

The place of women in European film productions

Fighting the celluloid ceiling

SUMMARY

The sexual assault allegations brought against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein laid bare the painful reality for scores of women working in the film industry around the world. However, sexual harassment is seemingly just the tip of the iceberg in an industry where gender inequalities relating to biased representation and pay are arguably systematic and pervasive. Europe's own film industry has not been spared. The weighted average of films directed by women in the 2012-2016 period is just 19.6 %, with country results varying from 5 % (Latvia) to 30 % (Sweden). More worryingly, research shows that the various positions in the film industry appear to be dominated by one or the other gender. Thus, women are over-represented in professions traditionally considered feminine – such as costume design and editing – and under-represented in others viewed as more technical, such as those dealing with sound, music and image.

To start redressing these imbalances, various EU-level initiatives have been introduced in support of female film projects. One such example is the LUX Film Prize, through which over the past 11 years the European Parliament has been consistently encouraging the dissemination of films directed by women and portraying strong, inspiring female characters. For its part, the European Commission has started measuring women's participation in key positions in projects supported under the Media strand of its Creative Europe programme. Similarly, it is currently considering specific ways for a more gender-balanced provision of support. Yet again, the cultural support fund of the Council of Europe – Eurimages – committed in its 2018-2020 strategy to achieving equal distribution of co-production funding between women and men by the year 2020; the distribution of funding currently stands at 38 %. Sweden is the EU leader in terms of regulatory policies at national level. The critical acclaim won by Swedish female filmmakers in the past 10 years has shown that by applying a methodical and systematic approach it is possible to achieve gender equality without compromising quality.



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Background

The [sexual assault](#) allegations brought against Hollywood producer [Harvey Weinstein](#) laid bare the painful reality for scores of women working in the film industry around the world. However, sexual harassment within the industry is seemingly just the tip of the iceberg, hiding underlying unbalanced power relations impacting on women's voices and participation through biased representation and pay, to name just a few. Despite the noise and intensity of protests that brought the wider issues of women's position in the film industry to the fore and created pressure for action, it is not yet clear whether activism and awareness have generated any real or lasting change with regard to long-term inequalities in the industry.

In 2018, the Cannes Film Festival showed it had taken criticisms on board by presenting a diverse, gender-balanced [jury](#) of four men and five women. However, this hardly makes up for the fact that in the festival's 71-year history, films [directed](#) by women represent just 5 % of those selected to compete for the Palme d'Or – the highest honour at Cannes. This year's [competition](#) included 21 films, only three of which were directed by women, thus confirming that gender equality both in the European and the global film industry still remains more of a wishful thinking than a reality.

Why film productions still need a Bechdel test

The [Bechdel test](#) – also referred to as the Bechdel-Wallace test – is an approach for gauging the fair representation of women in film productions. To pass the test, films need to feature at least two women talking about something else than a man. It is an indicator measuring the active presence of women and aims to spread awareness about how women are portrayed in films. The entire Lord of the Rings trilogy, all Star Wars movies, and all but one of the Harry Potter movies failed to pass the test. Applied to the top 25 Hollywood blockbusters in 2016, the test confirmed that gender equality is still a long way off, with half of the movies failing to pass.

Gender bias in portrayal and scripts

Even though the past 50 years have seen a significant advance in women's living conditions and status in society as a whole, their depiction on screen has continued to adhere to patriarchal stereotypes that are far removed from reality. [Gender stereotypes](#) are still abundant, with female characters being in general younger than their male counterparts and more likely to be reduced to life-related roles of wife, mother or girlfriend.

This trend is nothing new, as witnessed by [research](#) based on a sample of 855 top box-office films, released from 1950 to 2006. The results show that male characters outnumber female characters by more than two to one. More worryingly, the authors also found that although women continue to be under-represented in films, their disproportionate portrayal in more explicit sexual content has grown over time, with female characters being twice as likely to be involved in sex as male characters.

