

# In her own voice: Reflections on the Irish film industry and beyond

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## ABSTRACT

International research highlights a paucity of female screenwriters and directors in contemporary cinema. The consequences, in terms of employment equality and on-screen representations, have been well documented. However, few studies interrogate the film industry from the point-of-view of the female practitioners themselves. Certainly, these issues have not been comprehensively explored in an Irish context; something which this paper, as part of a wider study on Irish women screenwriters and writer/directors, sets out to address.

An analysis of three in-depth, exploratory interviews with produced female writers of film and television is presented here. The purpose of the interviews is to tease out the experiences, work practices, perceived barriers and narrative preoccupations of this underrepresented group. Although generalizations cannot be made on the basis of three interviews, many of the views expressed by these practitioners correspond to theoretical and empirical work emerging in the field. Other insights shed new light on aspects of women's creative labour in the Irish film industry.

## KEYWORDS

Female voice, Irish film industry, female protagonist, motherhood, creative practice

## Introduction

The Irish Film Board (IFB) is 'the national development agency for Irish filmmaking' (IFB website, 15 April, 2015) with a self-proclaimed brief to 'invest in the development of Irish talent in front of, and behind, the camera'; to keep Irish culture 'at the heart of Irish life' and to put 'Irish stories on film' (IFB 2015, 6). Despite these admirable aspirations the Irish film industry remains strongly male dominated. Between 1993 - 2013, only thirty three produced screenplays (13%) written by Irish female screenwriters were awarded production finance by the IFB; a state agency funded by the Irish taxpayer. This puts female writers/directors at the margins, rather than the heart, of Irish filmmaking (Liddy 2015 b).

This paper is a small part of a wider study, one of the first in Ireland<sup>1</sup>, focusing on the experiences, perspectives and narrative interests of Irish female screenwriters and writer/directors, as articulated by the practitioners themselves. An analysis of three exploratory semi-structured interviews with produced Irish female writers will tease out some of the issues relating to women and filmmaking in Ireland; issues that the larger study will engage with more fully.

## International Overview

It is self-evident that the underrepresentation of women in the film industry internationally has significance as an employment equality issue. For instance, Darnell Hunt et al. found women and minorities 'woefully underrepresented among the corps of directors, show creators, writers and lead actors' in 2011 US film as well as television produced in Hollywood in the 2011/12 season (2015, 28). But there are other, arguably more serious, consequences that relate to the production of culture. International research highlights links

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<sup>1</sup> The only other work that looks specifically at Irish women screenwriters and their work and experiences is a fascinating, but unpublished, MA thesis by Nicola Depuis in 2010. This current study is more wide reaching and will direct greater attention to an exploration of a distinctive female perspective or sensibility.

between women in senior positions *behind* the camera and the inclusion and treatment of female characters on-screen (e.g. Bhavnani 2007; Lauzen 2015; Smith 2009; British Film Institute 2012; Smith 2013; Liddy 2015).

Martha Lauzen's 2015 report shows that in US films with at least one female director and/or writer female characters comprise 37% of all speaking characters; 39% of all major characters; 39% of protagonists and 26% of male/female ensembles. Compare the statistics when there is an exclusively male creative team: in that scenario just 28% of all speaking characters are female; 28% of all major characters; 4% of protagonists and 9% of male/female ensembles. The overwhelming majority of protagonists (87%) are male when the directors/writers are also male (2015, 2).

In an Irish context, just 24% of all Irish films produced between 1993 and 2013 and written by a male writer have a female protagonist. A further 7% had both a female *and* a male character at the heart of the narrative. In comparison, over the same twenty year period, 64% of films written by an Irish female writer lead with a female protagonist (Liddy 2015b). It would appear that the majority of Irish women writers opt to put the spotlight on female characters (Liddy 2015b). Additionally, an analysis of a small number of Irish female-authored films produced between 2007-2013 point to a (limited) ideological challenge to hegemonic discourses about femininity, motherhood, aging and power (Liddy 2015).

