

Report for WIFT NZ, to 31 December 2010

Background

My Creative Writing PhD, ***Development: Opening space for New Zealand women's participation in scriptwriting for feature films?*** had to include both creative and analytical elements. In my analysis, I chose to research the percentage of public funding allocated to women who write and direct feature films (excluding documentaries) in New Zealand, and to do this, developed statistics from the NZFC records. I supplemented this with information from Creative New Zealand about their film funding (now no longer available) and placed the information in a global context. My starting point was my research that found that between 2003-2008 women wrote and directed only 9% of at least 75 feature films produced in New Zealand by New Zealanders. Of the 75 features, the NZFC funded 30, and women wrote and directed 16% of these.

Because short films are an established pathway to feature filmmaking I included them in my analysis, as well as the First Writers Initiative. And I did not analyse women's participation as producers, beyond confirming that it was almost equal to men's, because my primary interest is in scriptwriters and directors, the storytellers, and because women producers are well-represented in the film industry, globally and in New Zealand.

At the beginning of 2008—it seems a lifetime ago—I released my PhD Report to the Industry. After Dr Ruth Harley (then the CEO at the NZFC and now CEO at Screen Australia) read the report, she acknowledged that the NZFC had a 'gender problem' and resolved to 'keep an eye' on gender parity. She also questioned why women producers do not focus more strongly on projects by and about women.

When I submitted my thesis, a year ago, I was (cautiously) optimistic. Women writers and directors were well represented in the green-lit Short Film Fund projects in 2009. In the years ending June 30 2008 and 2009, feature projects with women writers and directors attached that sought NZFC Board funding for advanced development tripled in number, and so did the approvals.

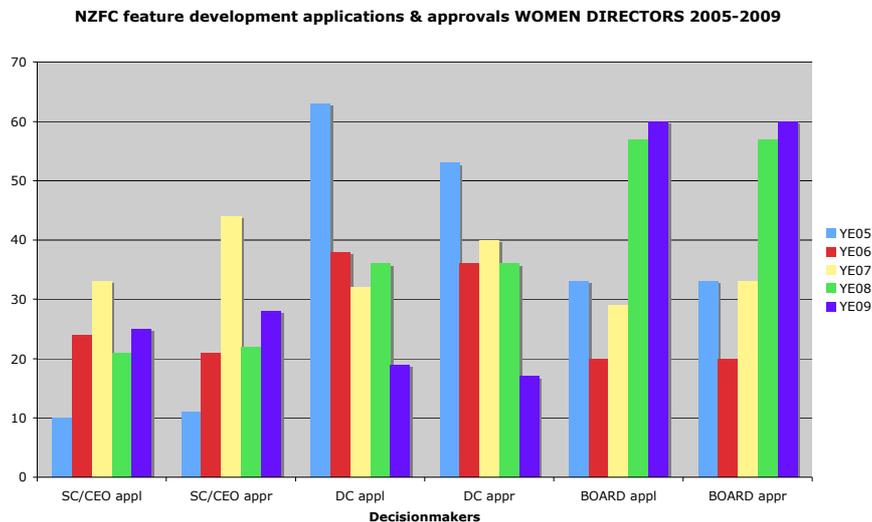
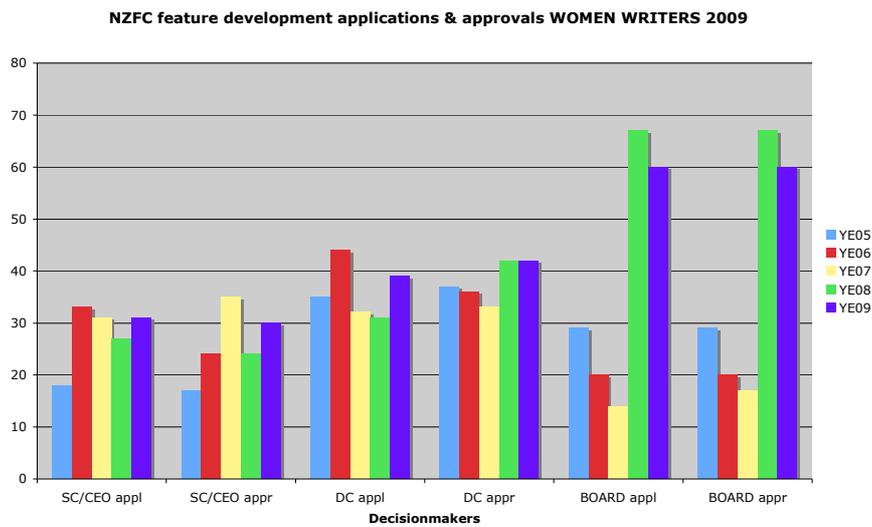


Figure 1 Percentages of NZFC feature development applications from and approvals for projects with women writers and directors 2005-2009, by decision-maker.

