It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing Films of 2018

by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen

Male characters continued to dominate on the big screen in 2018. While only 35% of films featured 10 or more female characters in speaking roles, 82% had 10 or more male characters in speaking roles.

Females comprised 35% of all *speaking characters*, an increase of 1 percentage point from 34% in 2017. Males accounted for 65% of speaking characters. Overall, audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters in the top grossing films of 2018 (see Figure 1).

In 2018, females accounted for 36% of *major characters*. This represents a decline of 1 percentage point from 37% in 2017. Males comprised 64% of major characters (see Figure 2).

The percentage of top grossing films featuring female *protagonists* increased to 31% in 2018, rebounding from 24% in 2017, and slightly besting the 29% achieved in 2016. It is a recent historical high. Males accounted for 52% of protagonists, and 17% were ensembles.

The percentage of Black females increased from 16% in 2017 to 21% in 2018. This is a recent historical high. The percentage of Latinas decreased from 7% in 2017 to 4% in 2018.

The percentage of Asian females increased from 7% in 2017 to 10% in 2018. However, it should be noted that this increase is due largely to one film, *Crazy Rich Asians*. When this film is excluded from the analysis, Asians accounted for 8% of all female characters, only 1 percentage point above the 7% achieved in 2017.

The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 2,500 characters appearing in the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2018. This report provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Overall, this analysis considers the representation of more than 18,500 characters appearing in approximately 800 films.

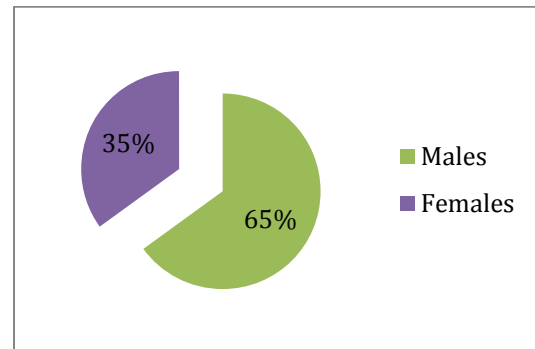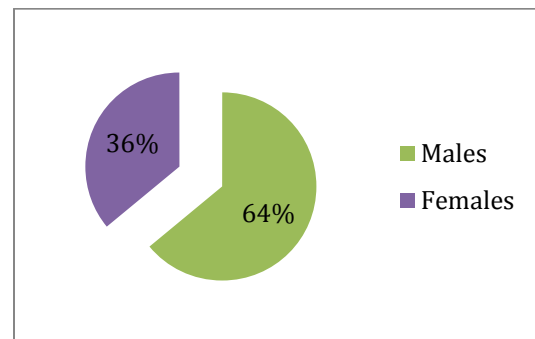*Figure 1. Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters*

Figure 2. Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters

The findings are divided into four major sections. The first section reports the percentages of female and male characters in top grossing films. The second section details various demographic traits of characters, including age, race/ethnicity, marital status, and occupational status. The third section reports the goals and leadership positions held by characters. The fourth section discusses important relationships between on-screen representations of female characters and behind-the-scenes employment of women as directors and writers.

Findings/Percentages of Female and Male Characters

•More films featured female characters as clearly identifiable sole protagonists in 2018 (31%) than in 2017 (24%) or 2016 (29%). It is a recent historical high. Males comprised 52% of protagonists, and 17% were ensembles. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

•Sole female protagonists were more than twice as likely to appear in independent features (68%) as studio features (32%). Sole male protagonists were more likely to appear in studio features than in independent features (54% and 46% respectively). Ensemble protagonists were more likely to appear in studio features than in independent features (53% and 47% respectively).

•Female protagonists were most likely to appear in comedies (32%), followed by dramas (29%), horror films (19%), science fiction features (10%), action features (7%), and films in other genres (3%). Male protagonists were most

likely to appear in dramas (31%), followed by action features (21%), science fiction features (15%), comedies (14%), animated features (14%), horror features (4%), and films in other genres (1%).

