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Putting gender in the mix

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Putting gender in the mix
Employment, participation, and role expectations
in the music industries

Marion Leonard

Efforts to map women’s participation in the music industries have been hampered by a lack of data. However, available statistics point to a continuing underrepresentation of women in the music industries; and the disparity is particularly acute within certain areas of practice. In 2010 the Performing Rights Society for Music (PRS), the UK’s leading collection society, revealed that women accounted for only 14 percent of their registered music creators and writers. This statistic prompted the PRS Foundation to fund the “Women Make Music” initiative as a way to raise awareness of the gender gap, correct stereotypes, encourage participation, and increase the profile of women creating new music.

Research commissioned in 2008 by the Cultural Leadership Programme and published as a substantial report, found that in the UK music sector “only 20% of businesses have any form of female representation on the management team and only 10% have an all female team” (Cultural Leadership Programme 2008: 29). According to the report, women in the music sector were generally very underrepresented within positions of responsibility: the average number of female executives per firm was as low as 0.2. Such evidence of gender inequality in leadership positions within the music industries is by no means unique to the UK. In 2012 the editorial team of the Australasian Music Industry Directory (AMID), in consultation with other industry professionals, ranked for the first time the most powerful people in the Australian music industry. The criteria included who has the greatest “ability to ‘shape’ the scene,” along with “their involvement in industry initiatives, overall career accomplishment, economic impact and public profile” (Fitzsimons 2012). The “power list” included 50 places and 56 people (some business partners held joint positions). Only six women appeared on the list, two of whom shared their place with a male colleague; overall, then, women were just under 11 percent. While the list can be critiqued for its partiality, it indicates the music industries’ gender gap.

Books on women working in the music industries usually focus on women musicians and performers, often with the aim of celebrating women’s contribution to the history of popular music (see, for example, Dahl 1984; Gaar 1993; Hirshey 2001; Downes 2012). In documenting women’s experience, field research with musicians has shown
how women have established their music careers, from acquiring instruments and learning to play, to performing and navigating the music business (see, e.g., Bayton 1998; Tucker 2000; Reddington 2007; Leonard 2007). A few specifically highlight women involved in music production and sound engineering (Sandstrom 2000; Smith 2009). Some recent work on women’s changing relationship with music technologies examines how artist-producers (Wolfe 2012) and women involved in the electronic dance music scene (Farrugia 2012) have navigated a gendered sphere of practice which has historically and discursively been associated with masculinity. Music journalism has also been a focus, with critical accounts addressing the work of women music journalists and the gendered discourse of music journalism (McDonnell 1995; Davies 2001; McLeod 2001). While the literature on women musicians, journalists, DJs, and music engineers is growing, the experience of women working in other roles within the music sector is much less well documented. Indeed, Smith (2009: 308) remarks that, except for musicianship, “scholarship on gender segregation in other music industry roles has been meagre. Because of this, the gendered division of labour in the music industry is not yet adequately understood.”

This chapter explores how gendered attitudes circulate within the workplace and in what ways they frame work in different sectors of the music industries. The plural term “music industries” suggests the chapter is not engaging with a unified field of practice, nor is it concerned only with the recording industry (Williamson and Cloonan 2007). I will draw on interviews with eight women who have worked in artist management, tour management, A&R (artist and repertoire), and concert promotion, although first I discuss the contexts in which these women work as a way to establish the extent to which their occupations can be broadly characterized as sex segregated.

