

Transforming Music Education:

A Call to End Sexism and Foster Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the pervasive sexism and systemic barriers that female band directors face throughout their careers. Despite initiatives encouraging women to enter the field, issues such as a lack of female mentors, hostile work environments, and societal stereotypes continue to undermine their careers. Data indicates that women are continuously underrepresented as band directors, and many leave due to negative treatment and sexism. Furthermore, female directors often confront implicit biases that challenge their authority and capabilities. This paper advocates for collective efforts to promote gender equality. I emphasize that until systemic changes are implemented, the cycle of gender disparity in band directing will persist.

Keywords: band, music education, women, female, sexism, discrimination, equality

Introduction

Research consistently shows that sexism remains prevalent in music education in the United States, particularly for band directors who identify as female (Bovin 2019, 2020, 2023; Sears 2010, 2014, 2017; Shaker 2020). This gender imbalance has a negative impact on the profession, affecting teachers and students alike. Information I gathered from study participants demonstrates that students who see educators with similar demographics to their own are more likely to be engaged in the learning process (Bovin 2020). In contrast, students who do not feel represented by their teachers may disengage from the subject

matter, ultimately leading to fewer individuals from underrepresented demographics pursuing careers in education. This attrition creates a cycle in which underrepresented populations become less visible in educational leadership roles, further perpetuating inequality (Gould 2003).

Currently, more educators identify as male than female in instrumental music positions at the high school, collegiate, and professional levels. This disparity is particularly visible in leadership roles. Table 1 presents the gender breakdown of high school band and choir directors by gender from 2001 to 2015 (MENC 2001; MTD Research 2015). I originally completed this table for the purposes of my 2020 dissertation.

Grade and Ensemble	Female			Male		
	2001*	2015**	Difference	2001*	2015**	Difference
9-12 Band	24.65%	20.45%	-4.20%	75.35%	79.45%	4.10%
6-8 Band	36.46%	35.60%	-0.86%	63.54%	64.40%	0.86%
3-5 Band	45.64%	51.17%	5.53%	54.36%	49.83%	-4.53%
9-12 Choir	56.44%	54.98%	-1.46%	43.56%	45.02%	1.46%
6-8 Choir	69.51%	69.57%	0.06%	30.49%	31.43%	0.94%
3-5 Choir	78.88%	79.59%	0.71%	21.12%	20.41%	-0.71%

(Source: MENC 2001; MTD Research, 2015)

Table 1: Gender Percentage Comparison of High School Band and Choir Directors from MENC, 2001 to MTD Research, 2015 (Bovin 2020)

These trends persist today. This table from my 2020 nationwide quantitative dissertation study involving over 1,000 participants revealed that the percentage of female-identifying band teachers at the high school level decreased between 2001 and 2015, with the ratio of female-to-male high school band directors dropping from 25%/75% to 20%/80%. Meanwhile, the female-to-male ratio for choir directors remained relatively stable, at approximately 55%/45%. Recent studies confirm that this gender gap exists in academia, with Shaker (2020) reporting that only 11.3% of college band directors identified as female in 2020. Gould et al. (2003) argued that the scarcity of female representation in higher-level positions in band leadership exacerbates challenges. According to various researchers, two key reasons for this unbalanced gender ratio in instrumental music education are sexism and discrimination, resulting in a field that is often hostile towards women,¹ and a lack of female mentors (Bovin 2019, 2020, 2023; Sears 2010, 2014, 2017; Shaker 2020; Coen-Mishlan 2015).

Women who enter the profession as band directors frequently experience sexism, harassment, and other forms of discrimination. The data show that many female high school band directors (FHSBDs) do not plan to remain in their jobs or the profession until retirement, citing sexism, discrimination, and other negative experiences as primary causes (Bovin 2019; Fischer 2013; Rahmani 2020). My dissertation study in 2020 found that 77.7% of FHSBDs reported experiencing sexism, 68.2% reported ageism regardless of age, 50.1% experienced mental or emotional harassment, 48.8% experienced verbal harassment, and 20.5% experienced sexual harassment or sexual abuse. Three years later, participants in a follow-up study revealed an increase in negative experiences, with 81.5% of FHSBDs experiencing sexism, 73% experiencing ageism regardless of age, 59.3% experiencing mental or emotional harassment, 56.7% experiencing verbal harassment, and 25% experiencing sexual harassment or sexual abuse (Bovin 2023). Some women take positions at other grade levels in an attempt to escape the hostility; however, researchers discovered that experiences are similar in middle and collegiate band programs (Bovin 2019, 2020; Shaker 2020; Shouldice 2024). Ultimately, many female band directors leave the band directing profession entirely due to adverse treatment. Shouldice (2024) revealed

