

## FULL PAPER

### **Influential film producers and their networks: The formation of creative teams and gender inequality**

**Einflussreiche Filmproduzenten und ihre Netzwerke: Die Zusammensetzung von Filmteams und Geschlechterungleichheit**

*Elizabeth Prommer, Deb Verhoeven & Skadi Loist*

**Elizabeth Prommer (Prof. Dr.)**, University of Rostock, Institute for Media Research, August-Bebel-Str. 28, 18055 Rostock, Germany. Contact: [elizabeth.prommer@uni-rostock.de](mailto:elizabeth.prommer@uni-rostock.de). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5238-4884>

**Deb Verhoeven (Prof. Dr.)**, University of Alberta, Canada 150 Laureate, Women's and Gender Studies, 3–51 Assiniboia Hall, T6G 2E7 Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Contact: [debver@ualberta.ca](mailto:debver@ualberta.ca). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3680-3561>

**Skadi Loist (Prof. Dr.)**, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Department of Art and Media Studies, Høgskoleringen 1, 7491 Trondheim, Norway. Contact: [skadi.loist@ntnu.no](mailto:skadi.loist@ntnu.no). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8299-4103>



### Influential film producers and their networks: The formation of creative teams and gender inequality

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**Abstract:** Gender inequality in screen industries across the world is well researched at both global and national scales. Evidence-based evaluation of inequality in these industries typically occurs at the level of annualised, aggregated statistical analysis in the form of summative data describing the number or proportion of women and gender minorities present in the screen sectors. Instead, this research study proceeds from the basis that gender inequality stems from unequal *social* relationships. We use Social Network Analysis (SNA) to evaluate the specific nature of collaboration networks in the German film industry over an eight-year period. We then extended the SNA research with career biographies, focussing our attention on the collaborative behaviours of the industry's most influential beneficiaries: male film producers. Whereas previous research concluded there is no "pipeline" problem in the film industry because women graduate from film schools at statistically equitable levels, our findings reveal that the professional relationships formed between men at film school persist throughout their careers and operate to obstruct women's opportunities.

**Keywords:** Film industry, gender, Social Network Analysis, gender equity, film school

**Zusammenfassung:** Geschlechterungleichheit in der Film- und Fernsehbranche ist sowohl auf globaler als auch auf nationaler Ebene gut erforscht. Eine evidenzbasierte Bewertung dieser Ungleichheit erfolgt in der Regel über jährlich aggregierte Statistiken, die in Form summarischer Daten die Anzahl oder den Anteil von Frauen und geschlechtlichen Minderheiten in der Branche erfassen. Diese Studie hingegen geht davon aus, dass Geschlechterungleichheit aus ungleichen *sozialen* Beziehungen resultiert. Wir wenden Soziale Netzwerkanalyse (SNA) an, um die spezifische Struktur von Kollaborationsnetzwerken in der deutschen Filmindustrie über einen Zeitraum von acht Jahren zu untersuchen. Ergänzend zur SNA beziehen wir biografische Informationen ein und richten unser Augenmerk insbesondere auf die Kooperationsmuster der einflussreichsten Akteure der Branche: männliche Filmproduzenten. Während frühere Studien zu dem Schluss kamen, dass es kein „Nachwuchsproblem“ gebe, da Frauen Filmhochschulen in statistisch gleichem Maße wie Männer abschließen, zeigen unsere Ergebnisse, dass die während des Filmstudiums geknüpften professionellen Beziehungen unter Männern über ihre gesamte Laufbahn hinweg bestehen bleiben und als strukturelles Hindernis für die Karrieren von Frauen wirken.

**Schlagwörter:** Filmindustrie, Geschlecht, Soziale Netzwerkanalyse, Geschlechtergerechtigkeit, Filmhochschule

## 1. Introduction and background

Gender inequality in the film industry is well researched. Empirical data show that women produce less audiovisual content as directors, producers, and writers worldwide and are seen less on screen (Lauzen, 2021; Loist et al., 2024; Prommer & Loist, 2020; Ross & Padovani, 2017; Simone, 2024; Smith, Choueiti, Pieper et al., 2020; Smith, Choueiti, Yao et al., 2020). The same data suggest that this is also not the result of a “pipeline” problem, as women make up at least 50 percent of graduates from film schools (Aylett et al., 2016). In an overview of gender inequality in Australia, the Australian screen agency confirmed that, “the cause of the imbalance does not appear to lie in education or training; rather, it lies in what happens after education ends.” (Screen Australia, 2015) But what happens after film school that leads to the underrepresentation of women? Previous research has shown that film schools are a key entry point into the industry, where professional connections are established (Banks, 2019; Jones et al., 2026). Our specific interest lies in the question, whether film schools play an important role in the formation of gender-biased creative film teams and, consequently, whether exclusion mechanisms begin prior to entry into the industry.

Gender equality and diversity in the film industry matter for several reasons. In addition to basic issues of workplace equity, several studies suggest that gender inequality in production teams leads to unequal visibility of diversity on screen (Liddy, 2020; Linke & Prommer, 2021). Laura Mulvey (1975) demonstrated how male directors adopt the “male gaze”, in which the story, camera angle and reception of a film are composed with a male audience in mind. In order to see diverse worlds on screen, it is necessary to have a diversity of content producers, as bell hooks argues (hooks, 2015).

A recent summary report on gender inequality in the creative industries, commissioned by UNESCO, notes:

*Diverse cultural expressions that promote gender equality can transform our individual and collective perceptions, banish long-held and damaging stereotypes and amplify the voices and stories of the invisible and/or long-silenced. (Conor, 2021, p. 5)*

To date, the international film industries have been impervious to equity-driven interventions, and the longitudinal data show little improvement over time. Industry and academic reports, often commissioned by national funding agencies, illustrate the snail’s pace in change for a wide range of countries (Flicker & Vogelmann, 2018). Overall, studies have demonstrated that the argument that there are “no good films by women” or “there is no female talent” does not hold (Aylett et al., 2016; Hochfeld et al., 2017; Loist, 2018; Loist & Prommer, 2019). Instead, what the data suggests is that severe structural barriers exist for women during their careers, which restrict their ability to enter the industry and/or main-

tain a career, and which must be further considered and addressed by researchers and industry stakeholders.

