

# MUSEUMS MOVING FORWARD

## What Problem?

### The Case for Data on Equity Inside Art Museum Workplaces

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Following the rise of the #MeToo movement and a series of high-profile incidents involving women leaving their art museum leadership jobs,<sup>1</sup> a bicoastal group of women museum workers came together in 2018. Informally called Time's Up Museums and inspired by colleagues in fields including film and theater, the group was drawn together by a commitment to collectively discuss gender inequities in art museums, to understand the scope of the situation, and to envision solutions.<sup>2</sup>

Following the onset of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning of 2020, a smaller group called Museums Moving Forward (MMF)<sup>3</sup> grew out of the by-then-defunct Time's Up Museums. MMF set out to "prove the problem" of why so many women and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) museum staff were leaving their jobs or the field altogether.<sup>4</sup> We interpreted that charge in a range of ways. Part of the problem was a field that refused to see itself as a hegemonic structure or at least refused to fully acknowledge its complicity with systemic inequities and its susceptibility to corruptibility.<sup>5</sup> The field was (and is still) by and large accepting the status quo and the attendant power relations.<sup>6</sup> We saw a field of museum workers

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the departures of Olga Viso from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2017 and Laura Raicovich from the Queens Museum in 2018 as just two examples. See <https://museumsmovingforward.com/timeline> for many others.

<sup>2</sup> These early meetings were attended by museum directors and curators, who were encouraged to invite others they felt might be interested in joining the conversation. See <https://museumsmovingforward.com/about> for the names of those who have been involved with the group since its outset and its transformation into Museums Moving Forward (MMF).

<sup>3</sup> The initial plans for MMF came out of discussions between Makeda Best, Connie Butler, Leah Dickerman, Christine Y. Kim, Michelle Kuo, Mia Locks, Helen Molesworth, Jessica Morgan, and Olga Viso during a grant application process to Ford Foundation and Mellon Foundation in 2020. The structure and leadership of the group evolved over the next several months. By 2021, MMF was co-led by Best, Butler, and Locks along with Katherine Brinson, Ruba Katrib, Alex Klein, Liz Munsell, and Margot Norton, with prior members moving into advisory roles or rotating out of the group. This fundamentally flexible and rotating structure has remained a core principle of MMF.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see the departures of Deborah Cullen-Morales from the Bronx Museum, Kelli Morgan from Newfields Museum, and Andrea Montiel de Shuman from Detroit Institute of Arts, all in 2019 and 2020. See <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/deborah-cullen-morales-bronx-1728567> (accessed April 11, 2023), <https://www.indystar.com/story/entertainment/arts/2020/07/18/newfields-curator-says-discriminatory-workplace-toxic/5459574002/> (accessed April 11, 2023), and <https://medium.com/@andreamontiel23/no-longer-in-extremis-9aa1c5996f35> (accessed April 11, 2023), respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>6</sup> La Tanya Autry, in Autry and Mike Murawski, "We Are Stronger Together," October 1, 2019, Museums Are Not Neutral website, <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/learn-more/we-are-stronger-together> (accessed June 12,

who have been increasingly (though inadequately) surveyed but feel skeptical of that data, and we saw how little trust there was between museum workers and their own leadership teams as well as a lack of confidence around the enforcement of workplace policies or the resolution of workplace disputes. The problem we saw dispelled the myth that because women comprise the majority of the art museum workforce,<sup>7</sup> gender equity has been achieved.<sup>8</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the field's longstanding structural inequities, also revealed the extent to which data on the experiences of the historically marginalized and vulnerable is lacking.

Like other culture workers before us,<sup>9</sup> we grapple with a contradiction embodied in art museums, which have progressive reputations but whose workplace cultures remain dominated by white patriarchal hierarchies. Artist-led groups like the Guerrilla Girls have long cited the lack of representation of women and minorities in museum collections, but the growing awareness of structural racism and discrimination in museum workplaces and the possibilities of sharing information offered by social media have introduced a new playing field. The 2014 racial uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, following the murder of Michael Brown marked a key moment when museums began to actively use the term “social justice” with their publics. Since Ferguson and through the events following the murder of George Floyd Jr. in Minneapolis in 2020, museum workers have been calling for interests in social justice explored in institutional programs and collections to be matched by commitments to changing internal practices and cultural legacies that prevent museum workers, especially BIPOC museum workers, from thriving and doing their best work.<sup>10</sup>

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2022): “Our initiative spotlights actions for change and exposes how the claim of neutrality fosters unequal power relations, and *Museums Are Not Neutral* became my way to inform people that I reject the status quo.”

