

# UC Santa Barbara

## UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

### Title

Gender inequality in culture industries: Women and men writers in film and television

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7m68s7vb>

### Journal

Sociologie du Travail, 51(2)

### ISSN

0038-0296

### Author

Bielby, Denise D

### Publication Date

2009-04-01

### DOI

10.1016/j.soctra.2009.03.006

Peer reviewed

# Gender inequality in culture industries: Women and men writers in film and television

*L'inégalité de genre dans les industries culturelles :  
les femmes et les hommes scénaristes de films  
au cinéma et à la télévision*

Denise D. Bielby

*Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA*

---

## Résumé

Cet article examine les manières dont les pratiques d'emploi des scénaristes de film au cinéma et à la télévision produisent les inégalités de genre et le plafond de verre à Hollywood. S'appuyant sur l'histoire des industries cinématographiques et télévisuelles et sur une analyse quantitative des registres d'emploi et d'adhésion au *Writers Guild of America, West*, syndicat des scénaristes de film et de télévision d'Hollywood, cet article retrace l'évolution historique de ces industries, passées d'un modèle hiérarchique à celui du marché. Cette vue d'ensemble permet de mieux comprendre la nature des relations d'emploi à Hollywood. Est alors repérée l'influence que jouent les modes spécifiques d'emploi des femmes scénaristes de film et de télévision sur la construction des inégalités de genre. La conclusion montre pourquoi les solutions, pourtant efficaces ailleurs pour réduire les inégalités de genre, s'avèrent difficiles à mettre en place dans l'industrie culturelle d'Hollywood.

© 2009 Publié par Elsevier Masson SAS.

*Mots clés* : Inégalité de genre ; Industrie culturelle ; Film ; Télévision ; Plafond de verre ; États-unis

## Abstract

This article discusses how employment practices concerning writers of film and television contribute to gender inequality and the glass ceiling in Hollywood. Relying on historical evidence about the industries of film and television and quantitative data from analyses of the employment and membership records of the Writers Guild of America, West, the union for film and television writers in Hollywood, this article presents an overview of the industry's historical transformation from hierarchy to market in order to understand the nature of Hollywood's employment relation. It then examines how the dynamics associated with the participation of women writers contribute to particular forms of gender inequality in film and television. The

---

*E-mail address:* [bielbyd@soc.ucsb.edu](mailto:bielbyd@soc.ucsb.edu).

conclusion considers why proven remedies for minimizing gender inequality are so difficult to achieve in the culture industry of Hollywood.

© 2009 Published by Elsevier Masson SAS.

*Keywords:* Gender inequality; Culture industry; Film; Television; Glass ceiling; USA

---

The persistence of gender inequality in employment and pay in the United States, and in the social construction of work and of the workplace, has vexed American sociologists for decades. Women in this country are less likely to participate in the labor force than men, and women tend to average fewer hours of paid labor per week and fewer weeks of employment per year, but differences in work hours alone does not explain all of the gender differences in income. Women tend to hold different occupations, work in different industries, firms, and jobs, and, they are outearned by men, hold less complex jobs, and are less likely to supervise workers of the other sex and to dominate the top positions in their organization. Even when working in the same professions, men continue to outearn their female counterparts. While the pay gap and the level of female labor force participation have diminished somewhat over time, considerable inequality still remains at the highest managerial levels and within the division of labor of the family.

When considering the association between gender and career outcomes, sociologists view sex segregation as a crucial causal mechanism that underlies many other differences in women's and men's careers. Central to sociologists' emphasis on sex segregation is their interest in societal level systems of differentiation and stratification; that is, the ramifications of the social location of individuals within social structure on life outcomes. The sex segregation of women and men exposes them to different career opportunities, employment practices, and reward systems that can amplify or diminish sex differences in other work outcomes (Reskin and Roos, 1990; Reskin and Padavic, 1999; Reskin and Bielby, 2005).

While enduring patterns of gender inequality apply to male and female workers throughout the paid labor force, the culture industries of film and television represent a particularly complex and challenging source of inequality in employment and pay. Although Hollywood has dominated domestic and global production of media images for nearly 90 years, its success as an industry and the particular contribution it makes to gender inequality could hardly have been predicted from the industry's disorganized beginnings. In a study of the origins of the entertainment industry, Allen J. Scott reveals how Hollywood—a geographic agglomeration of many large and small firms located primarily in and around southern California—achieved its trade-mark economic dynamism through an early and crucial “lock-in” by its members to a distinctive system of production and organizational practices (Scott, 2005). What began around 1900 as a geographically dispersed “loose and rather chaotic collection of motion picture shooting activities” evolved between 1915 and 1930 into Hollywood's “classic” organizational form, the studio system, wherein the industry became “a dense interlocking system of production companies, anchored in geographic space by its own virtuous circle of endogenous growth” (Scott, 2005, p. 11, see also Schatz, 1988). In the late 1940s, this production arrangement transformed in significant ways from studios that were vertically integrated bureaucratic hierarchies into unstructured markets. Alongside this structural transformation evolved a set of employment practices for overseeing creative personnel that remain remarkably entrenched today.

Research on other occupations and industries attributes gender segregation to the sex labeling of jobs and sex-specific demands (Reskin and Roos, 1990). Sociologists have identified sev-

eral factors that create and sustain workplace discrimination in corporate settings; key among them are practices where gender, race, and age stereotypes about workers influence personnel decisions. Subjectivity, immunity from review, stereotypes, and cliques are part of the context in which Hollywood executives make decisions about whom to hire. Yet additional, distinctive features of work in Hollywood build stereotyping and discrimination into everyday business practices; these include a high level of risk and uncertainty, an emphasis on reputation, demographically based marketing, and a product that embodies cultural idioms about gender, race, and age.

