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WOMEN'S IMPACT REPORT

Changing perceptions

Media-savvy femmes work to reverse stereotypes

By STEFFIE NELSON

Last spring on a billboard looming above Sunset Boulevard, a female gorilla in a plunging purple outfit and lipstick to match fought ferociously against the chains that bound her, a golden statuette in her hand. Perhaps it was some kind of advertisement for a distaff sequel to "King Kong"? Hardly. The buzzworthy billboard was an awards season protest from the feminist activist group the Guerrilla Girls, urging Hollywood to "Unchain the Women Directors!" -- reminding us that no woman had ever won the best director Oscar. If our story had a Hollywood ending, we'd say "until now" and cue the triumphant music. But this story's denouement is open-ended, with no resolution in sight.

Much as we'd like to believe the celluloid ceiling has gone the way of the girdle, recent history and box office trends point to the contrary. Of course, the news isn't all grim. "Obviously women have made huge leaps and bounds in the executive ranks of film and television," says Jane Fleming, president of Women in Film, who notes the organization was formed 35 years ago by women who were concerned about the lack of female executives in the industry. Today, Fleming acknowledges, the entertainment industry boasts many female professionals in power positions, "and I hope that in 35 years we feel the same way about writers and directors."

These days, however, women in Hollywood send mixed signals about gender politics. Many take exception for being singled out for their sex, which they now consider a nonissue. And those who feel victimized are loath to complain, for fear of biting the hand that feeds. So instead of decrying the inequities or attending estrogen events -- which producer Lynda Obst told *Variety* earlier this year "bore me to tears," and producer Cathy Schulman referred to as "another lunch with soggy chicken to get a butterfly pin" -- a number of media-savvy players are engaging in efforts that extend beyond their own interests.

One such endeavor is WriteGirl, of which Fleming has been an active supporter. Founded in 2001 by singer-songwriter-poet Keren Taylor, WriteGirl is devoted to the empowerment of teenage girls through writing and creative expression. The group publishes a lavish anthology every year and last month put on its annual Season End Celebration, featuring the girls performing their work with acting tips from the likes of Emily Deschanel.

This being L.A., about 50% of the teachers and mentors come from within the entertainment community, and Taylor says they're always looking to bring in more industry women.

"It's a constant outreach for us, because we know that some of our girls will be the next generation of TV writers and screenwriters."

For Taylor, the payoff has been igniting a spark in girls who didn't believe their stories were of any interest.

"They were shocked," she recalls. "Nobody ever asked them to write about their neighborhood, their culture, their food." Taylor adds that the goal is "not so much to make them writers as it is to get them excited about their own rich, unique self."

Jill Soloway, a writer for "Grey's Anatomy" who has also been involved with WriteGirl, agrees that the biggest challenge women face is learning that they have a voice the world needs to hear.

"Every day there are more men going to USC and saying, 'I've got a story to tell,'" says the four-year veteran of "Six Feet Under." "Women have to be empowered enough to feel tireless in their belief. You almost have to be a narcissistic lunatic." Without missing a beat she deadpans, "I just think that comes more naturally to men."

This spring, Soloway and Lindsey Horvath, the 24-year-old president of the Hollywood chapter of the National Organization for Women, co-founded the group Object, whose phone and email campaign was instrumental in the swift removal of the "Captivity" billboards that went up without the MPAA's approval. It was a victory, but Soloway and Object objected to their opposition being used as a selling point by the film's producer, who painted them as uptight housewives. "We're all artists ourselves," she says; "how did we get stuck in this role of being suburban moms?" While Soloway acknowledges Object's members include writers, directors, producers and other high-powered industry executives, she explains that the less-established women it's appealing to "don't have \$150 a plate to spend, and wouldn't feel comfortable at a dinner at the Beverly Hills Hotel but would feel comfortable at a rock concert."

Oscar-winning actress Geena Davis believes the earlier girls start learning their experiences and stories are valid, the better. An unwitting feminist icon, Davis says the response by women and girls to her starring roles in "Thelma & Louise" and "A League of Their Own" eventually led her in 2004 to form See Jane, a nonprofit that aims to reduce gender stereotyping in media for children 11 and under.....

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