Lights, cameras… mentors: Interview with Conchitta Bottse, Miriam Brenner and Lindsi Dendauw on how reduce gender inequalities in music

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Many academic articles have described gender inequalities in music. Yet, we have far less understanding of how to bring about change (Correll, 2017). This interview addresses exactly this topic: how can we make changes towards more gender equality in the music industry? Moreover, instead of talking about women in music, this group interview expresses how three inspiring women have each in their own ways contributed to gender equality – in their own words.

Conchitta Bottse is a music programmer at pop venue Paard in The Hague, freelance event producer for, amongst others, Amsterdam Dance Event (ADE), tour manager of Dutch soul artist Shirma Rouse, and has worked in many other positions in the music industry.

Miriam Brenner has her own music agency and management company called Kokako Music. She started working in the music industry as an assistant programmer at International Music

Meeting Nijmegen and was a producer at world music/jazz venue Rasa in Utrecht. Currently, she is coordinator at the Stichting Utrecht Wereldmuziek.

Lindsi Dendauw founded Girls go BOOM. Inspired by the Riot Grrrl movement, Girls Go BOOM organises shows to provide girls the opportunity to take the stage to perform their music, inspire other girls to start making music and themselves heard, and create a safe space for people ('girls to the front').

Gender inequality in the music industry

Gender inequalities are a defining characteristic of the pop music sector, despite its reputation as being 'cool' and egalitarian (Gill, 2002). Indeed, according to Miriam: 'We tend to see the music sector as arty, as idyllic… but no way! It is an industry, a business where money matters. As such, it does not differ that much from other sectors.' The structural organisation of the music industry disadvantages women in several ways, through 1) flexibility, 2) informality and 3) masculine culture. First, as Lindsi pointed out, 'jobs are highly competitive and you have to work in the weekends and evenings.' Yet, as 'most of the household tasks are still done by women', combining music work with family responsibilities becomes nearly impossible. Thus, whereas in theory flexibility might have helped women combine household tasks with music work, in practice it means one has to work 24/7 (McRobbie, 2016).

Second, in contrast to many other sectors, the music industry is organised based on informal procedures (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015). 'Hiring happens through informal networks. So you have to voice your opinion and make yourself heard. Such qualities are stereotypically associated with men' (Lindsi). Additionally, after the financial crisis of 2008, 'many people were forced to become self-employed as subsidies dried up,' Conchitta noted.

This impacts women in particular as acquiring work requires entrepreneurial skills stereotypically linked to masculinity. Miriam:

> You have to do all negotiations yourself, including setting prices. So you have to have a strong voice. I often get offered a fraction of the fee they offer to my male colleagues. Of course, this depends on where you are in your career, on your qualities, knowledge and experience. But I do expect to be treated like a legitimate music professional at one point!

Yet, even when women have mastered networking and negotiation skills, it does not automatically mean they are taken seriously (by men), as Miriam experienced:

> When you are assertive as a woman by voicing a completely legitimate issue, you are often seen as meddling or dominant – in a negative way. Whereas when a male colleague makes similar suggestions, men respond: "Great point, Klaas, let's do it". Even when you ask a simple question or provide facts about what is my work really, you are considered to be very intimidating… as a woman.

Third, many cultural categories in pop music are deeply gendered. In general, women are expected to do better in stereotypically feminine tasks: communication and emotional labor. Miriam: 'The role of tour manager is indeed often just babysitting. "Ooh, I know you have had little sleep. Shall I make you a sandwich? Did your already pack your suitcase? Do not forget your little cables?"'. Moreover, women are expected to fulfill the role of singer or dancer, referred to role-encapsulation (see Berkers & Schaap, 2018). Conchitta provided an example:

'They will automatically put an extra mic on the stage. When I ask them why it is there, they will say: "For you". Are you kidding me?'. Miriam has had similar experiences: 'As a tour manager, I often get the question whether I am the singer or the dancer in the band. I will tell them: "How many people are listed on the stage plot? Any dancers?"'. Such stereotypes are problematic for women as 'these characteristics are still regarded as less valuable'.

Thus, in the words of Lindsi, 'the professional music industry is in many ways a magnification of the professional world in general in terms of gender stereotypes and inequality'.

Changes and causes

All interviewees signal a change toward gender equality in the people working in the music industry in terms of overall participation of women as well as horizontal/vertical sex segregation. According to Miriam:

> Things have changed very much over the last ten years. In the jazz and world music scenes, I encountered very few women in their twenties. When I had meetings with organisations or colleagues, most women I dealt with were assistants. Currently, more women are participating in many more ways in both scenes.

