

Women Designers Face a Glass Ceiling Amid Global Fashion's Power Reshuffle

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The global fashion industry, currently revelling in a season of **frills, corsets, bold shoulders, and “naked dresses,”** is grappling with an unsettling imbalance behind the scenes — the **near disappearance of women in top creative roles.**

During the **Spring/Summer 2026 womenswear Fashion Weeks** in **Paris and Milan**, more than ten major fashion houses unveiled new artistic directors. Yet, among these fresh appointments at labels like **Chanel, Dior, Celine, Balenciaga, Loewe,** and **Jean Paul Gaultier**, only **one woman — Louise Trotter at Bottega Veneta —** took the bow at the end of a runway show.

Even more striking, **Matthieu Blazy at Chanel** and **Jonathan Anderson at Dior** replaced **high-profile female predecessors**, signaling what experts are calling a **backslide in gender progress** across the luxury landscape.

A Step Backwards for Women in Fashion Leadership

“It seemed there was a real opening for women before Covid,” says **Karen Van Godtsenhoven**, fashion academic and guest curator of *Women Dressing Women* at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**. “But the pandemic brought back conservative thinking, and in fashion, that meant a return to the old certainty of the male solo designer.”

The numbers speak volumes. According to **Vogue Business** and **Fashion Network**, over **95% of creative director roles at major European fashion houses** are now occupied by men. This, despite fashion’s self-proclaimed commitment to **diversity, inclusion, and representation.**

Industry Structure and the “Male Genius” Myth

The concentration of power within the **hands of a few conglomerates** — LVMH, Kering, and Chanel — is a key factor behind this imbalance. These corporations, led predominantly by **conservative male executives**, have historically shaped the creative direction of luxury fashion.

Author **Dana Thomas**, whose seminal book *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster* exposed fashion’s elitist inner workings, notes the irony:

“Chanel missed a big opportunity in not hiring a woman to lead the house founded by the most iconic woman in fashion history — Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel.”

She points out that labels originally built by visionary women — **Lanvin, Nina Ricci, Schiaparelli, and Celine** — are now helmed by men.

Meanwhile, only **Sarah Burton (Givenchy)** and **Maria Grazia Chiuri (Fendi)** stand out as female creative heads within major luxury brands. Even **Hermès**, which once prided itself on women-led design, recently saw **Veronique Nichanian** step down after a remarkable **37-year tenure**.

A Culture That Still Resists Change

Experts like **Frédéric Godart**, professor at **INSEAD** and author of *Unveiling Fashion*, attribute this regression to a **toxic mix of structural and cultural biases**.

“There’s a glass ceiling for women in most industries,” he explains. “But luxury fashion has its own barriers — long hours, pay gaps, and the myth of the ‘male genius designer’ that refuses to die.”

The contradiction is glaring: an industry built largely by women — from **Coco Chanel to Elsa Schiaparelli** — continues to glorify male creative leadership.

Looking Forward: Breaking the Pattern

While the fashion world embraces **innovation on the runway**, it remains **stubbornly traditional in the boardroom**. True diversity, analysts argue, will require not just token female appointments but **structural change** — mentorship, fair compensation, and a redefinition of creative leadership beyond outdated gendered ideals.

Until then, the global fashion narrative remains uneven — a spectacle of **female empowerment on the runway, but male dominance behind it**.
