A Seat at the Table

Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour in Metro Vancouver's Film and TV Industry Speak — A Community Research Project by The Future is You and Me & Cineworks

This community research report examines the barriers in the independent film sector in Metro Vancouver for people who are marginalized for their race and gender. In this report, we call them BIWOC: Black women, Indigenous women, and women of colour—this includes women and non-binary people who are racialized and/or Indigenous.

In facilitated group discussions (focus groups) and interviews, we asked community members, What support do BIWOC need to advance their creative and professional endeavours in the sector?

This project is interested in the lived experiences of participants and the interview process created space for gathering and sharing their experiences.

The level of work experience and type of work in the film and television industry varied among our respondents, from emerging creators to educators, seasoned professionals, and decisionmakers, such as funders and jury members.

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Land Acknowledgement

This project took place on the ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples.

As settlers, we recognize that this land was stolen and is occupied through various and evolving forms of colonial violence — of which we are often the beneficiaries. These truths beget our responsibility to work in service of artists of the host nations, create culturally safe spaces for Indigenous creatives to thrive, and be accomplices in the Land Back and Idle No More movements. The Indigenous Screen Office offers a wealth of tools and resources for working with Indigenous peoples, stories and communities, including the essential *Pathways and Protocols: A Media Production Guide for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories*.

Introduction

By Kristin Cheung and Megan Lau

This report started in March 2019 with a conversation between April Thompson, the Executive Director of Cineworks, and Kristin. A meeting over the phone led to another conversation over coffee and doughnuts, which to led us applying for a Vancouver Foundation Develop grant in September that year, which we were awarded. This grant enabled us to start an important dialogue and connect women of colour in the film and television industry with each other.

But the roots of this project stretch back to 2016, when we co-founded The Future is you and me together. “The Future,” as we like to call it — is a project based in Vancouver that uplifts, trains, and connects young women of colour in the arts.

Our paths first crossed in the Vancouver arts community — and more specifically, in the world of literary magazine publishing. Megan is Chinese and Kristin is Lao-Chinese. Aside from separate experiences at a Asian Canadian literary magazine, we rarely worked with other racialized people in media.

In 2016, after having achieved some level of stability and recognition in the Canadian arts and culture sector, we decided to create a mentorship program for women of colour, 18 - 25 years old, to share the wisdom that we had gained in our careers thus far, and to develop the support system we wish we had when we were starting out.

Each cohort welcomed 8-12 participants and up to 15 speakers from various artistic disciplines — all women of colour. Our workshops have always been small and purposely so. Small

intimate gatherings were a reflection of ourselves, in how we like to engage and connect, especially with our closest friends.

Although the workshops were an important step in our personal journey in integrating intersectional feminism in our practice, Kristin had always been curious to see what more we could do with the connections we've made. In 2018, Kristin completed a Masters in Arts Administration and Cultural Policy, and when she returned to Vancouver, she wanted to expand on her community research experience. After three years of running workshops under The Future banner, she became interested in learning more about how we could increase the impact of our work through research. From that impulse, this collaboration with Cineworks was formed.

We invited Tanvi Bhatia, an alumna of The Future, whose experience includes screenwriting, facilitation, community organizing, and research, to lead the engagement and research, and define the narrative of this report. Tanvi shared our interest in advocating for a more inclusive and equitable arts and culture sector. As our Research Lead, Tanvi led three in-person focus groups at Cineworks' facility in Downtown Vancouver in February and March 2020 and conducted three one-on-one interviews.

Intentionally, this report is unlike many other EDI (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) reports that lean heavily on quantitative data. The heart of this report is the qualitative data that came out of the focus groups and interviews. They were honest conversations that were able to happen among peers, friends, and colleagues in a shared space — a luxury in today's reality.

We hoped not only to name the barriers to opportunities and power for women and non-binary people of colour in the industry, but to bring to life the felt experiences of working within those barriers.

Publishing this report has been a long and slow journey. We developed this report on top of our personal, work, and school obligations, which were indelibly transformed by the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The film and television industry, too, has been impacted by the pandemic and a global reckoning with systemic racism. The impacts of these forces on racialized women and non-binary people in the industry is an open question.

This report is for our community. We hope the information shared here will change the perspectives of stakeholders, industry professionals, and gatekeepers, particularly those who are interested in creating a more equitable industry. But our greater hope is that women and non-binary people of colour in film and television see themselves reflected in the struggles and achievements shared in this report.

October 2021

About The Future is You and Me

The Future is you and me is a program designed to support young women of colour to take on leadership positions in arts, cultural and creative industries.

Its goal is to engage young, creative women, and non-binary individuals to build skills, community, and confidence through mentorship and workshops facilitated by established creative professionals of colour.

The Future is you and me was founded in 2016 by Kristin Cheung and Megan Lau as a one-time experiment to address gaps in the Canadian cultural sector that marginalize women of colour. The project has since expanded to include employment opportunities for alumni, workshop series for music professionals and artists, a satellite workshop series in Edmonton, and project bursaries for women of colour. It is also a sponsor of M.A.G.E.S. Interactive (marginalized genders accessing & generating evolving systems), a series of digital skills workshops to create works of interactive fiction.

The Future is you and me is based in Vancouver, which is within the traditional and occupied lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples.

About Cineworks

Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society is a non-profit artist-run centre, supporting independent filmmakers, media artists and arts audiences through facilities and initiatives encompassing production, exhibition, consultation, outreach, and advocacy. Cineworks was incorporated as a non-profit society in 1980.

