

It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing U.S. Films of 2022

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In 2022, female characters commanded an army of formidable warriors (*The Woman King*) and exposed the worst of serial sexual harassers (*She Said*). They talked (*Women Talking*), smiled (*Smile*), screamed (*Scream*), and worried (*Don't Worry Darling*). They traveled halfway around the world for a dress (*Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris*), longed for love (*3000 Years of Longing*), and conducted a world-renowned orchestra while proving that women can act just as badly as men (*Tár*).

But for all of their activity in the filmic world last year, the percentage of female characters increased only slightly. In 2022, 33% of films featured sole female protagonists, up 2 percentage points from 31% in 2021. The percentage of women in speaking roles increased by 3 percentage points, from 34% in 2021 to 37% in 2022.

Female characters remained younger than their male counterparts, with the percentage of women in their 40s dropping from 20% in 2015 to 14% in 2022. When female (and male) characters are relatively young, they are less likely to hold positions of great personal or professional power. Viola Davis and Cate Blanchett are superb actors but they are also convincing, at least in part, because they have achieved the gravitas and life experience needed to play those roles.

It's a Man's (Celluloid) World has monitored portrayals of girls and women in the top 100 domestic grossing films since 2002. It is the longest-running and most comprehensive study of women's representation in film available.

Background

Since 2002, *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World* has tracked the representation of female characters in the top 100 grossing films (international films and re-issues omitted). The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 2,100 characters appearing in films in 2022. This project provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Overall, this project has considered the representation of over 27,000 characters appearing in more than 1,200 films over the last two decades.

This report details the percentage of films with female protagonists, as well as the percentages of females portrayed as major and speaking characters. It also examines the demographic traits of characters, including race/ethnicity, age, marital status, and occupational status. In addition, the study considers the goals and roles held by characters. Finally, it examines important relationships between on-screen representations of female characters and the behind-the-scenes employment of women as directors and writers.

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. *Speaking characters* include all major and minor characters.

Every film in the sample was viewed one or more time(s) in its entirety. Every character who was seen speaking at least one line was included in the study. The figures are based on the top grossing films as rated by Box Office Mojo, January 1, 2023.

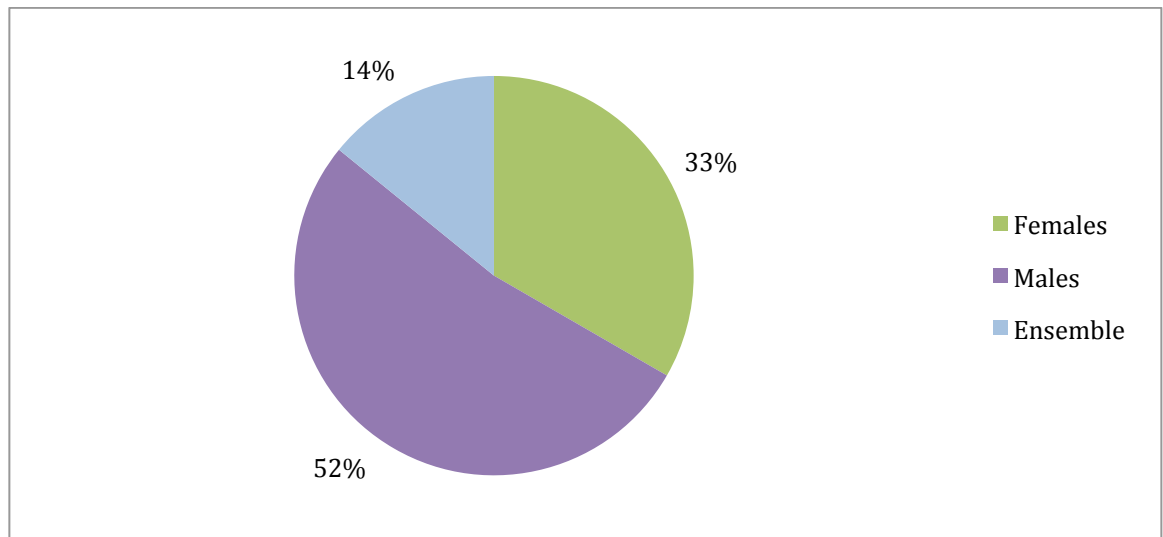
Findings / Top Films at the Box Office

Female and Male Characters

The percentage of U.S. top grossing films featuring sole female *protagonists* increased slightly from 31% in 2021 to 33% (33.3%) in 2022. 52% (52.2%) of films featured sole male protagonists, and 14% (14.4%) had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (see Figure 1). For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

Figure 1.

