

Women in Film Festival 2009

Written and presented by Sharon McGowan, Chair of the Please Adjust Your Set Initiative and member of the Women in Film and Television Vancouver Advocacy Committee, March 4, 2009.

Congratulations to the Festival Chair, Roslyn Muir, and to Women in Film and Television Vancouver for producing this terrific 4th Women in Film Festival.

This festival provides an important showcase for work by female filmmakers, particularly female directors.

In a recent survey by Vancouver Women in Film and Television Vancouver, only 18% of the films programmed at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2008 were directed by women. Women directors represented just 19% of films at the Whistler Film Festival, 22% at the Vancouver International Film Festival, 23% at the Montreal World Film Festival, 26% at the Atlantic Film Festival and 34% at the Hot Docs Festival.

We need the Women in Film Festival, and others like it, to redress the balance and give women filmmakers access to an audience as well as to film critics and buyers in order to build their careers.

This underrepresentation of women's films at Canada's film festivals is directly related to the underlying inequity in Canada's film production industry.

Last April, in its announcement of projects, women directors represented just 27% of feature films funded by Telefilm Canada, women writers just 19% and women producers slightly more at 36%. Projects led by women directors proportionally secured just \$4.4 million compared to \$11.84 million by male directors.

In every genre from feature films to television documentaries, women directors, writers and producers on average work on projects with the lowest budgets and secure the smallest amount of financing.

And in below-the-line positions, women remain concentrated in traditional areas (hair, makeup, script supervisor, accounting) and are vastly outnumbered in technical areas such as camera, lighting and sound.

Why are women under-represented in key positions of the industry at a time when studies by the B.C. Institute of Film Professionals (2006) and a study in Quebec supported by the Association des réalisateurs et réalisatrices du Québec revealed that women are graduating from film production training

programs at a rate of 40% to 45%? And when they are winning a higher proportion of peer-judged Arts Council funding, which, unfortunately only represents a tiny portion of the funding available.

Why is this happening when the BCIFP study revealed that B.C. women are more highly trained and more current with their training than their male counterparts in the industry?

And why is this happening when Women in Film volunteers across the country have worked for over 20 years to increase the profile of female creators at all levels of production and provided all levels of mentoring, networking and professional development opportunities?

Those of us over a certain age remember the days of blatant sexism that blocked women from this industry. Women just were not hired for certain jobs, and that was it. In the 1970s my broadcasting teacher told me I had better learn to work behind the scenes, because women announcers would never be accepted by the public. When I began to work in the industry, sexual harassment was frequent and accepted.

Much of this blatant sexism in Canada has decreased because of federal and provincial laws against discrimination, and a CRTC ruling that required

broadcasters to put female presenters on the air transformed the airwaves.

Legislation against sexual harassment greatly improved the working environment.

However, we are now in an era of subtle sexism—or gender bias, where bias against women and their abilities flourishes in small, unspoken ways that are accepted in institutions and society.

Subtle sexism may appear subtle but it has a profound effect. In the United Nations index for overall human development, Canada placed 4th in the world in 2006. When gender disparities were taken into consideration, Canada slid to 83rd of 136 countries.

In addition to being difficult to identify, since we are immersed in it as a society, subtle sexism has the unusual twist of favouring women in terms of perception of their abilities. In a 1992 study by T.H. Shore of subtle sexism in the assessment of managerial potential, female job performance was rated by women and men consistently higher than male performance. However, when it came to making decisions about promotion or advancement for those same employees, the males—even though they rated lower—were deemed more suitable for promotion or advancement by both women and men.

The study concluded that subtle sexism is not the result of some organized plot of men against women. It is simply a result of the way both sexes are acculturated to think certain things about women.

How else to explain why, at the Hot Docs forum I attended four years ago, of the 31 projects being pitched (which meant they already had broadcaster commitments) only 9 (29%) were directed by women and only 1 of the 31 featured a story about a female character? Yet when I brought this up to the organizers as well as other attendees, no one had noticed.

And how else to explain that last week in Quebec, SODEC, the provincial funding agency, announced proudly they were supporting, in conjunction with Telefilm Canada, a group of 9 feature films that “demonstrated a remarkable diversity”—yet not one of these was directed by a woman and no one appears to have noticed.

And how else to explain that while in Canada, like most other countries in the world, except for the United States, our film industry, including film festivals, are heavily supported by funds from the government, but only the St. John’s International Women’s Film Festival receives significant funding. This festival and the Female Eye Festival in Toronto, receive only tiny amounts.

What can we do about it?

We need to continue the good work of education, networking and the celebration of women's filmmaking that Women in Film and Television and our supporters have been doing for all these years.

But we also need to start lobbying. We need to lobby for gender equity in the Canadian film, television and new media industries, as well as equity in the proportion of public funding awarded to projects headed by women writers, directors and producers.

To this end, Women in Film and Television Vancouver has started an Advocacy Committee and is working with sister branches across Canada.

We will also be seeking support from the Status of Women Canada, Heritage Canada and the CRTC, as well as our provincial and national industry lobbying organizations such as the Motion Picture Production Industry Association and the Canadian Film and Television Producers Association.

Working together, we will begin asking some hard questions and looking for solutions.

We will be asking why, in the light of these dismal numbers, none of the many government agencies, government funds and government-subsidized broadcasters responsible for granting billions in taxpayer money to film projects over the last decade has a gender equity policy or gender equity monitoring process or has developed programs to identify and overcome barriers to gender equity.

Why aren't Telefilm Canada and other agencies required to report annually to Status of Women Canada? Telefilm is required to report to Multiculturalism Canada.

And why can't these agencies establish gender equity policies and programs similar to those initiated by Scottish Screen and others that are appearing around the world in relation to public funding and gender equity in screen-based media?

And why can't broadcasters supported by public money put in place policies and programs to ensure gender equity similar to those developed in the U.K. by the BBC around creating diversity within the industry?

And why can't financial incentives be created through federal and provincial tax credits to reward companies for hiring women in all positions, both above and below the line? Such incentives already exist in the form of

regional tax credit bonuses for companies shooting outside of metropolitan areas or for companies providing training positions for new filmmakers.

And these ideas are recession-proof. They don't ask for more money, just an equitable piece of the pie.

There is support for such activities from the highest levels of the Canadian government. In their official response to the 2006 Status of Women Report tabled in the House of Commons, the federal government, represented by Member of Parliament Bev Oda, committed to “*ensure the completion of a thorough analysis of proposed policies and programs, including the application of Gender Based Analysis and the inclusion of gender considerations.*”

It is time to make good on that promise in the film and television industries.

In closing, I would like to say that events like this Women in Film Festival are critically important. And again I want to thank Roslyn Muir, her incredible team of dedicated volunteers, all the sponsors, the filmmakers and the Board of Directors of Women in Film and Television Vancouver who have put it all together. This festival ensures we continue to encourage and

develop female filmmaking talent in spite of the obstacles we all face and to prepare for the day when gender discrimination—subtle or not-so-subtle—is in the past and women claim an equal place in our industry.