

Genre, gender and television screenwriting: The problem of pigeonholing

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Beth Johnson**  and **Alison Peirse** 

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Abstract

This article draws on the 2018 Writers Guild of Great Britain report 'Gender Inequality and Screenwriters', and original interviews with female screenwriters, to assess how the experience of genre plays out in the UK television industry. The report focuses on the experience of women, as a single category, but we aim to reveal a more intersectional understanding of their experiences. Our aim is to better understand the ways in which women are, according to the report, consistently 'pigeonholed by genre and are unable to move from continuing drama or children's programming to prime-time drama, comedy or light-entertainment'. Considering the cultural value of genre in relation to screenwriting labour and career progression, we analyse how genre shapes career trajectory, arguing that social mobility for female screenwriters is inherently different and unequal to that of their male counterparts.

Keywords

Children's television, feminist television criticism, genre, screen production studies, screenwriting, soap opera

In 2018, the Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) commissioned the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) to produce an independent report into gender representation among writers in the UK film and TV industries. Split into two sections, focussing on film and television, respectively, and covering a period of 10 years from 2005 to 2016, the report finds an inequity in the gender split between male and female

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writers, that ‘the percentage of television episodes written predominantly by women’ is only 28%, and that ‘the percentage of television programmes with a predominantly female writing staff is just 18%’ (Kreager and Follows, 2018: 9, hereafter, all report references are a page number). The report evidences that ‘female representation amongst writers of children’s television’ is the highest in any television genre, where ‘34% of all children’s TV credits go to female writers, compared to 28% for non-children’s TV’ (58). We hear similar resonance in Continuing Drama Series (CDS), most commonly, soap opera, where there tends to be ‘more equal representation’ of female and male writers (9). Across British television as a whole, the best female representation on writing staff is found ‘on series with over 100 episodes’, which primarily amounts to ‘including the major soaps and serials (such as *Doctors*, *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* or *Hollyoaks*)’, and short-form children’s television’ (54).

These figures suggest that children’s and CDS are the genres in which women writers are most likely to find work and keep working. At the same time, these are the two genres considered among television professionals to have the lowest cultural cache. In addition, the report demonstrates a clear link between television genre and gender inequality, suggesting that once women have got into these two genres, they are pigeonholed, and are unable to move on to more prestigious work in ‘prime-time drama, comedy or light-entertainment’ (4). This article is, at least in part, a critical response to these findings. Following Christine Gledhill’s (2019) desire ‘to ask how gender gets into genre and what genre does with it’ (p. ix), we ask, why and how does the gender of these writers ‘get into’ British television genres? And what do these genres (and the industry) ‘do’ with these women? How and why are women pigeonholed in this way?

Much early feminist television criticism focussed on soap opera, frequently on how soap’s narrative and female characters created a textual address for the imagined female audience (Ang, 1985; Brunson, 1981; Geraghty, 1991; Kuhn, 1984; Modleski, 1979), while scholarly accounts of children’s television have focussed on textual, archival and experiential analysis of pre-school and school-age programming (Holdsworth, 2015; Holmes, 2016; Peirse, 2010; Wheatley, 2012). In contrast to these valuable approaches, our work seeks to investigate the women writing the shows. As Vicky Ball and Melanie Bell (2013) put it, this is not about prioritising ‘issues of representation’, but about considering ‘women’s experiences within production cultures’ to shed new light on ‘women’s industrial participation’ (pp.549–550). On this issue, Julia Hallam (2013) has argued most academic work on gender and television has tended to ‘rely heavily on textual analysis and theorisation’, and there have been ‘few attempts to understand the ways in which female . . . producers, writers and directors, influence the depiction of female characters and their issues and concerns on the small screen’ (pp.256–257).

While we recognise the importance of Hallam’s point, we move beyond a simple correlation between women writers impacting upon women characters. Instead, we ask our interviewees how they experienced being hired in specific television genres and how they understand and recognise their own positionality on a cultural, commercial and personal level. In doing so, we reveal our deep interest in the experiences of women working in the media industries now, an interest commensurate with the contemporary ‘cultural turn in the social sciences and the ethnographic turn in the humanities’ (Mayer et al., 2009: 3). As such, while this research is underpinned by the feminist history of

television studies, it is also situated within the aims and methods of production studies, in the investigation of ‘how the organizations and individuals who create our media content operate’ (Lee and Zoellner, 2019: 45).

