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Venice International Film Festival is paying lip service to its pledge on gender transparency

Dina Iordanova

Things are really bad for women filmmakers at the 76th Venice International Film Festival with its poor record on female representation. Of the 21 films in competition, only two are directed by women. The appointment of the female Argentinian director, [Lucrecia Martel](#), as jury president is a step in the right direction but she cannot solve the issue alone – especially when some of her views on female-only quotas [appear to be ignored by the men in charge](#).

In part, the entertainment media are to blame. It was widely reported that Venice had [signed up to the gender parity pledge](#), known as [5050 by 2020](#) – but only a few reported that this was a modified version, and no report so far has scrutinised how and if the pledges are being met.

Also, there has been a huge outcry about the under-representation of women directors. But then it stops and things move on to the usual reporting on the great films in competition – by men.



Director of the Venice International Film Festival Alberto Barbera with festival president Paolo Baratta in 2017. [EPA/CLAUDIO](#)

A modified pledge

Overall, Venice's record on women is dismal. The Golden Lion award has been given [70 times so far](#) – but while 62 male directors have won it (some twice), only four women have. Among the 11 Italians who have won the Golden Lion, not one was female.

Last year, the festival only included [one female-made film in competition](#) (Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale*). Controversy ensued, so the festival reluctantly followed in the footsteps of Cannes and signed up to the gender parity pledge – but not before amending it.

The original pledge called for full [statistics-based transparency](#) on the submissions, for dissection of the gender bias in programming, and for instituting strategies that would lead to the dismantling of male-dominated power structures. But Venice [amended all three pledges](#)

and only committed to general talk of “transparency” related to film selection, programmers and management.

Speaking at the time, [festival president Paolo Baratta](#) said there were “fundamental differences to be taken into account” and as such the Venice version of the pledge uses wording that suggests the festival needs to continue its practices, implying that it is already making efforts to reach gender parity and that fundamentally the problem is not with the event itself. “We are ahead, what we have been doing up to now is a starting point,” he commented.

Looking at the state of things a year later, it does not appear that even the amended pledges have really been kept. Unchanged from last year, the festival is still governed exclusively by men. Assisted by three male board members, the president and general director have been in position since 2008 and the [artistic director, Alberto Barbera](#), since 2012.

According to Barbera, this is not a problem as [75% of its employees are women](#). The festival seems to believe it has done a lot to improve gender balance.

As to the pledge for transparency on selection committees, nothing is available on the festival website on this matter. Unlike other festivals that regularly publish information on their selectors or have profiles available online (Rotterdam, Berlinale, Locarno), Venice only lists regulations and gives generic email contacts. No names. All it says [regarding selection](#) of the films submitted is that the festival director will be “assisted by his staff of experts, as well as by a group of correspondents and international consultants”.

The festival also pledged to hold a “gender seminar”. After an extensive search, one finds an event on “[gender equality and inclusivity](#)” scheduled in September. But there is no

information on who is on it – just sponsors. If the festival is serious about the seminar, it could have commissioned participants and reports in advance and publicised accordingly.

Read more: [Cannes is not a film festival – it's a club for insiders](#)

The worst is, of course, the absence of female-made films. Two out of 21 titles in competition are by women. Compare that to seven out of 16 films in competition at [Berlinale in 2019](#). According to the pledge, there was meant to be “transparency about film selection”. Barbera apparently believes he has met it by disclosing that about [24% of submitted films](#) were by female directors.

But he did not explain why and how this 24% has shrunk down to 12% in the final competition cut. Had the gender distribution of the submission been replicated, about five films by women would have ended up in competition. As things stand, three extra slots have gone to films directed by men. There is no particular transparency here.

Barbera, as the only identifiable selector, is seemingly opposed to any quotas for women. “[The quality of individual films](#)” is the only possible criterion. Plus, women should not feel left out – some of the films in competition, he pointed out, “[reveal a new sensibility geared toward the feminine universe](#)” – even if they are directed by men. Why would women directors bother making films when men already address “the female condition”?

An exclusive club...for men

The Venice International Film Festival is nowhere near to accepting change. Change would mean destroying its own model, built on male privilege in the world of cinema and perfected over nearly 80 years of existence, operating like [an exclusive club](#). Programming for its main competition is not done through a submission process, which it runs but does not rely on.

It is done by working with a cohort of “auteurs” who happen to be predominantly male. Of the [19 male directors in competition](#), all but four are known entities. At least 15 of them already have Venice pedigree and include Todd Phillips (Joker), Roman Polanski (An Officer and a Spy), Stephen Soderbergh (The Laundromat) and Yonfan (No. 7 Cherry Lane). Their films have featured at various strands of the festival and one (Roy Anderson) is a past winner of the Golden Lion.

Some of the others were nominated or received secondary other awards. Quite a few of these directors are famous worldwide, in Europe or in their respective countries. Their films spell “quality” by default – as the “quality” Barbera means is somehow a characteristic of their personality. Some – like Roman Polanski – possess the “quality” of keeping the world media’s attention on the festival, through notoriety.

Venice cannot possibly say it is transparent with such a selection process. Yes, it formally welcomes submissions by women and it does have women on staff. But the true programming for the festival is done by male selectors schmoozing with the established “auteurs” who the festival continuously works with. The only thing I wonder is why women directors bother submitting their films in the first place?