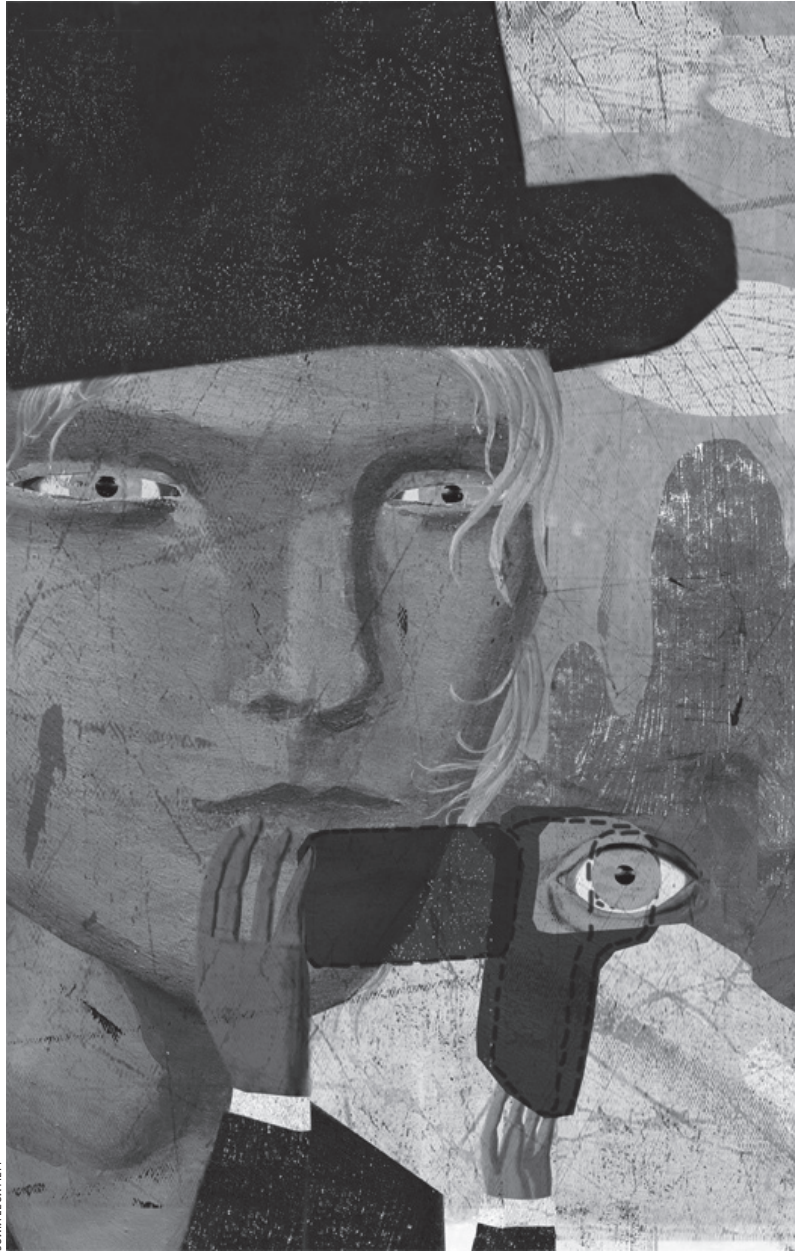


# STILL PIONEERS

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Career paths of Quebec female  
feature film directors



SONIA LEONTIEFF

## HIGHLIGHTS

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A study by **Anna Lupien** and **Francine Descarries**

in partnership with  
**RÉALISATRICES ÉQUITABLES**

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## The context: the persistent marginalization of female feature film directors

In the early 90s, Quebec female directors, united under the banner of the *Moitié Moitié* committee, challenged the marginalization of female filmmakers and published statistics on funding awarded to female directors by Telefilm Canada and SOGIC, the ancestor of present-day SODEC. Nearly twenty years later, the situation of female directors remains just as preoccupying, as shown by a study conducted in 2008 (Garneau, Descarries and *Réalisatrices Équitables*). Although almost as many women as men attend Quebec's three main film schools, significantly fewer women than men practice the profession today. Furthermore, their projects are submitted less often to various funding institutions. Proportionately, the success rate of their applications is also inferior to that of male directors, and their budgets are, on average, much lower than those awarded to men. Female directors are particularly under-represented in Telefilm Canada and SODEC's feature film assistance programs, which are geared towards cultural enterprises, and require that production companies rather than filmmakers apply for funding. Female directors are extremely rare in these programs, which also grant the highest budgets.

