Is Hollywood Still an All-White Boys Club?
By: Christina Chong

No, but do not let recent propaganda promoting diversity fool you. Although women are slowly inching into positions of power, my research revealed that white males heavily control the entertainment industry. My research report included the gender and race of 2,394 actors and actresses cast in 500 popular films over a span of five years (2010 to 2014). The study also included the gender and race of the 417 directors, 580 casting directors, and 691 screenwriters responsible for creating the 500 films. Click here to read the parameters of this study.

The Gender Gap Still Exists

In 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau reported 50.8% of the population was female. Although women were the majority in America, the number of male characters on screen was almost twice the number of female characters. My study revealed that men occupied 61% of lead roles while women occupied 39%. For supporting roles, men were 63% and women were 37%.

The disparity between male and female appearances also plagued behind-the-scenes positions. The results revealed women were 74% of the casting directors in film, but men still dominated the true positions of creative power. 92% of directors were men and 8% were women. For screenwriters, 78% were men and 22% were women. To view detailed data comparing the positions in movies versus television shows, please click here.

The casting director data tricks people into believing women hold positions of authority in the film making process. However, the artistic control remains with the white, male directors and screenwriters who are often responsible for creating the storyline. A casting director has limited discretion to modify the characters because casting mainly involves finding acting talent that meets the character breakdown prepared by the director or writer. In reality, women’s influence on today’s films remains minimal because women are underrepresented in directing and writing positions.

Hollywood’s Change is Slow

In the past, women were nearly absent from all film positions. Today, women at least have some presence in Hollywood. The entertainment industry is gradually improving, but women are still fighting an uphill battle to achieve equal representation and employment opportunity.

From 2010 to 2014, the number of women directors only increased by 1.7% (3.6% in 2010 to 5.3% in 2014). Women screenwriters made slightly more progress with an increase of 6% (12% in 2010 to 18% in 2014). If the results were analyzed by year, the annual increase of female directors was less than 0.5% and barely over 1% for female screenwriters. These diversity percentages are embarrassing for an industry that claims to be progressive. As for casting directors, the category where women made progress, the movement went backwards because the number of female casting directors decreased by 14% (75% in 2010 to 61% in 2014).

Although the behind-the-scenes statistics for women is disheartening, there is a positive trend for actresses. In 2014, the number of women in leading roles increased by 17% (31% in 2010 to 48% in 2014) and the number of female supporting roles increased by 9% (27% in 2010 to 36%
in 2014). The percentage of female characters is slowly rising, but women have not reached parity. Please click here to view detailed data for each year and a comparison between positions in movies versus television shows.

My research report is quantifiable proof that women struggle to succeed in entertainment. The more troubling question is why. Leaders in film advertise their commitment to diversifying the profession, the government recognizes women face additional barriers to careers in film, and society insists on more representation of minority groups. Nevertheless, Hollywood remains dominated by white males on screen and behind the scenes.

Implicit Bias is the Source of Gender Discrimination in Hollywood

Implicit bias exists in everyone and is one reason Hollywood lacks gender diversity. The Kirwan Institute defines implicit bias as “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions.” Implicit biases “are activated without [an] individual’s awareness or control.” This section explores three ways implicit bias limits opportunities for women in film.

First, Men Favor Men
Implicit bias includes preferences to one’s in-group. Male executives usually better relate to other males because women possess different experiences and perspectives. As a result, male executives, consciously or unconsciously, hire men over women, which keeps Hollywood a closed club that rarely accepts new members.

Second, Men Stereotype Women
Talented women are overlooked because many men stereotype women as extremely emotional; too fragile for the stressful lifestyle of a director, writer, or producer; or unable to write action or intense dramas. These stereotypes are a product of implicit bias. Young boys are surrounded by media that portrays women as meek, subordinate to men, overly sexualized, or damsels in distress. Eventually, young boys become adult males who dominate the film industry. Men may not explicitly endorse negative stereotypes, but a lifetime of stereotypical messages will naturally impact anyone’s decisions. The solution seems simple. Hollywood should include accurate and diverse portrayals of women to reduce the development of unconscious biases. But, implementation is not that easy because men write about men.

Third, Men Write About Men
Most men do not write stories with female characters because writers “write what [they] know.” Men experience life as a man, which means their desire to include a female lead is lower than their interest in writing about male leads. As a result, the casting opportunities for women are reduced. Male directors and writers experience the life of women from an outsider’s perspective, which generates implicit biases that hinder their ability to portray women with diverse characteristics. When most men write about women, the role frequently lacks complex dimensions and embodies a stereotype.

My research study revealed that out of 488 casting calls between January 2015 and May 2015, 57% requested an actor and 43% an actress. The results suggest that men are “writing what [they] know,” which are stories about men. Male leaders will continue to write and employ men. Thus, to promote diversity, women must obtain creative positions behind the scenes to write and employ more women.
Unfortunately, breaking the glass ceiling is difficult because many male executives believe the film industry lacks qualified female writers and directors. Oscar-nominated film director, Lexi Alexander, claims “[t]here is no lack of female directors” and supports her assertion with evidence that men and women graduate from the top U.S. film school at nearly equal rates. However, male leaders continue to use the absence of female talent as an excuse to shut women out of Hollywood.

The truth is some men are not ready to open the industry to women or racial minorities or do not understand the role implicit bias plays in their decision-making. If these leaders do not overcome their implicit biases, then the industry will remain insular. To read more about lack of racial diversity as it relates to Asian Pacific Americans, please click here. To view the research results for all racial groups, please click here.

Understanding Implicit Bias Can Move Hollywood Towards Inclusive Employment

Diversity in film is on everyone’s mind, especially with the recent controversy about the Oscars. Media attention increases awareness about the problem, but publicity alone will not change Hollywood’s culture. Society must candidly discuss how to battle implicit biases and take concrete actions, such as educating leaders about implicit biases; color-blind casting and pitches; and diversity programs with real career advancement opportunities for minority actors, actresses, directors, and screenwriters. Please click here to read more about these solutions.

The Real Solution is Government Intervention

Some people optimistically believe Hollywood will regulate itself or injured parties will continue to bring lawsuits until Hollywood is forced to abandon its discriminatory practices. But, diversity is currently not Hollywood’s first priority and artists are reluctant to sue the powers responsible for their professional success. As discussed above, change in Hollywood is nearly stagnant. Society, the government, and entertainment leaders must recognize that industry and litigation solutions are not working.

Fortunately, state and federal agencies realized Hollywood is resisting diversity and recently began to investigate the hiring practices of major studios, networks, and talent agencies. Click here to read more about the American Civil Liberties Union’s request that the government examine the rampant discrimination in Hollywood.

It’s about time the government stopped turning a blind eye to discrimination issues. Although these government solutions are still in the early stages, government involvement will hopefully push Hollywood in the right direction. But honestly, the best way to make substantial progress is for the public to convince legislators to enact laws that require Hollywood to modify its employment practices. Stay tuned because I’ll tackle this complicated topic in my next article.