Gender bias also extends to scripts. A 2017 New York Film Academy [analysis](#) shows that in a sample of 1 000 films, male characters had over 37 000 dialogues whereas female characters had just 15 000.

What about a female superhero?

In 2013, four Swedish cinemas and the Scandinavian cable television channel Viasat Film [incorporated](#) the Bechdel test into some of their ratings, a move supported by the Swedish Film Institute.

In 2013, only 30 % of Swedish feature films passed the Bechdel test, thereby getting an [A-rating](#). The following year that [percentage](#) soared to 60 %, and in 2015, 80 % of films earned the new rating seal. The test is now a feature in 30 cinemas and has also started appearing on DVD covers. Moviegoers are informed of the rating by a brief trailer that runs before the screening begins. Awareness of gender and racial diversity issues in film is now an educational goal in 10 Swedish cities, and the Bechdel test is taught in schools there.

More generally, the Bechdel test has inspired discussion about diversity as a whole. The implementation of the Chavez Perez test, which determines whether two minority characters in a movie speak about something other than crime, is currently being considered.

Men also had a wider choice of characters – some 4 900 – while women had just over 2 000. Similarly, male scriptwriters outnumbered female scriptwriters by 7 to 1.

Gender pay gap

Under-representation and misrepresentation of women is accompanied by a substantial pay gap between actors and actresses. A 2018 Forbes survey found that the world's 10 highest-paid actors collectively made [US\\$748.5 million](#) between June 2017 and June 2018, while the world's top 10 actresses made roughly [US\\$186 million](#) over the same period. Highest-paid among the men, George Clooney made [US\\$239 million](#), while his female counterpart Scarlet Johansson earned more than five times less – [US\\$40.5 million](#). Discussion on pay disparity has recently been reignited by a [report](#) claiming that actor Mark Wahlberg was paid US\$1.5 million for a reshoot of a 2017 crime thriller, while co-star Michelle Williams received a per diem of US\$80 for the same scenes, totalling less than US\$1 000.

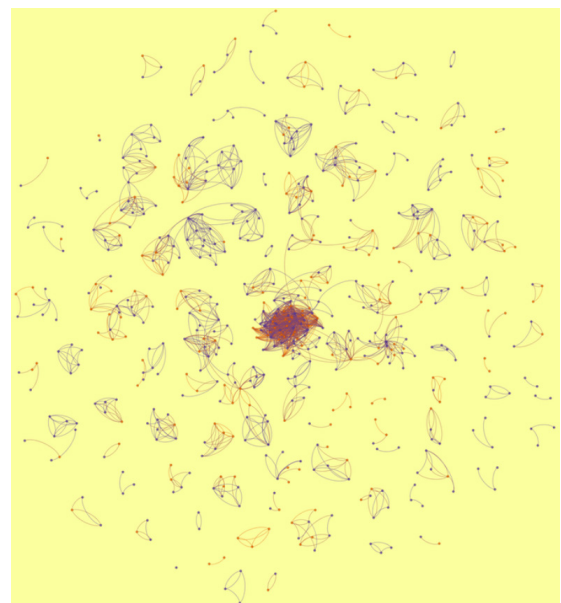
Likewise, 2014 [research](#) on the gender pay gap among Hollywood stars demonstrates that actresses in their twenties tend to outpace their male counterparts in terms of pay. However, after the age of 34, their earnings quickly decline, unlike those of male actors, which peak at the age of 51 and remain stable after that. More worryingly, the study suggests that roles for older actresses are limited, creating more pressure on them to maintain a youthful appearance. According to the study: 'Men's well-worn faces are thought to convey maturity, character and experience. A woman's face, on the other hand, is valued for appearing young'.

