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Creative men, organised women: labour narratives, gender stereotypes and precarity among film festival women professionals

Ona Anglada-Pujol^a and Maria Castellví-Lloveras^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Library and Information Sciences and Audiovisual Communication, Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; ^bDepartment of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

Film festivals are significant actors in the film industry and have been burgeoning in Catalonia (Spain). However, the network of film festivals is profoundly precarious, and few are women-led. This study aims to have a deeper understanding of the organisational structures of Catalan film festivals and how gender impacts women's roles and careers. To fulfill this aim, we have interviewed twelve female workers in the Catalan film festival industry, focusing on their experiences, perceptions about their abilities and how they navigate unstable and informal working conditions. Through reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews, we have identified that work distribution is heavily gendered and pushes women to less visible and creative jobs, which is intensified by the informality and precariousness of the film festival industry. We also discuss how women adapt to these dynamics and accept precarity as intrinsic to the creative industries without the possibility of imagining structural change.

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Creative labour; Catalan film industry; film festivals; inequality; gender

Introduction

This article examines gendered labour in the Catalan film festivals by analysing how women workers perceive their skills, qualities, leadership, aspirations and work–life balance, in order to understand how gendered barriers are experienced and negotiated in this sector. As key nodes in the global film industry, festivals operate as complex, networked systems (Ehrich et al., 2022), it is relevant to explore how their labour is organised and how it intersects with gender. Festivals are also considered “obligatory sites of passage” vital to the production, distribution, and circulation of films (De Valck, 2007, p. 36). Festivals act as gatekeepers and tastemakers, and filmmakers and producers seek to premiere their films there because of exposure, prestige and recognition (De Valck, 2016, p. 109).

In the Catalan context, the field of film festivals holds significant weight within the broader Spanish industry. In 2024, out of the total 55 film festivals that received public

CONTACT Ona Anglada-Pujol  ona.anglada@ub.edu  Department of Library and Information Sciences and Audiovisual Communication, Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media, Universitat de Barcelona, Melcior de Palau, 140, Barcelona 08014, Spain

funding granted by the ICAA (Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts), 31 projects (56.3%) were based in Catalonia. Moreover, Catalonia was the first region in Spain to establish a professional association of festivals, the Catalonia Film Festivals (CFF), which currently clusters over 48 festivals with a combined attendance of 570,000 spectators, employing approximately 3,500 professionals. This associative network fosters collaborations between festivals (shared screenings, joint communication initiatives, or collaborative projects), as well as overlaps between workers, given the seasonal nature of festival work.

Considering this, Catalan audiovisual festivals may be regarded as a distinct circuit that, although connected to national and international networks, operates according to its own dynamics. The Catalan landscape encompasses festivals categorised as being of high cultural interest, thematic festivals, and initiatives rooted in territorial embeddedness. Likewise, the budgetary range is very broad. In the 2025 ICEC call for public funding, six proposals had a budget below €30,000; ten between €30,000 and €50,000; thirteen between €50,000 and €100,000; sixteen between €100,000 and €200,000; and five exceeded €200,000.

The Catalan festival sector is characterised by a high degree of fragmentation, a trait extended to other areas of the Catalan film industry (Besalú Casademont et al., 2024). It is typically made up of very small teams working on a single project, with a high prevalence of temporary hires or freelance staff. Furthermore, hiring processes are not public and are usually carried out through trusted personal networks.

As a key part of the creative industries, film festivals receive systematised support from the public sector (Villarroya & Barrios, 2022). Grants and subsidies promoted by the Barcelona Culture Institute (ICUB), the Catalan Institute of Cultural Enterprises (ICEC), and the Spanish administration (ICAA) include gender equality indicators when evaluating projects for their calls. Applicants must explain in detail the gender distribution that characterises their programming and the composition of their team, and to specify whether the organising entity has protocols in place to handle sexual or gender-based aggressions. Nevertheless, while these indicators can add points to the applications and increase funding, they are not mandatory, and there are no follow-up or audit processes to verify implementation. Consequently, activist voices have pointed out the insufficiency of these measures to reverse the structural inequalities that characterise the sector (Jansson & Calderón-Sandoval, 2024).

