



### Keynote Essay

#### *Knocking on a Locked Door: Women in Australian Feature Films*

By Monica Davidson

*"The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off."*

Gloria Steinem

Men dominate creative leadership in Australian feature film, and always have. Male directors are responsible for more than 85% of the feature films made since the 1970s. This figure has not changed significantly for twenty-five years, nor has this disproportionate power been strenuously questioned. It's as if gender inequity is a problem solved decades ago by affirmative action, and we have subsequently evolved into a proudly unbiased industry. We haven't, and the time is long overdue for a serious enquiry into the issue.

### The History

According to Screen Australia, in 1971 only 4% of directors and 10% of producers credited on feature films were women<sup>1</sup>. Although women made up just over one-third of workers in the screen industry<sup>2</sup>, the representation of female creative leaders was shockingly low. These statistics, combined with a wider political push for women's rights and gender equality, led to vigorous activism and lobbying from collectives such as the Sydney Women's Film Group for change. The Whitlam government subsequently agreed to provide financing for film as part of its 1975 International Women's Year activities<sup>3</sup>, which eventually led to the establishment of the Women's Film Fund in 1976.

In the 1980s, the Women's Film Fund was brought under the auspices of the Australian Film Commission<sup>4</sup>, and became the Women's Program. This affirmative action was expressed as financial support for women-led films, as well as money for distribution and exhibition, research, training programs and employment opportunities for women. In 1985, every AFC financing program needed to 'have a responsibility to consider the participation and representation of women in their funding activities'<sup>5</sup>. The number of women directors in the 1980s rose to 12%, and producers to 22%.

Government funded programs continued into the 1990s, and the emphasis moved from financial support to professional encouragement, policy development and training programs. Women who were mid-career were particularly targeted for workshops, and again the numbers rose. By the 1990s 18% of feature film directors, and 29% of producers, were women.

In 1999 the Women's Program was integrated into the mainstream activities of the AFC, and quietly discontinued. There were no affirmative action programs aimed at bringing more women into filmmaking in the 2000s, but that didn't stop the exceptional talent of the women who were already creating. According to Associate Professor Lisa French, in the feature film categories of the AFI awards during the 2000s, Best Film was won 80% by women producers (33% of the workforce); Best Direction awards went 40% of the time to women directors (18% of the workforce); and Best Original Screenplay awards went 50% of the time to women writers (20% of the workforce)<sup>6</sup>. The unfairness of their numbers was ironically ignored in the face of these women's excellence as filmmakers, and in terms of representation the numbers did not increase.

In 2012, of the twenty-five features produced in Australia, 84% were directed by men, despite the fact that women now make up more than half of workers in the Australian screen industry<sup>7</sup>. In 2013, *Filmink* magazine published the *20 Most Powerful People in Australian Film*<sup>8</sup>. Only two named women appeared on the list – Liz Watts at number 15 and Rosemary Blight at number 16.

It seems that after all these years of working in the screen industry, and all the programs of the past to correct the imbalance, for women who want to lead the creative process nothing has changed for decades.

## The Problem

*When Prime Minister Julia Gillard attended the Annual Pacific Island Forum in Auckland in 2011, a bus driver refused to allow her onto the bus with the other leaders, assuming that as a woman she would be on the spouses' bus.*

Sydney Morning Herald, 2011<sup>9</sup>

To add insult to injury, it seems that people are not only unaware of the problem of gender inequity; they think it's a problem that has been fixed, presumably by the affirmative actions of old. In her 2012 survey *Women in the Victorian Film, Television and Related Industries*<sup>10</sup>, Lisa French found that the majority of respondents thought the situation had improved for women in the industry, and that there had been more improvement in the last ten years compared to the last five years.

In terms of leadership, this is simply not so. The numbers of women directors and producers are stagnating, or declining, and the industry-wide blindness to the issue means there are no gender-based initiatives to correct the problem. If left unchecked, the numbers of women leaders could continue to creep downwards to 1970s levels. Or American levels.

