Despite forming a large part of the workforce, relatively few women are achieving key positions of leadership across the cultural and creative industries.

Does it matter that more women take the lead?

# **women** at the top
## A provocation piece

Authors:
John Holden and Helen McCarthy

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# Women at the Top

The cultural sector is routinely perceived to be a 'feminised' environment.[1] Liberal in outlook, egalitarian in character and often employing large female workforces, cultural organisations, on the face of it, should be places where women thrive. Why, then, has the issue of women's leadership in the sector come under recent scrutiny? Why has it been suggested that a 'problem' exists? Why hold a conference to discuss women's cultural leadership? This paper attempts to sketch out the case for treating women's career progression as integral to the wider challenge of developing cultural leadership in Britain, and to identify key pathways for taking this agenda forward in the near future.

## What's the Problem?

To some extent, the perception of feminisation in the sector is accurate. Women make up almost 80% of Britain's librarians and archivists and 75% of the visual arts workforce.[2] In 2004/5, 58% of permanent staff working for organisations regularly funded by Arts Council England (ACE) were female, and a 2003 survey estimated that women composed 61% of employees in Britain's theatres.[3] Nor is there any apparent shortage of women coming up through the pipeline. Women accounted for 60% of UK students enrolled on creative arts and design courses in 2005/6.[4]

The problem, then, is not persuading women to pursue careers in the sector. It arises only when we try to gauge how well women are advancing into positions of leadership. The task of measuring women's representation in the top jobs immediately runs into difficulties on account of a lack of hard data. There is certainly a *perception* of a problem, which was taken seriously enough for City University to launch a dedicated MA in Cultural Leadership in 2006 with a specific focus on gender together with forty funded places allocated for female applicants.

Without reliable data, however, it is almost impossible to reach a full diagnosis of the problem. Whilst some statistics on women's representation are available for certain occupations or sub-sectors, these employ disparate methodologies - making comparison extremely difficult - and are rarely updated on an annual basis. In many cases the confusion stems from the wider thorny question of how to define a 'cultural' occupation, on which there is a notable absence of consensus amongst both practitioners and academics.[5]

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[1] The 'cultural sector' is defined here as consisting of museums, libraries and archives, galleries, and the visual and performing arts.

[2] Danielle Cliché, Ritva Mitchell and Andreas Joh Wiesand, eds*., Pyramids or pillars: unveiling the status of women in arts and media professions in Europe: An ERICarts report to the European Commission* (Bonn: ARCult Media, 2000), p195; T Jackson and M Jordan, *Review of the presentation of contemporary visual arts, part I: Analysis and recommendations* (An independent report for ACE, 2005).

[3] Data from the ACE annual RFO survey; Sheila Galloway, Robert Lindley and Heike Behle, 'Working in the Presentation of the Contemporary Visual Arts' (Warwick Institute for Employment Research, 2003), p144.

[4] Higher Education Statistics Agency, See http://www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/stud.htm

[5] See, for example, *The DCMS Evidence Toolkit* (2002), online access at: http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Research/det/

However, taking the figures which *do* exist, and with this health warning in mind, it is possible to start piecing together a tentative picture of women's status in the sector. Women appear to be significantly under-represented at the top of Britain's most prestigious cultural institutions. Of the twenty-seven museums, libraries and archives which make up the National Museum Directors' Conference, just three are currently headed by women.[6] Only one of Britain's major orchestras, the London Symphony Orchestra, has a woman heading up the management team.[7]

> 'We have few role models; the women who have made it to the top have smaller profiles than the men. I sense that people are always waiting for them to trip up.'
> Woman Leader, Cultural Leadership MA programme, City University