Until now, industry research and policy interventions have focused primarily on the statistical underrepresentation of women in key creative roles in film productions (typically writers, directors and producers). However, this focus presumes that the primary instrument for change lies in changing the behaviour of the small number of women in these roles, which will result in amplifying the participation of all women throughout the entire industry. These initiatives typically stipulate that women need support through mentoring or additional “development,” like training programs especially designed for women, and are based on a belief that the underrepresentation of women in the industry results from women’s behaviours rather than men’s (Verhoeven, 2024). Several mentoring programs for the creative industries (Deutscher Kulturrat, 2020) and film industry (Women in Film & TV UK, 2025) have been developed in the last five years, addressing women’s assumed inability to network and to connect with industry executives. To date, this argument has not been empirically examined, nor have the sponsors of these programs conducted formal evaluations. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this intervention appears to be widely assumed, as it was frequently cited in qualitative interviews conducted for the German Federal Film Board (FFA) (Hochfeld et al., 2017).

Given the film industry’s persistent resistance to various change strategies, scholars and activists have called for a revised approach to the types of data collected and the methods of analysis undertaken – first, to gain a better understanding of the industry’s dynamic structures and, second, to propose different mechanisms to effect change (Verhoeven et al., 2020). This paper adopts the first motivation: To better understand the underlying mechanisms. Specifically, it seeks to examine a central argument concerning gendered industry structures. Our primary research question is therefore:

*Do gendered film networks exist?*

To address this, we further ask:

*How are industry networks constituted and sustained?*

*Can we identify patterns in how individuals come together within these networks?*

*Does the educational path play a role in forming these connection patterns?*

To answer these questions, we examine the German film industry as a collaboration network in which key creative people (writers, directors and producers) work on projects together. We draw on the approach of Verhoeven et al. (2020), who use Social Network Analysis to understand and analyse gender inequity in order to identify more effective mechanisms for structural change. In this article, we provide an overview of the German film industry, introduce the use of SNA for examining equity within the sector, and outline our methodological approach. We then share findings from our expanded analysis of German film industry data. These findings are contextualized through an interpretation of collaboration net-

works within the German film industry, supplemented by career biographical information on the individual network members.

## 2. The film industry in Germany: Inequality by the numbers

Each year, approximately 120–140 fiction feature films and an additional 100–120 feature-length documentaries are produced for theatrical release in German cinemas (Filmförderungsanstalt [FFA], 2021, 2025). The market share of tickets sold for German film productions fluctuates between 20 and 30 percent, depending on the specific titles released (Berauer, 2017). As the German film market is primarily confined to German-speaking countries, international distribution for German films is rarely lucrative. Consequently, commercial revenues are limited, and the production of a typical German feature film intended for theatrical release is typically financed primarily through public film funding (Kanzler, 2021). In addition to public subsidies, financing is also secured, to a lesser extent, by television co-production money, with an even smaller portion from a distributor's guarantee. Overall, the majority of German film financing relies on public sources. Annually, around €600 million is made available in Germany through federal, regional, and local film funding agencies (Worschech, 2024). These institutions support a range of objectives – from commercially oriented productions to artistically ambitious works and projects that contribute to regional economic development or tourism. The budget of German theatrical feature films varies: About half of the films have a budget under €2 million, around 15 to 17 percent have a budget over €5 million, and the rest lies between €2 million and €5 million (Prommer & Siegemund, 2022, p. 18). Approximately 90 percent of German feature films released in cinemas receive some form of film funding (in the form of subsidies, loans or tax refunds), with only a few low-budget or film school productions being realized without such support (Kanzler, 2021).

The gender distribution of key creatives – writers, directors, producers – within the German film industry has been the subject of several studies, conducted either from academic perspectives (Prommer & Loist, 2020, 2026) or by film funding bodies (Hochfeld et al., 2017) and industry organizations (Langer, 2019; Prommer & Siegemund, 2022). The most comprehensive of these is *Gender and Film* (Hochfeld et al., 2017), commissioned by the German Federal Film Board (FFA). Unlike earlier studies that focused solely on key creative roles, this study examined gender representation across all creative departments in film production, including directing, screenwriting, producing, cinematography, sound, editing, production design and costume. Its data analysis examined the gender of the heads of department across all German feature and documentary films that screened in cinemas between 2011 and 2015. Findings revealed a significant overrepresentation of men as heads of department in nearly all categories, regardless of film type (Hochfeld et al., 2017). In addition, qualitative interviews conducted for the study highlighted systemic barriers identified by female directors. These included the dominance of closed male networks, persistent gender stereotypes and biases, and opaque decision-making processes – all of which were described as gatekeeping mechanisms within the industry (Hochfeld et al., 2017, p. 56).

The most recent data from 2023 indicates a slight improvement for the year 2019, with women accounting for 31 percent of all directors (up from 29%). However, the sustainability of this progress is questionable as film funding decisions in 2023 continue to reflect significant disparities: Proportionally less funding is allocated to films directed by women (Maier et al., 2024). The overrepresentation of male directors in Germany is comparable to that in other European countries. According to the *Where Are the Women Directors?* report by the European Women's Audiovisual Network, men accounted for 75 to 80 percent of directors in the seven European countries surveyed (Aylett et al., 2016). More recent European data from 2023 show no progress, with women directing only around 20 percent in most European countries (Simone, 2024).

In Germany, only a limited number of policy interventions aimed at improving gender equality have been initiated. These include the introduction of gender-balanced juries at the German Federal Film Funding Board (FFA), the recognition of child care costs as eligible production expenses within funding applications (FFA, 2022), and the development of more transparent reporting on the gender distribution of funding decisions involving the FFA and some of the regional film funders (Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg, 2021). Additional measures include the establishment of mentoring programs for women (Steinbauer, 2019). To date, only one regional funding agency – the MOIN in northern Germany – requires that applicants complete a diversity checklist as part of the funding process (MOIN Filmförderung Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein, 2020). Unlike Austria, which has introduced a financial gender incentive (Österreichisches Filminstitut, 2019), or the United Kingdom with its BFI Diversity standards (BFI, 2026; New Inclusion, 2022), Germany lacks binding gender incentives, quotas or other mandatory control mechanisms. Nevertheless, the topic of inequality in hiring talent remains a constant point of discussion. No film festival, industry conference, or national industry event takes place without raising the issue of gender imbalance in the sector.