<sup>7</sup> The Mellon Foundation's demographic surveys of art museum staffs in 2015, 2018, and 2022 have reported that gender ratios on staff remain consistent, with women making up 60% of employees in 2015, 61% in 2018, and 60% in 2022. Liam Sweeney, Deirdre Harkins, and Joanna Dressel, *Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey, 2022* (Mellon Foundation and Ithaca S.R.), available at <https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Mellon-Art-Museum-Staff-Demographic-Survey-11162022.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> As Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) argued in 2019, “An all-female field can still have issues with diversity and inclusiveness, with equal pay, with parental leave, with childcare, with sexual harassment.” Gender Equity in Museums Movement, “Museums as a Pink-Collar Profession: The Consequences and How to Address Them,” March 2019, [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/434074\\_6549b5054a474ac99b64d5780bc012b7.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/434074_6549b5054a474ac99b64d5780bc012b7.pdf) (accessed August 1, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> MMF acknowledges the many fellow museum workers who came before us, including but not limited to our colleagues and collaborators at MASS Action, Museums and Race, Museum Workers Speak, The Inclusion, Museums Are Not Neutral, Empathetic Museum, and Visitors of Color, all of whom are known collectively as the Equity Coalition. For more information on their work, see the groups' respective websites. See also Porchia Moore, Rose Paquet, and Aletheia Wittman, *Transforming Inclusion in Museums: The Power of Collaborative Inquiry* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Rose Paquet Kinsley and Aletheia Wittman, “Bringing Self-Examination to the Center of Social Justice Work in Museums,” *Museum* (January 2016), 40.

MMF's work began with preliminary research on workplace inequities in US art museums. As an intergenerational group of feminists, we have been committed to an intersectional approach from the outset. As we heard from colleagues and collectively imagined potential models for meaningful change, we recognized that the demands for racial justice in response to police violence against Black Americans meant our work must focus on the role of structural racism, in addition to sexism, in perpetuating discrimination. Moreover, as numerous open letters circulating at the time made clear (some being released within hours and days of each other in different areas across the country), our colleagues and fellow museum workers signaled an urgent need for reform.<sup>11</sup>

Through its basic policies to endemic cultural attitudes, the museum field has failed to care for its own workers, and we are now experiencing the impacts of that neglect. Our desire to develop museum workplaces that prioritize the care of workers as much as artworks has been increasingly echoed by other voices in the field.<sup>12</sup> Beyond low pay, the field has a widespread culture of hostility toward mothers and other caregivers. Such hostilities are unjust and unsustainable.

As cultural workers whose work involves direct engagement with our publics, we understand firsthand the risk that a workplace culture of inequity, which many now acknowledge as white-supremacy culture,<sup>13</sup> poses to the long-term sustainability of the field. We know how much these injustices matter to current and future artists, leaders, donors, and museum visitors. Museums, as Danielle Bennett points out, are places that depend on inspiration to motivate labor, but they are also places where workplace issues can “drain staff of their energy, enthusiasm, and ability to build a great institution.”<sup>14</sup> Despite a competitive job market, neither employers nor workers should conflate keeping a job with job satisfaction.<sup>15</sup>

By our conservative count—which only includes instances reported by major press coverage or personal disclosures to MMF—at least forty-four women have departed from directorial and

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<sup>11</sup> Such open letters circulating in 2020 were penned by staff from institutions including the Akron Art Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New Orleans Museum of Art, Palm Springs Art Museum, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, among others.

<sup>12</sup> As scholar and writer Amy Whitaker wrote: “The history of collecting objects and placing them in near-sacred buildings of structural or symbolic civic import may seem to be the point but actually those institutions depend even more so on the people who make up the workforce and the audience. . . . To ignore them is to risk that the status quo works until it does not, leaving museums penny wise and pound foolish, skimping on pay because they can, only to later realize they have lost much greater assets of public trust.” Whitaker, “Reconsidering People as the Institution: Empathy, Pay Equity, and Deaccessioning as Key Leadership Strategies in Art Museums,” *The Museum Journal* 64, no. 2 (April 2021): 284.

<sup>13</sup> Jackie Petersen and Stacy Mann, “The White Supremacy Elephant in the Room,” *Museum Magazine* 100, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>14</sup> Danielle Bennett, “Thinking about museum workplace communities,” *Museum Studies at Tufts University Blog*, January 18, 2019 (accessed December 22, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> “The HR Problem in Small Museums,” *Leadership Matters Blog*, August 6, 2018 (accessed December 21, 2021).

senior curatorial museum positions since 2017. By comparison, we counted twenty-four men who left similar roles during that same time period. Is it possible the departure rate for women in museum leadership is nearly twice that of men? How do institutional departure rates breakdown by race and ethnicity, for example, and other characteristics? To fully embody their progressive missions and develop and retain their workers, museums must urgently commit to and invest in developing a more transparent and equitable workplace culture.

With all of this in mind, MMF embarked on the research phase of our work in early 2021. Our secondary research was led by Apsara Iyer, Marissa Del Toro, and Matthew Villar Miranda, who focused on three initial areas of inquiry: legal issues, program and audience, and internal culture and structure, respectively. Del Toro and Miranda then created a timeline and bibliography, consolidating materials from independent publications, popular press, academic journals, institutional reports, and additional media sources that have guided conversations in the field and impacted museum culture over the past ten years.<sup>16</sup>

MMF's primary research was conducted through a series of focus groups, or what we call "convenings," for museum workers to discuss topics ranging from pay equity to retention of BIPOC staff. MMF hosted and cohosted eleven Zoom convenings in 2021 and 2022, which were attended by more than 200 people (among them, museum workers from departments including curatorial, education, administration, development, and publications). In some cases, speakers from other fields brought case studies on how their respective sectors are tackling equity-related issues and the role of data in these efforts.<sup>17</sup> In these sessions, we heard from colleagues (90% of whom identify as women, 56.7% of whom identify as BIPOC) about their museum workplace challenges and desires to see data on these challenges. What follows is a synthesis of the most critical and recurring issues identified.

