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Unheard Voices: The Battle for Gender Equality in the Creative Industries

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Abstract. The creative industries, encompassing film, television, literature, music, design and visual arts, are widely celebrated as spaces of innovation, free-thinking and social progress. These sectors shape public imagination, construct cultural narratives and reflect the complexities of human society. Nevertheless, beneath this progressive public image lies deep-rooted and persistent gender inequality. Female creators frequently confront suppressed voices, unequal pay, limited career opportunities and invisible structural barriers, which hinder their artistic development and deprive global audiences of diverse cultural perspectives. This paper explores the present situation of gender disparity within creative industries, analyses unconscious bias, gendered passion ideology and exclusive male-dominated social networks as core structural causes. By employing the case of Chinese female director Shao Yihui, it illustrates how female creators navigate systemic obstacles to achieve breakthroughs. Furthermore, this paper discusses feasible institutional, organisational and social solutions to push forward genuine gender equity. It argues that gender equality in creative fields is not merely a matter of social justice for women artists. It is essential to enrich cultural production and enable art to represent the full breadth of human lived experience.

Keywords: creative industries, gender equality, unconscious bias, female filmmakers, structural inequality

1. Introduction

When it comes to the creative industries, they are often praised as beacons of progress and free expression. Popular narratives frame artists, filmmakers and designers as boundary-breakers who defy social norms and question existing power structures. Cultural products generated by these industries influence public values, shape collective memory and offer windows into different lives and worldviews. From blockbuster movies to independent artworks, from literary novels to digital design projects, creative output defines how societies understand themselves. Yet behind the spotlight and finished artworks lies a persistent problem: gender inequality. It is a silent force that limits professional opportunities, devalues women's creative labour and silences half of the world's creative voices.

Gender gaps in creative work are not occasional individual incidents. They are embedded in recruitment, funding allocation, salary systems, promotion mechanisms and cultural perceptions of

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artistic authority. Female creators across different national contexts face overlapping challenges: lower income levels, fewer chances to lead large-scale projects, constant questioning of their professional competence, and extra emotional burdens placed upon them by social expectations. Too many talented women see their projects rejected, their ideas overlooked or their contributions attributed to male collaborators. The marginalization of female perspectives results in a cultural ecosystem that suffers from partial narratives, repetitive stereotypes, and missed nuanced reflections on important themes like family and identity.

Existing reports highlight gender gaps in Hollywood, European media, and Asian film markets, often focusing on pay disparities without addressing underlying cultural mindsets and informal power structures. By employing the method of case study, this paper lays out empirical evidence for pay disparity and opportunity shortage within creative industries. It also proposes practical intervention strategies ranging from institutional hiring reform to community-level mutual support.

2. The scope of the problem: pay and opportunity gaps in creative work

Hard statistical data demonstrates that gender-based disadvantage is not an exaggerated claim or isolated anecdote, it is a documented reality across global creative labour markets. The gender pay gap remains one of the most visible indicators of injustice. A 2025 cross-national survey illustrates stark gender disparities: 38% of female creators earn less than 500 Euros monthly, compared to merely 23% of male practitioners (European Creative Industry Federation [1]. This disparity cannot be attributed to personal career choices or poor negotiation skills, but rather systemic devaluation of women's creative labour. In the mainstream global film industry, pay inequity persists at the top tier: Hollywood A-list actresses receive 82 cents for every dollar earned by their male co-stars for equivalent working time and professional contributions [2].

Income disadvantage intertwines with unequal access to core career opportunities throughout the creative production chain, including big-budget project direction, mainstream content creation, funding acquisition and senior leadership appointment. Global industry statistics confirm severe gender under-representation in high-impact creative roles: in 2025, only 12% of the world's highest-grossing feature films were directed by women [3]. This imbalance does not stem from a lack of female talent. Instead, female creators encounter invisible structural barriers when transitioning from independent low-budget works to commercial mainstream projects [4].

