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**The Female Voice in Low budget, Independent Cinema of Australia: *Strange Colours,*
*The Second & Hot Mess.***

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Abstract

This study investigates the impediments that Australian female independent filmmakers face in bringing female centered stories onto the screen. In 2016, the federal screen funding agency Screen Australia launched *Gender Matters* to better understand the many barriers facing women filmmakers and create opportunities for female screen creatives to gain equity in the screen industries. But how has this impacted and improved conditions for female filmmakers? The authors of this current study are female screenwriters, directors and producers who have experienced and witnessed the many difficulties women face in the Australian screen industry. The article comprises case studies of recent, successful, female, independent feature filmmakers, the AACTA Award nominated creators of *Strange Colours*, *The Second* and *Hot Mess*. The research explores emergent themes and recommendations based on interviews with the filmmakers. They observe that while some impediments in the low budget, independent sector continue, others have subsided and a considerable number of promising developments are emerging. Screen Australia's *Gender Matters* and other initiatives by State-based screen agencies have encouraged this progress, but changes in the global socio-cultural discourse have also been influential.

Keywords: film; women; directors; producers; screenwriters; Screen Australia; creative careers; independent cinema; low budget cinema; Australian film; gender equity.

Introduction

In recent years, film and screen industries around the world have begun to acknowledge the longstanding gender disparity of women to men in key creative positions both on screen and behind the scenes. A 2014 global study by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that female characters represented just 30% of the total 386 characters featured in Australian films produced between 2010 and 2013 (Smith, Choueiti and Pieper 2014).

Behind the camera, only one in ten Australian films in that period was directed by a woman; a third of the writers were women and 30% of the producers were female (Screen Australia 2015, 6). A year later, Screen Australia launched its seminal report, *Gender Matters: Women in the Australian Screen Industry*, which aimed to understand the obstacles women encounter in gaining key creative roles and positions of influence in the Australian screen industry and to create opportunities for female screen creatives. From the outset, the report noted that there were far fewer female than male key creatives attached to funding applications in the roles of writer and director (Screen Australia 2015, 18).

The aim of this research is to assess the effectiveness of the *Gender Matters* initiative and to determine the current creative and practical challenges for female filmmakers in the independent and low budget feature film branch of the Australian film industry, which the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) defines as those with a budget of under \$2 million (2018). The authors of this study are female screenwriters, directors and producers who have experienced and witnessed many difficulties in producing female-centered screen stories in Australia, and these perspectives have influenced the research design. To interrogate the challenges and opportunities for women, the authors interviewed three female directors/writers from diverse backgrounds who have made recognised work since 2017. All three made feature films that were nominated for an AACTA Award in the Best Indie Film category from 2018 to 2020. It is worth mentioning that of the 52 films

nominated in this award category between 2018 and 2020, forty-three were directed by men and eight by women.

The *Gender Matters* report proposed a five-point, \$5 million plan over three years for a suite of initiatives that addressed the gender imbalance within the Australian screen industry. The strategy aimed to ensure that production funding was targeted to creative teams (writer, producer, director) that were at least 50% female by the end of 2018. In addition, it proposed to implement practical and effective measures, including a Women's Story Fund, 3 Tick Test (which would have at least three of the following elements: female director, female writer, female protagonist or female producer) and a women's enterprise initiative, to create sustainable and self-generating business infrastructure, ongoing professional development opportunities and viable career pathways. Furthermore, Screen Australia changed its assessment criteria to encourage projects that promote gender and cultural diversity and remove impediments that women who take time out of the workforce may face when applying for funding.

These measures, which aim to address gender equity in the film industry have been widely welcomed, but they are not without industry and academic criticism (Harris 2016; Verhoeven n.d.). While entering the film industry may be difficult for all aspiring practitioners, the barriers are higher for women to enter and develop a sustainable career and tell female-centred screen stories, than they are for men. Patterns of injustice, gender inequality and broader social equality indexes are evident in terms of pay, access to work, affirmation and support systems at all levels of the production hierarchy in many if not all local industries (Jones and Pringle 2015, 46). Commonly held assumptions abound, including the maintenance of myths around shortages of skilled female practitioners and the stereotypical roles women ought to fill in productions (Aylett 2018; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). Scholars have argued that '[m]ale domination of the world's film industries will

not decline until there is a different distribution of the film industry's resources' (Verhoeven, Coate and Zemaityte 2019).

