

# ***Indie Women in a Pandemic Year: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in U.S. Independent Film, 2020-21***

by Martha M. Lauzen, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2021– All rights reserved.

---

Over the last year, most film festivals found inventive ways to keep the lights on, in spite of the considerable constraints posed by COVID-19. While some fests canceled or postponed their in-person events, others went virtual and made creative use of outdoor venues, such as drive-ins, to provide socially distanced viewing experiences.

The pandemic also seemed to offer a silver lining -- time for festivals to reconsider their basic business models -- with some contemplating the ability to reach larger audiences via streaming even in non-pandemic years, and the chance to “recenter the audience rather than celebrities.”<sup>1</sup> Writing for *IndieWire*, Eric Kohn pondered how the pandemic might prompt festivals to reinvent themselves. He quotes film consultant Brian Newman as recommending that programmers “spend serious energy on making sure that festivals are bringing in a younger and more diverse audience.” Kohn suggests that more regional festivals focus on greater inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

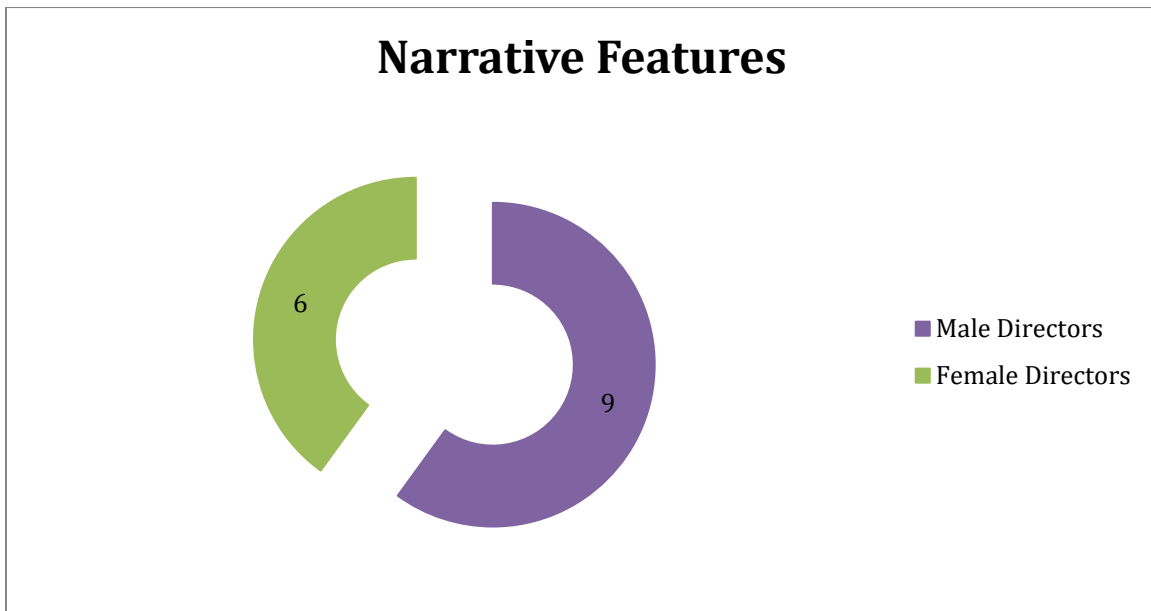
How are women filmmakers faring in this uncertain and rapidly evolving landscape? This report focuses on the representation of women working as directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers on domestically and independently produced feature-length documentaries and narrative films selected by 20 high-profile festivals in the U.S. from July 2020 through June 2021.<sup>3</sup>

## Key Findings

•In 2020-21, the U.S. festivals considered in this study streamed and/or screened more narrative films directed exclusively by men than with at least 1 woman director. The festivals streamed and/or screened an average of 9 *narrative* films directed by men, compared to an average of 6 films directed by at least one woman (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.*

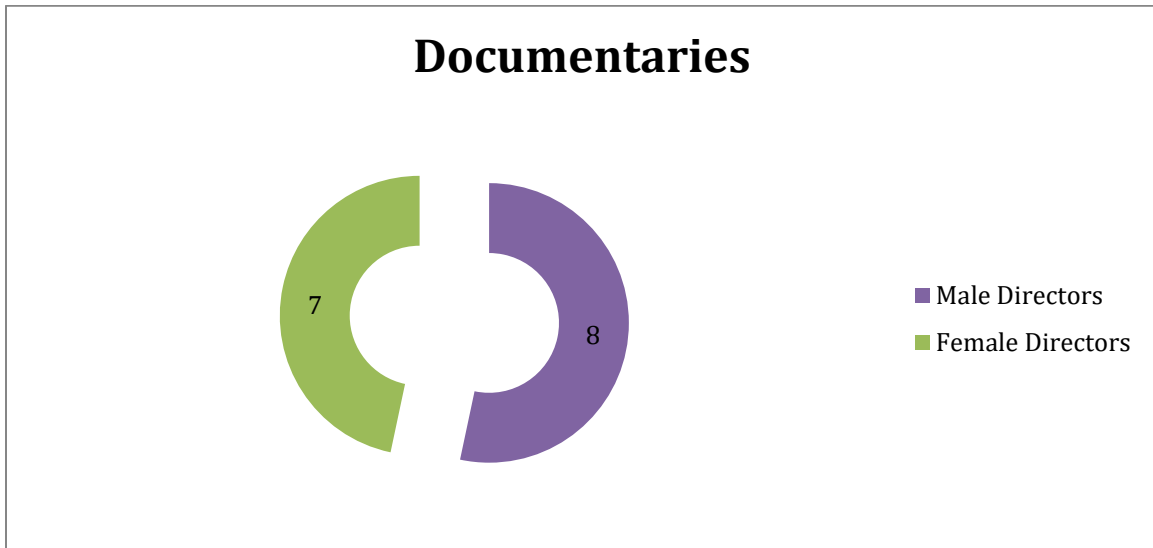
*Average No. of Narrative Features Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streaming/Screening at High-Profile U.S. Festivals*



