

Center for the
Study of Women
in Television and Film

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Boxed In

Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes in the 2007-08 Prime-time Season

Introduction

In retrospect, the 2007-08 prime-time season will be remembered as a somewhat fractured affair marred by the writer's strike – and the heightened emphasis on gender-specific programming. In an attempt to appeal to an increasingly fragmented audience, many programs seemed deliberately designed to target women *or* men. With varying degrees of success, the broadcast networks introduced series including *Cavemen*, *Big Shots*, *Chuck*, and *Carpoolers* for male viewers, and *Cashmere Mafia*, *Lipstick Jungle*, *Samantha Who*, *Women's Murder Club*, and *Bionic Woman* for female viewers. Joining the returning female-driven series including *Ugly Betty*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Girlfriends*, prime time offered female characters performing as adorable dopes (*Samantha Who*), working women (*Cashmere Mafia*, *Lipstick Jungle*), post-modern wives (*Desperate Housewives*), and teen queens (*Gossip Girl*).

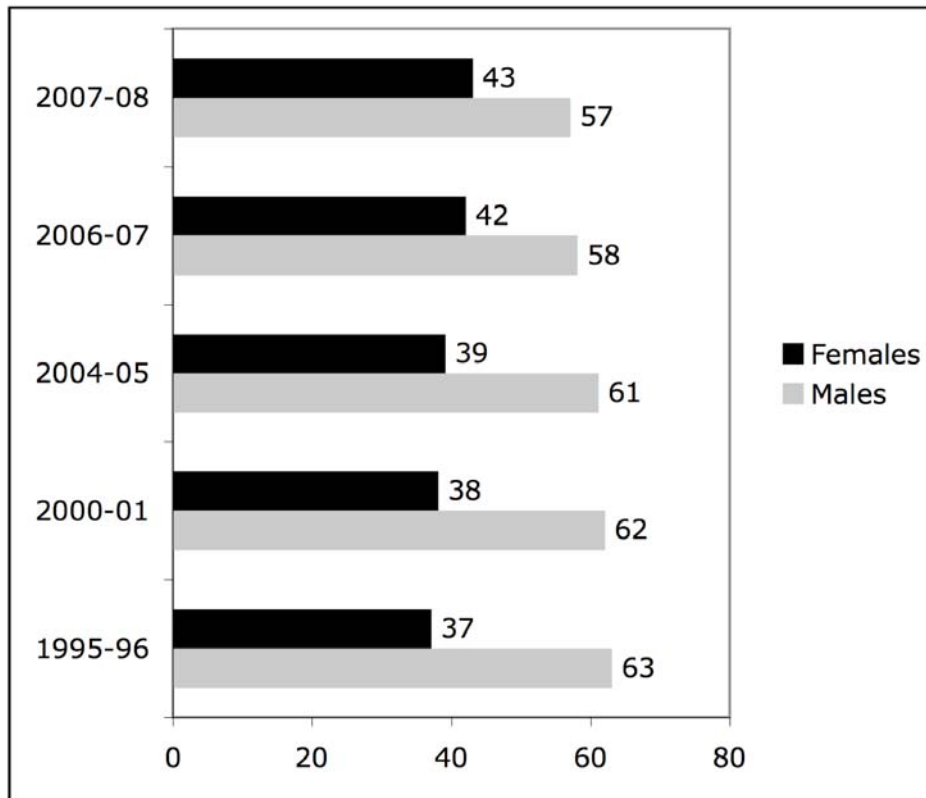
Behind the scenes, women continued to create a variety of series featuring female and male lead characters. Freshman series created by women included *Private Practice* (Shonda Rhimes), *Women's Murder Club* (Elizabeth Craft and Sarah Fain), and *Reaper* (Tara Butters and Michele Fazekas).

In spite of these considerable accomplishments, overall women remained under-represented on screen and behind the scenes. Using one randomly selected episode of every prime-time drama, situation comedy, and reality program airing on the six broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, CW, Fox, MyNetworkTV, NBC), this study reports employment figures for women working in the 2007-08 prime-time season.

