It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the 100 Top Films of 2017

by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen

Females comprised 24% of *protagonists* featured in the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2017 (see Figure 1). This represents a decline of 5 percentage points from 29% in 2016.

Last year, females accounted for 37% of *major characters* (see Figure 2). This represents no change from 2016.

Women comprised 34% of all *speaking characters*, an increase of 2 percentage points from 32% in 2016 (see Figure 3). Overall, audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters in 2017.

While only 32% of films featured 10 or more female characters in speaking roles, 79% had 10 or more male characters in speaking roles.

The percentages of female characters of color increased in 2017. The percentage of Black females increased from 14% in 2016 to 16% in 2017. The percentage of Latinas more than doubled from 3% in 2016 to 7% in 2017, and the percentage of Asian females increased from 6% in 2016 to 7% in 2017.

The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of 2,361 characters appearing in the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2017 (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 16,000 characters appearing in approximately 700 films.

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.

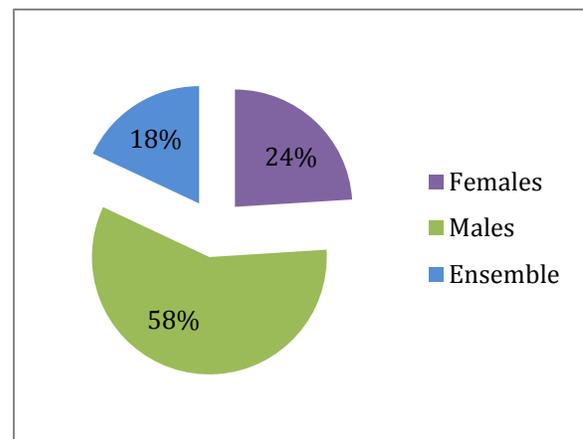*Figure 1. Percentages of Females, Males, and Ensembles as Protagonists*

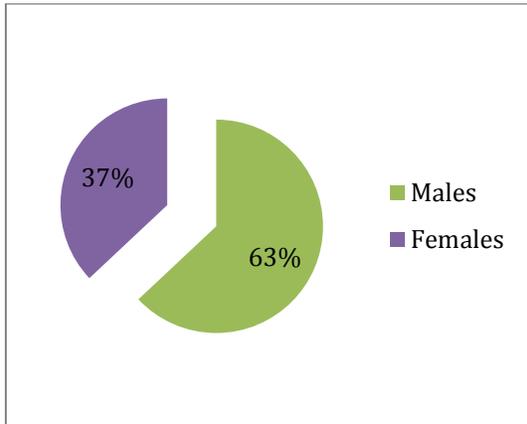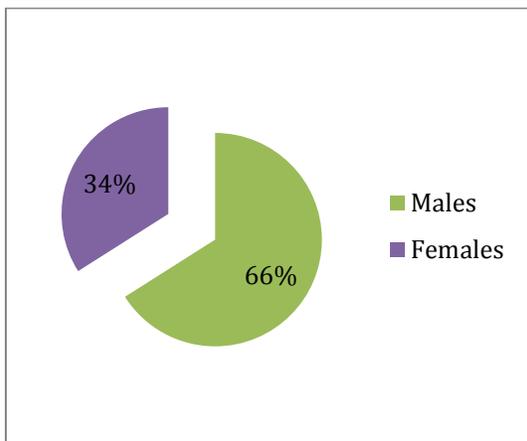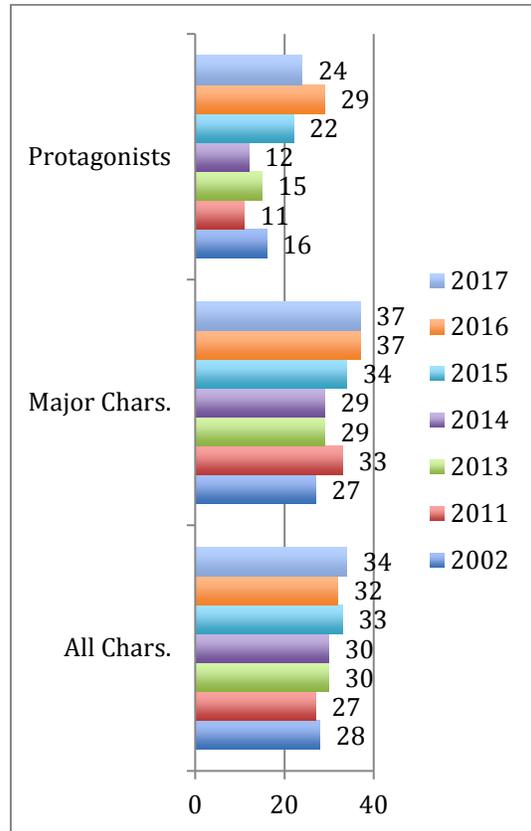**Figure 2. Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters**

Figure 3. Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters (Major and Minor)

Figure 4. Historical Comparison of Percentages of Females as Protagonists, Major Characters, and All Speaking Characters

Findings/Percentages of Female and Male Characters

•Females comprised 24% of all clearly identifiable sole protagonists featured in the 100 top grossing films of 2017. This represents a decline of 5 percentage points from 29% in 2016 (see Figure 4). Males comprised 58% of protagonists, and 18% were ensembles. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

•Sole female protagonists were much more likely to appear in independent features (65%) than studio features (35%). Sole male protagonists were more likely to appear in studio features than in independent features (54% and 46% respectively). Ensemble protagonists were substantially more likely to appear in studio features than in independent features (71% and 29% respectively).

