

The Film Industry: A Critical Front in the Fight for Gender Equality

By XXXXXXX

From suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton . . . to activists like Gloria Steinem, Maya Angelou and Ruth Bader Ginsburg . . . to inspiring 21st century heroes like Malala Yousafzia, American history is replete with unapologetic, courageous women who have championed the cause of gender equality. A lot of good men have lent their voices to the cause, too, including many in the entertainment industry today—“King of Calypso” Harry Belafonte, Grammy-winner John Legend, and actor Ashton Kutcher, to name a few.

So why are we still struggling with rampant gender equality in 2019? We’re making progress, to be sure, but there are so many forces at work to stifle gender equality on so many fronts, it can be overwhelming. So let’s focus on equality problems in one major industry—filmmaking. This is important because the movies we see play a powerful role in shaping the worldviews of those who see them.

Ironically, the United States Senate is more progressive than Hollywood in terms of gender equality? In 1999, the Senate was 9% female, compared with 25% today. In 1999, 4% of the directors in Hollywood were female; today the number still stands at 4 percent.

Independent film statistics seem to provide an encouraging contrast. Women comprised 32% of directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors and cinematographers working on indie films in 2018-19. That percentage is still lower than it should be, though, and understanding the challenges indie films face puts it in a far less favorable light.

Pre-production, obviously, there is the struggle to obtain development funding, which attracts compelling story lines, strong acting and production quality. These things can and are being overcome by many indie film houses. But the post-production system heavily favors large studios that have more financial muscle and own the reviewing sites that influence which films people choose to see. Fandango owns the American review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes. NBC Universal and Warner Media own Fandango. That’s a conflict of interest.

It gets worse. Rotten Tomatoes’ review methodology makes it hard to publish a “verified” review on its site. For your review to be verified, you must have purchased your ticket online from Fandango. It won’t count as verified if you bought it from another company, purchased it in person or if a friend purchased it for you. If that friend bought tickets for six friends, Rotten Tomatoes’ algorithm will recognize only one review for the one transaction.

Case in point: Last week, New York-based Cayenne Pepper Productions released “The Warrior Queen of Jhansi.” It tells the true story of the legendary Rani of Jhansi, a feminist icon in India and a fearless freedom fighter who—in 1857, at the age of 24—led her people in insurrection

against the British Empire. The film was produced by a woman-owned indie film house and starred a female of Indian descent. Not surprisingly, the film was treated unfairly by film critics.

The story of Rani of Jhansi is the kind of inspiring, empowering saga young women need to hear. In fact, female-owned independent filmmakers today are making some of the most thoughtful, insightful films on the market, often infused with greater depth and meaning than those produced by large companies. But because the deck is stacked against them, many will never see the light of day. That is a mammoth loss not only for women in the industry, but for society as a whole.

Of the 100 top-grossing movies of 2017-2018, only 33% of speaking or named characters were female. Only 9% had gender-balanced casts. Only 11 movies starred a woman of color. Female characters of almost every racial and ethnic background were underrepresented, and females—even teenage girls—were far more likely to be sexualized than male characters. This is what the public is seeing. This is what young people are internalizing as normal and acceptable.

Because Americans love to go to the movies, what we are seeing on the big screen amplifies and legitimizes the unequal treatment of women in every corner of society. The film industry may be the most important front in the war on gender equality. Winning that war starts with leveling the turf on which Big Hollywood and indie film houses—especially those headed up by women—compete.

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