

Why are there so few women screen composers?

August 1 2017, by Catherine Strong

Just 13 percent of those composing music for screen are women, according to membership figures from APRA AMCOS, the organisation that looks after [copyright for songwriters, composers and music publishers in Australia](#).

Female screen composers sit at the intersection of two industries – music and film - that have both been recognised as [being male-dominated](#). To better understand the pathways and barriers for [women](#) in this field, and why women in music are underrepresented more generally, APRA AMCOS commissioned research in this area early this year (conducted by myself and Fabian Cannizzo), which has just been released.

Using surveys completed by 159 screen composers and in-depth interviews with 28 of them, our research found there was a gulf between men and women in their understanding of [gender issues](#) in the industry. (All participants in the research identified as either male or female). For instance, 67 percent of women participants agreed with the statement that "gender discrimination is common in the industry," compared with only 32 percent of men.

In interviews, women talked about the screen composing industry as being a "boys' club." They perceived this as operating in many different ways, from male-dominated networks that proved almost impossible to break into, to studio cultures that were covertly or overtly misogynistic, through to actual sexual harassment.

Men, on the other hand, were more likely to talk about the industry as being a "meritocracy," where the only factor that mattered was talent. In responses to the survey, some men were openly antagonistic towards the idea that questions should even be asked about gender issues in the first place. At the same time, the men who could see there was a problem often had difficulty articulating exactly what it was or what the effects were.

Men and women agreed that a meritocracy was an ideal goal to work towards, but men's understanding of women's experiences – and therefore the ways in which they might be contributing to women's marginalisation – was limited.

Numerous other factors emerged as barriers to women in screen composing. Many of these have been identified as issues for women in a range of other careers. For example, having children had a much more negative effect on women's careers than on men's.

Working as a screen composer is precarious - most work on a project-by-project basis and reported "feast or famine" type schedules with little control over when work needed to be done. Factoring caring responsibilities into this mix limited or ended women's careers in many cases.

The women who successfully negotiated this life change had often established professional partnerships that meant networks and industry knowledge could be maintained. However, in a highly individualised field, establishing such partnerships is not always possible.

The research also found there was a common perception that men and women composed different types of music. Women's compositions were seen as more suited to the work of women directors, or to films or TV shows that dealt with "women's issues." Given the continued gender

imbalance both behind the camera and in the stories that are told on screen, this idea that women can only compose for or about "feminine" topics makes it less likely again that they will be hired.

We also found that far fewer women than men are enrolling in higher education courses related to screen composition. Education institutions we consulted reported around one-tenth to one-third of their students were female. This appears to be related to the wider issue of women's relationship with technology, as many of the courses related to screen composition were tech-focused.

These and other factors that emerged connect back to essentialist ideas about what men and women can or should do.

So what can be done to counteract these trends?

While we wish to avoid making this discussion "about men," finding ways to engage men in equity initiatives seems important. With men still in the majority of decision-making roles in the music, film and television industries, making change on a large scale will be difficult to achieve without men recognising and working to combat gender inequality.

Asking men to at least think about how their practices and decision-making processes may be negatively impacting women, and to acknowledge that women's experiences of the industry may be very different to their own is a simple starting point, but one that needs to go much further.

Other strategies such as finding ways for women to network and develop partnerships that help sustain their careers should be considered. Highlighting the careers of women who have succeeded in this area, such as [Lisa Gerrard](#), [Caitlin Yeo](#) [Amanda Brown](#) and [Bryony Marks](#) and providing mentoring and access to role models, is a starting point here.

It is encouraging to see APRA AMCOS committing to taking actions along these lines, through establishing mentorship programs and masterclasses. It is also working to increase women's participation across the board, from membership numbers to positions on award panels and beyond.

More research is still needed, especially to widen the focus to create a more intersectional understanding of inequality in music. However practical and measurable changes such as these are important steps in moving towards equality.

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