Gender Equality in the European Audiovisual Sector: An Intersectional Perspective

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Abstract

This article interrogates the ostensible progress towards gender equality in the European audiovisual sector through a rigorously applied intersectional framework, revealing the inadequacy of aggregated representation metrics for capturing the multidimensional nature of exclusionary practices. Drawing upon comprehensive data from national film institutes, regulatory bodies and independent research entities, the analysis demonstrates how the modest improvements in women's overall industry presence—from 21% to 26% between 2015 and 2023 (Fontaine, 2024)—obscure profound disparities when gender intersects with ethnicity, sexuality, disability and socio-economic positioning. The investigation reveals systematic marginalisation patterns wherein women of colour constitute less than 1.5% of key production roles in Britain's film industry (UK Film Council, 2016), whilst the examination of disability representation uncovers that 76% of disabled characters in contemporary media are portrayed as white males (Smith et al., 2023). Methodologically, the research navigates the variable data landscape across European territories, synthesising quantitative representation metrics with qualitative analyses of industry practices and policy interventions. In documenting the evolution from gender-specific to intersectional policy approaches, exemplified by the BFI Diversity Standards' multidimensional framework, the article contributes to emergent scholarly discourse on equitable industry transformation. The findings underscore the necessity for structural interventions that address not merely numerical representation but the complex

interplay of privilege and disadvantage operating within European media institutions.

Keywords: intersectionality, gender representation, European cinema, cultural policy, structural inequalities, media diversity, audiovisual industry

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1. Introduction

Gender equality, inclusivity, and diversity have become central issues in the European audiovisual sector in recent years. Spurred by movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp, many European countries and institutions have implemented measures to improve the representation of women in film and television. As a result, women's participation in the industry has slowly increased—women accounted for approximately 26% of active film professionals in Europe in 2023, up from 21% in 2015 (Fontaine, 2024). However, a sole focus on gender parity can obscure deeper inequities. An intersectional analytical framework proves crucial: factors such as race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and disability intersect with gender to compound disadvantages or privileges. Indeed, as the European Commission (2021, p. 2) has explicitly acknowledged, "an intersectional lens should be taken as a departing point, as the overlap of various personal identities (age, race, sexual orientation, disability etc.) actively contribute to systemic discrimination on grounds of gender."

This article examines the current state of gender equality in Europe's film and television industries through an intersectional lens, exploring how these multiple dimensions affect representation and opportunities. Drawing upon European examples, policies, and comparative insights from international research, the analysis illuminates not only progress made but also the persistent gaps when one looks beyond gender in isolation. This approach reveals which women remain excluded in diversity initiatives and points toward more comprehensive strategies for achieving an inclusive audiovisual sector.

2. Progress and Persistent Gaps in Gender Representation

Across Europe, awareness of gender inequality in the audiovisual industry has catalysed numerous initiatives over the past decade. The Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)9 urged member states to promote gender equality in the audiovisual sector, leading national film bodies to establish targets and monitoring mechanisms (Loist & Ehrich, 2024). Several countries have reported measurable improvements. The Swedish Film Institute, for instance, achieved gender parity in allocating production funding by the mid-2010s, with women comprising roughly half of directors, screenwriters, and producers of Swedish publicly funded films between 2013-2016.

The manifestation of gender-focused policy interventions across the European landscape reveals a textured cartography of variable success. Caballero and colleagues (2023, p. 112) document how Spain's Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts introduced a scoring system in 2015 that awards additional points to projects with female directors, resulting in a moderate increase in women-led productions from 8% to 19% by 2022. Similarly, Germany's Federal Film Board implemented a "gender incentive" model whereby productions with gender-balanced crews receive enhanced funding allocations, though its efficacy remains under scrutiny (Berghahn, 2024, p. 47). These policy mechanisms, whilst conceptually progressive, often suffer from implementation inconsistencies and monitoring deficiencies that attenuate their transformative potential.

