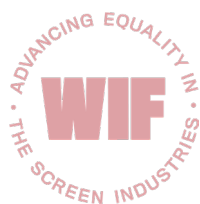


SPRING 2021

# Behind the Scenes

## The State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writing

A Research Study by the Think Tank For Inclusion & Equity





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# Executive Summary

- ▶ In 2019, the Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity (TTIE) surveyed current TV writers to delve deeper behind the scenes into issues of representation, inclusion, and equity in television writing. Our goal was to discover barriers that underrepresented writers face in entering and advancing within the industry and to better understand the relationship between underrepresentation and inclusive story content.
- ▶ In addition to our analysis of the survey data, we aimed to provide substantive recommendations to industry leaders as well as tools for underrepresented writers to be successful in their TV writing careers.
- ▶ This year's *Behind the Scenes Report* attempts to further understand the barriers that underrepresented writers continue to face, address how the pandemic has affected TV writers' careers in the last year, and dive deeper into the process of creating more authentic and inclusive content. As we did last year, we intentionally aim to discuss issues of *representation, inclusion, and under- or overrepresented* writers, as opposed to issues of *diversity*.
- ▶ Although 2020 brought on a monumental social movement that drove Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion initiatives, following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, the push to diversify writers rooms and address racial issues may be missing the mark. As our survey found, of the 37.9% of writers who witnessed problematic content in their most recent writers room, many of those who pushed back on problematic content or storylines were negatively

impacted. In fact, underrepresented writers were found to be twice as likely as overrepresented writers to be fired, reprimanded, or not asked back to their shows. Even though risk was lower, it still exists for overrepresented writers, many of whom also pushed back on problematic content. This type of support from overrepresented groups highlights what it means to be an active ally to underrepresented communities. In other words, pushing back on problematic storylines about underrepresented communities is one of many ways to be actively inclusive and supportive of other marginalized communities.

- ▶ To truly create inclusive television, underrepresented writers need to be staffed in writers rooms as well as hired for paid development. Since last year's survey, it seems that writers rooms are now being staffed with more women and BIPOC writers than before. Although this seems promising, the data may be somewhat skewed by "clustering," where shows that focus on underrepresented communities are staffed primarily with writers from that community. Additionally, many rooms still do not include any Disabled, Deaf, LGBTQIA+, or age 50+ lower-level writers. As we move up the ranks, even fewer head writers (comedy/variety), story editors (animation), and showrunners (drama/comedy) are from underrepresented communities. This means that the increasing diversity we see behind the scenes is concentrated at the bottom of the staffing ladder. Top slots, where power resides, continue to be filled by overrepresented writers.
- ▶ Underrepresented writers not only face barriers to finding opportunities, they later struggle to be heard and valued once in the writers room. As reported by our survey, underrepresented writers were talked over almost twice as often as their overrepresented colleagues and were more likely to have an idea rejected that was later accepted when pitched by someone else. This leaves underrepresented writers in positions marred by bias and tokenization. As we have found in previous years, many underrepresented

writers continued to be discriminated against and harassed or bullied by colleagues.

Underrepresented writers were almost one and a half times as likely to experience discrimination or sexual harassment than their overrepresented counterparts. Most women stated they had experienced gender/sexual discrimination or harassment. Despite some respondents saying that overt sexual harassment has become harder to get away with following #MeToo and #TimesUpHollywood, *covert forms* of harassment and bullying are creeping into the workplace, especially with the shift to virtual rooms. As we will see detailed in this report, some writers have difficulty distinguishing between what is indeed considered discrimination and what has been normalized as humor or play.

- ▶ It is very clear, after this year's report, that the television industry continues to be a place where individuals from underrepresented communities strive to achieve, yet due to barriers, struggle to succeed and advance their careers. Not only does this restrict underrepresented writers' growth within the industry, it also limits the ability of studios and networks to produce the inclusive content that today's television audiences demand. In looking to the future, it is imperative that the industry takes heed of diversity and inclusion recommendations in order to keep up with the demands of an increasingly diverse and inclusive society.

**"Our data shows broad appeal across audiences for inclusive content on TV. Not only are viewers turning to television with the expectation to have their own identity groups represented, the content we consume is also a way to explore cultural experiences different from our own. Expanding diverse representation on screen is one part of meeting that demand. Ensuring we can move beyond stereotypes or tropes for diverse talent also requires we continue to diversify who writes—and edits—the story." - Charlene Polite Corley, VP Diverse Insights & Partnerships at Nielsen.**

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## Top Findings

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- ▶ 73.7% of women respondents reported having faced gender/sexual discrimination or harassment.
- ▶ 58.6% (57.4%)<sup>1</sup> of underrepresented writers have experienced discrimination or sexual harassment, 1.5 times the rate of overrepresented writers (39.7%). 11.9% of underrepresented writers who reported incidents of discrimination, bullying, and/or harassment were fired.
- ▶ Inclusion seems to be improving for BIPOC and women writers. Nevertheless, 93.0% of writers said their most recent writers room had no Disabled or Deaf writers, 79.6% had no lower-level writers age 50+, and 25.3% had no LGBTQIA+ writers.
- ▶ Representation at the upper levels is still lacking, with 97.4% of writers reporting that their most recent writers rooms had no upper-level Disabled or Deaf writers; 56% had no LGBTQIA+ upper-levels; and 34.4% had no BIPOC upper-levels.
- ▶ 35.8% (34.3%)<sup>2</sup> of underrepresented writers had to repeat staff writer level positions, while only 24.2% of overrepresented writers had to do the same. While this remains a troubling disparity, this number has improved since last year's report, which showed 49.2% of underrepresented writers and 34.6% of overrepresented writers repeated staff writer positions.
- ▶ While 25.0% of writers were praised and/or promoted for pushing back on problematic content, 10.5% were reprimanded and/or fired or not asked back. Furthermore, negative consequences for speaking out against problematic content were not distributed evenly across under- and overrepresented groups.
- ▶ Underrepresented writers were twice as likely to be penalized via the aforementioned mechanisms for speaking out against problematic content (12.4%)<sup>3</sup> compared to overrepresented writers (5.1%).

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1. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

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2. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers ages 50+ in our sample of underrepresented writers. This statistic does include these writers.

3. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers ages 50+ in our sample of underrepresented writers. This statistic does include these writers.

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# Top Recommendations

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- ▶ Collect, track, and review inclusion and equity data for all TV writers rooms, as well as within the ranks of non-writing producers, executives, and representatives. In addition to race/ethnicity and gender, this data should also include the LGBTQIA+, Disabled, and Deaf communities, as well as those with large body types and lower-level positions filled by individuals age 50+. This data should be made available, in full transparency, on an annual or bi-annual basis.
- ▶ Fully fund a neutral, 3rd party reporting system for bias, discrimination, and harassment that prioritizes and protects victims. Formalize and enforce penalties for offenders.
- ▶ Review and eliminate bias and/or discrimination in staffing, development, pay equity, and career advancement.
- ▶ Hire underrepresented writers at all levels for skill sets independent of their identities.
- ▶ Fire/stop hiring toxic and abusive showrunners, producers, and executives and/or learn to identify and solicit information to determine if new hires are problematic.
- ▶ Increase the number of underrepresented professionals in industry leadership roles (e.g. showrunners, upper-level writers, agents, managers, and production company, network, studio, and streaming platform executives – especially those with greenlighting power).
- ▶ Mandate management training for gatekeepers and individuals with oversight and supervisory responsibility, including but not limited to showrunners, upper-level writers, producing and episodic directors, non-writing producers, and executives.
- ▶ Mandate implicit bias, anti-discrimination/harassment, and cultural sensitivity training for all writers rooms, showrunners, producing and episodic directors, non-writing producers, and creative/casting/production executives.
- ▶ Provide all writers rooms, writers in development, and creative executives support for stories about underrepresented communities that fall outside the expertise of the content creators on any given project. Please see the [TTIE #WriteInclusion: Tips for Accurate Representation](#) factsheets for more information.
- ▶ Provide paid development opportunities so lower income writers have an equal opportunity to develop content.
- ▶ Expand and fully draw upon educational and mentoring programs to support underrepresented TV writers at all levels.
- ▶ Provide a living wage for writers room support staff so individuals whose incomes are not subsidized by higher income families/partners can accept these positions.
- ▶ Create and communicate a clear path toward advancement for support staff.



A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored top, is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is operating a professional video camera on a set. The background is slightly blurred, showing some equipment and a warm, orange-toned lighting. The image is partially obscured by a diagonal gradient overlay that transitions from orange to purple.

# Background

- ▶ During a year of uncertainty, 2020-2021 not only brought us a global pandemic but also a wave of activism following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, among others. Calls for police reform were only the tip of the iceberg. Now, social movements, like Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, and #MeToo, are demanding real, genuine allyship and inclusion of people from underrepresented communities across the board. Younger generations are now asking for inclusive content that also explicitly addresses real-world social issues. One recent report from consulting giant McKinsey & Co. found that the film and television industries are missing out on some \$10 billion a year by underfunding and undervaluing Black stories.<sup>4</sup> Consider what that number would be across all underrepresented communities. As content creators grapple with the task of diversifying content, there is more space for those who come from underrepresented communities. As one Black writer in our focus groups put it: **“I suddenly felt more in demand because of the social unrest... which was very exciting, even though it’s, you know, obviously a little bit fucked up too”** (Black Man).
- ▶ With the widespread availability of media content across streaming platforms, YouTube, Twitch, and other services, younger generations are given more choices and more variety than ever before. As these newer generations select increasingly “niche” and varied content, TV writers are tasked with producing inclusive, authentic, and socially relevant stories to draw these viewers. As of

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4. Dunn, J., Lyn, S., Onyeador, N., & Zegeye, A. (2021). “Black representation in film and TV: The challenges and impacts of increasing diversity.” McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/black-representation-in-film-and-tv-the-challenges-and-impact-of-increasing-diversity>.