This article discusses how employment practices concerning women writers of film and television contribute to gender inequality and the glass ceiling in Hollywood. Writers are central to cultural production in Hollywood because without a script there is no product. Relying on historical evidence from the film and television industries and quantitative data from analyses of the employment and membership records of the Writers Guild of America, West, the union for film and television writers in Hollywood, this article begins with an overview of the industry's historical transformation from hierarchy to market in order to understand the nature of Hollywood's employment relation. It then examines how the dynamics associated with the participation of women writers contribute to particular forms of gender inequality in the sectors of film and television. These sectors comprise distinct labor markets because of their different industry origins, technologies, corporate structures, and placement in the cultural hierarchy. The conclusion of this article considers why proven remedies for minimizing gender inequality are so difficult to achieve in the culture industry of Hollywood.

## **1. Hollywood's historical transformation: from hierarchy to market**

In the 1930s and 1940s, most screenwriters (as well as actors, directors, cinematographers, and other creative personnel) were salaried employees of the major studios. The studios were vertically integrated motion picture factories —large, hierarchically organized firms engaged in the development, production, distribution, and exhibition of feature films (Christopherson, 1996; Paul and Kleingartner, 1996; Stanley, 1978; Works Projects Administration, 1941). Following World War II, rising production costs, declining box office receipts, and the government's anti-trust actions made the studio system difficult to sustain. Filling the void were independent productions initiated by prominent actors, directors, or producers, for whom profit participation and deferred compensation provided substantial tax advantages. Their films typically were produced using leased facilities from a major studio, which also provided marketing, distribution, and partial financing in exchange for a share of the profits. By the mid-1970s, the vertically integrated studio system in both film and television had been completely supplanted by a system of subcontracted production, with risks distributed downward to independent production entities (Baughman, 1997; Boddy, 1990; Christopherson, 1996, p. 87–92; Faulkner and Anderson, 1987; Wasko, 1981). The demise of the production system from studios that were vertically integrated motion picture factories to a system of subcontracted production fundamentally transformed employment relations. Since the 1970s, most writers and creative personnel have been employed by “single project organizations” (Baker and Faulkner, 1991, p. 283), formed only for the duration of a single film or television project. Even when creative personnel are employed by a major studio or network, they are “life-of-project” workers (Belous, 1989), temporarily employed for the duration of a single production.

The shift in Hollywood to project-based employment appreciably affected how potential employers gauged the value of creative personnel. Measuring the specific contributions of individual artists to the quality of an aesthetic object is inherently ambiguous, and in commercialized mass culture industries there is little consensus about what constitutes competence among creative personnel (Becker, 1982; Hirsch, 1972). As a result, the quality of an employee's contribution is assessed *post hoc* based on the commercial success of the products they produce (DiMaggio, 1977). In film and television writing, the most tangible signal of a writer's future productivity is her or his association with prior successful projects (Bielby and Bielby, 1994), and a career can be viewed as "a succession of temporary projects embodied in an identifiable line of. . . credits" (Faulkner and Anderson, 1987, p. 887). In this kind of system, where skill and productivity are not easily measured, *reputation* is a signal of a professional's standing in the labor market (Powell, 1990). However, as we shall see, the distinctive features of work in Hollywood build an especially insidious form of discrimination into everyday business.

### 1.1. *Women writers in the film sector of Hollywood*

Film writing is one of the few professional occupations in which a labor force with a substantial female presence has been displaced by men. Many of the most successful early scenarists, as screenwriters of the silent film era were called, were women (Francke, 1994; McCreadie, 1994; Mahar, 2006). The highest-paid writer of the 1920s, Frances Marion, wrote silent as well as sound film successes.<sup>1</sup> Although definitive statistics are not available, estimates of the gender composition of screen writers during the silent era (from the early 1900s to 1927) range from 50% (Martin and Clark, 1987) to 90% (McCreadie, 1994), and it is generally agreed that women screenwriters played a major role in establishing the narrative form and conventions of the film scenario (Francke, 1994).

The process whereby screenwriting was transformed from a profession with substantial opportunities for women to one that became male dominated appears similar to that described by Gaye Tuchman in her account of the masculinization of authorship of the Victorian novel (Tuchman, 1989). G. Tuchman's evidence indicates that before 1840 at least half of all novelists were women. She argues that the occupation of novelist was a relatively lucrative "empty field" for women of the educated classes at this time, albeit one with relatively low prestige. Over the next half-century, men "invaded" the empty field, drawn to the profession as demand increased and the field became more lucrative. Moreover, the centralization and rationalization that accompanied the industrialization of the publishing industry placed men in control of production and distribution. The transformation of authorship into "men's work" was legitimated ideologically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the narrative form of the novel was redefined as a valued cultural object and a critical double standard was applied that valued the contributions of male novelists over those of women.

G. Tuchman suggests that the same process of invasion, redefinition, and institutionalization should be apparent in other professions that experience masculinization, even when the

<sup>1</sup> Frances Marion worked as a journalist and a combat correspondent during World War I, and began her Hollywood career at "Lois Weber Productions," a film company owned and operated by pioneer female film director Lois Weber. Credited with writing over 300 scripts and producing over 130 films, along with countless published books, she is also known for writing many scripts for the highly successful silent film actress/filmmaker Mary Pickford. Frances Marion became the first female to win an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *The Big House* in 1930, and she received the Academy Award for Best Story for *The Champ* in 1932.

transformation occurs rapidly. The transformation of Hollywood screenwriting in the late 1920s and early 1930s appears to fit this pattern. According to records in the Copyright Office at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, between 1911 and 1929, when the then-new technology of sound-on-film was introduced, more than 25,000 film synopses and scenarios were registered.<sup>2</sup> Of these many thousands, film scholars commonly agree that at least half were written by women (Martin and Clark, 1987).<sup>3</sup> Although some of the more established women writers of the silent era, which in addition to Frances Marion included Anita Loos, Lenore Coffee, and Jeanie Macpherson, continued to thrive under the studio system (Francke, 1994; McCreddie, 1994; Schwartz, 1982), the male invasion of the profession was underway.

