**What About the (cis-, hetero, abled, middle-class, white) Men?: Gender Inequality Data and the Rhetoric of Inclusion in the US and UK Film Industries**

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**Abstract:**  
This article argues that **(cis-, hetero, abled, middle-class, white)**  men – as a group and as an identity category – are the structuring absence of inequality discourse and, as a consequence, it is ‘diverse’ persons who bear both the burden of and any hope for changing the film industry. By ‘rereading’ gender inequality data, diversity initiatives and inclusion rhetoric, this article shows the ways they elide men’s domination of the film industry and perversely reinforce it as the norm. Articulating how data on gender representation behind the camera can both illuminate inequality and can be used to obfuscate it, the article looks closely at selected reports to see what they do and do not tell us about gender inequality and the unequal presence of men in the industry. As the dominating demographic of the filmmaking workforce, the white middle class male is also the structuring absence of inclusion rhetoric which maintains the status quo of inequality in the film industry by interpellating ‘diverse’ persons as outsiders who must gain the attention of the white middle-class men who may choose to include them.

**Keywords:** British film industry;diversity; filmmaking demographics; gender inequality; workforce data.

In May 2016, Directors UK spearheaded the 50/50 campaign to pressure the British Film Institute (BFI) Film Fund to give 50% of its funding to women directors. The campaign was announced as part of its publication of a data report (Follows et al. 2016) that showed the very low percentages of women who directed British films since 2000. The data was corroborated by two other reports published in the same week by organizations conducting research on the numbers of women filmmakers: the European Women’s Audiovisual Network (2016) and the AHRC-funded *Calling the Shots: women and contemporary film culture in the UK* (Cobb et al 2016a). In response to these reports and the campaign, Ben Roberts, the director of the BFI fund, wrote an article for *The Guardian* stating the Fund’s agreement with the target, but then adding, pointedly, ‘if those women are all white, middle class and based in London or the southeast, it won’t be enough’, a comment he buttressed with statistics on the low numbers of women of colour filmmakers, data that came from the *Calling the Shots* report. The article’s headline is ‘Female film directors must get equal funding - but they mustn’t be all white’ (Roberts 2016a).

From the intersectional feminist perspective of this article, there is no arguing with this statement. A successful 50/50 funding split in which only straight, middle-class white women are awarded funding would be a severely compromised version of success. However, it is worth considering how Roberts’ statements sound when the gender is changed. What if the article claimed that male film directors should not receive more than 50% of funding, and that if all those men were white, middle class and based in London or the southeast, the initiative would have failed? Even in these #metoo times, when campaigns for equality and diversity agendas seem to be ubiquitous, it is hard to imagine a statement like this, even though that is exactly what is required to achieve, at least statistical, equality and diversity. What is at stake in my criticism of Roberts’ comments is that his rhetorically positive comments emphasising ‘inclusion’ of working-class women and women of colour conceal the reality that the goals of equality and diversity will require white middle-class male filmmakers to be subject to a much lower chance of receiving funding and successful and employment than they have been used to as a group.

This article argues that these men – as a group and as an identity category – are the structuring absence of inequality discourse and, as a consequence, it is ‘diverse’ persons who bear the burden of representing an unchanging film industry; the existing power structures, those who control them and the straight, white, abled, middle-class men who dominate the industry go unchallenged. Feminists critics have long used the strategy of ‘reading against the grain’ as a tool for interrogating ideological contradictions and multiple or competing discourses in texts or as a way of exposing and resisting hegemonic narratives of gender. Taking this approach, I ‘reread’ gender inequality data, diversity initiatives and inclusion rhetoric to show the ways they elide men’s domination of the film industry and reinforce it as the norm. In order to articulate this problem, first, I analyse the ways data on gender representation behind the camera can both illuminate inequality and be used to obfuscate it. I look closely at selected reports in terms of intersecting identity characteristics, types of filmmaking roles, industry size and the use of percentages versus numbers in order to see what they do and do not tell us about gender inequality and the unequal presence of men and women in the industry. I then analyse how the data is represented in graphs and commentary to show how white middle-class men are the structuring absence of film industry inequality data. Second, I argue that as the dominating demographic of the filmmaking workforce, white middle-class men are also the structuring absence of ‘inclusion’ rhetoric (increasingly used by equality advocates and institutions with diversity mandates). Though it appears to imply action over the more descriptive term ‘diversity’, rhetorically ‘inclusion’ maintains the status quo of inequality in the film industry by interpellating ‘diverse’ persons as those who must seek to be included and white middle-class men as those who may, or may not, choose to include them. This article concludes that it is these men who are the barrier to achieving inequality (Verhoven and Palmer 2016), and in the end, I make the case that ‘diverse’ persons are already doing ‘inclusion’ and the industry needs to learn from them.