In 2013, women accounted for only 6% of directors in the top 250 feature films produced in the United States<sup>11</sup>. In the UK, only 14% of feature films had a female director between 2009 and 2013<sup>12</sup>. The statistics are no better in other countries<sup>13</sup>, but unlike Australia the numbers have been alarming enough to trigger industry wide examinations of the inequity.

In 2012 the BFI released *Succes de plume? An examination of female screenwriters and directors of UK films, 2010-2012*<sup>14</sup>. The report stated that "Under-representation of women in key decision-making and creative roles has been a feature of the film industry for many years." Other major research papers and solution-focused gender equity and affirmative action programs are now being introduced in the Hollywood studio system, the US independent sector, and certain European film industries.

It seems ridiculous to justify whether or not the issue of male domination is a problem for the Australian screen, and yet the alarming inequity is so pronounced and accepted that justification for a solution is germane. Obviously there are social justice issues in an industry that fails to promote or engage women, but there are wider cultural and economic implications as well. New projects must be made from myriad points of view, films that tell a wide range of stories and appeal to a broad global audience, and this necessitates a collective portfolio produced by both genders.

The inequity is also, of course, grossly unfair. Why should men get a mandate to define and lead the versions of ourselves that we see on our screens? Why has there been no challenge to their majority ownership of this cultural mirror? After all, women are not an element of 'diversity' – women are half the population, and more than half of the audience<sup>15</sup>, and urgently need to be represented more equally in creative leadership.

## The Mystery

Perhaps a reason for the blindness to gender issues in Australian screen is the mysterious causes of the inequity. Women are not being overlooked for leadership roles due to any obvious impediments. Directing is not a job that requires brute strength or excessive testosterone. A producer really doesn't need a penis. There is also no gender inequality in the numbers of workers, or in the numbers of film students<sup>16</sup>.

For women, film education presents a promising start to their screen careers. According to the Census of 2011, more women than men working in film production have a qualification, and women are also much more likely to have a Bachelors Degree or higher qualification<sup>17</sup>. At AFTRS, the longest running film school in Australia, the numbers of students is reflective of this promising start. Total graduates in screenwriting, directing and/or producing since 1973 have averaged out to 52% male and 48% female. Assuming these young men and women are the best potential filmmakers in Australia, gender does not seem to be an issue at a school that prides itself on 'merit selection'.

However, to find out more about leadership, we need to look at the past. Assuming female producers and directors would currently be aged between 40 and 65, and assuming they might have studied at AFTRS, they would probably have graduated before 1995. Were the numbers of graduates more heavily male in that period? No. Graduates in screenwriting, directing and producing between 1977 and 1995 were 53% male and 47% female, almost identical to numbers across the history of the school. This phenomenon is once again seen internationally in similar screen education programs. In the US, the ratio of men and women who graduate from film school with a focus on directing is about 50/50 and has been for some time.<sup>18</sup>

There is also no gender imbalance favouring men in screen administration. In fact, the government funding agencies, at both federal and state level, are helmed in the majority by women. Only Screen Australia, Screen Tasmania and ScreenWest have male CEOs at the time of writing. At Screen Australia, five of the nine board members are female, and during 2013/14 the Program Operations team at Screen Australia was comprised of 28 men and 90 women<sup>19</sup>. A staffer at Screen Australia once joked to this author that there was such a gender imbalance in favour of women that perhaps affirmative action needed to be introduced to find more men. However, despite the female domination of administrative management, there has been no trickle-down effect on creative leadership. The prevalence of powerful women in screen administration has not changed the numbers of women leading creative teams.

Perhaps the mystery can be resolved by examining the tiny elephant in the room – children. The middle of a woman's career is her most vulnerable time when it comes to progressing upwards towards leadership, in every field. Once women reach the age they are most likely to have children, between 25 and 45, "Australia has significantly lower participation rates than other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations"<sup>20</sup>. A simple explanation for women's lack of representation in leadership is that women are leaving the workforce to have children and not coming back.