With the advent of sound movies in 1927, those with a talent for storytelling —playwrights, novelists, journalists— were recruited to Hollywood in large numbers (Beranger, 1950; Schwartz, 1982). The coming of the “talkies” had a profound impact on the industry, quickly shifting the emphasis in screenwriting ability from creating scenarios to crafting clear and compelling dialogue, and abruptly transforming the skill requirements of the occupation. Studios scoured New York for playwrights and journalists who could write dialogue, and while women were among those recruited to Hollywood, the influx brought many male writers into the field whose literary careers in the publishing industry had been undercut by the Great Depression. These male writers competed with women for jobs in what had previously been an occupational field readily open to women, and men’s presence introduced competition among women themselves for the diminished employment opportunities that existed in the downsized studios of the Depression era.

The Depression accelerated the industry trend toward consolidation of production that began in the 1920s, so that by the early 1930s the financing, production, distribution, and exhibition of feature films were dominated by eight vertically integrated corporations: Warner Brothers, RKO, Twentieth Century Fox, Paramount, MGM, Universal, Columbia, and United Artists (Stanley, 1978). This consolidation was accompanied by a rationalization of production, including writing. Under the studio system, the role of the scenarist had become elaborated, subdivided, and formalized (Staiger, 1983). Within the story department of each studio, a story editor had responsibility for identifying viable literary properties for producers and would supervise a dozen or so script readers who would evaluate books, plays, stories, or treatments for their cinematic potential. Studios generally relied on their own staff of screenwriters to write the actual scripts, with others such as continuity clerks and script clerks doing much of the routine work in processing the filming of a script (Works Projects Administration, 1941).

The male invasion of film writing was an accomplished fact by the mid-1930s. Membership statistics from the Writers Guild of America, West, show that women accounted for less than 15% of those working as screen writers in the late 1930s. In sharp contrast to the early years

---

<sup>2</sup> This legally required registration of film materials grew out of a law suit filed by the estate of writer Lew Wallace when the Kalem film company breached the copyright of Wallace’s novel *Ben Hur* to produce its 1907 scenario for the screen based on book. The Wallace estate won the case. According to film scholar Lizzie Francke, “In 1921, the American Copyright law was officially amended to recognize motion pictures so that features and shorts were at last perceived to be the products of authors, rather than stories that just happened to be made up by the actors on the screen” (Francke, 1994, p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> As a point of comparison, in 2005, women comprised only 17% of all executive producers, producers, directors, writers, cinematographers, and editors working on the top 250 grossing films that year (Lauzen, 2005).

of the industry —when the lines dividing production roles were fluid and women moved with relative ease across the tasks of scenarist, editor, director, and producer— under the studio system women writers were likely to be assigned to administrative or support roles such as reader or script supervisor (Francke, 1994) or as “corpse rougher” who “brightened the dialog of other people’s scripts” (Mary McCall, Jr., quoted in McCreadie, 1994, p. 11).

The institutionalization of the male invasion of the screenwriting profession was legitimated by the typecasting of women writers. Women’s work on story adjustment, scene polishes, and dialogue rewrites was regarded as the “tyranny of the woman writer” by male writers of the time (Frances Marion, cited by McCreadie, 1994, p. 28). Studio chiefs believed women were especially well suited for writing “women’s films,” for writing dialogue for female stars, and for infusing the “women’s angle” into films more generally (Francke, 1994). Of course, the reality is quite different; women screenwriters have been associated with successful scripts in every film genre, and many “women’s films” have been scripted by men.

With men’s dominance of screenwriting fully institutionalized, the decline of the studio system and the trend toward independent production during the 1950s had little impact on women’s representation among screenwriters. From the 1950s through the early 1960s, women continued to constitute about 12 to 13% of those entering the screenwriting profession. Perhaps not coincidentally, the decline in women’s representation among new screenwriters from 1962 through 1971 to its lowest level in the history of the industry corresponds exactly with the era feminist film critic Molly Haskell calls “the most disheartening in screen history” regarding the portrayals and prominence of women (Haskell, 1987, p. 323).

Not until the early 1970s is there a noticeable increase in women’s representation among those entering the profession: from 1972 to 2000, women accounted for about one in five screenwriters qualifying for membership in the Writers Guild. Between 2000 and 2005 their *share* of membership increased slightly to nearly one in four screenwriters due to an overall decline in Guild membership over the period.<sup>4</sup> It is not clear what accounts for the modest upturn in women’s representation in the early 1970s. On the one hand, feminist themes were beginning to appear in commercially successful films of the 1970s, and women in the industry began organizing to advance their interests through groups such as Women in Film and the Women’s Committee of the Writers Guild of America. These developments may have both encouraged talented women to pursue careers in the industry and persuaded producers to be more open toward material from women screenwriters. On the other hand, the early 1970s also marked the beginning of the “blockbuster” era, which greatly increased the financial risk involved in pursuing projects with potential box office sales in excess of \$100 million (Baker and Faulkner, 1991). Increasingly, the “blockbuster” mentality encouraged producers to seek out established directors, writers, and actors who have track records of consistent success and forgo serious consideration of writers who prefer to transcend proven formulae and established genres. As a result, the salaries of a small group of elite screen writers were bid up in the mid-1990s to levels in excess of \$750,000 per film (Young, 1995) compared to median earnings of approximately \$45,000 for women and \$50,000 for men (Bielby and Bielby, 1996, Fig. 4). Currently, elite screen writers earn as much as \$250,000 *per week* (Horn, 2007, A16) and command seven-figure fees compared to median annual earnings of \$50,000 for women screenwriters and \$90,000 for men in the mid-1990s (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> While overall Guild membership declined 12% between 2000 and 2005, women’s membership declined by 13.3%, a greater rate (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 15).

