**Data and responsibility: towards a feminist methodology for producing historical data on women in the contemporary UK film industry.**

Introduction

In feminist film studies, data, historically, has had a minor but key role. Feminist film histories have pointed out that there were less than a handful women directors in mainstream Hollywood during the classical period; that the feminist film movement of the 70s was a period of high numbers of women filmmakers; and that, contrary to previous thought, the early, silent period of filmmaking was a time when women pervaded every aspect of film production, often leading the way in this new art form.[[1]](#endnote-1) As is clear from these short descriptions feminist film studies and feminist film historians have been chiefly interested in recovering women’s history, working to find the women lost to the standard histories and to insert them into that history, rewriting it, and questioning the historiographic habits of film studies.

Feminist research across all disciplines has championed the need to hear and include those whose voices have been excluded from history and marginalized in the present. Broadly, qualitative methods, such as interviews, are considered the best way for ensuring that the experiences of women - and other oppressed social groups - are heard. However, when researching specific industrial contexts we must remind ourselves that many women who could have been there are not.[[2]](#endnote-2) In, for example, labour markets where there is a gender imbalance, hearing from members of the minority group still only includes the voices and experiences of those who have had some degree of success. It does not tell us about the women who are unable to be part of that profession, the scale or reasons for their exclusion. Moreover, individuals are not always able to observe or understand wider structural problems. For example, in a study carried out by the Institute of Employment Studies, one screenwriter presented with the numbers on gender inequality said:

Isn’t that a funny old thing? I didn’t even know that because screenwriters never get to meet each other. I was surprised to hear that.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Interviews with women practitioners may even give the impression that their success is based on merit, implying that others could also have “made it” if they were good enough. In order to counter meritocratic explanations that avoid structural prejudices, we contend that, in addition to allowing women’s experiences to be heard, feminist research needs to be able to illustrate the extent of inequality, and quantitative data is best placed to do that. Through quantitative methods the missing women, whilst still not heard, can at least be made visible by their astonishing absence.

Don’t we know this already? The case for feminist data collection

Feminist activism, research, and theory has long linked the personal to the political in critiques of structural sexism but after the many legal battles won in the 60s, 70s and 80s along with the rise of women in higher education and the workforce, the postfeminist discourse of the 90s relied on the assumption that individual women’s desires, choices and behaviors were the key reasons for remaining gender inequalities. In such a context, Ann Oakley has argued that without quantitative data:

… it is difficult to distinguish between personal experience and collective oppression. Only large-scale comparative data can determine to what extent the situations of men and women are structurally differentiated.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Such a stark claim remains controversial for many and will likely sound myopic to many Humanities researchers. And yet, statistics and data have long been central for feminist research and politics. In the 19th century, feminist researchers frequently gathered statistics in order to understand social problems.[[5]](#endnote-5) In policy-orientated and advocatory research, numbers are an essential part of any argument seeking to demonstrate a need for change.[[6]](#endnote-6) Quantitative data plays an important part in consciousness-raising.[[7]](#endnote-7) Actress and campaigner Geena Davis has spoken of the surprise that often greets her researched statistics about on-screen gender inequality.[[8]](#endnote-8) Similarly, women screenwriters interviewed by Marsha McCreadie expressed disbelief on discovering their exceptional status.[[9]](#endnote-9) More recently, feminist academics Andrea O’Rielly and Angie Deveau quantified how frequently motherhood is addressed in journals, women’s studies courses and textbooks. O’Reilly talks of now having “proof” and no longer feeling “paranoid”.[[10]](#endnote-10) It is clear in all these examples that the numbers gave some sort of credibility to the inequality, made it speakable and – for some – more real.

At the same time, feminist researchers have quite rightly challenged the objectivity and singular truthfulness of quantitative research methods and drawn attention to the inbuilt bias masquerading as objectivity in masculine positivist research.[[11]](#endnote-11) Even the most scrupulous of observers can never be entirely impartial: being systematic does not eliminate social construction, and “facts” and “truths” are rarely value-free. Quantitative methods can no longer be held up as definitive or objective, but this does not necessarily devalue the results. Indeed, the need to interrogate one’s own bias and subjectivities and to acknowledge the imperfect and partial nature of any research undertaken is one of feminism’s greatest contributions to research methodology. This self-conscious reflexivity has become an essential part of any feminist research and forms the bedrock of our own approach. Feminist methodology can help us understand why it is important to continually scrutinize taken-for-granted aspects of research methods and elicit more value from them by making the politics of knowledge production transparent.

Indeed, while qualitative methods still predominate as the preferred path to undermining hegemonic structures, these too have been scrutinized and found to be not so free from hierarchical relationships and objectification of the research subject.[[12]](#endnote-12) On the whole, rejections of quantitative methods as anti-feminist no longer prevail.[[13]](#endnote-13) In this paper we argue that a feminist history is only complete with elements of both. For us, qualitative data’s micro approach can and should work in tandem with quantitative data’s macro approach to record the complexities of the social reality of inequality. Our research, compiled with Linda Ruth Williams for the publicly-funded “Calling the Shots Women and Contemporary Film Culture in the UK 2000-2015” - precisely the type of large-scale comparative data to which Ann Oakley refers - is based in a Humanities faculty[[14]](#endnote-14). The earliest agenda of our project was to find the women working in the British film industry now so that they are not lost to future histories. The data provides us with an initial mapping of the contemporary history of women in British filmmaking: to count the numbers, the Calling the Shots’s team has had to find the names, and those names will be inserted into history now. Inasmuch as the quantitative data confirms the gender inequality of the industry it also can help us tell the history of what women *do* do in British filmmaking. But as noted above, it also recognizes those women who are absent, and consequently it helps us to recognize the incompleteness of the story we will tell.

