

Ryan Stodart

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Doctor Gray

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### The Boy's Club: Sexism in the Film Industry

Sexism is not an uncommon affliction in Western society, and has existed for centuries, causing a distinct divided between the sexes. There has, for a long time, been a large discrepancy between males and females, both in how they are characterized and their roles in society. While progress has been made, particularly in the last century, to create a more equal society for women, there is still much work to be done. Our culture, as a whole, is afflicted with this problem (as well as other types social discrimination), however one industry, in particular, is notorious for its treatment of women: the film industry, and Hollywood specifically. Women are greatly underrepresented in the casting of movies, including on-screen and off-screen roles, they are often treated with disrespect by coworkers and others involved in the process, and there is a large monetary discrepancy between even the highest paid female actors and their male counterparts.

In the film industry, the protagonist role is largely filled by a male; according to a web article from *Variety* magazine, a study done in 2014 by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University “found that females comprised a paltry 12% of protagonists in the top-grossing films of 2014...The latest figures represent a drop of three percentage points from 2013 and a fall of four percentage points from 2002” (Lang), illustrating that not only are the rates for female protagonists incredibly low, but that they have been getting

lower over time. The same article also states that females only represent, on average, twenty-nine percent of major characters in movies, and thirty percent of all speaking roles in movies, which also is quite abysmal (Lang), as a vast majority of the casting roles are given to men. These are just the on-screen roles, however; in regards to off-screen positions, particularly in the “holy trinity” of the movie industry (writer, director, and producer), the percentage of women getting these positions is staggeringly low.

According to an article from the New York Film Academy website, of the top two hundred and fifty movies in 2012, only nine percent of those movies had a female director, while ninety-one percent had male directors; fifteen percent had female writers, seventeen percent had female executive producers, twenty-five percent had female producers, twenty percent had female editors, and only two percent had female cinematographers (Zurko). Compared to the reverse statistics of men’s employment in these roles, females are horrendously underrepresented. A graphic on the same website which shows an array of percentages from 1998, 2006, 2011, and 2012; the percentages listed for 2012 illustrate, for directorship, writer, and producer percentages, the highest, or tied for the highest, percentages of all four data points, which marks some progress in equality, albeit very little. For executive producers and editors, the numbers have been fairly consistent for all data points, while percentages for cinematographer have decreased by half (from four percent to two percent) (Zurko). Despite the fact that, at least in a few categories, the percentages of female representation has increased over the fourteen years the data illustrates, the industry still has a great deal of work to do before creating an environment that provides equal opportunity for males and females in the industry.

Females in the film industry are almost guaranteed to experience sexism at some point in their career, in one form or another. In a web article published by The Guardian in 2015, Lexi

Alexander, a German-born director in Hollywood, states,

I would say 99% of women working in the film and television industries have experienced sexism. I can list endless examples, from the driver who refused to take me because he was told to wait for the director (which was me) to the executives who insist they need a male director for a film about boxing and fighting, then hire a guy who never had a fight in his life, while I spent the better part of my youth being an international competitive fighting champion. Once someone said to me: “We really wanted you to direct this movie, but ‘anonymous male action star’ refuses to be directed by a woman”. (99%)

This greatly illustrates not only the frequency of which sexism occurs, but the range and variety of the types of sexism that occurs. In some instances, they are patronized and not believed to be in charge of projects, simply because they are female; in some instances, they are passed up for a position they may be significantly more qualified to hold for the sake of someone who is less qualified (or not qualified at all), simply because they are female; in some instances, they are passed up for a job because a male who is also working on the project refuses to work under a female, which not only illustrates the individual sexism of the actors and other participants in the industry, but of the universal sexism of the industry, because even though the decision-makers in the above example state “We really wanted you to direct this movie...”, they sided with the actor over the director and over their own preference, the male subordinate over the female authority (Zurko).

