

It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2015

by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen

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Females comprised 22% of *protagonists* featured in the top 100 domestic grossing films of 2015. This represents an increase of 10 percentage points from 2014, which was an exceptionally poor year for women in these roles. The figure for 2015 is 6 percentage points higher than in 2002 and represents a recent historical high.

Last year, females accounted for 34% of *major characters*. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points from 2014 and an increase of 7 percentage points from 2002. It is also a recent historical high.

Women comprised 33% of all *speaking characters*, an increase of 3 percentage points from 2014, and an increase of 5 percentage points from 2002. This is another recent historical high.

For the first time, this year's study considered the sex of the primary antagonist or source of conflict in the film. Women accounted for 18% of antagonists in the films considered.

The percentages of women of color were largely unchanged, with a slight increase in Black female characters, no change in the percentage of Latina characters, and a slight decrease in the percentage of

Asian female characters. Further, female characters of color were less likely than White females to be major characters. 27% of Black, Latina, Asian, and females of other races/ethnicities were major characters, whereas 38% of White females were major characters.

Gender stereotypes were prevalent in the top grossing films of 2015. Moviegoers were more likely to know the occupation of male characters than female characters, and more likely to know the marital status of females than males. In addition, moviegoers were much more likely to see male characters at work and actually working than female characters.

The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 2,500 characters appearing in the top 100 domestic grossing films of 2015 (foreign films omitted). The report provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Overall, this analysis considers the representation of more than 11,500 characters appearing in approximately 500 films.

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

Findings/Percentages of Female and Male Characters

- Females comprised 22% of all clearly identifiable *protagonists* featured in the 100 top grossing films of 2015 (see Figure 1). This represents an increase of 10 percentage points from 2014 and an increase of 6 percentage points from 2002. Males comprised 52% of protagonists, and 26% were ensembles. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

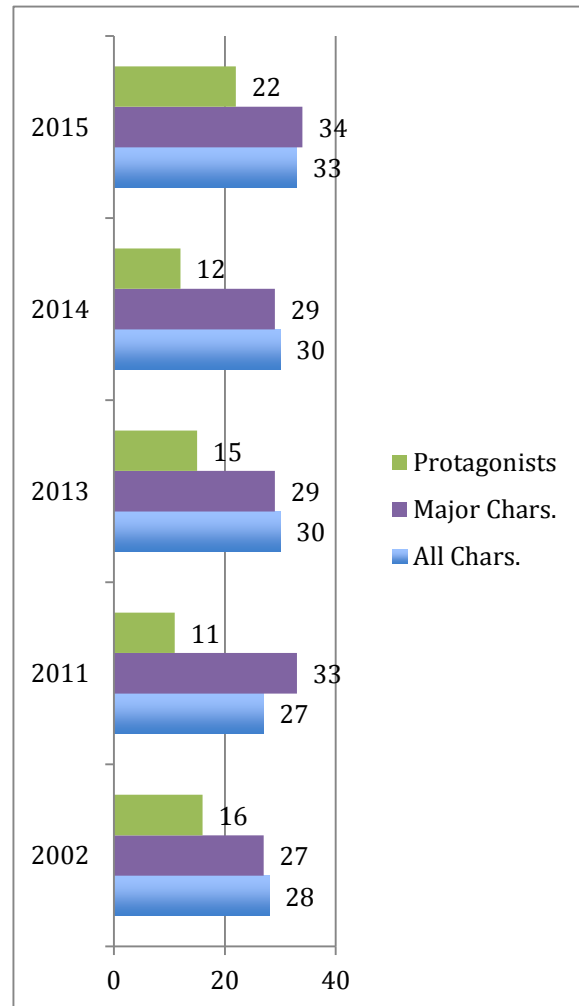
- Females comprised 34% of *major characters*. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points from 2014, and an increase of 7 percentage points from 2002. Male accounted for 66% of major characters. For the purposes of this study, major characters appear in more than one scene and are instrumental to the action of the story.

- Females comprised 33% of all *speaking characters* (includes major and minor characters) in 2015. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 2014 and an increase of 5 percentage points from 2002. Males accounted for 67% of speaking characters.

- Females comprised 18% of *antagonists* in 2015. Males accounted for 57% of antagonists, and 10% were ensembles. 15% of the causes of the main conflict in the films were natural disasters such as earthquakes and other non-human obstructions. For the purposes of this study, antagonists are the characters or natural disasters and obstructions that create the main source of conflict for the protagonist.

Figure 1.

Historical Comparison of Percentages of Female Characters as Protagonists, Major Characters, and All Speaking Characters



Findings/Demographic Characteristics

- Female characters remain younger than their male counterparts. The majority of female characters were in their 20s (24%) and 30s (28%). The majority of male characters were in their 30s (27%) and 40s (30%).

- Males 40 and over accounted for 54% of all male characters. Females 40 and over comprised 34% of all female characters.