### 1.2. *Gender inequality among film writers*

An overview of trends in employment and earnings of film writers suggests that women encounter an as yet impenetrable glass ceiling in Hollywood. Examination of quantitative data from the Writers Guild of America, West, reveal that from 1982 through 2005 there was no perceptible change in the gender composition of those employed in screenwriting; women accounted for about 18% of employed screenwriters throughout this period. However, gender differences in earnings trends over the same period reveal a gender gap in median earnings that closed modestly from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, but in both absolute and relative terms the gap at the 90th percentile was significantly greater in the early 1990s than it was in 1982 (Bielby and Bielby, 1992). Additional data reveal that from 1999 through 2005, the gender gap in earnings increased at the median, with women's earnings declining by 6% (from \$53,250 to \$50,000) and men's growing by 16% (from \$77,500 to \$90,000) (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, Table 5). This gender gap in median pay nearly doubled, from a difference of \$24,000 in 1999 to \$40,000 in 2005, doubling between 2004 and 2005 alone (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 20–21). Thus, the gender gap in career trajectories between women and men screenwriters continues to widen, and women screenwriters are falling further and further behind their male counterparts among the industry's most successful screenwriters.

In a quantitative analysis of the careers of women writers in the film sector, Denise Bielby and William Bielby found that women encounter a labor market in which *cumulative disadvantage* prevails (Bielby and Bielby, 1996). According this to explanation, access to opportunity early in the career pays off more for men than for women, and as a result the gender gap in wages increases with experience. In film, there are many ways for both male and female aspiring writers to participate at the periphery of the labor market (e.g., by selling an option on a story or treatment, by doing a rewrite or “polish” on a screenplay). Typically, both male and female film writers start at the margins of the industry, and although few succeed beyond that level, men have better prospects for breaking into the ranks of successful writers of feature film, and success breeds success once they do. This finding of cumulative disadvantage was based on evidence from a longitudinal quantitative analysis that observed for the relative effects of experience, prior employment, and prior earnings among a cohort of 4,093 screenwriters who as members of the Writers Guild of America, West were employed at least once during the period from 1982 through 1992. Confirming expectations, the analysis revealed that the gender gap in earnings of 4 to 6% that existed in 1982 *grew* as screenwriters moved through their careers, even after controlling for gender differences in prior career success. Within five years of career entry, the gender gap in earnings had grown to 20% or more, and by the fifteenth year the gap was on the order of 40% or more. In sum, the findings supported the conclusion that a gender gap in earnings is cumulative—it emerges and widens with years of experience in the film industry.

### 1.3. *Women writers in the television sector of Hollywood*

The situation for women writers in television differs in important ways from those working in film. Although women writing for television face discrimination and a pay gap, their careers are complicated by the way the television industry manages uncertainty in its business environment—a reliance upon genre to organize viewing choices, assumptions about whose writing appeals to targeted viewers, and fallout from the endless pursuit of the next programming concept.

Television was launched as a commercial industry in the United States in the late 1940s. By the mid-1950s the three major television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, were established



and these dominated access to television production and monopolized its broadcast distribution for the next four decades. In the television industry's early years, most national programming originated live from New York, and at the centerpiece of primetime were dramatic anthologies written by playwrights. This early television programming was owned by commercial sponsors and produced at independent studios, but by 1960 ownership and control over production had shifted to the major networks. This shift coincided with other developments as well: live dramas were no longer produced for television, the center for production had moved to Hollywood, and the dominant form of programming had become the filmed (and eventually the videotaped) series. More directly relevant to writers of this new medium was the consolidation of the primetime schedule around program genres—hour-long dramas, situation comedies, and crime/detective shows, among others—that predominate to this day.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the proliferation of cable television and the emergence of new, smaller, networks such as Fox, and the now-defunct UPN and WB (which have since merged into one network, CW) brought to an end the era of television controlled by the three major networks that had been instrumental to its establishment. This transformation in the industry was facilitated by the government's deregulation of television and radio.<sup>6</sup> The emergence of these new networks in the early to mid-1990s was a key trigger in the shift from mass audience programming and broadcasting to niche-marketing and narrowcasting strategies through emphasis (initially) on urban and African American audiences, teen and youth audiences drawn by series targeted to their life-style, and more generally the 18–34 year old demographic. Coinciding with this transformation in the television industry was the rise of the cable industry, which in the mid- to late-1990s brought the expansion of original programming on basic pay-cable networks, such as Lifetime and MTV, and premium subscriber networks, such as HBO and Showtime. These shifts in the industry's regulatory environment, the first of real import since the early 1970s, mark the last two decades of television history as a period of significant structural transformation that has been consequential to the labor market for television writers. On the one hand, the television industry is more vertically and horizontally integrated and impenetrable than ever before, while on the other, the proliferation of programming niches expanded the range of employment opportunities behind the scenes.

However, two distinctive features of the television industry remained that pose barriers to the careers of women writers. The first is the highly skewed sex ratio within the industry. The network executives who make decisions about program procurement and scheduling and those at the production companies who determine financing are almost always males. In the early 1990s, women constituted less than 15% of the executive producers of primetime programs and less than 25% of the writers working in television (Bielby and Bielby, 1992). In 2007 they still filled less than 15% of the industry's high status executive producer positions in the television industry and made up a mere 27% of employment in television writing overall (Writers Guild of America,

---

<sup>5</sup> These series concepts ushered in the narrative format that has become the convention of television writing—stories structured around a continuing character, with themes and plot ideas for the entire series established in the pilot episode (Boddy, 1990, p. 192).

<sup>6</sup> As the government agency that regulates the US television industry, the Federal Communications Commission's steady loosening of regulations eliminated the long-standing Financial Interest and Syndication Rules that had since 1971 intervened in the market in order to promote diversity and competition in the supply of primetime entertainment programming and forestall the kind of vertical integration that had dominated the film industry during the studio era. Following revision of the Telecommunications Act in 1996, existing caps on ownership of broadcast stations were raised and prohibition against cross-ownership of cable and broadcast stations was reduced. The results of these series of deregulatory moves were massive media mergers in the 1980s and 1990s, including thousands of small ones.

West, Executive Summary, 2007, Fig. 1; Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, Table 19). Even the newer networks, established in a presumably more enlightened industry era, employed more men than women in high-status producer positions. At the now-defunct WB and UPN, 25% of executive producer, co-executive producer, and creator positions were held by women, and although this was a larger share than women's 14% at the three major networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC and the 15.2% at Fox, it only just approximated the overall percentage of women employed to write for television at the time (Lauzen and Dozier, 2002).