*Inequality data: gendered narratives and gender knowledge*

Publicly available, statistical research on gender inequality in the film industry has multiplied over the twenty-first century (Wreyford and Cobb 2015; Conor 2015; Eikhof et al. 2018). This data, alongside other reports on racial inequality, has ‘been part of a rise in media attention paid’ to the exclusion of women and persons of colour in the industry (Wreyford and Cobb 2015), and has been a catalyst for experts to articulate and institutions to implement new approaches for increasing diversity in the filmmaking workforce under the rhetoric of inclusion. In this article, I focus on gender inequality data on above-the-line or Heads of Department roles, which can include director, writer, producer, cinematographer and editor, though director is the most commonly researched in this article for two reasons. First, they are widely understood as the creative authors (to varying degrees and relative to each other) of a film. And second, the data on these roles engenders the most media attention, which means they have the most influence on what the wider public understand gender inequality behind the camera to be. The reports analysed include: the *Celluloid Ceiling Report* (Lauzen 2019), first published in 1998 (making it the longest running) by the Research Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University, which calculates the percentage of women working in six above the line roles – director, writer, producer, exec-producer, cinematographer, and editor – on the top 250 grossing films in the USA each year; the BFI annual *Statistical Yearbook* (BFI 2018a) which includes data on the gender of writers and directors and began in 2006 at the UK Film Council (dissolved by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010); *Inclusion in the Director’s Chair* (Smith et a.l 2019) by the USC Annenberg School Inclusion Initiative which published its first report in 2006 on gender representation behind-the-camera in Academy Award Best Picture nominees from 1977-2006; the *Hollywood Diversity Report* (Hunt et al. 2019) produced at UCLA in the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies which has been producing the Hollywood Diversity Report since 2014; the European Women’s Audiovisual Network 2016 report *Where are the women directors in European films?* (EWAN 2016) a comparative report on gender inequality in seven nation’s film industries – Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the UK; *Cut out of the picture: a study of gender inequality amongst film directors in the UK film industry* (Follows et al. 2016) by the professional association Directors UK; and *Calling the Shots: women and contemporary film culture in the UK* (Cobb et al. 2016a, b, c, and 2018a and b) from the University of Southampton, which surveyed gender inequality in the UK industry in the six above the line roles used in the Annual Celluloid Ceiling Report.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As outlined elsewhere, these datasets show collectively that ‘not only has there been little progress [toward equality], but the numbers are vastly out of proportion with the population at large’ (Wreyford and Cobb 2017: 123). For example, all the reports have data on the gender of directors, with women’s proportion ranging from 8% in Hollywood (Lauzen 2019) to 36% in Sweden (EWAN 2016). Women directors in the UK come in at 11% (EWAN 2016), 11.9% (Follows et al. 2016), and 13% (Cobb et al. 2016a) with the variations being due to slightly different raw data sets. The average of all these percentages of women directors is fourteen and the median is twelve; effectively, of every ten directors, only one is a woman. Those reports that have produced data on multiple years show small ups and downs from year to year. Overall, progress toward gender equality is at best minor and at worst is non-existent. In the UK, women directors increased from 11.3% in 2005 to 11.9% in 2014 (Follows et al 2016) and in the US women directors fell from 9% in 1998 to 8% in 2018 (Lauzen 2019). Excepting Sweden as the outlier at 36%, there is a notable consistency across the UK and American contexts, as well as in the European industries measured by the EWAN (Conor (2015) also notes this consistency in other anglophone industries).

Public funding bodies for filmmaking in the European nations studied also reproduce gender inequality in film funding. EWAN data shows that less than a quarter of all directors in seven European nations were women and that the public funding bodies of those nations gave only 16% of public funds to women, even though they were almost half (44%) of all film school graduates. In the UK, film schools have a 50/50 gender split but films with a woman director made up only 21.7% of all those in receipt of public funding from 2008-2014 (Follows et al. 2016). The Swedish Film Institute is at the forefront of using targets to achieve an equal share of production funding for women and men directors (Jansson 2017). They nearly achieved it between 2013 and 2016 with 49% of funds going to women directors and 44% to women screenwriters but they have reported a significant dip in 2017, the first year of the next target period, with only 23% of funding awarded to women directors and 22% to women writers.

Data that includes roles beyond the director most often include writer and producer. The percentage of women writers in Hollywood were in the teens 10.1% (Smith 2019), 12.6% (Hunt et al. 2019), 16.0% (Lauzen 2019) and reached 20% in the UK (Cobb et al 2016a). In both the US and UK, women producers reach the highest percentages at 26% (Lauzen 2019) and 21.7% (Smith 2019) in Hollywood and 27% (Cobb et al, 2016a) in the UK. Only the Annual *Celluloid Ceiling* *Report* **and** *Calling the* *Shots* count the numbers of women working as editors and cinematographers. The proportion of women editors in the US has ranged across twenty years of the *Celluloid Ceiling Report* (Lauzen 2019) from 16% to the high of 21% in 2018 (Lauzen 2019). In the *Calling the Shots* report that covers the years 2003-2015, UK women editors reached their highest proportion in 2003 at 22% and fell to their lowest in 2011 at 13% (Cobb et al 2018a). In 2015, 17% of all editors were women (Cobb et al. 2016a). Women cinematographers suffer the lowest rates of representation in filmmaking, never reaching more than 4% in Hollywood (Lauzen 2019) and 7% in the UK (Cobb et al. 2016a); both reports show several years in which women were only 2% of all cinematographers. Each of these reports tells a specific tale, structured by the parameters of the raw data, whether that be the top-grossing films in America, the independent film sector of small European nations or the mix of big-budget Hollywood runaway or co-productions and small domestic films classified as British cinema. More importantly, together they create a narrative about the contemporary film industry, one in which, ‘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’ (Wreyford and Cobb 2017: 124).