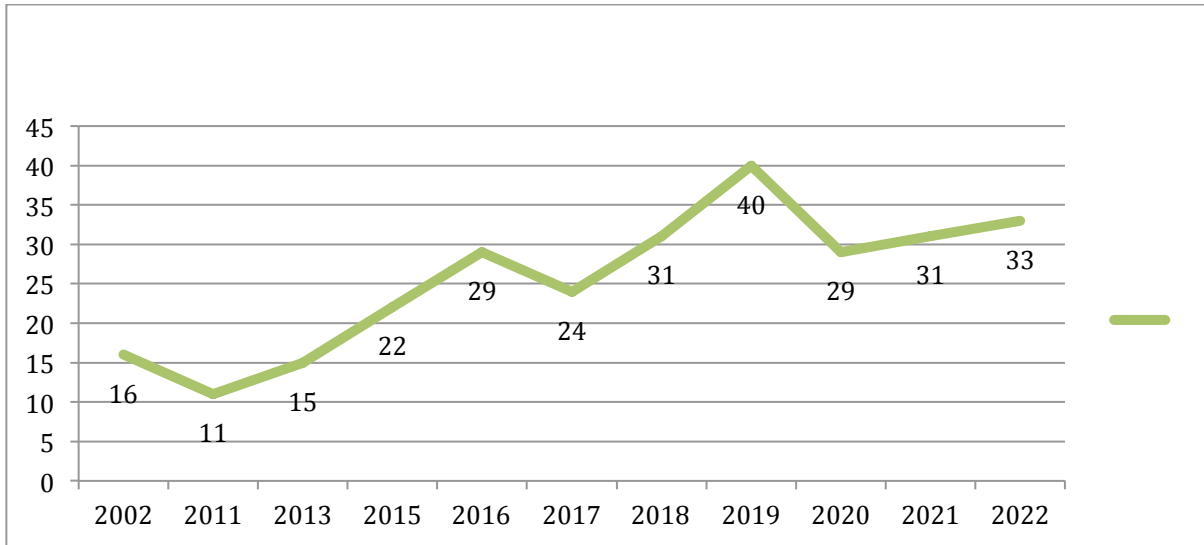
Percentages of Top Grossing Films Featuring Females, Males and Ensembles as Protagonists



The percentage of films with female protagonists in 2022 remains well below the 40% achieved in 2019 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

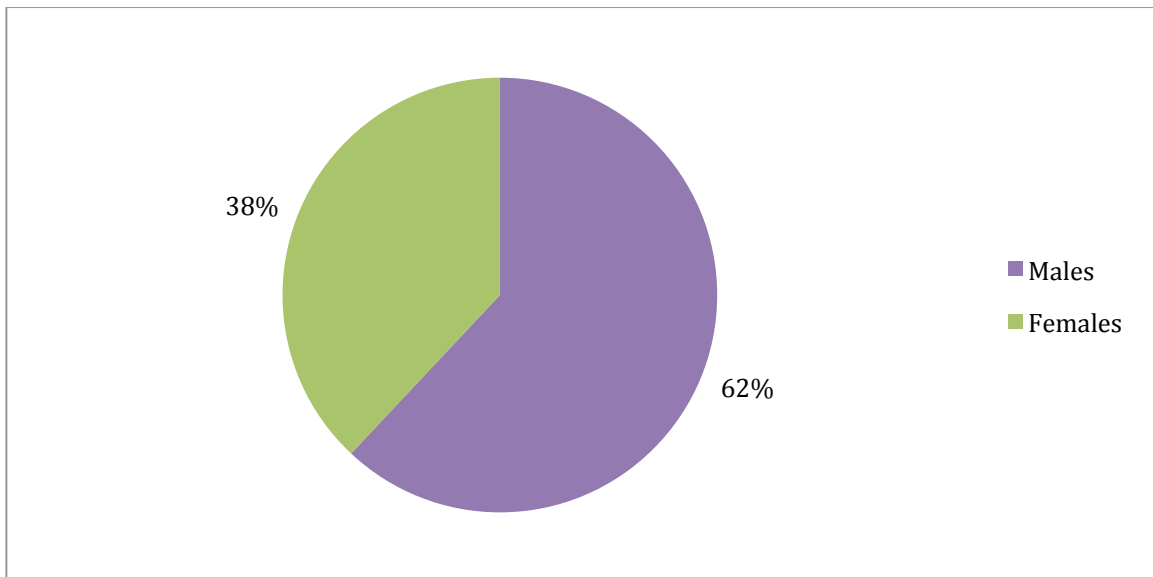
Historical Comparison of Top Grossing Films with Female Protagonists



