

Australia's major dance companies need to step up on gender equality

Written by Andrew Westle, Assistant researcher and PhD candidate, La Trobe University

The dance sector in Australia has a gender equality problem. While nearly [70% of people working in the industry](#) identify as female, there is a significant gender gap in programming and leadership at the major dance companies.

A report released this week, [Turning Pointe](#), by Andrew Westle, looked at the five big dance companies that receive the bulk of public funding – the Australian Ballet, Queensland Ballet, West Australian Ballet, Bangarra Dance Theatre and Sydney Dance Company. All the artistic directors at these companies are men. Between 2011 and 2017, women choreographed only 13% of full-length works and 24% of shorter works. Only 26% of Australian premieres were from women.

In the small-to-medium sector, which is significantly underfunded and under-resourced compared to the bigger companies, women are faring far better. Overall, in this part of the sector, women choreographed 59% of works.

Key recommendations of the report include:

- bringing in quotas as a funding requirement
- increasing support for child care
- increasing mentoring, particularly around the skills required to be an artistic director
- getting audiences to become advocates for equality.

The quota idea is based on the model introduced by [Screen NSW](#) in response to a [2015 report on gender balance in the film industry](#). Within a year of Screen NSW introducing these measures, significantly more grant applications had women as key creatives.

Dance, like other creative industries, has not been immune to revelations of [gender discrimination and harassment](#) in recent years. However, these [discussions](#) have happened primarily

overseas

Andrew Westle conducted interviews with 23 men and women working in the sector. Although the sector may not have appeared to have gender equality in creative leadership on the agenda, the interviews revealed that individuals are very much aware of the issues.

Some of the issues people talked about were more unique to dance, such as men being given increased support and attention to improve lower participation numbers. Others reflected iniquities in wider society, such as the challenges of balancing childcare responsibility alongside a career — particularly a career that involves travel, evening performances and odd hours.

In the small-to-medium and independent dance sectors, these barriers to participation are linked directly to income. Women reported that they are spending their whole contract fee on child care. Here, the major companies are ahead of the curve, with some offering well resourced and supported maternity leave structures.

Nevertheless, the disparity in support across the whole of the sector is concerning. Interviewees offered examples where companies blatantly contravened [Australian legislation](#). Yet women felt powerless to act, as they feared they would not get a second opportunity to choreograph, direct, or perform.

Women interviewees indicated that confidence was a trait that was fostered in men, but that a confident woman was not given the same respect. Men were said to pursue more opportunities as a result of this confidence. The impact of increased confidence and opportunities as training and emerging artists can arguably be traced to leadership later on in their careers.

Gender equality in creative leadership has recently, and importantly, been placed on the agenda in [film](#), [music](#), [theatre](#) and [visual arts](#). The gender imbalance in dance should be quickly redressed.

Gender equality should not be seen as a hindrance, but as an opportunity to strengthen the

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sector and celebrate its diversity. Dance is a tool for storytelling, and it should matter to us whose stories are being told on our stages.

Andrew Westle submitted a draft of this report for a MFA (Cultural Leadership) at NIDA. The Delving into Dance podcast is run by Andrew Westle and has some project funding from Creative Victoria.

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