On-Screen Representation of Female Characters

This study included all characters that spoke at least one audible line on camera. In the 2007-08 prime-time season, females comprised 43% of all characters, an increase of one percentage point from last season. This figure represents a historical high (see Figure 1). However, as females comprise 51% of the U.S. population, they remain under-represented in prime time.

*Figure 1.
Comparison of Percentages of Female and Male Characters
on Prime-time Programs*



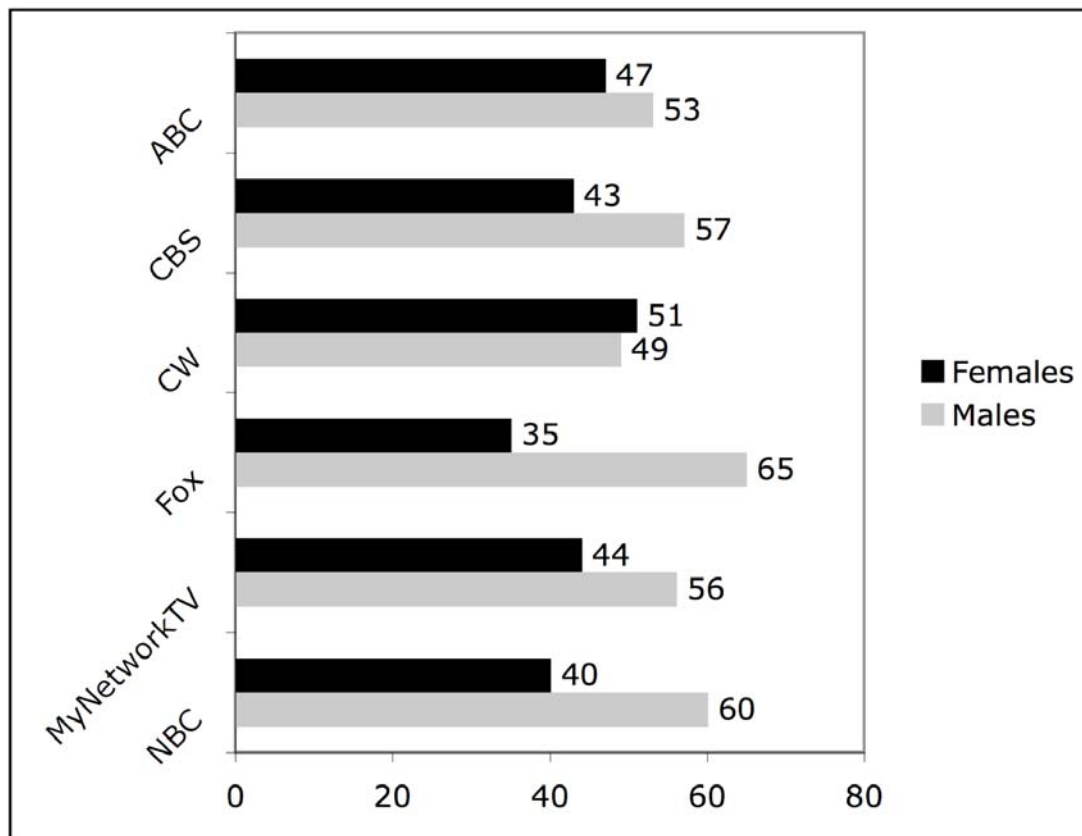
This study also distinguished between major and minor characters. Characters deemed essential to the development of the central or ancillary plots

were coded as major characters. Guest stars that were not regular cast members but were essential to plot development were coded as major characters. Minor characters spoke very few lines, were not central to the plot or sub-plots, and appeared in a single scene. Females comprised 44% and males 56% of major characters. Female characters accounted for 41% and males 59% of minor characters.

