gmtech

By **digital fems**

Music Gender Metadata Manifesto

digital fems

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A Call to Reflection

IIn the era of digital surveillance, where the debate about the limits of digital data usage conflicts with the right to privacy, we propose an initiative that includes the ethical and secure identification of gender metadata for all individuals contributing to musical creation and performance. This initiative seeks to balance the need for accurate data with the imperative to protect individual rights and prevent misuse.

Music metadata refers to data about a musical work and recording. It is used daily by all stakeholders in the digital music supply chain: from the label that distributes a new song to digital platforms (DSPs), rights management societies, digital aggregators, and others. All of them benefit from the creation of standards to manage the digital flow of each musical work. Metadata is not only an essential element for distributing the royalties generated by a work but also a critical component in training algorithms that use AI. Contrary to other uses, the more core and contextual metadata a musical piece has, the better. It is in this spirit that **we propose and demand a rethinking of the use and governance of metadata**—the foundation and driving force of the digital industry, particularly the metadata that DSPs use to recommend artists.

Every choice in metadata design impacts the visibility and accessibility of the data it represents. We believe in metadata that represents reality in its complexity and conscious development to eliminate barriers to representation in digital systems. Through this manifesto, w**e emphasize the importance of rethinking music metadata—the fuel for AI and automated systems**. Metadata is not only relevant for managing rights and royalties; it also has a direct impact on machine learning processes for recommendations and other algorithmic procedures. The absence of gender metadata creates algorithmic biases that affect artists, musicians and creators who are cisgender women, transgender, non-binary, or gender-diverse and perpetuate unfair dynamics, which we seek to expose and change now.

Metadata embodies human decisions and is thus imbued with the cultural, social, political, and economic biases that permeate our society. Adopting a metadata design that prioritizes equitable and fair representation is not only a technical necessity but an urgent need to promote fairness and equitable representation in digital systems. Only by including diverse voices in the creation and updating of these data structures can we mitigate exclusions and correct the inherent biases in these systems. Only through an intentional, community-led, and flexible approach to metadata design, we can create digital systems that genuinely reflect and respect the diversity of human experiences.

This manifesto is inspired by other manifestos and principles such as Embedded Metadata Manifesto, Feminist Data Manifest-No and Design Justice Principles

After reading this Manifesto, take action!

PRINCIPLES OF THE MUSIC GENDER METADATA MANIFESTO

PRINCIPLE 1: METADATA IS NOT NEUTRAL

Metadata is the language that digital systems use to classify and organize information. Music metadata is structured information that describes key aspects of a musical work and its sound recording, such as title, artist, musical genre, and release year. Metadata standards reflect the human decisions that shape them—what data is included, what categories are used, and how information is described. The design of metadata is not only a technical concern; it is deeply embedded in the social realities from which it emerges. Metadata thus embodies human choices, including cultural biases and values. Every choice in its design impacts the visibility and accessibility of the data it represents.
Metadata can be a tool to either reinforce or challenge invisible power structures. Recognizing that metadata is not neutral is the first step toward developing more representative, transparent, and accountable data systems. We recognize the inherent biases within metadata and urgently call for new metadata practices that better represent the complexity and richness of our societies, including gender metadata. We believe in diverse and comprehensive metadata structures as a means to eliminate barriers to representation in digital systems.

PRINCIPLE 2: INTERSECTIONALITY IS NECESSARY IN METADATA

Traditional metadata categories often reflect dominant social norms and power structures, failing to capture and represent the full range of identities in digital systems. I**ntersectional metadata challenges these structures by questioning and expanding categories to reflect race, gender, and other intersecting identities inclusively**. Female and gender-diverse artists, especially those from racialized communities, often face unique challenges in gaining recognition, navigating industry bias, and accessing opportunities. It is also essential to highlight that the concept of gender is complex, and fluid, and goes beyond a simple binary framework. Traditional data systems often classify gender as "male" or "female," ignoring the variety of gender identities that exist. This binary approach not only limits visibility for trans, non-binary, and other gender-diverse individuals, but it also reinforces outdated norms and perpetuates exclusionary practices in digital spaces.

For instance, Black women musicians may encounter both racial and gender discrimination, affecting their visibility, representation, and discoverability within the industry. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how overlapping social identities influence musicians' opportunities, visibility, and access to resources.

We call for the **creation of intersectional metadata to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and overshadowing diverse identities in how music is classified and recommended.** Making intersectionality a requirement in metadata is essential to recognizing and addressing the varied and intersecting identities that shape our societies.

