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Closing the Music Industry Gender Gap

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Closing the Music Industry Gender Gap

By Sami Fong

I still remember the shock on my parents' faces when breaking the news "Guess who wants to make a career in the music biz?" Their concern was that the industry was mostly run by men and all they could think was "sex, drugs, and rock-a-roll," which admittedly also gave me some concern. However, as the role of women in the music biz has become a point of topic (thank you "#MeToo") women from all walks of life are starting to flourish in this male-dominated business, which makes me optimistic. Women like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift may grab the headlines, but real growth for women in the music industry will not happen without breaking the proverbial executive "glass ceiling" to enable men and women to work and compete as equals.

A study by Stacy L. Smith, an associate professor of communication at the University of Southern California and the founder of its USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that from 2012 to 2018 women were under represented in popular music. In an analysis of Dr. Smith's second annual report, February 2019 *Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters & Producers*, (<https://annenberg.usc.edu/research>); a study of the top 700 songs on Billboard Hot 100 chart for each of those seven years showed only 22% of those songs were performed by female artists. The percentage is even lower for women behind the scenes such as songwriters at 12% and female producers (those most responsible for the sound of pop music) at just 2% or a gender ratio of 47:1 male to female. According to Dr. Smith, "When it comes to women's ability to contribute and to lead, they're being shut out of the process." The starkness of the study's findings is surprising given the success of stars like Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Adele, Ariana Grande (currently with 3 songs in the UK Top 10), and

new artists like Alessia Cara, Julia Michaels, Camila Cabello, Halsey, and SZA. Dr. Smith's sample size is narrow because it excludes thousands of artists who are less commercially visible and those in niche genres by looking only at a seven-year sample of the top 100 songs. It is even more surprising when considering that the music industry has provided homes for those labeled as outsiders or minorities. For instance, the industry opened their doors to black musicians in the 1960's while racial discrimination via Jim Crow laws received tacit approval from our legal system. Later, punk and alternative groups such as the Ramones, Sex Pistols, and Nirvana were promoted by the industry resulting in them becoming heroes to fans.

The take away from Dr. Smith's study is that when it comes to the music industry it remains a boy's club where women are offered less opportunity, work harder to get ahead, have fewer role models, and face gender bias. However, there is hope because every year Billboard publishes the Power 100 that is a list of top executives in the music industry from live, tech, management, and recorded music. In 2018, 17% of the people on the list were female, an increase from 10% in 2017. Also, the 2018 Billboard's annual celebration of more than 120 female leaders included many breaking the "glass ceiling" such as Latrice Burnette, Executive VP, Island Records who moved from Epic in September 2018 and the Billboard 2017 Under 40 honoree; Allison Jones, SVP A&R, Big Machine; Michelle Jubelirer, COO, Capitol Music Group; Chris Lacy, SVP A&R, Warner Music Nashville; and, Cindy Mabe, President, Universal Music Group Nashville.

The accomplishment of these women is noteworthy because it demonstrates an incremental decrease in gender bias, which is one of Dr. Smith's arguments of why female producers account for only 2% of the top 700 songs from 2012 to 2018. Dr. Smith sees a similar comparison to an earlier study by the USC Annenberg Inclusion on the movie industry. Her January 2019 report

Inclusion in the Director's Chair found that when the movie industry thinks director, the perception is male. The average percentage of female directors during the twelve-year study period (2007 to 2018) was 4% or a ratio of 22:1 male to female. Her study proposes that the same bias holds true for record producers. After all, both film and music correlate with the business of entertainment. Dr. Smith suggests that having a female director leads to more females on screen, more females in leading roles, and more racial and ethnic diversity. A good example is the 2017 movie *Wonder Woman* directed by Patty Jenkins and starred Gal Gadot that has earned over \$800 million worldwide. Patty Jenkins is a multi-award-winning director who in 2018 became the first woman to receive the Variety Creative Impact in Directing Award. She will direct *Wonder Woman 2* and promises to hire more women behind the camera. It is not unimaginable that the same thing may become a reality in the music world if women are advocating for other women.

In addition to women executives hiring more women, young women also need to be exposed to fields such as music composition and sound engineering to acquire the skills needed to compete. Which is why it is encouraging to learn of organizations such as [Women's Audio Mission](#) "WAM" in San Francisco that provide hands on training, work experience, career counseling and job placement to young women and girls in music and film. WAM was founded in 2003 by Terri Winston after serving 11 years as Professor of Sound Recording Arts at San Francisco City College. Winston, who is also WAM's executive director, said in a 2018 interview celebrating WAM's 15th Anniversary the organization has thrived because it fills an underserved population of women that fosters an attitude of women creating sound who are formidable competitors versus being a novelty.

Pioneering women such as Winston and Karrie Keyes, Pearl Jam’s engineer for 25 plus years and co-founder of [SoundGirls](#) in 2013, are leaving music legacies for the next generation of women. SoundGirls is a non-profit whose mission is “empowering the next generation of women in audio” by creating a network of professional women in audio and music production that provides a support system for women working in the field. The opportunity to ask questions, share resources and knowledge from other women is awesome. The success of GenY women such as two-time GRAMMY nominated Suzy Shinn and 2019 UK Music Producers Guild Breakthrough Engineer Award winner Dani Bennett Spragg, shows the talents of young women are being recognized. This highlights that talent paired with opportunity is slowly but surely beginning to close the gender gap in the music industry.