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# Why Not Her? Gender, power, and gatekeeping in Irish and UK radio and festival programming

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This article presents a cross-case analysis of gender-based exclusion in the Irish and UK music industries, with a specific focus on radio airplay and festival programming. Drawing from the disparity data reports produced under the Why Not Her? campaign (2018–2024) and from the recently published manifesto *Why Not Her? A Manifesto for Culture Change*, this research exposes the systemic underrepresentation of women and gender-diverse artists and the cultural power structures that sustain it. The study incorporates mixed methods: longitudinal data analysis across national and regional broadcasters (including RTÉ, BBC, and commercial radio stations in both Ireland and the UK), festival lineups, and policy engagement records from institutional bodies in both countries. It also draws from the author's lived experience as a publicist and culture strategist engaged in direct advocacy with media, government, and arts councils. Framed within an intersectional feminist and cultural policy lens, the article argues that gendered gatekeeping in music is not incidental but institutionalised. It is often justified by market logic, outdated programming models, and unchallenged assumptions about audience taste. The article also highlights the growing role of data activism in disrupting these narratives and driving reform. It concludes with actionable recommendations for cultural institutions, broadcasters, and funders, grounded in six years of campaign work and policy consultation, that could meaningfully advance gender equity in music-making across Ireland and the UK.

### KEYWORDS

gatekeeping behaviours, gender equality, Irish radio, music industries, policy, radio

## Introduction

Gender imbalance in the music industry is not speculation. It is as measurable as it is visible and structural. Working across publicity, label management, and consultancy in the music industry, it was always apparent to me. For years I watched it unfold in airplay logs, playlist data, and backstage conversations that decided who would rise and who would quietly disappear.

This lived experience sits alongside a growing body of applied, practitioner-led research on gendered exclusion in the music industries, including data-driven studies and industry-facing analyses produced by those working within or alongside the sector (Strong, 2018; Bain, 2021).

In 2020, I founded Why Not Her? because the silence around those patterns had gone on long enough. The idea to delve into the data began during COVID, when the world took an unprecedented standstill that finally gave me time to act. During lockdown, people tuned in for company. Across those months, Irish radio was reaching around 3.3 million adults every

day, roughly 80 percent of the population, with weekly listening approaching 90 percent (Coogan Byrne, 2025, p. 67; Ipsos B&A/JNLR, 2024).

Yet even in that moment of collective attention, women and gender-diverse artists were still missing from the airwaves. What I saw was not a lack of talent or effort. It was embedded exclusion disguised as taste.

In June 2020, I published the first *Why Not Her? Gender Disparity Data Report*, analysing Irish radio airplay from 2019 to 2020. What it revealed was shocking but not surprising. Across national stations, white Irish male artists dominated every playlist. On some national stations, Irish women made up less than 10 percent of the songs played. At others, they were absent entirely. Those numbers were the start of a movement, proof of what we had long known but had never been able to show with data.

This intervention followed a broader moment in the live music sector. In the mid-2010s, doctored festival line-ups circulating online exposed the scale of male dominance on British festival stages, prompting widespread public debate about gender and racial imbalance in live music. Academic analysis of this period demonstrates that such public reckonings often produced what Nissen (2023) terms “illusions of inclusion”, whereby organisers adopted “soft” measures of gender balance that obscured who was actually represented on stage, particularly within mixed-gender groups and hierarchies of billing, staging, and timing.

This article presents a cross-case analysis of gender-based exclusion across Ireland and the UK, comparing radio airplay and festival programming as two interconnected systems of cultural gatekeeping. It draws from the *Why Not Her?* data reports spanning 2019 to 2024 and my book *Why Not Her? A Manifesto for Culture Change*, to examine how exclusion persists despite years of advocacy and evidence. It argues that gendered gatekeeping is not accidental but institutional, sustained by outdated programming models, conscious bias, and an overreliance on what industry leaders call “market logic.” Using an intersectional feminist and cultural policy framework, I show how data activism has become a tool to expose and challenge these systems.

## Context and framework

The *Why Not Her?* campaign began with a simple act: counting numbers and using the machinery of a carefully laid-out PR campaign to turn the data into a story of inequality on the airwaves. I started collecting and categorising every artist played across Irish radio stations to see who was receiving exposure when it came to domestic artists. When the first report was published in June 2020, covering the previous year’s Top 20 annual airplay radio station charts, the disparity was clear. On stations like Today FM and RTÉ 2FM, Irish women artists represented as little as 5 to 10 percent of airplay (Coogan Byrne, 2025, pp. 65–66). This was not a reflection of talent. It was a reflection of who programmers chose to support.

