

Indie Women: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in U.S. Independent Film, 2023-24

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For the first time since women’s representation in independently and domestically produced films has been tracked, high-profile film festivals in the U.S. streamed and/or screened more *documentaries* directed by women than by men in 2023-24. Festivals streamed/screened an average of 9 documentaries directed by at least one woman versus an average of 8 documentaries directed exclusively by men. In 2022-23, festivals streamed/screened equal numbers of documentaries directed by women and men.

However, the U.S. festivals considered in this study streamed and/or screened more *narrative* features directed exclusively by men than directed by at least one woman. The festivals streamed/screened an average of 11 films directed by men and an average of 7 narrative films directed by at least one woman. In 2022-23, the ratio was an average of 10 narrative films directed by men and 7 by women.

Higher percentages of women worked as directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematography on documentaries (44%) than on narrative features (32%). Women achieved historic highs working as directors (45%) and writers (45%) on documentaries. However, the percentages of women working on narrative features declined in every role considered in 2023-24.

First conducted in 2008, the *Indie Women* project monitors the employment of behind-the-scenes women working on films screening and/or streaming at 20 high-profile film festivals in the U.S. 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 the festivals from July 2023 through June 2024.¹ This year’s study also tracks women’s representation as composers.

Key Findings

•In 2023-24, the U.S. festivals considered in this study streamed and/or screened more *narrative* films directed exclusively by men than with at least one woman director. The festivals streamed/screened an average of 11 *narrative* films directed by men, compared to an average of 7 films directed by at least one woman (see Figure 1). In 2022-23, the festivals streamed/screened an average of 10 narrative films directed by men and 7 directed by women. In 2021-22, the ratio was 10 to 6.

Figure 1.

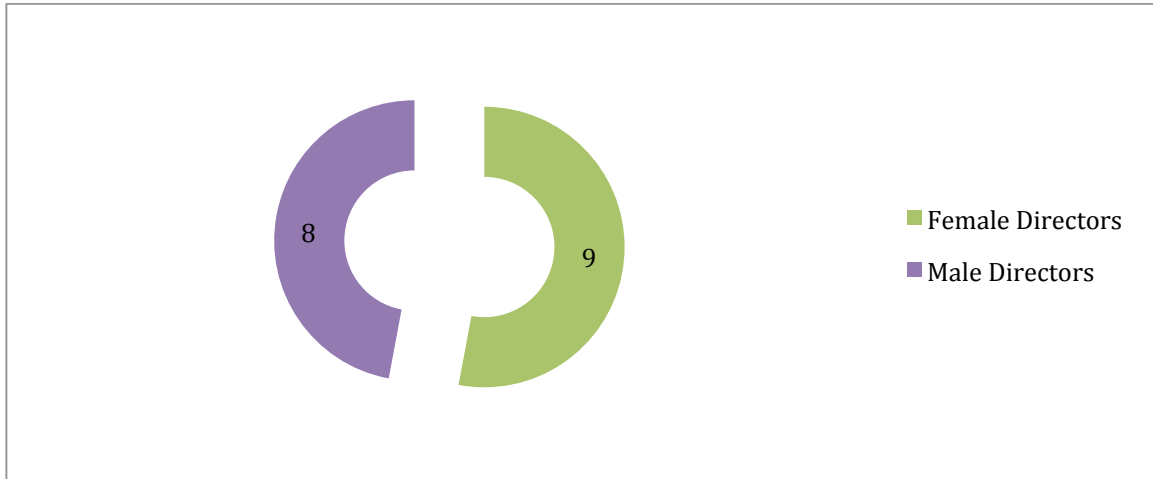
Average No. of Narrative Features Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streamed/Screened at U.S. Festivals



•For the first time since women’s representation at festivals has been tracked, festivals streamed and/or screened more documentaries directed by women than by men in 2023-24. Festivals streamed/screened an average of 9 *documentaries* directed by at least one woman versus an average of 8 documentaries directed exclusively by men (see Figure 2). In 2022-23, festivals screened equal numbers of documentaries directed by men and women.

Figure 2.

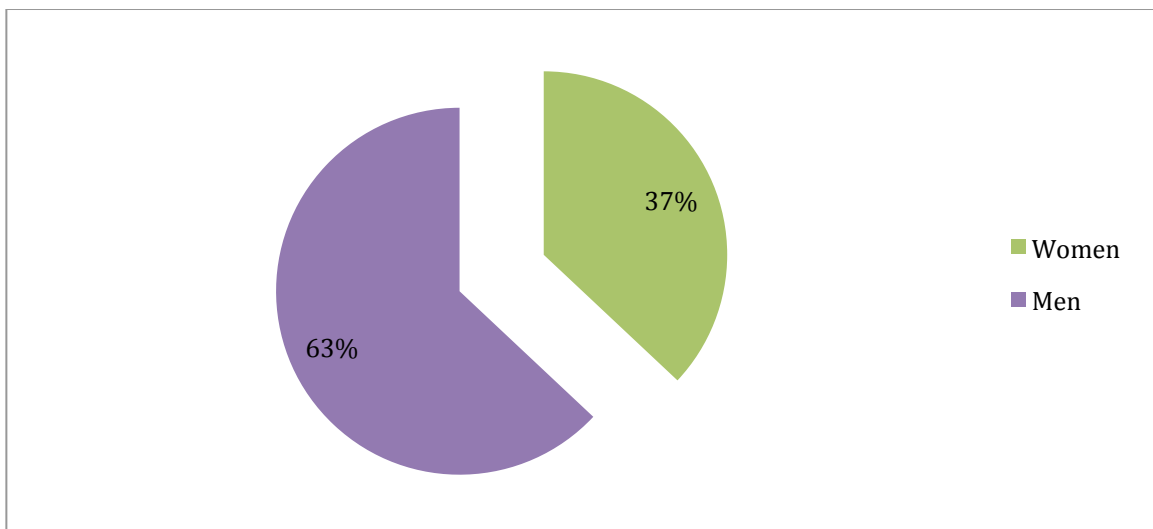
Average No. of Documentaries Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streamed/Screened at U.S. Festivals