When analysing gender inequalities in film festivals, the focus has been placed on the most visible parts: the number of programmed films directed by women, the composition of filmmaking teams, jurors and guests (Ehrich et al., 2022). However, little attention has been paid to the teams behind the organisation of these events. Several studies have pointed to the precarious nature of film festival labour and the conditions faced by workers in this sector (Czach, 2016; Loist, 2011; Loist & Herbst, 2021; Vogel, 2023; Zachar & Paul, 2018), characterised by low salaries, non-permanent contracts and a high turnover, as well as being jobs with little visibility within the film industry. In the Catalan context, the quantitative data available on the composition of the festival teams is limited but conclusive about the gap that exists between the measures encouraged by public administration and the reality of the sector: out of the 48 film festivals associated under the umbrella of CFF only 13 (27%) are directed by women, and 6 (12.5%) have mixed-gender leadership. Moreover, many of the festivals led by women

focus on topics that are traditionally feminised (e.g. children's cinema, educational initiatives, films made by women) and are often regarded as less significant.

These figures can be read as a symptom of a sector resistant to profound changes, governed by "traditionally androcentric institutions" (Calderón-Sandoval, 2022) and marked by gender bias in the distribution of roles.

In this study, we aim to explore the gendered labour in the Catalan film festival circuit and the female workers' account of their jobs or skills, to understand how gendered barriers are experienced by the workers and how they make sense of them. Through twelve in-depth interviews with Catalan film festival workers from 18 different film festivals, this research seeks to answer these three research questions: how do female workers perceive their qualities, abilities, and leadership skills? How do they manage the networking imperative and the informality of the film festival industry? And how do they handle work and life balance, and what are their future labour aspirations and expectations?

This paper contributes to understanding the connections between creative labour practices, the precariousness of the creative industries, and gendered work. Specifically, it broadens understanding of the mechanisms that reinforce the reproduction of gender inequalities in the Catalan film festival industry.

Creative industries and labour

Creative industries, associated with flexible and independent working structures, have been described as the best representative of the "liquid" employment culture of the post-industrial, post-Fordist, neoliberal age (Deuze, 2007). Flexibility is the main trait of these forms of work organisation that have transformed jobs into being more insecure and underpaid. Careers are now "boundaryless", a concept that relates to the shift from long-term stable careers in a single organisation to paths mainly managed by the individual through different organisations and situations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), in which workers assume all the risk, instead of the State or organisations (Beck, 1992, 18). In this regard, the relationship between employer and employee has become contingent, with workers responsible for "negotiating, securing and maintaining their own individual support structures" (Deuze, 2007, p. 2).

We must also consider studies on affective labour, specifically in creative industries. Affective or emotional work has primarily been studied in care and service jobs, where "emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). When looking into work distribution in creative industries, the framework of affective labour helps address fatigue, exhaustion, and frustration, as well as the fears of compulsory socialisation for securing future work (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 16). The affective experiences of creative work can be pleasant or unpleasant, but they are fundamental to understanding workers' experience.

Creative industries have been widely used to illustrate these work transformations (Stahl, 2013). Jobs in these industries are attractive due to the promise of "not work" and unconventional careers (Kotišová, 2019, p. 31). Features associated with creative labour are freedom, autonomy, dynamism, informality, or self-realisation (Gill, 2002; Kotišová, 2019; McRobbie, 2016). Nevertheless, these traits often come with precarious settings, high insecurity and unregulated practices.

Precariousness refers to insecure, contingent, flexible work – from illegalised, casualised and temporary employment to homeworking, piecework, and freelancing. In turn, precarity signifies the multiplication of precarious, unstable forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond traditional models of the political party or trade union (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

Passion is crucial in understanding how creative jobs work and how this precarious structure is reproduced. McRobbie (2016) identified how workers are expected to be passionate and develop an affective attachment to their work, a demand intensified in the creative sector. However, this passion often translates into insecure jobs, long hours, and little economic revenue. Hence, passion often legitimates these precarious jobs, demanding sacrifice and self-renunciation (Wallis et al., 2020) under the promise of creativity in the workplace.