These women work in largely under-studied but particularly sex-segregated areas of music employment. All eight were based in London, England and ranged in levels of seniority from a booking agent’s assistant to a general manager of a record company. Many of the women had established portfolio careers, having worked in different roles, including radio promotion, international relations, music publishing, and marketing, so had different levels of experience in management, A&R, and concert promotion. For example, one participant worked for two years at a junior level in A&R before moving on to develop expertise in other areas, eventually becoming a general manager of a record company. Another participant began as a regional A&R scout and was promoted to A&R manager, where she stayed ten years. Therefore, they could offer a broad perspective: collectively they were engaged with international professional networks, international tour management, and the management and career development of artists building international profiles. The majority of them worked with rock bands and artists but some had worked with artists in other genres. The participants could also reflect on their experience of working with artists at different stages of career development, from new and developing bands through to major international recording stars. Seven of the approximately hour-long interviews were conducted by telephone; their responses to the open-ended questions were recorded and transcribed. One respondent offered a written response to the research questions via email. The women all seemed candid in their responses. Their comments have been anonymized; references to particular record labels, bands, or named individuals have been omitted.
Gender and music occupations

Studies of the music industries in different countries offer an insight into gendered patterns of employment. For example, in the Nordic music industry, women’s participation tends to be low in areas such as A&R and top executive positions (Power 2003: 14). In Sweden, “men tend to work as executives and with A&R activities whereas women to a larger extent tend to work as administrators and with promotion” (Power 2003: 76). Similarly, in countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the music industries have clear gender divisions. Ambert found that men in the region undertook most of the production, circulation, and delivery functions; in several countries men owned “the means of production (studios, cassette and CD manufacturing, retail outlets and independent radio and TV stations)” (2003: 31). Women were generally “limited to composing and performing. Even within the ambit of these roles, women seldom play an instrument, and are clustered in backing vocals or as vocalists” (Ambert 2003: 31). Recent research in the UK (Creative & Cultural Skills 2009) has also found a considerable gender disparity: men are 66 percent of workers in the music industry. Moreover, certain roles were even more highly sex segregated. So, while retail and distribution of recordings were undertaken by a workforce that was 44 percent female, the proportion of women working in promotion, management, and agency-related activities was as low as 23 percent. While some doubt has been raised about the complete accuracy of these figures (UK Music 2012), the research nonetheless helps to highlight inequality.

Another way to gauge women’s presence within different music industries is to consider membership in professional music organizations, although participation in such organizations does not necessarily reflect employment ratios. For example, the extent to which music engineering and production is male dominated is suggested by the fact that women are 4 percent of the members of the UK-based Music Producers’ Guild (Savage 2012). The International Music Managers Forum (IMMF), which represents the interests of the music management profession, has five chapters in the US and 15 other national chapters worldwide. Women’s membership varies in each chapter but the available information points to a generally low level of involvement. For example, 30 percent of the members of the MMF South Africa are women (Music Managers Forum South Africa 2012), while women account for just 16 percent of the membership of the UK branch (personal communication, August 28, 2012). Barry Bergman, the president of the national headquarters of the US chapters, describes women’s membership in the US organization as “minimal” (personal communication, August 15, 2012). This low level of involvement is mirrored in the representation of women on the organization’s board. Of the 11 members of the MMF US’s executive board only one is a woman; no women serve on the advisory board.

Experiencing the gendered workplace

While such data help identify the gender biases within music occupations, these figures cannot give insight into the specifics of how gender informs decisions about employment or how particular roles become gender typed. Statistics cannot capture...
the decision-making processes through which people select occupational roles, employers identify employees, and people navigate their careers by moving in or out of different jobs. For a greater understanding of how women have negotiated careers within very male-dominated areas of work, I turn now to the interviews. The research participants, while a relatively small sample group, described how their work experience, behavior, and opportunities had been shaped by gender attitudes. In considering this material I follow Ridgeway’s (2011: 4) lead by “not asking the ultimate, sweeping question of why gender inequality has persisted, but rather the more proximate, means-focused question of how it has persisted.” The interviewees described how gendered role expectations were common, working to shape the experience of people who were trying to break into the sector or were already in post. They discussed instances: particular situations, contexts, or work cultures in which they felt they were treated differently because they were female. As most of them had worked for a number of different employers and with a wide range of personnel, however, they did not necessarily encounter such difficulties regularly.

