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The Underrepresentation of Women in Filmmaking

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The University of Southern Mississippi

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The Underrepresentation of Women in Filmmaking

by

Paola Sandoval

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

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ABSTRACT

My thesis project seeks to bring awareness to the ongoing problem of the underrepresentation of women in filmmaking. During the initial stages of filmmaking, many women contributed to the developing Hollywood industry. As film-watching grew in popularity in the 1920s, filmmaking turned into a lucrative business. Consequently, this boost of film production pushed women to the outskirts, making the field male-dominated. This has continued into the present-day leaving women having to overcome the challenges of garnering positions on a film crew.

Existing research on this topic mostly focuses on Hollywood. However, the underrepresentation of women in film is not only happening there but also in small-scale productions at the regional level, leaving Mississippi unexplored.

My project examines the Mississippi film community through first-hand perspectives of women filmmakers within the state. My research shows that Mississippi has a small number of women to men in the industry due to the traditional morals still practiced in the South. There is an underlying assumption about the role of women where they are only considered as caretakers or nurturers leaving women only more likely to find positions as producers rather than technical jobs, such as cinematographers or editors. This is a stereotype that has lessened in more impartial settings, but not in the South. Rather than looking at women filmmakers' technical abilities, employers look at traditional gender constructs.

Mississippi has a small but growing industry for movie making, and it is important to highlight these issues now before the community grows.

Keywords: film industry, filmmaking, inequality in the workplace, Mississippi, sexism, underrepresentation, women in film, women filmmakers

DEDICATION

Words cannot express the amount of love and gratitude I have for every person that has supported me throughout writing my work. I would not have been able to finish this without the constant encouragement each of you has given me. To my family and my friends, I love you all so much.

Thank you to those who answered my late-night calls during times I was beyond stressed. Thank you for proofreading countless times and being my second set of eyes. Thank you for listening to my rants on Marvel's releases of new films and TV shows, but most importantly, thank you for motivating me to become the woman filmmaker I want to be.

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Besides my thesis advisor, I would like to acknowledge my other support throughout my film school career, Dr. Vincenzo Mistretta. He has uplifted me and believes in my abilities to be successful. He has provided me with opportunities outside the academic setting, and I could not be more grateful for what heights I will reach because of him.

Last but not least, I could not have done this project without the contributions of each woman filmmaker who made this thesis possible. By learning their experiences from working in this industry, I am capable of showing society what it means to be a woman in film. Thank you to each of you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DP Director of Photography

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Trying to pursue a career in filmmaking is already difficult as it is. People must find the right connections and valuable opportunities to advance. Once that is acquired, those individuals can begin to climb up their desired career ladder. The problem with this is the unequal playing field between men and women getting those opportunities. In any job field, the issue of sexism is present, and in this case, in the film industry as well. A study by Martha M. Lauzen, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, found that men are more likely to be hired than women on film productions. This also ties in with not many women earning major leadership roles on crew. This is an issue that many people are unaware of. Although individuals in the industry know that women filmmakers face obstacles trying to pursue this career, much of the general public is unaware of the situation. Since film-watching is a popular activity that people indulge in often, it is important to address the problem that persists behind the scenes.

The underrepresentation of women in filmmaking has been an ongoing problem since the early days of cinema (Stein). Sexism in this field needs to be addressed now to alleviate these problems for future filmmakers. Some parts of the industry, such as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences or women who have been able to initiate change, have tried and succeeded in achieving more diversity. This is being done to change the ordinary demographic of older white males who have the majority of voting rights in the Academy. This demographic does not mirror all the viewers of a film, and this is where the problem lies. In terms of film-watching, many films are catered to a male audience. This inhibits the proper representation of all film viewers. In the

Academy, having a large ratio of this demographic prevents Oscar-worthy films from being recognized since those films do not cater to their wants. For instance, a study done by the Los Angeles Times in 2012 shows the individuals in the Academy have an average age of 62, with 77% being men and 94% being Caucasian (Horn et al.); Apart from what the Academy represents, this does not encompass all of the industry such as independent filmmakers, smaller productions, film festivals, film school, etc. The goal is to achieve equality in all areas of the field.

When I first decided that I wanted to pursue a career in film, I did not know much about the industry. My knowledge was limited to what I saw on film screens and the award show of the Oscars, which left me with many questions about why only a few women were represented in the field. Growing up, I always took notice of individuals' names during end credits. Many of the names I saw were men. I thought to myself, 'Why are there not more women working in these higher positions such as director or director of photography?'

I began to look for answers to my questions as I started my undergraduate film program and the Keystone Honors Program at the University of Southern Mississippi at the Gulf Park campus. After I became knowledgeable about the obstacles women faced entering the field, I was left with more questions and anxiety of how this could affect my future. I decided to investigate further into my chosen field and find what to expect as a woman entering a male-dominated career. The main concern is that women have more difficulty gaining leading positions on set, such as directing: a position in which I am personally interested. To challenge this, I wanted to speak with women filmmakers firsthand to understand their individual experiences better.

Question

In conversations about new films, the names of male directors are often at the forefront. Not many women are given the chance to direct the next upcoming blockbuster. My research question asks why women in the film industry face ongoing discrimination that inhibits them from obtaining equal opportunities in the field. Rather than just trying to create equality, we must also ask how to rectify the sexism women filmmakers have faced in the past.

My principal goal for this project is to help others who share the same concerns, whether they are filmmakers in general, other women pursuing the field, or the average movie-watcher. We are currently in an era where speaking up against inequalities is prevalent in everyday life. History shows that pressing for progressiveness and equal values makes a difference. Some changes have been made, but much more can be addressed. One woman filmmaker who has been making advancements in the field is Chloe Zhao. Her work has gained much recognition over the past few years, garnering her the achievement of winning best director at the 2021 Oscars. Needless to say, and at the time I am writing this, this has been only the second time a woman has won in this category and the first time a woman of color has won. This is the progress the film industry needs, but there are still structural problems for other women to achieve these accomplishments. This is a better start to a brighter future for women to succeed in more filmmaking, but more opportunities for women still need to be made.

Delimitation

To begin the delimitation of my thesis, I started by critically analyzing the history of women filmmakers dating back to the early 20th century and continuing into the present day. This gave an overview of persistent trends of how women have been historically overlooked as filmmakers. I focused on women who founded early cinema such as Alice Guy Blaché and Lois Weber. During their era, women were at the forefront of an industry that was still developing. In the 1910s, cinema had more opportunities available for women to succeed in the field (Gaines and Vastal). As the years went by, there was more resistance to women having the chance to enter the field because of film skyrocketing as a business endeavor. Yet, some women did persist in the now male-dominated workforce. During the 1940s and 1950s, Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino were the only prominent active women filmmakers. Since the 1990s, women filmmakers such as Jane Campion and Kathryn Bigelow have arrived in the field. They have been building on the legacy left before them. For the more present era of cinema, filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay and Chloe Zhao have been at the front of the conversation of women in the film industry. They advocate for better work opportunities and vouch for the necessity of including more women in this career field. Each of these women helped me obtain a better understanding of what to look for in today's film world.

At the same time, I want to obtain a firsthand perspective of women in film today. Existing research on this topic mostly focuses on Hollywood. However, the underrepresentation of women in film is not only happening there but also in small-scale productions at the regional level, leaving places such as Mississippi unexplored. The film community in this state is small but ample. Based on this, I determined my research

group to be women filmmakers who have worked or are currently working in Mississippi. Over the course of an academic semester, I reached out to potential candidates with the help of the Mississippi Film Office. Six women agreed to partake and give their thoughts and experiences they have encountered through their careers. I formulated the following five questions:

1. How did you decide you wanted to pursue a career in filmmaking?
2. At what age did you start gaining field experience?
3. Have you experienced sexism in the workplace? Could you elaborate if comfortable? What did you do to overcome it?
4. Have you reached your dream position in the industry? Are you still trying to reach it?
5. What would be the one piece of advice you would give to the future generations of women filmmakers?

Information regarding the technicalities of interviews can be found in Appendix A. During the period interviews were conducted, I published a survey for the Mississippi Gulf Coast residents. I generated this to gather a person's views and knowledge regarding the basic demographics of participants, personal film favorites, viewing habits, and previous assumptions and perceptions of women in filmmaking. For survey questions, how the survey was conducted, and how participants were decided on, see Appendix B. The detailed results of the survey are found in Appendix C.

Research Process

To begin my research process, I analyzed the data collected from the interviews, I transcribed each, and located similar thoughts and themes to further my research. By discovering these connecting viewpoints, I was able to better understand women

filmmakers' experiences in Mississippi. I found correlations between their career paths and advice on what it takes to be successful as a woman filmmaker.

For the interviews, I choose to work with the qualitative research method. I chose this method to better contemplate and understand the personal experiences each of the interviewees would give. This method is appropriate for my research topic because each filmmaker has garnered their roles in filmmaking through different means. Personal testimony regarding this subject helps give more meaningful data. The filmmaking career path is not very linear, so it is vital to obtain this information from the different sectors of the film industry. Qualitative research was best suited for this project as I was more interested in learning about this issue on a one-to-one level instead of focusing on statistics covering the topic.