that some of this attrition is due to microaggressions towards band directors who identify as female. These findings suggest that the challenges female band directors face are widespread across the United States and impact women across all career stages. Participants in my studies represented all 50 states and some territories, indicating that no region in the United States is immune to these issues.

Despite the persistence of sexism and discrimination in instrumental music education, I argue that both issues must be diminished and eventually dissolved to achieve gender equality in the profession. Research from 2020 onward points to emerging movements and organizations as having the potential to increase the number of females entering into the band profession, such as "Girls Who Conduct" (established in 2020), which provides mentorship and community for women and non-binary individuals in music leadership roles (Bovin 2020, 2023; Shaker 2020). However, true gender equality remains an ideal rather than a reality. Full equality in band directing would benefit the profession and empower students by providing them with role models they can relate to, regardless of gender (Bovin 2019, 2020; Grant 2000; Jacobs 2007).

I chose to focus solely on gender rather than the intersection of gender with race and other identifications, as the overarching data described in this article applies to all who identify as women. Factors such as age, race, religion, and sexuality contribute essential data to the discussion of barriers within the profession. Extensive research from my colleagues and me supports the larger argument discussed in this paper by showing that sexism and discrimination deter women from joining or remaining in the profession (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2019, 2020, 2023; Coen-Mishlan 2015; Fischer 2013; Jones 2010; Mullan 2014; Sears 2010, 2014, 2017; Shaker 2020; Shouldice 2024). Therefore, in this paper I argue the need for gender equality in band leadership positions across all educational levels in the United States. I contend that dismantling barriers is necessary to achieve true gender equality.

Definition of Terms

To facilitate clarity and a comprehensive understanding of the argument presented in this paper, it is essential to define key terms. While previous generations perceived gender as a strict binary, contemporary society recognizes a broader spectrum of gender identities. Adams (2019) identified 68 terms that describe gender identity and expression. Within this paper and my research, I use the term “female/s” and “woman/en” to indicate those who identify as such, regardless of biological sex. I chose to use the term “female” primarily in this article and in my own research over the term woman/en due to the idea that individuals select “female,” “male,” “nonbinary,” etc., on demographic paperwork. Furthermore, I chose to use “female” to align with and give honorable credit to the researchers whose studies inspired my own, as they also primarily use the term “female” when describing those who identify as such (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2019, 2020, 2023; Coen-Mishlan 2015; Fischer 2013; Jones 2010; Mullan 2014; Sears 2010, 2014, 2017; Shaker 2020; Shouldice 2024).

The following additional terms used throughout this article and listed alphabetically are defined as follows:

Attrition: The gradual reduction of a workforce through resignations or retirements. In the context of this article, attrition refers to the tendency of female band directors to leave the profession due to systemic barriers.

Community: A sense of belonging among individuals who share similar experiences or identities. In the context of this article, building a supportive community is essential for fostering resilience and empowerment among female band directors.

Discrimination: According to the Cambridge Dictionary, discrimination is defined as “treating a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way than how you treat other people, because of their skin color, sex, sexuality, etc.” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). In this article, discrimination pertains to the unfair treatment of individuals based on their gender identity, particularly those who identify as female.

Gender Equality: Refers to the equitable representation of all genders based on current statistics, moving beyond the traditional 50/50 male-female ratio. (United Nations 2015).

Implicit Bias: The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions unconsciously.

Mentorship: A relationship in which an experienced individual provides guidance and support to a less experienced person. Research indicates that strong mentorship can significantly influence career trajectories, particularly for females in male-dominated fields (Bovin 2020; Grant 2000; Jacobs 2007).