This plot becomes a story when news outlets run articles (some based on press releases from the studies’ authors) with headlines like ‘The number of women directing top Hollywood films declined in 2018’ (Gajanan 2019); ‘Only one fifth of UK film workers were female in 2015, study finds’ (Child 2016); ‘#MeToo but so what? Percentage of women directing top films dropped in 2018’ (Leah, 2019); and ‘British film industry “can be worse than Hollywood for female filmmakers”’ (Mapstone 2018). This is not the whole story, of course. The data does not give us explanations for the structural absence and exclusion of women, nor the ways that this is enforced in practice (Eikhof et al 2018: 12). Neither does the data tell us much, if anything, about who the women are, what films they make, and how they navigate an industry that makes little space for them, though some of those stories are being collected and told elsewhere (Cobb and Williams, forthcoming).[[2]](#endnote-2) Moreover, the fact that most of these reports collect data on women usually without other intersecting identities such as race, class and sexuality means that, collectively, as Eikhof et al. argue, they produce ‘gender knowledge’ about the contemporary film industry that is ‘dominated by a doubly reductionist understanding of gender: as cisgender heterosexual and as *equating to women’* (2018: 9, emphasis mine). Some of these reports do have data on the intersection of gender and race, though they usually do not acquire headline status on the reports or in the media. I consider these below in relation to how the data also limits gender knowledge to that about women only, consequently (collectively) establishing ‘gender inequality as meaning “unequalpresence of *women* in the workforce”’ (Eikhof et al. 2018: 10, emphasis mine). Eikhof et al. emphasise this definition generated by the data in order to critique the limits of gender inequality research in the UK screen industries, and they point to additional types of research that might offer more complex forms of knowledge. I borrow their phrase ‘unequal presence of women’ here to make a simpler point about how the presentation of the data constructs women as the problem of gender inequality, a point I will develop in relation to race further below.

*Rereading the data*

The reports’ visual representation of graphs and numerical data as well as the explanatory commentary alongside these images produce the gendered knowledge and gendered narrative of the unequal presence of women in the film industry. For example, *Inclusion in the Director’s Chair* (Smith 2019) takes its data from ‘1200 top films from 2007 to 2018’. The title of the first set of data reported is ‘Females are outnumbered in the director’s chair’ and the associated circle graph clearly shows that of all the directors on those films, only 4% were women. It also includes a column graph showing the percentage of *only* women directors per year, without comparing them to the percentages of men directors. The ‘females are outnumbered’ infographic uses the word ‘female’ four times and male only once. The use of those terms falls in line with Eikhof et al.’s analysis of the ways in which gender inequality data produce gender knowledge that is hetero-cis-normative. It also tells the story of women’s unequal presence by highlighting the total percentage (4%) of women in red and giving the year by year percentages that clearly show there has been no overall improvement in the number of women directors in the last eleven years.

If the headline story and the main plot of gender equality data is women’s absence, exclusion and unequal presence in the industry, then men’s domination of key, above-the-line roles in filmmaking is, at least, its subplot or more to the point, it is the structuring absence of the narrative of gender inequality in the contemporary film industry. Obviously, though, an unequal presence of women in the workforce also means an unequal presence of men in the workforce by virtue of their over-representation. All the reports include data on the unequal presence of men in the industry, though largely by implication. This foregrounding of the low numbers of women in filmmaking by withholding the numbers of men is common across all the reports. In the above example, the emphasis is reinforced by the decision not to print the percentages of men and to shade their portion in the circle graph in grey, compared to the percentage of ‘females’ in red. Data visualization that draws attention to the percentages of women and downplays or leaves out the percentages of men can also be found in other reports (Lauzen 2019; EWAN 2016).

The reports that present data on racial categories largely follow this pattern of obscuring the unequal presence of white men, even as they note the numbers of white women compared to women of colour. Smith’s *Inclusion in the Director’s Chair* (2019) gives the percentages of Black/African-American (6%) and Asian/Asian-American (3.1%) directors in their data set next to a graph presenting the gender breakdown of both groups in numbers (of 80 Black directors only 5 were women, and of 42 Asian directors only 3 were women) titled ‘The director’s chair is white and male’, semantically keeping those two groups separate. A graph on the following page details the racial breakdown of ‘female directors’ in numbers: white (39), Black/African-American (4), Asian/Asian-American (2) and Hispanic/Latina (1). The infograph (which uses the stick figure often used on toilet doors) is titled ‘Hollywood’s image of a female director is a white woman’. The report does not include the percentages or numbers of white men directors, arguably because the statement that Hollywood’s image of a director is a white man does not require comment. For its reports on women British film directors and cinematographers (Cobb et al. 2018b), *Calling the Shots* uses pie graphs to represent the total number of women and their racial identity in those roles from 2003-2015. The racial categories include white, Black, South Asian and East Asian. In 3,452 films made over 12 years, the number of directors and cinematographers in each of those categories, except for white, is less than twelve. The report does not include the total numbers of people of colour nor the numbers of men of colour, meaning white men’s unequal presence is visually and discursively obscured in relation to the marginalization of women of colour.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Even when the gender inequality visualizations include percentages of men, the corresponding commentary emphasizes women. The *Hollywood Diversity Report* (Hunt et al. 2019) clearly shows that of all directors on ‘top films’ in 2017, 87.4% were men, but the explanatory paragraph next to it begins, ‘Women’s share of directors for top films nearly doubled between 2016 and 2017’; it then uses the word ‘women’ twice more in a fifty-five word paragraph, and the word ‘men’ only when it states that women would need to increase their share of directorial jobs by four to achieve parity. The *Celluloid Ceiling* shows that men were 80% of all persons in above-the-line roles, but the accompanying explanatory paragraph begins ‘In 2018, women comprised 20% of all directors, writers, producers, exec-producers, and cinematographers working on the top 250 domestic grossing films’ (Lauzen 2019:1). Again, the word ‘women’ is used three times and ‘men’ used only once. The European Women’s Audiovisual Network report includes graphs with the numbers of ‘females’ only as well as graphs with both ‘males’ and ‘females’, but again, the commentary almost exclusively discusses ‘females’. Both the *Celluloid Ceiling* and *Calling the Shots* use the phrase ‘no women’ when presenting data on men’s collective dominance of above-the-line roles. The latter states on its first page that ‘25% of the 203 British films in production had NO women in any of the six key roles’ (Cobb et al. 2016a).

