Beyond 'one and done': Achieving gender equity in the film industry depends on more than entry programs

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Over the years I've heard a lot of theories about why the global film industry is so persistently skewed towards men and what can and should

be done to fix it.

Despite [my own best efforts as an activist and an academic](#), and the collective labor of many others, the position of [women](#), gender-diverse and non-binary people has barely shifted over the time I have been advocating for change—and against some measures, it has actually declined.

For example, a recent [Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film report](#) found the percentage of women directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers working on the 250 top grossing U.S. films has dropped two percentage points from 24 percent in 2022 to 22 percent in 2023.

And it's not just Hollywood that sees stagnation or decline with gender equity. A recent case study of three film industries that [I conducted with colleagues found that](#) gender equity efforts in the industries of Canada, Germany and the United Kingdom have, in large part, been in vain.

It is a galling proposition to repeatedly face political failure at this global scale (and at the same time to feel it so personally). But it's time to put feelings aside and face the facts from a different vantage by focusing on more viable solutions.

Slow progress

I worked with a social network analyst, [Pete Jones](#), and a computer scientist, [Aresh Dadlani](#) at the [University of Alberta](#), to develop a detailed evidence-based evaluation of the long-term impact of different gender equity policies in the [film industry](#).

In collaboration [with investigators](#) [from Germany](#) [and Scotland](#), our examination of film industries in all three countries under scrutiny

showed progress has been piecemeal and painfully slow.

Using data from the European Audiovisual Observatory's Lumiere dataset, we created network models of the film industry that allowed us to see who works with whom. We were able to pinpoint which writers, directors and producers occupy the most central positions in each industry. And because the data is longitudinal, we can test the impact of past equity policies, and we can also project forward to see how long existing trends will take before they achieve equity.

Looking at Canada

In the case of Canada, if we just persisted with existing equity policies and did nothing new, basic gender parity (in which men comprise 50 percent of the industry workforce) will not occur anytime within the next 200 years.

Our data showed that the peak Canadian film funding agency, Telefilm, is making a specific impact on one part of the equity picture—the proliferation of all-men production teams.

Telefilm funding policies are reducing the number of all-men projects. However, most film teams continue to be dominated by men. Significantly more work is needed for Canada to arrive at gender equity in film employment networks within our lifetimes.

From 'What is?' to 'What if?'

So if we want a more equitable screen industry, doing nothing, such as letting things evolve "naturally," or optimistically relying on the unseen handiwork of "market forces," is clearly not an option.

We assessed which of the most frequently used strategies for equity created the most opportunities for women, gender-diverse and non-binary people and/or limited the influence of men in our film industry data models. For example:

1. Fast-tracking more women into the industry.

Practically, most film industries, in Canada and elsewhere, lean heavily on this strategy. The "just add women and stir" approach underlies popular policies like providing extra training to advance women's employment. These initiatives effectively position women, gender-diverse and non-binary people as the cause of their own representational deficit rather than addressing the structural position and behaviors of dominant industry powerbrokers (such as men).

We found that a slight historical increase in the number of women, gender-diverse and non-binary people was not proportional to a decrease in the number of men, since the industries had expanded to accommodate a rise across the board.

It's not well known but between 70 and 80 percent of all newcomers to the film industries we analyzed leave after just one project (the "one and done" syndrome). This, alongside the sheer numerical domination of men, means "just add women and stir" is always going to be a very slow path to equity.

Simply giving more women, gender-diverse and non-binary people a film credit did not ensure they occupied the central or most powerful positions in industry networks. We measured the top one percent of the three industry networks from different vantages. In every industry, women, gender-diverse and non-binary people were not equitably represented in this industry elite, even if their numbers overall increased.

2. No more all-men teams.

This strategy is the basis for inclusion-based policies that rely on diversity checklists or quotas—and which often produce accusations of tokenism.

Could we advance equity by abolishing all-men teams? We tested this "what if" scenario. All-men movie-making teams are common: 42 percent of films are made with all-men teams in Canada and the U.K.

However, while simply removing all-men teams altogether does reduce the hugely disproportionate representation of men in influential positions, especially in Canada, men still account for 64 percent of people in the Canadian network even after this strategy is applied.

What had the biggest impact?

"Shadowing" strategies had the biggest impact for opening access to more central, network positions for members of under-represented genders. Shadowing assigns an emerging film professional to an established creative like a producer, director or writer for on-the-job mentoring. Importantly, newer entrants gain not only insights and connections but a film credit.

A more focused variation of "just add women," shadowing seems to change the gender composition of collaboration networks more than other strategies, largely because it gives women and other marginalized genders an extra project credit, a huge outcome in an industry in which so many people never get a second chance.

This finding suggests policymakers need to focus efforts on ensuring career sustainability for women, gender-diverse and non-binary people,

rather than directing policy at the point when people enter the field.

Measuring up

Advocates and agitators like me need to change our approach to film industry data to propose more finely tuned evidence-based equity interventions.

We haven't been attentive enough to the collaborative nature of film production. We haven't used analytic techniques that show the importance of gatekeeping practices for preserving existing power imbalances.

We do need to redress a shocking and historically persistent gender imbalance in the film industry. But the solution to gender inequality will depend on ensuring that once women, gender-diverse and non-binary people get jobs, they are not relegated to the far edges of the industry's employment networks.

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