

# Behind the Scenes

ttie

Think Tank  
for Inclusion  
& Equity

*In partnership with  
Geena Davis Institute  
on Gender in Media*

## *The State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writing*



Spring 2022

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Four years ago, Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity (TTIE) began examining the state of inclusion and equity in TV writing. Our goal was to identify the barriers to entry and career advancement for historically excluded<sup>1</sup> writers, as well as obstacles to authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling. This year's Behind the Scenes (BTS) Report digs deeper into how these persistent barriers and seismic shifts in the industry (e.g., the rise of streaming platforms, the proliferation of mini-rooms, the impact of a global pandemic) affect hiring and, ultimately, storytelling on a profound level.*

First, let's set the stage because Hollywood doesn't exist in a vacuum. The current polarized political climate has ushered in new tensions that negatively impact how historically excluded communities are perceived, treated, and, sometimes, erased. Just as Hollywood storytelling helps shape national perceptions, the national landscape can and often does influence Hollywood storytelling.

It's important for Hollywood to know that advertisers and audiences alike want content creators to ignore political pressure and reflect the true diversity of the world around them.

**“Given the media industry’s dependence on advertising, diverse representation factors into the bottom line. Brands seek out platforms that authentically engage a diverse customer base and avoid content that is not well received by the diverse audiences represented in storylines.”<sup>2</sup>**

Audiences crave inclusive content. In the Nielsen “Attitudes on Representation on TV” Survey, 87% of respondents said they are “interested in seeing more content featuring people from outside their identity group.”<sup>3</sup> However, where historically excluded audiences are concerned, **“a third of audiences feel that there is not enough content featuring people from their identity group on TV, and where there is, more than a quarter say that representation is inaccurate.”<sup>4</sup>**

To meet advertiser and audience demands for inclusive and authentic content, Hollywood needs to address many systemic issues. The good news is the TV industry is already moving in the right direction in some important ways. Networks, studios, and streamers have established many new equity/diversity/inclusion (EDI) initiatives. In fact, the latest WGAW employment data suggests an increase in BIPOC hiring at the lower- and mid-levels.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, **96% of BTS survey respondents agreed that we need to tell more inclusive stories.** 91% agreed that some stories need to be told from the perspective of people who have experienced them personally.

There is a desire to provide inclusive content, but there are still many obstacles throughout the pipeline to achieving it. Most industry interventions focus only on helping historically excluded writers break in. BTS data indicates that after that initial step, these writers encounter many additional barriers to gaining positions of power and making their voices heard.

It is crucial that historically excluded writers continue to work their way up the ranks, develop and helm their own projects, and have their voices valued. In this report, we discuss these issues as EQUITY OF AUTHORSHIP, VOICE, ACCESS, and ADVANCEMENT. Each is vital to the development and execution of authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling on screen.

This year's BTS report identifies the barriers to achieving this kind of storytelling. And, because systemic issues require a systemic response, we offer concrete recommendations for all facets of the industry to help make their equity and inclusive content goals a reality.

<sup>1</sup> This year's report employs a shift in terminology from “underrepresented” to “historically excluded” to recognize that these communities (BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ people, Disabled people, and women) have been systemically denied access to economic, political, and cultural participation. Conversely to “historically excluded,” we employ the term “non-marginalized.”

<sup>2</sup> Umoh, Ruth (2020) *Streaming Platforms Are Driving Diverse Representation In Television*. [Forbes.com 12/03/2020](https://www.forbes.com/2020/12/03/streaming-platforms-diverse-representation-television/).

<sup>3</sup> Nielsen (2021) *Seeing and Believing: Meeting Black audience demand for representation that matters*. [Nielsen.com 10/2021](https://www.nielsen.com/2021/10/seeing-and-believing/).

<sup>4</sup> Nielsen (2021) *Being seen on screen: The importance of quantity and quality representation on TV*. [Nielsen.com 12/2021](https://www.nielsen.com/2021/12/being-seen-on-screen/).

<sup>5</sup> *Writers Guild of America West (2022). Inclusion & Equity Report 2022.*

# TOP FINDINGS

**70%**  
of historically  
excluded writers  
who developed  
new series projects  
in the past five  
years did so  
**without pay**

— compared to 53% of  
non-marginalized writers

**81%** of upper-level white writers with *no* prior management experience are contracted to showrun their development projects, compared to only **67%** of upper-level BIPOC writers who *do have* management experience.

**76%** of showrunner respondents said they received no management training prior to or during their time running a show.

**68%** of white men and **56%** of white women respondents who worked as assistants in the past secured their first TV writing job by being promoted from the assistant ranks, compared to only **26%** of BIPOC men and **20%** of BIPOC women who worked as assistants.

**67%** of survey respondents who were harassed said their showrunner was the perpetrator.

**56%** of lower- and mid-level writers did not cover set on their most recent show.

**48%** of showrunner respondents said they could use help learning about best practices related to EDI (equity/diversity/inclusion).

# TOP RECOMMENDATIONS



- **Pay historically excluded writers for development** and *greenlight* more of their projects to series.
- **Empower experienced historically excluded writers** to run their own shows, especially taking into account transferable skills (e.g., prior management experience).
- **Create a widely accessible training program** for new and experienced showrunners and co-executive producers that includes both traditional management skills and guidance on running diverse and inclusive writers rooms.
- **Institute third-party confidential exit interviews** with every writer to help identify unsafe work environments and remove bias and/or discrimination in the hiring/firing/rehiring process.
- **Prioritize room-running, production, and post-production experience** for writers at all levels to ensure they acquire the skills to run their own shows.
- **Maintain Zoom and hybrid writers rooms to allow for better access**, especially for Deaf and Disabled writers and writers from low-wealth and low-income backgrounds.

# METHODOLOGY

This report is based on the findings of survey and focus group data. Below, we provide background information on both.