## Research objectives:

- **To gain a better understanding of the various constraints and incentives encountered by women over the course of their careers in feature films.**
- **To increase awareness on the part of decision-makers and the public regarding the place of women in feature film directing.**
- **To provide input on strategies that empower women to participate fully in Quebec's film industry.**

In order to avoid simplistic interpretations which attribute the discrepancies between male and female directors to individual choices, we chose to examine the situation of female directors by taking into account the wider context of social structures and collective stakes.

To this end, we conducted interviews with 20 female directors and a control group of 5 male directors. When we asked the female directors to participate in the study, almost all (18 out of 20) immediately accepted the invitation. This almost perfect response is undoubtedly a clear sign of the need for research on the obstacles encountered by female directors working in feature films.

The interviews with female and male directors, which total more than 450 pages of verbatim, were analyzed in several ways. Collating all the information collected from the group of female directors allowed us to identify the similarities in their experiences and grasp the various obstacles they encountered at different stages in their careers. We then compared the data collected from the female directors with the data derived from the interviews with the male directors which gave us a more precise idea of the specific reality of female directors in feature films. A synthesis of the main findings drawn from our analysis of the reports we collected is presented below. For a more detailed rendering of results and subsequent analysis, please consult the complete report available online at the *Réalisatrices Équitables* website: [www.realisatrices-equitables.com](http://www.realisatrices-equitables.com)

## Myths and reality regarding female directors

### Myth no. 1: “Women don’t apply”

#### REALITY:

- Filmmakers do not submit projects to SODEC and Telefilm Canada’s main programs which finance feature films: this is done by producers.
- Before submitting a project to a funding institution, the producer must first interest a distributor and a television broadcaster in the project.
- Filmmakers’ careers are built up over a series of determining stages, such as training in schools, professional opportunities, and relationships with various intermediaries (producers, distributors, broadcasters). These stages occur prior to submitting projects to institutions for funding, and may facilitate or limit women’s access to directing feature films.

### Myth no. 2: “The main hindrance is myself” Individual obstacles in an era of *Where there’s a will, there’s a way*

#### REALITY:

- Even though most artistic professions are based on a personal approach through which individuals distinguish themselves, this still doesn’t explain the fact that among the many who are called, men are chosen much more often than women. The responsibility for social realities cannot be entirely attributed to the individual alone.
- Many filmmakers, male and female, are occasionally gripped by moments of insecurity and doubt in various phases of the creative process. The testimonies we collected lead us to believe that male directors are more likely than their female counterparts to conceal their insecurity and display manifestations of self-confidence that correspond to the cultural codes of the profession.
- It seems that an attitude of insecurity is often interpreted differently according to whether it is shown by a man or a woman. Thus, a male director who expresses insecurity is perceived as an artist in the throes of torments intrinsic to his creative status. On the other hand, a female director who manifests moments of doubt is more quickly perceived as being fragile.
- Women still carry traces of sexual socialization which instills in them aptitudes and predispositions traditionally considered feminine. These traits do not correspond to common representations of the filmmaker’s profession, yet they limit women’s capacity to work in feature films.

### **Myth no. 3: “Women don’t help other women” or its variant “Women should help other women”**

#### **REALITY:**

- In general, female producers are more supportive of female directors than are male producers. However, male and female producers alike seem rather disinclined to submit projects directed by women when applying to the regular sector (referred to by SODEC as the “private” sector), where they attempt to obtain a more substantial budget for a film production. Male producers applying to the regular sector however seem slightly more supportive of female directors than are female producers.
- Many people think that women in positions of power should necessarily support female directors, out of feminine solidarity or as part of a principle of recognition, identification or empathy. But women grow up in the same society as men, and, like men, they are susceptible to internalizing representations of the world, value system and cultural codes that continue to assign distinct positions in social organizations to men and to women.

