

“Sometimes it Feels Like Being in a Parallel World” Life Worlds and (Gendered) Challenges of Women Songwriters in Germany

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Introduction

The beauty of the music industry is that it operates at its best as an ecosystem. Behind most songs, there is a story of collaboration. By the time of release, a song has been touched not just by the artist, but by songwriters, producers, mixers, engineers, record labels, publishers, managers and more.
*(The Pact)*¹

The process of creating a song is collaborative. However, women² have been in the minority in almost every form of musical creation. At least since the turn of the millennium, numerous studies have been devoted to the marginalization of women in the field of music (e.g. Smith et al. 2023; Female_pressure 2022; Strong/Raine 2018, 2019; Keychange/MaLisa Stiftung 2021; Leonard 2016).³ The results of these studies indicate the existence of horizontal as well as vertical segregation of the labor market, i.e., unequal distribution in terms of different professions, occupational fields, and hierarchical levels. In many areas of the music business, women can be described as a group of people who live in a life world where they have few opportunities for determination and participation. Thus, they exist in a “parallel society” where they are little perceived and valued (Heesen 2019: 39). This

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- 1 The Pact is a group of prominent professional songwriters who advocate for songwriters' rights. They can be found on Instagram. The quote is from a collaborative letter that is available via: https://84f4eabf-ee97-478a-a6ce-c3aa3a410761.filesusr.com/ugd/e3c7cf_0735f6e9f0084d58a1611818d10e8962.pdf (Accessed 30.3.2023).
 - 2 Women and men are not considered essentialist categories in this text. Rather, the category of gender is understood as a socially powerful social construction (see Schoop/Ptatscheck 2022).
 - 3 For a literature review see Schoop/Ptatscheck (2022).

also applies to women who work as songwriters. Female songwriters have long been a staple of the music industry, but their contributions are often overlooked or underappreciated, as exemplified by Mary E. Rohlfing (1996) for women songwriters in the early era of rock'n'roll, and M.L. Corbin Sicoli (1994) for the field of country music. From Carole King, Cynthia Weil, and Joni Mitchell to Taylor Swift and Beyoncé, female songwriters have written some of the most iconic and successful songs in the history of popular music, paving the way for the following generations of women artists. Nevertheless, the field of songwriting has for many years been regarded as male-dominated. Despite the growing acknowledgment of this fact and some evidence of diversification, gender representation, overall, remains quite unbalanced. This is also illustrated by the current results of the sixth annual report on the music industry, conducted by Stacy L. Smith (2023) and the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. In their in-depth analysis of inclusion on the Billboard Hot 100 Year-End Chart, they examined the gender of artists, songwriters, and producers across 1,100 songs from 2012 to 2022. The report highlights some improvements in the inclusion of women in certain areas but reveals a concerning lack of progress in the percentage of female songwriters across the board. In 2022, only 14% of songwriters were women, which was roughly the same as in 2021. Overall, women made up only 12.8% of the songwriters evaluated over the past 11 years – a ratio of 6.8 men to 1 female songwriter. The study also looked at how many songs included a female songwriter. More than half of the songs from the past 11 years contained no female songwriters, while 43% contained one or more female songwriters. In contrast, less than 1 percent of all songs lacked male songwriters. Moreover, the study identified that the 12 male songwriters most frequently credited in the sample were collectively responsible for nearly 25% of the 1,100 songs. According to a study by the MaLisa Foundation (MaLisa Stiftung 2022), there is no improvement in the German region either: Whether it's songwriting, charts, GEMA membership, or the songs registered there, the proportion of women remains far below one-fifth in all areas. In the period surveyed from 2010 to 2019, an upward trend in the proportion of men can even be observed. While 86% of the Top 100 singles charts were composed of men in 2010, the proportion rose to 91% in 2019. This raises the question of which factors prevent women from entering or maintaining a profession as songwriters, what it means for women to work in a male-dominated workplace, and what challenges are associated with it.

There is an increasing number of works (e.g. Hiltunen 2021; Tough 2013, 2017; Barber 2016, 2017; Long/Barber 2015; Negus/Astor 2015; Bennett 2011, 2012, 2014; Jones 2005) that make the creative and collaborative processes of songwriting, the product/production of songs, and its historical backgrounds the subject of scientific discourse. However, the working conditions of songwriters, their career trajectories, and related (mental health) challenges are only rarely part of these

discussions (Ptatscheck 2024). Focusing on the life worlds of women songwriters in specific, no research has been conducted to date.