When speaking on the qualitative interview type, I primarily followed a semi-structured format. This is defined as “a combination of both structured and unstructured interviews such as, a researcher will come up with a list of questions to be asked in the interview, but he can also ask follow-up questions to get deeper detail or explanation from the respondent on the basis of his response” (Bhasin). I chose this interview format to have participants feel comfortable and open up about their experiences. There is not a single answer to each question. Their responses are meant to be elaborated on to achieve richer details that could contribute to the topic at hand.

For the survey section of my research, I wrote the questions to be easily answered by a common film watcher. The 13 questions can be categorized into two sections. The first seven questions consisted of personal demographics and beliefs, while the last six revealed their perceptions of women working in the film industry. I based the answer

choices on Lanzen's study, *The Celluloid Ceiling*, which tracked the employment of women in the top 250 grossing films for the past 24 years. Those numbers were comprised of women directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers.

Overview

Considering the data collected and accessed, this thesis is divided into the following three chapters. Chapter 2 sets the basis of the history of women in the film industry. It will highlight the contributions women filmmakers have made along with the obstacles that inhibited their progress. Analysis of this history shows that awareness needs to be more prominent in today's film environment. Chapter 3 introduces the analysis of conversations I had with each woman filmmaker. It will introduce the themes and parallels discovered between the six interviews. This information will lay out the present circumstances women filmmakers have worked through in Mississippi. Chapter 4 concludes with a presentation of all findings in the research process to reveal a truth that has not been researched in the Mississippi film community. In particular, my analysis shows that Mississippi has a small number of women to men in the industry due to the traditional morals still practiced in the South. There is an underlying assumption about the role of women where they are only considered as caretakers or nurturers leaving women only more likely to find positions as producers rather than technical jobs, such as cinematographers or editors. This is a stereotype I plan to help lessen through this thesis.

CHAPTER II: THE HISTORY OF WOMEN IN FILMMAKING

When speaking about who began the foundations of the film industry, women filmmakers are often left out of the picture. The history of women in filmmaking has been overlooked by many since the industry became male-dominated. During the silent era of film ranging from the late 1890s to the early 1920s, women were in many field positions such as directing, screenwriting, cinematography, editing, and producing. Women were essential to the early progress of filmmaking. There are many acclaimed names of women who founded the industry that are still somewhat recognized today (Gaines and Vastal).

As Anthony Slide tells us in his writing of *Early Women Directors*, women such as Alice Guy Blaché and Lois Weber are notable examples of women filmmakers who left a legacy for women in film. He quotes an article from *Photoplay* from 1912 that describes her as, “A striking example of the modern woman in business who is doing a man’s work” (Slide pg. 15). This is the reputation Alice Guy Blaché left in the film industry. Her budding career began at the start of the French film industry, where she became the first woman director and one of the first directors in history. She set out the footprint for the generations of women that have come after her. Blaché knew it was a complicated world that rarely wanted women to be successful, but she challenged societal stereotypes by paving her own path. She spoke upon the topic in an article she wrote for an issue of *The Moving Picture World* in July of 1914.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that a woman success in many lines of endeavor is still made very difficult by a strong prejudice against one of her sex doing work that has been done only by men for hundreds of years. Of course, this prejudice is

fast disappearing and there are many vocations in which it has not been present for a long time. In the arts of acting music painting and literature woman has long held her place amongst the most successful workers and when it is considered how vital all of these arts enter into the production of motion pictures one wonders why the names of scores of women are not found among the successful creators of photo drama offerings there is nothing connected with the staging of a motion picture that a woman cannot do as easily as a man and there's no reason why she cannot completely master every technicality of the art" (Blaché).

That being said, Blaché worked past the prejudice society already placed on her and began the foundations of her career. She began working in the industry through her former boss who hired her as a secretary at the popular film company, L. Gaumont et Cie. She began sitting behind a desk writing her ideas which slowly got her to the place she was at. Her first film, *La Fee aux choux*, was released back in 1896. The success of this film garnered the future success of this company (Slide).

Blaché went on to pioneer talking pictures which is also known as sound film. This caused the creation of over 100 films all directed by her from 1906 to 1907. As her success grew, she took the chance of taking her filmmaking skills from her homeland to the budding industry in the States. Shortly after her move, she founded her own film company called The Solax Company. She supervised all 300 films the company set out to make. Later, she took charge of another production company, Blaché Features, alongside her husband. During her time there, she directed about half of all productions released. After directing many projects, she gained the respect of her peers, cast, and crew. An actress, Madame Olga Petrova, who worked with closely the feature film, *The Tigress*,

spoke highly of Blaché's directing style, which she explained differed from the traditional man (Slide).

“She never bellowed through a megaphone as I was told many another director was wont to [would] do. She obtained her results earning the respect and obedience of her artists. In the four succeeding pictures she never deviated from these methods” (Slide, pg. 27).

Blaché continued to be an influence in the filmmaking world. She continued to work alongside her husband at the time, Herbert Blaché, until their divorce in 1922. She stopped her work briefly but eventually decided to return in the late 1920s. She left the States and returned to France with no success in landing another production job. During this age of cinema, the film industry dynamic became quite different, specifically for women. Men producers and directors gained dominance during this time, due to filmmaking becoming a business effort rather than just creating an art. Even though her career ended prematurely, Alice Guy Blaché is a key filmmaker in the industry. She was a woman who knew of the hardships of taking on a position in the arts and made it known that it was an ongoing problem. Her success is what proves that it is possible for women to be successful in careers mostly given to the male demographic. She is represented as a success story in film history, but the way her career ended reflects the fate of other women filmmakers at the time.

In addition to Blaché, there are many other women who were important in building the reputation of women in the film industry. Lois Weber, a woman who soon became known as the most important female director during the silent era. She was not only a storyteller to the casual viewer, but also produced films on taboo topics that were and

remain controversial today. These topics included issues such as supporting abortion and advocating birth control. She challenged capital punishment and racial prejudice. Weber would also expose the hypocrisy of the church, politics, and business. These were concepts that were risky to take on considering the more traditional lifestyles at the time, but she continued, nonetheless (Slide).

She started her career in 1907 at the Gaumont Talking Pictures Company. Weber wrote, directed, and acted in the first film the company released. She began working alongside her husband G.W. Smalley as director and co-star in many films. This paved the way for her future success in the industry. Weber talked about her success (Slide).

“I first became interested in pictures through writing – and selling! – scenarios. My husband, who had a great deal of faith in me, left a splendid position on the dramatic stage to act in them. That was in the old Rex company. We worked very, very hard. My field began to enlarge. First, I was asked for advice concerning other people’s work, and so, quite naturally, I eventually became a director”
(Weber, as cited in Bizarre).

After the major success of running other production companies, Lois Weber became part of Universal where her career would take an important turn. She and her production team would release two short silent films a month, each co-directed, written, and co-starred by Weber and her husband. She gained recognition and much respect throughout her time at Universal. She was soon elected the mayor of Universal City in the fall of 1913. After a year of being mayor, she left Universal to join another production company called The Bosworth Company. It was here where she began producing a handful of reel feature films, which began the release of films dealing with controversial topics,

especially one named *The Naked Truth*: a film that touched on the hypocrisy of the church (Slide).

With the success of this feature, Weber returned to Universal. She had the reputation of being a well-distinguished writer and director. Her prominence in the film industry earned her some of the highest regards as a filmmaker alongside many other successful people. Weber received the same respect as both Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith, male directors well-known for their films and the ones who are remembered as the big filmmakers of the 1920s (Stamp). After a series of successful films on social issues at Universal, she gained the title of the screen's greatest woman director. One of the only things that she had not carried out yet was the creation of her own production company which soon changed in 1917. Lois Weber Productions led many feature films. In the beginning, much praise was given to her work; however, success and financials began a slow decline. She abandoned her company to return to Universal in the early 1920s. She no longer did her own independent productions and rather focused on the jobs Universal recruited her for. However again, the environment she was once used to changed (Slide).

“By 1927 times had changed, and women directors were a curiosity in the film industry (pg. 50),” Slide said in *Early Women Directors*. Why did this occur? Less women were seen in the positions they were first succeeding in. The silent era of filmmaking was where women had dominated for many years, each of them contributing to the outpour of films being released. This was at the time the film industry had begun to blossom. Since this was a newer field of work, there were not many barriers created for those making a living off it, especially for women. This began to change in the mid-1920s. It was not until business executives realized monopolization of production

companies could bring money pouring in, that women were not gaining the leading roles they once had. With the business workplace being dominated by men, women had no say as to how their productions could be funded by these powerful companies.

The creation of Hollywood's first studio system began the film business' industrialization. With the addition of sound being a game-changer to films, many companies were trying to monopolize their franchises to gain the most control of the filmmaking system in Hollywood. They used the concept of vertical integration¹ as their business model, which allowed them to control film production, distribution, and exhibition. Vertical integration has been particularly important to the growth of the film industry. In relation to Hollywood, this concept has been used to increase market power in the media industry. Vertical integration started in the 1920s and remained the dominant production model in Hollywood until the 1960s. By the 1930s, Warner had become the largest production company. The monopolization of studios continued to increase until there were a sole five companies that ran the entire industry within the United States: Warner Brothers, Paramount, MGM, Fox, and RKO Pictures (Douglas). Women and independent filmmakers were pushed to the fringes of the industry. It was difficult for them to get their ideas picked up by these studios. With having lost their funding for production, most women filmmakers did not have the support from previous years, because of inequality solidifying itself within the industry. With filmmaking now industrialized, the workplace became more male-dominated. Business leaders saw the

¹ "Refers to the process of acquiring business operations within the same production vertical. A company that opts for vertical integration takes complete control over one or more stages in the production or distribution of a product" (Tarver).

influx of money that came through from their practiced business tactics. They wanted to increase that flow tenfold. With men having those executive positions, they were the ones to decide who received their job offers. With women already battling sexism in the workplace, they were always overlooked in the selection even with their previous success in starting this craft. Men almost exclusively wanted to hire other men (Morris).