•In 2023-24, women comprised 37% of individuals working in key behind-the-scenes roles on U.S. independent features (narrative films and documentaries). This represents a decline of 2 percentage points from 39% in 2022-23. Men continued to account for the majority (63%) of individuals in these roles (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women and Men Working on U.S. Independent Features Streamed/Screened at High-Profile Festivals in 2023-24



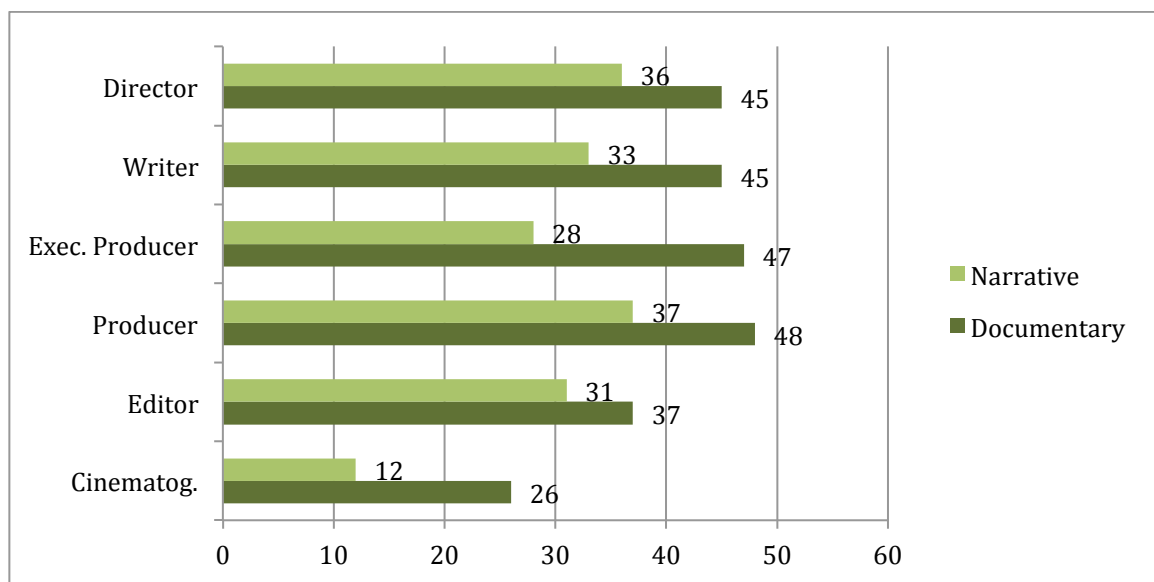
•On all films considered (narrative features and documentaries), women fared best as producers (41%) and directors (41%), followed by executive producers (36%) and writers (36%), editors (34%), and cinematographers (20%).

•Women continued to enjoy higher employment on documentaries than on narrative features. Women accounted for 44% of those working in key behind-the-scenes roles on documentaries and 32% of those working on narrative features.

•The percentage of women working in every role considered was higher on documentaries than on narrative features (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, cinematographers, and composers. For example, on films with at least one woman director, women comprised 32% of cinematographers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 7% of cinematographers.

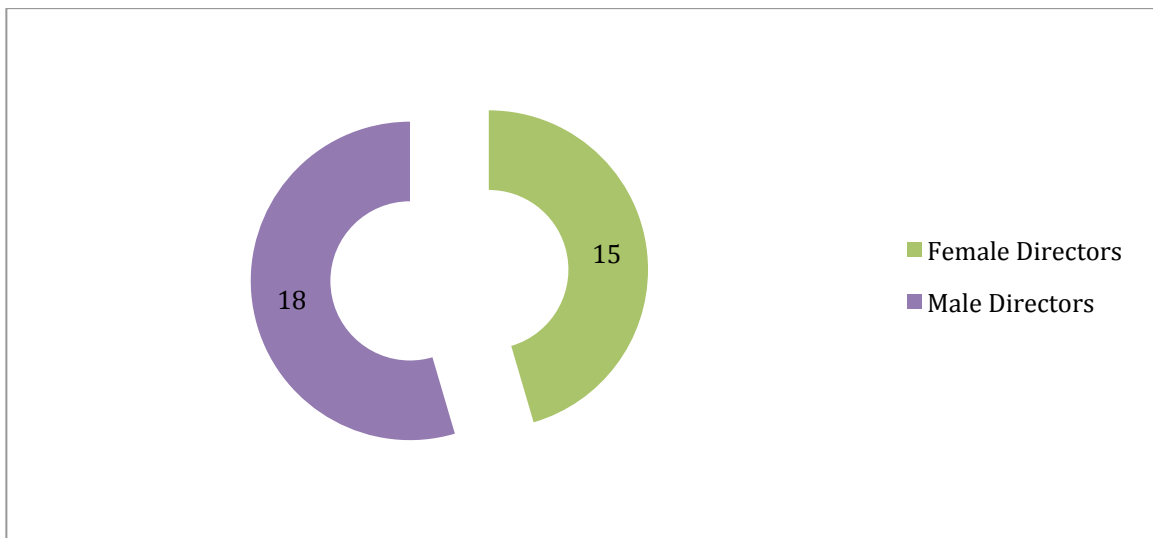
•Overall, women comprised 18% and men 82% of composers working on independent films in 2023-24. Women composers fared better on documentaries (24%) than narrative features (15%).

