

***Women in the International Film Industry: Policy, Practice and Power*, edited by Susan Liddy. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 340 pp.**

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Over the last decade, particularly in the second half of it, a notable cultural shift has occurred across screen industries worldwide, bringing issues of gender equity to the fore. Three years after the watershed moment of #metoo, *Women in the International Film Industry: Policy, Practice and Power* brings together seventeen chapters from scholars around the globe, exposing the scale of ongoing inequality for female-identifying practitioners, and exploring what is being done to address the problem. This timely anthology highlights common themes across territories in relation to structural barriers, policy frameworks and practitioner perspectives. By celebrating the work of the activists that have driven change thus far, and by highlighting the limitations of government interventions, the book is a rallying cry for further, urgent change.

Liddy has a strong record of scholarship that has given voice to women in the Irish Film Industry, which she continues in “The Road to 5050: Gender Equality and the Irish Film Industry”. This chapter charts the recent gender equity focussed policies and initiatives of national development agency Fís Eireann/Screen Ireland (SI) and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), noting positive outcomes such as more female protagonists on screen, but less useful change for practitioners. Liddy thoughtfully interrogates the reasons why women may not embrace the opportunities created through recent initiatives, noting that “women’s choices and decisions are shaped by prevailing gender inequalities” (91). She concludes that “the struggle for gender equality must be fought on a variety of fronts”, flagging potential problems such as loss of momentum and gender fatigue (91).

European countries receive the most attention in other contributions, although the collection also covers North America, Australia, New Zealand and Nollywood. Chapters on countries such as Sweden or Hollywood offer further analysis of industries that have received significant attention in the past, while territories with a shorter tradition of activism and/or research into women’s participation are also usefully explored. For example, Greta Gober’s chapter, “With Eyes Wide Open: Gender Equality in the Polish Film Industry”, charts the formation of the Polish Female Filmmakers Association (Stowarzyszenie Kobiet Filmowców) in 2014, followed by the informal group, Women in Film Poland (Kobiety Filmu) in 2017 with Gober observing that “the struggle to advance and formalize gender equality in the Polish film industry started quite recently” (61). The latter group successfully campaigned to have the influential Polish Film Festival in Gdynia sign a “50x50 by 2020” gender equality pledge in 2018 (71). On a similar note, authors Eva Flicker and Lena Lisa Vogelmann note that “research regarding gender ratios in the Austrian film industry does not have a long tradition” (22). Their

important research into Austrian feature films, Austrian film festivals, and public funding and film education in the country reveals “deep gender imbalances” (38).

The strength of the book is its abundance of qualitative data in relation to women’s participation in the screen industries as practitioners, the inclusion of female-led work in film festivals, the receipt of public funding, the size of film budgets, the number of female actors in leading roles, and more, providing indisputable evidence of women’s marginalisation and the need for change. Academic analysis of these statistics is imperative, as data in some territories is non-existent or lacking in transparency. For example, in the chapter titled “Gendered Representation in Danish Film”, Tess Sophie Skadegård Thorsen offers a close analysis of statistics relating to public funding from the Danish Film Institute, finding a large discrepancy in amounts granted to different genders when these are calculated on an annual basis (113). Thorsen thus exposes “selected forms of reporting” that limit understanding of the extent of gender inequalities in this area (114).

As Liddy acknowledges in her introduction, many contributors examine the participation of women in key creative roles (writer, director and producer), these “above-the-line” positions considered by Stacey L. Smith to be the “holy trinity” (2). This is true of Guorún Elsa Bragadóttir’s important chapter “Out in the Cold? Women Filmmakers in Iceland”, which explores women’s peripheral participation in the role of director. A focus on key creative roles is perhaps not surprising seeing as public funding initiatives in multiple countries have targeted gender equity in this area as a means of creating a wider change. In “Gender Still Matters: Towards Sustainable Progress for Women in Australian Film and Television Industries”, Lisa French aptly probes the impact of national funding body Screen Australia’s 2015 “Gender Matters” initiative, which sought to improve the participation of women in the roles of writer, director, producer and protagonist. French concludes that “Gender Matters has been particularly valuable to assist women to develop tactical agility, aiming to resource them to navigate the structures of the industry” while also noting the need for “a whole-of-industry, long-term, multipronged focus to promote cultural change in order to achieve sustainability” (288).

