It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing Films of 2020

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The percentage of top grossing films featuring female *protagonists* declined precipitously from 40% in 2019 to 29% in 2020. 49% of films featured male protagonists, and 22% had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (see Figure 1).

In 2020, females accounted for 38% of *major characters*. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 37% in 2019.   Males comprised 62% of major characters (see Figure 2).

Females made up 36% of all *speaking characters*, an increase of 2 percentage points from 34% in 2019. Males accounted for 64% of speaking characters (see Figure 3).

79% of films featured more male than female characters. Only 17% of films had more female than male characters. 4% of films featured equal numbers of female and male characters.

The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 1,700 characters appearing in the top 100 domestic grossing films of 2020. This report provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Overall, this analysis considers the representation of almost 22,000 characters appearing in approximately 1,000 films.

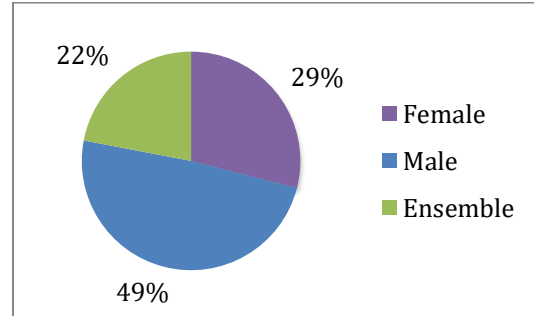*Figure 1. Percentages of Films Featuring Females, Males and Ensembles as Protagonists*

Figure 2. Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters
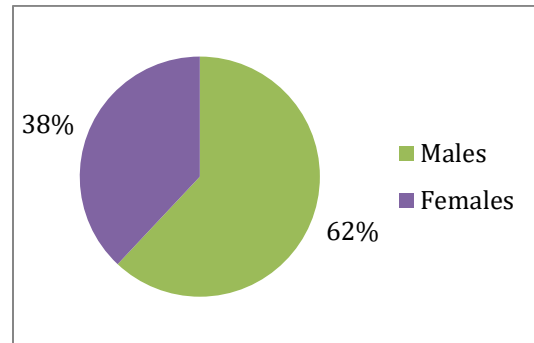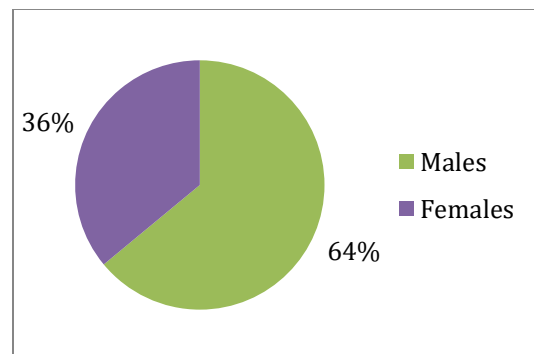

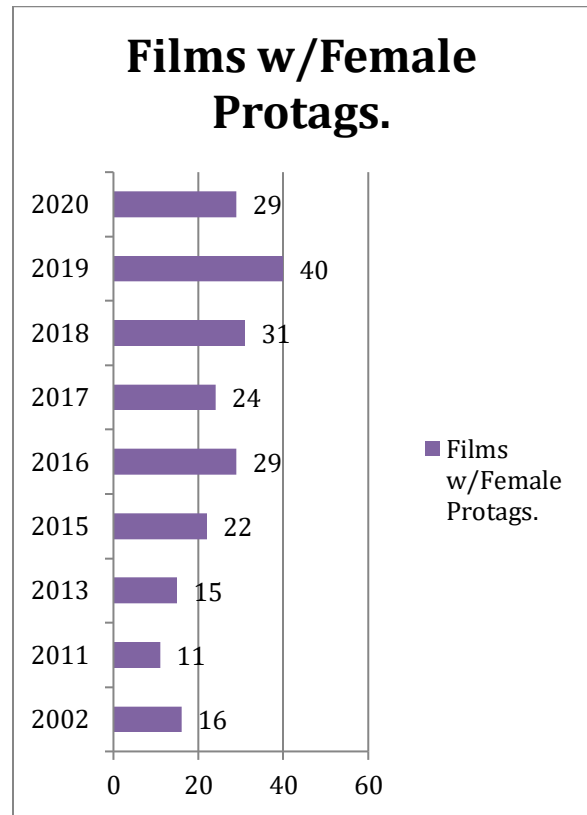*Figure 3. Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters*

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 roles 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/ Female and Male Characters

•In 2020, the percentage of top grossing films featuring female protagonists declined 11 percentage points from 40% in 2019 to 29% (see Figure 4). This is even with the percentage achieved in 2016. 49% of films featured male protagonists, and 22% had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

•Female protagonists were most likely to appear in horror features (39%), followed by dramas (22%), action features (22%), comedies (9%), animated features (4%), and features in other genres (4%). Male protagonists were most likely to appear in dramas (49%), followed by action features (18%), comedies (15%), animated features (10%), and horror features (8%).

