

Gender Equality In The Live Music Sector

Introduction

As part of Live DMA's Live Style Europe II project, which focuses on observing the live music sector in Europe and prioritizing gender equality, the European network for live music associations have commissioned a literature review on gender disparities within this sector. This review aims to consolidate existing research, offering a comprehensive view of the current landscape. The intention is not to compare the datasets and findings within the literature but to show the prevalence of gender inequality in the live music sector across Europe.

The wider issue of gender inequality in the music industry has been well publicised with recent research finding that women working in music face discrimination, harassment, unequal opportunities and a lack of support in an industry characterised by power imbalances (Women and Equalities Committee, 2024). This is certainly not just a European problem but a worldwide one, reflecting a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards women's rights and bodily autonomy.

This literature review will explore themes around gender and live music such as festival line ups, gendered employment in the live sector, sexualised violence in live music spaces and the challenges of establishing an effective methodology for gender data collection. The review concludes by considering some of the solutions implemented to tackle gender inequality in the live music sector.

Part I: On The Stage

Keychange and the Challenges of Establishing an Effective Methodology for Gender Balance Data Collection in Artistic Line Ups

Keychange has offered one of the main inspirations for conversations around live music spaces and gender diversity. The programme first launched in 2017 at Reeperbahn Festival with the aim of reaching 50/50 gender representation on festival stages by 2022 through organisations and festivals signing a pledge to improve the gender diversity of their line ups. The reports covered in this literature review show that 50% gender representation has not been achieved but the work of Keychange has created space for debate and visibility of the issue, with the organisation expanding its outreach to include a talent development programme and over 650 pledge signatories (Keychange, 2024). The pledge has moved beyond festivals to include the wider music industry who design their own goals, rather than signing a pre-populated document. Signatories self report their diversity data back to Keychange but almost half have not (or could not) provide data on their progress, of the ones that have submitted data, only 28.5% have achieved their pledge goals (Swartjes, Joshi & Berkers, 2022). However there is evidence that signing a Keychange pledge leads to better gender diversity on festival stages (McGee, 2023; Raine, 2019).

Issues have been raised by Werner (2022) and Nissen (2024) around the methodology used by Keychange to collect data on gender and festival lineups. Nissen argues that they use a 'soft' data collection method which does not count all of the musicians on stage but rather rounds up the data so that there is the requirement of only one woman member to count a group as a "woman" artist. A 'hard' definition would count all musicians on stage and would also take into account staging and timings. Nissen suggests that the 'soft' method used by most researchers to count diversity on festival stages sets a low bar for representation. He surveyed WOMAD festival between 2012-19 and using the 'soft' definition the festival was roughly gender balanced, but using the 'hard' method, it was only 30% women. Staging and timing data shows that men were given more high profile slots, on larger stages, at peak times. An emerging issue around festival lineups and gender is where women are placed, with 92% of acts in headline festival slots in Europe being male (IQ and Rostr, 2024) and recent research by the BBC (2022) showing that of 50 UK festivals, 50% did not have any female headliners.

Gender Inequality on Festival Stages: The Need for Harmonized Methodologies in Quantitative Research

The lack of gender diversity on festival stages has become an inevitable news story each year, inspiring organisations and activists to collect data of their own. Quantitative research offers an effective and concise way to represent the prevailing problem of gender inequality in festival lineups across Europe. Easy to understand headline data offers flash talking points for wider discussions in the culture and is able to effectively communicate stark inequalities across borders.

The Jaguar Foundation (2022) looked at UK dance music festivals between 2018-22 and found that men dominated lineups, with festival bookers not taking risks on female artists, often booking the same women for multiple festivals and also relegating the female acts to one stage, rather than across all stages. Female Pressure (2024) collected data on 110 electronic music festivals across 35 countries between 2018-22. Festivals were invited to self submit data but the organisation has seen a steady decline in submissions. Festivals in Portugal had the lowest percentage of female acts and Slovenia and Sweden had the highest. Scivias (2024) surveyed 41 contemporary and classical Belgian festivals, with only 35% of artists not being cisgender men. Scivias felt the need to introduce new gender categories: cisgender woman, non-binary, transgender, cisgender men to reflect societal changes in gender identification. Classical events had a higher percentage of women on stage but

only 10% of the work performed was written by female composers. The Italian organisation Equally studied the lineups of 34 festivals in Italy with women in the minority at every festival (Tiberi, 2023).