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 15 films (narrative features and documentaries) directed by at least one woman versus an average of 18 films directed exclusively by men (see Figure 5). These numbers represent a decline in the numbers of films streamed and/or screened in 2022-23 when festivals screened an average of 18 films directed by at least one woman and 20 films directed by men.

Figure 5.

Average No. of Narrative and Documentary Films Directed by At Least One Woman vs. Average No. of Films Directed Exclusively by Men Streamed/Screened at U.S. Festivals



Women comprised 37% of directors, writers, executive producers, producers, editors, and cinematographers working on independently and domestically produced feature-length films in 2023-24 (see Figure 3 in Key Findings section). This represents a decline of 2 percentage points from 39% in 2022-23.

Women fared best as producers (41%) and directors (41%), followed by executive producers (36%) and writers (36%), editors (34%), and cinematographers (20%) (see Figure 6).

By role, women accounted for 41% of directors, down 1 percentage point from 42% in 2022-23. Women comprised 36% of writers, down 4 percentage points from 40% in 2022-23. Women made up 36% of executive producers, down 4 percentage points from 40% in 2022-23. Women accounted for 41% of producers, down 3 percentage points from 44% in 2022-23. Women comprised 34% of editors, even with the percentage in 2022-23. Women accounted for 20% of cinematographers, down 1 percentage point from 21% in 2022-23. Figure 7 provides a historical comparison of 2023-24 figures with those from prior years.

Figure 6.

