

It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2016

by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen

Copyright © 2017– All rights reserved.

Females comprised 29% of *protagonists* featured in the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2016 (see Figure 1). This represents an increase of 7 percentage points from 2015 and is a recent historical high.

Last year, females accounted for 37% of *major characters* (see Figure 2). This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 2015. It is also a recent historical high.

Women comprised 32% of all *speaking characters*, a decrease of 1 percentage point from 2015 (see Figure 3). Overall, audiences were more than twice as likely to see male characters as female characters in 2016.

Findings for female characters of color were mixed. The percentage of Asian females doubled from 3% in 2015 to 6% in 2016. The percentage of Black female characters increased slightly from 13% in 2015 to 14% in 2016. The percentage of Latina characters declined slightly from 4% in 2015 to 3% in 2016.

Gender stereotypes remained prominent in the films considered. Female characters were less likely than males to be seen at work, actually working, and were less likely to be portrayed as leaders. Female characters were also younger than their male counterparts.

The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of 2,595 characters appearing in the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2016 (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 14,000 characters appearing in approximately 600 films.

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

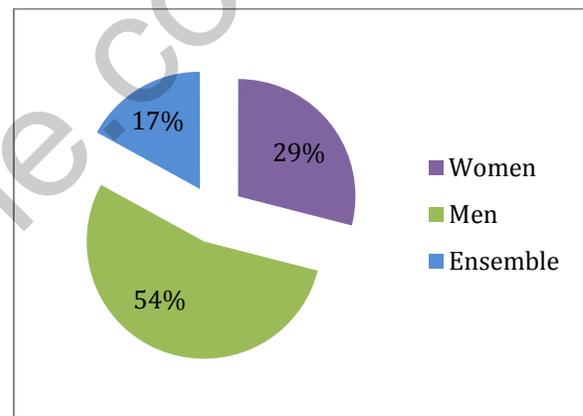


Figure 2.
Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters

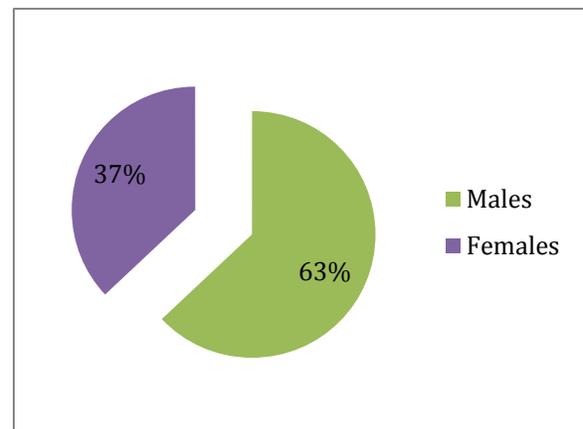
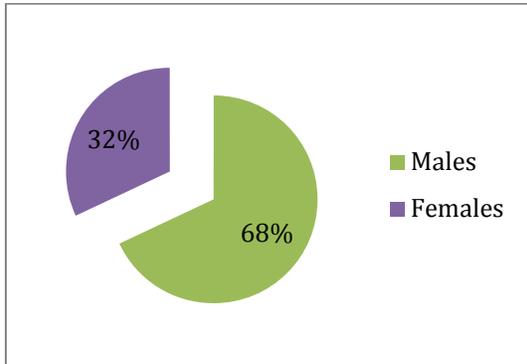


Figure 3.

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



contrast, male protagonists were most likely to appear in dramas (30%) and action features (30%), followed by comedies (17%), animated films (13%), and science fiction features (10%).

- Females accounted for 37% of major characters. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 2015, and a recent historical high. Males accounted for 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.

