

Gender Equality in British Filmmaking: Research, Targets, Change

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Introduction

The history of women's filmmaking in the UK is as long as the history of British cinema, but - as in many other national cinemas – women have been under supported and often forgotten in film history, despite the many and varied achievements, both in the past and in the present, of women filmmakers in the UK. The most prolific British woman director of all time, Muriel Box, directed 15 films in the context of a small British 'studio system' between 1949 and 1964; the even more prolific Betty Box produced 52 films between 1945 and 1975.¹ These women exemplify the exceptional nature of those who have managed to carve out successful careers against the grain of an industry that has continually marginalised them. The woman with the next biggest number of credits to her name is currently one of the most successful popular directors of British cinema, as well as, increasingly, other platforms (theatre, television): Gurinder Chadha has written and directed 13 films for theatrical release since 1991, plus four films for television. Indeed, women have marshalled and helmed some of the most successful titles (both critically and in terms of box office) in recent British film history, working as producers, screenwriters and directors (often writer-directors), and though their numbers are few some of their work has been extremely successful. To cite just a few examples, Phyllida Lloyd's *The Iron Lady* (2011) has made \$115 million to date and garnered its star Meryl Streep her third Oscar; and Lloyd's first feature *Mamma Mia!* (2008) is one of the most successful British films of all time in terms of box office (\$615.7million, as of publication). The *Bridget Jones* franchise has made over \$756 million to date across the three films, all of which were directed by women (Sharon Maguire, *Bridget Jones's Diary* [2001]; Beeban Kidron *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* [2004]; Sharon Maguire *Bridget Jones's*

Baby [2016]). Made by Working Title on the instigation of the producer Debra Hayward, all the films' production teams have multiple women. *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie* (2016) directed by veteran TV comedy director Mandie Fletcher and written by Jennifer Saunders made \$37.9 million. Women have also excelled in making some of the most critically applauded but smaller-budgeted auteur films so far in twenty-first century British cinema. These writer-directors include Clio Barnard – *The Arbour* (2010), *The Selfish Giant* (2013), and *Dark River* (2017); Carol Morley – *Dreams of a Life* (2011), *The Falling* (2014) and *Out of Blue* (2019); Sally Potter – *Orlando* (1992), *The Tango Lesson* (1997), and *The Party* (2017); Jenny Lu, writer and director of *The Receptionist* (2016); and Joanna Hogg – *Unrelated* (2007), *Archipelago* (2010), and *Exhibition* (2013). British women also have been celebrated on the international documentary stage, from Kim Longinotto (*Shinjuku Boys* [1995]; *Rough Aunties* [2008]; *Dreamcatcher* [2015]) to Molly Dineen (*Geri* [1999]; *The Lie of the Land* [2007]; *Being Blacker* [2018]). And women producers working on British productions have been arguably most successful of all, from Debra Hayward (*Les Misérables*; *Bridget Jones's Baby*; *Cats*) to Finola Dwyer (*An Education*; *Quartet*; *Brooklyn*) to Elizabeth Karlsen (*Made in Dagenham*; *Carol*; *Colette*).

Notwithstanding these huge successes, women continue to be drastically underrepresented and underemployed in the British film industry, but until recently there was limited information quantifying the UK situation accurately - so these impactful names and films give a disingenuous view of gender inequality in British filmmaking now. Moreover, the film industry is out of step with improvements in the numbers of women in academia, the law and medicine (Baker, 2018), though of course women in these industries continue to suffer from a wage gap, sexual harassment (as well as unfit harassment policies and complaint procedures), and a lack of women in the most senior positions. This chapter will give an accounting of the

current state of gender (in)equality in the UK industry by: outlining new research that has clarified the stagnant inequality in the UK film industry; articulating the key role of a network of activist groups (that include researchers, professional and campaigning bodies, exhibitors and filmmakers) to bring attention to the problem, putting pressure on the film industry and public bodies; and summarising institutional responses to that pressure since 2016, with a critical analysis of the potential and limits of the British Film Institute's (BFI) relatively recently-implemented diversity and equality targets. It is our contention that in the context of media attention to inequality in the film industry widely, and the emergence of #MeToo and Time's Up movements, the growing pressure for change in British filmmaking and public funding in relation to gender equality and other forms of diversity may well turn out to be one of the defining issues of this period of British film history.

