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GENDERED TRAJECTORIES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN AND ANIMATION: REASSESSING THE ROLE AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY IN GHANA

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Abstract

Despite increasing female participation in creative disciplines globally, gender disparity remains entrenched within Ghana's graphic design and animation industries. This study examines the socio-cultural, institutional, and professional barriers that limit women's advancement in these fields, focusing on practitioners in Accra and Winneba. Drawing on qualitative interviews and ethnographic reflections, the research analyses how women navigate structural and cultural constraints and the strategies they employ to assert creative agency. Findings highlight systemic underrepresentation, workplace discrimination and a lack of mentorship as persistent obstacles to gender equity. The study argues for inclusive policies, gender-sensitive leadership development and mentorship initiatives as critical pathways toward a more equitable and representative design ecosystem in Ghana.

Keywords: Gender equity, creative industries, graphic design, animation, Ghana, qualitative research, mentorship, representation.

1. Introduction

Women constitute a slight majority of the global population, yet their representation and impact across various sectors often fall short of their demographic and intellectual potential (Elo & Kyngäs, 2013). In the creative industries, fields characterised by innovation, symbolic production, and cultural influence, women have increasingly assumed creative and managerial roles. Nevertheless, persistent disparities in visibility, recognition, and leadership continue to shape their professional experiences. Within the domain of graphic design and animation, this underrepresentation is particularly salient in the Ghanaian context. While international trends indicate that women earn a significant proportion of degrees in graphic design and animation, exceeding 60% in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), this educational attainment has not translated into equivalent levels of professional prominence or industry leadership in Ghana. The absence of women in high-profile design roles and industry

discourse reflects both systemic barriers and a broader cultural tendency that marginalises women's creative contributions.

The discourse surrounding gender equity in design and animation has often been fragmented, marked by isolated initiatives rather than sustained critical engagement (Ezumah, 2017). Despite its rhetorical commitment to progress and experimentation, design and animation as disciplines have not been immune to the reproduction of gendered power relations. Institutional mechanisms such as the composition of international design juries, editorial boards and professional associations continue to reflect masculinised hierarchies, thereby limiting women's influence and visibility in the field.

In Ghana, the gender imbalance is particularly evident in both academic and professional spaces. A notable example is the Department of Graphic Design at the University of Education, Winneba, where only one female lecturer serves among seventeen male counterparts. Such disproportionate representation can be discouraging for aspiring female designers and animators, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and thereby perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation. Additional barriers include the lack of mentorship opportunities, limited access to specialised training and professional networks, as well as societal expectations that dissuade women from pursuing creative or technologically oriented careers. Moreover, the predominance of men in leadership and decision-making roles in the industry constrains opportunities for women to exert influence or ascend to senior positions.

The consequences of these systemic inequities are multifaceted: they limit gender diversity and creative plurality, while also hindering the development of a more inclusive and representative visual culture in Ghana. Addressing these challenges, this study investigates the socio-cultural, institutional and professional barriers that women encounter in the graphic design and animation sectors in Accra and Winneba, while also exploring the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges in ways that can inform equitable policy and practice within Ghana's creative industries.

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1 Low Representation of Females in the Graphic Design Industry in Ghana
The graphic design and animation industries in Ghana, mirroring global trends, have long been characterised by male dominance. Despite a growing number of women pursuing tertiary education in creative disciplines, their transition into and visibility within the professional graphic design and animation landscapes remain disproportionately low. This literature review examines the multifaceted factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women in this creative industry and outlines the challenges they face throughout their professional journeys.

2.2 Societal and Cultural Perceptions
A major barrier to female participation in graphic design and animation stems from entrenched societal and cultural norms. Ghanaian society traditionally promotes gender roles that position women in professions deemed "feminine," such as teaching, nursing, and clerical work (Adu-Gyamfi & Asante, 2020). In contrast, careers requiring technical proficiency such as animation and graphic design, are perceived as masculine domains, often creating inhospitable environments for aspiring female animators and designers (Owusu & Baah, 2019). Additionally, parental expectations and community perceptions further restrict women's choices. Many parents actively discourage their daughters from pursuing careers in animation and graphic design due to perceived instability and limited employment opportunities (Nyarko, 2021). As a result, enrollment of women in graphic design and animation programmes remains low, further reducing their presence in the professional sphere.