Sex of Characters by Broadcast Network

Female characters were more likely to be featured on programs airing on some networks than others (see Figure 2). CW was the only network last season to represent female characters at parity with women's representation in the U.S. population. Females comprised 51% of characters on CW programs, followed by ABC programs (47%), MyNetworkTV (44%), CBS (43%), NBC (40%), and Fox (35%). These findings are perhaps not surprising as the CW features programs such as *Gossip Girl* intended to appeal to a young female audience.

Figure 2.
Comparison of Sex of Character by Broadcast Network



Sex of Characters by Program Genre

Female characters were equally likely to appear in dramas and reality programs and less likely to appear on situation comedies. Forty five percent (45%) of female characters appeared on dramas and 45% appeared on reality programs. Only 10% of female characters appeared on situation comedies.

Male characters were most likely to appear on dramas (51%), followed by reality programs (38%), and situation comedies (11%).

These percentages reflect the distribution of series among program genres. Last season, dramas comprised 43%, reality programs 39%, and situation comedies 17% of all programs.

Sex of Characters by Setting

Female characters were equally likely to appear on scripted programs taking place primarily in workplace settings and domestic settings. Fifty percent (50%) of female characters appeared on programs with workplace settings and 50% of female characters appeared on programs with domestic settings.

In contrast, male characters were more likely to appear on scripted programs taking place primarily in workplace settings than on programs in domestic settings. Fifty seven percent (57%) of male characters appeared on programs with workplace settings and 43% of male characters appeared on programs with domestic settings.

These findings represent a departure from studies conducted in previous years when female characters were significantly more likely to be found in domestic settings than workplace settings. The findings suggest that those working behind the scenes are feeling increasingly comfortable placing female characters in a variety of settings. However, the findings also suggest that male characters remain confined to more traditional settings.

Sex of Characters by Occupation

The occupation of characters differed significantly by sex of the character. A number of occupational categories revealed only small sex differences such as out of the workforce positions including homemaker and student (13% of female characters and 11% of male characters), service positions (21% of females and 21% of males), professional positions (9% of females and 10% of males), and clerical positions (3% of females and 2% of males). Other categories revealed more substantial differences, such as blue-collar positions (2% of females and 9% of males), and white-collar positions (13% of females and 20% of males). In

addition, female characters were much more likely to have an unknown occupational status (39%) than male characters (24%). These findings suggest that occupational status remains a more important part of a male character's than a female character's identity.

Sex of Characters by Marital Status

For the first time since this study has been conducted, marital status did not differ by the sex of the characters. Traditionally, female characters have been more likely than male characters to have an identifiable marital status. This distinction has suggested that marital status is a more important part of a woman's identity than a man's identity.