•Females accounted for 36% of major characters (see Figure 3). This represents a decline of 1 percentage point from 37% in 2017. Males comprised 64% of major characters. For the purposes of this study, major characters appear in more than one scene and are instrumental to the action of the story.
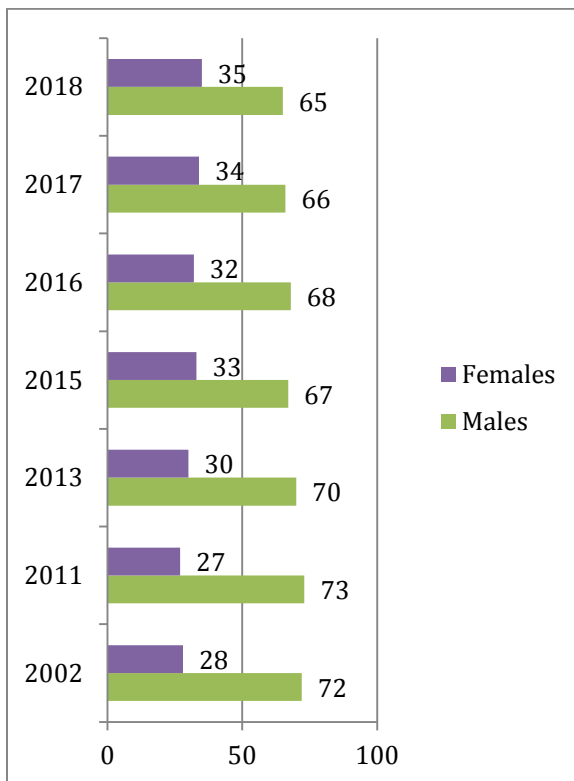
Figure 3. Historical Comparison of Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters

•Females comprised 35% of all speaking characters in 2018 (see Figure 4). This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 34% in 2017. Males accounted for 65% of speaking characters. Overall, audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters.

•13% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 52% had 5 to 9 females, and 35% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 6% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in speaking roles, 12% had 5 to 9 males, and 82% had 10 or more males.

Findings/Demographic Characteristics

•Female characters remained younger than their male counterparts (see Figure 5). The majority of female characters were in their 20s (29%) and 30s (28%). The majority of male characters were in their 30s (35%) and 40s (25%).

•Males 40 and over accounted for 45% of all male characters. Females 40 and over comprised 31% of all female characters.

•13% of females were under 20, 29% were in their 20s, 28% were in their 30s, 16% were in their 40s, 8% were in their 50s, and 7% were in their 60s or older.

Figure 4. Historical Comparison of Female and Male Characters as Speaking Characters

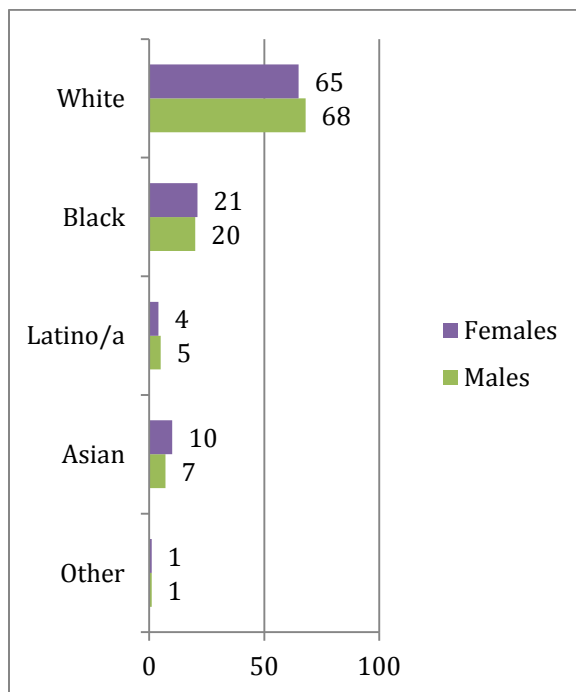*Figure 5. Comparison of Ages for Female and Male Characters*
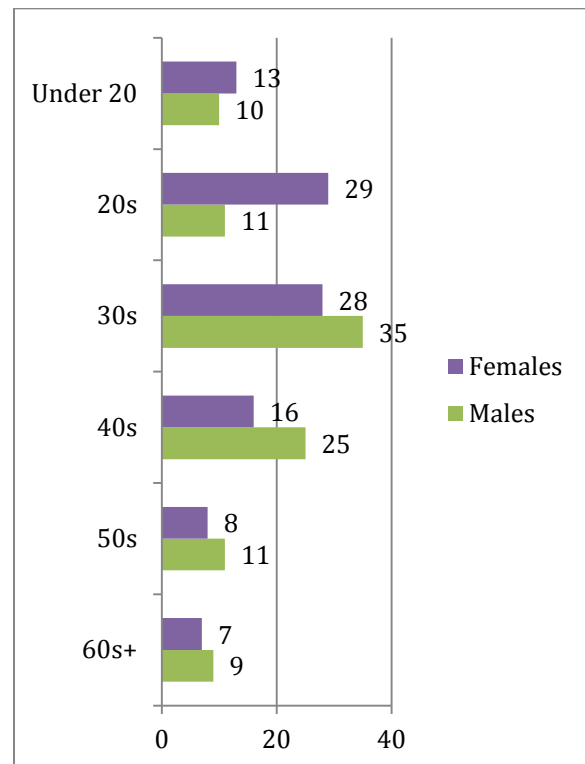
•10% of males were under 20, 11% were in their 20s, 35% were in their 30s, 25% were in their 40s, 11% were in their 50s, and 9% were in their 60s or older.