Other chapters, such as the one by Shelley Cobb and Linda Ruth Williams, dig into the situation for below-the-line workers (such as Editor or Cinematographer) as well. In addition to exploring conditions for women filmmakers in a variety of roles, Cobb and Williams’s work in “Gender Equality in British Film-making: Research, Targets, Change” also considers the role of racial identity on employment opportunities, finding that “women of colour (BAME—Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) are widely and consistently excluded” (101). This intersectional approach is rightly acknowledged by Liddy who calls for a greater focus in this area going forward (1). However, in the majority of chapters, the focus is directed primarily on issues of gender equality so as to explore the common experience of women across racial groups.

Alongside the statistical data presented, several chapters take a qualitative approach, reporting on interview data so as to probe the on-the-ground experience of women practitioners. For example, Maria Jansson and Louise Wallenberg analyse interviews with twenty-one practitioners working in a variety of crew roles in “Experiencing Male Dominance in Swedish Film Production”. In doing so they probe the ways that “women’s experiences give rise to counterstrategies and resistance” (164). While Sweden’s levels of gender equality may be considered highly successful in relation to other national film industries, the authors find

challenges for women filmmakers in relation to their authority on set, the realisation of certain film genres, and the production and marketing budgets that they are able to access.

Other chapters focus on highlighting the work of female trailblazers and/or overlooked workers, exploring the impact of activism or dissecting problematic industrial cultures. For example, in “Hollywood and Gender Equity Debates in the #metoo Time’s Up Era”, Courtney Brannon Donoghue aptly considers recent trade publications, social media campaigns and industry events so as to expose “a complex industrial culture [...] deeply rooted in systemic gender inequity, rampant misconduct, and deep structural biases” (236). She concludes that while recent activism has created industry-wide awareness of gender equity problems, the burden of addressing this problem falls back on individual women who fight for structural change.

While it is not practicable to cover all seventeen chapters in this review, one can note common themes that emerge, such as low female practitioner participation rates across industries that have seen minimal improvement despite increased awareness; the continued existence of structural barriers; limits to the types of films that women tend to produce in terms of genres and budgets (for example, Courtney Brannon Donoghue notes that very few female directors have been hired on Hollywood studio projects with a production budget over \$100 million (236)); and the link between fewer on-screen roles for women and fewer women behind the camera. On this last point, in relation to the German industry, Elizabeth Prommer and Skadi Loist find a link between the gender of both producer and commissioning editor in television productions and the number of female protagonists on screen (50). Likewise, in “Women and Representations in Nollywood: Questions of Production and Direction”, Agatha Ada Ukata usefully examines evidence that greater numbers of female scriptwriters, producers, and directors in Nollywood have led to less “one-dimensional” roles for women on screen (315–30).

It also becomes clear in the book that female-led screen works enjoy high levels of success at the box office and at film festivals, even though they are less widely distributed and programmed. Throughout the anthology, authors relay stories of women’s continued activism and it is heartening to note the many positives of recent years, such as the establishment of independent bodies to support practitioners. In the context of Germany, for example, Prommer and Loist outline the founding of Themis, an independent institution supported by the Minister of State for Culture and Media, where film, television and theatre practitioners can report bullying, discrimination and sexual assault (54).

In sum, this important edited collection very usefully documents conditions for women in the screen industries post #metoo, paving the way for further research and industrial responses. As Liddy describes in her introduction, the “overall picture to emerge here is that of a gender order” (14), the collective research contained within the anthology suggesting that radical change is some time away, despite the notable and effective interventions that have occurred to date. By highlighting the ongoing challenges for women across territories, the collection provides a much-needed amplification of the global struggle for equality, one that will hopefully sharpen the resolve of activists and inform the way forward.

References

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