•In 2020-21, fests streamed and/or screened almost equal numbers of documentaries directed by women as by men. Festivals streamed and/or screened an average of 8 *documentaries* directed by men versus an average of 7 documentaries directed by at least one woman (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

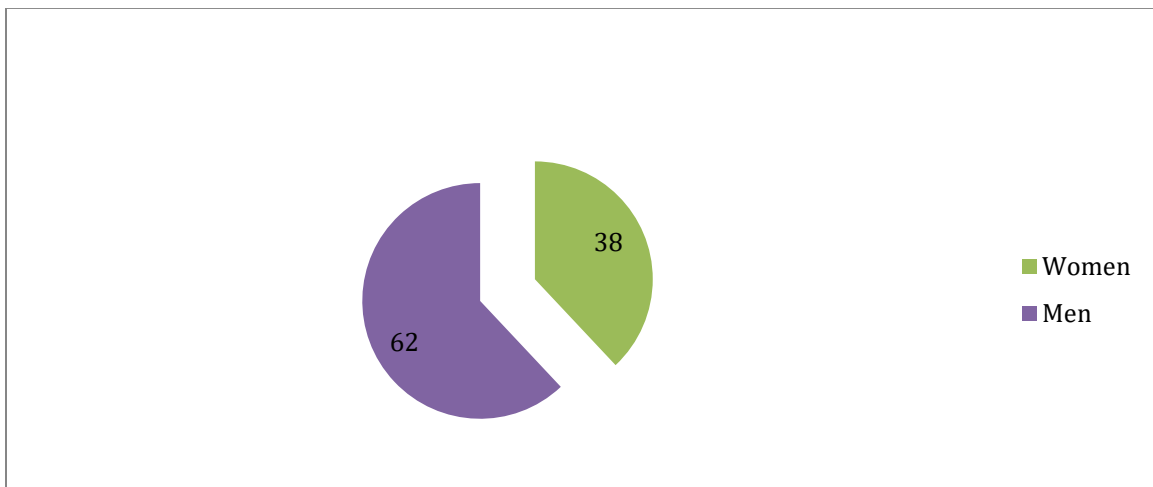
*Average No. of Documentaries Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streaming/Screening at High-Profile U.S. Festivals*



•In 2020-21, women comprised 38% of individuals working in key behind-the-scenes roles on U.S. independent features (narrative films and documentaries). Men continue to make up the majority (62%) of individuals in these roles (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

*Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on U.S. Independent Features Streaming/Screening at High-Profile Festivals in 2020-21*



•10% of independent films employed 10 or more women, while 33% employed 10 or more men.

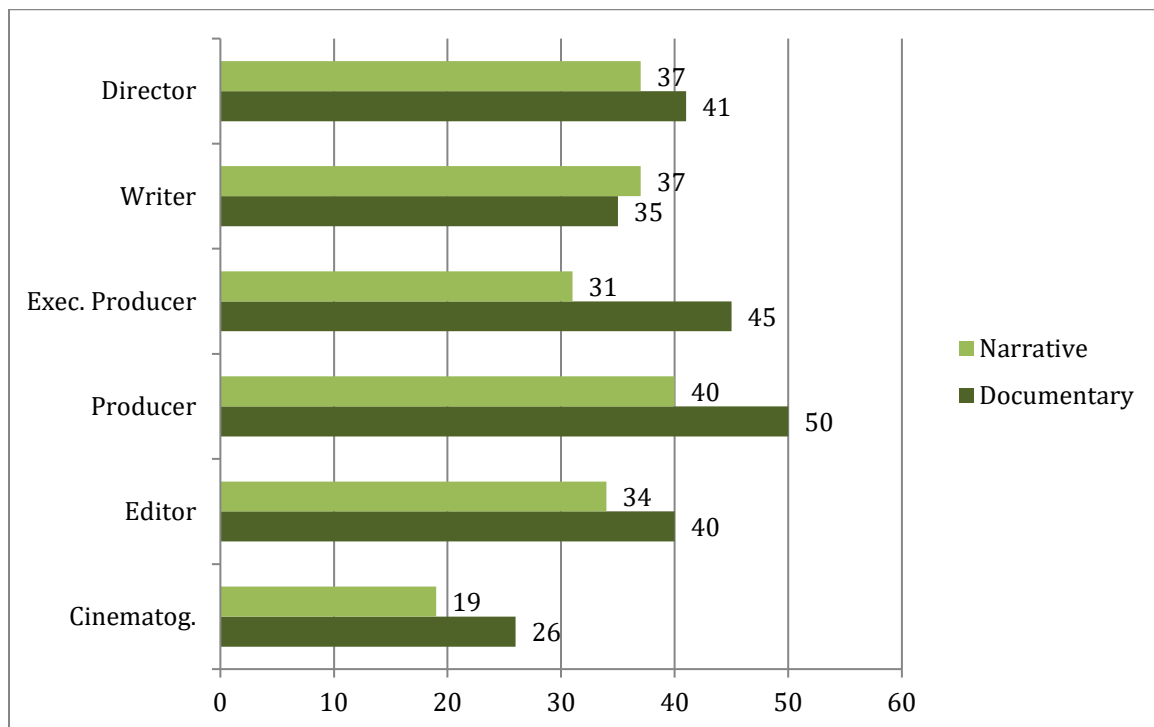
•On narrative features and documentaries, women fared best as producers (44%), followed by directors (39%), executive producers (38%), editors (37%), writers (36%), and cinematographers (23%).

