It's a Man's (Celluloid) World:
Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing U.S. Films of 2023

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Barbie dominated the theatrical box office in 2023, and with it much of our cultural conversation about women in film. Outside of Barbieland, girls confronted the trials of adolescence (*Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken*), young women found the strength to leave abusive relationships (*Priscilla*), and foursomes of women 60 and older bonded over football, Tom Brady, books, and travel (*80 for Brady*, *Book Club: The Next Chapter*).

But for all of the talk about *Barbie's* success, the overall percentage of women in speaking roles contracted from 37% in 2022 to 35% in 2023, and the number of females in major roles remained the same at 38%. The percentage of films with female protagonists declined from 33% in 2022 to 28% in 2023.

In addition, the percentage of female characters plummeted as they moved from their 30s (33%) into their 40s (15%), while the number of male characters in these age cohorts held steady at 28%. In spite of high-profile performances by Jane Fonda, Diane Keaton, Rita Moreno, and a handful of other actresses, females over 60 remained dramatically underrepresented, accounting for just 7% of all female characters, well below the percentage of women in this age cohort in the U.S. population.

Overall, fully 77% of films featured more male than female characters in speaking roles. Only 18% of films had more female than male characters, and 5% of films featured equal numbers of female and male characters.

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 appearing in the top 100 grossing films (international films and re-issues omitted). The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 2,200 characters appearing in films in 2023. This report provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Overall, this project has considered the representation of over 29,000 characters appearing in more than 1,300 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 characters 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 women's roles as leaders. 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. A character was considered a *leader* if they occupied a leadership position in an organization, government or social group, and if their instructions or behaviors were followed by two or more other characters.

Every film 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 The Numbers, January 1, 2024.

Findings / Top Films at the Box Office

Female and Male Characters

The percentage of U.S. top grossing films featuring sole female *protagonists* declined from 33% (33.3%) in 2022 to 28% (28.3%) in 2023. 62% (62.0%) of films featured sole male protagonists (up from 52.2% in 2022), and 10% (9.8%) had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (down from 14.4% in 2022) (see Figure 1). For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.
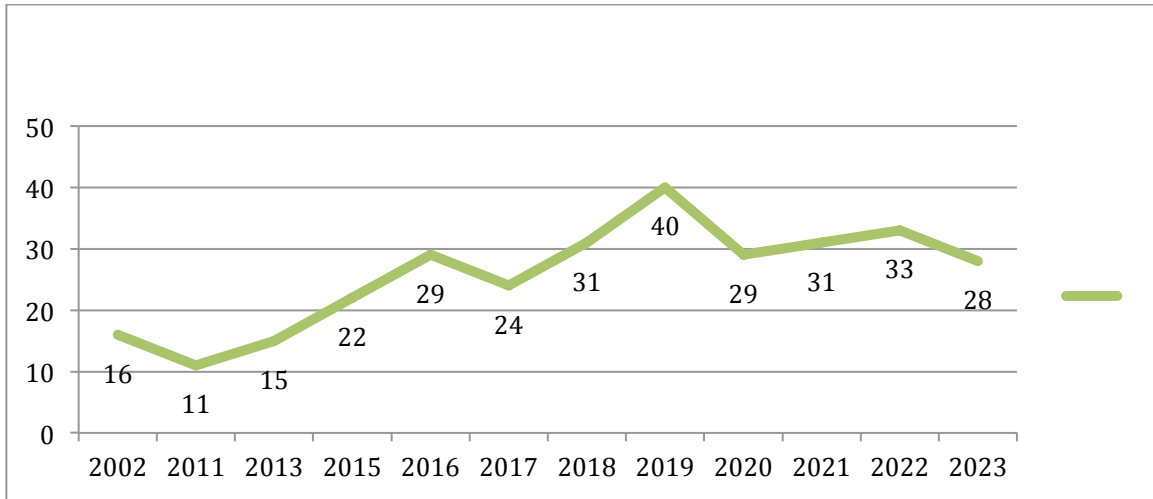
Figure 1.