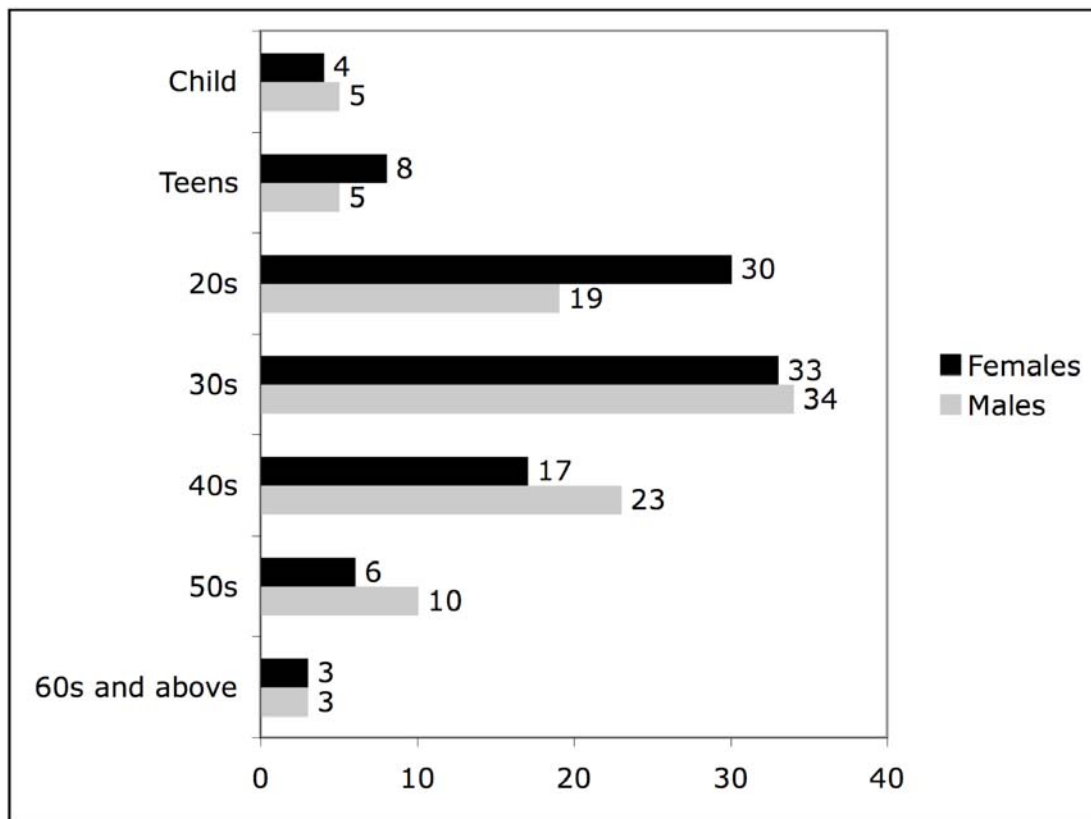
In the 2007-08 season, these differences were not significant. Fifty two percent (52%) of female characters were single, 16% were married, and 32% had unknown marital status. Similarly, 51% of male characters were single, 15% were married, and 35% had unknown marital status.

Sex of Characters by Age

Male characters were significantly older than female characters (see Figure 3). The majority of female characters (63%) were in their 20s and 30s, whereas the majority of male characters (57%) were in their 30s and 40s. Note that the distribution in Figure 3 differs markedly from the age distribution in the U.S. population. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 18% of women are in their 30s versus 33% of female characters in the prime-time population. Similarly, about 19% of men are in their 30s compared to 34% of male characters on prime time. The numbers are also skewed at the older end of the age distribution. For example, approximately 22% of women in the

U.S. population are 60 and older versus only 3% in prime time. Approximately 18% of men in this country are 60 and over compared to only 3% of males in prime time.

*Figure 3.
Sex of Characters by Age*



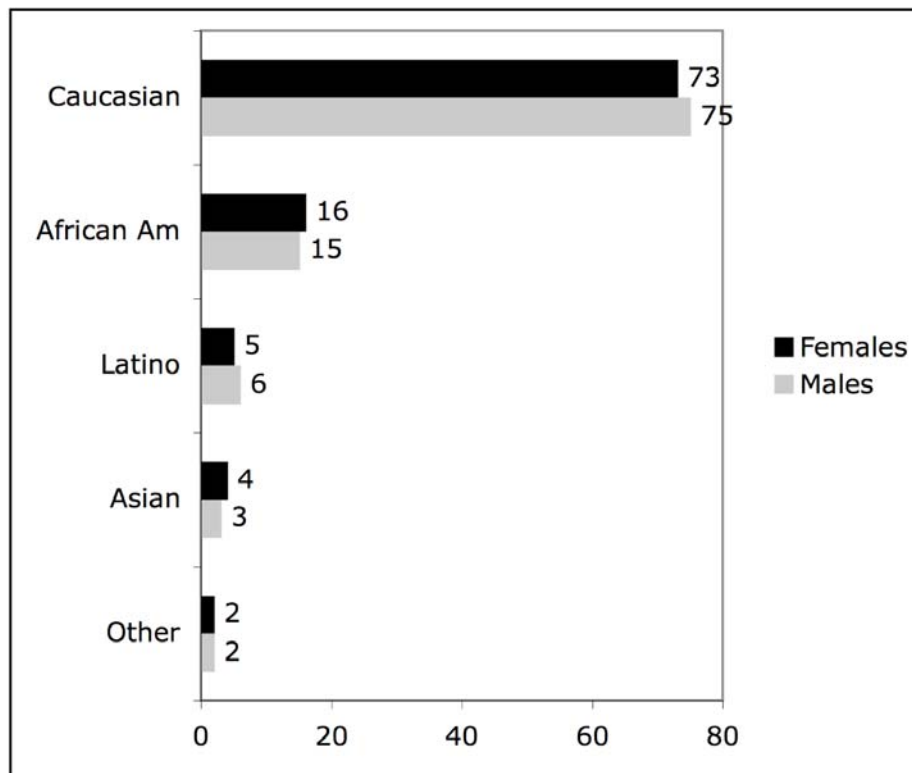
Overall, characters are most likely to be in their 30s. The impulse to highlight this age group is most likely driven by the desires of advertisers who regard the 30s to be a highly relatable decade for those in younger and older cohorts (Avins, 2004). In other words, the belief is that those younger and older can relate to being in their 30s. Simultaneously, those individuals in their 60s have been discarded as a largely irrelevant demographic, having made their