## **1. Museums have been focused on external-facing data at the expense of understanding internal dynamics. We need data on internal culture to address the structures that perpetuate gender and racial inequities.**

Data disclosed by museums has largely focused on external-facing aspects, such as the demographics of exhibitions, collections, events, community initiatives, artists, and

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<sup>16</sup> The timeline and bibliography, which are contingent and growing, can be found on MMF's website at <https://museumsmovingforward.com/research>. They are continually updated as ongoing, contextualizing tools. It has been and remains MMF's goal to make our research as accessible as possible.

<sup>17</sup> For more information and notes from MMF's convenings, including bios on each session's speakers, please visit <https://museumsmovingforward.com/programs>. Please note that the names of attendees have been omitted to protect confidentiality.

audiences. This approach to data disclosure<sup>18</sup> has come, as the ongoing unionization wave in the sector demonstrates, at the expense of addressing internal workplace issues and organizational culture writ large. As Martina Tanga explains, “programmatic initiatives are inherently temporary and subject to the priorities of individual staff members . . . [and] the most vulnerable in times of crisis.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, museum director Madeleine Grynsztejn gets to the heart of the matter: “We cannot support art and artists that reflect social justice while we ourselves fail to address it internally.”<sup>20</sup>

There is no field-wide data on experiences of individual or institutional discrimination and harassment, nor is there an understanding of such experiences by race, ethnicity, ability, age, and more. In 2018 Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) conducted a survey of museum employees that found 55% of the five hundred respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment.<sup>21</sup> These staggering numbers, along with several allegations of harassment against various male artworld figures, explain why a group called #NotSurprised emerged in 2017 with a phrase borrowed from artist Jenny Holzer’s 1982 artwork: “abuse of power comes as no surprise.”<sup>22</sup>

It is no secret that the museum field frequently turns to referrals based on social networks and personal connections to identify job applicants, so the risk for unreported bad behavior is obvious and common. And discrimination is often embedded in interactions with prospective employees from the outset if they come from outside these privileged networks.<sup>23</sup> During MMF’s convenings, several women of color shared they felt they were

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<sup>18</sup> M. Morris, *Leading Museums Today: Theory and Practice* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Martina Tanga, “Let’s Imagine a New Museum Staff Structure,” *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 19 (2021): 7.

<sup>20</sup> Madeleine Grynsztejn, in Cristina Bechtler and Dora Imhof, eds., *Museum of the Future: Now What?* (Geneva: JRP Editions, 2021), 100.

<sup>21</sup> Gender Equity in Museums Movement, “Survey Reveals Extent of Gender Inequity in Museum Workplace,” <https://www.genderequitymuseums.com/single-post/2018-survey-reveals-extent-of-gender-inequity-in-museum-workplace> (accessed April 11, 2023).

<sup>22</sup> As 1,800 women and gender-nonconforming persons declared in a letter in response to the resignation of *Artforum* co-publisher Knight Landesman, following allegations of sexual harassment and assault: “We are not surprised. We are artists, arts administrators, assistants, curators, directors, editors, educators, gallerists, interns, scholars, students, writers, and more—workers of the art world—and we have been groped, undermined, harassed, infantilized, scorned, threatened, and intimidated by those in positions of power who control access to resources and opportunities. We have held our tongues, threatened by power wielded over us and promises of institutional access and career advancement.” “We Are Not Surprised,” *ArtNet*, October 30, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/not-surprised-read-blistering-open-letter-art-world-women-wrote-artforum-1132463> (accessed April 11, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> “You are far too young and far too female to have a curator ever report to you,” Kaywin Feldman, now director of the National Gallery of Art, was once told during an interview for a position at a large art museum in Texas when she was thirty-one. Feldman, “Power, Influence and Responsibility,” presentation at 2016 Annual Meeting, American Alliance of Museums, Washington, DC, May 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMCJU8I0IUM>, posted July 5, 2016.

often being interviewed for jobs they were never going to get. One attendee said, “More than once I’ve gotten a job interview simply so the search committee or search firm can say their applicant pool was diverse, but it was obvious they had zero intention of considering me for the position,” a phenomenon that museum director Thelma Golden has referred to as “diversity theater.”<sup>24</sup> Another colleague shared she felt she was at times interviewed solely to provide free advice or programmatic ideas to a room of people who never took her seriously as a candidate.