Their experiences also differed. For instance, a record company general manager stated that she did not feel her career had been blighted by sexism. By contrast, a tour manager described regularly encountering difficulties with men promoters and security staff when on the road. One respondent tied the issue to “age and stage” (personal communication, October 18, 2012); she had initially encountered difficulties but, as she grew more experienced and was promoted to more senior positions, she encountered these attitudes less and also felt better equipped to deal with them.

One point where sex segregation of jobs occurs is at the recruitment stage because, as Ridgeway (2011: 99) notes, “the sex segregation of jobs is an emergent structure that comes about through the job-matching processes by which applicants seek and employers place men and women into different positions in an employment organization.” At this stage barriers to entry can be established which discourage women from applying for a position or prevent employers from thinking about women as ideal candidates for a job. To take these in turn, first consider how gendered role expectations about specific jobs can act as a barrier to women wishing to enter that field. For example, a recent newspaper article noted “a complete dearth of women” (Lindvall 2009) working for record companies in A&R. Women have been so absent from this field that people in this post have historically been referred to as “A&R men.” The description continues to be regularly used rather than the more neutral reference to “A&R personnel.” One woman with ten years of A&R experience described her frustration when newspaper reporters write A&R “men”: “What I think that does, is to stop women from thinking that they could go and do that job” (personal communication, October 15, 2012). This label reinscribes the role as one naturally undertaken by men and moreover as a job suitable for men. To unpack this one needs to attend to assumptions about gender. Women need to negotiate a male-dominated field of practice and to face jobs carrying particular gender connotations.

The perception of certain roles as more suitable for men or women can lead people involved in the selection process to make quick decisions about the suitability of particular candidates. One research participant, reflecting on her experience of specialist music recruitment agencies, said: “They are always trying to put you into PA [personal assistant] roles or secretary roles. They are just trained to think of you as a
young woman in fixed terms” (personal communication, October 18, 2012). She first entered the workplace by applying to a training program for university graduates run by a major record company. The program took several months and formed part of a very competitive recruitment process. At the end of the scheme she was offered a number of jobs, including a personal assistant role, but she declined these as she wished to work specifically in A&R. When one of the male candidates enquired if he might instead be put forward for the personal assistant job he was told: “Oh no. We would never put a guy forward for that” (personal communication, October 18, 2012). In this instance the employer had a mental picture of the ideal employee for the supportive role of a personal assistant based on previous employment patterns and gendered expectations about the qualities a woman would bring to the post. While one cannot gauge from this one account how common such instances are, it nevertheless illustrates how ideas about gender can become so ingrained within a workplace that opportunities for change are impeded.

**Gendered cultures**

Once they had secured work in the sector, several women explained that, at various points in their career, they found the workplace to be not only male dominated but also one in which employees were encouraged or even expected to adopt particular patterns of gendered behavior. This resonates with Negus’ 1992 description of the A&R department of a transnational record company where men executives worked in offices that opened out onto an open-plan area occupied by women secretaries and personal assistants. He observed the “casually dressed A&R men frequently strolled from their offices into this space exhibiting an informal style of working with relationships based around a bantering male camaraderie, while they were waited on by their handmaidens” (Negus 1992: 58). The number of women working in A&R roles within record and publishing companies has increased in the intervening years, including senior appointments; for example, Caroline Elleray became Head of A&R at Universal Music Publishing UK in 2007. Nevertheless, the descriptions of A&R departments in record companies given to me by women working in the music industries today were dishearteningly similar to Negus’ account. One respondent, now a manager of a very successful and critically acclaimed rock band, said when she worked in A&R “it was the pretty girls out on the floor and the men in the office” (personal communication, September 4, 2012). Another woman reflected on the time she had spent in the A&R departments of different London-based record companies. She described how colleagues engaged in male social bonding rituals and how the A&R workplace culture favored stereotypically masculine behaviors of robust competitiveness and self-promotion:

You just have to behave in a way like everyone around you is behaving or they see it as a sign of weakness, I think. So there is a lot of bragging and a lot of arrogance; and all that side of things does not come naturally to me. I’m not that kind of game player. ... In one particular record company, it was all guys in their mid-30s and then me much younger and most of the
time they seemed to spend bigging each other up, stabbing each other in the back, going to strip clubs, all these things and I had to try and keep up one way or another.