Men, as a demographic of the film industry workforce, have very little visibility in these reports’ representation of gender inequality. And though the percentage of men may not be highlighted in the reports, when 4% of directors are women, the glaring but not printed fact is that 96% of directors are men. The infographic above does state that the ratio of men to women is 22:1. But the data could also be stated as for every ten directors 9.4 of them are men; or if a hundred directors from the data were in a room, 96 of them would be men. When I read against the grain of their numbers and graphs, *The Hollywood Diversity Report* for 2017 found 87.4% of all directors were men, that men were 9.7 out of every ten directors, and that men would have to reduce their share of directorial positions by nearly *half* to reach parity with women. Reading between the lines of the data on other above-the-line roles in *Celluloid Ceiling* and *Calling the Shots* shows that equality with women would require men writers and editors to be reduced by just over a third and men producers by just under a third and that the number of men hired to be cinematographers would also have to be reduced by half for parity with women. And though *Calling the Shots* found three times as many women directors as *Inclusion in the Director’s Chair* and almost twice as many as *Celluloid Ceiling*, men directing British films would have to reduce their share by 40% to achieve gender equality.

Reading the data against its grain and in between the lines of its presentation in the reports rewrites gender inequality as the unequal presence of men in the industry and tells the story of their almost total monopolization of above-the-line roles, which is clearly systemically entrenched and shows no signs of diminishing. Rereading the reports also illuminates the implications of their language. Focusing on the low percentages of women suggests that changing the industry means changing the numbers of women and that the industry simply needs more of them to achieve equality and parity. If this interpretation of the data is inverted so the focus is on the preponderance of men, then equality and parity require reducing the numbers of men and changing the industry will mean fewer men in it.

Gender inequality discourse has no room for this reading of the data. Within the film industry, the most common form of response to gender inequality is to employ ‘empowering interventions’, such as training schemes for women, persons of colour, and disabled workers which, though helpful to individuals, do little to ‘remove existing barriers to diversity’ (CAMEo 2018: 8). Also, it has become a common mantra amongst mainstream feminists that ‘equality is not a zero-sum game’ (Mayer 2017). I am not going to make the case one way or the other for understanding the outcomes of gender equality as zero sum or not. Instead, I want to point out that the language of increasing women’s presence and the absence of any discussion of reducing men’s presence assumes that the ‘pie’ can get bigger. The common discourse of gender inequality in the film industry relies, at the very least, on the refusal to consider any negative implications for men as a result of increasing the numbers of women because it assumes that growth of the film industry is a constant.

Of course, constant growth is a capitalist imperative, but capitalism is not obliged to do equality or diversity, whether there is a good business case for it or not (see Newsinger and Eikhof in this special edition). More importantly for this article, the fluctuating expansion and contraction of economies (both macro and micro) over time, even within long-term growth, creates periods of decline when jobs decrease. This is obviously true of the film industry as well. My concern here is not with the economy of the film industry per se but with how its economic ups and downs are reflected in the gender inequality data. This is in part to critique the assumption of growth as linked to women’s increased participation in the workforce, but also to think again about how the data is presented and how it obscures certain realities. I return here to a focus on the UK film industry because the Annual Statistical Yearbook, first published by the UK Film Council and then the BFI, includes data on the British box-office as well as the gender of directors and writers on British films.