There is very little data on museum hiring practices or about how employees move through (or out of) museum workplaces. What data might be collected by individual institutions is rarely if ever shared with the field. We need field-wide data on the promotion and retention rates of staff members by gender, race and ethnicity, department, pay level, and so on. We need field-wide data on how many and how often museum employees are filing claims of discrimination and harassment, and if and how such experiences are impacting institutional departure rates. We need to hear from employees who leave their jobs (or the field) due to experiences of discrimination or harassment, and we need data on whether workers feel empowered to speak about such experiences in the first place, let alone if mechanisms for reporting and action are effective. We need data on the prevalence of nondisclosure agreements (NDAs), which high-level employees are often asked to sign in exchange for severance packages, used by employers to coerce employees to contract away rights that are integral to discrimination prevention and the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.<sup>25</sup>

Discrimination and harassment are not limited to certain segments of the workforce (directors and senior management can be victims too); nor are the perpetrators solely museum employees (they can also be board members, contractors, artists, and so on). Decisions to pursue claims or not are due to a host of concerns (psychological safety, sense of belonging, fear of retaliation, etc.) that have not been studied in the museum sector to date. One remedy is inward-facing work that examines the current state of affairs, how these issues and behaviors are socialized within our workplace cultures, and the impact on our workforce.

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<sup>24</sup> Golden mentioned this phrase in a meeting with MMF co-leaders in July 2021.

<sup>25</sup> According to the National Women’s Law Center, “these agreements can allow employers to hide harassment, abuse, discrimination, and exploitation from public scrutiny and accountability, enabling the continuation of these practices.” National Women’s Law Center, “Limiting Nondisclosure and Nondisparagement Agreements that Silence Workers: Policy Recommendations,” <https://nwlcl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NDA-Factsheet-4.27.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2022).

The scope and extent of harm is far from clearly understood, and harassment need not be physical. For example, pregnancy discrimination is perceived bias that can result in social isolation, negative stereotyping, and rude or negative interpersonal treatment on top of more overt outcomes such as lower performance expectations, lost promotions, and inflexibility in scheduling or work environment.<sup>26</sup> In the museum field, pregnancy discrimination often extends to wider disadvantages for parents. Common museum practices such as normalizing a culture of unpaid overtime and working outside of traditional hours for events and donor stewardship and cultivation (and having to hire childcare as a result) are easy to overlook.<sup>27</sup> A landmark study by Baylor University found pregnancy discrimination negatively impacts the mother's *and* the baby's health.<sup>28</sup>

Parenting is only one form of caregiving, however. Caregiving responsibilities still fall disproportionately to women, especially mothers, and women are more likely to scale back their hours or postpone advancement opportunities. Mothers endure the “motherhood penalty” in pay and benefits, while those with nontraditional families (adoptive families, for example) or caregiving responsibilities can struggle for any kind of recognition or support. At a time when caregiving can still be unpredictable and remote work is necessary, workers who are caregivers are susceptible to a new kind of discrimination: “workplace proximity bias,” or employer prejudice against remote workers.<sup>29</sup>

The neglect of internal culture is more than just a matter of diminished workplace positions. What are the ways in which museum workers live in a cycle of overwork or inadequately supported work? And how might BIPOC women workers feel this most acutely? What policies do museums have to support the balance of work and life, and how effective are they? In 2020 and 2021 numerous social-media accounts emerged,

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<sup>26</sup> Curator and educator Naima Keith has spoken out about her concern that having a child would negatively affect her career in the field and why she ultimately decided to make parenting a visible part of her life. “Empowering the Whole Woman: Black Female Bodies, Motherhood and Art,” December 12, 2018

<https://www.tilastudios.com/post/empowering-the-whole-woman-black-female-bodies-motherhood-and-art> (accessed August 4, 2022). See also Angela Garbes, *Essential Labor: Mothering as Social Change* (New York: Harper Wave, 2022). Meanwhile, curator and writer Nikki Columbus settled a claim she brought against MoMA PS1 for rescinding a job offer upon learning she had recently given birth. Melena Ryzik, “MoMA PS1 Settles with Curator Who Said Giving Birth Cost Her Job Offer,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “We are an industry of vampires because so much of the ‘real’ business happens at night or when you are out of the city on business trips,” said mother and art publicist Tiana Webb Evans on being a mother in the artworld. Rachel Corbett, “The Art World Is Considered a Progressive Place, But It Has a Big Problem Supporting Working Mothers,” *ArtNet News*, September 19, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Bryan Robinson, “Pregnancy Discrimination in the Workplace Affects Mother and Baby Health,” *Forbes*, July 11, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Caroline Colvin, “What Is Workplace Proximity Bias – and How Can HR Prevent It?” HR Dive, August 3, 2022, <https://www.hrdive.com/news/what-is-proximity-bias/627935/> (accessed August 5, 2022).

sharing micro-aggressions experienced by BIPOC and LGBTQ staff as further evidence of issues internal to museums that are not being adequately addressed.<sup>30</sup> These stories from the museum field follow the broader findings of McKinsey and Co., which reported in June 2020 that LGBTQ women in the workforce experience the most inappropriate comments and sexual harassment.<sup>31</sup> Research shows that the day-to-day experiences of Black Americans create physiological responses and that experiences of racial discrimination are powerful psychosocial stressors that can lead to adverse changes in health status and alter behavioral patterns that increase health risks.<sup>32</sup> Women with disabilities often experience unequal hiring and promotion standards, unequal access to training and retraining, unequal pay for equal work, and occupational segregation.<sup>33</sup>

