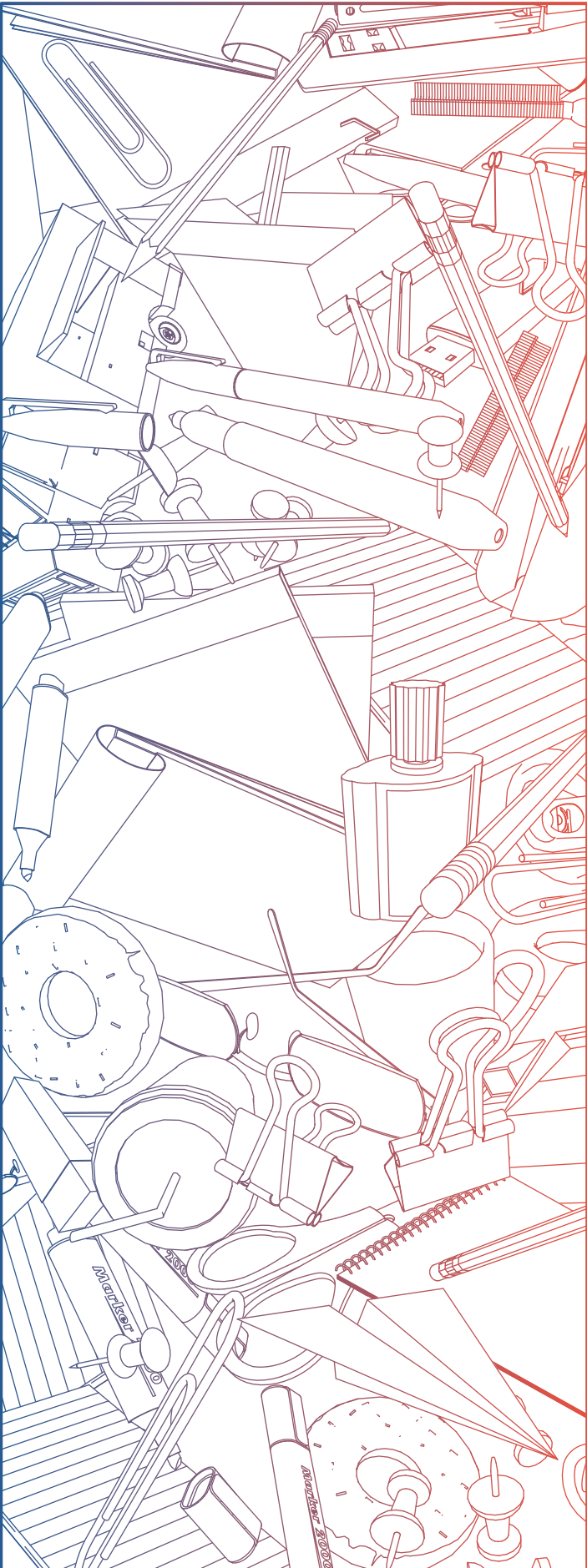


A Research Study by  
the Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity  
(a Consortium of Working TV Writers)  
and Alton Carswell, MA, LMFT

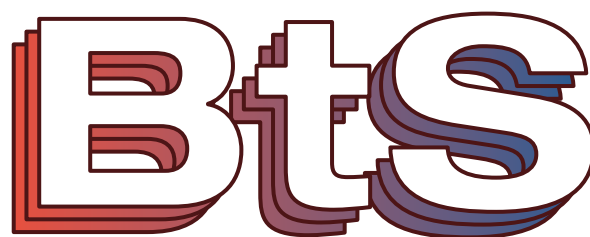
# BtS

## Behind the Scenes:

the state  
of inclusion  
and equity in tv  
writers rooms







## **Behind the Scenes:**

the state  
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and equity in tv  
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# Acknowledgments

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The THINK TANK FOR INCLUSION & EQUITY (TTIE) would like to thank all the writers who helped design, circulate, and populate the survey, as well as the survey respondents and salon participants for their candor and trust in allowing us to share their stories and testimonials.

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# Executive Summary

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Writers are often told, “write the truth.” But as our data shows, for diverse writers, too many barriers and obstacles stand in the way of achieving that goal. The stories we tell have great power to either maintain the status quo or paint a new way of thinking, acting, and behaving. TV writers need to acknowledge that their words have impact. They can shape public opinion but also have the power to change hearts and minds. TV writers need to take that responsibility seriously. “At the most basic level, the sharing of stories results in the public acknowledgement of communities that have traditionally been marginalized and left out of the broad cultural narrative conversation” (Halverson et.al, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. Authentic, inclusive storytelling begins with writers – writers of all backgrounds.

The Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity (TTIE) offers this “Behind-the-Scenes” report as a tool to help effect meaningful change in the TV industry by (1) identifying key areas where inclusion and equity are still challenged and (2) providing actionable recommendations to help remove barriers toward producing more authentic and diversified TV content. As we have seen over the last few years with the successes of TV shows like “Pose,” “One Day at a Time,” “Queen Sugar,” “Black-ish” and many others, as well as box office hits like “Black Panther,” “Wonder Woman,” and “Crazy Rich Asians,” audiences are hungry for this kind of content. Authentic storytelling is not just good for society; it makes good business sense.

<sup>1</sup> Halverson, E. R., Lowenhaupt, R., Gibbons, D., & Bass, M. (2009). Conceptualizing identity in youth media arts organizations: A comparative case study. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 6(1), 23-42.

Many studies and reports, including the “Hollywood Diversity Report 2018” and Color of Change’s “Race in the Writers’ Room,” have shed light on the lack of representation and diversity within Hollywood. They have analyzed employment and salary statistics, film and TV credits, on-screen representation, and exposed this basic fact: **We can do better.**

As writers on the ground and in the trenches know, the data in these reports only tells part of the story. “Behind-The-Scenes” seeks to further the findings of previous studies by collecting data across a spectrum of diverse working writer groups (Female/Non-Binary individuals, People of Color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and People with Disabilities) to look at trends on an intersectional basis. The report investigates what’s happening in hiring, title advancement, in the writers room, and in development. It also identifies barriers to entry and advancement and provides quantifiable data to experiences, which, up until now, have been dismissed as exceptional anecdotes.

**First:** Our survey found that diverse writers are routinely isolated within writers rooms, often relegated to the lower-levels where writers possess little agency or power to contribute to the stories coming out of writers rooms and little say in casting in order to improve representation on screen. **Representation in TV writers rooms must move beyond token hiring** (i.e. “checking the box”).

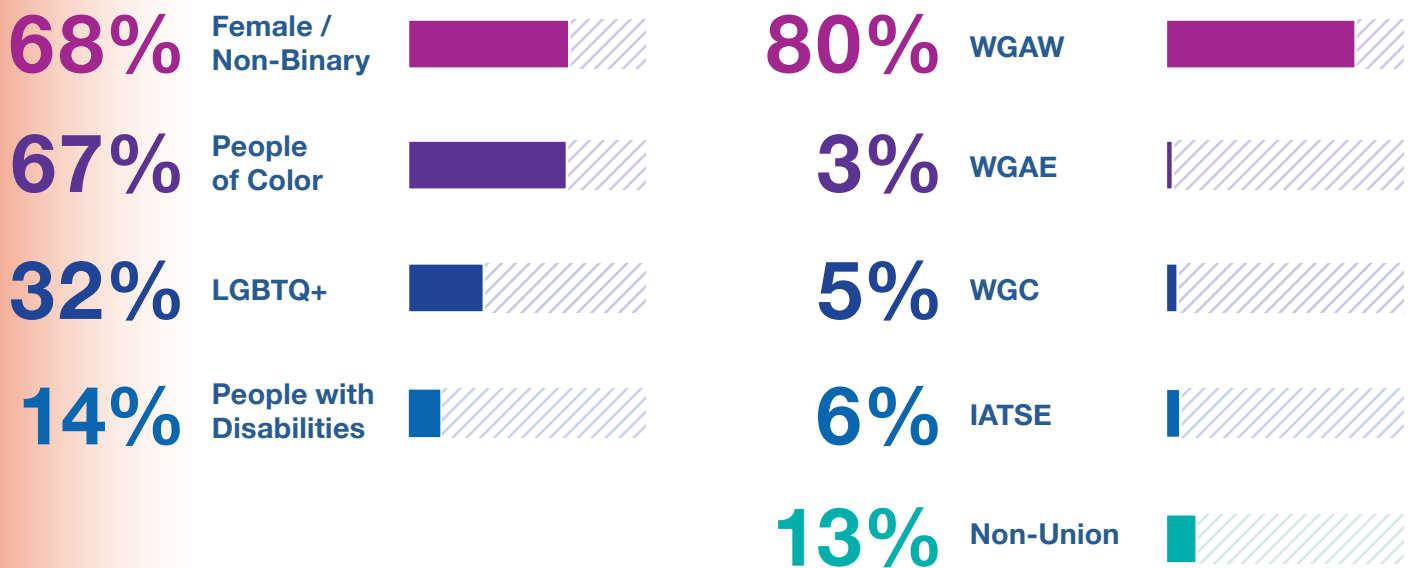
**Second:** Survey findings indicate that while the studio and network practice of financially incentivizing diverse writer hires does help diverse writers get their foot in the door, it typically does not result in writers advancing. Once diverse writers are in the pipeline, a vast majority find their path to advancement blocked. This explains the constant refrain that there are no diverse writers at the mid, upper, and showrunner levels. There are, but **these qualified writers are systematically held back from title advancement.**

- Employers must acknowledge the systemic barriers faced by diverse writers and provide equitable opportunities for advancement and promotion.
- The industry must recognize the contributions of diverse writers not only when a show's content seems to call for a particular POV (i.e. a script has an African-American character, so let's hire an African-American writer), but because a wide range of perspectives generates more authentic stories and, often, higher profits.
- Industry players must commit to representation at all levels of TV staffing, from lower to the highest echelons.

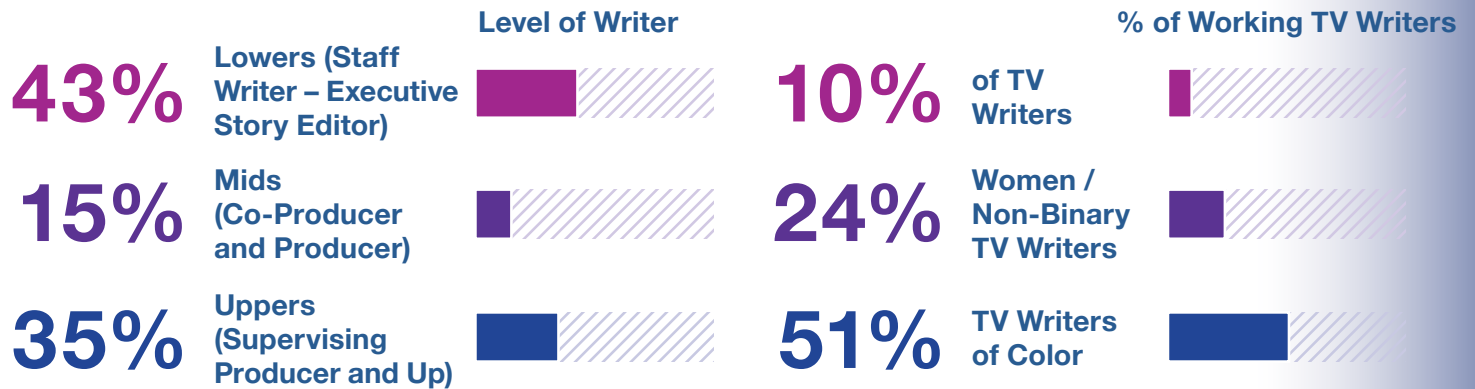
**Finally:** Enduring toxic behavior and hostile work environments is, unfortunately, a struggle shared by many. **A majority of diverse writers have experienced some form of bias, discrimination, and/or harassment in the writers room.**

Almost half of these incidents go unreported, while those who do report often experience reprisal and retaliation from a system that protects and rewards offenders. The system urgently requires repair to protect victims and sanction the offenders. Safe workplaces need to be common, required practice – not the exception.

## SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS (N = 282 Diverse Writers)



*Respondents could pick more than one option.*



It is important to note that survey respondents were non-randomized and self-selected. Therefore, at a most conservative reading, the survey results can only speak for those who took the survey. However, it is also important to note that our survey represents a significant percent of working TV writers. Based on the “2015 TV Staffing Brief,” there were 791 women, 372 minorities and a total of 2724 writers working across 292 television shows during the 2013-2014 season. This means our survey represents 10% of working TV writers, as well as 24% of all women and non-binary individuals and 51% of all people of color working in TV. Estimates for LGBTQ+ writers and writers with disabilities were not available for comparison.