Although there are no statistics available about the numbers of mothers leaving Australian screen work specifically, in other areas of industry women are not quitting work forever to nurture their young. A 2005 American report found that only 43% of highly qualified women with children leave their careers or 'off-ramp' for any significant period of time<sup>21</sup>, and if they leave they're not gone for long - on average, between 1.2 and 2.2 years. The same report found that 25% of highly qualified men also take time off work for similar periods of time, although not usually to raise children (education and retrenchment are the main reasons for their career breaks). There seems to be no commensurate assumption that leadership is hard for men to attain because a quarter of them off-ramp at some point in their careers.

The Committee for Economic Development in Australia (CEDA) surveyed 619 members of the business community<sup>22</sup>, 93.3% of whom were female. Respondents were asked to rank in order of importance the barriers to women's equality in the workplace. Family was *not* placed at number one – it barely made the top five. The most important barriers to women's equality were:

1. Workplace culture
2. Lack of female leaders
3. Gender stereotypes
4. Lack of flexible work practices
5. Affordability and accessibility of childcare

Also, if having children were the only impediment to mothers working in screen, it would not explain the representation of women who work in other areas of the audiovisual industry. In the 2011 census, women were a majority in the following occupations, and it must be assumed that a significant number of these women would be mothers<sup>23</sup>:

- Artistic directors, 57% female;
- Script editors, 53% female;
- Make-up artists, 95% female;
- Production assistants, 70% female.

So, there are equal numbers of women studying film and working in screen, and women leading screen administration and other areas of production. Having and rearing children is certainly an issue in the gender debate, but family responsibility is not enough evidence to definitively prove the point. And it seems being female does not mean being rubbish at filmmaking. Films directed by women regularly win awards and attract audiences, and some of our most famous directors are female.

If men direct 85% of feature films then the argument that everyone gets the same shot at leadership is ludicrous. This means that the dual assumptions of parity and merit must be unpacked. If larger numbers of women are not climbing to levels of creative leadership naturally then perhaps there is something wrong with meritocracy itself.

## The Myth

'Merit' has become synonymous with fairness, equality, or objectivity – and merit means that gender diversity strategies are not needed. However, discrimination is integral to a meritocratic system, because someone needs to decide what constitutes this 'merit'. A meritocracy dictates who gets to enter the locked door, and who doesn't.

For women at the start of their careers, life certainly appears to be a meritocracy. Working hard at school, studying for exams and preparing for assignments are all activities rewarded by the education system. Women respond very well to the clearly explained rules and processes of education - study after study shows that girls outperform boys at school, and are disproportionately represented in top-tier graduate school programs<sup>24</sup>. This is certainly reflected in the qualifications of females working in Australian screen<sup>25</sup>. Carol Dweck, Stanford psychology professor and author, once stated that "if life were one long grade school, women would be the undisputed rulers of the world."<sup>26</sup>

School assumes the pre-condition that everyone has equal opportunity to acquire merit, which in turn assumes a level playing field. So does working for a government funded organisation like Screen Australia. Section 18 of the *Public Service Act 1999* requires that government agencies establish workplace diversity programs and recruit without discrimination based on gender, age, language, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, religious belief and family responsibilities<sup>27</sup>.

The public service proudly announces in its literature that "the diversity of the people in the APS is one of its greatest strengths"<sup>28</sup>. It claims that diversity in a working environment means valuing and utilising the contributions of people with different backgrounds and experiences, and that diversity of perspectives means a heightened ability to generate new ideas and ways of doing things. Sadly, this perspective stays on high in the hallowed halls of public screen agencies and broadcasters. No such fondness for diversity has trickled down to affect the creators of screen content.

The meritocracy of the 'real' world of screen is based on a largely unknown set of rules. The film industry itself does not need to abide by educational transparency, diversity issues or gender legislation. The meritocracy decides who will be hired, who will be allowed to tell their story, and who will lead. Although overt sexism still exists, the reason why meritocracies fail are not intentional or blatant. The fatal flaw in the meritocracy argument is unconscious bias.