Moreover, Conchitta noted that 'women are participating at many levels, not only as "marketing girls" or "production girls"'. In addition, they all see more possibilities of career mobility. Conchitta highlighted two reasons for these changes. First, a natural course. 'As educational programs become more diverse, people entering the music industry is also more diverse.' Second, funding. 'Subsidy programs are developed to increase diversity, which means the topic

becomes more visible and there is money available.' Lindsi put the discussion about gender inequality in music in 'a broader debate which is taking place about women and sexual harassment in society at large'. However, she warned 'that programming many women artists has become a fashion trend, which festivals use to generate a lot of positive media attention.'. Indeed, Conchitta added that 'it should not be a trend but core business'.

Working towards gender equality: specific solutions

This raises the question of how to work towards gender equality. For all interviewees, this goal is part and parcel of their everyday interactions within the music industry. However, they also all have (co-)developed specific solutions.

Mentorship program

Miriam developed a mentorship program. It consists of a mentor and a mentee, a more experienced woman wanting to share their knowledge, train a mentee and help them in their career. The reason for starting this was:

> because we never had a mentor ourselves. Someone you can trust, who you contact when you have a specific issue. For example, how someone treated you or when you did not get any speaking time at a conference. Something that you cannot easily discuss with male colleagues, without thinking it might jeopardise your position or not being taken seriously anymore. In these cases, you need a female mentor to talk to on how to deal with this situation. (Miriam)

The mentoring process is very active and hands-on.

For example, I recently took a young woman to a large conference and showcase festival. We all know each other, so people give each other hugs. However, there are boundaries. And sadly some men still cross such boundaries, for example by hugging too long or too up-close. I then have to have a conversation with a young assistant telling here this can happen anywhere, and this is what you can do. I just do not want someone to feel uncomfortable. (Miriam)

The reactions to this initiative have been very positive as women working in the music industry often feel isolated.

Safe spaces

Together with others, Lindsi started Girls go BOOM, inspired by Riot Grrrl and the punk do-it-yourself ethos, to provide a safe space to perform for women. 'We noticed that very few women in punk music were taking the stage, which is actually quite contradictory to the ideas of punk as it aims to give minorities a voice.' She defined a safe space as 'a space where no one will be sexually harassed or touched without consent, where girls can stand in the front and literally can take up space'. Talking about how to make a space safe, Lindsi argued that they were 'a bit naïve' in the beginning. 'We thought we would say it is a safe space, and then hope it will become one by itself. This turned out not to be the case.' Yet, creating such a space has proved to be 'super difficult' as 'sometimes people are not aware they are at a Girls go BOOM evening and that a venue is now a place where women can take the center stage'. 'Sometimes you have these annoying dudes [bleh] who start yelling things. But sometimes it worked really well and then it

is really cool.' Maintaining a safe space is a process, a continuous search for the best ways to create a safe space.

> We also have to teach ourselves on how to keep a place a safe space, because we are women and socialised into being too polite and too friendly. I really have to shake it off. We have had several incidents with middle-aged men who brought a rather large photo camera and feel they can take up all of the space in front of the stage. They will use the camera as an excuse to make contact with women band members. So yeah, I have kicked out a few of them. (Lindsi)

Ideally, every concert is a safe space but we are far removed from that situation, according to Lindsi. 'The best thing would be if all the girls in the front would together say to men who make them feel uncomfortable: "No, this is not how we behave here"'. While difficult at times, many positive reactions serve as an encouragement.

> Some girls have said: 'Thanks to Girls Go BOOM I started my own band'. But also men come to look at other men because they do not have to act like a macho metal or punk fan. I find it very important that everyone can be themselves. (Lindsi)

Changing an existing music organization
Finally, people like Conchitta have been working in existing music organisations to change things from within. 'At pop venue Paard, we aim to tackle issues of gender not simply top-down. The people at the work floor need to put things in action and signal opportunities to make sure

the venue will become a safer space.' As a result, several changes were implemented, such as the installment of more lighting at dark places and more cameras and more security. Moreover,

> we chose to have only women security members at some nights. No men. On purpose. At other days, we only have women bartenders. We also increased the number of women backstage, as managers, technicians etc. We want to make our audience feel as comfortable as possible. (Conchitta)

Miriam confirmed the importance of women security members:

> American colleagues at one point said to the security company: 'We want 50 per cent of the security staff to be women. If you do not have them yourself, hire more free-lancers. Otherwise we will hire another company'. You do have the power to make such demands as a festival. And honestly, it does make a difference whether you are dealing with a security woman – who takes your issues seriously – than with a security man who is likely to think: 'Oh, another drunk girl'.