•Women continued to enjoy higher employment on documentaries than on narrative features. Women accounted for 42% of those working in key behind-the-scenes roles on documentaries versus 35% of those working on narrative features.

•The percentages of women working as directors, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers are higher on documentaries than on narrative features. The only exception is writers who fare slightly better on narrative features than documentaries (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Comparison of Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women Working on Narrative Features vs. Documentaries



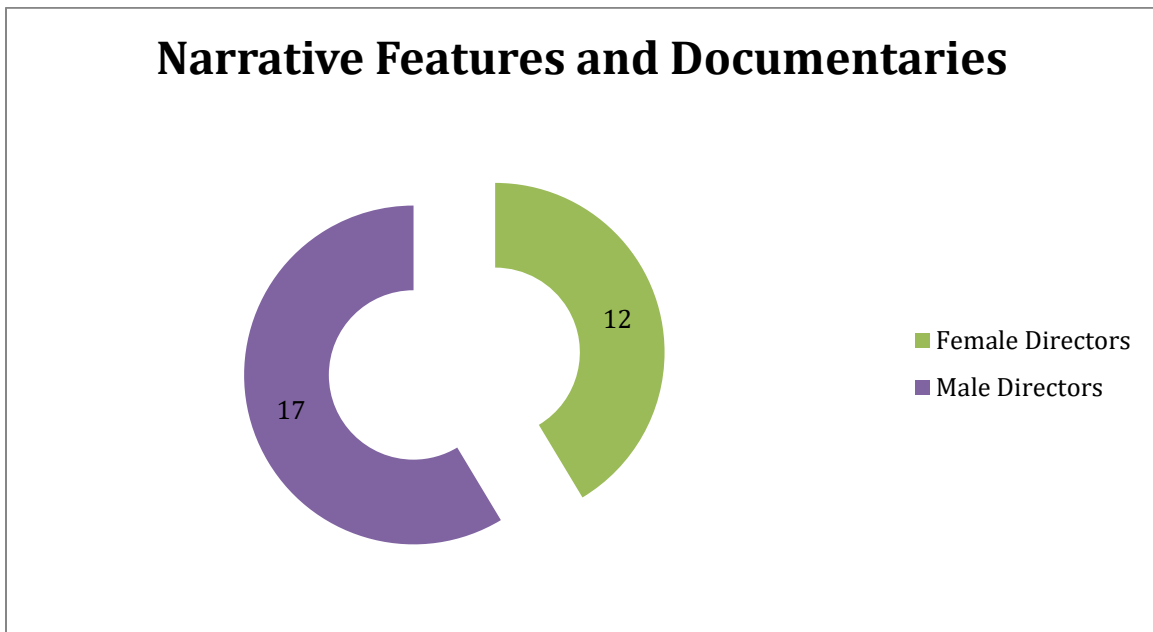
**•Films with at least one woman director had substantially higher percentages of women working as writers, editors, and cinematographers.** In fact, the numbers of women working in other key behind-the-scenes roles more than doubled. For example, on films with at least one woman director, women comprised 33% of cinematographers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 12% of cinematographers.

## *Findings for Documentaries and Narrative Features Streamed and/or Screened at Festivals*

Overall, high-profile festivals in the U.S. streamed and/or screened an average of 12 films (narrative features and documentaries) directed by at least one woman versus an average of 17 films directed exclusively by men (see Figure 5).

*Figure 5.*

*Average No. of Narrative and Documentary Films Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streaming/Screening at High-Profile U.S. Festivals*



22% of the independent films considered employed 0 or 1 woman, 41% employed 2 to 5 women, 27% employed 6 to 9 women, and 10% employed 10 or more women. In contrast, 7% of the films employed 0 or 1 man, 30% employed 2 to 5 men, 30% employed 6 to 9 men, and 33% employed 10 or more men.

Women comprised 38% of directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers working on independently and domestically produced feature-length films in 2020-21 (see Figure 3 in Key Findings section).

Women fared best as producers (44%), followed by directors (39%), executive producers (38%), editors (37%), writers (36%), and cinematographers (23%) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6.

*Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Narrative Features and Documentaries by Role*