The problem extends far beyond film directing. In television production, women are under-represented in showrunner and head writer positions. In music production, female producers and sound engineers remain a small minority behind the scenes, even though many female singers occupy centre stage. In publishing, women write a large share of fiction works, yet male authors are more likely to obtain big marketing budgets, win major literary awards and receive extensive media reviews. In visual arts, female artists' works are sold at lower average prices at auctions, and large museum exhibitions are more frequently curated by men.

Unequal opportunity generates two key outcomes. First, female creators are pushed toward low-budget, small-scale independent projects. Without sufficient funding, they cannot expand their artistic vision or reach broad audiences. Their works are confined to niche circles, and they struggle to convert creative achievement into stable livelihoods. Second, the shortage of women in decision-making roles creates a self-reinforcing cycle. When most producers, investors and senior executives are male, project selection naturally reflects existing male perspectives. Fewer female decision-makers mean fewer female-centred stories get green-lit, which in turn limits role models for the next generation of young women artists. Young girls may gradually internalise the belief that

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high-level creative leadership belongs to men. This cycle harms both individual careers and the long-term diversity of cultural output.

It is worth noting that gender disadvantage intersects with class, race and regional background. Women from marginalised ethnic groups or low-income backgrounds face double barriers. Even so, gender itself acts as a consistent structural factor across different regions and creative professions. Pay gaps and opportunity shortages are symptoms of deeper-seated cultural and institutional mechanisms.

3. Digging deeper: the root causes of inequality

Gender imbalance in creative industries stems from cultural assumptions, workplace norms, and informal power structures, rather than just individual misconduct. Key factors include unconscious bias, the gendered "passion ideology", and the exclusionary old boys' club network. These forces perpetuate unfair outcomes subtly and often without deliberate malicious intent.

3.1. Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias represents a major driver behind systemic gender inequity in creative industries. Defined as automatic, culturally ingrained cognitive shortcuts, unconscious bias drives unintended discrimination by associating masculine traits with leadership, vision and decisiveness, while framing female creators as risky, unassertive or limited in artistic scope [5]. In project pitching and funding review scenarios, industry decision-makers often attribute "bold artistic vision" to male directors, whereas female creators with comparable proposals are frequently questioned about execution risks rather than artistic potential [6].

This subtle prejudice influences hiring decisions, project funding, promotion reviews and public criticism. Male creators get praised for boldness. whereas female creators must prove reliability. Even female managers and producers can internalise these social stereotypes, making biased judgements without realising it. Unconscious bias hides beneath rational-sounding comments. Decision-makers may reject a female-led project by saying "this story lacks market appeal", while the real underlying concern is implicit doubt toward women's leadership capability. Without self-reflection and institutional constraints, biased thinking will continue to shape resource allocation.

3.2. The gendered "passion ideology"

The gendered "passion ideology" is a covert yet pervasive structural trap that perpetuates the exploitation of female creative labour [7]. This cultural discourse romanticises artistic creation as selfless labour of love, propagating the narrative that genuine creators prioritise passion over material compensation. Critically, this standard is disproportionately enforced against women: male creators are widely recognised as deserving high remuneration, while female creators are pressured to accept low pay, delayed compensation or unpaid work under the guise of "artistic dedication" [8].

Many female creators receive offers framed as rare privileges. Under such discourse, asking for reasonable salaries may make women seem ungrateful or overly commercial. As a result, numerous women accept unfair compensation terms out of fear of losing scarce creative opportunities. Long-term underpayment pushes many women out of creative professions entirely. Unable to sustain daily life through artistic work, they choose more stable non-creative jobs. The passion

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ideology does not celebrate female artistry. It exploits it by transforming systemic underpayment into a personal moral test for women creators.