Headlines at the time told their own story. The Irish Times ran with “Irish radio failing to support Irish female musicians – report.” TheJournal.ie highlighted that “Across Irish radio stations, female artists make up just 7 percent of the top Irish artists played.” The Journal of Music quoted bluntly, “It’s choosing men over women for whatever reason. I don’t know why, but it has to change,” while Clash Music later described 2020 as “The year Irish women stood up for radio equality

and representation” (Pollak, 2020; Boland, 2021; Quinn, 2020; Clash Music, 2020).

With that first report, the silence was broken. It spread across social media, trending on Twitter, Reddit and other social media platforms. Everyone was talking about it. It hit the national headlines, and for a brief moment the country stopped pretending it did not see what we had just shown. Even the late artist and activist Sinéad O’Connor called it out as “the same shit, different era” [O’Connor, quoted in Coogan Byrne, 2025, p. 102; O’Connor, 2025].

After that, there was no going back.

With the widespread impact of the first report I had put out, people began reaching out and offering their help. Such people included respected data analysts and researchers who connected with the data and wanted in on this culture change they were witnessing. And so, with a small team of brilliant volunteer data analysts who gave their time freely, I decided this could not be a one-off. We finally had the template, the formula, and the proof, so why stop at one? We wanted to see how far we could push this search for culture change, and data became our weapon of choice.

We kept going, publishing new reports each year, with biannual updates that pulled in regional broadcasters, commercial stations, and mid-year snapshots. The aim was to keep the pressure on and to make it impossible for anyone in radio to ignore what was happening. Soon after, the work stretched across the Irish Sea. Between 2020 and 2024, our team released reports that showed the same pattern in the UK. BBC Radio, Bauer Media, and Global were all culprits in different ways. Some improved once the spotlight hit them. Others significantly dragged their heels.

As I wrote in *Why Not Her? A Manifesto for Culture Change*, “three of the UK’s most prominent rock, alternative, and indie stations: Planet Rock, Kerrang!, and Radio X, have collectively decided to act as if women-fronted bands are a mythical unicorn in the Rock and Alt world. You’d be forgiven for thinking gender equality missed the playlist meeting” (Coogan Byrne, 2025, p. 71). As I argue throughout that analysis, representation is not simply a matter of fairness but a prerequisite for cultural growth, genre relevance, and artistic evolution (Coogan Byrne, 2025).

Radio X and Planet Rock, in particular, have been commendably quiet on gender diversity. Silence, after all, is the most efficient way to tackle inequality, is not it? Meanwhile, Kerrang! made its grand gesture on International Women’s Day with a Facebook post honouring “incredible female artists who inspire us daily.” Lovely sentiment. Pity the inspiration did not extend beyond twenty-four hours.

Planet Rock’s playlists between 2019 and 2024 showed a glaring lack of progress. White male artists ruled the roost while acts like The Last Dinner Party, Black Honey, Cassyette, and YONAKA were out there tearing up the stage and redefining rock. As I put it, “representation isn’t just about fairness; it’s about evolution.” Kerrang! and Radio X fared little better, clinging to the same testosterone-heavy formula while women like Nova Twins, Dream Wife, and Wolf Alice were busy reinventing the genre.

If rock radio really wants to be edgy, maybe it should start by doing something genuinely rebellious, like giving women the mic more than once a year.

And it wasn’t just radio. The same bias was alive and well in the festival scene. From Electric Picnic to Reading and Leeds, the line-ups told the same story: more than 75 percent male acts year after year. In 2023, Glastonbury’s co-organiser Emily Eavis publicly acknowledged the gender imbalance and spoke about building a stronger pipeline for future female headliners, while the overall picture still leaned heavily male. Yet

that very year Lizzo, Raye, and CMAT were breaking records around the world.

Each report was built from verified airplay data (Coogan Byrne, 2025, p. 21). We used Radiomonitor, the hefty subscription-based industry-standard airplay tracking system relied on by record labels and PR teams across Europe and the UK, to capture the Top 20 most-played domestic Irish artists on every national and regional station. The 2021 to 2022 dataset, for example, covered plays from June 2021 to June 2022 and identified both the Top 20 Irish acts and the Top 5 songs per station. This ensured that our findings were not anecdotal but grounded in commercial data.