The numerical trajectory of female participation in European cinema, whilst trending positive, exhibits substantial sectoral and geographical variation. Rossiter's (2023, p. 203) comprehensive seven-country analysis demonstrates that whilst women's representation amongst producers has reached relative parity in several territories (42% in France, 45% in Finland), their presence amongst cinematographers remains profoundly marginalised across all studied contexts (ranging from 4% in Italy to 11% in Denmark). This occupational stratification reveals the persistent operation of gendered assumptions about technical competence that structure career pathways. As O'Brien and Liddy (2023, p. 87) astutely observe, "technical roles carry masculine coding that functions as an invisible barrier, constructing them as natural domains for male practitioners whilst rendering female aspirants as interlopers."

The evolution of methodological approaches to gender monitoring itself warrants critical interrogation. Early initiatives frequently employed binary metrics that obscured both non-binary identities and intersectional dimensions of disadvantage. More sophisticated frameworks have emerged, such as the European Audiovisual Observatory's multilayered assessment matrix, which examines not merely presence but substantive participation, leadership authority, and resource allocation (Fontaine, 2024, p. 12). Such methodological refinement illuminates the qualitative dimensions of inequality that raw numerical indicators frequently obscure—revealing how ostensible inclusion can coexist with marginalisation in decision-making processes.

Despite these advances, significant gender disparities persist, particularly in leadership and technical roles. Women remain a minority of directors, cinematographers, and showrunners across most European countries. In the UK, women comprised only 13% of film directors and 7% of cinematographers as of the mid-2010s (UK Film Council, 2016). The data reveal a discernible pattern: the higher the budget or prestige of a project, the fewer women involved. A Swedish study found that in big-budget films, only 27% of directors were women, even as women formed approximately half of directors on smaller productions (Loist & Ehrich, 2024). This "celluloid ceiling" suggests that whilst entry-level opportunities for women may be improving, access to positions of power and high-profile jobs continues to favour men.

The correlation between financial resources and gender imbalance illuminates the tenacity of structural exclusion. Across European public funding bodies, a consistent pattern emerges whereby the financial magnitude of awards demonstrates an inverse relationship with female participation. Kovács and Willems' (2023, p. 304) forensic analysis of funding data from twelve national film institutes reveals that women directors receive, on average, 24% less funding per project than their male counterparts, with this disparity increasing to 37% for technically complex productions. This budgetary disadvantage creates a recursive cycle wherein women's projects are systematically under-resourced, reducing their commercial viability and reinforcing perceptions of female directors as commercially precarious investments.

Moreover, qualitative research indicates that beyond numerical representation, the industry's work culture often remains exclusionary—men in key positions tend to rehire other men, forming male-dominated "network elites"

resistant to female participation. The mechanisms sustaining these homosocial recruitment patterns operate through both formal and informal channels. Dowd's ethnographic studies of production environments in Ireland and Portugal document how critical industry knowledge circulates through masculinised social spaces—post-production drinking sessions, technical workshops with presumed male audiences, and informal mentorship arrangements that reproduce gendered patterns of cultural capital transmission (Dowd, 2024, p. 119). These subtle exclusionary practices construct what Jansson and Müller (2023, p. 76) term "gendered geographies of industry knowledge" that structurally advantage male practitioners whilst requiring female professionals to navigate additional barriers to information acquisition.

3. Intersectionality: Overlapping Identities and Systemic Barriers

Intersectionality, a theoretical framework introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, describes how different aspects of identity (gender, race, class) can overlap to multiply discrimination. Rather than experiencing bias in isolated strands, individuals belonging to multiple marginalised groups often face compounded disadvantages. In film and television, intersectionality illuminates how not all women benefit equally from gender-focused diversity efforts—women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, working-class women, or women with disabilities frequently remain the most underrepresented.

As one UK study poignantly noted, women who also belong to ethnic minorities or lower social classes may find that "I felt more difficulty because of my class than I have because of my gender", depending on which aspect of their identity proves most salient in particular contexts (Bruzzi, 2024, p. 91). In other instances, these factors prove inseparable: a Black woman filmmaker may struggle to disentangle whether sexism or racism presents the greater obstacle, as she encounters both simultaneously.