The British Film Institute stresses the importance of diversity in film because of its power 'to reflect changing attitudes, people, landscape' (BFI 2015). Moreover, the consequences of cultural invisibility can be grave: 'when marginalized groups in society are absent from the stories a nation tells about itself' inequality can be normalized (Hunt et al. 2015, 5). For a range of reasons, then, it is crucial that the voices of women screenwriters and writer/directors are heard.

## Methodology

Women writers and writer/directors have been side-lined since the establishment of the Irish Film Board with funding and support overwhelmingly directed towards male filmmakers. Their experiences are the 'untold story' (DeVault and Cross 2012, 206) in the context of a male-dominated Irish film industry. I adopt a feminist research methodology which explores and challenges the marginalization of women's experience though, as Maynard and Purvis caution, experience must be a starting point for a feminist analysis rather than an end in itself (1994, 4).

Qualitative methods are central to, though not necessarily a prerequisite for, feminist research. Mindful of the fact that knowledge can be produced in structured encounters organised around 'talking about experience' (DeVault and Cross 2012, 209) I conducted three semi-structured interviews with produced Irish female screenwriters/directors. Interviews were an hour and a half to two hours in duration and the range of questions placed the lives of these women 'at the center of social inquiry' (Hess-Biber, 2012, 3). Questions elicited demographic information and both objective and subjective answers (see Rogers 2007, 13) about their experiences as practitioners in the Irish film industry.

The three interviewees are urban and rural, new and established, writers of film and television. Generalizations are, of course, impossible based on such a small number of interviews. However, my purpose here is not to produce data from which to make such generalizations but, rather, to begin to tease out the experiences, work practices, insights and narrative preoccupations of this underrepresented group.

## The Writers

Two screenwriters and one writer/director agreed to be interviewed. These are Harriet O Carroll whose credits include the BBC drama *Aristocrats* (1999) an adaptation of Stella Tiliard's book of the same name; episodes and storylines for *Glenroe* (RTE 1983-2001) and episodes for *Fair City* (1988 - present), two of the longest running TV serials on Irish television. As a 'writer for hire', O Carroll has developed countless television and film projects for production companies in a long career and has also written short films and numerous (produced) radio and theatre plays.

Ailbhe Keogan is a relative newcomer with one produced feature to date, *Run and Jump* (2013). Keogan won a Zebbie award in 2013 for Best Script; a nomination for Best Screenplay at the 2013 Irish Film and Television Awards and the film won Best Feature at the Galway Film Fleadh in the same year. Keogan's second feature is in the process of attaching a director.

Finally, Rachel Moriarty is an experienced freelance television writer and director whose credits include a children's animation series, a range of lifestyle television programmes and a number of short films. Her first feature film, *Traders* (2015), co-written and co-directed with Peter Murphy, premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh in 2015. Moriarty and Murphy are recipients of the 2015 Irish Screen America *Rising Talent Award*. They are currently developing their second feature.

## Emergent themes

A number of key themes surfaced repeatedly during the interviews, only some of which can be discussed here<sup>2</sup>. The themes that will structure the discussion below are motherhood, limiting stereotypes and a female perspective or sensibility; all of which play a part in shaping the creative output of these three writers.

### Motherhood

Domestic responsibilities, motherhood and caregiving represent a formidable challenge for women struggling to balance the social role of homemaker and mother with their creative aspirations. Indeed, as in other fields, 'unpaid care features strongly among women artists and professionals as a cause for abandoning their creative pathway' (UNESCO 2014, 82). Moriarty and O Carroll are mothers of adult children. Domestic responsibilities and childcare do not feature at all in Moriarty's accounts and only in recollection by O Carroll. In contrast Keogan has two small children (aged 3 yrs. and 4 yrs. at the time of interview) and she references the conflicting demands of motherhood and career many times throughout the interview.

The demands of young children is not something Moriarty reflects upon, even as a feature of her past experience. With 'the skill of juggling things' you simply 'make it work' she suggests. There is little acknowledgement in Moriarty's analysis of 'the enduring inequalities that still mark out the relations between men and women' (Tasker and Negra 2007, 35). However, she does acknowledge that personal problems can impinge on professional life:

Well I have a daughter and I have a partner who was very sick the last year. But everybody has that type of, you know, normal human life stuff. It impacts in that it takes some of your time but at the same time if you're writing something a lot of the time it's part of what you're writing about.