2017, Millennials and Gen Z make up nearly half of television audiences in the U.S. and have more access to an array of devices for viewing.<sup>5</sup> Gen Zs, like Millennials before them, have become the most diverse and complex generation yet, with nearly 44% of the cohort identifying as BIPOC (compared to 29% of Baby Boomers). Approximately 60% of Gen Z streamers identify as being multiracial, multicultural, and/or multilingual.<sup>6</sup> This means that younger viewers not only crave more inclusive content that reflects their own identities, but also reach across linguistic and cultural barriers to view it.

- ▶ One reason behind the need for inclusive television is the viewer's desire to see characters who are like them. According to a recent study published by Movio & the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, characters from an underrepresented identity are more likely to draw in audience members of that same identity, particularly along the lines of race and ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> As a Native American writer explained: **"If you have a Native character, we're all watching. That's it. Because there are so few! So even if it's a genre we hate, we're showing up. Just to see familiar faces"** (Native American Woman). An emerging generation that is more gender-fluid, more racially diverse, and more conscious of the content they consume means that content producers need to create more complex, nuanced stories that relate to their varying identities.
- ▶ Currently, TV is still found lacking in its overall representation of the American Mosaic. Although women saw a record amount of speaking and screen time in 2019 children's television, representation of all other underrepresented communities (including BIPOC, LGBTQIA+,

Disabled/Deaf, age 50+, and large body size individuals) remains below actual U.S. demographics.<sup>8</sup> As audiences become more socially aware and involved, mere numbers are not enough. The target audience for television is now looking for authentic representation rather than problematic stereotypes or white-washed stories. As we continue to see underrepresented communities stereotyped on television, there seems to be a disconnect between what audiences want and what the TV industry is ready to give them. As one Black writer said: **"They [networks/studios] definitely are craving more Black stories, but they are craving more Black stories that are already familiar to them. They want the negativity. They want a poverty story...hopefully that'll change. More, not different looks like the goal at the moment"** (Black Woman).

- ▶ One barrier to authentic storytelling is the lack of inclusion behind the scenes, in both lower- and upper-level positions. As of 2019, most television CEOs, Senior Executives, Unit Heads, and Show Creators were white males.<sup>9</sup> Among broadcast and digitally scripted shows, white show creators outnumbered BIPOC show creators 8 to 1 and 6 to 1 in cable scripted television. Marginalized communities also remain underrepresented amongst directors, writers, and those who receive awards and recognition. Until we see an increase in underrepresented individuals on *both sides of the screen*, we will never achieve truly authentic, inclusive storylines.
- ▶ Being pressured by socially conscious consumers, many industries, including the entertainment industry, are introducing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE),

5. The Nielsen Company. (2017). "Youth Movement: Gen Z Boasts the Largest, Most Diverse Users Yet." Retrieved from <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2017/youth-movement-gen-z-boasts-the-largest-most-diverse-media-users-yet/>.

6. Hulu. (2020). Generation Stream: Volume One. Retrieved from <https://advertising.hulu.com/generation-stream-volume-one/>.

7. Movio & The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. (2020). I Want to See Me. Retrieved from <https://movio.co/i-want-to-see-me/>.

8. Heldman, C., Narayanan, S., Cooper, R., et al (2020). See Jane 2020 TV Report. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Retrieved from <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/2020-tv-historic-screen-time-speaking-time-for-female-characters/>.

9. Hunt, D. & Ramón, A. (2020). Hollywood Diversity Report 2020: A Tale of Two Hollywoods, Part Two: Television. Retrieved from <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/hollywood-diversity-report-2020/>.



for example, announced they would be expanding their current inclusion efforts and contracting consultants tasked with diversifying the IATSE community.<sup>10</sup> The Writers Guild of America West has taken on the work of tracking employment of underrepresented Guild writers as of 2019. The Writers Guild of America East won a tax credit to incentivize the hiring of women and BIPOC TV writers in New York, and has developed best practices recommendations with BIPOC comedy/variety writers to improve representation in late night shows. Although BIPOC and women writers saw 5% gains in employment over the previous year, both groups remain underrepresented relative to their percent of U.S. population, with BIPOC writers making up only 35% of all working TV writers and women comprising only 44% (LGBTQIA+, Disabled, Deaf, and age 50+ writer employment data was not available, but WGAW membership percentages remained low for Disabled, Deaf and age 50+ writers). Therefore, there is still substantial room for progress across all underrepresented communities.

- ▶ This brief summary on the status of representation in television shows us that viewers are demanding more complex, inclusive content, but the entertainment industry lags behind both in front of the camera and behind the scenes. As viewers crave more authenticity, depth, and development of complex storylines, we must increase the number of underrepresented writers in writers rooms, especially at the upper and showrunner levels, to deliver what audiences seek and deserve. On our end, TTIE continues to identify specific hurdles that underrepresented writers face, not only as far as entering the industry and staying employed, but also in their efforts to bring *authentic* and inclusive stories to a new generation of television viewers.

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10. Loeb, J. (2020, Oct. 12). "IATSE announces two latest actions in drive toward inclusion." Retrieved from <https://iatsecares.org/2020/10/12/iatse-announces-two-latest-actions-in-drive-toward-inclusion%e2%80%af/>.

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## COVID-19: A Global Pandemic

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- ▶ In 2020, the COVID-19 virus swept across the globe and changed our daily lives in countless ways. From massive unemployment to mandated stay-at-home orders, the television and movie industry was only one of many sectors affected by this pandemic. Studios have begun to release new feature films on streaming platforms rather than in theaters and many projects were postponed until industry workers could safely reconvene. Because of these changes and delays, many writers have found themselves unemployed, laid off, or working in other industries altogether. As our survey revealed, at least 18.6% of writers found themselves out of work due to the pandemic.
- ▶ Many writers rely on relationships they make within the industry to find their first job and advance their careers in the future. For underrepresented writers, this seems to be especially true. After a year without in-person events, many found it difficult to make the professional connections needed to be a successful, staffed television writer. One writer shared their experience of trying to connect virtually in her Zoom room: **"I had twelve other faces of people that I hadn't met and was still not meeting because the interpersonal interactions that you have just naturally did not happen. And it's a much more concerted effort to make them happen over Zoom than in person"** (Woman of Color). When underrepresented writers are unable to network in person, they not only lose out on interpersonal connections, but potential professional opportunities.
- ▶ As we will see in more detail later (See *Development*), many writers who were employed during the pandemic felt overworked and out-of-sync with uncertain project timelines and scattered scheduling. One writer mentioned that virtual work meant being available outside of normal office

hours: **“It’s been challenging to feel like now that we are at home...we’re sort of expected to be on-call all day long which is strangely stressful to not know when you’re going to get [a work] call...and to not have any structure”** (Woman of Color). Though some enjoyed the efficiency of online meetings, others struggled to be heard and seen on online platforms. One writer described struggling to be heard in the virtual space, saying: **“A lot of times I would have a pitch, but if I wasn’t in someone’s cube of Zooming [i.e. visible on someone’s screen], I would not be able to pitch”** (Woman of Color).

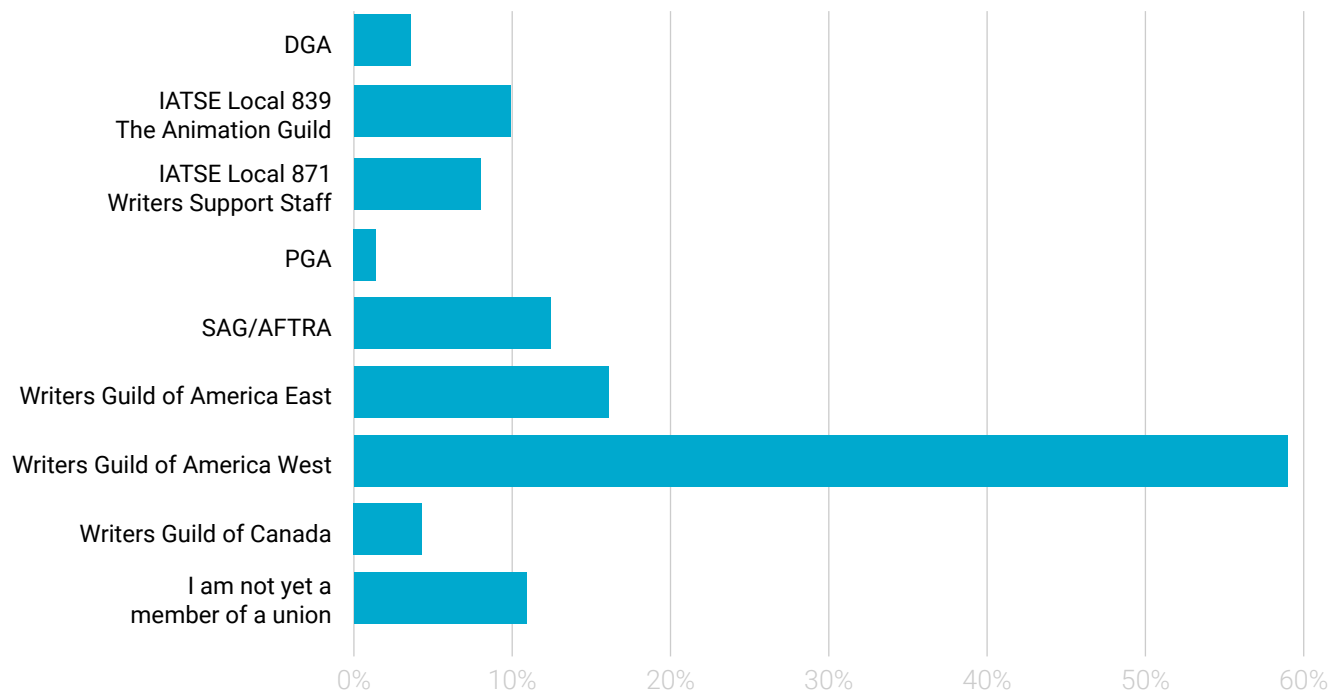
- ▶ Despite the many ways this global pandemic has challenged writers, some were able to find a silver

lining. One writer shared how working from home allowed him to spend more time with family: **“My husband lives [not in LA]...with the pandemic, I could just go and hang out with him...suddenly I had more freedom in my life to do the job and hang out with my husband, so that was amazing!”** (Gay Black Man) Other writers shared similar feelings of being able to set better professional boundaries and having more flexibility in how and where to work.