Since the #MeToo era of social media activism and awareness-raising the tide has begun to turn. The 2020 edition of the long-running *Celluloid Ceiling Report*, prepared by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University, noted 'historic highs' of women working in roles such as directing, writing, and producing in top grossing U.S. films of that year (Lauzen 2020). Screen Australia similarly announced 57% of key creative roles were occupied by women across approved development and production funding in 2019/20, exceeding its KPI of 50% women in creative roles across all formats (2020). Such promising figures may appear to indicate that women now have more opportunities to express their experiences and understandings on screen. However, an open letter to the Screen Australia board, signed by over two hundred global academics and film industry advocates, expressed strong concern that Screen Australia's 2019 funding decisions still showed a significant gender bias (ScreenHub 2019). Some argue that cultural change in Australia is moving too slowly (French 2020, 288). *Gender Matters* Taskforce Chair, Joanna Werner, acknowledges 'the KPI has been lifted by high levels of participation by women in development applications, and these high levels are not yet carrying through to some areas of production' (Screen Australia 2020). Furthermore, Werner notes that scant data exists regarding the independent and low budget sector, which is arguably an important division of the industry for emerging female voices to be heard.

Research Design

The low budget, independent feature film sector offers unique opportunities for female directors, writers, and producers to write and create innovative screen stories (French 2015, 2). But how have women figured in the independent, low budget feature film production

sector in Australia and have screen agencies helped to foster integration and acceptance via initiatives such as *Gender Matters?* This research reveals some of the challenges and opportunities arising from widespread contemporary socio-political shifts towards greater gender parity in the screen industry via three women filmmakers.

Alena Lodkina directed and co-wrote *Strange Colours* (2017), wherein Lodkina's heroine Milena (Kate Cheel) journeys to meet with her estranged father in the remote opal mining community of Lightning Ridge. It was made on a micro-budget of approximately AUD\$200,000 funded through the Venice Biennale College¹. The arthouse drama premiered at the 2017 Venice Film Festival. *Strange Colours* was critically hailed as 'impressive' (Martin 2018) and nominated Best Indie Film at the 10th AACTA Awards.

Mairi Cameron's independent film *The Second* (2018) was the first project made through Stan's Original Fully Funded Features one-million-dollar initiative, in partnership with Screen Queensland. The psycho-sexual thriller follows a celebrated author (Rachel Blake), who is threatened when her best friend and muse reveals the dark secret behind her first novel's provenance. *The Second* 'toys with time, memory and the provocative side of storytelling' (Cockrell 2018) and was also nominated Best Indie Film at the 8th AACTA Awards.

Lucy Coleman directed and wrote *Hot Mess* (2018), which follows 25-year-old Loz (Sarah Gaul), a wannabe writer who seems intent on sabotaging her own success. The comedy, which cost Coleman \$3,000 of her own money to make, 'min[es] sexual frustrations for every possible laugh' (Pierce 2019). It was acquired for global distribution by Netflix in 2020 after a strong festival run including the Seattle International Film Festival. *Hot Mess* was nominated Best Indie Film at the 10th AACTA Awards.

The participants in this study were interviewed at length in 2021 about the process of developing, producing, and distributing independent cinema in Australia and internationally,

with each interviewee identifying examples from their professional practices and emergent careers. The researchers considered the interview data via a thematic analysis methodology to trace, explore and evaluate recurring topics (Mills, Eurepos and Wiebe 2010, 925-927).

Interviews are considered one of the primary tools of qualitative research, and help identify the personal experiences of participants, along with their feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions and outward existential conditions (Clandinin and Connelly 1994, 417).

Several international studies have used interviews to investigate the obstacles facing women working in the screen industries. *Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary Film Culture in the UK* conducted primary research over fifteen years through a detailed statistical analysis of British films from 2000 to 2015. Interviews conducted with fifty women in six key filmmaking roles. The project found that women are widely and consistently excluded from key creative roles in the British film industry and that no improvement in gender equality was made between the years 2003 and 2015 (Cobb, Williams & Wreyford 2019). The research also highlights the importance of promoting equality in the film industry through analysis and celebrating the engaging work produced when women are enabled to flourish in areas of production in which they are commonly under-represented.