*It’s in the numbers*

New Labour founded the United Kingdom Film Council (UKFC) in 2000. As a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation (quango) it was responsible for developing and promoting the film industry in the UK (Doyle et al., 2015). Upon its closure by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, the BFI subsumed most of the UKFC’s responsibilities, including research and the production of data on the British film. As such, there is a relatively long-term and consistently comparable series of data reports on the UK film industry that include percentages of the gender of directors and writers on British films, with their earliest numbers from 2006. Stella Hockenhull argues that the UK Film Council and its Leadership on Diversity in Film Group led by Tim Bevan brought about positive change for women directors (2017: 50). She goes on to suggest that the UKFC encouraged an increase in the numbers of women directors evidenced by the data reporting 15% of women directors in 2011, the year after the UKFC closed, a close second to the highest percentage of 17% women directors in 2009. Both are significant rises from the first reported figure for 2007 – only 6% women directors – and it is possible to argue that ‘The success of the UKFC cannot be underestimated for women directors’ (Hockenhull 2017: 50). However, in Table 1 below from the 2018 *BFI Annual Statistical Yearbook*, the percentage of women directors on British films from 2007 to 2015 shows significant fluctuation from year to year, while remaining between 6 and 17 percent.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Table 1: Gender of directors of UK films release in the UK, 2007-2015 (BFI 2018a)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2018 | |
| Number of UK films released in the UK | 108 | 111 | 114 | 119 | 127 | 162 | 139 | 154 | | 209 |
| Number of directors associated with these films | 117 | 113 | 123 | 133 | 140 | 179 | 149 | 165 | | 224 |
| Number of male directors | 110 | 100 | 102 | 116 | 119 | 165 | 128 | 148 | | 203 |
| Number of female directors | 7 | 13 | 21 | 17 | 21 | 14 | 21 | 17 | | 21 |
| % male | 94.0 | 88.5 | 82.9 | 87.2 | 85.0 | 92.2 | 85.9 | 89.7 | | 90.6 |
| % female | 6.0 | 11.5 | 17.1 | 12.8 | 15.0 | 7.81 | 14.1 | 10.3 | | 9.4 |

What I want to point out here are the *numbers*, rather than the percentages. The number of UK films released in the UK rises overall from 108 in 2006 to 162 in 2012. A significant contraction appears in 2013 with a drop to 139, but growth returns, culminating in this chart at 209 films in 2015. The first thing to highlight is that the drop in the number of films from 2012 to 2013 by twenty-three and the reduction of the number of directors overall by thirty corresponds with a near doubling of the percentage of female directors – from 7.8% to 14.1%. However, the number of women increased by only 50%, from 14 to 21. The rise in the percentage of women is accounted for by the drop in the number of male directors, from 165 to 128. The second thing to note is that the 21 women directors in 2013 is the highest number in this chart and it repeats four times. The percentages that represent those 21 women are different for each year – 17% in 2009, 15% in 2011, 14% in 2013 and 9% in 2015. Three of the eight years in the chart (2008, 2010, 2014) have numbers lower than 21 but percentages higher than the 9% recorded for 2015. The reason the same number of women equals a lower and lower percentage each year is because every year the number of women reaches its same numerical height, the number of men is higher than the number they had the last year women directors totaled twenty-one.

The initial and significant rise from 2007 when 7 women equalled 6% of all directors to 2009 when 21 women equalled 17% of all directors could be attributed to the UKFC’s diversity agendas, as Hockenhull does. However, taking stock since the publication of her book in 2017, when we look at the numbers, women directors’ heights in 2009 quickly turned into stasis, and it is the rise and fall in the numbers of male directors that has as much, if not more, relationship to the ups and downs of the percentage of women directors on British films. This becomes even clearer when we look at the most recent years’ data in the BFI *Statistical Yearbook*. The yearbook from 2018 shows that after the 21 women of 2015, female directors increased to 25 in 2016 and 28 in 2017. Moreover, the numbers of men decreased year on year from 203 (2015) to 163 (2016) to 150 (2017). Consequently, the percentage of women directors increased from 9.4 (2015) to 13.3 (2016) to 15.7 (2017). And yet, the 21 women of 2009 (17.1%) still reached a higher percentage than the 28 women directors in 2017 (15.7%) because the numbers of men in 2008 was 102 and in 2017 men numbered 150. Ultimately, because women are such a small number of directors on UK films, their fluctuating proportion year on year is more a product of the increase and decrease of the numbers of men than it is of their own ups and downs. Consequently, changes in the percentages of women directors can appear to indicate the improvement or the retrogression of women’s presence in the industry, when the actual numbers show stagnation. Though the numbers of women tripled after the UKFC did a study on women’s representation and, arguably, ‘a number of female film directors benefitted’ from their diversity initiatives, those women are a small group, mostly making ‘low-budget fiction films’ (Hockenhull, 2017: 52).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Therefore, inequality data reports’ elision of (white) men does three interconnected things. First, as shown above for women directing UK films, focusing on the proportions makes small changes seem bigger and more laudable than they are.[[6]](#endnote-6) In the BFI’s most recent *Statistical Yearbook*, the data for 2016 and 2017 shows an increase in the percentage of writers, and the commentary declares, ‘In 2017, of the 209 identified writers of UK films released during the year, 44 (21%) were women; this is the first time since our records began that the percentage of female writers has been above 20%’ (BFI, 2018a: 200). However, like the number of women directors discussed above, this proportional achievement represents an increase of only three from the next highest number of women in 2015, equalling 14.4% of that year’s writers. Again, the reduction of the numbers of men has had more effect on this apparent improvement than the numbers of women, as ‘male’ writers decreased by 79 (corresponding with an overall decrease in the number of UK films released from 2015 to 2017 by 50).