2.3 Educational and Institutional Barriers
Although some women express interest in animation and graphic design at the tertiary level, institutional structures and practices often inhibit their full engagement. Research indicates that female students in animation and graphic design programmes frequently experience isolation and a lack of mentorship from female professionals (Mensah & Amankwah, 2022). This absence of role models makes it difficult for young women to envision viable career pathways within these fields. Moreover, institutional practices may subtly reinforce gender bias. In some academic settings, male students

receive more attention and encouragement from instructors, inadvertently positioning them as more competent or promising (Adu-Gyamfi & Asante, 2020). Such disparities contribute to reduced confidence, higher dropout rates among female students, and an overall decline in female retention in design programmes.

2.4 Workplace Discrimination and Gender Bias

Gender disparities persist beyond the classroom and into professional practice. Hiring practices in design and animation firms often favour male applicants, with employers harbouring assumptions that men possess superior technical or creative abilities (Owusu & Baah, 2019). Female animators and graphic designers who secure employment frequently encounter discrimination in the form of unequal pay, exclusion from leadership tracks, and limited access to high-profile projects (Asiedu, 2023). Furthermore, workplace cultures often remain inflexible and unaccommodating to women, especially those managing familial obligations. The demanding nature of animation and graphic design, characterised by long hours, tight deadlines, and erratic schedules, can create additional challenges for women without adequate support systems or family-friendly workplace policies (Nyarko, 2021).

2.5 Lack of Female Role Models and Mentorship

Mentorship and professional networks are critical to career progression in male-dominated fields (Sanders & VanLaan, 2006). Their absence in Ghana's design industry perpetuates exclusion and stagnation for women (UNESCO, 2019). Thus, the visibility of women in leadership positions within Ghana's animation and graphic design sector remains limited, contributing to a cyclical lack of representation. Aspiring female designers and animators often find it difficult to identify mentors or professional networks that support their development (Mensah & Amankwah, 2022). The industry's male-dominated networks can be exclusionary, further constraining access to collaborations, promotions, and recognition.

Numerous studies emphasise the critical role of mentorship and professional networks in advancing women's careers in male-dominated sectors (Asiedu, 2023). Nevertheless, such initiatives remain scarce in the Ghanaian context, depriving many women of the guidance necessary to navigate and thrive within the profession.

2.6 Financial Constraints and Limited Access to Resources

Graphic design and animation are resource-intensive fields, requiring access to costly software, equipment, and continuous skill development. Women, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, often face financial barriers that impede their entry and progress in the industry (Owusu & Baah, 2019). In contrast, male counterparts may benefit from informal training opportunities or family support that mitigate such constraints. The digital divide, coupled with limited institutional support, further exacerbates these challenges.

2.7 Challenges Faced by Women in the Industry

Women in Ghana's graphic design and animation industries face numerous obstacles that limit their professional growth and long-term participation. One of the most pressing challenges is the limited career advancement opportunities available to them. Gender-based biases in promotions and leadership appointments often hinder upward mobility, with senior positions predominantly occupied by men. This imbalance is reinforced by the restricted networking opportunities accessible to female professionals, making it more difficult for them to advance to influential roles within the industry (Adu-Gyamfi & Asante, 2020).

Another significant issue concerns the struggle to maintain a work-life balance. The profession's demanding hours and unpredictable schedules pose considerable difficulties for women who must manage both professional responsibilities and domestic roles. In the absence of flexible work arrangements or supportive workplace environments, many women find sustained participation in these fields unsustainable, which contributes to attrition over time (Nyarko, 2021). The gender pay gap further compounds these challenges. Research indicates that women in the creative sector often earn significantly less than their male counterparts for equivalent work. This disparity undermines morale and creates a sense of devaluation that discourages women from remaining in the industry. The lack of

transparency in compensation practices also makes it difficult for women to advocate for fair remuneration, further entrenching wage inequality (Asiedu, 2023).

Workplace misconduct, including sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination, presents another formidable barrier. Female designers and animators frequently report experiences of harassment, yet the absence of robust workplace policies and enforcement mechanisms exacerbates this issue. Such hostile environments compromise productivity, limit professional growth, and deter women from pursuing long-term careers in the industry (Mensah & Amankwah, 2022). A further challenge lies in the lack of recognition and institutional support. Women's contributions to graphic design and animation often go unacknowledged, with industry accolades, media coverage, and professional visibility disproportionately favoring men. This lack of recognition not only marginalises women but also restricts their access to career development opportunities and leadership roles (Owusu & Baah, 2019).