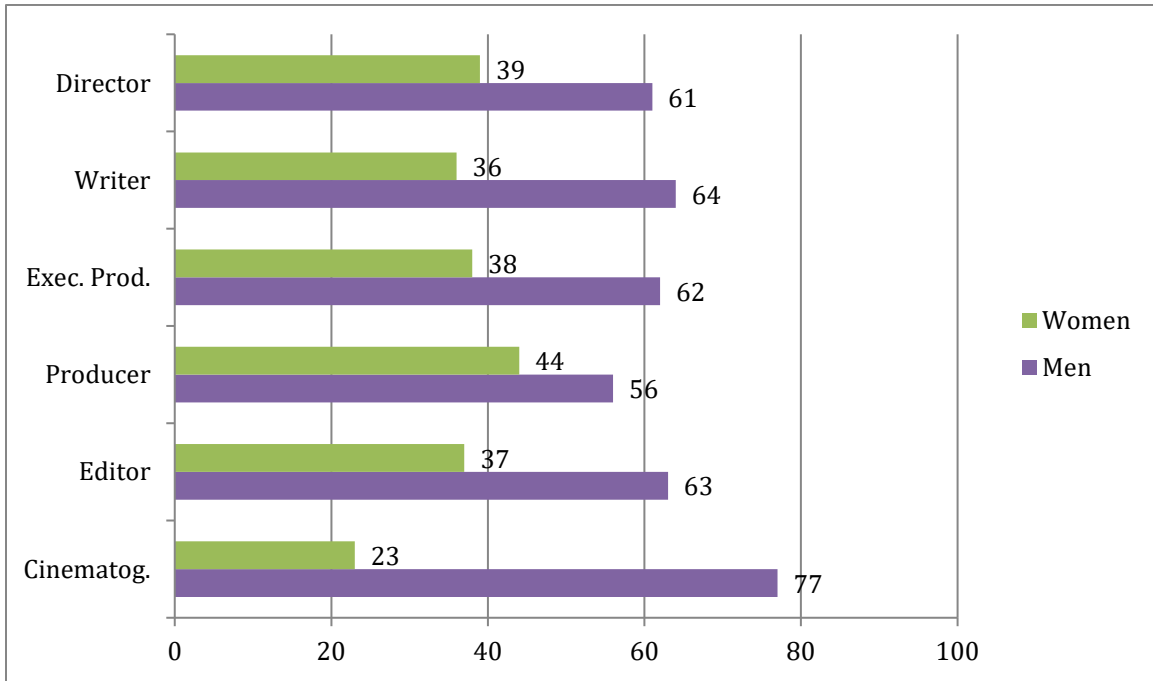
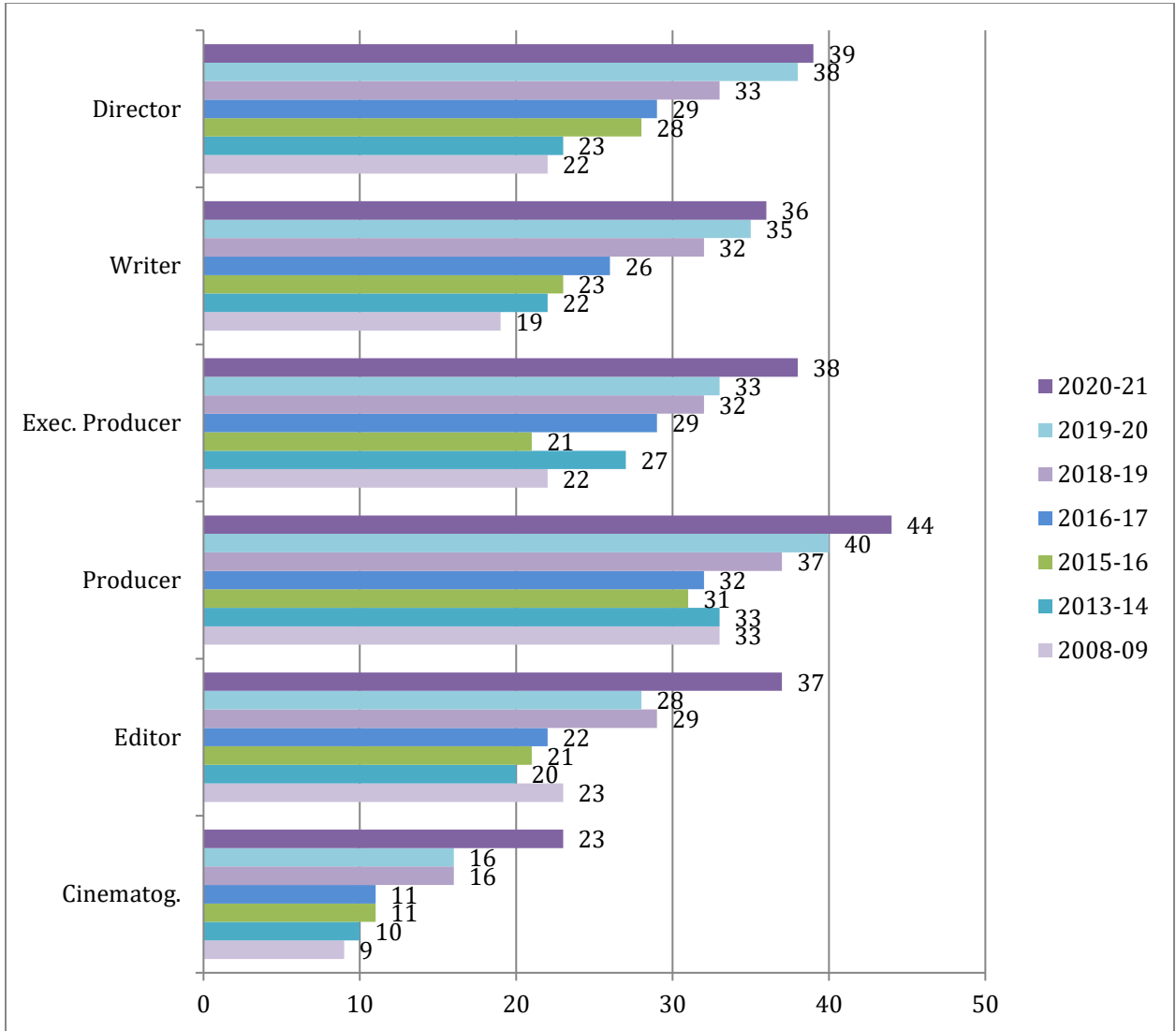


Figure 7 provides a historical comparison of 2020-21 figures with those from prior years. Overall, women accounted for 38% of individuals in the behind-the-scenes roles considered. Women comprised 34% of individuals in these roles in 2019-20. However, because the selection of festivals in the study shifted somewhat in 2020-21, comparisons should be made with caution.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 7.

*Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Independent Films  
(Documentaries and Narrative Features) by Role*



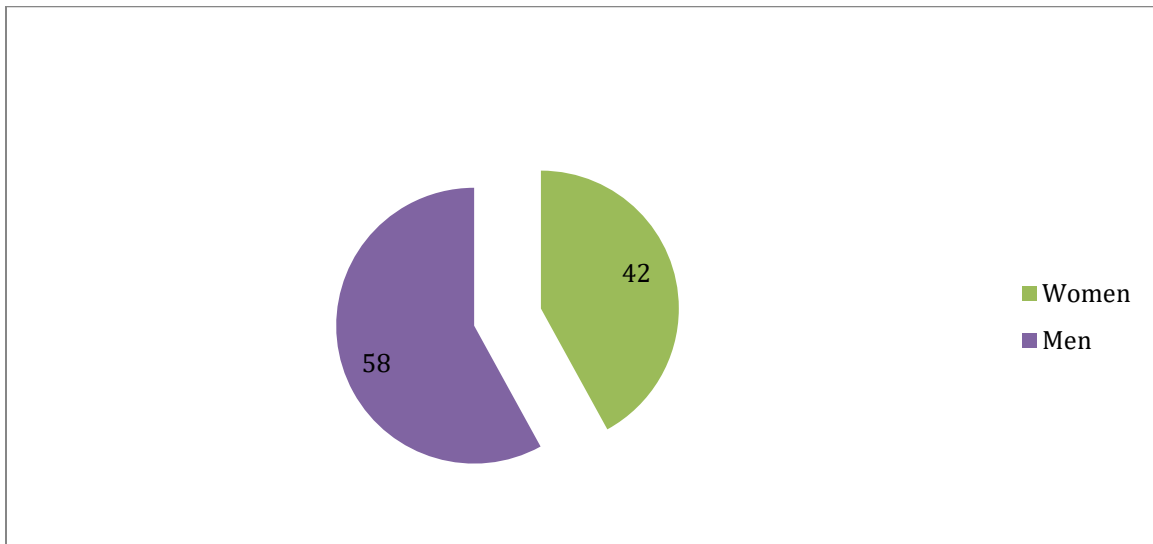


## *Findings for Documentaries Only*

Women comprised 42% and men 58% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on documentaries in 2020-21 (see Figure 8).

*Figure 8.*

*Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Documentaries Streaming/Screening at High-Profile Festivals in 2020-21*



•Women fared best as producers (50%), followed by executive producers (45%), directors (41%), editors (40%), writers (35%), and cinematographers (26%) (see Figure 9).

Figure 9.

*Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Documentaries by Role*

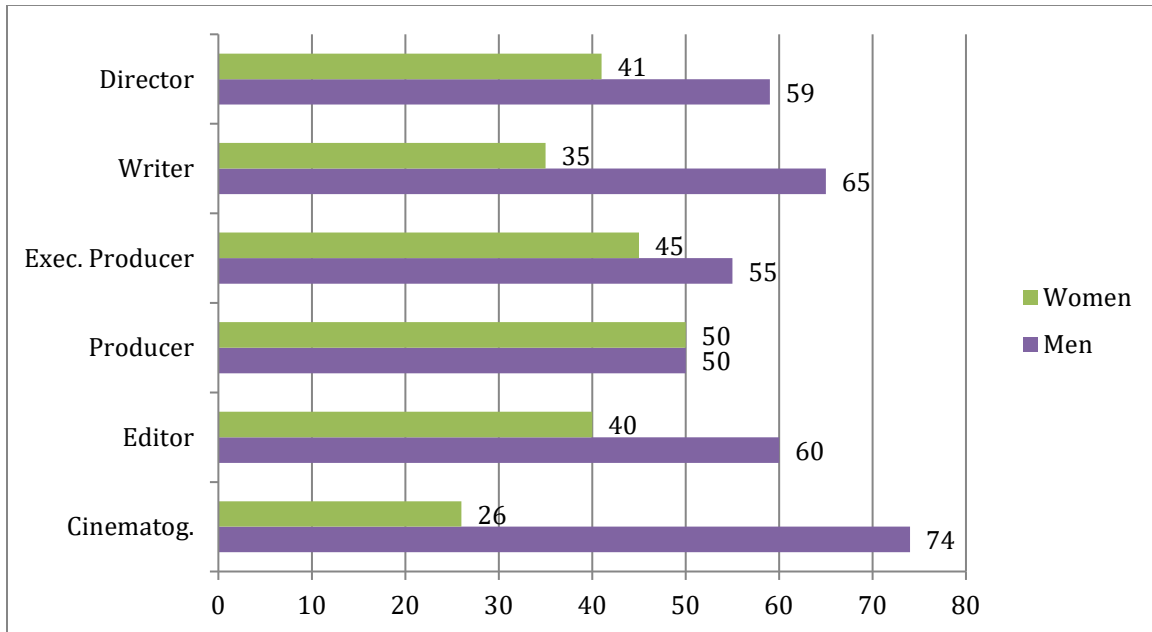
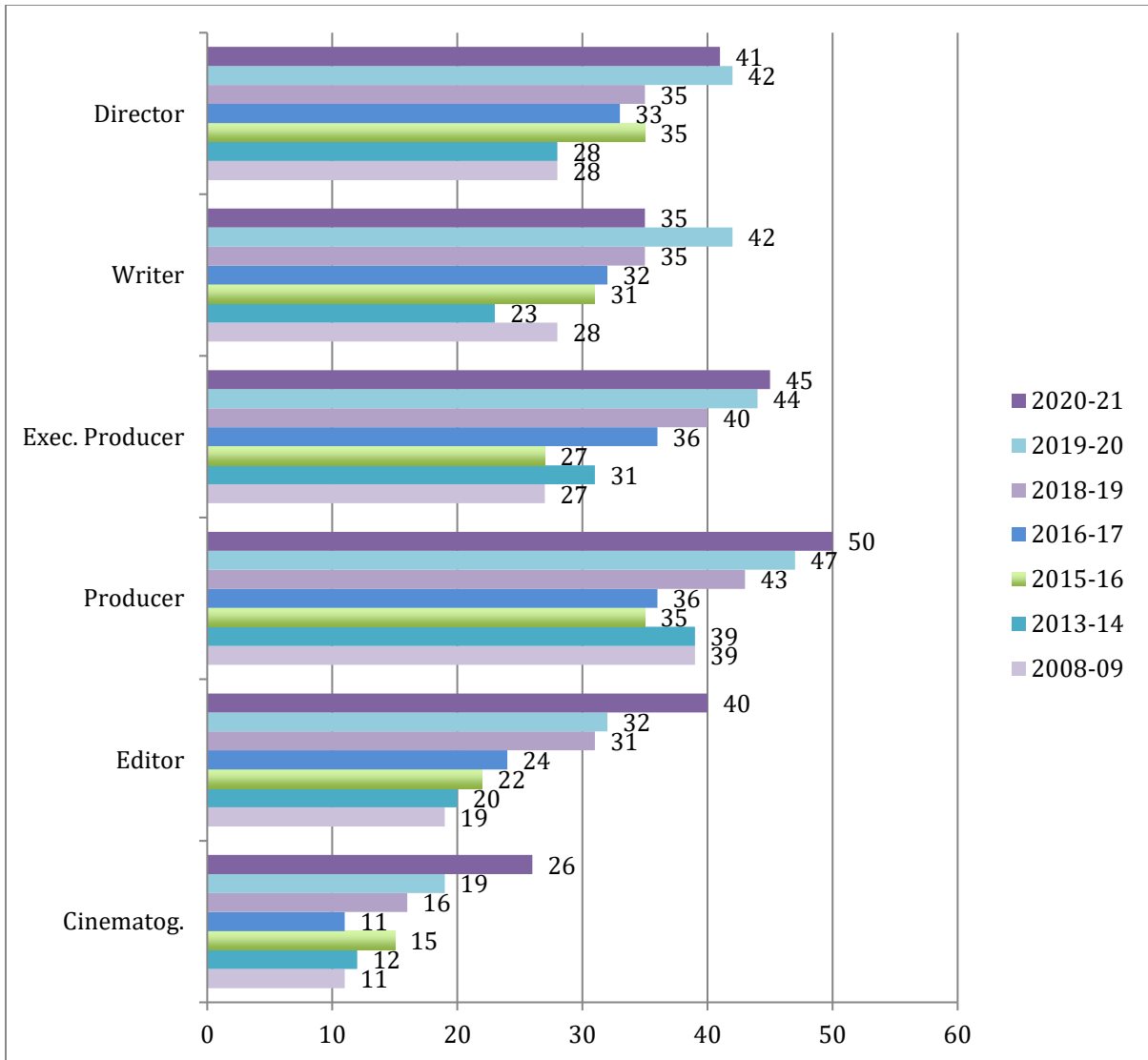