Unconscious bias is the process by which people form unconscious knowledge based on their existing associations and relationships, usually started in childhood, which leads to 'auto-pilot' or 'fast' thinking<sup>29</sup>. For example, the social and cultural expectations of young women are different from young men. Girls are socially rewarded for being peaceful and industrious, and criticised for being 'bossy'. They are applauded for doing well in school but scolded for questioning authority or bragging about their accomplishments. By the age of twelve, "it is clear that both girls and boys have learned to equate maleness with opportunity and femininity with constraint."<sup>30</sup>

Innumerable studies have shown that both men and women demonstrate unconscious bias when asked to define the achievement-oriented or ‘agentic’ traits of someone with the “merit” to move up the ladder. Those traits are usually listed as aggressive, forceful, independent, and decisive. In these studies, such agentic traits are also assumed to be male characteristics<sup>31</sup>. Women’s characteristics are defined as more ‘communal’ traits - kind, helpful, sympathetic, and empathetic – but not necessarily the traits of a leader.

Anecdotally, these ‘communal’ qualities may go some way to explain why there are comparatively more women producers in the screen industry than in the other creative leadership roles of directing and writing. Producing requires a leader who can work toward what’s best for a story and a team. Writers and directors, on the other hand, need to be more self-focused in order to work. Having said that, however, only 34% of feature film producers in Australia are female. ‘Success’ is relative.

Women who defy the expected communal traits of their gender and demonstrate leadership ability through more agentic characteristics and behaviours, however, may face a backlash for behaving against ‘type’. This was famously exposed by the Heidi/Howard experiment at Columbia Business School in 2003<sup>32</sup>. Male and female students were asked to appraise the CV of a real-life entrepreneur, described as a successful venture capitalist, one who relied on an outgoing personality and large personal and professional networks. Some students read the CV with the real name of the entrepreneur attached – Heidi Roizen. Others were given a CV with the fictional name of Howard. While the students rated both candidates equally in terms of competence, Howard was perceived as “likeable, genuine and kind” while Heidi was deemed “aggressive, self-promoting and power-hungry” and “not the type of person you would want to hire or work for.”<sup>33</sup>

This leaves ambitious, self-advocating and achievement-oriented women in a terrible double bind. If a woman shows that she is agentic, and therefore has demonstrated ‘merit’ or leadership qualities, she can appear to be less attractive because she is violating the rules of femininity as dictated by unconscious bias. The various labels range from bossy to bitch, and worse. If a woman does not, however, show the agentic traits required for leadership, she cannot demonstrate the merit required to advance. She will not be perceived as a leader, and will therefore not be given the opportunity to lead.

Unconscious bias is rarely questioned, because it’s covert. However, in 2013 two reports on women directors in the UK found that unconscious bias is rife in the British screen industry. Decisions on hiring women are influenced by a risk-averse culture that keeps hiring the same directors “guaranteed to deliver”, most of whom are male. Gender stereotyping is prevalent when hiring in specific genres such as drama, action and comedy. In two distressing examples, executives with hiring responsibilities tended to assume women find having children “incompatible with directing”, and there was “a perception that women may not be able to manage large, mainly male crews who, in turn, may feel uncomfortable being led by a woman. Some male lead actors do not like being directed by women”<sup>34</sup>.

If women are repeatedly told that their progression is based on merit, and they are not making the cut, it can have a subtle but powerful effect on their likelihood of pushing for leadership. According to CEDA, “propping up this myth (of meritocracy)... acts as a key inhibitor to women trying to climb the ladder by eroding their confidence, sending a strong signal they are simply not up to senior jobs and, of course, depriving them of role models”<sup>35</sup>. This can even affect the successful minority of women who have risen to leadership levels.

### **The Imposters**

Women who make it, in the face of all gender odds, are very likely to experience the Imposter Syndrome. This phenomenon was originally identified in 1978 to describe the feelings of fraudulence reported by high achieving women. Imposters doubt their achievements are a result of their ability and instead attribute their success to non-ability factors such as luck<sup>36</sup>. Imposters tend to feel that they are a fake, and are likely to downplay or discount their achievements<sup>37</sup>.