brand choices and major purchases decades earlier. Note that neither female nor male characters tend to age into their 60s and beyond. Marketers ignore this demographic group at their peril as those 60 and over are showing an increasing willingness to sample new products with their considerable disposable incomes that dwarf those of individuals under 50. For many “zoomers” (Heller, 2005), turning 50 is no longer the beginning of the end but the start of the second chapter of their lives.

Sex of Characters by Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity did not differ significantly by gender (see Figure 4). The majority of female characters were Caucasian (73%), followed by African American (16%), Latina (5%), Asian (4%), and other (2%). The majority of male characters were white (75%), followed by African American (15%), Latino (6%), Asian (3%), and other (2%). In comparison with their representation in the U.S. population, this distribution over-represents Caucasians and African Americans. Asians are accurately represented numerically and Latinas/Latinos are substantially under-represented.

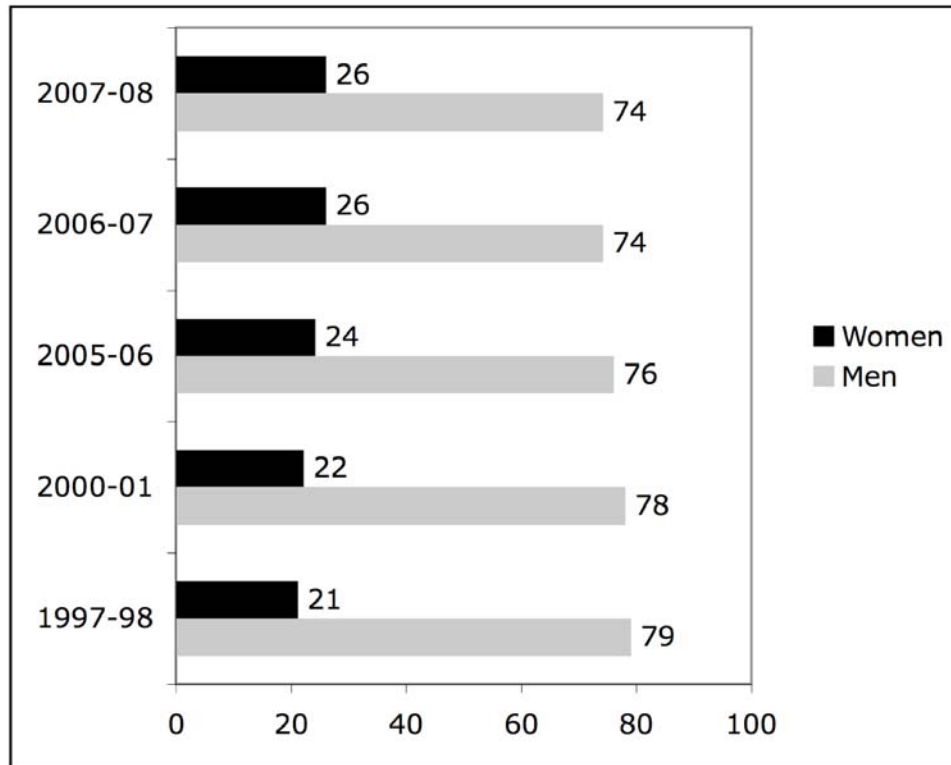
Figure 4.
Sex of Characters by Race and Ethnicity