(personal communication, October 18, 2012)

As a woman in this environment she felt that she was continually marked out as different because she could not, and did not want to, engage with the performative culture of homosociality. Admittedly both of these women now work in other roles. So they were reflecting on past experience. Nonetheless, they offer an insight into a work culture in which they felt stymied on account of assumptions about gender.

Some interviewees perceived a double standard in operation, whereby certain modes of behavior might be permitted for men but were judged unacceptable when adopted by women working in the same role. For example, a tour manager, who has worked on US and European tours with numerous internationally acclaimed artists in the fields of rock and pop, remarked: “If I have a go at somebody or I lose my temper, it is seen to be ‘Oh, that crazy woman. She must be PMS.’ Whereas if a male reacts just the same way as I do to a situation [the response is] ‘Yeah, you give ‘em one!’” (personal communication, August 22, 2012). Her comments have parallels with the experiences of women rock musicians (Leonard 2007: 58–9), who describe how the history and culture of rock music supports and sustains stereotypical gendered behaviors. While instances such as the one described by the tour manager may occur only infrequently, they suggest a culture of masculinity within some music environments where gendered identities are expected and endorsed. Similarly a booking agent’s assistant explained that she felt compelled to adapt her behavior in order to preserve her professional reputation. She said male colleagues judged her actions differently on account of her sex: “You need to be careful not to give the wrong impression just because we are girls. We have assistants that are boys and they can go out and get absolutely smashed with the bands. But that is fine because they are boys. We can do the same but, you know, you’re definitely seen in a different way. You have to handle yourself a bit differently” (personal communication, September 4, 2012). She conceded that her understanding of the workplace as a gendered arena meant that she modified her behavior to fit in: “I think we compensate by being boyish. I don’t know many women working in this industry that are super-girly. … Let’s say we can handle a male conversation quite well. It is definitely an issue” (personal communication, September 4, 2012).

Motherhood and work

Interviewees’ comments in relation to children highlighted further inequalities in the workplace. Some discussed the negative impact of motherhood on career progression, the pressure not to take extended maternity leave because of the demands of the job, and the difficult logistics of organizing childcare and balancing work schedules. The participants discussed these parenting issues as ones that particularly affected them as women, reflecting the fact that parenthood usually has a greater impact on the careers of women than of men (Brown 2010; Ridgeway 2011).
challenges discussed here are also faced by many women in the wider workplace, but certain dimensions seemed particularly pronounced for women working in certain music sector roles. Almost all the women described the demands of their jobs as being very difficult to balance with the responsibilities of motherhood. Some even described these twin demands as completely incompatible. For example, a tour manager who did not have children said that planning long-term commitments was very difficult, “because you are on the road for a year or longer, you think in legs [of a tour]. … So before you know it, a year and a half has gone by and then another year and a half and then another year and a half. So, for me, ten years went by and I basically didn’t even notice” (personal communication, August 22, 2012). She reflected that while men tour managers and artists were able to balance parent-hood and tour schedules, this was more difficult for women. Partly this was because motherhood would require periods of absence from a field of practice where job opportunities come through active participation in professional networks. Moreover, she added, the job did not allow much flexibility for people with primary responsibility for childcare and, as this is a role traditionally taken by women, it might lead some women to make decisions to move into different spheres of work. She said:

As a tour manager you are on the road so much you know it is really, really difficult. … And I know women who have come off the road and had babies who have said. “That’s it. I can’t do this.” Or other people who have come off the road and said, “It’s time. I need to have a relationship. I’m never going to have one if I am on the road.”