•Female protagonists were most likely to appear in comedies (30%) and dramas

(30%), followed by action films (17%), horror films (13%), animated features (4%), and science fiction films (4%). Male protagonists were most likely to appear in action features (38%), followed by comedies (20%), animated features (18%), dramas (13%), horror features (7%), and science fiction features (4%).

•Females accounted for 37% of major characters. This represents no change from 2016. Males comprised 63% 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 34% of all speaking characters (major and minor) in 2017. This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from 32% in 2016. Males accounted for 66% of speaking characters. Overall, audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters.

•18% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters with speaking roles, 50% had 5 to 9 females, and 32% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 5% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters with speaking roles, 16% had 5 to 9 males, and 79% had 10 or more males.

Findings/Demographic Characteristics

•Female characters remained younger than their male counterparts. The majority of female characters were in their 20s (32%) and 30s (25%). The majority of male characters were in their 30s (31%) and 40s (27%).

*Figure 5. Comparison of Ages for Female and Male Characters*
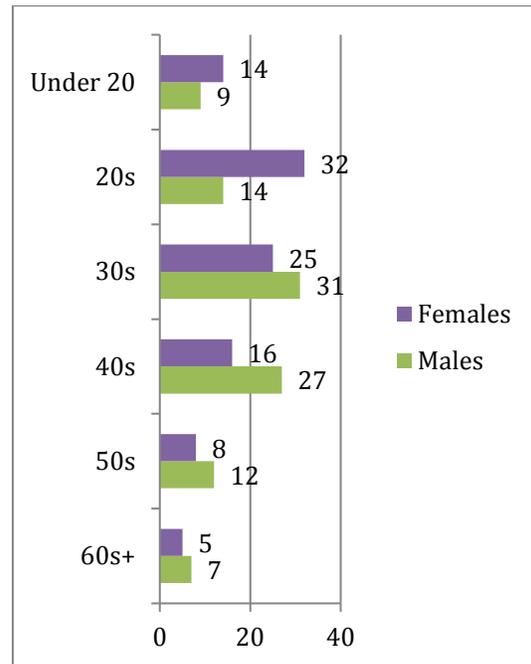
•Males 40 and over accounted for 46% of all male characters. Females 40 and over comprised 29% of all female characters.

•14% of females were under 20, 32% were in their 20s, 25% were in their 30s, 16% were in their 40s, 8% were in their 50s, and 5% were in their 60s or older (see Figure 5).

•9% of males were under 20, 14% were in their 20s, 31% were in their 30s, 27% were in their 40s, 12% were in their 50s, and 7% were in their 60s or older.

Figure 6. Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female and Male Characters
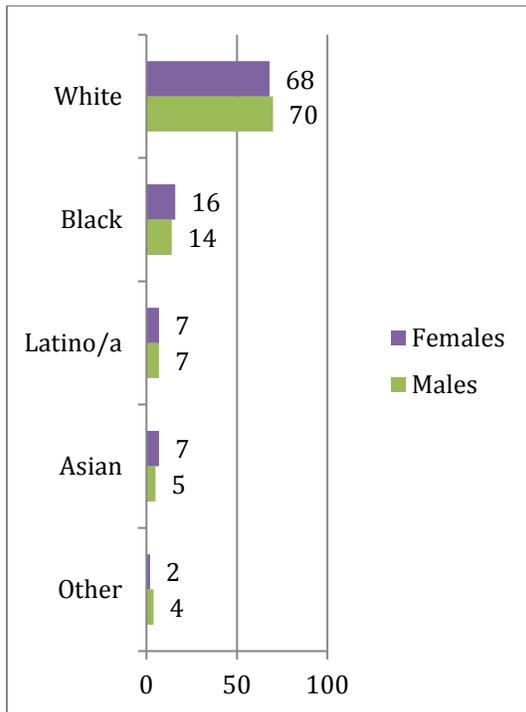
•In 2017, 68% of all female characters with speaking roles were White, 16% were Black, 7% were Latina, 7% were Asian, and 2% were other (see Figure 5). 70% of all male characters were White, 14% were Black, 7% were Latino, 5% were Asian, and 4% were other.

•68% of all female characters were White in 2017. This represents a decline of 8 percentage points from 76% in 2016.

•16% of all female characters were Black in 2017. This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from 14% in 2016.

•7% of all female characters were Latina in 2017. This represents an increase of 4 percentage points from 3% in 2016.