A Life World Approach to Songwriters

This article is based on a qualitative study of the life worlds and (mental health) challenges of songwriters in Germany (Ptatscheck 2024). The term "life world" is understood here in the sense of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann (1984: 11), as the epitome of subjective realities that are experienced and suffered by individuals. To provide insights into the life worlds of songwriters, between November 2021 and January 2022, twelve narrative biographic interviews were conducted with German Schlager and Pop songwriters (aged 19-54 years), of whom seven identified themselves as female and five as male.⁴ The interviewees all define themselves as professional songwriters who earn their living by writing songs either full-time or part-time. All interviews (90 to 360 minutes long) were collected in person or online via video calls and subsequently transcribed. Data analysis and interpretation were based on biographical case reconstruction according to Rosenthal (2018). The focus here was on the songwriters' life worlds and their self-perceived mental state. It became clear that sustaining a career as a professional songwriter is a precarious form of work that is affected by personal experiences and structural problems of the music business in general (e.g. financial insecurity, unpredictable schedules, lack of acknowledgment, discrimination) and particular challenges for women songwriters in specific. For this article, a focus will be placed on the latter, highlighting women songwriters. For this purpose, the sample was extended by three interviews, conducted between February and March 2023. In total, 10 women songwriters could be found, who gave insights into their life stories. Even if the individual cases outlined in the following cannot be considered representative of the overall songwriting business, an attempt was made to provide diverse insights into the working and living environments of women songwriters based on interview excerpts. The quoted passages in the following were translated to English; person-related data was anonymized, and interviewees are referred to throughout this article by using pseudonyms. Due to the small number of women songwriters in the music business, and the close networking in the business itself, demographic information is omitted.

4 One of the interviewees identified themselves as "female" in the interview, but now describes themselves as "non-binary". Since the person addresses this in public statements and no other interviewees identified as non-binary could be found, the characteristic will no longer be associated with the person in the following or discussed in the article to preserve data protection.

The article addresses the hypothesis that women songwriters, as part of the patriarchal structures of the music business, exist in a parallel society where they are underrepresented and – or perhaps precisely because of this – confronted with gender-specific challenges that are often not perceived as such by their environment – or as interviewee Sarah (2021) puts it: “Sometimes it feels like being in a parallel world. There are male songwriters in our universe, and there are us, women, in our little galaxy. Does anyone see us and our needs?”

In the following, the question of how the interviewees managed to gain a foothold in a male-dominated world is explored. General and gender-specific challenges and stressors that come along with the (musical) socialization and everyday life of songwriters will be elaborated. Furthermore, empowerment strategies are discussed. Finally, perspectives are presented that may contribute to a (structural) change and improvement of the songwriters’ working and living conditions.

As a contribution to popular music studies and public health, the study follows a growing body of literature concerning the realities of creative labor(ers) and its sometimes-precarious conditions (e.g. Sandoval 2018; Huges et al. 2016; McRobbie 2016; Hesmondhalgh/Baker 2011), specifically focusing on the state of (mental) health and wellbeing of musicians within the music industries (e.g. Musgrave 2022; Help Musicians 2021; Brunt/Nelligan 2021; Gross/Musgrave 2020; Gross/Musgrave/Lanciute 2018). Using the example of a group of women songwriters, this article provides a deeper insight into the gender-specific power relations in the field of popular music described by Schoop/Ptatscheck (2022).⁵

Becoming and Being a Songwriter

All interviewees “slipped” into the business more or less by chance. None of them initially took songwriting seriously as a career prospect because they lacked knowledge about this possible profession: “I didn’t really have it on my radar that it was such a profession, that you could also write songs for others” (Lisa 2021). In this respect, they do not differ from the male respondents. It is noticeable, however, that all female respondents got into the business through their activities as singers or singer-songwriters. Most of them got their first contacts in the songwriting business through singing and songwriting competitions (e.g. Jugend Musiziert, Treffen Junge Musikszene, German Songwriting Award) already in their teenage years or as young adults, by studying in the field of ‘singer-songwriter’ (e.g. HS Osnabrück, Popakademie Baden-Württemberg), further education programs (e.g. Eventim Popkurs Hamburg, Masterclass für Textdichter, Celler

5 The article is explicitly intended as a continuation of the work of Schoop/Ptatscheck (2022) and Ptatscheck (2024), which serve as the theoretical framing for this paper.

Schule), and/or networking events (e.g. German Song Week). Julia (2023), for example, was asked to be a songwriter because of her voice; the fact that she had been creating fantasy lyrics since elementary school and later wrote songs for her band was to her advantage:

“A DJ hit me up to write something for him because he thought my voice was cool. And then he asked if I also write myself. I said yes, I do. It worked out well and then it was a bit of word of mouth. He then recommended me to others and that’s how several collaborations came about. When there’s a chance, you just must try to deliver well and in the best-case scenario, the next job will result from that” (Julia 2023).

Julia’s statement not only makes it clear that it is important to network to find job opportunities and maintain contacts. Since these networks (as will be discussed below) are mainly dominated and regulated by men, it is especially important to adapt to them in order to “fit in” (see also Leonard 2016: 50).