Gender bias in awards

The results of a journalistic investigation [show](#) that in the 89-year history of the Oscars, only one woman – Kathryn Bigelow – has been awarded the film directing prize (2009). The track record of the 71-year-old Cannes Film Festival does not look any better: only one [female director](#) – Jane Campion – has won the Palme d'Or (1993). Two other major European film festivals exhibit slightly better statistics. From 1980 to 2018, the Berlin and the Venice film festival [honoured](#) four female directors each.

In 2018, French group [50 50x2020](#) initiated a [Programming pledge for parity and inclusion in cinema festivals](#), which would later roll out to other festivals around the world. The key commitments under the pledge include the compilation of statistics to record the gender of the filmmakers and key crew of all submissions; a promise to improve the transparency of selection processes by publicly listing the members of the selection and programming committees, and to work towards parity on the executive boards of these committees. To date, the pledge has been [signed](#) by the Cannes and the Locarno film festivals.

Figure 1 – Analysis of networking within the Australian film industry



Source: D. Verhoeven, S. Palmer, [Women aren't the problem in the film industry, men are](#), 2016.

Men-only networks

Similar trends emerge when analysing networking within the film industry. [Research](#) using social network analysis examined all of the key creative roles in films submitted to the Australian Academy awards from 2006 to 2015. The data including information on over 200 films and nearly 1 000

creative jobs show that the Australian film industry operates as a series of networks in which male-only or male-dominated teams prosper.

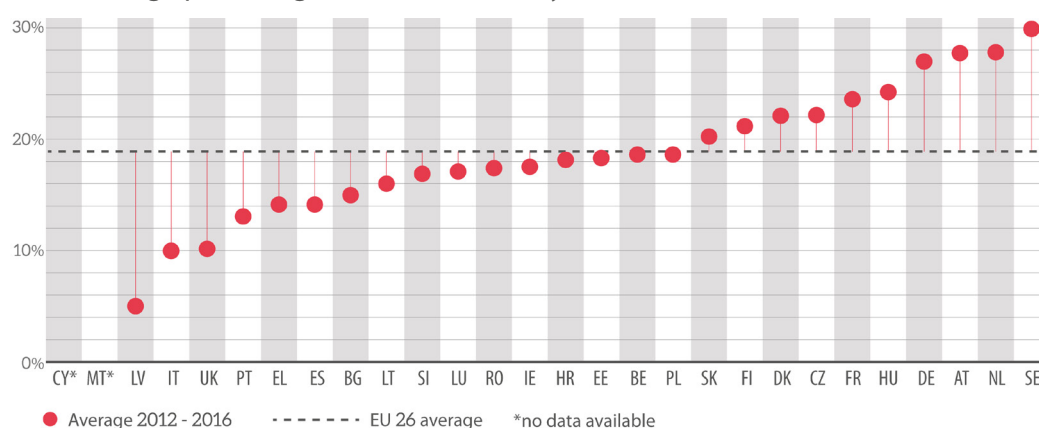
The data visualisation in Figure 1 describes the relationships between male producers in the Australian film industry in the period surveyed. The blue dots represent men who worked exclusively with other men, and the orange dots represent those who worked with women.

The results indicate that during this time, 40 % of the total number of male producers worked exclusively with other men in key creative roles. More worryingly, over 75 % of the male producers in the industry worked with only one or no women in key creative roles.

Gender inequality in EU film productions

The results of the most extensive [study](#) on European female filmmakers to date show that Europe's film industry is also marked by substantial gender inequalities. Thus, the weighted¹ average² of European female directors for the 2012-2016 period is 19.6 %, with country results varying from 5 % in Latvia to 30 % in Sweden (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Average percentage of films directed by women in the EU, 2012-2016



Source: Le Lab 'Femmes de cinema', [Emergence of a new generation of female film directors](#), 2017.

