

GENDER INEQUALITY IN METAL MUSIC PRODUCTION, PAUWKE BERKERS and JULIAN SCHAAP (2018)

Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 176 pp.,
ISBN: 9781787146754, p/bk, £40.00

Reviewed by Jan-Peter Herbst, University of Huddersfield

What names come to mind when you think of metal musicians? How many of them are female, and what positions do they occupy in their bands? Chances are that women are outnumbered by men and that most of them have the role of a singer. Such deliberations lie at the heart of *Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production* (Berkers & Schaap 2018). The authors set out to explore how many women are involved in metal music production, how present they are in the various subgenres, what roles they fulfil in bands, and how their degree of recognition differs from that of men. With these guiding questions, they address common perceptions in metal music culture of women still being a minority who do not have equal opportunities to men.

Over the last decade, a lot has been written on gender in metal music (i.e. Berkers & Schaap 2015; Gruzelier 2007; Heesch & Scott 2016; Herron-Wheeler 2014; Hill 2016; Hoad 2017; Nordström & Herz 2013; Riches, Lashua & Spracklen 2013; Savigny & Sleight 2015; Schaap & Berkers 2014; Vasani 2010). Most of these studies have either been theoretical or qualitative case studies based on approaches such as ethnological observation, interviews or study of online scenes, which do not, to the present, disclose the extent of gender inequality in metal music. To bridge this gap, the authors of *Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production* (Berkers & Schaap 2018) draw upon the largest publicly available database for metal music, the *Metal Archives* (Encyclopaedia Metallum 2018). With more than 100,000 registered bands from all over the globe, the archive – the only source for statistical data used in the book – includes a wide range of artists at all career stages, from amateurs to professionals (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 20–21). Using a specifically designed web scraper, capable of examining websites of all registered bands, the authors quantitatively investigated questions around gender based on 350,348 musicians active between 1964 and 2015. Methodically, this primary data was extended qualitatively with twenty interviews plus further secondary sources such as online materials and third-party interviews (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 20–21).

One of the characteristics inherent in qualitative case studies is the restriction to study local scenes at one single moment in time. With the *Metal Archives* spanning over fifty years of metal history, longitudinal trends can be explored quantitatively. The results confirm the common impression of women being a minority in metal music production. Merely 3 per cent of metal artists are female (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 34). This number has slightly increased since the 1970s, likely due to the rise of women as vocalists, keyboardists and players of other non-metal instruments such as strings and flutes (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 70–73). The data further demonstrates that metal music has become a global phenomenon in the past decade. Whilst the percentage of female metal musicians does not differ much between the continents, it does so between some countries. Still, in only ten countries, i.e. Uzbekistan, Armenia and Taiwan, women make up 10 per cent of the musicians (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 41–45). As the authors suggest, this uneven distribution is likely linked with the popularity of different subgenres of metal that are strongly gendered. Indeed, the data reveals disparity between male (death, black and thrash) and female (gothic, folk, power and progressive) metal subgenres, and it confirms differences between countries. The percentage of women seems to be

disproportionally higher in Japan, Russia and Holland. The authors explain this finding with the popularity of subgenres such as heavy and power metal in Japan, gothic and folk metal in Russia and gothic and progressive metal in Holland, which all belong to the feminine end of the metal music spectrum. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that 16% of the gothic and 9 per cent of the folk metal musicians are women (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 55–61). The data also confirms expected roles in bands; nearly half (44 per cent) of all women are singers, followed by ‘non-metal instruments’ such as cello, violins and harp (19 per cent), bass guitar (12 per cent) and keyboards (10 per cent). Only 8 per cent perform as guitarists and 6 per cent as drummers (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 71–73). In other words, the ratio above average of women in gothic and folk metal bands can largely be explained by their role as singers (often with a clean voice) and by their playing of ‘non-metal instruments’. These two roles, as the authors emphasise, are ambiguous regarding status; women are in the spotlight as vocalists, but as supporting instrumentalists they play marginal roles. Drawing on the theoretical model of horizontal and vertical sex segregation (Ridgeway 2011), the authors conclude that the stereotypical instrumentation and prominence of female singers lead to role encapsulation, allowing for metal music to remain masculine. Women as instrumentalists occupy positions with relatively little prestige, but then again, taking up these roles is often the only chance for them to join the otherwise heterosocial circle of male bands (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 73–77).

The recognition that women receive as a minority within the metal scene is a double-edged sword, as the authors emphasise (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 85–88). On the one hand, they stand out from the crowd of skilled masculine musicians (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 88–91), but on the other hand, they suffer from gender-based evaluations that undermine their musical abilities and encapsulate them to the roles of singers and supporting instrumentalists (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 91–95). Consequently, female musicians might question their musical abilities and suspect receiving positive attention for being an exotic token ((Berkers & Schaap 2018: 82–85; Roth 2004). A way to measure recognition with the quantitative data available the authors see in record label deals which also have implications on the musicians’ financial situation and professional status. The results demonstrate that at no time since 1964 gender has had a significant effect on being signed to a record label. The authors conclude that the negative and positive tensions are likely to cancel each other out, except in a few subgenres where gender seems to play a crucial role (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 95–100). Whilst it is surprising that women in gothic metal bands have no effect on the likelihood of getting signed to a record deal, probably because they are less visible in this genre, the study finds that women are disadvantaged in getting a record deal in death and black metal; subgenres that are the most male-dominated. Notwithstanding gender having negligible effect on recognition, the authors found evidence in original interviews and secondary sources that several groups strategically use their female band member for marketing purposes. Yet, they also highlight the negative consequences of such practices, limiting women to predefined, stereotypical or encapsulated roles (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 95–100).