### 3. The network approach to the film industry

#### 3.1. Social Network Analysis (SNA) in the film industry

Films are not made by a single person: they are made by creative teams. Building a creative team in the film industry primarily relies on personal connections in the form of pre-existing professional relationships (Faulkner & Anderson, 1987; C. Jones, 1996; Wreyford, 2015). Because most professionals in the film sector work as freelancers, creative teams are typically assembled on a project-by-project basis. This freelance model, common to many creative industries, results in a high degree of dependence on informal, reputation-based structures to gain employment (Apitzsch, 2017; Blair, 2001; Lutter, 2015). Film workers not only need to maintain strong professional networks to access job opportunities; they also rely heavily on word-of-mouth recommendations, visibility through awards or nominations, and screenings at festivals (Blair, 2001). Crucially, they must build connections with producers and production companies who hire them – who in turn

depend on relationships with commissioning editors and funding agencies to greenlight the projects (Windeler, 2004).

In Germany, only a few large production companies have dedicated departments for evaluating submitted scripts and recruiting talent; therefore, this remains an exception. Most creative teams in the German screen industries are assembled through informal networks. Indeed, Sydow et al. (2002) explicitly describe the German television production sector as a network of organizations and freelance workers (Sydow & Windeler, 2006; Sydow et al., 2002; Windeler, 2004; Windeler et al., 2001). Drawing on qualitative interviews, their research illustrates how these freelance production networks enhance both the flexibility and the operational efficiency of the creative industry.

Adopting a Social Network Analysis (SNA) approach to film industry recruitment can enable researchers to uncover the hidden dimensions of informal collaboration networks by examining the relational structures among individuals working together in production teams. By visualizing and quantifying relationships, SNA can identify key players and roles, reveal collaboration clusters, and detect structural biases in employment patterns. For example, SNA that incorporates an equity lens has shown how small, seemingly inconsequential initial gender inequalities can, over time, wedge people into social network positions and become a basis for cumulative disparities that are increasingly difficult to undo (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1993). Organizational Network Analysis (ONA), which focusses specifically on the relationships formed between group members within professional settings (from work teams to board membership), can show how networking, social identities and social capital affect connectivity and workplace success. In their scoping review of this literature, Decker-Tonnesen et al. (2025) identify a dearth of studies relating specifically to men's networks but a rich vein of research assessing women's workplace networks as more peripheral and less connected. Studies on creative industry employment patterns repeatedly show that women are subject to exclusionary network dynamics in these work settings (Grimme et al., 2026). An emerging body of research has begun applying SNA methods to the study of the film industry (Dadlani et al., 2024), with some studies showing that these exclusionary network practices are also important for understanding the role of gender in the formation of film production teams (Jones et al., 2024; Lutter, 2015).

In their comprehensive overview of the existing literature, Dadlani et al. (2024) identify three main trends in SNA film analysis: Research focussed on networks of individuals, research focussed on the connections between films, and research focussed on other links, such as those between commercial companies, or organisations, such as festivals, awards ceremonies, production locations, and so on. Existing work using SNA to analyse the German film industry falls into the latter category. Krätke (2002), for example, examines the location of German filmmaking in order to identify regional production clusters. Similarly, Hoyler and Watson (2018) include the German film industry in a global comparative analysis of film production networks, using SNA to trace spatial and organizational clusters of activity.

Overall, as Dadlani et al. (2024) note, only a limited number of studies have used SNA to examine social inequalities in the film industry from a relational perspective. Among the notable exceptions, Verhoeven et al. (2020) build on the work of Lutter (2015), applying an SNA approach to the Australian, Swedish and German film industries to reveal patterns describing which specific male producers did not work with women. Additionally, they created “what if scenarios” to evaluate the effectiveness of a variety of interventions (“network control mechanisms”) intended to produce more gender equity in these industries. Their research shows that the most effective way to create more equitable conditions for women in the film industry is not necessarily to remove influential men (“key players”), nor to simply add more women, but to ensure that women in the industry are linked to influential men.

Since our main focus lies on the dynamics of team formation, we are specifically interested in the relations between network members in the film industry, and in particular in the role of the film producer, who is largely responsible for recruitment. We therefore adopt a two-step approach: First, we use social network visualizations to identify the most influential producers in the network; second, we add qualitative career-biographical data on the professional career of team members to extend our understanding of patterns underlying the constitution of creative teams. In this way, we combine SNA with qualitative career-biographical data as a form of exploratory data analysis (EDA) (Du Toit et al., 1986). For the biographical career information of industry members, we researched and coded the following variables: Year of birth, place of birth, attendance at film school, other education, specific name of film school, city of the company registration, and city of residence. Since existing data show that women and men attend film schools in equal proportions, we are specifically interested in examining what happens to men and women, respectively, after film school.

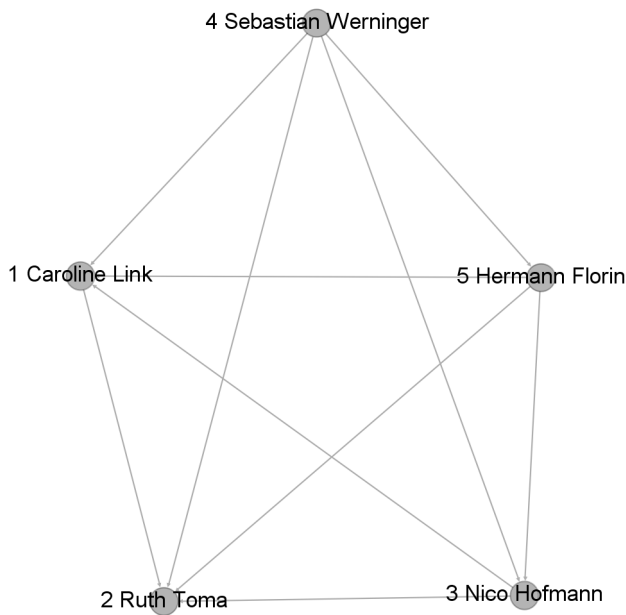
### 3.2. Network analysis methodology for the film industry