## TOP FINDINGS

**73%**

of diverse writers have had to repeat a title at least once. This number jumps to 82% for people of color (POC) writers.

**64%**

of diverse writers have experienced bias, discrimination, and/or harassment by members of the writing staff.

**58%**

of diverse writers say their agents pitch them to shows only in ways that highlight their “otherness.”

**58%**

of diverse writers experience pushback when pitching non-stereotypical diverse characters or storylines.

**51%**

of diverse writers have never worked on a show with primarily non-diverse leads.

**42%**

of diverse writers entered the industry as a “Diversity Slot” hire.

**34%**

of female/non-binary writers reported having been the only female/non-binary writer on staff. This number jumps to 38% for writers with disabilities, 65% for POC writers, and 68% for LGBTQ+ writers.

## TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Seek Meaningful Representation in Hiring:

- **Tracking:** Networks, studios, production companies, agencies, and the Writers Guild of America (WGA) need to work together to create a method for collecting, tracking, and reviewing inclusion and equity data for staffing submissions, as well as within the ranks of TV writers rooms, non-writing producers, executives, and representatives. This data should be reviewed and made available **(in full transparency)** on an annual basis.
- **Programming:** Similarly, they must expand and fully draw upon **mentorship and educational programs** to support diverse writers at all levels.
- **Training:** When hiring upper-level writers/producers, as well as non-writing producers, and executives overseeing shows/productions, it should be mandatory that these new hires participate in standardized **implicit bias and general management training**.

### 2. Remove Systemic Barriers to Promotion and Advancement for Diverse Writers:

- Actively support the **promotion/advancement** of diverse writers by: a) instituting additional programs that financially incentivize promotions and b) sanction shows (and showrunners / upper-levels / non-writing producers / executives) who abuse these programs.

- Establish a **“Showrunners’ Think Tank”** to identify and disseminate best practices. Incorporate into the **WGA Showrunners’ Training Program** – which should be mandatory for all new showrunners.
- Provide anti-bias, discrimination, and harassment **training** and formalize a **code of conduct**.
- Establish clear guidelines for title promotion in the WGA **Minimum Basic Agreement**.

### **3. Fix the System to Equitably Address Bias, Discrimination, and Harassment:**

- Networks and studios need to formalize **exit interviews** with every writer to help remove bias and/or discrimination from the hiring/firing process.
- Industry players and the WGA must unite and commit to an **independent, third-party reporting system** for bias, discrimination, and harassment, and formalize and enforce **sanctions** for offenders.

## **BACKGROUND**

According to the “Hollywood Diversity Report 2018”, minority writers are still under-represented, making up just 15.5% of credited writers for broadcast scripted shows in 2015-2016.<sup>2</sup> Other reports, such as “Race in the Writers’ Room” from Color

of Change, underscore the severe lack of representation in the upper-level and showrunner ranks. Take the example of People of Color (POC) TV writers who only account for 13.7% of Hollywood TV writers rooms, compared to white writers at 86.3% representation; while at the showrunner level, POC representation is even worse at 9%, compared to 91% for white showrunners.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the “Race in the Writers’ Room” report did what few others have done before, which is to focus on the dynamics within the writers room and underscore how often diverse writers, or in this case Black and POC writers, find themselves isolated within the room. “Behind-the-Scenes” seeks to take this inquiry further from an intersectional point of view, by investigating barriers to and providing recommendations on entry and advancement for **all diverse writers** (Female/Non-Binary individuals, People of Color, LGBTQ+ individuals, People with Disabilities).

Part of the issue is that Hollywood is not separate from society, but a part of it. So it is vulnerable to the same biases evident in society at large. According to the “Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment,” implicit bias permeates many aspects of the industry from the hiring process, where diverse writers are often treated as tokens, to the creative end where stereotypical characters and content abound, and finally to casting.<sup>4</sup> All stages of media creation would benefit from an overhaul.

<sup>2</sup> Hunt, D., Ramón, A. C., Tran, M., Sargent, A., & Roychoudhury, D. (2018, February). Hollywood Diversity Report 2018: Five Years of Progress and Missed Opportunities. UCLA College of Social Sciences, February. Retrieved from <https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2018-2-27-18.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, D. (2017, October). Race in the Writer’s Room: How Hollywood Whitewashes the Stories That Shape America. Color of Change, Hollywood. Retrieved from <https://hollywood.colorofchange.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, K. (2016, February). Inclusion or invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg report on diversity in entertainment. Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg (IDEA): USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Retrieved from <http://annenberg.usc.edu/pages/~media/MDSCI/CARDReport%20FINAL,2022216>.

To understand barriers to entry and advancement, we must investigate the various junctures along the way. As many writers working in the industry understand, getting into the business is just the first step. Once in the coveted spot of a selected few, namely studio/network writing programs' alumni, it is assumed that success is right around corner. Unfortunately, this is not often the case. Many diverse writers experience career bottlenecks and stagnation, which leads to stagnation in diverse storytelling. This is a problem, as it seems clear that programming today can no longer speak to limited audiences. According to the "Hollywood Diversity Report 2018" audience demographics are becoming increasingly multicultural, multigenerational, and varied. This audience seeks representation and it is writers who are part of these communities that can best develop and encourage this growth.

Psychologically, media has the power to assist in identity reflection, to foster positive aspects of self-definition, and to create worlds that engage the imagination of audiences by mirroring societal values and traditions. As individuals in society interact with content that is created to entertain, they are engaged in a relationship that is personal.

It's the same for a writer in the room. "In this space, ideas are negotiated, consensus is formed, and issues of gender, race, and class identities play out and complicate the on-screen narratives that eventually air on network and cable television" (Henderson, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Without the free expression of varied and unique perspectives within writers rooms, the potential for character development and stories that reflect society at large is severely limited. What this report seeks to answer is the following: **Can the culture and make-up of TV writers rooms be improved to allow for more inclusion, representation, and authentic storytelling?**

<sup>5</sup> Henderson, F. D. (2011). The culture behind closed doors: issues of gender and race in the writers' room. *Cinema Journal*, 50(2), 145-152.

“...To anyone struggling with [their identity] and trying to discover their voice, listen: we made a film about a gay man, an immigrant, who lived his life just unapologetically himself, and the fact that I’m celebrating him and this story with you tonight is proof that we’re longing for stories like this.” <sup>6</sup>

**—Rami Malek,  
Oscars 2019**

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity (TTIE) survey was conducted online July 28 through September 1, 2018, among 282 “diverse” working TV writers and/or writing program/fellowship alumni.

(Diverse was defined as any respondent who identified with one or more of the following groups: Female/Non-Binary individuals, People of Color, LGBTQ+ writers, and People with Disabilities.)

The screening question “Have you staffed in the last five years and/or participated in a writing program/fellowship” was posed to respondents to ensure the survey sample represented working TV writers in the industry. Respondents who did not identify as “diverse,” were removed from the sample for this report but may be featured in future analyses.

Subjects for this survey were self-selected. The initial contacts were made through email, warm calls, a networking event, and referrals from participating writers. To garner trust and candid responses for this project, anonymous informed consent forms

<sup>6</sup> Pahl, Amanda. (2019, February 26). “Rami Malek’s Oscars Speech Was a Heartfelt Tribute to Being “Unapologetically” True.” Retrieved from: <https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/Rami-Malek-2019-Oscars-Acceptance-Speech-Video-45837801>

were completed. This survey encompassed questions that asked the sample group about their experiences as working writers in the industry and addressed the following topics: writing programs and staffing, the writers room, development, agents and managers, and recommendations. As a result, sample sizes differ from question to question based on the experiences of respondents. Percentages were rounded to the nearest percent and may add up to more than 100%. Similarly, some questions allowed for multiple response selections, adding up to more than 100%, and are indicated when relevant.

Upon analysis, respondents were identified only by their self-identifying sub-groups and level:

- **All Diverse Writers:** Any respondent who self-identified with the following groups:
- **All People of Color:** including mixed race respondents
- **All Female/Non-Binary:** including “prefer to self-describe”
- **All LGBTQ+:** including “asexual”, “prefer to self-describe”
- **All People with Disabilities**

Additionally, three salons were conducted with 30 total participants to share preliminary survey findings, solicit feedback, and delve deeper into the issues facing diverse TV writers. To focus and encourage discussion, salon participants were separated by level into lower-levels (up to co-producer) and upper-levels (producer and up).

# Findings

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# Fellowships & Writing Programs and the “Diversity Slot”

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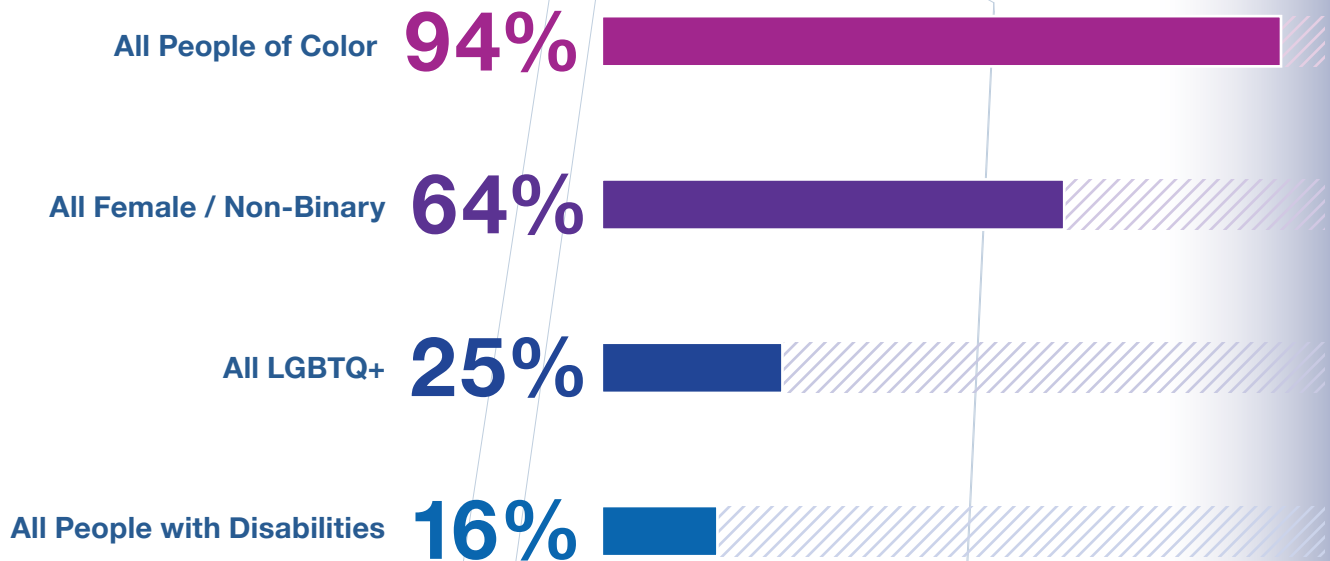
Network and studio writing programs and fellowships provide participants with hands-on training, valuable mentorship, access to the industry, and even possible placement in writers rooms. Therefore, for many entry-level TV writers, they are the holy grail of opportunities and highly sought. And for good reason, as our findings show.

