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Women and Leadership in the Creative Industries: A Commentary

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1 | Introduction

The creative industries are a vital and expanding sector of the global economy, supporting cultural and economic development in many regions (United Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organization 2022; Anheier and Markovic 2024). In the United Kingdom, they are critical to the economy, contributing an estimated £124.6bn in 2022 or 5.7% GVA (DCMS 2024). These industries, encompassing sectors such as film, television, publishing, advertising, and the performing arts, have gained prominence in recent policy discourse, notably in the new Labour Government's vision for the UK's economic future.

The proportion of women working in the creative industries is difficult to accurately state—complicated by the diversity of contract types and freelance work, variations in how "creative and cultural industries" are defined globally, and the broad range of specific industries that the creative industries encompass, which are likely to have differing representation (Anheier and Markovic 2024). If we look to Europe, where employment reporting standards mean we can compare data more accurately, typically just under half of those employed in the cultural sector are women (Anheier and Markovic 2024). Although women make up a substantial portion of the workforce in many areas of the creative industries, they remain underrepresented in leadership roles, a trend mirrored globally, with disparities further exacerbated for women of color and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Gill 2014; Ruth Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; United Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organization 2022). These patterns of horizontal and vertical segregation are not unique to the creative industries. However, recent scholarship within *Gender, Work & Organization* has highlighted how they are compounded by industry-specific features such as gender-based discrimination (Cannizzo and Strong 2020; O'Brien and Liddy 2021), sexual harassment (Hennekam and Bennett 2017), gendered division of labor (Jansson et al. 2021; Wallenberg and Jansson 2021), informal hiring practices, reliance on unpaid labor, and precarious project-based work (Steedman and Brydges 2023). Existing research has examined these structural and cultural features of the creative industries; however, there has been less research on how these impact women leading within these sectors, the barriers to leadership for women, and gendered modalities of leadership.

Within this commentary, we outline three broad areas impacting women's advancement to leadership within the creative industries: creative work as a privileged precarity; valorizing the myth of creative genius; and networks and social capital. In doing so, we call for greater research that understands the lived experiences of women in leadership in the creative industries and the specific boundary conditions that differentiate the creative industries from other organizational and industry contexts. A greater understanding of the lived experiences and paths to leadership moves beyond challenging and exposing inequalities within the creative industries; it recognizes the cultural influence of the creative industries, which manufactures the narratives that define societal values and norms (Oakley and

O'Brien 2016). Representation and leadership matter: the creative industries tell the stories that shape the societies in which we live.

1.1 | Creative Work as Privileged Precarity

We start this commentary by discussing the specific working conditions within the creative industries. These are distinctive and deeply implicated in the reproduction of gender inequalities shaping women's experiences and paths to leadership. Central to this is the notion of "privileged precarity," a term that captures the paradox of these sectors, where the aspirational nature of creative work obscures its inherent instability and vulnerability (Gill and Pratt 2008). The allure of "doing what you love" often normalizes precarious employment practices (Duffy 2017; Conor et al. 2015; Verklan 2018), enabling what McRobbie (2016) terms flexploitation: the expectation that workers, particularly women, must adapt to irregular schedules and unpredictable demands. The responsibility falls upon employees to be flexible, whereas employers often offer limited accommodation. These conditions are a structural feature of the sector where inequities are reinforced under the guise of opportunity and passion (Steedman and Brydges 2023; Szczepanska 2023).