SC/CEO: Staff Committee/ Chief Executive Officer delegation DC: Development Committee Board: NZFC Board (see links at http://www.nzfilm.co.nz/DevelopmentAndFinancing/FeatureDevelopment/Feature_Development_Overview.aspx for more info)

In the year ending 30 June 2009, there were nine applications to the Board for conditional production funding. Six applications were successful, and three of these were for projects with women writers and directors. I wrote:

Collectively, with the Short Film Fund decisions this year, all this data seems to indicate that some change has happened. But so many questions still.

And I remained a little concerned about the informality of ‘keeping an eye’ on gender parity. Ruth Harley had acknowledged that if there is nothing written into the NZFC’s legislation, into its statements of intent, or into the policies it uses in its decision-making, ‘keeping an eye’ will work only if and when there are individuals within the institution who are committed to doing this.

I submitted my draft thesis to the NZFC Review, with a further submission that

It is essential that any change to the Film Commission Act incorporates an explicit gender equity provision, to protect the interests of women writers and directors in whom the Film Commission has made measurably less investment than in men, without justification, for some time.

The word ‘gender’ otherwise appeared only once in submissions to the review, in Film Auckland’s submission, so it is unsurprising that there is no reference to it in the review itself.

Against this background, I have now updated some of the information: about

- feature films that received conditional production funding in the 2009 and 2010 years;
- writer development loans;
- the new low-budget (\$250,000) feature programme Escalator Te Whakapiki;
- feature development funding;
- the Short Film Fund (now Premiere Shorts); and
- the new Fresh Shorts programme

I did not update the First Writers Initiative statistics, though the last year that I recorded, women’s applications were proportionately fewer than the previous year.

The information that follows is based on the NZFC Annual Report for 2009 and its newsletters from the report’s closing date to December 2010. Where I could, I also paid closer attention than I had in my thesis research to the

central characters in films that women write and direct, asking whether they are **about** women, as well as **by** women. This matters, I believe, for two reasons. The first is that the world needs more stories about women. The second is that women actors need parts.

Here is the good news and the bad news, followed by a brief discussion.

Feature films given conditional production funding

Because conditional production funding often needs other funding before a film can be produced, and that women globally tend to find access to 'other' funding more problematic than men do, I checked whether all three women's projects approved for conditional funding in the year ending June 2009 were made. They were not. Gaylene Preston's *Home by Christmas* and Simone Horrocks' *After the Waterfall* and four men's projects, as well as a woman's documentary, are listed in the annual report. Nevertheless that's 33%, a big increase from 16% in the years 2003-2008. And when I went through the newsletters from June 2009-December 2010, to date it's three out of ten—30%, with Roseanne Liang's *My Wedding & Other Secrets*, Emily Corcoran's *Stolen*, and Kirstin Marcon's *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying*. *My Wedding & Other Secrets* is in post-production. I have no up-to-date info for *Stolen*, but according to a recent NZFC press release, *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying* is in production here and in Europe over the next couple of months. Like *Home by Christmas* and *After the Waterfall*, *The Most Fun You Can Have Dying* is a story about a man; I wonder whether it is easier for stories about a man to attract support at the NZFC as well as complementary funding and a distribution deal.

At the end of 2010, the NZFC December newsletter listed its features in pre-production, production, post-production, and ready for release. Of the eleven films (excluding two documentaries) women wrote and directed two: 22%.

Writer development loans

Seven out of the fifteen writers given development loans during this period are women. The advantage of writer development loans is that recipients can

work on their scripts before any producer is attached, so this is an especially helpful scheme for women, who sometimes find it more difficult than men to find producers.

Escalator Te Whakapiki

The recent Escalator Te Whakapiki announcement was also encouraging. Of the four greenlit projects, women have written or co-written and will direct two. One of the women's projects has a female protagonist, and one of the men's. That outcome is all good.

Unfortunately, however, the NZFC did not make a gender analysis of Escalator Te Whakapiki's original 251 applicant teams (<http://wellywoodwoman.blogspot.com/2010/05/big-picture-could-i-do-that.html>). It could only say that about a third of its primary contacts with the teams were women. Of those selected for the twelve-team boot camp, there were twenty-six men and six women, in the same proportion as in feature films produced 2003-2008: 16% women.