Labour and gender barriers in the creative industries

Under these new forms of labour, insecure jobs, precariousness, and the promise of creative jobs, we must look closely at how gender intertwines with it. Patterns of gender inequality are present in creative industries and have been examined and studied by many scholars (see Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Gill, 2002, 2014; Lamberg, 2021; McRobbie, 2016; O'Brien, 2014, 2015). In the Spanish and Catalan context, a growing body of research has examined how gender inequalities manifest across different areas of the creative industries, including studies on women in the audiovisual industry (Herrero-De-la-Fuente et al., 2022), women in the field of advertising (Pueyo, 2012; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022), salary discrimination in the performing arts sector (Villarroya & Carreño, 2024) and barriers to entry creative industries faced by women (Barrios & Villarroya, 2022). These contributions help us to understand the localised configurations of gendered precarity in Catalonia, while also shedding light on structural dynamics found across the creative industries.

These contributions are essential for understanding the localised configurations of gendered precarity, and they offer valuable insights that should be more consistently integrated into international debates on creative labour.

We can see the impact of gender on the work distribution patterns since there is vertical and horizontal segregation (Jones & Pringle, 2015, p. 39). Women and men end up being channeled into different roles and jobs (O'Brien, 2015, p. 2), often based on stereotypes, and with different opportunities and rewards for their jobs, like technical roles are often linked with traditional masculine norms (Guerrier et al., 2009).

The unstable and informal structure of creative industries also contributes to gender inequality. Project-based works, such as those in the film and film festival industry, heavily rely on networking to find jobs. Access to work must be achieved for every project, and it is obtained through networking and personal contacts. However, these networks of film workers are often highly gendered, with men occupying important and visible roles (Ehrich et al., 2022). This informality also impacts the processes of hiring, which lack transparency (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013) and make it harder for women to claim better working conditions or better salaries. This informality heavily impacts the impossibility of complaining or demanding improvements in their job (Wing-Fai et al., 2015) or even denouncing situations of sexual harassment.

Of course, we must consider the impact of childcare on women working in creative industries, as parenting and childcare primarily affect women's career whilst it has a negligible impact on men's career (O'Brien & Liddy, 2021). There are no structural solutions to manage work and life balance in the film industry, and women must find individual solutions to adapt their jobs to care for children or dependent people.

Finally, the lens of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) helps us understand how these workers in the creative industries understand and address some of these inequalities and work patterns. Individualism is an essential factor to consider: issues are formulated in individual terms and not through the lens of collective frameworks (Gill et al., 2017, p. 6). Gender inequality is often situated in the past, hence claiming that the relevance of gender in the workplace can be dismissed in postfeminist societies (O'Brien, 2015, p. 260). That also means that any solutions to gender inequality in cultural industries are situated on the individual, who must improve their self-management skills or assume individual failure instead of advocating for structural solutions (Lamberg, 2021; Wallis et al., 2020).

Materials and methods

Our research draws on semi-structured interviews with twelve female workers in the Catalan film festival industry between November 2020 and January 2021. At the time, the Catalan cultural sector was going through the "cultural reopening" after the Covid-19 lockdown, and all interviewees had resumed their activities, albeit with restrictions and safety measures. The interviews lasted 40–70 min and were conducted through video calls. All participants signed informed consent and were free to leave anytime. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Participants were selected through snowball sampling with two criteria: (a) to be working or have recently worked in the film festival industry, and (b) diversity in terms of age, professional activity, years of experience and contract type. Women selected work in different festivals and positions such as producers, public relations, or programmers. All are non-racialised. In terms of age, six fall into the 25–35 range, four into 35–45, and one into 45–55. All have completed a university degree in communication, social sciences, or arts. Seven combine different jobs inside and outside the film festival industry. Four are freelancers, while nine are directly employed by festivals, some permanently and others seasonally. This abundance of multiple jobs relates to the seasonal contracts and low pay common in audiovisual and creative jobs in Spain (Ateca & Villarroya, 2023, p. 5) and other film festival networks, such as Germany (Loist & Herbst, 2021, p. 8) or Austria (Zachar & Paul, 2018, p. 489).