Susan Liddy's study *In Her Own Voice: Reflections on the Irish Film Industry and Beyond* (2017) uses a similar methodology to the present study, analysing three in-depth, exploratory interviews with produced Irish female film and television writers. Liddy acknowledges that generalisations cannot be made based on three interviews, however she argues that many of the views expressed by her interviewees correspond to theoretical and empirical work emerging in the field (Liddy 2017, 19). Interview-based research, including spontaneous interviewer–interviewee interaction, creates a rich dataset of information (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 487), particularly if the interviewers come from a similar

background as the interviewees and are therefore privy to ‘insider meanings’ (Anderson 2006, 389).

Thematic Analysis

The research has identified three broad themes from the participant interviews the researchers have conducted. These themes help to clarify the status of women currently working in above-the-line (creative development) roles in the Australian independent, low budget feature film sector, and lead to several recommendations about how the federal and state screen agencies, and perhaps the screen industry more broadly, can foster a more inclusive and productive environment.

Theme 1 – Diverse Voices, Personal Perspectives

Australian cinema has long been concerned with postcolonial and nationalistic projects of Australianness, often falling back on stereotypes of typical Australian behaviour and focused largely on British/Anglo heritage (Hutcheson 1996, 40). The participants of this study recognise the power of film, particularly in the independent, low budget arena, to express diverse lived experiences in Australia, as well as influencing broader perceptions. While acknowledging the privileged position they hold in portraying a multiplicity of situations and characters, be they fictionalised or based on true life, the participants in this study understand the sector as a place for exploring and fostering diverse voices in front of and behind the camera, particularly for women in Australia. Mairi Cameron believes low budget films can enable particular stories that might not be seen in bigger budgeted, internationally focused Australian work.

You know, in that desire to speak to international audiences, I think we can lose ourselves in broader brushstrokes of what it is to be Australian. We've got crocodile hunters and red dogs

which is fine, but we need more than that! Cinema is a mirror to our culture and it's important. Independent filmmaking is where we can tell our real stories and they're vastly diverse, and we need to focus on that (2021).

As individual filmmakers and women in collaboration with other screen practitioners, each of the participants feel they have something unique to say in their films. The formation of the female voice includes lived experiences and memories, of which gender is an integral element, and is highly phenomenological in nature (Fisher 2011, 92). The creative work may become what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms, a form of *aberactive catharsis*, whereby artists try to express something about themselves, and their past (Runco 2007, 14-15). Yet, this expression appears to be at times conscious, and other times unconscious, and the participants often find it difficult to articulate exactly what is their 'female voice'. Cameron argues that it is integral to have women in key creative roles to tell authentic female stories.

You can't be a man and have a female lens or voice. It only comes from being female, but what is that? When I am directing, I don't think about bringing a female voice, I just bring my perspective. It's about putting women in the storytelling positions and behind the camera (2021).

The authors of this article use the term "the female voice" to capture the sphere of influence women in key roles have on various screen productions and screen stories. This use of the female voice is both a practical concern, as well as a philosophical one. Lisa French's analysis of projects supported by Screen Australia found a strong relationship between the gender of feature filmmakers and their protagonists, suggesting that 'stories from female points of view are more likely to be made by women directors' (2015, 4). Humm, citing both

Silverman and Foucault, points out that patriarchal voices ‘control the unfolding of discourse by “owning” discursive practices’ and urges women to actively subvert masculine hegemonic culture (1997, 41). In doing so, the authors of this study contend that female filmmakers dismantle voyeuristic notions of the male gaze and develop an active and nuanced female viewership of Australian independent cinema. Lodkina exemplifies this when she says,

I don't know what my voice is but all I know is that...these are my starting points and probably that somehow contributes to maybe projects being a little bit different to things that are normally made...Everything that's in the film was inspired by direct experience (2021).

