

Female Representation in the Film Industry:  
Bringing Women In Film to Universities Around the Nation.

A Senior Project  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Journalism Department  
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Bachelor of Science

by

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## **Abstract**

The following study explores the lack of gender parity in the film industry and dives into the nuts and bolts of what makes up female representation in the industry. It also explores the potential a national organization like Women In Film has on a university campus. Despite the majority of people believing women make up nearly half of the film industry, the reality is that only 23% of the key behind-the-scenes roles in the film industry are occupied by women. Since 1998 up to the year 2020, female representation has only grown by 6% (17% in 1998 to 23% in 2020), while it actually needs to grow 25% every five years for gender parity to be reached by the year 2100 (Women In Film 2020). Women In Film is a national organization that advocates and supports female filmmakers across the nation through education, funding, and networking. As of now, Women In Film is available for anyone to join but could be expanded to universities to bring focus to the next generation of female filmmakers. With the programs already in place, Women In Film could inspire and educate young people on the realities of the industry and help them navigate the disproportionality challenging industry.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **Statement of the Problem:**

The film industry is prominent in nearly everyone's lives and has been since its beginning in the 1890s. People all over the world reference films daily, whether it's in casual conversation or used as a teaching aid. It's one of the most popular pass-times and something that most everyone can find commonalities. The film industry plays a pillar role in society and culture, so why don't those creating these works represent the society in which they are designed?

In 2020, of the top 250 films, only 18% of film directors were female. Women made up 17% of screenwriters, 21% of executive producers, 22% of editors, and 6% of cinematographers (Lauzen 2021). The lack of gender equality in film production is stark and obvious. Women In Film (WIF), a non-profit Los Angeles-based organization, was founded in 1973 to pool together women who work in the film industry. WIF is the most prominent female-centered organization in the film industry and advocates for and advances females' careers in the film industry, whether in front of or behind the camera. They offer funding services, financing courses, mentorship pairings, and writing workshops, among other services women have traditionally been at a disadvantage in when it comes to film production. If Women In Film expanded its horizons to university campuses, like California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, young females who aspire to work in the film industry can not only find comfort in like-minded people but begin the fight for parity and fight for a place in the industry before they have to enter it officially.

The systemic bias against women is intersectional across ability, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Until men and women can receive equal opportunity,

pay, and representation across all aspects of film production, the industry will not be fair or operate to its fullest abilities. As argued by Women In Film, "parity, inclusivity, and equal representation are non-negotiable requirements of sustainable media businesses." To increase female representation in film production, change must begin at the top. It must be representative of the entire female population without bias against ability, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

### **Background of the Problem:**

According to the 2019 Annual Report published by Women in Film, women represent 51% of the total United States population, yet only around 20% of key behind-the-scenes positions are held by women, and less than 1% of directors are women of color (Women In Film, 2019). Based on future projections compiled in the 2019 Annual Report, it would take until the year 2072 for parity to be achieved in the film director position, 2047 for film writers, 2069 for TV cinematographers, and 2083 for film composers, assuming there is a 25% increase in numbers every five years (Women In Film 2020). In the last five years (2015-2020), female representation behind the scenes of the top 250 films only grew 4%, according to a Celluloid Ceiling study completed and published by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, founder and executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University (Lauzen 2021). Representation grew 6% in the last 22 years, from 17% in 1998 to 23% in 2020 (Lauzen, 2021). At this rate, gender parity in the film industry is far from attainable in the next 100 years.

With the rise of the Feminism movement in recent decades, organizations and research centers, including Women In Film and the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, have been going strong in making strides to awareness and hopefully action. Similarly,

University campuses across the United States have implemented chapters of national organizations like Women in Business, Women in S.T.E.M., Her Campus, and Society of Women Engineers, but female-focused film clubs don't have that national chapter to connect with. Women In Film can begin expanding their strides in increasing female representation in the film industry to include university students.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons behind the lack of female representation behind-the-scenes in the film industry, the reasons for its incredibly slow progress, and how to combat it – starting on university campuses. Numerous studies have and continue to highlight the lack of gender parity in the film industry and implementing Women In Film chapters on university campuses could not only had numbers to the fight for gender parity but inspire and guide the next generation of female filmmakers. Women In Film is a well-known organization within the film industry and is supported by other prominent film-focused organizations such as Sony Pictures and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It has the potential to attract more supporters and sponsors by expanding onto university campuses, and in turn, it will offer female students the opportunity to connect with, learn from and work with other female filmmakers.