Microaggressions: Subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or behaviors that reinforce stereotypes. These can contribute to a hostile work environment and negatively impact the self-esteem of individuals, including those who identify as female (Shouldice 2024).

Sexism: This term denotes discrimination based on gender identification, encompassing attitudes, behaviors, and institutional practices that perpetuate inequality. It often manifests as societal stereotypes that undermine the capabilities of those who identify as female. (Fischer 2013).

Social Dominance Theory: A theory suggesting that societies are structured in group-based hierarchies, where dominant groups maintain their position through various means, including discrimination and exclusion, often impacting those who identify as female (Sumra 2019).

By defining these terms, I aim to clarify the arguments presented in this paper, emphasizing the importance of addressing systemic sexism and promoting gender equality in band directing.

History of Women in Bands

To fully establish the argument presented in this article, a brief history of women in instrumental music, particularly in band settings in the United States, is necessary, as history reveals a complex tapestry woven with threads of sexism, exclusion, and gradual

progress. From the American Revolution onward, women faced substantial barriers to participating in bands, which were predominantly male-dominated institutions. In the 19th century, bands were often closely associated with the military, which, at the time, was exclusively male. According to Gould (2003), the term “military band” evolved to encompass any wind band ensemble, regardless of its military affiliation, effectively reinforcing the notion that bands were inherently male spaces. Consequently, as military service was restricted to men, women were systematically excluded from most wind bands, even those not directly tied to military service.

As Gould (2003) noted, college bands during this period were similarly composed primarily of male members, as students organized and conducted these ensembles. This exclusionary practice was rooted in benevolent sexism, a form of sexism that, while often perceived as protective or complimentary, ultimately reinforces traditional gender roles (Jessee 2025). Benevolent sexism redirects women toward roles that align with societal expectations, which, in the context of this article, meant keeping them away from instrumental bands. Gould further emphasized that women are often dismissed on the basis of perceived physical limitations, such as “the theory that women’s smaller stature caused uniformity problems in marching,” highlighting the overt sexism that permeated band culture (Gould 2003, 7). Overt sexism manifests through blatant discriminatory remarks and actions, as outlined by Thomas (2017), which further perpetuates gender inequities.

The landscape began to shift during the World Wars, as the enlistment of men left numerous vacancies in both concert and college bands. While some institutions temporarily allowed women to fill these roles, the underlying sexism remained prevalent. Gould (2003) pointed out that many women were viewed as temporary members, with their inclusion justified by the exigencies of wartime. This type of exclusion, which appeared less overt and more justified, can be categorized as subtle sexism. In some cases, separate ensembles for women were created, effectively sidelining them from mainstream band activities (Gould, 2003). Sullivan (2008) highlighted that there were eight women’s military bands and four drum and bugle corps during this period, all of which were conducted by women, with many of their leaders having been music educators prior to the war. Notable historical

examples included the Women's Air Force Band and the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARS) Program, showcasing women's capability in leadership roles within these ensembles (Sullivan 2017; U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office, n.d.).

As women began to organize themselves, new opportunities emerged. During World War II, the founding of Tau Beta Sigma (TBS), National Honorary Band Sorority, Inc., marked a pivotal moment. Founded when the male-dominated Kappa Kappa Psi (KKPsi), National Honorary Band Fraternity, Inc. denied entry to female applicants, TBS provided a platform for women to participate in band activities, develop leadership skills, and contribute to the band community. The mission of TBS, alongside KKPsi, emphasized service to music and the cultivation of leadership, creating avenues for women in a landscape that had previously sidelined them (<https://www.tbsigma.org/>).