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<sup>2</sup> Other themes that emerged during the interview but which cannot be included because of space restrictions are: confidence issues, feminism, gender in Irish society and affirmative action strategies.

O Carroll recalls the challenges she faced in developing a writing career while working part-time as a physiotherapist and caring for small children:

I would sort of work out how to find the time. You know, if they're going playing with friends I'd say ok I'd have that hour and a half or two hours. I was always looking for little spaces which would work for being able to think. Going into physio even, all that in the car you would be thinking. And it wouldn't be time taken away from anything.

Keogan's working life is inexorably interwoven with her identity as a mother- 'I don't want to miss out on any of it' - and the demands and responsibilities of motherhood, as she experiences it. Women's care responsibilities 'are often perceived as in 'conflict' with their professional activities' (UNESCO 2014, 82) and this is very much the case here:

My children are in crèche five mornings a week. I actually have 9-1 available to me but I stop at 12 and I try to go for a walk or something because I need to go to transition from writer to Mum. It's actually more trouble to try and half-think about your projects. You might as well go in full mum-mode. I work four mornings a week and that's when I do my commercial projects. Friday I take to do the big shop. It's very unusual for you to be free enough of them to be able to think about something completely different. I mean I hear crying children when I'm in the shower – there's no one crying at all, like. I'm permanently on.

Keogan stresses the equal partnership between herself and her husband and points to the 'evolved' households of their friends in creative careers where everything is equally shared - 'down the line, fifty: fifty'. Yet it is clear that her 'full mum mode' requires enormous reserves of energy and commitment to both her role as a mother and her role and a writer. Indeed, all three women tend to 'privatize' gender and reaffirm the *status quo* 'to create the appearance that the social order is as it should be, because feminism has been transcended' (Budgeon 2011, 24).

At a wider societal level in Ireland domestic responsibilities and childcare still fall disproportionately on women's shoulders, irrespective of a supportive partner. This often has an impact on women's careers at a material and/or a psychological level. The Irish workforce is characterised by high levels of gender segregation; exorbitant childcare costs and declining numbers of employed women after the age of 35 years (National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI) 2015, 12).

The comments made by Keogan and O Carroll are instructive in that they illustrate how women can internalized a sense of guilt about 'stealing' personal time from the perceived duties of motherhood; a socially constructed role which varies across time and place. The current reality is that women often have to choose between having children and having a career. If women have children, as Natalie Wrayford observes, they will likely be required to make 'personal and professional sacrifices that their male colleagues are not required to make' (2013, 16).

### **Motherhood and Creative Practice**

Motherhood can impinge on creative practice as can be seen in the accounts offered here by O Carroll and Keogan. O Carroll devised a strategy of working through her creative ideas while doing mundane tasks like ironing or driving, which proved effective for her:

So I mean driving to pick up the kids after school I would have been listening to a radio play. A lot of people used to do the ironing and listen to the radio play. I think, that when you try to force solutions your brain just doesn't give them to you. When you stop they seem to be released.

However, she acknowledges that by the time her career as a television writer took off ‘the children were older’. Given her response, it appears unlikely that the ‘wear of working’ that she experienced when called to Dublin for meetings, sometimes at very short notice, would have been manageable if coupled with the demands of small children.

Keogan’s current working arrangements are rigorous and almost punishing. In order to contribute financially to her family (both partners are freelance in the film industry) she must keep two creative balls in the air; her own authored work and projects from which she could earn a living as a ‘writer for hire’:

So what I do now is I get up at half five to half seven so I can have those two hours where I work on projects that are important to me. They’re not necessarily commercial or paying projects but they’re projects that I want to develop because I feel they represent who I am. What I want to say.

However, even putting yourself forward for a writing job requires a lot of effort. ‘I do an awful lot of work for pitches’, Keogan concedes. ‘I do an awful lot of work to get work’.