By creating melodies and lyrics, the interviewees describe themselves as ‘songwriters’ or ‘topliners’, and work as freelancers or via exclusive contracts in cooperation with music publishers and labels. In contrast, most male songwriters interviewed also take on roles like ‘producer’ or ‘tracker’⁶. Only two of the female songwriters also work professionally or privately as producers; they have acquired the technical skills in the course of study programs, or are self-taught. What all interviewees have in common is their passion for music or writing music as the foundation of their songwriter career paths. All songwriters quickly realize that they take on a new role with different functions when they write for others instead of for their own projects. None of them describes a role conflict; rather, they see songwriting as a creative complement or (temporary) replacement for their own projects. “I’m an artist *and* songwriter,” Hanna (2021) explains, “I’m totally fulfilled by being on stage and sharing *my* songs with fans. But I also think it’s really cool to go into the studio for others and get lost in the creative process and let off steam creatively.” Lisa can try her hand at writing for others and she finds room for ideas that don’t fit her own project. To develop creatively and to have fun are the main motivations to work as a songwriter – also as a contrast, balance, or occasional distancing from her own project:

“It’s not about me then, I’m in the background. I primarily do a service. I put myself in someone’s shoes and play a role. I’ve noticed that it’s also good not to have to go on stage, but just to stand in the audience and realize, okay, this is

6 ‘Trackers’ record and produce demonstration recordings (Hiltunen 2021: 50).

still my song. [...] That gives me a good feeling and takes the pressure off my own project” (Lisa 2021).

Not for all interviewees who (try to) work as performing artists themselves, the role of a songwriter is a first-choice decision. For some, like Andrea (2023), songwriting is the only alternative maintain a career in the music business. She would have liked to pursue her stage career much longer. However, she realizes that she cannot find a market as a performing artist anymore – not only because of a lack of attention but also, or perhaps especially, because of her increasing age. While, within a masculinist work environment, she was sexualized as a female artist early in her career, she now feels discriminated against and marginalized because of her increasing age. Unlike most of her aging male colleagues, she has had to reorient herself and look for new creative ways, such as songwriting for other artists. Andrea’s case is an example of what is also revealed by Marion Leonard (2016). Leonard argues that an understanding of women’s experience in the music business cannot only be developed by attending to gender as a single issue:

“It is important to recognize the differences and inequalities that exist between women workers and how their experiences are shaped not only by approaches to gender, but also by how these interact with attitudes to other factors including age⁷, class, sexuality and ethnicity” (Leonard 2016: 48).

Amanda, on the other hand, left the stage of her own choice. In songwriting, she finds a creative activity where she doesn’t *have* to be on stage:

“I always had the problem that I liked to make music, but I never wanted to be famous. This idea has always been for me the biggest hell there is in the world. [...] Having your own project is fine. But somehow, I realize that when I’ve played a song ten times, I can’t listen to it anymore, I don’t want to play it anymore and I want something new. I realized early on that my heart beats more for songwriting than for being on stage myself” (Amanda 2022).

Sandy (2022) likes to write for other artists. However, she admits that, especially when a song with another artist becomes very successful, she would sometimes like to be the performer herself. She has not been able to achieve any major chart successes with her own project so far, which sometimes gets to her in situations like that. Hanna (2021) also is familiar with such experiences. Nevertheless, she

7 On women and aging in popular music, see also Gardner (2020), Jennings/Gardner (2012), and Whiteley (2005).

uses this energy positively and motivates herself to move forward with her own project.

It is striking that almost all interviewees describe songwriting as a kind of self-therapy. Sandy (2022) is aware that her “products” can, however, also be a therapy for consumers. In German Schlager in particular, she says, it’s about selling the most positive moments possible, in which listeners can forget their fears and worries and escape from everyday life. Although she believes there is still too little room for such topics, she also sees an increasing trend in pop music to address mental health issues. Even though Alice (2023) is aware that in her function as a songwriter for other artists, she has to distance herself emotionally from her “product”, she nevertheless also sees herself with the responsibility to use her lyrics as a mouthpiece to empower other people: “I also want to pass something on. I want to shake up a few people for a few topics. And I also want to improve the world a bit. I really [...] try to use it in a positive way. [...] Of course, that doesn’t always go down well.” Here it depends not only on the genre but also on the values and images of the artists for whom she writes. Julia (2023) also has an open ear for the problems of the artists in sessions and sometimes addresses them in their songs: “Sometimes you are almost the therapist yourself, who listens, who takes notes, who also gives impulses, who asks questions, who somehow helps another person perhaps to process a situation creatively.”

For Amanda (2022), the creative process of songwriting for others even represents a “healthy” way to gain distance from her own inner life: “I have a lot more fun just writing a song I don’t have to say anything with. I also realized it’s just fun for me to slip into different heads [...]. That’s just more exciting for me than dealing with myself.” On the other hand, for one interviewee⁸, it is *existential* that she deals with her inner life and related dispositions and disorders because these have a decisive influence on her songwriting process. In the interview, she talks about being diagnosed with ADHD and classified on the autistic spectrum. She describes herself as hypersensitive and extremely empathic. Because of her mental condition, she can put herself in the shoes of the artists she writes for and use this as a creative tool. At the same time, she is particularly good at creating structure and keeping to schedules and work plans. However, it is precisely this behavior that also becomes a burden when she must conform to the structures of her “clients”: “Disorganization and creative chaos make me aggressive. Of course, I cannot show this to the outside world, but it stresses me out insanely and I so often think to myself, people, I just need a break here right now.”