Despite these advancements, formal barriers to women participating in collegiate marching bands remained until the enactment of Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972. Title IX prohibited gender discrimination in federally funded education programs, leading to increased access for women in various educational settings, including music (Hanson, Guilfoy, and Pillai 2009). However, while it opened doors for many women, some institutions have struggled to fully implement its provisions, leading to ongoing disparities in access and representation (Hanson, Guilfoy, and Pillai 2009). Thus, the repercussions of historical exclusion still echo in contemporary band leadership. As discussed earlier in this article, in 2015 women led only about 20% of high school bands (Bovin 2020) and 11.3% of college bands (Shaker 2020). From 1993 to 2019, women directed a mere 5.3% of bands selected to perform at conferences held by the College Band Directors National Association and only 13.4% of bands at the Annual Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic (Shaker 2020). These statistics underscore the ongoing gender disparities in band leadership and highlight the significant barriers that persist, ultimately impacting women's retention in the profession.

Ongoing Challenges and Progress

The issue of gender inequality in band leadership is not merely a historical phenomenon; it continues to manifest in various forms today. Research indicates that band directors who identify as female face multiple challenges, including a lack of mentorship opportunities, biases in hiring practices, and a scarcity of role models in leadership positions (Grant 2000; Jacobs 2007; Sharma 2023). For example, Grant (2000) emphasized the importance of mentorship in fostering female leadership in music, noting that women often report feeling isolated and unsupported in predominantly male environments. Moreover, the perception of women as less capable or competent in leadership roles contributes to their underrepresentation in band direction. This perception can discourage young women from pursuing careers in music education or conducting, leading to a cycle of underrepresentation. As I argued in my 2020 dissertation, systemic change is necessary to alter these perceptions and create a more inclusive environment in music education.

Organizations such as Women Band Directors International (<https://www.womenbanddirectors.org/>) have emerged to support female musicians and educators, providing networking opportunities and resources that aim to foster gender equity in the field, while other organizations, such as Girls Who Conduct (<https://girlswhoconduct.org/>), aim to address issues by empowering women, women-identifying individuals, and non-binary conductors through mentorship and training. These organizations strive to empower women through mentorship programs, professional development workshops, and advocacy for equitable hiring practices. Such initiatives are vital for breaking the cycle by providing young female musicians with visible role models and supportive networks. Moreover, the establishment of local and national networks for female conductors fosters a sense of community that can mitigate feelings of isolation. The need for ongoing advocacy for gender equity in music education remains crucial, as many women continue to face barriers to advancement in their careers (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2019, 2020, 2023; Coen-Mishlan 2015; Fischer 2013; Jones 2010; Mullan 2014; Sears 2010, 2014, 2017; Shaker 2020; Shouldice 2024).

The journey of women in band history illustrates not only the challenges faced but also the resilience and determination of female musicians and educators. As the profession evolves, fostering an inclusive environment that encourages equal representation in band leadership is crucial for the future of instrumental music education. Until significant cultural and structural changes occur, achieving gender parity in directing ensembles at major conferences will remain a distant goal. By addressing the root causes of gender disparity and actively promoting female participation in music, music education can move towards a more equitable future in the world of bands.

The Argument: The Endless Cycle

Despite significant legal advancements allowing women to serve in the military and participate in bands, systemic sexism continues to pervade the field, particularly for those aspiring to become band directors. This sexism manifests throughout a female band director's career, beginning with her formative experiences in school band programs and perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and discouragement for aspiring female leaders. This cycle is characterized by a lack of female instrumental leaders and mentors, experiences of sexism, and eventual attrition from the field, collectively undermining the potential for greater gender equity in band leadership.

Lack of Female Mentors

The gender imbalance in band leadership has a significant impact on mentorship opportunities for female music students (Grant 2000; Jacobs 2007). Fewer band directors who identify as female at the secondary and collegiate levels means that music students are more likely to encounter male band directors, which limits their access to female role models who could inspire and guide them. According to the participants in my studies, women become band directors due to their experiences in high school band and the mentorship of their previous band directors. A lack of equal gender representation can deter aspiring female conductors, who may question their place in a field that is predominantly male (Bovin 2020).

Identity Crisis

The absence of female mentors can lead to an identity crisis for new female band directors. Sears (2014) noted that mentees often adopt their mentors' teaching styles and personas, which can influence their professional identity. Jones (2010) found that the lack of female presence at higher levels of music education leads many women to question their roles and identities as educators. This internal conflict is further exacerbated by societal expectations and biases that question women's capabilities in leadership roles (Sharma, 2023). The absence of female role models can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt among aspiring female conductors. Furthermore, participants in various studies reported encountering sexist remarks that undermine their authority (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2019; Fischer 2013). Such comments, whether overt or subtle, create an environment where female directors feel they must constantly prove their competence, perpetuating the cycle of doubt and insecurity.