Following feminist scholars in sociology who have argued that “it’s not what you do but the way you do it that matters,” this paper describes how our team developed a feminist methodology for counting the numbers of women in the contemporary history of the UK film industry, and the public presentation and reception of our findings.[[15]](#endnote-15) Recognizing that the collection and dispersion of data are social and political processes, we consider the challenges and benefits of working with a feminist consciousness.[[16]](#endnote-16) First, we explain our guiding principles for feminist quantitative research and our constant negotiation of the limitations and blocks we came up against. We discuss how Calling the Shots’s navigation of these was informed by — and contributes to — feminist methodological approaches.

However, like Walby and Armstrong, our consciousness of responsibility does not end once the data has been collected. In the second half of the paper we turn to concerns arising from putting reports and graphs into the public sphere, where they can be misappropriated or even purposefully misread.[[17]](#endnote-17) We consider how data, when released to the public, can play a role in creating a sense of women’s absence and argue that women’s stories must be included in the public dissemination of data whenever possible in order to counteract potential defensive readings of that absence.

Methodological challenges when building the data

Calling the Shots’s quantitative and qualitative methodologies include, respectively: a) the identification of women working on British films from 2003-2015 in the roles of director, writer, producer, exec-producer, cinematographer, and editor; and b) recorded interviews with 50 women working in those roles during those years. The former is our main concern in this article, but we will discuss the role of the interviews in relation to the inability of numbers to tell a full history when we consider their dissemination in the public sphere.

Calling the Shots has multiple goals: to influence the British Film Institute’s policies on equality and diversity; to advocate specifically for women’s increased participation in the film industry; to map a history of contemporary women filmmakers in the UK; and to produce analyses of the kinds of films women do make in the British industry. The data will contribute to all these goals, alongside the 50 interviews.[[18]](#endnote-18) The interviews will be held in a permanent archive and will form the basis of our qualitative analyses of women’s contemporary filmmaking in the UK.

Our dataset is circumscribed by the list of British-qualifying films provided to us by the BFI. The choice of roles to examine was inspired by the Annual Celluloid Ceiling Report (ACCR) authored by Martha Lauzen.[[19]](#endnote-19) It was important to us to produce data that is comparable with another national context; see Walby & Armstrong and our discussion in section 2 below.[[20]](#endnote-20) Beginning in 1998, the ACCR has reported on the numbers of women working in the six key roles listed above in the top 250 films in each year. The top 250 films are defined by their domestic grosses in the United States of America, therefore not limited to American-produced films, but limited to films distributed and exhibited in the US, inevitably excluding many films produced in other national contexts. Part of the impetus for Calling the Shots is the fact that media reports on gender inequality in the UK film industry regularly refer to the ACCR as evidence without recognizing the fact that there are successful British films that never make it to the US: for example, *StreetDance 3D*, a British film directed by Dania Pasquani and Max Giwa, made £15.4 million in the UK but was never screened in the US.[[21]](#endnote-21) Such a successful film in a small country that was directed by a mixed-gender and mixed-race directing team and a woman screenwriter won’t appear in the ACCR’s report. Consequently, the ACCR’s focus on top-grossing films presents a particular data set that has circulated, in the media, as representative of more than it contains.

A growing collection of data reports on gender and racial inequality in both the production of film and television in Hollywood and their onscreen representations have been part of a rise in media attention paid to these issues in recent years.[[22]](#endnote-22) More recently, the collection of data on gender inequality in the film industry has spread to Europe, with reports on the German film industry by the University of Rostock, a multi-nation report by the European Women’s Audiovisual Network, the Directors UK report “Cut Out of the Picture”, and our own report released in May 2016.[[23]](#endnote-23) With the exception of our research, all of these focus on directors only.

In undertaking our research, Calling the Shots follows the work of Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Johanna Esseveld in applying some fundamental feminist research principles.[[24]](#endnote-24) These can be summarized as the desire to produce knowledge that can be used by women themselves, to gain this knowledge using methods that aren’t oppressive and to continue the feminist tradition of critical self-reflection of our methods of knowledge acquisition. Working within this framework, Calling the Shots applies feminist methodological principles that have predominantly grown out of arguments for qualitative participatory methods to quantitative statistical analysis. Following Ann Oakley’s attempt to “rehabilitate” quantitative methods for feminist research we are producing data that help, and can be used by, women working or wanting to work in film.[[25]](#endnote-25) Oakley describes using sociological research “in an emancipatory way, to further the political goals of feminism”.[[26]](#endnote-26) These goals for a fairer society and equal opportunities for women are at the heart of Calling the Shots. In addition our explicitly feminist methodology draws on the idea that researchers must treat their subjects as they would themselves wish to be treated, of passionate scholarship, and conscious partiality as a substitute for the rule of value-neutral research.[[27]](#endnote-27)