Figure 10 provides a historical comparison of 2020-21 figures with those from prior years. Overall, women accounted for 42% of individuals working in behind-the-scenes roles on documentaries in 2020-21. Women comprised 40% of individuals in behind-the-scenes roles in 2019-20. However, because the selection of festivals shifted somewhat in 2020-21, comparisons should be made with caution.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 10.

*Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Documentaries by Role*

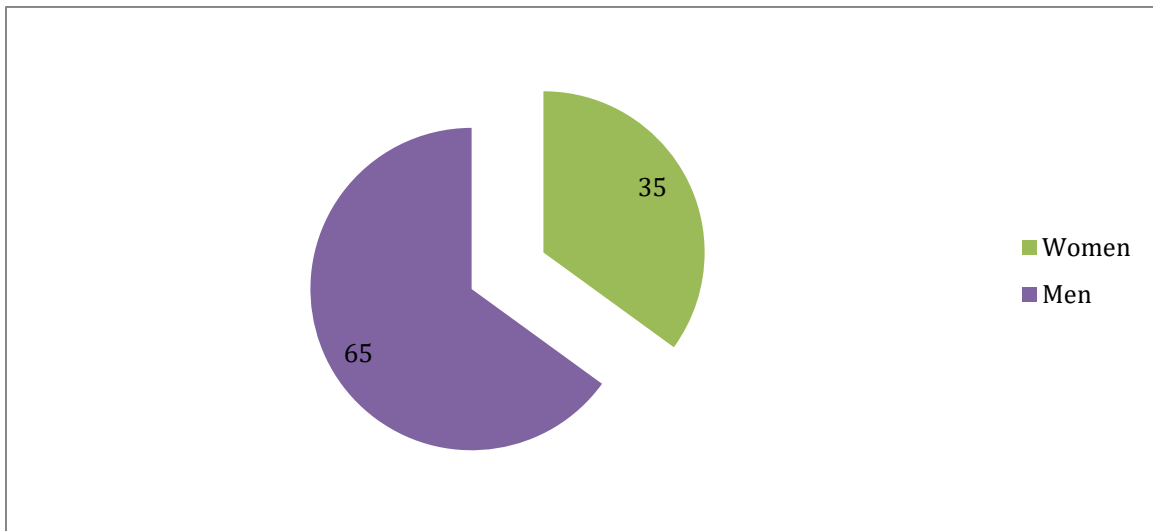


### *Findings for Narrative Features Only*

Overall, women comprised 35% and men 65% of individuals working in the behind-the-scenes roles considered on domestically and independently produced narrative features in 2020-21 (see Figure 11).

*Figure 11.*

*Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Narrative Features Streaming/Screening at High-Profile Festivals in 2020-21*



Women fared best as producers (40%), followed by directors (37%), writers (37%), executive producers (31%), editors (34%), and cinematographers (19%) (see Figure 12).