Alpha Female Complex and Queen Bee Syndrome

Interestingly, the dynamics of female competition can also hinder progress. Mullan (2014) found that some women in leadership positions may consciously or unconsciously reinforce existing hierarchies, limiting opportunities for emerging female leaders. This phenomenon, linked to Social Dominance Theory, suggests that women who achieve "alpha" status may feel compelled to protect their positions, creating an unwelcoming or competitive atmosphere for newcomers (Sumra 2019).

This aligns closely with research on the Queen Bee Syndrome, a documented pattern in which women in senior positions, particularly within male-dominated fields, distance themselves from junior female colleagues, sometimes actively obstructing their advancement rather than providing mentorship or support (Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers 2016; Faniko, Ellemers, and Derks 2021). Initially identified by Staines, Tavis, and Jayaratne in 1974, Queen Bee behaviors include senior women emphasizing their own masculine traits, denying experiences of gender-based discrimination, or even criticizing junior women for expressing femininity or seeking equity. Such behaviors reinforce existing gender hierarchies and contribute to ongoing systemic inequalities by fostering division

rather than solidarity among women in professional settings (Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers 2016; Faniko, Ellemers, and Derks 2021).

Negative Professional Environments

Once in their positions, female band directors face sexism from various sources, including administration, colleagues, and students. Mullan (2014) found that administrators often question women's abilities to manage the demands of being a band director, leading to a lack of support. A 2024 study by Shouldice illustrated that such microaggressions contribute to a hostile work environment that can lead to burnout and attrition. In her study, Shouldice (2024) found that female and feminine-presenting band directors frequently encountered gender microaggressions, such as being addressed with demeaning names like “sweetie,” “honey,” and “young lady.” All these experiences contribute to negative professional environments by reinforcing feelings of inferiority and perpetuating restrictive gender roles.

This type of disrespect can manifest in practical ways; for example, a participant in Fischer’s study was mistakenly identified as an assistant rather than the director during a public event (Fischer 2013). Such misidentifications reflect deep-seated biases that persist even in professional settings (Sharma 2023). Female band directors mistaken for non-directorial roles not only experience a lack of respect but may also begin to internalize these perceptions, questioning their legitimacy and belonging in the field.

The “Good O’ Boys Club”

The notion of the “Good O’ Boys Club” further complicates the landscape, highlighting the exclusionary relationships and informal networks that male directors often share, frequently to the disadvantage of their female counterparts. All eight FHSBD participants in my 2019 phenomenological study mentioned the idea of a “Good O’ Boys Club” without being prompted. This informal network offers male band directors opportunities for mentorship, professional support, and career advancement that are often inaccessible to women (Bovin 2019, 2020). Though the “club” is not an official organization, it is well known throughout the profession as something that successful male band directors become an unofficial part of at some point in their careers. Women, non-binary

individuals, and those who are newer to or less successful in their careers are often on the outside. Such exclusion can lead to disparities in professional development, recognition, and career progression.

Female band directors often report feeling isolated or marginalized within professional communities, attributing this to the implicit biases that underpin these informal networks. These biases often manifest as preferential treatment during hiring processes, leadership assignments, and invitations to professional gatherings and workshops (Shaker 2020; Sharma 2023). Women band directors have noted that even when included, they face additional hurdles in establishing credibility and forming equitable professional relationships (Bovin 2020). Many need to work harder to be seen as equal to their male colleagues who are members of the “Good O’ Boys Club,” and many will never experience being members themselves due to their gender identity (Bovin 2019, 2020). Existing studies have identified these challenges as significant barriers, highlighting that the persistence of these exclusionary practices maintains gender imbalances within the field of band directing (Bovin 2020). Addressing the negativity surrounding the unofficial organization and dismantling these informal barriers is crucial to promoting equality and fostering a more inclusive environment within music education.