Filmmakers often face endemic sexism when it comes to the formulation of female voices and screen characters. Screenwriting academic Radha O’Meara argues that while male characters are commonly named and described expansively in screenplays, female characters are often unnamed, described meagrely, highly sexualised and infantilised. This in turn ‘impacts on production practices, the nature of workplaces, the films produced, and the gender representations we see daily on our screens’ (O’Meara 2017, 79). Helen Jacey also notes the abundance of ‘complex, dark, male heroes’ in various screenplays and the anxiety many screenwriters hold that viewers ‘won’t like the heroine’ if she is too edgy or difficult (2010, 25). Developing multifaceted female characters for the screen becomes more critical when dealing with the intersectional experiences of women both on camera and behind the scenes, where addressing the imbalance may be more urgently required (Johnson 2021). However, this shift towards elusive, multifarious, and even dangerous female characters on screen may be met with resistance from some quarters. As screenwriters Michelle and Benjamin Law argue:

...a lot of white men aren't as used to having to empathise with people who aren't them. Whereas if you're a woman, if you're from an ethnic minority, you're constantly watching other people's stories and putting yourself in their shoes (2016).

Such resistance often leads to a form of counter-resistance from the participants of this study who from their own intersectional backgrounds, report struggles both internal and external to convey stories that are distinctly female, often defiant, and nearly always difficult to tell. Here, the limitations of low budget filmmaking, in terms of time and money, mean that the participants regret they could not do more to subtly advance their agendas. For Cameron, who identifies as over-50 and 'still emerging' in the industry, the politics of representing older women on-screen is close to her own desires to tell female-centred stories.

I come from a very feminist point of view. With more time, more money, more confidence, I might have come out with a film that had more to say about gender and rape culture, and about female storytellers, because I want to make films that aren't just entertaining, but meaningful as well (Cameron 2021).

The participants of this study expressed a desire to make sense of a large breadth of human experience and not be restricted to depicting only female characters. Indeed, the way female filmmakers treat male characters on screen can be political, and initiate 'radical new perspectives' (Lee 2020). In reviewing *Strange Colours*, Adrian Martin notes that it 'offers a fascinating and original portrait of Australian masculinity' (2018). Lodkina, a Russian migrant to Australia, insists such a treatment is borne out of getting to know the community of Lightning Ridge and its inhabitants intimately, and establishing a relationship based on trust and mutual understanding, rather than consciously writing from a particularly 'female' perspective.

That said, the creation of more female-centered events and situations on screens means, as US filmmaker Jennie Snyder Urman states, ‘the less we have to fit into one box, or one set of assumptions’ (Nakamura 2018). Lucy Coleman, creator of *Hot Mess*, noted the nuanced treatments of characters both male and female by women in independent cinema may be leading to a broader acceptance, empathy, and appreciation of female-told screen stories and characters in Australia.

I feel like I've noticed a big shift in men embracing female stories in much more recent years... Our cinema and audience experience with *Hot Mess* has been broad as well. Our cinemas for festivals weren't just packed with women... We had women and men at the end of the film chatting to us and our followers on our Instagram are both women and men and when men chat to me about the film... They're talking to me about the film in a way where they're putting themselves in the shoes of the female protagonist and relating to her (Coleman 2021).

Yet concern persists about how this gender rebalance is being addressed and supported by government policy in Australia. The *Gender Matters 3 Tick Test*, while aiming to support more female screen leadership, has nonetheless been criticized for reiterating the status quo as women in the industry already tend to work together with other women (Verhoeven, n.d.). Furthermore, the test may unnecessarily force filmmakers to form creative teams merely for the purpose of eligibility (Harris 2016). The participants of this study claim that for the female voice to be developed for the screen, it is imperative for female filmmakers to work with those who encourage, understand, and support a female point of view irrespective of their gender. As Coleman recognised,

It's more kind of who you align with as producers and how much they have the capacity to really deeply engage with a female story because I found some producers and heads of development incredible to work with and they really embrace the female experience and what

I'm trying to express and then I found other producers to be really narrow-minded and to almost strip the story of its femaleness because they just don't relate to it themselves (2021).

Cameron spoke highly of her 'male allies'.