On top of the often-blatant sexism in the day-to-day activities, there is also a huge lack of representation in terms of acknowledgments and accolades. Since the first Academy Awards were unveiled in 1929, only four female filmmakers have been nominated for the “Best

Director” award, and only one of the four actually won the award (Kathryn Bigelow for the film *The Hurt Locker*). Only seven women have won the award for “Best Picture”, however all of them won as co-producers with men, which somewhat takes away from the accomplishments. Only eight women have won for “Best Original Screenplay” and eight for “Best Adapted Screenplay”. In the history of the Oscars, not a single woman has ever even been nominated for “Directing”, “Cinematography”, “Film Editing”, “Writing (Original Screenplay)”, or “Music (Original Score)”. While it is difficult to determine the demographics of these fields, and it may be possible that there simply are not many females in these fields (as stated above, women only consist of two percent of the employed cinematographers), so it may not always be overt sexism, although it mostly certainly still illuminates a glaring discrepancy in representation and recognition (Zurko).

Along with being discriminated against verbally, in regards to employment, and in regards to recognition and opportunity in the field, women are also discriminated against in terms of how much money they make, even at the top of the pay scale. According to the New York Film Academy article and Forbes Magazine, in 2013, the gross income for the Top Ten highest paid actors was four hundred and sixty-five million dollars, while the gross income for the Top Ten highest paid actresses was one hundred and eighty-one million dollars, virtually one fourth of the amount their male counterparts earned. Angelina Jolie, who was the highest paid female actor earned thirty-three million dollars, while Robert Downy, Jr., who was the highest paid actor earned seventy-five million dollars, and a total of eight of the Top Ten actors earned more than Jolie, with the ninth and tenth earning the same and one million less, respectively. So even the highest paid female actor, who is at essentially at the top of her potential earnings (although this can of course fluctuate, as the industry is dynamic), makes forty-seven percent of

what her male counterpart makes, doing essentially the same job, also making far less than others who are not at the top of their field (99%, Pomerantz Angelina, Pomerantz Robert).

Part of the issue with dealing with sexism in the industry is that, as Amma Asante states in her section of a web article from The Guardian, "...once you have boarded a project, you're already dealing with the converted – you have arrived in the position of head of the creative team because those responsible for financing and producing your project are comfortable with the idea of a woman in charge" (99%), which brings up an interesting point; the people in the industry that are willing to work with and under females are the ones that, obviously, do not have a problem with it, while the ones who do have an issue with women in the industry are the ones who do not involve themselves with women, which only maintains the problem. Asante also states that there is indeed a camaraderie amongst the women in the industry, and that one of the most basic ways to combat the rampant sexism is to ensure that the women who do manage to break into the industry and gain a foothold make a concerted effort to employ and mentor other women in the industry, as it is evident that males in the same roles are much less likely to do so (99%). As stated by the author of the scholarly article *Unmanageable inequalities: sexism in the film industry*, "Linking women 'on-screen' with women 'behind-the camera', it is argued that in films where women are 'decision-makers' – directors, writers and producers...more women are shown on screen and as major protagonists" (Jones 38-39), which reinforces what Asante believes and has experienced as an active member of the industry, and also reinforces the idea that by encouraging more women who are in these roles to support their fellow females, the sexism and underrepresentation in the film world can be combated and mitigated, and is one step to producing a more equal community.

Sexism is a real issue in our world today; despite the fact that women fought through the

suffrage movements of the early 1900, winning the right to vote in 1920, women, and more importantly our society, still has a long way to go to gain equality for the sexes, much like the Civil Rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s were a starting point, but not the end-all-be-all for African American rights, or any of the protests for LGBTQ rights or religious freedom rights. The United States of America likes to pride itself on its slogan “America the Free”, and while it certainly is leaps and bounds better than other places around the world, we should not get complacent and of the impression that racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are a thing of the past and that “we have made it”. If the film industry is any indication, sexism is still a very potent and blatant issue that plagues the industry, and illustrates, on a grand scale, that the issue still exists in our society. Hopefully, with the more recent generations tending to be the most accepting and socially progressive generations, the world will be headed towards a more equal and accepting future, and sexism, racism, and other discriminatory practices will, at some point, finally be a thing of the past.

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