Most interviewees expressed concern about anonymity due to fear of reputational damage. Names, festivals, and any identifying details have therefore been anonymised. The following table shows anonymised information on the twelve workers. Participants are referred to by ID and job title. When quoting participants with more than one role, we indicate the position relevant to that specific case (Table 1).

The semi-structured interview allowed participants freedom to expand on any topics, rather than following a rigid question – answer format. Initial questions focused on their educational background, work experiences in the creative industries, and current job specifications. Then, we addressed themes identified as relevant in the literature: perceived

Table 1. Sociodemographic and professional characteristics of participants.

ID	Age range	Job title	Type of contract
P1	25–30	Producer, director	Employed by one festival and freelancer for another festival
P2	35–40	Production manager	Employed by one festival
P3	35–40	Public relations, director	Employed by two festivals
P4	25–30	Coordinator	Employed by one festival and another job
P5	30–35	Producer, industry	Employed by one festival and freelancer
P6	30–35	Industry	Employed by one festival
P7	40–45	Producer and programmer	Employed by one festival
P8	40–45	Coordinator	Freelancer in more than two festivals
P9	40–45	Programmer and producer	Employed by more than two festivals seasonally
P10	50–55	Copy logistics	Employed by one festival
P11	25–30	Coordinator	Freelancer
P12	25–30	Producer	Employed by one festival

skills and qualities (Black et al., 2019; Eikhof & Chudzikowski, 2019), leadership (Creus et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2017), networking (Gill, 2002; Wreyford, 2015), and work – life balance (O'Brien & Liddy, 2021; Wing-Fai et al., 2015).

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, employing both deductive and inductive approaches. Braun and Clarke (2019) define it as a flexible, iterative approach structured around four phases, which we applied. First, immersion in the data through repeated reading. Second, systematic description and organisation of the data by deductive – inductive identification of codes. We used themes predefined through the questionnaire and literature (i.e. gendered skills, visibility, leadership, networking) to organise the data. Third, interpretative analysis of these codes to group them and establish hierarchies. Finally, reviewing and refining the main themes to inductively identify themes and subthemes (e.g. generational gap, creative aspirations, precariousness).

Findings

The gendering of skills

Previous studies show that the skills perceived as necessary for some jobs are highly gendered (Guerrier et al., 2009; O'Brien, 2014). This bias is especially acute in emotional and social competence (Kelan, 2008) and organisational skills, which are perceived to be “a natural part of a feminine skill set” (Gill, 2014, 518). When we asked the participants what qualities they thought were necessary for their job, most interviewees highlighted being organised as a natural trait. As one participant said, “either you are very organised, or you have to force yourself to be, but the organisation is key” (P11, coordinator).

They also highlighted the need to be capable of multitasking due to high workloads and pressure from their bosses. They identified this capacity as typically feminine in opposition to their male colleagues: “men are only good in one specific area, but we know how to plan, and our abilities are transverse, we know a little bit of everything” (P2, production manager). Being able to cope with different things is fundamental to survive in high-pressure environments and peaks of work: “you have to do lots of different things in little time, you have to prioritise and be able to react quickly to anything that might come up” (P9, programmer, and producer). Also, the idea that the job is stressful and demanding is not questioned but accepted as intrinsic to the sector.

In contrast, they defined their male co-workers as “unable to listen” (P12, producer), or incapable “[to] consider their team’s needs” (P9, programmer and producer). Therefore, even though being empathetic and kind was a positive quality, they also recalled that it might become a toll and a risk because it could transform them into the “mommy” of the team: “since she’s the only one that listens [her boss], everyone goes to her to share problems and needs” (P6, industry). This also shows how participants are often aware how the “feminine skill set” can be used against them, meaning that they are also critical of the expectations placed on them and how it is often taken for granted and exploited.

Another difference with their male co-workers – especially the festival directors – is that they described them as “creative” or “artistic”. In contrast, they referred to themselves as the ones in charge of “keeping things running”. Here, we can see how P8 (coordinator) explains the division of her work and skills:

The two [male] directors make the artistic decisions, I’m the right-hand woman. I take care of the process, paperwork, and programming, supervision of the production, management of the film copies, ticketing, and activities. I make sure all the gears of the team function properly. But I’m not visible.