Situating our approach

Feminist researchers have long recognised the usefulness of qualitative methodologies, including ‘women doing oral histories with other woman to recover their stories and revise received knowledge about them’, an action which places women ‘at the centre of the research’ (Gluck and Patai, 1991: 1–2; O’Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2011: 498). We also utilised the qualitative research tool of ‘snowball sampling’ to recruit respondents, which ‘uses interpersonal relations and connections between people’ to ‘access specific populations’ (Browne, 2005: 47). Selection for interview was initially made on the basis of genre and geography, to allow for face-to-face interviews and to speak to writers outside of London, at early and more established (defined as 10 years plus) career stages. As such, all interviewees live in England (and the majority in the North) and work on English productions.

We went on to interview 11 female writers, and one CDS female producer across a period of 5 months. Five of the writers worked in children’s, ranging from pre-school animation to live action drama, and six worked in CDS, across *Doctors*, *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street*. The interviews were conducted in a variety of ways according to the needs of the interviewees, including face-to-face, by video Skype, on the telephone and by email, and ran from 40 minutes to 2 hours plus, with the face-to-face interviews having the longest duration. The interviews were unstructured, a qualitative ‘data-gathering technique’ designed to explore ‘people’s views of reality and allow[ing] the researcher to generate theory’, as opposed to quantitatively oriented accounts designed to test hypotheses (Shulamit, 1992: 18). Following Wreyford and Cobb (2017: 116) we reproduced identity labels that the interviewees assigned to themselves in terms of gender, race, class and regional identity.

Interviewees were offered anonymity, understood here as ‘removing or obscuring the names of participants or research sites, and not including information that might lead participants or research sites to be identified’, a decision usually considered desirable ‘in order to minimise risk to or harm to participants and sites of study (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011: 198–199). Anonymity is a complex ethical consideration, and it is made even more complicated when ‘studying sideways’, that is, working with practitioners in the media industries (Ortner, 2009). The more established writers we interviewed are arguably ‘highly visible or easily identifiable’ and even ‘pseudonyms will probably not conceal the identity of individuals in relation to others from that same site or community’; in addition, we also believe that ‘actions taken to hide or gloss over’ particular details ‘would impede the ability to demonstrate authenticity, validity and verisimilitude’ (Bickford and Nisker, 2015: 276–281). All participants chose to waive their right to anonymity, which meant we were able to illuminate detailed, personal experiences within specific television genres.

The interviews were then professionally transcribed, and the transcription was shared with the interviewee who was able to redact, correct or clarify any material she did not

want to be used, before we considered it for inclusion in the article. We continued to be reflexive and open throughout the writing of the first draft. There were several points when we felt unsure about including a quotation, usually because of the way the participant had described another person or event, or because the writer's meaning was not completely transparent. When this occurred, we contacted the writer with a copy of the specific paragraph or page for context, and asked for clarification, and to check they were happy with how we were presenting their words. Throughout this process, we reflected upon our intention to do no harm in publishing this research, particularly given the potential impact on the writer's informal professional networks, given these networks are the primary route for future employment opportunities (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; Lee, 2012; Ursell, 2000).

We do recognise that our small pool of interviewees cannot be representative of all writers' experiences, and that our interview materials can only ever be partial and subjective. We also recognise that a comprehensive feminist history requires a combined qualitative and quantitative methodology that offers greater opportunities to address micro- and macro-structural issues simultaneously (O'Shaughnessy and Krogman, 2011; Wreyford and Cobb, 2017). In addition, the choice to waive anonymity arguably leaves us open to a critique that we inadvertently enable a neoliberal rhetoric that magnifies the choice of the individual at the expense of the structural inequity. At the same time, naming our participants potentially hinders their explication of 'negative emotions', that is, their 'ugly feelings' (Ngai, 2005: 1) about their experiences. Tellingly, the two most junior writers were only carefully neutral or positive about their working lives, while the most senior writers were more carefree (and damning) in their proclamations, and evidently much more secure within their positions in the industry.