People from historically marginalized groups are too often the ones performing the additional work of what sociologist Arlie Hochschild described in 1983 as “emotional labor”: the work of managing one’s own emotions, or someone else’s, in response to the demands of society or a particular job.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, Hochschild distinguishes mental labor from emotional labor, the latter being especially disturbing and exhausting, leading to anxiety and burnout. A *New York Times* headline in 2018 summarized the situation in a nutshell: “This Gender Gap Can’t Be Stressed Enough: Women face added stressors in the home and at the office. The consequences can be dire.”<sup>35</sup> A landmark 2022 study outlines how BIPOC workers in particular are feeling burned out and unsafe across the US.<sup>36</sup>

Workplace structures and organizational cultures include museum boards, and data on board demographics and the possible correlations between board composition and organizational culture is sorely lacking. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM)’s Facing Change initiative, launched in 2019, has turned the museum field’s attention to advancing board diversity by providing resources and training for leaders who want to

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<sup>30</sup> A notable example is the Instagram account @changethemuseum.

<sup>31</sup> “LGBTQ+ women experience the most microaggressions and sexual harassment in the workplace,” McKinsey & Co., June 26, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/coronavirus-leading-through-the-crisis/charting-the-path-to-the-next-normal/lgbtq-women-experience-the-most-microaggressions-and-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace> (accessed July 20, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> David R. Williams, “Why Discrimination Is a Health Issue,” *Culture of Health Blog*, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, May 21, 2020, <https://www.rwjf.org/en/blog/2017/10/discrimination-is-a-health-issue.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Disability Employment Gap Among Women and Girls with Disabilities,” LaMondre Pough and Nabil Eid, Ruh Global Impact, March 30, 2021, <https://www.ruhglobal.com/disability-employment-gap-among-women-and-girls-with-disabilities/> (accessed April 30, 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Julie Beck, “The Concept Creep of ‘Emotional Labor,’” *The Atlantic*, November 26, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Kristin Wong, “This Gender Gap Can’t Be Stressed Enough: Women face added stressors in the home and at the office. The consequences can be dire,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Hue, *State of Inequity: Building a Brighter Future for BIPOC at Work* (2022), <https://www.stateofinequity.wearehue.org/> (accessed August 5, 2022).



build a more inclusive culture. More recently, the Black Trustee Alliance formed in 2021 to focus on the representation and experiences of Black board members in art museums specifically. However, racial and ethnic diversity in the board room does not necessarily translate to a commitment to equitable workplaces. And there is a continued need for diversity by age (i.e., younger board members) to usher in the next generation's perspectives. Moreover, museum boards need to expand the range of knowledge and expertise at their proverbial tables to consider the value of diverse contributions beyond merely financial.

Systems of oppression—patriarchal, racial, economic, and otherwise—thrive inside hierarchical structures. In upper-level organizational schemes that consolidate power at the top, often entirely in the hands of the museum director, traditional positional hierarchies (i.e., curator above educator or public-programs personnel) continue to be the norm. The art museum field would benefit greatly from developing new organizational structures that prioritize equity across all staff and departments, that create fewer silos and more meaningful collaboration and co-design from inception to execution, and that support staff self-determination for meeting institutional needs based on experience and expertise.

## **2. We need data on internal culture to illuminate traditionally obscured areas like human resources.**

The hierarchies and power structures of museums shape the lived experiences of the workplace. The task of preventing, monitoring, and addressing discrimination and harassment generally falls to human-resource (HR) departments, which tend to get mired in the same problematic power dynamics that produce such incidences in the first place. In smaller museums, as our convening respondents made clear, there may be no dedicated HR person, let alone department, and the person handling HR duties often holds another position or is an external consultant. We also heard during our convenings how for some museums it is not unusual for board committees to decide on the day-to-day management of staff, despite having no training or experience in HR, let alone regular interactions with staff. Staffing at museums tends to respond to museological needs (for example, collections management and audiences) rather than workplace structural needs<sup>37</sup>—an issue that encompasses not only *what* work gets done but *how* it gets done. As Christine Engel notes, “this puts those organizations in the position of assuming unintentional risk; of falling behind when it comes to best practices; and not having an ombudsman to help with employee relations.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tanga, “Let’s Imagine a New Museum Staff Structure,” 2.

<sup>38</sup> Christine Engel, “The Role of Human Resources in Museums,” *American Alliance of Museums*, January 2, 2016.

### **3. We need more data on key signifiers of gender and racial equity such as compensation.**

Data collection might exist in focused areas, while in other significant areas it remains inadequate. Amid expanding national attention to women's leadership roles in the corporate sector, the museum field entered the discussion in 2015 when the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) shifted focus from the salary surveys it had been conducting since 1986 and set out "to understand the gender gap and explore potential factors to help its member institutions advance towards greater equality."<sup>39</sup> But across the field, workers lack access to their coworkers' pay information. In the spring of 2019, Art + Museum Transparency demonstrated the extent of pay inequity in their groundbreaking Google spreadsheet. The shared document, which asked people to disclose their salaries, went viral. *For Love or Money: Confronting the State of Museum Salaries*, published by Museums Etc. later that year, revealed the ways in which low and unequal rates of pay have been endemic in the field for decades. Yet when we talk about the pay gap and pay inequity, more nuanced data might help to explain that there is no single gender or racial pay gap or form of pay inequity since women of different backgrounds have different experiences and earnings.