Through programs that foster experimentation with motion-picture arts, in dialogue with their historic, current and future cultural contexts, Cineworks engages their membership and wider communities in the investigative, expressive, and transformative powers of the moving image.

In addition to their main offices, production studio, edit suites, and equipment rental store off Howe Street in Vancouver's Downtown core, Cineworks runs an analogue film lab and studio in the city's Downtown East Side. Known as the Annex, this facility features an extensively equipped darkroom and open studio with equipment for machine and hand processing photochemical film, as well as for contact printing, optical printing, stop-frame animation, and editing Super 8, 16mm and 35mm film.

Part of Cineworks' mandate is to facilitate public participation in the development of Canadian cultural policy through discussion, research, and submissions.

Cineworks gratefully acknowledges and pays respects to the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations on whose unceded traditional territories their organization and their work is based.

Research Context

In 2012, Women in View, a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to strengthening gender representation and diversity in Canadian media, published its first *On Screen Report*, analyzing the position of writers, directors, and cinematographers in scripted English-language series funded by the Canada Media Fund, and feature films funded by Telefilm Canada. Over the years, the *On Screen Reports* have held public funders accountable to their gender equity commitments and measured the impact of media diversity initiatives.

In the fifth edition (2019), Women in View's *On Screen Report* quantified the impact of race on women's opportunities in screen-based media.

> *The findings in this report are sobering. Women's share of writing, directing and cinematography work in both film and TV remains below 25%.* ***Women of colour are not experiencing the same gains as other women. Worse still, over the course of the study, Indigenous women's participation dropped from insignificant to negligible****, a very troubling result.*

The researchers also found that the race of women in key creative roles impacts the diversity of cast and crew overall:

> *When women take on the creative leadership role of showrunner there is a trickle down effect and more women are hired in all key creative roles.* ***When the showrunners are women of colour and Indigenous women there is an added bonus; along with gender balance, there is increased diversity among the writers, directors and cinematographers.***
>
> *...When the showrunning team included a woman of colour or an Indigenous woman, not only was there gender balance with 52% of contracts going to women, there was also far greater diversity with 8% of those contracts going to women of colour and 22% to Indigenous women.*
>
> *The analysis of showrunners shows that a better strategy is to start at the top with women in creative leadership positions. When women lead, more women work. When women of colour lead more women of colour work. When Indigenous women lead, more Indigenous women work.*

The "Showrunner Effect" was also true for producers in development and production (Women in View, *On Screen Report* 2019). "Women of colour producers had a greater percentage of

women of colour on their teams than other producers and Indigenous women producers worked with greater numbers of Indigenous women."

As Women In View acknowledges in their 2021 report (which was completed with oversight by Nathalie Younglai, founder of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour in TV and Film (BIPOC TV & Film), "These intersectional insights reveal a disturbing pattern common across gender-parity initiatives: setting targets merely based on gender doesn't equitably serve all women." Research about gender equity in film has historically highlighted increased opportunities for women, but the 2019 and 2021 *On Screen Reports* show that it is largely white women who have been beneficiaries of public commitments to gender equity.

> ***Initiatives to increase the number of women working in TV and film did not have a significant impact on diversity.*** *Of the 43% of women in key creative TV roles in 2019, only 6.44% were Black women & Women of Colour and 0.94% were Indigenous women.* ***The same disparity exists in every measured category.***

Consequently, the ongoing challenges and barriers faced by women of colour and Indigenous women in the industry have been largely rendered invisible — until now. Women in View and BIPOC TV & FIlm's vital information gathering and analysis makes the barriers we have witnessed and experienced as BIWOC in Canada's film and television industry undeniable.

In this landscape, we saw an opportunity to amplify the experiences of women marginalized by the industry's status quo in their own words. What if BIWOC had a chance to speak to their realities, strengths, fears, and doubts? How might that change our approaches in meeting diversity and inclusion targets? What other strategies could we employ?

We also wanted to make space to document these lived experiences with a finer grain, to show how intersections such as race, ethnicity, appearance, education level, socio-economic status, language, and sexuality can affect a person's opportunities in the industry. For instance, a newcomer filmmaker from China would have vastly different experiences from an Indo-Canadian filmmaker born in Williams Lake. However, both are "women of colour."

This research is intended to complement the research on gender parity and diversity in the Canadian screen-based production industry by Telefilm Canada, the Canadian Media Producers Association, the Canada Media Fund, the National Film Board, and Women in View.

In addition to those reports, we are indebted to the contributors and authors of the following publications, which have notably influenced this project:

- *On Screen Protocols and Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories* (May 2019) commissioned by imagineNATIVE and written by independent consultant Marcia Nickerson

- *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative - Inequality across 1,300 Popular Films: Examining gender and race/ethnicity of leads/coleads from 2007-2019*
- *By All M.E.A.N.S Necessary: Essential Practices for Transforming Hollywood Diversity and Inclusion* (2019). Research conducted by UCLA Division of Social Science.

Methodology

In this project, we use the term *BIWOC* — Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour — because most of the research participants identified as women; only two participants identified as non-binary, one of whom is gender fluid and also identifies as a woman. We acknowledge that *BIWOC* does not adequately represent all the participants, nor properly include non-binary and gender-queer people.

When we started this project, our primary goal was to identify barriers and opportunities for BIWOC in the local film and television industry. To understand the lay of the land, we began by surveying the available data about gender and race in the film industry from American and Canadian sources.