Percentages of Top Grossing Films Featuring Females, Males and Ensembles as Protagonists
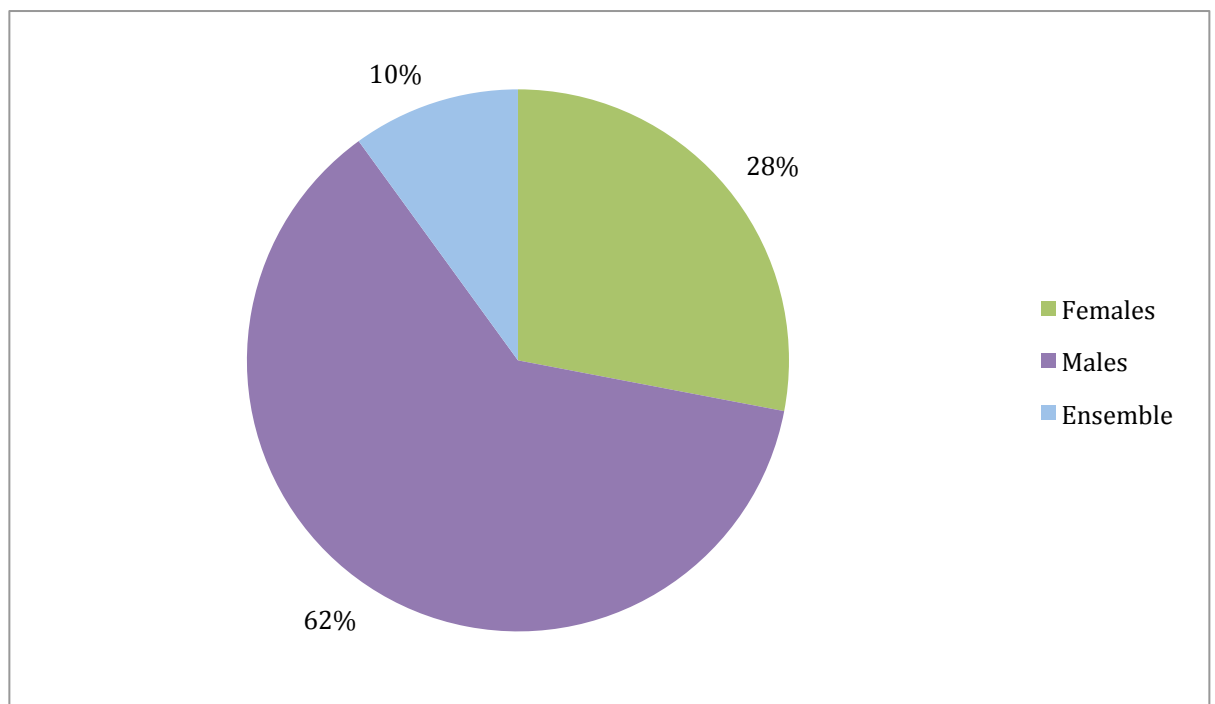
The percentage of films with female protagonists in 2023 remains well below the 40% achieved in 2019 (see Figure 2), and is slightly below the percentage achieved in 2016.
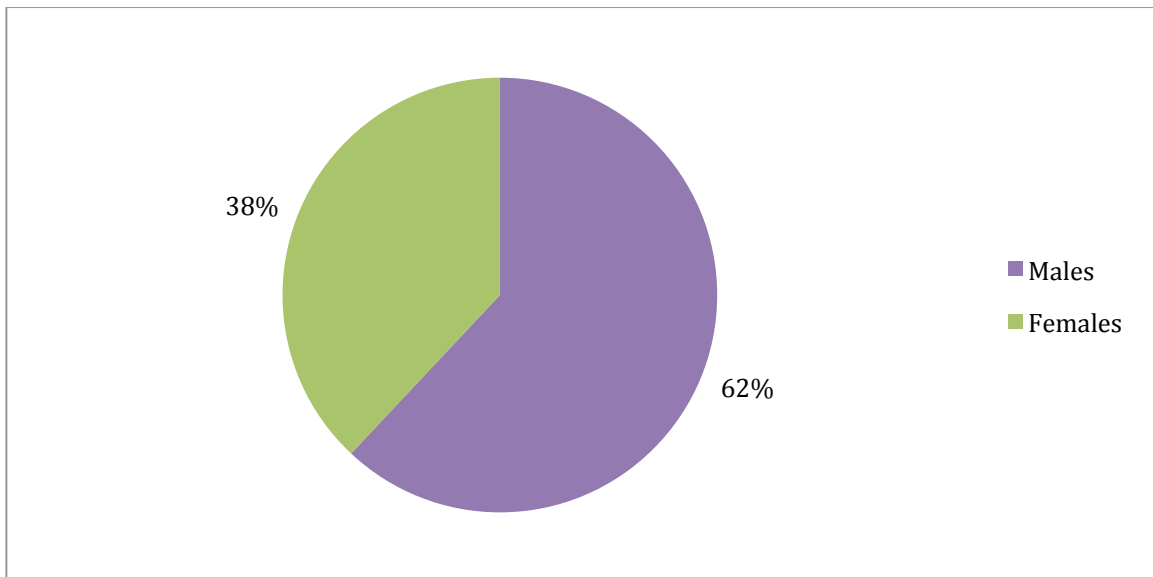
Figure 2.