A second feature that places women at a disadvantage in the television industry is the typecasting of writers. Program selection and hiring decisions are made in the context of high levels of ambiguity and risk, and network decision-makers rely upon television's now well-established and relatively unchanging genres to minimize the uncertainty involved in producing a series. Presumptions among network decision-makers about who is best able to appeal to specialized audiences and sustain the creative demands of writing particular genres leads executives to rely on typecasting when deciding whom to hire. The situation comedy genre, for example, which tends to be a male-dominated form of humor, is usually "committee-written" by the entire series staff of a dozen or more like-minded writers who are expected to endure 16-hour workdays together in a single room; work demands such as these are premised on co-workers sharing common sensibilities about male humor and related considerations that are notoriously difficult for outsiders such as women to penetrate. Employment of women who defy conventions by seeking to write "against type" is likely to be viewed as especially financially risky by network executives. In another example of how executives rely upon typecasting, consider the smaller networks, which target niche markets with programming designed to appeal to specialized audiences. Employment statistics from the Writers Guild of America, West, have revealed disproportionate employment among women writing for networks that specialize in genres, such as movies-of-the-week, that are targeted to women viewers, indicating that women writers are presumed to possess the requisite talent to reach a specialized, female audience (Bielby and Bielby, 1998).

Industry practices that rely upon stereotyping to evaluate the creative talents and abilities of writers create role encapsulation (Kanter, 1997) for those writers who are typecast. Because television is a culture industry that is driven by fashion (Hirsch, 1972), constantly in search of the newest style, a creative worker who is stylistically specialized risks falling out of fashion as tastes change (Faulkner, 1983). Typecasting that, on the one hand, creates employment opportunities for women writers, on the other, relegates them to genre and program niches that render them particularly susceptible to the cycles of popularity that drive this industry. Although reputations are built on past success within culture industries, as they are in other industries, only success in areas that remain fashionable contribute to a writers' marketability. Faced with the trade-off between short-term employment security arising from specialization *versus* the long-term threat to their careers from being typecast, women television writers are continuously confronted with the constraints that create unique barriers to their career advancement.

#### 1.4. *Gender inequality among television writers*

The effect of the television industry's business environment on the labor market for women television writers was documented in the early 1990s by a longitudinal quantitative analysis of Writers Guild of America, West, employment and earnings records of 5,167 men and women writers who were employed at least once during the period from 1982 through 1990 in the television sector of Hollywood (Bielby and Bielby, 1992). This analysis found a high degree of discontinuity in the employment of both men and women writers in the television industry and that this feature

of employment was particularly consequential for women. Technically, a television writer is a salaried employee in an industry dominated by about a dozen conglomerates and large independent studios, but the labor market for television writers has always been highly unstructured, and the employment relation for television writers is closer to the kind of short-term contracting typical of craft administration of production (Stinchcombe, 1959) than to the bureaucratically organized labor markets typical of large firms.<sup>7</sup> Writers are employed for the duration of a project, which might be as short as a few weeks for work on a single telefilm, pilot, or episode of a prime-time series. Most secure (and potentially most lucrative) is employment as a writer-producer on an ongoing prime-time series. Those series last anywhere from a few weeks to a few years, but even on the most enduring series there is considerable turnover among the production staff from season to season. Television writers attempt to sustain careers by moving from project to project in a “revolving door” fashion (Jacobs, 1989), perhaps working for dozens of employers over a period of a few years.

Television’s “revolving door” employment creates not only risk and uncertainty in careers, it fosters a kind of environment at every turn in which the sources of gender bias that enter into executives’ decisions about whom to hire are likely to be subtle, and indirect, and subject to the stereotypes and preconceptions of decision makers who place a premium on social similarity. The longitudinal analysis by W. Bielby and D. Bielby is consistent with this interpretation (Bielby and Bielby, 1992); they found that women writing for television experience an income disadvantage at career entry and that it is neither greater nor worse at later stages in their career. Women’s sizeable overall gender difference in earnings—about 70 cents for each \$1 earned by males—remained consistent at about 25% when compared to men of similar age and industry experience. Thus, the effects of employer bias that appeared early in female writers’ careers persisted as continuous disadvantage in the form of an enduring salary differential that affected them equally throughout their careers. The persistence of this disparity reflects a process of continuous disadvantage rather than one of cumulative disadvantage, as was found among film writers, in which gender disparity increases over time. However, the reasons this disadvantage is continuous in form rather than cumulative are not yet understood.

By the late 1990s, the television industry’s structural transformation had opened a few additional doors for women writers (Lauzen and Dozier, 2002), and presently the television sector accounts for a larger percentage of female employment in Hollywood, although this has remained flat at 27% since 1999.<sup>8</sup> Writers Guild of America, West, statistics reveal that between 1999 and 2005, median earnings for men and women combined increased 28%,<sup>9</sup> with the earnings of women television writers increasing at a greater rate than their male peers and all but closing the gender wage gap in median earnings by 2005.<sup>10</sup> Also occurring during this period was a 3.5%

---

<sup>7</sup> Hollywood conglomerates are media companies that either own or are owned by the large vertically integrated enterprises, which include major studios. In 2004 and 2005, conglomerates included Disney, Dreamworks, Fox, MGM, NBC-Universal, Sony, Time Warner, and Viacom. Large independents are companies defined by the Writers Guild of America, West, as unaffiliated with any of the large conglomerates and employing 40 or more writers in a given year. In 2004 and 2005 these included Bigwood Films, Carsey-Werner, LRF Development, Lions Gate, New Regency Productions and Revolution Studios.

<sup>8</sup> Compared to film, the television sector and the industry’s largest companies account for a greater share of writers’ employment in Hollywood (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 12).

<sup>9</sup> Median earnings increased from \$73,607 to \$94,218 (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 20).