### **Setting for the Study:**

This study was conducted using mainly data collections and resources provided by Women in Film and the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film. Because Cal Poly does not have a film-focused degree, additional data was collected from interest groups via LinkedIn and Facebook. These interest groups include Young Entertainment Film Professional

and Cal Poly Class of 2021. Because of the virtual aspect of this study and its focus on university campuses in general, this study includes participants from across the nation and internationally.

### **Research Questions:**

The research questions that this study will focus on were created to understand the demand for a female-focused film club on university campuses, examine the current mindset of a female entering the film industry, and the determine what difference a female-focused film club would have made in the employment process of young females entering the industry.

The research questions are:

What is the current state of female representation in the film industry?

Why has growth in gender parity in the film industry been so slow?

How many female students and/or recent female graduates were part of a female-focused film club during their undergraduate or graduate years?

Would a female-focused film club on university campuses make a difference in increasing female representation in the film industry?

### **Definition of Terms:**

According to the MasterClass, the following terms are defined as:

**Screenwriter:** "Most movies begin with a script. A screenwriter produces that script, either from an original idea or by adapting an existing text. The screenwriting process often carries over into production when the director requests rewrites on set."

**Executive producer:** "An executive producer sources and secures the financing for a film production, either through an independent financing company, through a studio, or by financing it themselves. Executive producers act as the liaison between the film's financiers and the producers who ultimately run production and oversee postproduction."

**Director:** "A film director is involved in each of the three stages of filmmaking and shepherds the entire creative process. The director assembles the core production crew, creates a vision for the film, makes casting choices, directs actors, and oversees all departments, and gives notes on the edit in postproduction."

**Director of photography:** "Also known as a **cinematographer**, the DP is in charge of all camera work and commands a large crew."

**Editor:** "A film editor or video editor takes many hours of raw footage and cuts and pastes it into a coherent film. Directors and film editors work closely with one another to produce the product that audiences see on the big screen."

This study includes the words "female" and "woman/women" often. Readers of this paper should consider the words "female" and "woman/women" to include all female-identifying people, regardless of biological sex. It also considers all female-identifying people regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This literature review focuses on female representation in the individual key behind-the-scenes roles on a film set and how it has fluctuated over time.

#### **Fluctuation in Female Representation in Key Behind-The-Scenes Roles on a Film Set Over Time:**

In a study conducted by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, founder of the Center for the Study of Women in Film and Television, female representation behind-the-scenes only grew 6% in the last 22 years, from 17% in 1998 to 23% in 2020 (Lauzen 2021). 67% of the films produced in 2020 employed 0-4 women, compared to the 71% that employed ten or more men (Lauzen 2021). Key behind-the-scenes roles include directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers. Women making up 23% of the key behind-the-scenes roles on film sets in 2020 has set a new high for female representation in the film industry, but when the roles are broken down, and individual films are studied rather than the collection of the top 250 grossing films, the female representation is rather skewed. Most of the female representation comes from the role of producer. In 2020, 30% of the 23% of women working in the film industry were producers, and 21% of the 23% being executive producers (Lauzen 2021). 22% of the 23% were editors, leaving 18% as directors, 17% as writers, and only 6% being cinematographers (Lauzen 2021). Compared to the data reported in 2019, the number of female directors rose by 5%, producers rose by 3%, cinematographers rose by 1%, executive producers rose 0%, editors declined by 1%, and writers declined by 3% (Lauzen 2021). Of the top 250 films of 2020, 80% had no female directors, 73% had no female writers, 41% had no female

executive producers, 26% has no female producers, 72% has no female editors, and 94% had no female cinematographers (Lauzen 2021).

The role of director is the most prominent position on a film set, and therefore the hiring power lies in their hands. There is a stark difference in what a film set looks like in terms of female representation when a female is filling the role of director rather than a male. In films with at least one female director, women made up 53% of writers compared to 8% on film sets with exclusively male directors; and women made up 39% of editors rather than the 18% of male-directed films (Lauzen 2021). The Hollywood Diversity Report 2021, Part 1: Film conducted and published by UCLA College, Social Sciences Division, Dean's Initiative, explains in more detail the importance of filling these key behind-the-scenes roles with females. When a film is directed by a female-identifying person, the film set is more likely to be filled with women (Lauzen 2021), and the story told on screen is often more diverse in its cast and in the stories being told (UCLA 2021). The same goes for female writers. When a writer of a film is female, the story often portrays the cast in a more respectful and understanding way while simultaneously making it a more diverse story (UCLA 2021).