In 2022, females accounted for 38% of *major characters* (see Figure 3). This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 35% in 2021. 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. There were no nonbinary or transgender characters in major roles.

Figure 3.

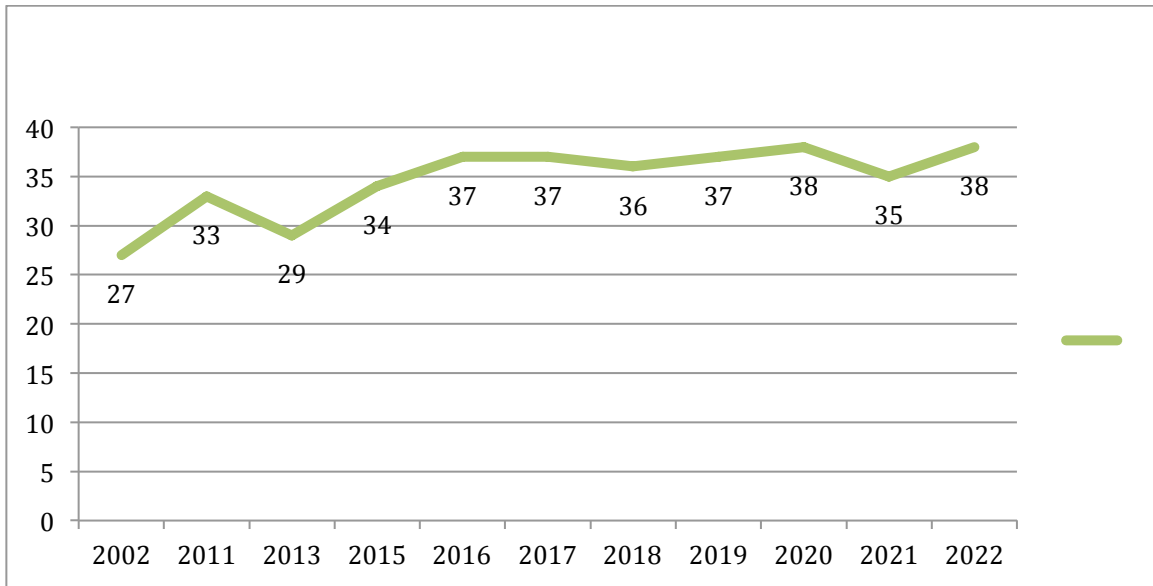
Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters in Top Grossing Films



The percentage of major female characters in 2022 is even with the 38% achieved in 2020 (see Figure 4). As the figure illustrates, the percentage of females as major characters has been relatively stable since 2016, increasing or decreasing by 1 to 3 percentage points from year to year.

Figure 4.