This research is based on the understanding that BIWOC are the experts of their own experiences. Whether they are emerging, mid-career or established artists, filmmakers, and/or crew, they can speak knowledgeably about experiences of sexism and racism, and have made meaning from those experiences.

The project's research associate, Tanvi Bhatia, designed the research process with the oversight of The Future is you and me's co-founders, Kristin Cheung and Megan Lau, and Cinework's former Executive Director, April Thompson. We were also supported by Cinework's Community & Education Liaison, Michelle Martin.

To our personal and professional networks, we sent out a call-out for participants from Metro Vancouver via email and social media. We welcomed women and non-binary people of different ages, professional experiences, ethnicities and races, educational backgrounds, immigration status, and mother tongues.

Our original aim was to listen to the experiences of 50 participants in facilitated focus groups or one-on-one interviews:

- 10 youth (under 25 years old)
- 10 emerging screen professionals, such as actors, directors, editors, producers, writers, and crew above and below the line
- 10 established screen professionals, such as actors, directors, editors, producers, writers, and crew above and below the line
- 10 industry professionals, such as curators, general managers, executive directors, festival programmers

- 10 gatekeepers, such as board members, policy makers, funding agency)

Twenty-six BIWOC responded with interest and they were invited to one of three focus groups at Cineworks, which took place in February and March 2020. Most participants were either emerging or established filmmakers. Six participants identified as either an "industry professional" or "gatekeeper."[1] The focus groups served as a research method, but also a form of consciousness raising and community building for women of colour in the industry.

Interviews with three filmmakers, established and emerging, were conducted virtually over Zoom in April 2020.

Through the focus groups and interviews, we hoped to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and identify trends. We encouraged participants to speak freely, as all identifying information would be removed in the final report. All participants were paid an honorarium for their time and contributions.

This project is not an academic research endeavour in the tradition of the social sciences, nor a statistical analysis like Women In View's *On Screen Report*s. We designed this to be a humanistic, community-first process. Emotional safety, community, connection, and sharing were paramount. For instance, trained facilitators hosted the focus groups and community agreements were established before the discussions began. The Research Lead did not act as a neutral party, but was in dialogue with the interviewees and focus group participants, sharing her own experiences as well.

Though we ultimately could have given more time to the focus group sessions, the data that was gathered is rich and nuanced. It represents women and non-binary people of various ages, professional backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. However, a few groups were significantly underrepresented: technical professionals (e.g. music and sound, lighting, camera operators, cinematographers, editors), administrators such as funders, festival staff, and network executives; and gender-queer and non-binary people.

Notes were taken at the focus group by Robyn Lee, and the interviews were transcribed. Tanvi, Kristin, and Megan later identified themes from the discussions, which are unpacked in the Research Findings section below. This report was shared with all the research participants in October 2021 and they were able to suggest edits, ask questions, and make clarifications before publication.

Research Findings

The conversations in the focus groups and interviews were wide ranging. Though a set of inquiry questions were prepared (for a full list, see Appendix A), the participants directed the

[1] We gathered demographic information, including age, number of years in the industry and profession/role in the industry, in the online registration form.

dialogue toward various topics, building on each other's opinions and observations, providing advice and support, and sometimes offering differing points of view.

Below, we describe themes that emerged and share related experiences and perspectives from BIWOC in their own words. (Note: Many of the quotes have been edited for clarity and to preserve the anonymity of the participants.) Together, they give a textured picture of BIWOC's experiences. We see these as a few areas of importance deserving of more attention and discussion in the sector.

Most of the themes are related to obstacles BIWOC face; this is a result of the research question, which focussed on identifying barriers and surfacing challenges. It goes without saying that BIWOC also experience triumph and success, but this was not the focus of our inquiry. However, one question asked participants to reflect on the particular strengths BIWOC bring to film and TV: *What are some of the strengths that you as an individual, and BIWOC in general, bring to the table?*

Not all participants identify or agree with the experiences and interpretations described in our findings. There were differences and disagreements among participants, and this was expected. In looking to capture a broad spectrum of experiences, we knew it would be impossible to definitively and comprehensively illustrate the realities of all racialized and Indigenous women and non-binary people in the Metro Vancouver film and television industry. However, the vast diversity among BIWOC in film and TV is a quality we hope to bright to light in this project.

Themes:

1. Barriers to breaking into the industry
2. Harassment and discrimination
3. Tokenism and stereotyping
4. Lateral violence
5. Anti-Black racism
6. Structural and cultural challenges
7. The unique strengths of BIWOC

Barriers to Breaking Into the Industry

Breaking into the screen industries can be hard at the best of times. For BIWOC, getting a foot in the door can feel can feel like a pipe dream. The lack of representation on screen is both a symbol and symptom of how welcome BIWOC are in the industry. For several research participants, going to film school and then finding work in the industry wasn't their "Plan A." Instead, they chose other career paths where they could more easily see themselves before diving into the world of film and TV later in life. As compared to their white counterparts in the industry, they may be "behind" in their careers.

Another barrier to entering the industry was access to education and training. One participant noted that "there are a lot of BIWOC who are immigrants, and won't be able to access

post-secondary education in that field. Because it's so expensive, it's ridiculous." Tuition costs and applications, which require references, can be a significant barrier to BIWOC who are low-income or don't have strong connections to the industry.