That would be how I'd describe [co-producer and writer of *The Second*] Stephen [Lance] who leans in strongly towards female-centric stories and writes fabulous female characters. Also, he's a great collaborator. He listens and he wants to make stories that are respectful and sensitive to female perspectives. I would put Mark Wareham [cinematographer] and [editor] Steve Cooper in the same category. They were both very supportive and happy to work with female stories and directors (Cameron 2021).

The participants in this research study recommend that distributors, exhibitors and platforms examine how they might expand upon opportunities for audiences to engage with female-made independent cinema. Cameron suggested cinemas open up to the idea of shorter theatrical windows rather than the gap that currently exists between an often-too-brief theatrical release and VOD or streaming. She believed that this is especially the case for independent films with small marketing budgets.

The Second had an exceptional marketing campaign thanks to Stan, but we also benefited from a short theatrical window and the buzz of media attention and different audiences promoting the film to each other. I just think they're different demographics that want different experiences (Cameron 2021).

The research participants generally accept the introduction and maintenance of quotas to ensure gender parity in the Australian screen industry, if with some hesitation and confusion

about how and for whom they should be applied. Verhoeven, Coate and Zemaityte argue, ‘simply adopting an “add women directors and stir” approach will not be enough since male-dominated gatekeeping transpires at many points in the lifecycle of feature films made by women’ (2019, 137).

Theme 2 – Risk, Experimentation, Innovation

A second theme the authors identified in this research was that independent, low budget filmmaking in Australia allows women filmmakers to take risks in testing form and content and gives them control over their creative work. Critics often bemoan the conventional development processes in Australia, which ‘creates a sad (and sadly prevalent) situation where style is regarded as a mere add-on’ (Martin 2014, 23). While other avenues may have been unavailable or inflexible, the female participants within our study state that producing a low budget film independently has allowed them to take risks with structural form, aesthetics and themes, and feature edgy and diverse content. Lodkina argued that this is more possible (and perhaps more palpable) in the independent, low budget space because it is more personal.

You're working to express an idea that doesn't need to be expressed. The market didn't ask for it...You're taking risks...I think in low budget [filmmaking] you have that freedom. You have the freedom to do that (2021).

This commentary applies equally to both experimental female low budget, independent filmmakers, and those whose work observes more traditional genre and narrative conventions. Universally, the participants acknowledge the independent component of the screen industries allows for innovation, even if only incremental, and a greater degree of ‘creative freedom’ from onerous commercial restrictions and imperatives.

I think it's also a space where we can play not just with stories and characters but with film form, which is another way for Australian cinema to find relevance on a world stage. Bolder directorial visions are enabled by lower budgets with fewer commercial agendas, but also these are the films that cut through in this space. It's a place for new voices and cinematic perspectives (Cameron 2021).

Coleman contended that the independent sector is integral for emerging screen voices to be empowered:

It was really the only way it was going to get made, so I think there was no other route...I mean really it was the only option and it gave me just the complete freedom to just do it (2021).

The study participants also insist independent film in Australia supports a variety of genres that appeal to female and diverse audiences. The Australian marketplace, according to the *Gender Matters* report, has historically been unwilling to take a risk on women operating in traditionally male genres and, furthermore, is not recognising the economic value of cinema-going female audiences, which female writers, directors and producers are strongly positioned to reach (Screen Australia 2015, 10). Even in the past year, the appetite for high quality, female-made films has notably increased, and there is greater critical reception to and visibility of female creators at major film festivals and award ceremonies. For example, the winner of the 2021 Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (Julia Ducournau's *Titane*) became the second-ever film directed by a woman to be awarded the honour in a field overwhelmingly dominated by men (Thorpe 2021). The participants in this study agree change has occurred, and audiences are opening up to gendered approaches to typically 'male' genres and forms, although sometimes not without challenges as Cameron discovered.

The audience for *The Second* was women, because of the two strong female lead characters. We used genre, the psychological thriller twist at the end, to attract a wider audience, but that's a tricky line to navigate. I don't want to be a poor copy of a bigger budget model; I'd rather subvert the genre in some way. But genre is one of the ways, as a little film, to attract an audience (2021).

