



**Gender Matters**  
**37 South - Melbourne International Film Festival**  
**Graeme Mason**  
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**Melbourne 4pm**

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*Check against delivery*

Firstly, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

It's great to be here once again at MIFF 37 Degrees South and I thank Clare, Mark and all the team for making this possible.

MIFF and 37 Degrees South suite of industry focused programs are a great opportunity to build relationships and share knowledge across the various parts of our industry operating here in Australia, in New Zealand and across the world. Screen Australia and I are keen supporters of this concept and of MIFF and 37 South in general.

One of the things that we at Screen Australia value most from the MIFF / 37 South range of activities, screenings and programmes is that their focus is on highlighting and developing the same core values for the sector that we also aim to. For them, like us, it is about culture, it is about celebrating creativity, it is about the commercial; it is about careers; it is about greater collaboration.

We believe that we all have a shared interest and goals: Everyone in this room is passionate about content creation. Everyone here is trying to work out how to get stories made and out to the widest audience.

Irrespective of our role in the sector or where we come from, we all, I believe, have much in common. We largely face many of the same challenges especially in today's rapidly changing production and distribution environment.

It has to be said, however, that whilst it is true that it is a tough world which we all have chosen to operate in - it is not even close to being a level playing field.

As bad or hard as it is for some of us to achieve our goals, it is much worse for many in our sector. This is undoubtedly true for many minorities, but, it is also often the case that those disadvantaged are not a minority at all but make up the majority of the population.

That is why we at Screen Australia are here today to continue to talk about our *Gender Matters* programmes and unveil the final two parts to Screen Australia's exciting, world-first innovative 5-point plan to drive change.

Issues of gender bias are unfortunately not new and they have been approached in various ways, by Screen Australia, our predecessor agencies, state agencies and industry guilds over the years.

Despite these efforts, the level of women's participation in many key roles in our industry continues to track along at the low percentages we saw in the 1970s. And a lot of us are asking why, and also, how is this still the case today. As Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on appointing his gender equal cabinet - this is 2016.

Today I want to specifically look at one of the major issues which most of you face - getting your film into good, meaningful distribution and out for audiences to see. Film Distribution has had and will continue to have massive changes and challenges and this affects all of us.

It has been a red-hot issue for the past few years and will undoubtedly be so for the immediate years to come. With the extraordinary proliferation of content, the incredible escalation in costs of releasing and the staggering fundamental changes in means of accessing and consuming content it is now a very difficult landscape to navigate through.

I do want to stress that these changes and challenges are not just about Australian films - box office results have largely been challenging for independent films globally. Local films and their releases domestically are, however, of the greatest interest to us with our remit and are therefore our focus today.

So, I can feel you asking, what does distribution and its current issues have to do with addressing the gender imbalance within the Australian screen industry? Even more importantly how can Screen Australia be part of a drive for change? I will come back to this shortly. But first some more general information to think about.

When we - and many others - look across the full screen sector in which we operate there were interesting anomalies. We have seen really strong levels of gender representation in the emerging end of the sector. The representation of women in key roles in the online world is well on target - surprising I know to many who think it is all by and about young males.

TV whilst not perfect is doing ok - especially in terms of the central protagonists in most dramas on air here, and also in on air talent in the very successful general entertainment and reality shows.

Documentary is also doing well with gender in key creative roles - though there is some room, I think, for greater emphasis and improvement on the people and subjects covered.

It is in film, however, where Houston we really have a major problem. This is in spite of the long and proud history we have of huge success of female-led projects at home and abroad. Yes even two key segments of our gender initiative are of course named after *My Brilliant Career*. This film is a very important part of the Australian cinematic new wave and our cultural reach out to the world, thanks to Eleanor Witcombe's

novel, taken to new places by Margaret Fink, Judy Davis and of course Gillian Armstrong who is a key supporter of our current efforts for change. In a nod to the combined nature of the antipode film-makers here today, we can all lay claim to Jane Campion and Jan Chapman's *The Piano* which similarly had and has real resonance globally

Films such as *The Dressmaker*, continue to show the strong commercial case for more female-driven content - especially in indie releases, Maggie Smith/Judi Dench anyone? So if we know women have talent, and we can show that women make stories and take the lead in stories with audience appeal and help promote our culture internationally, what's happening?