*Figure 12.*  
*Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on Narrative Features by Role*

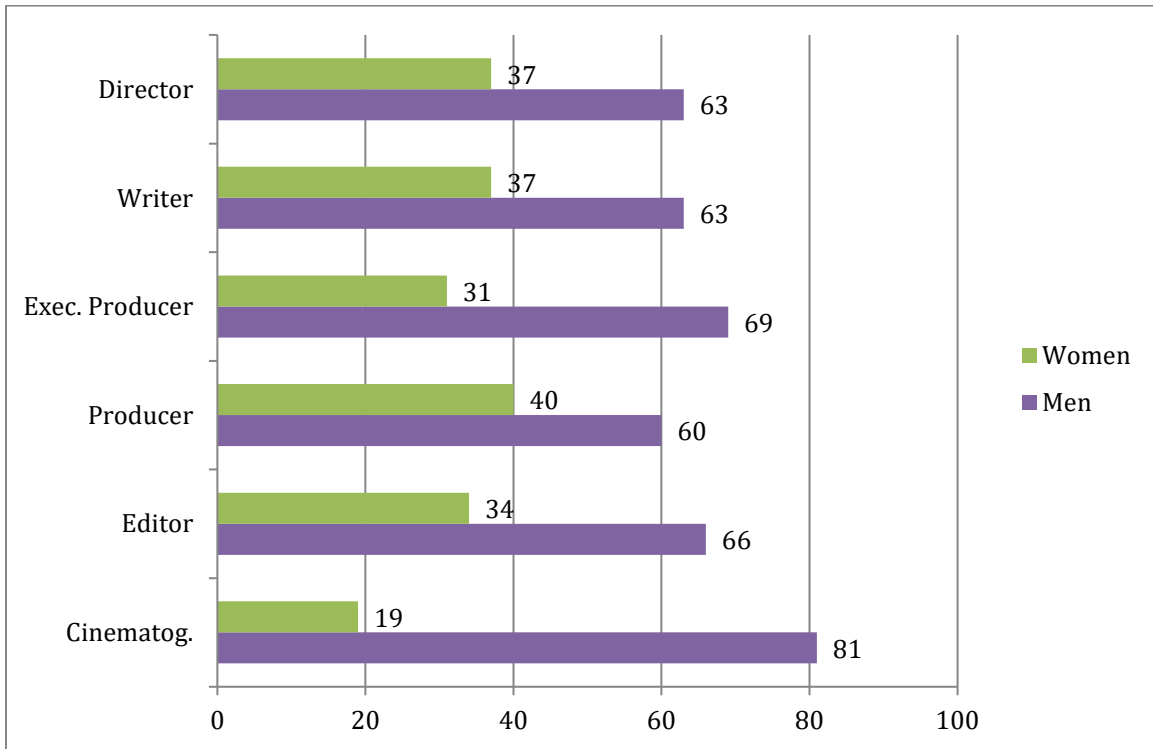
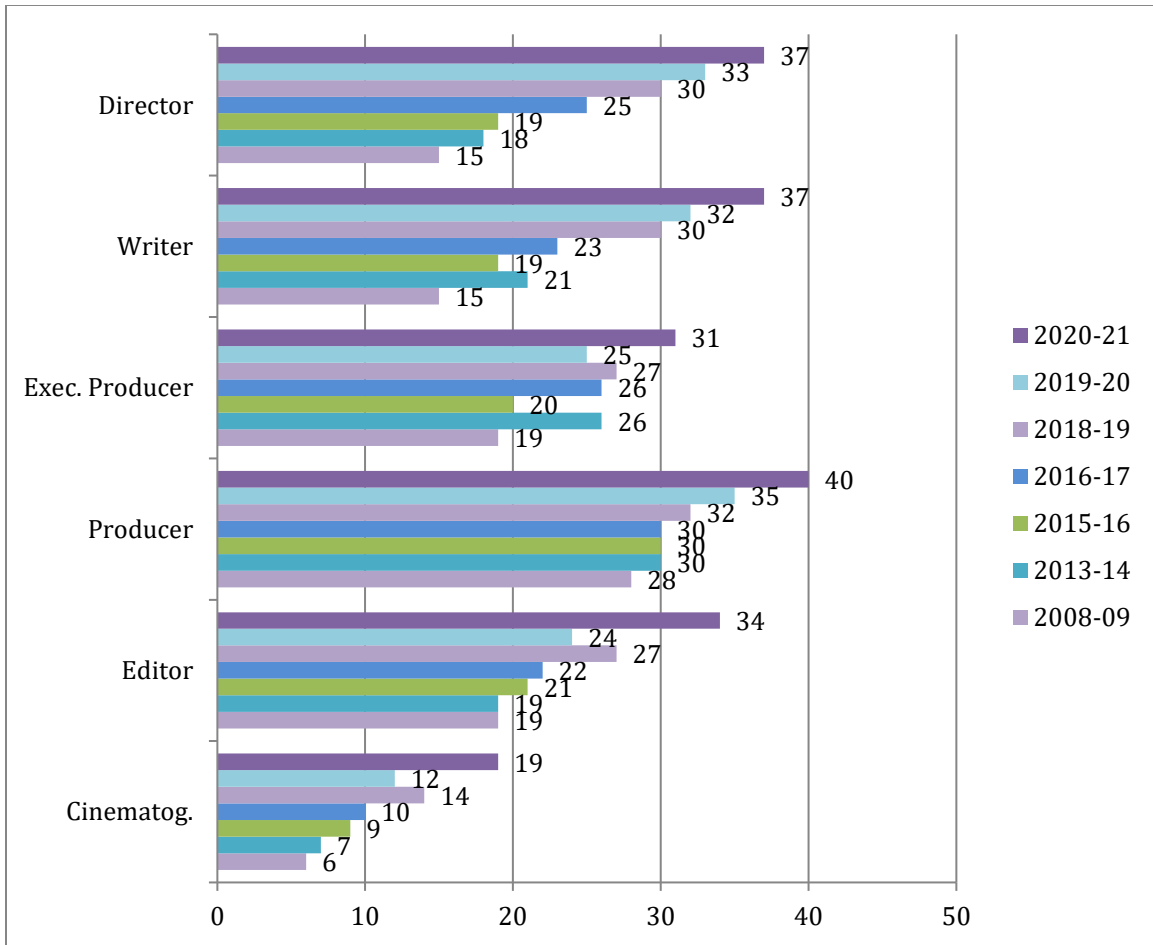