Historical Comparison of Top Grossing Films with Female Protagonists

In 2023, females accounted for 38% (38.0%) of *major characters* (see Figure 3), even with the figure from last year. Males comprised 62% (61.9%) 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.
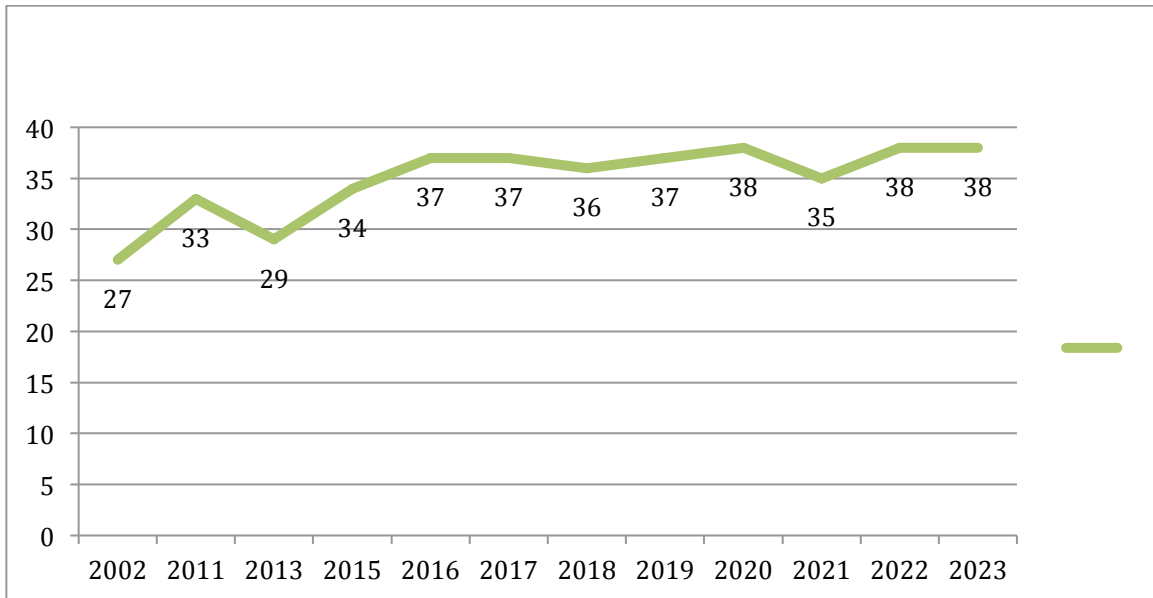
Figure 3.