The principle of SNA is based on describing the mathematical graph of social relations in a network in which people are represented by nodes, and if people have a connection, then these nodes are visibly linked by ties, also known as edges. The relationships between nodes can be described using a range of measures that evaluate their levels of connectivity, distribution, and fragmentation. The social networks formed by the relationships between nodes can be modelled and visualized using tools such as Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). Importantly, Gephi can perform network calculations and offers different layouts to explore the data, such as Force Atlas or Open Ord (Ng & Soo, 2018). Gephi also enables different attributes (colour, size) to different node and edge properties. There are also various analytic methods available to visualize networks. For example, if a *force-directed algorithm* was used to visualize the network, then nodes without edges would repel each other while more closely linked nodes would attract each other (Ng & Soo, 2018).

Applying these graph-based and graphic approaches to the film industry focuses attention on the relational behaviours of people who collaborate on projects.

In the Social Network Analysis of the German film industry that follows, key creative team members, the director, writer and producer, are nodes. They are connected when they work together on film productions. For example, Academy Award-winning director Caroline Link used the screenplay of author Ruth Toma for the film *Der Junge muss an die frische Luft* (*All About Me*). The film was produced by Hermann Florin, Nico Hofmann and Sebastian Werninger. A visualization of these relationships as a social network can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** The social network of the film *Der Junge muss an die frische Luft* (*All About Me*)



*Note.* All visualizations generated by using Gephi OpenOrd, no overlap algorithm (Prommer & Görland, 2022, p. 111), redesigned for better readability.

In our given example, Caroline Link has collaborated with multiple producers throughout her career, meaning her network includes numerous connections to other individuals. When representing the film industry over an extended period, it is essential to select a layout algorithm that enhances readability and reveals underlying patterns. For example, network visualizations can be adjusted to reflect the strength of relationships – such as by thickening the edges between individuals who have worked together repeatedly over time – or to highlight central figures by displaying nodes with many connections in a larger size. To effectively visualize the complex and overlapping professional relationships that develop over many years in the film industry, we employed the OpenOrd algorithm, previously used by Verhoeven and Palmer (2016), which is well suited for large-scale network data (Martin et al., 2011; Verhoeven, 2017). In the following section, we

analyse the overall network structure of the German production landscape and then zoom in to analyse its structural components in greater detail.

We will focus on the production roles of the producer, screenwriter, and director – commonly referred to as the “key creative team.” This definition is widely used to measure gender inequality in the screen industries. While we acknowledge the significance of other creative roles in film production – such as the director of photography (DOP), editor, sound and costume designers – our analysis adheres to the industry definition of “key creative team” for purposes of constituency and comparability.

It is important to note that our analysis does not approach production networks from a purely statistical perspective. Rather, we use SNA as a visualization tool for exploratory data analysis (EDA), with the aim of uncovering patterns, spotting anomalies, and testing hypotheses (Du Toit et al., 1986). While the structural metrics of the German film networks have already been modelled in previous work (Verhoeven et al., 2020), our approach leverages SNA primarily for visualization, allowing us to examine specific patterns of collaborations. These visual insights are further enriched through integration of qualitative career-biographical data.

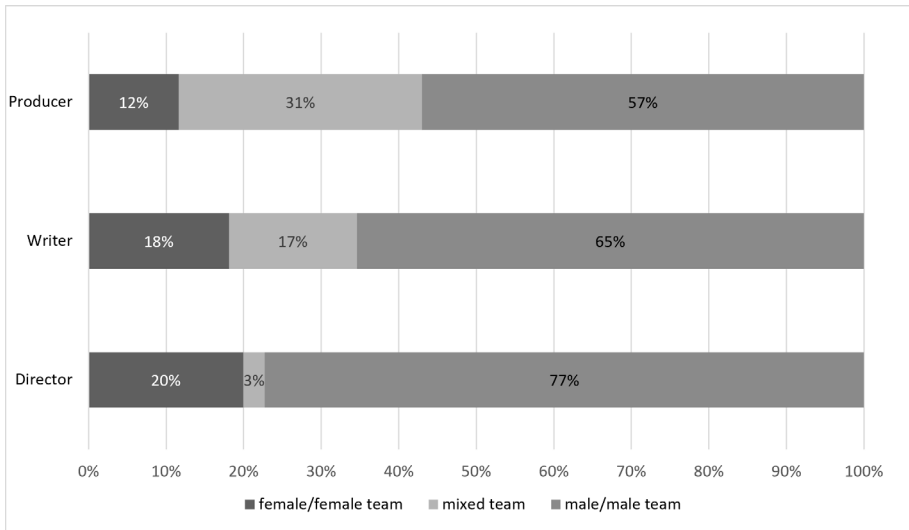
Looking at our given example, we are interested in exploring how the producers Nico Hofmann, Sebastian Werning and Hermann Florin connected to Caroline Link. To answer this question meaningfully across the German film industry, we researched the careers of the most influential producers and the directors and writers they have worked with beginning at their point of entry to the industry.

## 4. The German film production networks

### 4.1 Description of data

Our dataset comprises all feature films produced in Germany that premiered in cinemas between 2009 and 2016. This includes all fiction feature films with either majority- or minority-German financing intended for theatrical release, in accordance with the industry definition of a German film. This full sample was compiled from the annual reports of the German Federal Film Board (FFA, 2016). For each film we manually coded the gender of the director, producer, and writer. In addition, we collected the data for distribution, funding, audience numbers, as well as festival screenings and award recognition. This comprehensive dataset provides a detailed overview of the German film industry during the period under study, encompassing a total of 1,139 films.