Analysis of Screen Australia figures, back in May, shows that the imbalance in traditional film roles is still staggering - with only 32% of producers' being women, only 23% of writers, and a truly awful figure of 16% of directors.

Our film production funding is provided to producers, writers and directors in close proportion to applications received. It is in fact even slightly higher, so there is already minor positive discrimination in funding. This suggested to us that initiative's to stimulate projects led by women early on - not at the late funding stage - is key in addressing this issue head on if we are to have any long term success and stimulate change.

We believe that the issue is not best addressed at the stage when they hit the production funding round but much, much earlier.

Our \$5million Gender Matters initiative is, we believe, not only important in addressing the severe underrepresentation of women in the key facets of our film sector referenced above, but we are confident that it will make a meaningful difference to women's participation in the broader industry. We want to create more sustainable and self-generating careers, which is why we invested real money - that will be used to support women to build a range and breadth of skills in this industry for the long-term.

We received a record-breaking 452 applications for **Brilliant Stories** and **Brilliant Careers**, the first two programs strands announced in late 2015 under the Gender Matters initiative. These were the most applications ever received for any funding program undertaken by us and we were thrilled with the response to the callout for projects that hope to empower and increase the participation of women in the screen industry.

Earlier this month, we unveiled the 45 successful bold, original and compelling scripted story concepts (18 features, 11 online and 16 television) and 13 successful proposals from screen businesses with the broad aim of developing more careers for women.

We are thrilled to be able to stand here today and proudly say that these two programs have already clearly made a difference. We have seen applications from 27 new directors and 46 new writers (or writers extending their careers into new genres and

platforms) who have teamed with more experienced producers thus ensuring that new voices will be seen and heard and great new partnerships and collaborations formed.

These partnerships, I am sure, will be of real benefit to all of those involved and from that out to the sector more broadly. As I have said often, collaborations are key to good content creation and the survival of careers and businesses.

Courage, imagination and vision are what are needed in driving the change to address gender imbalance in the Australian film industry, and Screen Australia is up to the challenge.

**So the actions undertaken thus far are looking good, but I think we all also need to constantly be looking at what is the cause of the issue itself?**

Is it our inbuilt image of key creative talent, such as directors are male - or youngish male protagonists are needed to drive a story; is our focus from the outset too one-dimensional?

Are the gatekeepers just not getting it, to see the commercial value in women's storytelling on film? And who are these gatekeepers? Especially in the world we operate in today?

Is the inequity of other roles and demands outside the industry, such as being the primary child carers, creating obstacles?

#### **What else?**

As the leading government agency for film, television and online, it is our job to ensure that Australian stories are being told and celebrated on screen. We like other similar bodies around the world really exist because of local market failure so we already take a hands on interventionist role.

This means that I have no issue with taking the said interventionist position here on this issue. So we are and will continue to really look at what is happening, what is changing, talk to all players, analyze the stats, see where the gaps are and of course identify what we ourselves can do better.

We are not only the funders, but also often we both directly ourselves and through others assist the nurturing, the development and the innovation in the sector here - we therefore need to be leading the field on equality, and we need to be bold enough to make the change where it counts.

We need to continue to identify the right type of interventions to take out the perceived risk of engaging with female writers, producers and directors - we need interventions that will result in gender no longer being taken into the equation, at all, and certainly when talking about commercial opportunity.

It does seem odd to me, purely on a commercial basis, for anyone in today's theatrical environment to continue to ignore stories by and about people who are the core ticket buyers/viewers/consumers of the content which is being created. This is true across almost all indie cinema and goes further with the exception perhaps for some of the top end studio summer blockbusters - lord even Disney realises it now with their family films.

I really believe that this is of course a moral and creative issue but people are ignoring a commercial opportunity as well and for those in this room it is madness to not be conscious of this.