In many ways, the independent film sector in Australia, despite (or in spite of) its limitations, fosters intimate modes of production and collaboration, which may be inviting to female creatives. The intimate nature of small cast and crews and limited locations in low budget, independent filmmaking, coupled with a tight budget and schedule to realise a well-honed script, creates an arena in which to experiment and play safely. The typical flattening of traditional production hierarchies in the sector allows for organic and strong connections between collaborators and a more inclusive environment in which the production occurs. As Lodkina noted:

I guess what I thought I could offer to the audiences, and to the crew and to myself, was this kind of level of intimacy in working and I got to know the people that I was working with well. It both applies to crew and performers...which I guess feeds into creativity, feeds into that level of authenticity, proximity to people, filmmaking as living, you know, being alive and interacting with people, filming people that you are fascinated by (2021).

Although the low budget, independent sector in Australia allows for women to experiment with cinematic form with relative agility, some participants worried about a culture that consistently fails to foster divergent creators. While some sectors of the arts have traditionally understood the necessity for artists to access education and exposure to standards of excellence, screen culture in Australia seems sadly deficient. The Australian

screen industry and corresponding governmental institutions are commercially-focused when compared to other creative spheres of activity, and value individualism and celebrity often to the exclusion of collaborative and cultural imperatives (Moore and O'Meara 2021, 32). Some of the participants noted there exists little to no scope for filmmakers in Australia to develop new ideas, conduct research or even 'think' and be inspired, whereas artists, musicians and writers can apply for residencies through arts grants.

The participants argued for greater infrastructure for film engagement and screen cultures, including the need for new spaces, supported by government, business and philanthropy, in which to view and discuss cinema. Additionally, Lodkina passionately advocated for the continued role of film criticism, and an increase in the esteem in which independent cinema is held by the news media. Reviews and news about independent cinema appear to be slowly dwindling in the mainstream news media publications and outlets due in part to the increasingly 'blurry line between advertising and editorial' (Martin 2016). Lodkina asserted:

I think it's just like it's an ecosystem. There are various parts of the film ecosystem that are malnourished in Australia and so it contributes to the whole organism being weak (2021).

Theme 3 – Skills, Careers, Opportunities

The participants in this study unanimously agreed that taking the independent route empowered them to take on leadership and production roles, without necessarily requiring gatekeeper approval. In the process, they have advanced their careers to the 'next level'. Mairi Cameron notes the industry perception that 'you're not a serious filmmaker until you've made that first feature or ventured into long form in some capacity' remains a powerful benchmark,

and therefore female filmmakers are often actively exploring ways to make a feature film. Once this opportunity has been exploited, previously closed doors open.

For all participants in this study, the success of their films – defined by awards, audience and critical exposure and reaction – has led to increased opportunities and career advancement including Screen Australia funding, talent escalator programs, industry representation and most importantly, opening film industry doors for future creative opportunities. For Cameron, the creative and financial risk of *The Second* has led to a directing job on the ABC television series *Harrow* (2021). This chance arose from an Australian Directors Guild scheme aimed at improving gender parity by offering opportunities to female directors. For Lodkina, the success of *Strange Colours* has led to production investment funding from Screen Australia for her second feature, although the budget still qualifies as ‘low’.

It's amazing how it sounds like such a huge amount of money and then when you start doing your budget, the film budget it like just goes (Lodkina 2021).

Lucy Coleman’s initial success attracted online platform distribution for *Hot Mess*, with video-on-demand streamers seeming to embrace independently made content in a post-COVID bid to attract larger audiences. Coleman detailed her film’s release:

It's very much a streaming film because it's made for so little money it doesn't really have the big blockbuster theatre aesthetics. So, they were a hugely integral part to then getting it on Netflix and we are about to launch on Foxtel movies as well. We were on Qantas and Virgin airlines before COVID happened and we had our cinema run which was awesome and then Gravitas Ventures picked us up in the US and so we're on Amazon Prime in the US and we're on like a million platforms in the US (2021).

However, female filmmakers still face obstacles as they try to establish a career, and this applies to the ‘success stories’ examined in this research. The *Gender Matters* report identified five major blocks that may impact women filmmakers over the course of their career. These include key male industry decision makers, male dominance in related industries, time out of the workforce/childcare, lack of self-belief and pay equity (Screen Australia 2015, 7-8). Although none of the research participants identified as parents or carers, they confirmed encountering these other impediments, as Coleman explained:

I've certainly experienced what I think all women experience of just being underestimated and sort of dismissed and you really have to prove yourself a hundred times over to get any job, to get any kind of step further in a lot of ways, but I don't know, it's sort of almost like I feel all those sorts of challenges only ever push you to be better (2021).