A number of participants noted that once they'd overcome the hurdle of being accepted into film school and making tuition payments, they were met with other challenges in post-secondary. According to one participant, they faced a lot of racism and microaggressions, some in part because "professors didn't know how to show or understand non-Western perspectives."

> *"My department [at school] is still run by mostly white people and a lot of POC or women of colour friends also felt that they were not supported. In hindsight, students who are white women didn't go through that same stress or experience."*

> *"In four years of my cohort, I'm the only Black student, even in the contemporary arts department. It's a very collaborative space, but I still feel very alone. I feel very boxed in by what people expect from me. I'm not only the only Black person in the space, I'm also an international person. I'm African and my vibes and my interests are totally different, so I'm already lost all the time."*

> *"[At film school], I wrote a script about how violent [the n-word] is and how it makes people feel. It was a whole thing, I wrote a script with this one word in it. And they were trying to police how I went around that. The faculty who still works there, said that word six or seven times in meetings, where we were talking about it and their excuse was I was allowed to because it's in the script and I couldn't believe it was happening. I feel like it's hard in this industry, it affects wanting to stay in the industry."*

Participants also drew attention to how their success in the industry is determined, in large part, by who you know: "The majority of people are hired because they know people already, and usually it's another white male who they're friends with."

> *"A lot of the films have been curated because [people] know each other: 'I've been working on this for eight years, we've known each other for 15.' Of course your film will get in. We don't have that legacy to set us up."*

Lacking those networks and connections, participants felt they were offered fewer opportunities for work or to have their films shown. A participant commented on how BIWOC were often in competition with one another, especially in front of the camera. With very limited roles for BIWOC, the only time they would come across other women of colour would be in the audition room, an inherently competitive environment.

> *"When I was starting out as an actor, it was difficult to book roles because there are limited roles written for women of colour. So you're competing against other women of colour. And there's a lot of you and it could be like, you know, a Black woman, Asian woman, Latina woman — just all of these women of colour and they're all fighting for one*

role, because this is the only role that they're open to seeing someone who's not white…. It's basically one tenth of the roles that a white woman could play."

"We aren't getting the same opportunities as white women or white men. We're not getting the same opportunities for leads, eight-page auditions, etcetera. So I have to work twice as hard so if I ever get that eight-page audition, I'm ready... I'm getting called for a two-word part as an EMT or police officer, and they call that diversity because the entire screen isn't white anymore."

Several participants noted the lack of women of colour in leadership or gatekeeper roles, who could understand the stories they want to tell and fund them, hire them, or act as mentors and role models as a significant barrier. One participant suggested, BIWOC are often considered for jobs by white leadership but ultimately passed over because they "won't fit the culture."

"It's all about luck, who you know, and people taking chances on you. And unfortunately, there's not as many women of colour in those positions. If you remind somebody of a younger them, they're probably gonna take a chance on you. That's just how this industry works. They're like, 'I see something in you. You remind me of me, and I'm gonna take a chance on you.' No white man is going to tell me that I remind them of them."

Participants shared stories of feeling pushed away and compelled to leave the industry because the barriers felt insurmountable. A number of participants shared how they took time away from the industry to recover and heal.

"There's a lot of things I haven't done because white men wanted to be in that space more, pushing and elbowing you out of the way. I'm somewhat thankful though because if I [pursued working in sound], I probably would've left the industry and not come back."

"*I don't know how many people just have the strength to keep going.*"

Harassment and Discrimination

For all the participants, racism and sexism are part of the reality of working in the industry. At every level and no matter their role, BIWOC reported microaggressions, casual racism, and incidents of outward harassment and discrimination. Several participants shared indelible experiences at work and industry events that left them feeling dehumanized, hypersexualized, alienated, and unsafe. They sometimes avoided parties to avoid potential harm, but then sacrificed important networking and professional opportunities.

"When I went to my first [Vancouver International Film Festival]: old men came up to me all night. One guy was really insistent. I gave him my number and he was saying, 'So you're on screen wanting to be an actress, right?' and I was like, 'No, that's not what I

do.' He was like, 'I'm a writer. I want to write you into my film.' And I had to explain to him that I'm a writer-producer."

"I stopped going to film festivals and industry mixers etcetera. I don't want to meet men. Most people in the room are men, men saying, 'Send me photos, send me a headshot.'"

The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have increased awareness of the scale, pervasiveness, and impacts of sexual harassment in the film and TV industry. However, the mainstream media has largely spotlighted the experiences of very famous thin, white actresses, while leaving the intersection of race and gender virtually unexamined vis-à-vis sexual harassment. In reality, racial stereotypes are often sexualized and influence how men perceive and treat BIWOC. For instance, in the focus groups, a few Asian participants talked about the impossible bind of either being hypersexualized or being made to feel not worthy of attention or consideration when adopting a less feminine aesthetic.

"I used to dress more feminine and Asian people tend to be sexualized a lot more, if you meet certain standards. And if you don't, it's almost like you're invisible."

"I'm just thinking about how I've been doing this, maybe trying to look or present myself as being older and not attracting as much male attention."

Despite their credits, credentials, talents, or other qualifications, participants largely agreed that they were rarely taken seriously or given the respect they deserve by their male and white female colleagues.

"Being a woman of colour just means that people assume you don't know what you're doing, which is a really frustrating experience."

"No one believes you're the one in charge."

"There's the sense that [they think] you're not capable of being creative… That's been my professional experience. You have to prove yourself over and over again."