Examining diversity through an intersectional lens reveals stark inequities obscured by aggregate figures. If 25% of filmmakers in a country are women, one might declare progress—but an intersectional analysis might reveal that nearly all those women come from the majority ethnic group, with virtually no women of colour present. A 2016 UK research report found that whilst women made up 20% of key production personnel on UK films, only 7% of those women were from Black,

Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (UK Film Council, 2016). Effectively, BAME women accounted for under 1.5% of key behind-the-scenes roles in British film production.

4. Race, Ethnicity, and the Marginalisation of Women of Colour

Racial and ethnic diversity in the European audiovisual sector varies considerably by country, but consistently lags behind Europe's demographic reality—particularly regarding women of colour in creative roles. In many European nations, immigration and demographic shifts have increased the proportion of minority ethnic communities, yet this diversity remains inadequately reflected on screen or behind the camera (Fioroni, 2025).

The Danish Film Institute found that "new Danes" (immigrants or descendants) constituted just 7.8% of the film industry workforce, compared to approximately 11% of Denmark's population. In France, around 15% of people on television were non-white in 2019, but France does not collect official statistics on ethnicity to gauge population representativeness. The UK's more established diversity monitoring reveals persistent underrepresentation: in 2015, only 11% of the UK creative industries workforce came from BAME backgrounds, despite the UK's working-age population being approximately 14% BAME (UK Film Council, 2016).

Crucially, the intersection of gender and ethnicity demonstrates that women of colour experience the most profound underrepresentation. The UK's Calling the Shots study concluded that women of colour filled under 1.5% of key production roles. In France, advocacy groups have documented a scarcity of non-white women in French cinema, both on screen and in directing positions, though comprehensive data remains limited due to legal restrictions on collecting ethnic statistics (Fioroni, 2025).

5. LGBTQ+ Representation, Disability, and Socio-Economic Class

Sexual orientation represents another critical intersectional dimension. Despite progress in LGBTQ+ representation, numbers remain low, especially for queer women and transgender individuals. According to the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, just 2.1% of speaking characters in 2022's top 100 films were LGBTQ+, with the majority being gay men; indeed, 84 of these films featured no LGBTQ+

women whatsoever (Smith et al., 2023). European data, while less comprehensive, suggests similar patterns. France's broadcasting regulator noted in 2020 that LGBTQ+ people remained "virtually invisible" or confined to specific genres on French television. From an intersectional perspective, queer women of colour or with disabilities are almost entirely absent from media representation.

Disability constitutes an often overlooked dimension of diversity that intersects profoundly with gender. In 2019, only 0.7% of people appearing on French television had a disability—an extremely low figure given that approximately 15% of the population has some form of disability (Fioroni, 2025). In Hollywood's top films of 2022, just 1.9% of speaking characters had disabilities, and over three-quarters were male (Smith et al., 2023). The data reveals a stark intersectional gap: 76 of the 100 top films did not feature a single female character with a disability. When disabled characters do appear, they are frequently portrayed by non-disabled actors and predominantly depicted as white, with 76% of characters with disabilities being white and only 24% from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (Smith et al., 2023).

Socio-economic class, whilst less measurable than other identity categories, exerts powerful influence on industry access. The audiovisual sector often relies on networking, unpaid internships, and low-paid entry positions that implicitly favour those from affluent backgrounds. Intersectionally, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face additional barriers compared to their middle-class counterparts. In a qualitative study of British women documentary filmmakers, nearly all interviewees identified class as a significant obstacle—some even felt their working-class background presented a greater barrier than gender (Bruzzi, 2024). The influence of class intersects with gender and race in complex ways: research indicates that women of colour in film/television more frequently come from middle-class or elite backgrounds than their male counterparts, as those few who break through often required access to education and networks to overcome multiple barriers.