- Whereas the percentage of female characters declined from their 30s to their 40s (28% to 20%), the percentage of male characters increased slightly, from 27% in their 30s to 30% in their 40s.

- The percentage of male characters in their 50s (17%) is almost twice that of female characters in their 50s (9%).

- 76% of all female characters were White, 13% were Black, 4% were Latina, 3% were Asian, 2% were other worldly, and 2% were other (see Figure 2).

- 13% of all female characters were Black in 2015, up 2 percentage points from 2014 and down 2 percentage points from 2002.

- 4% of all female characters were Latina in 2015, even with the figure from 2014 and 2002.

- 3% of all female characters were Asian in 2015, down 1 percentage point from 2014 and even with the figure from 2002.

- Female characters of color were less likely to be major characters than White females. 27% of Black, Latina, Asian, and females of other races/ethnicities were major characters, whereas 38% of White females were major characters.

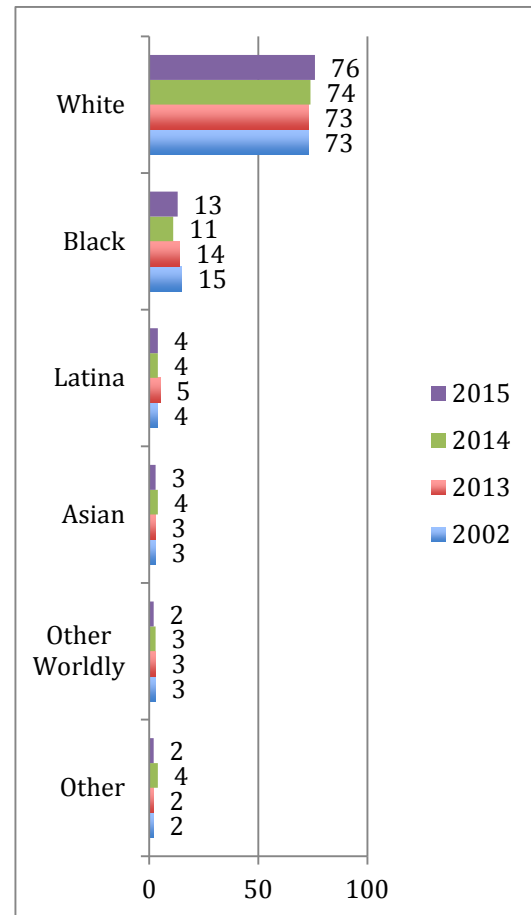
- Male characters were more likely than female characters to have an unknown marital status. 58% of male characters but 49% of female characters had an unknown marital status.

- A higher proportion of male than female characters had an identifiable occupation. 78% of male characters but only 61% of female characters had an identifiable job/occupation.

- A substantially larger portion of male than female characters were seen in their work setting actually working (64% vs. 44%).

Figure 2.

Historical Comparison of Race/Ethnicity of Female Characters



- Male characters were more likely than females to have an identifiable goal (60% vs. 49%). Male characters were more likely than female characters to have work-related goals (48% vs. 34%) or crime-related goals (7% vs. 2%). Female characters were more likely than males to have goals related to their personal lives (14% vs. 5%).

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

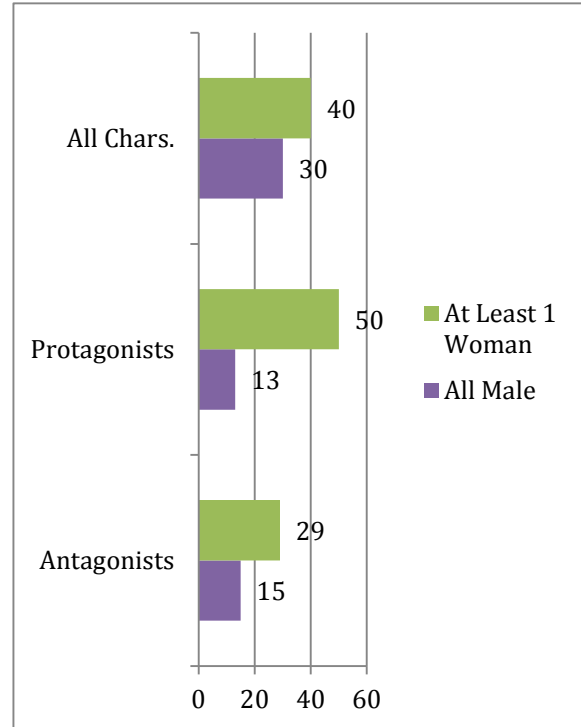
- In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 40% of *all speaking characters*. In films with exclusively male directors and writers, females accounted for 30% of all speaking characters (see Figure 3).

- In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 50% of *protagonists*. In films with exclusively male directors and writers, females accounted for 13% of protagonists.

- In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 29% of *antagonists*. In films with exclusively male directors and writers, females accounted for 15% of antagonists.

Figure 3.

Comparison of Representation of Female Characters in Films with At Least One Woman Director and/or Writer and Films with Exclusively Male Directors and Writers



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