We also consulted the guidelines from the UK’s Office of National Statistics (ONS) for measuring the quality of statistical data, and considered their compatibility with feminist concerns.[[28]](#endnote-28) The ONS recommended gauges are: relevance, accuracy & reliability, timeliness and punctuality, accessibility and clarity, coherence and comparability. Relevance is concerned with meeting the potential needs of those who might use the data: for Calling the Shots we wanted the research to be useful to academics and filmmakers with an interest in gender equality. Balancing the needs of two different markets required careful attention, but was key for the first principle of contributing to women’s equality through knowledge production. For us, this requirement crossed over into issues of timeliness and accessibility, discussed below. Accuracy and reliability demand focus and attention to detail, but feminist methods require that dominant intellectual traditions are continually interrogated as to their inclusivity and subjectivity. Timeliness and punctuality, whilst important, must not produce discomfort for research participants. Timeliness became an important factor for us when considering the potential impact of our research and its relevance for filmmakers and policy makers. We had a unique opportunity working in 2016 to provide data on films in production during 2015, putting our results temporally ahead of all other film data, which is based on released films (meaning these films were in production during 2014 or earlier). We believed that it was important to complete this data as quickly as we could, to avoid the oft-repeated retort that the situation for women had improved in the time between the last report and the present. However, speed was problematic, as we detail further in the next section.

Considerations of accessibility and clarity were central when making Calling the Shots’s results public, as we will discuss in the second half. It chimes very strongly with the feminist principle of producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves and as such one of our primary aims was to provide clear and easily readable data. Finally coherence and compatibility, whilst not mentioned in the principles outlined by Acker et al, were for us implicit in the feminist aims to make our research accessible and useful as well as our desire to produce results that could be easily compared with other countries. The ONS concedes that there are relationships between each of the quality measures and that improvements in one can be at the detriment to another. Approaching these guidelines with a feminist consciousness allowed us to be particularly aware of these dynamics and the need to communicate any trade-offs to users of the data, and be open about how our own subjectivities played a part in decision-making.

Necessities and frustrations of circumscribing the dataset

This section both describes and interrogates the team’s path to finding a feminist method that would achieve the best realization of our collective hopes for Calling the Shots, whilst adapting to the realities of data collection that are out of our control. Datasets seem to promise definitive knowledge and inarguable facts and yet in the process of constructing our own dataset, we were constantly confronted by the limitations and omissions of our sources. Consequently, even as we sought to have a detailed and comprehensive account of the numbers of women in the UK film industry, we had to be constantly aware of how our sources (and their sources) would constrain us. Approaching our project with feminist principles made us conscious of our responsibilities, but no less at ease making the decisions with which we were presented. The BFI provided us with a list of British-qualifying feature films compiled by a contracted production tracker. We were not fully cognisant of the disparate and on-going nature of this process when beginning our research and how unstable this would make our base list of films on which we hoped to provide data and calculate results.

One early example of the sort of choices we were faced with is that the BFI’s list of films includes titles that do not currently qualify as British, but are likely to apply for qualifying status at a later point in time e.g. *Wonder Woman* and the film version of J. K. Rowling’s *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*.[[29]](#endnote-29) The reasons why some films may become British-qualifying are beyond the scope of this paper, but according to the BFI Research and Statistics Unit, if a film does not qualify under one of the UK’s bilateral co-production agreements or the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-production, it can be considered British on the basis of its content, producers, finance and talent. It is worth pausing to consider the significance of the inclusion of these future-qualifying films in the BFI dataset, as it is illustrative of the complexities we faced.

Like many of our methodological dilemmas, what is significant is that the team was presented with a decision about whether to include these films. Leaving out certain films from 2015 that were still in production or post-production, but likely to qualify as British in the near future, could mean that our reports became dated almost as soon as we had begun. On the other hand, including films from 2003 that still had not qualified seemed unnecessary, as they were unlikely to still apply for British status in 2016.[[30]](#endnote-30) Including some of these films but not others felt methodologically messy, and raised questions about where the line should be drawn. This one small consideration is illustrative of how designing a methodology for quantitative data is not a dispassionate and scientifically gaugeable process. Gut feeling, personal experience and collective agreement play a necessary role, something which chimes with feminist calls to recognise the researcher’s own role in the process.[[31]](#endnote-31) As feminists academics, the Calling the Shots team mistrust claims of certainty and totality which characterized much pre-feminist quantitative research, and here we offer an alternative method of care, attention, debate and enquiry that was to become the backbone of our feminist methodology.

On receiving a list of titles from the BFI, it was clear that we needed to communicate more precise parameters for the data. However, this triggered an unexpectedly protracted process of receiving new datasets from the BFI and subsequent frustrating delays. Each time we raised a query it resulted in a completely new dataset from the BFI, always with considerable discrepancies between the film titles, some having been removed and often many more additions. This was a key point at which feminist methodology was able to inform our considerations of validity. The mutability of the BFI’s lists brought us face to face with the impossibility of a definitive dataset. The project team met and acknowledged that the BFI’s data were, like so much data, imperfect and unstable.[[32]](#endnote-32) In wanting the research to be robust and useful, we had been seduced by the positivist traditions in quantitative research. We were concerned about the risk of losing women if the process wasn’t watertight. We desired definitive knowledge, even though our feminist teachings had warned of the impossibility. Academic writing demands a presentation of findings in a neat and ordered way, but what ellipses does this conceal?[[33]](#endnote-33) It would have been easy to believe that the changeable nature of the dataset reflected badly on the quality of our research, but in applying feminist research principles we recognised that by admitting to imperfections we were doing something far more valid: making our methods accessible and transparent. We renounced the all-powerful, all-knowing position of the positivist academic researcher and remained true to our feminist principles. Our work was clearly still valid and very useful to those interested in gender inequality. Indeed, changes in the film lists had produced very little variation in the overall results, which clearly indicated a low participation of women across the six professions. By problematizing a quantitative tradition that brushes over questions of the definitiveness of datasets we did not allow our passionate feminist research to be derailed. Although a stable, definitive dataset is impossible, it does not invalidate overall discernable patterns.