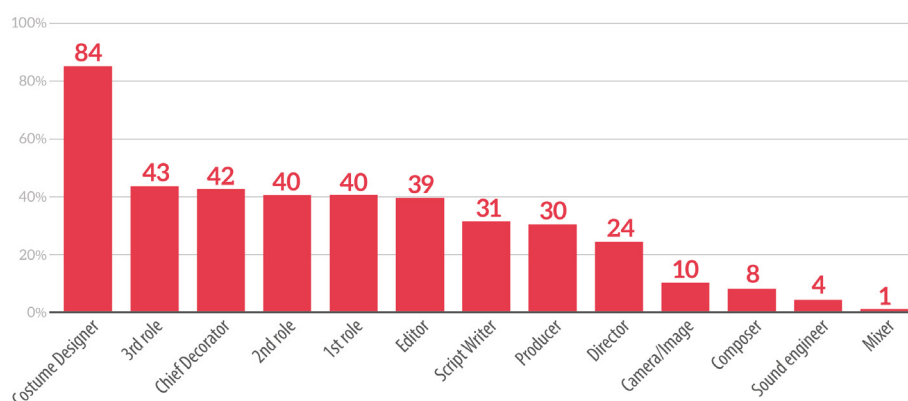
A north-south geographical divide is easily discernible, with Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria exhibiting the highest percentages and Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece showing the least impressive performances. The eastern European countries – Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia – remain caught in the middle.

Another [study](#), carried out by Eurimages – the cultural support fund of the Council of Europe – came to similar conclusions. Since 2012, the fund has been collecting data on the gender of the holders of key positions in the film projects submitted to it for funding. The study results demonstrate a clear under-representation of women in the main film production functions: from 2014 to 2015, the average participation of women in these functions was just 30 %, with documentaries exhibiting the highest rate (36 %), followed by fiction (31 %) and animation (13 %).

Worryingly, the figures also confirm what other studies have previously shown (for example, in [France](#) and [Germany](#)), namely that the various positions in the film industry appear to be associated with one of the two genders (see Figure 3). Thus, it appears that women are over-represented in professions traditionally considered feminine – such as costume design and editing – and under-represented in others viewed as more technical, such as those dealing with sound, music and image. Although women's participation in the main creative functions has progressed since 2012, it still represented only 29 % in all projects submitted to Eurimages in 2015. Similarly, only 27 % of eligible projects had a female director. While those projects received 29 % of the overall support granted, their average budget was 40 % lower than the budget of the projects with a male director. However,

low funding perpetuates the scarcity of female-directed films in circulation, affecting in turn the markets' willingness to invest and thus creating a vicious circle.

Figure 3 – Positions of women in fiction film projects receiving Eurimages funding, 2014-2015



Source: Eurimages, [Strategy 2016-2017 for gender equality in the European film industry](#), 2017.

As in other parts of the world, female directors were paid 23 % less than their male counterparts. Finally, even though there are almost as many women (44 %) as men (56 %) directors [graduating](#) from film schools, the average proportion of female directors in the industry is just under 20 %.

Support for European female filmmakers

Achieving a gender balance within the European film industry is not an aim in itself. The basic rationale behind this requirement is that more women in key positions will in turn lead to better conditions for women in the industry and will likely help guarantee diversity in stories and perspectives being portrayed on the cinema screen. However, as shown, the sheer scale of gender inequalities is such that awareness-raising actions alone seem unlikely to bring about substantial change. It appears therefore essential that proactive solutions be proposed to start redressing the imbalances with the aim of achieving a widespread and lasting improvement.

European Parliament

Despite the EU's commitment to equality between men and women, the Parliament [acknowledges](#) that there is still a gap in the legislation on non-discrimination against women and gender equality, notably in terms of social security, employment and wages. The Parliament supports stepping up the implementation of the existing legislation in these areas and bringing in new legislation. However, considering the slow progress in narrowing the [gender pay gap](#) in the EU (which still stood at over 16 % in 2017), together with ineffective enforcement of existing provisions, the Parliament has [consistently asked](#) the European Commission to present proposals for better implementation and effective means of enforcement, including mandatory pay audits for large companies.