It was later that this time period was labeled as The Golden Age of Hollywood which spans from the late 1920s to the 1960s. This translates to a mass increase in films produced and released during this time; however, a problem emerged with this statement. How can the so-called Golden Age exclude women? If that many films were produced, there should have been an opportunity for women to take leading positions; however, a study conducted at McCormick University in 2020 shows the opposite.

“A lot of people view this era through rose-colored glasses because Hollywood was producing so many great movies — They argue that types of movies being made — such as Westerns, action and crime — caused the decrease in female representation. But we found the decrease occurred across all genres, including musicals, comedy, fantasy and romance” (Amaral, as cited in Morris).

This study considered 26,000 movies from 1910 to 2010, with a focus on four job positions: directing, screenwriting, acting, and producing. According to the study, during the 1910s, the involvement of women in film steadily increased as the boom of Hollywood began. Statistics showed women actors made up 40% of the acting cast, 20% of writing, 12% of producing, and 5% of directing. By the 1930s, these percentages changed drastically, with directing and producing hitting close to zero (Morris). This,

again, was caused by the creation of the studio system where men were in control of hiring decisions.

Despite this data, there were prominent names of women filmmakers that did persist in the challenges presented. Dorothy Arzner built her way up by beginning with screenwriting, next moving to editing, and then seamlessly transitioning to her directorial debut in 1927 for the silent film *Fashions for Women*. She conquered the transition from silent films to talkies with her creation of the boom microphone² (ACMI). Arzner was the first woman to direct a talkie and the first woman member of the Directors Guild of America³ (UCLA Library).

Arzner made great contributions to the film industry during her time; however, following her retirement, there were not many other female filmmakers who had the chance to follow her success. Women directors were rarely seen, let alone writers or producers. It took several years before a woman was recognized as working in film. Nonetheless, in the 1950s, one filmmaker, Ida Lupino, had made a return for women leading productions. This filmmaker, once actress, began her directorial debut with *Never Fear* in 1949. Lupino went on to direct other films released throughout the 50s and ran her own production company, The Filmmaker, alongside her husband Collier Young (Barrett). Other than this instance, Lupino was the only female director of the time. This compares drastically between the number of women behind the camera in the 1910s.

² A sound recording device that enables actors to move freely while acting instead of being confined to one space where a standing microphone would be placed. Debuted first on the film *The Wild Party* (ACMI).

³ “The Directors Guild of America is a labor organization that represents the creative and economic rights of directors and members of the directorial team working in film, television, commercials, documentaries, news, sports and new media” (About the DGA).

What was once common in the industry was now a rarity. In comparison before them, Blaché and Weber were prominent in the industry, but there were other women filmmakers with them just not as known. During Arzner's era in the 1940s and Lupino's era in the 1950s, it was just them working in the established studio system.

Since then, it has been a constant battle for women to get back to the recognition they once had. More women today have been trying to bring more recognition to early film history where women succeeded and how the industry has continuously failed to bring about change in its systematic sexism. Alicia Malone is one of those who voices her concerns about the underrepresentation of women in filmmaking. She has been working in the film industry for the past twenty years and has worked in writing, producing, and editing. Her reputation and expertise eventually gained her the position she currently has as a film critic for all media types such as television, radio, and film (TCM). Malone expressed her concerns about the exclusion of women in the industry and the need for change in two Ted Talks in 2015 and 2017.

“Right now, what we are learning from, what we're sporting out into the world, and what we're seeing, are stories that are overwhelmingly told from just one perspective. You may have heard about the statistics of female filmmakers working in Hollywood. On average, out of the 100 highest-grossing films per years, 96% are directed by men and 4% by women, and that's despite film school graduates having a ratio about 50% men and 50% women. These statistics have not changed in many years” (Malone).

Malone goes on to explain the reasoning behind these odd statistics. Most filmmakers start off independently, all working for the chance to be picked up by a major studio. It is

in this process that women face the systematic obstacles that Hollywood created early on. Women constantly face the gender barrier of having to be considered good enough to hold such a prominent position on a film crew. Women are rarely given the opportunity to direct a film as Hollywood has deemed it a risk in giving women funding to create a film, but no hesitation when it comes to a man wanting to produce his ideas. This inhibits women from obtaining the experience employers want them to have. Men are given job positions based on potential. Women are given job positions based on proof (Malone).

There are plenty more women who have challenged the status quo of the film industry. Today, one of high importance is Ava DuVernay. She has earned prestige and respect within the filmmaking community. Beginning as a small publicist in journalism has brought her to being the first black woman to be nominated for the Academy's best picture category. Her work on and off-screen gives hope and inspiration to all diverse groups of women. She is a filmmaker who realizes change needs to be made to progress the future of the industry. She talked in an interview with VOGUE in 2017 about the reasons Hollywood has not made changes.

“Until there's actual change, it's all Band-Aids. No healing can happen when something has been put over it just to get us from one year to the next. I look at the systemic changes that the Academy is trying to put in place and can applaud that. It has tried to create a new makeup of the body [of the Academy's membership], new rules, new development of voices, all of that is happening, but it's only been a couple of years” (DuVernay).

The film industry has done some work to progress women filmmakers, specifically the Academy, even though it took many years for them to recognize the issue. Over the

course of DuVernay's career, she has directed many critically acclaimed films. In 2015, she was well known for her direction of *Selma*. Much praise was given to this film, but not the worthiest acknowledgment of all: an Academy Award nomination. She and many other minorities, particularly actors, were denied any nomination in all major categories. There was a growing controversy on how all minority groups nominated failed to receive any recognition after all white men won their category's award. This caused the campaign #OscarsSoWhite to trend nationally. This brought about a reaction from The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, pledging they would commit to being a more diverse community in its voting process (Garcia).

The reason behind that year's whitewashed awards was due to the overwhelming male dominance in the Academy during this time. DuVernay spoke on this problem earlier, and it has since been recognized by the Academy; however, it took many instances beforehand for them to address the problem and execute change. A study from 2012 by The Los Angeles Times revealed two particularly important statistics that show the problem firsthand. It was revealed that the Academy's voting body consisted of 94% Caucasians with 77% being male (Horn et al.). These percentages are quite absurd considering the ratio of men to women in the United States. It reveals how deep-rooted sexism lies within the industry, and little was done to change it.

Yet in 2016, The Academy received the same backlash as the year prior when nominations released showed that white actors and men filmmakers, once again, dominated all major categories. The hashtag was resurrected, and it was not until then The Academy initiated a statement for change. They promised that diversity within their

Oscar voters would increase by 2020. The results of their initiative were released in July of 2020.

“In 2016, the Academy set specific inclusion goals as part of its A2020 initiative to double the number of women and underrepresented ethnic/racial communities by 2020. Through dedicated and intentional work by the Board of Governors and members on the branch executive committees, the Academy has surpassed both these goals... The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is extending invitations to join the organization to 819 artists and executives who have distinguished themselves by their contributions to theatrical motion pictures. The 2020 class is 45% women, 36% underrepresented ethnic/racial communities, and 49% international from 68 countries” (Academy).

The Academy has now addressed the concerns filmmakers have regarding the inclusion of diversity and opportunities with its group members. This is being done to ensure representation on all fronts regarding gender, race, sexuality, etc. Nevertheless, this is only one entity that has made an attempt to change. DuVernay continued to speak on how larger studio outlets should be recognizing and making efforts toward making changes in their part of the industry

“The industry has put no system in play [to support women], and until that happens, you’ll have the same dire numbers of women directing, the same lack of opportunity for women behind the camera in all of the departments, the same thing that happens to women who do direct and who are then forced to have crews of mostly men. Or what happens to people of color who get the chance to direct who are forced to have the most convenient crews, which are crews that are not of

color. So it's a systemic thing that until the industry addresses it, nothing will change, except more conversation and more *New York Times* pieces" (DuVernay).

This is how these problems still exist. The part of the industry that works and produces productions have not made many implementations to advance women with opportunities. These drawbacks hinder the progress that needs to be made. Executives who have the power to initiate change rarely implement more diversity of crew. They do realize there is prejudice within their sectors and talk of wanting to promote change, but it is not executed. It is talk with no action. The film industry tends to only patch up the problems. The wound of underrepresentation can only be patched up by a Band-Aid for so long. The problem can be addressed and told it will be altered, but action must take place, no matter how troublesome it may be for the men that have governed their positions in the industry for too long.

DuVernay is an example of taking initiative on the subject by enacting her own change with her productions. With her show *Queen Sugar*, she hired women directors for each season (Fernandez). This is a prime example of how women can begin to make their own changes, no matter how big or small they may be. It practices the concept that women should work with other women filmmakers. This is a start to initiate change by taking matters into one's own hands, by offering experience and opportunity to more women filmmakers; however, she does not want to be the only one putting forth the effort. She wants to see more people doing so. She spoke more about this in the same VOGUE interview.

