

Women @ the Box Office: A Study of the Top 100 Worldwide Grossing Films

by Martha M. Lauzen, Ph.D.

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Last year, the president of production at a major studio allegedly pronounced that the company would no longer produce films with female leads. He suggested that such films are bad box office bets. In response, Manohla Dargis, film critic for *The New York Times* wrote, “it is hard to believe that anyone in a position of Hollywood power would be so stupid as to actually say what many in that town think: Women can’t direct. Women can’t open movies. Women are a niche” (May 4, 2008).

Women @ the Box Office tests these beliefs about women and box office grosses. This study asked two basic questions: how do films with at least one woman working in a key behind-the-scenes role fare at the box office when compared to those employing only men in the same roles, and how do films featuring female protagonists fare at the box office when compared to those featuring males.

Are Women Filmmakers Bad Box Office?

This study compared the box office grosses of films employing at least one woman in a position of power behind the scenes (director, executive producer, producer, writer) with films employing only men in these positions.

Women comprised 13% and men 87% of all individuals in these roles working on the top 100 worldwide grossing films of 2007. Twenty nine percent (29%) of the films had no women in any of the roles considered. None of the films failed to employ at least one man in the roles considered.

On average, films employing at least one woman in the behind-the-scenes roles considered had slightly larger budgets (\$69.1 million) than films with only men in these positions (\$58.7). This difference is not statistically significant.

On average, films employing at least one woman in the behind-the-scenes roles considered earned approximately the same domestic box office grosses as films with only men in these roles (\$82.1 vs. \$81.9 million), earned slightly lower foreign box office grosses than films with only men in these roles (\$89.9 vs. \$95.1 million), earned slightly higher opening weekend U.S. box office grosses as films with only men in these roles (\$27.1 vs. \$24.6 million), and had slightly lower DVD sales than films with only men in these roles (\$50.4 vs. \$53.9 million). None of these differences are statistically significant.

On average, films employing at least one woman in the behind-the-scenes roles considered opened on approximately the same number of screens (2,752) as those with only men in these roles (2,799).

Overall, when women and men filmmakers have similar budgets for their films, the resulting box office grosses are also similar. In other words, the sex of filmmakers does not determine box office grosses.

Are Female Protagonists Bad Box Office?

Female characters comprised only 10% and males 59% of clearly identifiable protagonists in the films considered. Thirty one percent (31%) of films featured ensemble casts with at least one prominent female character. As the number of films featuring female protagonists only was too low to permit statistical comparisons with films featuring male protagonists, the study combined films featuring female protagonists and at least one major female character as part of an ensemble cast. These films were compared with films featuring male protagonists.

On average, films with female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast had significantly lower budgets (\$45.0 million) than films featuring male protagonists (\$77.9 million).

In turn, films featuring female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast had significantly lower average domestic box office grosses than films featuring male protagonists (\$54.5 vs. \$101.0 million), significantly lower average foreign box office grosses (\$57.6 vs. \$114.5 million), significantly lower average opening weekend U.S. box office grosses (\$18.0 vs. \$32.2 million), and significantly lower average DVD sales (\$32.2 vs. \$64.6).

In addition, on average, films with female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast opened on slightly fewer screens than films with male protagonists (2,670 vs. 2,832), and stayed in theatres for slightly fewer weeks (12 vs. 14).

Initially, these findings might lead one to believe that films featuring female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast yield lower box office grosses and DVD sales than films featuring male protagonists. However, this conclusion ignores the influence of the size of the budget on box office grosses.

When the size of the budget is held constant, films with female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast earn similar box office grosses (domestic, international, opening weekend) and DVD sales as films with male protagonists. Because films featuring male protagonists have larger budgets, they earn larger box office grosses. However, the differences in box office grosses are not caused by the sex of the protagonist but by the size of the budget. Films with larger budgets generate larger grosses, regardless of the sex of the protagonist.

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