Yet, despite these caveats, we still argue that this study provides illuminating answers to the material outlined in the report, on what causes gender inequalities in television genres, and why they happen in the way that they do. Specifically, we recognise the valuable nature of the individual experience of these women, and we make a case for the importance of seeking out, listening to, and reflecting upon their individual voices. In particular, our research speaks to Annette Hill's (2019) insistence on the importance of 'affective qualities' of understanding those working in television, that is, by paying attention to 'both individual and social relations', we can address subjective experience, from which we can then 'consider the individual-personal and the collective social affective practices within popular culture' (p.9).

Getting in and getting on

In Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison's (2019) work, they speak of 'social closure' in relation to the 'exclusionary nature of executive environments' (p.147) such as the television industry. But, in addition, they also articulate processes of cultural matching in relation to both *getting in* and *getting on* in the cultural industries. What role does genre play in these processes?

CDS is commonly understood as the one genre in television where some sort of clear training route for getting in is enabled. As Debbie Moon, creator and lead writer on live action children's fantasy drama *Wolfblood* (CBBC/ZDFE/Disney) notes,

The only real training process that we have for writers here is on the soaps where you might go in as junior writer and work your way up. Again, that only really works for certain kinds of people. From my point of view, I did a couple of trial scripts with various soaps but I kind of feel that I am not really a soap writer . . . It is not going to work for everyone and there is no other alternative system to train people.

Claire Bennett, a core writer on *Doctors* (BBC) and writer for *Holby City* (BBC), discusses the belief that *Doctors* was a place to train in the genre of soap:

Originally, it was supposed to be a training show but, of course, that could not happen and keep going because you had to have the quality. It has not been a training show in fact for about the last 10 years, I would say. It still does bring on, in as far as any television show does, new writers. There are avenues for writers to get a break. It is very Machiavellian. [For *Doctors*] it is a question of identifying the script editor and making contact and getting them to be committed.

The recognition that the original conception of *Doctors* as a training ground has been unsustainable due to the need for ‘quality’, points towards the commercial imperative of the genre if a CDS show is to survive. As Anamik Saha (2018) notes ‘commodification is at the core of the work that the cultural industries do, transforming an aesthetic expression of culture into a commodity to be bought and sold’ (p.22). Sustaining quality via ensuring less risk-taking with new writers reinforces our knowledge of the ways in which commercial success shapes the culture of working practices. Despite the perceived stable context of CDS, Bennett’s interview can be understood to point towards ways in which structural features have changed in the British television sector over the last 30 years (McElroy and Noonan, 2019), a change that created an ever-increasing drive towards more precarious working conditions, that are frequently determined by issues of gender, race and class.

Beyond this, the onus is on aspiring individual writers to put themselves forward to acquire the necessary cultural and social capital to break into the industry. Like the British film industry, television is an ‘informal, socialized recruitment process’ for a ‘project-based’ labour market (Wreyford, 2015: 85). Emma Boucher is a writer for pre-school animation and live action series, including *Go Jetters* (CBeebies). She developed *My Petasaurus* from initial concept, through to Cbeebies commission, and wrote all 20 episodes for the first two seasons. Boucher reveals that when she started out, ‘I was like, ‘How on earth does this work?’ It is not like you apply for a job. It is who you know, who you have met, the fact that your name is circulating’. This is particularly the case at *Cbeebies*: ‘people will be putting a crew together and everyone will chuck in ideas; you will have met someone ages ago and they will be like, “Oh, I just popped your name in for this”’.

The WGGB concludes that ‘the structure of the film and television industries, like many others, places the burden of responsibility for hiring firmly on individuals, with little direct oversight’ (p.106). What is less discussed is the informal mentoring that established women writers often undertake to widen the pool of potential hires for a programme. Jan McVerry has written over 250 episodes of *Coronation Street* (ITV), and has written for other CDS including *Brookside* (Channel 4), *Families* (ITV) and *Emmerdale* (ITV). As McVerry explains, ‘you might meet someone who you think needs/deserves a break and you might be their only “in”. These might be

‘working-class kids you’ve done a talk for’, ‘from a less privileged background or might not be your archetypal writer’, or even people ‘I have just got chatting to in a bar’. In this case, ‘if there are people that I have come across that I can read a script for, I will do it’. She admits this is a ‘really flawed system’ and ‘it’s not a systematic or structured thing; it’s just luck or coincidence’, but at the moment this flawed system ‘is the only one we have got’.