This quotation shows how the participant uses concepts such as “taking care” or “managing” to describe all the tasks she does inside the team. At the same time, she attributes all the artistic decisions to the male directors. The perception of some skills, abilities, or roles as naturally feminine emerged when some participants in decision-making positions expressed that they tend to rely on women for production and logistic tasks. One of the participants (P2, production manager) in charge of temporary hiring puts it like this: “Men don’t know how to plan things, they can be very good in a specific area, but women tend to be more transversal”. She sought kindness, empathy, and the ability to be aware of the feelings of the rest of the team, a quality that she believed was easier to find in women.

Also, besides specific qualities ascribed to women, our participants in decision-making positions involving hiring people expressed that they look for people who make them feel secure and comfortable. Again, these profiles tend to be female: “I try to bring people that I feel comfortable with to the team, and in my surroundings, there are many women that I can trust and make me feel comfortable” (P11, coordinator).

Being (in)visible and (not) being a leader

Many interviewees hold jobs away from the spotlight, as only directors and programmers usually make public appearances during the festival or in the media. Thus, the “public face” of a festival is usually a man. All participants were aware of this, and most of them felt comfortable away from the public eye: “being in the shadows is very comfy” (P1, director) or “I don’t need to appear in all the pictures” (P8, coordinator). Once again, we can see how their job roles and tasks are attributed to their personality and rather than a structural, gendered organisation, where men are more visible than women (Villarroya & Barrios, 2022).

Still, some expressed frustration as they would like to be more confident and have a public presence: “women never go on stage and make a 15-minute speech about how

great their festival is ... sometimes I'd like to speak more in public, but I don't dare, I don't feel comfortable" (P1, director). A participant reflected on how this lack of visibility was not only a matter of recognition but of better pay or working conditions: "creative positions are more visible and glamorous. Instead, production jobs are less visible and less glamorous. I guess that if you are visible, it's easier to ask for more money" (P7, producer and programmer). In this case, she identified a link between visibility and better job conditions, which is hard to achieve for women when they occupy less visible positions, even more so in the context of film festivals, which is often an invisible or unrecognised labour within the film industry.

Many of our respondents, even if they are not the festival's directors, hold a position of leadership, usually in the production team. However, when asked about their leadership skills, most participants were reluctant to call themselves "leaders" or "bosses", preferring terms such as "coordinators". This participant's reluctance to define herself as a "leader" can be seen in the following quote: "I wouldn't say I'm a leader. I just coordinate the people on the programming team" (P4, coordinator).

When we asked them to define their leadership style, the following concepts emerged: horizontal, human, warm, empathetic, open, accessible, and sensitive. These qualities fall into the "soft skills" set of skills, usually attributed to women: "Women are resolute, they know how to listen, and they understand" (P9, programmer, and producer). We can see the contraposition of terms when we asked them to define men's leadership, where we also found an agreement: toxic, impractical, strict, controlling, not empathetic, and despotic. In fact, many of them shared their bad experiences with male leaders. For example, P12 (producer) told us, "I had a boss who was very nice to people from outside the team. But us on the inside ... We had to handle all his shit".

These widespread bad experiences shaped their own leadership styles, and many of them built their leadership style in opposition to what they had experienced, giving autonomy and trusting their teams. Still, they also noted the need to set boundaries with their teammates: "I've made the mistake of being too close to my team, showing my weaknesses, and then people don't respect you" (P5, producer, and industry). Another participant reflected on her female boss's strategy: "She has to force herself to be tougher, but still being nice. Being a young woman in her position ... She has to reinforce her authority; otherwise people don't respect her" (P6, industry). So, while they rejected male leadership models, they also recognised the need to embrace some of their traits to gain respect.

Networking for survival

Our participants agreed that the informal structure of the film festival circuit means that hiring is mostly made by personal contacts. Thus, they all agreed that networking becomes required to keep working and progressing in the sector, specifically for those freelancing or with temporary or part-time contracts. However, most of them did not enjoy it and felt that they had to learn how to perform in these spaces: "I don't know how to behave in these situations. It's not that I felt uncomfortable in terms of age or gender, but that I was lacking experience and I didn't know how to approach people" (P4, coordinator). At the same time, they feel they must be visible; thus, they have to learn how to do it to build their careers and professional identities: "I feel it's important

for my job ... I always think 'I want to be seen, that people know me' (P5, producer, and industry).

