

The Struggle for Gender Diversity in the Film Industry in Canada

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The film industry is one of the most economically impactful industries in the world. According to World Atlas, in 2016, the film industry in the United States and Canada generated approximately \$11.4 billion. Also, according to the Canadian Media Producers Association in 2020, the film and TV industry generated \$9.3 billion in production volume, and it contributed \$12.2 billion to Canada's GDP. The growth of the film industry in Canada in recent years has been remarkable, and "Avison Young." states that "Hollywood North" is a popular expression of the media industry based in Vancouver and Toronto nowadays (Avison Young 2021). This indicates that film is a profitable and important industry in Canada. However, despite being a growing industry, women continue to struggle in the Canadian film industry. Why do women have fewer career opportunities and struggle to advance within the film industry?

Although women were active in the early years of the film industry, their influence declined as the film industry expanded. The first female filmmaker in the history of cinema is a French

director, producer, and screenwriter named Alice Guy-Blache (1873-1968). She started her career in 1895 and produced and directed more than 600 silent films and paved the way for women in the film industry (McMahan). Unfortunately, however, the presence of women in the film industry started to decline in the mid-1920s, around the end of the silent film era. In the "talkie" era, the film industry became more commonly seen as a business where women were unwelcome. On the other hand, men became increasingly powerful in the film industry, and they were employed in major positions such as writer, producer, while women were employed in editorial and production positions (Stein 2019).

The film industry in Canada developed in a similar fashion. During the early 1940s, men were employed in jobs with high positions of authority, influence, and economic power in Canada. This social situation was reflected in the film industry. For example, there were no women in the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), which was founded in Ottawa by the government in 1939. Later, during World War II, female staff were also employed, but women still made up only 20% of all staff. In addition, there were no women in important positions such as direct promotion (St-Pierre 2013).

Even so, before and during the war was an important period for women in the film industry. John Grierson, who was a Scottish producer and the first head of the NFB, said that "there was starting to be a demand for films on the role of women during the war". This was due to the following : (1) the Canadian

government asked the NFB "to produce films that would give citizens a unique Canadian view of the war" (Ohayon 2021), and (2) the NFB was busy producing propaganda films during the war (St-Pierre 2018). Evelyn Lambart was one of the women who played an active role during this era. The documentary series, *The World in Action*, was produced to present an international point of view of the war (Ohayon 2021). Lambart was asked to create animated geographical maps for the series which was important to show the geopolitical issues in war propaganda films (St-Pierre 2013). That was the start of her career as a "First Lady of Canadian Animation" (St-Pierre 2018). In addition, Jane Marsh was the only woman who made war propaganda films. Previously, women were not involved in creating war propaganda films because it was a privilege of men. Marsh broke through this barrier and made a series of films on the role of women in wartime. Works drawn from the perspective of female directors and producers were starting to attract attention, but after the end of the war (1945-1949), the percentage of women in production teams and the number of women in the whole of NFB declined (St-Pierre 2013).

However, in addition to female filmmakers during the war, there were women who had held important positions and had shown a female presence in the film industry even under difficult circumstances. The first Canadian female film director was Judith Crawley (1914-1986). She was a pioneer in Canadian film and not only became the first female director of the NFB with the film *New Apple Dishes* (1940), but also made history with

the making of Canada's first color film. Her work spread within Canada and around the world, and contributed to the history of women's film in Canada (St-Pierre 2013). The first black female filmmaker in Canada is Jennifer Hodge de Silva (1951-1989). She was the first woman of color to work with both NFB and CBC and portrayed social issues through stories of Chinese-Canadian immigrants and Indigenous artists. Her most famous work, *Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community* (1983) represented a severe tension between black communities and the Toronto Police Services (Parris 2017).