Taken together, these challenges highlight the persistent underrepresentation of women in Ghana's creative sector, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, educational, institutional, and economic factors. Societal norms, gender biases, unequal access to resources, and a dearth of mentorship and support systems collectively impede women's full participation and advancement in the field. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach, including policy reforms, institutional commitments to gender equity, the establishment of mentorship programs, and workplace practices that promote inclusivity and work-life balance. Without such targeted interventions, the gender gap in Ghana's animation and graphic design industry is likely to persist, limiting both diversity and the innovation necessary for the sector's sustainable growth.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which was most appropriate for capturing the lived experiences of women in Ghana's graphic design and animation industries. Qualitative inquiry enables an in-depth exploration of how individuals make meaning of their social and professional realities, and it is particularly suited for examining issues of marginalisation, gender, and power (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Anchored in feminist epistemologies that emphasise centering marginalised voices and interrogating dominant structures of knowledge (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2007), the study sought to provide a platform for female practitioners whose perspectives are often underrepresented in both academic discourse and industry narratives. In line with this orientation, a phenomenological approach was employed to illuminate the socio-cultural, institutional, and professional challenges women encounter in the industry, as well as the strategies they employ to assert creative agency. This design ensured that women's narratives were not merely descriptive but also analytically connected to broader questions of equity and representation within Ghana's creative economy.

Participants for the study were five women working in the graphic design and animation industries in Ghana, with a focus on Accra and Winneba as creative hubs. Purposive sampling was used to identify women with direct experience in the field, ensuring that participants could provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon under study. Selection criteria included active professional engagement in design or animation, willingness to reflect on personal and professional experiences, and availability to participate in extended interviews. This sampling strategy was justified by the need to foreground depth over breadth in qualitative research, allowing for nuanced and situated accounts of women's trajectories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews provided flexibility to probe deeper into emergent themes while maintaining consistency across participants. Questions focused on career pathways, professional challenges, workplace experiences, mentorship, recognition, and strategies for navigating barriers. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data were analysed thematically, by identifying patterns of responses across participants' narratives while allowing space for unique and context-specific insights. Feminist standpoint theory guided the interpretation, emphasising how women's positionalities shape their professional realities and how

systemic inequalities manifest in their lived experiences. Themes that emerged from the data included limited career advancement opportunities, work-life balance struggles, gender pay disparities, sexual harassment and workplace misconduct, and lack of recognition and institutional support.

Ethical protocols were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality was assured by anonymising names and professional affiliations in the reporting of findings. Participation was voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Sensitive issues such as workplace discrimination and harassment were handled with empathy and respect, ensuring that participants felt safe in sharing their experiences. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking were employed, allowing participants to review and verify transcripts and interpretations of their narratives. Triangulation was achieved through the combination of interviews and questionnaires, which strengthened the robustness of the findings. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the research process, with the researcher acknowledging personal biases and positionality in relation to the study context.

4. Data Presentation of Data

As already stated, the data analysis employed an inductive thematic approach to organise and interpret responses. Interviews were conducted both verbally and electronically, guided by a structured interview format. This allowed for the systematic collection of information on participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges as women in a male-dominated creative industry. The themes emerging from the responses are presented below:

4.1 The Meaning of Creativity

Respondents defined creativity as a deeply personal and expressive process. One participant described it as a reflection of self, while another emphasised the freedom to transform internal ideas into visible outcomes. A recurring sentiment was that creativity involves uniqueness, self-expression, and nonconformity. Participants (P) rejected rigid definitions of creativity, asserting its subjective and individual nature. The following are examples of their responses.

> *I don't think creativity has just one definition. For me, it's about how I make meaning and express myself in ways that feel true to me.* (P1)

Another participant said this:

> *Creativity is different for everyone. What works for me might not work for the next person, and that's the beauty of it. In my practice, I see creativity not as a fixed concept but as a flexible tool for exploration and problem-solving, shaped by individual perspective. Nobody can define creativity for me. It's something I carry within myself, my own way of expressing, exploring and finding solutions.* (P2)

This ascertains that creativity was seen as an essential tool for self-expression, exploration, and problem-solving.