German researchers have offered extensive quantitative research around diversity in the German festival scene with researchers building on past methodologies to create more detailed and expansive datasets. Rike Van Kleef (2022) collected quantitative data on 5 major German festivals: Das Big City Beats World Club Dome, Parookaville, Wacken Open Air, Fusion-Festival and Rock Am Ring, focusing on their 2019 line-ups. The research counted the gender of acts across all stages at these festivals. Rike noted that research has mostly focused on gender binary, with little discussion or inclusion of non-binary or marginalised gender music makers in previous data. Rike took the approach to not 'assume gender' or pronouns, using media sources to identify gender. Where a gender identity could not be determined, artists were contacted individually to confirm their gender, and where a response was not received, the artist was not included in the dataset. Rike's data only counted permanent band members, excluding session and guest musicians from the data. Research findings included that 89.9% of headline slots across the five biggest festivals in Germany were male and 72% of all slots being filled by men.

Research by Himmelreich (2024) built on the methodologies of Van Kleef (2022) and the diversity advocate MaLisa Stiftung (2022), once again focusing on diversity on German festival stages. Her research focused on a much larger dataset, collecting data on 15 festivals in 2023 and choosing to count all performers on stage rather than just permanent band members. Following the methodology of Van Kleef, Himmelreich also used self identifying pronouns for all performers where available. Across the 15 festivals, 20% of performers on stage were women and 1% were gender diverse. Himmelreich's work also offers a comparison between the number of women on festival stages since 2010, noting that smaller festivals have increased the number of women on their lineups significantly faster than larger festivals. Himmelreich's methodology is the nearest data collection method to the 'hard' definition defined by Nissen (2024).

Gender Diversity in European Music Venues: Limited Data and Localized Challenges

There is significantly less data on the lineups and gender diversity of venues and clubs in Europe. This could be because advocacy groups have focused their time on 'piggybacking' off festivals to use their platforms and exposure to create wider interest and conversations around gender inequality (Jutbring, 2014). Music venues lack this international reach, are more likely to be serving a local community and are often under-resourced and run by a small core team. These venues also lack a clear and efficient methodology to collect data on the gender of the artists programmed.

Of the data available, gender diversity on venue stages is a clear issue. Live DMA (2024) surveyed 30 venues in Europe, finding that only 30% of artists on stage were female. Two studies have been identified in France including the Fedelima (2021) report which surveyed 97 French music venues and found that 17.4% of artists programmed were women, and a survey of jazz clubs in Paris where less than 10% of performances were by women (Picaud, 2016). Circuito (2024) used the 'soft' method (Nissen, 2024) to count the gender identity of artists playing at 14 Portuguese venues, finding that 64% of artists were male. Interestingly the report also took the approach to offer a comparison using a 'unitary method' (nearer to the 'hard' method defined by Nissen) which meant counting the gender of every individual performer on stage and the gender gap between performers widened with only 20.4% being female. This report shows the disparities that can be created by using different methodologies on the same dataset.

Part 2: Off The Stage

Behind the Scenes of Live Music: Gender Inequality, Role Segregation, and Barriers to Inclusion

Employment in the live music sector encompasses a diverse range of roles and responsibilities. The 'hidden actors' in the music industry are those working behind the scenes whose work is not publicly visible but essential for the success of the live industry. Live DMA (2020, 2023) found that 42.9% of workers in venues and clubs are female but that men often hold higher paid roles and more responsibility. A common issue that arises within the live sector is the segregation and stereotyping of certain roles (Kielich, 2024; VNPF, 2022; Vilano and Cassidy, 2019, MIM, 2022) as women are more likely to occupy positions such as caterer, wardrobe assistant, or merchandise vendor compared to men. This role segregation can be seen in the Netherlands where 42% of workers in live music venues are women. Men are overrepresented in technical and managerial roles with women (nearly) reaching gender parity in catering and marketing (VNPF, 2022). This is also highlighted in the Fedelmia (2021) study where only 10.9% of technical staff in French music venues were women.