## Focus Groups

TTIE held two focus groups: one for lower- to mid-level writers and one for mid-level to upper-level writers on March 12 and March 13, 2022, respectively. A moderator led two approximately two-hour-long discussions over virtual video conferencing, inviting the 16 total participants to share personal experiences and dig deeper into issues raised in our survey.

## Survey

The survey was designed to evaluate TV writers' experiences across all demographics, genres, career levels, and paths within the United States.

Survey subsections were designed for writers who had been staffed in a writers room, developed, or performed showrunner/head writer duties in the last five years. These questions were only presented to respondents when applicable.

The survey was distributed via an anonymous link through official TTIE communication channels, including the organization's website, social media, and newsletter. It was also sent directly to industry groups with language requesting they share the link with their networks and/or members. The survey went live on March 1, 2022, and closed on March 17, 2022.

## Sample

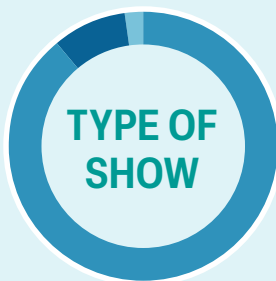
876 respondents completed the survey. The majority worked in live-action scripted TV (90%), and a select few in animation (9%) and comedy/variety (2%). Just under half the sample were in the early stages of their careers: 11% were pre-staff writers; 10% were freelancers; and 28% were lower-level writers. The rest of the sample were further along in their careers: 17% were mid-level; 23% were upper-level, and 11% were showrunners.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1: Frequencies of Demographic Groups in the General Population of TV Writers' as Compared to the BTS Survey Sample.**

	ALL TV WRITERS	SURVEY RESPONDENTS
Non-binary People <sup>8</sup>	-	3%
Women	45%	61%
Men	55%	35%
BIPOC	37%	55%
White	63%	45%
BIPOC Women	21%	35%
BIPOC Men	15%	30%
White Women	26%	29%
White Men	37%	16%
LGBTQIA+	12%	35%
Disabled People	2%	13%
55 and Over	15%	-
50 and Over	-	22%

*In this sample, Deaf writers were included in the Disabled demographic if they chose to self-identify as Disabled. It's important to note that sample sizes for some groups like Disabled writers and writers who identify as non-binary/agender/other are too small to report findings for many questions, but where data is statistically relevant, it is included. The small sample size for these groups speaks to a larger systemic issue that is discussed in the following sections.*

Demographically, 89% of BTS survey respondents were part of at least one group that has been historically excluded from the field of TV writing: women, people who identify as non-binary/agender/other, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ writers, Disabled writers, and those at the lower level over the age of 50. Although this is not reflective of the overall population of TV writers, as seen in Table 1, this report's findings are well-positioned to represent the experiences and perspectives of historically excluded writers in the TV industry.



● 90% Live-Action Scripted  
● 9% Animation  
● 2% Comedy/Variety



● 11% Pre-Staff Writers ● 17% Mid-Level  
● 10% Freelancers ● 23% Upper-Level  
● 28% Lower-Level ● 11% Showrunners

<sup>6</sup> Pre-staff writer: support staff, fellowship/incubator participant, etc.; Lower-level: staff writer, story editor, executive story editor; Mid-level: writer (animation, comedy/variety), co-producer/producer (live-action scripted); Upper-level: consulting producer, supervising producer, co-executive producer, executive producer; Showrunner: showrunner/executive producer (live-action scripted), story editor/showrunner (animation), head writer/showrunner (comedy/variety).

<sup>7</sup> *Writers Guild of America West (2022). Inclusion & Equity Report 2022.*

<sup>8</sup> Per the WGAW Inclusion & Equity Report 2022, for their analysis, writers self-identified as non-binary are included in the category of LGBTQ+ writers. In this BTS report, non-binary writers are included in LGBTQIA+ stats as well as reported separately when discussing issues of gender.

# FINDINGS

When writers on staff feel harassed, unwelcome, and unable to speak up, writers rooms miss out on *all* their storytelling ideas, not only those about representation. But when they're silenced on representation issues in particular, harmful storytelling practices about historically excluded communities can persist.



**EQUITY OF AUTHORSHIP:**  
*the practice of ensuring  
equal treatment and  
support for all writers in  
their creative process*

# EQUITY OF AUTHORSHIP

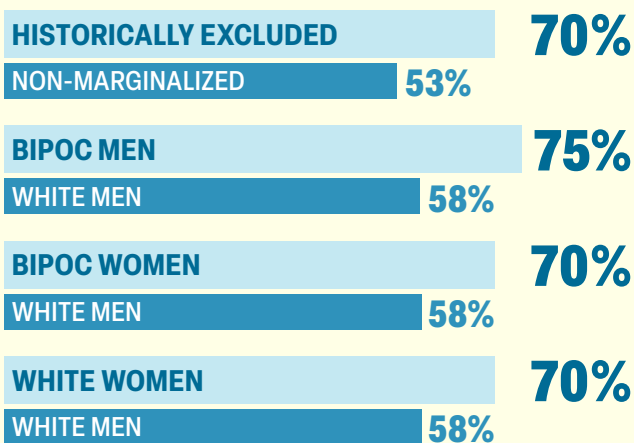
Equity of authorship is integral to the TV development process to afford writers equitable control over their creative product and to help ensure their stories are told authentically, inclusively, and responsibly.

## Free Work and Who's Getting Paid

In the past five years, 76% of survey respondents have been involved in either paid or unpaid development with an incubator, production company, studio, network, or streamer. Of those, **70% of historically excluded writers engaged in unpaid development work, compared to only 53% of non-marginalized writers.** When breaking this down by race and two genders, BIPOC men (75%) and all women (70%) did this unpaid work at higher rates than white men (58%). The sample size for those who identify as non-binary/agender/other was too small to report findings, which, in itself, suggests the need for more representation.

Unpaid work not only exploits writers' talents, it's also a barrier to entry. Prior BTS reports<sup>9</sup> found that many historically excluded writers get their first break in the industry through development. When development is unpaid, that door is effectively shut to writers from low-wealth or low-income backgrounds.