While McVerry reveals a model of women writers undertaking informal and unpaid mentoring of aspiring writers, we can also see how women writers can influence producers, who have ultimate control over hires. As Boucher explains,

There is a lack of knowledge from producers on who is out there and available. Evgenia Golubeva has put together a database of female children’s writers ‘because she was finding that she would have producers come to her saying’, ‘We need more female writers but we don’t know any. Can you help?’

The work of Golubeva here, establishing a list of female screenwriters in the genre of children’s, is understood by Boucher as a form of feminist work. Similarly, while working on an animation series currently in development, a producer asked Boucher for recommendations for writers. Boucher said, ‘I think it would be good if we had some people of colour’ and asked her agent Jean Kitson for recommendations. Kitson sent Dilpreet Kaur Walia’s CV, who was, at the time, brand new to children’s television. For Boucher, ‘I was like, “Let’s give her a go. Her writing looks really good”. She did a really good job’. Through situating the work of hiring within the context of genre, Boucher’s reflections help to reveal the production practices of pre-school animation. Indeed, the professional aim of Boucher in the instance noted above, was to influence how cultural work is created, and by whom.

Indeed, if female screenwriters are still relatively unknown in the genre of children’s television (a list is needed!), then writers facing further intersectional biases are additionally disadvantaged. Here we can understand intersectional work as ‘a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities’ (Cho et al., 2013: 788). We can find a precedent for this kind of reckoning in existing feminist television criticism on soap opera. As Geraghty (1991) points out in her work on soap’s characters and intended (women) audiences, when it comes to identity and power,

it is not merely a question of arguing for the importance of understanding womanhood as a construction, but stressing the importance that it is a construction which is inhabited differently in ways that are to do with race, class, age and experience as well as gender (p. 197).

What Boucher refers to in her reflection is not a commercialised ‘diversity initiative’, which Ahmed (2012) and Fleras (2016) have noted can govern difference, and Saha argues serves ‘an ideological function of racial capitalism’ (p.90). Instead it is a practice that occurred as a result of a trusted relationship between producer and writer. Despite this, however, a critical question raised by such in/formal practices of hiring is the extent to which these remain exclusionary, particularly in intersectional terms, whereby female BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) writers face a double disadvantage. This accords with Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s (1989) analysis that ‘the paradigm of sex discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of white women; the model of race

discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of the most privileged Blacks' (p.151), and that 'this focus on the most privileged group members marginalises those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination' (p.140).

According to McVerry, *Coronation Street's* current writing team is 14 white men, nine white women and one woman of colour. McVerry reflects,

I don't feel, for years and years, that we have ever needed to put pressure in terms of, 'We need more [women] writers', but there is definitely pressure being put on about the BAME situation because that is a real concern for lots of us.

One way that the industry attempts to recruit BAME writers is through schemes and initiatives. Ella Greenhill is a playwright and screenwriter with credits, including *Coronation Street* (ITV). Reflecting on ITV's 'Original Voices' initiative, designed to provide aspiring drama writers from BAME backgrounds with an opportunity to work on *Coronation Street*, she reveals 'It absolutely changed my life. I would not change it for the world. It was supportive and brilliant and, for me, fantastic in every way. However, there will always be a little bit of, "I got in through a scheme"'. Discussing schemes themselves as a form of pigeonholing, Greenhill noted that she has 'had experiences', such as 'someone commenting to me about how I got on the *Corrie* scheme because, "What are you?"'

For Darnell Hunt (2015), those championing underrepresented groups are expected to be 'placated' with writing initiatives, which Hunt dismisses as 'effectively' constituting a 'lottery system' that provides 'just one or two real opportunities for the hundreds of talented screenwriters competing for them', and that it is unclear whether this 'foot in the door' actually leads to 'long term career opportunities' (p.167). Indeed, writing on BAME initiatives in Hollywood, Kristen Warner (2015) reveals that 'rarely do the producers keep the apprentices on the staff', and 'the success rate of these apprenticeships' demonstrates just how 'small the window is for a diverse set of writers and experiences' (p.158).