Women In Film is a national organization that advocates for female representation in the film industry and fights to create more diverse crews, casts, and stories to be shared on the big screen (Women In Film 2020). With its support programs, Women In Film has become one of the more well-known film-focused organization because of its dedication to helping female filmmakers make waves in the film industry from the get-go of their careers. The programs in place are:

**Emerging Producers**—participants can network amongst each other and attend classes and group advising sessions (Women In Film 2021).

**Film Finishing Fund**—a select group of women are awarded grants to help them complete their film projects (Women In Film 2021).

**INSIGHT**— a group dedicated to women of color filmmakers where they can seek mentorship and additional education in filmmaking (Women In Film 2021).

**Mentorship** – a program that focuses on peer mentorship and offers a safe and collaborative space to cultivate their work (Women In Film 2021).

**Production Program**—a multifaceted program that offers funding and support for women across all key behind-the-scenes roles (Women In Film 2021).

**The Black List Writing Labs**—a lab and residency for non-professional writers that allows them to explore and hone their craft through workshops and online courses (Women In Film 2021).

**The Sundance Institute Financing Intensive**—two-day workshops taught by industry executives that teaches filmmaking teams about financing strategies and connects them with leading financiers (Women In Film 2021).

Women In Film advocates for women just starting their careers and film veterans alike. The organization is confident that increasing female representation in the film industry will not only transform the industry but also culture as a whole, considering film plays a larger role in culture than most realize (Women In Film 2021).

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### **Data Sources:**

To collect data for this study, a survey was sent out to students and young entertainment professionals to gauge whether a female-focused film organization on their university campus would have benefitted them.

#### **Participants:**

The participants in this study consist of Cal Poly students and young entertainment professionals from mainly North America and include a few responses from Oceania. The data consists of responses from participants with a varying range of interest and knowledge of the film industry.

#### **Survey Design:**

This study focuses on whether a female-focused film organization on university campuses could benefit young female filmmakers. This survey begs the question of if the lack of female representation in the film industry can be addressed before these filmmakers even begin their official careers. The survey is anonymous but does ask participants to confirm their gender identity to see if gender affects the knowledge and/or awareness of the lack of gender parity in the film industry. It asks participants to explain, based on experience or general knowledge, how they perceive female representation in the industry and if they see potential in true gender parity. It additionally asks whether a female-focused film club would be or would have been beneficial in their undergraduate careers. The survey was designed to dive into multiple research questions and shed light on how female representation is understood by people inside the industry as well as those outside it.

## Data Collection:

The data used in this study was collected by posting a Google Survey to social media platforms. Facebook and LinkedIn were the chosen platforms because of their group function. Because this study is focused on current and very recent graduates, the survey was sent out to people who specifically fit in that category. The two groups that were presented with this survey were: Cal Poly SLO Class of 2021 of Facebook and Young Entertainment Professionals on LinkedIn.

### Facebook Post:



Allison Mays shared a link.  
Yesterday at 8:33 AM · 🌐

Hi everyone! I am finishing up my senior project and would really appreciate some additional participation in the following survey. I am researching the whys and hows of female representation in the film industry and whether or not a female-focused film organization on university campuses would help move towards gender parity in the film industry.

If you have a quick minute to respond to the survey linked below to assist in my research, I would very much appreciate it. I inv... [See More](#)

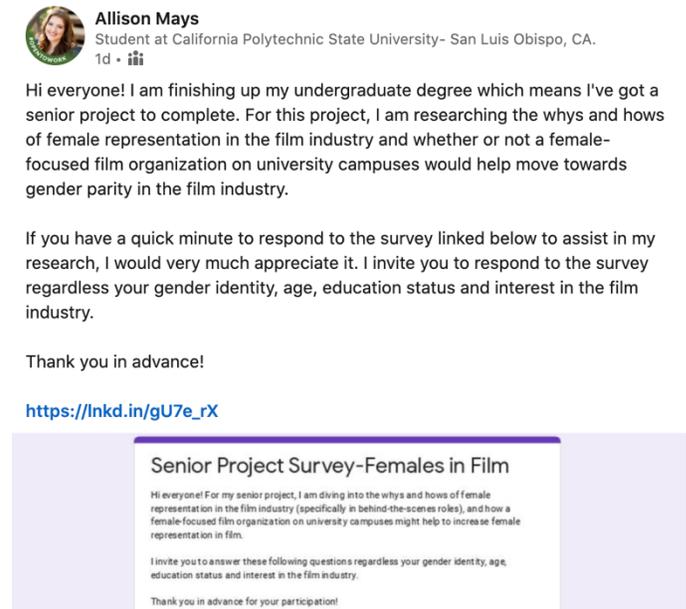
Senior Project Survey-Females in Film  
DOCS.GOOGLE.COM  
**Senior Project Survey-Females in Film**  
Hi everyone! For my senior project, I am diving into the whys and hows of female representation in the film industry (specifically...