"There have been a couple of other artists who have pledged to do the same thing, but that's not the same as HBO saying it's unacceptable that *Game of Thrones* is

going into a seventh season and [has only had one] woman direct episodes. I'm saying HBO and Game of Thrones [as an example], but I can say the same at CBS, NBC; these shows don't have inclusive voices around not just with their directors, but the folks doing the high-level decision making about what the stories are. And that's not an embarrassment?" (DuVernay)

These bigger outlets are failing at the representation the industry needs. Change in studios such as this one would help the cause for which we are fighting. These major sectors of the industry must begin to take a step in the right direction. The progress of inclusion must be made but also continue. This shows how important it is to not let Hollywood band-aid society's concerns about the industry, as DuVernay has said. If a problem can be addressed, it can be adhered. Since there is now a structure Hollywood can build on, it can initiate more change in the future.

It has and always will be important for women to band together in times when a male-dominated environment is difficult to work through. The act of women supporting women is the key factor to helping the industry grow and diversify it as much as possible. In each industry where men rank higher, it is always probable that women will be undermined, ridiculed, or taken advantage of. In the aspects of the film industry, it is clear that women in front and behind the scenes have been subjected to this unwanted interaction. In 2006, the phrase "#MeToo" was coined for women who have survived violence and sexual assault from men. This sparked a major movement within the entertainment industry. As the term gained more traction over the years, sexual abuse allegations began to emerge within the film industry (Hutchinson). Most of these were made against Harvey Weinstein, a co-founder of a major entertainment company called

Miramax who released films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. He forced women into sexual favors with the promise to advance their careers. As women came forward with their stories, they began to come together to bring awareness of the situations they faced working in the industry. With Weinstein's conviction and sentence to 23 years in prison for rape and assault (Ransom), some initiative for change was made for those women producers and writers, but was it enough?

According to a study done in 2020 by Hong Luo and Lauriana Zhang of Harvard, there has been a significant increase with Hollywood producers hiring more women writers than before the charges of Weinstein. Those who worked previously with Weinstein are now more likely to hire women writers. Their results revealed these important statistics and statements.

“We find that producers previously associated with Weinstein are, on average, about 35-percent more likely to work with female writers after the scandal than they were before... Female producers are the main drivers of our results, which may be because they are more likely than male producers to be sympathetic to the movement's cause and face relatively low costs of enacting change. Changes made by other groups, such as production teams with the most intense association with Weinstein and less-experienced all-male teams, may be better explained by motivations to mitigate risk or guilt. We also find that producers do not sacrifice writer experience by hiring more female writers and that both experienced and novice female writers have benefited from the increased demand.”

Even though this situation helped mostly those affected by Weinstein, it is a step in the right direction to give women these opportunities that were not available before. The

outcome of the #MeToo Movement did spark a meaningful change, especially among women screenwriters. In the Harvard study, results showed a 35% increase in women being hired. This was because of the social effect the movement had. It was important for some producers to acknowledge the wrongs that had been done. Their goal was to help initiate change, and it has. It is movements such as this that progress the initiative for change. Without the word of people highlighting the individual experiences of systematic sexism, nothing could be done to take a stand against these men's' wrongs.

Furthermore, other advancements toward change have sparked throughout the years. Specifically in the past two decades, there is a correlation between women filmmakers going into television. Women have been able to find more chances to work via television productions. It may not inherently be the film industry, but it does grant women experience to advance even further into their careers. A peer-reviewed article from 2019, "Independent Women: From Film to Television," acknowledges the positive change these discussions have brought for women recently.

"The mere presence of this discourse is important in drawing attention to entrenched issues around gender representation and norms in global television industries, and the conversations around individual series and creators contribute to critical debates on the rise of "women-centric" media over the past decade (Warner, as cited in Perkins). Both of these effects are reinforced and contextualised by the ways that these discussions have intensified in the wake of growing attention to issues of sexism and inequality in media industries as a result of the #MeToo and TimesUp movements" (Nussbaum et al., as cited in Perkins).

This illustrates how valuable it has been for women and the industry to start a conversation about their concerns. It promotes justice, growth, and hope for the future endeavors of women pursuing this entertainment field. It is possible for women to make more advancements. This form of filmmaking not only progresses women in America but also around the globe.

“The discourse, which, in its broadest remit, is constructing a perception of the current cultural moment as a golden age of television for women, understands and promotes the increasing representation of women on and behind the screen as a positive development for feminism. These changes are seen to combat the long-held masculinism of quality television as a system of evaluation that prioritises darkly realistic dramas premised upon male anti-heroes and the sexist and abusive treatment of women” (Gill et al., as cited in Perkins).

There is an interesting parallel here between the Golden Age of Television and the Golden Age of Hollywood. Recent innovations in TV and increased demand for new shows has created an emerging field just as the film industry was in the beginning. It is early opportunity women filmmakers are taking advantage of. There is sort of a historical repeat. Again, this is still a developing field, but the parallel to the early cinema is apparent.

The results of this study are centered on the productions U.S. women have, but because of streaming platforms, such as Netflix, it gives the opportunity to more women globally. It shows an increase in U.K., Australian, and European women filmmakers. With women being able to take the reins of some television productions, it has helped battle the stereotype male creators have portrayed in their productions with male heroes

having to save abused women. The only problem that has arisen is that critics tend to label these women-led productions “feminist.”. These women filmmakers want to be seen as the creators of those productions, not be put into another subgenre. This is making feminism an object and not a goal.

Each of these advancements is important to the ongoing development of women in film. Women are an essential part of the industry, and we must not succumb to the stereotypes that are set in place. It is a step in the right direction to allow more representation and opportunity. There are chances for women to pursue their desired work, but the goal does not end there. Bringing these sexist issues to light does bring the needed change in major sectors of the film industry; however, some sectors remain unexplored. Not only are we seeing progress within major film and media industries, but these are not the only places where film productions happen. We must see where the underrepresentation of women in film plays out in smaller film industries and productions like Mississippi.

CHAPTER III: INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

This chapter analyzes the data collected from interviews I conducted with Mississippi women filmmakers. Each interviewee has been working in filmmaking in and out of Mississippi. The best way to gather information concerning this topic is from firsthand experience with people who have faced or are dealing with this ongoing problem. One can rely on statistics of research assuring there is a numerical difference with the problem, but qualitative data from personal experience is what is needed to establish the concern.

Each of these filmmakers come from contrasting backgrounds and disciplines of the industry. Of the six women, they all consider themselves independent filmmakers. On the other hand, they are each at different points in their careers. One woman classifies herself as a director of photography⁴ along with running a production company in marketing media. Another works as a producer⁵. Another works as an actress in company with being a part of the art department⁶. One woman has the title of film festival

⁴ “Also known as the DP or cinematographer, is the person responsible for creating the look of a film. The DP controls everything that affects what the camera is able to capture (i.e., composition, exposure, lighting, filters, and camera movements). the head of the camera and lighting crews on set, and also selects the cameras, lenses, and filters to be used on a shoot” (MasterClass Staff).

⁵ “The person responsible for finding and launching a film project. Means anything and everything from arranging financing, hiring writers, hiring a director, hiring key members of the creative team, and overseeing all elements of pre-production, production and post-production, right up to release” (MasterClass Staff).

⁶ “The team responsible for creating the overall look of a television show or feature film, as determined by the director. Together, they design, build, and decorate the sets on which the actors shoot, being mindful of every little detail that can support the director’s vision” (MasterClass Staff).

executive director⁷. Another is a recent film school graduate, and another woman works independently on her work and teaches filmmaking basics to younger children. They have not defined their current job positions as permanent ones in their careers. Some are still working on trying to reach their desired position, while others are trying to find what that position is. Besides this, they are each content with what they are doing now and continue to work towards their dream goals.

There is a differing age range among the interviewees, with some in their middle or late 20s while others are above 50. Along with this, the interview pool consisted of one woman of color. Each of these helps give a bigger sense of what filmmaking is for these women and what they endure at various stages in their careers.

Their perspectives have given me different insights to their experiences as women filmmakers. Many answers ring similarly while others leave more questions left to answer concerning the dynamics of Mississippi's film industry.

Direct quotations are included throughout the chapter separated from the other text. The names of each are removed to ensure her identity remains anonymous.

Question 1: How did you decide you wanted to pursue a career in filmmaking?

To my surprise, I found few had film as their first choice at university. Each of them did have an interest in the arts and creativity ranging from photography to writing and to acting. Only two knew film was what they wanted to pursue firsthand. Others discerned after achieving their bachelor's or during their graduate programs. This was due

⁷ "Responsible for overseeing the administration, programs and strategic plan of the organization. Other key duties include fundraising, marketing, and community outreach. The position reports directly to the Board of Directors" (5PointFilm).

to them not realizing early on they could pursue film as a career. Each would take a more traditional route by majoring in English, Art History, or Law. One spoke of this realization when she accomplished her original endeavors.

“I have always had an interest in film. A long time ago, when I was thinking about careers, I wasn’t even really aware that I could possibly think about film school or that was even realistic... Once I wrapped up my primary careers, that interest in film drove me to go back once I had that time to pursue that interest. I began volunteering on films and finding people who wanted to work on films, and I just threw myself into it sort of teach yourself film school on the set. I’ve been doing that now for the last 12 years or so.”

An interest in pursuing the arts appears to be a risk and impractical, especially for women. Having the mindset that filmmaking is an unrealistic career must stem from somewhere. This kind of attitude constrains some women from pursuing their dream of being a filmmaker. It is thoughts of apprehension such as this that inhibit late starts or no starts at all in this career. Backlash occurs when women choose a “nontraditional” path such as film, whether it be from friends, family, relatives, or society: something most everyone, including myself, has had to deal with. One interviewee made a difficult choice for herself for her future with film.