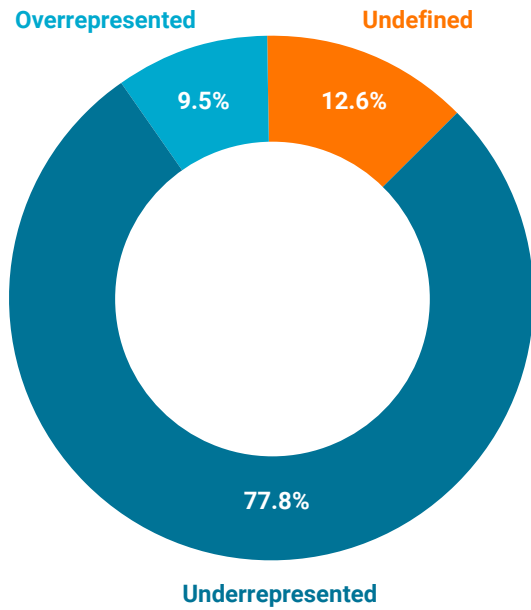
- ▶ As television production resumes in fits and starts, we hope that the scripts delivered to set include more authentic, nuanced, and inclusive stories, despite the challenges created by virtual writers rooms this past year.

## Survey Participant Snapshot

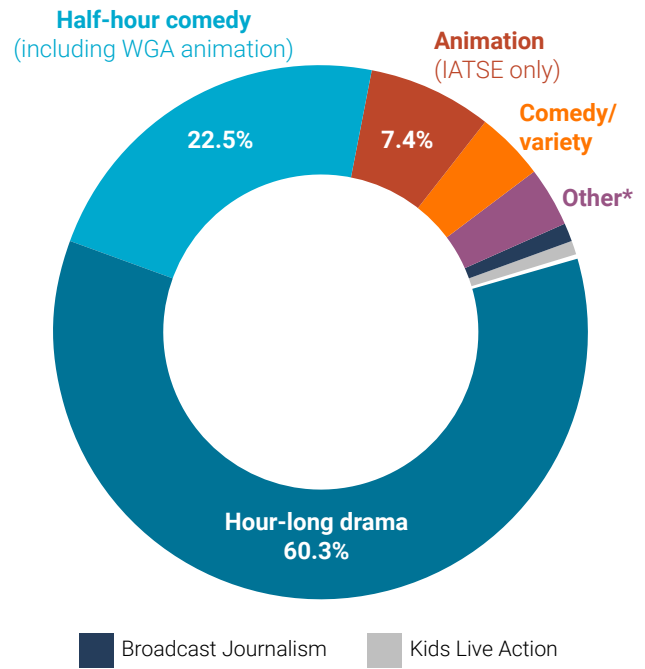
### BREAKDOWN BY UNION MEMBERSHIP



## BREAKDOWN OF WRITERS

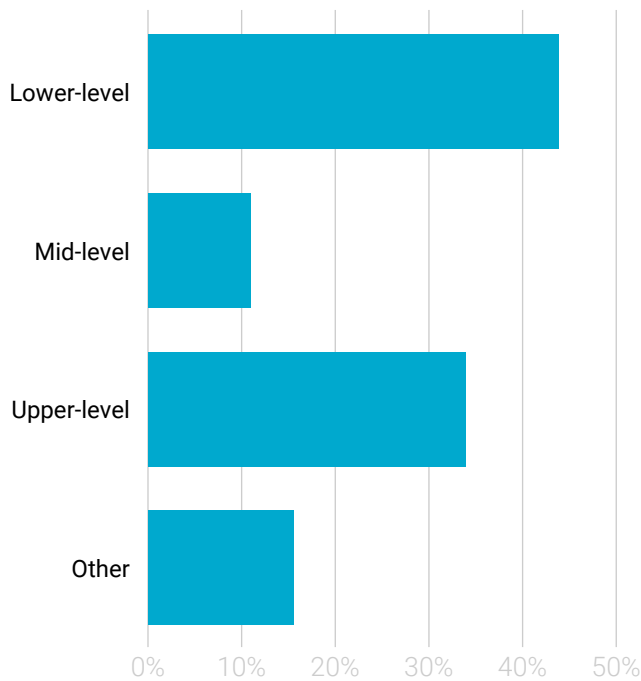


## BREAKDOWN BY GENRE



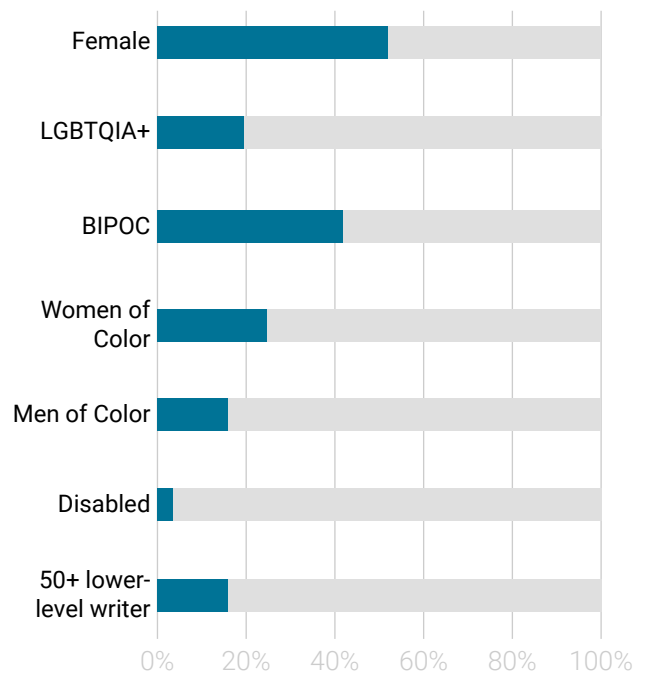
\*This response included writers from the following mediums/genres: film, non-union animation, hour-long young adult television, dramedy, feature, sketch, playwriting, and documentary

## BREAKDOWN BY LEVEL



These levels were broken down as follows: Lower-Level (up to Executive Story Editor), Mid-Level (Co-Producer, Producer), Upper-Level (Supervising Producer and up), and Other (Freelance, Not Specified/Other).

## BREAKDOWN BY UNDERREPRESENTED COMMUNITY AFFILIATION





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# Methodology

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- ▶ This survey was conducted online between February 19, 2021, and March 10, 2021. This study included 1,226 participants who were TV writers, writing program and/or fellowship/incubator participants or alumni, and writers room support staff. To ensure our sample consists of working TV writers, a screening question was posed to all respondents to determine if they were active in the industry within the past five years. *Underrepresented* writers are defined as those writers who belong to any of the following underrepresented communities: women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, Disabled or Deaf people, and lower-level writers age 50+, unless otherwise noted. *Overrepresented* writers are those who do not belong to any of the aforementioned groups. Of this sample, 9.5% of respondents were considered *overrepresented* writers. 12.6% of respondents elected to omit demographic details.
- ▶ Two focus groups were also conducted with 22 total participants to share personal experiences and dig deeper into findings from our survey results. A moderator led two 2-hour long discussions over virtual video conferencing.
- ▶ This survey was anonymous and distributed via email to WGAE and TTIE members, as well as through various industry networking groups and social media. The survey included questions regarding: the writers room, staffing, showrunning, development, and discrimination and harassment. As a result, the sample sizes differ slightly from topic to topic, based on participant experience. Additionally, personal testimonials from the focus groups have been included, but identifying information has been redacted to protect the anonymity of our respondents.
- ▶ Survey respondents were self-selected and non-randomized. A conservative reading means these results can only speak for those who took the survey. However, as in previous years, it should be noted that our sample does include a significant percentage of current working TV writers with almost 90% of respondents identifying as members of industry guilds/unions.



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# Overall Findings

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## Staffing

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- ▶ This past year, many writers faced more obstacles to being staffed than ever before. With the pandemic decreasing the number of jobs available during the 2020 staffing season, writers had to adapt to the uncertainty related to employment. The push across all fronts to be more inclusive of underrepresented communities, ignited by Black Lives Matter and the 2020 civil rights movement, might suggest that underrepresented writers would be staffed *more easily* than they had been before. As detailed below by some of our respondents, this was not always the case as the hiring of underrepresented writers seems to still be perceived as a risky venture. Explaining why they were turned away from a writing position, one writer said: **“Producers have a great way of saying, ‘We are going to go with this big white dude who’s done 20 movies versus you, because we’re in a global pandemic’”** (Woman of Color). Then, in attempts to better sell themselves to showrunners, some underrepresented writers highlighted their “diverse” experiences or biographies only to be tokenized and undervalued in the room. For those still trying to break into the industry and experienced writers looking to move onward and upward, underrepresented writers faced more barriers in their careers compared to their overrepresented colleagues. We will tackle each of these barriers to staffing and advancement in the following sections.