<sup>10</sup> Over this period, the gender gap in median earnings was more than \$4,000 in 1999, increased to nearly \$10,000 in 2004, and declined to around \$300 in 2005 (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 20). This fluctuation in the earnings gap is indicative of just how tenuous wage equality can be in a culture industry ruled by fashion cycles driven

increase in female television writers employed in staff positions on series. However, this increase over this period has been only from 25.8 to 29.3%, and much of the growth was concentrated in relatively low status staff writer positions or middle-level producer positions, such as supervising producer, producer, co-producer, and story editor.

Despite these slight improvements, other evidence indicates that women still have a long way to go before cracking the glass ceiling in television. Of those employed on writing staffs of series in the 2005–2006 season, only 43 women —8.2%— were executive producers; in contrast, 249 men —19.7%— were executive producers. Furthermore, improvements remained concentrated in small pockets of opportunity that are for the most part out of the mainstream. Of the 152 show staffs in the 2005–2006 season, the five series with the largest percentages of women staff writers included only one series airing on a major broadcast network, and another on a small network that no longer exists.<sup>11</sup> Ten series employed no women writers at all.

In short, it would appear that the structural transformation of the television industry that began in the early to mid-1990s has been beneficial for women writers, but only if median earnings are used as the measure of progress. The labor market in the television industry remains a problematic one for women writers because the career barriers that they face in this sector arise from mechanisms that are different from causes of extreme gender segregation in other occupations and industries. Sex labeling of jobs and sex-specific demands account for the segregation that exists elsewhere, but the continuous disadvantage female television writers encounter appears to be sustained by more subtle forms of discrimination. In the male-dominated world of studio and network executives, male writers are better known and are perceived as better risks than equally successful female writers. As a result, male writer-producers are more likely to get long-term development deals and multiple-series commitments from the networks. As an indicator of this bias, Writers Guild of America, West, statistics from 2005–2006 report that women writers were underrepresented as “principals” among teams of producers, directors, and/or writers who play key roles in projects for new television series. Such inclusion is especially important in the context of the industry’s “revolving-door” type of employment because it assures continued involvement in projects and opportunities for access and marketing to network decision-makers. One other key indicator of ongoing gender disparity was women writers’ under-representation in the pipeline of television projects in development: over 58% of the pilots and 59% of the projects for which a script was either commissioned or a project was approved to begin production did not include a female member (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 46–47).

## 2. Glass ceilings in culture industries

Writing is one of the few professions where women have achieved parity with men, at least in terms of participation. By 1990, women in the United States accounted for 50% of authors, 50% of technical writers, and 51% of editors and reporters, according to US census statistics. Factors favoring women’s participation seem to be present in Hollywood as well. Writing for film and television does not require long-term commitment to a single corporate employer. The work can be done in any setting, during hours of the writers’ own choosing. Shouldn’t Hollywood prove the exception to the glass ceiling faced by women in most professions?

---

by ever-shifting public tastes and niche marketing.

<sup>11</sup> One series was *Grey’s Anatomy*, which airs on ABC and employs 66.7% women writers; the other now-cancelled series was *The Bad Girls Guide* on UPN, which employed 75% women. The other series were on cable or cable subsidiaries of the networks (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, Table 21).

There was no glass ceiling in Hollywood 75 years ago when women accounted for at least half of those writing for silent films and were among the most highly compensated professionals in the industry. But over time, as the definition of motion pictures evolved from an uncertain technological novelty to an enormously profitable entertainment medium, Hollywood experienced the gendering of its occupations and occupational structure (Mahar, 2006; see also Jones, 2005). By the time the studio system became firmly established in the 1930s, filmmaking had become centralized, hierarchical, and masculinized, and as in other industrial settings, men soon dominated the most important positions on both the business and creative sides. Television adopted a similar structure once it emerged as a commercial industry. Today, men still outnumber women by more than five to one among those writing feature films and nearly three to one among those writing for television.

Accounting for how women writers shifted over time from industry dominance to subordinate standing requires integrating understanding of the organizational mechanisms that underlie gender inequality in employment and pay with how institutional arrangements shape labor markets in culture industries. Extensive sociological research has demonstrated that job segregation along the lines of sex—along with race, ethnicity, and age—“is the linchpin in workplace inequality because the relegation of different groups to different kinds of work both facilitates and legitimates unequal treatment” (Reskin and Padavic, 1999, p 344). Compounding the inequality caused by segregation of social categories is hierarchical segregation—the segregation of workers across different ranks in the same job—which grants favored groups with employment opportunities that confer more status, authority, and pay, thereby contributing to earnings and authority gaps (Reskin and Padavic, 1999, p. 348). Glass ceilings—the lack of women in top positions as a result of intangible barriers—can be attributed to actions taken by employers to prevent women from occupying elite positions, the decisions made by employees in job preparation, or institutional features of a labor market (Milgrom and Petersen, 2006). While each contributes in particular ways to gender inequality in writing for film and television, finding remedies to undo them are complicated because Hollywood, as a culture industry, has evolved a distinctive system of production and organizational practices that are profoundly consequential to the employment relation.

Sociologists have identified several factors that create and sustain workplace discrimination in corporate settings. Making work assignments in an arbitrary and subjective manner, especially where accountability for equal employment opportunity is absent, allows stereotypes to influence personnel decisions. In the corporate world, this happens when managers have unfettered discretion concerning who to hire or promote, permitting them to make personal judgments about who best “fits” the job. More often than not, the “best fit” matches the gender, race, and age of those already doing the job. In such circumstances interpersonal ties can determine access to the corporate fast track.

In Hollywood, managerial decision-making is further complicated because from the earliest stages of assembling a new project in Hollywood, the men and women who finance, produce, market, and distribute films and television programs must engage in short-term contracting in a context of ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty. In the absence of formal evaluation guidelines, they rely on closed social networks of interpersonal ties and informal subjective criteria for evaluating writers’ contributions. These are precisely the conditions under which stereotypes shape decision making, especially when there is no system for holding decision makers responsible for making unbiased decisions. Moreover, few companies have reformed their personnel practices to minimize bias regarding creative talent. One reason is that the stereotypes make perfect business sense to Hollywood executives, who self-consciously attempt to mirror and trade on cultural idioms about age, race, and gender. Cultural stereotypes are embodied in the industry’s product, figure

prominently in its marketing strategies, and therefore become rules of thumb for making decisions about writers and other creative professionals.