These network spaces, like opening or award ceremonies, are often presented as informal situations during the nighttime. In these spaces, many women feel uncomfortable or exposed to potential sexual harassment: "I've found myself in situations with guests that have told me things that were completely inadequate" (P3, public relations and director). In a similar vein, one participant recalled this experience when preparing for a networking event with a male co-worker:

It was my first time going [to a foreign festival]. Before leaving, instead of giving me useful advice, he told me 'remember, wear a red dress'. This made me feel awful; I had to work hard to convince myself that I deserved to attend that festival (P6, industry).

Respondents agreed in defining networking spaces as a "boys club" that are particularly hostile to younger girls and where they received paternalistic treatment from other men in the industry. Therefore, many of them told us that they preferred networking events that happened during the daytime and that were not informal: "I don't like going to a cocktail party and not knowing anyone. I like networking that happens in formal meetings so that you can prepare in advance" (P10, copy logistics). That same participant added that the male director of the team did all the presence in the informal networking events, as she feels more comfortable participating in other kinds of activities with a more organised and clearly professional nature. For freelancers or workers with seasonal contracts, participating in networking events is seen as the only way to secure their jobs for another season. Workers who are directly hired by the festival on a more stable condition feel more comfortable not assisting, or finding workarounds. The job situation of the workers clearly has an impact on how they handle networking events and the need to attend, but we have not identified any strategies to challenge the "boys club" culture, as it is seen as intrinsic to the film festival industry.

Between passion and precariousness

As previous research in the cultural and creative industries has shown, not only are certain positions or job profiles heavily gendered, but precariousness affects women workers differently. Respondents expressed a common assumption that having a career in the cultural sector is inevitably related to precarious work conditions, often perceived as the price to pay to be part of the creative industry. Most interviewees have work routines that include extra hours without economic compensation, little pay, being available 24/7, and feeling exposed to mental health issues such as burnout. A participant who holds the position of coordinator described her routine during the film festival as follows:

Three months before the festival begins, I assume I no longer have a life. I wake up working and go to bed working, and most of the time, I eat in front of the computer. I must be very aware of everything, which sometimes affects me (P11, coordinator).

To handle these demands, participants identified different types of immaterial aspects that are assimilated as compensations for their precarious situations. One idea that appeared repeatedly was the perception of work as a source of happiness and passion: "Work is often a piece of shit, but it's a piece of shit that makes me happy" (P1, director). In this regard, the connection with work that respondents build is akin to a romantic

relationship (McRobbie, 2016) that is highly driven by passion and requires devotion, commitment, and sacrifice, and resonates with the affective mantra “Do What You Love” (Duffy, 2016) that defines creative and cultural industries: “my priority now is to do a job that motivates me rather than having better work conditions (...). Also, when I started working in a film festival, I had very precarious conditions, but the bosses told us that we should be the ones paying to have the opportunity to work there” (P5, producer, industry). In this regard, we see how the toll of precarious working conditions associated with “doing what you love” is reinforced by narratives generated within the sector, often imposed as a form of common sense reinforced by those in leadership positions.

Almost all the interviewees share an educational background in film, media, or arts, and even if their job positions are not directly related to creative tasks, working in the creative industries emerges as another form of compensation, as a “promising reward connected with the aura of creativity” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 127). Therefore, being part of a creative project – even in a more logistical role – is identified by the interviewees as a form of reward:

From wanting to be a film critic, I’ve ended up being a cultural manager. I’m good at coordinating, and I also believe that my point of view and thoughts are there, too. Maybe I’m not deciding the program, but still, my voice is there (P9, producer).

However, despite this shared feeling of belonging and contributing to an artistic project, several participants expressed frustration at not being able to develop their more artistic or creative sides. In this sense, particularly the youngest participants often expressed frustration with the time-consuming nature of their work in the festival circuit, which prevents them from pursuing aspirations their current roles do not allow them to fulfill. As one participant put it: “Another job would allow me to have time for myself and develop my creativity; now, all my energy is focused here [her job in a film festival]” (P12, producer).