“One of the things I notice as a woman, when I first started at the junior college, I didn’t know we had a film school here, so I was an English major... I didn’t want to be a teacher, and the first thing everybody says, ‘Oh, you’re going to college. What are you taking?’ ‘English.’ ‘Oh, you’re going to be a teacher?’ ‘No.’ And then they said, ‘No, you need to go into teaching or nursing.’” There are never

any other options. They never say, 'You're going to be a rocket scientist or a lawyer.' It is always either you are going to be a teacher or a nurse as a woman. When I came here, I had to make that decision. I really wanted to do film, and I had to tell people. The first thing they said, 'Well that's stupid, you're never going to make any money at that.' You have to stop listening to the peripheral voices. The first thing you did is sit down with yourself and you have a conversation with yourself asking 'Are you doing this because you have a drive for it and a love for it? If you don't have that, you are going to get frustrated, and you are going to walk away from it. I realized I do have a love for it and I'm doing it.'"

This is where the mindset of film being an unrealistic career choice comes from. There is a stereotypical concept that women must fall under the category of caretaker. This creates a barrier for women wanting to take on this path, leaving many to be criticized for their career choice as it goes against the status quo. Society continues to practice these ideals consciously and subconsciously, and women are raised on these morals. As we see here, the caretaker stereotype is now passed on to the profession. There is the preconceived notion a woman must have a job that involves caretaking, and this is the problem that must diminish. This is how these problems begin to manifest themselves later in a woman's filmmaking career. Comments that this interviewee received are common to women pursuing this field. It is a dream she and many others have, but they are automatically met with opposition. Since filmmaking does not align with this nurturer stereotype, society does not want us to follow it.

Another interviewee has also had to deal with the repercussions of the opposing opinions, even after obtaining a high position.

“I am a skilled director and producer. I think it is a gender thing. A woman is often raised to be caretakers, and that is kind of what a producer is.”

These ideals are deeply rooted within society and consequently in the film industry. Women begin to face this criticism early on and it does not seem to go away. Most interviewees spoke of how they did not pursue film as a career at first because they believed there was no chance of making it their life. It is important to address this early as it diminishes the determination women have to enter the film industry. With the industry already being heavily man-dominated, it is substantial to not continue these values to welcome progressiveness.

Question 2: At what age did you start gaining field experience?

This question posed different responses as many defined their field experiences at different points. Some labeled film school as their start by working on student films. Others would say their own productions after college or volunteering on major production sets or interning through production companies. Each gave them exposure to film; however, some experiences were more eye-opening and defined the reality of gender inequality in film. This is due to the demeanors of some of the men the filmmakers worked with. It was unprofessional and inappropriate for the workplace. These filmmakers went to gain more experience in film but were left with concerning impressions.

One spoke about her experience working for a production company during her senior year at university. It was not extremely useful as far as making connections as

most of her time was spent doing filler work and reporting to the next lowest ranked personnel in the room besides herself. In one instance, she had the chance to speak with a head supervisor of the company and asked her if any interns before her had made the connections to get them through the door. The answer was only one man made a real connection and had the chance to progress himself in his career.

“The way that she described it was clear that he was very extroverted and charismatic and probably inappropriate in a way that if it had been a woman, people would have said it is a problem.”

Two things become apparent here. First, we see there is a woman looking over this group of interns. She supervises and takes care of them. This instance feeds into the caretaker stereotype previously mentioned. Second, we see the dynamics her internship has set up against her. Even before women filmmakers have a chance to make something of themselves, they are overlooked by male colleagues getting by through charisma instead of the quality of work. Then again, men and women are on the same playing field starting out with an opportunity such as this internship; however, men do have a particular advantage when it comes to social status in a domain where men are already in charge. This structure makes the workplace difficult for women to climb up in ranks but makes it easy for men to prattle to their desires. The same interviewee spoke of another time in her internship where she was overlooked.

“I shared a desk with a male intern who was objectively not super competent. He just showed up late and didn’t get very much work done, but some of the younger guys at the office would walk to and from work with him and chat him up and

come to him during the day with side projects for him to do that were more interesting and more involved than mine.”

A work environment rewarding behavior such as this only decreases morale for women filmmakers. It is necessary to promote equality in any field of film. Along with these instances, many of these women realized the type of dynamics they were getting involved in at the age of 23 or 24. Each scenario shows the reality an average onlooker would not think twice of, but it does not stop there.

Some women dealt with the pressures of learning more technical aspects of film. Not many women work within the camera department since it does not fulfill the caretaker need. One spoke about her feelings about entering the discipline of being a director of photography.

“It is unusual for women to work in production. When they do, usually they’re directors or producers. They’re not editors or camera operators, usually. When I was 24 at that point, I was confirming all my gender biases.”

Technical positions, such as editors or camera operators, are where a barrier is placed for women in film. They do not fall under the caretaker notion unlike directing or producing. She and along with many more women must persist this to succeed in this part of the field, just like the founding women of the industry, who also worked in directing rather than cinematography. It was a struggle for her to overcome the stereotype that women are not adept at technical jobs, such as operating a camera. However, over the course of five years learning and working professionally with her skill set, she has conquered some of those ideals with the help of learning from another woman who had pursued the position of DP. This occurred during her time obtaining her Masters.

“She’s meant so much to me. She’s not big or strong or anything. She wore almost the same size, tall and skinny, but I saw someone who had my similar body shape carrying around a heavy thing for eight hours a day. It still took me time to come around to it. I still even feel weird saying I’m a DP, because I think I don’t look like one. I’m still in the process of accepting I have a technical job especially because of my skills.”

Here we see two aspects come into play. First off is the concept of mentoring. She noticed the importance of having a mentor who achieved her same goal. Training with other women helps lessen intimidations from learning a technical position a man would primarily hold. This type of exposure is essential. As trivial as it may seem to other men who are also learning or educating in this field, the reinforcement of seeing women in film is crucial to the development of a woman’s career here. Secondly, there is the problem of women having to internalize the stereotypes society has taught her. This is how those preconceived thoughts of not being able to pursue film affect a woman in the field today. She acknowledges these stereotypes exist but works past them to break those standards. She knows her skill set is valuable and vital to her position and that she can do what is needed. She continues to persist and is successful in her work.

Regarding another interview, a conversation focused on a divide when it comes to independent filmmakers distributing their work, especially within film festivals. The divide comes from specific genre films. This filmmaker entered a film festival with a horror short that went on to be featured many separate times. Over the course of this period, she noticed the other filmmakers in her genre, and not many were women.

“When I first made one of my shorts which was a horror film, it played at a lot of genre festivals. It was usually 1 or 2 females were involved and everyone else was a male director. That was very eye-opening starting out. It is better now. It’s not like that now.”

This occurred during the mid-2000s in Mississippi. It is still recent enough to showcase that a problem has been here. It was at the start of her career that again is important to recognize. It sets a standard that needs to diminish from the start. From then to now, she has seen this become better. This interviewee was able to have a better insight into film festivals after having become the executive director of a local Mississippi film festival. She worked in this position for a handful of years after volunteering and working at her local festivals. She saw firsthand her previous experiences change because of the progression the community has somewhat made. She most likely contributed to that by holding her festival director position. If more women lead projects, they can help bring about this change. Based on their experiences, they have better insight into the problem. They recognize the imbalance and want to bring change.

Overall, the gathering of experiences in this age range is paramount, because these instances occur with many women at this stage of their careers. They continue forward through the obstacles to make their stand. Having experienced these problems firsthand allows them to continue their work and help those after them.

Question 3: Have you experienced sexism in the workplace? Elaborate if you are comfortable, and what did you do to overcome it?

This question posed one of the longest conversations in the interview process. Each woman was able to recall a specific example that dealt with sex discrimination. All showcased what it is like to be a woman in film.

To start off, the classroom setting was a prominent example of men believing their knowledge outweighs the knowledge of a female professor and/or student. Male students seemed bias regarding the learning process and the opinions of others. In film school, the first chance of networking begins with classmates. With the types of attitudes portrayed here, it is difficult for the female students. Previously mentioned in chapter two, Alicia Malone talked about the ratios of male and female students in film school. Ratios are said to be equal in the classroom setting. One interviewee also confirmed her film school class followed this trend. It seems overall that statistics show the ratio is equal, but when we look at a specific place, such as Mississippi, it shows the opposite. To further investigate this concern, I reached out to other higher education institutions that run a film program. Upon analyzing the data collected from 3 schools, the University of Sothern Mississippi, Hinds Community College, and The University of Mississippi, all showed a dwindling number of women enrollments over the course of the past 5 years. Most students are men and consist of over half the class. Being one of three women in a 12-student class, this confirms my own anxieties for my future. Men already do outnumber them in the ratio, meaning those men are likely to stick with their other friends. They are already divided, leaving it arduous for those women to work with others

in this setting. If these attitudes continue to manifest in these preliminary stages, they will continue to hold those values at high regard once entering the film workforce.

To go in hand with this, one woman further talked of these dynamics between men and women in the professional setting.

“It’s hard to put your finger on and be like that was sexism. It’s more just like the way that men and women operate and how if it’s already a male-dominated field than like there’s more men and therefore the men become friends with the young men and they’re more likely to have the kind of friendship bonds that are going to result in more work than the female in the room.”