•7% of all female characters were Asian in 2017. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 6% in 2016.

•In 2017, 74% of *major* female characters were White, 14% were Black, 6% were Latina, 4% were Asian, and 2% were of some other race or ethnicity.

•Female characters were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 53% of female characters but 40% of male characters had a known marital status.

•A larger proportion of male than female characters had an identifiable occupation. 78% of male characters but 63% 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 (69% vs. 55%).
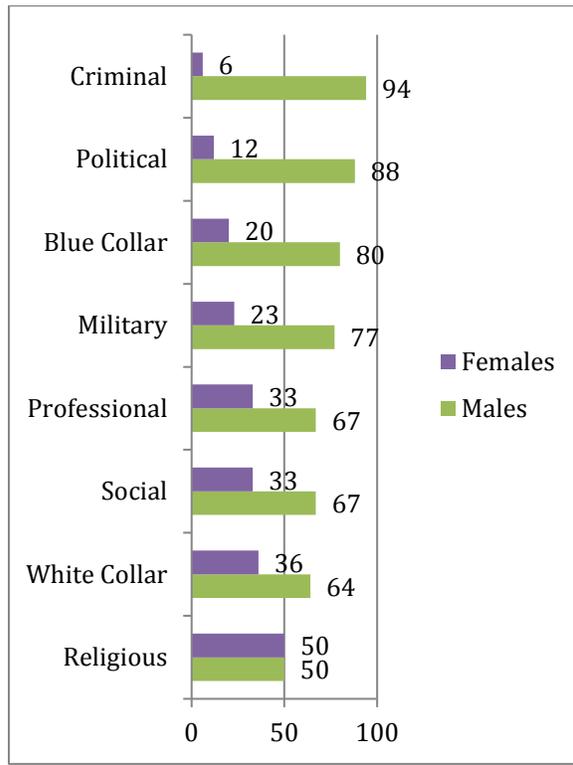
Findings/Goals and Leadership

•Male characters were more likely than females to have work-related goals (42% vs. 34%). Female characters were more likely than males to have goals related to their personal lives (20% vs. 13%).

•Male characters were more likely than females to be seen in work-related roles only (65% vs. 44%). Female characters were more likely than males to be seen in personal life-related roles only (39% vs. 21%).

•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

Figure 7. Comparison of Female and Male Characters Portrayed as Leaders

leaders, 12% of political leaders, and 6% of criminal leaders.

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

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 45% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 20% of protagonists (see Figure 8).

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 48% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 33% of major characters.

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 42% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of all speaking characters.

instructions and/or behaviors are followed by two or more other characters. Of those characters, 8% of males and 5% of females were portrayed as leaders.

•Broken down by type of leader, men comprised 94% of criminal leaders, 88% of political leaders, 80% of blue collar leaders, 77% of military leaders, 67% of professional leaders, 67% of social leaders, 64% of white collar leaders, and 50% of religious/spiritual leaders (see Figure 7).

•Women accounted for 50% of religious/spiritual leaders, 36% of white collar leaders, 33% of professional leaders, 33% of social leaders, 23% of military leaders, 20% of blue collar

Figure 8. 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

Protagonists — 45, 20

Major Chars. — 48, 33

All Chars. — 42, 32

■ At Least 1 Woman
■ All Male

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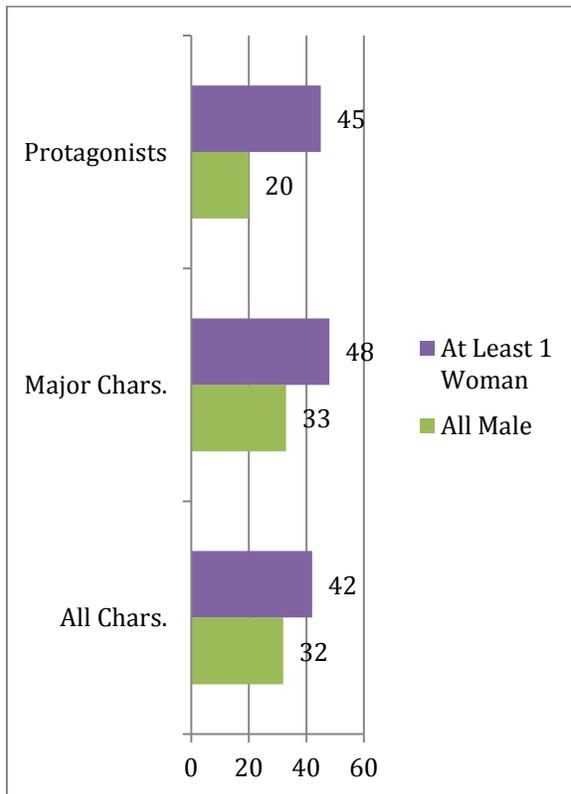
Figures based on top grossing films as rated by Box Office Mojo on January 2, 2018.

Report compiled by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, Executive Director, Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92182, lauzen@mail.sdsu.edu