Where are we now? Research and mutual activism

In 2006 the UK Film Council (UKFC) began publishing data on the gender of directors and screenwriters (Hockenhull, 2017). As part of the statistical yearbook produced by the UKFC and now by the BFI (which assumed responsibility for the UKFC's activities in 2010 when it was closed), the numbers of women directing and writing British films has been available for more than a decade. However, it was not until quantitative research from academics and campaigning bodies appeared in 2016 that the media paid attention to the problem, a consequence of both these organisations' activities and the changing cultural politics of the 2010s (Cobb, 2020). In this section we give a detailed accounting of our own research on women in the British industry to show how entrenched gender inequality is in UK filmmaking, situating it in relation to other inequality reports and the mutually supporting

actions taken by us and other campaigning groups to pressure the BFI to take the lead in making change.

Our research project *Calling the Shots: Women in contemporary UK film culture*, which began in 2014, has been studying the work of women filmmakers in Britain, in the context of the contemporary industry's structures, conventions and inequalities that they negotiate. We set out to establish a baseline of quantitative and qualitative evidence focused on the contemporary UK film industry. British filmmaking culture provides a nationally distinct but also internationally collaborative and partly publicly funded landscape that underpins the critical and box office successes mentioned above, as well as an industrial culture in which women find themselves underfunded, underemployed and ignored. Until the publication of multiple UK-focused reports in 2016, the British media and advocacy groups like Women in Film and Television – UK (WFTV-UK) regularly drew on the US-based 'Celluloid Ceiling' reports generated by Martha Lauzen's Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University. This unit has done path-breaking quantitative research on gender inequality in the film industry since the 1990s. However, its focus is Hollywood as their data is based on the 250 top-grossing films in the USA each year. British films enter the statistical mix only if they do phenomenally well in the States. So, whilst some of the films in the Celluloid Ceiling data were indeed British, the reports' application to the UK industry was limited and *Calling the Shots* sought to extend/ redress this with a focus on the British situation, driven by our agenda that in order to effect change we need to have a clear, detailed and specific view of the British industry now.

In the UK, it is possible for filmmakers to secure development, production and/or distribution funding from bodies such as the British Film Institute, the BBC, Channel Four and some

regional funding bodies (e.g. Creative England and Creative Scotland). Usually partial, the funding will be topped up by international co-production packages, private (even personal) funds or studio money. In this context, the fact that taxpayers or lottery money is not being distributed in a way that reflects the profile of the population who provide these public funds has animated discussion around gender and race in filmmaking for a number of years. We have intervened in these discussions through our production of UK-specific research on women filmmakers. For our work, 'woman filmmaker' means any woman working as a screenwriter, editor, cinematographer, producer, executive producer and director. In addition to identifying the gender of persons working in these roles, we also include racial identity in order to take into account the role of racism as well as sexism on the employment opportunities for women in filmmaking (Wreyford and Cobb, 2017). Our quantitative research has found that women's employment opportunity across all these roles is extremely limited and is worst for those working in the traditionally perceived masculine profession of cinematography, and that women of colour (BAME – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) are widely and consistently excluded.