Second, without any discussion of white men, achievements by one underrepresented group, however big or small, will be compared to another. Annenberg’s *Inclusion in the Director’s Chair*, above the associated infographic, declares: ‘For black directors, 2018 was a banner year’. Its data shows 16 black directors in the top 100 grossing films for that year (Smith 2019). What they do not declare until several pages later in the commentary is that only one of those was a woman, so what at first looked like successful proportional representation of a demographic is not quite what it seems. Though absolutely an achievement for black men directors, black women are still vastly underrepresented. Moreover, media outlets titled their stories on this report in the following ways: ‘New studies say 2018 was a boost for black male directors, but not women’ (Sperling 2019); ‘Black male directors made major gains in 2018, number of women plateaued again’ (Women and Hollywood 2019); ‘Black directors had a big year in 2018 – but other inclusion numbers stagnated’ (Dwyer 2019); ‘Black filmmakers make history in 2018, but female directors still shut out’ (Lang 2019). Considering the Annenberg report does compare the ‘white male producers to underrepresented female producers’ finding a ratio of 44:1 (Smith 2019), it is worth speculating what kinds of headlines might have been written if they compared the ratio of white men directors to black women directors or all underrepresented women. Finally, the elision of data on white men that engenders a focus on small proportional shifts for underrepresented groups and contributes to a view of these groups fighting for their places in the industry reinforces (white) men’s predominance as the unremarked norm, which as I argue in the next section underpins inclusion rhetoric and initiatives.

*Gender equality and inclusion rhetoric*

In the *Guardian* article cited above, Roberts rightly says, ‘statistics and percentages can be reductive, skirting over the deeper issues that need addressing’ (2017). I have been making the case that the presentation of statistics is one key way inequality data is made reductive. But, how they are reported matters even more. As I noted in my introduction, Roberts responds to Directors UK call for a 50/50 target for funding of women directors by referring to data from *Calling the Shots* that includes multiple above-the-line roles. Of all those roles on UK films in-production during 2015 only 20% were held by women, and of those women only 7% were women of colour. Roberts first recognizes that the call for gender equality targets for funding ‘lands at our [the BFI’s] feet . . . we agree with the target, of course’, but then pushes back on that with his comment that if ‘those women are all white, middle-class and based in London’ the BFI and the film fund will have failed its diversity agenda. Discursively, Roberts pits women against women, fighting for their share of the funding, without mentioning that white men are awarded the greatest part of the funding. Instead, he notes that of the 31 feature films that received funding for the 2015/2016 fiscal year, a third were directed by women. According to a March 2016 article by Roberts detailing those films funded, ten had women directors and three of those were women of colour, meaning 30% of the women funded were from minority racial groups. The rest of the fund went to 21 men directors, and only two of those were men of colour, meaning just 10% of the men funded were from minority racial groups (Roberts 2016b). I am not interested in blaming Roberts as an individual for these outcomes or for the defence of his institution’s approach to diversity. But, to be plain: the article about equality targets does not recognize or point out that the BFI film fund has proportionally given more money to directors who are women of colour than men of colour, even as there are many fewer women overall. Nor does it mention men directors of colour and their difficulties in getting film funding (Lee 2018). Not once does it recognize the fact that the majority of the film fund goes to white male directors. Not once does it suggest that *they* might be the problem. Roberts thus seems to pit women against women in order to use the diversity standards as an institutional defence against the lack of progress evidenced by the three data reports and the media attention they garnered.

Clive Nwonka critiques the Diversity Standards in this special issue for the ways in which its framework speaks diversity ‘babel’ but demands little implementation and leaves structural inequality intact. In this article, I want to point out how the Diversity Standards allow productions to easily avoid hiring women in roles where they are historically underrepresented. For example, the diversity standard for production personnel offers a list of below-the-line jobs, six of which must be filled by an underrepresented person to pass the criteria. Four of the roles are ones in which women have been historically, and still are, overrepresented: Costume Designer, Hair and Makeup Designer, Casting, and Script Supervision. The language of the standards is flexible enough that it might well be possible to meet the criteria therefore by hiring women in those four roles and hiring only two other underrepresented persons in others. Indeed, as Nwonka points out, the production personnel standard can be avoided altogether: ‘Given that a film production can opt to focus solely on one particular identity (race, gender, sexuality, disability or economic status), films can achieve a diversity standard whilst the actual industrial structure of inequality remains undiminished; the most perpetually excluded groups can remain so’ (20??, To be referenced. I’ve added it to reference list)[[7]](#endnote-7)