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

The percentage of major female characters in 2023 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.
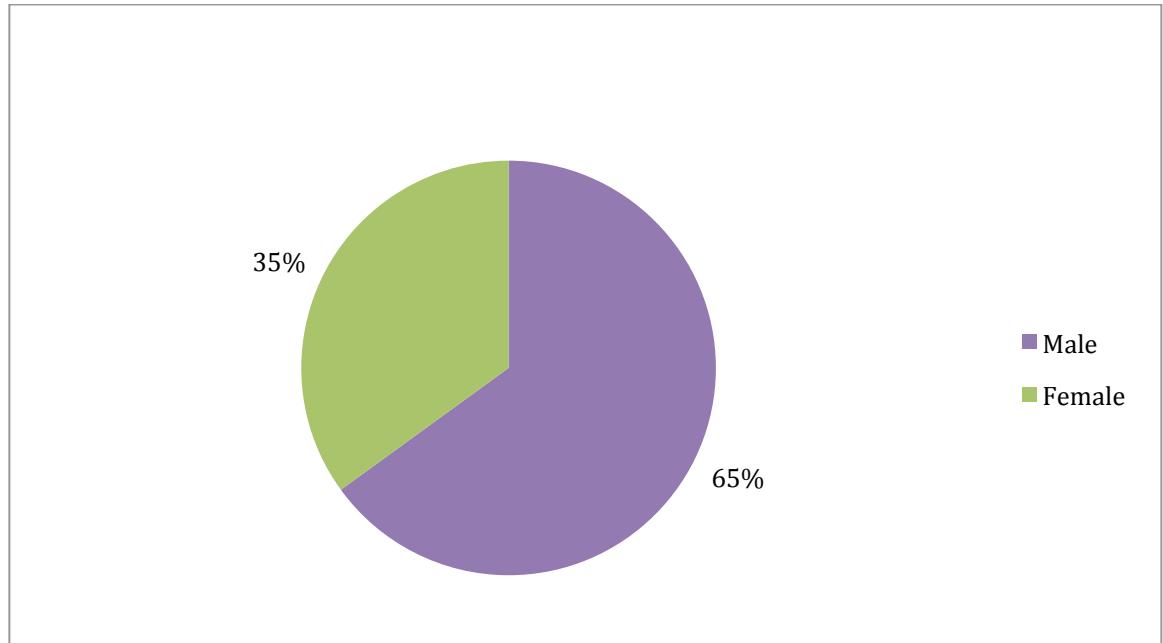
Figure 4.

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

Females made up 35% (34.8%) of all *speaking characters*, a decline of 2 percentage points from 37% in 2022. Males accounted for 65% (65.1%) of speaking characters (see Figure 5). 0.1% of all speaking characters were transgender.
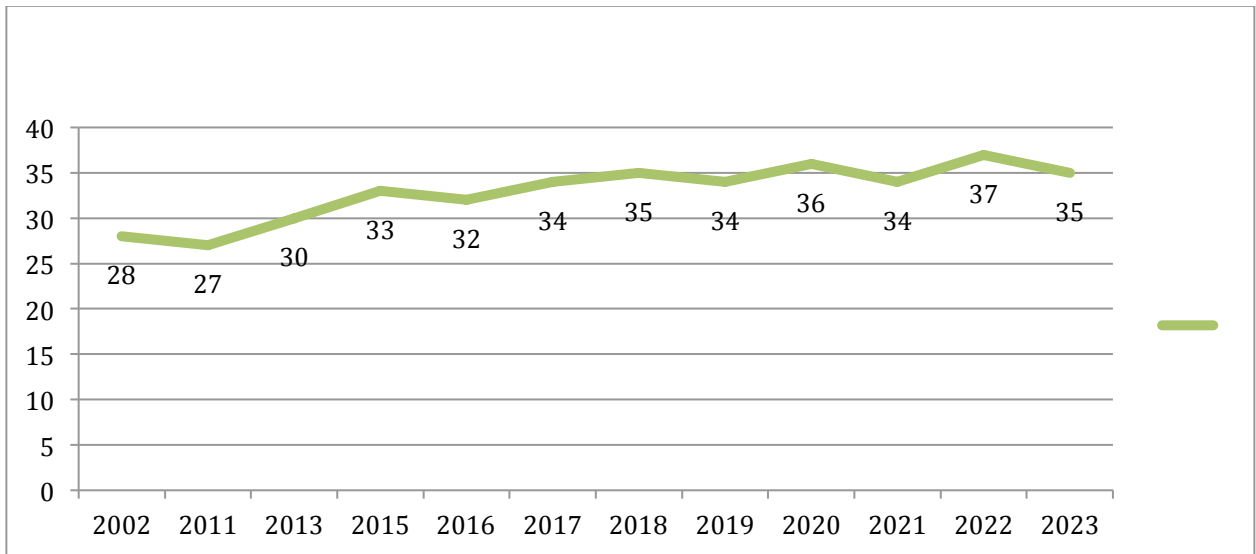
Figure 5.