### WHO DOES UNPAID DEVELOPMENT?



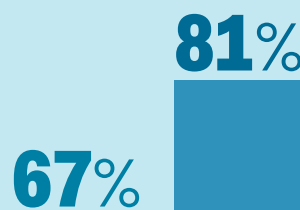
## Deal-Making

Paid development opportunities favor white men across the board. They're afforded more overall deals, script sales, and blind script deals than BIPOC men, BIPOC women, or white women. **When looking at overall deals in particular, white men and white women are granted this opportunity twice as often as BIPOC men and BIPOC women.** Again, the sample size for those who identify as non-binary/agender/other was too small to report findings.

TABLE 2: DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES GRANTED TO WRITERS IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS, BY RACE AND GENDER

OPPORTUNITY	BIPOC WOMEN	BIPOC MEN	WHITE WOMEN	WHITE MEN
Overall Development Deal	7%	6%	12%	17%
Script Sale	27%	22%	29%	40%
Blind Script Deal	10%	18%	13%	23%

Even when historically excluded writers acquire paid development deals, a significant number aren't contracted to run their own shows, despite having many of the necessary qualifications. BTS survey data reveals that 59% of historically excluded writers are career-changers who often enter the industry with managerial experience. However, this experience is frequently discounted. **Only 67% of upper-level BIPOC writers who have those management skills contractually make showrunner on their projects if they're picked up,** compared to 81% of upper-level white writers with *no* prior management experience.



IF YOUR MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT HAD BEEN PICKED UP, **WOULD YOU HAVE BEEN MADE THE SHOWRUNNER?**

- UPPER-LEVEL BIPOC WRITERS **WITH** PRIOR CAREER MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE
- UPPER-LEVEL WHITE WRITERS **WITH NO** PRIOR MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE

<sup>9</sup> TTIE Behind the Scenes: The State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writers Rooms, March 2019; TTIE Behind the Scenes: The State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writing, Spring 2020.



## **Inclusion as an Afterthought**

The graphics on the previous page indicate that historically excluded writers aren't empowered to tell their own stories or run their own shows. Some BTS focus group participants went as far as to suggest that inclusion in development may be little more than performative—that buyers develop their projects with no intent to produce them. One white showrunner who participated in our focus groups expressed her frustrations with the superficiality of network/studio inclusion conversations:

***“It’s a lot of talk—which is really sad—about ‘box checking.’ Openly. ‘We have this box to check.’ No conversation about it, no investment in the actual change, in actual issues, actual equity. There’s zero humanity behind it and frankly annoyance at trying to go any deeper. It happens with hiring. It happens with storytelling. It happens with casting.”***

This all can lead to historically excluded writers being exploited and/or tokenized. One common practice our focus group participants noted was for studios and buyers to hire a non-marginalized writer to develop a project about an historically excluded community. Only later do they hire a writer from that specific community onto the project, usually in a lesser capacity. An upper-level Latina participant in our focus group described her experience of being brought in on a project created by a white writer:

***“That’s their version of diversity. It’s just white people telling those stories. Throw the ‘salsa’ in at the last minute, but that’s just for optics and the optics are complete bullshit. The ‘salsa’ never makes it in because you’re not the creator.”***

An Afro-Latine focus group participant expressed concern about a similar trend, in which historically excluded writers are invited to partner on projects solely to “rubberstamp” storytelling, but are not actually included in the conversation:

***“White cis gentlemen...looking for brown people to co-create with. ...[They] definitely want more Black projects but I feel like they’re just grabbing anything that looks like a Black person.”*** To which another Black participant added: ***“The Brown shield. It’s a new archetype you get to be.”***

Many Disabled writers are even further exploited. As some shared, they're not only excluded from the process of telling their community's stories, they're also misled about the purpose of meetings so others can mine them for unpaid consulting work. One Disabled focus group participant described how this happens:

***“This industry tells our stories all the time...but they don’t want to actually work with Disabled people or let Disabled people take the reins and tell their own stories. And so we are constantly being asked to come in and even for free. ...I go into a meeting. I’m excited about it. I think I’m meeting with these producers...[but] they’re bringing me in to sort of pick my brain. And I realized, Oh my God, I’m not in an interview. I am being used.”***

## **Why Equity of Authorship Matters**

All the issues explored in this section are barriers to authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling. Without equity of authorship in the development process, stories about historically excluded communities can continue to be written from outsiders' perspectives. This frequently leads to further harmful misrepresentations of these communities on screen and real-world consequences, as we'll discuss in the next section.



**EQUITY OF VOICE:** *the practice of affording all voices equal opportunity to speak and be heard*

# EQUITY OF VOICE

*Equity of voice is integral to an inclusive writers room to help ensure all writers are heard, considered, and valued in the creative process.*

## A Toxic Workplace?

Once a show gets the green light to form a writers room and historically excluded writers make it through the staffing process, they often encounter a number of obstacles. **60% of the entire BTS sample reported experiencing discrimination, bullying, microaggressions, and/or harassment at work.** This is especially prevalent among women (67%) in comparison to men (48%). Although numbers for women remain higher than men regardless of race, BIPOC women (69%) report higher rates than white women (66%) and BIPOC men (54%) have higher rates than white men (39%). The sample size for those who identify as non-binary/agender/other was too small to report findings.