**Figure 2. Gender composition of creative teams in all theatrical feature films released in Germany (2009–2016,  $N = 1,139$ )**



Our full sample of 1,139 German feature films produced between 2009 and 2016 reveals significant gender imbalances in the compositions of key creative teams (producers, directors, and writers). Over half of these films (57%) were produced exclusively by male producers or all-male producer teams. Women producers were involved in 43 percent of the productions, including mixed-gender teams. However, producer teams composed entirely of women account for only 12 percent of all productions. This means that men were involved as producers in approximately nine out of ten feature films, while more than half of the productions had no women producers involved at all.

Similar disparities are evident across other key creative roles: In two-thirds of the films (65%), no women were involved in writing scripts, while men (co-)wrote 82 percent of the scripts. Men helmed 77 percent of these films, while women directed 20 percent, and three percent of the films were directed by mixed-gender teams.

Loist and Prommer (2019) have emphasized the crucial role producers play in creating team diversity and gender equality in production roles. This is clearly reflected in our dataset: When women served as producers, they hired women directors or other female team members more than twice as often (33%) as all-male producer teams did (14%). The same pattern applies to screenwriting, with women writers engaged more than twice as often by women producers (27%) compared to by men producers (12%).

Our data further demonstrates that German women producers face unequal opportunities across multiple dimensions. Their status is not on par with that of their male counterparts. Male producers receive significantly more funding, benefit from better distribution opportunities, and consequently achieve higher au-

dience reach. On average, films produced by men are awarded nearly twice as much funding for their projects (€770,000) as those produced by women (€400,000). Despite one in ten films being produced by all-women production teams, these projects received only seven percent of the total national film funding.

Distribution opportunities are similarly unequal. Films produced by women are released, on average, on 75 screens, whereas films produced by men launch on 118 screens, benefitting from larger marketing budgets and broader audience exposure.

Given that men tend to hire other men, we further analysed gendered participation within creative teams. We found that 450 films (39%) did not include a single woman in any key creative role. Conversely, men were absent from the creative teams in only in 12.4 percent of films. In other words, women are excluded from creative teams three times more often than men.

These findings, which highlight the stark underrepresentation of women in key creative roles, raise pressing questions: What patterns of behaviour govern the formation and structure of creative teams? And do specific professional networks structurally and systemically exclude women from participating in film projects?

4.2 Methodology – Visualizing the production networks

To generate a collaboration network for analysis, the production data was reformatted to track how creative teams were assembled across eight years of German film productions (see Table 1). We compiled a list of individuals and their corresponding gender for all key creative personnel involved in the 1,139 films in our dataset. These film projects employed a total of 2,848 unique individuals, occupying 5,379 key creative roles. Within our sample, women held approximately one-quarter (23%) of the creative positions ( $N = 1,231$ ), while men occupied three-quarters (77%;  $N = 4,145$ ), and 3 individuals identified outside binary gender categories. To enable a detailed analysis of gender representation in the film sector, we manually assigned gender categories “woman,” “man,” or “in another way” – to each unique director, producer, and writer, based on first names and available pronoun information. The average size of a key creative team in German film production is 3.7 members. It is not uncommon for individuals to occupy multiple roles within a single project, such as serving as both screenwriter and director.

Table 1. Overview of feature film production data in Germany (2009–2016).

| Fiction feature films ( $N = 1,139$ )  | Germany 2009–2016 |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Positions                              | 5,379             |
| Unique individuals                     | 2,848             |
| Function director, proportion male     | 79%               |
| Function screenwriter, proportion male | 75%               |

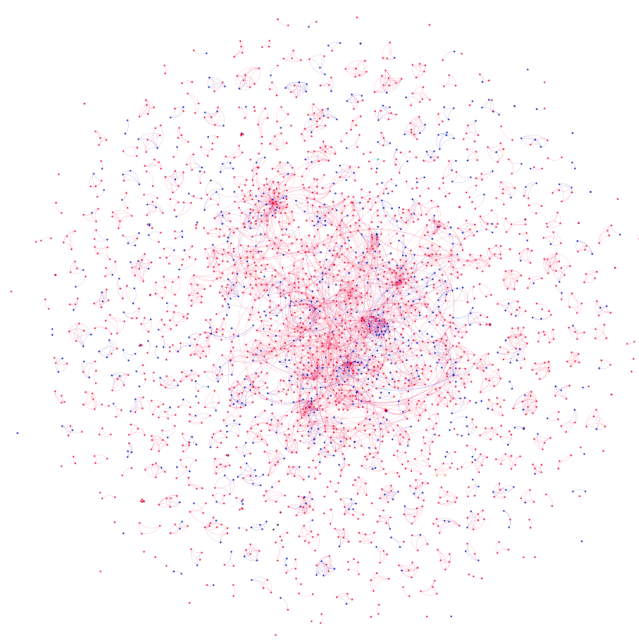
|                                                                        |       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Function producer, proportion male                                     | 77%   |
| Producers (unique individuals)                                         | 1,446 |
| Average size of creative team                                          | 3.7   |
| Share of male producers who worked with 0 women in the years 2009–2016 | 45%   |
| Share of male producers who worked with 1 woman in the years 2009–2016 | 30%   |
| Share of films with women in minority role                             | 79%   |

Our analysis reveals that 45 percent of all male producers in Germany did not work with a single woman in their creative team over the eight-year period covered by our dataset, while an additional 30 percent collaborated with a woman only once. Given that the average size of a creative team is 3.7 members, teams featuring just one woman fall far short of gender parity. In total, this means that 75 percent of male producers in Germany consistently worked in male-dominated teams across an eight-year period. These findings confirm and align with results from previous research applying similar analytical approaches across various national industries, including Germany (Verhoeven et al., 2020).

In our network visualizations of the German film industry, we position the producer as a “source” node, reflecting their formal authority in assembling the creative team – an approach informed by Sydow and Windeler’s conception of producers as central coordinators within project networks (Sydow & Windeler, 2006). To emphasize this dynamic, we constructed a directed network that maps key creative collaborations with reference to the producer’s role.

The network visualisations, created using Gephi, represent individuals as nodes and shared film projects as edges linking them. The following visualizations are designed to illustrate patterns of gendered collaboration. To visualize gender as a variable, we depicted men as red nodes and women as blue nodes. The connecting lines (edges) represent instances of their working collaborations on the same project. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of individual creative team members have been anonymized.