Dilemmas of labelling others in the search for robust data on inequalities

Embarking on data collection the Calling the Shots team has frequently found itself in discomfort as conscientious feminist researchers. The process is extremely monotonous and raises questions about how proving inequality through data gathering is a gendered task, and just how many numbers are required to make equality happen? Indeed, in the past the gathering of statistics was considered feminine work because of women’s supposed “tolerance for painstaking, tedious work.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Paradoxically, doing research on women in the British film industry is mostly about men in the British film industry, since they make up the majority of workers in the six key roles, and their details are required for comparison.

Finding biographical information for all the workers in our key roles requires searching through numerous resources, though we tend to start with the IMDb (International Movie Database). Where the information is not available on the IMDb itself, there are often links to other web pages and company details that can be used to further investigate. Frequently, however, it is necessary to visit multiple sites to obtain all the information for the project. These include, but are not limited to: Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, production listings sites, on-line newspaper and magazine articles, film company websites, and personal contacts. In some cases the challenge is to verify information as referring to the same individual, for example by looking at their personal or work histories, or photographs. In more than a few cases, this protracted process does not result in any concrete data at all and the fields are left blank.

Despite this commitment and rigor, using sources other than the person themselves to assign gender, race and nationality labels is of course problematic and puts the researcher in a position of significant power. Geof Wood contends that classifying others is a fundamental human instinct. As feminists we are aware that the process is one that risks normalizing and essentializing. Wood argues that:

Essentially the *power* of labelling and categorization is a dialogue between those in authority … and those trying to activate rights or make claims on those with the power and authority to dispose of matching resources and services.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Although working in a different field, Wood’s ideas are applicable here since one of the purposes of Calling the Shots is to encourage those with the authority and means to redistribute film finance in a way that is more equitable. By predominantly using resources such as the IMDb and social media, which have a large element of user-generated identity markers, we seek to reproduce the identity labels that individuals assign to themselves and thereby “read” an individual’s gender, race and nationality in the same way that potential employers would.

In the majority of cases, gender and race is initially read from photographs, although use of gendered pronouns and race identification can be found in biographies, news articles and interviews. This does not allow for a nuanced accommodation of the societal construction “woman” and “race” and how they are differently salient in different contexts.[[36]](#endnote-36) For nationality, the main difficulty is to include recognition of residency, i.e. when someone born outside the UK is living and working within the country, paying taxes and entitled to benefits. As Calling the Shots is unable to obtain details of official right-to-reside status for all non-British workers in our sample, residency can usually be identified through addresses, spouse nationality and work history.

As intersectional feminists, we would ideally have liked to include a range of gender options into our data.[[37]](#endnote-37) One clear limitation of quantitative data is the lack of room to discuss social constructions of gender and other identity markers, or the limited options that might be available to some. However, our primary concern is how an individual’s presentation of themselves is read by others. Therefore our priority was to identify those who present as a woman, and this includes both transgender and cis women and takes no account of sexual preferences. Our gender categories are woman, man, gender non-conforming and “unknown”, which is used when gender cannot be identified. So far we have found only one openly gender non-conforming individual, signalling, perhaps, the compounded prejudices they face in getting work and being open at work.

Calling the Shots aims to highlight the extremely low inclusion of women of colour in the film labour market as they are so often overlooked in diversity discussions.[[38]](#endnote-38) It has been a recent priority for public film funding in the UK to address racial inequality.[[39]](#endnote-39) Although the process of assigning race is incredibly problematic, as discussed below, it is still more frequently measured and straightforward to methodologise than other axes of inequality.[[40]](#endnote-40) In order to get a clearer picture of racial inequality in the British film industry, the team also decided to record nationality. This made possible distinctions between, for example, British people of Indian heritage and Indian people living and working outside the UK. It also allows for a complication of the category “white”. Since the white Caucasian category encompasses individuals who may be othered by sections of the British population (e.g. those of Middle Eastern origin), the data capture the degree of participation from these communities.

The racial categories that we applied are defined by the Commission for Racial Equality.[[41]](#endnote-41) The small number of individuals working in the film industry made it necessary to aggregate the sub-categories even though this can lead to obscuring of important differences.[[42]](#endnote-42) As a result we employ the CRE main categories. These are White, Mixed, Asian, Black and Chinese. The numbers for women are so low in the last four categories that presentation of data to wider audiences often requires a further aggregation of these, which risks normalizing “whiteness.”[[43]](#endnote-43) We acknowledge that our data may include individuals who disagree with the labels that they have been given, but hope that this is a small minority - if any - and welcome feedback and corrections. Furthermore, because our aim is to identify patterns of exclusion and structural inequality, it is possible to accommodate small variations or inaccuracies as they do not significantly alter the overall results. Whilst acutely sensitive to feminist concerns about objectification in research, our methodology for our quantitative data is focused on the possibilities for social justice provided by large-scale measures of continued inequality.