#### **A LOOK AT STATISTICS**

It is often said that female producers do not help other women. However, according to a SODEC report (2008) on production assistance, 53.4% of projects submitted by female producers between 2004 and 2007 were directed by women and 46.6% were directed by men, whereas only 16.1% of projects submitted by male producers were directed by women and 83.9% were directed by men. Female producers are more likely to partner with female directors when applying to the independent sector (71.4% of projects submitted by female producers are directed by women) than to the regular, or so-called “private” sector, where 15.2% of projects submitted are directed by women. Male producers applying to the private sector tend to support female directors (23% directed by women) more than female producers. However they support projects directed by men three times as often (76.2%) (Audet and SODEC, 2008).

### **Myth no. 4: “Female directors can be just as successful as men: look at Micheline Lanctôt and Léa Pool”**

#### **REALITY:**

- From the dawn of our film history to 2007, we were only able to inventory 100 feature films made by a total of 48 female directors.
- While it is true that directors such as Léa Pool and Micheline Lanctôt have marked Quebec’s cinematographic landscape, we should remember that success stories are extremely rare among female directors. Once again, prior to 2007, only 3 female directors had made more than 4 feature films.

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**Distribution of female directors who directed a feature film prior to 2007**

NUMBER OF FILMS	NUMBER OF FEMALE DIRECTORS
1	26
2	9
3	7
4	3
5	1
9	2

**Sources:** Coulombe et Jean (2006), bottin professionnel de l'Association des réalisateurs et réalisatrices du Québec (ARRQ), répertoire audiovisuel en ligne de la Cinémathèque québécoise et Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois.

### **Myth no. 5: “Women choose to make author-driven films, a more difficult category to finance”**

**REALITY:**

- Funding institutions, production and distribution companies, movie theatre owners, broadcasters – the vast majority of players in the film financing chain – do, in fact, favor commercial films over author-driven films and independent projects.
- Statistics on the financing of films supported by independent sector programs, in which women have less difficulty than in Telefilm Canada’s regular sector or in SODEC’s so-called “private” sector, speak more to the scale of their budgets than their artistic intentions.
- Author-driven films can be financed by programs of the regular sector, also called “private” sector, or of the independent sector. Author-driven films by women however are most often restricted to the independent sector with much smaller budgets.
- Author-driven films directed by women receive a particularly marginal form of support, as a series of factors contributes to maintain female directors in sectors with budgets under 1.5 million dollars, and limit their access to the more substantial budgets in the regular sector (3 to 5 million dollars and over).
- Several female directors wish to expand their range while earning a living directing commissioned projects or developing proposals with commercial potential, but encounter a variety of obstacles when they attempt to break into these niches.

## Myth no. 6: “Women are more comfortable working with small budgets”

### REALITY:

- Female directors often fall back on smaller budgets after being refused more substantial financing. Some female directors then rely on independent programs after several failed attempts in the “regular” or “private” sectors.
- Several female directors turn to independent programs when their project fails to interest a production company, since these programs do not require the support of a producer.
- It seems that several players in the film industry still tend to have less confidence in female directors than male directors when it comes to directing large-scale projects.

### **AUTHOR-DRIVEN AND INDEPENDENT FILM**

The term “author-driven films” refers to films whose nature is primarily cultural rather than commercial. They can be financed by Telefilm Canada and SODEC’s “private”, “regular” or “independent” programs.

The term “independent films” refers to films financed by Telefilm and SODEC’s independent film assistance programs and by Quebec and Canada’s arts councils. Budgets in these programs are lower, and filmmakers must necessarily produce or co-produce the film in order to maintain full creative freedom.

### **SODEC’S PROGRAMS : “PRIVATE” AND INDEPENDENT SECTORS**

SODEC supports feature film production through two funding programs; selective support for fictional feature film – private sector, and selective support for fictional feature film – independent sector. However, the use of the term “private” is confusing, because all films in all categories depend on public funding. Differences between the two programs are not in the amount of public investment involved, but rather, the scale of their budgets. In the “private” sector, SODEC awards up to 2 million dollars, whereas in the “independent” sector, the institution’s envelopes are limited to \$500 000 (SODEC, 2010).

## Myth no. 7: “Women prefer documentaries”

### REALITY:

- While it is true that more women make documentaries than feature films, this prevalence stems from a variety of factors which go beyond the question of individual preferences.
- While many filmmakers work in documentaries out of pure interest, certain female directors turn to documentary filmmaking only after experiencing great difficulty breaking into feature films, or because directing feature films involves too much financial insecurity or a work schedule incompatible with motherhood.