Beyond Brilliant Stories and Brilliant Careers (and our addition of gender and diversity consideration across all aspects of our slate overview) we believe we need interventions that focus on women at the supply and also the commercial distribution end of the value chain.

And this is where those of you in the sales and distribution areas come in, and where our final 2 strands of the Gender Matter initiative come into play.

We are seeking to address issues in opportunity, marketplace support, as well as access to experience and credits for talented women.

This is about creating opportunities, and removing the false perception that female films are risky. So looking at the Sales and Acquisition arena and Distribution there were again worrying facts and barriers.

A report commissioned for the Female Filmmakers Institute found that 70 per cent of successful female-directed films which premiered at the Sundance film festival between 2002 and 2014 picked up a deal from a small independent firm. By contrast, male-directed films at the same festival were split relatively evenly between majors and indie distributors. What this shows, is that by-and-large, even on relatively comparable indie films and from the same indie festival those independent movies with a female director at the helm struggle to secure distribution deals from major players, in comparison to their male counterparts.

According to this same study, the common misguided obstacles that women often face include:

- a sense among executives that films made by women or for women were less appealing to audiences;
- there are not female directors to choose from; and
- women are generally less interested in directing and showed little passion for more commercial, big-budget action fare.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/04/study-suggests-female-directed-films-get-smaller-distribution-deals>

This study highlights the real impact that these out-dated, and frankly offensive, gender-based biases are having on the process of buying and selling.

The idea that female-led films are for a niche audience only is a false dichotomy - they are not. We know women are great storytellers and create compelling and complex characters; we know that audiences want to see them, and we know that they earn money at the box office and of course on down the value chain.

As an aside we are all aware too that most films are not what we all hope for creatively and certainly commercially. The smaller the number of films in a pool there is of course therefore a higher chance of them not working so we also need, quite frankly, more films by women to raise the chances of them working to a level where the talent involved get to go again.

### **So how do we change this perception?**

We want to flood the pipelines with projects and build momentum - we don't just want this to be a one-off success in a single funding round or year. We want to make this work for the long-term, with greater numbers of good films and more audience satisfaction and stronger careers - and it's a challenge that I'm sure every single person in this room is willing to take on.

We know that many key sales agents and most key distribution decision makers are predominantly male, which means that of course there's going to be at least an unconscious bias towards male storytelling and their notion of audience - indie films with 30 year old white male leads anyone?

What Screen Australia is saying is that great stories are great stories - gender should not come into it.

We have all heard Sue Maslin, producer of local box office smash hit *The Dressmaker*, reflect on the obstacles she encountered when trying to finance the film. She said that "when I talked to people about raising finance for this very female-skewing movie, the almost exclusively male sales agents just weren't interested unless I had A-list males attached. Even with Kate Winslet and Judy Davis, two of the finest actresses alive, they just thought it was too risky."

### **So what's the proposal?**

We know that the Australian distribution landscape for feature films is challenging and securing a local distribution deal is particularly tough for female-driven filmmaking teams, especially with female directors.

With ancillary revenues declining, distributors are more risk averse than ever and their investment (minimum guarantees and P&A spends) in local film production has inevitably seen a reduction.

This has meant that, as a general rule, that the distributors, including perhaps some of you here in this room today, are more inclined to choose projects from existing proven networks of filmmakers, which has the unintended knock-on effect of perpetuating the male dominated status quo.

We are therefore instigating *Gender Matters: Better Deals* a pilot program aimed to create a new incentive for distributors to better look at and consider quality female-driven projects from the outset, with additional Screen Australia financial support pledged before production to help each film reach its target audience.

This is we believe a world-first pilot program, one that seeks to encourage greater consideration of the gender makeup for commercial projects in the local market. It encourages positive collaboration between producers and distributors early on, with the additional benefit of giving the producer a voice throughout the distribution process.

Screen Australia's ambitious pilot program, offers funding support to remove some of the barriers and disincentives affecting films that are perceived to be smaller and riskier in the marketplace, more often films by women, and also to give suitable teams the best negotiating position with their distribution partners.