Women fought to have a presence in the long history of film and represent their social difficulties through their work. However, the number and reputation of women remains low, especially for women of color. The need for increased representation and involvement of women, as well as diversity within the industry, is clearly recognized by the Canadian media. CBC announced it would try to increase the number of women in directing in several CBC series to 50% in 2016 for gender equity. As a result, the percentage increased 15%, from 22% to 37%, between 2016 and 2017. However, only 7% were women of color and Indigenous women were 0% (Women in View On Screen in 2019). This shows that women, especially women of color and Indigenous women, still remain under-employed in the media industry. Hingman Leung, who is an independent filmmaker based in Ottawa, mentions that "voices of women of color are underrepresented in Canadian films" (Jackson 2020). Although Canada is the third most filmed country in the world (GoCompare, British

financial services comparison website), and it claims to be a multicultural society with a policy that supports this, the film media industry does not reflect gender equity, and there is a lack of recognition for female filmmakers, indigenous, and women of color in Canadian film.

The purpose of this essay is to understand the continued barriers that women - especially women of color - face in the film industry. The essay will firstly explore how women in the film industry have broken stereotypes before examining possible solutions to solve the issue of gender inequalities and to improve the status of women in the film industry in Canada in the future. The status of women and women of color in the Canadian film industry is low and they continue to be underrepresented, but there have been efforts to improve the influence of women in the industry. First, I will explain about the current situation of women in the film industry in Canada and clarify the problems faced by women, especially for women of color. Second, I will examine the relationship between feminism and the film industry and their deep-rooted issues through the history of Studio D. Lastly, I will review the efforts of several filmmakers and organizations to understand the way to ensure the diverse identity of women in the Canadian film industry.

Women are underrepresented and face severe situations in the film industry, and most notably, the problems faced by women of color are serious. The proportion of women, women of color, and Indigenous women in the share of key creative works, and productions women have taken part in remains low. Surveys of

the position of women in the Canadian film industry which were carried out by Women in View in 2019 and 2021 show an undervaluation of women. Women in View is "a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to strengthening gender representation and diversity in Canadian media both on screen and behind the scenes" (Women in View). It was founded in 2008 and it aims to enhance the presence and status of women in the media and to raise awareness of the impact of gender balance and diversity. The reports have surveyed numbers of women writers, directors and cinematographers in Canada's publicly funded film and TV industry (Women in View On Screen in 2021). According to the report of Women in View On Screen in 2019, 24.9% of film production writing, directing and cinematography contracts went to women in 2017 and the percentage increased approximately 4% between 2014 and 2017. However, 3.56% of them were given to women of color and only 1.19% were awarded to Indigenous women. On the other hand, 75.1% of contracts went to men. Compared to each position, 31.5% of director contracts went to women and 4.49% of them were to women of color and 2.25% went to Indigenous women in 2017. Although the number of contracts for women is low, it has increased by more than 10% in the past three years. For writers, 34.1% of director contracts went to women and 4.55% of them were women of color and 1.14% went to Indigenous women. For the Director of Photography Contract, 6.58% of director contracts went to women and 1.32% of them were women of color and surprisingly, 0% went to Indigenous women. The results of both the writers and the

Director of Photography have increased and decreased over three years, and the percentage of the Director of Photography dropped by nearly half from 2015.

While there have been positive changes for women in the film industry, in fact, there are women who are deprived of the opportunity to take on the role of director of film production because they are women. Emily Ramsay, who is an independent producer and filmmaker in Ottawa, is one of them. She is often told that she should not direct because she is more emotional than her male colleagues. She complained that opportunities were taken away by others because of gender (Jackson 2020). Behind the scenes of the glamorous film industry, prejudice and underestimation against women coexist. In terms of the percentage of production, according to the report, *Women in View On Screen in 2021*, writing film production by women was 41% and a breakdown of the rate is 25% were white women, 12% were women of color, and 3.7% were Indigenous women in 2019. As for directing film production by women, 25% were white women, 10% were women of color, and 4.44% were Indigenous women out of 40%. Although the past three years, the number of women in important positions has been increasing gradually due to changes in attitudes toward gender equality, such as the CBC's commitment to gender balance in June 2019 (*Women in View On Screen in 2021*), the proportion of women of color and Indigenous women remains low. Also, as Hingman Leung, who is an independent filmmaker in Ottawa, pointed out "as both an immigrant and a woman in this industry, I feel like I have to prove

myself over and over again in order to be taken seriously or to be recognized as someone who brings value" (Jackson 2020), awareness and concern for the diversity still takes time and tolerance.

