

Top 50 Employers

'Look out lads' — impact of women in the arts grows

Tradition-breaking pioneers have made great strides but more are needed, says Sandra White

The UK's creative industries are worth £71.4 billion to the economy, according to statistics from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Women are an important part in that story, but they also play a leading role in tackling equality and other social issues.

Debbie Taylor, founder of *Msllexia*, a magazine for women writers, says: "I think all participation in the arts creates a social good, principally because the arts promotes a nonmaterialist outlook — being

and doing, rather than buying and consuming."

As far as outcomes go, however, Taylor says that while women are far more likely than men to attend writing courses and literary events, and to read, buy and borrow books, "we are still devoting a whole working day a week more than men to unpaid domestic and care work. And, we are still far less likely than men to submit our writing for publication".

The good news is that women are gaining ground, she says. "One Hilary Mantel, one Carol Ann Duffy and one Lucy Prebble don't make a summer — but look out lads, we're galloping up in the outside lane."

Madonna Baptiste, a TV drama executive, agrees. "I think there are positive signs for women in TV, both in front of and behind the camera."

"There are strong lead roles, such as Gillian Anderson in *The Fall*, Maxine Peake in *Silk*, Olivia Coleman in *Broadchurch* and Keeley Hawes in *Line of Duty*, and there are brilliantly creative women among all the broadcasters and running independent



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production companies. But we need more female directors, writers and directors of photography, as well as more diversity."

Meanwhile, Susan Fisher Sterling, director of the **National Museum of Women in the Arts** (NMWA) in Washington DC, says its London-based group, the UK Friends of NMWA, has had a positive impact

Merryn, by Barbara Hepworth, on display at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington

through its work on behalf of women in the arts. While the NMWA is the only major museum in the world solely dedicated to celebrating women in the visual, performing and literary arts, she says the UK can be proud of institutions, which are "paying real attention to women artists".

"Some of the people I've met who are making a difference include Iwona Blazwick (Whitechapel Gallery), Margot Heller (South London Gallery), Jenni Lomax (Camden Arts Centre), Alison Myners (ICA), and Sheena Wagstaff when she was at Tate Modern."

Making a difference can also include creating alternatives. Artist Louise Ashcroft studied sculpture at the Royal College of Art for a year but found it "too expensive and too corporately run to be a really great place to learn".

"In 2010 I set up AltMFA — an alternative (unaccredited) peer-led art MA course — with some friends. We could not afford to do art MAs at the time. We wanted to share ideas and learn and get feedback on our work, so we formed our own master's course."

"There are almost as many men as women [in AltMFA], but I think that this grassroots approach is a legacy of the DIY approach of feminists, and also other historically marginalised groups such as immigrant and queer communities. Women have been forced to be pioneering and take things into their own hands throughout history, because society did not always encourage them to deviate from socially accepted roles."

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