Without data, pay discrimination goes undetected and there is no way to challenge pay disparities. We know meaningful compensation analysis requires several sources of compensation data in order to determine fair market value for any job; however, in the art world, as the Google spreadsheet demonstrated, there isn't even a baseline. There is more to be studied beyond the disparity in numbers: women, who are often better educated than their male peers (since women often feel pressured to gain institutional legitimization through education), are also held to different professional expectations. To develop compensation baselines, a comprehensive and comparative national survey that accurately demonstrates trends and patterns across gender, budget size, and geographic location, among other factors, is required.

### **4. Data studies need to be transparent about the contexts of their production.**

Across the field, there are calls for more data and internal assessments. For example, one of the five characteristics of the Maturity Model created by the Empathetic Museum<sup>40</sup> is "performance measures: developing standards for internal assessments, conducting them

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<sup>39</sup> Association of Art Museum Directors, *The Gender Gap in Museum Directorships* (2015), 2.

<sup>40</sup> A group of colleagues who advocate institutional empathy—"the intention of the museum to be, and be perceived as, deeply connected with its community"—as a transforming force for museums.

and acting on the results.” Not only does data collection within museums need to be designed more equitably and with an understanding of structural oppression, but data needs to be shared across the field.

Performance measures and data don’t serve those most vulnerable if the same gender and racial biases in our workplaces are also present in our methods of data collection—if “certain bodies take up spaces by screening out the existence of others.”<sup>41</sup> Even though the presence of some of us in the data is obscured (or often not even included), this flawed data becomes the basis for policies, funding, and initiatives in the field. As feminist geographer Joni Seager reminds us, “what gets counted, counts.”<sup>42</sup>

Data on the state of the field and the surveys that produce them are too often taken at face value. In the past decade, the research of BIPOC data scientists such as Alejandro Diaz has warned against assuming the neutrality of data structures.<sup>43</sup> We need to rigorously question who produces a data study, what their assumptions and motivations are, and how the resulting data might be used to maintain existing power structures. For example, more than asking “Does museum board diversity translate to an increased willingness to hire diverse senior leadership?,” we need to know if this translates into improved working conditions for and the retention of diverse staff.<sup>44</sup> Just as important is who is establishing the goals for the metrics and who is interpreting how the data relates to those metrics. The field is developing ways to critique narratives of heteronormativity, linearity, periodicity, and subjectivity within the demographic data we gather on artists, but we still default to established approaches to collecting data on our workforce. The Urban Institute’s Racial Equity Analytics Lab argues further that data collection methods need to allow people to exercise authority over their own data—that is, have a voice in how it is collected and interpreted.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Ahmed, “Making Feminist Points,” *feministkilljoys* blogpost, September 11, 2013, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/> (accessed March 29, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Joni Seager, in Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, eds., *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020), 96.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Alejandro Diaz, “Through the Google Goggles: The Sociopolitics of Search Engine Design,” honor’s thesis, Stanford University, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> A report by the nonprofit Equality Insights explains, “Data is often collected in ways that cannot be broken down to show how factors such as ethnicity, age, ability or disability status, sexuality, geography and other factors intersect and overlap.” “The Gender Data Gap,” Equality Insights, <https://equalityinsights.org/mind-the-gender-data-gap/> (accessed April 19, 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Megan Randall, Alena Stern, and Yipeng Su, “Five Ethical Risks to Consider before Filling Missing Race and Ethnicity Data,” Urban Institute, March 2021, 4.

## **5. New methods of capturing data that elude traditional assessment tools are necessary, as is the need to decenter those tools.**

The dominance of institutional rhetoric in the public sphere inevitably positions the lived experiences of marginalized people as deviant or atypical or ignores them all together, as if such politics of identity are “over.” Feminist and anti-racist critiques are sometimes heard as old fashioned and outmoded, based on identity categories that are assumed to be obsolete.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps more dangerous in the “progressive” art world, feminist, anti-racist, and class critiques are often assumed to be unnecessary, as if we have already “solved” these problems of the past. Institutional rhetoric also drowns out the fact that many workers don’t view so-called progressive policies and initiatives in the same light.

While celebrating artistic freedom and authored emotive content in artworks, the field consistently and ironically devalues the emotional labor of those who care for the very same artworks. Recent years have seen an increase in museum workers willing to speak publicly about their work experiences in the form of personal testimonies, tweets, and other social-media posts. This form of speech has played an important role in the field for some time. We cannot continue to dismiss these forms of speech in search of “hard” data. From these sources, we can gain an understanding of what it feels like to work within institutions and the ways workers’ well-being and work production suffers. In 2015, a rogue session called Museum Workers Speak convened at the AAM annual conference. Created by Alyssa Greenberg, a fellow at the Toledo Museum of Art (and former organizer of Occupy Museums), the session grew into a collective of museum workers committed to “turning the social-justice lens inward.” The movement operated as a Twitter hashtag and a blog and drew attention to the historically taboo subject of labor in museums. The #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #NotSurprised movements were another watershed moment in the production of alternative forms of data—since 2018, digital public platforms of disclosure have become increasingly important to documenting the experiences of women and non-binary employees. These platforms are some examples of the ways that employees are increasingly communicating about their experiences that traditional surveys fail to capture.