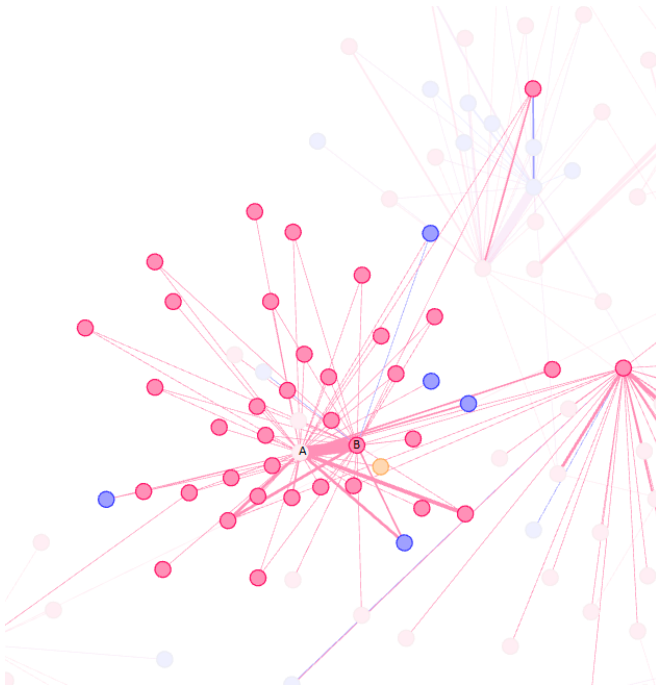
**Figure 3. Complete collaboration network: German producers, directors, and writers (2009–2016)**



*Notes.* In the network 2,848 unique individuals are connected via 1,139 films. Red nodes represent men, blue nodes represent women. Edge direction is clockwise from the source node (producer) to the target node (other creatives).

The network visualizations (Fig. 3) clearly demonstrate the dominance of red nodes, representing men, confirming the gender imbalance observed in our quantitative analysis. A closer inspection of the network reveals clusters of male collaborators who have either never worked with a woman or have done so very rarely – visually reinforcing the patterns described in the statistical analysis above. At the periphery of the network, we observe projects involving individuals who participated in only a single film. Isolated nodes typically represent cases where one person held all three key creative roles – producer, writer, and director – on a single production.

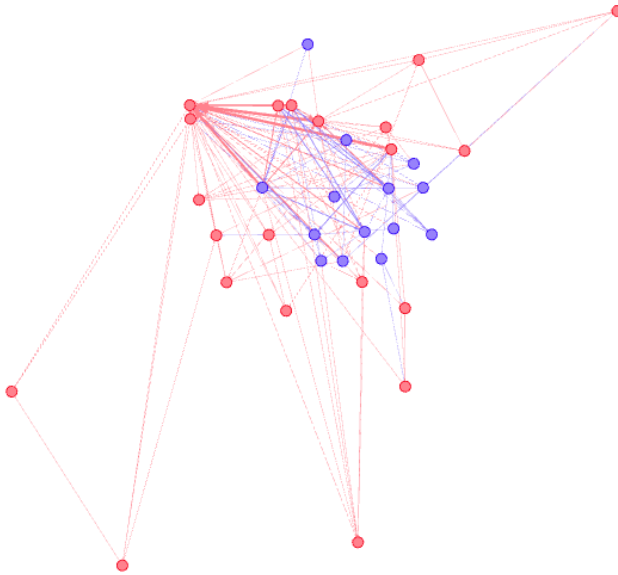
To understand the network in greater depth, we examined a specific segment of the producer collaboration network. Figure 4 highlights a cohesive, male-dominated creative cluster that is representative of broader trends in the data. This cluster is centred around two influential producers (nodes A and B), who co-own the same company. The network includes 37 men and only five women – mostly screenwriters, one co-producer, and no female director. Over the eight-year period covered by our data, this production company did not employ a single female director, and women were hired as screenwriters in just 12 percent of its projects.

**Figure 4.** Close-up view of a predominantly male producer collaboration network

*Notes.* Producer collaboration network. In this network, two influential producers (A & B) are connected to 37 men and five women (primarily screenwriters, no directors; women represent 12 percent of the network). The orange node is a nonbinary individual. The line thickness represents the number of joint projects between producers – the thicker the line, the more often producers have worked together on projects.

Another detailed example is shown in Figure 5, illustrating the networks of those very few producers who work with both men *and* women. In this social network, women work as directors, co-producers, and writers. Although two strong producers are also visible, they do not occupy central positions in the network and maintain a greater number of connections to women. This network represents a large film and television production company.

**Figure 5.** Snapshot of a producer collaboration cluster involving both men and women



*Note.* The network depicts a team of two producers collaborating with 15 women (42%) and 21 men (58%) within their creative network of a large film and television production company.

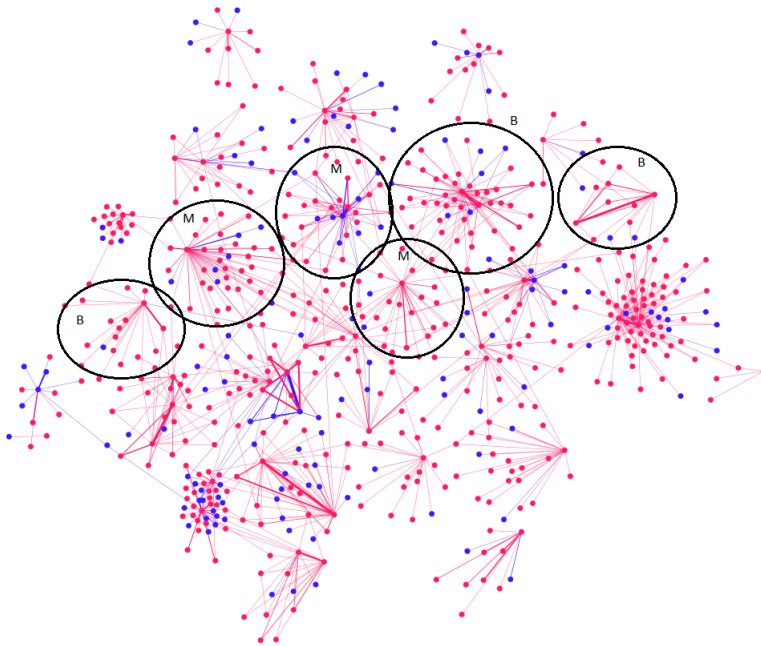
## 5. The influential producers and their networks