The *Gender Matters* report cited barriers to female participation and progress within the screen industry due to potential bias on the part of key industry decision makers. Female directors have collectively experienced significant and multiple barriers to industry entry and sustainable success in a way that men have not (Verhoeven, Coate & Zemaityte 2019, 151). Further, the *Gender Matters* study notes, because decision makers are overwhelmingly male, they are less likely to back projects that have female key creatives attached or which provide opportunities for emerging female talent (Screen Australia, 7). Some of the study participants stated that even female decision makers have been programmed to back projects that feature a male point of view.

...five years earlier when I pitched this to female executives/gate keepers they told me that audiences were not interested in films about female friendship...That was a very shocking

moment for me, I thought, 'oh look if it had been two male executives...but it was two female executives! (Cameron 2021).

It is encouraging, in the wake of #MeToo and the *Gender Matters* initiative, to find that emerging Australian female filmmakers are making films in an era of industry and cultural change where the female point of view is both encouraged and supported with funding initiatives, talent escalator programs as well as audience backing. As Coleman observed:

I am wanting to tell female stories because they are of deep importance to me and it happens that the funding bodies are supporting female voices right now...We're in a new era and the money people have realised audiences are 50% female, and everyone is interested in stories about female friendship, stories with female protagonists (2021).

However, for some, the best opportunities to develop a career lie outside of Australia, leveraging a favourable reputation from having completed successful low budget feature film work locally. After *Hot Mess*, Lucy Coleman participated in international talent escalators including *Talent USA: LA* with Screen Australia and Imagine Impact run by Ron Howard and Brian Grazer. She has gained representation by a US agent and has multiple projects in development.

I've done a couple of LA trips now and each time I'm there I end up going to about 30 meetings and all of them will have watched **Hot Mess** before I walk in the room...It ends up just being such amazing meetings because people have such a sense of what my voice is and who I am as a filmmaker and all that kind of stuff (Coleman 2021).

Talent escalator initiatives such as *Talent USA: LA* can support and open doors for female and emerging Australian filmmakers to receive agency representation as well as increased

access to streaming giants such as Netflix, Foxtel and Amazon Prime. Mairi Cameron's experience as a director's attachment on *Harrow* after the success of *The Second* also demonstrates that industry incentives and attachments to encourage production companies to employ women are another step in the right direction.

However, Verhoeven argues:

In Australia, women constitute around half of all film-school graduates. And yet they do not go on to receive the full benefits of a public funding system delivered through Screen Australia. This is a spectacular waste of industry resource and an indictment on the national funding agency which doesn't, and hasn't for a long time, served the full national interest (n.d.).

This is a sentiment the participants of this research project echo.

I'd love to see funding bodies invest more in the emerging talent who are fresh out of film school because I think they bring new perspectives and can do a lot with a little amount of money. Give them a little bit of money and creative control and watch a whole new era of strong, diverse, unique voices emerge (Cameron, 2021).

However, it must be noted that the ability of women to continuously engage with low-paid, full-time creative work reduces significantly in later life. The participants note that during their youth, they and their collaborators possessed a certain zeal and 'hunger' for artistic exploration, fruitful collaborations, success and fame. However, without mentorship, advocacy, and guidance, emerging talent suffers burnout and exploitation. The longevity of a career beyond a first low budget feature was an ever-present concern for the participants of this study.

We're still lucky to have all the people that we're working with, but I think a number of my crew have said that that's probably the last low budget film they'll do because it's extremely stressful. You're not getting paid enough and...it's fine in your 20s and your 30s but when you're getting into your 40s you've got a family to support and a mortgage maybe. Maybe you don't want to work like this. It's too much (Lodkina 2021).

