

A Response to “Women They Talk About” by Karen Ward Mahar

When the AFI shared the results of the “Women They Talk About,” I got a little emotional. These filmmakers were my companions for over a decade. Pre-internet research required reading years of industry publications page-by-page, traveling to archives to watch footage on hand-cranked editing tables, and holding contracts, memos, personal letters and scrapbooks in my hands. I talked to relatives and drove to spots where studios once stood, trying to imagine the lives of these women in three dimensions. I knew these women and their industry, and it was unlike any other. Women worked alongside men in the same positions, if not in the same proportions. If existing studios did not suit, women filmmakers could and did start their own production companies. The evidence was everywhere that women and men built the American film industry together. Women wrote, directed, and produced films with men and on their own, and doing so was not exceptional. I liked to imagine how startled the Director’s Guild would be when I revealed the shocking percentage of American films written, directed, and produced by women before 1930.

But I could not nail down that percentage. The fluidity that removed gender and craft boundaries made it difficult to know who really did what. Onscreen credits were incomplete or dubious. Sometimes husbands of filmmaking couples demanded greater onscreen credit than they deserved. Advertisements for some female movie stars may have exaggerated their role behind the camera. And the dynamic openness that allowed independent women filmmakers to find financing and distribution also meant things went wrong. Ballyhooed titles might never make it to the screen. Entire film series collapsed before cameras even rolled. But women filmmakers also worked for large studios. Universal promoted their female filmmakers as New Women and suffragists. At Paramount, Lois Weber directed social problem films about poverty, birth control, and marital strife, elevated by her middle-class Christian origins and a cinematic style compared favorably to D. W. Griffith. Whether making cliff-hanger serials about daring New Woman characters or exploiting the assumption of female moral superiority, women filmmakers were foundational to the development of the American film industry. But a conclusive answer regarding the percentage of films made by women eluded a generation of film scholars. No individual scholar could collect enough data, much less analyze it. It was a problem awaiting the digital age. It took the resources of the AFI to find answers.

The result? Nearly 11% of feature films were written, directed, or produced by women between 1910-1930. This doesn’t even count the bread-and-butter of most female filmmakers: the short film. And since female filmmakers dropped off rapidly after 1923, it doesn’t reveal how high this percentage may have been at its peak. Conclusion? “The research outcome supports the theory that women’s labor was more prolific in the silent era than at any other time in the first century of filmmaking.”

We were right. But there is so much more to untangle. I sincerely hope this study intrigues new scholars who will continue to explore this extraordinary and inspiring era of American filmmaking and American life.

Karen Ward Mahar, Ph.D., *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (2006)