This under-representation extends to wider management and governance structures too. Figures for boards and management committees of regularly-funded organisations (RFOs) produced by the ACE for 2004/5 suggest that women have attained a 43% share of positions, but this picture is potentially misleading, as the data refers to a limited subset of RFOs and provides no information on the number of women in chairperson roles.[8] Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is not uncommon to find boards with a majority of female members chaired by men. Scottish Arts Council data for an earlier period painted a less rosy picture, with women constituting only 32% of board members and 29% of chairpersons.[9] A 2003 survey of the theatre sector found that men constituted just under two thirds of all boards.[10] A partial exception to this rule is the dance sector, where women are relatively well-represented at board level, although this is in part a function of the number of dance companies with female founders.[11]

> 'I have worked in the arts for many years, nearly always in organisations where the majority of the staff have been women and the majority of the managers, men. I've also been a sole worker with a committee dominated by women but chaired by a man'
> Woman Leader, Cultural Leadership MA Programme, City University

Other studies suggest that women are more likely to be found at the lower end of cultural organisations, occupying low-grade administrative and secretarial roles. A reader survey carried out by *Arts Professional* magazine found that male respondents were two and a half times likelier than their female counterparts to be on high salaries.[12] Further research is required to give this picture greater texture. Anecdotal evidence gathered by Demos points to considerable variety in women's status in the

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[6] See http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/members.html The three are: the British Library (Lynne Brindley), the National Archives (Natalie Ceeney) and the Wallace Collection (Rosalind Savill).

[7] From a survey of fourteen orchestras resident in the UK, the only other with a female chief executive or managing director is the Milton Keynes City Orchestra.

[8] Data from ACE annual RFO survey

[9] Susan Galloway, 'Cultural Occupations, A CCPR Briefing Paper' (Centre for Cultural Policy Research, August 2004)

[10] 'Working in the Presentation of the Contemporary Visual Arts', p145.

[11] The Royal Ballet has a female director, whilst the English National Ballet and the Birmingham Royal Ballet are both led by men. The Scottish Ballet has a male artistic director and a female executive producer. Women are strongly represented in independent dance companies, such as the Siobhan Davies Dance Company, Magpie Dance Company, Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company, and Diversions: the dance company of Wales

[12] 'Salary Survey – the reinforced glass ceiling' *Arts Professional Magazine,* Issue 132, October 2006.

sector at regional level, depending on local, historical and organisational circumstance. In some cases, women appear to be thriving in local authority-funded or smaller organisations, whereas in others the quirks of personality or institutional peculiarities have resulted in their marginalisation. Academic studies of specific sectors tend to endorse this picture. For example, a 2001 study of museums found that women working in institutions housed in universities were often exposed to the male-dominated culture of the higher echelons of academia.[13]

This picture is largely replicated across the wider 'creative industries'.[14] Here women tend to be clustered in certain sub-sectors and in secretarial and administrative roles, whilst their male counterparts are twice as likely to be found in professional and managerial jobs.[15] A 2005 survey of the creative industries in Scotland found that 28% of respondents believed that women were under-represented in executive roles and 38% thought that the sector suffered from occupational segregation along gender lines.[16] It is instructive to compare this situation against that found in other EU countries, although, again, a lack of consistent data precludes any conclusive findings. According to a major European survey carried out in the late 1990s, women's share of employment across the creative industries ranged from 49% in Finland to 32% in Italy, with the UK ranking in between at 39%.[17] Similar trends were evident across the sample in relation to women's strong presence within libraries, museums and archives and under-representation in sectors such as photography, architecture and music. Some striking disparities, however, warrant further investigation, such as Finland's high proportion of female museum directors (52% against Britain's 22%), or the Netherlands' success in achieving parity between male and female writers and journalists (against a 37:63 ratio in Britain).[18] Clearly, differences relating to the structure of the cultural labour market, equality regimes and wider societal attitudes play an important part in shaping opportunities for women to advance their careers.

**What's behind the problem?**

If then, as the picture sketched above appears to suggest, a problem *does* exist, it remains to ask *why* this situation has come about. In part, this is a wider question about the match between women's career aspirations and organisational cultures. There appears to be little doubt that women are hungry for success. City University received over 140 applications for the 40 funded places on its Cultural Leadership MA. Women made up 64% of applicants to the Clore Leadership programme for 2007/8. The high proportion of women on arts and design courses in HEIs would further suggest that women are willing to invest in developing their careers in the sector.