A culture of long hours, low pay, and unpaid work characterizes many roles within the creative industries. Anheier and Markovic (2024, 9) discuss how the shift from manufacturing to service-based economies has created "greedy jobs" that demand workers to be flexible, stay longer, and be readily available. This is particularly true within the creative industries, which are "greedy" not just for time but for unwavering loyalty, commitment, and role perfection (Anheier and Markovic 2024). This can disproportionately impact women, who often shoulder caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Ruth Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; A. O' Brien 2025), narrowing the pipeline to leadership. Indeed, Anheier and Markovic (2024) point out that domestic responsibilities are in themselves greedy, and when these two things collide tension and role conflict occur. Unlike sectors with standardized employment structures, the lack of routine and security in the creative industries exacerbates the challenges for women balancing professional and personal demands. Systematic bias against mothers working in the creative industries is normalized as "the way it is" (O'Brien and Liddy 2021; Miliopoulou and Kapareliotis 2021). These conditions reflect broader societal gender norms; however, the absence of formal policies or protections in the creative industries leaves women particularly vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion (Anheier and Markovic 2024). Furthermore, certain roles within the creative industries have a distinctly embodied element, where physical performance or appearance is integral to the work itself. Motherhood presents distinct emotional, mental, and cultural challenges for women in leadership roles, particularly within the creative industries, where flexibility is often a double-edged sword (Gill 2014; O'Brien 2019). Societal expectations regarding maternal presence and caregiving responsibilities can pressure women into precarious, freelance, or part-time work arrangements, thereby restricting access to stable leadership positions (Orgad 2019; Dent 2020). The embodied aspects of motherhood—including pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and postnatal recovery—further exacerbate workplace barriers, particularly in industries that privilege continuous availability and uninterrupted career trajectories (Mavin and Grandy 2016). Scharff (2017) highlights how classical musicians, for instance, navigate not only the physical demands of their craft but also gendered expectations of performance and appearance. This intersection of precarious working conditions, the paradox of aspiration, and embodied labor compounds the barriers women face in advancing within the creative industries.

The creative industries echo elements of broader labor market inequalities; however, the imperative for flexibility, creativity, and individual passion obscures structural inequities that impact women, particularly those with intersecting vulnerabilities related to race, class, or caregiving responsibilities. We call for further research to better understand how the working ecologies of the various creative industries facilitate or undermine women's progression to leadership positions. Research could investigate the structural changes needed to create clearer pathways for women to access and thrive in leadership roles within the creative industries. Specifically, what types of policy or institutional interventions (e.g., parental leave policies, flexible working arrangements, funding initiatives) have the greatest potential to support women's leadership in the creative industries? How can industry stakeholders—including employers, policymakers, and professional organizations—work together to create a more supportive leadership pipeline for women? Research could examine to what extent these same ecologies work to sustain women in leadership positions or render their tenure unsustainable. Questions remain as to the strategies women currently use to overcome barriers to leadership in the creative industries and how these strategies can be scaled up or institutionalized. Research could explore the boundary conditions of gender and leadership in the creative industries that render them differently from other industry contexts. Beyond the creative industries, for example, what lessons can be drawn from other industries with similarly high demands for flexibility, such as tech startups, to better support women's leadership progression in the creative industries? Are there sectors or organizations that have successfully implemented policies to mitigate gendered precarity, and how can these policies be adapted for the creative industries? How can industry norms around flexibility and precarious work be reformed to better support women's career progression? In sum, features of the creative industries based on privileged precarity exacerbate women's lack of advancement to leadership; these issues merit closer scrutiny and intervention.

1.2 | Valorizing the Myth of the Creative Genius

Although the creative industries hold structural features creating barriers to women's advancement to leadership, they can also be characterized by a specific leadership archetype, grounded in the myth of the "creative genius" (Negus and Pickering 2000, 266). The creative genius is deemed so exceptional that their interpersonal skills and ethical behavior can be excused or overlooked as a dimension of their genius. This archetype represents a hypermasculine form of "heroic"

leadership, where talent is narrowly defined by individualistic and often gendered notions of brilliance (Ruth Eikhof 2017; Coles and Eikhof 2021). Against this archetype, women face several leadership issues where the "phantom male norm" (Billing 2011) reinforces environments where women's contributions are undervalued or marginalized.

How women perform leadership is typically judged against leadership archetypes. Beyond the creative industries, women are expected to do leadership "well and differently," evaluated against expectations for leadership deemed masculine and simultaneously against standards of behavior deemed appropriate for women (Mavin and Grandy 2012). In other words, women must negotiate the boundaries of agentic, masculine leadership norms, which contrast with societal expectations around "respectable femininity" (Mavin and Gandy 2014). Within the creative industries, leadership archetypes take a particular form, often conflated with "masculinist creativity" (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). The (male) creative artist is insecure and emotional and displays infantile behavior (Nixon 2003). Although this does not conform to conventional notions of masculinity, it allows childish and temperamental behavior from men to be conflated with creative genius (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015; Nixon 2003). Women are marginalized into "mothering roles" such as account planning and coordination, which can shape both horizontal and vertical gender segregation within cultural work (Cannizzo and Strong 2020).