## 1. Networking and “Diversity” Opportunities

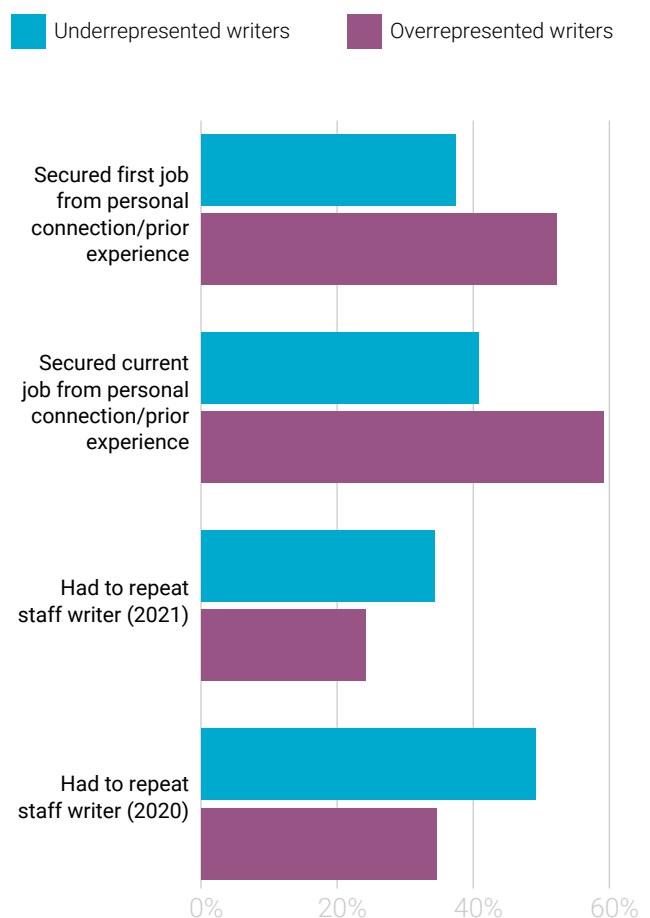
- ▶ Spontaneous social interaction and water cooler chat used to be a normal part of work life before COVID-19. For many, these work connections expanded their professional networks and later played a role in landing new job opportunities. When asked how they secured their *first* staffed positions, 37.7%<sup>11</sup> of underrepresented writers reported prior industry experience or a non-professional personal relationship as the reason for being hired compared to 52.3% of their overrepresented colleagues. For those writers already in the industry, 40.7%<sup>12</sup> of underrepresented writers secured their *most recent* job from these personal connections (compared to 59.1% of overrepresented writers). From these numbers, we see that a writer’s first and subsequent career opportunities can be dictated by the personal connections they make within the industry. While personal connections play an important role in the hiring of underrepresented writers, they play an even more substantial role for overrepresented writers, at a rate of nearly 20% more. The loss of these interpersonal connections could greatly impact the careers of all writers, including new, underrepresented writers who already face significant barriers to both breaking into the industry and advancing fledgling careers.
- ▶ While some underrepresented writers suffered from a lack of in-person social networking opportunities, other writers are still struggling to be recognized for their underrepresented experiences. One queer writer explained: **“While looking for new reps, one of my trusted friends and mentors went to bat for me with his rep and came back to me saying he couldn’t even get me read because, ‘My rep says they are only looking for diverse writers right now.’ Like, how am I not diverse? I feel the word diverse is being weaponized against the true purpose of equity, diversity, and inclusion, which**

11. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

12. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

is to bring underrepresented voices to a level playing field where our stories and experiences are heard, valued, and respected. Instead, the word diversity is being used as a tool to fill a quota or balance out a publicity photo” (Queer Trans/NB Writer). A Disabled writer described the obstacles they face when employers limit their “diversity” outreach to underrepresented ethnic and racial communities: **“I tried to get staffed as a diversity hire...[they said no] because they, at the time, didn’t consider disability diverse”** (Disabled Writer). Some of our underrepresented respondents mentioned that being considered “diverse” is not always a blessing in terms of securing employment. As one writer of color shared: **“What they say to diverse clients is: ‘we have too many diverse clients at your level that we can’t staff.’ So being diverse gets you nothing”** (Woman of Color).

## STAFFING





## 2. There Just Aren't That Many of Me

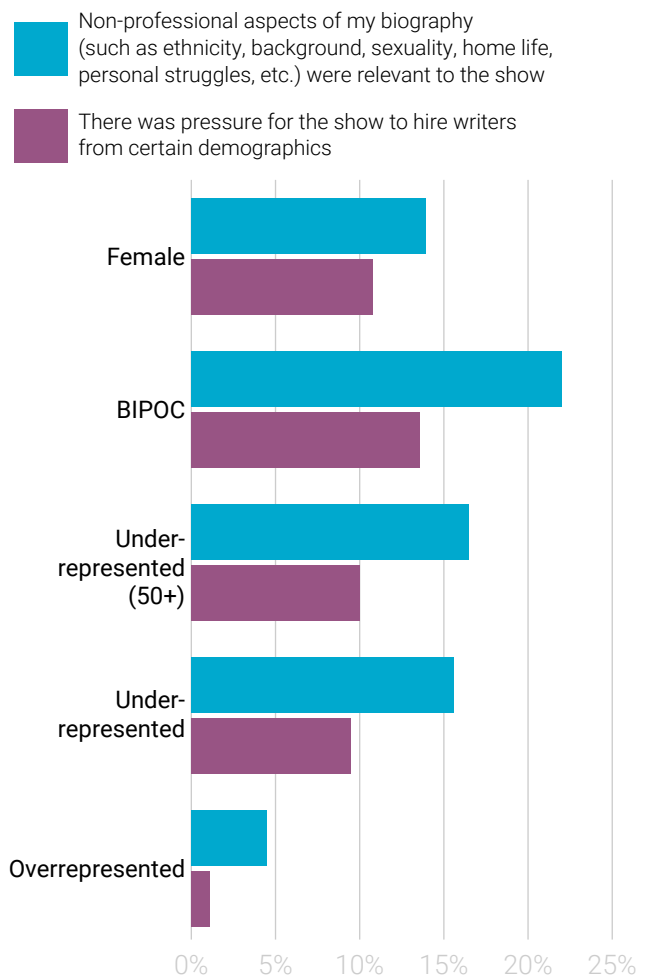
► Tokenization continues to be a significant issue for underrepresented writers as it overlooks any contributions they might have to offer the writers room outside of their specific identity or background. One Native American writer shared why they were hired to consult for a series: **“I know for a fact that the only reason I was brought in was because I was Native. There were no bones about that...They said ‘we really only need you to consult, but from a story perspective’”** (Native American Writer). This statement is supported by our survey findings. 49.2% of showrunners stated that their primary reason to hire a writer was whether or not the non-professional aspects of the writer’s biography (ethnicity, background, sexuality, home life, personal struggles, etc.) matched that of the show. Overall, conscious efforts like these to staff rooms more inclusively are encouraging, as long as they go beyond tokenization and the proverbial checking of boxes for appearances’ sakes. 11% of showrunners said they hired underrepresented writers due to pressure from their networks or studios. For freelance episodes or assignments, 21.2% of respondents said their primary reason to hire writers were relevant non-professional aspects or pressure to diversify the writing staff. On the applicant’s end of the hiring process, underrepresented writers were almost four times (15.6%)<sup>13</sup> as likely to say they were most recently staffed because of non-professional aspects of their biography than overrepresented writers (4.5%). Additionally, 9.5%<sup>14</sup> of writers from underrepresented communities said they were hired due to network or studio pressure to hire underrepresented writers. Being the

13. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

14. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

“token minority” in the room means answering for a whole community, being asked to educate those from overrepresented communities, and having others make assumptions about you based on your identity. Not only does this exhaust underrepresented writers, it isolates and marginalizes them. As one writer described: **“I did hear a lot the past two years, ‘Well you can work anywhere you want’. Because I’m talented? No. Because I’m an upper-level woman and there just aren’t that many of me. Which doesn’t feel so great”** (White Woman).

### What are the primary reasons you secured your MOST RECENT job as a staffed TV writer?



### 3. Career Trajectory & Professional Representation

- ▶ In last year's survey, we asked writers if they repeated the staff writer position (i.e. the lowest level in a writers room). 49.2% of underrepresented writers and 34.6% of overrepresented writers said they had repeated this entry-level position. This year, 35.8% (34.3%)<sup>15</sup> of underrepresented writers reported having repeated staff writer, compared to 24.2% of overrepresented writers. While overall, title repetition seems to be decreasing across the board, underrepresented writers are still almost one and a half times more likely to repeat staff writer compared to their overrepresented counterparts. Clearly, some underrepresented writers are still struggling to advance in their career and be compensated appropriately. One woman writer explained that after working one and half seasons as a staff writer, she was denied a pay raise that a male colleague had previously received when in the same position: **"When it came time to renegotiate my deal, my agent said, you know, this woman put in 36 episodes as staff writer. She deserves a bump. And they [the studio] said that [the season and a half] was a favor... The writer's assistant before me was a man and had happened to have done the same exact thing. And I pointed to him for precedent and said, 'He got a bump'. And I was still told no"** (White Woman).
- ▶ As was evident in the WGA/ATA conflict in 2019, the relationship between writers and professional representation continues to be a complicated one. Some of our respondents felt they did a lot of their agents' work themselves and feared losing representation entirely if they requested their agents do more. For other underrepresented writers, their agents had trouble pitching them because they did not fit into a singular identity box. As one writer shared: **"I would tell my agents: I am [mixed-race/ethnicity] and they would say...'Say you're [Latinx]!' I had other reps that said, 'You're**

**not [Latinx] enough. I don't know how to market you"** (Woman of Color).

### 4. Beyond the Diversity Hire

- ▶ In order to produce authentic stories about or including underrepresented communities, writers from these communities need to be given the opportunity to staff on projects. But they shouldn't be restricted to shows explicitly about their communities. Throughout television history, overrepresented writers have had the freedom to write stories in-and outside of their personal experiences. The same should be true for underrepresented writers. Once underrepresented writers are "in the room," they need to be listened to and valued as the skillful writers they are, rather than being seen as solely useful for their "minority identity." Moreover, they should be promoted and trained as writer/producers, allowing underrepresented talent to access all levels of writing, production, and development.