Since our focus is on producers and the formation of their networks, we conducted an even closer and more detailed analysis of 1,466 individual producers. The vast majority (71%,  $N = 1,047$ ) produced only one single film during the study period, while an additional 22 percent ( $N = 314$ ) produced two or three films. We defined the most active producers as those who produced at least one film every two years, meaning four or more films between 2009 and 2016. This group comprises 102 individuals, representing seven percent of all producers in our sample. Among these 102 highly active producers, only 15 individuals produced more than 10 films during the period, and of these, just two were women. The two most prolific producers worked, respectively, on 20 and 23 projects each and both men own their production companies. Our analysis centres on this group of “influential producers,” examining how their predominantly male-dominated networks are structured and maintained.

To explore these networks in greater depth, we collected biographical data about the careers of the 102 most active producers and the creative teams (directors and writers) they worked with across the period of our study. Career biographies were synthesized from company websites, industry publications (such as mediabiz.de), talent agency profiles, and Wikipedia entries. We coded data on educational background (e.g., film school, university, and other pathways), pro-

fessional biography, the city where the production company was registered in 2020, and, when available, the current cities of residence for the directors and writers they worked with. This in-depth individual analysis reveals two major factors shaping network formation among Germany's most influential producers. First, attending the same film school plays a critical role in building professional networks. Second, geographic proximity – captured by the concept of “propinquity” – also emerges as a key driver, with creatives more likely to collaborate when living and working in the same city.

**Figure 6.** Visualization of the network of the most active influential German producers



*Notes.* Producer collaboration network of the most active producers ( $N = 102$ ) and their creative teams, based on more than four projects over an eight-year period. Clusters centred in Berlin (B) and Munich (M) are highlighted.

Our analysis identifies three major clusters in Munich, each centred around producers from different generations (teams) who formed professional ties while attending the Munich film school (Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film, HFF München) in the 1980s and late 1990s (Fig. 6). Similarly, we observe three clusters in Berlin: one centred around alumni of the Film University Babelsberg ‘Konrad Wolf’ (formerly Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen Potsdam-Babelsberg, HFF), one around a producing actor, and one other around a filmmaker collective. A striking commonality of all these clusters is the noticeable underrepresentation of women within their networks.

Many of these professional ties, especially in the Munich networks, were established during film school and have been sustained over the course of the graduates' careers, as reflected in the filmographies of the individuals involved. This highlights the crucial role of film schools in affording and shaping enduring industry networks. Prior research confirms that film schools, as pre-industry institutions, often mirror the broader structural inequalities of the film industry (Banks, 2009, 2019). Acknowledging these challenges, the heads of six German film schools signed a joint position paper, "Together for Gender Equality," in 2018. The measures outlined aim to address structural gender discrimination, including promoting equal opportunities, instituting a zero-tolerance policy for gender-based violence and abuse, and adopting a gender-sensitive approach to teaching, particularly in content development and production (Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf et al., 2018).

But why is the film school effect so dominant in the Munich cluster? This can be traced back to German postwar developments (Kaiser & Liecke, 2007). Following World War II and the partition of Berlin, the city lost its status as the centre of the national film industry. The television sector largely relocated to Cologne and Munich, while feature film production became predominantly concentrated in Munich. The establishment of the Munich film school in 1966 further consolidated this development, reinforcing the city's role as a key industry hub. Today, Munich remains home to a dense network of media companies employing around 11,000 people (IHK München, 2026). When correlating years of attendance within the Munich film school clusters, it becomes evident that many individuals began their careers either prior to German reunification in 1989 or in the early 1990s. At that time, entering the film industry in Munich was comparatively easier than in other cities, due to the city's dense concentration of film production and television companies (e.g., Bavaria, Constantin). This context also helps explain the comparatively limited role of the former East German film school, Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf in Potsdam. The profound transformation of industry infrastructures following reunification produced a rupture in the 1990s and gave rise to new institutional and industrial configurations.

While film school affiliations are a major driver in cluster formation, proximity – or propinquity – also plays a significant role. The importance of geographic proximity to key industry hubs such as Berlin and Munich is clearly reflected in the data (Bathelt & Gräf, 2008; Mossig, 2006). Beyond film school-based networks, we identified one cluster of influential producers each in Berlin and Munich that are not anchored in shared educational backgrounds but instead emerge through co-location in major production centres. The centrality of urban hubs in fostering production activity also helps explain the absence of a significant cluster around the Film Academy Baden-Württemberg in Ludwigsburg, a smaller city without a comparable film industry infrastructure. Many of its alumni relocate to Berlin to pursue career opportunities. Similarly, although Cologne constitutes a major hub for television production, it plays a less significant role in feature filmmaking, which is reflected in the relatively small size of the Cologne cluster (Apitzsch & Piotti, 2012). Overall, these findings align with broader patterns of geographic clustering often observed in creative industries (Mossig, 2006).

Although film schools clearly contribute significantly to network formation, they are not the only pathway into the industry. Among the 102 most active producers in our sample, about half attended a film school: A quarter (24) studied at the Munich film school (HFF München), three at Film University Babelsberg in Potsdam and nine at the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg in Ludwigsburg. The remaining producers entered the industry through alternative routes. Based on our sample, promising pathways into producing include being a son of a successful film family (“nepo-babies”), successful acting careers, experience in distribution companies, or cinema management.

Notably, the more gender-diverse clusters within our network are often associated with producers who attended a variety of film schools or who work across both film and television sectors, or who are affiliated with larger production companies in Germany. In these clusters, women are more frequently represented among the key creative teams. Recruitment strategies at larger, corporate-affiliated companies, such as UFA, indeed appear to support greater gender diversity among key creatives as is proclaimed as a strategic aim by such companies (UFA, 2020).