•In 2018, 65% of all female characters with speaking roles were White, 21% were Black, 4% were Latina, 10% were Asian, and 1% were other (see Figure 6). 68% of all male characters were White, 20% were Black, 5% were Latino, 7% were Asian, and 1% were other.

•65% of all female characters were White in 2018. This represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 68% in 2017 (see Figure 7).

•21% of all female characters were Black in 2018. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points from 16% in 2017, and is a recent historical high.

•4% of all female characters were Latina in 2018. This represents a decrease of 3 percentage points from 7% in 2017.

•10% of all female characters were Asian in 2018. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 7% in 2017. However, it should be noted that this increase is due largely to one film, *Crazy Rich Asians*. When this film is excluded from the analysis, Asians accounted for 8% of all female characters, only 1 percentage point above the 7% achieved in 2017. Similarly, the percentage of male Asian characters drops from 7% with *Crazy Rich Asians* to 6% without. This is just 1 percentage point above the 5% achieved in 2017.

•In 2018, 70% of *major* female characters were white, 18% were Black, 4% were Latina, and 8% were Asian.

Figure 6. Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female and Male Characters

Figure 7. Historical Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female Characters
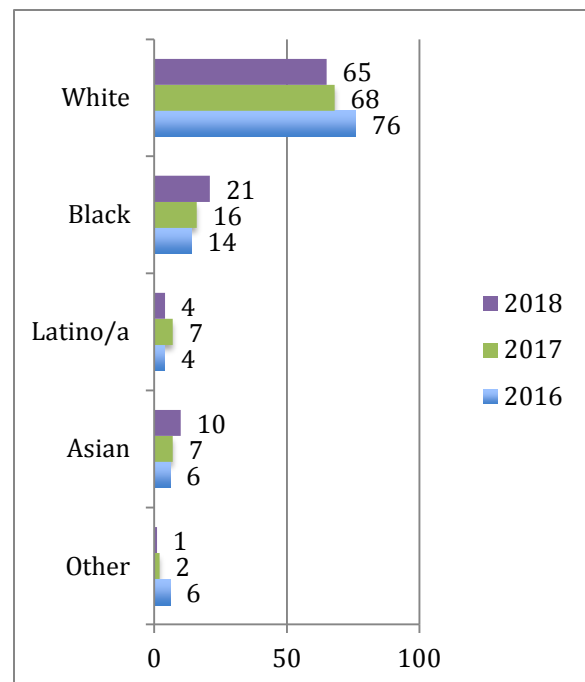
•Female characters were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 47% of female characters but 36% of male characters had a known marital status.

•A larger proportion of male than female characters had an identifiable occupation. 76% of male characters but 62% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation.

•A larger portion of male than female characters were seen in their work setting, actually working (62% vs. 46%).

Findings/Goals and Leadership

•Male characters were more likely than females to have work-related goals (70% vs. 30%). Female characters were more likely than males to have goals related to their personal lives (54% vs. 46%).