(personal communication, August 22, 2012)

Women working in other roles made similar points in reflecting on the future possibility of motherhood. For example, a concert promoter working mainly with rock and metal bands stated, “I am lucky enough to say I do love my job and, for the time being, going out to shows isn’t a burden or a problem but, if I had my own family, it would certainly be tricky to juggle everything” (personal communication, October 25, 2012). Similarly, a booking agent’s assistant commented, “My boss will do Norway, Reading festival and Manchester in three days. … I just got married and if I am going to have a family I’m going to have to rethink … my role. I won’t be able to do everything that I do now for sure” (personal communication, September 4, 2012). These remarks parallel Gill’s (2007: 7) research with new media workers, many of whom insisted that combining parenting with new media work would be “difficult, if not impossible.”

Actual responsibilities for childcare or anxieties about balancing work commitments with future parenting can account for why some women may select not to work in the areas of promotion and tour management or may not feel able to continue in posts which demand long hours, travel, and regular evening work. While balancing such work commitments with childcare responsibilities is not impossible, the effort that this requires in terms of logistical planning is important to recognize. A woman who is an artist manager and has sole parenting responsibility for two children commented:
You work a lot of hours or odd hours. You’ll do evenings, you’ll do weekends. For example, you have got three bands on at Glastonbury [festival] and they are on the Friday lunchtime and the last one’s on the Sunday evening. So you have got to … come back in the early hours of Monday morning and then get up with the kids on Monday morning because you haven’t seen them since Wednesday and you have to pay for childcare.

(personal communication, September 4, 2012)

Another woman, who was a record company general manager when she had her first child, acknowledged that she could only balance her work commitments with her parenting responsibility because she could afford to pay for a nanny who could work flexible hours at very short notice:

I don’t know how people do it if they can’t afford to have a nanny. It is nigh on impossible, I think, to be honest. You have got to have that flexibility to be able to say, “I am running an hour late. I am really sorry. I will pay you an hour extra.” You can’t do that with nurseries; they expect you there at six o’clock on the dot.

(personal communication, August 28, 2012)

The cost of childcare is a salient point. A UK research report found that 78 percent of women working in music earn less than £20,000 per year, compared to 51 percent of men. Moreover, this report found, 47 percent of women working in music earn less than £10,000 a year, while only 35 percent of men in the sector are in this wage bracket (Creative & Cultural Skills 2009: 19). For some women, then, continuing to work in a low paying job is not financially worthwhile, when the costs of paying for childcare are calculated. As the same artist manager pointed out, “I have friends in major record labels who have had their first child and because childcare is so expensive and they don’t get big wages in the music industry they can’t afford to work and they stay at home because, as is the case in most of the world, their husbands earn more” (personal communication, September 4, 2012).

Conclusion

Available statistics and reports from around the world highlight how women continue to be underrepresented in many key areas of the music industries. This chapter draws on interviews with women working in the areas of music management, promotion, and A&R to explore their accounts of working in highly sex-segregated roles and to consider to what extent they experienced the workplace as a gendered environment. Given the relatively small number of interviews, caution must be taken not to generalize too much from these perspectives but instead to recognize the need for further qualitative research to develop a broader understanding of the gendering of music occupations. Nevertheless the interview material offers insights into the ways in which gender has a perceptible influence on how roles, responsibilities, and expectations within the music industries are experienced and navigated. It reveals
how gender stereotyping can limit access to job opportunities and how gendered behavior can be enacted within the workplace to exclude or regulate women’s participation. It also supports other studies of women in the cultural industries (Gill 2007; Banks and Milestone 2011) which point to the anxieties and difficulties of many women in attempting to achieve a good balance between work commitments and the demands of parenthood. These ongoing issues confirm the need for initiatives such as the Equality and Diversity charter launched by UK Music in 2012, and the mentoring work and networking events organized by the Women in Music organization in New York. This is not to overlook or downplay the very real achievements of women in the music industries but rather to recognize that issues of gender inequality persist and have real effects on the experiences and earning potential of many women working in this sector. Identifying how gender operates within the business of music may go some ways toward dismantling the structures that support inequality.

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