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

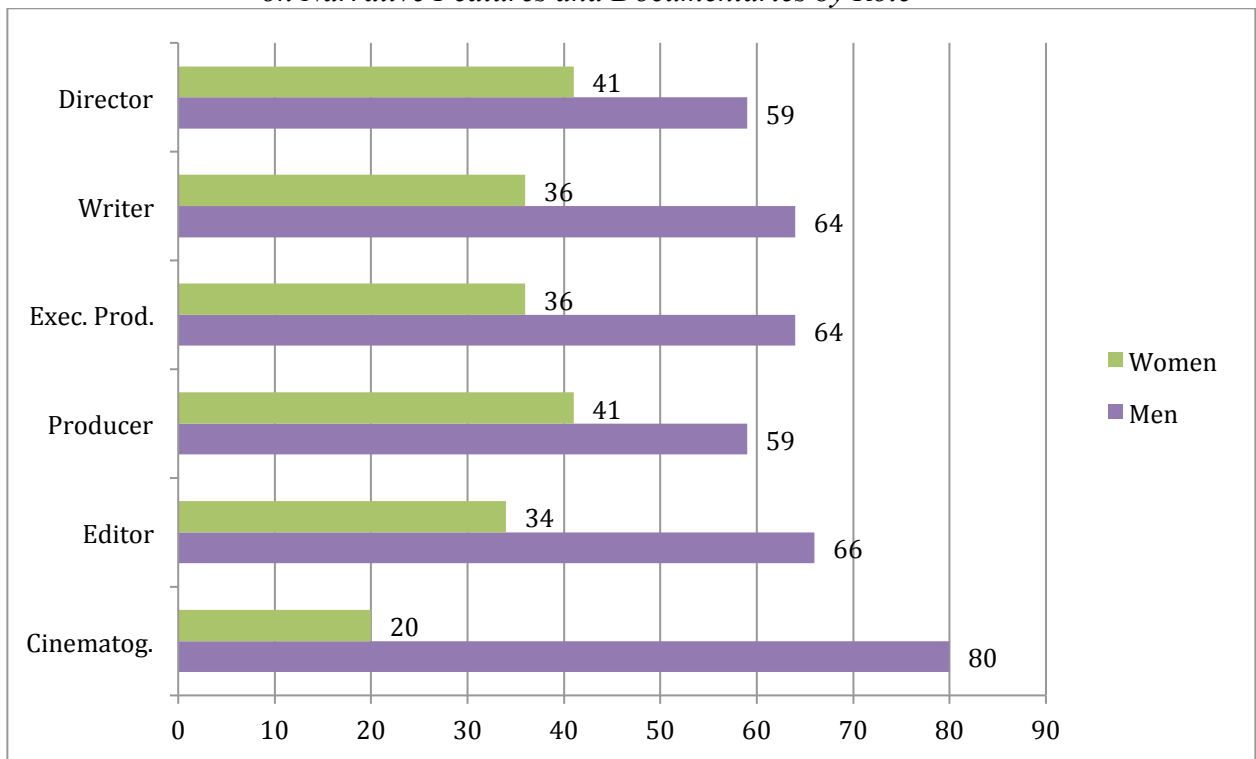
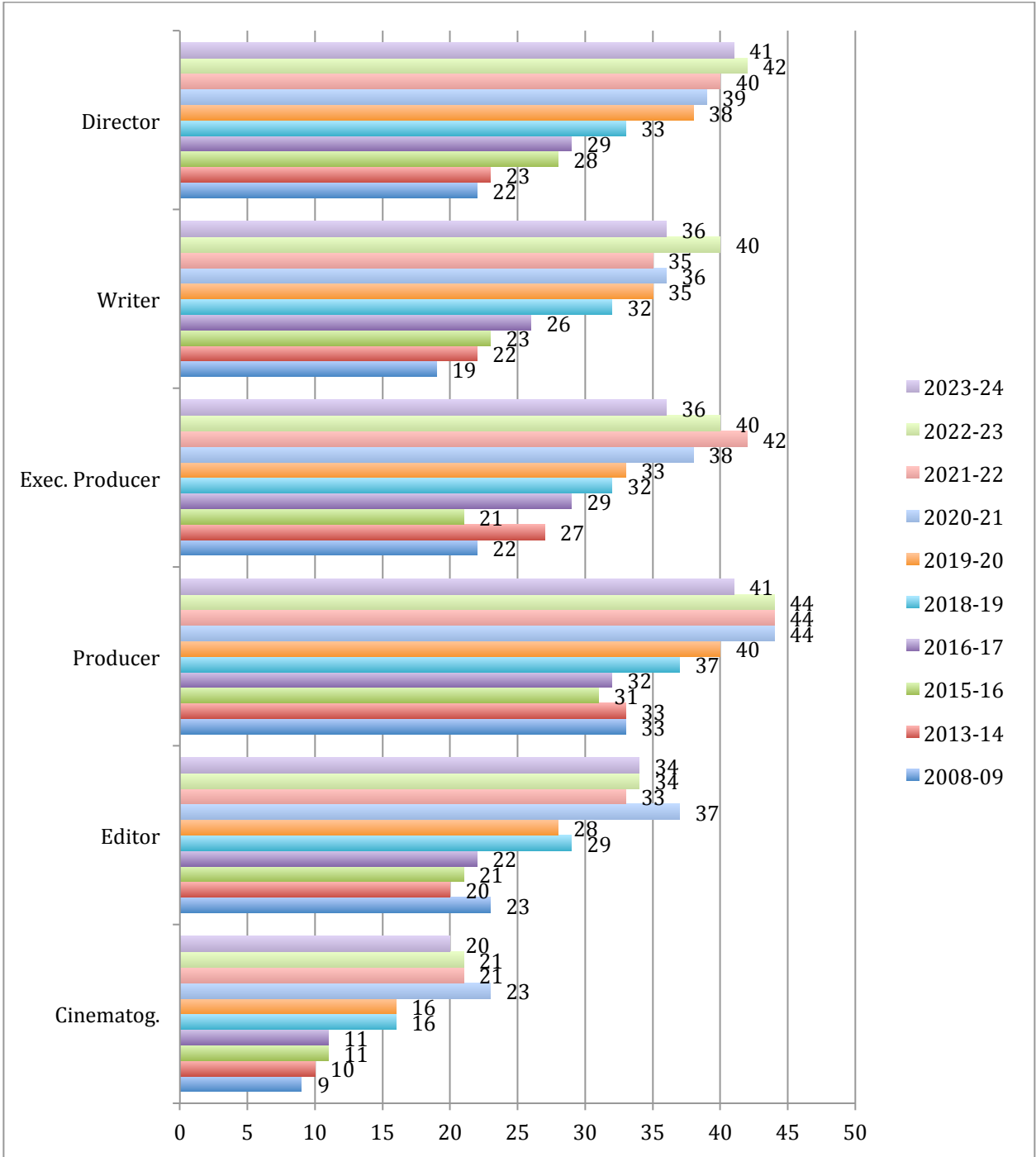


Figure 7.

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

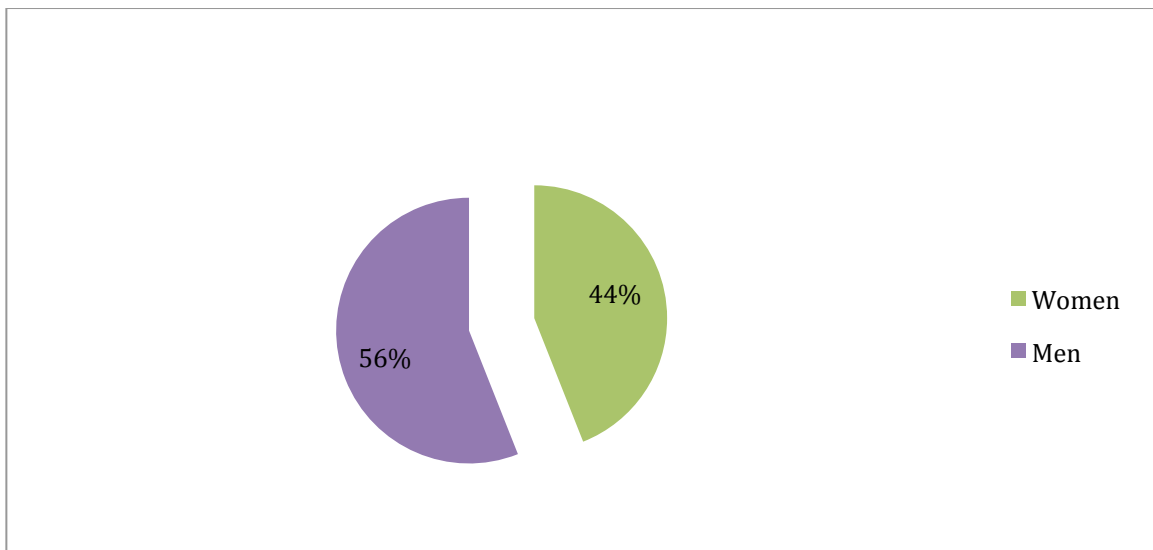


Findings for Documentaries Only

Women comprised 44% and men 56% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on documentaries in 2023-24 (see Figure 8). This represents no change from the behind-the-scenes gender ratio in 2022-23.