Films w/Female Protags.

Year	Films w/Female Protags.
2020	29
2019	40
2018	31
2017	24
2016	29
2015	22
2013	15
2011	11
2002	16

•Females accounted for 38% of *major* characters (see Figure 5). This represents a slight increase of 1 percentage point from 37% in 2019, and a recent historic high. Males comprised 62% 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 5. Historical Comparison of Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters
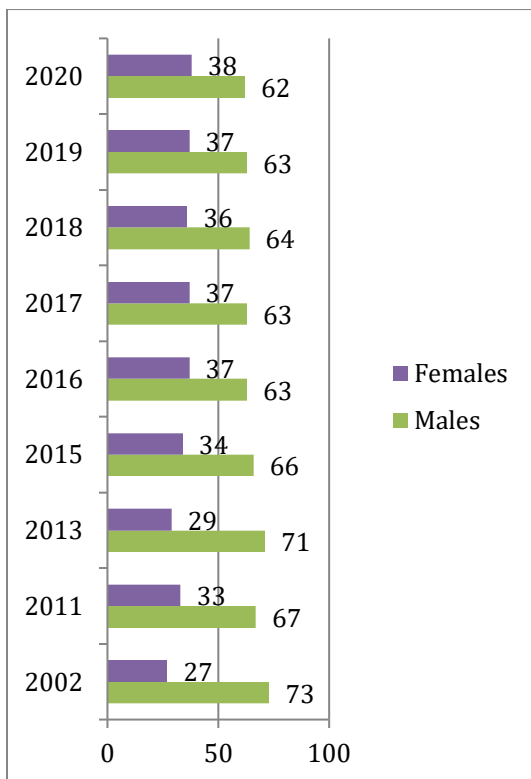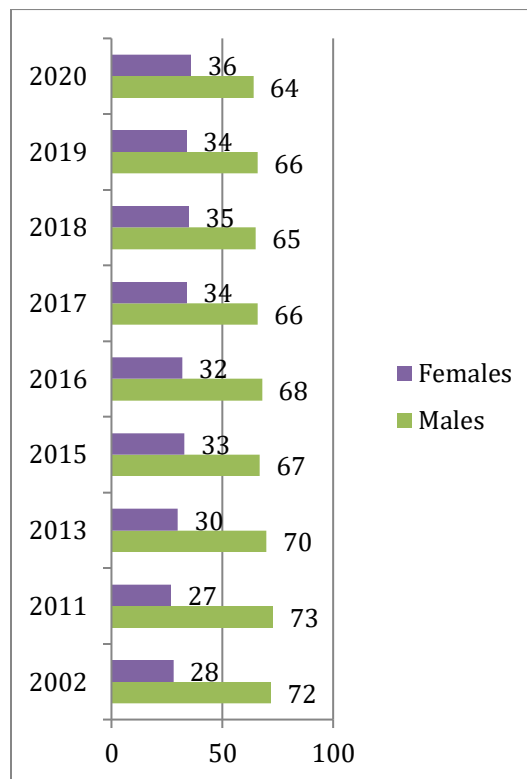
Year	Females	Males
2020	38	62
2019	37	63
2018	36	64
2017	37	63
2016	37	63
2015	34	66
2013	29	71
2011	33	67
2002	27	73

Figure 6. Historical Comparison of Female and Male Characters as Speaking Characters

Year	Females	Males
2020	36	64
2019	34	66
2018	35	65
2017	34	66
2016	32	68
2015	33	67
2013	30	70
2011	27	73
2002	28	72

•Females comprised 36% of all *speaking characters* in 2020 (see Figure 6). This represents an increase of 2 percentage points from 34% in 2019 and a recent historic high. Males accounted for 64% of speaking characters.