The prevalence of self employment in the live/ festival sector makes it vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion as unpredictable work often excludes women and minorities first (Conor et al, 2015) due to unsocial work hours, unsafe environments and a prevailing 'boys club' (Women and Equalities Committee, 2024: Leonard, 2016). The Jaguar Foundation (2022) surveyed the gender split of employees in live music industry companies (event companies, ticket agents, talent agencies, media companies and record labels) using LinkedIn data, noting the majority of employees were men and only 37% of women in these companies are in senior positions. Female Pressure (2024) also tried to curate employee data for festival curation but they struggled to access this data for 94 out of 175 festivals they surveyed, showing that the key decision making roles for festival curation are often well hidden. The Jaguar Foundation report found that an all female team leads to a higher proportion of female acts booked for live events. Unsurprisingly the majority of festival programmers (Scivias, 2024; Swartjes and Berkers, 2023; Swartjes, 2024; Female Pressure, 2024) and venue bookers (Live DMA, 2024) across Europe are male, possibly explaining the lack of diversity on festival stages. Gadir (2017) was inspired to speak to booking agents in Norway after only 4 out of 47 DJs booked for the 2016 edition of Musikkfest were women. The bookers were majority male and took a defensive position to their booking practices stating that skill and talent were the main drivers for their process, with equality falling way down the list. Some bookers even saw gender bias as an 'overstated issue' and that 'to prioritise gender balance is to deprioritise talent' (Gadir, 2017). Live DMA (2024) found that gender representation was a priority for some in house bookers at live music venues, however the report did not make a connection between the gender of the booker and their need to prioritise gender inclusivity in their booking practices.

Leonard (2007) notes that the backstage area is often seen as a male space. If women do decide to take on a backstage role they often over educate themselves and take on multiple internships before landing a paid role. Networks within the live music industry are integral to securing work and many of the skills required to be part of backstage crew are learnt on the job rather than through formal qualifications, leading to women struggling to access skill sharing and job roles due to the prevalence of closed ranks male networks in the live industry (Kielich, 2024; Gadir, 2017). Once employed, their skillset is often questioned by male colleagues (Paracani, 2023; Kielich, 2024; Micalizzi and Paraciani, 2023). Internships and informal training are essential when trying to enter the live music industry, and these roles are often poorly (if even) paid which can prohibit women from participation. Even when women do partake in these internships, the environment can often be unwelcoming. Swartjes and Berkers (2023) interviewed festival interns in Rotterdam, the majority of the men interviewed wanted to remain in the sector after their internship, the women did not.

Part 3: Sexualised Violence in the live Music Industry

Gendered Violence In Live Music Spaces

Gendered violence in live music spaces is a serious issue. Festivals (Platt and Finkel, 2020; Silvestre, Royo and Linares, 2020; Bows, King and Measham, 2020), including gender based violence against festival employees (Jones, 2020) and nightlife venues (Brooks, 2011; Sheard, 2011; Fileborn, Wadds & Barnes, 2019; Hill & Megson, 2020b; Hill, Megson & Hesmondhalgh, 2024) all offer increased risks for women. Data on sexual violence in venues and festivals is often hard to collect and verify (Helvetia Rockt, 2024) but women attending festivals are often hyper aware of their surroundings and fearful of sexual violence or victimisation (Sexism Free Night, 2022). These issues are not often raised by men (Motl, 2018). In Switzerland, Helvetia rockt (2024) found that it is often the responsibility of interns and unpaid workers to carry the burden of prevention and intervention around sexual violence in live music spaces. These workers often lack power within organisational structures to implement effective safeguards and policies to support victims. External security staff are also often not trained properly to deal with issues around sexual violence and many venues/events have difficult relationships with wider state services such as the police who should (in theory) be involved in supporting victims of sexual violence.

Tackling gendered violence in live music spaces is incredibly difficult as it requires wider societal change but there are proposals to encourage live music spaces to support workers and audiences. In Ireland they are considering legislation where venues could lose their licence if they refuse to tackle sexual violence (McCurry, 2022) and in France the Centre National de la Musique conditions its grants to projects and spaces implementing training on the prevention of sexual violence (CNM, 2021). There is now the move towards 'Safer Spaces' training (Hill & Megson, 2020a) led by organisations such as the Good Night Out Campaign and online resources produced by Sexism Free Night (2022). However, there are issues around training programmes which can often be expensive and sometimes ineffective due to the high turnover of staff in the live industry where the chain of command can often be difficult to understand. This training is at risk of being used as a performative action by organisations and institutions who otherwise do nothing to support women within their ranks or have proper safeguards in place against sexual violence.

Part 4: Potential Solutions

Activism, Women only spaces and events

As the previous sections have noted, women as employees and audiences have struggled to access live music spaces due to structural inequalities and exclusion. This has led to the creation of women only* spaces and projects to combat this (Goodwin, 2024), including training courses for stage crew (See: 3T, Crew Gal), and groups such as NOWIE (Networks of Women In Live Events). These courses and groups help to create a sense of community for women who feel marginalised where they can share skills, experiences and form networks for future employment. However these women-only spaces can also widen the gap between men and women working in the live sector.

