



Promoting Responsible Portrayal of Mental Health in Iranian Cinema: Experience from the Second-Best Mental Health Movie Award at Iran's 44th Fajr National Film Festival

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Dear Editor,

Media profoundly influences public attitudes and behaviors in contemporary societies. Among various forms of media, cinema is particularly influential because it not only disseminates information but also shapes role models, evokes emotions, and influences social perceptions and behaviors. Over recent decades, mental health-related themes have increasingly attracted the attention of filmmakers worldwide. Consequently, cinema plays an important role in shaping public attitudes toward mental disorders, psychiatric treatments, mental health professionals, and affected individuals. Given the persistent stigma associated with mental health problems, the portrayal of these issues in films can have substantial and long-lasting effects on public perceptions (1).

Cinema occupies a prominent place in Iranian society, attracting audiences from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, Iranian films are increasingly viewed and recognized internationally. Recognizing the influence of visual media, the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MoHME), through its Department of Mental and Social Health and Addiction, has progressively implemented several initiatives aimed at improving the portrayal of mental health issues in visual media. These efforts have included raising awareness regarding responsible representation of mental disorders, conducting educational workshops for screenwriters and directors, and advocating for greater sensitivity in the depiction of issues such as suicide. Previous research has suggested that contemporary Iranian filmmakers demonstrate more positive attitudes toward people with mental disorders than the general population (2). Nevertheless, stigmatizing portrayals of mental illness remain a significant challenge within Iranian cinema.

Since 2024, the Department of Mental and Social Health and Addiction,

in collaboration with the Deputy Ministry of Cultural and Student Affairs of MoHME, the Iranian Psychiatric Association, and the Iranian Psychological Association, has organized the Best Mental Health Movie Award within the Fajr National Film Festival (3). The primary objective of this initiative is to promote and positively reinforce scientifically accurate, responsible, and non-stigmatizing portrayals of mental health issues in Iranian cinema. The most recent festival marked the second consecutive year of this award. The continuation of the award for a second consecutive year reflects an effort to establish a sustainable mechanism for encouraging responsible and evidence-informed portrayals of mental health in Iranian cinema.

As members of the judging committee, we reviewed 31 narrative feature films. The award was ultimately granted to *Woman's Well-Being*, a film portraying the challenges faced by a young couple experiencing severe unconsummated marriage, influenced by several factors including the woman's history of childhood abuse. The film was selected because of its realistic and non-judgmental narrative, accurate presentation of relevant psychological issues, constructive portrayal of mental health professionals, emphasis on communication between partners, and hopeful progression of the story. In addition, *Mid-Night* received special recognition for its realistic and hopeful depiction of resilience within Iranian society, particularly the health system, during the recent armed conflict affecting the country (4,5).

Despite these encouraging examples, our observations suggest that stigmatizing portrayals of mental disorders, individuals living with mental illness, psychiatric and psychological treatments, psychiatric

facilities, and mental health professionals remain common in Iranian films. Furthermore, sensitive topics such as suicide, aggression, and substance use are often depicted without sufficient consideration of their potential public health impact. These observations underscore the importance of adopting a balanced strategy that both discourages irresponsible portrayals of sensitive issues—particularly those affecting children and adolescents—and promotes greater awareness among film industry professionals regarding mental health concepts and stigma reduction.

Constructive collaboration between mental health professionals, scientific associations, policymakers, and influential figures within the film industry may contribute substantially to improving the portrayal of mental health issues in Iranian cinema. Such partnerships can support the development of more accurate, evidence-informed, and socially responsible representations of mental illness and mental health care.

In conclusion, improving the portrayal of mental health issues in Iranian cinema requires sustained efforts, including awareness-raising activities, promotion of responsible representation, and recognition of positive examples. The Best Mental Health Movie Award, now in its second year at the Fajr National Film Festival, represents a promising opportunity to advance these objectives and contribute to stigma reduction and mental health promotion through cinema.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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