Figure 8.

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



Women fared best as producers (48%), followed by executive producers (47%), directors (45%) and writers (45%), editors (37%), and cinematographers (26%) (see Figure 9).

Figure 9.

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

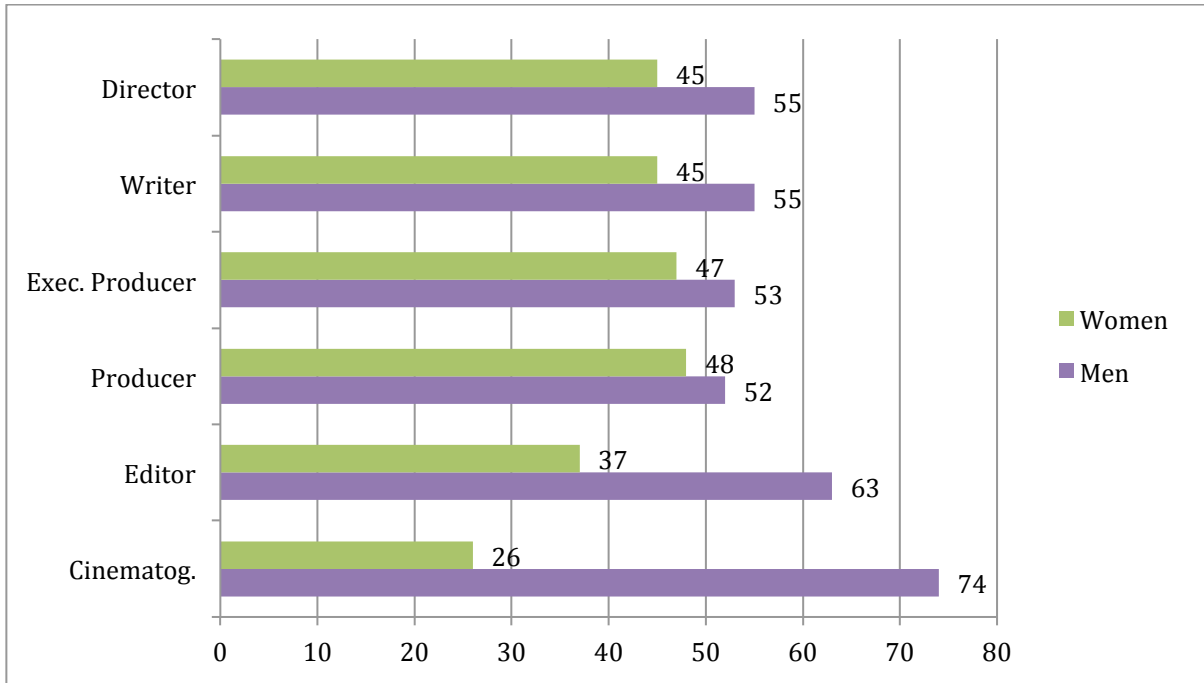
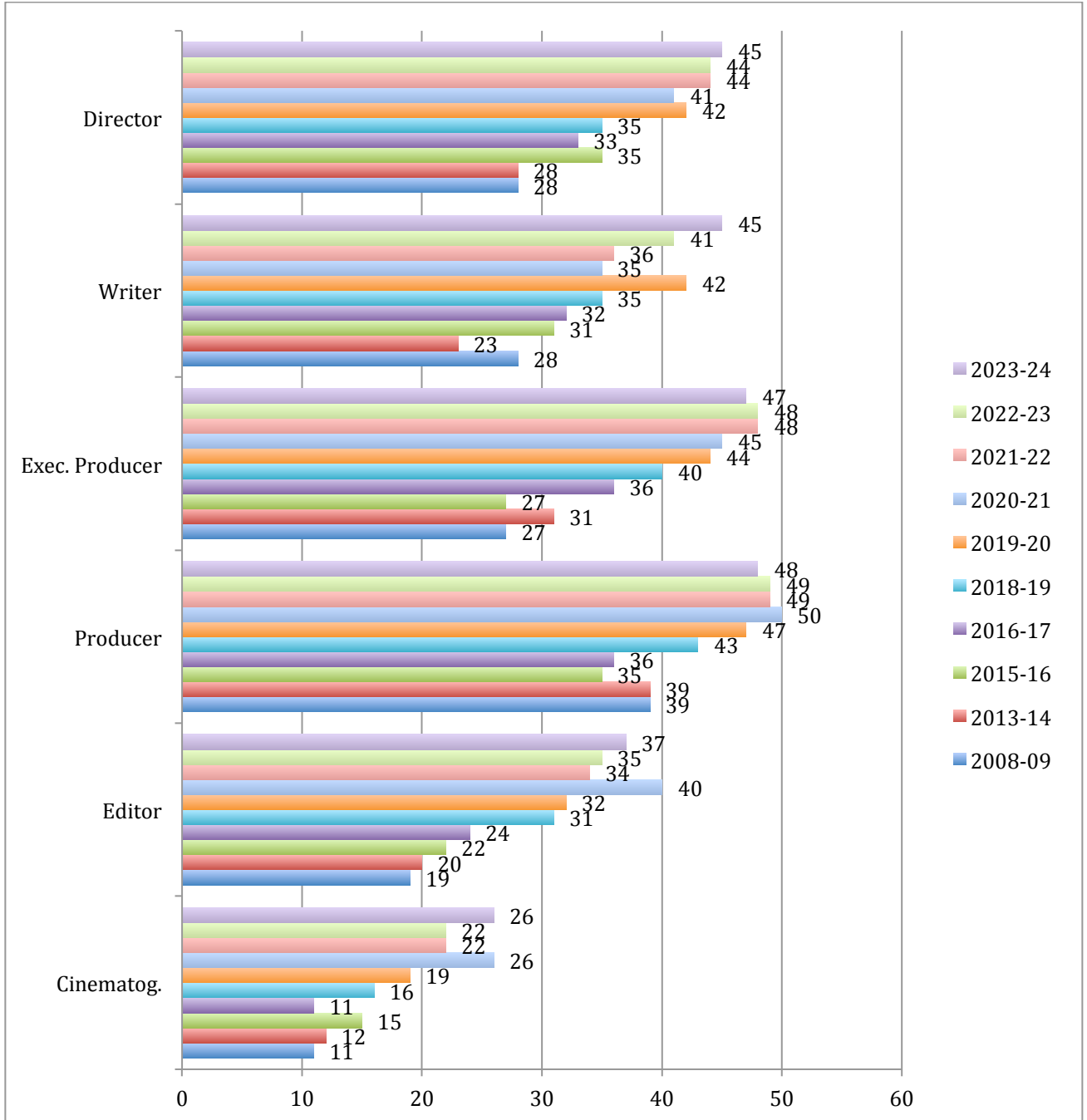