6. Policies and Initiatives: Towards Intersectional Inclusion

European institutions and industry organisations have implemented various policies to foster greater diversity, increasingly adopting intersectional approaches. Many national film bodies have evolved their gender initiatives into broader

diversity plans. The British Film Institute expanded its inclusion targets to encompass underrepresented ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities alongside its 50:50 gender balance target (BFI, 2022). Similarly, the Swedish Film Institute extended its action plan to address on-screen representation of racial/ethnic minorities and people with disabilities after achieving gender parity in funding.

Diversity standards and quotas represent another significant policy mechanism. The BFI Diversity Standards (now adopted or piloted by film funds in the Netherlands and Germany) establish criteria across four dimensions of diversity—on-screen roles, creative leadership, industry access, and audience engagement—encompassing gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and socio-economic background (BFI, 2022). Productions seeking funding must meet several criteria, ensuring a more holistic approach. In television, numerous European broadcasters have established diversity charters. Trăilă''s (2023) comprehensive analytical framework of European audiovisual policy architectures demonstrates how such criteria-based approaches frequently exhibit variable efficacy across different intersectional dimensions, with particularly notable implementation disparities between gender and ethno-racial metrics. His forensic examination of six national contexts reveals that whilst gender-focused criteria demonstrate robust compliance mechanisms, measures addressing racial and ethnic representation remain structurally undermined by inconsistent definitional parameters and monitoring deficiencies (Trăilă, 2023, p. 147). This empirical finding substantiates theoretical critiques regarding the uneven operationalisation of intersectionality within European policy instruments.

France's CNC (National Cinema Center) implemented a "diversity bonus" to funding: projects receive additional points or funds for meeting gender and diversity benchmarks (Fioroni, 2025).

Data collection and transparency constitute cornerstones of intersectional approaches. The UK's Project Diamond represents a leading example, collecting self-reported data from cast and crew across gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity, enabling analysis of intersectional representation. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) recently updated its guidance to help Member States collect data on "intersecting inequalities", acknowledging the need for improved statistics on how gender overlaps with factors like disability and ethnicity (EIGE, 2022).

Beyond official policies, grassroots and industry-led initiatives advance intersectional inclusion. Collectif 50/50 in France, initially focused on gender parity in cinema, broadened its scope to encompass diversity generally—it proved instrumental in establishing parity pledges at Cannes and operates mentorship programmes for women of colour and LGBTQ+ creators. Film festivals increasingly serve as platforms for inclusion charters, as exemplified by Locarno's inclusion pledge.

7. Conclusion

The European audiovisual sector has made measurable progress toward gender equality, yet examination through an intersectional lens reveals persistent inequities. Women as a whole remain underrepresented, and women who also belong to marginalised racial or ethnic groups, the LGBTQ+ community, have disabilities, or come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds face even greater exclusion. These intersecting factors affect both who creates stories and whose stories are told.

The focus on intersectionality does not pit identities against each other, but rather illuminates the complex, compounded nature of disadvantage. European institutions increasingly acknowledge this complexity. The European Commission and bodies like EIGE emphasise the need for data and policies capturing intersecting inequalities (European Commission, 2021; EIGE, 2022). Grassroots initiatives—from the BFI's diversity standards to Collectif 50/50's campaigns—broaden the scope of inclusion. Internationally, research by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative demonstrates that improving intersectional diversity benefits both audiences and business outcomes (Smith et al., 2023).

Closing these gaps requires sustained commitment to structural change: in education, so youths from all backgrounds perceive creative careers as attainable; in hiring and funding, to counteract biases; and in creative decision-making, to embrace diverse stories and voices. The European audiovisual industry must evolve from simply counting women to empowering all women—and men and non-binary people—across society's full spectrum. As the aphorism suggests, "diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance". The crucial next step involves ensuring everyone, regardless of gender, race, class, sexuality, or ability, has the opportunity not merely to dance but to choreograph the performance.

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