Rhetorically, the language of the Diversity Standards criteria and guidance construct an applicant by repeatedly using a first-person question as section headings. Examples include, ‘Do I need to meet the diversity standards?’ (BFI 2019a: 3), ‘What do I get if I meet the diversity standards?’ (BFI 2019a: 3), ‘I am unsure if my project can do this – should I still apply?’ (BFI 2016a: 2), ‘What happens if I plan to meet certain criteria then cannot?’ (BFI 2016a: 3). The documents do not identify this speaker. There is only one instance when the speaker is identified in order to clarify that ‘diverse’ personnel can be counted only once: ‘I am a female writer-director…can I count this as two of the three people required in element B1 of the standards?’ (BFI 2016a: 8). The answer clarifies that ‘diverse’ personnel can be counted only once but the fact of having to identify the questioner as female seems to imply a male voice for the other questions. I would argue that these questions, alongside others such as ‘What are the under-represented groups?’ (BFI 2019a: 3) and ‘I’d like to hire crew from under-represented groups, but need some help’ (BFI 2016a: 8), construct an implied speaker who is a white, middle-class, cis, straight, abled man. Like the data sets as I have analysed above, white men as an identity category do not appear anywhere in the criteria or guidance while underrepresented groups are everywhere. This might seem obvious and right since white men as a group are the ones succeeding in filmmaking and they do not need to be proactively ‘included’, but that is exactly the point: the criteria and guidance construct them as their Standards’ audience because white men are the ones who need to *include others*.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Discursively, the relationship between the criteria and the applicant is performative. The guide’s answer to the question about the consequences of not meeting criteria as the applicant promised is that he would simply have to explain why they could not be met. Inclusion rhetoric and initiatives in the Hollywood context function the same way. The ‘Inclusion Rider’, made famous by Frances McDormand at the 2018 Academy Awards and created by Stacy Smith at the USC Annenberg Inclusion Institute with the lawyer Kalpana Kotagal, is a clause in a film star’s contract with the production company stipulating diversity requirements for on-screen and off-screen personnel. The language in the example on the Inclusion Institute’s website is similar to the Diversity Standards. It requires the director, producer, and casting director to ‘affirmatively seek opportunities’, ‘wherever possible’, and ‘make all reasonable efforts’ to audition, interview and hire women and other underrepresented minorities (CohenMilstein 2018: 2). Other initiatives by the Institute include ‘the Rooney Rule’ which asks producers and executives to interview at least one woman for ‘open directing jobs’ (Pieper 2016), and the ‘4% Challenge’, supported by and announced with Time’s Up in January 2019, that asks stars to ‘publicly vow to announce a project with a woman director in the next 18 months’ (Montpellier 2019). As of writing, 123 individuals have committed to the challenge as have the big four studios (MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros, and Universal) and Amazon. It is to be hoped that all keep to their commitment. And yet, the commitment for one woman director to be announced before summer 2020 by each studio is at best tokenistic – though a token worth asking for when some have had recent years with not one woman director in an entire year’s slate of films (Sneider and Doty 2016). And of the 123 individuals, only a third are men, the most well-known of whom are the directors Paul Feig, Jordan Peele and J.J. Abrams. A few male stars and directors have also committed to adopting the inclusion rider: Michael B. Jordan’s production company; Matt Damon and Ben Affleck’s production company; Paul Feig. It is still early days for these initiatives, but like the Diversity Standards they act largely as performative promises and commitments.

In April 2019, the *Hollywood Reporter* ran the story of ‘How Michael B. Jordan Pulled Off Hollywood’s First Officially “Inclusive” Production’ (Keegan 2019). Even with white men in the roles of music, cinematography, editing and VFX supervision, the outcome is impressive: the director is an Asian-American man; the production designer is a white woman; the costume designer and head of makeup are both Black women, the head of the hair department and the stunt coordinator are both Black men. But it is worth remembering that Jordan has previously worked on films that are ‘unofficially’ inclusive like *Black Panther* (2018). Before the advent of the official ‘Inclusive’ label, filmmakers such Ryan Coogler, Gina Prince-Bythewood, Spike Lee, Ava DuVernay, Mary Harron, Christine Vachon, and many others, have repeatedly worked with women and persons of colour in key roles. Inclusion rhetoric and initiatives may speak to the white men who, in their absence, dominate inequality data but underrepresented persons have already been doing ‘diversity and inclusion’ and continue to lead the way.

If the authors of the Diversity Standards or the creators of the Inclusion Rider had looked more closely at a range of film production contexts, they might have seen that ‘diverse’ persons already ‘include’ each other on their films sets, both behind the camera and in front of it. The key limitation of the data from the Inclusion Initiative is its dataset’s basis in the top 100 grossing films of the year. Directors and producers who are women and persons of colour have tended (arguably for reasons of discrimination) to make smaller budget and consequently lower-grossing films, both in Hollywood and in the national film industries around the globe. But they are and have been making films with other women and persons of colour long before the Diversity Standards, the Inclusion Rider and the 4% Challenge came into being. *Calling the Shots*’ report ‘Women working with women’ found that for UK films in production during 2015, 93% of films directed by a woman also had a woman screenwriter and that three quarters of films directed by women also had at least one woman producer. Furthermore, 61% of films with a woman cinematographer had at least one woman producer and half of all films with women editors had at least one woman producer (Cobb et al. 2016b). Finally, the *Calling the Shots* report ‘Women of Colour’ found, in a four-year sample, that of the films which had a Black woman as director, writer, editor or cinematographer, 81% had a white woman producer or a black man producer. Of the films with a South Asian woman in any of those four roles, 70% had a South Asian woman as producer (Cobb et al, 2016c). This data makes clear who is already doing the actual work of diversifying film production cultures. Indeed, given the high correlation between diverse producers and diversity in other roles and given that other Calling the Shots data for 2015 shows that that only 27% of producers were women and that 25% of UK films that year failed to have any woman in a key role, it becomes clear that it is white men who need to change and white men who should be the object of diversity and inclusion initiatives.