Figure 10 provides a historical comparison of 2023-24 figures with those from prior years. By role, women comprised 45% of directors, up 1 percentage point from 44% in 2022-23. Women accounted for 45% of writers, up 4 percentage points from 41% in 2022-23. Women made up 47% of executive producers, down 1 percentage point from 48% in 2022-23. Women comprised 48% of producers, down 1 percentage point from 49% in 2022-23. Women accounted for 37% of editors, up 2 percentage points from 35% in 2022-23. Women made up 26% of cinematographers, up 4 percentage points from 22% in 2022-23.

Figure 10.

Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Documentaries by Role



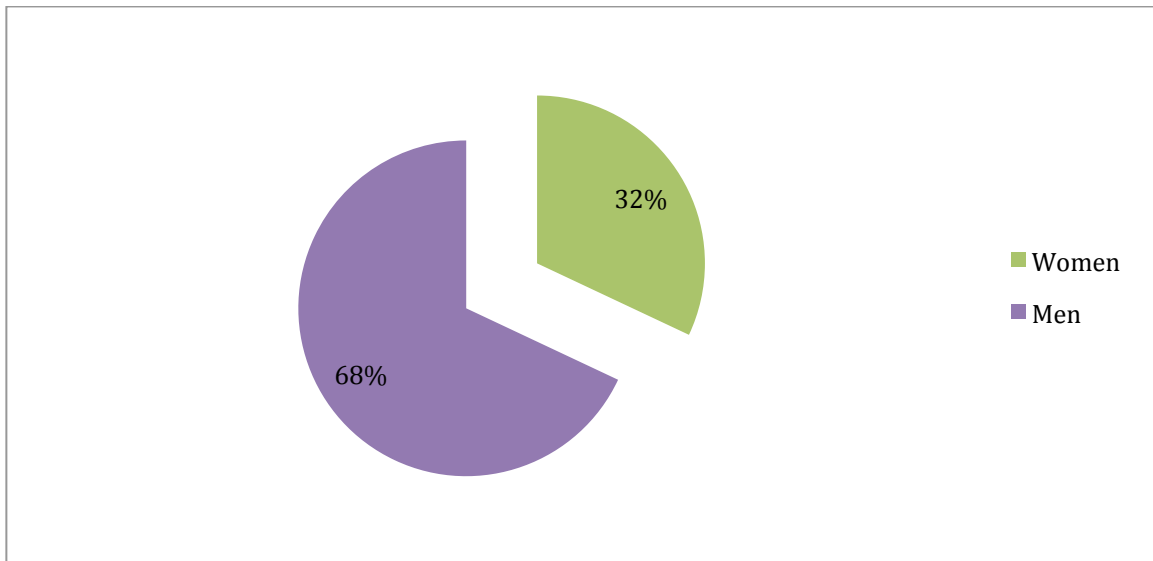
The percentages of women working as directors and writers on documentaries increased in 2023-24 to achieve recent historic highs.

Findings for Narrative Features Only

Overall, women comprised 32% and men 68% of individuals working in the behind-the-scenes roles considered on domestically and independently produced narrative features in 2023-24 (see Figure 11). For women, this represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 35% in 2022-23.

Figure 11.

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



Women fared best as producers (37%), followed by directors (36%), writers (33%), editors (31%), executive producers (28%), and cinematographers (12%) (see Figure 12).

Figure 12.