Turning political discourse into action, the Parliament has been steadily supporting the dissemination of film productions directed by women or portraying strong and inspiring female characters through its [LUX Film Prize](#). Over the past 11 years, the prize has helped promote more than 100 films. In its 12 editions since its creation in 2007, the prize has been awarded to five women, thus nearly achieving equality. Many other of the winning films, such as 'Woman at war' or 'Ida', tell the stories of strong women and inspiring role-models (see box). More importantly, the overwhelming success of these films at international film festivals refutes claims that selecting films

directed by women involves a lowering of standards, as has been [implied](#) by sources wishing to justify their marginalisation.

Examples of LUX Prize winners' success stories

[Woman at war](#) (2018) Benedikt Erlingsson (Iceland, France, Ukraine)
Lux Prize 2018

[Sami blood](#) (2017) Amanda Kernell (Sweden, Norway, Denmark)
Lux Prize 2017 and nine other international film awards

[Toni Erdmann](#) (2016) Maren Ade (Germany, Austria)
Lux Prize 2016 and 30 other international film awards; nominated for the Palme d'Or 2016, Golden Globes 2017 and Academy Awards 2017

[Mustang](#) (2015), Deniz Gamze Ergüven (France, Germany, Turkey)
Lux Prize 2015 and 20 other international film awards; nominated for Oscars and Golden Globes

[Ida](#) (2013) Pawel Pawlikowski (Poland, Denmark)
Lux Prize 2014, Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film 2015, and 62 other international film awards

[Io sono Li](#) (2012), Andrea Segre (Italy, France)
Lux Prize 2012 and two other international film awards

[When we leave](#) (2010), Feo Aladag (Germany)
Lux Prize 2010, Best Film at the 2010 Tribeca Film Festival

The quality of films directed by women has also been evidenced by [research](#) carried out in seven EU countries from 2006 to 2013.³ Taking 2013 as a reference year, the results showed that overall, a higher proportion of such films participated both in national and international festivals and won more awards than films directed by men (see Figure 4). In spite of this, films directed by women were significantly under-represented at A-list festivals.

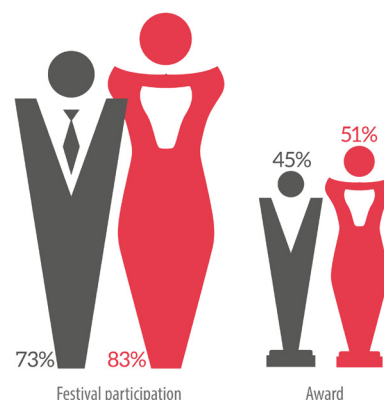
European Commission

The Commission provides funding for the development, promotion and distribution of European works through the [Media strand of Creative Europe](#) – the EU's programme supporting culture and the audiovisual sectors.

The Media [monitoring report](#) for 2017 ascertains that the Commission is fully committed to bringing gender equality to the fore. The executive has already started gathering data and measuring women's participation in key positions in supported projects. The results show that the presence of women in Media-supported projects is as low as in the EU film industry in general. In specific terms, only 29 % of directors and 37 % of scriptwriters in 2017 were women. Interestingly, women's participation in training schemes was much higher – 54 %.

The monitoring report argues that the success rate of projects submitted by a woman director/ scriptwriter is an indicator of the absence of negative gender bias in the selection process. Indeed, in 2017, these projects represented 36 % of all projects submitted but in spite of that were proportionately more successful, since they accounted for 41 % of all selected projects. The Commission is currently considering specific ways of ensuring a more gender-balanced provision of support.

Figure 4 – Gender share of overall festival participation and awards



Source: European Women's Audiovisual Network, [Where are the women directors in European films?](#), 2015.