8 Since the psychological characteristics are very specific to this person and she would like to address them more often in the future, she is not assigned a pseudonym at this point in order to avoid a link to other statements.

Even regardless of existing disabilities, Julia explains that it is fundamentally important to deal with one's health and to reflect on one's profession. Lisa (2021) is also in favor of talking openly about mental health in the music business. She herself suffered from burnout as a result of being a workaholic and sees a therapist regularly. Although it is still a taboo topic in many areas of the business, in her work environment, she said, it's a rarity to find a person who has not had therapy:

“Especially in a profession where you're artistically active plus somehow also freelance, which brings such extreme stress, you should be aware that your mental health is your foundation. Everything you do now and what you do in the future is built on your wellbeing.”

This is also confirmed by Hanna. She indicates that songwriters' success is influenced a lot by perseverance and persistence: “You have to be prepared that there is a long and often rocky road ahead.” Besides general stressors such as poor pay, related financial insecurity, and the lack of recognition (Ptatscheck 2024), according to Lisa (2021), the songwriting profession has many additional challenges, especially for women songwriters, that will be elaborated on in the following.

Individual Problems and (Gendered) Challenges

Like most of the other interviewees, Mara's (2022) artistic trajectory has been marked by “not-so-great experiences” even before her songwriting career. Against the background of her activities as a singer in her project, she describes the music business as a male-dominated, toxic environment in which she was reduced to her appearance, confronted with body shaming, and had “to bend to please”. Even though songwriting is now an alternative to her work as a performer, sexism is still a major burden in her work environment:

“I feel like you have to prove yourself three times more as a woman to get the same recognition that a guy gets. A guy comes into the room, I'm going to write you a song, it's going to be a mega-hit. He's going to be believed. When you come in as a woman, it's like, what have you done already, can you show off? Yes, I've already won a German Songwriting Award, but I have to put it there somehow to say that I'm entitled to write the song for you. [...] As a woman, you have the feeling that you must have three gold records hanging somewhere before you can even call yourself a songwriter. [...] And even if I'm successful and am proud of it, then they say don't be so conceited or be a bit more modest, that's arrogant” (Mara 2022).

The belief “that you always have to be nice and reserved as a woman and not push yourself to the fore like that” (Mara 2022) can be down to the continued reproduction of stereotypical assumptions according to which men and women were not only attributed different anatomical features but also different character traits (Hausen 1976: 368). Studies, such as de Boise (2015), show that these attributions lack a scientific basis. Nevertheless, examples like the ones mentioned here demonstrate that they are still widespread today, constructing differences and reproducing patriarchal power relations (ibid.: 176-178). Lisa also sees patriarchal socialization as the reason why many women have not learned to assert and believe in themselves:

“There are so many girls and women who are so talented and do such cool things, but in the end don’t dare to assert themselves in this industry or say, hey, I’m going to do this. Instead, there are some men who have a huge sense of self-confidence because they are socialized as males and are sometimes even not as good as the women, but still take their place. That annoys me so much. I’m afraid it’s going to take a very long time for these structures to break down for them to change” (Lisa 2021).

Even though Mara emphasizes that, according to her perception, 90% of the male people she works with are “completely open” and “cool,” it is still the 10% of experiences that left a lasting impression on her, “and that still gives me the feeling of being *just* a woman”. Even today, she still hears sexist remarks like “that’s really good, even though it comes from a woman” or “not bad at all for a woman”. She is surprised that the potential of women in the songwriting process is often not seen. Mara makes the experience that especially many female artists for whom she writes are happy to work together with a woman. Often, not only can a special ‘safer space’ be created here, but topics can also be addressed that they would be reluctant to discuss with a man. For her as a songwriter, it is also pleasant to work with a woman: “Something that is often not considered: Often you are put in a room with three guys and being told, so now write. That can also be uncomfortable and difficult for some.” In this context, Julia believes that not only the female artists, but the entire team would benefit from a more diverse songwriting group:

“I notice that again and again when I write with women that they say after a session, oh great, you have empowered me and I had the feeling, you have taken my perspective as a woman also quite different than that a man could have. I’ve also had that before, where I was supposed to write a song about cat-calling, and the other male writer also said that it was a huge challenge for him to think himself into it because of course he hadn’t experienced it” (Julia 2023).

Mara also experiences situations in which male colleagues tell her how to think as a woman:

“I had a session with two male producers, and we had written a song that a woman should sing. I wrote the lyrics and I read it to them and then one of them looked at me and said, nah I don’t think a woman would say that. And then I was, okay could you explain to me a little bit more how a woman thinks or what a woman would say?” (ibid.).

