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Standfirst

Revelations of sexual harassment, sexism and unequal pay in film and broadcasting have called ‘time’s up’ on the myths of egalitarianism that circulate about the creative sector, argues Rosalind Gill.

Pull out comment

Arguably...inequality in our cultural industries is even more troubling than in other fields

Our cultural fields are not as equal as they think

For people interested in equality, diversity and social justice in the workplace, the cultural and creative industries present a curious paradox. On one hand, much evidence indicates that fields such as advertising, architecture and design, broadcasting, film and new media are sites of stark and persistent inequalities, in which women, people from black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups and from poorer backgrounds are often under-represented, paid less and concentrated in less highly valued areas compared with men, white people and those from more privileged socioeconomic groups. Yet on the other hand, these same fields are deeply invested in egalitarian values, are hostile to hierarchies, and present themselves as open, tolerant and based on democratic and meritocratic principles. As I was

told on numerous occasions doing fieldwork among media workers: 'it doesn't matter if you're male or female, black or white, gay or straight, as long as you're creative'. What recent scandals have shown, however—from 'MeToo' to the BBC's record of unequally rewarding male and female talent—is that it clearly does matter and, moreover, that our 'creative' fields are no better (and possibly a lot worse) than other fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), where gender inequality is better recognised and where programmes are in place to challenge it.

Focussing on gender, and taking the film industry as an example, it is evident that almost whatever indicator is examined—from pay, to seniority, to security of tenure—women fare significantly less well than men. There are, of course, exceptions but the data is compelling. There is horizontal segregation, with women concentrated in some roles (make-up and wardrobe, for example) and men in others (sound and lighting). But there is also vertical segregation, which becomes stark at the top in key creative roles. For nearly twenty years, a California-based research team lead by Martha Lauzen has tracked the employment of women behind the scenes in the top-grossing 250 films produced in Hollywood. The Celluloid Ceiling report for 2017 (https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2016_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf) revealed that women made up only 17% of directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers, a drop of 2% from the previous year. In terms of directors, women were only 7%, again representing a reduction from the previous year, and thus contesting optimistic accounts that things are slowly getting better. Expressed differently, 92% of the 250 top Hollywood films were directed only by men. The picture in the UK is similar, and further highlights the inverse relationship between a film's budget and the likelihood of a woman being employed in any of the key creative positions.

These figures are sobering in their own right, representing a great loss of talent and potential, particularly considering that women and men graduate from film school in equal numbers and express similar desires for their working lives afterward graduation. However, it is also disturbing for another reason: namely that film is a storytelling medium that shapes which narratives and whose narratives and voices we see and hear. Arguably, for this reason, inequality in our cultural industries is even more troubling than in other fields.

Researchers have become more adept at measuring the impact that employment inequality can have on the nature or content of films, from the famous 'Bechdel Test'—in which films were evaluated on whether they had more than one female character who spoke to another woman about something other than a man—to sophisticated measures of the screen time or speaking time of female and male characters. There is clear evidence that female actors and characters are less disadvantaged in films with female creatives behind the camera. Similarly, research from Directors UK in 2016

(https://d29dqxe14uxvcr.cloudfront.net/generic_file_content_rows/file_1s/000/002/703/original/Cut_Out_of_The_Picture_-_Report.pdf?1462534821) shows there are 'symbiotic' benefits in that female creatives tend to be more likely to hire women than male creatives.

Why, though, is inequality so entrenched in our creative professions—from art and architecture to publishing, film and television? The conventional explanation is that motherhood is the issue. As industry bodies such as Skillset note, our societies are not set up for people who may need to work round the clock at times, then have no work at all for several months; nurseries are not open for someone who needs to leave for a shoot at 4AM. Yet these factors also affect men who become fathers, but who rarely pay a penalty in this way. Moreover, such an argument does not account for the large number of women in arts and media professions who do not have children but are still under-represented in positions of authority.

Another potential explanation focuses on the informality of many of the 'employers' in these fields—film, for example, is organised around project teams that are often pulled together at short notice. In this context, 'homophily'—appointing in one's own image—comes to the fore, as well as falling back on one's 'contacts', who are also likely to be 'people like you'. Unconscious bias clearly plays into this, especially in the context of hiring practices that do not depend on a formal record of achievement (e.g. qualifications, resumé) and are more likely based on by word of mouth judgments (e.g. 'he's good to work with' versus 'she can be difficult'). Deborah Jones and Judith Pringle have coined the term 'unmanageable inequalities' to talk about forms of inequality that exist and are reproduced outside the formal apparatuses (e.g. Equal Opportunities legislation) that have been put in place to deal with fairness in the workplace.

It may be also that the myth of egalitarianism, to which people in cultural and creative fields are so attached, is itself part of the problem, because it obscures inequalities or presents them as the outcome of differential individual merit. During the 2000s it seemed as if inequalities had become not just unmanageable but also unspeakable, producing strange affective dissonances for me as a researcher as I was told again and again how open, equal and diverse workplaces were, even when this contradicted the evidence of both my own eyes and reliable data. One of the most surreal experiences was being told how ‘multi-culti’ the staff of a large new media company was, while surveying a large open-plan space filled almost exclusively with white people. As my interviews attest, a profound investment in meritocracy can, and does, sit alongside acknowledgements that other factors are in fact crucial to success (eg, ‘it’s all down to who you know’). For women I interviewed, choosing not to talk about inequality was sometimes a strategic decision; I was told ‘you don’t talk about gender if you want to get on’. In this sense, ‘MeToo’, ‘TimesUp’ and the eloquent activism of Carrie Gracie and others in exposing the ‘secretive’ pay culture of the BBC, offers hope in breaking the silence and challenging the myth of egalitarianism in our creative professions. For it is only when we begin to acknowledge how unequal our cultural industries are that we can truly start to work on challenging this.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.