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[13] Victoria Turner, 'The factors affecting women's success in museum careers: a discussion of the reasons more women do not reach the top, and of strategies to promote their future success' *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies,* Issue 8, (November 2002), pp1-16.

[14] 'Creative industries' is defined by the DCMS as comprising advertising; architecture; the art and antique markets; crafts; design; designer fashion; film and video; interactive leisure software; music; the performing arts; publishing software and computer services; and television and radio.

[15] *Pyramids or pillars*, p206, 209.

[16] 'Women in the Creative Industries in Scotland' (Centre for Cultural Policy Research, 2005)

[17] *Pyramids and Pillars*, p12.

[18] Ibid, p19, p13. It should be noted, however, that Britain is doing better on other fronts. For example, the representation of women on cultural councils in the Netherlands was under 20%, and Britain's 26% figure for female musicians was higher than those for Germany (23%) and Portugal (17%).

Is it, then, the case that women are somehow lacking in the qualities and skills required to be a good cultural leader? The answer to this question inevitably involves making questionable generalisations about gender difference and relying on subjective judgements about what makes a 'good' leader. The generic management literature on leadership suggests that women bring important qualities and skills to organisations. In particular, recent evidence suggests that women's preference is for 'transformational' leadership styles, which focus on transforming colleagues' motivations, expectations and self-belief in order to drive up performance. Men, in contrast, tend to exercise 'transactional leadership', with a stronger emphasis organising, planning, objective-setting and monitoring performance.[19] Most organisations require both, and a key way of achieving a healthy balance is through attending to the development of female as well as male leadership talent. There is no reason to believe that these lessons should not equally apply to the cultural sector; the evidence of both the City MA and Clore leadership programmes suggests that high levels of passion, commitment and ability to inspire are to found amongst aspirant women leaders.

The factors holding women back, therefore, might be better understood by looking at the structure and culture of the sector itself. Here, multiple factors present themselves for further investigation. For example, why are the formal qualifications which women are disproportionately likely to hold failing to translate into career mobility?[20] Is 'on-the-job' experience and informal training more highly valued by employers? Is there a need for greater transparency or clarity about the status of paper credentials versus hands-on experience in relation to promotion and progression regimes within cultural organisations?

> 'I think the key issue here is really about professionalizing the cultural sector – that is, ensuring that salaries are in line with expertise and professionalism.
> Woman Leader, Cultural Leadership MA Programme, City University

As cultural leadership development becomes more established in universities and business schools, is this likely to change, and can we expect women to benefit as a result? Another factor is the striking prevalence of free-lance or temporary work within the sector. Impressionistic evidence suggests that this can offer women greater flexibility but at the same time inhibit long-term planning, thus presenting problems for those with families and other caring responsibilities. Women's over-representation in non-creative roles is also a potential barrier, in that leaders of many flagship national organisations tend to be recruited from those with artistic, creative or curatorial backgrounds. Another factor is the long and frequently unsociable hours which employees are required to work in the performing arts and increasingly in many galleries and museums too. Some jobs take individuals away on long tours or work placements, requiring a level of geographical mobility which many women with caring responsibilities are unable to supply.

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[19] See, for example, Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe and John Alban-Metcalfe, 'Gender and Leadership: A Masculine Past, but a Feminine Future?' in *'Gender & Excellence in the Making'*, a Report of the European Commission, Women & Science Unit, Joint Research Centre, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

[20] *Pyramids and Pillars,*, p212, finds that women working in the cultural industries are more highly qualified and trained than their male peers and are more likely to have received recent training.