The fact that women are overlooked because of patriarchal power relations and are reduced to certain stereotypes is also experienced by female songwriters in the current music industry. Mara is particularly annoyed when her male colleagues do not see her as a songwriter, but only in the role of the singer: “I once worked with a DJ and then he came in at the session and he said, ah, you’re the one who sings the song, aren’t you? I’m like, nope I’m the one who writes the song for you. He didn’t like that very much.” The fact that women in popular music were/are often pressured to take on certain roles – or precisely not able to take them on – can be interpreted as a result of the discursively constructed distance of women from technologies (Schoop/Ptatscheck 2022: 10). In this context, women are repeatedly denied interest in technology and attributed a supposed inability to use it (ibid.). This is still reflected in many areas of the music business. Women still predominantly take on the role of singers, while they are, among many other areas, significantly underrepresented in the field of music production (ibid.; Smith et al. 2023; MaLisa Stiftung 2022). Schoop/Ptatscheck (2022: 13, 18) show that the narrative of the “genius composer” also has male connotations, which may explain why the role of a creative composer or producer even today is also associated with men. At German educational institutions, the reality is still that the proportion of women in singer-songwriter studies is significantly higher than in the field of producing. In the winter semester of 2021/2022, for example, only one person who identified as female studied producing as a major at the Popakademie Baden-Württemberg.⁹ This confirms that women predominantly participate in musical practices that are coded as “feminine” and thus correspond to widespread notions of femininity. Julia, for example, already perceives as a teenager that it is exclusively men who worked as producers with her and took over technical work:

“When I was 17, I wasn’t that interested in technology, or at least I wasn’t that into it that I knew how to produce something. Sure, I kind of worked with Garage Band, but I never saw myself in that role. This is a pity because I think if I

9 A biographical interview study on the mental health of pop music students at Popakademie Baden-Württemberg conducted by the author is expected to be published in late 2024.

had started early somehow, I could have grown into such a role. And I wouldn't have been so dependent in the later period" (Julia 2023).

Julia's impression is also reinforced in her 'singer-songwriter' studies. Due to the low percentage of women in the music production program, knowledge is primarily passed on to males and gender-centered stereotypes are reproduced.

"You get labeled as the singer who has no idea about the craft, which some older men want to explain to you. Such stories, where you first think, yes wow. [...] In such moments I think, would this person also treat me like this if I were a man? That annoys me so much because you have this feeling, okay, I'm performing the same as my male colleagues now, but this performance is not equally recognized. There's always an extra step or I must be better, be louder than my colleague so that I'm taken seriously and that's an extra resource that's used up. And that's often not seen. There are so many obstacles in our path. That's something that needs to be made aware of" (Lisa 2021).

In business matters, Julia also experiences often not being taken seriously and being confronted with stereotypical attributions. In a negotiation situation in which she is the spokesperson for her two co-producers, the head of the publishing house looks around at the end of the conversation and says to her, out of all people, "you must still have questions because women always have questions". While everyone started laughing, she was so perplexed that she went into a kind of shock. From then on, she did not want to continue working with the publisher. Julia also reports a session with several male participants in which a producer, "another older guy," addresses her exclusively and thinks he has to explain to her what an A&R is: "I just thought, with all due respect, I've been working in this business long enough and even have a university degree as a singer-songwriter, that's super nice of you, but I really don't need that." In addition to being reduced to her role as a singer and associated stereotyping and sexist discrimination, Mara, like almost all her female colleagues, has also experienced sexualized boundary crossings and misconduct¹⁰:

"There are often guys in the business who don't know the boundaries and say, should I give you a massage so you can relax a bit when you write, where I'm like, what the hell? Would you have said the same thing to your male col-

10 Misconduct can be referred here, in the sense of Monika Holzbecher and Katharina Alexi (2021), as behaviors with sexual reference, "which are undesired by the persons concerned, are experienced as disrespectful and humiliating, and an imbalance when negative consequences have to be feared due to a rejection or criticism" (ibid.: 6, translation Melanie Ptatscheck).

leagues, what's going on? Honestly, if someone is too assaultive to me, then I leave the situation and say something. I don't swallow everything, I hit back. But if, for example, comments or jokes come from the side, then I often have to put up with them. Then it is said, it was only a joke haha. And then I just leave it at that, because I think to myself, I can't get out of the situation now. Sometimes I let them repeat what they said a few times. Then I say, I didn't really understand that, so they then figure out for themselves how stupid that was" (Mara 2022).

Because she was often the only woman in sessions, Sandy (2022) felt a sense of exclusion within male-dominated workspaces and received little backup when she felt harassed, overlooked, or not taken seriously. To provide more understanding to prevent such situations, they must be made visible: "As a woman in the music business, you're just outnumbered, and because of that you're often treated differently than your male colleagues. And these are simply experiences that have accumulated and therefore I think it's about time that you somehow talk about things" (Sandy 2022).