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

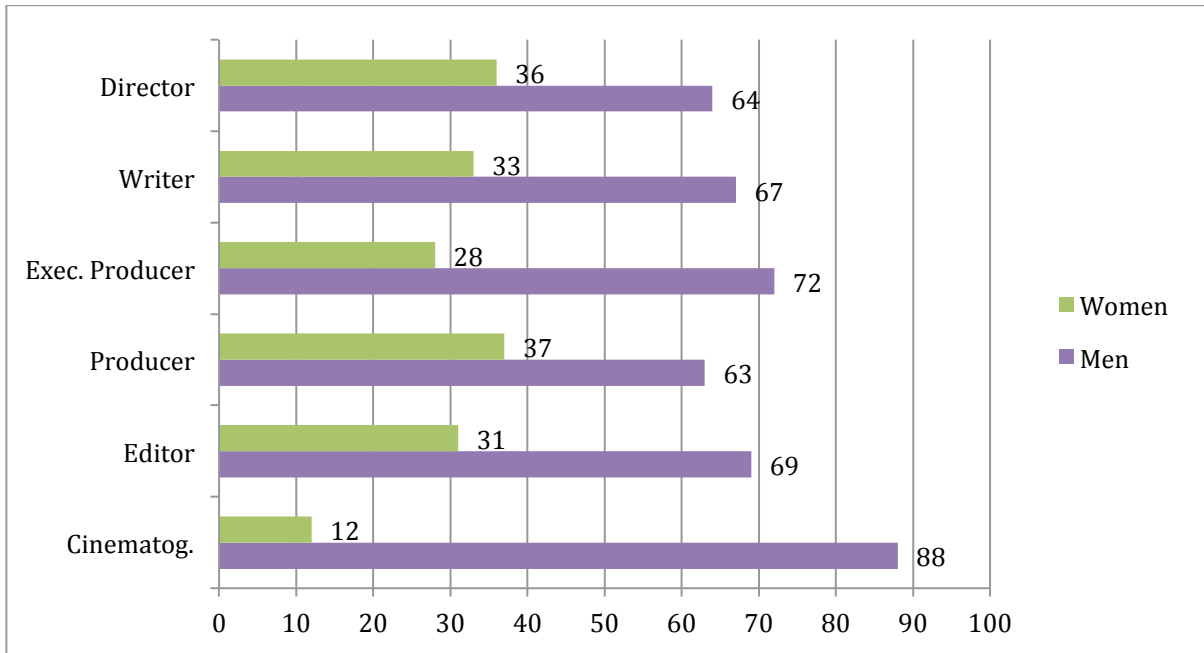
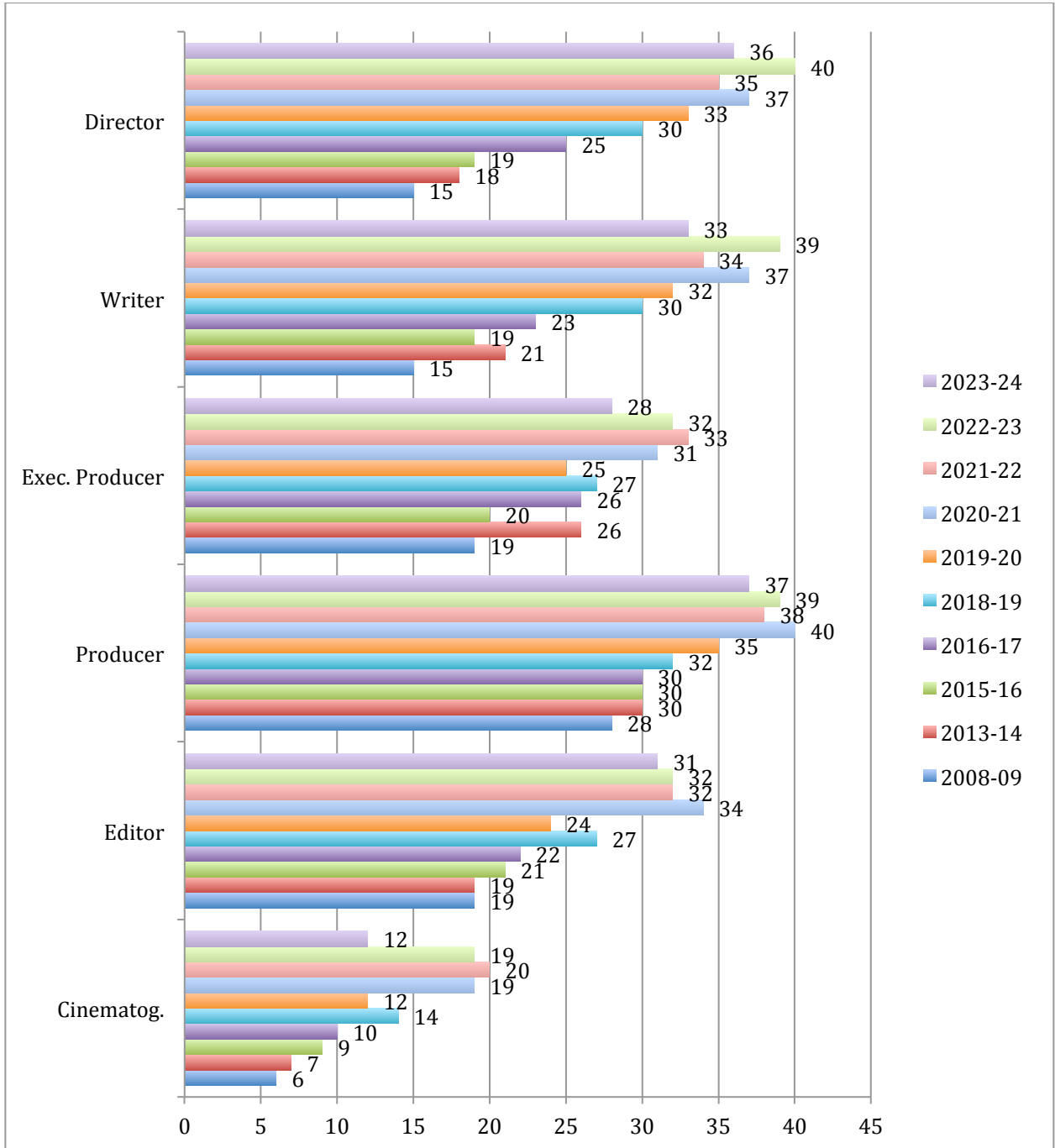