Behind-the-Scenes Representation of Women

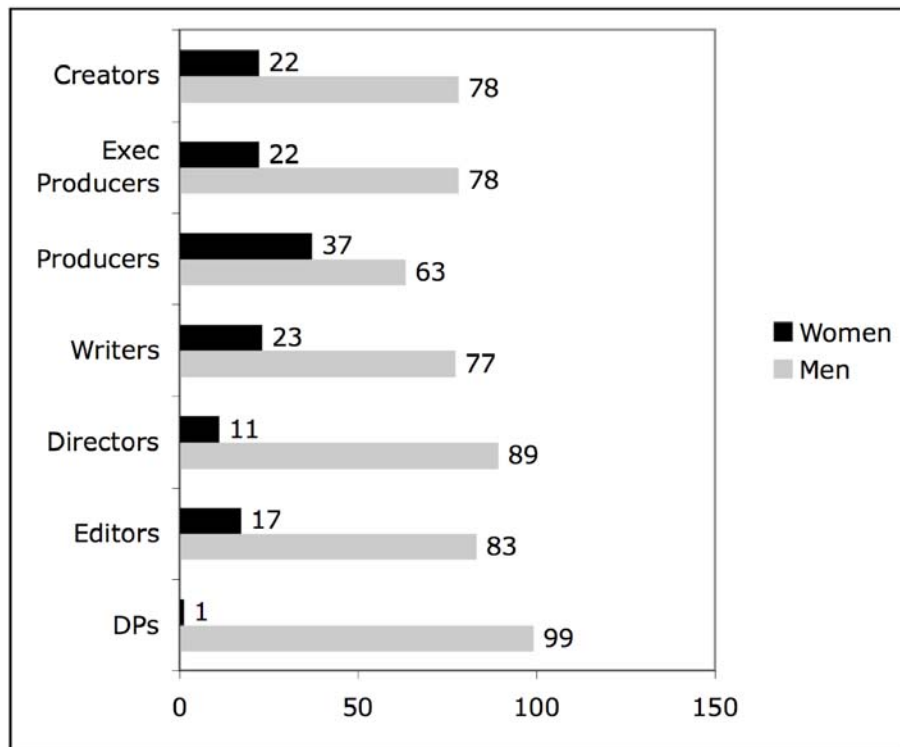
In the 2007-08 prime-time season, the percentage of women working as creators, executive producers, producers, writers, directors, editors, and directors of photography remained stable at 26%. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points over the last decade (see Figure 5). However, as women comprise 46% of the U.S. workforce according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, they remain under-represented in the behind-the-scenes positions considered.