Working towards everyday solutions

Besides their specific work-related efforts, all interviewees strongly believe in making change happen by addressing the issue, using your own network and influence organizations.

First, all interviewees believed that you have to 'always address gender issues' (Miriam) and 'check your privilege' (Lindsi). Miriam gave an example which clearly illustrates this:

Less than a month ago there was a situation with a male colleague and one of my assistants, a smart lady who can take care of herself. They were dancing, having a drink. All fine. But at one point, he repeatedly started pulling her towards him and dry humping her. Even though she is a bit older than me and participating in my mentor program, she still struggled with how to deal with this situation. I was not present when this happened. She told me this later. The next morning this male colleague came to us and said while grabbing my arm: 'We had such a nice time dancing yesterday'. I replied: 'In what universe do *you* live? Let me tell you my version of what has happened. You made my female colleague uncomfortable!' The guy looked completely confused. He thought they had had fun. He did not see he turned into a scary stalker figure.

This example is a case of 'simply not seeing certain things' (Lindsi), a typical sign of privilege. For Miriam, 'it was necessary to clearly and openly communicate: "This was not okay for this and that reason. Take note". I hope he got a wake-up call and thinks about his actions more carefully next time.' Conchitta also argued that addressing issues of gender works:

At an ADE Beats meeting, I literally said: 'Dudes, let's critically check our program. I do not see a single woman. Seriously? Are you going to tell me there are none? I want this, that and that artist put on the program'. They responded: 'Holy shit, you are right'.

Finally, the role of men was addressed. According to Lindsi: 'Men as bystanders are also very important, because men take other men more seriously than women'. They can make women feel supported. 'Men often forget the power they have to address these issues as well. The profound

effect it has on other men when someone says: "He, stop harassing her!" Or when they address gender inequality on the work floor.'

Second, interviewees used their network to create more gender equality. As Conchitta illustrated:

I was studying at a program with people with many different backgrounds. The percentage women was very high. But I did not see this diversity among my colleagues at the work floor. So when I got the opportunity to do something about it, I involved a diverse group of people purposively drawing on my own network.

Similarly, Miriam argued: 'When I was able to afford an assistant myself, I always hired young women. To offer women what I did not have when I started: a female mentor'. When working for ADE Beat, Conchitta used a similar strategy: 'When we could make our own decisions, we involved more women, more young people, those who were never invited to participate. We wanted to hear their ideas, what they want to hear and see.'

Third, there was some ambivalence towards organizational change, particularly 'radical interventions' like quota (see Benschop & Van den Brink, 2014). Lindsi talked about how she was invited to a conference recently. The organization was actively trying to get more women on the panels by providing male invitees two invitations: one for themselves and one to bring a woman working at their organization. Lindsi felt that 'this is not the way to tackle this issue'. Miriam responded that from the perspective of someone who has been going to such events for years, this is a good initiative, an eye opener for people.

In 90% of these cases, they will send the same programmer or director, men who are just there to dine with other men or go to the beach. This might make people think: 'Oh wait, maybe we should not again send Piet but see if this event is interesting for someone else. Hey, we have this young female talent for whom this might be useful'.

Conchitta agreed that 'in some sectors of the music industry, such an invitation is sadly a necessity'. Yet, quota might lead to tokenism, according to Miriam.

Not every festival needs to have an equal number of men and women on stage. What matters is to be aware of the issue and the right intention. It is the collective responsibility of the sector itself. So do not wait for young women to raise their hand, but pro-actively involve them and help them grasp opportunities. Create space for women to voice their opinions and make them feel comfortable.

Avenues for future research

All interviewees confirm the importance of research. First, numbers can be used to convince people (read: men) of the problem as Miriam stated:

Numbers are always useful. Really! Often in talks with people… men, I hear: 'Oh really? Where is your proof?' A lot of things are a matter of gut feeling: 'Yes, we and all other women know this is true'. Numbers strengthen your case.

They also help to encourage policymakers to take action towards gender equality. Second, more research is needed on 'how women ended up working in important positions and how they got there' (Miriam). Also Lindsi put it:

> And why is it normal for boys to start a band, and not for girls? I know girls are more likely to play piano or violin, or are encouraged to do so by their parents, while boys are more keen on playing drums or guitar. But still. I meet a lot of girls who say they would have liked to play guitar for years, to be in a band. But they do not take that step. I have formed my own ideas on why this is the case. A male band member I met at the conference last week argued that women do not have good enough friendships to start playing music together. Obviously, this is not the reason. We can do research on what these boundaries really are.

To conclude: only when we know why women drop out, we can come up with solutions.

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