In contrast, Moriarty is immersed in a life in which her time is willingly devoted to the pursuit of creative projects. She describes her working arrangements with her writing partner:

We would be dipping in and out of projects and because of that feature script, we put a lot of time into writing. And I think if you just kind of embrace that. I think if you fight it and try and go - oh I have to dedicate x hours to this or x hours to that, no. There’s a bit of going with the flow.

The difficulties for women in reconciling domestic duties and childcare or ‘love labour’ (Lynch and McLaughlin 1995) can result in limited time to invest in economic activity or creative work. Women are still responsible for more than 80 per cent of the tasks of family life, e.g. childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning and so on so the reconciliation of private life and working life ‘is a prerequisite for fostering women's advancement’ in the public arena (NWCI 2013, 32). Of interest here is the suggestion that motherhood can impact so negatively on women’s working lives in a segment of the industry that is often deemed quite flexible. Keogan describes the way in which she manages to meet deadlines:

What happens is coming up to a deadline when I’ve to deliver I need a fully immersive period so I would check into a B& B down the road. I go to the same one and I do a 24 hour period where I’m allowed get as obsessed as I want with the screenplay without – I mean I would literally do eleven hours in a row. The time flies because I’ve been denying that. But you can get obsessed and you’ve no one calling on your attention. You don’t have to talk to anyone.

In Keogan’s assessment of her current responsibilities and O Carroll and Moriarty’s differing recollections of past ‘juggling’ the problem is internalised as an individual one rather than the operation of a patriarchal, capitalist society. In the day-to-day reality of these women’s lives such difficulties are/ were overcome with exhaustive personal manoeuvring. As sociologist Pat O Connor notes, ‘the lack of structural consistency in the mapping of gender across institutions and the related cultural tensions have tended to be seen as private troubles rather than public issues in Irish society’ (2006, 8).

### **Limiting Stereotypes**

Film can be said to both reflect and create society; as Bhavnani argues, it has the capacity to challenge stereotypes but it can also ‘perpetuate social prejudice and inequality’ by fostering stereotypes both on-screen and off-screen (2007, 110). Interviewees reference a number of ways that stereotypes pertaining to women can surface in the industry. These range from implicit assumptions about the capabilities of female directors;

perceived appropriate genres for women and limitations on the construction of female characters and narratives.

Moriarty works with a writing and directing partner, Peter Murphy. Research suggests that commissioners are 'risk averse and are culturally bound as to what may be a commercial product' (Sinclair et al. 2006). Moriarty and Murphy's first feature, *Traders*, is a thriller with an original concept that Moriarty is aware was likely to have swayed funding in their favour. However, she admits there were raised eyebrows not from the Irish Film Board but from other industry people along the way who told her: 'it's very unusual, isn't it, a woman writing about people killing each other?' A suggestion that Moriarty emphatically rejects:

Think of all those Queens of Crime, or whatever you want to call them! It's only when you transpose it into the world of film that people go – oh, that's unusual. Because you're going to be directing a fight scene and somebody's going to be hit!

It is true that there may be a genre difference between male and female written/directed films, with women 'more concentrated' in drama (Rogers 2007, 35). Yet David Steele suggests that, in 2010/2012 more women had greater box office success compared to men in the fields of animation, family, horror, music/dance, romance and thrillers (2013, 1); a reality, like many other realities, that individuals in the industry may be slow to register.

Moriarty is also aware that she does not match the image that many people have of the film director:

I think of male directors I know, that I really like. But they go around and they are being directors the whole time. It's a persona! Now, it's not all men, of course not, but I just see men being able to do that whereas women tend to be dropping a kid off to a crèche! You have to be singular and selfish – the project, the project, the project. And I think it is of course women still do, you know, other things in their lives and they find maybe to exclude those other things.

But when it came to seeking funding from the Irish Film Board, she believes a male director on the team implicitly offered the film board the assurance it needed: 'I think it helped to reassure people, yes, I do.' She adds:

People tend to gravitate to people who are like them [...] men find it easier to get on with men who are on their wavelength and who are talking the same language, especially when it comes to genre and thriller.