Gender and race identification followed an inclusive and transparent process. We drew on pronouns used publicly by artists, interviews, and industry databases to categorise gender while remaining open to correction. Our definitions of “female” and “male” were self-identifying and trans-inclusive. This mirrors the methodology used by Waking the Feminists in their Gender Counts report. Across 2019 to 2024 we identified very few openly non-binary artists in the domestic datasets and we remain open to correction where artists update their public identifiers. This highlights both the limits of representation and the continuing absence of gender-diverse visibility across Irish radio.

As we ventured out as a volunteer organisation, we focused on national, independent, and major regional stations because of time and resource limits. Community and college stations were not included in every dataset, but we continue to welcome collaboration and data sharing. Every report was released publicly to invite accountability, not to shame. The goal has always been to build a clearer picture of who is heard and who is left out and to create the evidence needed for structural change.

Ireland’s radio landscape is smaller but heavily concentrated, with a handful of national and regional networks controlling most of the market share. Key players include Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) as the state broadcaster, alongside commercial groups such as Bauer Media Audio Ireland and Wireless Group. Bauer entered the Irish market in 2021 via the acquisition of Communicorp and has since expanded its portfolio significantly. Wireless Group remains an independent presence with market share in the low-teens in recent years.

The UK market, by contrast, operates under stronger public-service oversight through the Office of Communications (Ofcom), and within the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the 50:50 Equality Project created the framework that drove measurable parity across key music networks. These structural differences shape how equality policies are, or are not, implemented. In Ireland, the absence of regulatory mechanisms to measure or enforce gender balance has allowed inequality to persist across both public and commercial media, while in the UK the BBC’s data-led accountability offers a clearer example of what progress looks like when equity becomes part of performance review.

Observing both countries helps explain why similar advocacy efforts produced different outcomes across the two contexts, with accountability mechanisms driving change in the UK and their absence allowing inequality to persist in Ireland.

We met with the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), later replaced by Coimisiún na Meán, the agency tasked with developing and advising on media policy (Coogan Byrne, 2025, pp. 84, 94). At those meetings, we were told structural change would take years to achieve. It was a sobering reminder of how deeply embedded these imbalances are and how little accountability exists to change them. In the years that followed, the authority published its own “Ceol na mBan ar an Raidió” report, which echoed our findings but carefully avoided naming the

problem for what it was. Our work was quietly shelved, our data sidelined, and reduced to footnotes. Gaslighting is a common tactic in activism, especially when the truth threatens the status quo.

Historically, Irish radio programming has been shaped by a narrow demographic of decision-makers. Playlist committees, station executives, and A&R teams have long been dominated by white middle-aged men who often share similar cultural backgrounds. These structures created an ecosystem where the same voices were amplified again and again, producing a cycle of familiarity mistaken for popularity. Our data disrupted that illusion by proving that what was presented as audience preference was, in fact, structural bias.

The act of measuring became an act of resistance. In a landscape where no regulator or broadcaster had ever compiled gender data, a grassroots team of women did it instead. Despite the risks of public backlash, harassment, hacking, online abuse, and professional blacklisting, we kept going. These are the unspoken costs of activism in Ireland: when you tell the truth too loudly, those in power pretend not to hear you, or worse, they brand you as the problem.

I personally experienced all of the above, including industry blacklisting, simply for asking for gender and racial equality. This had direct economic consequences. Other researchers and activists documenting gender inequality in music scenes have reported similar experiences of hostility and professional risk, highlighting how discrimination extends into the production of knowledge itself.

While Coimisiún na Meán can develop Media Service Codes that promote gender balance, its tools remain limited and indirect, and do not operate as straightforward enforceable quotas across music programming. It produces reports, holds consultations, and hosts panels, yet those of us doing the work on the ground, the ones gathering the data and naming the bias, are the ones left vulnerable, unpaid, and often dismissed. Their well-funded caution contrasts sharply with our volunteer-led urgency. Gaslighting becomes a public service when institutions use it to maintain their image.