Between the ages of 30 and 39, women are also likely to suffer from a 20% ‘confidence gap’<sup>38</sup> with regard to their ability to become a senior leader, compared to their male colleagues. The authors of *The Confidence Gap* write that “compared with men, women don’t consider themselves as ready for promotions, they predict they’ll do worse on tests, and they generally underestimate their abilities.” The timing of these feelings could not be more destructive, as they occur during the time when “many professional women are starting to confront the challenges of integrating the demands of work and family”<sup>39</sup>.

The cure for Imposter Syndrome and the Confidence Gap is not going to be found in meritocracy. If women make up half of screen graduates and employees, and the playing field is level, then their failure to progress must mean that they are just not good enough. Women who are looking to advance into leadership, particularly those in the middle for their careers, are faced with fewer opportunities and fewer role models. They’re also faced with an industry that just doesn’t care.

Meritocracy is a myth, because merit is being defined by “a particularly narrow cohort of white, middle-aged men”<sup>40</sup>. Unfortunately, it is also a myth that is being propped up by the very industry that believes itself to be cured of bias. This covert sexism is running unchecked, and scant attention is being paid to the prejudice behind the hiring, funding and promotion of women in the Australian screen industry.

*“If there’s specific resistance to women making movies, I just choose to ignore that as an obstacle for two reasons: I can’t change my gender, and I refuse to stop making movies.”*

Kathryn Bigelow<sup>41</sup>



## The Challenges

In 2013 the CEDA survey *Women in Leadership: Understanding the Gender Gap* found that workplace culture and gender stereotypes, lack of female leaders and family-unfriendly work places were the main barriers to women's equality in the workplace. In the past, affirmative action programs challenged some of these barriers. However, the programs from the 1970s-1990s were not formally measured to examine whether or not they could be successfully sustained over a longer period of time. Certainly records have been kept, but there are no obvious metrics available to clearly explain what impact they made in redressing the gender imbalance among film directors and producers of the time. While the raw statistics reflect a temporary improvement for women, once the programs were disbanded the results did not last.

The days of affirmative action are not completely over, at least not overseas. Programs that actively target and favour women for screen funding and support are being trialled in some countries that have the same issues of male dominance as Australia. The most rigorous is Sweden. From 2006 to 2012, the Swedish Film Institute (SFI) production funding was to be allocated to at least 40% women in the categories of screenwriter, director and producer. By the end of the program, only short films met this goal. However, the numbers of women improved overall, and 29% of funded feature films had a female director. From 2013-2015 the number of projects receiving advance production funding from the SFI will be divided equally between women and men in the key positions director, screenwriter and producer<sup>42</sup>. Similar programs are being discussed throughout Europe and in Canada as a way of rectifying the problem<sup>43</sup>. Whether or not these targets and quotas will lead to an increase in women leaders is yet to be seen.

However, affirmative action programs can be problematic, and again the myth of merit is a problem. If the playing field is level, then the best people will always rise to the top. If a film director or producer is hired over others because she is female, her ability to do her job effectively may be questioned. Was she promoted because of her gender, or her ability to direct a film? Will there be cutting remarks aimed her way about tokenism and quotas? If her advantage is seen as unfair, regardless of the sexism that prompted the positive discrimination in the first place, it can create more problems than it solves. Imposter Syndrome and the Confidence Gap will once again eat away at the belief that women are born to lead.

The challenges of culture and stereotyping can also be addressed through a focus on relationship capital, which refers to the worth and investment built into an organisation (or small industry) by the network of people that represent customers, partners, suppliers, employees and peers. The stronger and more intertwined the network, the better the good will that generates, the greater the worth of relationship capital.