“ Throughout television history, overrepresented writers have had the freedom to write stories in- and outside of their personal experiences. The same should be true for underrepresented writers.

15. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

# The Writers Room

- ▶ To truly create more inclusive and authentic content, more writers from underrepresented communities need to be not only staffed in writers rooms, but also be heard, given space, and allowed agency. The 2020 Behind the Scenes Report detailed that 6.3% of women, 16.9% of BIPOC, 38.7% of LGBTQIA+ writers, and 91.7% of Disabled writers said they were the only staffed writers from their underrepresented communities in their most recent writers room. This year, we asked how often there was one or more writer from each of five underrepresented communities (i.e. BIPOC, Disabled/Deaf, LGBTQIA+, lower-level age 50+, and women). These results and the experiences of underrepresented writers in the writers room are as follows:

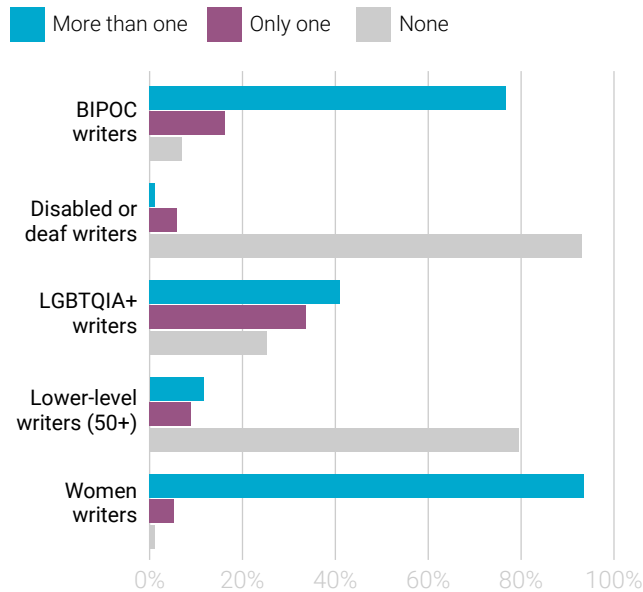
Additionally, with creative decisions and power concentrated amongst overrepresented upper-level writers, there are fewer voices in the room to address incidents of harmful storytelling about underrepresented communities.

## 1. Status of Diversity & Representation

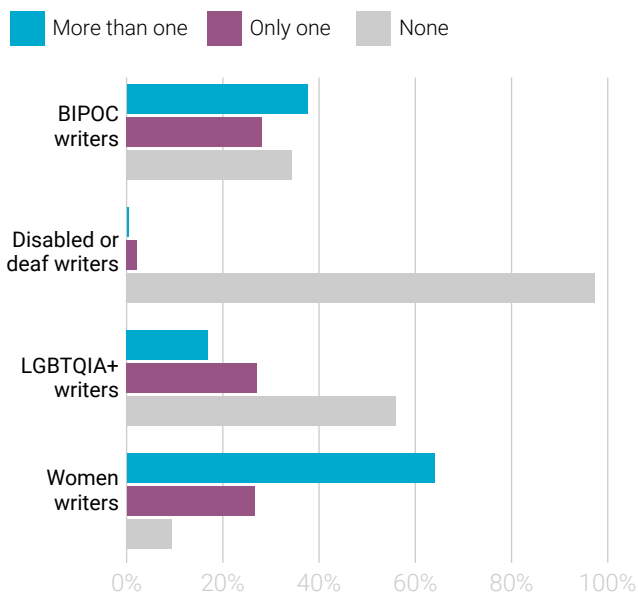
- ▶ While most respondents' rooms included BIPOC writers and women writers, many were staffed with no Disabled or Deaf writers, no LGBTQIA+ writers, and no lower-level writers age 50+. Based on our survey results, 93.1% of writers' most recent rooms had one or more BIPOC writers (16.3% had only one) and 98.9% had one or more women writers (5.3% had only one). For these same writers rooms, 93% had no Disabled or Deaf writers, 79.6% had no lower-level writers age 50+, and 25.3% had no LGBTQIA+ writers. Although the numbers for BIPOC and women writers seem promising, we also found that "diversity" is concentrated at the lower level while upper-level positions are still saturated with overrepresented writers. As one respondent put it: **"I also know [their attempts to diversify staff are] disproportionately lower-level. I don't want to say they staff up on their white people, but they staff up on their white people and then they're like, 'Oh, I guess we need People of Color. We need some staff writers'"** (White Male). Our survey results tell us that 90.6% of respondents' most recent writers room had at least one woman upper-level writer (26.6% had only one) and 65.7% had at least one BIPOC upper-level writer (28.1% had only one). Conversely, most of these rooms had no Disabled or Deaf writers (97.4%) and no LGBTQIA+ writers (56%) staffed at Supervising Producer and above. Fewer underrepresented writers at the upper level means that lower-level underrepresented writers are unprotected. Additionally, with creative decisions and power concentrated amongst overrepresented upper-level writers, there are fewer voices empowered in the room to address incidents of harmful storytelling about underrepresented communities. Though showrunners seem to be diversifying their writers rooms, it is clear, based on our findings, that there is still much room for progress.



QUESTION: Thinking about your MOST RECENT writers room, were there writers from underrepresented communities on staff to the best of your knowledge (If applicable, include yourself)?



QUESTION: Thinking about your MOST RECENT writers room, were there any UPPER-LEVEL writers (Supervising Producer and above) from underrepresented communities on staff to the best of your knowledge (If applicable, include yourself)?



## 2. At the Table but Not Included

► When attempting to address “inclusion” behind the scenes, we noticed that some underrepresented writers were being invited into the writers room but not given the space or voice to fully contribute. This year’s survey found underrepresented writers were nearly twice as likely (15.8%)<sup>16</sup> to have pitched ideas that were rejected, only to have another writer pitch the same idea and be accepted, whereas only 8.3% of overrepresented writers experienced this same issue. 26.3% of underrepresented writers also said they were “always or often” talked over or interrupted, nearly twice that of their overrepresented colleagues (13.3%). This invisibility or exclusion also manifests in more subtle ways. Underrepresented writers are 16.8% less likely than their overrepresented counterparts to be included in side conversations about writing, as well as 10.4% less likely to be invited to social engagements. In addition, writers who are seemingly hired for their identities are often not allowed agency to contextualize and authenticate underrepresented characters and storylines. One writer was hired to help write a story about Mexican immigration to the United States but then found the show had not cast the lead role appropriately. The writer asked: **“Are you trying to tell a Mexican-American story? Where is this actress from? Nobody could answer that question. Everybody just assumed that this [Latinx] actress was Mexican. Come to find out, she isn’t at all. No one had thought to take the time to ask that”** (Anonymous Respondent). Another writer was asked to help write a Muslim character into a show but felt that their team did little to use their expertise to create a truly nuanced story. This writer shared: **“There’s always that feeling of nudging [toward familiar storylines and stereotypes]...They stopped listening [to me] when it wasn’t convenient for what they wanted to do casting-wise or the story that they wanted to tell”** (Muslim Woman). Even though 40.4%<sup>17</sup> of

16. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

17. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+.

underrepresented writers said they were “always or often” consulted on issues related to their identity characteristics, are these writers truly being *heard*?

### 3. More, Not Better

- ▶ As mentioned in more detail earlier, some writers feared that a push for inclusion over the past year has led to *more* underrepresented characters and storylines, but not necessarily ones that are more nuanced, complex, and *better* representations. When one writer was asked to write a Black character for their show, they soon realized their supervisors wanted a Black story that fit their misconceptions of the Black experience. They stated: **“They were trying to ask me to make him more Black, meaning more stereotypically Black, without saying as much...I wrote him as a real Black kid, not a stereotype”** (Anonymous Respondent). All this is underscored by 37.9% of respondents having witnessed bias or prejudice in storylines or other show content in their most recent writers room. In addition, 24.6% reported having witnessed this bias or prejudice aimed at specific writers on the team.

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This statistic does include these writers.

Underrepresented writers are more than twice as likely (12.4%) to be reprimanded or fired for opposing problematic content than overrepresented writers.

- ▶ While some showrunners deemed exposition of underrepresented characters to be ancillary to the main storylines, many writers feel the need to push back on problematic or inaccurate story elements. Though 25% of respondents were praised and/or promoted for critiquing these issues, 10.5% were reprimanded, fired, and/or not asked back and 3% said that it negatively affected their ability to be rehired by that studio or network or resulted in them being blacklisted. Most especially, underrepresented writers are more than twice as likely (12.4%)<sup>18</sup> to be reprimanded or fired for opposing problematic content than overrepresented writers (5.1%). At face value, it would seem that any opposition to stereotyped media content should be positively praised, but based on our survey results, all writers risk losing opportunities and advancing their careers within the industry for doing so.