Unsupported and Hostile Work Environments

The culture of silence surrounding harassment and sexism can leave female band directors feeling isolated. Research indicates that strong sexist beliefs contribute to a hostile work environment characterized by inappropriate jokes, intimidation, and verbal abuse (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2019, 2020; Coen-Mishlan 2015; Gould 2001; Mullan 2014; Rahmani 2020). Data from my studies in 2020 and 2023 reveal that approximately half of FHSBDs experienced verbal, mental, or emotional harassment, and about a quarter experienced sexual harassment, but many chose not to report it due to feelings that they are alone, a fear of retaliation, or increased assumptions from others of perceived weakness. On the other hand, those who do speak out often do not receive proper attention to the matter from administrators or other personnel with the power to take proper and appropriate action. Fischer (2013) documented a participant who faced blackmail from a staff member

and received no administrative support when she reported an incident. Such a lack of institutional backing can lead female directors to exit their positions entirely, perpetuating the cycle of attrition.

Combating Stereotypes

Compounding these challenges is the lingering societal stereotype that women should prioritize family responsibilities over career ambitions. Participants in Sears' (2010) study expressed difficulty balancing work and personal life, contributing to the decision of many to leave the demanding role of band director. I found that one of the main reasons that women leave their positions as high school band directors is due to motherhood and time commitments (Bovin 2019, 2020). These data align with similar studies, which suggest that societal expectations often create barriers that discourage women from pursuing leadership roles, resulting in significant attrition in the field (Fitzpatrick 2013; Shaw 2014; Wilson 2014).

The cycle of sexism and exclusion within the realm of band directing is deeply entrenched and multifaceted. It encompasses a lack of female mentors, identity crises, competitive dynamics among women, hostile professional environments, and societal stereotypes. Breaking this cycle requires a concerted effort from both genders to foster inclusive and supportive environments. Initiatives that promote female mentorship and highlight successful female leaders are essential for encouraging the next generation of female band directors. Only through systemic change and community support can music education hope to achieve true gender equity in band leadership.

Counterarguments that Hide and Distract from Sexism

I acknowledge that some arguments challenge the assertion that sexism remains a persistent issue for female band directors, leading others to believe that conditions are improving rather than deteriorating. Though there is truth in these counterarguments, narratives such as these minimize and invalidate the sexism that the majority of female band directors experience. In the next section, I address three counterarguments that, at face value, appear to be benefits. I address each in turn, providing rebuttals that illustrate

why each point obscures the sexism that remains a significant barrier in the profession for female band directors. These three counterarguments are (1) Women as Minority Candidates for Band Directing Positions, (2) Positive Connections with Students, and (3) Progress Towards Gender Equality.

Counterargument 1: Women as Minority Candidates for Band Directing Positions

The first argument suggests that women, as a minority in the band director profession, may benefit from affirmative action policies, leading hiring committees to favor female candidates to enhance diversity. Participants in Mullan's study (2014) reported that their hiring experiences were relatively straightforward, implying that women may have been selected as minority candidates and thus have an easier time getting a band directing position. The creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in 1965, formed one year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, required hiring committees to consider a diverse pool of candidates, potentially leading to increased interviews for women.

While it is true that women may have had a higher likelihood of being interviewed due to the EEOC, the overall data demonstrates a stark gender disparity in band directorships even in the 21st century. The percentage of female band directors dropped from 33% in 2001 to just 21% in 2015 (MENC 2001; MTD Research 2015). Subsequent research indicates that this trend has continued into the 2020s, with reports showing that only 11.3% of band directors at the university level and 30% at the high school level identify as female (Bovin 2023; Shaker 2020). This decline indicates that even when women are interviewed, many do not secure positions, possibly due to underlying biases that favor male candidates despite the intention of promoting diversity.

Even when women are presented as candidates, prevailing attitudes may still lean toward hiring men due to stereotypes and implicit bias (Sharma 2023). The perception that women may only be hired to meet diversity quotas could reinforce stereotypes that diminish their qualifications. Thus, the opportunity for women to enter the field remains limited, perpetuating the cycle of gender disparity.