In addition, gender balance in the Canadian film industry is different from region to region. In the report by Women in View On Screen in 2021, the number of films produced by women were compared by four regions, Quebec, Atlantic Canada, Western Region, and Ontario. According to the survey, 53 films were produced in Quebec in 2019 and 33 of them, which was 62% of the total, were produced by white women, which is an increase of 20 from 2017. However, only 1 film was produced by women of color and as for Indigenous women, none were produced there. In Atlantic Canada, 12 films were produced and 9 of them, which was 75% of the total, were produced by white women, which is an increase of 7 from 2017. This is the largest percentage of women-produced projects among four regions. However, it is the only region as well that there were no films produced by women of color and Indigenous women.

On the other hand, In the Western Region, 20 films were produced and 7 of them, which was 35% of the total, were produced by white women, 1 film was produced by women of color, and 2 films were produced by Indigenous women. In Ontario, 49 films were produced and 9 of them, which was 40% of the total, were produced by white women, which is an increase of 15 from 2017. Moreover, 9 films, which was 18% of the total and the largest number among four regions, were produced by women of color

and 1 film was produced by Indigenous women. It can be argued that a significant reason for a larger number of films produced by women of color in Ontario is a larger and well established black population due to the settlement in Ontario in the early 1800s after the American Revolution and established communities there. (Ontario Heritage Trust)

The effect of leadership in filmmaking also varies between men and women and it has an impact on the key creative roles of the other members of film crews. According to the Women in View On Screen in 2021, in the case of directing film productions produced by women, women's creative participation was 51% and 34% of them were white women, 13% were women of color, and 3.61% were Indigenous women in 2019. On the other hand, in the case of directing film productions produced by men, 14% were white women, 5.88% were women of color, and 5.88% were Indigenous women out of 25%. This shows the leadership effect is low when women participate in projects led by men, and women tend to work with women. In addition, in the case of directing film productions produced by women of color, women's creative participation was 55% and 9.09% of them were white women, 45% were women of color, and 0% were Indigenous women in 2019. As for those produced by Indigenous women, surprisingly, 0% were white women, 0% were women of color, and 67% were Indigenous women. When women of color lead, more women of color take part in the work. In the case of Indigenous women it is more obvious. On the other hand, when men take the initiative in film making, women, especially Indigenous women and women of

color, have fewer opportunities to share their work. This trend has exacerbated the gender balance imbalances in the film industry and has limited opportunities for women of color and Indigenous women to take part in gender-equal businesses.

The problems that arise when women advance in the film industry are related to the deep-rooted issues between feminism and the film industry. The best example of and, therefore, an appropriate way to explore the relationship between feminism and the film industry, is through an examination of the groundbreaking Canadian female organization, Studio D. It was founded by the National Film Board in 1974 initiated by Kathleen Shannon who was a producer in NFB. The studio was known as the first publicly funded feminist film-production in the world. However, it faced several issues in its activities due to the lack of recognition for women. First, the establishment of a feminist film studio was an unprecedented case. As I noted above, during the war, women played an important role in NFB's documentary film. This is because socially, women were asked to work in place of men who served in the military in the war (Eidinger 2020). However, after the war, women's participation declined rapidly and men dominated the film industry by holding key positions, while women were restricted by gender prejudice.

This situation continued, but during the 1970s in Canada, rights for women had appeared as an important issue. In 1967, Laura Sabia, who was a lawyer from St. Catharines, Ontario, and president of the Canadian Federation of University Women,

began a movement for the improvement of the social problems faced by Canadian women with the Honourable Judy LaMarsh, Secretary of State. 50 women from 32 women's organizations across Canada joined the movement and launched the Committee on the Equality of Women in Canada (Vanstone 43). According to "Women's Movements in Canada: 1960-85.", the movement during 1960-1985 is known as second wave feminism. In this movement, awareness of gender roles improved, and support for women's equality in education and employment, awareness of violence against and action for peace increased. The ideas of second wave feminism also began to appear in popular culture.