(Self-)Perceptions in the Boys Club

The fact that women are underrepresented as songwriters in the music business is clear not only from statistics such as those mentioned above but also from the descriptions of the life worlds of the female songwriters interviewed. "The people I write with are almost always men," Julia (2023) describes her everyday work, "it's fascinating even nowadays to see when anyone puts out an album that both producers and songwriters are almost all males. That's still a reality." However, Lisa (2021) experiences a change in her environment. After only two women were signed out of 22 songwriters at her first publishing company, she not only looked for a working environment where a woman was the boss but also added "hey, we just need more women in the industry, get in touch". She recognizes that many women are also specifically looking for other women to collaborate with. This is also Mara's experience:

"When I started working at the publishing house, the first year there was not one session with another woman. Not even one. And then it came to the point where I said, I've had enough and I simply asked people, a female producer I know, who I think is mega good and mega talented, hey don't you want to do sessions and I simply wrote to female colleagues and said, hey I don't feel like doing sessions with men all the time, we can do it well, what's wrong, don't we

want to start something ourselves? I then practically just rounded up everyone and just arranged the sessions with them myself” (Mara 2022).

For Lisa (2021), developing a general feeling for unequal structures is an important step. She believes that some people in the industry have recognized them. But since they themselves are not affected, they are not bothered by them.

“These are often men who always invite the same male colleagues to sessions and always have the same male colleagues in their band, who say, I know, something has to change, but still don’t care. With me it was like, the more aware I became, the angrier I got, and the more it annoys me when I see, there was a songwriting camp and there are 20 guys and me. Then I’m like, heh, you know it better... I’ve already talked to at least three of them about it. Why don’t you see what’s going on here, why didn’t we invite any women? Unfortunately, that’s the step that’s still necessary after perception, and there’s often still a problem” (Lisa 2021).

Mara (2022) also describes a situation in a songwriting camp where out of 50 participants there were only five women. Nevertheless, she says, the announcement came “we are very happy that we have so many female songwriters this year, more than ever before”. She wonders if those responsible cannot or do not *want* to see the imbalance that still prevails. This question also arises regarding the Association of German Songwriters (VERSO), which serves as a network to improve working conditions for songwriters and related toxic structures in the music business. Networks are considered to have a high-power potential, which is often denied to women due to a lack of network connections (Rastetter/Cornils 2012). Vertical gender segregation and the associated underrepresentation of women in the music business results not least from a structural exclusion by homosocial male communities – or also referred to as “boys clubs” (Leonard 2016: 42). The following interview excerpt with a VERSO board member not only shows, even if heterogeneous networks would be desirable from a gender equality perspective, that mixed-gender networks “have (almost) exclusively men at the crucial levels” (Metz-Göckel et al. 2016: 129; translation Melanie Ptatscheck). It also illustrates how important an exchange of perspectives can be in this context:

“Interviewer: Are there more men than women who are songwriters? Is this a man’s world?

VERSO: Nah not at all. On the producer or tracker side, it’s still a little bit like that, male-driven. But on the topliner side, incredibly many girls. I haven’t seen sessions where there’s not at least one girl. It’s very rare that it’s a boy’s club.

Interviewer: But if I look at your members at VERSO, you have about 135 members, and I just counted 20 women.

VERSO: Really? That few?

Interviewer: Yes 15% of the members that I read as female from the names, there were 20 out of 135 women.

VERSO: I think it's a communication thing. [longer break] You're right. Because I just notice that I'm much more likely to address a boy like that and say, hey don't you want to join VERSO, than I address girls. That's true now that you mention it. I can't even remember that I [...] for example, the last two months I've worked incredibly much with [a female songwriter] but I haven't even said, hey don't you have time, here that's VERSO, an association for songwriters. But when I sit at the table with boys and we write, that's always immediately such a topic. That's kind of weird, now that you mention it."

According to the songwriters interviewed, this "boys club" is reproduced in particular in Rap music. Also, many current albums by very successful artists in German Schlager and Pop are an example of both male dominance and male cronyism, as some of the interviewees claim. In this context, one interviewee alludes to the last album of Helene Fischer and songwriting sessions that were held specifically for her: "Of course, the artist's label first wants to push its own bandwagons, mostly male. As an outsider who is not signed to this label, you don't stand a chance anyway. [...] The same people are always invited to the sessions, and they are often buddies who know each other and invite each other. It's about who knows who, and whether you risk bringing a woman in" (Interview with anonymous).

Amanda's (2022) case represents a counter perspective. She has always felt part of the "boys club" and has taken advantage of it. In fact, being the only woman in the publishing company has always been something pleasant for her. This perception can be attributed to her socialization and previous experiences:

"I prefer hanging out with guys anyway, I always have. We always played soccer and I always found it more uncomplicated to work with men. I don't feel like I run into problems because I'm a woman, but rather the opposite, men hold the door open for me. I don't even ask myself whether I am underrepresented as a woman. Maybe that's the case, but at the same time, I can't stand the complaining about it" (Amanda 2022).

For Amanda (2022), it's not so much a question of whom she works with on songs, but what quality the product has in the end. The "feminist efforts" would distract from the actual work; she seems rather annoyed talking about these issues:

“A couple of years ago it started out like, you want to work more with women now, women power and stuff. But then I had a session with one and it was just like, you just don’t write well, what can I say? Not because you’re a woman, but just because your work is not good. She was just talking all the time about how she’s treated in sessions and not taken seriously and I’m like whatever gender you are but if you bring that, sorry, that’s just not good [...]” (Amanda 2022).