But Hollywood's glass ceiling exists for reasons that go beyond stereotyping and typecasting, and the absence of managerial accountability. Within the industrial context of Hollywood, how organizations mediate between buyers and sellers of externalized labor as they certify and signal an employee's reputation dramatically affects career outcomes.

Hollywood's structural arrangement that economizes on the unique transaction costs incurred in matching creative personnel to specific projects is a "brokerage" system in which brokers establish reputations through repeated successes in matching artists to commercial projects. In Hollywood, this brokerage system is the talent agency, and as Todd Gitlin notes, talent agencies are a "kind of solution" to the problem of uncertainty. "If agents did not exist," says T. Gitlin, "they would have to be invented" (Gitlin, 1983, p. 144).

Talent agencies contribute to gender disparity in Hollywood through the labor market segmentation they create by assuring greater access to more lucrative employment for the writers they represent. A study of agency representation across demographic groups of writers in the early 1990s found that men dominated the clientele of talent agencies, and just under one-fourth of agency rosters were women (Bielby and Bielby, 1999).<sup>12</sup> When agencies operate as principals, not just as agents, by initiating—and profiting—from the production of new television and film projects, writers are even more likely to find employment and earn considerably more than equally accomplished writers without this type of representation.<sup>13,14</sup>

Contemporary women writers in Hollywood have a way to go before they achieve parity with equally experienced male writers, an overall gap that has changed little since the mid-1980s, when the Writers Guild of America, West, began systematically documenting disparities in earnings and employment. Indeed, the most current information indicates that gap has grown in recent years.<sup>15</sup> However, even women who are neither segregated to specific positions nor constrained to write for specific genres face subtle barriers. In the clubby, male-dominated world of executives,

<sup>12</sup> This study is based on the employment and earnings trajectories of 8,819 film and television writers who were employed at least once during the period from 1982 through 1992. The data are from the employment and membership records of the Writers Guild of America, West. Information on agency representation existed for 1987, 1990, and 1992, and the analyses apply to employment and earnings during each of these three years.

<sup>13</sup> Agencies that operate as principals are elite or "core" agencies. These agencies are those clearly recognized by participants in the industry and in the industry press as having the clientele and business connections to initiate and package new film and television projects. Coding the agencies assumed a dichotomous segmentation of agencies into core and noncore sectors based on the number of writers the agency represented. Analyses found there were little or no differences between small and medium sized agencies or among large, very large, and boutique agencies, but substantial differences between the small and medium agencies on the one hand and the large, very large, and boutique agencies (i.e., the agencies classified as "core") on the other.

<sup>14</sup> The effects of talent agencies on writers' careers can be understood by considering the networks in which social actors at different levels of analysis are embedded. Affiliation with a core agency provides a writer with access to an otherwise loosely connected network of opportunities. From the perspective of a writer as social actor, such representation fills a "structural hole" (Burt, 1992), providing nonredundant access to information and resources. As a result, representation by a core agency works to the writer's advantage, even if it precludes having the writer's work considered for projects initiated by rival packaging agencies and results in the agency's bottom-line interests being aligned with the entity that pays the writer's salary.

<sup>15</sup> Overall trends in earnings for writers between 1999 and 2005 reveal that relative earnings of women writers fell from \$0.87 to \$0.82 compared to every dollar earned by white males, and among elite writers at the 95th percentile of the earnings distribution for employed writers during this period the decline was substantial; women dropped from \$0.82 to \$0.59. In 2005, earnings at the 95th percentile for white male writers were \$738,750 and for women were \$431,500 (Writers Guild of America, West, 2007, p. 17).

male writers are insiders. As a result, they are better known and are often perceived as better risks than equally successful female writers. Men are more likely than women to get long-term development deals and multiple project commitments. Pro-male bias in the industry generates a pattern of advantage for men whereby women fall further behind their male counterparts during the course of a career.

Establishing equal opportunity accountability for creative professionals in Hollywood is a formidable challenge. While most writers are legally employees of large organizations, their employment is similar to that of outside contractors hired for a short-term project. As a result, the organizational structures and policies that create barriers to career advancement tend to remain invisible to the writers themselves. Moreover, the lines of authority for hiring and pay decisions are often blurred. The producer who assembles a writing staff on a television series or approves the screenwriter for a film project is likely to be reporting, directly or indirectly, to executives within his or her organization, who are likely to demand input into the hiring and compensation of writers. Given these multiple authorities, it is not clear who would establish such an equal opportunity policy and how oversight might be implemented.

### 3. Conclusion

Hollywood's culture industries of film and television are sites where symbolic representations of gender are literally produced, and they provide new challenges for understanding the persistence of gender inequality. This article has identified and discussed several distinctive features of Hollywood's system of production and organizational practices in order to invite further investigation into how gender inequality is sustained in culture industries. Those features are: (1) the employment relation is based on short-term contracting for the duration of a specific project; (2) the quality and commercial viability of the completed work cannot be unambiguously evaluated based on technical and measurable features of the finished product, but it can only be evaluated *post hoc*; (3) career success is largely dependent on a writer's current reputation among a small group of "brokers" who match creative talent with commercial projects; (4) reputations are based on perceptions of an artist's success in currently fashionable styles or genres; and, (5) the overwhelming majority of those who make decisions about matching creative talent to commercial projects are men. The research presented here underscores the importance of each for advancing insight into gender inequality in culture industries, but it also highlights the importance of attending simultaneously to industrial context, social networks, organizational arrangements, and the symbolic content of the commodities produced to fully understand the barriers to women's complete participation in the production of culture.