Anecdotal industry accounts further underscore the role of film school as a foundational moment for building lasting professional networks. A quote from the study *Gender und Film* (Hochfeld et al., 2017, p. 49) captures this dynamic:

*I believe that this time at film school is not only important... for learning how to make films, but it's also just as important to build your network. And networking is everything in this industry. So that's just, if nobody knows you, then you're screwed. (Male director, translated from German)*

Friendships formed at film school often lead to enduring professional collaborations. However, our network visualizations suggest that this advantage disproportionately benefits men. Women occupy more marginal positions in these networks, with tangible consequences for their careers. Because they are less integrated into these enduring “in-groups”, women cannot rely on them for consistent employment. Instead, they must continually reapply for each new project. By contrast, men benefit from the security of stable, self-reinforcing professional in-groups that offer ongoing employment opportunities. In some cases, this dynamic is so strong that a successful male director, when moving to a larger production company, brings along his former producer as a co-producer, reinforcing these durable male-dominated networks.

## 6. Limitations

Our study focused on a single national film market; however, as Verhoeven et al. (2020) have shown, there are notable similarities between network structures in the German film industry and those observed in other contexts, such as Australia and Sweden. Whether comparable network patterns exist in film markets with less dominant public funding schemes – such as the United States – remains an open question for future research.

Our analysis is further limited by its exclusive focus on the film industry; television production was not included due to insufficient data, even though many creative professionals work across both sectors. Another limitation concerns the timeframe: The dataset covers an eight-year period, although film projects often spend several years in development before their release, potentially obscuring long-term network dynamics.

For reasons of feasibility, we systematically researched the biographies of only the most active “influential producers” and the directors and writers with whom they collaborated, rather than the full range of production collaborations across the industry. Nevertheless, even within this subset, the pattern of network formation through film school affiliations emerged clearly.

Finally, our gender analysis was basically restricted to binary categories (“man” and “woman”), assigned based on name attribution and pronoun usage, rather than self-identification by individuals within the industry. We only found pronouns for non-binary categories for three individuals in our sample. This methodological constraint reflects data availability rather than conceptual endorsement of binary gender frameworks.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has undertaken an exploratory data analysis that combines social network visualisation with detailed career-biography research to generate critical insights into the mechanisms of gender exclusion in film production recruitment. In doing so, it reveals how women’s career trajectories are systemically constrained. Employment in the film industry is inherently precarious, structured around project-based work under unstable conditions and highly sensitive to shifts in a dynamic economic and technological environment. Our findings demonstrate that this precarity is itself gendered: Employment uncertainty is not only experienced differently by men and women, but also structurally organised along these lines.

Our findings raise the pressing question of how such entrenched structures can be changed. A necessary starting point is to rethink existing equity policies that primarily target women’s behaviours. In dynamic industrial settings such as the film industry, regulatory frameworks can play a crucial role in enabling more equitable forms of creative production. However, many existing programs, such as mentoring schemes aimed at improving women’s networking capacities or the creation of women-only networks, fail to address the core issue: The exclusionary dynamics of entrenched, male-dominated networks (Cobb, 2019; Jones et al., 2024).

In this respect, our findings support calls for a shift in focus toward encouraging influential men in the industry to diversify their networks and actively collaborate with women. Some jurisdictions have already taken steps to incentivise such behaviour. For example, both the Austrian Film Institute and the French film funding system have introduced gender incentive schemes (Goodfellow, 2018; Österreichisches Filminstitut, 2019). In Sweden, the Swedish Film Institute implemented gender monitoring and set gender targets, achieving near parity in recent years (Swedish Film Institute, 2018). Although Austria and Sweden are smaller

markets – with roughly one-fourth of Germany’s film production volume – the effectiveness of these initiatives suggests that similar incentive schemes could also be promising for the larger German industry. Given the European film industry’s heavy reliance on public funding, there is both a justification and a responsibility to allocate these funds toward more effective gender equity measures.

Moreover, our research underscores the pivotal role film schools can play in fostering gender-diverse networks from the outset. Both the empirical findings and the career-biographical analysis indicate that professional networks are frequently established during film school and continue to shape career trajectories long after graduation. It is therefore vital that film schools and their educators actively cultivate, and normalize, diverse approaches of creative team building during training, counteract exclusionary patterns of male-dominated network formation, and contribute to the development of more inclusive industry networks (Jones et al., 2026; Kearney & Twenty Female Film Students, 2018).

Finally, this study demonstrates that the often subtle mechanisms of gender exclusion – particularly in the formation of creative teams – can be rendered visible through innovative forms of data analysis and visualization. The integration of aggregated statistical analysis of industry data, relational Social Network Analysis, and detailed career-biographical research provides a more granular understanding of both structural conditions and individual practices, thereby strengthening the basis for meaningful, systemic change.

## Generative AI declaration

In the final editing stages of this article’s preparation for publication, one author used ChatGPT for language refinement suggestions for small sections of the text. Outputs were evaluated for accuracy and bias, the authors retained editorial control over meaning and style. All claims and citations derive from sources that were read and interpreted by the authors, who accept full responsibility for its content. No proprietary materials were entered without consent.

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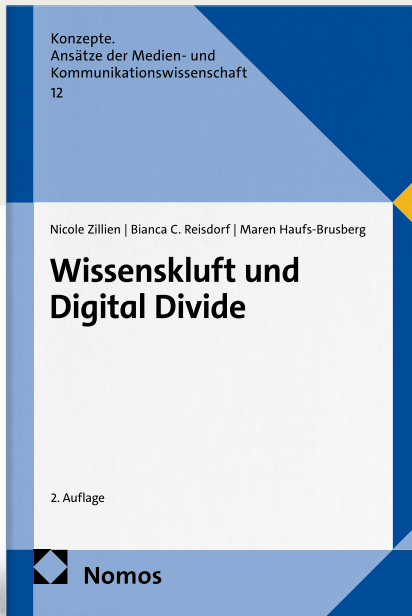
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