Everybody needs to know this: matters of impact and interpretation.

This final section is a feminist reading of what happens to quantitative data when it is published, and a consideration of how it can write history, even if that was not the intent. The imperative for, and the difficulties of, the intersection of politics and research and/or activism and research for feminist academics has been an important discussion for feminists working within the academy.[[44]](#endnote-44) More recently in the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (the national system for assessing the quality of research in the UK higher education system) introduced the criteria of “research impact,” requiring research prove its “social and economic impact” on public life in the areas of “public policy, cultural impact and improving quality of life.”[[45]](#endnote-45) In the midst of debates about the lack of clarity on what “impact” is, how it will be assessed, and what it means for scholars in the Humanities to achieve research impact, scholars in sociological disciplines have written about how feminist researchers have and can take a lead in shaping and modelling “impact”.[[46]](#endnote-46) Calling the Shots includes both qualitative and quantitative methods because we believe both are required for intellectually rigorous and self-consciously feminist outcomes. Though we have a variety of plans for achieving and measuring impact, dissemination of the research to the public is a necessary starting point and we will focus on two ways that Calling the Shots made public its first report and the outcomes.

Calling the Shots sent out its first full report to newspapers and online media outlets, along with a press release highlighting the headline statistics. Articles and news items on our report reached double figures and were published in places such as *The Guardian*, *Women and Hollywood*, and *The Huffington Post*. All of these outlets reported on our research accurately, without distorting the figures. Some allowed public responses on articles and with a close analysis of comments on the report in *The Guardian* we want to consider the ways that data on gender inequality in the public sphere seems to invite members of the public (particularly, though by no means exclusively, men) to speak against the standard interpretation that the data shows a problem that should be rectified. In the context of British politics academic Joni Lovenduski rhetorically asks, “Who opposes increases in women’s political [insert other institutions/industries here] representation?”[[47]](#endnote-47) A similar range of her types of opponents - from the uninterested to the actively oppositional - appear in the comments to *The Guardian* article on our report. A look at some of these and the discussion that ensued offers some perspective on how data can be misinterpreted, misread and misunderstood in the process of dissemination.

In her research on broadcasters’ justifications for gender inequality on the radio, Ros Gill uses discourse analysis to identify four key forms of explanation for gender inequality in their industry.[[48]](#endnote-48) Three of these apply directly to *The Guardian* commenters’ objections to our research and help illuminate how data on gender inequality can be re-interpreted or wilfully misread in order to reject and dismiss the clear structural problem that the data shows:

The first justification is that “women don’t apply”. This was a common refrain by the commenters that can be seen in the two examples below:

Was there a concurrent study to ascertain how many women wanted to be production personnel working on UK films in 2015? evilbuttmunkeh[[49]](#endnote-49)

I’m really not trying to be offensive, but surely the main statistic would only be meaningful if equal numbers of men and women actually wanted or tried to get jobs in film? And we don’t know that, do we?... Well, I’m puzzled. The grandly-titled ‘Chief Executive of Women in Film and Television’ says “Equal numbers of men and women enter this industry”, but the headline says only 20% are female. So which is it? It can’t be both. Bobby\_Chariot[[50]](#endnote-50)

The question from evilbuttmunkeh succinctly and pointedly suggests that not enough women want a career in film, implying clearly that the low numbers of women in film production simply reflect the number of women who choose the film industry as a career and that structural inequality can be explained away by women’s choices. Bobby\_Chariot echoes this sentiment and then uses the tautological argument that the low numbers in production falsify the claim that equal numbers enter the industry and then, that the low numbers in production must be a result of the unequal numbers entering the industry. Both commenters pick up on an absence of contextual information and additional data that might have staved off their criticisms.[[51]](#endnote-51)

The second justification is that audience preferences and tastes explain the inequality:

Why would you decide to hire inferior people because they have a twig and berries if the superior wonder woman would do a better job and make you more money?

This sounds like the gamer gate situation, certain women moaning that the ladies never get a chance when it reality the stuff they were producing just wasn’t very good and no one wanted to buy it. Socialistforever[[52]](#endnote-52)

This response attempts to account for gender inequality by displacing it onto quality and financial success, ultimately putting the blame on audiences not wanting the kinds of films women are making. This justification is a common discourse amongst film studio executives, producers and financers, despite evidence that clearly shows films with more diverse casts and crews make a better return on investment.[[53]](#endnote-53) Socialistforever’s argument is based on the assumption that the film industry is a meritocracy even though a lack of critical or commercial success does not impede men in furthering their film directing careers to the same extent that it does for women.[[54]](#endnote-54)

The third type of justification for inequality is “gender differences”. In Gill’s research these differences are focused around qualities and skills required to do the job.[[55]](#endnote-55) In the comments on our report, the difference is one of life choice:

At some point we are going to have to address, as adults, the fact that many women LIKE to take time off to raise families. They CHOOSE to prioritise their children over their work. One of the reasons they are able to make this choice is because they have a partner (usually male) who will provide for them.