We see the same in the United Kingdom; Lisa Holdsworth, Head of the WGGB and writer on a range of CDS including *Call the Midwife* (BBC) and *Ackley Bridge* (Channel 4) describes the very 'limited opportunities' of such schemes: 'what if everyone who enters one of those schemes who is black or Asian or female or over the age of 50, what if every single one of them is a brilliant writer?' There are so few places on these schemes, which then 'sets those communities in competitions against each other'; the scheme becomes 'a box ticking exercise and someone is put on a writing team just because they are female or black or whatever', and there is 'very little support afterwards'. As Bennett surmises, 'A lot of the time they make these big pronouncements of, "This is what we are doing", "this is how open we are", "this is about access" and then that is where it finishes'.

The WGGB report notes that 'the scale and scope of the disparity suggests that the gender imbalance is, at least in part, due to the personal preferences . . . of the hirer' (106). McVerry reflects on the lack of BAME writers in the *Coronation Street* team,

It is hard to point the finger at anybody. You can't say, 'It is Iain [MacLeod]'s fault as the producer'. He's got bags of integrity and cares deeply. He has got the team he inherited and he is trying hard to put right decades of institutional inertia and bias (conscious and unconscious). I think the producers are trying; it just isn't happening fast enough at the moment.

Eikhof and Marsden (2019) reflect upon the ‘limitations of women, working class, BAME “initiatives”, explaining they are underlined by an approach that seeks “to make good” the “deficiencies” of individual workers – their lack of social or economic capital, knowledge or skills, most commonly’. As they explain, these initiatives are unlikely to bring about significant and immediate change because they work within the current system and reinforce rather than challenge it. Providing better access to networks for workers who do not command enough social capital themselves may be helpful for the individual worker but does not lower the barriers for other non-networked individuals (p.254).

The tension here is articulated by Jo Clegg, an animation writer for pre-school with a long list of credits including *Hey Duggee* (Studio AKA/CBeebies). Clegg says schemes are ‘great’ and the idea of no schemes ‘is unthinkable’, but the people who are recruited are ‘pushed in against a current that is flowing the other way’. As Moon notes ‘the industry is very middle class and very white . . . it is starting to change. It is too slow but it is always going to be too slow’. Or, as McVerry succinctly puts it, ‘anyone who sees this industry as a meritocracy is talking out of their arse’.

Community building as text

The WGGB report notes that ‘a predominantly male senior staff tend to hire a predominantly male crew, particularly in key roles. This process may then be perpetuated, with new, but still predominantly male, senior staff, who, in their turn, make similar hiring choices’ (16). While part of the problem of getting in then is linked to white men (often unconsciously) hiring in their own image, the picture is also more complex than this. Indeed, in an industry where hiring is most commonly undertaken through personal connections, existing relationships and friendships are also critical mediating factors that need to be recognised.

Boucher reveals that pre-school shows are ‘quite good at getting brand new writers on board’, to write new episodes, but then, quite often, ‘producers and head writers were going back to work with people who they have worked with before because it is a safe pair of hands’.

Reflecting on her previous work as a production manager, Boucher admits ‘we have all been guilty of that’, that ‘I would hire the same people because I knew they could get the job done’. Clegg concurs,

Bob gives jobs to Bob. Bob gives jobs to the safe pair of hands. People don’t want to take chances . . . It is just that thing of ‘is that person going to get it, do it, roll with the punches, understand what is wanted in the notes?’.

We see similar parallels in CDS. Brooks, who is one of three senior women responsible for hiring writers on *Emmerdale* (ITV) concurs: ‘I would not ever want to hire somebody (they could be brilliant) if they have not got an even temperament’. Bennett reflects on her 20-year professional relationship with series producer Peter Lloyd. They started on *Doctors* together when it was a new show, and ‘A lot of people think, “Oh you get preferential treatment”. I bloody don’t’. But then she jokes, ‘I have used it on occasion. I have complained about things and said, “If you don’t do X, Y and Z, I am not going to let you come and play with my dog”’.