Figure 13 provides a historical comparison of 2020-21 figures with those from prior years. Overall, women comprised 35% of individuals working in behind-the-scenes roles on narrative features in 2020-21. Women accounted for 29% of behind-the-scenes individuals in 2019-20. However, because the selection of festivals shifted somewhat in 2020-21, comparisons should be made with caution.<sup>4</sup>

*Figure 13.  
Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Narrative Features  
by Role*



### *Important Relationships*

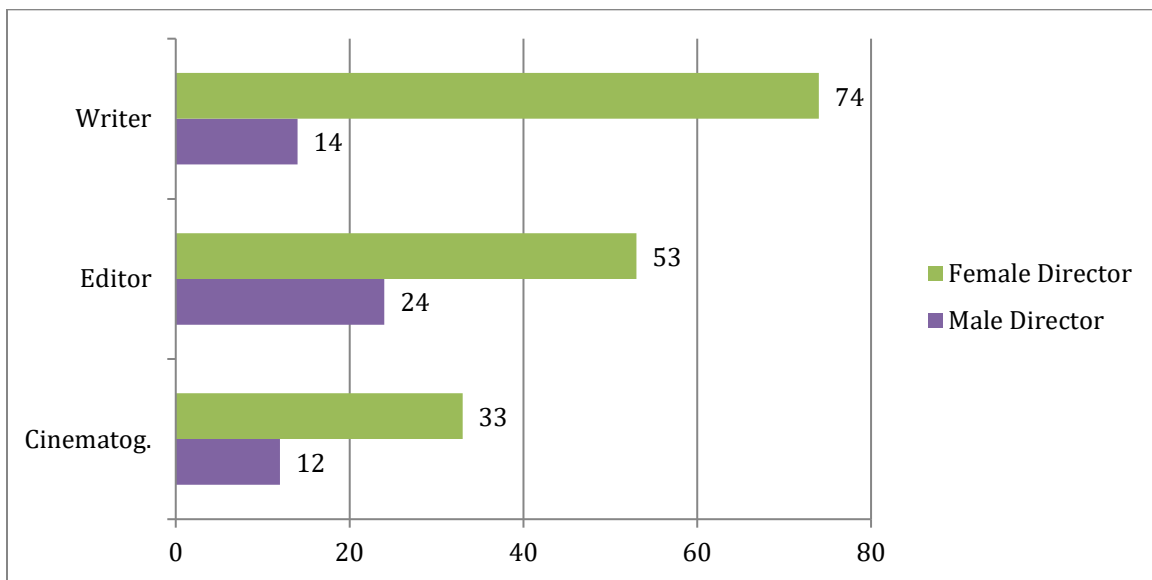
Films with at least one woman director had substantially higher percentages of women working as writers, editors, and cinematographers than films with exclusively male directors (see Figure 14). In fact, the numbers of women working in other key behind-the-scenes roles more than doubled.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 74% of writers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 14% of writers.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 53% of editors. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 24% of editors.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 33% of cinematographers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 12% of cinematographers.

*Figure 14.  
Comparison of Employment of Behind-the-Scenes Women on Films with At Least One Woman Director vs. Films with Exclusively Male Directors*



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Strong, Hannah. (March 9, 2021). How film festivals have managed the shift to virtual. *Hyperallergic*. <https://hyperallergic.com/626125/virtual-festivals-covid-19/>.

<sup>2</sup>Kohn, Eric. (July 23, 2021). American film festivals have a future if they're willing to change (almost) everything. *IndieWire*. <https://www.indiewire.com/2021/07/future-of-film-festivals-collaboration-1234652935/>.

<sup>3</sup>The festivals included AFI Fest; Ann Arbor Film Festival; Atlanta Film Festival; Austin Film Festival; Chicago International Film Festival; Cinequest Film Festival; Cleveland International Film Festival; Florida Film Festival; Hamptons International Film Festival; Nashville Film Festival; New York Film Festival; Rhode Island International Film Festival; St. Louis International Film Festival; San Francisco International Film Festival; Santa Barbara International Film Festival; Seattle International Film Festival; Slamdance Film Festival; Sundance Film Festival; SXSW Film Festival; Tribeca Film Festival.

In total, this study considers 7,452 credits on 582 films in 2020-21, and over 95,400 credits on more than 9,500 films over the period of 2008 to 2021.

All of the films included in the study were posted on the festival's website and/or in program guides. The study included U.S. feature films (narrative and documentaries) screening at the festivals, including those in and out of competition.

There are no definitive or objective lists from reputable sources designating the "top" festivals. However, festivals appearing on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Oscar qualifying lists (short films/documentaries) tend to be well regarded. All of the festivals included in this study appear on those, as well as other, industry lists.

For the purposes of this study, independent film is broadly defined as films made outside of the studio system. However, the study does include films produced by independent companies owned by the major studios.

<sup>4</sup>Two festivals included in last year's study – Palm Springs International Film Festival and Telluride Film Festival – canceled this year and did not post selections. In addition, the Ashland Independent Film Festival, Nantucket Film Festival, and New Directors/New Directions were omitted from this year's list. The following festivals were added: Ann Arbor Film Festival, Nashville Film Festival, and Seattle International Film Festival. Because the list of festivals in this year's study differs somewhat from last year's list, historical comparisons should be made with caution.