52% of diverse writers participated in a fellowship or writing program, which suggests these programs do matter in getting diverse writers into the industry.<sup>7</sup> When asked “Within 1 year of completing one or more of the fellowship/writing programs,” most diverse writers (Respondents could pick more than one option.):<sup>8</sup>

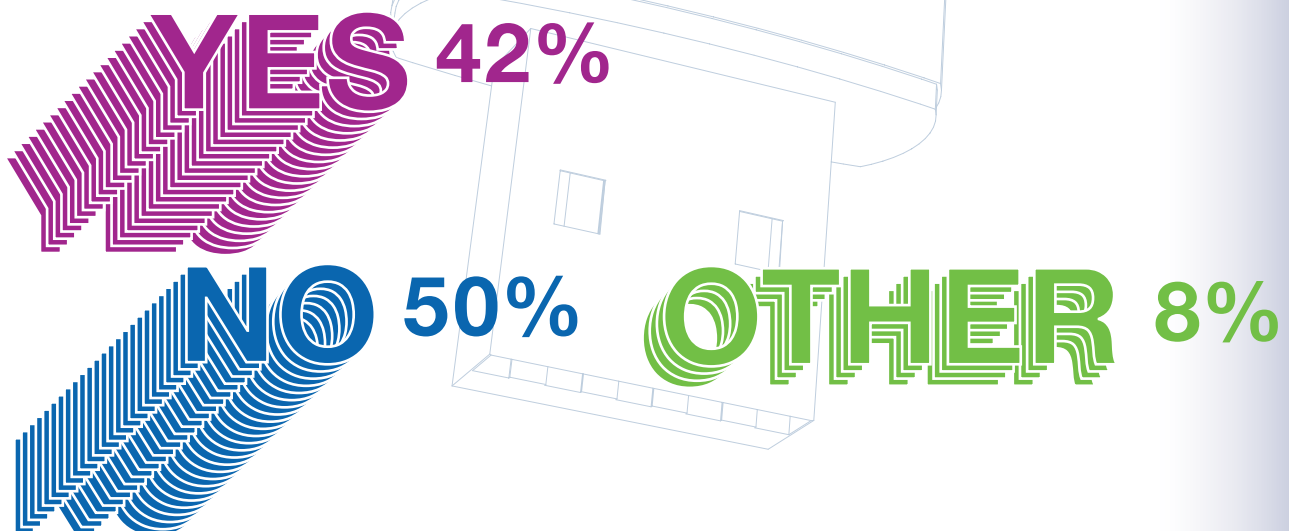
- Had staffing meeting(s) (67%)
- Got staffed on a show (60%)
- Secured representation (58%)

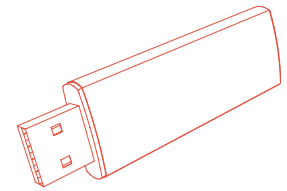
The programs really do help. However, they are by no means a silver bullet, as almost one in five (19%) did not experience immediate career advancement. In addition, there is no standardization across the programs to provide equal access to all diverse writer subgroups.

## Diversity slot hire by sub-group (N = 81)



## Was your first or second job a diversity slot hire? (All Diverse Writers -- N = 192)





# Almost Half

of diverse writers get their first/second job as a “diversity slot hire”

For those whose first or second job was a “diversity slot” hire, 94% identified as People of Color, whereas a significantly smaller percentage identified as LGBTQ+ or People with Disabilities. This can be attributed to the fact that many writing programs and fellowships define diversity differently, or in some cases avoid the term altogether. However, our data shows throughout the report that the experiences of all diverse sub-groups with regards to entry, professional advancement, etc., are much more similar than different. Therefore, all these subgroups need equitable access and support to navigate the pipeline.

When assessing the success of the “diversity slot” hire and financially incentivizing a diverse writer’s first or second job, we found that practically half of diverse writers got their first staffing job via these means.

However, while the programs and the diversity slot position do help diverse writers get in the door, it’s also indicative of an industry-wide problem:

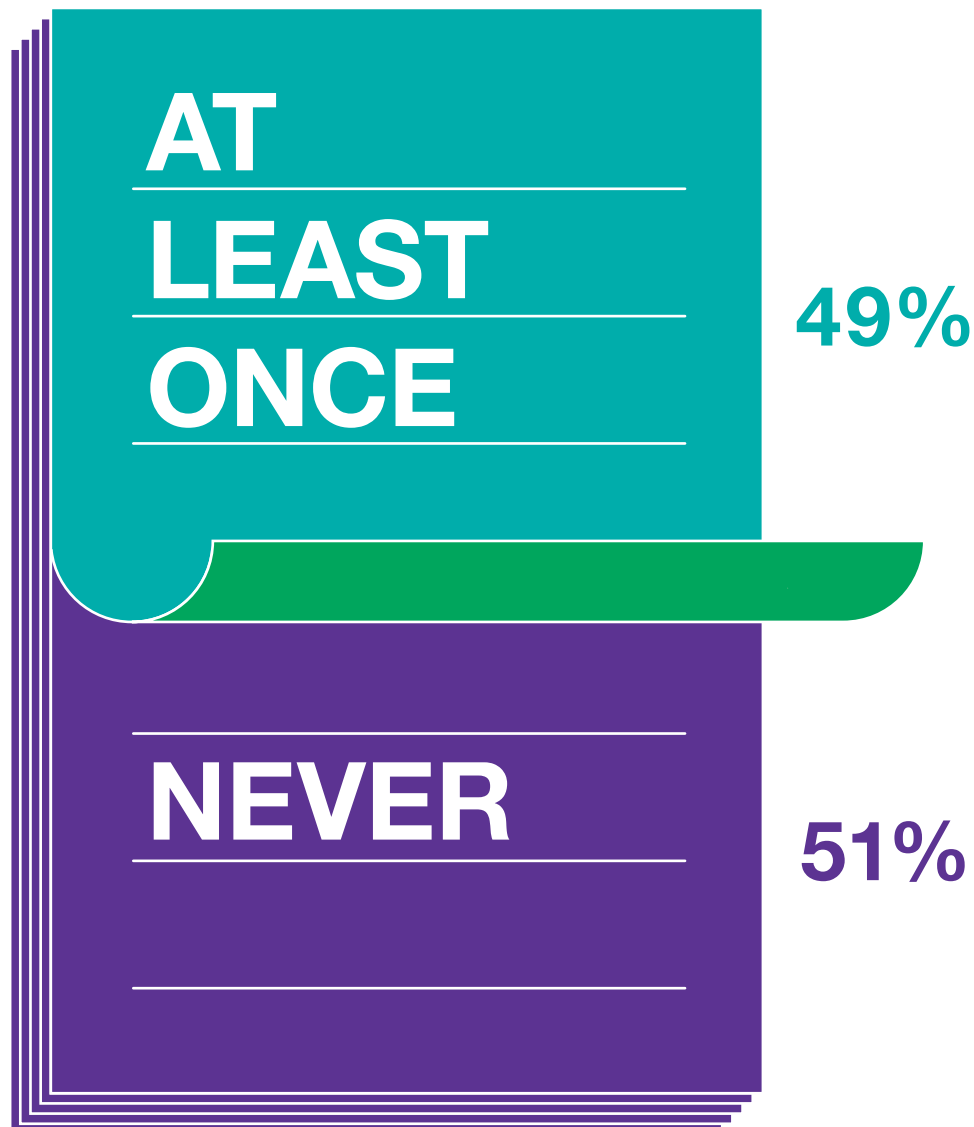
**Unless diverse writers come at a discount, they’re not given the chance.** Respondents cited how diversity hires are often relegated to second-tier hires because they are subsidized. As one respondent explained: “Showrunners turn to diverse candidates because their studio-funded salaries make them affordable, where non-funded, non-diverse candidates are not.” **This creates the perception that diverse candidates are somehow lesser/would not be employable in a “free market.”**

In fact, sometimes the diversity slot position can be an extra burden for diverse writers: (1) forcing an added year (or more) of “paying one’s dues” before making it into the official pipeline and hierarchy, if ever, and (2) providing a financial obstacle to advancement. As one lower-level salon participant shared; “It makes it doubly hard to come back for another season because the showrunner is now having to put money down on you because before you were a free hire.” This was a sentiment shared by others. But, responsibility does not lie only at the feet of the showrunner. When asked whether they received a promotion to story editor after the diversity slot hire, one survey respondent elaborated:

**“Though the year I was hired was my 2nd job and therefore my 2nd full season as a staff writer, I was still made to repeat staff writer for a 3rd season on this show. When the showrunner pushed back, she was told ‘Why should we promote this diverse writer if we don’t have to?’”**

# How many times have you worked on a show that featured only non-diverse main characters?

(All diverse writers -- N = 213)



# Staffing

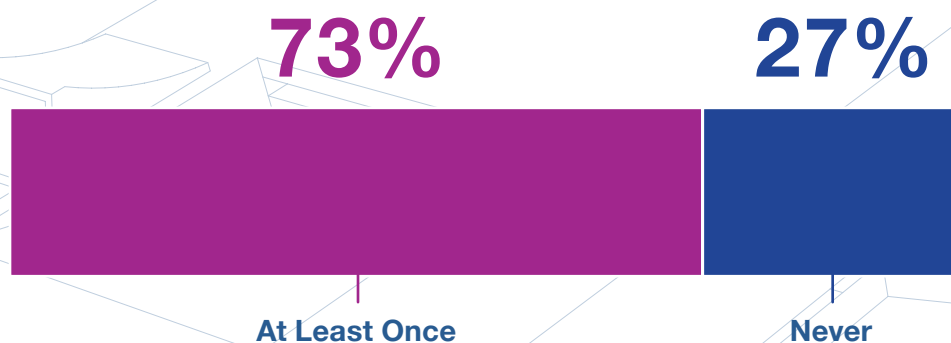
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Staffing can be compared to a game of musical chairs. When the music stops, someone is left without a chair. But too often, diverse writers can't get into the room where the game is being played. And once they do win a chair (i.e. get the job), they encounter significant barriers to future staffing and advancement.

One reason for this: **35% of diverse working TV writers do not have an agent** (N = 282). They have been denied access to these gatekeepers, thus securing professional opportunities on their own.

Data also suggests that **often the only way to get into the room or even be considered for staffing submissions is when the show's material seems to call for a diverse point of view.** 51% of diverse writers reported "never" having "worked on a show that featured only non-diverse main characters." This was a source of common and repeated frustration for many salon participants: the common fallacy that somehow non-diverse writers are capable of writing all characters and stories, but diverse writers can only write diverse storylines.

## Percent of all diverse writers who repeated a title at least once (N = 158)



## Respondents who repeated a title at least once by sub-group

**82%**

All People  
of color

(N=105)

**73%**

All Female /  
Non-binary

(N=108)

**67%**

All People  
with Disabilities

(N=18)

**65%**

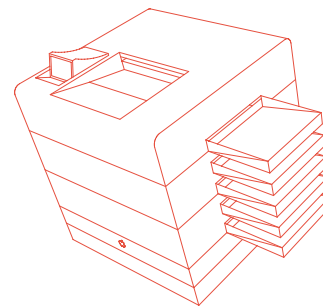
All LGBTQ+

(N=43)



# 73%

**of diverse writers have repeated a title at least once**



Once in the ranks, almost **three out of four diverse writers repeat a title at least once** and just under half have had to repeat a title twice or more. These findings are consistent across all sub-groups.

According to one writer:

**“I spent 54 episodes as a staff writer.”**

Another reported:

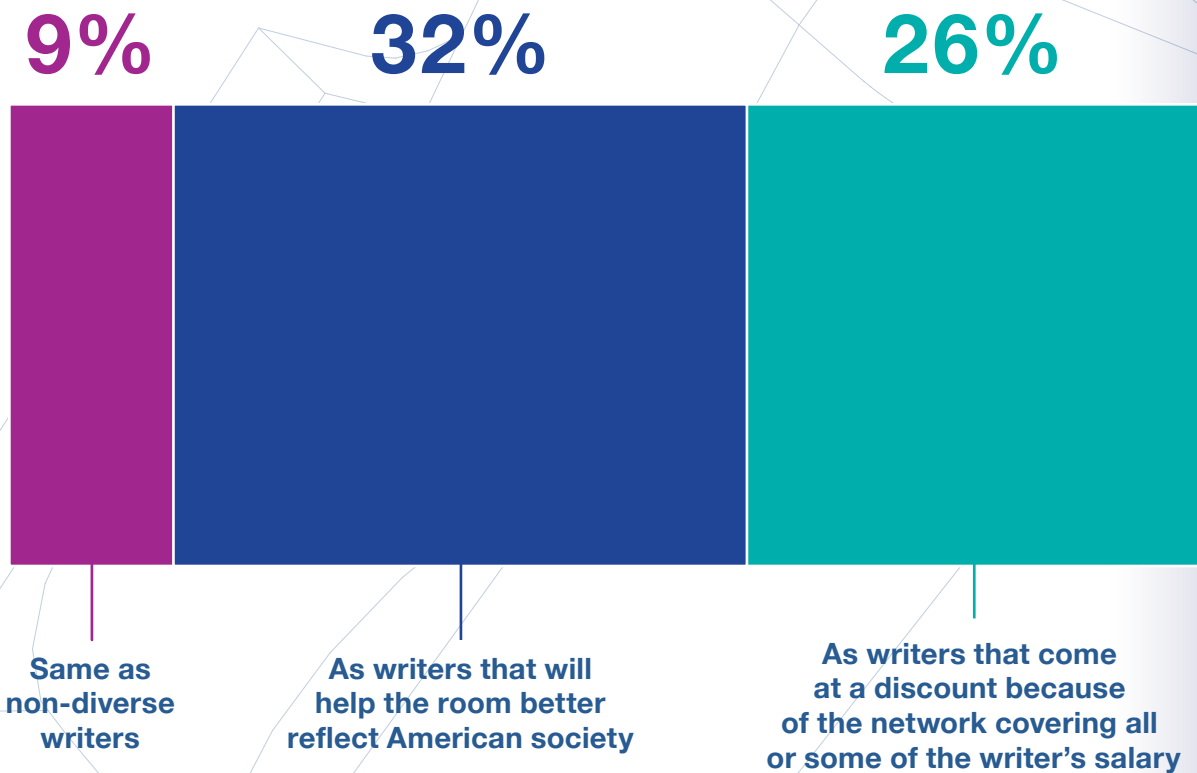
**“I did 83 episodes at staff writer.”**

A lower-level salon participant broke the problem down this way: “Sometimes, you get stuck at a level. It’s hard to go beyond staff writer to story editor. Then, if you get to story editor, the next one is executive story editor. But to fight to get there is hell on earth.”