The gender disparity on festival stages has led to the rise of women only festivals which can be used to highlight the work of underrepresented musicians. However, issues have been raised around all female festivals being tokenistic (Heble and Siddall, 2000) and the politics of who can be included on lineups is still up for debate- are groups with male members admissible for an all female lineup? (Brewer, 2017). It must be noted that the audiences for these events are majority female, creating a safer space to participate in live music in an environment where the majority of gendered violence is carried out by men (Sexism Free Night, 2022).

Promoting Gender Diversity in Live Music: Quotas, Funding Policies, and Inclusion Riders

An alternative or addition to all female events is intervention by government bodies to promote gender diversity at mixed gender events. The Swedish National Arts Council made cuts to its financial support to the Swedish Jazz Association, Svensk Jazz, as they had not reached the goal to include at least 25% women among artists featured at local jazz club stages (Björck and Bergman, 2018). These types of quotas are also being enshrined into law in places like Argentina to require female musicians to comprise at least 30% of participants in live events of more than three groups (Lahasky, 2022). Whilst incredibly controversial, the withholding of funding is one way to ensure women are featured in lineups. However, these methods could also support the idea of women on stage as 'tokenistic', only booked to play as a way to secure funding. Another method to promote gender diversity that has been suggested is artists demanding inclusion riders as part of the booking process for events (Kozel, 2019). This could be used to implement diversity quotas on festival stages and even behind the scenes. However, the adoption of an inclusion rider does not automatically change the environment to make it more welcoming to women, this requires systematic change. There is also the argument that these agreements are only accessible to high profile artists who have the bargaining power to demand certain conditions. Inclusion riders need to be used alongside other methods for lasting change.

Conclusions

Progress Amid Challenges: Striving for Gender Equity in Live Music Spaces

This literature review has shown that we are still a long way off gender parity in live music spaces. The research referenced here has mostly been collected and produced by female researchers and activist groups, with men not as actively engaged with the issue of gender equity in live music spaces. Gender inequality on festival stages has been well publicised with a significant amount of data made available. However, there are clear issues around the lack of standardisation for data collection methodologies which means that comparing equality issues across countries can be very difficult as data cannot be measured using the same metrics. Sample sizes vary wildly from 5 festivals to 110 and use differing methods for determining gender identity and deciding on which events to include. A standardised methodology needs to be devised and data collection could be encouraged by using Van Kleef's (2022) suggestion that any festival in receipt of public funding should be required to share their diversity data. There is a lack of data collection in live music venues and clubs looking at event programming, this is an area that needs to be explored further. Live DMA have explored the issues around venue data collection which includes a lack of training for venue staff on how to collect data, especially the feeling of asking 'intrusive' questions, and also not wanting to burden people with more work as staff in venues are overworked post COVID.

Employment in the live music sector is highly gender segregated with some roles feeling less accessible for women, especially technical roles and managerial positions. Still, live music associations are starting to collect data on the gender of artists on stage, as well as their workers, and addressing the challenges they encounter via targeted projects such as training, mentorship programmes and setting-up of adequate and healthier working conditions.

A grim picture has been painted by the research focused on women's engagement in live music spaces, where they are at an increased risk for sexual assault, violence and unwanted attention as audience members and employees in late night and festival environments. Despite this, we have reason to hope. In November 2018, Iceland airwaves became the first festival to achieve a 50% female line up (Marshall, 2018) showing that it is possible, and Primavera have just announced their 2025 headliners who, for the first time ever, are all female. This reflects a steady increase in female representation across the European festival circuit. Women are now creating their own spaces and methods of participation in the live music sector including hosting their own events and offering dedicated training courses for women and gender minorities. Whilst progress is slow, it is hard to deny that we are moving in the right direction.



Author biography

Grace Goodwin is a researcher who focuses on inequalities in the creative industries. Her PhD thesis focuses on gender equality in the music industry. She delivers projects, research and talks and launched GENIE (Gender Equality Networks in Europe), a database of over 400 projects supporting gender equity in the music industry. Her passion for gender equity arose from her work as a session drummer and percussionist and artist mentor. She also sits on the board of the PRS Foundation, one of the largest funders of new music in the UK.

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