## Limitations and obstacles encountered by female directors

### “Women’s films”, an uncomfortable label

- While the vast majority of movie screens are populated by male heroes, the simple fact of placing women in leading roles challenges dominant codes in film.
- Female directors’ films often carry traces of their social position as women, because their main characters are predominantly women, they tell stories from a female point of view, and they often deal with themes that specifically affect women.
- Female directors from various horizons, driven by a desire to recount women’s lives, express the importance of creating space for their perspective. Certain well-known male directors have also placed female characters at the heart of their stories, but they approach these characters from a male point of view.
- In several cases, “feminine” characteristics of female directors’ work have, directly or indirectly, led to reticence on the part of producers, broadcasters, or funding institutions.
- Most female directors do not identify with the categories of “chick flicks” or “women’s films”, because they often perceive them as simplistic or even pejorative. Female directors want to be recognized for the uniqueness and diversity of their approaches, styles and methods.
- While the only male-directed films to be labeled “guy films” are specific genres in which guns or cars figure prominently, films directed by women are almost systematically stamped with the seal of so-called feminine specificity.
- By trying to identify a feminine “difference”, the industry excludes female directors who wish to express themselves without necessarily treating themes explicitly related to women.
- Several female directors polled fear that generalizations about the essence of “feminine writing” lead to simplistic representations of their work and mask the diversity of their filmmaking styles.
- Male directors’ styles are extremely varied, as are those of female directors. Greater artistic differences often exist between the work of two female directors than between that of a male and female director. To illustrate this point, one might say that the Frères Dardenne’s film style is closer to the work of Claire Denis than to that of Jean-Pierre Jeunet.



**CHARACTER GENDER IN FILMS MADE FOR A BROAD AUDIENCE: 70% MALE, 30% FEMALE**

An analysis of the 122 most popular Canadian and American films made for a broad audience and shown in movie theatres between September 2006 and September 2009 clearly shows the marginal position of female main characters in film. Indeed, researchers at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism (University of Southern California) who carried out this study identified 70.8% of speaking roles as male, versus 29.2% as female (Smith et Choueiti, 2010).

**CHARACTER GENDER IS RELATED TO THE FILMMAKER'S GENDER**

Preliminary results of a study conducted by sociologist Alain Pilon in collaboration with Évangéline De Pas and Marquise Lepage shows that female directors give women leading roles much more often than do male directors (Pilon, De Pas and Lepage, 2011). Analysis of 31 Quebec feature films distributed in 2010 demonstrates that male directors give men the most leading roles. Indeed, male directors gave men a leading role 85% of the time (22 out of 26). The five feature films directed by women show quite a different distribution of roles according to gender. Female directors gave women a leading role 80% of the time (4 out of 5).

**Absence of female directors as role models**

- Because of the limited number of female feature film directors in Quebec's film industry, female role models span a narrower range than their male counterparts. Consequently, female directors benefit from fewer guideposts than their male colleagues, especially when they try to break into genres that are not typically feminine.
- Several female directors note that the absence of female filmmakers as role models is not only a significant handicap for female directors in general, but also for female film students. This absence of female role models inevitably leaves its mark on the formal training of these potential female directors, who must learn their craft through a body of work almost entirely directed by men.

**Male and female directors: a double standard**

- The male and female directors polled agree on a series of qualities necessary for directing feature films. There is no reason to believe that female directors are, for example, less passionate about their work, nor that they are less capable of directing actors, being strong leaders, listening, communicating their ideas to a crew, knowing precisely what they want, making rapid-fire decisions or showing a talent for improvisation.
- Certain character traits perceived as significant assets when embodied by men, turn into defects when adopted by women. For women in positions of authority, the problem is not a lack of professional qualities, but rather, the negative perception of the qualities they possess.

- Female directors note that attitudes which confer a certain prestige on men, can have a completely different result when applied to women. While a flash of anger in a male director will tend to be well accepted, or even seen as proof of authority, a female director who shows anger risks being branded as hysterical.