To add insult to injury, **15% of survey respondents said they had to accept a demotion in title in order to staff.**<sup>11</sup> How can the ranks of upper-levels and showrunners be diversified if diverse writers are not advancing beyond lower levels due to systemic challenges?

# How do agents present diverse writers to Showrunners?

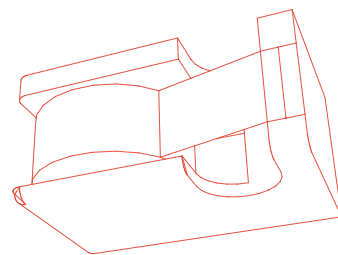
(co-executive producer and up -- N = 57)



"Other" accounted for 33% of respondents.  
Themes are discussed in the analysis.

# 26%

of agents present diverse writers as “writers that come at a discount”



## WHAT'S IT LIKE FROM A SHOWRUNNER'S PERSPECTIVE?

No discussion of staffing can take place without showrunners – those primarily responsible for hiring and firing, promotion and advancement. While it's true showrunners make the final decision on many matters, it's also true that showrunners work within an ecosystem that systemically impedes and stymies inclusion and equity efforts. According to showrunners and upper-level writers (co-executive producer and up) in our sample, **agents are major obstacles.**

Data shows that regardless of how agents pitch diverse TV writers, the writers' “diversity” or “otherness” is almost always front and center, whether it's because their “diversity” situates them as “writers that come at a discount because of the network covering all or some of the writer's salary” or as “writers that will help the room better reflect American society.” As one survey respondent remarked: **Diverse TV writers are pitched “as little more than a category of otherness. Agents in my experience tend to reduce everyone, except cishet (cisgender heterosexual) white men, to a descriptor of otherness.”** What's more, many agents lump all diverse writers together by their “otherness,” rather than as writers appropriate for a given show. As one upper-level salon participant described: “They're like ‘you're looking for a black gay person? I got one. You're looking for a non-binary disabled person? I got one.’ As if we're interchangeable, but we are not.”

The staffing submission process presents yet another obstacle for diverse writers. When asked about the frequency of diverse writers' submissions for staffing positions from reps, studios, and networks, only 8% of showrunners and upper-level writers (co-executive producer and up) reported

diverse writers “always” being submitted, while 38% reported submission “very frequently” and 21% reported on an “occasional” basis.<sup>12</sup> **This data suggests that for diverse TV writers to be included in staffing submissions, there needs to be a reason or justifying factor,** as one respondent echoed: “If diversity themed show, more diversity submissions.”

Data also indicates that a good portion of diverse writers are only being submitted at the lower levels. This is one of the contributing factors to diverse writer career stagnation. One lower-level salon participant described it this way: “Sometimes it's hard to go beyond [staff] writer to story editor, and **sometimes the person who is keeping you back is your agent.**” Representatives, studios, and networks can do better at pitching clients/ writers for mid and upper-level positions where financial incentives are not available. One upper-level respondent remarked: **“I'd rather have diverse voices at the upper/middle levels where they have some power to be heard...”**

However, sometimes diverse TV writers are not being submitted even when requested. **35% of showrunners/upper-level writers reported “having asked for a diverse writer and been told there are none.”**<sup>13</sup> One upper-level salon participant relayed this story:

A showrunner got the list from the agencies and was going through and interviewing and then he's like, “wait, why aren't you giving me diverse writers?” They were like “oh THAT list.” Separate – they have a whole separate like... thing. For THOSE people you have to ask specifically. And he was like “I meant WRITERS. I did not mean the person had to be white. I just wanted writers.”

<sup>12</sup> N = 56

<sup>13</sup> N = 55



# The Writers Room

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This is where the magic happens, where characters and stories are born and raised. It's a place of freedom and creativity, of passionate discussion and sharing. It's a place where outlines and scripts get written and where final cuts are discussed and dissected. It's also a workplace where real people come in day after day, often putting in long hours, to get the job done. Yet, despite working just as hard as their non-diverse counterparts, many diverse writers find their contributions to writers rooms stifled.

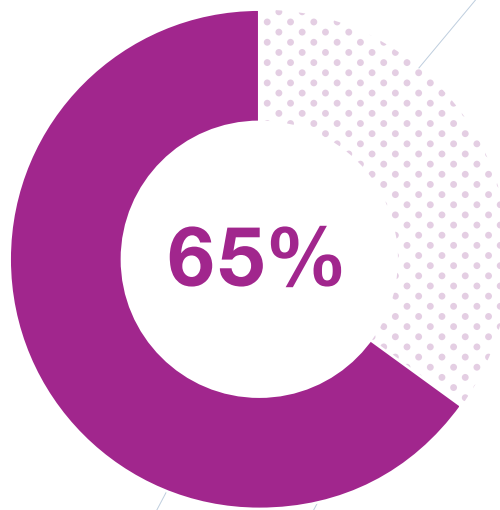
One reason for this is that once diverse writers are in the door or back in the door, many discover that they are the only diverse writer to have been asked to the table. In other words, they are the token hire:

*Tokenization* is defined as the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of racial or sexual equality within a workforce.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Dictionary, O. E. (2011). Oxford dictionaries online.

# How many times have you been the only [...] on a writing staff? (At least once)

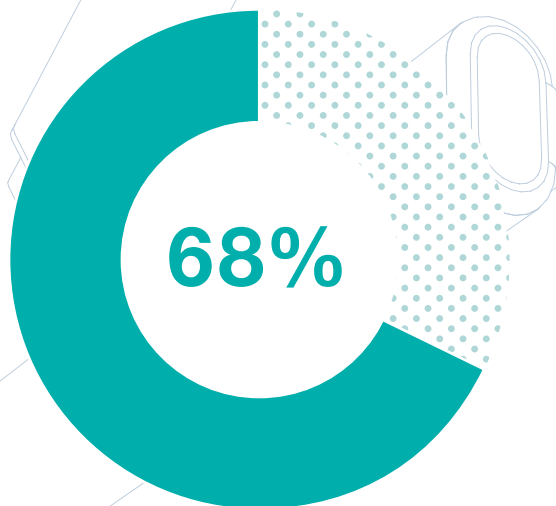
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All People of Color (N = 121)



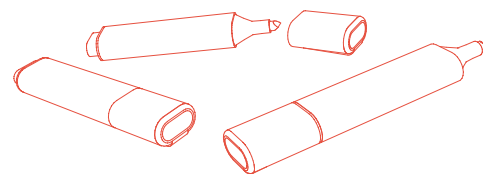
All Female / Non-Binary (N = 126)



All LGBTQ+ (N = 62)



All People with Disabilities (N = 24)



# 65%

of people of color reported being the only POC on staff

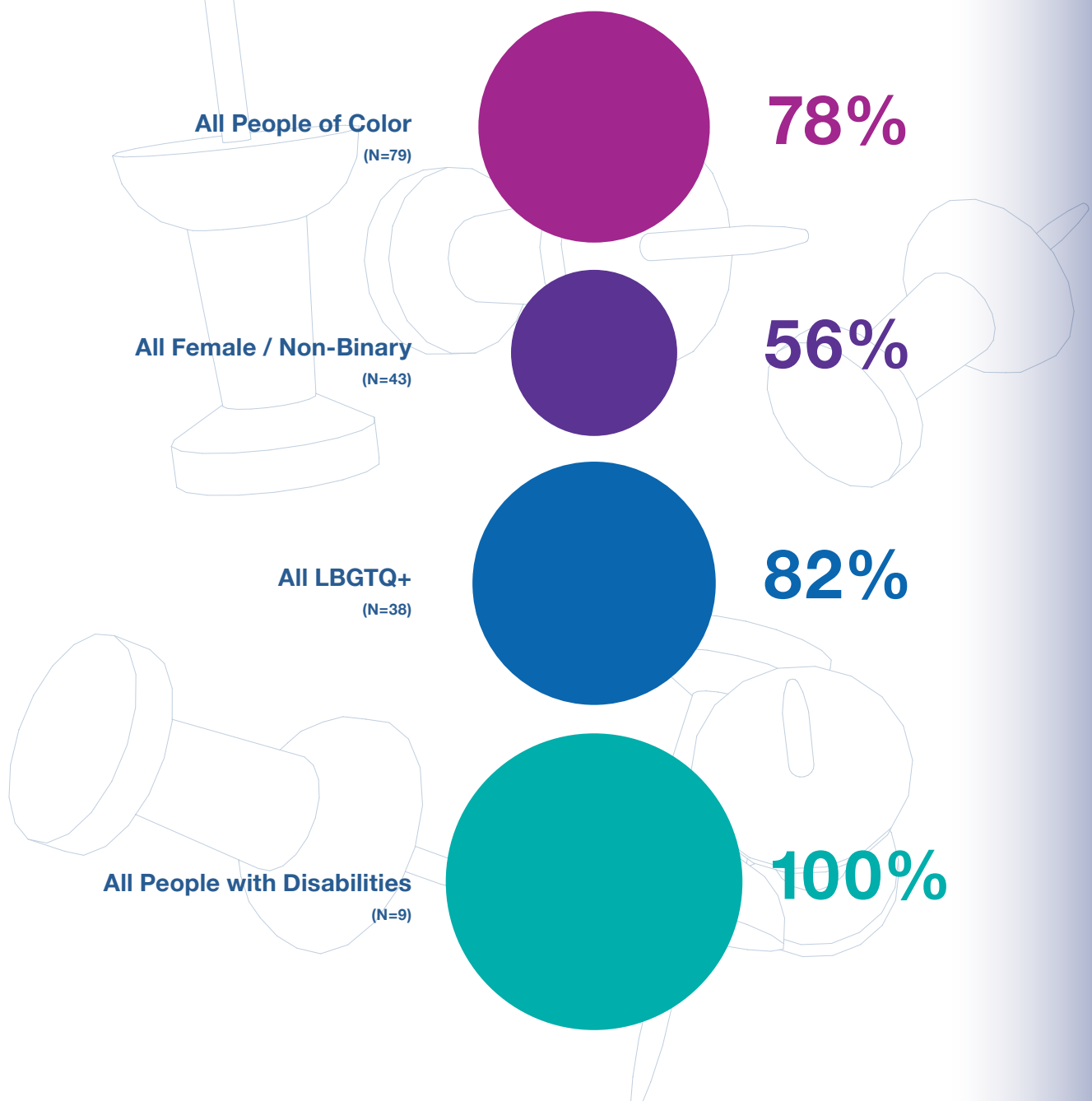
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From our survey, **65% of People of color (POC) reported being the only POC on staff, while 68% of LGBTQ+ individuals reported being the only LGBTQ+ person on staff. Additionally, 34% of female/non-binary individuals reported being the only female/non-binary individual on staff.**

Given women (and non-binary individuals) make up at least 50% of the global population, if writers rooms had gender parity, this 34% statistic would not exist. Interestingly, only 38% of persons with disabilities, who make up a much smaller percentage of the population, experienced tokenization in the room, which brings up the flip side of tokenization: pigeon-holing. Sometimes it's not that you're the only diverse writer in the room, but that the only rooms you can get into are the "diverse" rooms.

# % of respondents who were the only [...] on a writing staff at least once by sub-group (Staff writers only)

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*Respondents could pick more than one option.*

# 78%

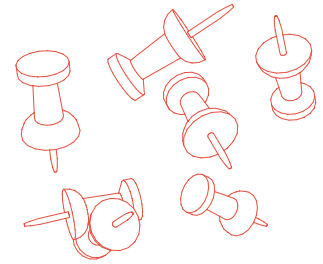
**of people of color staff writers have been the only POC in the room at least once.**

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**The vast majority of token hiring occurs at the staff writer level** – the lowest-ranked writer, who is rarely a part of decision-making at any stage in the process of making TV shows.

**Token hiring leads to isolation and lack of voice in the room,** especially when relegated to the lower level or the “diversity slot” hire. One upper-level salon participant summed up their observations about the experience of many a “diversity slot” hire this way:

“You become part of the writing staff but you’re not included. They leave you out, they have no incentive. You’re not given a voice. So, when it’s time to re-up, they’re not going to bring you back on as someone that they pay. They don’t know who you are. You haven’t been allowed to speak.”