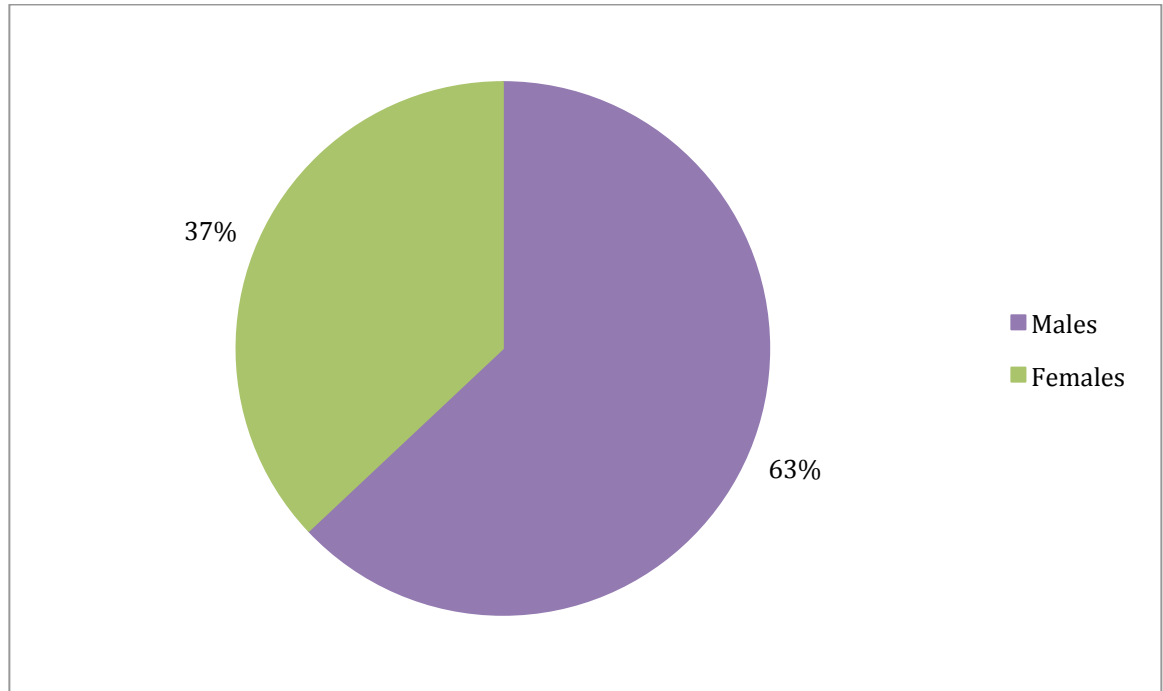
Historical Comparison of Percentages of Females as Major Characters in Top Grossing Films



Females made up 37% (36.9%) of all *speaking characters*, an increase of 3 percentage points from 34% in 2021. Males accounted for 63% (63.0%) of speaking characters (see Figure 5). There was one explicitly nonbinary character and 0.1% of all speaking characters were transgender.

Figure 5.

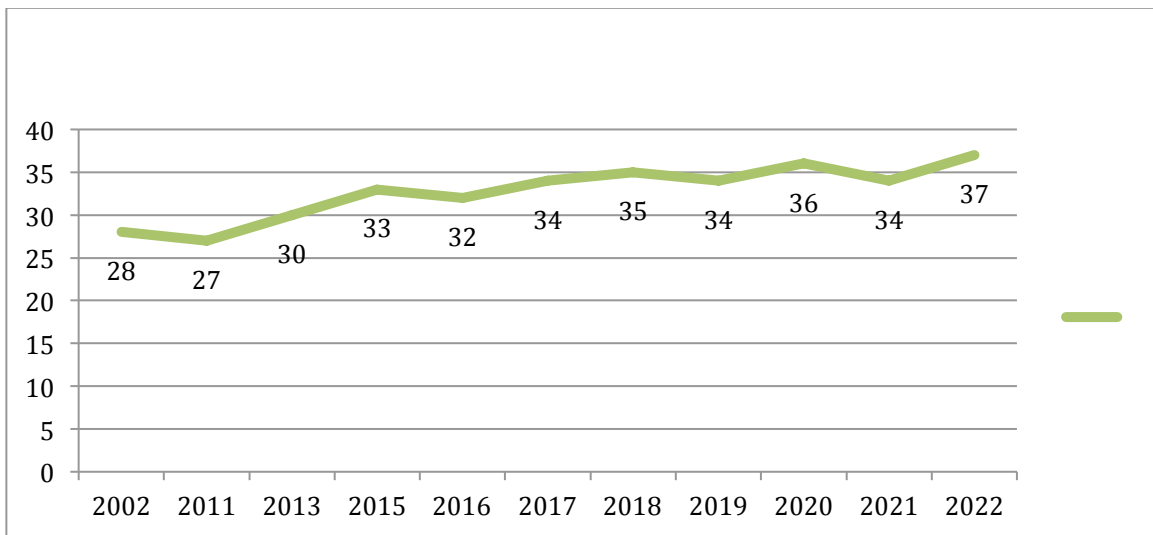
Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters in Top Grossing Films



As Figure 6 illustrates, the percentage of female characters in speaking roles has fluctuated up or down by just 1 to 3 percentage points from year to year.

Figure 6.

Historical Comparison of Females as Speaking Characters in Top Grossing Films



80% of films featured more male than female characters. 11% of films had more female than male characters. 9% of films featured equal numbers of female and male characters.

12% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 51% had 5 to 9 females, and 37% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 4% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in speaking roles, 23% had 5 to 9 males, and 74% had 10 or more males.

Female protagonists were most likely to appear in horror features (43%), followed by dramas (37%), action features (10%), animated features (3%), comedies (3%), and features in other genres (3%). Male protagonists were most likely to appear in action features (30%), followed by dramas (23%), comedies (19%), animated features (19%), science fiction features (4%), and horror features (4%).

Demographic Characteristics

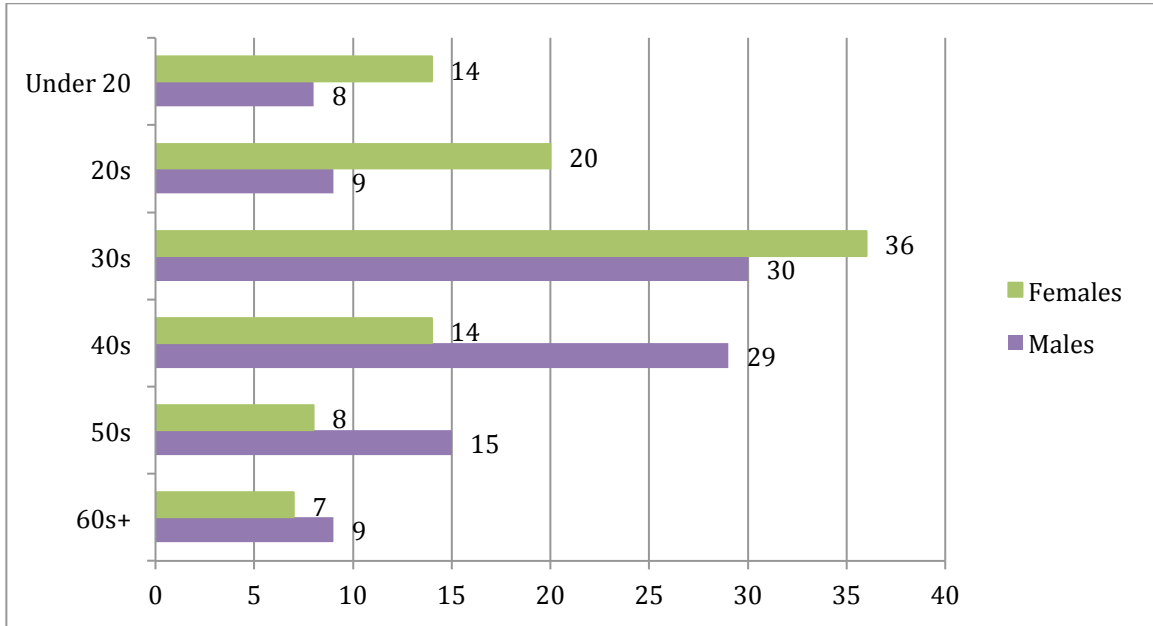
Female characters were younger than their male counterparts (see Figure 7). The majority of female characters were in their 20s and 30s (56%), while the majority of male characters were in their 30s and 40s (59%). Male characters were more likely than females to be 40 or over (53% males, 29% females). The nonbinary character was under 20 and the transgender characters were in their 30s.

Female characters experienced a precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s (36% to 14%). The percentage of male characters in their 30s and 40s differed by a single percentage point (30% vs. 29%). Male characters experienced a more substantial decline in numbers from their 40s (29%) to their 50s (15%).

There were more male characters than female characters aged 60 and over. 7% of female and 9% of male characters were in their 60s or older.

Figure 7.