The growing strength of the feminist movement inspired Kathleen Shannon to stand up to changing the male-dominated culture in the Film Board. At that time, the NFB had no interest in a women's studio and no financial commitment based on the philosophy of the NFB founder John Grierson that "women should not assume prominent roles" (Vanstone 38). However, Shannon realized the growing public awareness of women's issues, and requested the NFB create a new studio for women. Subsequently, the new studio was launched as Studio D and started with just three members who were the NFB employees, Shannon, Yuki Yoshida and Margaret Pettigrew.

However, while the establishment of Studio was a significant victory, it faced an important obstacle - the budget. Budget uncertainty continued to plague the studio's activities throughout its history. By 1977, its budget had reached \$600,000, and by 1978, it reached \$853,000. This is a significant amount, but the

studio had to cover all of the resources for filmmaking (Vanstone 89). According to Schuyler Moore, in a *Forbes* article, there are two main reasons for the importance of budgets in filmmaking, (1) a film's budget is related to movie sales and (2) production costs increase or decrease with the amount of the budget. Thus, as Bonnie Sherr Klein mentioned, low budget showed that Studio D was not taken seriously (Vanstone 91). The low level of support for budgets in filmmaking shows the low awareness of the importance of the female studio and filmmakers. According to Gail Vanstone, "in 1984 to 1985, Studio D was the only studio in the English Production Branch to receive less money than in the previous year" (Vanstone 97). Compared to the years 1983 to 1984 and 1985 to 1986, the share of funding for Studio D had declined from 10% to 6% (Vanstone 97). The budget situation did not improve, despite Shannon's urging. However, despite struggling with funding limitations, Studio D provided opportunities for women to take part in the film industry and experience key positions through documentary films.

In 1996, Studio D set the slogan "D is for Daring," and focused on the goal to make films that promote discussion and action for improving the status of women in society. Despite active challenges and contributions, the studio faced another funding problem with approximately 25% reduction in funding for the NFB from \$80 million to \$56 million per year by the federal government, and Studio D was abolished due to the NFB restructuring (Vanstone 12). The budget problem for female filmmakers still continues today. According to CBC in 2019, Telefilm Canada

explains the necessity of supporting putting women in directing for big-budget films. The higher proportion of men in high-budget projects prevents women from showing their presence in the film industry.

Moreover, in order for women to succeed in the film industry, it is important to have understanding and support not only from outside but also from inside the industry. Studio D emphasized issues of gender inequality and discrimination in Canada, and strived for increased women's voices for empowerment. There were two main objectives in Studio D, "to project women's perspectives in its documentaries and to create filmmaking opportunities for Canadian women in a field traditionally dominated by men" (Vanstone 36), and its mission was "to make films by and for women" (Vanstone 65). Studio D created documentaries which focused on feminist issues in Canada, and it also gave women the opportunity to train in important positions such as producer, director and editor.

However, the approach of Studio D was criticized as well. From the beginning of Studio D, only middle-class white women took part in filmmaking at the studio, and the studio was criticized for the lack of racial and class representation. On the other hand, these criticisms may have been a sign that society had begun to pay attention to cultural diversity hidden in the problem of gender inequality. In the late 1980s, women from diverse backgrounds joined and Studio D tried for diversity (Vanstone 56). Studio D built relations with the National Initiatives in Film (NIF), which was established in order to commit "the under-

representation of Women of Colour and Native Women in Canadian film" (Vanstone 106). During this period between 1991 and 1996, Studio D began to reflect not only gender issues, but also diversity among women on the screen. However, Studio D's strong belief in feminism was not accepted by the NFB because there was a gap of enthusiasm for feminist culture between Studio D and the NFB. Therefore, although Studio D belonged to the influential organization, NFB, it was also criticized by insiders of the NFB and this led to a lack of support financially and internal control (Vanstone 80). No matter how much Studio D took on activities and challenges to advance the reform of women's role in the film industry, it was difficult to eradicate differences in understanding and perception from inside and outside the studio completely. Studio D is one of the historical examples of showing the struggle within the film industry to bring women's issues to the public, and the harsh realities women will face when they take part in male-dominated society.

However, dissatisfaction with women's predicament and voices for improvement are gradually spreading, and the situation has been improving gradually through the efforts of people and organizations who have been trying to bring more cultural diversity to the film industry.