**53%**

I have pitched ideas that have been rejected by the room, but when a non-diverse writer pitches the same idea a few minutes later, it is accepted

**31%**

I was not consulted on story issues that did pertain to my personal knowledge, experience, and/or association

**29%**

I was often consulted on story issues related to anything diverse even when I had no relevant knowledge, experience, or association

**25%**

I was only consulted on story issues related to my diversity attributes

**20%**

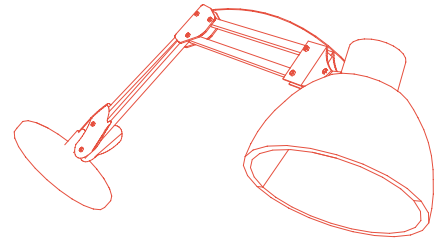
I was excluded from room discussions



*Respondents could pick more than one option.*

# 53%

of diverse writers report having pitched ideas that have been rejected by the room but then accepted when pitched by a non-diverse writer.



## Pitching and Pushback

When diverse writers are allowed to speak in writers rooms, other issues arise. One upper-level salon participant described the experience of a colleague:

“This woman got on a show. She’s a black woman, very smart. She had a great script. But she was hired to check a box. So, when the box had a voice and brought things, she was fired.”

Although this is an extreme example, it is not uncommon. Nor is it the only obstacle diverse writers encounter. In fact, their voices and contributions are being stifled, and in some cases, completely unheard, with 53% of diverse writers reporting they “pitched ideas that have been rejected by the room, but when a non-diverse writer pitches the same idea a few minutes later, it is accepted.”

Akin to this is the issue that diverse writers, when contributing in the room, are not being “seen.” One lower-level salon participant gave this example:

“Whenever it was the guys, they always remembered their name but with the women it’s like ‘someone said...’ and it’s like ‘yeah me, hi [name] here, two seconds ago.’”

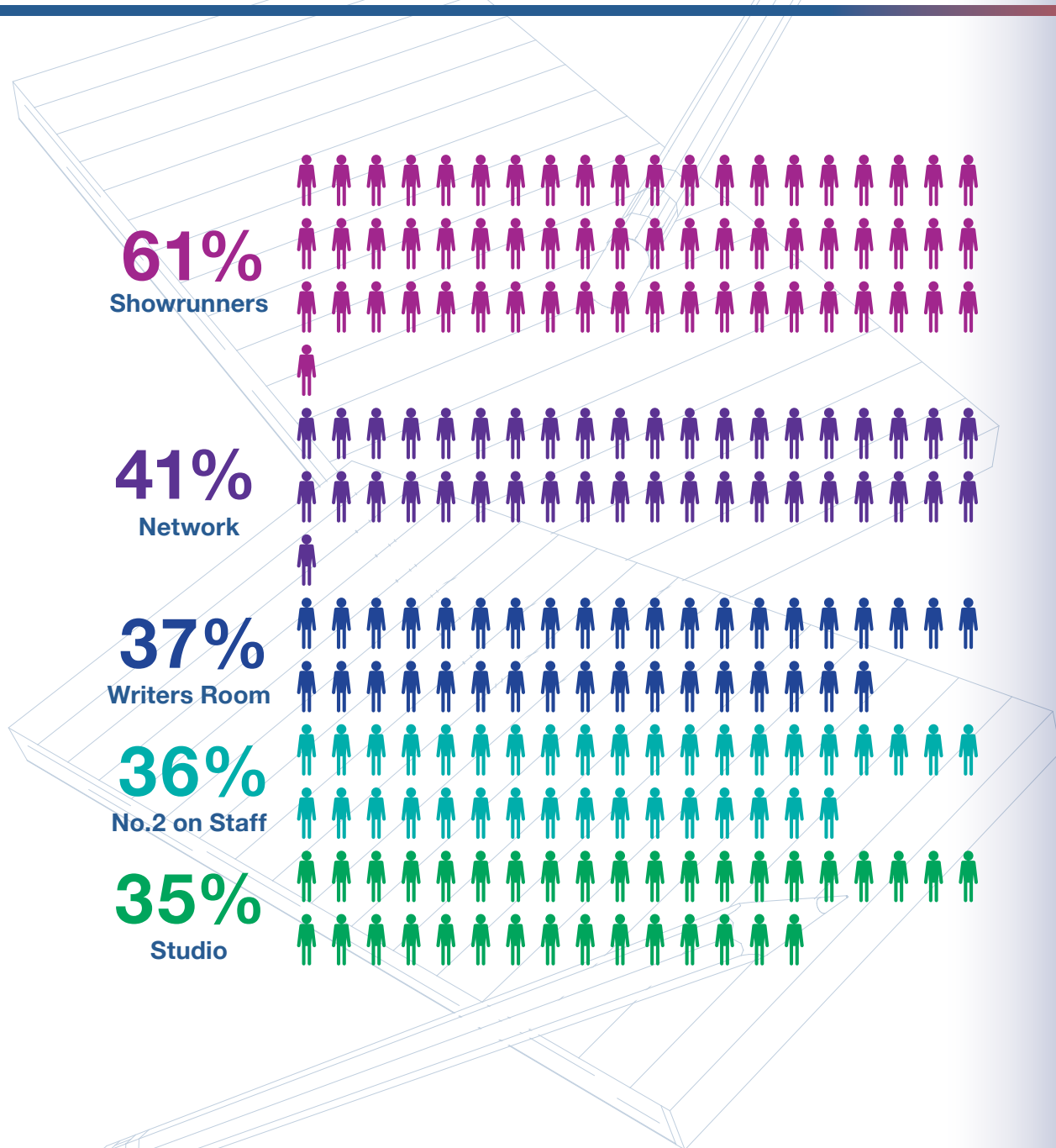
Diverse writers have therefore developed strategies to contend with these issues. As one lower-level salon participant shared, “I’m just thinking to our room where we have enough women in it. We back each other when we see that they’re silencing us.” What the respondent is talking about is **“amplification,”** a strategy that gained attention years ago when female staffers in Obama’s administration shared tactics for ensuring contributions were heard and credited:

“amplification”: When a woman made a key point, other women would repeat it, giving credit to its author. This forced the men in the room to recognize the contribution – and denied them the chance to claim the idea as their own.<sup>15</sup>

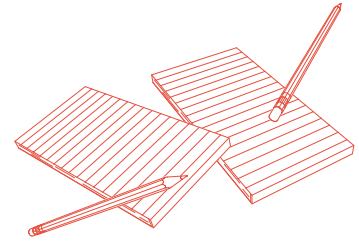
<sup>15</sup> Eilperin, Juliet. (2016, September 13). White House women want to be in the room where it happens. The Washington Post. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/power-post/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/?utm\\_term=.41c55bb36121](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/power-post/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/?utm_term=.41c55bb36121)

# What groups have you found to be resistant to diversity in story content?

(All diverse writers -- N = 182)



Respondents could pick more than one option.



# 58%

**of diverse writers experienced pushback simply for “pitching a non-stereotypical diverse character or diverse storyline.”**

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Amplification, however, is just a stop gap measure, not a permanent solution. It is also not an option when you are the only diverse writer in the room.

Without amplification, diverse writers often face pushback and sometimes even professional consequences for their contributions in the room.

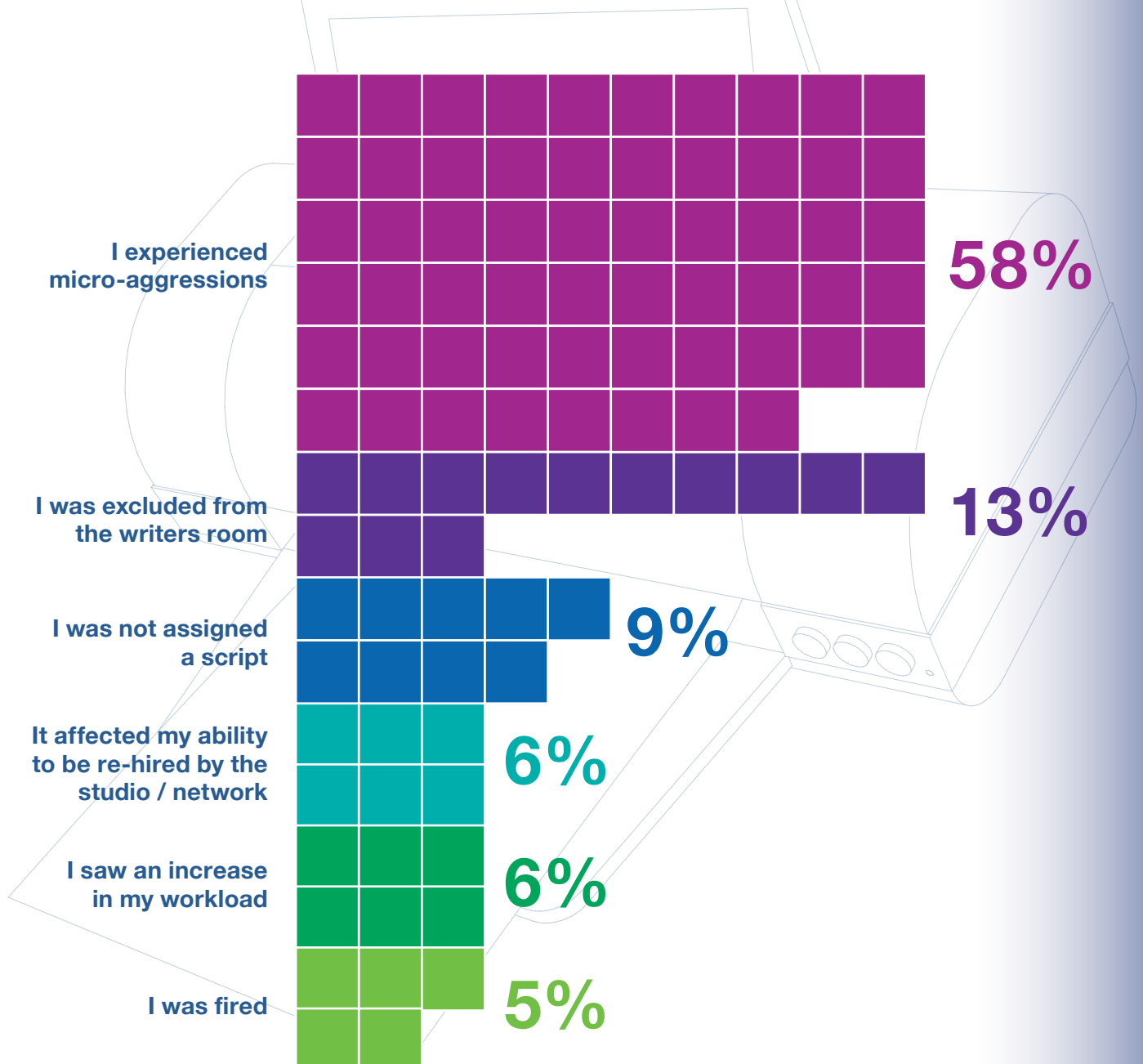
**58% of diverse writers experienced pushback simply for “pitching a non-stereotypical diverse character or diverse storyline.”**

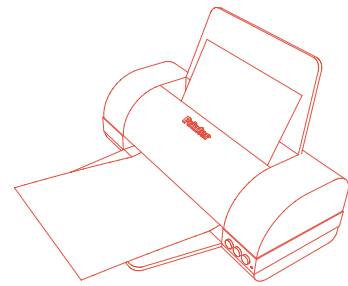
As the data suggests, showrunners are at the forefront of this issue, but are by no means the only obstacle. Pushback comes from many sides. Often, it starts from inside the writers room. What does pushback look like? According to one upper-level salon participant:

“It’s as small as someone ignoring you when you’re pitching, talking over you, declaring ‘you’re ruining the mood’ when you point out something offensive or problematic. Or even saying ‘this isn’t a show that teaches lessons’ or ‘this should appeal to everyone’ when you try to be culturally specific.”

# Repercussions of pitching non-stereotypical content

(All diverse writers -- N = 124)





# Over Half

of diverse writers experienced micro-aggressions after pitching non-stereotypical content

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**Microaggressions** are common responses to diverse writers pushing back on stereotypes in the writers room.