She admits she too sometimes struggles with feeling like a “frightened little mouse” when she’s in a session with very successful people. However, it is because of herself and her accomplishments that she then feels “small”, not because of her colleagues. On the contrary, she feels well embedded and supported within her company structures: “It’s not at all a question of them making so much conscious mental effort or pursuing any strategies, but you simply feel that they are there for you. I just don’t feel like a number there, like many others at publishing houses” (ibid.).

Lisa (2021) also notes that as a songwriter, if she manages to establish herself, she also receives attention precisely *because* women are underrepresented in the business. However, she sees this as a double-edged sword:

“The fact that there are so few women and, of course, non-binary people in this field makes you stand out more. And you are then told, oh how great that you have made it so far, at a point where you actually think, yes of course, why not. On the one hand, you stand out, but on the other hand, you don’t want or shouldn’t stand out at all” (ibid.).

Due to this attention and the fact that there is often only *one* place for a woman, according to Julia (2023), a kind of elbow mentality even develops among some women. In her opinion, some female songwriters are afraid that others could take something away from them because the places are so competitive: “I think that’s why many don’t help you as they could, which I find very unfortunate. And that’s why a lot of things aren’t talked about at all” (ibid.). Mara has also found herself envious of a woman colleague’s sudden success:

“And then I thought to myself, stop, I don’t begrudge the person that and she’s cool and she’s not taking anything away from you. You have to remind yourself of that every now and then. But that’s how you’re treated in the business, that you have to push through and that you have to fight for everything” (Mara 2021).

Empowerment Strategies

Sharing negative experiences and related challenges is particularly important to most of the interviewees. Saying 'no' is one of the greatest challenges for many of the respondents. Here, also gender-related, stereotypical ways of thinking become clear, which they have acquired in the course of their socialization. "My male colleague has never had any problems with this," Julia indicates: "He can immediately say, no, I can't get along with that guy, I won't do a session with him, even if he's a top writer. I don't think he's a good person, I won't do it. Wow. Where I would probably have said, oh yeah fuck, but it's a chance I maybe shouldn't miss. He's totally aware of himself and his abilities, and I really admire that" (Julia 2023).

Julia does not want to stand out unpleasantly, to be considered "resistant" or "difficult". "I always tried to be Everybody's Darling," she admits, "until I realized how important it is to set boundaries and not always say yes. It's a long process, though, and hard training to break with those toxic narratives." In particular, songwriters find it hard to turn down offers when they feel financial pressure imposed on them, especially by publishing contracts. But fear of missing out is also considered by some to be a trained behavior that they are trying to get rid of:

"Of course, I had to learn to make smart choices somehow. But that's always very stressful because I've often thought, okay, what if I cancel this session now, but it's going to be a hit or would have been a hit. That's a bit like playing the lottery. You never know in the end what the outcome will be. And then you have to trust your gut feeling. In the meantime, I can say, okay, I can estimate it better, I've made my experiences, and I'm now at a point where I can decide more confidently and can say no" (Lisa 2021).

Songwriters lack this experience, especially in the early years of their careers, so they must rely on support from experienced colleagues or learn by doing. Julia would have liked to have more woman role models not only in producing but also in songwriting, on which she could have oriented herself.

"When you're young, you put up with a lot of things that aren't good for you. It's just hard to empower yourself when you just don't have a clue. At that time, I didn't have any role models who showed me otherwise. I had the feeling that I was always my own role model. And now I see myself in the position of being able to be a role model for others and support them" (Julia 2023).

Julia finds support, above all, in her partner, who also does production work in addition to songwriting and understands her problems and concerns: "Sometimes it's just nice to have someone who just has your back and says, hey, you're not alone

in this situation right now” (ibid.). Julia also looks to associations like VERSO, for example, when it comes to no longer selling her work “for nothing”. As also suggested by VERSO, she recently started charging a session fee for her work as a songwriter.¹¹ However, fearing not being able to assert herself and defend her interests, especially in front of male colleagues, and losing commissions, continues to be a challenge. This is also Alice’s experience:

“The songwriters are afraid that artist XY will say, well then I’ll go to the one who does it for free, anyone can write anyway, he’ll do it well enough. But that’s why we’re all stuck in this fear, where everyone just says. No, come on, I’ll do it for free. And that’s not possible” (Alice 2023).

In this context, some of the interviewees advocate joining forces in associations such as the Music Women* Germany network, in which people who identify as female or non-binary are not only given visibility but also can represent their concerns collectively and find opportunities for support.

However, according to Julia, participation in networks alone is not the only thing. For her, the job and the connection that goes with it require above all a certain proactivity in approaching people, which not every person in business is made for: “In addition to creativity and business skills, the job also demands certain social skills. Here, too, regular reflection on one’s own needs and limits helps, as well as the willingness and flexibility to take different paths if necessary” (Julia 2023). She finds that it is also necessary to provide “a more realistic insight into the business” – other than what is often portrayed on social media. In this context, Alice has clearly noticed the negative impact that toxic beliefs and narratives presented on social media can have on the way she works and ultimately on her health:

“I have to keep telling myself, it’s okay, I’m not a machine. You get it on Instagram or something, how is it going with other songwriters and then you really get this feeling of, yes, actually in three, four hours a song should be ready with demo. If that doesn’t make pressure [...]. If they don’t end up in burnout at some point. Then I also think to myself, maybe they have other genes, other brain messengers, other resilience. Then that’s okay, maybe they’ll manage. But I know *I don’t*” (Alice 2023).