Moriarty's observations are echoed in a recent analysis of women's progression as writers and directors in the British film industry. If there is a way to reduce risk, producers and funders are likely to take it; 'one of these is to commission writers and directors who are a known "pair of safe hands"'. In an environment where most established writers and directors are male, this desire to reduce risk will therefore lead to a continuation of the under-representation of women' (Steele 2013, 2).

Stereotypes held by development executives can also impinge on the kinds of female characters that individual writers wish to spotlight. Keogan was startled to learn that her creation of a 40 year old female protagonist was greeted with such scepticism:

Older women especially are seen as something to be avoided or something of non-commercial appeal. You feel that when you're writing an older woman character. You can feel the resistance from money - men, you can. I think it's a commercial type response so I think even women working in the commercial sector have that resistance to it. I've been in meetings where I've been literally stunned by

the way they talk about 40 plus women characters. And actresses. And these are all women in the meeting.

Moriarty is challenging perceptions about women's entry to a traditionally male genre like the thriller, particularly when she has a directorial role. In contrast, Keogan recognises that female writers can also be encouraged to reprise a particular kind of drama again and again. As the writer of *Run and Jump* she finds:

I get asked to bring a certain thing to a table and it a lightness; it's not grim. I know what they're looking for from me. And it's very specific, it's like I don't want you to go to the dark place but you (don't) have to avoid the issue altogether. But just keep it attractive and palatable and nice. I could go way more serious but the appetite isn't there for it.

In this context, stereotyping serves as a form of ideological policing and bolsters the status quo.

### **A Female Sensibility?**

In order to tease out the concept of a 'female sensibility' (McCreadie 2006, 47) it is instructive to unpick the approaches to narrative themes and the inclusion and creation of female characters as identified by the interviewees.

Attributing particular writing styles and genre competences to women writers as a whole is a contentious issue. In Seger's study she found that women want to tell different stories; that their writing could be characterised as more interior and concerned with personal issues; stories tended to be character-led and foregrounding emotions, behaviour and relationships, as opposed to male writers who prefer stories of action, conflict and heroism (2003, 116). In contrast to Seger's findings many of the female screenwriters interviewed by McCreadie rejected the notion of a distinctive female 'sensibility' (2006, 47).

Script editor Mark McIlrath does see some differences in approach between male and female writers. While not suggesting that female writers are any less focused on structure than their male counterparts McIlrath observes: 'I would say that, yes, female screenwriters do place more emphasis on character – that their scripts do show more of an interest in the complexity and idiosyncrasies of character' (2015). The three interviewees here identify thematic interests and approaches to the writing of female characters that, although not always articulated as such, does tentatively point to the existence of a female perspective or sensibility. O Carroll points to the different life experiences of men and women.

Our life experience is slightly different and your voice is really dependant on your life experience. I mean nobody born on the equator is going to come up with the same sensibility as somebody born in the artic. That I suppose the big thing about being female is you can be a mother [...] the way you deal with life and love and people and caring and all that is, you know, is of major importance... and the detail of that.

In contrast, Moriarty rejects an automatic link between certain perspectives and gender suggesting a post-feminist position:

It's very hard to assign it to gender and I'm not sure that it's kind of constructive to do it. Because I think that writers bring a lot of their own selves. It's such a big diverse world out there of people's experience... you'll find so many different intersections between people.

The 'commonality' that was at one time thought to comprise women's experience is challenged here 'by an understanding that the category is more contingent and variable than was previously assumed in

approaches that took feminist consensus as the starting point for a feminist politics' (Budgeon 2011, 25).

## Narrative Themes

Moriarty is drawn to issues around masculinity identifying 'blokey bullshit' as a theme running through *Traders*:

I love that masculinity in crisis. I think that a very, very interesting rich area to look at. I'm very much about obsession with money, is money the only currency? So that is a theme that I think is very interesting. I think that is something we will revisit because it's like that absurdity and that hardness of the capitalist system.

When recalling what female writers brought to the table in the television series she contributed to in the 1980s and 1990s O Carroll references aspects of family life.

Baby growing up .and the need for being babysat all the time. What impinged on your life. I think we brought small detail of what life is like. That thing about the pressure on your time - you are the back-up in the family. [...] I think they (women writers) did bring more detail and a kind of reality. For female characters particularly.