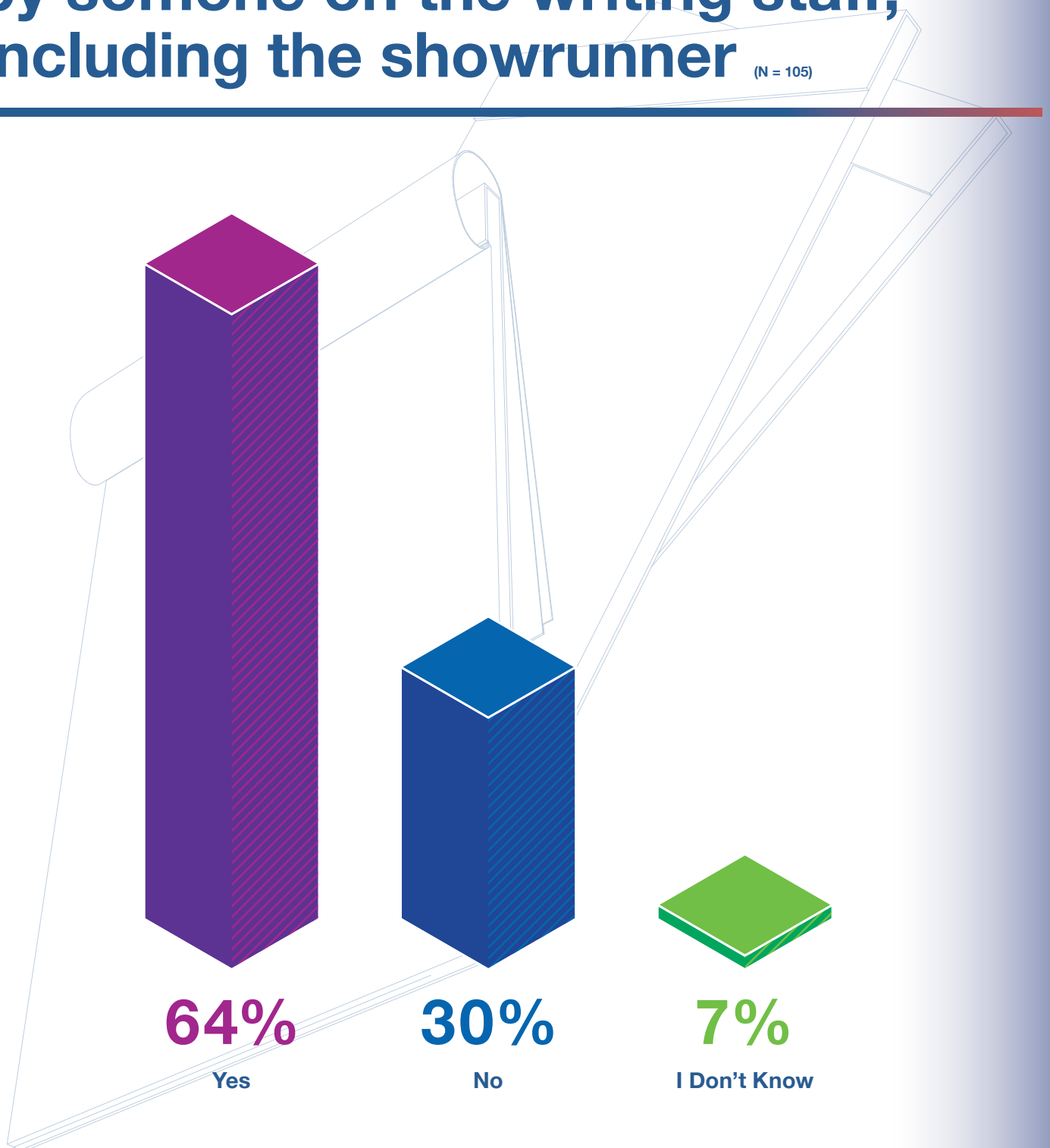
Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.<sup>16</sup>

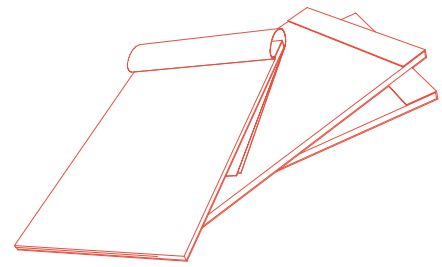
But “retribution” can go far beyond just microaggressions with 5% of diverse writers reporting having been “fired” for pitching non-stereotypical storylines and 6% having had difficulty being “re-hired by the studio/network.” One survey respondent even said: “I’m pretty sure the person I ‘offended’ kept me from staffing on another show.”

<sup>16</sup> Sue, Derald Wing. (2010, November, 17). Microaggressions: More than just race. Psychology Today. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-every-day-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>

# Diverse writers who experienced bias, discrimination, or harassment by someone on the writing staff, including the showrunner

(N = 105)





# 64%

**of diverse writers reported experiencing bias, discrimination, or harassment from someone on the writing staff.**

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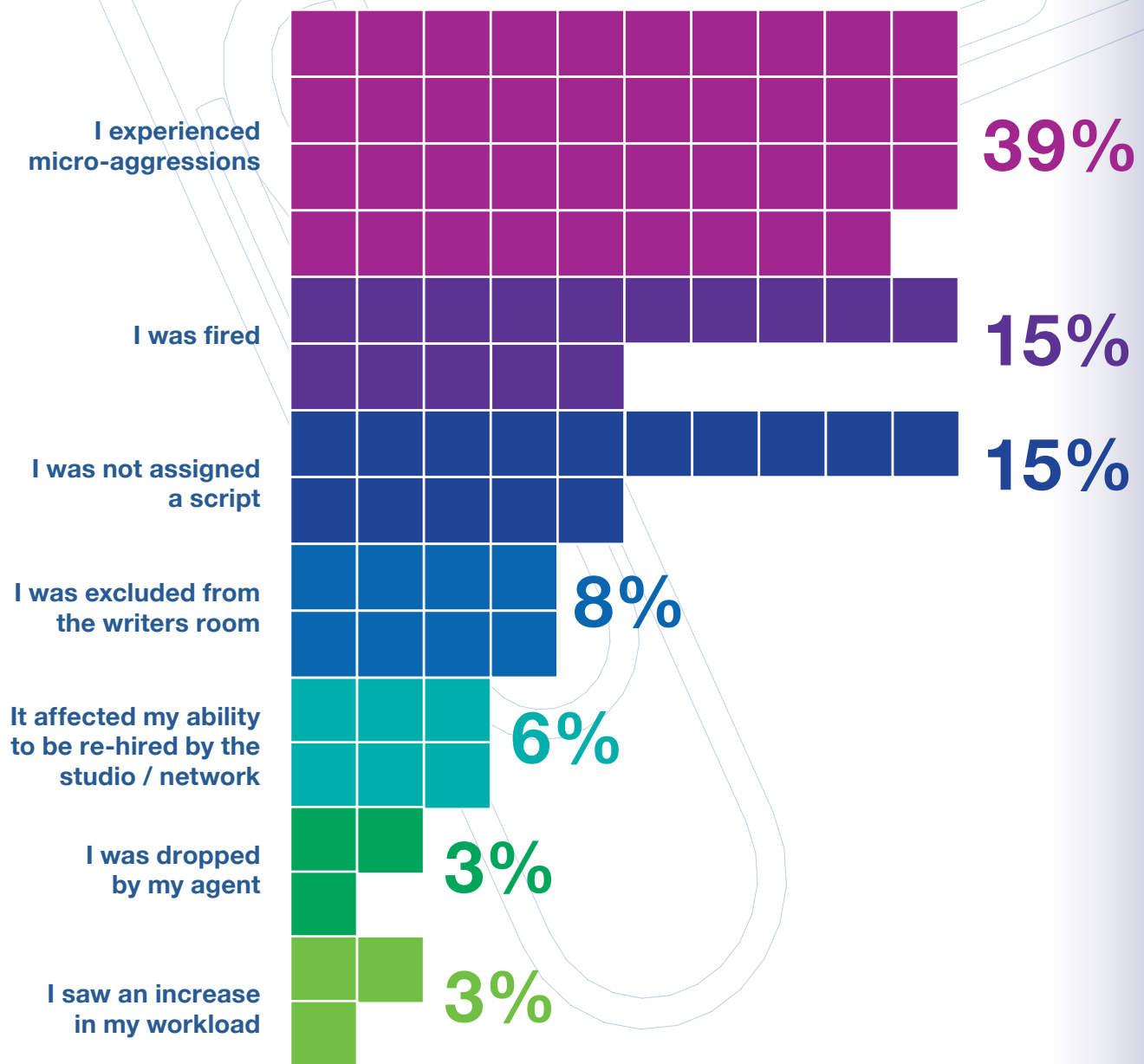
## **Dealing with Bias, Discrimination, and Harassment**

It's clear that the line between doing one's job and authentically contributing in the room is an extremely murky one for many diverse writers, sometimes leading to toxic encounters. 64% of diverse writers reported experiencing incidents of bias, discrimination, and harassment.

One poignant example of this: Several respondents cited male showrunners' penchant for microaggressions to outright overt aggressions toward women about their appearance, their lifestyle choices (i.e. marital status, motherhood) and their "inability to take a joke," to the degree where these incidents have been described as "torturous hazing."

# As a result of taking action, did you experience any of the following?

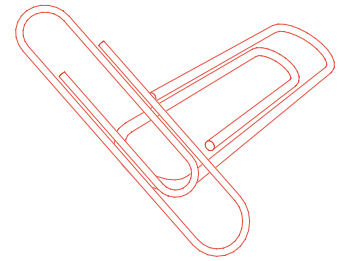
(All Diverse Writers -- N = 66)



Respondents could pick more than one option.

# 15%

**of diverse writers were fired for reporting incidents of bias, discrimination, or harassment.**



Of those who experienced some form of bias, discrimination, and/or harassment, 48% of survey respondents did not report.<sup>17</sup> As to why?

- “I didn’t think anything would come of it anyway.”
- “There was a long time where it never occurred to me to even consider reporting. It was just the way things were.”
- “This person has a history and has repeatedly been rewarded. I did not feel compelled to ruffle feathers.”

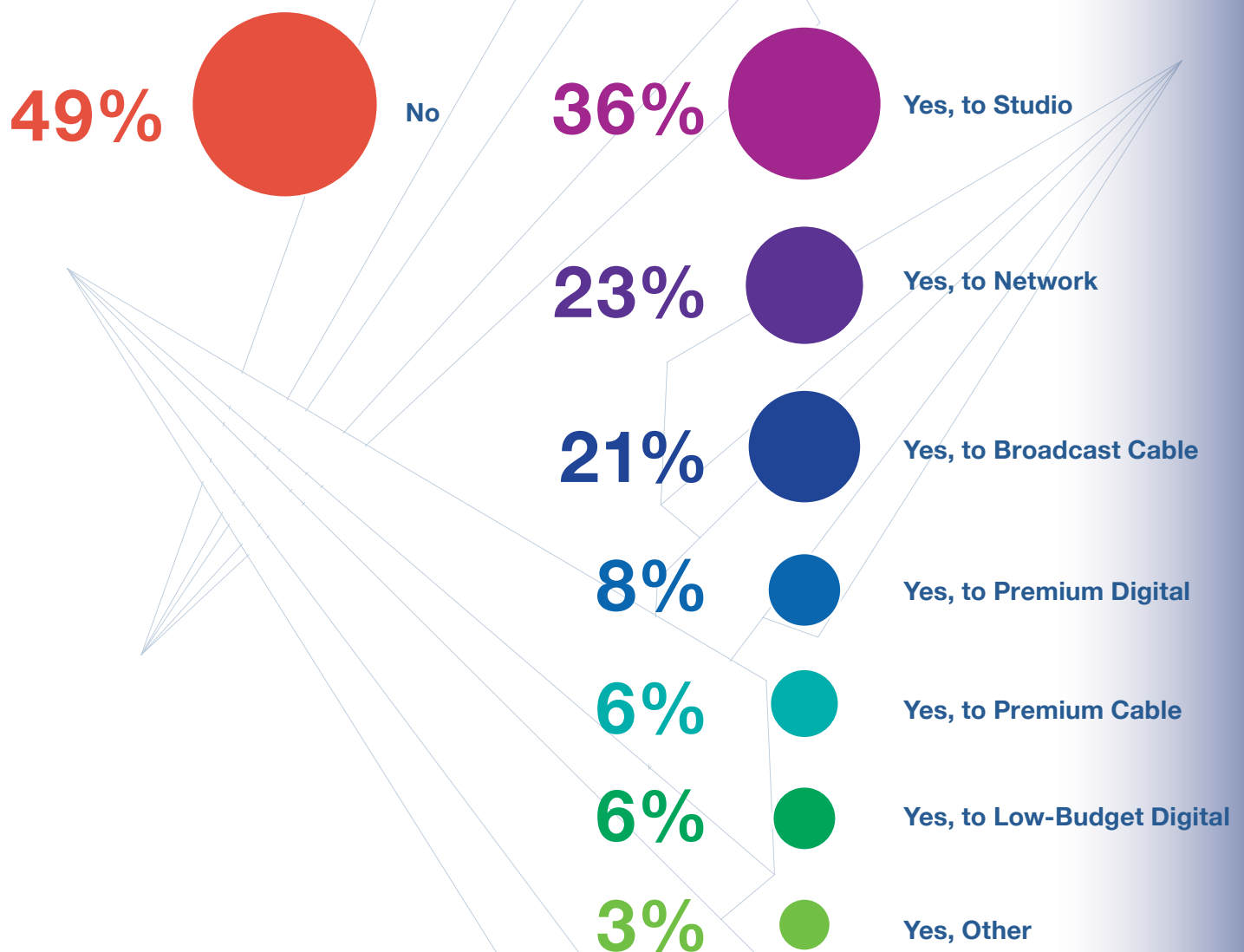
For those who did take action, 48% reported the incident(s) to their agents. But as some respondents noted: “Complaints did not go beyond my representation. Nothing happened.” 24% “followed up with a supervisor or upper level.” One lower-level salon participant shared her experience in doing so:

“And she said, ‘I know it sucks but you got to suck it up.’ And she was weeping and I said ‘OK.’ And she was right. And then I got asked back. So, I’m like did I win or did I lose?”