Figure 5.
Historical Representation of Behind-the-Scenes Women



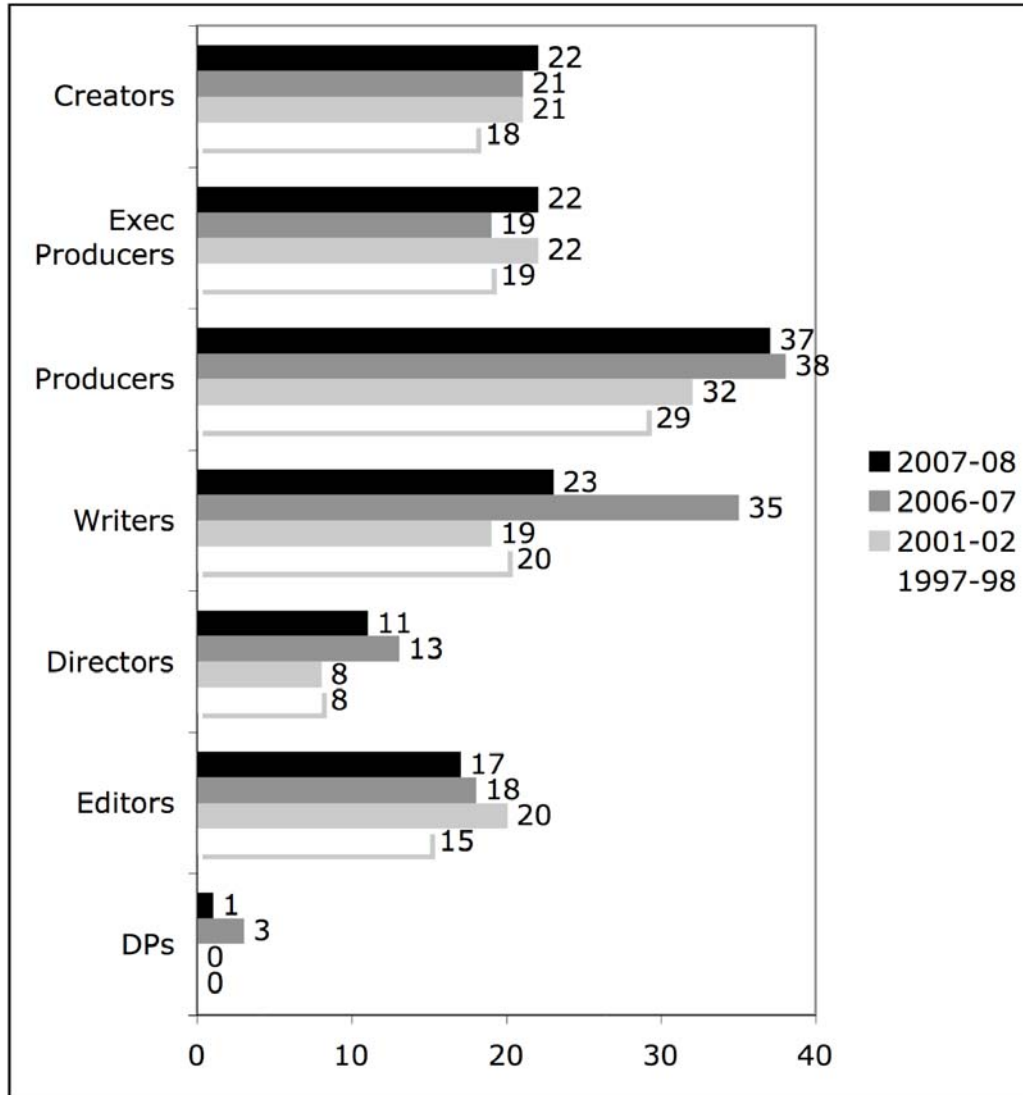
By role, women fared best as producers (37%), followed by writers (23%), creators (22%), executive producers (22%), editors (17%), directors (11%), and directors of photography (1%) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6.
Percentages of Behind-the-Scenes Women



A comparison of this year's percentages with last year indicates that the percentages of women creators and executive producers increased, whereas the percentages of women directors, writers, producers, editors, and directors of photography declined (see Figure 7).

Figure 7.
Historical Comparison of Percentages of Employment of Behind-the-Scenes Women



Creators. Women accounted for 22% of creators, a slight decrease of 1 percentage point from last year but a 4 percentage point increase since the 1997-98 season.

Executive Producers. Women comprised 22% of executive producers in the 2007-08 season. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 2006-07 and a decade ago.

Producers. Women accounted for 37% of producers last season, a decrease of 1 percentage point from the 2006-07 season. However, the percentage of women producers has increased 8 percentage points since the 1997-98 season.

Writers. Women comprised 23% of writers in the 2007-08 season, a decline of 12 percentage points from last year but an increase of 3 percentage points from a decade ago. The historical high recorded from the 2006-07 season was more likely a fluke than an indication of significant growth in the percentage of women writers. Seventy eight percent (78%) of the programs considered had no women writers.