Once women obtain leadership roles in the industry, they may not have adequate protection from financial and reputational ruin, nor do they fit easily into cultures of 'mateship', which often govern the management of relationships in Australia (Piterman 2008). Pervasive stereotyping and poor provisions for women in the workplace lead many to form a dim view of the industry, and their role within it. Women often make difficult decisions to exit the creative workforce at this juncture. Lucy Coleman, the youngest participant making her first feature, and with the smallest budget, acknowledges the short lifespan of working in the independent, low budget sector.

It's a completely unsustainable model of filming and I feel like you can maybe do it once or twice in your career because at the end of the day you need to be paying rent and paying your cast and paying your crew and not only putting a roof over your head but putting a roof over your team's head (Coleman 2021).

Additionally, some argue the 'curse of the first time filmmaker' persists, and the opportunity to create a second or third feature film has for more than a decade eluded many Australian directors, male and female alike, although demonstrably more so women (Groves 2021).

Coleman identified specific resources she needs to support the development of her next film.

I do massively now want to be able to focus a lot more on writing and directing...It would definitely be so much more amazing next time around to have really hard-working producers working alongside me and to then have that PR person at the end of it and that whole machine that goes along with distribution and everything (2021).

This study demonstrates that emerging, as well as experienced Australian female filmmakers, can achieve much with a minimal budget, if only for a defined period of their careers. While the idea of quotas to support Australian screen industry gender parity may be controversial, some in the industry believe they are integral to balance out decades of unconscious bias towards industry support of male screen content and creative production roles (Fisher 2018). Support of female filmmakers by national and state funding bodies, production companies and distributors has proven to be an investment in the growth of our local industry that resonates world-wide, but without it, the opportunities for female filmmakers in Australia could atrophy.

Conclusion

As female writers, directors and producers who have struggled to get films made in Australia, the authors of this article are heartened by comments from the participants that now is a 'good time' to be a female filmmaker. The participants' first features have emerged at a critical juncture in history when female voices and screen stories have become ever-more celebrated and acknowledged. A study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2020) noted an increase in opportunities in the screen industries of the United States for women as well as for people from racial and ethnic minority groups and the LGBTQ community (although it found women directed only 10.6% of the 100 highest-grossing films in 2019). Closer to home, it is encouraging that since the *Gender Matters* initiative, the percentage of women in key production roles in Australian feature drama that have received Screen Australia development and production funding has increased from 27% in 2016/17 to 52% in 2019/20

(Screen Australia 2020). There has also been an increase of female protagonists in successful feature, television and online drama development and production applications in 2019/20. Across all formats, 62% of the protagonists in successful applications were female. Key creative roles in feature drama, however, continue to show the highest levels of inequity, with only 18% female directors in Australian feature films from 2015/16 to 2018/19, and an average of 20% over the eight-year period (Screen Australia 2020).

Independent film in Australia gives female writers and directors autonomy over their creative work to develop skills and take risks to create intimate and innovative female-centered films. Appealing to a niche and broad audiences alike, these films have been acclaimed both critically and commercially. While the participants in this study appear to thrive in the creative freedoms inherent within independent and low budget production, they nevertheless spoke of the financial strain in creating these films. They receive little, if any, remuneration and are not able to financially support their creative collaborators adequately. It appears, therefore, that independent female filmmakers can only viably work in this way early on in their careers and it is not a sustainable method of filmmaking without industry and government support.

Creating further opportunities for new female voices to be included in the sector in Australia, such as government and industry initiatives that support the top emerging female film-makers, and fostering forums which encourage debate and dialogue around cinema throughout the nation, may expedite further meaningful change. However, the underrepresentation of women across many key roles, particularly writer and director roles, requires ‘a cultural change the entire industry needs to embrace and act upon’ (Screen Australia 2020).

The participants in this initial study of women in the low budget, independent sector of the Australian film industry stressed the importance of aligning themselves with producers

and other collaborators, regardless of gender, who support and encourage the female voice to develop, produce and distribute their independent films. Subsequent studies could draw on a larger participant pool, as has been undertaken in other countries, to identify whether cultural shifts such as #MeToo and Australian film industry initiatives such as *Gender Matters* have enabled emerging and experienced female filmmakers to sustain success on a broader scale in Australia and beyond.

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¹ A Venice Biennale program dedicated to helping young artistic talents develop new work alongside experienced mentors.