4.2 Inspiration for Entering the Field

The motivations for entering graphic design and animation varied across respondents. Influences included early exposure to visual media, personal passion for art, curiosity about design processes, and therapeutic engagement with traditional and digital art forms. One participant highlighted the societal function of visual communication, while another traced her journey from childhood fascination with animated characters to a professional career in the following words:

> *Design is not just about making things look nice; it's how we speak to society, how we educate and influence people without words. Visual communication carries power because it shapes how communities see themselves and understand issues.* (p3)

> *I used to sit for hours watching animated characters and sketching them.*
> *That early excitement never left me, and it's what pushed me into*
> *animation as a profession. From childhood, I was fascinated by cartoons.*
> *Over time, that passion grew into a career because I wanted to create the*
> *same magic for others. (p4)*

These inspirations reveal that women are drawn to the field by both internal passions and external stimuli.

4.3 Experiences in a Male-Dominated Industry

Respondents shared mixed experiences working in a male-dominated industry. While some encountered supportive male colleagues, others reported marginalisation, "mansplaining," and skepticism about their capabilities. A common theme was the need to prove themselves to gain credibility constantly. The majority of the respondents rejected the notion of being overtly sidelined, attributing challenges instead to societal perceptions and implicit bias.

One, for instance, had this to say:

> *It's not that we're pushed out directly, but people often assume*
> *women can't handle the technical side. That perception is the real*
> *barrier. "I don't feel deliberately excluded, but there are subtle*
> *biases such as like people being surprised I'm the lead animator.*
> (R1)

Despite these barriers, respondents showed resilience and adaptability in asserting their place within the industry.

4.4 Challenges and Coping Strategies

Major challenges included limited access to high-profile opportunities, gender-based assumptions, familial disapproval, and work-life balance issues. Some respondents described being denied commissions or recognition, while others struggled to gain family support for their career choices. Like one respondent intimated:

> *Sometimes you don't get the job, not because your work isn't good, but because*
> *they believe a man will deliver better. I've had my designs used without credit;*
> *it's like being invisible in your own field. My family didn't understand at first.*
> *They kept asking why I didn't choose teaching or nursing instead of animation."*

Coping strategies included leveraging social media for visibility, building strong portfolios, pursuing continuous education, and maintaining perseverance.

4.5 Equal Opportunity and Gender Disparities

Most respondents felt they did not receive the same career advancement opportunities as their male colleagues. They cited instances of being overlooked despite equal competence, with one participant noting,

> *No matter how competent you are, sometimes clients just don't see you as*
> *the first option because you're a woman.*

Some respondents acknowledged that institutional settings, such as schools or structured organisations, offered more equitable treatment than the broader industry. As another reflected,

> *In my workplace, I feel treated fairly, but once you step outside into the*
> *wider industry, the bias becomes very clear.*

While a few respondents described supportive work environments, the consensus was that systemic gender biases often hinder women's professional advancement. The perception that women must outperform male peers to gain similar recognition was widespread.

4.6 Thoughts of Giving Up and Motivation to Persist

While some respondents admitted to moments of self-doubt and fatigue, none had given up on their careers. Motivation came from personal passion, family responsibilities, and the desire to serve as a role model. One respondent explained:

> *Sometimes I feel exhausted, but when I remember why I started, I find the strength to keep going.*

Another cited her child as the primary reason to continue, stating:

> *When I think of my daughter, I know I cannot stop. I want her to see that women can make it here.*

Others emphasised the responsibility they felt toward inspiring young women in the field, with one participant remarking:

> *If I stop now, what message am I sending to the younger ones who look up to me?*

Breaks were sometimes necessary to recover from pressure, yet the collective sentiment was that the desire to overcome adversity and achieve career goals remained a powerful motivator.

4.7 Advice for Aspiring Female Creatives

Respondents offered both practical and motivational advice to emerging female creatives. They stressed the importance of focus, resilience, continuous learning, and staying passionate. One participant advised:

> *Don't let the challenges distract you, focus on your craft and keep improving.*

Another echoed the value of persistence, stating:

> *You have to be consistent; if you keep showing up with quality work, people will eventually respect you.*

Women were encouraged to stay committed to their craft despite industry challenges and to actively seek growth opportunities, with one designer noting:

> *Always find ways to learn something new; growth is what keeps you relevant.*

They emphasised that skill, dedication, and professionalism could counteract biases and establish credibility in the field. Collectively, their insights reinforced the message that there is indeed space for women in the industry, but success requires determination and consistency.