Counterargument 2: Positive Student Connections

The second argument suggests that female band directors possess unique qualities that enable them to forge meaningful connections with students, fostering positive relationships that may not be as easily established by male counterparts (Mullan 2014; Sears 2010). This perspective highlights the potential for female educators to create supportive environments through empathy and nurturing traits, thereby fostering positive work environments that counteract the negative experiences discussed throughout this article.

While these relational advantages are significant, they do not negate the persistent disrespect female band directors often face, particularly from students who hold stereotypical views regarding gender roles in music education. Participants in Mullan's (2014) study indicated they frequently encountered stereotypes that undermined their authority. Although some students may connect well with female directors, the presence of sexism from peers and other adults can overshadow these positive interactions.

Moreover, a study by Leisner and Wright (2021) indicates that the experiences of female band directors can include a double-edged sword: while they can relate to students on a personal level, they simultaneously encounter skepticism and derogatory attitudes that can hinder their effectiveness as leaders. Negative experiences with colleagues, administration, or parents outweigh the positive connections with students, which can lead to burnout, contributing to the ongoing cycle of gender disparity (Bovin 2019, 2020; Mullan 2014; Sears 2010, 2014, 2017; Shaw 2014, Shouldice 2024).

Counterargument 3: Progress Toward Equality

The third argument posits that recent social movements, including the Women's March and the #MeToo movement, signal a shift toward greater gender equality and empowerment for women in various fields. Some researchers question whether we are entering a postfeminist era characterized by a sense of "Girl Power" (Pomerantz et al. 2013). These movements have raised awareness and initiated crucial conversations about gender equality; however, it is essential to recognize that systemic issues persist despite increased visibility of pro-women movements.

Studies confirm that women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles across various professions, including band directing (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2019; Fischer 2013; Shaker 2020). According to data collected by the National Federation of High Schools that I presented in 2023, approximately 66% of high school band directors identify as male, 30% as female, and 4% as nonbinary/other. In addition, female band directors continue to experience highly negative interactions with others, which create harmful and toxic work environments. My presentation at the 2023 Midwest Clinic International Band and Orchestra Conference included data stating that approximately 81.5% of FHSBDs participants in my studies experienced sexism, 73% experienced ageism regardless of age, and 94.7% experienced discrimination if they identified as LGBTQ+.

Additionally, while the increased dialogue surrounding women's issues is a step forward, many female band directors still face barriers that inhibit their advancement. Research conducted by Shouldice (2024) found that female directors frequently navigate a landscape riddled with sexism, discrimination, and microaggressions, leading to high levels of attrition in the field. Data from my 2023 research suggests that over one in two FHSBDs experienced mental, emotional, or verbal harassment, and approximately one in four have been sexually harassed or sexually abused at some point during their career (Bovin 2023). These data, along with those from other researchers, indicate that despite societal progress, significant challenges remain for female band directors (Bovin 2023; Shouldice 2024).

In conclusion, while these three ideas suggest that female band directors may benefit from certain hiring practices or student relationships due to their gender identity, these points do not negate the pervasive sexism that still exists in the field. The evidence outlined in this article demonstrates that band directors who identify as female continue to face significant barriers in their professional journeys. Until systemic changes are implemented to create a more equitable environment, the cycle of gender disparity in band directing will persist.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, I advocate for the urgent need for gender equality among band leaders at all educational levels. Through a combination of personal insights, data I collected over the last decade, and similar research findings from my colleagues, I assert that sexism remains a significant barrier for female band directors, impacting not only our careers but also the overall integrity of the profession. Female band leaders frequently encounter negative interactions, including sexism, harassment, and bias, which contribute to a persistent cycle: the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles leads to experiences of discrimination, resulting in many leaving their positions or even the profession entirely. Research indicates that these challenges are widespread across the United States and not confined to specific regions (Anderson 2010; Bovin 2020; Fischer 2013; Jones 2020; Rahmani 2020; Shaker 2020). Women currently in or pursuing band director roles are likely to face similar sexist attitudes, hindering their professional development and perpetuating the cycle of gender disparity.