Thus, we observe a shared perception of the sector’s resistance to change, where the price of being part of the creative industry is assumed to be the acceptance of unfavourable working conditions. In this way, precarity is internally justified through immaterial compensations linked to passion, the promise of contributing to artistic and creative processes and also the “luck” of having secured a job in a highly limited sector where opportunities are scarce. At the same time, the lack of collective organisations, the isolation due to the temporary nature of contracts and the sectors’ fragmentation lead workers to perceive their precarious conditions as individual cases, rather than as part of a broader structural issue requiring change.

No future

In the last part of the interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on future perspectives on their careers. Regardless of their age or working conditions, participants showed a lack of capacity to project themselves as workers in the film festival industry in the future. Older participants coincide in attributing this incapacity to a condition of their personality, portraying themselves as non-ambitious or enterprising, as seen in the first section. For example, one of the participants expressed it as follows: “I consider myself a non-ambitious person. I don’t project myself further, I live day by day” (P2, production manager).

All the participants expressed common views on their jobs as something for the young but not a long-term option due to the unstable working conditions and the high demands of their positions as producers or coordinators. As one of the participants puts it: “The job that I have now is for young people because it demands a high level of intensity and the income doesn’t pay off” (P1, producer, and director). Even one of the senior participants (P10, copy logistics), who has been working in the same film festival for the last ten years, reflects on her situation with uncertainty, saying: “We’ll see if the festival goes on”. In this regard, even the most established projects are perceived as unstable and prone to disappearance.

Younger respondents who fall into the 25–35 age range coincided in showing passion and devotion for their jobs in the film festival industry. However, in parallel to their present jobs, they felt the urge to find a plan B “that is a little bit safer” if all else fails, as defined by one young woman (P11) who is a freelancer. She is almost thirty years old, and she combines her job with a master’s programme to become a teacher to “explore more opportunities for the future”. In a similar vein, another participant who is also in her thirties (P5, producer, industry) said that, despite enjoying her job, she will prioritise having “a more decent salary and peace of mind” in the medium term.

Conciliation is considered when discussing future perspectives concerning instability and precariousness. Many of the respondents shared with us that they understood conciliation in relation to motherhood, taking care of children or dependent people, but also the possibility of combining their professional and personal lives. Most participants shared a depoliticised vision of conciliation, perceived as something that “goes by personal decisions” (P8, coordinator) or that requires “learning how to put barriers” (P7, producer, and programmer). Also, there is a shared perception that empathy among women can be helpful in this regard, as highlighted by one of the participants (P6, industry), who explains that, in her case, having a female director results in greater flexibility around work-life balance. However, as she notes, it is an informal arrangement that needs to be negotiated individually with her. Thus, the possibility of achieving work-life balance depends on each company’s internal work culture and even on the sensitivity of those in leadership positions, but there are no significant structural measures in place, according to our participants’ perceptions.

Particularly, younger interviewees have very pessimistic views on conciliating their present jobs with experiencing motherhood and having a family. They also express disappointment when reflecting on their working conditions in comparison to their aspirations:

I want to be a mum, and I wanted to become 30 with the assurance of having a maternity leave. I’ve done everything that it’s required, I’ve studied, I’ve worked. Maybe in two years, I’ll be able to have kids; you never know, but nowadays, it’s impossible (P5, producer, industry).

In this case, the interviewee has a part-time contract at a festival combined with freelance (self-employed) work. Even though this type of employment can access maternity leave, the intensity of the work, low salaries and uncertainty foster a sense of insecurity, as this participant explains.

Thus, despite the passion that the interviewees express for their work, there is a prevailing inability to envision these jobs as a solid long-term option – whether due to precarious conditions, low salaries, or the difficulty of achieving a good work-life balance. This

pushes participants to seek an alternative plan, a more secure – albeit less stimulating – career path, in the face of the perceived impossibility of imagining structural change within the cultural industries.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The promise of creative work is built upon the expectation of self-realisation, cultural and social capital, and passion (Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). This promise often justifies instability, long working hours, and low wages, normalising precarity as intrinsic to the sector and resulting in the paradox of “privileged precarity” (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025). These narratives resonate among Catalan female festival workers, who remain attached to the idea of creative fulfilment within film festivals, perceived as prestigious actors in the audiovisual sector (De Valck, 2016). However, they mostly occupy logistical, organisational, and invisible positions. One participant illustrates this paradox: she works in production to sustain herself but programmes another festival (her “passion”) in her free time and without pay, seeking creative fulfilment.