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 since 2017.

Figure 6.

Historical Comparison of Females as Speaking Characters in Top Grossing Films

77% of films featured more male than female characters. 18% of films had more female than male characters. 5% of films featured equal numbers of female and male characters.

17% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 46% had 5 to 9 females, and 36% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 9% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in speaking roles, 17% had 5 to 9 males, and 73% had 10 or more males.

Demographic Characteristics

17% of female characters in speaking roles were under 20, 22% were in their 20s, 33% were in their 30s, 15% were in their 40s, 6% were in their 50s, and 7% were 60 or older. In contrast, 10% of male characters in speaking roles were under 20, 10% were in their 20s, 28% were in their 30s, 28% were in their 40s, 15% were in their 50s, and 9% were 60 or older (see Figure 7). The transgender characters were under 20 years old.

Female characters were younger than their male counterparts.   The majority of female characters were in their 20s and 30s (55%), while the majority of male characters were in their 30s and 40s (56%).   Male characters were more likely than females to be 40 or over (52% males, 28% females).

Female characters experienced a precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s (33% to 15%). The percentage of male characters in their 30s and 40s remained the same (28%). Male characters experienced a decline in numbers from their 40s (28%) 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

Age Group	Females	Males
Under 20	17	10
20s	22	10
30s	33	28
40s	15	28
50s	6	15
60s+	7	9
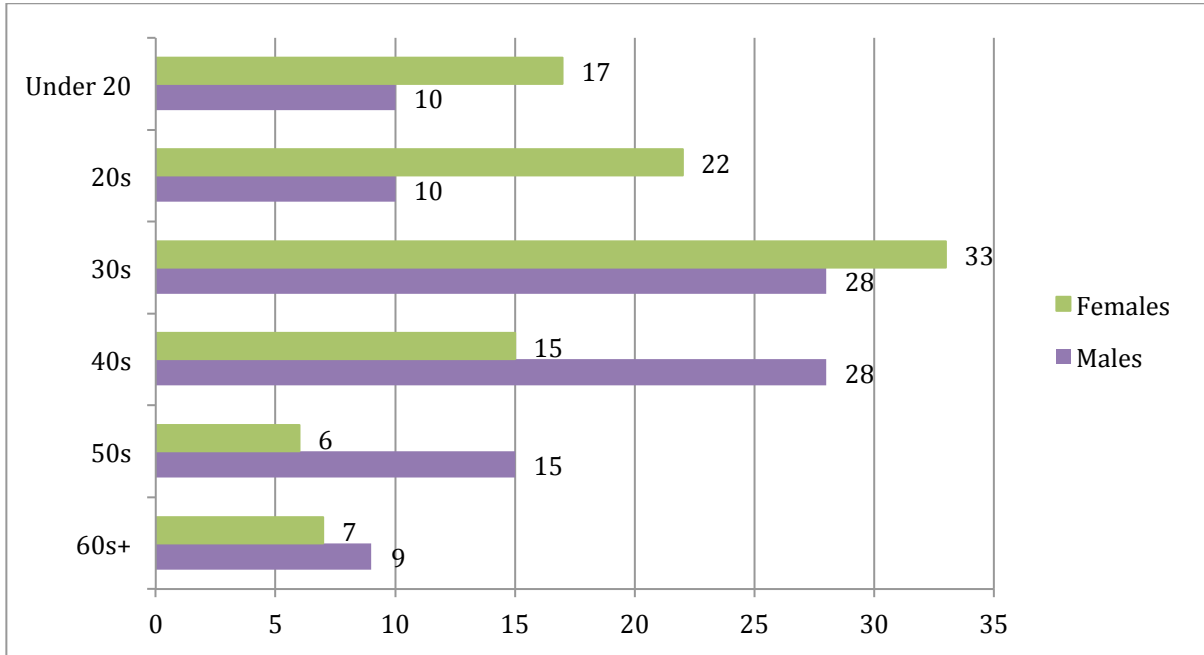
As Figure 8 illustrates, the percentage of female characters in their 40s dropped from 20% in 2015 to 15% in 2023.