BTS survey respondents described many incidents, including:

*“A fellow writer with a disability was routinely left out of conversations because of the inconvenience of his disability.”*

*“I spent months being treated as a consultant rather than as a writer. I could answer questions about Natives, but pitches were generally unwelcome and input on non-Native storylines was generally ignored...”*

*“[An] EP on a project felt that the show had ‘too many Asian characters’ and would bristle when any new Asian characters were pitched. This EP never raised concerns over the higher number of white characters.”*

In addition to gender and race harassment, BTS qualitative data indicates that homophobia is also prevalent in the industry. Last year, the WGAW LGBTQ+ Writers Committee<sup>10</sup> conducted a survey of its membership, which echoes this sentiment. It found that 46% of respondents felt the need to hide/conceal their LGBTQIA+ identity in an industry setting or environment. Narrowing the focus to the last five years, one in four still felt this same need. One reason may be to avoid homophobic encounters like these described by BTS survey respondents:

*“Gay slurs have been used to my face...and behind my back (as I understand it).”*

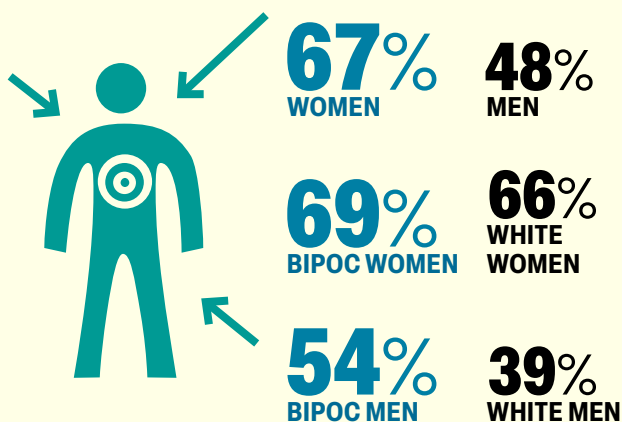
*“I was in a room with a...woman who made several references that since I am gay, I must also be promiscuous/a slut.”*

## Reporting is a Double-Edged Sword

Just over one-third (34%) of historically excluded writers said they experienced harassment *in the last year* alone (another 6% weren't sure). 54% of them didn't report the incident. Of those who did, twice as many answered it went “poorly” than “positively.” One survey respondent described their experience:

*“I emailed the showrunner [that] when I spoke up about [LGBTQIA+] issues on the show, the [show’s] creator... had a problem with it. The showrunner flagged my email and sent it to HR. ...They did an ‘investigation’ and came back and told me that I was the problem and that...the showrunner is ‘one of their best’...and that I was in the wrong.”*

### WHO EXPERIENCES DISCRIMINATION, BULLYING, MICROAGGRESSIONS, AND/OR HARASSMENT



<sup>10</sup> Robb, David (2021) WGA West's LGBTQ+ Writers Committee In Open Letter Urges Hollywood To Combat Gay Bigotry. Deadline.com 06/11/21.

## TOP REASONS HARASSMENT WAS NOT REPORTED

"Worried it would impact my future work"

22%

"Didn't think it would make a difference"

22%

"Worried it would hurt my professional development at my current job"

18%

"Didn't think it was serious enough to do anything"

14%

As seen above, two of the top reasons for not reporting harassment incidents were not wanting to impact future work (22%) and worrying it would hurt professional development at one's current job (18%). These particular concerns are unsurprising given that **67% of survey respondents who were harassed said their showrunner was the perpetrator**. Respondents offered many examples; here is a sampling:

*"On my last show, there was definitely an 'in crowd' of people the showrunner personally liked, and a 'B team' of people the showrunner didn't like. And all of the Black women (including support staff) happened to be on the B team. This affected people getting scripts and rewrites and work time with the showrunner to solve story issues."*

*"I am Latino and gay [and] my white, male showrunner would frequently refer to me by the feminine form of my name."*

**"An actively misogynistic showrunner noted how there was 'too much feminine energy' in the writers room, told a writer 'a woman could never prove a man wrong' on his show..."**

### Tone Starts at the Top

When showrunners like those described above set the tone for the writers room and the show's content, they create an unhealthy and potentially abusive work environment. This frequently disincentivizes writers from speaking up, especially about storylines regarding historically excluded communities.

Some of this bad behavior may be caused by a lack of preparedness to be in a leadership position. **76% of showrunner respondents said they received no management training prior to or during their time running a show**. Since showrunners are ostensibly in charge of multi-million dollar corporations, management is among the most important skills to possess. Both new and established showrunners need formalized training to support their high-level responsibilities.

Offering that training can be difficult when there is resistance to challenging the status quo. According to one focus group participant, their union created a guidance manual for writers and showrunners but never distributed it to showrunners:

*"I would ask, 'Why aren't you sending this out to showrunners?' And they're like, 'Oh, we don't want to offend them.'"*

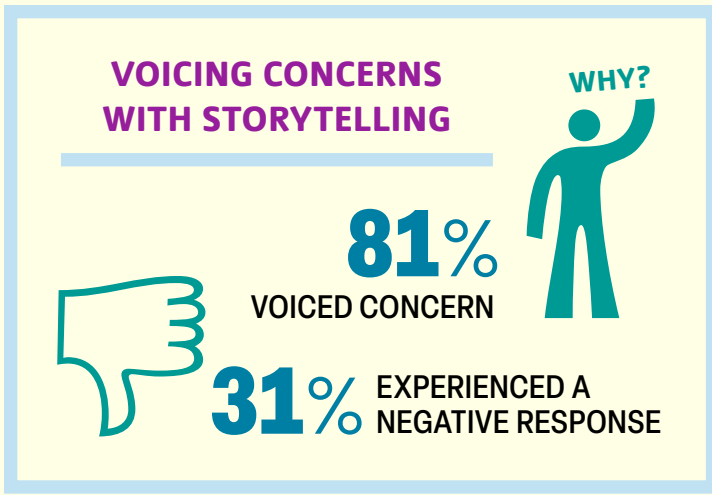
Many showrunner respondents, however, said they want EDI (equity/diversity/inclusion) guidance. 98% said they try to make sure their staffs are diverse. **48% also said they could use help learning about best practices related to EDI**.