5. Discussion of Findings

This study sheds light on the systemic gender inequities shaping the experiences of women in Ghana's graphic design and animation industries. The findings reveal that while women demonstrate resilience and creativity in sustaining their careers, they continue to face entrenched structural and cultural barriers. This discussion situates those findings within broader scholarly debates on gender and the creative industries, drawing thematic connections to barriers, resilience, and implications for policy and practice.

5.1 Barriers to Recognition and Advancement

A recurring theme is that women must exert greater effort than their male counterparts to gain recognition or career progression. Respondents noted being overlooked for commissions, promotions, and leadership opportunities despite demonstrating equal competence. One participant observed, "Sometimes you have to do twice as much as a man before they even notice you." This echoes with the critique by Rawsthorn (2008) that design history overwhelmingly privileges male figures, obscuring women's contributions. Similarly, Ezumah (2017) and Pratt (2019) highlight the "glass ceiling" effect in creative sectors globally, where competence is insufficient without extraordinary effort to counter gender stereotypes. Within Ghana's creative industries, this imbalance reinforces a cycle of underrepresentation that both mirrors and perpetuates historical exclusions.

5.2 Resilience and Agency

Despite such systemic obstacles, women in this study exhibited considerable resilience and agency. Many derived motivation from family responsibilities, personal passion, or a sense of social responsibility toward younger women. One participant explained, "When I think of my daughter, I know I cannot stop. I want her to see that women can make it here." This perspective reflects feminist theories of agency (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2007), which emphasise how marginalised groups resist exclusion by cultivating alternative strategies for empowerment. Respondents highlighted strategies such as continuous learning, self-branding, and networking as critical to sustaining careers. These findings align with Eikhof and Warhurst (2013), who argue that resilience in the cultural industries often involves negotiating precarious working conditions through self-directed strategies.

5.3 Variations in Experience

The study also revealed variations in women's professional experiences, suggesting that exclusion is neither monolithic nor absolute. Some participants found more equitable treatment within institutional spaces such as academia, where formal structures could support advancement. Others, however, described industry contexts where systemic biases remained pervasive. One respondent noted, "Even when the environment is good, you still feel you have to work harder than everyone else just to be seen as equal." This nuance reflects the argument by McRobbie (2016) that women's inclusion in creative industries often comes with conditions, requiring them to continuously prove legitimacy within masculinised professional cultures. Such findings underscore the importance of examining not only barriers but also the differentiated contexts in which women navigate their careers.

5.4 Implications for the Creative Industry

The consequences of these inequities extend beyond individual careers. When women are excluded or undervalued, the creative sector loses the diversity and plurality that underpin innovation. Studies such as Gill (2014) have argued that gender inequities in creative labour reproduce homogeneity, stifling experimentation and inclusivity. Respondents in this study reinforced this concern, while also offering practical advice for aspiring female creatives: persistence, professionalism, and continuous learning. Their insights suggest that systemic reform is essential. Transparent recruitment and promotion processes, structured mentorship programs, and platforms that amplify women's visibility are all necessary interventions. Without these reforms, Ghana's design and animation industries risk reproducing exclusionary practices that hinder both gender equity and sectoral growth.

To wind up, the findings highlight a paradox. Women in Ghana's graphic design and animation industries face entrenched structural barriers, yet they demonstrate resilience and agency that hold transformative potential for the sector. Their narratives affirm that equity in the creative arts is not simply a matter of justice but a prerequisite for innovation and sustainability.

6. Conclusions

This study explored the experiences of women in Ghana's graphic design and animation industries, highlighting how they conceptualise creativity, navigate professional barriers, and sustain their careers. Findings reveal that despite passion, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose, women remain constrained by gendered biases, limited mentorship, and systemic underrepresentation. Success often requires outperforming male peers to gain similar recognition, underscoring the inequities embedded in the industry.

To address these challenges, deliberate interventions are needed. Equal opportunities in recruitment, promotion, and leadership must be ensured, alongside transparent practices that counter bias. Platforms such as exhibitions and creative fairs should be expanded to enhance women's visibility, while targeted training programmes, boot camps, and structured mentorship can bridge skills gaps and strengthen career pathways. Academic institutions and professional associations also have a role to play in offering tailored career support and fostering partnerships with female-led firms. Empowering women in these creative sectors is not only a matter of equity but also of innovation and sustainability. A more inclusive design ecosystem will enrich Ghana's cultural landscape and strengthen its creative economy.

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