### 4. Creating Social Impact

- ▶ Many writers in our focus groups shared how this past year’s protests and social movements have changed the shaping of content about underrepresented communities. A writer who had been hired on a new season of an established show said simply: **“One of the main characters [in our show] is a Black character and one is a Latina character. And in prior seasons of the show, they didn’t have any Black or Latinx writers. So, this year they did. Was it because of the protests? Who knows”** (Latinx Woman)?! Another writer shared their experiences of incorporating the Black Lives Matter movement and systemic racism in the United States into their show: **“You’re being told that stories about racial injustice...[were] really welcomed. But then, when those stories were pitched or put on the board, they were kind of dismissed as being too racial or too on-the-nose”** (Woman of Color). Though we can hope for progress, underrepresented writers in our sample felt that the goal of diversity and inclusion this year has fallen short. An upper-level writer expressed similar

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18. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

fears: **“Advocating for certain types of stories, for characters to have agency and more real estate, with directors, I’ve gotten a lot of lip service about telling certain stories...it doesn’t feel as progressive as I would have hoped. Or as genuine. Or like it’s going to continue”** (White Woman).

## 5. Diversifying the Writers Room

- ▶ As we can tell by survey results, better representation in TV writers rooms should start with bringing in more writers from underrepresented communities. Not only should underrepresented writers be hired into staff writer positions, but they must be hired up and down the ladder of writers in the room. Once in the writers room, underrepresented writers face the added burden of being overlooked and unheard, which only makes pushing back on problematic content even harder. Finally, as noted above, we are missing out on opportunities to share more authentic, complex stories of underrepresented communities by not being open to constructive critiques from underrepresented writers.

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# Development

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- ▶ Our BTS reports over the past two years showed that some underrepresented writers made their break into the industry by selling projects before having much or any television writing experience. Last year, 53.3% of respondents said they sold their first writing project before or while working as an entry-level writer. Still 39.7% of underrepresented writers worked in development without pay. As networks and studios attempt to diversify their content, many underrepresented writers pointed to barriers they still face in trying to bring *authentic* stories of underrepresented communities to television.

## 1. Barriers to Entry

- ▶ Among the many barriers to entry underrepresented writers face, financial obstacles prove especially challenging. With writers room support staff jobs paying below living wage, some writers may be able to rely on support from family, savings, or income from outside employment while developing projects for free, but others will simply have to walk away from the industry. In describing their experience with development, one writer worried about covering their living expenses for the duration of their projects. They stated: **“I am currently in development on three projects...For two of them, I have received nothing... There’s been no money, no idea of money, no talk of money”** (White Woman). We found this to be a recurring issue for television writers in development. Regardless of race or ethnicity, women were more likely to be in unpaid development positions compared to men in the industry (59% of women compared to 41% of men).
- ▶ Bake-offs (competitive pitching) for paid or unpaid open writing assignments are one way that writers are able to pitch their projects to producers. Unfortunately many of these unpaid bake-off proposals require a significant amount of work and writing. These types of pitches pit writers (often those who share similar identity characteristics) against one another while providing no compensation to those writers whose ideas were not bought. As one writer shared: **“They’re forcing us to compete with each other for one job. And whoever doesn’t get that job gets nothing...That’s a lot of free work that a lot of us are doing for nothing. And the studios and the networks are reaping the benefits on all accounts”** (Woman of Color). Once writers pitch successful projects to develop, we see a number of other issues come up for underrepresented writers, as will be detailed in the next section.

## 2. Overworked and Underrepresented

- ▶ “Free work” is a growing problem in American business culture, but many writers would argue it’s particularly pernicious in Hollywood. Many writers from underrepresented communities are willing to work for “free” just to get a foot in the door. But, even when one is paid, or possesses more experience, unpaid development goes beyond just putting together a pitch. One writer in paid development shared their experience of being taken advantage of as a new writer: **“I got to the point in this paid development process where... the producer literally just keep asking me to do [unpaid] homework and bring it back to them... So when I brought it up the sheer volume, the producers acted like I wasn’t willing to do the work when what I really wanted was to clarify to what end I was being asked to do this work. I ultimately had to engage my attorney. Before I’d even found the courage to bring this up, I had turned in over 45 pages of ancillary material that wasn’t part of my deal”** (Queer Trans/NB Writer). Feeling that they cannot risk the loss of opportunity, many underrepresented writers feel obligated to accept these conditions.
- ▶ Even when underrepresented writers manage the workloads given to them as new writers, many are still undercredited and underappreciated. One writer recalled their feelings of invalidation and discomfort with someone else taking credit for their work: **“I started to experience bullying from the producers who expected and made me do all of the work—the outlines, pitch deck, and script— and they added a non-writing producer as a co-writer saying, ‘though we adore your words, you don’t have a big resume’...so that producer’s name was added as a co-creator even though they’d done zero work to it”** (Anonymous Respondent). Behind the scenes, our survey found that overrepresented writers were more likely to be named Showrunner or Executive Producer if their shows went to series compared

to underrepresented writers. This means that underrepresented writers struggle to maintain creative control over projects they create and develop.

## 3. Telling Authentic Stories

- ▶ Last year, 51.3% of underrepresented writers said they were approached to develop a project because their identity matched the project. This year, that number decreased to 44.2% (42.5%).<sup>19</sup> It would be interesting to know whether this decrease is due to underrepresented writers being approached for professional reasons rather than identity status. What’s clear is that tokenization impacts underrepresented writers on the development track as well. Underrepresented writers are 10% less likely than overrepresented writers to be approached for development opportunities because their credits or previous careers were a good fit. Though it is important to include individuals from underrepresented communities in creating content related to those communities, it is also important to remember that each of these writers has a whole repertoire of other experiences, interests, and intersectional identities that allow them to write much more than just their “diversity story.”
- ▶ This year, 8.8% of underrepresented writers said they were approached for a project because their employer “wanted an authenticity pass, rather than a development partner.” And the goal of the authenticity pass is rarely genuine authenticity. As one writer confirmed: **“All they wanted to do is find a way to excuse the behavior that they didn’t want to change”** (Queer Trans/NB Writer). That is, some development opportunities appeared to be more “inclusive” by adding an underrepresented writer to the team but in reality, little was done to incorporate that underrepresented writer in the creation process. Underrepresented writers are often hired as afterthoughts or liability shields rather than as valued voices. In terms of

19. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.



diversifying content, 24.2% of respondents noted being told to increase the diversity in their core cast in order to increase the chance of selling the pitch. Notably, a very small portion of respondents (6.1%) reported they were told to *decrease* the diversity of their projects to better sell them.

#### 4. From the Streets to the Page

- ▶ As the television industry grapples with the pressure to expand diversity and inclusion, networks, studios, streaming platforms, and production companies should set clearer standards for what is expected from writers in development and, in particular, find ways to protect writers from unscrupulous employers and unpaid labor. This previous section makes clear that removing barriers to access and providing adequate compensation to underrepresented writers in development are essential to producing more authentic storytelling about underrepresented communities on television. Moreover, all content creators could benefit from thinking more proactively about representation and authentic storytelling, as opposed to as an afterthought. One way to do this is to ensure underrepresented writers are provided opportunities to showrun, especially for projects that they've originated. The previous sections make it obvious that barriers keeping underrepresented writers out of development may also mean barriers to authentic and inclusive television.

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## Discrimination & Harassment

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- ▶ Though it has long been standard practice to address sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace, the recent prevalence of the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements have shown these efforts have so far been less effective than hoped. As was found in our survey, most (71.8%) of all showrunners received some form of sexual harassment/discrimination training over their careers. However, without proper management training, showrunners are ill-equipped to deal with conflict and discrimination that slip under the radar. Showrunners are often put in charge of large workforces with little to no management training, whereas multi-million dollar corporations (which a TV show essentially is) require MBAs. This lack of preparedness can cause significant repercussions on employees from underrepresented communities. Discrimination is now cropping up in more covert ways that make responding and reacting tricky, as we will see in more detail below.

### 1. Discrimination & Covert Bullying

- ▶ This year, 58.6% (57.4%)<sup>20</sup> of underrepresented writers expressed facing discrimination or sexual harassment over their careers, compared to 39.7%<sup>21</sup> of their overrepresented counterparts. That means that underrepresented writers are one and a half times more likely to face discrimination than their overrepresented counterparts. Compared to last year (68.5%), the percent of underrepresented writers who reported facing discrimination during

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20. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

21. Surprisingly, more overrepresented writers reported experiencing bullying or harassment in this year's survey (39.7%) compared to last year's survey (30.8%).

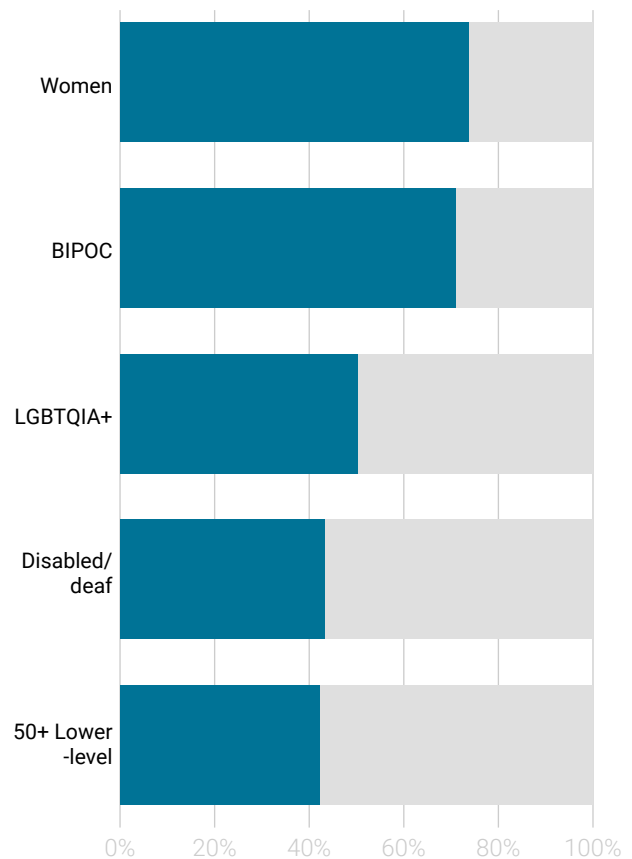
their career has decreased. This decrease could also be a symptom of more virtual rooms, which have made identifying instances of discrimination and/or harassment more difficult. Nevertheless, discrimination and bullying are still a problem and take on many forms.