This simple arrangement, that happens everyday and everywhere, is treated as heresy by some. Moog[[56]](#endnote-56)

Though framed in the postfeminist language of choice and individualism, the accounting for women’s lack of representation in the film industry is also implicitly steeped in biology, and essentialist notions of women’s desire to prioritize motherhood over all else. Some additional data on the numbers of women working in casting, makeup, costuming, and other production roles dominated by women might have given context to counter Moog’s claims that motherhood keeps women from working on films.[[57]](#endnote-57) However, without further discussion of the gendering of workforces, working practices, childcare expenses and gendered cultural expectations more data would likely not have been enough to convince Moog that biology and an essentialised desire for motherhood do not explain the lack of women working in the industry.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Moreover, such evidence might have been given a response like the one below in which the commenter references the apparent marginalization of men in other industries to deflect and dismiss the data on women’s inequality, allowing the commenter to say freely (and with some vitriol) that the problem is all women’s fault:

How many midwives are men? Apparently according to the Telegraph only about 100. And my point is? Well I'm not sure, but it does get tedious when women drone on and on about inequality in employment despite the legal protection now provided. If more women want to get into the film industry, or any other industry for that matter, then get off your rear ends and fight for what you want, don't just expect someone else to sort it out for you (usually a man maybe??) petepcj[[59]](#endnote-59)

This commenter utilizes misogynistic language to make his point, saying that women “drone on” and that they should not expect a man to fix their problems for them. Language like this runs throughout most of the comments, suggesting that women expect men to take care of them financially, that they “moan” and that when they hold a “grand” title, it is inevitably undeserved (according to the ironic tone used by Bobby\_Chariot above).

We are highly aware that these comments are mild compared to abuse and threats that feminist activists receive on social media, but we do see them as part of women’s widespread experience of gendertrolling online.[[60]](#endnote-60) As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate Miltner argue, studies and analyses of what they call “networked misogyny” explain it away by focusing on anonymity, technical structures and policies, and insufficient legal frameworks.[[61]](#endnote-61) It has become too easy to dismiss networked misogyny as something that is not real (by virtue of being online) and should be ignored, but this misses and dismisses the reality that “misogyny is not only widespread and deeply entrenched in Western culture, it is naturalized”.[[62]](#endnote-62) In such a cultural context, it seems highly unlikely that any data on gender inequality in the film industry can be made public without receiving a deluge of sexist responses. Even as Calling the Shots accepts the incompleteness and instability of data, we are confident that the numbers show a pattern of inequality that must be addressed. And yet, the data circulates in an historical moment when popular feminism and popular misogyny, as Banet-Weiser and Miltner describe, co-exist and clash, and that a “fear of female encroachment” pervades the gendertrolling responses to women who speak out about sexism.[[63]](#endnote-63) It is also important for us to note, as Alison Phipps does, that feminist academics can also be on the sharp end of gendertrolling and popular misogyny, and that for feminist academics in the UK researching and working under HEFCE’s impact agenda, “impact is not neutral”.[[64]](#endnote-64) At this historical moment when fourth-wave feminism, networked misogyny, and the impact agenda intersect, we must recognize that any form of feminist research that seeks to intervene in sexist culture may come with a price.

In a more targeted dissemination of our results, we reached out to members of the British film industry and interested members of the public by hosting an event in collaboration with the BFI. Every attendee was given a printed copy of our 2015 report. More than 100 people attended, a third of whom were invited guests from the film industry and academia, whilst the rest applied for free tickets through the BFI. In this way we could ensure some influential film financiers and distributors saw our research, but there was opportunity for those who did not hold such a position and yet had a keen interest in the status of women in film to also participate. Those in attendance included students, filmmakers, studio and broadcaster executives, BFI staff, and interested members of the public.

The Calling the Shots team gave a presentation that contextualized the report and highlighted its findings. In that forum, we were able to include qualitative data alongside the numbers by showing clips from completed interviews. We also organized a panel of women in the field who responded to the report (including film financiers and film makers). We moderated an open discussion, followed by a period of networking that allowed for individual discussion of the project’s findings and their impact. Though there was considerable - and passionate - debate amongst the panellists and the audience about what kind of action was needed in response to the report, no one queried or criticized the research itself. In-person comments at the time, as well as post-event direct emails and tweets invariably described the event and our report as “informative, stimulating, passionate, inspiring.”

This is clearly in sharp contrast to the responses that we were aware of to the wider publication of the report in traditional and social media outlets. Although there may have been many who read the news reports and responded similarly to our event attendees, there was no communication of this to us. Despite some comments on *The Guardian* article defending our report and contesting the negative responses, it was easy to see how others might be put off from making positive comments in a public forum where they were likely to receive dismissive or unkind replies:

In a minute someone will come with some logic and you'll run away as normal.

Moog[[65]](#endnote-65)

Furthermore, some of the attendees were affiliated with Directors UK and EWA and Raising Films, all organizations producing data and striving to improve the representation of women amongst filmmakers in the UK. One key benefit of the event is that all of these groups have become mutually supportive of each other.