Furthermore, women are expected to perform leadership while integrating caregiving responsibilities or embodied challenges unique to their roles, as seen in creative sectors such as dance, film, and classical music (Fotaki 2013; Scharff 2017). These embodied challenges further reinforce perceptions of women as outsiders in an industry that rewards traits associated with the myth of the male genius (Wallenberg and Jansson 2021). One example of the myth of the (male) creative genius can be seen in the screen industries where research has illustrated how systemic barriers have excluded women from key roles in directing and producing (Cobb 2020; Dodd 2012; Jansson et al. 2021). Compounding this dynamic, women, particularly those who experience intersectional disadvantage, are more likely to be seen as risky hires in creative roles, a bias that perpetuates their underrepresentation in leadership (Coles and Eikhof 2021). As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2015, 34) conclude, "associations of various modes of masculinity with creativity, then, serve to marginalize women from the more prestigious creative roles and even sectors in the cultural industries." This calls for further research to examine how conflating masculinity with creativity reinforces gendered hierarchies and affects leadership career trajectories over time. As an illustration, how does the "creative genius" myth influence hiring, promotion, and retention of women in leadership roles? What specific strategies can help women navigate and dismantle these stereotypes within their career progression? How do different intersectional identities impact women's ability to attain and sustain leadership roles in creative sectors?

The creative genius myth can sideline alternative leadership approaches while silencing inequities and harmful behaviors observed in the sector. There is a need to dismantle the creative genius narrative, reframe leadership and talent,[1] and seek ways to foster creative environments that are more collaborative, inclusive, and ethical (Worley 2023). Women's leadership collectives, such as the Women in Cinema Collective in India (Alna and Mathew 2021) and the Women's Musical Leadership Online Network (WMLON) (Hamer and Minors 2024), offer some examples of how alternative leadership in the creative industries can build collective resistance and innovation. We call for more research on these alternative forms of leadership and the conditions under which this can flourish beyond masculine conceptions of talent. Specifically, how can leadership in the creative industries be redefined in ways that challenge the masculine "creative genius" archetype? What models of leadership exist, or could be developed, that better reflect the collaborative and dynamic nature of creative work? Part of this could be in further exploration of the extent to which women leaders in the creative industries are positively represented and promoted within relevant political, cultural, and social spheres. In addition, how could alternative models of leadership, such as postheroic (Fletcher 2004), aesthetic (Hansen et al. 2007), or relational (Uhl-Bien 2006), advance our theoretical understanding of alternative opportunities for leadership? Above all, it is important to study those successful strategies (whether by institutions or by women collaborating for change) that have shown the potential for progress within individual industries and across the wider sector and to determine how these might inform future initiatives.

1.3 | Networks and Social Capital

The creative industries are characterized by a high degree of informality in hiring practices, behaviors, and relationships. Recruitment processes can be unregulated, relying on personal recommendations and networks, freelance arrangements, and casual labor (Friedman and Laurison 2019). Consequently, the importance of social capital is deeply entrenched within the creative industries, shaping routes to professional success for some while operating as a mechanism of exclusion for others. This dependence on informal social networks is impacted by homophily, where collaboration is more likely to occur between those who have similar cultural, educational, and demographic backgrounds (Ruth Eikhof 2017; D. O'Brien et al. 2016). The lack of formal pathways, combined with homophily, disproportionately impacts women, ethnic minorities, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may lack access to networks or symbolic capital that privileges them as potential candidates (D. O'Brien et al. 2016; Gill 2014; Simon 2019). Women are often excluded from the spaces where connections are made (Conor et al. 2015). The creative industries allow these practices to flourish because the sector continues to be marked by poor legal and ethical standards, health and safety regulations, and fair pay practices (McRobbie 2016).