Some suggested that appearing younger or more feminine resulted in men in the industry undermining or ignoring them on set. A few recalled instances of being asked who was really in charge, or having their competence dismissed in similar ways. Some participants recalled situations where men would try to take over or establish their own authority, rather than accepting the direction and leadership of BIWOC.

*"For whatever reason, one of the directors came up to me like, '*Oh sweetie, where's your boss?' *And he would hover around me often. '*Are you sure you know what you're doing?' *Even though I was the literal boss. I remember getting so angry."*

"My experience in the industry is that people don't really believe me, it might be my own insecurities playing into this role as well, but when I'm producing or organizing, people are always looking to see who's in charge. So, I'll make up a fake producer, go to the

washroom and just come back. I've learned to adopt new vocabulary. I say We *a lot. It's gotten to the point where I'm like, Who's* we*? It's me."*

The discrimination and indignities have material impacts on the BIWOC of the film and TV industry. Fewer opportunities to work and even fewer to lead affects their financial health: "I can't think of one time where I got paid properly for my labour," said one participant. But the costs are so much more: "It's more than just not being included," one participant said, "It really affected my mental health. It really affected me emotionally...I really want to put emphasis on that dehumanizing aspect."

"One thing that I feel is kind of constantly being disposable and unimportant."

"There's still this feeling of 'I'm still not good enough and you're trying to retrain your mind. No matter how hard you work you still need to work twice as hard."

"I've been mistaken so many times for a different Asian person. On one occasion, when it happened, it made me feel really invisible. It was just a demoralizing day and my first reaction was to joke about it. That particular day, I felt really unseen. The people here, they don't appreciate who I am. They don't even know who I am."

Tokenism and Stereotyping

While conversations about equity, representation, diversity, and inclusion have taken off in the media, participants noted a lack of meaningful inclusion of marginalized voices in the industry and a focus on the appearance of diversity instead. The latter often happens through tokenizing individuals who come from underrepresented backgrounds, such as BIWOC.

Many participants felt that some opportunities were offered to them because they "fit the diversity quota" or "checked the right boxes," ultimately reducing their value and personhood to their racial and gender identity. Participants felt that some collaborators' true motivations to work with BIWOC were about enhancing their image, qualifying for funding, or seeking a seal of approval to tell stories outside their experience. These underhanded dynamics create a host of complicated dynamics that foster mistrust, self-doubt, and resentment.

"I feel like whenever I see white people in leadership in this industry, who are giving a 'chance' to marginalized folk, it's always in an exploitative way in some capacity."

"They kind of just want to hide behind saying, Oh, look, we have a person of colour here, give us your grant money."

One participant recalled a colleague asking her to sign a funding application so that it would increase their chances of funding because she is a woman of colour, "I was stunned when she said it because I didn't know how to explain that that's racist in the moment. Don't tell me to sign it because I'm brown, ask me as a producer."

Dedicated funding programs for talent and filmmakers from underrepresented communities can get weaponized against BIWOC in the way that affirmative action has been misunderstood and used against communities of colour. One participant shared a story about a BIWOC filmmaker who was told by a white peer that she only received funding because she is a woman of colour.

Similarly demoralizing was having peers and colleagues label them as “diversity hires,” rather than worthy and talented in their own right. These kinds of interactions raise doubts in BIWOC about their own abilities and deservingness of those opportunities in the industry, leading to imposter syndrome. “I'm not entirely sure if it's because I'm a good artist or if it's because I’m Black, or a good poster child,” one participant said. Another participant explained how landing her first job out of film school through a program for “minorities” felt like “a handout”: “I was president of my high school, captain of sports teams, I was in every leadership position. You’re saying that I need help, but I don't need help and I don't want your help.”

Even when opportunities given are products of are superficial, misguided, or cynical diversity initiatives, participants also viewed them as relatively rare opportunities to work, to be seen and heard, and to represent their communities. The double-edged nature of tokenism came up a number of times.

> *“‘Ticking the boxes' is something that I often struggle with. You want to have an opportunity to be a representative of your culture or gender, and you want to help facilitate that learning and experience, but it becomes so problematic when the exchange is just you giving to someone else.”*

> *“They want me to be the thing they want. But if I’m not sitting at the table, who is sitting at the table?”*

One participant expressed frustration with pressure put on them to speak as the voice of all members of their race: “It’s really frustrating because it’s important work…but I don’t want to be expected to hold all that knowledge and bring that to the table.” Another participant stressed that diversity and inclusion initiatives can normalize the tokenization of people of colour.

Similarly, participants spoke about the tension between maintaining the status quo, in the interest of landing opportunities or keeping a job, and their desires to dismantle racist and colonial power structures — which could jeopardize their employment and future opportunities. The isolating combination of being tokenized and being the only BIWOC on a project or team made showing up authentically a complicated and sometimes impossible task.

> *“That’s a thing for all colonized groups. One struggle that we have is banding together against the colonizer. We feel like we have to impress them, or we feel like we have to somehow live up to their expectations instead of kind of making our own way for our own people.”*

One filmmaker noted that as the only BIWOC on her team, she didn’t know how to address how power on one of her projects fell along traditional gender lines.

