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Sexism on Show
Has gender equality in photography moved on from the 1970s?
### by Emma Campbell

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In April of this year the *British Journal of Photography* (BJP) published a 'Women Only' issue featuring women photographers, projects run by women and conversations about the paucity of women in photography. It touched lightly on the reasons behind this disparity and briefly, in an almost embarrassed tone, highlighted the magazine's own past sexism, showing some of the easier to digest sexualised advertising that had filled its pages in the past.

But why now? The role of women in photography has become a vital issue once again, tallying with wider public discussions about women's involvement in other arenas. A conference at the Tate Gallery *Fast Forward: Women and Photography then and now* has also taken place this year (part of a larger research project at the University College of the Arts, Farnham). Other initiatives include Firecracker, the European women photographers project, started by Fiona Rogers, a Magnum employee, to showcase women's work. As was highlighted in *Source 76* women now make up a majority of the photography curators in Ireland and the UK (62%). Graduating photography students are now more likely to be women than men, but are these moves beyond equal participation reflected in the wider photographic culture? Are questions around gender in photography redundant? To get some answers to these questions we have surveyed the programmes of a selection of photography institutions to find out the historical and contemporary participation of women photographers. These include the magazines *Creative Camera* and the *BJP*, the galleries Belfast Exposed, Impressions, Open Eye, the Photographers' Gallery and Gallery of Photography. The available information – either supplied by the galleries or taken from library collections of magazines – covers the period from 1970 onwards (depending on the history of the organisation).

Taken by decade, in the 1970s women made up 18% of the photographers published in *Creative Camera*, 13% of the exhibition programmes of the galleries and just 8% of the work published in the *BJP*. Since the 1970s things have improved but are still well short of parity. In the last four and a half years women have made up only 30% of the exhibitions in the galleries and, notwithstanding their 'Women Only' issue, 28% of the work in the *BJP*.

Percentage of women in exhibition programmes from 1970s – 2010s
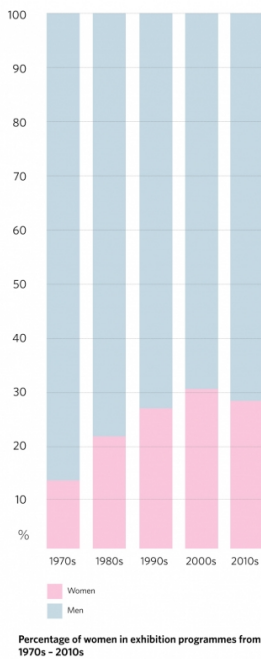
The graphs show the percentage of exhibitions or portfolios made up of women's photography and the number of exhibitions that made up this percentage. The number of exhibitions in a decade is only shown if the figures for that period are complete, so comparisons can be made across decades and between galleries.

Creative Camera and the *BJP* make useful case studies as they have both been influential publications throughout this period in British photographic history and represent different sectors of the photography industry. *Creative Camera* was identified as the 'independent' and therefore more progressive forum for photography in the UK. In the 1980s 22% of its portfolio pages were made up of work by women, a gradual increase on the previous decade. Moving on from *Creative Camera* to the *BJP* – long established as an industry magazine, for commercial professionals and technically proficient amateurs – it becomes clear how radical *Creative Camera* was. It is immediately apparent that the *BJP* of the 80s was for male audiences. Women were regularly featured as sex-objects in both the editorial and advertising (similar to contemporary 'technical'

magazines) ensuring that women practitioners would not feel relevant or welcome as producers. This must go some way to explaining why throughout the 80s women photographers made up only 10% of the portfolios in the magazine.
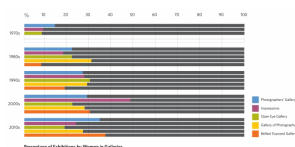
The figures record the number of exhibitions rather than the number of participants. For example a group show of 3 men and 2 women would be recorded as 0.4 of a women's exhibition.

An editorial comment from May 1997, in response to being asked why they feature so few women states: *"To go back to the original point about paucity of women photographers featured in BJP, it really is quite simple. BJP reflects the reality, and, for whatever reasons, far fewer women pursue a career in professional photography than men... We are not going to positively discriminate and publish inferior work. What would be the point of that? We are on the look out for good photography, and as they say: age, colour and sex immaterial."* This Olympian attitude is contradicted by the facts, if *Creative Camera* can include more than double the number of women then it isn't just a reflection of the world at the time.

This is not to say that the poor representation of women in the *BJP* was exclusively a consequence of the sexist attitudes of the editors. Work being made by women was undoubtedly harder to find in the UK and Ireland than it is today because not as much was being made (incidentally much of the earliest women's work shown was by French, American or German photographers). There were many other obstacles to women photographers including limited access to photographic equipment, training and education. The 70s and 80s saw a huge increase in the uptake of further education by middle and working class women and men, which in turn influenced the type of work produced. There is also a perception of photography as a 'male' profession; even today many newsagents still sell their photography magazines in the 'men's section'.
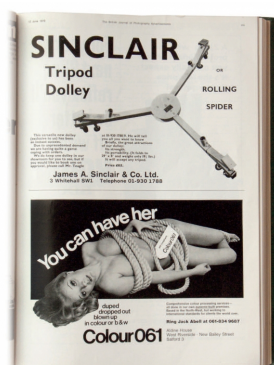
A good comparison here is the exhibition histories of the photography galleries surveyed. As it happens, many of these galleries have women curators or directors but their record of showing women is close to that of *Creative Camera* (they also showed 22% women in the 1980s). The percentage of gallery exhibitions that involve women also only tells part of the story. Ironically, as women have made up a higher proportion of the work shown, galleries have started to show less

work; they may have more of the pie, but the pie is getting smaller. The 119 exhibitions of women's photographs that were exhibited from 2000-2010 were 31% of the total exhibitions held that year but that is only a marginal increase on the 113 exhibitions in the 1980s.

Another important factor must be the various initiatives that have been taken to increase the participation of women in photography such as the 1988 Spectrum Women's Photography Festival, the 1994 Signals Photography Festival and many others besides. This began to mean photography was not only seen as being produced differently by women but also began to be regarded more seriously. This higher regard then allowed greater inclusion of women's work in galleries and publications, but at an infuriatingly slow pace of progress. To return to the question of why there is an interest in women's photography today. Perhaps it is due to an awareness of the ongoing problem? Since 2010 the galleries surveyed have included women in 30% of their shows. This may be an improvement on the 1970s but it is actually less than the previous decade (2000-2010) when, on average, women made up 31% of the same galleries' exhibition programmes. The problem of the poor representation of women photographers has not been solved and is in danger of getting worse. It will take a lot more work by photographers, educators, curators, publishers and editors to redress the balance.

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