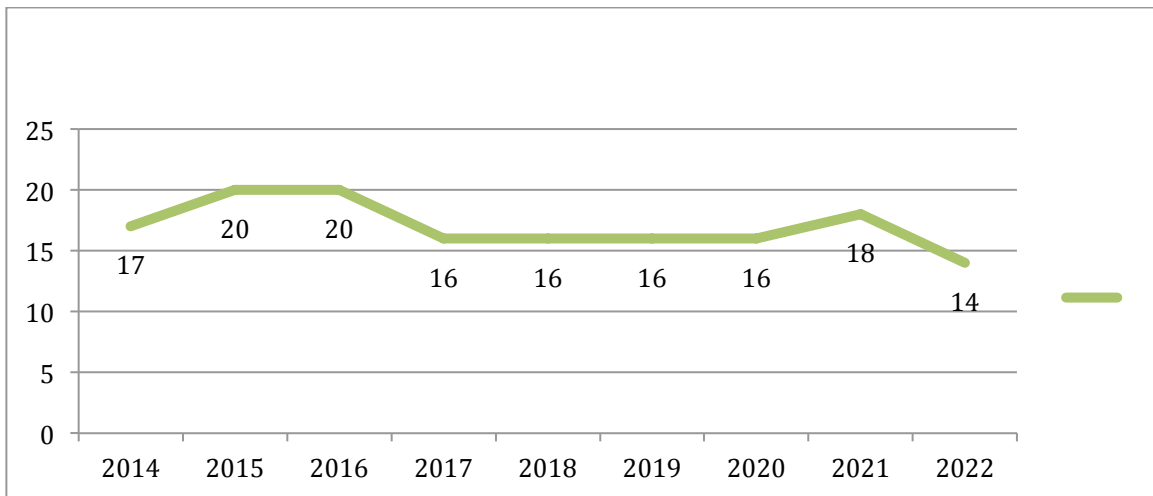
Comparison of Ages for All Speaking Female and Male Characters in Top Grossing Films



When the majority of female characters remain under 40, they are less likely to hold positions of great personal and/or professional power. As Figure 8 illustrates, the percentage of female characters in their 40s dropped from 20% in 2015 to 14% in 2022.

Figure 8.