The unfortunate reality is that there is a great deal of fear associated with reporting. And those fears are well-founded. After taking action, 39% of diverse writers experienced microaggressions, while many others experienced even worse effects: One respondent said that taking action “ruined my reputation for 10 years.” These incidents raise important questions about the psychological and emotional toll many diverse writers experience through the professional ranks. It also raises the question: “How many diverse writers have been lost along the way?”

# Have you ever sold a pitch or a pilot (i.e. been in active development)?

(All diverse writers -- N = 211)



*Respondents could pick more than one option.*

# Development

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Much of this report has focused on what happens in staffing and the writers room, but development is another arena where many TV writers make their living by working with production companies, studios, and networks to craft compelling series' visions and pilots. Our data suggests that selling a pitch or pilot, i.e. being in active development, seems to be one of the major avenues for diverse writers to break in and/or continue to work in the industry.

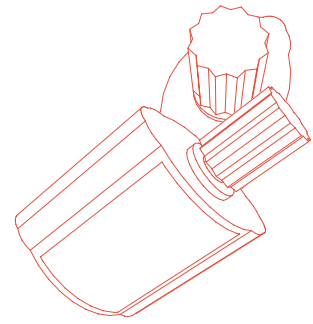
It's difficult to ascertain whether this seemingly high rate of development (51% have sold a pitch or pilot) is reflective of the fact that the pool of respondents is working writers and that's why they are more apt to have sold something or been in active development or if, in fact, development is a more friendly and accessible path for diverse TV writers.

# If sold pitch or pilot by level of writer

(All diverse writers -- N = 98)



Respondents could pick more than one option.



# 26%

of diverse writers were staff writers when they sold pitches or pilots

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**Development does appear to be a solid path into the industry** with over a quarter of respondents (26%) indicating they sold a pitch or pilot as a staff writer, or even well before that as the vast majority of our “other” category (11%) mentioned selling before even entering the staffing ring. **Development also seems to be a means for mid-level diverse TV writers to combat the challenges of moving up the ranks.**

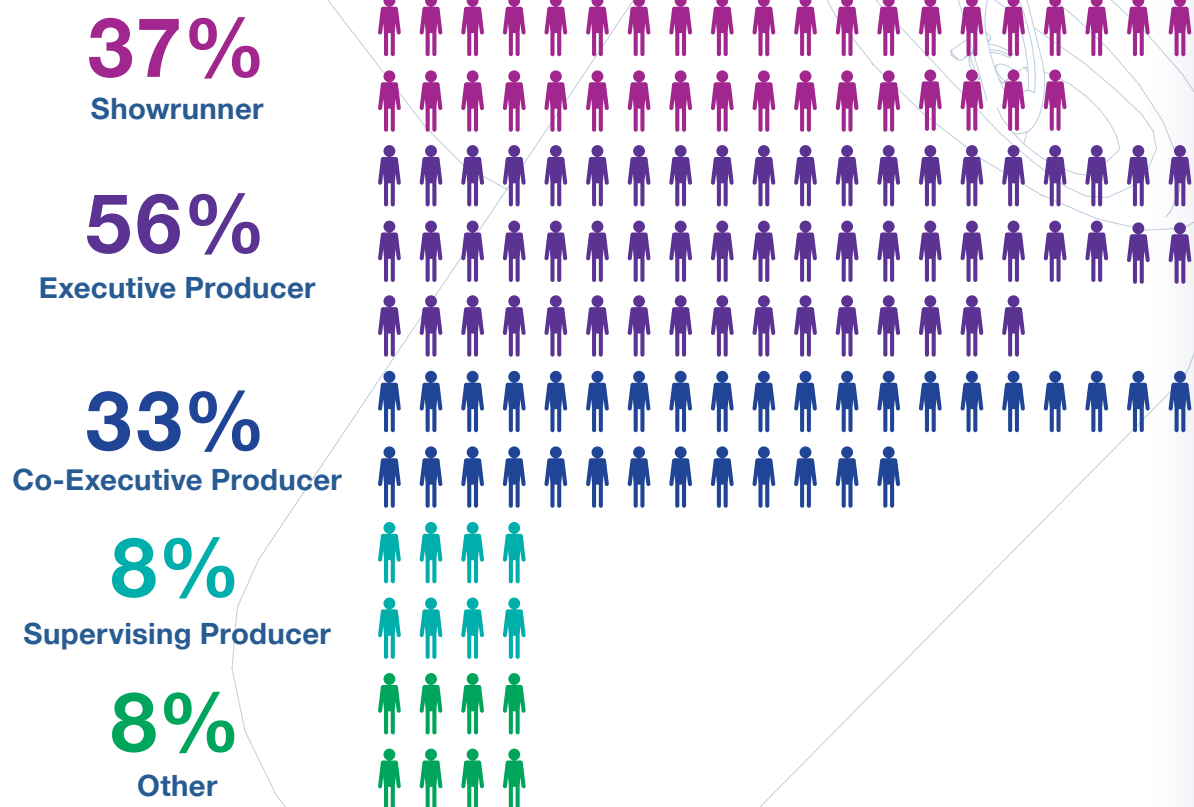
But there are drawbacks to this path. **Developing when less established leads to lower quotes.**

One upper-level participant elaborated: “It gets baked in from jump. Where the younger you are, the less white straight male you are, that quote starts lower... and takes forever to reach parity, if... if ever.”

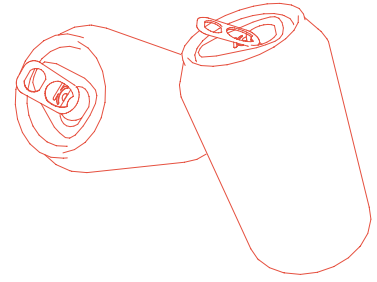
Another drawback raised in the salons is that diverse writers' development deals are often negotiated to where the series creator is afforded lower starting credits, fees, and less control over their show than their non-diverse counterparts. As one upper-level salon participant shared:

“So, one of the reasons that we are hired is, we are the expert, right? We’re brought in to be the cover, we’re brought in to speak specifically to that niche. Then, on the other side of it, when shows are being picked up, we are suddenly not an expert in anything.”

# Diverse writer title/status afforded if series picked-up (N = 99)



*Respondents could pick more than one option.*



# On 63%

**of their own projects, diverse writers are not achieving showrunner status.**

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According to salon participants, responsibility for these differences in credits, fees, and control lies at the feet of agents and managers. They are not fighting for their diverse clients, as evidenced by the fact that **on 63% of their own projects, diverse writers are not achieving showrunner status and on 50%, they are afforded lower than executive producer status.**

One upper-level salon participant articulated it this way:

“The thing is the agency. This goes back to agents and managers. They have all the files. They know what all their clients are making. They know who’s coming in at EP on development and who’s coming in at Co-EP. They’re letting it happen.”

How can true inclusion succeed if diverse writers are not allowed a significant voice even on shows they create?



# Conclusion

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For many diverse TV writers, the findings in this report are neither staggering nor surprising. After all, these are their lived experiences. But until now, these experiences have been sidelined to exceptional anecdotes, just plain bad luck, and/or perceived lack of talent. The fact is that there are systemic and pervasive barriers to representation and advancement. In addition, diverse TV writers have to navigate a minefield of bias, discrimination, and harassment in the writers room and through all facets of development and production. Yet, many endure and succeed. But at what cost? These barriers don't only cost diverse TV writers, but as other studies and reports have shown, it also hurts the bottom line. This isn't news. **But as working writers in the trenches, we would be remiss to poke holes without providing pitches for fixes.**

## SHARED RECOMMENDATIONS

Networks, studios, production companies, agents and managers, showrunners, upper-levels, and guild/unions all have a role to play in forwarding inclusion and equity efforts, and many are already spearheading important initiatives. However, as with many other industries, the inclusion and equity problem is much too large and pervasive for any one entity to adequately address. **It is absolutely crucial industry players work together.** If resources are shared, the impact will be both exponential and long-lasting. Specific recommendations for all industry players include the following:

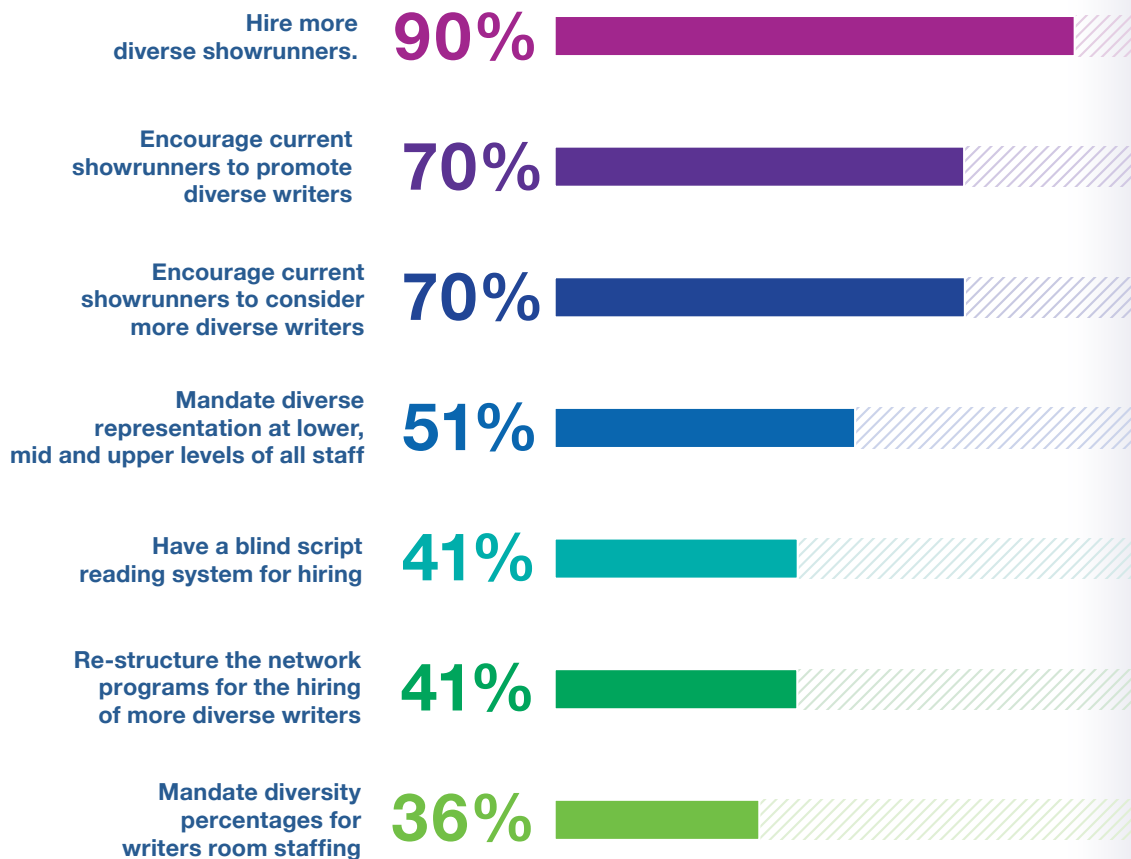
- **Collect, Track, and Review** inclusion and equity **Data** for staffing submissions, as well as within the ranks of TV writers rooms, non-writing producers, executives, and representatives. This data should include the LGBTQ+ and Disability communities and be made available **(in full transparency)** on an annual basis.
- Commit to **an independent, third-party reporting system** for bias, discrimination, and harassment that protects victims. Formalize and enforce **sanctions** for offenders.
- **Review and Eliminate** bias and/or discrimination in staffing submissions and in development.
- **Increase Diverse Professionals in Leadership Roles.**
- **Expand** and fully draw upon **Educational Programs** to support diverse TV writers at all levels.