> I think that women have a general concern about work life balance because we do so much other work once we're at home so the evenings and weekends are so much more precious.
>
> Women runs loads of organisations in the North East – it's great up here for women – but there just aren't too many jobs so if you want to stay here you can end up in your job for ages!
>
> I am a mother of a pre-school child and feel that the consistent hostility to working flexibly in the cultural sector as well as the culture of working long hours for no additional financial reward will prevent me rising further up the career ladder
>
> Women Leaders, Cultural Leadership MA Programme, City University

In describing this workplace culture, it is important to distinguish between the pressures which affect all who work in the sector and those which disproportionately affect women. For example, it is well-known that working unpaid is rife in many organisations, helping individuals to get a 'foot in the door', and, in practical terms usually requiring access to private means.[21] Some institutions are perceived to be notoriously hierarchical, making it difficult for anyone without personal connections to get in or get ahead. Encouraging race diversity has been rightly identified as a key priority for the sector, as has engaging young people and overcoming public perceptions of cultural institutions as 'elitist'.

Women's under-representation at the top of cultural organisations thus belongs to a wider set of issues relating to opportunity and diversity across the sector. To what extent are boards looking beyond the traditional pool of white male professionals when making high-level appointments? How far is progress on diversity impeded by structural factors in the sector, such as lack of funding and the need for individuals who are willing to work long hours (often for free)? Many cultural organisations are sensitised to these issues, but simply lack the financial resources to take positive steps. It will be interesting to observe how the new public sector Gender Equality Duty impacts on cultural organisations over the coming years; will it create further pressures or will it enable decisive action? Underlying all these questions is the more fundamental problem of how, as a society, we should select the guardians of our nation's cultural heritage and the creators of our nation's cultural future. Do we believe that this role should be played by a narrow cross-section of the population, or do we believe that our cultural leaders should reflect the rich diversity and talent to be found in Britain in 2007?

**A Platform for Action**

If we believe the latter, then what can be done to improve opportunities for aspirant women leaders?

In the first place, more research is required to enhance our understanding of the status of women in the cultural sector in Britain. Ideally, what is required is the development

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[21] 'Salary Survey – what are we worth?' *Arts Professional Magazine,* Issue 132, October 2006.

of an authoritative measure which can be updated annually, tracking changes over time and within different parts of the sector. This should be supplemented with qualitative studies of the variations and internal dynamics of different kinds of cultural organisation. These would explore career structures, employment patterns, recruitment practices (including the role of boards and head-hunters) and workplace cultures, and would greatly add to our understanding of the various pathways by which individuals progress in the sector. A first step would be to carry out a comprehensive synthesis of existing literature in this field.

Secondly, cultural organisations should review their own performance in providing leadership development for all staff, ensuring that women as well as men have access to opportunities for acquiring new skills and taking on new responsibilities. One practical step would be to introduce mentoring schemes; another might entail establishing action learning sets. Both would require the full support and active involvement of the most senior individuals, male and female alike, to be effective.

Thirdly, the sector as a whole must celebrate women's success by giving greater visibility to women leaders and creating female role models for younger women pursuing careers in cultural occupations. Several awards already exist for women in the arts and in the creative industries, but there is ample room for a high-profile, prestigious award to be established explicitly to recognise women's excellence in the field of cultural leadership. Another possibility is the creation of a 'Top 20 Power List' of women leaders in the sector, to be compiled annually.

Finally, women's networks are effective means of building confidence and publicizing the contribution of women in a given industry or sector.[22] Whilst a number of groups exist for women in specific occupations, such as the Women in Museums network currently being supported by the Cultural Leadership Programme, there is immense scope for a powerful new cross-sector network to be founded, aimed specifically at developing women's leadership within the sector as a whole.

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[22] Helen McCarthy, *Girlfriends in High Places: how women's networks are changing the workplace* (London: Demos, 2004)

For further information on the Cultural Leadership Programme visit
**www.culturalleadership.org.uk**

For further information on City University's Cultural Leadership Programme visit
**www.city.ac.uk/cpm/cl**