In recent years, numerous social-media accounts have continued to appear.<sup>47</sup> Feminist-informed data theory embraces multiple forms of knowledge, “including knowledge that

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<sup>46</sup> Ahmed, “Making Feminist Points.”

<sup>47</sup> Some of the Instagram accounts include @aam\_accountable, @abetterguggenheim, @cancelartgalleries, @changethemuseum, @charitysowhite, @diastaffaction, @dismantlenoma, @\_fortheculture2020, @mocadresistance, @museumaction, @museumsasmuck, @museumworkers, @show\_the\_boardroom, @showthesalary, @blacksva, @xsfmoma, @deathtomseums, and @vmfa\_reform.

comes from people as living, feeling bodies in the world.”<sup>48</sup> These forms of self-reporting are either underacknowledged or plainly disregarded by the powers that be, and yet they offer critical information about the hypocrisies and inequities employees are experiencing on a regular basis. The vast majority of posts recount incidents of racial or gender discrimination. As of March 2023, @changethemuseum has more than 51,000 followers.<sup>49</sup> The anonymity of these accounts may be essential in protecting workers from retaliation, but that doesn’t preclude the information from being taken seriously as data.<sup>50</sup> Understanding lived experiences can expose the contradictions that underpin structures of inequity. Metrics that address the quality of employment and the health of organizational culture are vital.

## 6. Data-gathering initiatives should be centralized.

Both the AAM (since 2012) and AAMD (since 1980) have produced salary studies. Their 2017 joint survey on the gender gap in museum directorships followed the groundbreaking Women in the Workplace Study by McKinsey & Co. in 2015 and Why Diversity Matters 2015, also by McKinsey. The Mellon Foundation has produced three cycles of its Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey, in partnership with AAM, AAMD, and Ithaka S+R starting in 2015.<sup>51</sup> Today, these efforts are joined by other organizations that recognize who is overlooked in dominant data studies.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, in the absence of long-term financial resources and commitment, methods of collection are scattershot, and data on organizational culture in art museums specifically continues to be elusive. The multiplicity of surveys and ad-hoc data studies do little to inspire confidence for real change in the field. The Urban Institute’s *Principles for*

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<sup>48</sup> D’Ignazio and Klein, *Data Feminism*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Trupti Rami’s July 15, 2020, article “The Instagram Account ‘Change the Museum’ Is Doing That” for *Vulture* highlights common threads of discussion on @changethemuseum.

<sup>50</sup> As an example, the educator-led group MASS Action (Museum as Site for Social Action) aggregated and analyzed social-media posts and statements made by various museums following the murder of George Floyd. Mass Action, “Museums and Anti-Racism: A Deeper Analysis,” October 30, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> <https://mellon.org/programs/arts-and-culture/art-museum-staff-demographic-survey/> (accessed April 11, 2023).

<sup>52</sup> Professional Organization for Women in the Arts published a salary study based on data gathered from three hundred of its members in 2020. As a core strategy, the Black Trustee Alliance for Art Museums (launched in 2020) looks to “conduct original research and support affiliates’ research to develop data-driven tools that enable our trustees to be more effective in navigating change and transforming their institutions.”

<https://blacktrusteealliance.org/about/overview/> (accessed April 1, 2022). Juline A. Chevalier, Gretchen M. Jennings, and Sara A. Phalen recently conducted a quantitative content analysis of more than five hundred accredited museums’ statements issued in 2020 in the wake of George Floyd’s murder; see their “Nothing Can Be Changed Until It Is Faced: Museum Solidarity Statements as Reflections of Understanding Systemic Racism,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/cura.12544> (accessed April 10, 2023).

*Advancing Equitable Data Practice* (2020) argues for coordinated data collection as a matter of justice.<sup>53</sup> While still being mindful of the variation of laws between states, cross-institutional data is important and required in order to create ethical standards and accountability measures for the field pertaining to the present and future of work.

In the area of collections and programming, the Burns Halperin Report, a data study examining representation of women artists and Black American artists in museum acquisitions and exhibitions since 2018,<sup>54</sup> has added immeasurably to the understanding of the scale of imbalance, but not all museums have been willing to participate. The unionization movement in the field is promising for future data collection. The work of unions—negotiating contracts and protecting workers from discrimination and harassment, for example—will lead to the collection of significant data related to hiring, pay, and other employment practices. The field would benefit greatly from consolidating and sharing this kind of data across museums to see if there are cross-institutional learning opportunities.

MMF’s advocacy on behalf of improved data is not unique. For example, a key objective of the ten-year-old United Nations–based organization Data2x is to increase funding for and improve the availability and quality of gender data. By showing its relevance to decision making, they hope to increase demand for gender data and to drive smarter and more equitable policies. These ideas apply to the museum field as well. The field can support collaborative data-collection strategies across the field, just as the field moves toward collaborative organizational models. Funding is needed to collect data and to centralize various data collection efforts.