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PRINCIPLE 3: AI NEEDS GENDER METADATA

Artificial intelligence is profoundly influenced by the data on which it is trained. AI systems reflect and often amplify the biases present in their training data. **Without** accurate, nuanced, and **diverse gender metadata, AI systems will continue to perpetuate historical biases,** impacting representation, visibility, and economic and cultural participation in music digital services. Gender metadata, however, can **prevent** the erasure and **invisibilization** that AI systems currently generate.

The demand for gender metadata in AI goes beyond technical enhancement—it is a call for ethical and transparent systems that recognize and respect the full diversity of human experience. Research in algorithmic fairness and representative data practices reveals that gender metadata is not merely an addition but a requirement for AI systems that aspire to be just and equitable, counteracting historical biases and the amplification of existing inequities.
Now, in the era of automated systems and AI, this discussion must be central to the industry. Metadata was not originally created for AI, yet it is one of the essential elements for its functioning, making it imperative to address this topic with urgency. Otherwise, the industry will be responsible for failing to prevent the bias and exclusion that metadata is creating, pushing us toward a digital world that, by omission, renders invisible a significant part of individuals

PRINCIPLE 4: GENDER METADATA SHOULD BE HANDLED SAFELY

The music industry has gone further than many other sectors in adopting effective standards. Twenty years ago, the whole industry collectively, created and established industry-wide standards for music data architectures, ensuring that information about music —known as metadata—was communicated in a common format and consistently delivered across different stakeholders and companies, enabling each party inputting and outputting metadata to understand it.

While there have been some efforts to include gender metadata in the standard data architecture, the industry has not shown sustained commitment to this possibility. We firmly believe that the conversation on how and in what ways gender metadata should be included is of the utmost importance, and we call on all stakeholders to consider this demand with the seriousness and urgency it requires. Music plays a fundamental role in the cultural sector—not only as an artistic expression and form of entertainment but also as a powerful force for shaping identity, reflecting values, and sharing collective stories and emotions. It represents a space for human creativity and freedom, capable of bringing people together, fostering a sense of belonging, and holding the potential to shape and transform social values and attitudes.

PRINCIPLES OF THE MUSIC GENDER METADATA MANIFESTO

Do we envision a digital music industry that feels no need to take responsibility for technological governance to prevent discrimination in the digital music sector? Can the industry accept a digital cultural future that overlooks female and gender-diverse music contributors?

We call for common sense and an intentional, community-led, and flexible approach to metadata design, one that invites diverse voices into the process to create digital systems that genuinely reflect and respect the diversity of human experiences. This approach requires transparency, accountability, and a commitment to continuously re-evaluate and adapt our metadata systems to honor evolving identities and experiences.

PRINCIPLE 5: CROWD-CREATED SYSTEMS NEED OPEN DISCUSSIONS

To foster equitable and inclusive representation, gender metadata must be carefully designed to reflect the full diversity of gender identities and handled with the highest standards of security and privacy. Gender, as a sensitive and personal attribute, requires careful management. Mishandling this data can lead to serious privacy breaches and even endanger individuals, particularly in regions where non-binary and gender-diverse identities are stigmatized or criminalized. It is crucial to ensure that gender metadata is only collected where it serves a meaningful purpose, such as improving visibility and representation.

The handling of gender metadata requires robust data privacy measures to protect against unauthorized access and misuse. This could include strong encryption protocols to secure data both in transit and at rest, as well as tightly controlled access to ensure systems that can handle this information. It is essential to give artists and music contributors control over whether and how their gender data is collected, stored, and shared. Consent for using gender metadata must be explicit, ensuring that individuals fully understand the purpose and potential uses of this information. Additionally, systems should allow artists to update or remove their gender metadata at any time.

Digital systems that handle gender metadata must be transparent about how this data is used. Providing clear information on the purpose, scope, and intended outcomes of metadata collection and processing builds trust with users, who can then make informed decisions about their participation builds trust with data owners, who can then make informed decisions about their participation.

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This Manifesto is a call to rethink how we design, manage, and use metadata in the digital music industry. Through these principles, we aim to highlight and correct the structural inequities that music metadata systems perpetuate, advocating for a shift toward practices that foster equality, representation, and justice in an ever-evolving digital world.

Thank you for reading this far; we invite you to take action by different means:
- Participating in the Industry Survey
- Signing the Manifesto
- Engaging with us in the Music Gender Metadata Pilot Lab. Contact us thais@digitalfems.org

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