## **Motherhood**

- Almost all female directors who are also mothers saw their professional careers transformed after the birth of their children. Several have had to slow the pace of their careers considerably because of family responsibilities. For some, the birth of a child meant concentrating more on writing for a time. Others chose to take more time between projects, or turn to documentary filmmaking, where schedules are more flexible.
- In order to qualify for Telefilm Canada's or SODEC's screenwriter and writer-director programs, an applicant must have directed a feature film (or the equivalent) in the past five years. This criterion penalizes female directors whose work pace is slower because of the requirements of motherhood. It also penalizes all independent filmmakers, who often wait more than five years before obtaining the funding they need to direct a project.
- Many female directors have partners they can count on to share in the task of raising their children, but men who dedicate themselves entirely to their family while their partner directs a feature film are rare indeed. Inversely, male directors' partners more often take on the entire responsibility of the family while the men are on a film shoot.
- Although the Quebec film industry is particularly unsuited to work/family balance, mainly because of its work schedule, most motherhood-related obstacles encountered by female directors stem from issues common to Quebec working mothers in general.
- Whether or not they work in the film industry, structural changes are still needed if women are to have a real possibility of investing fully in their careers while raising their children. These changes must take place not only in workplace organization, but also in gender relations, particularly within the family and domestic sphere.
- As long as women are assigned and identified as primary parent, and perceive themselves as such, they are unlikely to achieve the desired work/family balance. It is also unlikely that there will be an end to the race against the clock which determines the pace of their lives and their capacity to produce.

## Academic training

- Social representations of the profession of director, which impregnate men and women's imaginations, insidiously reproduce the traditional notion of the director as a male leader.
- In film schools, where only a few students are called on to direct their own films, female students are less strongly encouraged to direct a film. And yet directing a student film has become an important step in the process of entering the profession.
- It seems that, from the outset, male students benefit from a greater trust capital on the part of film school professors, and they display a type of assurance that is very useful for their advancement in the profession.
- Several film school professors tend to guide female students towards traditionally feminine occupations in film, such as script supervisor, artistic director, editor etc.

## Financing

- Most female directors consider that some funding institutions support them more than others. Their experiences with SODEC are generally presented as more positive than those with Telefilm Canada.
- Female directors feel in fact much more accepted in programs where filmmakers themselves, rather than producers, submit projects, where budgets are smaller, and where selection rests on a jury of their peers. Furthermore, they encounter proportionately much less difficulty obtaining financial support in such programs.
- Year after year, some female directors continue to fight for access to financing from the regular sector. Others, after numerous unsuccessful attempts, then apply only to programs with lower budgets, which have higher success rates for women.

## Producers

- Many female directors state their difficulty in finding a producer as one of the main pitfalls restricting their careers as directors. The male directors we met mentioned no difficulty finding a producer, male or female.
- When producers initiate projects, for example, when they look for someone to direct a screenplay already in their possession, they approach male directors much more frequently than female directors. Female directors are almost never solicited by producers developing large-scale projects.
- Several female directors deplore the lack of trust shown to them by certain producers. Most often, their difficulty in gaining the confidence of producers occurs when initiating a professional collaboration.

## **Distributors**

- The support of a distributor is absolutely necessary before film projects can be submitted to SODEC and Telefilm Canada's regular programs. It is often the commercial qualities of projects which incite distributors to invest in them. Since women direct fewer films with strong commercial potential, they are particularly affected by difficulties regarding the distribution of their films.
- As fewer and fewer movie theatres showcase independent films, distributing films without strong commercial potential becomes a problem. Limited by the ascendancy of a few American giants who own the majority of movie theatres in the province, independent distributors struggle to survive and to promote Quebec's independent films. Since most female directors work in the independent film sector, they are particularly affected by this problem.

## **Relationships with colleagues**

- Female directors' experiences on film sets are increasingly positive. Early pioneers seem to have significantly prepared the ground by changing the consciousness of their male colleagues who were used to taking direction from men and directing women.
- Overtly sexist or misogynistic behavior has become the exception on film sets, but difficulties subsist. This type of behavior has become more insidious, which makes it harder to unmask and challenge.