> *“I don't know how to approach it and I just felt very alone… Because I've been having all these thoughts and I don’t know who to go to. I don't want it to make it seem like I'm throwing my teammates under the bus.”*

Lateral Violence

“Lateral violence” describes when members of an oppressed group become the oppressor by directing abuse to people of their own gender, culture, sexuality, or profession. Instead of directing their anger at the oppressor, these workplace or community aggressors direct their anger toward their peers or community members.[2]

Lateral violence is related to internalized racism and it is an effect of colonization. “When a powerful oppressor has directed oppression against a group for a period of time, members of the oppressed group feel powerless to fight back and they eventually turn their anger against each other,” writes Jane Middleton-Moz, renowned author and professor of social work at the University of Toronto. Lateral violence manifests as toxic behaviours, intentional and unintentional, particularly in situations that are uncertain and volatile — which are qualities that are inherent to the entertainment and media industry.

Several Indigenous participants shared that they have been the targets of lateral violence in the film and television industry — a phenomenon their white colleagues and peers were unequipped to address or even recognize.

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[2] Native Women's Association of Canada, *Aboriginal Lateral Violence* (2011), https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2011-Aboriginal-Lateral-Violence.pdf

One participant named lateral violence as the main barrier she faces as an Indigenous woman in the industry. “I've experienced a lot of lateral violence from my own people and I find it really difficult to engage with them. I can’t even describe how hard I have tried to work with a lot of my people,” she said. When seeking mentorship from Indigenous filmmakers who were already become established in the industry, she was denied. “They didn’t want me to rise up,” she said.

> *“Behind closed doors they don't talk to me. I have a lot of mentors who are Caucasian men, and you know what? They return my emails and phone calls, they guide me in this industry. I’ve asked for mentorship from my own people who are high up there, and I either don’t get the calls or emails answered.*
>
> *“People outside my community are giving me love and there’s this group of people in my own community who are causing me grief and problems and talking about me. I don't want to work with them ever again and I have anxiety just seeing them.”*

An Indigenous producer and executive also similar experiences of lateral violence as she was building her career. She noted that lateral violence was one of the impacts of the Canadian Indian residential school system. The perpetrators feel that “if they suffered, you should suffer.” This sentiment echoes Middleton-Moz’s explanation of their motivations: “When individuals feel inferior, inadequate and afraid, they take on the qualities of the oppressor as a way of acquiring strength and an illusion of power.”[3]

> *“It's taken me until 40 to realize that dynamic was playing out. They treated me like family, but the family is dysfunctional. I’ve raised funds and people have run off them. I'm getting to a place of forgiveness. It's taking me a long time to realize where that's coming from.”*

Lateral violence impacts all oppressed communities. Two participants, one South Asian and the other Indigenous, said getting respect from men from their own communities was a challenge they faced.

> *“I still struggle with my recognition with the male producers on set. They take credit for my work, they take up more space than me, and they think they’re more important.”*
>
> *“Men from my community would try to sabotage my production or they would say they were gonna do something and not do it. It was very combative and confrontational. They did it behind my back and I ended up not working with any of them.”*

Others highlighted the specific challenges of working with white women. “I’ve been finding it more challenging to work with white women,” one participant told us, “especially because they hide behind this kind of façade of looking out for and representing all women. But in my experience, they have only been upholding power structures.” Similarly, participants noted that many advocacy groups for women in the industry lack an intersectional approach and focus their efforts and resources on the interests of white women under the pretext of advocating for

[3] Ibid

gender parity. Some participants suggested that these organizations actively caused harm to BIWOC both outside and within them.

> *"When I came into the industry, I was excited. I saw all these advocacy groups for women, and I bought into the rhetoric that they are a fantastic support for women. That changed over time, because I started to realize that those things were not true... At the end of the day, white feminism wins."*

Anti-Black Racism

In July 2020, over 50 Black Canadian entertainment professionals signed an open letter to Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Canadian Heritage, asking the federal government to work together to eliminate the unacknowledged anti-Black racism in the Canadian screen industries.[4] The letter stated that projects by Black writers, showrunners, directors and producers are systemically under-financed and under-supported, adding that Canadian funding for inclusion and diversity has gone disproportionately to film and TV projects by women and Indigenous creators. The letter led to the creation of the Black Screen Office in Fall 2020.

Black participants in this research project shared their experiences of anti-Black racism in the industry, which were not as widely discussed at the time of the focus groups in February and March 2020. However, their experiences and stories foretold the sentiments in the open letter.

> *"Indigenous people and their stories are given space, but Black people and their stories and their bodies are not."*

With a proportionally smaller Black community in Vancouver, compared to say, Toronto or Montreal, participants also expressed feeling particularly isolated in the local industry, and being gaslit and invalidated by their non-Black colleagues when asking for the racism or discrimination they experienced to be acknowledged and addressed. One participant attributed this systemic denial to Vancouverites' perceptions of themselves as polite and progressive.

> *"Many times I have been the only Black woman in the room or in space. I didn't even know half the time, growing up, all the interactions were violent and racist. Because they were so insidious and microaggressions where they weren't in your face, but they still made me uncomfortable. I find that is a problem, in this industry especially, when you feel like you're screaming at people that its a problem and everyone's like, Is it though? I find that you have to prove it is a problem and prove these horrible experiences for them to even care about it."*

> *"Recently I worked on a commercial, and the first AD said the N-word."*

[4] "Black Media Creators Demand End to 'Systemically Racist Policies' in Canadian Entertainment," *The Hollywood Reporter* (2020)

Participants also talked about the stereotyping they faced and how other people's perceptions of Blackness made them feel boxed in and denied their own individuality.