### References

- Baker, W., Faulkner, R., 1991. Role as Resource in the Hollywood Film industry. *American Journal of Sociology* 97, 279–309.
- Baughman, J.L., 1997. *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941*, 2nd Edition. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.
- Becker, H., 1982. *Art Worlds*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Belous, R.S., 1989. How Human Resource Systems Adjust to the Shift Toward Contingent Workers. *Monthly Labor Review* 112, 7–12.
- Beranger, C., 1950. *Writing for the Screen*. WC. Brown, Dubuque, IA.
- Bielby, D., Bielby, W., 1996. Women and Men in Film: Gender Inequality Among Writers in a Culture Industry. *Gender & Society* 10, 248–270.

- Bielby, W., Bielby, D., 1992. Cumulative *versus* Continuous Disadvantage in an Unstructured labor market. *Work and Occupations* 19, 366–489.
- Bielby, W., Bielby, D., 1994. “All Hits Are Flukes”: Institutional Decision-making and the Rhetoric of Network Prime-time program development. *American Journal of Sociology* 99, 1287–1313.
- Bielby, W., Bielby, D., 1998. The 1998 Hollywood Writers’ Report: Telling ALL Our Stories. Writers Guild of America, West, West Hollywood, CA.
- Bielby, W., Bielby, D., 1999. Organizational Mediation of Project-based Labor Markets: Talent Agencies and the Careers of Screenwriters. *American Sociological Review* 64, 64–85.
- Boddy, W., 1990. *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL.
- Burt, R., 1992. *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Christopherson, S., 1996. Flexibility and Adaptation in Industrial Relations: The Exceptional Case of the US Media Entertainment Industries. In: Gray, L.S., Seeber, R.L. (Eds.), *Under the Stars: Essays on Labor Relations in Arts and Entertainment*. ILR Press, New York, pp. 86–112.
- DiMaggio, P., 1977. Market Structure, the Creative Process, and Popular Culture: Toward an Organizational Reinterpretation of Mass Culture Theory. *Journal of Popular Culture* 11, 433–451.
- Faulkner, R., 1983. *Music on Demand: Composers and Careers in the Hollywood Film Industry*. Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Faulkner, R., Anderson, A., 1987. Short-term Projects and Emergent Careers: Evidence from Hollywood. *American Journal of Sociology* 92, 879–909.
- Francke, L., 1994. *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Gitlin, T., 1983. *Inside Prime Time*. Pantheon, New York.
- Haskell, M., 1987. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd edition. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Hirsch, P., 1972. Processing Fads and Fashions: an Organization-set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems. *American Journal of Sociology* 77, 639–659.
- Horn, J., 2007. Writers Work Picket Lines as TV Shows Shut Down. *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, A1, A16.
- Jacobs, J., 1989. *Revolving Doors: Sex Segregation in Women’s Careers*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Jones, C., 2005. From Technology to Content: The Shift in Dominant Logic in the Early American Film Industry. In: Lant, T., Lampel, J., Shamsie, J. (Eds.), *The Business of Culture: Strategic Perspectives on Entertainment and Media*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 195–204.
- Kanter, R.M., 1997. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Harper & Row, New York.
- Lauzen, M., 2005. The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in the Top 250 Films of 2005. [http://www.moviesbywomen.com/stats\\_celluloid\\_ceiling\\_2005.php](http://www.moviesbywomen.com/stats_celluloid_ceiling_2005.php).
- Lauzen, M., Dozier, D., 2002. Equity Time in Prime Time? Scheduling Favoritism and Gender on the Broadcast Networks. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 46, 137–153.
- Mahar, K., 2006. *Regendering the Movies*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.
- Martin, A., Clark, V., 1987. *What Women Wrote: Scenarios, 1912–1929*. Cinema History Microfilm Series. University Publications of America, Frederick, MD.
- McCreadie, M., 1994. *Women Who Write the Movies*. Birch Lane Press, New York.
- Milgrom, E.M., Petersen, T., 2006. The Glass Ceiling in the United States and Sweden: Lessons from the Family-friendly Corner of the World, 1970–1990. In: Blau, F., Brinton, M., Grusky, D. (Eds.), *The Declining Significance of Gender?* Russell Sage Foundation, New York, pp. 156–211.
- Paul, A., Kleingartner, A., 1996. The Transformation of Industrial Relations in the Motion Picture and Television Industries: Talent Sector. In: Gray, L.S., Seeber, R.L. (Eds.), *Under the Stars: Essays on Labor Relations in Arts and Entertainment*. ILR Press, Ithaca, NY, pp. 156–180.
- Powell, W.W., 1990. Neither Market nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior* 12, 295–336.
- Reskin, B., Bielby, D., 2005. A Sociological Perspective on Gender and Career Outcomes. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, 71–86.
- Reskin, B., Padavic, I., 1999. Sex, Race, and Ethnic Inequality in United States Workplaces. In: Chafetz, J. (Ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Kluwer Publishers, New York, pp. 343–374.
- Reskin, B., Roos, P., 1990. *Job Queues. Gender Queues*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Stanley, R., 1978. *The Celluloid Empire: A History of the Motion Picture Industry*. Hastings House, New York.
- Stinchcombe, A., 1959. Bureaucratic and Craft Administration of Production. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 4, 168–187.



- Schatz, T., 1988. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. Pantheon Books, New York, NY.
- Schwartz, N.L., 1982. *The Hollywood Writers' Wars*. Knopf, New York.
- Scott, A.J., 2005. *On Hollywood*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Staiger, J., 1983. "Tame" Authors and the Corporate Laboratory: Stories, Writers, and Scenarios in Hollywood. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8 (Fall), 33–45.
- Tuchman, G., 1989. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Wasko, J., 1981. The Political Economy of the American Film Industry. *Media, Culture, and Society* 3, 135–153.
- Work Projects Administration, *American Guide Series*, 1941. *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City*. Hastings, New York.
- Writers Guild of America, West. 2007. *The 2007 Hollywood Writers Report: Whose Stories Are We Telling?* Writers Guild of America, West, Los Angeles.
- Writers Guild of America, West. 2007. *The 2007 Hollywood Writers Report Executive Summary: Whose Stories Are We Telling?* Writers Guild of America, West, Los Angeles.
- Young, P., 1995. *Scripters Caught in Studio Squeeze*. *Daily Variety* 247, 18.