Producers’ individual taste then governs who gets the writing commission. Karin Young has written over 270 episodes of *Emmerdale* and explains, ‘if I took

over tomorrow as a producer, there would be people that I would have as my favourite writers'. She clarifies, 'people have favoured voices. It is not necessarily about gender. It is about what floats your boat as a producer'. She is pragmatic about this: 'sometimes it might be that I get more double [episodes to write] and, in that respect, more favoured if you like and then with a different producer, they prefer someone else's voice to mine'. She is accepting of this, recognising it as an issue of 'temperament and how people connect with each other'.

Young's experience, alongside that of Bennett and Clegg in children's, points to the critical importance of friendship and existing relationships as a key factor that impacts hiring and working practices. Moreover, the experiences noted above can be understood as practices of 'cultural matching' in which employers seek 'candidates who were not only competent, but also culturally similar to themselves' (Rivera, 2012: 999). Hiring your friends, people you have worked with before that you can rely on and trust, and perhaps whose voices you favour, is foundational for recruitment practices in a demanding, long-hour work environment. Genres, as Alexander and Smith (2006: 146) argue, 'carry with them particular implications for social life' and these apply not only to the viewers of televisual texts, but also to those who write and make them. Friendships and relationships provide both social and professional capital and this is needed in soap and children's television due to the high numbers of episodes required.

In addition to favoured voices, our research has revealed a network of interpersonal relationships across multiple programmes within the genres. In children's, we can plot a diagram of connections for our interviewed writers between *My Petasaurus*, *The Hive*, *Hey Duggee* and *Go Jetters*. McVerry similarly describes the recruitment processes on CDS as 'very fluid', and that people 'ping pong back and forward': 'I worked on *Brookside* (Mersey Television/Lime Pictures). I worked in the script office as a junior script editor and, later, I did a few years on the writing team. I worked on *Emmerdale* for a couple of years and obviously *Corrie*'. Many writers, script editors and producers in CDS are 'also ping-ponging around' (frequently between *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street*). People are promoted, perhaps 'producing or script editing' and then they 'want to bring you onto their team if they've rated your work in the past'.

For the female screenwriters here, their friendships and relationships with other colleagues constitute a different mode to what Thanki and Jeffreys (2006–2007) nominate as a 'contacts culture' (in which women, BAME groups and working-class people are frequently disadvantaged). This practice of friendship networks described and experienced by these women concerns not only stabilising opportunities to be hired, but also the stabilising positive experiences of work and life. Such friendships provide emotional and professional resilience, allowing colleagues to recognise natural emotional resonances between writers and producers, while also feeling assured of their place within the CDS community. As such, friendship networks can be understood in feminist terms, as a form of community building (both personal and professional) – building relationships of reciprocity as a mechanism to aid stability, trust and happiness. Friendships and communities are necessary for the genre machines to function. As opposed to single dramas which are frequently 'authored', for example, the machines that are soaps and children's television are not and cannot be individualistic. They can only ever operate collectively. Amid these women's genres which have workforces that

are still male-centric in relation to positions of power, friendships are necessary both to sustain careers and provide trusted communities. It is through such communities that women get in and get on.

The WGGB report also evidences the importance of writer influence on gendered cast and crew representation. Across British television as a whole, without a female writer on a programme, only 24% of the crew, and 27% of the combined cast and crew are female. With a single female writer, this increases to 32% female crew, and 34% combined cast and crew. Where a show is predominantly female written, or there is an all-female writing team, the statistics continue rise to 36% crew, and 37% cast and crew (146). As the report surmises, ‘there is a trickle-down effect of higher female employment in key creative roles (including writers) resulting in better representation throughout the production, while higher female employment in key creative roles correlates with female written scripts’ (146). The television writers that we interviewed noted the significance of established female writers to help them break in and get on in the industry.

Boucher credits Jackie Edwards (former BBC Head of Children’s Acquisitions and Independent Animation) and Vanessa Amberleigh (Genre Lead for Pre-School, BBC Children’s In-House Productions) as ‘people who made a difference’, who are ‘really keen on championing women writers’. When Moon was involved in hiring writers for *Wolfblood*, she emphasised the importance of gender, noting that it was a ‘priority’ to ‘try to keep it roughly 50:50’ She dismisses the ‘we just wanted the best writers’ justification of all white/male writers rooms. She argues, ‘you have 5,000 really good writers out there. You could just pick one that is a woman or who is Black or whatever. I don’t really buy this, “Oh we picked the best people and somehow, they all turn out to be white, heterosexual men”’.