Such practices could aid showrunners in better supporting historically excluded writers in the writers room. As BTS data suggests, historically excluded writers encounter notably more negative experiences in their rooms than their counterparts. Over half (52%) say they've dealt with microaggressions at work. Many writers also experience the room rejecting their ideas but accepting them when someone else pitches the same idea later (52%). In addition, over a third (34%) felt tokenized at work, and nearly a quarter (24%) have had others take credit for their ideas. When looking specifically at the intersection of race and two genders, we see again that BIPOC women face far more obstacles overall than white women or BIPOC men (see Table 3). The sample size for those who identify as non-binary/age/other was too small to report findings.

TABLE 3: EXPERIENCING OTHERING IN WRITERS ROOMS, BY RACE AND GENDER

WHAT WAS EXPERIENCED	BIPOC WOMEN	BIPOC MEN	WHITE WOMEN	WHITE MEN
Micro-aggressions	62%	48%	42%	29%
Double standard when pitching idea*	61%	42%	45%	37%
Tokenized	43%	28%	17%	22%
Someone else took credit for their idea	29%	14%	13%	34%

\*Had an idea rejected by the room but accepted when someone else pitched it



## The Perils of Pushing Back

We asked respondents if they had ever raised concerns when they identified harmful or offensive storytelling. 81% reported having done so, but of those respondents, it did not go well 31% of the time. One BTS survey respondent said:

*“Myself and other women fought to change elements of a sexual assault storyline that we felt were harmful and [we] failed to get through to the showrunner, who disrespected and invalidated the women in the room who shared their personal stories of assault. It was a depressing reminder that writers are often pushed to share personal traumas in a room in the interest of making the show better, but in the wrong environment that can be really unsafe and psychologically damaging.”*

**Story pushback went poorly for LGBTQIA+ writers 32% of the time, compared to only 20% for non-LGBTQIA+ writers.**

One survey respondent said:

*“My queer identity was used against me when breaking a ‘coming out’ story for a character.”* Another shared they *“Unsuccessfully argued against killing the only queer character of color on the show in order to further white characters’ stories.”*

Many focus group participants said that the Zoom writers rooms of these past pandemic years helped them cope with a number of these issues, especially the constant barrage of microaggressions or overt aggressions resulting from pushing back on problematic storylines. One focus group participant said:

*“I am bad at fixing my face. This is something I’ve learned because of Zoom and, as a Black woman, there are often times that I am interpreted as having an attitude or being super sensitive. And so turning my camera off has helped me keep my job at times, whereas I know my face is going to betray me.”*

## Real-World Consequences

When the story concerns of historically excluded writers are ignored, there can be real-world consequences. One focus group participant described a particular incident on her show:

*“Sometimes [there were] jokes [about a particular historically excluded group] or storylines I would flag, and I would very conscientiously pitch the fix, which is the way to not be the squeaky wheel. ...And what was really frustrating is I was not taken seriously, unfortunately, until the actors were confronted by an angry fanbase.”*

BTS qualitative data indicates that problematic storytelling can originate from many different sources. But when it's from the studio or network upper echelons, there can be even more harmful effects, as one BIPOC showrunner from our focus groups described:

*“On our show, we weren’t allowed to mention George Floyd. We weren’t allowed to mention Parkland. We weren’t allowed to mention Jan. 6. I’m willing to bet every show on [the network] was given similar notes. It’s erasing. It’s a way to support false versions of history that are so dangerous.”*

## Why Equity of Voice Matters

Discriminatory practices in the writers room can shut down voices trying to safeguard authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling, as one BTS survey respondent affirmed:

*“On my first show as a staff writer, I was bullied by the Co-EP/#2 so mercilessly that I eventually stopped talking.”*

When writers on staff feel harassed, unwelcome, and unable to speak up, writers rooms miss out on *all* their storytelling ideas, not only those about representation. But when they're silenced on representation issues in particular, harmful storytelling practices about historically excluded communities can persist.

Addressing equity in development and the writers room is key to promoting authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling. But it's important to note that historically excluded writers often encounter equity barriers long before they enter these stages of their careers, as we'll discuss in the following sections.

# STUDENT ELECTIONS



**EQUITY OF ACCESS:**  
*the practice of  
affording all people  
equal access to the  
pathways that lead  
to employment*

# EQUITY OF ACCESS

*Equity of access to TV writers rooms (i.e., breaking into the industry) is integral to creating an industry where all voices can be included, heard, and valued in the creative process.*

## Breaking In

BTS data reveals that **it takes seven years, on average, for an aspiring TV writer to break into the industry** (i.e., secure their first staffed writer position). But data suggests some have more of an advantage than others: 20% of non-marginalized writer respondents broke in within their first year versus only 12% of historically excluded writers.

How people break in tells an interesting story as well.

## The Assistant Route

Starting in an assistant position is a common tactic for breaking in. But not everyone can afford to work as an industry assistant. According to #PayUpHollywood, 80% of assistants surveyed made less than \$50K per year. This is considered a “cost-burdened” wage in the industry hubs of Los Angeles and New York.<sup>11</sup> This, and the seven years it takes (on average) to break in, creates significant financial barriers to entry for talented writers from low-wealth or low-income backgrounds.

With the transition to Zoom writers rooms, however, the pandemic has made the assistant route more viable for a wider range of people. As one focus group participant explained:

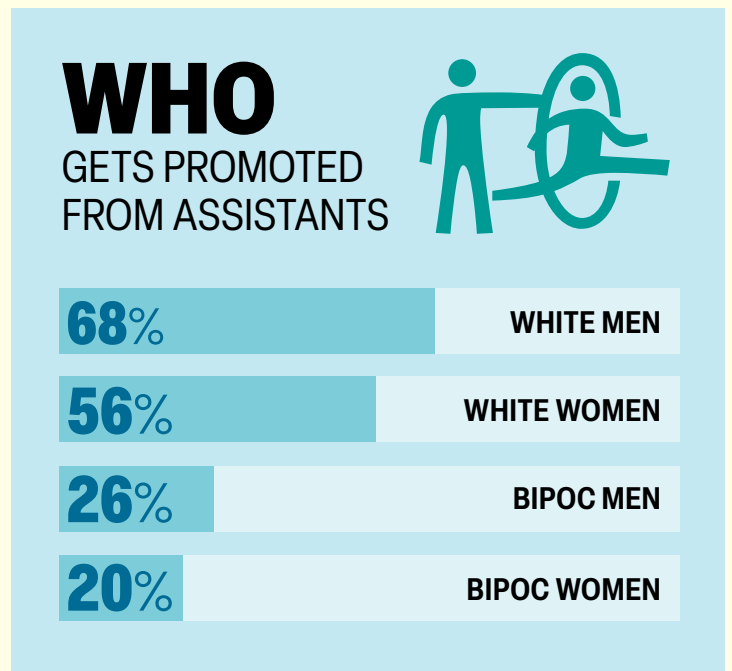
**“The one thing that Zoom really did is it made having a career as a writer—TV writer or support staff—more accessible. You don’t have to be in L.A., you don’t have to have a car [etc.]”**

Even with a financial safety net, the assistant pathway still isn’t accessible to many aspiring writers. Ageism and ableism create significant barriers. One BTS focus group participant explained:

**“Early on in my career...I wanted to make the transition to drama writer. I actually went to showrunners...and I said, ‘I know what a writers assistant does, and I’m willing to do it.’...But they were not comfortable with me because [I was older than those] fresh out of film school.”**

A Deaf focus group participant said: **“Being support staff is not a viable option for Deaf writers.”** A Disabled writer added: **“Whether I can do the job or not, most people are not going to even think of having a person in a wheelchair as their assistant.”** This kind of ableist bias has led to many Deaf and Disabled writers seeking development as a way into the industry, which has its own challenges, as discussed earlier.

So, who secures these coveted assistant positions and gets promoted from them? Recent research from #PayUpHollywood suggests 77% of industry support staff and assistants are white.<sup>12</sup> According to BTS data, among those who have worked as assistants, 68% of white men and 56% of white women respondents secured their first TV writing job by being promoted from assistant ranks. In contrast, **only 26% of BIPOC men and 20% of BIPOC women got their first writing gig the same way.** The sample size for those who identify as non-binary/agender/other was too small to report findings.



<sup>11</sup> Kilkenney, Katie (2021). *Nearly 80% of Hollywood Support Staff Considered “Cost Burdened,” Survey Shows.* HollywoodReporter.com 02/01/2021.

<sup>12</sup> Kilkenney, Katie (2021). *Nearly 80% of Hollywood Support Staff Considered “Cost Burdened,” Survey Shows.* HollywoodReporter.com 02/01/2021.

## The Other Routes

More than many other industries, TV careers depend a great deal on who you know. As Table 4 suggests, the “personal connections” way into the industry also favors white men. Respondents from this demographic got their first writing job through personal recommendations or connections 1.5 times more often than BIPOC men, BIPOC women, or white women.

**TABLE 4: THE NUMBER ONE FACTOR THAT LED TO RESPONDENTS’ FIRST STAFFED TV WRITING JOB**

WHAT HELPED	BIPOC WOMEN	BIPOC MEN	WHITE WOMEN	WHITE MEN
Promoted from Assistant	10%	14%	41%	47%
Personal Recommendation	13%	16%	15%	24%
Agents/Managers	26%	25%	15%	10%
Fellowship/Incubator	26%	26%	7%	2%

Table 4 also indicates that many BIPOC writers must break in through different means—i.e., via agents/managers or fellowship/incubator/equity and inclusion programs. Securing any or all of these requires a rigorous vetting process of written material. In fact, two fellowship programs provided TTIE with data about their acceptance rates. These numbers indicate it’s harder to get into their programs than Harvard. And yet, many program alumni are still stigmatized, as this BTS respondent mentioned:

**“People assum[e] because I went through a diversity program, I’m not as qualified or I don’t deserve the promotions I’ve received.”**

## Why Equity of Access Matters

The playing field is not level for all writers to break into the industry. This is especially true for Deaf and Disabled writers and writers from low-wealth or low-income backgrounds. These barriers to entry can leave important stories about historically excluded communities untold and people within those communities feeling invisible.

IT’S **HARDER** TO GET INTO NETWORK FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS **THAN HARVARD**



HARVARD

**5.2%**

Class of 2021  
Acceptance Rate



FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS

**0.3% - 0.7%**

2019-2020 Acceptance Rates





**EQUITY OF ADVANCEMENT:** *the practice of ensuring equal opportunity for continued employment and promotion*

# EQUITY OF ADVANCEMENT

*Equity of advancement is integral to ensuring historically excluded TV writers have the same opportunities to advance their careers as non-marginalized writers.*

## Staying in the Game

Breaking into TV writing can be tough. Maintaining a career, moving up the ranks, and getting the skills one needs to become a showrunner present their own set of challenges.

There is one piece of good news, though. There's been a notable decline (-12%) in historically excluded writers repeating staff writer since TTIE began spotlighting this issue in 2020.



Sustaining one's career, however, takes more than just title advancement. It also requires the financial means to make it through periods of unemployment. 93% of white writers were able to get through lean times by drawing on personal savings. It's a much different story for unemployed historically excluded writers. **52% of Disabled writers had to rely on family support and 72% relied on public support** (e.g., unemployment). Although many BIPOC writers (87%) were also able to draw on savings during employment gaps, a disproportionate amount of them (47%) had to take jobs outside the industry to make ends meet, compared to only 37% of their white writer counterparts.

## The Stacked Deck

The emergence of the mini-room may be contributing to these inequities. A third (32%) of historically excluded writers surveyed worked in a mini-room in the last five years. Only 39% were paid above WGA scale. Broken down by gender, men respondents (55%) were paid above scale more often than women (35%), and **no non-binary writers were paid above scale.**

Furthermore, 41% of respondents said their mini-rooms did not get picked up. This can leave writers with no screen credit for their resumes, less money in their pockets, and no production or post-production experience, all of which can negatively impact career development.