Findings/Percentages of Female and Male Characters

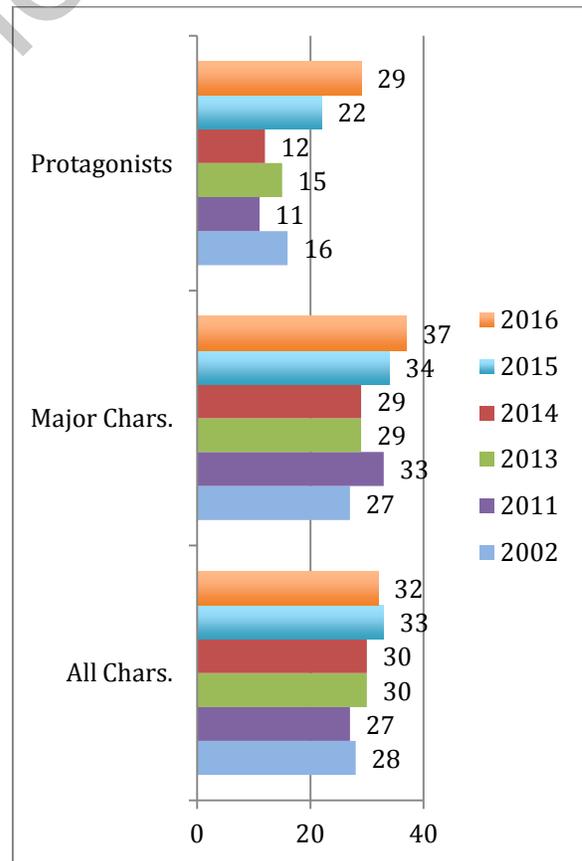
- Females comprised 29% of all clearly identifiable sole protagonists featured in the 100 top grossing films of 2016. This represents an increase of 7 percentage points from 2015, and a recent historical high (see Figure 4). Males comprised 54% of protagonists, and 17% were ensembles. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

- Sole female protagonists were almost evenly split between studio features (52%) and independent features (48%). Sole male protagonists were more likely to appear in studio features than in independent features (60% and 40% respectively). Ensemble protagonists were more likely to appear in studio features than in independent features (59% and 41% respectively).

- Female protagonists were most likely to appear in comedies (28%), followed by dramas (24%), horror films (17%), animated features (14%), science fiction films (14%), and action films (3%). In

Figure 4.

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



- Females comprised 32% of all speaking characters (major and minor) in 2016. This represents a decrease of 1 percentage point from 33% in 2015. Males accounted for 68% of speaking characters. Overall, audiences were more than twice as likely to see male characters as female characters.

Findings/Demographic Characteristics

- Female characters remained younger than their male counterparts. The majority of female characters were in their 20s (23%) and 30s (32%). The majority of male characters were in their 30s (31%) and 40s (30%).

- Males 40 and over accounted for 52% of all male characters. Females 40 and over comprised 32% of all female characters.

- Whereas the percentage of female characters declined substantially from their 30s to their 40s (32% to 20%), the percentage of male characters declined very slightly, from 31% in their 30s to 30% in their 40s.

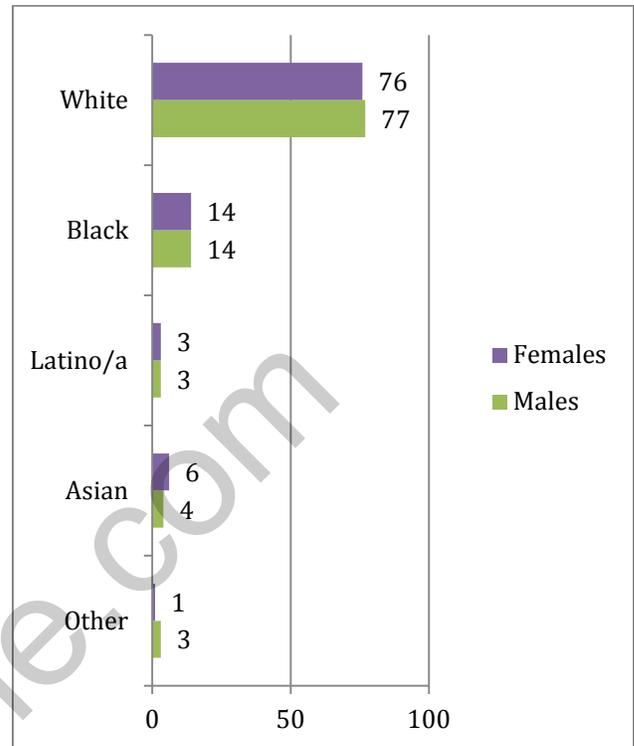
- In 2016, 76% of all female characters were White, 14% were Black, 6% were Asian, 3% were Latina, and 1% were other (see Figure 5). 77% of all male characters were White, 14% were Black, 4% were Asian, 3% were Latino, and 3% were other.