To compliment this quantitative data analysis, we have also produced qualitative research by interviewing women working in the above six roles. We have then been 'counting' women in two ways - numbering them and 'naming' them by recording their personal stories and career histories. Naming women through recorded interviews is another way of 'making them count' by inserting them in the historical record. Women's history often gets lost, forgotten and ignored, but these women's histories will ultimately be archived in the award-winning BECTU History Project,² ensuring that their work remains a central part of British film history (Cobb and Williams, 2020). Initially, we aimed to interview 50 women to fill gaps in and expand contemporary film history, and, so far, we have interviewed 58. These interviews

tell stories of women at all stages of career progression - from early career cinematographer Martyna Knitter to veteran editor Anne V. Coates, from new generation producer Ivana McKinnon who has a distinct vision of developing an ethical production house, to established producer Debra Hayward who has now teamed up with the prolific producer and her friend Alison Owen, and from the long-established directors such as Sally Potter and Beeban Kidron to the more recent successes of Amma Asante, Sarah Gavron and Hope Dickson-Leach, as well as the many who move between feature films, television and even theatre like Phillipa Lowthorpe and Susannah White, Sarah Gavron and many others. In our interviews the women narrate their own histories and stories, and our questions are semi-structured allowing them the space to tell it how they want. We always ask how their gender has affected their career development, though many bring it up of their own accord, and their experiences of sexism, racism, and other prejudices they have faced, such as class background and care-giving responsibilities, will further inform our explication of gender inequality in film that we have mapped in our data sets.

To date we have produced fourteen data reports, all of which can be found on our website.³ There are eight synchronic reports on individual years. Four of those count the women in all six key roles giving a snapshot of the industry for each year. The other four look closely at 2015 with different foci: women and racial categories, low and high budgets, women working with women, and funding category (domestic, co-productions and inward investment). There are six diachronic reports that look at the data from 2003 to 2015. Three look closely at the gender data on individual roles: director, cinematographer and editor. One counts the numbers of women of colour across those year. And the last shows the lack of change in gender disparity between 2003 and 2015. Our report on domestic films, co-productions and films with inward investment found that women are better employed in co-productions than

in solely British-funded films. We have identified how women of colour fare in relation to their white sisters, and found that in the four years of 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2015 just 10% of films had at least one woman of colour working in those key roles (so, scandalously, 90% of films had no women of colour in any of these roles). Of the 801 qualifying films of 2015, only 23 films had a black woman in a key role, 12 films had an East Asian woman in a key role, 45 films had a South Asian woman in a key role, whilst 721 films had none. We have also been able to drill down into the data to find out how women fare in lower budget films (under £0.5million) making the not-surprising discovery that women are more likely to make documentaries at this budget level than any other genre and, proportionally more than men do. Looking at specific roles we found that the situation for women directors hardly changed between 2003 and 2015. The best year for British women directors was 2010, when numbers rose to 19%, but two years later they were back down to 8%, and the overall average is 14%. Cinematographers fared even worse: at their lowest (in 2004) just 1% of cinematographers were women in British qualifying films; the highest number was again in 2010 when numbers rose to 14%, but by the following year this had halved. The overall average for the period of 2003 - 2015 is just 7%.

Initial interpretations of the unusual rise in numbers in 2010 is that this was the 10th year of the UK Film Council's work as primary funders, and their distinct diversity remit may have by then had some impact (Hockenhull 2017: 50). However, the actual number that corresponds to the 19% of women directors for 2010 is 58. In 2012, 8% of directors were women, but that percentage corresponds to 42 women. The 2010 percentage is more than twice as much as that for 2012, but the difference is only 16 individual women. As Cobb has noted elsewhere, 'women are such a small number of directors on UK films, their fluctuating proportion year on year is more a product of the increase and decrease of the numbers of men