While Studio D strived for diversity in the Canadian film industry, several individuals and groups are currently working to overcome the lack of diversity in the Canadian film industry. Frances-Anne Solomon is one of the filmmakers who is currently working to increase diversity in film. She is an award-

winning filmmaker of Caribbean heritage, a writer, producer and director in film, TV, radio and new media. She spent 15 years as a producer at the BBC in London and moved to Canada in order to produce content for Black people in 2002 (Lopez 2020). She engaged in the film industry for many years and appealed for underrepresented and underpaid women of color, and she is active in improving the film industry as a founder and executive manager of CineFAM, which is a Haitian creole word meaning Films by Women. She states the purpose of CineFAM is to create a pipeline for creators, women of color, and represent them in the media industry by providing opportunities for women of color who have diverse backgrounds (Solomon and Mirror 2019).

According to Frances-Anne Solomon, Canada should be a leader in ensuring better representation of women of color because it is known for cultural diversity. In fact, cultural diversity is an essential element in Canada. According to the news release by the Government of Canada, "[a]ll Canadians originally come from somewhere else. The story of immigration fills many chapters in the history of Canada including the most recent one" (Canada.ca). The report announced that Canada has welcomed more than 401,000 new permanent residents in 2021. This is the largest number in Canadian history. Lisa Evans explains that Canada is the first country in the world to enact an official policy of multiculturalism in 1971 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was introduced in 1988 (Evans 2013). Also, Statistics Canada predicts between 25% and 28% of the population

will be people who were born in foreign countries by 2031. Thus, it is necessary to commit to improving the situation for women and for diversity. In order to change the situation in the film industry, Frances-Anne Solomon supports female filmmakers through her programs to abolish all forms of discrimination against women and receive proper recognition.

Maissa Hourri, an Arab-Canadian actress and director in Ottawa, is also trying to increase diversity in the film industry. She felt discriminated against for the roles she was given at the audition, so she broke stereotypical prejudices against Muslim women in film by writing her own story (Jackson 2020). According to Maissa Hourri, "We don't have the same stories as men, and we need to be able to tell them. We have the experience, but we just need the opportunities" (Jackson 2020). As Sasha Leigh Henry, who is a Canadian director, producer and writer, said that "The film industry lost many black people to racism" (Wilson 2021), among women, especially women of color and Indigenous women have few opportunities to be recognized. However, by working to improve the awareness and bring diversity to the Canadian film industry, women contribute to raising their status. By showing women involved in one of the popular cultures taking the lead in struggling with women's issues through films, and providing opportunities for women to become mainstream, women will gain more attention and it leads to getting closer to solving women's problems in society.

In addition, making films that find and represent the important significance of women is an effective way to influence public

opinion. Christene Browne is a filmmaker and novelist. According to Amanda Parris, in a CBC news article, "Browne became the first black woman to write, produce and direct a dramatic feature film in Canada" (Parris 2017). Another Planet (1999) is one of her works and reflects her life. It is a story of a young black woman, whose name is Cassandra Jones, searching for identity after leaving Toronto for an exchange program between Quebec and West Africa. It premiered at FESPACO, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival in Burkina Faso, then screened at several film festivals around the world. She described the difficulty of financing at that time, when prejudice against blacks was still widespread, "I had to convince people, mainly the funders, that I could do the job because I had only done documentaries and never done a feature before or worked with actors before. Reading the script everybody said, 'this is too ambitious', the meaning is a little black girl can't do this film" (Roxane 2000). Sandy Daley, who is a main actress of Another Planet also mentioned that the film industry has a narrow perspective for black films (Roxane 2000). Women of color face struggles not only because they are seen as women but also as black. Therefore, stereotypes impact abilities to land roles and the types of roles they are cast in.