The book is structured in four chapters on the four areas of interest: 1. longitudinal trends and cross-national differences, 2. subgenres, 3. instrumentation, 4. recognition. Each chapter includes a summary of relevant theories and empirical data onto which the original quantitative analyses are added. Discussion of previous research includes areas such as the history of women in metal music production, genre conventions and the question of “female-fronted metal” as a genre, instrument stereotypes and prestige, social marking and tokenism. This helps readers not familiar with the discourse to understand the study’s findings in a wider context. Furthermore, the authors succeed in bringing

together general and other music-related discourses on gender with those specific to metal music. The empirical analyses are well connected to the current state of research and contribute important quantitative results so far lacking in metal music studies. The presentation is clear and does not require an understanding of quantitative methods. Most of the analyses are based on absolute numbers and percentages extracted from the data set. However, this is one of the weak points of the study. While the authors are always aware of the methodical limitations and do at no point overstate the significance of their findings, some results are based on unstable ground. For example, when concluding that in ten countries the percentage of women amongst all musicians exceed 10 per cent, five of these countries had less than twenty registered musicians in total, and only two had more than fifty (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 41–45). Thus, several results should better be taken with a pinch of salt. It is likely that significance tests would have revealed few or no systematic differences between the countries regarding the ratio of female musicians. A similar result can be expected for other areas of analysis such as those surrounding subgenres. Only the analysis of recognition, operationalised with record labels (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 95–100), used a significance test, which turned out not significant. It would have helped to evaluate the significance of the results if the authors had explained their choice and exclusion of methods. If they expected the intended readership not to be familiar with quantitative methods, they could have added more powerful tests in footnotes or in the appendix. Yet, with their descriptive evaluation, it remains open whether the findings are systematic. Whilst numbers and percentages can be compared, standardised effect strengths would have given a clearer and more thorough indication of gender inequality. The authors may be willing to provide such analyses in future research, or, given the sophisticated process of collecting the data, they might decide on making the data set publicly available.

Another point worth raising concerns the qualitative case studies that motivated a quantitative investigation in the first place. Despite doing excellent work combining different theories and data from gender studies, sociology, psychology, music education and popular music studies, the authors hardly discuss their findings against the backdrop of the many ethnomusicological case studies in metal music studies. Consequently, their interpretations and conclusions are very clear, but maybe do not consider enough the complexity the case studies indicate. This critique is not a particular weakness of this study, since it can be expressed for quantitative methods in general.

The methodical criticism should not distract from the fact that *Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production* (Berkers & Schaap 2018) is a significant contribution to the disciplines of metal, popular music and gender studies. The book confirms the widespread perception of women being disadvantaged in this genre, and it offers convincing explanations based on theory and empirical data. On a methodological level, the study is also one of the few quantitative works in metal music studies, and as such might motivate other researchers to explore different methodologies. This would certainly help the discipline to develop and gain value at an institutional level.

References

- Berkers, P. and Schaap, J. (2018), *Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Berkers, P. and Schaap, J. (2015), 'YouTube as a virtual springboard: Circumventing gender dynamics in offline and online metal music careers', *Metal Music Studies*, 1:3, pp. 303–318.
- Encyclopaedia Metallum (2018), <https://www.metal-archives.com>. Accessed 23 September 2019.

- Heesch, F. and Scott, N. (2016) (eds.), *Heavy Metal, gender and sexuality: Interdisciplinary approaches*, New York: Routledge.
- Gruzelier, J. (2007), 'Moshpit menace and masculine mayhem', in F. Jarman-Ivens (ed.), *Oh boy! Masculinities and popular music*, London: Routledge, pp. 58–75.
- Herron-Wheeler, A. (2014), *Wicked women: Women in metal from the 1960s to now*, Scotts Valle: CreateSpace Publishing.
- Hill, R. L. (2016), *Gender, metal and the media. Women fans and the gendered experience of music*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoad, C. (2017), 'Slashing through the boundaries: Heavy metal fandom, fan fiction and girl cultures', *Metal Music Studies*, 3:1, pp. 5–22.
- Nordström, S. and Herz, M. (2013), "'It's a matter of eating or being eaten": Gender positioning and difference making in the heavy metal subculture', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16:4, pp. 453–467.
- Riches, G., Lashua, B. and Spracklen, K. (2013), 'Female, moser, transgressor: A 'Moshology' of transgressive practices within the Leeds extreme metal scene', *IASPM@Journal*, 4:1, pp. 87–100.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (2011), *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Roth, L. M. (2004), 'The social psychology of tokenism: Status and homophily processed on Wall Street', *Sociological Perspectives*, 47:2, pp. 189–214.
- Savigny, H. and Sleight, S. (2015), 'Postfeminism and heavy metal in the United Kingdom: Sexy or sexist?', *Metal Music Studies*, 1:3, pp. 341–357.
- Schaap, J. C. F. and Berkers, P. (2014), 'Grunting alone? Online gender inequality in extreme metal music', *IASPM@Journal*, 4:1, pp. 101–116.
- Vasan, S. (2010), 'Den mothers and band whores: Gender, sex and power in the death metal scene', in R. Hill and K. Spracklen (eds.), *Heavy fundamentalisms: Music, metal and politics*, Leeds: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 69–78.