than it is of their own ups and downs' (2020), and even the small increases in the numbers of women never last. We have also compared the British situation with Hollywood, because the UK industry is popularly thought to be more equal place than Hollywood due to the many independent production and co-productions, the availability of public funding and a cultural emphasis on the auteur. However, our 2018 report comparing Celluloid Ceiling figures with *Calling the Shots* data shows that Britain is often no better (and can be worse) than Hollywood when it comes to employing women in key roles. For example, in 2015, 44% of British films had no women producers, whereas in the top 250 grossing films in Hollywood in 2017 a rather better 28% of films had no women producers. In the USA slightly less than one third (30%) of films had no or only one woman in any of the six roles analysed, whereas in the UK slightly more than half (56%) had no or only one woman in those roles. On a more positive note one of the most striking things we have found is that when one woman is in a key role on a film, it is more likely that another woman will be in a key role on that film. For films in production during 2015, 93% of those directed by a woman had a woman screenwriter. And 74% of films directed by women had at least one woman producer. In fact, a woman producer on a film meant that all other roles were more likely to have a woman in them. Fifty percent of films with a woman editor had a woman producer, and 61% of films with a woman cinematographer, had a woman producer.

In parallel with women filmmakers who work together, as an all-woman research team, we have also worked alongside and in collaboration with sister organisations that have been involved in gathering and publishing new information and have been actively using this information to put pressure on the industry. This loose network of organisations and individuals has sought to influence and effect change as a supportive band united by the common view that ingrained inequality is neither sustainable nor desirable; nor is it good for

an industry which strives to reflect the diversity of filmgoers. The first significant act of bringing these groups together was when *Calling the Shots*' first report and reports by Directors UK⁴ and the European Women's Audio-Visual Network (EWAN)⁵ were published and promoted in the media within a few days of each other in May 2016 (public events for these brought us together and are discussed below). The Directors UK report *Cut Out of the Picture* produced research on women directors in the UK ranging across a career arc, from their equal numbers in film school to their dwindling participation in filmmaking as they progressed. The report shows a distinct 'funnelling' process as women fail to get funding for their first or second features, as they try to combine developing careers with parenthood, and as they experience difficulty getting back onto the career ladder post-parenthood (Follows et al. 2016). The European Women's Audiovisual Network report *Where are the women directors in European film?* produced comparative research into directors of independent films in Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the UK which has enabled contextualisation of the British situation alongside comparator nations (EWAN, 2016). Most significantly though, what the simultaneous publication of these reports offered was corroborating data that, at least for women directors, the low percentages found by all of us were effectively the same: 11.9% - Directors UK; 11% - European Audiovisual Network; 13% - Calling the Shots.

In late 2016 Raising Films⁶ was founded to campaign for changes in working practices which have hitherto discriminated against working parents, and in 2017 they published *Making It Possible* (Raising Films 2017), interview-based research that focuses on women's circumstances as mothers, but extends to fathers and carers in all forms, but especially to those experiencing the 'double squeeze' of being filmmaking parents who are also carers of elderly parents. Their most recent research report *We Need to Talk About Caring* (Dent &

Almenoar, 2019) asked 58 questions of 135 respondents, 76% of whom identified as female. The headline data is that 82% of respondents said that the impact of caring had a somewhat or strong negative impact on their screen careers. In response to their findings they launched the Raising Films Ribbon. The ribbon is awarded to companies, festivals and other groups that put practices in to place that support carers in the screen industries. In addition, a wealth of women's film exhibition organisations in the UK have also been active in showcasing women's film work, providing training and activism, and acting as public outlets for current research ideas forums for effecting change. These include Women in Film and Television (UK),⁷ the Bechdel Test Festival,⁸ the Underwire Festival⁹ and Bird's Eye View,¹⁰ and F-Rated¹¹ all of which *Calling the Shots* has collaborated with in various ways. The implications of these diverse groups working together, with their combined national and international influence on our thinking, have been significant for recent developments in British film culture around discussions of quota-setting, target-setting and diversity, and this chapter will conclude with a look at recent events and developments that have moved the discussion into action.