Council of Europe

Based on statistical findings and in line with the Sarajevo Declaration (see box) highlighting the need to reduce inequalities in the European audiovisual sector, Eurimages has committed to reinforcing a [gender equality perspective](#) in its policies and measures and to achieving equal distribution of co-production funding between women and men by the year 2020; it currently [exhibits](#) a 38 % rate in this respect.⁴

In 2016, Eurimages introduced the [Audentia Best Female Director Prize](#) – worth €30 000 – to be awarded at a different international film festival each year. Other actions include using a Bechdel test for Eurimages' script-readers where possible; requesting information about the gender composition of the full cast and crew at the submission stage; encouraging filmmakers to be more sensitive to the representation of women on screen; organising quarterly master classes for female filmmakers throughout Europe; and offering [scholarships](#) to encourage female directors.

National approaches

The approaches [chosen](#) by the various national film institutions differ widely, but can nevertheless be divided into three groups (see Figure 5). Research shows that this classification broadly mirrors the state of gender equality at national level as reflected by the [European index on gender equality](#) (2017).

Proactive policies

Some EU countries have embraced proactive approaches. They usually start by implementing broader measures aiming to encourage a change in mentality and, at a later stage, they often introduce quotas and/or other quantifiable objectives.

Sweden is the leading EU country in terms of [regulatory policies](#). In 2013, it focused on the aim of attaining an even gender distribution – 50/50 in terms of production funding. Other countries, such as **Ireland**, chose to implement [measures](#) encouraging women filmmakers to apply for funding. The **UK** has shown a similar intent. In its [Diversity Standards](#) programme, the British Film Institute declared an intention of allocating 50 % of public funding to women by 2020. The **Danish** Film Institute has appointed a [working group](#) to ensure progress and specific efforts in this area.

The **Spanish** [Ley del Ciné](#) (Cinema Law, 2007) requires gender equality within selection and funding committees, among director and screenwriter(s), and in the distribution of roles. As of 2017, the **Netherlands** has also started implementing a system of [selection criteria](#) for funding, to evaluate not only the quality of the project but also its potential contribution to diversity. Likewise, the **Polish** Film Institute introduced gender equality [objectives](#) in its committees of experts in 2017. **Austria** started implementing [gender budgeting](#)⁵ in 2015. Even though this measure is not specifically aimed at the film industry, it still has a substantial indirect impact.

In **France**, several measures are expected [to enter into force](#) in 2019. The most tangible one is the creation of a bonus of 15 % to support projects featuring a gender-balanced crew in the managerial positions. Similarly, gender statistics will be made mandatory and all French film companies will have to adhere to a charter of good practices covering matters such as decision-making powers,

Sarajevo gender equality declaration

In 2015, representatives of European film funds and ministries of culture adopted a declaration embracing gender equality in the industry during the Sarajevo Film Festival. The declaration was the result of a high-level [conference](#) entitled 'Women in today's European film industry: Gender matters. Can we do better?' Participants committed to supporting the efforts undertaken by Eurimages to collect and analyse data on the presence of women in projects applying for co-production support. Similarly, they called on the Council of Europe to encourage its member countries to implement policies to reduce the gender imbalance in the European audiovisual industry, notably through enhancing women's access to key decision-making posts and within selection panels, juries, festivals and educational institutions, in particular by improving prospects for women and by encouraging experienced directors and producers to act as role models and inspire younger generations.