It is important to recognize that the positive environment and experience of this event is undoubtedly due to the audience comprising individuals invested in equality and diversity in the film industry, a consequence of our guest list as well as the inevitable self-selection of attendees who chose to come to an event clearly billed as having an agenda to improve gender equality in UK filmmaking. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority were women, although we anticipated this and targeted men working in the industry for our guest list. Public dissemination of data cannot rely on such a welcoming audience invested in the research agenda and the project’s goals. We did offer to be interviewed by those interested in our press release, and this might have provided on opportunity to contextualize and complicate the numbers, but unfortunately no one took us up on that offer. The contrast between the two experiences clearly illustrates both the power and the limitations of quantitative data, and why we advocate as feminists for allied qualitative research to be carried out.

Feminist data and constructing women’s history

The growth in inequality and diversity data collection outlined in the beginning of this article has created a collective critical voice, and all of these reports, whether produced by academics at universities or by para-industry institutions, have been advocates in various ways (e.g. advising film studios, collaborating with national film institutes) for institutional change in order to push for gender and racial equality in the film industries. Yet, the main finding of all these reports is that little to nothing has changed in the last fifteen years. The latest Hollywood Diversity Report from the Bunche Center was secondarily titled “Busine$$ as Usual?”[[66]](#endnote-66) Nearly all media stories on the latest USC Diversity in Entertainment report highlighted little to no change in the representation of women and persons of colour in film and television. The EWA report shows that there has been no change in the percentage of independent British films directed by women in their research period of 2006-2014; the Rostock report shows the same for Germany; and Calling the Shots’s research shows that the number of women working across all six roles in the UK industry has improved by 2% only (from 18 to 20) between 2003 and 2015. The longest annually released report, the ACCR, shows that the number of women working in the six key roles is 17% in 2016, exactly the same as the first report in 1998 with only very small movements up and down in between those years.[[67]](#endnote-67)

In addition to serving as the basis for advocacy, all these reports are establishing a history of women’s participation in film production and on screen representation. Not only has there been little progress, but the numbers are vastly out of proportion with the population at large. The gender demographics at universities and in the professions of Law and Medicine have changed; women are attending university in higher rates than men and are becoming lawyers and doctors at rates that have put them above 30 per cent.[[68]](#endnote-68) These changes in professional careers, though still tempered by the wage gap and the abysmally low numbers of women in senior roles, show the disparity in the film industry to be particularly striking. According to the data, the main plot of the twenty-first century history of women’s filmmaking so far is one of pervasive absence and exclusion: this is an important part of this history that must be told. However, as we’ve argued, it is not the whole story, and we seek to tell the rest as best we can with the qualitative data.

As is explained above, our dataset is circumscribed by the BFI’s own set of rules as to what counts as a British film. Consequently, not every film that might be seen by audiences or its filmmakers as British will be on it. It is our hypothesis that women filmmakers in particular may get lost in this pre-written history, and therefore we recognize that the way our dataset constructs the contemporary history of women’s filmmaking in the UK is already limited by an “official” history constructed by a public institution and its agendas. Conscious of this problem, we have found that the recorded interviews that Calling the Shots also conducts allow us not only to record and archive women’s stories of working in film, but give us names and stories of other women who are contributing to British film now, but cannot be found on the BFI list. Amy Mathieson is one such woman. Mathieson made a film called *1 Way Up*.[[69]](#endnote-69) It is a 3D feature documentary about the Peckham BMX club. She happened to start filming the cycling team as a few members were rising through the competitions to the world championships. It premiered in London at Clapham Picturehouse, was bought by MTV, and aired in the United States.

Mathieson and her film are not on the BFI’s list. Calling the Shots found her through the qualitative element of our research: we were given her name by a screenwriter we interviewed early on in the project. The interview was conducted at a time after the successes of her film had died down and the next one didn’t seem very clearly on the horizon. Mathieson is another example of the ways that our work on women’s contemporary film history in the UK is always unfinished and incomplete; no matter how robust out data, there will be more “Amys” to find.

Conclusion

Statistics are famously difficult to differentiate from “lies” and can be used to prove almost anything.[[70]](#endnote-70) There is frequently more than one way to present numbers. Ben Roberts, Director of the BFI Film Fund recently claimed that “consistently half of the film producers we work with are women”, but this is not reflected in the data the BFI have given us.[[71]](#endnote-71) If both statistics are accurate, it raises questions about whether women producers have a harder time getting their films into production, something not discussed by Roberts. On the other hand, actress Geena Davis, who has campaigned for gender equality on screen for many years, is frequently quoted as referencing a report on gendered perceptions that appears impossible to track down.[[72]](#endnote-72) A debate on Twitter suggests it may not exist.[[73]](#endnote-73) It is likely that Davis’s claims are based on her own commissioned research on the gender ratios of animated film characters but it also demonstrates the way that numbers can provide attention-grabbing headlines that have a powerful *implication* of factualness.[[74]](#endnote-74)

As feminist academics we are cautious of “truth” claims or assertions that “our data is better than your data,” but in this paper we have argued that quantitative data has an important role to play in bringing to light the history of women’s participation in, and exclusion from, film work. Furthermore we demonstrate how feminist epistemological concerns provide a methodological framework for ensuring quantitative research is rigorous, flexible, and aware of its own limitations. The methodological approach for Calling the Shots has been one of openness, discussion and consideration: of others and of any decision made. Building on the work done by feminist academics before us, we have arrived at a methodology for quantitative research in film histories that is defined by three key elements. First it must seek to provide indicators of structural inequality not always readable from individual accounts. Secondly it should acknowledge imperfections and the impossibility of definitive knowledge claims whilst still granting the value of the data. Finally, it can only be properly understood alongside additional context and personal accounts. Without this, quantitative data showing varying participation by gender is open to misinterpretations, whether willful or accidental. Numbers on their own run the risk of contributing to neoliberal or post-feminist assumptions of women’s disinterest, personal choice or market preferences, as we have demonstrated. The research generated through Calling the Shots will provide evidence of women participating in key creative roles in the UK film industry, and challenge assumptions about their disinterest or capability. More crucially, to be able to share evidence that the number of women participating in key creative roles has not changed in any meaningful way over the last two decades can challenge claims made by film funders, such as Ben Roberts’s mentioned above, and forces the conversation around equality to move forward and address why this is still happening.