> *"When I started doing auditions, I remember being utterly confused and disappointed in what was given or what my options were. When they asked me, Could you talk more 'urban,' I remember not knowing what that meant. I was ten years old at the time, and I told my mom that I don't know, I don't relate to these scripts.*"

The oppressive nature of colourism, the privileging of light skin over dark, was a barrier Black participants felt from both inside and outside their community.

> *"Now that they want people of colour, but if you're mixed with white, they want you more. To me, that's really not fair."*

> *"I even find now, even within the Black community, it's really hard to see because people are like, It's getting better, but it's getting better for one kind of person. No one's thinking dark-skinned Black women are full and complex human beings."*

Structural and Cultural Challenges

Another barrier that emerged was the structural, historical, and cultural conditions of the screen-based industries. One participant highlighted how film has historically been used as a "storytelling tool in service of empire and oppression." As part of the colonial project, film has been used to capture images of people and places in sovereign territories and supposedly in need of civilization.

> *"[Cinema] was used to explicitly oppress so many of us in so many ways, and to tell stories that are lies. We've been denied access to telling our own stories. We're so far behind.*

> *"So much of the machine of filmmaking is designed to do certain things and a lot of the stories women of colour need to tell don't fit into those structures of storytelling and they don't get funded because people at top don't understand it."*

In a contemporary context, mainstream films still work to normalize white supremacy, patriarchal attitudes, and colonial ideology, she said.

This history also impacts how BIWOC benefit, or don't, from the recent opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour in film. The participant noted that funding alone is not enough. Without "a support system or network that you trust or access to different things that are a part of it," BIWOC encounter many roadblocks in making the films and series they want to see.

> *"We don't have the support to use those resources wisely. It's not just money, it's community and mentorship and all these different things. Arts funding bodies and the industry are doing this thing now: there's a flood of opportunities and cash, but we*

haven't been set up for success to receive those things in a good way and see through our projects in a good way.

"We end up making work that we're not proud of, or working with abusive people, or getting pigeonholed into telling stories that we are expected to tell."

A number of other participants spoke to the problematic beliefs and attitudes that are undergirding industry initiatives for diversity and inclusion. Whether they be programming streams at festivals, fellowships, or grant programs, several participants felt the decisionmakers behind "diversity" programs and funding generally expect and award only certain kinds of stories from people of colour, specifically those that explore their identities. One participant noted that only the films she made which dealt with her identity were selected by film festivals, whereas those with no mention of race or culture were not. Another participant said they didn't apply to opportunities that were specifically for BIPOC because their work didn't deal with race: "The [people] in charge…they don't want to look at your own experience. They want to see how it relates to a struggle."

"I don't want to just fill that quota for them so that they can say, 'Hey, we are diverse.' Sometimes they expect you to fulfill certain stereotypes about being a woman or being Latinx to be taken seriously as a minority."

"I'm someone who doesn't make stuff about my race and my identity. And strategically that was a choice that I made because I was pigeonholed, so I moved away from it."

The Unique Strengths of BIWOC

Despite the host of struggles they face in the industry, when we asked participants, "What are some of the strengths that you as an individual, and BIWOC in general, bring to the table?" they answered broadly and expansively.

Some participants spoke to how their marginalized position within the industry and society gives them unique perspectives and approaches to storytelling and leading, at times giving them access to communities and stories cis, straight, white filmmakers simply cannot. Experiencing discrimination and isolation lends BIWOC the ability to connect with other underrepresented communities and create more caring, sustainable, and successful sets and teams through empathy, vulnerability, humour, and compassion. It also gives them experiential knowledge of how power can be abused and how to work against creating those dynamics on set.

"We make other people feel seen."

"I think [BIWOC bring] a vulnerability and empathy that a lot of white male directors won't be able to have because they have never lived a life where their existence is either shamed or threatened."

> *"As a woman of colour, I understand that nurturing people is better as a leader than putting people in their place…. People's emotions should be prioritized over making money."*

> *"The most marginalized groups are the ones who are the most empathetic by nature. And so it just allows for more depth in terms of storytelling."*

> *"There's a reason why most oppressed groups are oppressed. And it's because they shine the brightest. And I think BIPOC women are just phenomenal in terms of just not only the way that we look, but we all come from such rich cultures, whether we're extremely tied to it or loosely tied to it. It's just instilled in us in our blood. It's a different creative approach to telling stories. It's the ability to display more character development, because there's more nuance in us and who we are."*

One participant spoke specifically about being a newcomer to Canada as an adult, and gaining a new perspective about her strengths as a storyteller.

> *"Language is also a power. For a long time, I felt like that [my English language skills were] a weakness. But after finishing my documentary — and the documentary is the story of new immigrants — I actually feel empowered, and I feel like my strength is also different languages and bringing new perspectives.*

> *"Although it is a struggle, you just have to face it and embrace that. And just do your best and continue creating your work."*

Similarly, others spoke to the expertise and skillfulness in BIWOC that is often overlooked, challenging the myth of meritocracy often used to justify non-diverse casts and crews.

> *"In my experience, women of colour and Indigenous people are just incredibly adaptable and really hardworking. I think that's why I want people on set that look like me and aren't the just same old thing. We're good at solving problems."*

BIWOC make space for other BIWOC through mentorship, community building, breaking glass ceilings, and hiring. After gaining some success, many BIWOC consider it a responsibility to "pay it forward" and uplift other BIWOC. A few participants credited specific filmmakers in the room for motivating them to continue in the local industry and showing the potential for a different kind of leadership.