•23% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 47% had 5 to 9 females, and 30% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 10% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in speaking roles, 25% had 5 to 9 males, and 65% had 10 or more males.

•79% of films featured more male than female characters. Only 17% of films had more female than male characters. 4% of films featured equal numbers of female and male characters.
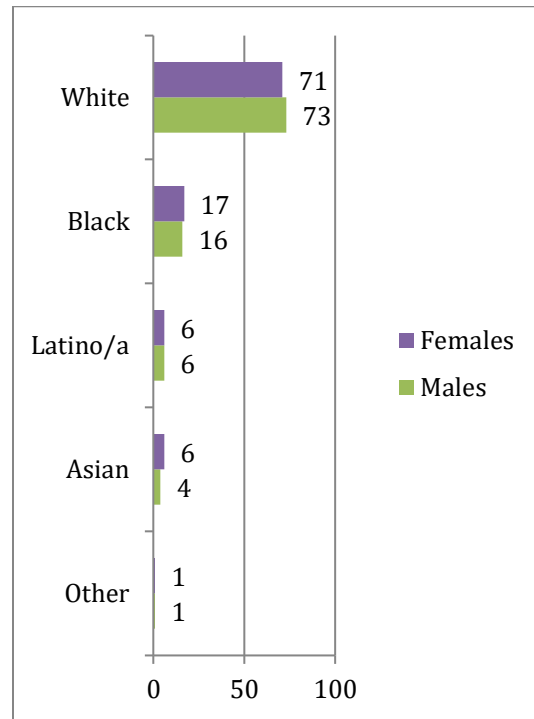
Findings/Demographic Characteristics

•Female characters remained younger than their male counterparts (see Figure 7). The majority of female characters were in their 20s (24%) and 30s (29%). The majority of male characters were in their 30s (31%) and 40s (28%).

Figure 7. Comparison of Ages for Female and Male Characters

Figure 8. Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female and Male Characters
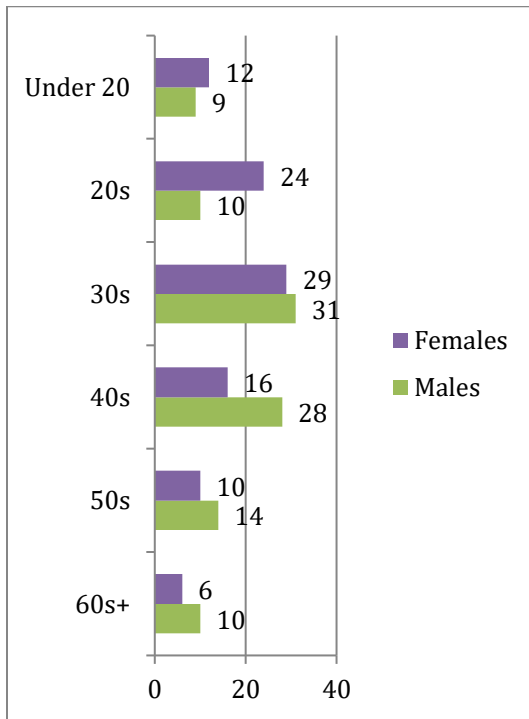
•Males 40 and over accounted for 52% of all male characters. Females 40 and over comprised 32% of all female characters.

•There were almost twice as many male characters as female characters aged 60 and over. 6% of female and 10% of male characters were in their 60s or older.

•Findings for *major* female characters are quite similar to the findings for all female speaking characters. *Major* female characters are younger than *major* male characters. The majority (57%) of female characters are in their 20s (26%) and 30s (31%). The majority of male characters (52%) are in their 30s (27%) and 40s (25%).

•*Major* female characters experience a precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s (from 31% to 13%). *Major* male characters experience a decline in numbers from their 40s (25%) to their 50s (14%). The chasm between major male characters and female characters 60 and older is greater for major characters than characters in all speaking roles, with 6% of female characters and 13% of male characters in this age cohort.

•In 2020, 71% of all female characters with speaking roles were White, 17% were Black, 6% were Latina, 6% were Asian, and 1% were of some other race or ethnicity (see Figure 8). 73% of all male characters were White, 16% were Black, 6% were Latino, 4% were Asian, and 1% were of some other race or ethnicity.

•71% of all female characters were White in 2020. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 68% in 2019 (see Figure 9).

•17% of all female characters were Black in 2020. This represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 20% in 2019.

