

Taking the Lead: Why we need more female bosses in the film and television industries if we are to close the real-life gender gap

By Lucy Brown

Throughout school and university, women thrive and outperform men. They start their careers earning the same amount as their male colleagues. Yet few make it past middle management to senior leadership positions. Why is that?

This year's mandatory gender gap reporting for companies with more than 250 employees reveals that a whopping 78% of companies pay men more than they pay women - a result of men holding the majority of senior, highly paid positions. Personally, I am interested in the film and television industries. I teach equal numbers of talented male and female students, but studies show women do not rise through the ranks to chief executive or head of department roles.

In fact, a 2018 study by Nordicom found there are only six female CEOs among the top 100 global media companies, and women make up only 17% of senior managers. Another study, from the University of Southampton, found just 27% of producers and 14% of directors are female - statistics that have barely changed in 20 years. Unfortunately, things are no better on-screen, where men make up 81% of film characters with jobs. When women are portrayed in the workplace, they take up mostly low-status jobs - comprising 76% of on-screen secretaries, 81% of receptionists and just 6% of managers, according to gender data research by BFI Filmography. Stereotypes of men as leaders are all-pervasive in the media. If you do a web search for 'CEO' or 'leader', the majority of images that are returned are of white, middle-aged men. So what can we do about this issue?

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media coined the phrase: "If she can see it, she can be it." It's true that film and television can make a difference. TV series such as *CSI* have been credited with doubling the number of women studying criminology, while *The Hunger Games* influenced a rise in the number of girls taking up archery. We need to embrace a wider picture of leadership, however. Women are not monolithic, yet on-screen female bosses are often portrayed as ball-breakers. Think *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Working Girl*, although TV shows such as *Veep* and *Commander in Chief* move beyond this stereotype. Female leaders from all backgrounds working behind the scenes would lead to more multidimensional females and stories on screen.

The struggle to balance family and a demanding job with inflexible working conditions results in many women leaving the media industry. Raising Films, an organisation that supports parents and carers in the industry, reports that family-friendly cultures, flexible working practices and job shares would help to remove some of the barriers to top jobs and prevent companies from haemorrhaging talented women who are pushed out by necessity.

We should look to Sweden for inspiration. Anna Serner, CEO of the Swedish Film Institute, proved the impossible when she achieved 50:50 funding for male and female filmmakers. But when speaking at the recent Trailblazing Women On and Off Screen conference at the University of Greenwich, she was clear that it is necessary to demand change and have the intention for action.

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