However, Another Planet represented a positive perspective of women of color on the screen, and provided an opportunity to change the prejudice against women of color in the Canadian film industry. Films have major influences on economy, entertainment, and social attitudes just as propaganda films had

spread during wartime. Michelle C. Pautz, who is an associate professor of political science at the University of Dayton, tested the influence of X film. In this test, students at a private Midwestern college were required to answer questions about their opinions on government before and after watching the movies *Argo* (2012) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). The result of the test was that after watching the films, 20% to 25% of students changed their opinion favorably. This indicates that watching movies can influence the thought processes of the audience. According to Michelle C. Pautz, young audiences in particular tend to be influenced by films. She also argues that "Movies contribute to the political socialization of people. They help us to understand societal opinions, institutions, and even demystify aspects of society" (Guida 2015). As she explained, since film is a tool that can easily convey a message to many people, presenting social issues through film will effectively encourage discussion and influence people's ways of thinking. Therefore, just as Christene Browne represents the view of women of color through her film, films have a power to change and improve gender balance not only in the film industry but also in society.

Moreover, there are several organizations for women and gender diverse filmmakers. The St. John's International Women's Film Festival is a charity and non-profit-organization. It was founded in 1989 in order to "support and promote women's creative work in screen-based industries locally and internationally" (St. John's International Women's Film Festival). It is known as the historical women's film festival in Canada and is held every

October. More than 950 works participate each year and all of them are directed and written by women. The festival not only increases the exposure of works produced by women, but also promotes St John's to the Canadian and international film industry, raises its profile as a cultural and business market, and supports the development of the film community (St. John's International Women's Film Festival).

Women in Film and Television Vancouver is another organization committed to "creating an equitable screen-based industry for women and gender diverse people" (WIFTV). It was founded in 1989 as a not-for-profit society registered in British Columbia, and accepts all people, regardless of age, color, race, gender, or ethnic origin. It proposes equity in funding and promotional opportunities for all women in film and television. Also, it produces the Vancouver International Women in Film Festival which was launched in 2006. Through film screenings and discussions, the festival supports gender equality and diversity in the media industry. In 2022, the festival was held on March 8th to 13rd. 33 films from 12 countries, 17 of them were Canadian films and 9 of them were local BC filmmakers (WIFTV). It contributes to the development of women in the film industry.

Currently, the NFB committed to gender parity in the film industry as well. According to Jovana Jancovic, on International Women's Day, every March 8th, a special website is created by the NFB and it provides related film playlists and essays on women's contributions to Canadian filmmaking (Jancovic 2014). In addition, the NFB announced that "it continues to

achieve its goals in terms of both the number of productions and budget allocation over five years in 2021" (National Film Board of Canada 2021). For example, 46% were female directors and 40% were male directors of the ongoing projects between 2020 and 2021. As for creative positions, screenwriting, 45% were women and 46% were men. In the position of editing, 47% were women, and 49% were men. It shows that men and women have almost equal proportions in their key positions. However, as for cinematography, 77% were men and only 14% were women. In the music position, 73% were men, but women were 23%. It can be said that gender equality is advancing, but there are still issues and perceptions that need to be improved. Therefore, it is important to keep changing people's awareness of women's advancement in the Canadian film industry through projects and organizations.

Female filmmakers have faced serious issues such as difficulty to receive proper recognition in the long Canadian film industry history. Even today, it is difficult for women, especially indigenous and women of color, to play an active role in key positions. The reason why it is difficult for women to get more opportunities to take part in the film industry for many years is due to stereotypical ideas of women and institutional gender and racial discrimination. In particular, women of color are more underrepresented and underpaid because of the lack of diversity in the film industry. However, the situation is changing due to the efforts of people and organizations who try to bring more cultural diversity to the film industry and improve the identity of women. Especially, Studio D played an important initial role in

recognizing and fulfilling the need for a female voice, and helped women gain a foothold in the film industry. Through the films of Studio D, many of which highlighted feminist issues, became important in Canada and showed the presence of women in the Canadian film industry. Also, it helped to raise awareness of women in society. Today, many female film organizations, and female filmmakers, work towards improving the industry. The issue of gender inequalities in the film industry might be difficult and take time to solve. However, Kathleen Shannon said, "Women must speak to the issues facing us all, and one of the most important contemporary tools of speech is film because of its capacity not only to inform and instruct, but to change attitudes" (Vanstone 130). The film industry is one of the largest industries and has a huge impact and a power to take the lead to change the idea for women among many people by expressing the issues through films. The situation of gender-balance can be improved not only in film, but also in the whole of the media in the future by continuing to take actions and convey messages of women, and it will also lead to bringing multiple identities in society.

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