By publishing transparent figures, we created a mirror the industry could not look away from. The work echoed other UK and European organisations like The F-List and *Keychange* (2017), which called for gender parity on festival stages and within creative organisations. Yet *Why Not Her?* went further. It presented the hard data that showed how far Ireland and the UK were from achieving those goals, and it demanded that those in power answer for the silence they were publicly funded to maintain. This pattern mirrors wider research showing that feminist interventions in cultural industries often emerge from outside formal regulatory structures, particularly where institutional gatekeepers have failed to act (Nissen, 2023).

## Main analysis

Radio is one of the most powerful cultural filters in modern music. It determines not only what becomes popular, but who is allowed to become visible. When women are excluded from radio, they are excluded from the wider ecosystem: from charts, tours, sponsorships, and recognition.

The *Why Not Her?* reports showed how consistent and systemic that exclusion was. By 2020, the data demonstrated that Irish female artists were receiving between 5 and 15 percent of airplay on most major stations. RTÉ Radio 1 held roughly 50 to 60 percent women across five years, RTÉ 2FM spiked from about 10 percent to about 40 percent before

settling around 35 percent by 2024, and Today FM climbed from about 5 percent to about 20 percent in the same period. Yet progress plateaued quickly, settling around those figures by 2023. This revealed an uncomfortable truth: when change is not enforced, it slips back into old habits.

Airplay is not symbolic; it is economic. A single song on heavy rotation can mean the difference between sustainability and collapse for an independent artist. Radio royalties, performance opportunities, and digital algorithm boosts all stem from exposure. When women and artists of colour are excluded, they lose not only visibility but also income. This inequality perpetuates itself: fewer royalties mean fewer resources to record, promote, and tour, reinforcing the myth that women are less commercially viable.

Intersectionality exposes how race and class amplify gender exclusion. The vast majority of Irish artists with consistent radio support are white and urban-based. Artists from rural regions or migrant backgrounds remain almost invisible on mainstream playlists. Streaming platforms mirror these inequalities. Algorithmic curation, trained on existing airplay data, reinforces the same bias: artists who receive little radio exposure are less likely to be recommended on Spotify or YouTube. The digital economy has replicated old hierarchies in new forms.

The justification offered by programmers was almost always the same: “We play what people want to hear.” This argument is circular and false. Audiences can only want what they have been given. By repeatedly promoting male artists, radio stations create and reinforce a market that appears to favour them. Taste is not neutral; it is cultivated through repetition and visibility.

When *Why Not Her?* expanded its analysis to the UK, the comparison was revealing. After facing similar criticism in 2020, the BBC introduced its 50:50 Equality Project across programming (Coogan Byrne, 2025, p. 70). By 2024, BBC Radio 2 and 6 Music had achieved near gender parity, and BBC Radio 1 featured more female than male artists in its Top 20. Our UK Top 100 radio analysis showed 41 percent women, 39 percent men, and 20 percent collaborations (Coogan Byrne, 2025, p. 49). These results did not happen by accident. They happened because institutional will and accountability were applied.

In Ireland, similar institutions resisted change. Despite public funding and equality legislation in media bills we worked on with the Irish government, national radio stations remained behind the curve. This contrast exposed the importance of policy frameworks actually being followed. Equality does not emerge from goodwill; it emerges from systems that measure and reward it, and from policies that are implemented rather than left gathering dust.

The same imbalance played out in live music. Festival data mirrored radio’s bias. Reading and Leeds 2021 featured 91 percent male acts; by 2024 women made up about 18 percent. Electric Picnic 2024 remained below 20 percent women, while Latitude 2024 reached about 42 percent (Coogan Byrne, 2025, pp. 6–7; *Book More Women*, 2024). These figures, drawn from the *Why Not Her?* festival datasets, show the uneven progress across the live sector. They were indefensible, especially in the same years when women were leading global charts. When we published these findings, some organisers accused us of disrupting the scene. Others dismissed it as just statistics. But those numbers represented real exclusion, vast economic loss, and, perhaps most painfully, artistic silencing. Research on international festival environments has shown that such exclusion intersects with gendered power relations and safety, challenging the myth of festivals as neutral or utopian spaces and linking male-dominated programming cultures to heightened experiences of harassment and gender-based violence (Platt and Finkel, 2020).

The concept of data activism emerged naturally from this work. Counting became a political act. Each dataset became a mirror that forced institutions to confront their own bias. By releasing the data publicly and coordinating media campaigns, we transferred the burden of proof from the marginalised to the powerful. Data became both weapon and witness.