We can find similar parallels in drama. Holdsworth points out ‘Kay Mellor gave me my chance’, and that *Happy Valley* screenwriter and director Sally Wainwright gave writer Amelia Bullmore ‘her chance’. When Young started at *Emmerdale*, she reveals that her first two episodes did not impress her male boss, who confided to McVerry, the only other woman writer on *Emmerdale* at the time, that Young ‘is just not going to make it. I am going to have to sack her the next time’. McVerry reassured the producer, saying ‘she is great, stick with it and it will be fine’. Sure enough, Young wrote a third episode and he said ‘I don’t know what you have done here but you need to stick with this . . . and then off I went’.

Emmerdale is an intriguing case in point. It is a soap with a strong feminist intent, with a recent episode featuring an all-female cast and all-female crew to celebrate International Women’s Day (2019). Young admits that her experience on *Emmerdale* is not necessarily representative of other CDS practices: ‘I can’t speak for other shows . . . Now on our show, we have got a majority of women by a country bloody mile’. The programme is run by an all-female producing team, Kate Brooks working with Executive Producer Jane Hudson and Series Producer Laura Shaw. And the ‘country bloody mile’ that Young refers to is born out in the writers’ gender split, with 18 female writers and 11 male writers. However, Brooks denies that the majority women writers’ room bears any relationship to the fact that ‘the show is now run by three women. We have always been quite a female led show’. When she hires people, ‘I employ the best person for the job. It is as simple as that. I always try to go for the best person who is going to bring the most to the team’. She argues it is ‘important to strike that balance between equality and making sure that we are

not just favoured towards one sex. There is no bias there regardless'. Yet, as the WGGB report evidences, when women do get into senior roles they effect change 'because female creatives are more likely to work on female-written and female-directed projects, and female creatives are more likely to hire female crew' (19).

Moving on up?

Beyond the need for interpersonal connections, community and friendship, there is one more important facet to consider in relation to women's careers 'getting in and on' in British television. Genres hold differing levels of prestige within the television industry. Holdsworth explains, 'The things that people turn their nose up at are soap and children's. That's where most people start their career, but the idea is that most people should be moving on', but 'the reality is that the vast amount of your top-level writers couldn't cope in a soap anymore' and the 'demands of the audience' in children's "are extraordinary".

CDS and children's frequently occupy daytime slots, times historically associated as the domain of the housewife and caregiving responsibilities. As Ana Alacovska (2015) argues, women's experience of gender inequality in media industries is a function of the genre in which she works (p.130). We can see historical and cultural parallels for the placement of women through Julie D'Acci's (1994) work on women characters in soap opera. D'Acci points out that throughout television history, 'when women are stars', they are 'usually limited to the situation comedy – the site of the family, the domestic, the private sphere . . . and the consumer' (p.107). Mary Gerhart's (1992) argument that 'genres are built on premises about gender' (p. 189) suggests a binarism of these gendered genres, restricting 'women to a narrow set of forms defined by presumed feminine interests – home, romance and personal life' which in turn, 'represses the potential productivity of media genres themselves' (Gledhill, 2019: xii). Crucially, this binarism has not changed in a very long time. In the past decade, there has been 'little change' to either the ratio of women writers in television, or the 'relative career trajectories' of those women writers (6). We are in a plateau, with continuing 'severe disparities' between male and female writers, 'both in overall levels of representation and in respect to individual career progression' (6–7).

This is starkly apparent in the genre of serial drama, where only 6% is predominantly written by women, the lowest percentage across all television genres (100). Serials are arguably the most prestigious genre of British television drama, and are what Holdsworth describes as the 'authored piece', the 'absolute honoured thing . . . that's very low concept, people talking, sitting around talking to each other'. Authorship in turn suggests the ability to exercise an individual voice in one's script; for Paul Ashton (2011) voice is 'a distinctive tone', 'physically unique, unlike any other' (p.54). This allows us to add further nuance to the report's findings.

