



## The Fight for Gender Equity

BY ALEXANDER GELFAND

In the wake of last year's bombshell reports on sexual abuse and harassment by powerful men in the art, entertainment and media industries, women's advocacy groups and professional organizations across the creative fields have been more visible, vocal and, arguably, influential than they have ever been. But even as they seek to address the most blatant forms of misconduct, representatives from these groups point out that women in fact face a slew of interrelated challenges in the workplace.



Studies show that working women of all professions typically earn 20 percent less than the men in their field, and in the creative industries the gap may be even wider: Last fall, *Fast Company* reported on a study that showed self-employed women make about 32% less than their male counterparts. What's more, women on staffs rarely occupy key leadership roles. According to Deborah Adler (MFA 2002 Design), principal of Adler Design and co-founder of the Women Lead Initiative (WLI) at the design industry organization AIGA ([aiga.org/women-lead-initiative](http://aiga.org/women-lead-initiative)), women make up more than 60% of design students, yet they hold only 11% of leadership positions in the field. And those statistics are by no means unusual.

"The numbers across all the creative industries are really terrible," says Lynda Decker (MFA 2014 Design Criticism), president and creative director of Decker Design and WLI co-chair. In part, she says, this is a retention problem. As they climb the corporate ladder, many women "start running into gender bias issues, get fed up and leave." Those issues include not only outright harassment, but also the kind of unconscious or implicit bias that affects how women are compensated and promoted.

"It's there, but you can't see it," says Adler, who notes that WLI developed a gender-equity tool kit, available to all AIGA members, to help people identify



their implicit biases, raise awareness of the gender disparities around them and offer guidance about negotiating for better pay or benefits.

Parenthood brings additional complications, as a lack of flexible working hours and affordable childcare options, coupled with deeply ingrained preconceptions about the mother's role,

present further career obstacles to women with kids. "There's not enough support within organizations for women who are mothers, and that's really when

**OPPOSITE AND TOP** Women Lead Initiative co-chair Lynda Decker presents at group events. **ABOVE** A local chapter meets in Denver, Colorado. Photos courtesy AIGA.



we start losing people,” Decker says.

All of these factors contribute to a workplace where the leadership skews male. That, in turn, means that there are relatively few women mentors available to help guide and inspire young female creative professionals, further hampering their career prospects.

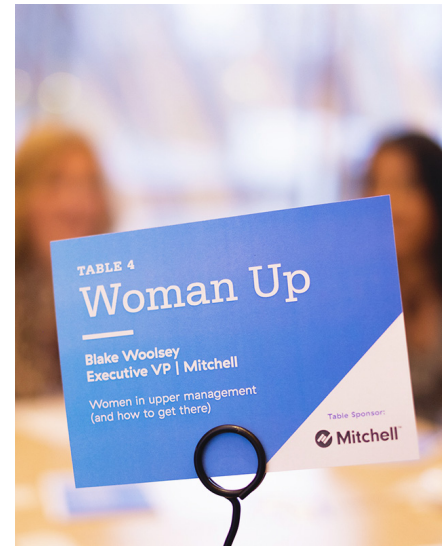
“You need to be able to see that there are women directors to even think that’s an option for you,” says Margaret Dean, president of the nonprofit organization Women in Animation (WIA; [womeninanimation.org](http://womeninanimation.org)) and general manager of Stoopid Buddy Stoodios, a Southern California production company that specializes in stop-motion films. Dean spoke at SVA last October about gender bias and the difficulties of pursuing a career as an animation director at an event jointly hosted by the WIA New York Chapter and SVA’s WIA Student Chapter.

This vicious circle—gender bias prevents women from rising to the top, and a lack of women at the top reinforces gender bias—contributes to sexual harassment. A recent article in *Harvard Business Review* cites voluminous research demonstrating that harassment flourishes in workplaces where men dominate management and women have little power, but is less likely in industries where women are well represented in core jobs.

“Assault is not really separate from all of these other issues,” Decker says. “What it boils down to is that there are serious issues of dignity and respect for women in the workplace, from feeling

To help its members identify implicit biases and raise awareness of gender disparities, AIGA worked with Disrupt Design to develop its Gender Equity Toolkit. Photos courtesy AIGA.





that women aren't deserving of equal pay to the rest of it."

The bottom line: Moving more women into leadership roles is essential to combating sexual misconduct. For their part, WLI recently launched a new initiative to double the number of female designers in leadership positions to 22% over the next two years, and will soon unveil a new digital platform devoted to women's issues. WIA, meanwhile, maintains a members-only job board and is calling on independent animation studios to increase the number of women in creative roles to 50% by 2025. And both organizations' local chapters organize workshops, mentoring programs and networking opportunities for their members.

Neither group expects harassment or inequity in their industry to disappear anytime soon. But both hope that the current focus on sexual misconduct and abuse will raise awareness of the less overt gender bias that makes hostile work environments possible, ultimately transforming the way women are regarded in the workplace—a shift that is already well under way, Dean says.

"I don't believe we'll ever go back to the way things were. There's been too much cultural change already." \*

**ALEXANDER GELFAND** has written for *The Economist*, *The New York Times* and *Wired*, among other publications.

Local AIGA chapters around the country offer workshops, networking and mentoring events as part of the organization's Women Lead Initiative. Photos courtesy AIGA.

## MORE RESOURCES

The demand for gender parity and the end of sexual harassment in the arts is a central tenet of a growing number of professional women's organizations as well as more community-based alliances. From co-working spaces to nationwide networks, the following resources champion the advancement of women in the art world and beyond. [Emma Drew]

**Women in Photography**, founded by Amy Elkins (BFA 2007 Photography) and Cara Phillips, showcases and supports the work of female lens-based artists. An internet-based project, Women in Photography maintains a grant and mentorship program, a list of resources pointing to other women-focused opportunities and publications, and a running tally of women's solo exhibitions at major arts institutions.

▀ [wipnyc.org](http://wipnyc.org)

**POWarts**, the Professional Organization for Women in the Arts, organizes events and cultivates mentoring opportunities that support the professional lives of women in the art world; last season's roster included a talk by legal professionals on confronting sexual harassment and a series addressing representation, diversity and feminism in the arts. POWarts is geared toward museum, auction house, and nonprofit professionals, gallerists, academics and educators, art advisers and owners of art-related businesses. Most events are not member-exclusive.

▀ [powarts.org](http://powarts.org)

**New Women Space** is a community event space in Brooklyn whose programming is led by self-identified women and femme, queer, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. They offer rental rates on a sliding scale

and host art exhibitions and support groups as well as evenings of financial vision-boarding, zine making and workshops on self care.

▀ [newwomenspace.com](http://newwomenspace.com)

**The Wing** is a women's social club that offers dedicated spaces in New York City (and soon, Washington, D.C.) for co-working and connecting. Membership (\$215 – \$250 per month) is required but the amenities are top-notch—illustrator Joana Avillez (MFA 2012 Illustration as Visual Essay) designed the wallpaper at the inaugural location, in Manhattan's Flatiron District—and programming thus far has included events like Negotiating 101 and an exclusive conversation with U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand.

▀ [the-wing.com](http://the-wing.com)

**Modern Alliance**, founded in 2017 by Emmy Award-winning writer Kater Gordon, aims to unite people and organizations across industries to put an end to sexual abuse and harassment. A growing coalition of organizations and creatives working together to fund research, produce original content and champion platforms that empower and educate, it acts as a resource as well as a way for creators, designers and technologists to join the movement.

▀ [modernalliance.com](http://modernalliance.com)