Keogan's genre preference is directed towards drama though her narrative interests within that genre range straddle a wide range of stories. Her 'pet' project is a political thriller set in Western Sahara. But the script that has been developed and is currently edging towards production is about 'a forty year old woman and motherhood'. She reflects:

I think the best thing I would ever write would be about my family. Not my new family, my own family. And is that because daughters are more involved in family life? I don't know, I don't know. So family would be a massive one. Like the intricacies of sisterhood, of daughterhood, of all of that I find fascinating. Maybe men don't find it as fascinating, I don't know. The picking up of every nuance in the room.

## Female Characters

Sinclair et al. have suggested that the social effect of women's under-representation as screenwriters may result in films being made that 'lack the female perspective and instead are dominated by a male view of the world. Even where female characters are used, these may be presented from a male perspective and be stereotypical' (2006, 16).

The greater inclusion of female characters and a resistance to stereotyping is shared by all three writers. Moriarty recalls her response to watching two recent Hollywood releases:

And you're kind of watching- who are these female characters? You still see appallingly badly drawn - and look, having gone through the script process, I am going - how the hell is nobody challenging this?

Interestingly, despite being sensitive to the blandness of many female characters on-screen, Moriarty does not have a female character at the centre of the narrative in *Traders*. Neither does she echo O Carroll's innate towards female characters. That said, she has definite ideas about not creating female characters merely to serve the male protagonist:

There's a lot of expectations sometimes, around script, that the protagonist has, or starts, a relationship. That woman is either Lady McBeth who goes in on it or she's a kind of a support. We

were very conscious that she has her own life. She (Orla) is looking after her dying father, she has her own life. But I suppose I'm conscious of it, I hope, in a more subtle way. The protagonist's relationship ('love interest') does not have to serve the protagonist. I just think there are subtle ways of doing it as well.

Moriarty stresses that the needs of the story determines the characters within. *Traders* foregrounded male characters but another of the screenplays she and Murphy are developing is headed by a female protagonist. While Moriarty concedes that she does not set out to challenge limiting representations of women on-screen she believes that female writers are 'more conscious of women in the world'. She explains:

Maybe without really being on a mission it's much more natural for us to put - to say - well where's the woman in this story? I suppose maybe as a woman you balk at those things. You're more sensitive, you bristle. You bristle more at those stereotypes.

When it comes to writing male and female characters O Carroll distinguishes between the insight that she, as a female writer, can bring to the writing of female characters and the professionalism that she can call upon to construct male characters:

I suppose what I feel is I don't have anything really fresh and new to say about male characters cos I don't know them from the inside. Except I'm a professional writer, I can create the illusion of a male character but I can't be as strong-mindedly contributing something new. I'm interested in both male and female but I probably have more to offer in the female because I am female!

O Carroll reflects on her interest in writing female protagonists and makes the point that she had not realized it was not a widespread practice:

Mostly I think the protagonists of my pieces were female and I didn't even realize that. I mean I didn't even realize it wasn't happening all the time. Like in *The Aristocrats* I made all the women articulate and with a point-of-view. Acting rather than acted upon. And it was great to be writing women and these four women were really interesting and they all had a logic. They weren't just being blown here and there even if they did crazy things.

However, there were times in the past when her character choices and those of her script editor diverged sharply; 'What I would have considered was that he would think they were more dependent than they would really be'.

This resonates with Helen Jacey's observation that 'heroine softening' is widespread. Female writers are encourage 'to generate huge levels of sympathy for a heroine in order to justify any difficult choices she might make' (2010, 25).

### **The Way Forward?**

This snapshot of the views and experiences of Irish women screenwriters offer some interesting, though partial, insights into the working lives of these three very different women writers. The interviews yielded an abundance of rich material, only a fraction of which is drawn upon here. While there are differences in the views expressed a number of common threads did emerge, particularly around stereotypical and potentially limiting gendered assumptions.