Finally, we would argue that data on gender and racial inequality in the film industry (and any future research on other marginalized identities) should contribute to the writing of film history. The collection of women’s names, roles and films will be a key source for planned books on the contemporary history of women’s work in the British film industry. This is an important way of counteracting the perception that because women are underrepresented in filmmaking, what they do make is insignificant or not influential. Our data, within data protection guidelines, will be made available to future researchers so that the women whom we have found do not become lost to history and our feminist counterparts of the future have a resource with which to start, though one which will leave them with plenty of gaps and omissions to fill.

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2. . In *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), Virginia Woolf contends that there are women who have contributed to culture but been forgotten because they are women, and there are women who could have but were never able to contribute to culture because they are women. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Alice Sinclair, Emma Pollard, and Helen Wolfe. “Scoping Study into the Lack of Women Screenwriters in the UK” (Report produced for UK Film Council, 2006) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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5. . Shulamit Reinharz, “Neglected voices and excessive demands in feminist research.” *Qualitative Sociology* 16 (1993): 69-76. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Jacqueline Scott, “Quantitative methods and gender inequalities.” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13, no.3 (2010): 223-236. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld. “Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research” in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, ed. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook. (Indiana University Press. 1991), 133-153. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
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11. . Maria Mies, *Towards a methodology of women's studies*. (No.77. 1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . See for example Christina Hughes and Rachel Lara Cohen, “Feminists really do count: the complexity of feminist methodologies”. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13 (3) (2010): 189-196, Ann Oakley, 1981; see also “Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms.” In *Doing feminist research*, ed by Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981) and Acker et al, “Objectivity and Truth.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Oakley, “Paradigm Wars” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
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15. . Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton, and Linda Regan. “Researching Women's Lives or Studying Women's Oppression? Reflections on What Constitutes Feminist Research.” In *Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, ed. M Maynard and J Purvis, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
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17. . Sylvia Walby, “Measuring women's progress in a global era.” *International Social Science Journal* 57 (184) (2005): 371-387. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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19. . Latest report: Martha Lauzen, “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2016” accessed on February 13, 2017: <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2016_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Walby and Armstrong, “Measuring equalities.” [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . *StreetDance 3D*, directed by Max Giwa and Dania Pasquini, written by Jane English. (2010, Vertigo). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Attention to gender inequality in the film industry must also be attributed to Melissa Silverstein’s founding of the Women and Hollywood blog in 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Elizabeth Prommer and Skadi Loist, “Who Directs German Feature Films? Gender Report: 2009-2013” (Insititute for Media Research at the University of Rostock, 2015); Holly Aylett, “Where Are the Woman Directors? Report on gender equality for directors in the European film industry 2006-2013” (European Women's Audiovisual Network, 2016); Stephen Follows and Alexis Kreager. “Cut Out of the Picture: what directors think about gender inequality” (London: Directors UK, 2016); “Calling the Shots: women working in key roles on UK films in production during 2015” available on the website: <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/cswf/project/number_tracking.page>? [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
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27. . Ibid; Barbara Du Bois, “Passionate Scholarship--Notes on Values, Knowing and Method in Feminist Social Science.” (1979); Mies, *Towards a methodology.* [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
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32. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . Stanley and Wise, “Feminist Research” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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39. . See for example Emma Pollard, Elaine Sheppard, Penny Tamkind, and Robert Barkworth, “Researching the Independent Production Sector: a Focus on Minority Ethnic Led Companies.” (Report for PACT and UK Film Council, 2004), Reena Bhavnani, “Barriers to Diversity in Film” (Report for UK Film Council, 2007) and Channel 4 360 Degrees Diversity Charter 2015, accesssed November 30 2016, <http://www.channel4.com/media/documents/corporate/diversitycharter/Channel4360DiversityCharterFINAL.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
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41. . “Categories for ethnic monitoring.” (The Commission for Racial Equality, 2001) accessed November 30 2016, <http://miris.eurac.edu/mugs2/do/blob.pdf?type=pdf&serial=1017161876525>. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
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50. . Ibid. (6:54pm, 10 May 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
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55. . Gill, “Justifying Injustice”142. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
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57. . See for example, Angela McRobbie, “Post-feminism and popular culture” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no.3 (2004), 255-264; data on the gender breakdown of film roles can be found in “Film Workforce Survey” (Creative Skillset. 2005), accessed on November 15, 2016. <http://creativeskillset.org/assets/0000/6240/Film_Workforce_Survey_2005.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
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62. . Ibid, 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. . Ibid, 173; Mantilla, “Gendertrolling” 565. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
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65. . Comment on Child, “Only one-fifth of UK film workers” (5:07am, 12 May 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
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