3.3. The "old boys' club": male-dominated informal networks

Formal institutional rules only govern a fraction of creative industry resource allocation, most core opportunities rely on informal professional social networks [9]. The "old boys' club" refers to exclusive male-dominated professional networks that control key industry resources, including project information, investment channels and senior position vacancies. These resources circulate within closed social gatherings such as industry banquets and private salons, forming a self-sustaining privilege system that excludes female practitioners [10].

Women are often excluded from these informal spaces or treated as outsiders even when they attend. Insufficient access to mentorship further worsens the situation. Young male creators can receive guidance and insider information from senior male predecessors. Many early-career women struggle to find experienced mentors willing to advocate for their projects. Without network support, even highly skilled female artists find it extremely difficult to advance to senior roles. This barrier is embedded in industry culture rather than written company rules. The old boys' club reproduces privilege generation after generation, preserving male dominance in high-status creative positions.

These three root causes reinforce each other. Unconscious bias shapes how network members evaluate women's competence. Passion ideology makes women tolerate poor working conditions when they cannot enter inner circles. Exclusionary networks further amplify biased hiring outcomes. To achieve real change, society must address cultural mindsets alongside institutional structures.

4. A case study: director Shao Yihui's journey

Examining the professional trajectories of female creators highlights structural inequality more concretely. Chinese director Shao Yihui has achieved artistic success amid systemic obstacles, yet her career path was far from easy. Her experience reflects common difficulties female directors face, as well as the positive impact when successful women create space for other female practitioners.

At the early stage of her career, Shao Yihui confronted universal systemic scepticism toward young female directors globally [11]. When seeking commercial film financing, investors consistently questioned female directors' operational capacity for large-scale productions and doubted the market viability of women-centred narratives, a well-documented discriminatory phenomenon in China's film industry [12]. Female-focused scripts were routinely labelled "niche" and "non-commercial", while male-centred life stories received default recognition of market potential. Against widespread industry hesitation and repeated rejections, Shao Yihui adhered to her creative positioning, focusing on authentic, intimate modern female life narratives that fill expressive gaps in mainstream domestic film creation.

Her first commercial feature film B for Busy brought unexpected box-office and critical success. Set in Shanghai, the movie depicts middle-aged women's friendship, love and self-awareness, rejecting simplistic romantic clichés. Its commercial performance powerfully disproved the stereotype that women-centred stories cannot win mainstream audiences. This work demonstrated that films written and directed by women could achieve both artistic quality and market profit.

After gaining public recognition, Shao Yihui chose not to stay silent about industry unfairness. In media interviews, she openly talked about the challenges women filmmakers meet: being persistently underestimated, facing subtle micro-aggressions on set, and fighting for sufficient creative autonomy. She turned her personal platform into a tool for public advocacy. Her later work

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Her Story continues this core mission. Beyond telling multi-layered female-centred narratives, she intentionally hires many women for behind-the-camera positions including scriptwriting, cinematography, art design and production management. This practical choice creates concrete job opportunities for other female filmmakers. She is not merely breaking the glass ceiling for herself, she is holding the door open for other women coming after her.

Shao Yihui's story also reveals limitations of individual success. One outstanding female director cannot automatically dismantle deep-rooted industry structures. Even after her box-office victories, female directors as a group still face funding bias in the Chinese film market. Individual talent and hard work are necessary, yet not sufficient. Individual breakthroughs must be matched by systematic institutional reform to produce large-scale, lasting improvement. Her case illustrates how female creators can resist inequality through artistic creation and conscious collective support, while reminding audiences that personal success cannot replace structural change.

5. Solutions: how we can drive system-wide change

Addressing gender injustice in creative industries requires a multi-level approach, including changes in hiring rules, salary transparency, enhanced community networks, and shifts in cultural attitudes. Several actionable strategies can push the industry toward greater inclusiveness.