Where narrative preoccupations are concerned Moriarty's interest in the thriller genre arguably foregrounds plot over character. In contrast, Keogan and O Carroll lean towards drama. Their accounts appear to support Mcillrath's (2015) observation that female screenwriters 'tend to have character as the reason for action

rather than the reverse'. All three, in varying degrees, display a sensitivity toward the inclusion and the portrayal of multifaceted female characters. In the context of creative practice, it would seem that motherhood has the potential to disrupt creative work to a significant extent when children are very young. Keogan acknowledges: she is 'not at full throttle as a writer' and has, for now, resigned herself to that fact. Based on these accounts, women with adult children may have greater freedom to pursue a working life on a more equal footing with male writers.

One of the problematic assumptions of postfeminist discourse is that women can 'have it all' if they try hard enough. Women who support an individualistic and liberal agenda and operate 'on a mantra of choice' tend to assume that the political demands of feminism have been met' (Genz 2009, 20). This has the effect of positioning women's struggles and accomplishments as purely individual, thereby clouding the social and material constraints faced by women (Lazar 2007, 154). These interviewees have only a passing knowledge of how inequality operates in society and in the film industry. Hence, they are all, perhaps, operating in 'the bubble' that Keogan identifies. This resonates somewhat with Lisa French's findings, in the context of an exploration of female screenwriters in the Victorian film and television industries in Australia: 'one reason gender is not receiving higher priority is that individuals are not aware that inequality exists; in order to support efforts to correct an inequality, they must first recognise the existence of an inequality' (2012, 5).

Creativity is not gender neutral. It is not adrift from wider socio-economic and political concerns. Inequalities within the creative sector mirror the structural barriers found in other economic sectors and in society at large (UNESCO 2014:14) and is unlikely to be rectified without intervention. During interviews with key IFB decision makers in 2014/2015 (Liddy 2016) the question of affirmative action measures to increase the number of women in the Irish film industry- specifically writers and writer/directors in the first instance – had a mixed response: tentative support for 'soft' initiatives, scepticism, or outright rejection. However, a seismic shift was to occur with a year.

While a comprehensive discussion on the place of affirmative action in reconfiguring a gendered landscape is beyond the scope of this paper a number of events are notable. In November 2015 the highly influential *Waking the Feminists* campaign kick-started a public debate about the side-lining of women in Irish theatre.<sup>3</sup> That the underrepresentation of women was not confined to theatre but also characterized the Irish film industry was highlighted in the press during the peak of the campaign.<sup>4</sup> Lobbying for gender equality in film was formalized with the formation of the Equality Action Committee (a combined pressure group representing the Writers Guild of Ireland and the Screen Directors Guild of Ireland) and the activation of Women in Film and Television Ireland, both of which continue to keep the equality agenda in the spotlight. On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2015 the Irish Film Board's gender initiative, the Six Point Plan, was announced by the then Acting Chair (now the Chair) Dr Annie Doona. It includes the potentially radical target of a 50/50 gender split in funding over three years.<sup>5</sup> While, arguably, progress has been slow and concrete action less robust than many would have hoped, the Six Point Plan is now part of Irish Film Board policy which offers a degree of hope that change is at least on the horizon.

Nearly one hundred years ago Virginia Woolf lamented the absence of 'literary mothers'; the role models needed to inspire current and future generations of women writers. This has a resonance for

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<sup>3</sup> [www.wakingthefeminists.org](http://www.wakingthefeminists.org)

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, a letter on this subject published by *The Irish Times* (S. Liddy) on November 11, 2015, the day before the cathartic *Waking the Feminists* event in the packed Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the announcement by the Irish Film Board that they had concerns about the underrepresentation of women in film. <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/women-and-the-irish-film-industry-1.2424444>

<sup>5</sup> [www.irishfilmboard.ie/news/Statement\\_from\\_the\\_IFB...Six\\_Point\\_Plan/2975](http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/news/Statement_from_the_IFB...Six_Point_Plan/2975)

women filmmakers today. The lack of female visibility can act as a deterrent for younger women who cannot see the possibilities in a film industry in which so few women are writing /directing feature films. In such a landscape it is arguably more difficult for women to believe their stories and their vision is valid, important and worth fighting for.

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