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Breaking through the lens

By ROBYN STUBBS, 24 HOURS

"As soon as film turned into a business, it became a boys' club."

The struggle for success in the male-dominated film industry is all too familiar for Vancouver-trained director/writer Tracy Smith (*Sandra Gets Dumped*).

Smith's professional challenges are echoed in a new study by the B.C. Institute of Film Professionals, which reveals just 11 per cent of feature film or TV directors and editors and seven per cent of writers in B.C. are women. Add to that this powerful number: There are no female directors of photography.

With only a handful of internationally recognized Canadian female role models, including Deepa Mehta (*Water*), Julia Kwan (*Eve and the Fire Horse*) and Sarah Polley (*Away From Her*), women are in a constant fight to tell their stories.

"Deepa - I've seen her in the middle of her career down and out, and she's seen me down and out, when we were both asking ourselves 'is this worth it?' There are times when we wanted to go get housekeeping jobs," said veteran director Anne Wheeler (*Better than Chocolate*, *Bye Bye Blues*) with a chuckle yesterday.

"I felt like I had to prove myself over and over, and I felt I had a real responsibility to other women in the industry not to disappoint."

The striking gender gap has prompted female directors to ask why - a question with many possible answers.

"It's very hard to sell women's stories to the big screen, because there are a lot of assumptions about what will sell," Wheeler said.

Not only that, but women "aren't socialized to fake it 'til they make it - and as a director, you can't ask for help on set," added Smith.

It may also be a "chicken-and-egg situation where you need a track record to get the backing, but you need the backing to get a track record," explained Carol Whiteman, president and CEO of Creative Women Workshop Association and producer of the Women in the Director's Chair Workshop.

A good sign: Despite the tough road ahead, more women are emerging from film schools across the country, said Whiteman.