As passion often masks the downfalls of the job, it is experienced in a contradictory manner by our participants. The work is exhausting and unsustainable, yet fulfilling enough for workers to give it everything it demands, however precarious. They work on logistical jobs, not out of passion, but out of the belief that this is what they are naturally skilled at.

This belief is informed by the gendered distribution of work in the creative sector. Women are repeatedly channelled towards coordination, production, and care-related roles, seen as “natural” extensions of their skills. While essential for festivals, these tasks are undervalued and poorly remunerated, reinforcing inequalities. Importantly, this does not mean that women reproduce their own oppression. Rather, it highlights how pervasive ideas about “feminine” skills narrow their professional horizons, limiting the roles they can aspire to and their labour conditions, as these types of jobs are often less well paid. Similarly, it reveals the gender regime (Jansson et al., 2021) of the Catalan film festival network, where labour is divided by gender and norms that shape women workers’ routines, aspirations, and practices.

These dynamics are exacerbated by broader sectoral characteristics. Quantitative studies in Catalonia and Spain (Barrios & Villarroya, 2022; Villarroya & Carreño, 2024) show gender gaps in leadership and pay. Our qualitative research adds depth by examining how workers themselves experience and navigate an androcentric industry.

Moreover, we identified traces of postfeminist discourse. Work-life balance was usually understood as an individual responsibility, to be solved through personal decisions, rather than as a structural issue. Leadership aspiration and styles was also individualised: women sought to be empathetic, horizontal and approachable (O’Brien, 2017), while simultaneously recognising that respect often required adopting traits associated with traditional masculine authority. This resulted in ambivalent feelings, as they had to perform what was expected of them as women, but also gaining respect through traits perceived as masculine that they disliked (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025). Hiring practices sought to mitigate traits of the androcentric film industry they disliked, but again, it was framed as an individual and temporary solution. Overall, neoliberal and postfeminist logics intersect, placing responsibility at the individual level and obscuring structural inequalities.

This can help us understand their lack of confidence and hope in future change. The informality and job insecurity of the market makes workers afraid to complain and undermines feelings of belonging. Precarity is not seen as transitional but endemic, and therefore, as something they must manage individually. As one participant put it: “I’ll leave [the industry] before anything changes” (P5, producer).

There is no film festival union in Catalonia or Spain, but unionising is uncommon in the Spanish audiovisual industry. In recent years, Alma (Spanish writers guild) or AMMAC (Catalan film editors association) have acted as unions to demand better labour conditions but focused on the specificity of their professions. CIMA and Dones Visuals have also pointed out the gender inequalities in the audiovisual industry, but their scope is broad and not specific to film festivals. The lack of unions in the audiovisual sector, added to the informality and insecurity, makes the idea of creating unions or even protesting as hard to imagine for our participants. However, initiatives like the Fair Festival Award, promoted by the Workgroup Festival Labour within the German Ver.di union (Loist & Herbst, 2021) or the reports commissioned by the Forum der Österreichischen Filmfestivals (Association of Austrian Film Festivals) (Zachar & Paul, 2016) can help shed light on ways of organising within film festivals and gathering data to address the structural inequalities and precarious conditions.

Our research contributes to better understanding how gendered assumptions impact women workers in the film festival industry, pushing them into logistical, invisible and low-paying jobs with less prestige to pursue their passion. Even though our sample cannot represent the totality of experiences of female workers in the Catalan film festival industry, the qualitative approach helps shed light on how passion, precarity and gender stereotypes are intertwined. Further research could opt for a more collective approach and stir away from interviews (which are individual recallings) and explore the possibilities of focus groups among workers in the sector. Since most experiences were told from an individual point of view, interviewees expressed surprise when they were told that other workers shared similar experiences, and thus, using a collective approach could lead to the emergence of new and collective discourses.

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