- ▶ **“It’s not just bullying. It’s making you feel singled out...it’s not about being outright mean to someone. It’s mean in different ways”** (Anonymous Respondent).
- ▶ **“A lot of times, the bullying, the micro-aggressions, are not presented in what’s said, but what’s not said, which is part of their effectiveness. It’s when you sit in a room and say ‘Wait, I feel like I’m picking up on this fucked up thing over here, but now I’m not really sure. Is it just me”** (Lesbian White Woman)?
- ▶ Of all underrepresented communities, women in our sample faced discrimination and harassment most often, with 73.7% of women respondents saying they have experienced gender or sexual harassment or discrimination while working in the television industry. Other underrepresented communities also faced alarmingly high levels of discrimination or harassment. 71% of BIPOC writers experienced discrimination or harassment aimed at their race, with women of color experiencing discrimination nearly 1.5 times more than men of color. In addition, 50.3% of LGBTQIA+ writers experienced discrimination or harassment aimed at their sexual orientation/gender identity. Among the other three underrepresented communities, many Disabled and Deaf (43.3%), lower-level age 50+ (42.2%), and some large body type (27%) writers have experienced discrimination targeting their identities. We will discuss bullying and discrimination and its effect on the workplace in the next section.

## 2. A Toxic Workplace

- ▶ Discrimination and harassment are not about hurt feelings. They make workplaces unsafe, stifle creativity, and even cause physical symptoms of

## Have you experienced discrimination and/or harassment at some point during your television writing career?



discomfort, leading to serious health concerns. One writer described how bullying in comedy has become normalized: **“People get teased in comedy a lot. And [we’re] told that it’s okay. And generally, the teasings are not okay...when it’s usually teasing about what you’re passionate about, what you care about, or your identity...it can also still be outright [bullying]”** (White Woman). Another writer shared their experience of a straight, newly single male co-worker who would not make eye contact with them: **“I figured out he found me threatening as a [supposed] straight woman, in his age group, while he was going through a divorce. So, I let him know that I was a lesbian... and it changed the entire dynamic. And it was very shaky ground for me. No one should have to jump through all of those hoops just to get someone**

**in your work environment to make eye contact with you when you are pitching a story to the room”** (Lesbian White Woman). As detailed above, many underrepresented writers face blatant and covert discrimination in ways that make working as a writer even harder. Next, we will discuss how and why individuals respond to workplace discrimination or harassment.

### 3. Responding to Harassment

- ▶ When someone uses a slur, it is much easier to recognize and report than when someone makes a pointed, more subtle comment about identity. As our respondents reported, 46.2% of those writers who faced discrimination or harassment in the television industry decided not to take any action following the incident(s). Confirming that it is often difficult to grapple with subtle bullying, we found that 37.6%<sup>22</sup> of underrepresented writers did not take action because they believed it was not serious enough and another 52.3% out of fear of appearing “overly sensitive.” While it may seem intuitive and obvious to report all incidents of discrimination or harassment, our results show that almost half (49.1%) did not take action because they believed nothing would change, and 14.7% of underrepresented writers did not want to negatively affect their perpetrators. For those who did report these incidents, only 12%<sup>23</sup> of underrepresented writers were satisfied with how the situation was handled and 11.9% were fired.

### 4. Creating Safe Spaces

- ▶ As made clear by the previous sections, underrepresented writers continue to face various forms of discrimination and harassment in the television industry. Though recent social changes are beginning to make certain types of clearly identifiable harassment less likely, microaggressions, gaslighting, and cultural insensitivities are still quite present, and

underrepresented writers are still working inside a culture that promotes silent suffering. To combat this, studios and networks need to create clear and defined courses of action to deal with incidents of discrimination, while also providing victims with safety from retaliation and security in their jobs.

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## Interventions

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- ▶ As the film and television industries respond to social and political pressures to expand diversity, equity, and inclusion, some respondents hinted at new programs that are in the works for the near future. We will hopefully see the benefits of these programs soon. By expanding opportunities for underrepresented writers, removing the barriers they often face, and providing them with the necessary resources for success, networks, studios, and production companies can make a commitment to producing more authentic, inclusive content for an audience that is craving exactly that. In the following sections, we will briefly discuss some of the current interventions aimed at helping industry workers from underrepresented communities.

### 1. Fellowships/Writing Programs, Incubators, and Mentorship

- ▶ Over the past year, a number of promising new programs and initiatives aimed at emerging talent and diversifying the pipelines have cropped up. These include grassroots efforts to identify Pre-WGA talent and new programs targeting writers from underrepresented communities to provide them the education and training needed to be successful writers’ assistants and script coordinators. Beyond emerging talent, several new incubators, pitch programs, and mentorship initiatives target existing and established writers from underrepresented communities, many of which have not only proven effective, but also

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22. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

23. Our previous report did not include lower-level writers age 50+. This statistic does include these writers.

By expanding opportunities for underrepresented writers, removing the barriers they often face, and providing them with the necessary resources for success, networks, studios, and production companies can make a commitment to producing more authentic, inclusive content for an audience that is craving exactly that.



profitable, like the Lucky Exports Pitch Program.<sup>24</sup> These new initiatives supplement and complement existing efforts by addressing systemic flaws in the existing pipeline, providing financial compensation to offset financial need, and focusing on the needs of underrepresented writers beyond the entry level. It is important to note that many of these efforts are grassroots volunteer initiatives, spearheaded by writers from underrepresented communities, aimed at rectifying the systemic flaws of a multi-billion dollar industry. However, the success of these efforts relies equally on improving internal work culture. Bringing new talent into or supporting established talent in a flawed system without doing the requisite work to change that system fails to recognize the impact context and work culture play in impeding the advancement of underrepresented writers.

## 2. Authentic Storytelling/Underrepresented Content Initiatives

- ▶ In terms of producing new content from and about underrepresented communities, there seems to be an increasing number of production companies, as well as new partnerships between studios and content creators, with explicit mandates to increase representation both on-screen and behind the scenes. Many of these ventures are led by underrepresented talent leveraging their celebrity and influence through inclusion riders like Michael B. Jordan<sup>25</sup> or by attaching structured programs as a part of their overall deals like LaToya Morgan<sup>26</sup>, Soo Hugh, and Tanya

24. Donnelly, M. (2020, Oct. 14). "Every Member of Margot Robbie and Christina Hodson's All-Women Screenwriting Lab Has Sold a Feature Film." *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/every-member-of-margot-robbies-all-women-screenwriting-lab-has-sold-their-feature-films-1234804455/>.

25. Victor, D. (2018, Mar. 8). "Michael B. Jordan Adopts an Inclusion Rider for His Company." *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/business/media/michael-b-jordan-inclusion-rider.html>.

26. Andreeva, N. (2020, July 1). "Writer LaToya Morgan Inks Overall Deal With Warner Bros. Television Group, Launches Production Company." *Deadline*. Retrieved from <https://deadline.com/2020/07/latoya-morgan-overall-deal-warner-bros-television-group-production-company-launch-the-walking-dead-1202975291/>.



Saracho.<sup>27</sup> However, as with the proliferation of writing programs and incubators, these new content initiatives are subject to the context and work culture in which they are created. Executives and those with greenlighting power (often not from underrepresented communities) must acknowledge and address the limited cultural lens through which they note and assess new content.

### 3. Systemic & Internal Work Culture Change

- ▶ As stated previously, for interventions to be successful, employers and companies must remember to take context and work culture into account. These are systemic issues that necessitate a systemic response. And the system seems to be responding. New policies, new players, and increased resources to existing efforts abound. A number of new management companies and agencies have emerged, explicitly focused on increasing representation in hiring and in storytelling. As previously mentioned, many actors and top writing talent are wielding their influence with purpose and cause to influence representation behind the scenes. However, the same lack of agency and voice experienced by underrepresented writers also affects many of those who participate in the content creation process from the other side (executives, producers, non-writing talent, etc.) because most executives from underrepresented communities are junior or middle management, or they're on the selling side of the content creation business, thus lacking decision-making and/or greenlighting power.
- ▶ One way to address the aforementioned lack of representation and one of our main recommendations for the industry as a whole is

to track representation amongst writers, as well as within the ranks of all others who participate in the content creation business – whether cast and crew, producers, or executives all the way up to the C-suites. Some of this is already happening. The WGAW, in its annual Inclusion Report, tracks and reports progress for underrepresented writers across the industry. According to this report, as of 2020, LGBTQIA+ writers were the only underrepresented group to reach parity with national population estimates in terms of guild membership.<sup>28</sup> Though this seems hopeful, a question remains as to whether these LGBTQIA+ writers spanned the diversity of the community to which they belong. More specifically, it would be interesting to see in future years how numbers for trans, bisexual, lesbian, non-binary, BIPOC, and otherwise queer writers compare to those of (white) cis gay men. In comparison to last year, BIPOC and women writers gained representation within the industry while Disabled, Deaf, and age 50+ writers remained vastly underrepresented. And all marginalized groups remained underrepresented at the upper level, where writers have the most power to interrupt harmful storytelling. Although these findings from the WGA report may sound dismal, they are a key factor in tracking inclusion, identifying barriers to underrepresented communities, and expanding opportunities for those who need it most. There need to be more efforts like these on the part of studios, networks, streaming platforms, and production companies. To achieve progress, industry players must be able to accurately assess where they are in terms of diversity, inclusion, and equity, what it will take to improve, and track and troubleshoot the effectiveness of their efforts.