In fact, **55% of all lower-level writers and 59% of all mid-level writers did not get to cover set on their most recent show.** In addition, 65% of lower-level and 52% of mid-level writers did not run the room for their episode on their most recent show, missing out on developing key leadership skills.

Per the recent WGAW Inclusion & Equity Report<sup>13</sup>, BIPOC writers make up over 50% of employed writers from staff writer to co-producer (i.e., lower- and mid-level). But this up-and-coming cohort of writers is often unable to build the vital skills they need to eventually run their own shows. An upper-level Black woman writer from our focus groups said:

*"I don't think it's a coincidence as just when we're demanding more inclusion and more equity and more representation in terms of writers in and across the board, the studios and upper-level showrunners and gatekeepers are being like, 'Oh, no, writers don't need to go to set!' ...I think it's setting up a pipeline for those maybe more experienced...EP-level cis het white guys to say, 'Well, they need us, because we have all the production experience.'"*

## Accessibility and Advancement

For Deaf and Disabled writers, workplace accessibility issues hamper advancement throughout their careers. Another positive result of the shift to Zoom writers rooms is improved opportunities for Disabled writers. As one focus group participant noted: **"Zoom has helped disability hiring; they can't see you're in a wheelchair."**

In our new COVID-reality world, Zoom rooms are not just an advantage for some writers, they're a necessity. In fact, they can be the difference between life and death, as one focus group participant described:

*"For me, I'm severely immunocompromised. I cannot go back to [an in-person] room because if I catch COVID, I'll die... [The Zoom room] is working pretty good for me, but it's like everybody else's conversation is 'I'd be more comfortable in a live room. For social comfort.' I'm like, 'I'll die, or I won't be able to work.'"*

## Why Equity of Advancement Matters

Denying historically excluded writers the tools, access, and experience they need to run shows hinders their advancement to the showrunner ranks. Story decisions are made at the top. Without historically excluded writers in these positions, authentic stories about their communities will continue to be filtered through the lens of outsiders.

<sup>13</sup> Writers Guild of America West (2022). *Inclusion & Equity Report 2022.*

## **ACTION ITEMS**

*Systemic issues require a systemic response. Following are concrete recommendations for all facets of the industry.*



# ACTION ITEMS

Many advertisers<sup>14</sup>, audiences<sup>15</sup>, and TV industry stakeholders agree Hollywood needs to tell more inclusive stories that better reflect the world we live in and its unique communities. To put our collective words into action, we must enact specific, targeted initiatives that are well-developed and properly funded. In this section we provide recommendations to help achieve the goal of more authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling by setting up historically excluded writers for success and fostering safe work environments for all TV writers.

## Networks/Studios/Streamers/Production Companies

### #1 Invest in historically excluded talent to help promote authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling.

- Hire and promote historically excluded creative executives and empower them to shepherd and greenlight projects by historically excluded creators.
- Center the voices of historically excluded writers and executives from project inception and build story around their input, rather than bringing them in after the project is already in progress.
- Pay historically excluded writers for development and *greenlight* their projects to series.
- Empower experienced historically excluded writers to run their own shows, especially taking into account transferable skills (e.g., prior management experience).

### #2 Create safe, equitable, and inclusive work environments.

- Institute and uphold a code of conduct for showrunners and all working writers.
- Establish and fully fund a widely accessible training program for new and experienced showrunners and co-executive producers, which includes both traditional management skills and guidance on running diverse and inclusive writers rooms.

- Help showrunners find historically excluded talent through alternative methods (e.g., reaching out to WGA Inclusion and Equity Committees and referring to curated databases available online) to encourage them to hire writers they don't already know.
- Hire and promote historically excluded writers equitably, especially regarding title and pay.
- Track which shows consistently experience turnover of historically excluded writers, investigate root causes, and implement protections.
- Institute third-party confidential exit interviews with every writer to help identify unsafe work environments and remove bias and/or discrimination in the hiring/firing/rehiring process.
- Hire support staff from historically excluded backgrounds and pay them a living wage. Create and communicate a clear path toward advancement.

### #3 Improve writers room accessibility and access.

- Gain input from Deaf and Disabled community members to increase accessibility across workspaces.
- Maintain Zoom and hybrid writers rooms to ensure better access, especially for Deaf and Disabled writers and writers from low-wealth and low-income backgrounds.

<sup>14</sup> Umoh, Ruth (2020) Streaming Platforms Are Driving Diverse Representation In Television. *Forbes.com* 12/03/2020.

<sup>15</sup> Nielsen (2021) Seeing and Believing: Meeting Black audience demand for representation that matters. *Nielsen.com* 10/2021.

## Showrunners

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### #1 Hire inclusively and nurture the career development of all writers on your staff.

- Hire and promote historically excluded writers equitably, especially regarding title and pay.
- Increase the number of upper-level writers from historically excluded backgrounds and be deliberate about involving them in decision making.
- Assign mentors to mid- and lower-level writers to set them up for success in the room and to help foster professional relationships and career growth.
- Prioritize room-running, production, and post-production experience for writers at all levels to ensure they acquire the skills to run their own shows.
- Hire support staff from historically excluded backgrounds and pay them a living wage. Create and communicate a clear path toward advancement.

### #2 Create a safe, equitable, and inclusive work environment to promote authentic, inclusive, and responsible storytelling.

- Establish and uphold performance expectations and room guidelines for all writers on staff.
- Listen to and believe the story concerns of historically excluded writers on staff, especially those about their own communities.
- Use community/issue factsheets and enlist cultural consultants to help inform and guide stories about historically excluded communities. Avoid referencing past TV and film because many contain harmful stereotypes that shouldn't be perpetuated.
- Provide multiple safe avenues for staff to communicate challenges and issues faced in the writers room.
- Gain input from members of the Deaf and Disabled communities to increase accessibility across workspaces. Give special consideration to Zoom and/or hybrid writers rooms for this purpose.

## Agents/Managers

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### #1 Invest in historically excluded talent.