•Male characters were more likely than females to be seen in primarily work-related roles (64% vs. 44%). Female characters were more likely than males to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (48% vs. 30%).

•Overall, 7% of characters were leaders. For the purposes of this study, leaders are those individuals occupying a leadership position in an organization, government or group and whose instructions and/or behaviors are followed by two or more other characters.

•Females comprised 26% of leaders, while males accounted for 74% of leaders.

Figure 8. Comparison of Female and Male Characters Portrayed as Leaders
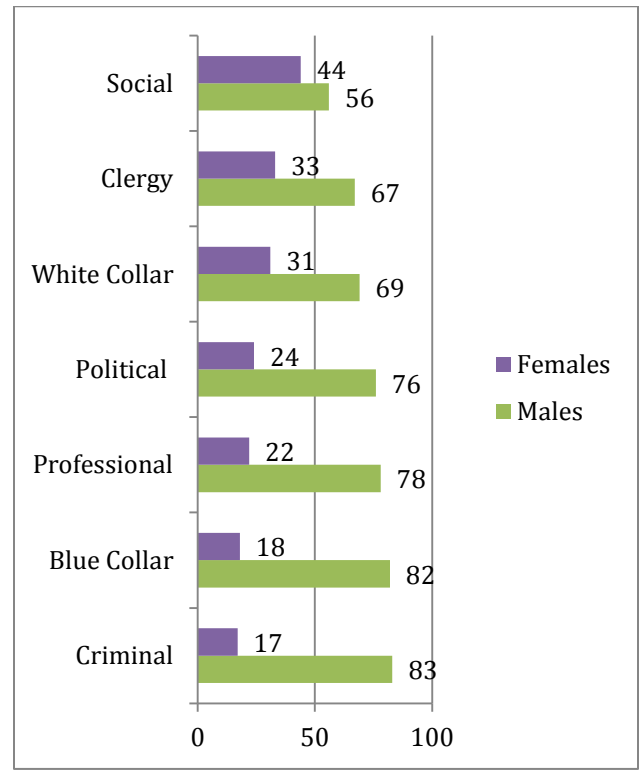
•Broken down by type of leader, females were most likely to be social leaders (44% vs. males 56%), followed by religious/spiritual leaders (33% vs. males 67%), white collar leaders (31% vs. males 69%), political leaders (24% vs. males 76%), professional leaders (22% vs. males 78%), blue collar leaders (18% vs. males 82%), and criminal leaders (17% vs. males 83%) (see Figure 8).

Findings/Behind-the-Scenes Employment and On-Screen Representation

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 57% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 21% of protagonists (see Figure 9).

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 47% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of major characters.

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 43% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of all speaking characters.

Figure 9. Comparison of Representation of Female Characters in Films with At Least One Woman Director and/or Writer and Films with Exclusively Male Directors and/or Writers
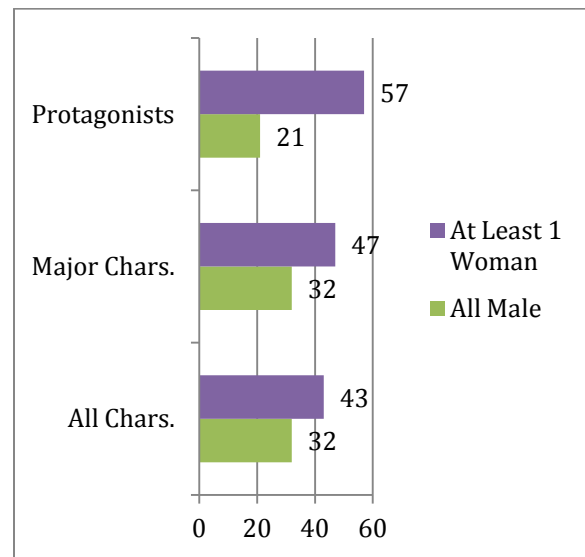
Figures based on top grossing films as rated by Box Office Mojo.

Every film in the sample was viewed one or more times in its entirety. Every character who was seen speaking at least one line was included in the study.

For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told. Major characters appear in more than one scene and are instrumental to the narrative of the story.

Characters classified as leaders are those individuals who occupy a leadership position in an organization, government or group and whose instructions and/or behaviors are followed by two or more other characters.

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