Figure 8.

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

| Year	Percentage
2014	17
2015	20
2016	20
2017	16
2018	16
2019	16
2020	16
2021	18
2022	14
2023	15
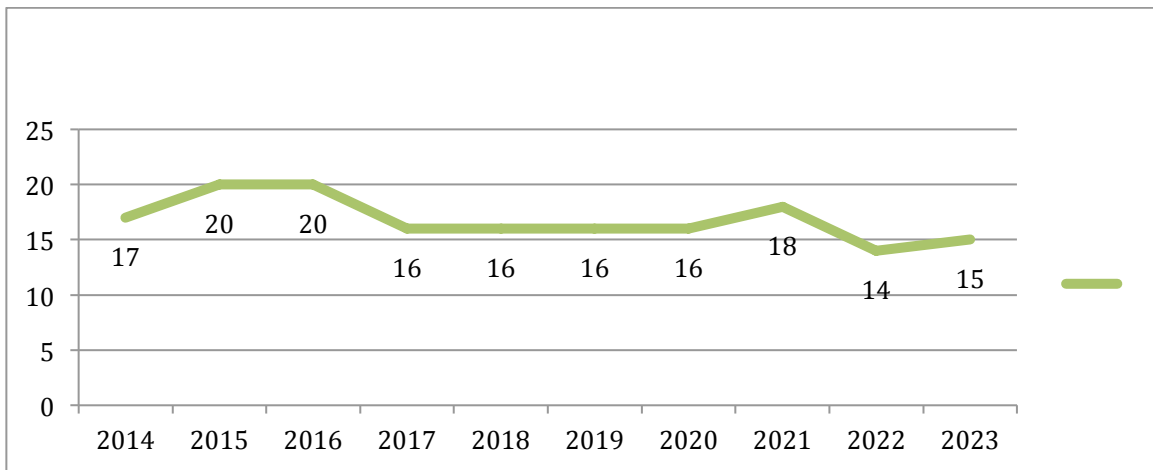
Findings for *major female characters* are similar to the findings for all females in speaking roles. 23% of major female characters were under 20, 20% were in their 20s, 30% were in their 30s, 13% were in their 40s, 7% were in their 50s, and 8% were 60 or older. In contrast, 13% of major male characters were under 20, 9% were in their 20s, 22% were in their 30s, 28% were in their 40s, 18% were in their 50s, and 10% were 60 or older.

Major female characters were younger than major male characters. Half of major female characters were in their 20s and 30s (50%), while half of male characters were in their 30s and 40s (50%). 27% 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 (30%) to their 40s (13%). The percentage of major male characters actually increased from 22% in their 30s to 28% in their 40s. Few major characters aged into their 60s or older (8% females, 10% males).

In 2023, 56.9% of *female characters in speaking roles* were White (down from 64.2% in 2022), 15.3% were Black (down from 18.0% in 2022), 6.3% were Latina (down from 6.9% in 2022), 9.2% were Asian or Asian American (up from 8.1% in 2022), 0.6% were Native American (up from 0.0% in 2022), 0.6% were MENA (down from 0.8% in 2021), 0.6% were of multiple races or ethnicities (up from 0.4% in 2022), and 10.4% were of some other race or ethnicity. 61.5% of *male characters in speaking roles* were White (down from 68.7% in 2022), 11.6% were Black (down from 14.0% in 2022), 5.6% were Latino (down from 6.4% in 2022), 6.7% were Asian or Asian American (up from 5.6% in 2022), 0.7% were Native American (up from 0.2% in 2022), 2.5% were MENA (up from 2.3% in 2022), and 11.4% were of some other race or ethnicity (see Figure 9). 50.0% of transgender characters were white and 50.0% were of some other race or ethnicity.