As we saw before, there is this tendency for men to bond easily. They continue to build their boys network as they did in film school. The condescending attitudes continue because of this. It could happen anywhere within the industry, whether it be on set, the production office, or post-production. Men obtain these higher positions based on their old boys’ network. Once this happens, they are put into a position that reinforces their confidence. This leads them to having a great demeanor with fellow colleagues on set, and not with those below them. They are supported from all directions, but as a woman, it is much more difficult to get there without that kind of support. Women must work twice as hard to be seen and heard. Another interviewee noticed how the power given to a male individual easily goes to their head.

“It’s very interesting because it’s made me more selective about how much time I spend on set. I’m at a very interesting and pivotal point in my life. I’m at a point where I don’t want to be on crew if I didn’t put the crew together. Which in itself

sounds arrogant, but I've dealt with it enough. You're not talking to the actresses that way or maybe you are but there's a limit. There's a wall, there's a line."

What this filmmaker is saying here is she is selective with whom she spends time with on set. She does this to allow herself to break the cycle of undermining and disrespectful attitudes. Some men tend to lack a certain factor when talking to their production teams. There are positive ways to help run a team more efficiently and boost morale, just as Alice Guy Blaché was once praised for. This continues from the early parts of the film industry to today. Women are constantly aware of how they are treated. In noticing those opposing attitudes, they do not want to carry on those same mannerisms. Women have built on their experiences to bring peace to the difficulties that a man's behavior can cause. It is implied here that those positive attitudes are not present on some men's sets. If there is a trend of men constantly belittling other departments, cast, and/or crew, the cycle continues. These positions should be given to those who have a respect for others and are able to lead many people.

Along with undermining attitudes comes the inappropriate behaviors some higher executive's exhibit. This is not a topic to be taken lightly. This subject matter has been in conversation many times in Hollywood, but it's important to note it occurs in many regional and local sectors, such as the film and media industry in Mississippi. One filmmaker voices her concerns about an individual who hired her at a local broadcasting station.

"The guy who hired me at [a local radio station], I think he hired me because he thought I was cute, honestly, because things went on after that. He texted me inappropriately and invited me over to his house to watch movies late at night. I

believe he felt that I was indebted to him for getting me this job. He was a white older man, probably 15/20 years older than me. I didn't encourage or take him up on any of those offers."

In any professional setting, this should not be tolerated. Occurrences, such as this one, usually are thrown under the table to be disregarded. No one should have to face these unwanted interactions. This filmmaker disapproved of his behavior and set her own boundaries to not be crossed; however, his behavior did not change. Since some men have the notion they can get away with anything, he continued to pursue another younger woman in the company. No further information was given on this situation.

When it comes to men believing they have sexual authority in the workplace, it creates difficulties for women to receive equality both in terms of respect and earning money to their equal counterparts on set. This is difficult because a woman's knowledge and expertise can be overlooked because of her 'cute' appearance, just as the situation previously described. She was professionally qualified for her position but hired for the wrong reason. These differences appear in almost all departments these filmmakers worked in ranging from the production office, art department, costume department, and camera department. There is more of this in women holding a technical position on set, such as director of photography. Those are usually held by a man, because there is the underlying assumption a woman cannot work a camera. The same woman who is a DP faced some trouble in the past trying to obtain job and equal pay.

"There were times that I knew men were getting paid more than me on set, or a man was the DP, and I was just a second camera operator. It felt like the only

difference between us was gender. That was my perception and I believe I was right.”

As we can see, situations like this do not only happen in larger-scale productions as established in the previous chapter. It occurs in our local regions as well. This circulates back to men film friend groups only wanting to stick together and hire one another. It diminishes the chance for an opportunity with women. This DP went on to explain a certain scenario when it came to being hired for crime documentaries here in the South. The only explanation they gave as to not being hired was not having experience shooting this genre, even though the opportunity to gather said experience is not possible because of hiring the same male DP for every project. How can one gain experience when not given the opportunities to?

Again, this does occur in several departments, but a correlation was found in the higher leadership positions on productions. More respect was earned if having a position that worked closely with a director or in a production office. Being in those positions garnered respect with only less sexism. One filmmaker, who mainly works through producing, gave her view on the dynamics of a crew.

“On film productions, it was more subtle in ways of men not listening in the same way to women as they did to the other men crew members. I would say any sexism had to do more with not having as strong a voice that was listened to as some as the other male crew members on production.”

She followed this with explaining how she has been fortunate having the leadership position as a producer, but again, it does not stop those comments going to the women who work in the lower levels of the production chain or other parts of the industry.

With this being a positive note when it comes to women filmmakers high in the production chain, some women in leading positions do experience a lack of respect even when holding high-level positions in the film industry, such as the film festival executive director. This position entails running the entirety of a film festival. A large amount of work is put into this event such as gathering permits, contracting sponsors, staffing the festival, and supervising each aspect of the festival. She led her festival for many years with much success; however, when it came to receiving recognition, it was obtained differently than expected.

“Both as a festival director and a filmmaker, I’ve experienced some [sexism]. Not very extreme cases. If I have a white male DP, then some people would look to him for the answers instead of me. That happened on a couple of different sets, but mostly I started working with people that I work well with so that really went away very quickly but being in charge of a film festival in the South specifically, I have had less of this in Kansas, but in MS specifically, because I had a male board president at the time, I would literally get dismissed and they would go to him to thank him. He would say ‘Well this is the executive director. You should know her too.’”

First off here, we see an echo of women being selective with their crew. It is important for women to find and work with people with whom they are comfortable. She creates a cohesive and supportive work environment. She creates a setting that is positive for herself and her crew; however, with any leadership position a woman holds comes this type of disregard for recognition of work. This is the mentality that appears throughout all lines of the industry. It is something most women in this field face, but

what is more important is overcoming the fact. The same woman spoke on how these instances of sexism became less common as she carried forward into her work field. She has learned to have a presence to be seen as a leader, and it took experience more than anything to reach this height.

Generally, with all the facts presented, sexism does exist in all types of forms when it comes to our modern-day film industry, in and out of Mississippi. Apart from that, there is a difference between the state of representation of women filmmakers from southern regions, such as Mississippi, and other places with a more progressive liberal compass. Women are more underrepresented here than in other states. There are contrasting attributes to women working in the South. It is commonly known that more Southern states practice traditional ideals. This varies differently with women who have worked outside of Mississippi. There is a more prominent area for women filmmakers on the West Coast, specifically California. One woman spoke on how common it is to have a women-heavy film crew. She worked with an all-woman crew for a documentary that later went to be considered for an Oscar nomination. Since then, she returned to Mississippi to accomplish her own goal of telling Mississippi stories. Her heart lies in this storytelling, but she reminisces on the time she could work with an all-woman crew. She said it seems impossible to accomplish this in South Mississippi. Another woman spoke on the reasoning behind this. She has noticed this trend while working in Mississippi's film industry for the past 20 years.

“There’s a tendency to go back to the people you know, the people you’ve worked with, that’s comfortable. That is a conservative sort of safe thing to do, but I do try to explore in Mississippi.”

She works on challenging these ideals as this further inhibits many women in Mississippi to make it into the industry here. It is already dominated by men, leaving them to continuously hire each other. This exemplifies one of the problems the Mississippi film industry has. It is a conservative belief of staying with those you know and profiling women as the caretakers is the downfall. The growing representation of women in filmmaking overall seems to be heading in the right direction, but the state of Mississippi seems to need more work in achieving this goal.

Question 4: Have you reached your dream position in the film industry?

Many women found themselves at a crossroads when asked this question. Some were content with their places in the industry now, but some are still trying to ascertain their own goals. The common goal within each of them is being passionate and happy with what they are doing. All of them are proud of where they are now, but some want to find their true positions. The older women interviewed have found where they want to be, but the younger filmmakers are working towards finding that. All of them are currently doing their own independent work. A similar comment was made throughout: a wish for better pay and distribution deals being more obtainable. A previously mentioned in chapter two, women have historically had problems getting past this point, and this puts it into contemporary reality. They complete their productions but gain little notice as it is not what men in the industry are looking for. They look for the young men that they can get along with and have the same mindset film-wise.

Other than that, they are happy with where they are currently. They work creatively and collaborate with others sharing the same goals. Those who are still reaching their dreams want to find work on larger productions. This is another struggle

any or all filmmakers face. It is troublesome finding the right people to network with to reach this place in the industry. Therefore, it is crucial that today's women enter a prominent level of larger projects to later bring more women filmmakers into this part of the industry they want to be in. To clarify, it is not impossible for women to be successful. Nonetheless, we can see that they must do twice the amount of work to overcome the obstacles set in their way.

Question 5: What would be one piece of advice you would give to the future generations of women filmmakers?

As a woman going into the field of the film industry, this question held much importance to me and other women following the same path. While each piece of advice followed the same message, each was composed of their different experiences. Gathering this advice not only helps gain motivation but also shows that women can overcome the male dominance in this world of filmmaking.

Six different topics crystallized throughout this section of the interview. To begin, the first piece of advice was that a woman must acknowledge what they are going to get into. It is known that there is a problem with the representation of women in filmmaking. It is a struggle, but one can work past it by finding those women who have the same thoughts about this. One filmmaker from the interviews said the following:

“If you're going to go into an industry setting, you have to understand that right now, our industry is dominated by older and middle-aged white guys... They're controlling the film industry for their demographic, which is white guys.”

