonist—OTT platforms have introduced complex, multifaceted female characters. These women are career-driven, ambitious, unapologetically bold, and empowered. They defy the typical "saas-bahu" narrative that has long dominated Indian television, instead reflecting the realities, struggles, and aspirations of modern women.

The widespread success of shows like *Aarya*, *Delhi Crime*, *Four More Shots Please*, and *Mai* underscores the audience's growing appetite for stories centered around strong, independent female characters. These series not only elevate the lead female roles but also ensure that supporting female characters are portrayed with depth and agency. For example, the nuanced portrayal of Sushmita Sen's daughter in *Aarya* illustrates that empowerment and strength are not restricted to lead roles. Similarly, Shefali Shah's commanding performance in *Delhi Crime* demonstrates how women in leadership positions can captivate and inspire audiences.

The research findings clearly indicate that viewers are embracing these empowered depictions, with a preference for women in action and thriller genres over traditional family drama. This shift highlights a cultural and social change in the audience's mindset, where women are increasingly recognized for their decision-making abilities, resilience, and independence. The digital medium has allowed creators to experiment with bold themes, nuanced narratives, and unconventional character arcs, thereby providing female artists and storytellers with a platform to explore stories that were previously sidelined or deemed too risky for traditional broadcasting.

Moreover, the influence of these portrayals extends beyond entertainment. By breaking stereotypes and showcasing women in positions of power, these web series challenge deep-rooted gender biases and contribute to reshaping societal attitudes. They present a vision of gender equality and empowerment that resonates with the younger generation, inspiring them to question and challenge outdated norms. This cultural shift has the potential to catalyze broader social changes, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

As the viewership of OTT platforms continues to grow, the demand for high-quality, diverse, and relatable content is expected to rise further. These platforms have already proven their ability to deliver stories that cater to a wide range of tastes and demographics. With the increasing willingness of audiences to invest in premium content, the scope for innovative storytelling—particularly stories that amplify the voices of women—has never been greater.

In conclusion, the representation of women on OTT platforms is not merely a reflection of societal change but also a driver of it. By celebrating the strength, resilience, and complexity of female characters, these web series challenge the status quo and inspire audiences to envision a world where gender equality is not just a goal but a reality. The transformative power of storytelling, combined with the accessibility of digital platforms, is creating a cultural revolution that is redefining the role of women in both media and society. As this trend continues, it holds the promise of fostering a more progressive, inclusive, and empowered world.

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