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27. Zorilla, M. M. (2021, Feb. 26). "Soo Hugh Signs Overall Deal With UCP, Will Launch Talent Incubator." *Variety*. Retrieved from <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/soo-hugh-signs-overall-deal-with-ucp-will-launch-talent-incubator-1234916554/>.

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28. Writers Guild of America – West. (2020). *WGAW Inclusion Report: 2020*. Retrieved from [https://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/the-guild/inclusion-and-equity/WGAW\\_Inclusion\\_Report\\_20.pdf](https://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/the-guild/inclusion-and-equity/WGAW_Inclusion_Report_20.pdf).



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# Conclusions

- ▶ The findings of this year's report give us hope of a truly more inclusive future for television. However, underrepresented television writers continue to face a number of barriers in their careers, including discrimination and harassment. To produce the inclusive stories television audiences crave, the industry must take a firm stance in supporting and uplifting talent from underrepresented communities. We can only fully address this issue with specific, targeted initiatives that are well-developed and properly funded. In calling out the shortcomings of our industry, we will provide suggestions below on how to better support writers from underrepresented communities and promote more authentic storytelling.

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## Recommendations

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### 1. **Network/Studio/Streaming Platform/ Production Company Recommendations:**

- ▶ Since networks, studios, streaming platforms, and production companies share oversight for employment and workplaces, it is their responsibility to ensure that these workplaces are safe, inclusive and equitable for all employees, including underrepresented TV writers. Networks, studios, streaming platforms, and production companies play an important role in advocating for underrepresented talent and in doing so, can produce more authentic, diverse stories that important television demographics are craving.

Specific recommendations for employers include:

- ▶ Hire more showrunners, producers, and executives from underrepresented populations.
- ▶ Fire/stop hiring toxic and abusive showrunners, producers, and executives and/or learn to identify and solicit information to determine if new hires are problematic.
- ▶ Track which shows experience consistent turnover in their writers rooms, especially turnover of writers from underrepresented communities, and investigate root causes.
- ▶ Mandate management training for gatekeepers and individuals with oversight and supervisory responsibility, including but not limited to showrunners, upper-level writers, producing and episodic directors, non-writing producers, and executives.
- ▶ Mandate implicit bias, anti-discrimination/harassment, and cultural sensitivity training for all writers rooms, showrunners, producing and episodic directors, non-writing producers, and creative/casting/production executives.
- ▶ Provide all writers rooms, writers in development, and creative executives support for stories about underrepresented communities to expand the expertise of content creators. Please see the [TTIE #WriteInclusion: Tips for Accurate Representation](#) factsheets for more information.
- ▶ Incentivize showrunners to retain and promote underrepresented writers. Penalize shows (and showrunners, upper-levels/non-writing producers/executives) who abuse these incentive programs.
- ▶ Formalize and fully fund a neutral, 3rd-party reporting system for victims of harassment and/or discrimination.
- ▶ Institute anonymous and confidential exit interviews with every writer to help remove bias and/or discrimination in the hiring/firing/rehiring process.
- ▶ Provide and increase paid development opportunities.
- ▶ Increase authentic content depicting characters from underrepresented populations, created and informed by writers from those communities.
- ▶ Increase accessibility across workspaces with input from members of the Disabled and Deaf communities.
- ▶ Expand and standardize fellowship/writing program opportunities to include all underrepresented writers (i.e. women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ individuals, Disabled/Deaf people, and writers age 50+) and share best practices.
- ▶ Provide a living wage for writers room support staff so individuals whose incomes are not subsidized by higher income families/partners can accept these positions.
- ▶ Create and communicate a clear path toward advancement for support staff.

## 2. Agency/Management Company Recommendations

- ▶ Last year, many agencies could not represent writers as the WGA implemented new agency guidelines. This year, most agencies have been franchised by the WGA and have agreed to the new Code of Conduct, which includes improving DEI practices.

Specific recommendations for agencies and management companies include:

- ▶ Hire more agents and managers from underrepresented populations.

- ▶ Expand the types of shows and title levels to which underrepresented writers are submitted, moving beyond theme/identity or financial incentive as factors.
- ▶ Negotiate equitable development deals (quotes/fees, titles, etc.) for underrepresented clients to afford them greater control over their projects.
- ▶ Advocate for paid development opportunities to reduce the amount of free work.
- ▶ Foster increased communication and support for underrepresented TV writers to ensure abuses are being heard and addressed.
- ▶ Submit all writers contracts to the WGA, as mandated, to ensure that the Guild has the data it needs to, for instance, compare episodic quotes between underrepresented and overrepresented writers.

### 3. Showrunner/Upper-Level/Non-Writing Producer Recommendations

- ▶ While showrunners often shoulder blame when things go awry, many showrunners, upper-level writers, and non-writing producers are working hard to integrate inclusion and equity into their hiring and management practices. But there are many who aren't yet taking proactive steps and/or could benefit from extra guidance.

Specific recommendations for showrunners, upper-level writers, and non-writing producers include:

- ▶ Hire, retain, and promote underrepresented writers.

- ▶ Hire underrepresented writers at all levels for skill sets independent of their identities. Participate in implicit bias, anti-discrimination, and management training, even if not mandated. Provide mentorship to underrepresented writers on staff and in development.
- ▶ Fire/don't hire toxic and abusive writers, showrunners, and producers and/or learn to identify and solicit information to determine if new hires are problematic.
- ▶ When staffing shows, seek recommendations from a diverse group in terms of identity, level, etc.
- ▶ Add inclusion riders to your development deals.
- ▶ Sign-on and adhere to a showrunners' code of conduct.
- ▶ Provide writers with support for stories about underrepresented communities that fall outside the expertise of writers in the room. Please see the [TTIE #WriteInclusion: Tips for Accurate Representation](#) factsheets for more information.
- ▶ Hire assistants from underrepresented communities and provide a living wage for writers room support staff so individuals whose incomes are not subsidized by higher income families/partners can accept these positions.
- ▶ Create and communicate a clear path toward advancement for support staff.
- ▶ Assign freelance opportunities to underrepresented writers and support staff.



#### 4. Guild/Union Recommendations

- ▶ Since guilds and unions are responsible for collective bargaining and working in the interests of all writers, there are clear opportunities to work with industry players and grassroots advocacy groups to advance and improve working conditions, not just for underrepresented writers, but for all writers. Similar to last year, survey respondents identified showrunners and networks as the primary targets for guild efforts regarding inclusion and equity.

Specific recommendations for guilds and unions include:

- ▶ Educate showrunners on alternative methods of finding underrepresented talent (i.e. beyond just reaching out to a network's DEI department and relying on agencies).
- ▶ Establish a "showrunner think tank" to identify and disseminate best practices, in conjunction with a DEI advisory committee.
- ▶ Incorporate these trainings and best practices into the WGA Showrunner Training Program.
- ▶ Expand or supplement the WGA Showrunner Training Program to reach more new showrunners as well as established showrunners who may have never received anti-discrimination training, management training, etc.
- ▶ Create and enforce a code of conduct for all working writers and for showrunners specifically.
- ▶ Establish clear guidelines for title promotion in the WGA Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA).
- ▶ Enlist outside inclusion experts to continually evaluate and improve antiracism and inclusion efforts.
- ▶ Improve communication and outreach to membership regarding efforts in the DEI space and make clear, specific statements about ongoing action items.
- ▶ Strengthen existing harassment- and discrimination-reporting and resolution programs to provide stronger protections and better outcomes for union members.
- ▶ Expand and fully draw upon educational and mentorship programs to support underrepresented TV writers at all levels.

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# About the Authors and Partnering Organizations

**THINK TANK FOR INCLUSION & EQUITY (TTIE)** is a consortium of working TV writers from underrepresented 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 underrepresented 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 WIF.

**GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE ON GENDER IN MEDIA** was founded by Academy Award-winning actor Geena Davis in 2004 and is the only research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion, and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media. “If They Can See It, They Can Be It.” More information can be found on its website: [www.seejane.org](http://www.seejane.org).

**ROMEO PÉREZ** is the Senior Project Manager of Research & Insights at the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. He has worked at the Institute as a researcher for the past two years on a variety of projects that address on-screen representation of underrepresented communities (i.e. women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ folx, Individuals with Disabilities, people ages 50+, and those with large body types). His academic research has focused on representations of queer characters on screen, social perceptions of gay men, Latinx queer identities, and transinclusive Spanish linguistics. Romeo received a Bachelor of Arts with High Distinction from the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor with a dual degree in Spanish and psychology and minors in LGBTQ & Sexuality Studies and Judaic Studies.

**WOMEN IN FILM (WIF)** advocates for and advances the careers of women working in the screen industries—to achieve parity and transform culture. Founded in 1973, Women In Film supports all women working in film, TV, and digital media from emerging to advanced careers. Its distinguished programs include: mentoring, speaker & screening series, production training program, writing labs, film finishing funds, a sexual harassment help line, and an annual financing intensive. It advocates for gender parity through research, media campaigns and ReFrame, a collaboration with Sundance Institute. Women In Film honors the achievements of women in Hollywood through the legacy series, annual Emmy and Oscar parties, and the annual WIF Gala. Membership is open to all media professionals and more information can be found on its website: [www.womeninfilmm.org](http://www.womeninfilmm.org)