## NETWORK / STUDIO / PRODUCTION COMPANY RECOMMENDATIONS

Since networks, studios, and production companies share oversight for employment and workplaces, it is incumbent upon these entities to ensure that these workplaces are safe, inclusive and equitable for all employees, including diverse TV writers.

### In your opinion, how could networks and studios support equal treatment and promotion of diverse writers?

(All diverse writers -- N = 210)



Detailed recommendations for networks, studios and production companies include the following:

*Respondents could pick more than one option.*

- **Expand and Standardize** fellowship/writing programs to include all diverse writers and share best practices.
- **Hire More Diverse Showrunners.**
- **Incentivize** showrunners to retain and promote diverse writers. **Sanction** shows (and showrunners/upper-levels/non-writing producers/executives) who abuse these incentive programs.
- **Mandate and Standardize Implicit Bias, Discrimination, Harrassment and General Management Training** for showrunners, upper-level writers/producers, non-writing producers, and executives overseeing shows/productions.
- **Formalize Exit Interviews** with every writer to help remove bias and/or discrimination in the hiring/firing process.

On the topic of exit interviews, one lower-level salon participant had this to say:

“Our industry is one of few, maybe only, where exit interviews aren’t conducted for writers at the end of the season or upon termination. We should have a safe space to tell the truth about our bosses, the culture and dynamics inside the room, and the uncomfortable situations we confronted.”

## AGENCY / MANAGEMENT COMPANY RECOMMENDATIONS

Almost two out of three (65%)<sup>17</sup> of diverse TV writers have agents and over half (58%)<sup>17</sup> have managers. Regarding agents, sentiments were decidedly mixed; expectations are low and turnover is high, as many survey respondents and salon participants lamented. As per managers, survey respondents and salon participants seemed, on the whole, more positive. This may be due, in part, to the shift to managers assuming the role of “breaking in” new writers, as one upper-level salon participant elaborated:

“There are a lot of managers who represent writers who are not represented yet by agencies. They are the writers who are the writers assistant on the show or who is the assistant to the exec producer or they are people who’ve written one thing or did a little short at a film festival. You can find really interesting writers because sometimes it takes people a year or two to get into the big leagues so to speak.”

Specific recommendations for agencies and management companies include:

- **Expand** the types of shows and title levels to which diverse writers are submitted, moving beyond theme or financial incentive as a motivating factor.
- **Negotiate** equitable development deals (quotes/fees, titles, etc.) for diverse clients to afford them greater control over their projects.
- **Foster** increased communication with diverse TV writers to ensure abuses are being heard and addressed.
- **Fight** to get clients paid above WGA negotiated minimums, with consistent title bumps and raises.
- **Don't encourage** clients to accept sub-optimal offers (e.g. repeating levels or taking demotions or pay cuts).

## SHOWRUNNER / UPPER-LEVEL / NON-WRITING PRODUCER RECOMMENDATIONS

While showrunners often shoulder the blame when things go awry, many showrunners, diverse and non-diverse alike, are working hard to integrate inclusion and equity into their hiring and management practices. But there are many who are not. Specific recommendations for showrunners, upper-level writers, and non-writing producers include:

- **Hire, Retain, and Promote** diverse writers.
- **Participate** in trainings and “soft skills” professional development.
- **Sign-On and Adhere** to a showrunner’s code of conduct.
- **Assign** freelance opportunities to diverse writers.
- **Hire** diverse assistants.
- **Mentor** and provide “soft support” to diverse writers.

While many of these solutions and practices are available, they are not mandatory and often suffer from low participation. One upper-level salon participant underscored the need for mandatory training and participation in this way: “All of these are top-down problems. So, it can feel like screaming into the wind because the people who you rely upon to not be harassers and hiring diverse rooms are the people who are not attending these things.”

## GUILD / UNION RECOMMENDATIONS

Since guilds and unions are responsible for collective bargaining and working in the interests of all writers, there are clear opportunities to work with industry players to advance and improve working conditions, not just for diverse writers, but for all writers.

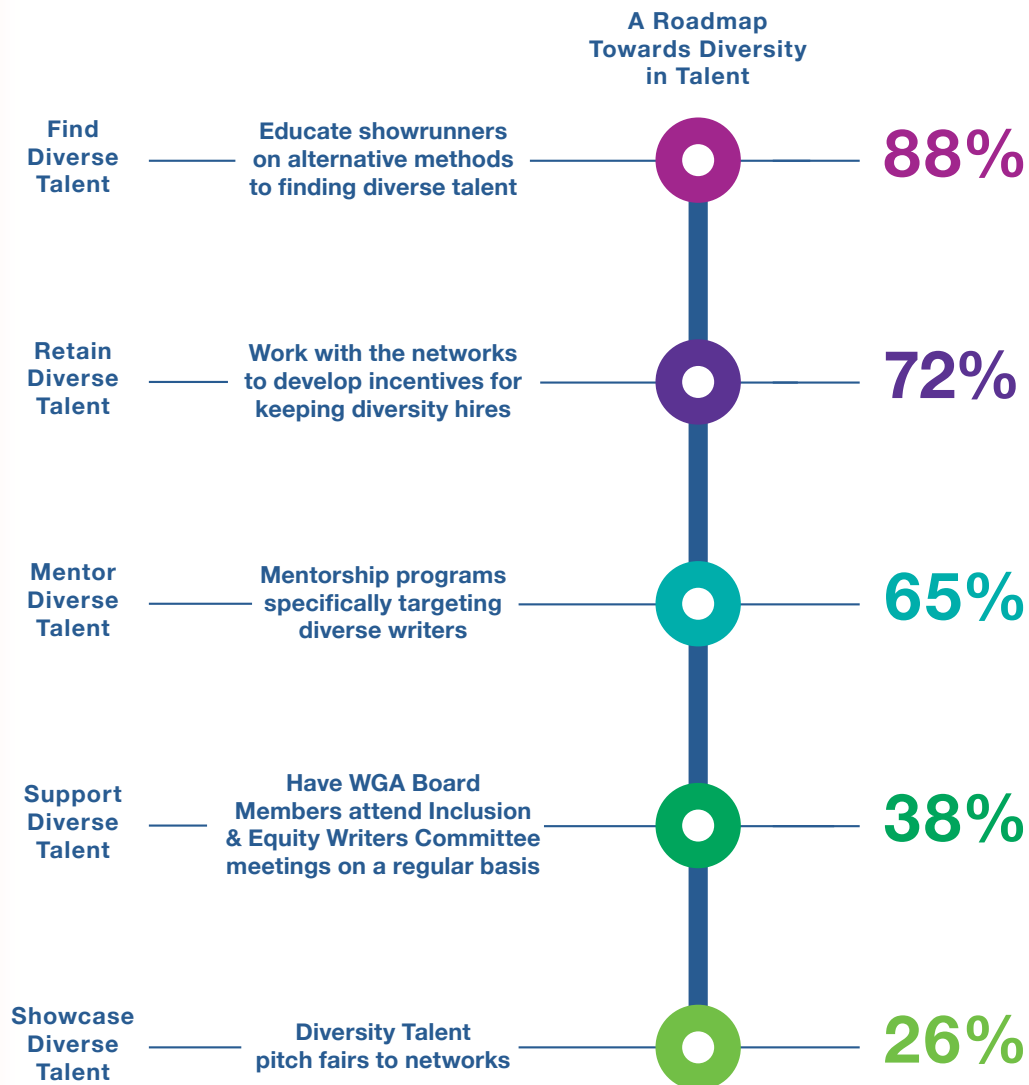
Specific recommendations for guilds and unions include:

- **Educate** showrunners on alternative methods to finding diverse talent (i.e. beyond just reaching out to a network's diversity department and relying on agencies).
- **Establish** a "Showrunners' Think Tank" to identify and disseminate best practices. **Incorporate** these trainings and best practices into the WGA Showrunners' Training Program.
- **Create and Enforce** a **code of conduct** for all working writers and for showrunners, specifically.
- **Establish** clear guidelines for title promotion in the **WGA Minimum Basic Agreement**.
- **Create** protocols and practices that protect the interest of writers, including setting parameters for negotiations between agencies and studio/networks.
- **Expand** and fully draw upon **Mentorship Programs** to support diverse writers at all levels.

On the topic of mentorship, one lower-level salon participant said this: “The people who have truly been the greatest help to me in my career are the people who are just a couple of years ahead.” As our data shows, diverse TV writers, in particular, could benefit from the support and counsel of other diverse peers and seniors, as well as from their non-diverse fellow TV writers.

## In your opinion, how could your guild support equal treatment and promotion of diverse writers?

(All diverse writers -- N = 209)



*Respondents could pick more than one option.*

## FUTURE RESEARCH

“Behind-The-Scenes: The State of Inclusion and Equity in TV Writers Rooms” is only a first step in directly tracking the experiences of diverse TV writers in the industry. Our hope is to continue collecting and reporting on this data, year-after-year, so progress on inclusion and equity issues can be measured in real time. Future inquiry should address the following:

- Cross-cultural communication within the writers room
- Length of time spent in writing staff positions for all sub-groups
- Length of time to advance from staff writer to Co-EP for all sub-groups
- The psychological, emotional toll for diverse writers and professional attrition rates
- Writers room make-up and efficacy in delivering diverse, authentic content
- Best showrunner and room practices with regards to successful programming/shows
- Unique challenges faced by individual sub-groups

Such avenues of inquiry will identify the characteristics and benefits of an inclusive room culture and industry. They will also identify possible correlations to the success of the end-product, whether it be in content, casting, or sheer profits. Research results presented in this “Behind-the-Scenes” report and other reports are providing roadmaps to a more reflective and representative Hollywood that can avoid the mistakes of the past and forge a future where content and creation are really for everyone and by everyone.

# Appendix – About the Authors and Partnering Organizations

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The **Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity (TTIE)** is a consortium of working TV writers, spanning baby writers to showrunners, from various backgrounds and working across various segments of the TV industry (Network/Cable/Digital, Drama/Comedy, Animation, etc.). TTIE is committed to increasing inclusion and improving working conditions for all writers, in particular those from diverse backgrounds. In 2018, TTIE became a grantee of the Pop Culture Collaborative and a collaborative project of Women in Film.

**Alton Carswell** is a Media Psychologist who has over 20 years' experience working for social justice in the field of Media and Psychotherapy. He is a clinical psychotherapist and user experience research consultant. Alton's educational experience includes a bachelor's degree in visual arts and media from the University of California San Diego, a master's degree in Clinical Psychology from Antioch University Los Angeles, a master's degree in Media Psychology from Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, where he is presently completing his dissertation as a PhD candidate. Alton's body of work focuses on LGBTQ issues, ethnic imagery, visual literacy, and health interventions. Most recently he consulted with Revry, the first LGBTQ streaming media application and service, providing content and demographic analysis.

Established in 2016, the **Pop Culture Collaborative** is a philanthropic resource and funder learning community that uses grantmaking, convening, narrative strategy, and research to transform the narrative landscape around people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Native people – especially those who are women, queer, transgender, and/or disabled. The Collaborative believes there is an opportunity – and that philanthropy has a responsibility – to build a field capable of shaping popular culture to reflect the complexity of the American people and make a just and pluralistic future feel real, desirable, and inevitable. Through partnerships between the social justice sector and the pop culture industries, the Collaborative believes activists, artists, and philanthropists can encourage mass audiences to reckon with the past and rewrite the story of our nation's future. The Pop Culture Collaborative is a project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

**Women in Film** advocates for and advances the careers of women working in the screen industries – to achieve parity and transform culture. Founded in 1973, Women In Film supports all women working in film, TV, and digital media from emerging to advanced career. Its distinguished programs include: mentoring, speaker & screening series, production training program, writing labs, film finishing funds, a sexual harassment help line, and an annual financing intensive. It advocates for gender parity through research, media campaigns and ReFrame, a collaboration with Sundance Institute. Women In Film honors the achievements of women in Hollywood through the legacy series, annual Emmy and Oscar parties and its signature event, the Crystal + Lucy Awards. Membership is open to all media professionals and more information can be found on its website: [www.womeninfilm.org](http://www.womeninfilm.org).





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