The shifting sands of policy and funding

For women working in the industry, fans, critics and researchers of the film industry, the period from 2014 to the present has been eventful to say the least. None of the *Calling the Shots* research team, nor indeed the Arts and Humanities Research Council who funded us could have anticipated the seismic shifts in perception and awareness of the position of women in film which followed the #MeToo and #TimesUp moments in 2017. We do not wish to rehearse and reiterate a 'progress narrative', the likes of which is discussed by Everingham, Stevenson & Warner-Smith (2007) and about which Wreyford (2018) sounds a

note of caution. Despite the repeated mantra in the media and sometimes by high-profile women in the industry that 'things are changing' accompanied by an insistence that the industry has fundamentally altered its priorities and power-balance since the Weinstein moment (Erbland, 2018), there is reason to be cautious about long-term change (Cobb & Horeck, 2018). Our research into women directors across the period 2003 - 2015 has found that their numbers have remained steadily and disappointingly consistent at between 10 and 13 per cent year on year, regardless of the ups and downs of the industry, or a woman finally winning the Best Director Oscar (Masters, 2010), or various 'years of the woman in film' being declared by a self-congratulatory industry, or even Diversity Standards implemented by the BFI (Cobb, 2020). Nevertheless, the increased visibility and vocalisation of inequality as a primary concern during these times has provided an interesting context in which to carry out this work.

Two moments exemplify the quickly shifting situation of UK funders in response to public opinion. In 2016 we launched our first data report at the British Film Institute, which looked across our six key roles using data on all in-production films of 2015, which involved identifying a total of 1864 people working on 203 films in productions, and including just 363 women - so the total percentage of personnel working in film that year across our six roles was 80% men and just 20% women. We also identified that in 2015 some 25% of films had *no women whatsoever* working in those key roles. Specifically, only 7% of cinematographers, 13% of directors, 17% of editors, 18% of executive producers, 20% of screenwriters and 27% of producers were women. We also identified how many of these were women of colour, discovering that all women cinematographers in films in production in 2015 were white, whilst only 3 editors, 4 directors, 4 executive producers, 5 screenwriters and 11 producers were women of colour (these are numbers not percentages). We aimed this

data launch at as many people from the working industry as possible and invited an audience which included senior people from the major funding bodies, broadcasters and distributors, as well as filmmakers and students. The event was timed to take place before most of the British film and TV industry departed London for the Cannes film festival the next day, and featured a panel of activists and filmmakers including Women in Film and TV UK CEO Kate Kinninmont, Bechdel Test Festival founder Corrina Antrobus, independent producer Sarah Curtis, filmmaker and Co-Founder of Raising Films Hope Dickson Leach, and director Gurinder Chadha. Just days before this, Directors UK had launched its report 'Cut Out of the Picture - A Study of Gender Inequality Among Film Directors Within the UK Film Industry', and a week before that the European Women's AudioVisual Network had launched its report on women directors in Europe at a workshop event that we attended. Members and leaders of both Directors UK and EWAN attended our launch and the question and answer session after our presentation of the data was lively, with several audience members (some of whom were members of the public and not industry personnel) spoke strongly about the BFI's need to lead in making change. A few days later, Ben Roberts, Director of the BFI Film Fund wrote an article for the Guardian titled 'Female film directors must get equal funding – but they mustn't be all white', in which he wrote that the BFI agreed with Directors UK call for a 50/50 public funding target by 2020 (Roberts, 2016). However, no official targets were announced, and the BFI's five-year plan BFI 2022, published in November 2016, made no mention of funding targets. A year after the publication of our report, members of Calling the Shots, F-Rated, Raising Films, and Directors UK attended an event hosted by WFTV(UK) on actions for improving gender equality in film and television. Many inspiring activists, producers, and leaders shared their ideas for and experiences of effective change. However, those of us in attendance were taken aback by a senior executive of the BFI who declared that targets would not be implemented, and that voluntary change was the Institute's priority.