Figure 9.

Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for All Speaking Female and Male Characters in Top Grossing Films
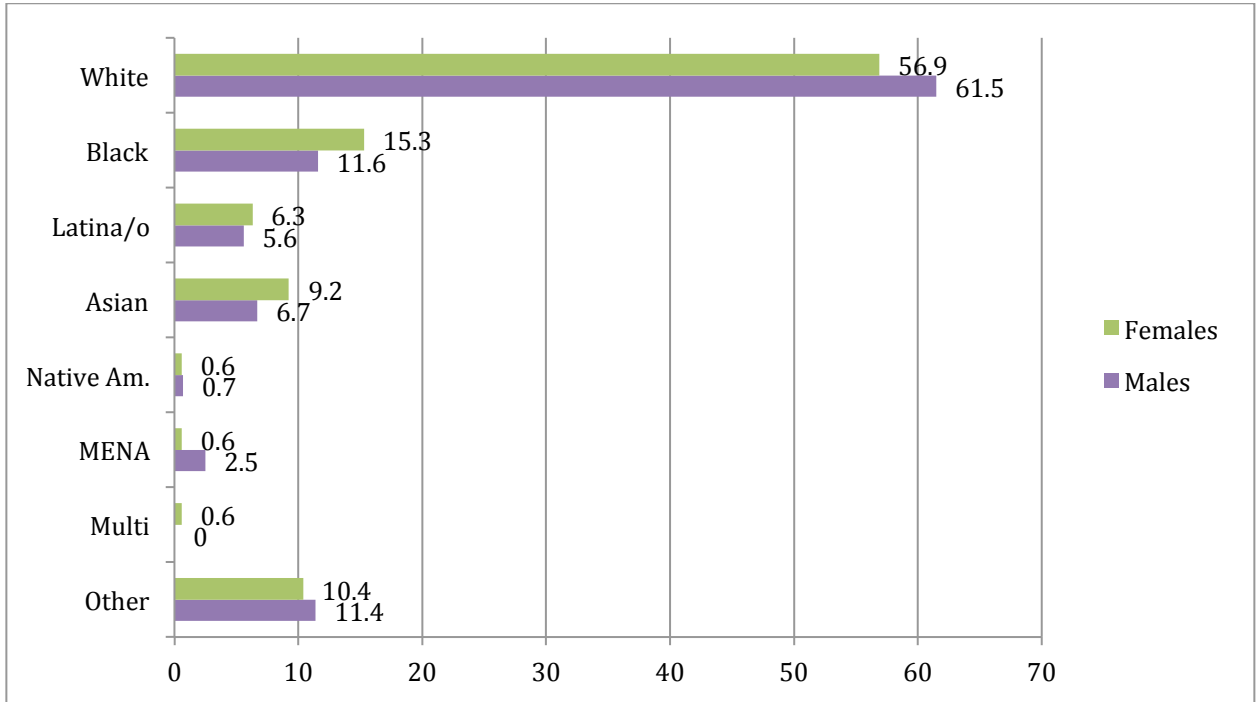
*MENA or Middle Eastern/North African characters are from the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

In 2023, 54.7% of *major female characters* were White (down from 61.3% in 2022), 16.7 % were Black (down from 21.6% in 2022), 7.6% were Latina (up from 7.0% in 2022), 6.7% were Asian or Asian American (up from 6.6% in 2022), 0.6% were Native American (up from 0.0% in 2022), 0.9% were MENA (up from 0.3% in 2022), 1.2% were of multiple races/ethnicities (up from 0.7% in 2022), and 11.6% were of some other race or ethnicity. 60.0% of *major male characters* were White (down from 68.6% in 2022), 12.4% were Black (down from 13.9% in 2022), 6.7% were Latino (down from 7.0% in 2022), 5.2% were Asian or Asian American (up from 4.9% in 2022), 0.6% were Native American (up from 0.2% in 2022), 2.5% were MENA (down from 1.3% in 2022), and 12.6% were of some other race or ethnicity.