Directors. Women accounted for 11% of directors last season. This represents a decline of 2 percentage points from the 2006-07 season but an increase of 3 percentage points from the 1997-98 season.

Editors. Women comprised 17% of editors in the 2007-08 season, a decline of 1 percentage point from the previous season but an increase of 2 percentage points from the 1997-98 season.

Directors of Photography. Women accounted for a dismal 1% of all directors of photography last year. This represents a decline of 2 percentage points from the 2006-07 season but an increase of 1 percentage point from a decade ago. Ninety nine percent of the programs considered had no women directors of photography.

Behind-the-Scenes Women by Broadcast Network

Men working in the behind-the-scenes roles considered outnumbered women at every network.

Programs airing on ABC, employed an average of 6 behind-the-scenes women and an average of 13 men, a difference of 7 individuals.

Programs airing on MyNetworkTV employed an average of 3 behind-the-scenes women and an average of 10 men, a difference of 7 individuals.

Programs airing on the CW employed an average of 5 behind-the-scenes women and an average of 14 men, a difference of 9 individuals.

Programs airing on Fox employed an average of 6 behind-the-scenes women and an average of 15 men, a difference of 9 individuals.

Programs airing on NBC employed an average of 4 behind-the-scenes women and an average of 14 men, a difference of 10 individuals.

Programs airing on CBS employed an average of 5 behind-the-scenes women and an average of 16 men, a difference of 11 individuals.

Behind-the-Scenes Women by Program Genre

Behind-the-scenes women were not more likely to work in certain genres than others. Dramas, situation comedies, and reality programs employed an average of 5 women in the roles considered.

Similarly, behind-the-scenes men were not more likely to work in certain genres than others. Dramas and reality programs employed an average of 14 men. Situation comedies employed an average of 13 men in the roles considered.

Conclusions

The percentage of female characters appearing on broadcast network programs inched up slightly during the 2007-08 prime-time season whereas the percentage of women working behind the scenes remained stable.

When compared with women working in similar behind-the-scenes roles on the top 250 domestic grossing films, women working in broadcast television fare better than those working in film. For example, women accounted for 22% of all executive producers working in television and 14% in film. Women

comprised 23% of writers in television and 10% of film writers. Women accounted for 11% of television directors and just 6% of film directors. Women comprised 17% of television editors and 17% of film editors. Women fared poorly as directors of photography in both television (1%) and film (2%).

When making historical comparisons of women's behind-the-scenes employment in television and film, strikingly different stories emerge. Whereas the numbers of women working in prime-time television remains at a historical high, the numbers of women employed in key roles in film are on the decline.

In summary, television continues to provide greater employment opportunities for women than film. As the broadcast, and increasingly cable networks recognize the size and influence of the female viewing audience, the televisual product is stretching to appeal to and accommodate that audience.

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About the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film

The Center's mission is to celebrate the accomplishments of women directors, writers, producers, cinematographers, and editors in television and film, encourage more women to pursue careers as storytellers, and conduct an extensive program of original research. *The Celluloid Ceiling* and *Boxed In* serve as the cornerstones for the Center's expanded agenda of research examining women's behind-the-scenes employment, and the impact of their employment on television and film content. In addition, the Center hosts a lively speaker series featuring women working in these industries. The series highlights the careers and works of the women featured, and addresses current issues in film and television.

About the Author

Dr. Martha M. Lauzen is founder and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University. A nationally and internationally recognized expert on the employment of women on screen and behind the scenes, her research has been widely published in scholarly journals, trade publications, and the popular press. Dr. Lauzen teaches classes including *The Women of Prime Time: From "That Girl" to "Saving Grace"* and *Film Directors: When Women Call the Shots* in the School of Theatre, Television and Film at SDSU. She holds a doctorate from the University of Maryland and M.A. and B.A. degrees from the University of Iowa.

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