Figure 13 provides a historical comparison of 2023-24 figures with those from prior years. By role, women comprised 36% of directors, down 4 percentage points from 40% in 2022-23. Women accounted for 33% of writers, down 6 percentage points from 39% in 2022-23. Women made up 28% of executive producers, down 4 percentage points from 32% in 2022-23. Women comprised 37% of producers, down 2 percentage points from 39% in 2022-23. Women accounted for 31% of editors, down 1 percentage point from 32% in 2022-23. Women made up 12% of cinematographers, down 7 percentage points from 19% in 2022-23.

Figure 13.

Historical Comparison of Percentages of Women Working on Narrative Features by Role



Findings for Composers

Overall, women comprised 18% and men 82% of composers working on independently and domestically produced narrative and documentary films in 2023-24. This represents a decline of 2 percentage points from 20% in 2022-23.

Composers, who happen to be women, fared better on documentaries than narrative features. Women accounted for 24% of composers working on documentaries (down 2 percentage points from 2022-23) and 15% of composers working on narrative features (down 1 percentage point from 16% in 2022-23).

When a film had at least one woman director, women accounted for 30% of composers. When a film had exclusively men directors, women comprised 9% of composers.

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).

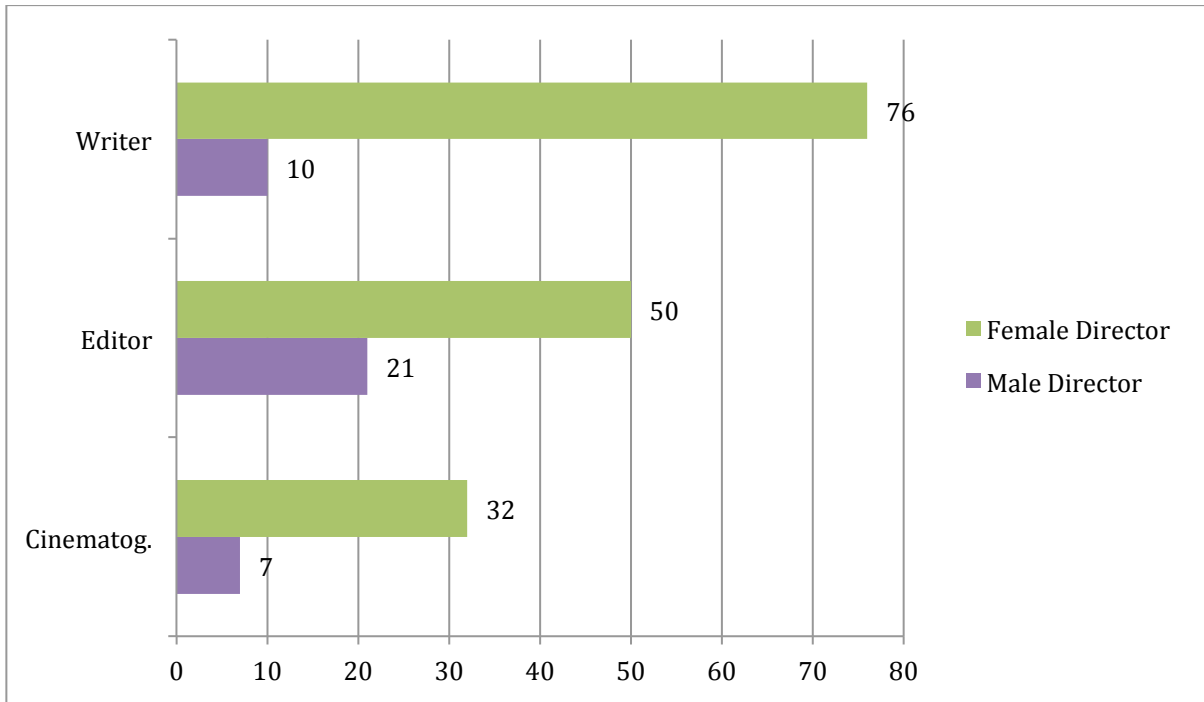
On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 76% of writers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 10% of writers.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 50% of editors. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 21% of editors.

On films with at least one woman director, women comprised 32% of cinematographers. On films with exclusively male directors, women accounted for 7% 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

¹The festivals include AFI Fest; 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 Hampshire 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 more than 8,570 credits on over 650 films in 2023-24, and over 124,900 credits on more than 11,500 films over the period of 2008 to 2024.

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/streaming 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. 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.

The study identified one non-binary editor and one transgender director, writer, and producer. The inclusion of these individuals in the study did not affect the overall numbers.