- 76% of all female characters were White in 2016. This represents no change from 2015.

- 14% of all female characters were Black in 2016. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 2015.

Figure 5.

Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female and Male Characters



- 6% of all female characters were Asian American in 2016. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 3% in 2015.

- 3% of all female characters were Latina in 2016. This represents a decline of 1 percentage point from 4% in 2015.

- Male characters were more likely than female characters to have an unknown marital status. 68% of male characters but 54% of female characters had an unknown marital status. In other words, moviegoers were more likely to know the marital status of female characters than male characters.

- A higher proportion of male than female characters had an identifiable occupation. 86% of male characters but

78% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation.

- A substantially larger portion of male than female characters were seen in their work setting, actually working (61% vs. 45%).

- Male characters were more likely than female characters to have work-related goals (75% vs. 54%). Female characters were more likely than males to have goals related to their personal lives (46% vs. 25%).

- Overall, 9% of characters were portrayed as leaders. For the purposes of this study, characters portrayed as leaders occupied a formal leadership position in an organization, government or group and their instructions and/or behaviors were followed by two or more other characters. A larger proportion of male characters (11%) than female characters (5%) were portrayed as leaders.

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

- In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 57% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 18% of protagonists (see Figure 3).

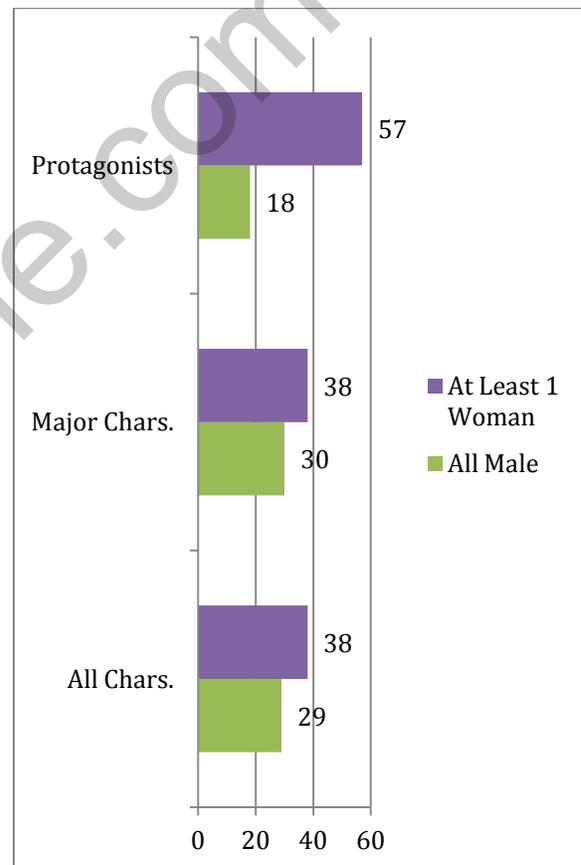
- In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 38% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 30% of major characters.

- In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females

comprised 38% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 29% of all speaking characters.

Figure 6.

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 on January 2, 2017.

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