Various studies have found that women excel at managing and investing in relationships, but often fail to grasp the importance of relationship capital. They will happily do favours for other people, but show reluctance to ask for favours in return, “lest they appear to be self-serving - or for fear they’ll be turned down. Many feel that getting ahead based on “who you know” is an inherently unfair - even a ‘dirty’ - tactic”<sup>44</sup>.

Men, on the other hand, are less likely to perceive this as an issue. Sam Mostyn, the AFL's first female Commissioner, reports in *Women in Leadership: Engaging Australian Business*<sup>45</sup> that the Australian concept of mateship leads to different outcomes between the genders. “When men define a relationship as mateship, women tend to define as friendship. Mateship is like a contract to care for, look after and, in the business environment, recruit and promote those like you. Women’s concept of friendship is more of providing emotional support and not so involved in outward demonstrations of support.” Women seek out opportunity based on their merit, but do not ask for advocacy from peers and leaders with power, which generates the paradox that women can find themselves surrounded by good will and supporters but lacking in advancement.

More seriously, this aversion to the quid pro quo of relationship capital can manifest as a lack of leadership skill. Being a team player is one thing, but advancing in any industry means demonstrating the ability to lead. Cultivating relationships and mobilising supporters for career gain is an anathema to many women, and seems to be the antithesis of good leadership, but ironically the reverse is often true. The practice of seeking out powerful people, understanding the currency of favours owed and granted, and having the ability to balance the quid pro quo are all inherent to the demonstration of leadership potential. Women who do not act on the power of relationship capital can find themselves stuck outside the locked door of leadership.

By clinging to the hope that ‘merit’ will somehow help them out of the power pipeline, and avoiding the development of relationships for career gain, women get stuck in the middle. One of the ways this imbalance is being addressed in business and cultural areas is mentorship. The relationship between a mentor and a protégé mitigates the power imbalance because it is at once both altruistic and beneficial to both parties. The mentor recognises the protégé’s merit in terms of talent and potential, and is compelled to offer their support, which not only helps the protégé but allow the mentor to benefit from the association. It’s a win-win, and mentoring programs are being introduced in all the countries where gender inequality is a problem<sup>46</sup>.

Lack of flexible work practices and the affordability and accessibility of childcare are universal problems that may take another generation to solve. However, these issues point to the fact that focusing on ways to increase the numbers of women in creative leadership means paying attention to the women who have slipped into invisibility in the middle of their careers. The child-bearing and rearing years are an ambitious woman’s most vulnerable time, and she can easily become stuck in the leadership pipeline with nowhere to go.

While there has been little focus on these women in the area of screen, in 2012 the Australia Council research report *Women in Theatre*<sup>47</sup> stressed the importance of recognising and developing mid-career artists. The report found that “there was a sense that a lot of attention has been paid in recent years to nurturing emerging artists, but that there needs to be more support for mid-career artists to build a reputation and to develop their voice, their craft, and their understanding of the nature of the audience. Investment in early career artists is wasted if there is no follow through.”

### **The Way Forward**

Women’s ‘failure’ to attain parity as directors and producers in Australian film is a result of the apparent meritocracy, which cannot see past its own bias to reward the talent or experience of women posed for leadership opportunities. This lack of equality is founded on entrenched discrimination built on familiar models of authority, unconscious bias about what it means to be a leader, and an industry-wide blind spot about gender.

There are countless possible ways of rectify this problem, some of which have been introduced here. Other answers could include improving access to funding, overhauling the exhibition and distribution systems that favour films made by men, challenging the falsehood that audiences only like films created by men, and raising awareness about the gender disparity behind and on our screens. More loud and pointed communication is needed to encourage everyone to understand that there actually is a problem.

Moreover, the Australian film industry as a whole needs to take responsibility for addressing the gender imbalance in creative screen leadership. To paraphrase Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick<sup>48</sup>, it’s time to stop asking what’s wrong with women that they’re not making it to the top, and start asking what’s wrong with an industry that can’t retain and promote women. Equal representation of women in creative leadership is an issue that needs to be addressed by both genders at all levels if a lasting solution is to be found.

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