•6% of all female characters were Latina in 2020. This represents a slight increase of 1 percentage point from 5% in 2019.

•6% of all female characters were Asian in 2020. This represents a decline of 1 percentage point from 7% in 2019.

•In 2020, 74% of *major* female characters were white, 13% were Black, 6% were Latina, and 6% were Asian, and 1% were of some other race or ethnicity.

•Female characters were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 47% of female characters but 35% of male characters had a known marital status.

•A larger proportion of male than female characters had an identifiable occupation. 73% of male characters but 57% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation.

•A larger proportion of male than female characters were seen in their work setting, actually working (59% vs. 42%).

Figure 9. Historical Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female Characters
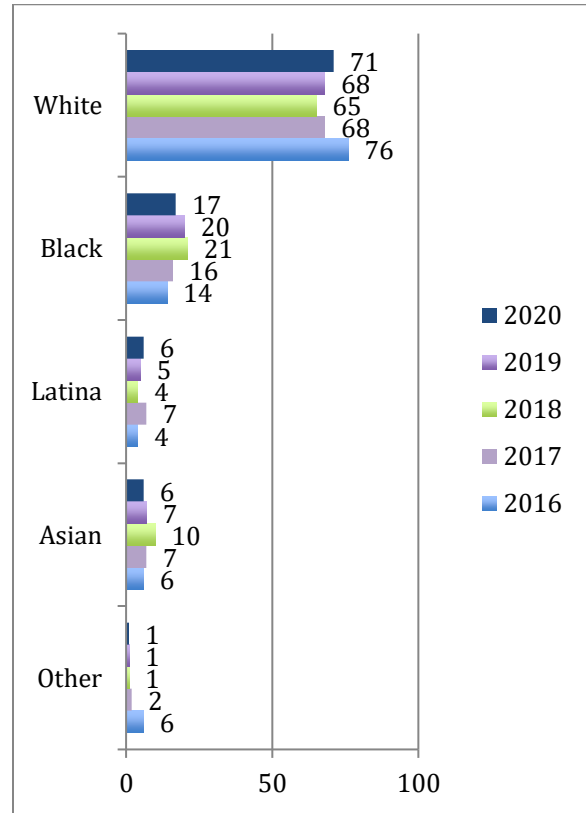
Findings/Goals and Roles

•Male characters were more likely than females to have primarily work-related goals (41% vs. 32%). Female characters were more likely than males to have primarily personal life-related goals (19% vs. 10%).

•Male characters were more likely than females to be seen in primarily work-related roles (59% vs. 41%). Female characters were more likely than males to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (54% vs. 36%).

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

•Films with at least one woman director and/or writer were more likely than films with no women in these roles to feature higher percentages of females as protagonists, in major roles, and as speaking characters.

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 60% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 17% of protagonists (see Figure 10).

•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 49% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 35% 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 34% of all speaking characters.

Figure 10. 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
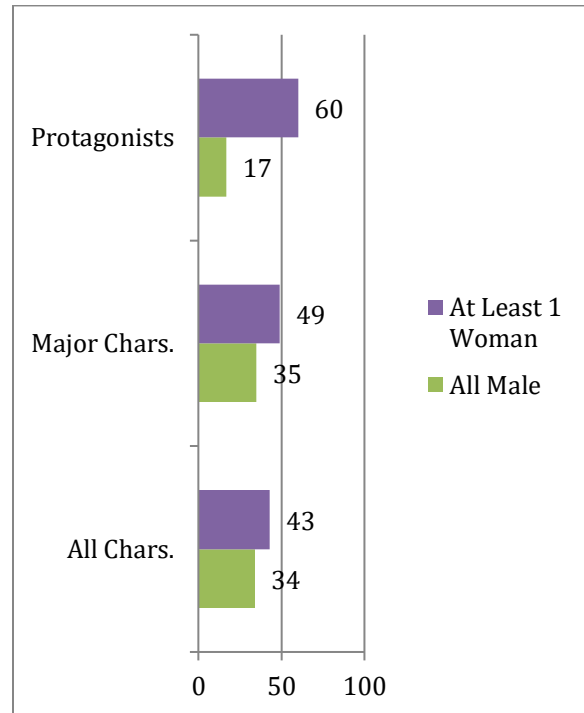
Figures based on top grossing films as rated by Box Office Mojo, January 1, 2021.

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.