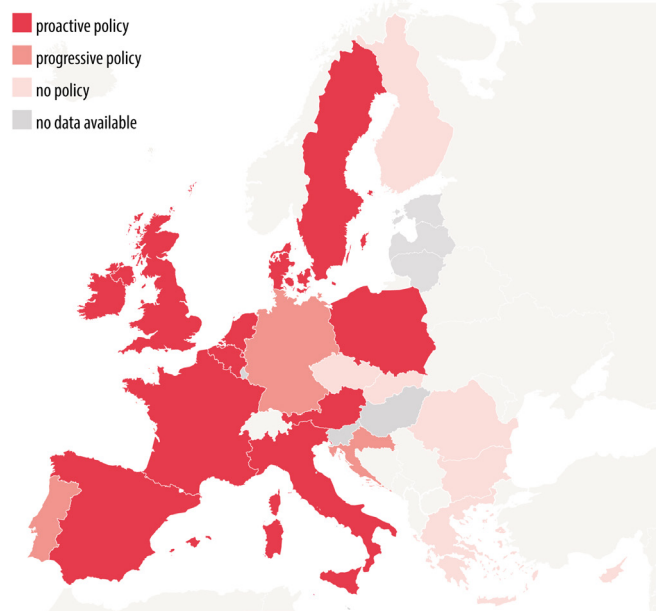
salaries, and the fight against harassment. Finally, an increasing share of women's films will undergo restoration and will be digitised.

Progressive policies

The second group consists of countries in which gender equality is part of long-term cultural policies seeking to encourage diversity in general and aiming to achieve a fundamental change in society as a whole. These policies do not have any quantifiable objectives, but rather aim to raise awareness on the issue.

A good example in this regard is the amended **German** Federal Film Funding Act (2017), which contains a general paragraph on [gender equality](#) and the composition of committees. However, it does not set mandatory quantifiable objectives and in this sense is more of a long-term incentivising policy. The policies of two other EU countries – Croatia and Portugal – fall in this group, together with the gender equality policies and measures advocated by the EU.

Figure 5 – Types of policies pursued in the EU



Source: Le Lab 'Femmes de cinema', [Emergence of a new generation of female film directors](#), 2017.

No policies

Finally, some countries do not have specific policies in favour of women filmmakers. These include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Finland.

Lessons from Sweden: gender equality not just a matter of fairness but also of quality

Incremental steps

The Swedish Film Institute's work on gender equality has largely been made possible by Sweden's efforts in this area since the mid-1970s.

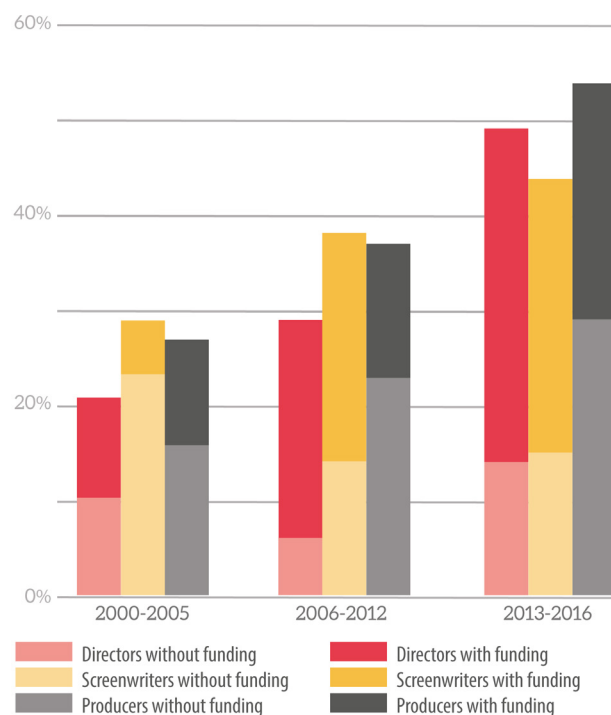
Many of the [reforms](#) shaping the backbone of today's gender equality policy were introduced during that period. Debates were held on issues ranging from the equal value, rights and obligations of men and women, to separate taxation (a method where a husband and wife are treated as separate individuals for the purpose of computing income tax), gender-neutral parental pay, and extended child care systems. While these reforms facilitated women's access to the labour market, gender division became even more conspicuous. Women were limited to public sector jobs, while men had a choice of various private and corporate sector jobs. This perpetuated gender division but shifted the confrontation venue from society as a whole to the workplace.

