

MEND

THE GAP

RESEARCH

EMILY

MA

GRAPHIC

COMMUNICATION

SUMMARY

HOWARD

DESIGN

Abstract

Within the UK design industry, 77% are men and only 23% are women. 86% of the industry is white, and just 14% are of minority ethnicity.

How is it that these statistics revealing a gap so big could be so underrepresented? Often hidden in lengthy reports and covered up by corporate marketing, the reality of the design industry is one often overlooked or unrealized. With this in mind, I question how I could contextualize and activate this data to better amplify these statistics and create increased awareness within the design community? How can the passing of time and change be considered when designing data visualization? On top of that, I set out to do so through the art of weaving — a form with a visual connection to intersectionality and a medium rich in sidelined histories and the oppression of the female voice.

As a response to my inquiry, I first wove a set of scarves serving as a form of wearable resistance design that could be used as a vehicle to grow awareness for the industry's layered inequities. These scarves utilized symbolism, data visualization, and typography to communicate the statistics. However, weaving scarves by hand proved an incredibly time consuming practice, inhibiting potential for circulation, in addition to being a seasonal garment. With this in mind, I began to think smaller, nimbler, and more distributable. What resulted is still a form of wearable resistance design, but is instead in the form of small cross stitched pins. These pins are woven by the wearer to reflect the inequities they feel in the industry. The stitches themselves quantify inequity ratios shown through color. Once the user sews their pin, they can submit it to the Mend the Gap website, where an archive of pins lives. This serves as an ever-evolving home for the movement and a data base where change can be visually tracked as time brings shifts in industry inequities. While this project currently exists only within the UK, there is potential for the archive and pins to be brought to other regions – the archive can serve as a data center to see change among regions as well as over time. Pins are distributed through a pin stitching kit with materials, instructions, and a link to the website which houses the archive, industry data, a reference library, and further resources for change.

In circulating these pins to the London design community, I plan to utilize industry events and word of mouth - starting locally with hope for a gradual spread. The purpose of the pins is to spark conversation - “What is that and what does it mean?” “Where can I get a kit?” While the audience breadth may seem large, narrowing in to a specific sector would be ignorant of the fact that these inequities touch every part of the industry, and it will take students, designers, CEOs — everyone — to inch closer to a more equitable landscape for the design industry.

Context

Mend the Gap has been built up from a large base of references surrounding equitable design practice, feminist theories, histories within the design world, as well as histories surrounding women and weaving. *Made in Patriarchy* was a catalyst in recognizing the potential for collective, community-centered social movements and the utilization of traditional craft. This proved especially relevant in considering the history of women-made craft being sidelined by a patriarchal world despite their societal impact. This validated my desire to use weaving as a medium to convey data on the inequities of the design industry and highlight ignored histories of women in design.

With her Own Hands brings in the histories of sidelined craft and situates them within the world of weaving and textile craft. It served as a source for relevant practices concerning social movements that use textile work to amplify voices. Textile work has historically been an outlet for women to express themselves independently and collectively in a world where their voices were not heard or respected. This fueled the fire behind the use of weaving as a medium and the decision to create kits so that users can sew their own pins. Taking the time to pause from a fast-paced digital-centric world and sit down with nothing but your own hands and a thread leaves space for intention, thought, and reflection. This is a key point within Nicole Nehrig's book, and it also inspired the idea to bring in the collective aspect through creating an archive, as well as future potential for community pin stitching workshops.

With a pin badge being the final outcome and physical manifestation of this project for the end user, it is interesting to consider the network of a pin badge. They typically exist within a collection of pins on tote bag, jacket, or backpack – all in conversation with each other to project personality, passions, aesthetics of the wearer. It is wholly unknown what collection the mend the gap pins will end up within, but I enjoy the potential for them to exist in a shared and changing environment. In addition to this, with there being a pin archive, this becomes its own network, creating an environment for the individual and collective to develop a narrative over time on the industry and its changing (or perhaps unfortunately unchanging) state.

In a wider setting, Mend the Gap exists primarily within the network of design, being relevant for anyone in the industry, as the data being spotlighted touches everyone. This project is also relevant for those interested in resistance design and community activation to create change in inequitable environments. There are quite a few initiatives that focus on inequity within the design industry, which have the potential to be collaborated with in the future. There would also be the potential for brand, company, or corporate collaboration to promote equity and community within certain design workspaces.

For practical reasons, Mend the Gap is starting only in the UK to develop in a constrained environment as it gains its footing. There is certainly potential for the project to expand across global design communities, uniting them through shared hardship. Distribution will be through

online purchase and shipping, or in-person sales. Due to the cost of materials, shipping, and lack of funding, pin kits will be available for purchase at the exact cost with no inflation for profit. This cost breakdown is transparent to the audience on the Mend the Gap website (www.mend-the-gap.com). Kits have been designed to fit in a mailable letter envelope – the cheapest method for shipment. It is assumed that no one receiving the kit knows how to sew, so an instructions kit is provided along with a link to an online video tutorial. Giving agency to the user to design their own pins comes with the assumption that not everyone will follow the correct directive and will stray outside of color + ratio representation constraints, but this lends to the notion of women's design history being messy and rife with imperfection.

Projected Contribution

When it comes to Mend the Gap and its relevance when situated within graphic communication design, there is no question that it touches every aspect of it's realm. While it is relevant to every person within the community, I hope this project serves as a reference for considering merging data visualization, form, evolution. and community interaction. It may not be higher level and theoretically challenging the bounds of design, but it highlights the importance to look inwards at the space you are in, contemplate it's reality as a whole, reflect, and consider paths for leading the evolution of the industry.

Looking into the future, this is where Mend the Gap will thrive and grow. Currently, the project is in its beginning phase, but the future holds opportunities for growth in terms of reach and new iterations across the globe. There is also the potential for the development of workshop templates for others to use in group or community setting where pin badge making workshops could be carried out. As Mend the Gap grows, there is also potential for collaboration with other organizations, companies, schools, etc also poses an exciting extension to activate iterations of the project within specific audience groups. This project is also open to feedback and adaptation as user testing continues and distribution takes off – it is not a stagnant project but a living and growing movement. My hope is that Mend the Gap will incite awareness of and interaction with the inequities of the design industry, sparking desire for change and a more equitable future.

“EVEN IN THE MOST RESTLESS SEAS, THE TIDE ALWAYS TURNS AND THE WAVES THAT CRASH AGAINST US CAN ALSO CARRY US FORWARD. MAY THAT ALSO INSPIRE US TO SEE DESIGN NOT MERELY THROUGH ITS CELEBRATED OBJECTS BUT AS AN INSURGENT, LIVING, AND COLLECTIVE FORCE.”

From the forward by Bibiana Oliveira Serpa, Made in Patriarchy, 2025

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