5.1. Implement blind auditions and anonymous application processes

Blind audition and anonymous recruitment mechanisms have been empirically proven effective in mitigating gender bias in professional selection processes [13]. The classical music industry's adoption of blind auditions significantly increased the employment proportion of female musicians in professional orchestras. This anti-bias mechanism is adaptable for recruiting directors, screenwriters, designers and core creative team members [14]. In practice, all gender identifiers and gender-suggestive personal information can be removed from preliminary application materials, enabling reviewers to evaluate candidates solely based on professional portfolios, script quality and creative proposal feasibility.

Anonymous screening helps restrain unconscious bias in the earliest selection phase. Of course, blind applications cannot eliminate bias completely, later-stage interviews and pitch meetings will restore personal identity information. Still, anonymous preliminary screening allows more high-quality female creators to pass the first round of assessment. Companies, film funding institutions and media platforms can revise their application workflows to adopt this approach.

5.2. Fight for salary transparency

Salary secrecy is a core institutional loophole that sustains persistent gender pay gaps in creative industries [15]. In labour environments with opaque salary systems, female creators cannot effectively identify unequal pay for equal work. Mandatory salary transparency policies require cultural and creative enterprises to publish clear salary ranges for all open positions, which helps reduce gender pay discrimination [16].

If every job posting clearly states expected pay bands, applicants do not need to guess appropriate compensation. Women are less likely to be pressured into accepting abnormally low offers. Existing staff can compare their actual income against published standards and spot unfair treatment. Cultural organisations should also conduct regular internal pay audits, investigating whether gender-based wage differences exist among employees undertaking comparable creative responsibilities.

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5.3. Amplify women's voices and build support networks

Institutional policy reform requires matching community-level support. Audiences, investors and industry practitioners should actively seek out and promote creative works produced by women. Market demand sends powerful signals to funders and producers: stories created by women have audience value and commercial potential.

Professional female creative organisations play an irreplaceable role in breaking male network monopoly [17]. Platforms such as Women in Film and Television International provide systematic mentorship, skill training and peer support for early-career female creators. Cross-generation mentorship effectively compensates for the network disadvantage of female practitioners and forms a mutual-empowerment development mechanism [18].

Educational institutions also bear responsibility. Film schools and art academies should challenge gender-related stereotypes in teaching content, invite more female senior creators as guest lecturers, and teach students to recognise unconscious bias within creative work environments. Media critics ought to give fair exposure to women-produced artworks, avoiding framing female artists only through the lens of gender identity while ignoring their artistic skill.

5.4. Broader cultural shifts: challenging the passion ideology

Cultural ideological transformation is fundamental to eliminating gender discrimination in creative-labour evaluation [19]. Long-standing gendered passion ideology has normalised underpaid and unpaid labour for female creators [8]. To reverse this prejudice, cultural institutions and public opinion must advocate for the professionalisation of creative labour, popularise equal-pay principles, help female creators build rational salary-negotiation awareness, and decouple artistic passion from unconditional self-sacrifice.

These solutions cannot take effect overnight. Resistance will emerge from stakeholders who benefit from existing power structures, and progress will include setbacks. Even so, combining institutional adjustment, community solidarity and cultural re-education creates multiple pressure points to push industries forward.

6. Conclusion

Statistics quantify the scale of unfairness: low income for many female creators and tiny percentages of women directing top-grossing global films. Root causes lie not in lack of female talent, but in unconscious bias, the exploitative passion ideology and exclusive male-centred professional networks. Shao Yihui's career demonstrates how individual female creators can achieve artistic success and open doors for peers, while reminding us that individual victory cannot replace structural reform. Concrete change comes from blind recruitment processes, salary transparency, building women-centred support networks and reshaping harmful cultural attitudes toward creative labour.

The road ahead remains difficult. Bias will not disappear instantly. Old power structures will not dissolve voluntarily. Still, every anonymous application form, every transparent salary announcement, every mentorship connection and every audience member choosing women-created art contributes to gradual transformation. It is a must for us to keep questioning biased assumptions, back under-represented creators, and continuously demand a more inclusive creative ecosystem. When women can create freely, without being underestimated, underpaid or pushed to the margins, all of society wins.

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