We want to ensure that there is meaningful consultation on this marketing strategy and the P&A budget between the Producer, the Distributor and Screen Australia - with approval for this new contribution to the P&A budget ultimately up to our distribution team.

### How much is this worth?

To ensure we are enhancing the distribution and marketing quality of Australian films with significant female content, approximately \$1,000,000 will be available over two years, with each project able to apply to match the Minimum Guarantee offered by the Distributor up to a maximum amount of \$300,000.

To access this world-first pilot program, we are looking for theatrical feature film projects with budgets under \$10m with minimum guarantees expected to be 5% or more of the production budget. Projects must satisfy the Gender Matters 'three tick test' - that is three of:

- Female producer
- Female director
- Female writer
- Female writer/director (counts for two ticks)
- Female protagonist

Our support will be provided as a grant to be used as a non-recoupable contribution to the distributor's P&A budget. Funds must be used to boost the project's visibility in

the market and preferably be allocated to paid media costs, for the Australian theatrical release.

Matched funding is not automatic, and each project will be assessed on the strength of the deal terms, the experience of the distributor and the quality of the marketing strategy. Funding will also be provided on a first come, best dressed basis, with quality still a key ingredient - the pilot program will end once the funds have been exhausted.

It's worth noting that projects supported through this pilot may also be eligible for Screen Australia's P&A Plus program, closer to the release date.

While we are well aware that this is a bold new pilot program that we are trialling, and one that, as far as we are aware, hasn't been attempted anywhere else in the world, we remain confident that taking out the perceived risk associated with female-led projects, will ensure that female-driven projects not only reach their target audience, but also encourage producers to work in close partnership with distributors on female driven projects - to shape and market the film.

But this isn't where it ends. To ensure that ongoing professional development opportunities are available for women, to round out our suite of initiatives to tackle gender bias in the film industry, I am pleased to announce that Screen Australia is running a pilot attachment program, **Placements for Women** in the financial year 2016-17 for all scripted drama projects applying for more than \$500,000 investment from Screen Australia. Participating projects will receive up to \$20,000 to cover the cost of the attachment.

This program will be an add on to and run in conjunction with our existing investment programs and successful existing schemes such as the Directors Attachments run under the Directors Guild.

The purpose of this scheme is to provide valuable production experience for women who want to break into long-form storytelling whether as creatives or crew. We recognise that supporting women behind the scenes is equally important - think cinematography, music, set design, costume design, make-up, and so on. These placements will create valuable opportunities to extend networks and professional relationships that will ultimately assist with careers.

We anticipate that emerging and mid-level career female creatives and female crew that need to extend their production experience and/or take the next step in establishing an ongoing career will benefit from this scheme.

We want to ensure that the attachment position is a valuable one for both the female creative, and the project - The only criteria we are stipulating is that the attachment can be an above or below the line position but must have as its primary objective the ability to offer a meaningful learning and experiential opportunity. It cannot replace an existing crew position.

We are also looking here at ways that this can be of use particularly for women not in the two key cities where most of the screen production is taking place.

## Conclusion

I don't stand here today pretending that what we have announced is the perfect solution to the issue of gender inequality - but what I will say is that as a government agency we have a role in leading from the front, and tackling challenges when we see them.

I am immensely proud of *Gender Matters* across all its strands and firmly believe that in three years, when we look back and assess the success of our five-point plan, we will see that these initiatives, including the two measures announced today, will have made a real difference to the careers of female creatives in Australia.

As I said, I think this is not just a moral issue, this is obviously a way to get more, and better stories told. It is therefore creatively sensible. It is also undeniably a good idea commercially, especially in a world where most indie theatrical content has such high female audience.

The end result? I want to see an Australia screen sector where stories, told by women and or about women, are seen to be of equal value, where the opportunities are the same, where we do make the best stories for the interest of all audiences - both domestic and international. Ideally to a place where gender doesn't matter.

Hopefully the new strands today on top of those already announced in *Gender Matters* will help make this happen.