## **Earning a living as a director**

- Less than half of the female directors we met earn their living from their profession. Regularly or occasionally, they practice a variety of related occupations in order to survive. Some teach, while others work in editing, assistant directing, production, sub-titling etc.
- Most female directors who earn their living from their profession are also screenwriters, producers, and even cinematographers.
- Female directors have less difficulty obtaining writing grants than production budgets. Although writing provides a relatively stable income for some female directors, they experience great frustration when their projects abort in the production phase.
- Male directors earn a better living from their profession than do their female colleagues. Along with their personal projects, they direct commissioned projects in film, television and advertising. These lucrative and formative occupations allow them to earn a very good living, and sometimes to invest in their own films.

## **Advertising: a “Boy’s Club”**

- For several feature filmmakers, advertising is an ideal way to earn a living: it allows them to earn appreciable sums of money in a short time, gain directing experience, broaden their professional networks while setting aside time for their own projects, and increase their credibility with producers of feature films and television series.
- Female directors occupy an extremely marginal position in the world of advertising. Few have managed to carve out a place for themselves in the business. Even when they do get a foothold in a company, they obtain fewer contacts than men, and earn much less.
- All of the female directors who had any dealings with the advertising world encountered major obstacles, which they undeniably associate with the sexist culture of that environment. Reports of male directors confirm these observations.

## Conclusion

Our fieldwork carried out with 25 Quebec filmmakers demonstrated a variety of factors that contribute to the marginalization of female directors. This marginalization was previously revealed by statistical data on the status of women in the film industry. The data we collected also shows that prolific careers are the exception for female feature film directors.

The vast majority of female directors polled believe that they encounter more difficulty than their male counterparts when they attempt to direct feature films. Most comment that the many obstacles on their path are insidious, and that, barring a few exceptions, they do not result from a conscious effort to exclude women from the profession. The male directors polled expressed sensitivity and solidarity with their female colleagues' cause and also showed an awareness of the specific difficulties encountered by their female counterparts.

Our analysis demonstrates that only by grasping the situation of female directors within the context of gender-based social structures, is it possible to understand what remains to be done before we can attain a better representation of the feminine imagination on our screens. Indeed, the main pitfalls encountered by female directors can be attributed, on one hand, to certain practices within the film industry, and on the other hand, to women's position in Quebec society in general. In that sense, the marginalization of female directors constitutes a systemic problem.

### **Main obstacles encountered by female directors:**

- Gender-based categorization of female directors' work: feminine subjects and female characters remain less popular than their male equivalents.
- Lack of female directors as role models, which affects female film students, the general public and female filmmakers themselves.
- Difficulty finding a producer.
- Difficulty earning a living as a director. Female directors have extremely limited access to commissioned projects, television, and especially advertising.
- Balance between motherhood and working as a filmmaker in a context where the majority of parenting tasks are still carried out by women. In fact, almost all the female directors we interviewed who were mothers saw their careers transformed after the birth of their children.
- Importance of the role of numerous intermediaries such as producers, distributors and broadcasters, involved in producing a feature film.
- Commercial imperatives that currently determine the direction of the film industry and practices in funding institutions.

According to the majority of testimonies collected for this study, the most serious problems encountered by female directors occur prior to the work of directing. On the other hand, competent female directors, passionate about their work, encounter fewer and fewer major obstacles on film sets, where they are able to take their rightful place. Problems occur in the stages preceding the actual filming.

Despite the rather gloomy portrait painted by this study, we noted a few promising findings or signs of change. Indeed, the interviews showed remarkable diversity in female directors' styles, approaches and methods.

Whereas some female directors identified with a specifically feminine cinematographic approach in their writing, choice of themes or characters, all demanded that the uniqueness of each director be recognized.

Furthermore, female directors display tremendous determination in bringing their projects to fruition. They also want to transform certain practices in the film industry in order to give female directors a more prominent place and achieve work/family balance. This situation and these ambitions are summed up by one female director: "I'm luckier than the women who were here 25 or 40 years ago, and less lucky, I hope, than those who will be here in 25 years."

What stands out from the overview of female directors' careers presented in this study, is the persistence of structural limitations encountered by women who became directors, a profession which remains traditionally male. Female directors continue to occupy a marginal position in film because the many factors leading to those constraints, which stem from both institutional practices and the general social context, are so ubiquitous.

The situation of female directors has remained generally unchanged over the last twenty years or so, and the testimonies we received illustrate the insidious and ongoing obstacles that restrain their real possibilities. For this reason, socio-political interventions are necessary in order to redress the situation and favor a more equitable distribution of the public funds that finance our film industry.

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