Acknowledgment of problems a woman will face once entering this industry is essential. It is an environment that will be challenging, but it can be overcome.

Having other women acknowledge the difficulties helps create a sense of security showing they are not alone. Coming together to create a community in which they have people to support them will only advance women in film and the film industry.

Moreover, one must realize many women have the same feelings toward this problem. Of course, a woman wants to achieve what is best for herself but take note that she cannot do it entirely alone. The second piece of advice is one must collaborate and start the discussion to promote change and the inclusion of all. Another interviewee gives her stance on advice she wants to give to other women like her.

“Your race and your class play into womanhood (and where you’re from.) ... Even though it’s not true, you’re going to have limitations. You’re going to feel it. You don’t have to ignore it. You don’t have to push that away. I would say it is probably better to find women like you who have the same feelings. It doesn’t have to be in your industry or your culture or your race or your class. Just find a woman who has similar feelings and talk about it. It’s important to not disqualify those feelings. They’re real and they’re there and they exist. It’s better to investigate them and question them and where they come from, but don’t do it alone and don’t do it with your perspective only guiding that process, because I think that’s how we create bubbles and how women became divided and turn against one another.”

This field is already made difficult for women, which is why she addresses any woman filmmaker should not battle these circumstances alone. Working with other women of the same beliefs makes the potential a reality. A simple conversation discussing these conditions, such as these interviews, creates the momentum to bring

more awareness to these problems. It is commonly known that one concern you have will be the same concern another has. Therefore, conversing is principal in taking the first step in addressing sexism in film.

Another interview mentions collaboration being important but in a different way: through mentoring opportunities. A woman filmmaker can find outside resources to find other women who want to help. There are several organizations established where their sole purpose is to help and promote women, along with minorities, in filmmaking.

“Look for mentoring and dialogue opportunities with other women. For example, seeking out film festival panels. A lot of the film festivals these days in MS offer women filmmakers' panels that sometimes some of them even offer women filmmaker discounts in an effort to sort of incentivize to really seek out women produced, women-directed, women written films, and so there is an opportunity there to talk, to go to panels, to be on panels, to network.”

These groups want to help alleviate the tension surrounding sexism in the film industry and support women filmmakers following in their footsteps. All these resources are meant to enhance the experience of minority groups. It gives us a chance to be and feel represented by other professional filmmakers in our field. Each of these creates connections and networking opportunities for the future. It is a small step toward reaching the goal a woman filmmaker has. Getting the chance to talk to other filmmakers who have gone through this process gives an example for younger generations to get to where these women are. This is the start of how we can get our foot in the door.

To go along with this, another interviewee emphasizes the importance of working with all types of women, and what they can each bring to the screen. This brings the third

piece of advice: diversity. Solely seeing the world through the lenses of a white man's perspective inhibits women and minorities to feel recognized in society.

“We need to work with all types of different ages of people, races of people, genders of people, all types of protected classes I think benefit in enhanced productions. I think I would encourage women to think about, aggressively looking for other women in leadership roles on their productions. If they're writing a film or directing a film, especially if they're directing a film...

Aggressively look for DPs who are women or other crew positions to try and increase our female representation on the overall film crew productions. I really do think that women have a unique voice and ability to tell really compelling stories, and I wish that more women had more opportunities to do that...”

Another filmmaker reiterates that diversity is important to the film industry.

“They're [older and middle-aged white guys] not into the diversity. They're not as interested in women's issues and women filmmakers and minorities, and the problem is they put us in a box. First, I'm a woman and if I were a woman of color then I'd be in another box. If I was LGBT, I'd be in another box. These boxes separate us. The biggest issue we have is we have to stop letting everybody stick us in a box and separate us from each other. We've got to be more supportive of other female filmmakers whatever their categories are. If you want to tackle the glass ceiling⁸, you need backup.”

⁸ “An intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level position” (Webster)

Having different demographics working in higher positions on productions influences the outcome of a film entirely. It will not be catered to a specific target audience such as the middle-aged white man. It will appeal to other genders, races, ethnicities, nationalities, and sexualities. The world is changing every year and the lack of representation of women and minorities will only slow down progress today and in the future. Film and media will still be as prevalent as it is today. As a woman of color who has experienced marginalization to some extent, having the opportunity to work with other women of color is key to myself and others who feel underrepresented in this area of diversity. This also goes hand in hand with my LGBTQ+ community. In our modern-day, we are trying to reach equality on all fronts so our audience can feel seen. Without anyone questioning the status quo of the industry, we would not have seen the progress filmmaking has made so far. It is time to include all women and work with each other to achieve what true equality is. This can and should continue to make women pursuing this career more likely to achieve their goals.

However, leading on from this brings the fourth piece of advice: bridging the gap and finding a balance. A woman filmmaker must not solely rely on working with women. That is not the mission at hand. The goal is to obtain equal working opportunities, and this cannot be done by excluding men from the narrative completely. Instead, it is about creating new ways to shape the industry to be more inclusive. My next interview spoke on the reality of doing this.

“It’s learning the careful balance of making sure you’re identifying other females you can collaborate with along the way and making sure you’re intentionally trying to bring them in and work together. Also, I can feel that it can be not smart

to go exclusively with that. You have to figure out how to still work with the men and try to fold in more women as you go. Another reason for that is if you're just trying to make stuff with other females that are probably at the beginnings of their careers too, you can't pay each other very well. Part of the thing with trying to ally yourself with male filmmakers too is that they're more likely to be the ones commanding larger budgets. I feel like it's time to get more women in those better-paying positions.”

As motivating as it can be to work with only women, it is necessary, as a filmmaker, to work with everyone. The separation between both men and women already causes unfortunate outcomes and adding these divides will only create more disarray. There are pros and cons to working with man filmmakers, however, building on their advantages to further a whole team's career can open opportunities to all. What is important is to have woman filmmakers on the team beforehand.

Additionally, other interview conversations led to more personal anecdotes on how women filmmakers should continuously try and pursue their endeavors. This leads to the fifth piece of advice: perseverance. It is easy to get bogged down over not landing a specific job or having to work for numerous years until you reach where you want to get. With one filmmaker, it took her several years of volunteering, collaborating, and traveling to meet with other filmmakers to get where she is today. She is still working to find her end goal, but her progress keeps her passionate in finding it. She spoke about how new filmmakers must continue and not give up.

“Especially a new filmmaker, you just have to get in there and keep trying and doing things and getting closer to what the vision is in your hand. That's whatever

gender you assign yourself or role you think you are. It doesn't really matter. It's just about kind of being stubborn and not giving up. I think what's great about whatever specialty group you're in so if you're a female filmmaker or a black filmmaker, there are so many great organizations that there just to support you and have mentors and networking. I think 90% of our industry is about the networking and a lot of people forget that. They think 'Oh, I've made a perfect film. Everyone will just love it.' It really is more about selling yourself than the films."

Perseverance is a need for all filmmakers. It is an arduous path to find the position and place one wants in the industry. It takes consistent time and effort to reach the goal. Finding and meeting those people who had the same goal will guide you in the right direction to reach your target. As a woman filmmaker, it is critical to not sell oneself short. If a woman has had a vision or goal in mind that they have believed in for so long, they cannot let go of the dream, no matter the circumstances. The world of film revolves around who you know. As said before, a woman filmmaker must begin making those connections early on to achieve a foundation in the industry. Moving forward, that is how they can make it. Find the support because there are other filmmakers who want to see other women filmmakers succeed. This advice transitions to the last conversation that pieces everything together.

By going into the film industry, each filmmaker has their own personal endeavors they want to pursue. One goes into the game with the intention of writing the biggest blockbuster screenplay, directing a documentary showcasing a subject not many know of, or winning best picture at the Oscars. No matter how big or small the dream is, there is a

passion for it. With film being a vast field with many possibilities, there are times those original goals can change. No one knows where this path will ultimately lead them, and they must understand so. The last piece of advice is to have an open mind.

“If you know what you want to do, stick to your guns, but don’t be afraid to change your mind. I say that because sometimes you might fall in love with the costume department. Being a director, the politics, I love the act of doing it on my own, but maybe the grip life is for me. Keep an open mind and if you want to try things and you’re not afraid to change your mind, then go for it, but don’t be afraid to say what you initially came into the game for.”

With any career goal, it all starts with an original love for it: a fascination with something that drives a person to obtain it. Pursuing an art form, such as filmmaking, exhibits that love. The process of going for the goal can come with hindrances, but fulfilling that desire comes with the feeling of achievement. The world of filmmaking is an expansive environment that even I did not realize. Many different departments exist to make a production a reality, and without the cohesiveness of each of them working together, film would not be what it is today. This is important to have in mind as career goals can change after finding a true love for something else within filmmaking. Having an open mind and being flexible in this field can generate future success in what any individual, woman or man, came in to do to begin with.

These six pieces of advice, acknowledgment, collaboration, diversity, balance, perseverance, and flexibility, all come together to aid in a woman filmmaker’s success. This advice and the rest of the interview process left me with lasting impressions of what it is like for a woman to be a filmmaker. Each woman was incredibly supportive of my

research as they deemed it as equally important to them as it is to me. Having the chance to converse with these filmmakers encouraged me as a woman to continue pursuing my dreams. There are other women in this field who want to encourage those who come after them, and this is key to keeping women represented in this growing industry. With Mississippi growing its filmmaking output, it is important to discuss what obstacles are already set in place here to lessen those stereotypes and increase opportunities for women as this industry grows.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to bring about more awareness of the underrepresentation of women in filmmaking, based in Mississippi. My research data found dealt with the experiences of Mississippi-based women filmmakers, along with establishing the common knowledge of the Gulf Coast regarding women in film, and the statistics concerning the ratios of women in film school programs in Mississippi.