When working on a CDS with over 100 episodes, or a children's series with over 50 episodes in a season, women writers are working with established worlds, characters and narrative shapes, which offer limited opportunities to flex individual voice. As Greenhill notes in relation to CDS 'you come onto a show where you are not creating characters, you are finding the voices already in existence'. To return to D'Acci (1994), 'the history

of prime-time programming has been dominated by traditionally male-orientated stories and genres and by male characters – specifically white males’ (p.106). Again, we can re-orientate her observation to see how, while women’s primetime *representation* has improved in the last few decades, primetime *writing* remains the domain of the white male. What does this genre inequality mean for women’s larger scale career ambitions?

Boucher did a Masters in Screenwriting and focussed on writing for adults, but in her career ‘ended up doing pre-school, I really enjoy it. I am quite happy at the moment’. Kaur Walia similarly reveals that the pigeonholing angle did not speak to her, for ‘I’ve always wanted to write for children’s television’. Greenhill says working on *Coronation Street* is ‘the best thing ever’ and ‘I can never see a situation where I would want to leave’. Young similarly rejects pigeonholing, stating ‘do you know what? Just to be a working writer is great’. She explains, ‘you are working as a writer and particularly if you are working on soap (because soap is now on five nights a week at least) you are earning really good money’. She concludes, ‘if it is a pigeonhole, I am very bloody happy to be in it’.

However, beyond satisfaction with the genre (and the working conditions, gender mix and pay attached to the genres), we then found issues of confidence permeating some of our interviewee’s responses. Boucher reflects further, ‘the kids’ world is quite different, you do have more women and it is more mixed . . . The idea of doing it all again when it is more blokey is a bit daunting’. Bennett confesses she would love to have an authored primetime drama that was ‘properly funded and wonderfully cast and all that kind of thing’. But she then denigrates her own personality, ‘I am probably not dynamic enough to get that because I am a bit crap, really’. She concludes ‘I think it is better for my mental health if I am satisfied with what I am doing’. McVerry reveals ‘The chances of actually getting something away are so slim that you can reach a point where, after a while, you just stop trying really . . . or, sometimes, your confidence goes’. She explains that a few years ago she was ‘really top of my game at *Corrie*’ but ‘felt really stuck in terms of writing new stuff . . . I got to a phase, I don’t quite know what caused it, where I thought, ‘Oh, what’s the point because I will only fuck it up’, so I just stopped trying’. She is ‘out of that’ stage now but acknowledges that ‘that dream of having your own series away, of being the new Sally Wainwright, it is very, very difficult’.

Conclusion

Across our interviews, issues of confidence, particularly in CDS, were evident, despite what, from an external perspective, can be understood as significant and often sustained career success. We can see the link between success within the genres of CDS and children’s television, and gendered socialisation more broadly through our interviewees’ concerns about their ability to ‘write new stuff’ and move towards primetime drama. A lack of confidence to write new things does not equate here to fear of leaving one show for another, but rather can be understood as connected to moving genre.

What our interviews revealed was not only the power of gendered socialisation, but also a tension between a desire and a reticence to move towards a genre where female and indeed intersectional representation is significantly worse than in CDS and

children's. Discourses around such change were revealing in that these women did not fear writing new work in new genres, but feared that (a) they would not be expected to move and therefore were unlikely to be 'let in' to new genres (b) they might not be good enough and (c) they did not have the energy left to fight for a place. While many of our interviewees noted that they had no interest in moving genres, those that did ultimately felt that they should, on balance, stick with 'knowing their place'.

While powerful in many respects, the WGGGB report is focussed exclusively, as was its remit, on gender. Through interviewing these writers, we have been able to build on the evidence of gender inequalities and reveal an affective and more intersectional understanding of women's experiences, communities, caring practices and concerns, while also critically examining the intersectional and 'contextual dynamics of power' (Cho et al., 2013: 788) that govern hiring practices and career progression for women writers. In doing so, we have come to better understand 'how gender gets in genre' (Gledhill, 2019), and why parts of television might be 'women's genres', not just for those who hire, but for the women themselves. When asked why she works in pre-school animation, Clegg says 'what, you mean this lovely, big, bounteous island where the people are kind and nobody tries to eat you or chop you off at the ankles or pass something off that you said as their own?' She smiles, 'yes, believe me. This is why women come to live here'.

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