Addressing and dismantling sexist beliefs, comments, and actions is critical for eradicating gender discrimination in the field. As these biases are reduced, a new cycle can emerge, one in which more women enter and remain in the profession. This shift can lead to a decrease in self-doubt, allowing aspiring female band directors to go from questions such as “Is this profession for someone like me?” and “Can I succeed in this role?” to confidently stating “This profession is for me” and “I can succeed in this role.” Increased self-confidence will not only benefit individual women but also provide music students with a more equitable education and lessen the biases that currently pervade the profession. Research emphasizes that diverse role models positively influence students’ perceptions of leadership, underscoring the importance of gender equality in band directing (Bovin 2020; Grant 2000; Jacobs 2007).

Moving Towards Gender Equality: Unanswered Questions and Advice

While the problem has been identified, pressing questions remain: What are the next steps in dissolving sexism and promoting gender equality? How can individuals from all genders contribute to this cause? Transforming entrenched beliefs and societal norms

requires collective effort and commitment. Recent years have witnessed significant strides toward gender equality, as movements advocating for women's rights gain momentum and women increasingly share their experiences of bias and discrimination (Rahmani 2020; Sharma 2023). Reports indicate that public awareness of gender issues has risen, with many holding those who perpetrate sexism accountable.

My most important advice for aspiring band directors who identify as female is to continue to pursue their passion for as long as they are physically and mentally able to do so, despite existing biases and barriers. To best help each other, successful women in the field should actively support their peers, fostering an environment where visibility and mentorship can flourish. The more women who occupy prominent leadership roles, the more they become role models for future generations, and thus, more potential avenues for support are created in the profession. Research highlights the critical role of mentorship in helping women navigate the challenges of male-dominated fields, emphasizing the need for robust support networks (Bovin 2020; Grant 2000; Jacobs 2007). These networks can provide invaluable resources and guidance, helping to mitigate the isolation many female educators feel.

Moreover, women must not remain silent about their experiences, especially the negative ones. Sharing these stories is essential for raising awareness and facilitating change. As Sears (2010) aptly noted, "sound must prevail over silence," and for the field of secondary instrumental music education to become more gender-equitable, women need to vocalize their struggles and triumphs. This advocacy not only illuminates the existing problems but also empowers others to confront and challenge systemic sexism. My research (2020, 2023) suggests that sharing experiences, which I refer to as "Breaking the Silence," among women can catalyze social change, inspiring others to speak out and fostering a culture of support and resilience.

Ultimately, women aspiring to lead bands must actively combat sexism and negativity, persistently advocating for gender equality until it becomes a reality. The path to gender equity is complex and requires the concerted effort of individuals across all genders to break the cycle and create a more inclusive environment for both teachers and students.

In conclusion, until educational institutions implement policies that promote diversity, confront the cultural norms that sustain gender bias, achieve equitable representation of those who identify as female in band directing, and eliminate harmful workplace dynamics, gender equality within music education will continue to remain an aspiration rather than a reality.

About the Author

Amy J. Bovin is the Interim Director of Bands and Music Education at the University of Tampa, the Chair and President of the Florida Chapter of Women Band Directors International (WBDI), a frequent guest conductor and clinician, and an education researcher specializing in the experiences of female band directors. In addition to Florida, Dr. Bovin taught secondary and collegiate bands in Connecticut, Utah, and Texas. She completed a Ph.D. in Music Education at The University of Hartford's the Hartt School, and a Master of Music in Instrumental Conducting, a Bachelor of Arts in Music, and a Bachelor of Science in Education from the University of Connecticut. Dr. Bovin was a recipient of a 2018 CBDNA Mike Moss Conducting Grant and a conducting fellow for the 2015 Cortona Sessions for New Music in Cortona, Italy. At the 2016 Midwest Clinic, she received the Citation of Merit from WBDI for "outstanding contribution to band and band music". Dr. Bovin is a Past President of Connecticut Music Educators Association, Past WBDI Connecticut Chair, a life member and past National Officer of Tau Beta Sigma, and an honorary life member of Kappa Kappa Psi.

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¹ Note from author: the terms “female” and “women” will be used interchangeably in this paper. Please see page 98 for a further explanation.