*Conclusion: Diversity, Inclusion and Intersectionality*

After Roberts’ 2016 *Guardian* piece, targets for equal funding for women directors were not officially set. They do not appear in the BFI plan for 2017 to 2022 (BFI, 2016b). In fact, gender gets little mention in that plan at all. It is listed twice alongside, ‘race, age, disability, sexual orientation, social background or geographic location’, once in the ‘What We Mean by Diversity’ section that pronounces the Diversity Standards as the way forward for change (BFI 2016b: 5). However, in the context of ongoing annual data reports on Hollywood that show little to no change, the creation of Time’s Up in the wake of the Weinstein scandal and #metoo movement has only increased attention to inequality in the film industry. In October 2017, the BFI Film Fund announced it would set ‘inclusion targets’. Across its four major funds – Production, Development, First Features, and the Film Academy – targets were set as follows: ‘a 50/50 gender balance in supported filmmakers, 20% target for BAME filmmakers, 9% target for LGBTQ-identifying filmmakers, 7% target for filmmakers with disability’ (Roberts, 2017). In April 2018, the BFI reported that many targets had been very nearly reached (BFI 2018b). Most recently, in May 2019, the BFI released its latest data on the ‘inclusion targets’ for the Production fund (BFI 2019b). The report states that for the nineteen films funded, 47% of writers, 53% of directors, and 53% of producers are women and 21% of writers, 21% of directors, and 5% of producers are from ‘underrepresented ethnicity’ groups. It is difficult to disagree with the summation that ‘some of these results are really encouraging’ (Roberts 2019b). The data, though, does fall foul of Kimberle Crenshaw’s original analysis of intersectionality – that keeping the identity categories of gender and ethnic identity separate means not taking women of colour into account (1993). The data cannot tell us if, as Roberts warned, the targets will have failed because only white middle-class women have received funding. To the report’s credit, a list of all nineteen films funded is included and each director, writer, and producer named. The equality percentages above represent all white women directors, one Black British woman writer, and one South Asian British woman producer. The achieved target for ‘underrepresented ethnicity’ reflects a majority of men. Roberts’ commentary on the most recent targets recognizes the gaps, and he says, ‘they do reflect the need to increase the number of successful BAME producers [and] the number of BAME women in top creative roles’ (2019). Indeed, support and development of BAME men and women in top creative roles should be happening much more. As we know though, from Calling the Shots data, they are in the industry making films and doing ‘inclusion’ already. The BFI-funded film with the South Asian producer, Ameenah Ayub Allen, who worked on *Suffragette* (2015) as an intern for Sarah Gavron, proves the point. The film she is producing with BFI funding has a Black woman writer (Theresa Ikoko), a white woman director (Sarah Gavron), and has hired a ‘75% female crew, who are ethnically diverse, including at senior level’ in roles across the areas of music, cinematography, editing, production design, art direction and more (Screen staff 2018). She is but one example of the fact that persons from underrepresented demographics not only bear the burden of change in the film industry when the cis, hetero, abled, middle-class white men are let off the hook, but they are also the ones leading the way. We will have failed if we do not follow them.

**Figures**

Figure 1 – Image found at: Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Choi, A and Pieper, K. (2019), ‘Inclusion in the Director’s Chair: Gender, Race and Age Across Directors Across 1,200 Top Film from 2007 to 2018’, USC Annenberg, Inclusion Initiative, Available at <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inclusion-in-the-directors-chair-2019.pdf> (accessed) 3 March 2019

Figure 2 – Image found at: BFI (2018a), ‘Statistical Yearbook 2018’, BFI.org. Available at https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/statistical-yearbook (accessed 20 April 2019).

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1. **Notes**

   Though I am the Principal Investigator of Calling the Shots: women and contemporary film culture in the UK, I interrogate the Calling the Shots data reports here as objectively as possible, alongside the other reports. And though the reports were authored by me, the Co-Investigator Linda Ruth Williams and the Research Fellow Natalie Wreyford, as PI I take full responsibility for any mistakes and misrepresentations in the data and the visual presentation of the reports. For more on our methodologies see Wreyford and Cobb, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See also the historical work of Vicky Ball and Melanie Bell at http://melaniebell.webstarts.com/history\_of\_women\_in\_television.html [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As the PI of the Calling the Shots data research, I made the decision that due to time and resource constraints the Research Fellow would concentrate on finding the women of colour and that we would present the data on their numbers only. This decision was also related to the project’s dual focus on quantitative and qualitative research, as we hoped that any WOC we found in the data might be included in our recorded interviews. See Wreyford and Cobb, 2017 for more information on our methodologies. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This table is a recreation of Table 4 in the 2018 *BFI Annual Statistical Yearbook*.I chose this data set ending in 2015 because it corresponds with the data years in Hockenhull’s book and the end dates of Calling the Shots data. At the time of publication, the BFI had published data for 2016 and 2017 and I consider them below. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a perspective on how the UKFC’s economic sustainability remit created barriers for increasing diversity, see Moody (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. My thoughts on this were sharpened by a twitter exchange with Chardine Taylor Stone on the 2019 inclusion target data from the BFI. Her initial estimate of the numbers reflected in the percentages was an important help to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is beyond the scope of this article but worth noting here that The Equality Act 2010 allows for very limited types of ‘positive action’ and the Diversity Standards will be constrained by legal concerns over actions that might incur litigation. See Jarrett 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Brook et al. for research on ‘inequality talk’ and their ‘Analysis of senior men’s own narratives of their career biographies and explanations for their position and success demonstrates a considerable distance between their rhetoric and their understanding of how occupations need to change’ (forthcoming). Also see, Coles and MacNeil for research on the ‘systemic advantage’ enjoyed by men in the Canadian screen industries means they are more likely to progress to decision-making roles. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)