It is in the creative industries that we see social class as a persistent barrier to opportunities. Individuals from working-class backgrounds face pronounced barriers to entry and advancement, a disadvantage compounded for those who

are women, ethnic minorities, or have disabilities (Carey et al. 2021). Working-class women are nearly five times less likely than middle-class men to secure creative jobs, with disabled individuals also facing sharply reduced prospects (Carey et al. 2021). It has been highlighted that White men, particularly in senior roles, enjoy greater access to decision-making power and higher remuneration (Friedman and Laurison 2019; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). This perpetuates a culture of gatekeeping that serves to exclude individuals who do not conform to a limited set of expectations. Research has identified the power that senior (often White male) leaders hold, but there is limited exploration of how power structures sustain gendered leadership inequalities over time. The role of sponsorship, mentorship, and advocacy networks in disrupting gatekeeping remains underexplored.

These intersecting inequalities influence both the leadership pipeline and the voices that shape the creative industries as a whole. Greater intersectional research is needed to challenge the cultural and social hierarchies that sustain inequality in the creative industries and explore how these inequalities are expressed in recruitment for and performance in leadership positions. Theorizing the cultural and social hierarchies within the creative industries has previously drawn upon a range of theoretical perspectives from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, Foucault's (1979) theory on power and discourse (Foucault's 1979, 1988, 2008), Butler's theory on gender performativity (Butler 1990, 1997), and Boltanski and Thévenot's theory on economies of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). These, alongside theoretical frameworks from other disciplines, could be extended to focus on the challenges for women in leadership in the creative industries. Future research could consider the role that gatekeeping practices play in shaping the leadership pipeline in the creative industries and how they can be dismantled. Additionally, it could explore how mentorship, sponsorship, and advocacy programs influence women's access to leadership roles in the creative industries. There is room to further explore a range of specific challenges that women face over the course of a creative (leadership) career ranging from ageism, sexual harassment, lack of maternity support or family-friendly policies, and various forms of explicit and implicit discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, or class. Furthermore, how do issues such as ageism, sexual harassment, and lack of maternity or family support impact women's ability to secure and sustain leadership roles?

In conclusion, the creative industries rely heavily on informal hiring practices, where social capital and personal networks play a critical role in career advancement. However, these unregulated systems reinforce exclusionary patterns, disproportionately disadvantaging women, ethnic minorities, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who lack access to influential networks. The persistence of homophily and gatekeeping practices further limits diversity in leadership, as decision-making power remains concentrated among a privileged few. Addressing these inequalities requires greater scrutiny of recruitment norms, alongside structural interventions that promote fairer, more transparent pathways to leadership.

2 | Conclusion

We have explored three areas that impact women's experiences and pathways to leadership in creative industries: creative work as privileged precarity, valorizing the myth of the creative genius, and networks and social capital. These are far from an exhaustive list but are offered as a call for further research and exploration concerning women and leadership in the creative industries. Although we acknowledge a rich and detailed body of work on the individual areas of creative industries, gender and organizations, and leadership, the nexus of these three areas remains somewhat underexplored. In doing so, we acknowledge the challenge of researching the creative industries as constituents of a broad sector embracing areas of commonality alongside specific historical, economic, and cultural factors that distinguish them from one another. Given the complexity of exclusion in the creative industries, novel methodologies are needed to capture the nuanced ways in which gender, class, race, and informal practices intersect to shape leadership opportunities. These could include, for example, longitudinal qualitative research, ethnographic studies, and social network analysis, which could provide deeper insights into career trajectories, power structures, and lived experiences. Participatory and action-based research methods may also offer a way to engage directly with women in the sector, identifying strategies for structural change while amplifying marginalized voices. We encourage scholars and practitioners to address these issues for women and leadership in the creative industries. The creative industries shape cultural discourse, narratives, and stories; thus, it is critical that their leadership represents the societies in which we live.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

[1] The BBC Director-General recently called for the term "talent" to be banned from being used to describe presenters. This recognizes issues arising from the notion of "talent" as a special category of persons to whom the usual rules of acceptable behavior do not apply (Quinn 2024).

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