The NZFC did not make any public statement about the contrast between the comparatively low proportion of women involved in Escalator Te Whakapiki at the beginning of the process, the low numbers of women selected for the boot camp, and finally the huge increase from 16% of the boot camp participants to 50% of the storytellers in the green-lit projects.

Feature development funding

In the past, I had access to development applications. This time, I did not. So I focused on comparative development investment, regardless of applications made and the decision-makers, who include the Staff Committee, the Development Committee, and the Board. And, because some projects do not yet have a director attached, I focused on each project's writer's gender.

In the year ending 30 June 2009, 31.5% of all projects allocated development funding had women writers attached; these projects received 32.4% of the total development funding. In the newsletters that cover the period from July 1 2009 to December 2010, the figures are different. Sixteen of the sixty-two

approvals are for projects with women writers attached: 25.5%; and these projects received 27.8% of the total funds allocated. (There are also a couple of projects with mixed gender writers.) Up until September, the figures were even lower: 23.5% of the approvals, and 21.6% of the funding allocated, and the only obvious difference seemed to be that—in contrast with the year to 30 June 2009—the Board did not allocate any development funding over this period. What changed after September? Is it just that Fiona Samuel is on a roll, as she wrote two of the four women's projects funded between September and December?

In the recent past, often women writers' participation was low at early development and steadily declined between early development and production. We ended up with few NZFC-funded features that women wrote and directed. Is this going to happen again?

Short Film Fund (Premiere Shorts)

In the 2009-2010 short-list, of twenty-two short films spread across three producer pods, women wrote only four: 18%. Half the Kura Shorts projects have a woman writer but there is no woman writer in two of the pods' short-lists, made by Robbers Dog and Big Shorts. Fourteen of the twenty-two projects had directors attached and one of these (Big Shorts) is a woman: 7%.

In the 2010-2011 shortlist announced in the NZFC December newsletter, women wrote two of the four projects shortlisted by A Collective Intake of Breath (which has an additional project written by a man in 'script development'), three of the seven shortlisted by Tauihu Shorts, and three out of Tom Thumb's seven. That's eight out of nineteen projects: 42%. A wonderful improvement. (And I understand that Tom Thumb blind-read all the projects submitted to them, and that's great news, too.)

Fresh Shorts

Fresh Shorts—managed by the NZFC rather than by producer pods—had 229 applications for funding of eight projects with \$30,000 budgets and eight with \$10,000.

In the \$30,000 budget category, men wrote and will direct five greenlit projects, women wrote two, and one story-telling team was mixed gender. In the \$10,000 budget category, men wrote and will direct seven, and women one. The investment this represents is \$70,000 (22%) in women writers and directors and \$220,000 (69%) in men, and \$30,000 (9%) in the mixed gender team.

The historical gender skew in the NZFC's short film programmes is underlined on its short film page. There, the images taken from completed short projects are overwhelmingly male. I'm told that one of this year's pods has been reading scripts blind, but that won't, according to my correspondent, "get us around the issue of the fact women are writing men's stories because they're seen as more worthy". And I agree with her.

Discussion

It seems that the NZFC's ongoing 'keeping an eye' on gender is intermittent at best and that its—the public's—investment in stories by women and about women is compromised because the NZFC has no coherent gender policy. At the end of 2010, NZFC investment in Fresh Shorts AND women's share of NZFC-funded features is 22%. This proportion reflects the organisation's investment in the development of feature projects written by women. How flawed are the NZFC processes? There are many questions to ask. For example, how fragile are the current gains in conditional production funding, the writer development loans, and Escalator Te Whakapiki? Did some reverse discrimination occur in these programmes, and in the Board's advanced development funding in the two years ending June 2009? And if so, will that continue? Will the women writers who received development loans find it difficult to find producers and to access further NZFC development funding? Are women writers and directors who want to make feature films about men more likely to attract NZFC support? And will there be fewer features that women write and direct because of the NZFC's current low investment in women's short films and its reduced development investment in projects with women writers and directors (except through the writer development loans)?

Are women applying in smaller numbers than men to most programmes?

Why?

It is impossible to answer these questions, because the NZFC is absolutely silent about any attitudinal changes it has had, and about any informal gender policy it develops from time to time. As well, there appear to be no gender-relevant statistical records kept at the moment, that carefully distinguish between applications and approvals and between storytellers and producers. (I have arranged to go in and analyse the Fresh Shorts applications, in the new year.)