And then, the *New York Times* article that broke the Weinstein scandal appeared on 5 October 2017, and on 11 October 2017 the British Film Institute declared that it would commit to specific targets for gender equality and diversity in key production roles on films with support from the Film Fund (Roberts, 2017). No doubt the plans for and the details of the targets had been in development long before the Weinstein scandal broke, but the timing is suggestive of our main point, that this period of film history might well (and we hope does) become known for the activism around gender equality and diversity (even if permanent change is not achieved). The BFI's targets are for the three roles of director, writer and producer, seeking 50/50 gender balance, 20% BAME filmmakers, 9% LGBTQ-identifying filmmakers, and 7% target for filmmakers with disability. According to the BFI they have 'long been guided by' the principles of diversity and inclusion and are simply formalizing them by implementing them on top of the Institute's Diversity Standards which have been in place since 2014 (Roberts, 2017). As part of the application process for funding and BFI certification, the Standards require filmmakers to demonstrate a diversity and inclusion plan for the production. However, the criteria for inclusion of underrepresented groups is so flexible as to verge on the meaningless as argued by Clive Nwonka (2020) and Cobb (2020), who has clearly shown how women can be easily left out of any successful application. Furthermore, the BFI has yet to release any data on the Standards that would show whether or not they are effective. The decision by the BFI to set targets for the Film Fund, arguably, did not come just from their own diversity standards and inclusion goals. Those activist groups with which *Calling the Shots* has collaborated as well as individual filmmakers have, as we have seen, previously called for targets for the Film Fund, especially for women directors. So far, as the BFI have presented them to the public, the first and second years of the targets have improved the equitable distribution of funding, with gender equality achieved for

directors in 2018 and nearly achieving BAME targets for the production fund. And yet, by keeping race and gender as separate identifying categories, BAME women are missing almost completely and falling through the spaces between gender and race targets (Crenshaw, 1993 and Cobb, 2020). The announcement for the latest data on funding targets makes it clear that the BFI know where they are failing (BFI, 2019).

More importantly, though, we must recognize that the Institute can only take a lead for the wider British industry through the example of their diversity and inclusion targets for the 30 or so films they fund each year (quotas are widely considered illegal under the terms of the 2010 Equality Act [Jarrett, 2011]). The few hundred British films each year are studio productions, co-productions, and independent productions that need other forms of pressure to improve the equality and diversity of their production team. One new approach taken up by activists is to pressure the government to include diversity targets for film and television productions with tax relief (BBC, 2018). Led by the activist Marcus Ryder and the actor Lenny Henry and other creative industry workers of colour, this idea has yet to be taken up by the current Tory government, but it is a good example of taking on the industry beyond the limits of the BFI's influence. The alliance of activist and campaigning groups that, like *Calling the Shots*, are putting research to work, will continue to pressure public bodies and the government to transform the British industry in terms of gender equality and diversity so that it lives up to the standards of the trailblazing women filmmakers above. This will have to be a multi-pronged approach, with continuing attention to the BFI's funding targets and interrogation of the Diversity Standards, but also investigation of other funding sources such as the BBC and Channel 4, as well as wider use of targets for co-productions with Hollywood and other national industries. Film history shows that this fight has been fought before, but those moments have ended without permanent change and even been forgotten by many. One

of the most important things researchers, activists, and filmmakers must continue to do is keep attention on the industry's progress or lack thereof and to keep up the pressure for lasting change.

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¹ See <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0101504/> and

https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0101489/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1

² BECTU is the British Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union. For more on the history project go to: <https://historyproject.org.uk>

³ All our reports can be found in the Reports section of the *Calling the Shots* website:

<https://womencallingtheshots.com>

⁴ For more information see: <https://www.directors.uk.com/>

⁵ See <https://www.ewawomen.com/> for information about the European Women's

Audiovisual Network

⁶ See <https://www.raisingfilms.com/about/>

⁷ <https://wftv.org.uk>

⁸ <http://bechdeltestfest.com/>

⁹ <http://www.underwirefestival.com>

¹⁰ <https://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk>

¹¹ <http://f-rated.org>