This work also drew from lived experience. I faced harassment, hacking, and industry backlash for exposing the imbalance. Yet the reports gained international attention. They were cited in the Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality, in Arts Council consultations, in the House of Parliament in the UK, and by the BBC’s internal diversity boards. By 2024, our reports had become part of cultural policy discussions across the sector. Visibility, once denied, had become unavoidable.

## Implications and recommendations

After five years of data reporting and advocacy, several clear recommendations emerged. These are not abstract ideals but practical measures drawn from evidence and experience.

### Institutional transparency

All broadcasters and festivals should publish annual gender data on airplay, bookings, and leadership. What is measured gets changed.

### Equity targets

Cultural institutions should commit to gender parity goals. The BBC’s 50:50 model demonstrates that accountability produces results.

### Funding and policy alignment

Publicly funded organisations should link grants and sponsorships to measurable inclusion. Equality must be a condition, not an option. The European Commission’s Creative Europe programme already recommends gender balance in cultural funding, yet national implementation remains uneven. Legal scholarship has also proposed the use of inclusion riders as enforceable contractual mechanisms to embed gender equity within festival, touring, and production contexts, shifting responsibility from voluntary pledges to binding agreements (Kozel, 2019).

### Structural reform in gatekeeping roles

Diversity must exist not only on stage but in the offices where decisions are made. Women and people from under-represented backgrounds must hold roles in programming, A&R, and executive positions.

### Education and mentorship

Long-term equity depends on cultivating future generations of artists. Mentorship schemes, songwriting camps, and educational programmes for women and gender-diverse artists should receive targeted support from the Arts Council Ireland and equivalent UK bodies.

## Cultural accountability

Governments, broadcasters, and festivals must embed inclusion into their policy frameworks. In Ireland, this means enforcing equality measures through the Department of Culture and the media regulator. In the UK, it requires Ofcom and the BBC Charters to maintain diversity benchmarks.

Future progress requires transparent data systems that can monitor equity in real time. Emerging technology can support inclusion rather than erode it. Open dashboards, publicly accessible databases, and ethically designed tools could track representation across playlists, festivals, and grants. Our next phase at Why Not Her? focuses on building these frameworks with partners in cultural policy and HR technology, proving that fairness can be measurable and scalable.

These recommendations are achievable. They require not only awareness but the political will to act. The future of inclusion in Irish and UK media depends on whether equality becomes a regulatory measure or remains a moral appeal.

## Conclusion

I did not begin Why Not Her? to start an academic debate. I began it because I was tired of excuses. The first report in 2020 proved what many of us had long felt. It quantified inequality and turned private frustration into public evidence.

Over five years of data, analysis, and advocacy, we have learnt that the problem is not a lack of talent or audience appetite. It is the persistence of cultural systems that reward familiarity and resist accountability. But we have also seen that change is possible when data, activism, and community come together. In 2024, women overtook men on UK radio playlists for the first time since our comparative reporting began. This was mirrored in festival programming and touring rosters. When women are supported, they, like their male counterparts, succeed.

What began at my kitchen table grew into a movement that forced institutions to face their reflection. Change is rarely welcomed by those who benefit from silence, yet visibility is contagious. Data became a form of truth-telling that could not be ignored. The Why Not Her? campaign has shown that transparency drives progress. When institutions are confronted with evidence, they must choose: act or defend the indefensible. Each year, more choose to act.

Cultural memory depends on who gets heard. If women and gender-diverse artists are missing from the airwaves, they are missing from the archive, from history itself. Data may seem dry, but it is the record of who mattered in a given moment. Activism preserves what might otherwise be erased. That is why the work continues: to make sure that the future historians of Irish and British music will not have to ask where the women were. They will already know.

Why Not Her? is not a slogan. It is a demand. It is a question every gatekeeper in Ireland and the UK must answer. When they finally do, the future of music will be fairer, richer, and far more interesting. And we will keep asking it until the question is no longer needed.

## Author's note

All datasets, statistics, and findings cited in this article are drawn from Why Not Her? A Manifesto for Culture Change (Coogan Byrne,

2025), which documents five years of gender disparity data across Irish and UK radio and festival programming, along with the corresponding methodology and policy frameworks.

## Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study is subject to the following licenses/restrictions: paid for data from radiomonitor. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to [www.whynother.eu](http://www.whynother.eu).

## Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the patients/participants or patients/participants legal guardian/next of kin was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

## Author contributions

LC: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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## Conflict of interest

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