2

Like Comment

Write a comment...

### LinkedIn Post:



Allison Mays  
Student at California Polytechnic State University- San Luis Obispo, CA.  
1d · 🌐

Hi everyone! I am finishing up my undergraduate degree which means I've got a senior project to complete. For this project, I am researching the whys and hows of female representation in the film industry and whether or not a female-focused film organization on university campuses would help move towards gender parity in the film industry.

If you have a quick minute to respond to the survey linked below to assist in my research, I would very much appreciate it. I invite you to respond to the survey regardless your gender identity, age, education status and interest in the film industry.

Thank you in advance!

[https://lnkd.in/gU7e\\_rX](https://lnkd.in/gU7e_rX)

Senior Project Survey-Females in Film  
Hi everyone! For my senior project, I am diving into the whys and hows of female representation in the film industry (specifically in behind-the-scenes roles), and how a female-focused film organization on university campuses might help to increase female representation in film.  
I invite you to answer these following questions regardless your gender identity, age, education status and interest in the film industry.  
Thank you in advance for your participation!

The questions asked in the survey are:

- What is your gender identity?
- What is your age?
- Where are you from?

- Did you go to university?
- Did you pursue a film-focused degree?
- How would you rate your interest in the film industry?
- Were you a part of any on-campus film organizations?
- Was the organization(s) gender inclusive?
- If you identify as female, would a female-focused film organization be something that interested you?
- Would a film organization with ties to a national organization be more or less attractive to you as a student interested in film?
- Have you worked on a film set before?
- Based off experience or general understanding, how would you rate the presence of female identifying people working in behind-the scenes roles in film?
- Do you think gender parity is possible in the film industry?
- Are you a member of a national film organization currently?

The survey received 23 responses and overall showed a clear direction of knowledge amongst the participants regarding female representation in the film industry and the need for a female-focused film organization on university campuses.

### **Limitations:**

This survey faced a few limitations during data collection, the most prominent limitation being outreach. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, face-to-face outreach was not possible, and outreach had to be done solely online. Because the survey needs to be accessed through a link, I had to select social media platforms that allow direct links to be added to a post. Additionally,

because this survey was created to be responded to by students and very recent graduates, I further had to narrow the social media platforms to those with group functions that pooled together necessary participants (Cal Poly SLO Class of 2021 on Facebook and Young Entertainment Professionals on LinkedIn). Another limitation during this data collection is, due to the pandemic, the film industry halted production for a large majority of 2020. Because so many classic films were revisited last year from homes across the world, public data was skewed to show more female representation when there wasn't necessarily any growth, which could have inadvertently affected the knowledge and responses of some of the participants of this study.

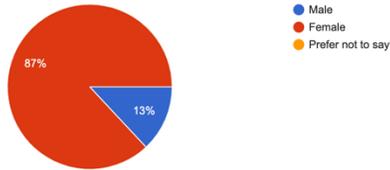
# Chapter 4

## Data Analysis

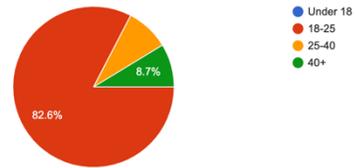
### Description of Participating Respondents:

The participants of this study were predominantly female-identifying people. 20 of the 23 respondents identify as female, and the remaining three identify as male. two of the 23 respondents are aged 40+, 2 being between 25-40 and the remaining 19 being between the ages of 18 and 25. 22 of the 23 respondents are from North America, leaving one respondent from Oceania. All respondents attended university, and six of them pursued a film-related degree.

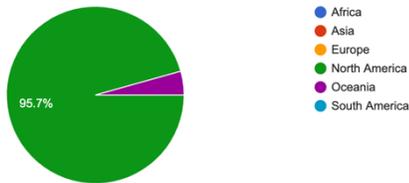
What is your gender identity?  
23 responses