Each of these circumstances of data comes from different sectors of the industry; however, they encompass what the industry is as a whole. The interviews focus on personal testimonies consisting of their own endeavors in pursuing the career path. The Gulf Coast survey helps establish the public's firsthand knowledge concerning the problem. The comparisons of women in film programs in this state show how not all film schools have equal ratios of men to women in the classroom setting.

Regarding women filmmakers who have or are working in Mississippi, there were many correlations between their experiences. These findings dealt with women being treated only as nurturers and caretakers. This is because of the more traditional mindsets the Southern region still practices. This inhibits the progression of how women are viewed in society. While the underrepresentation of women is still a structural problem, more liberal locations are more likely to look past these stereotypical thoughts and consider a woman's technical abilities.

After reviewing the results of the published survey, only a few knew of the accurate representation of women in film with what they are watching. Most participants overestimated the percentages of women working on production crews. This goes to show how little awareness is among the public. Since film-watching is a leisure activity

done by many people, it is important for them to be aware of the problem going on within what they choose to watch.

As recent research has shown, the ratio of men to women in film school programs is usually equal in more progressive states. In Mississippi, this is not the case. This is reinforcing the idea that women choose not to pursue this career in the South as it does not fulfill the caretaker and nurturer role they are expected to fulfill.

The significance of this work is to show the Mississippi film community that this is not only a problem happening in Hollywood films but also those on the regional level. There is an underlying assumption about the role of women as caretakers or nurturers leaves them more likely to find positions as producers rather than technical jobs, such as cinematographers or editors. Rather than looking at women filmmakers' technical abilities, employers look at traditional gender constructs. This stereotype has lessened in more impartial settings, but in the South, more work must be done.

The film industry has been a constantly growing business and will only continue to do so. It is research such as this that seeks to bring awareness and lessen prejudice in the years to come. This will not only help Mississippi's small but growing film community but could also help other states whose film industry is beginning to grow. The goal is to make this industry an equal workplace where all men and women have the chance to create and collaborate in what they love doing.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW TECHNICALITIES

Interviews were conducted from September through December 2021. Most interviews were conducted over Zoom, except for one in person, which adhered to COVID 19 guidelines. Conversations ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in length. Each interviewee was asked for verbal and written consent before the interview began. Combining each experience brought insightful results to help advocate for more awareness in Mississippi's industry and the film industry entirely. Of the six interviews, five were conducted online via Zoom, while one remained in person. I secured a private area to administer the interview questions to protect the identity of everyone. Each was asked for consent to participate prior to the interview via email and again before recording each conversation. Each recording was then stored on my laptop, remaining locked to ensure privacy. Written notes and analysis of notes remained in designated notebooks unavailable to anyone. Further analysis documents were electronically stored and left with only my personal access.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS AND TECHNICALITIES

Thirteen questions were decided on being the following:

1. What is your age range?
2. What is your gender?
3. How often do you watch movies?
4. Think back to your favorite movie. What year range was it released?
5. What is your favorite movie?
6. What is the gender of the director of your favorite movie?
7. Think back to the three most recent films you've watched. How many would you believe followed a "female gaze" instead of a "male gaze" traditionally associated with Hollywood Cinema?
8. What do you think the percentages of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 1998?
9. What do you think the percentages of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2005?
10. What do you think the percentages of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2015?
11. What do you think the percentages of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2019?
12. What do you think the percentages of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2020?
13. Did you know of the ongoing problem of the underrepresentation of women working in the film industry before this survey?

The percentage questions were based on published data regarding the “Comparison of Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women on Top 250 Films.” Participants of the survey were acquired through word of mouth, electronic mail, and social media. Each was asked for consent prior to fulfilling the survey questions. This was published electronically through Google Forms, reaching 102 responses. The survey was published in early October 2021 and closed in early January 2022 to begin an assessment of the data. Responses produced several pie charts along with percentages of the given answer choices.

APPENDIX C: DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS

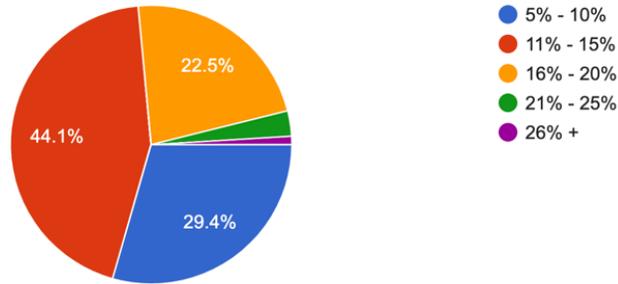
The majority of the survey pool did not know women were underrepresented in filmmaking. The accurate percentage of women working in film has fluctuated between 17% to 23%. The survey pool continuously voted above 23%. Most believed that statistics would stay increasing each year, but that is not the case. In analyzing the data entirely, it goes to show the Mississippi Gulf Coast is unaware of the problem women face in the film industry.

APPENDIX D: SURVEY GRAPHS

Figure 1. 1998 Estimates

What do you think the percentage of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 1998?

102 responses



Majority wrongly voted – 44.1%

Underestimated – 29.4%

Overestimated – 3.9%

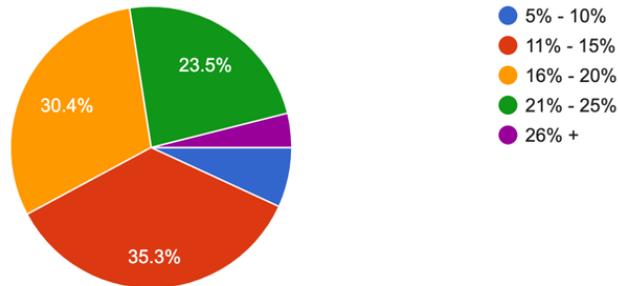
Correctly estimated – 22.5%

Actual 1998 percentage of women working in film – 17%

Figure 2. 2005 Estimates

What do you think the percentage of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2005?

102 responses



Majority wrongly voted – 35.3%

Underestimated – 42.2%

Overestimated – 27.4%

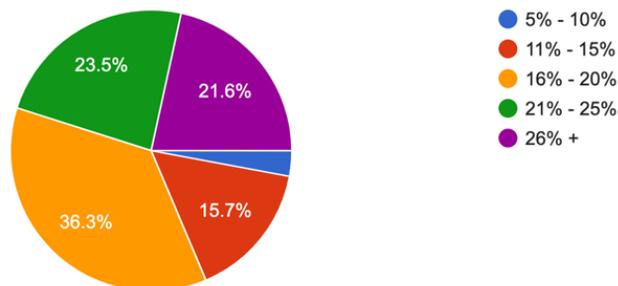
Correctly estimated – 30.4%

Actual 2005 percentage of women working in film – 17%

Figure 3. 2015 Estimates

What do you think the percentage of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2015?

102 responses



Majority correctly estimated – 36.3%

Figure 3. (Continued)

Underestimated – 18.6%

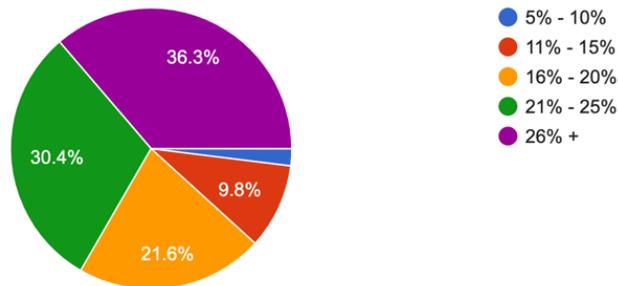
Overestimated – 45.1%

Actual 2015 percentage of women working in film – 19%

Figure 4. 2019 Estimates

What do you think the percentage of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2019?

102 responses



Majority wrongly voted – 36.3%

Underestimated – 33.4%

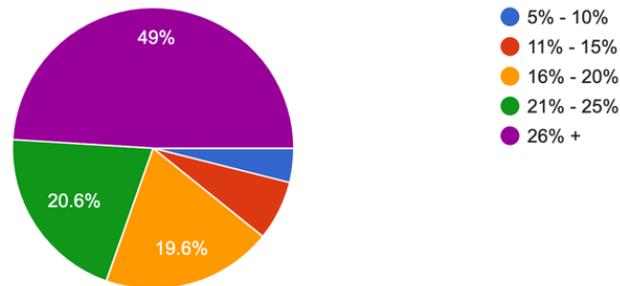
Overestimated – 36.3%

Correctly estimated – 30.4%

Figure 5. 2020 Estimates

What do you think the percentage of women employed in the film industry behind the scenes was in 2020?

102 responses



Majority wrongly voted – 49%

Underestimated – 30.4%

Overestimated – 49%

Correctly estimated – 20.6%

Actual 2020 percentage of women working in film – 20.6%

APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of
Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-21-267

PROJECT TITLE: The Underrepresentation of Women in Filmmaking

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Communication Studies

RESEARCHER(S): Paola Sandoval, Katrin Pesch

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: July 16, 2021

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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