This silence affects all filmmakers, men as well as women. If and when, for instance, the Board has itself decided to change its assessment practices to take account of storyteller gender, or instructed the NZFC staff to do so, we all need to know. If women storytellers are now more likely and men storytellers are proportionately less likely to get funding in some programmes, with the reverse in other programmes, we all need to know. Gender equity works both ways, and the NZFC needs to acknowledge this, and to establish a formal policy, and transparent practices, including consistent recording of gender statistics.

Finally, there is the question of 'talent'. The NZFC review report says:

A creatively successful film industry is as much about talent scouting as it is about training, and once a talented individual is found, they must be nurtured and supported. Variations on this theme are found at the heart of any meaningful film industry and especially within the Hollywood studio system. . . In the Hollywood industry, talent has long been the organizing principle. The very structure of the industry reflects this with the talent agencies directly rivalling the movie studios in their power and control of the business. In their fierce competition they scour the world for new talent, beating a path to every promising door. The intensity of the search confirms the importance of the target.

Unfortunately, according to the Writers Guild of America West (WGAW), the writers guild closely associated with the Hollywood industry, the Hollywood talent agencies and studios do not beat a path to every promising door.

The WGAW commissions regular reports about one essential element of the 'talent' required for making a film: the screenwriters. These reports consistently show that Hollywood's intense search for talent is focused largely in a single direction, towards young, white, men. Here's a quote from the WGAW 2005 report, which showed that:

The industry... provides few points of access for writers traditionally denied the chance to demonstrate their skills and gain experience. Until this basic structural truth is addressed, and until a norm of inclusion is enacted by industry gatekeepers both large and small, it is unlikely that the familiar story told in this report will change in any dramatic way. Without meaningful interventions targeted at the industry status quo, the industry will fall further and further behind a changing America.

According to the reports, offering access programmes (like those offered under Britain's Skillset programme) won't make a lot of difference, though the WGAw 2009 report provides details about a diversity blind script reading exercise that I found very interesting. What's needed is a change among decision-makers, in New Zealand within the NZFC in particular, who must decide to search out talent from groups that are under-represented, to be proactive rather than to wait passively for applications. This is how the 2009 report expresses this necessity:

In the past, the Guild has found value in the establishment of access programs and many such programs have been implemented by our employers. However... we must seriously consider whether access can be truly provided by programs or if it is people who provide access. Ours is a business based on personal relationships and social contacts. Work is distributed most fundamentally on the basis of a hiring party's personal knowledge of a writer's talent, commitment, character, work ethic, and overall appeal. This requires a social integration within the professional community and a personal access to company decisionmakers that is too often lacking for our colleagues who happen to be neither male nor white... It is abundantly clear to me that diversity in hiring requires a firm commitment on the part of decisionmakers...to actively seek out and read the work of writers who are women and people of color.

This view fits well with research that shows that women need 'sponsors' more than mentors to advance in any industry (see e.g. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/186d2054-f1ba-11df-bb5a-00144feab49a.html#axzz17IP6zzBN> & <http://hbr.org/2010/09/why-men-still-get-more-promotions-than-women/ar/1>); access to 'sponsors' is often complicated because women in powerful positions are unable or unwilling to help other women and because of the issues about men in power 'sponsoring' young women.) In New Zealand it can be argued that the NZFC, as an institution with responsibility for allocating public money, has to engage with aspects of 'sponsorship' to allocate it equitably.

The WGAw research is ongoing and relentless, as it needs to be. This from the 2009 executive summary of the report:

...the Guild encourages the broader industry to rethink business-as-usual practices on the diversity front. The Guild encourages key industry players to join with it to establish clear goals, reasonable timetables, and effective mechanisms for progressive change. It's extreme folly to continue to do the same thing and to expect a different outcome. Breaking out of the stagnation in writer diversity documented in the last few WGAw reports will require bold, new approaches. Only then will we begin to make appreciable

progress toward catching up with a changing America. Only then will we move closer to making sure that all of our stories are told.

I'd like to think that the NZFC will start to develop policies that require it to "actively seek out and read the work of writers who are women and people of colour" to match and complement its Maori policies, establishing "clear goals, reasonable timetables, and effective mechanisms for progressive change", with mechanisms to monitor that progress, including the gathering of statistics. Otherwise, there may be another generation of women writers and directors whose talent remains unacknowledged, unsupported and unexpressed, and the needs of the audience for stories by and about women will remain unmet.