

Taraji P. Henson in *This Changes Everything*.

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Miami Film Festival Calls for Gender Parity in Hollywood — As It Works Toward Equality Itself

CIARA LAVELLE | FEBRUARY 28, 2019 | 9:53AM

The Miami Film Festival's opening night documentary, *This Changes Everything*, is a bold call for gender equality in the film industry. It cites devastating statistics that measure women's participation in some roles as low as two percent and includes testimony from directors, producers, television network executives, and women actors from Meryl Streep to Amandla Stenberg. Throughout its 97 minute run, the message is clear: Gender parity isn't merely possible – it's easy to achieve if you're genuinely interested in doing so.

"It's definitely a film that makes a statement," says Jaie Laplante, Miami Film Festival's executive director and director of programming, "and it's a statement we wanted to make."

There's just one problem:

Miami

Film Festival itself has not yet achieved gender parity in its film selections.

Of the films in its 2019 lineup, 33 percent were directed or codirected

by women. That figure seems to dampen the message of its prominent opening night placement of *This Changes Everything*. A statement is fine, sure. Taking action would be better.

Laplante says it's not that simple. He points out that MFF's ratio of women filmmakers is on par with, if not slightly above, that of other festivals. Sundance this year achieved a **42 percent rate**, but a 2018 study found that the average across 23 U.S. festivals was just **29 percent**. Among festival employees, he adds, women have a strong majority. (MFF's **programming team** includes four men and three women. All three senior positions are held by men.)

Miami Film Festival has, in fact, taken action on this issue, Laplante points out. The festival partnered with Google in 2016 and 2017 for a program titled the Google Seminar Series on Gender & Racial Gaps in Film & Tech. The series brought experts from a diverse array of film professions together, from *Shugs and*

Fats comedians Radhika Vaz and Nadia P. Manzoor to

Tilane

Jones, the executive director of the collaborative film distributor Array. The objective: to discuss the obstacles women and people of color face and possible ways of overcoming them.

"It was a fascinating experience, not only for the people who attended the seminars but also for myself, the director of programming, and other programmers who work on the festival," Laplante says. "We possibly have had unconscious bias in our programming choices [in the past], and it was an illuminating couple of years."

When the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* revealed in 2017 that producer Harvey Weinstein had spent decades using his power to harass and assault women in Hollywood, it only amplified those effects. "We've been working very hard towards gender parity in the last few years," Laplante says, estimating the festival's pre-2016 rate at somewhere around 20 percent. "We've had a significant increase in the amount of films that are directed or codirected by women."

This Changes Everything contains many unbelievable statistics and devastating personal stories from women in Hollywood: directors who achieved one success yet never found work again, actors who learned too young that male filmmakers were more interested in their bodies than their talent, and beyond. But one of the film's most affecting sections is a story of success. After a report in *Variety* revealed that FX network was the least diverse in the entire U.S. TV landscape, with **88 percent of its episodes directed by white men**, CEO John Landgraf instituted a swift change. In the documentary, he admits he felt ashamed he hadn't noticed how homogenous his company had become. So he started noticing and directed his employees to notice, too.

That simple change in perspective led to greenlighting shows like *Atlanta*, *Pose*, and other critically acclaimed hits, and also resulted in more directing opportunities for women on episodes of the network's existing shows. This year, FX was **recognized by the Director's Guild of America** for its diversity efforts, which have resulted in 52.6 percent of its programming directed by women and people of color. (MFF's percentage of filmmakers of color is higher than that for women – 44 percent. Laplante says his team is working to improve "a complex range of diversity representation improvement, which includes considerations of racial, minority religions, and minority sexual orientation.")

For film festivals, Laplante says, the challenge is different. "A lot of things are changing, but it takes a few years to get reflected. Now women are being given more opportunity because of this reckoning, but it's going to take another couple years for their films to start coming out. So we're looking forward to continuing to be part of that progress."

But *This Changes Everything* producer Ilan Arboleda points out that there's no shortage of projects by talented women filmmakers right now. "In the independent film world, there are more female storytellers behind the camera and writing the scripts," he says. "The problem is the matriculation into the Hollywood ranks and the opportunity. So the more that film festivals really focus on this gender parity issue, they'll force studios... to do the same."

Right now, Laplante says, the festival has no concrete plans for future initiatives like the Google series that address issues of gender inequality in Hollywood. But the work he and his staff did with Google "changed our DNA," he says.

He also makes a prediction that, in 2019, feels both bold and long overdue.

"I think that we'll be getting to 50 percent in a very short time, in two to three years," he says. "That's what I believe."

This Changes Everything. 7 p.m. Friday, March 1, at the Olympia Theater, 174 E. Flagler St., Miami; olympiatheater.org. Tickets cost \$25. Guests attending include director Tom Donahue, filmmaker Maria Giese, and producer Ilan Arboleda.

Miami Film Festival 2019. March 1 through 10 at various venues; 844-565-MIFF; miamifilmfestival.com. Tickets to most screenings cost \$13.

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