Echoing the findings from the 2019 and 2021 Women In View *On Screen Reports*, participants agreed that BIWOC leaders are the critical force in opening the doors for more BIWOC in the industry. Increasing the visibility and presence of BIWOC on-screen, behind the camera, at industry events, and in advocacy roles has a tremendously positive impact on the diversity and inclusivity of the screen-based production industry and inspires other BIWOC to start or continue working in film and television.

“I love whenever I see a person of colour or a woman in a position of power or on-screen. I’m instantly interested, even if it’s a commercial. I just think we’re so beautiful and it’s so engaging.”

“I'm learning the importance of doing things on your own, starting my own company, working through yourself and using that as a platform to uplift others so it becomes very empowering at the same time.”

“My role in the film industry is also to help other female filmmakers.”

“When you're in a room full of BIWOC folk, you just feel so invigorated.”

Conclusion

The systemic barriers for Black, Indigenous, and other racialized women and non-binary people in the film and television industry have emotional and material impacts. Removing those barriers may require time, effort, and energy, but the solutions are not complicated.

One of the main recommendations that emerged from the focus groups was simply creating opportunities for BIWOC to lead, hire, and cast. When given the chance, participants readily embraced the opportunity to give untested talent an opportunity to work on their projects and to collaborate with talent from their community and/or other people of colour. They could tell their stories on their own terms, with people who could engage with those narratives with care and sensitivity.

A few participants encouraged other participants to embrace the industry’s tradition of hiring people in your network as a strategy for inclusion. One producer expressed her passion for training people of colour and Indigenous people and creating employment opportunities for them.

“As a producer, you’re the one in power, and there's no reason why we can't take structure that exists right now and toss it out the window... My hope is that there are more women and women of colour in those positions of power because that's where we can make that change “

In other words, BIWOC have already developed the networks — relational infrastructure, you could say — for greater inclusion of BIWOC. Networks and streamers, funders, and financiers could easily exceed their diversity and inclusion targets by greenlighting work where BIWOC have creative control. This isn’t to say that installing anyone who identifies as a woman or non-binary person in a position of power is equitable in and of itself. BIWOC who tend to be successful in the industry are generally homogenous in terms of ability, neurotype, and class. However, to achieve more racial diversity in the industry overall, more BIWOC in leadership roles is key.

More funding and policy designed to address the specific needs of BIWOC in film and industry was also recommended. As discussed in the “Tokenization and Stereotyping” and “Structural and Cultural Challenges” sections of this report, the historical roots of underrepresentation are often left unaddressed when grant and mentorship programs emphasize increasing diversity overall, instead of building sustainable careers and affecting systemic change. More equitable and holistically supportive programs are needed to ensure that BIWOC advance from entry-level positions.

Fostering emotional and cultural safety in the industry was also important to most participants — and this can be achieved through culturally diverse crews. “When we have people in the crew who are diverse, the environment is safer for actors, as well as for me as a director,” said one participant. The practice of hiring counsellors and having elders on set was also recommended.

Our last recommendation is close to our hearts. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants told us how meaningful it was to share their experiences honestly, in community with other BIWOC. “No one has ever asked me about these experiences,” one participant said.

In every session, participants expressed the desire to strengthen their connections with BIWOC in the local industry. Facilitating intentional, safe spaces for BIWOC, we discovered, is a gamechanger. While conversations like these don’t dismantle structural barriers, they are vital nonetheless. They help BIWOC find strength in community and in themselves.

“That was such a powerful thing to have, have us all come together and just speak about our experiences. It was so cathartic to feel like, Oh my god, like, you all know what I'm talking about and I don't have to explain it.”

“That’s how things have shifted for me, realising how many talented filmmakers are put in this box. We’re all struggling with the same things and working together to make things better.”

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Appendices:

A - Interview and focus group questions

B - Registration survey questions

Appendix A - Interview and focus group questions

- How long have you been working in the film industry?*
- Would you categorize yourself as an emerging artist (ex. student, early career), established artist (ex. screened films and projects in public), industry professional (ex. general manager, executive director), or gatekeeper (ex. funder, board member, policy maker)?*
- What is your role in the industry?
- What are some of the challenges you have faced working in the film industry as BIWOC? How have these challenges affected your career or wellbeing?
- If you can think back to when you first started out in the industry, what was your experience like? What challenges did you face then? Has your experience changed since then? Why or why not?
- What are some of the strengths that you as an individual, and BIWOC in general, bring to the table?
- Research has shown that when members of marginalized groups (such as a BIWOC) are put in leadership positions, they tend to bring other marginalized people in. Has this been your experience? Who has opened doors for you? Do you see BIWOC reflected in leadership positions within the industry? Have you created opportunities for others?
- What would you like to see change in the film industry to better support BIWOC filmmakers?

* *These questions were directly asked in interviews; focus group participants answered these questions in their registration forms.*

Appendix B - Registration survey questions

- What is your gender identity?
- How would you describe yourself? *
    - Emerging artist (ex. student filmmaker, early career)
    - Established artist (ex. screened films and projects in public, including festivals)
    - Industry professional (ex. general manager, executive director)

    - Gatekeeper (ex. board member, policy maker, funding agency)
    - Other:

- How long have you been working in the film industry? *
    - <5 years
    - 5-10 years
    - 10-15 years
    - 15+ years

- What is your role in the film industry? Ex. writer, director, technician, funder, etc. You may write in more than one. *