Percentage of Female Characters in Speaking Roles in their 40s Over Time

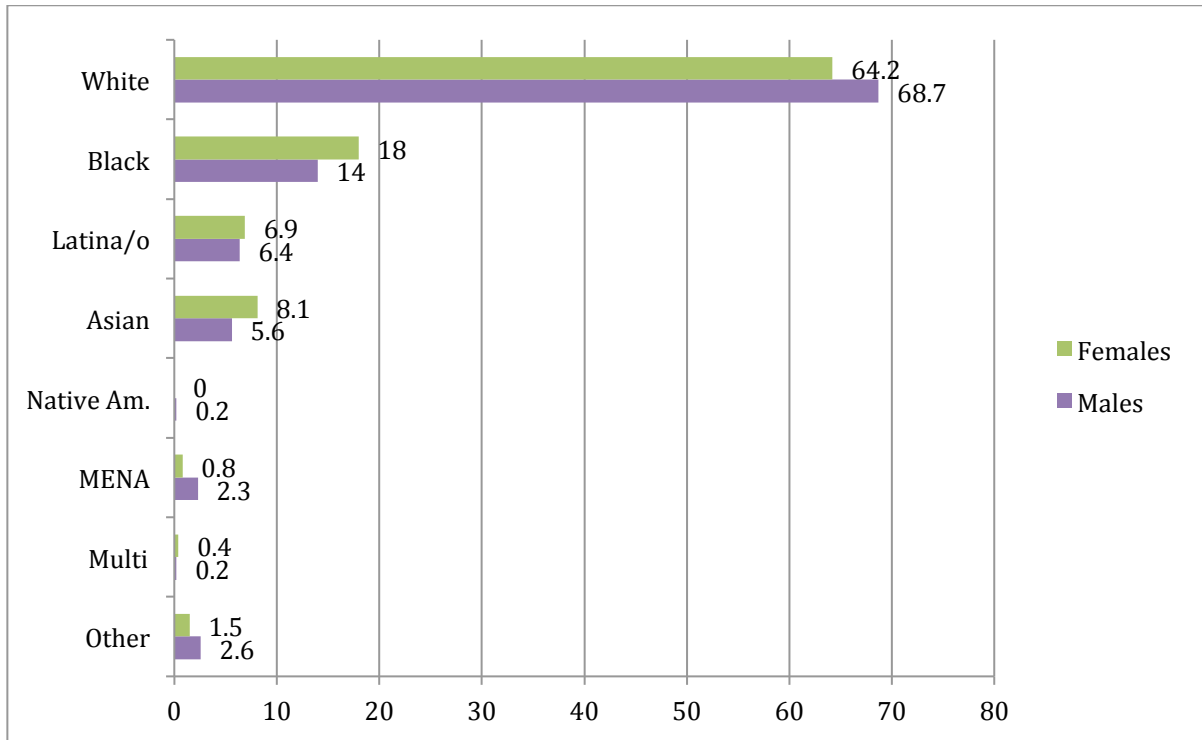


Findings for *major female characters* are similar to the findings for all females in speaking roles. Major female characters were younger than major male characters. The majority of major female characters were in their 20s and 30s (54%), while the majority of male characters were in their 30s and 40s (56%). 31% of major female characters but 56% of major male characters were in their 40s and older. The percentage of female characters declined dramatically from their 30s (32%) to their 40s (16%). The percentage of major male characters actually increased from 26% in their 30s to 29% in their 40s. Few major characters aged into their 60s or older (8% females, 9% males).

In 2022, 64.2% of *female characters in speaking roles* were White (up from 60.6% in 2021), 18.0% were Black (down from 19.3% in 2021), 6.9% were Latina (down from 9.5% in 2021), 8.1% were Asian or Asian American (down from 8.4% in 2021), 0.0% were Native American (down from 0.3% in 2021), 0.8% were MENA (up from 0.5% in 2021), 0.4% were of multiple races or ethnicities (down from 1.4% in 2021), and 1.5% were of some other race or ethnicity. 68.7% of *male characters in speaking roles* were White (up from 64.6% in 2021), 14.0% were Black (down from 16.7% in 2021), 6.4% were Latino (down from 8.3% in 2021), 5.6% were Asian or Asian American (down from 8.4% in 2021), 0.2% were Native American (up slightly from 0.1% in 2021), 2.3% were MENA (up from 1.3% in 2021), 0.2% were of multiple races or ethnicities (down from 0.6% in 2021), and 2.6% were of some other race or ethnicity (see Figure 8). The one nonbinary character was white, 67% of transgender characters were Black and 33% were white.

Figure 8.

Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for All Speaking Female and Male Characters in Top Grossing Films



*MENA or Middle Eastern/North African characters are from the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

In 2022, 61.3% of *major female characters* were White (up from 57.6% in 2021), 21.6% were Black (up from 16.4% in 2021), 7.0% were Latina (down from 12.8% in 2021), 6.6% were Asian or Asian American (down from 10.0% in 2021), 0.0% were Native American (down from 0.4% in 2021), 0.3% were MENA (up from 0.0% in 2021), 0.7% were of multiple races/ethnicities (down from 2.8% in 2021), and 2.4% were of some other race or ethnicity. 68.6% of *major male characters* were White (up from 64.3% in 2021), 13.9% were Black (down from 17.0% in 2021), 7.0% were Latino (up slightly from 6.8% in 2021), 4.9% were Asian or Asian American (down from 10.2% in 2021), 0.2% were Native American (down from 0.4 in 2021), 1.3% were MENA (up from 0.4% in 2021), 0.9% were of multiple races/ethnicities (up from 0.4% in 2021), and 3.6% were of some other race or ethnicity.

Female characters in speaking roles were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 46% of female characters but 36% of male characters had a known marital status. Similarly, *major female characters* were more likely than males to have a known marital status (74% females, 63% males).

A larger percentage of *male than female characters in speaking roles* had an identifiable occupation. 78% of male characters but 65% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation. Similarly, *major male characters* were more likely than major females to have an identifiable occupation (84% males, 68% females).

A larger percentage of *male than female characters in speaking roles* were seen at work, actually working (66% of males, 52% of females). Similarly, a larger percentage of *major male than female characters* were seen at work, actually working (72% males, 54% females).

Goals and Roles

Male characters were more likely than females in speaking roles to have primarily work-related goals (45% of males, 38% of females). Female characters were more likely than males to have primarily personal life-related goals (24% of females, 14% of males). The findings were similar for *major characters*, with males being more likely than females to have primarily work-related goals (males 33%, females 25%). *Major female characters* were more likely than males to have primarily personal life-related goals (females 34%, males 20%).

Male characters were more likely than females in speaking roles to be seen in primarily work-related roles (63% males, 48% females). Female characters were more likely than males to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (43% females, 30% males). The findings were similar for *major characters* with male characters more likely than females to be seen primarily in work-related roles (56% males, 36% females). *Major female characters* were more likely to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (45%) than major male characters (27%).

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 56% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 23% of protagonists.

In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 45% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 36% of major characters.

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/or writers, females accounted for 35% of all speaking characters.