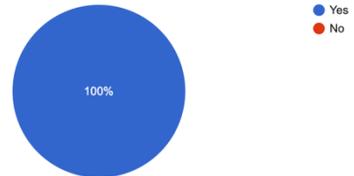
What is your age?  
23 responses



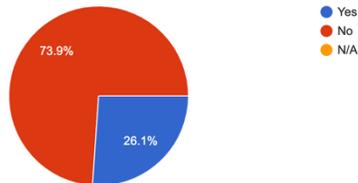
Where are you from?  
23 responses



Did you go to University?  
23 responses



Did you pursue a film-focused degree?  
23 responses



## **Research Data:**

Based on the data collected via this Google survey, it is clear that most respondents aren't entirely aware of the lack of gender parity in the film industry. When asked to describe the presence of female-identifying people working in behind-the-scenes roles in film, two respondents believed females make up 30% of the film industry, ten believed that females make up 40% of the film industry, five believed they make up 50% of the industry, three believed they make up 60% of the industry, and one believes they make up 80% of the industry. To summarize, 21 of the 23 respondents to this survey (91.3%) believe women play a much more significant role in the film industry than they actually do. 91.3% of the respondents believe that women make up more than 30% of the industry rather than the actual data reported by numerous national organizations that women only make up 23%.

On the other hand, the data collected from this survey shows a clear interest in a female-focused film organization being present on university campuses. Of the 23 respondents, only five belonged to an on-campus film organization, and of those five, only one of them was specifically tailored to women. When asked whether a female-focused film organization would have interested them in their collegiate years, 15 of the 23, or 65.2%, respondents said it would. Additionally, 20 of the 23 respondents showed interest in the idea of having an on-campus organization with ties to a national organization.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Recommendations

#### **Summary:**

This study was designed to understand the complexities of female representation in the film industry. Female representation in the film industry, although at a record-breaking high, is still very low. Women fill 23% of key behind-the-scenes roles in the film industry (director, producer, executive producer, writer, and editor), and 67% of the top 250 films produced in 2020 had four or fewer women employed in leadership roles. Over the last 22 years, female representation in the film industry only grew by 6%, when it needs to grow 25% every five years to reach gender parity in the upcoming decades.

In a survey sent out to Cal Poly students and students and recent graduates from around the world, it is clear that there is a misunderstanding in how prominent female representation is in the film industry. The majority of respondents believe women make up far more of the industry than they actually do, and it has led to the slow increase of representation over recent decades. Although the survey only collected 23 responses, it shows a clear skew to this conclusion.

#### **Findings:**

This study found that there is not only an interest but a need for a female-focused film organization on university campuses. It also found that having a national, overarching organization to connect to would be more beneficial and attractive to students. Many study

participants believe gender parity might be possible in the film industry but can be with the right push and deeper education. Students, especially female-identifying students, would benefit from an on-campus female-focused film organization like Women In Film; the survey conducted for this study serving as a good springboard for future research.

### **Recommendations For Practice:**

In order to increase awareness of female representation in the film industry and increase the representation itself, the national Women In Film organization should expand to include university-based chapters. With ties to a national chapter, student members could further connect with members at other universities as well as recent graduates. They will have access to mentoring programs, workshops, funding opportunities, and additional education they may not be receiving in their daily studies. Women In Film, in turn, would grow their member population, could spotlight student projects and host collegiate-focused events. Their service-focused philosophy about advocating for women in the film industry would be met, and real change could happen from the get-go. Female filmmakers would be able to build their network and resume and start their careers closer to the top of the pyramid than they've ever been able to do before. With awareness being built right away in the female population, the conversation of gender parity and the lack of it will be heard by more people and spark real change. This next generation of filmmakers, whether they be directors, producers, writers, or editors, has the power to shift the idea of gender parity into actions; but it has to begin with awareness and education.

### **Conclusion:**

With key leadership positions behind-the-scenes being filled by mostly men, women are disproportionately at a disadvantage in filling other roles as well. It is common for hiring

managers and leaders to hire those similar to themselves; it can be easy to stick with what they know and hire those who think the same as them, often resulting in a male-dominated team.

When females are given hiring power and fill a leadership position, film sets are often much more diverse in the crew all the way to the cast and the story being told. If gender parity is ever reached, studios around the world will need to make changes to the top of the pyramid, granting women more opportunity to be a leader. This, of course, is much easier said than done. It is even more difficult when the vast majority of people are unaware of the stark difference in representation, to begin with. The misconception that women make up near half, if not more, of the film industry, is a dangerous misunderstanding to those fighting for gender parity, like Women In Film, because it leads people to believe nothing needs to change. Addressing this misconception requires exposing young filmmakers to the reality of what they are stepping into and educating them on how and why there is so little female representation in the industry.

Expanding the Women In Film organization to university campuses will allow advocating for young filmmakers to happen sooner and will better educate them as well as the general public about the lack of representation in the film industry. It can allow students to complete projects and build competitive resumes, connect with other female filmmakers, and hone their unique craft as female storytellers.

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