According to Hanna, being aware of one’s own physical and mental limits is an important prerequisite for staying “healthy” on the job. She also considers recog-

11 Songwriters are usually compensated only by GEMA income, but not for the work of the songwriting process itself (see Ptatscheck 2024).

nizing one's own strengths to be a key strategy. Working on one's own self-worth is a central basis for Hanna to remain resistant to stressors in her business.

“There are two possibilities, either you drift off completely and doubt yourself, or you think to yourself like, now more than ever. For me, it was the second option. [...] I just ended up working for that self-confidence. If no one tells you, you must tell yourself. [...] I know that I am heard because I write very good topline. Someone has to copy me first. There's a reason why I was asked to do exactly that kind of job” (Hanna 2021).

Self-care is mentioned by almost all interviewees as an essential resource for which they want to consciously take time to listen to their needs – be it through yoga, meditation, journaling, or more songwriting for themselves, as Julia (2023) describes: “It's important to write songs for yourself every now and then, to reconnect with yourself. That's kind of a self-love thing, that you sit down and say, I need it for myself right now.”

Solutions for Change

The study presented here underscores the findings of the USC Annenberg Initiative report (Smith et al. 2023) that women are stereotyped or do so themselves due to their patriarchal socialization; they are sexualized and often devalue their talents and experiences. The statements of the interviewees not only provide insights into their individual life worlds and often shared challenges. They likewise provide a change in perspective for those who cannot – or do not *want to* – see the challenges faced by women songwriters. The interviewees wish for individual support and see structural changes as a central prerequisite for equal opportunities in the songwriting business. This already begins in the context of musical socialization in (music) schools and later higher music education. Here, there has been a deficit of role models for female songwriters, as well as a lack of knowledge about the profession. This also applies to the field of activity of the female music producer. Some of the interviewees are not only interested in producing and would have liked to receive further education in this field in earlier years, but they also indicate that production skills would have expanded their opportunities to work as songwriters, since they learned that songwriting may include both writing lyrics and melodies *and* recording and producing demonstration recordings. In addition to the craft of songwriting itself, the female songwriters interviewed would have liked to know more about the (interrelated) structures of the business earlier in their careers. In addition to legal and business information about the songwriting profession, they would have been particularly lacking in the themati-

zation of mental resources and related competencies to strengthen resilience. Also, experience reports about special conditions for women or non-binary persons in business would have been helpful for them to avoid unpleasant situations and to protect themselves. Initiatives such as Music Women* Germany not only fundamentally help to make women and non-binary people more visible and to exchange with each other. Exclusive events for women such as the Music Rheinland Pfalz Women* Workshop “Creative Hub Songwriting” also offer safer spaces for specific competence development through knowledge transfer in the areas described above. Networks are necessary for women’s professional success (Sagebiel 2019) – this is also true for the songwriting profession, as the study shows. However, as Smith and her colleagues (2023: 24) also postulate, such “pipeline programs” alone are not sufficient to remove all barriers. They argue, however, that it is not enough to empower women to integrate women into women’s networks – and therefore build their own societies within the “parallel world” (Sarah 2021). However, despite the establishment of social collectives among women songwriters, these parallel worlds are nonetheless subject to life world and economic segregation. To bring about structural change, women must be included in the overall structures of the entire music business, invited to briefings and sessions, and hired. For this, women require allies and champions – men *and* women – throughout the industry to help break down barriers – or as Smith et al. (2023: 24) put it: “Industry change must be a community effort, and until those who control access and opportunity realize the role they can play, progress for women will continue to move slowly.” According to the interviewees, this also requires sensitization and a related change in perception of prevailing structures among those who are not affected by structural disadvantages. These disadvantages certainly do not only refer to gender-centered issues but focus on all forms of discrimination. Making grievances transparent on an intersectional level through public discourse to enable greater participation of women in songwriting is among the central demands of most interviewees – or as one interviewee Julia puts it: “Diversity and equal opportunities require first and foremost values and norms that don’t remain empty labels but should be lived at all levels of the music industry.”

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Abstract

This chapter is based on a qualitative interview study of the life worlds of ten women songwriters in Germany. It addresses the hypothesis that women songwriters, as part of the patriarchal structures of the music business, exist in a parallel society where they are underrepresented and confronted with gender-specific challenges that are often not perceived as such by their environment. The question of how the interviewees managed to gain a foothold in a male-dominated world is explored; the general and gender-specific challenges and stressors that come with the (musical) socialization and everyday life of songwriters are elaborated. Empowerment strategies are discussed and perspectives are presented that may contribute to a (structural) change and an improvement to the working and living conditions of songwriters.

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