- Increase the number of agents/managers from historically excluded backgrounds to help support and grow your diverse client roster.
- Pitch experienced historically excluded writers, especially those with transferable skills (e.g., prior management experience), as capable of running their own shows.
- Advocate for title bumps, equitable pay, and paid development for historically excluded clients.
- Hire support staff from historically excluded backgrounds and pay them a living wage. Create and communicate a clear path toward advancement.

### #2 Protect and support your clients to help ensure career longevity.

- Listen to and believe the concerns of historically excluded writers, especially regarding their projects and work experiences.
- Track which shows consistently experience turnover of historically excluded writers. Inform clients if they are entering a challenging work environment.

## Guilds/Unions

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### **#1 Prioritize inclusion and equity internally (i.e., within the guild/union) and externally (i.e., in the industry).**

- Hire a career inclusion professional whose sole responsibility is to continually evaluate and improve equity, inclusion, and antiracism efforts internally and externally.
- Listen to and believe the concerns of historically excluded members to learn how best to serve their communities, support their careers, and promote solidarity.
- Collect, track, and review TV writers room inclusion and equity data to cover as many of the following identifiers as possible: race/ethnicity, gender, LGBTQIA+, Deaf, Disabled, Muslim, immigrant, those with large body types, and lower-level individuals age 50+. Analyze data to discount clustering of historically excluded writers on shows about their communities to better gauge inclusion on shows with majority white leads/casts. Make this data publicly available on an annual or biannual basis.

- Educate showrunners on alternative methods of finding historically excluded talent (e.g., reaching out to WGA Inclusion and Equity Committees and referring to curated databases available online) to encourage them to hire writers they don't already know.

### **#2 Champion safe and equitable work environments for all writers.**

- Create, circulate, and uphold a code of conduct for showrunners and all working writers.
- Establish an industry-wide third-party reporting system for harassment, discrimination, and bullying. Improve resolution programs to provide stronger protections and better outcomes for all TV writers.

Collect, track, and review TV writers room inclusion and equity data to cover as many of the following identifiers as possible: race/ethnicity, gender, LGBTQIA+, Deaf, Disabled, Muslim, immigrant, those with large body types, and lower-level individuals age 50+.



# We're here to help.

TTIE provides consulting services for writers, producers, studio and network executives, representatives, HR departments, and EDI managers looking to make the TV industry a more inclusive, authentic, equitable, and accountable space. Offerings include:

## ● GROUP TRAININGS AND BRIEFINGS:

We curate and share vital information and action items in engaging, efficient, and interactive ways for various industry audiences.

**Topics:** Behind the Scenes Report Data and Insights Sharing; Building and Running Inclusive and Engaged Writers Rooms; Navigating Staffing Meetings and Writers Rooms as Historically Excluded Writers.

## ● COACHING AND CONSULTING:

Private small group and 1-on-1 sessions for showrunners, upper-level writers, and executives expanding on the lessons from our trainings and briefings.

Custom-designed sessions to support participants and provide tools necessary to apply best practices in writers rooms, executive suites, and/or throughout your company.

### **A Partial List of Topics and Elements:**

- Ask Us Anything: We design teams around specific EDI or authentic storytelling needs.
- Program Design: We share insight and expertise as you plan and develop mentoring, pipeline, and other programs.
- Problem-Solving: We uncover why things aren't working and present targeted solutions.

## ***Additional Tools and Resources***

### **#WriteInclusion Factsheets**

Research-driven one-pagers to help guide writers rooms, writers, and all content creators toward better representation of historically excluded communities in their stories.

### **Writers Resource Page**

Looking to hire historically excluded writers? TTIE amplifies the efforts of many grassroots initiatives that compile TV writer lists by community.

### **Behind the Scenes: The State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writing**

Annual data from *hundreds* of working TV writers shared with the industry to provide insight into what is and isn't working and where the paths to change lie.

**Learn more about our mission and programming:**

**[WriteInclusion.org](https://writeinclusion.org)**

**Or email us and we'll be happy to get back to you:**

**[info@writeinclusion.org](mailto:info@writeinclusion.org)**

# Authors and Partner Organizations



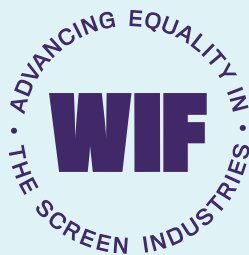
**THINK TANK FOR INCLUSION & EQUITY (TTIE)** A consortium of working TV writers from historically excluded communities, spanning emerging writers to showrunners and working across various segments of the TV industry (network/cable/streaming, drama, comedy, animation, etc.). By increasing inclusion in TV writers rooms and improving working conditions for all TV writers, TTIE seeks to empower historically excluded writers and transform the industry into one in which all writers and all stories can thrive. In 2018, TTIE became a grantee of the Pop Culture Collaborative and a collaborative project of Women in Film (WIF). [writeinclusion.org](http://writeinclusion.org)

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**GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE ON GENDER IN MEDIA** Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only global research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and impede negative stereotyping in family entertainment media. [seejane.org](http://seejane.org)

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**WOMEN IN FILM (WIF)** Founded in 1973 as Women In Film Los Angeles, WIF advocates for and advances the careers of women working in the screen industries—in front of and behind the camera, across all levels of experience—to achieve parity and transform culture. We work to change culture through our distinguished programs, including mentoring, speaker and screening series, a shorts production lab, writing labs, producer training, a sexual harassment help line, and an annual financing intensive. WIF advocates for gender parity through research, education, and media campaigns. And, we build a community centered around these goals, anchored by our signature events, including the WIF Annual Gala and Oscar Nominees Party, along with programs honoring the achievements of women in Hollywood, like the Legacy Series. Membership is open to all screen industry professionals and more information can be found online at [www.wif.org](http://www.wif.org).

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**DESIGN:** [MLucas Design](#) **ILLUSTRATION:** [Janice Chang](#)



WriteInclusion.org