Throughout the 1980s, statistics were gathered in a more systematic way, and in the 1990s, it became obvious that finding funding for women's film projects was very difficult (in 1999, the proportion of female fiction projects receiving funding was respectively 17 % for directors, 19 % for screenwriters, and 25 % for producers).

In 2000, the government formally tasked the Swedish Film Institute to work towards greater gender equality and to monitor the progress of female film projects funded through the Institute. Thus, gender equality started emerging in the Swedish film industry through its inclusion into the Film Agreement – a cooperation tool facilitating working relations between the film industry and its various players, such as producers, distributors and cinema owners on the one hand, and the government on the other.

A specific gender equality goal was added in 2006, stating that production funding for the key positions of producer, director and scriptwriter should be allocated on a 40/60 ratio for films funded through the Film Institute. This measure rested on the premise that the greater number of women participating in film projects would ultimately lead to more equal working conditions. However, the Film Institute also strived primarily to ensure that film projects receiving funding were of high quality.

Figure 5 – Proportion of fiction films with a woman in a key role, with or without funding from the Swedish Film Institute, 2000-2016



Source: European Film Agency Research Network, [Research highlights](#), 2018.

Achievements

In 2013, the Film Institute was tasked with attaining the desirable aim of an even gender distribution – 50/50. This was eventually achieved in 2016 for nearly all types of funding (see Figure 5). Quite unsurprisingly, the chart shows that for all three key roles – screenwriter (44 %), director (49 %), and producer (54 %) – support has been more equally distributed for films funded through the Film Institute. A quick comparison between the 2006-2012 and the 2013-2016 periods indicates that support for women directors funded through the Institute has increased substantially, from 29 % to 49 %. Interestingly, a positive evolution is also taking shape for films funded outside the Institute, most notably for producers – from 23 % to 29 % – even though not at the same pace as for films supported by the Institute.

The Film Institute acknowledges that decisions to use gender equality quotas often morph into discussions about quality or the lack of it. However, if the gender equality goal has not been achieved, the Institute would have considered using quotas. Sweden has nevertheless consistently shown that with a methodical and systematic approach it is possible to achieve gender equality without compromising quality.

Critical acclaim

The three titles with the highest average review rating by Swedish critics in the past 10 years were all directed by women: *Sámi Blood* (2017) by Amanda Kernell, *The Reunion* (2013) by Anna Odell, and *She Monkeys* (2011) by Lisa Aschan. Several Swedish women directors have taken part in international film festivals to critical acclaim. Amanda Kernell's *Sámi Blood* has been awarded nine international prizes, among which the 2017 LUX Film Prize. In 2017, Niki Lindroth von Bahr won the

short film award for *The Burden* at the Toronto Film Festival. In 2015, two Crystal Bears went to Beata Gårdeler and Sanna Lenken respectively for *Flocking* and *My Skinny Sister* at the Berlin Film Festival.

Similarly, the percentage of women directors receiving funding from the Institute's international co-production funds has doubled from 2013 to 2016, currently reaching some 50 %. This evolution is arguably due to the fact that women filmmakers have a greater chance of obtaining funding if they apply in Sweden than in other countries. This in turn has helped showcasing Swedish (co-)productions in leading film festivals, such as Cannes, Toronto and Berlin.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The weighted average was calculated on the basis of the number of films produced in each country.

² The calculation of the average includes data for Norway, Russia, Switzerland, and Turkey.

³ This report brings together comparative research from Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the UK.

⁴ This percentage reflects the share of total support awarded to projects directed by women and is calculated as a sliding average over the past six Eurimages decision meetings. A sliding average is a calculation allowing to analyse data points by creating a series of averages of different subsets of the full data set to smooth out short-term fluctuations.

⁵ [Gender budgeting](#) is a way for governments to promote equality through fiscal policy. It involves analysing a budget's differing impacts on men and women and allocating money accordingly, as well as setting targets and directing funds to meet them.

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