## **7. Data disclosure alone does not translate to improved workplace culture, behavior change, or strategies of accountability.**

2014 was a significant year for demographic data in the corporate world. That was the first year that influential tech companies including Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft began releasing annual diversity reports. Within a corporate culture that had

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<sup>53</sup> “Some people and communities are consistently the targets of data collection and study, sometimes from organizations seeking the same information for similar purposes. Siloed data place an additional—and potentially unnecessary—burden on community members.” Marcus Gaddy and Kassie Scott, *Principles for Advancing Equitable Data Practice*, Urban Institute Elevate Data Equity Project, June 2020, [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102346/principles-for-advancing-equitable-data-practice\\_0.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102346/principles-for-advancing-equitable-data-practice_0.pdf) (accessed July 10, 2022).

<sup>54</sup> The report, led by journalists Charlotte Burns and Julia Halperin, started in 2018. See “Introducing the 2022 Burns Halperin Report, artnet.com, December 13, 2022, available at <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/letter-from-the-editors-introducing-the-2022-burns-halperin-report-2227445>.

expected a correlation between disclosure and behavioral change, these landmark reports—which largely recorded the diminished roles of women and BIPOC people in the companies—were praised for their transparency. Yet, despite pledges to change the demographic makeup of their workforces, as of late 2020, one study found that African American and Latinx women, for example, still hold only a combined 4% of computing occupations.<sup>55</sup> Often, some see diversity and equity workplace initiatives as effective, while others do not. In early 2022, Hue’s report *The State of Inequity* found that 82% of HR professionals said their industry does a good job of implementing diversity-related initiatives; meanwhile 84% of employees noted “a lack of meaningful progress” regarding equity for BIPOC workers.<sup>56</sup>

AAM began promoting a rigorous focus on social justice in the 2010s. Surveys continue to demonstrate that while among senior leadership positions, education and curatorial departments have grown more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, areas like conservation and leadership have not changed. The field continues to have a workforce that is majority women, but leadership positions continue to be majority men. Turnover continues to be high for staff tasked with addressing DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion) issues. Museum human resource departments are notoriously uneven in their training and opaque in their practices. These are just a few of the ways that data studies and reports don’t necessarily lead to change. The fact that only about 25% of employees say their companies prioritize disability in its DEAI efforts<sup>57</sup> suggests that change also doesn’t happen if the design for change doesn’t adequately recognize the scope of vulnerabilities. In other ways, we need to be aware of how data (official and anecdotal) can reinforce inequities.<sup>58</sup>

What data scientists and authors of the influential 2020 book *Data Feminism*, Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein, describe as “the pitfalls of proof”—the assumption that, by

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<sup>55</sup> Siri Chilazi and Iris Bohet, “How to Best Use Data to Meet Your DE&I Goals,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 3, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Hue, *The State of Inequity: Building a Brighter Future for BIPOC at Work* (2022), <https://www.stateofinequity.wearehue.org/> (accessed August 5, 2022).

<sup>57</sup> “Women in the Workforce: Women with Disabilities,” September 2021, LeanIn.org and McKinsey Company, <https://leanin.org/article/women-in-the-workplace-women-with-disabilities> (accessed April 30, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> For example, following studies and articles that discussed the lack of diversity in art museums staff—see, for example, *The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey* (2015) and Robin Pogrebin, “With New Urgency, Museums Cultivate Curators of Color,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 2018—many began to speak of the problem with the “pipeline.” Even the Metropolitan Museum’s president and CEO Daniel Weiss suggested that “One of the fundamental challenges in art museums is that the pipeline of talented people who want to work in museums is not as diverse or representative of the larger society as it needs to be if we’re truly to be an institution that reflects the world around us. There needs to be a stronger, more robust level of interest across our society.” “Directors in Dialogue: Daniel Weiss,” *The American Federation of the Arts*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.amfedarts.org/danweiss/> (accessed July 26, 2022).

being made aware of the extent of the problem, those in power will be prompted to take action—is useful here.<sup>59</sup> “Proof,” they write, “can just as easily become part of an endless loop if not accompanied by other tools of community engagement, political organizing, and protest.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, data efforts in the field need to be transparent about what the data will serve.

In short, there is a fundamental lack of data on internal equity and workplace culture that recognizes structural inequities, is culturally informed and sensitive, and builds trust among stakeholders. This missing data set is a significant impediment to understanding the scope of museum workers’ experiences and circumstances, and thus to designing strategies for change and methods of accountability. And still, data disclosure is not enough by itself; an equitable and inclusive data infrastructure must also be created to capture, interpret, inspire, and design those strategies now and into the future. Data is a powerful tool for actionable change and accountability for museums moving forward, but an independent entity is required to maximize its impact.

Shortly after identifying this missing data set, MMF partnered with data scientists at Boston University and the social research firm Slover Linett to design a quantitative data study examining workplace equity and organizational culture in US art museums. Our pilot study launched in October 2022 with fifty-four partner museums, and the report is forthcoming in summer 2023. We believe wholeheartedly that there should be no data without stories and no stories without data. We need a combined approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data to adequately address the problems at hand. Identifying these oversights is about more than demographic information; as author and internet studies scholar Safiya Umoja Noble asserts, data is a matter of human rights.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> D’Ignazio and Klein, *Data Feminism*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> D’Ignazio and Klein, 58.

<sup>61</sup> Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 1.