Female characters in speaking roles were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 48% of female characters but 32% of male characters had a

known marital status.   Similarly, *major female characters* were more likely than males to have a known marital status (75% females, 56% males).

A larger percentage of *male than female characters in speaking roles* had an identifiable occupation. 76% of male characters but 60% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation. Similarly, *major male characters* were more likely than major females to have an identifiable occupation (81% males, 66% females).

A larger percentage of *male than female characters in speaking roles* were seen at work, actually working (68% 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).

Portrayals as Leaders

10% of characters in speaking roles were portrayed as leaders. 63% of leaders were male and 37% were female. For the purposes of this study, a character was considered a leader if they occupied a leadership position in an organization, government or social group and if their instructions or behaviors were followed by two or more other characters.

By type of leader, 83% of white collar leaders were male and 17% were female. 79% of blue collar leaders were male and 21% were female. 60% of leaders among professionals were males and 40% were females. 50% of leaders in social groups were male and 50% were female. 76% of leaders of criminal groups were male and 24% were female. 87% of clergy and spiritual leaders were male and 13% were female (see Figure 10).

Figure 10.

Female and Male Leaders in Speaking Roles
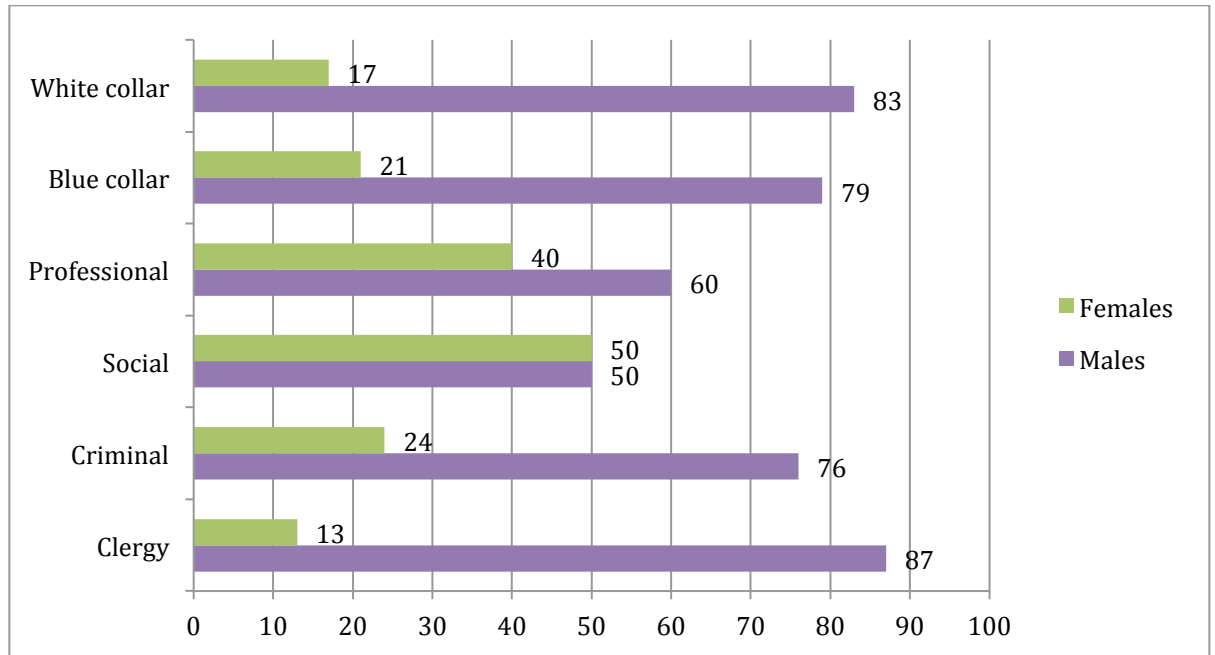
Behind-the-Scenes Employment and On-Screen Representation

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 48% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 19% of protagonists.

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 43% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 31% of all speaking characters.