

It's a Man's (Celluloid) World, Even in a Pandemic Year: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top U.S. Films of 2021

by Dr. Martha M. Lauzen

Copyright © 2022– All rights reserved.

In good times and pandemic times, male characters rule in film. In 2021, male characters outnumbered females by almost 2 to 1. The percentages of females in speaking roles and as major characters declined slightly, while the percentage of films with female protagonists increased slightly. An astounding 85% of films featured more male than female characters, but only 7% of films had more female than male characters.

While the percentages of major Latina and Asian/Asian American female characters rose substantially last year, the increases were primarily due to their appearance in a limited number of films.

In 2021, the most foundational gender stereotypes lingered. Female characters were younger and more likely to have a known marital status than males. Male characters were more likely than females to have an identifiable occupation. Girls and women were more likely to have personal-life related goals, whereas boys and men were more likely to have work-related goals, as well as anti-social goals such as violence and crime.

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. In addition, this year's report also considers portrayals of girls and women in recently released films included on the Digital Entertainment Group's *Watched at Home* list. Together, these analyses document and inform our understanding of women's continuing underrepresentation and misrepresentation in film.

Background

Since 2002, *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World* has tracked the representation of girls and women on the top 100 grossing films (international films and re-issues omitted). The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 3,100 characters appearing in films in 2021. This project provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Due to the closure of many theaters in 2021 and 2020 and the resulting drop in box office grosses, comparisons between the last two years and previous years should be made with caution. Overall, this project has considered the representation of over 25,000 characters appearing in more than 1,100 films over the last two decades.

The findings are divided into two major sections. The first section reports the percentages of female and male characters appearing in top grossing films. Specifically, it details the percentage of films with female protagonists, as well as the percentages of females portrayed as major and speaking characters. This section also provides the demographic traits of characters, including race/ethnicity, age, marital status, and occupational status. In addition, this section 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.

The second section of the report considers findings for many of these same variables for films included on DEG's weekly *Top 20 Watched at Home* list from January through December 2021. The list includes U.S. digital sales, digital rentals (VOD), DVD and Blu-Ray. This list does not include premium VOD. Companies providing streaming services – including Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ -- do not release comprehensive lists of their most viewed films at home. Every recently released (2020, 2021) U.S. film that appeared on DEG's weekly list at least once was included. There is substantial overlap between the lists of the *Watched at Home* films and the top grossing films at the box office. 57% of the films on the *Watched at Home* list also appear on the list of the 100 top grossing films.

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. Finally, *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, 2022.

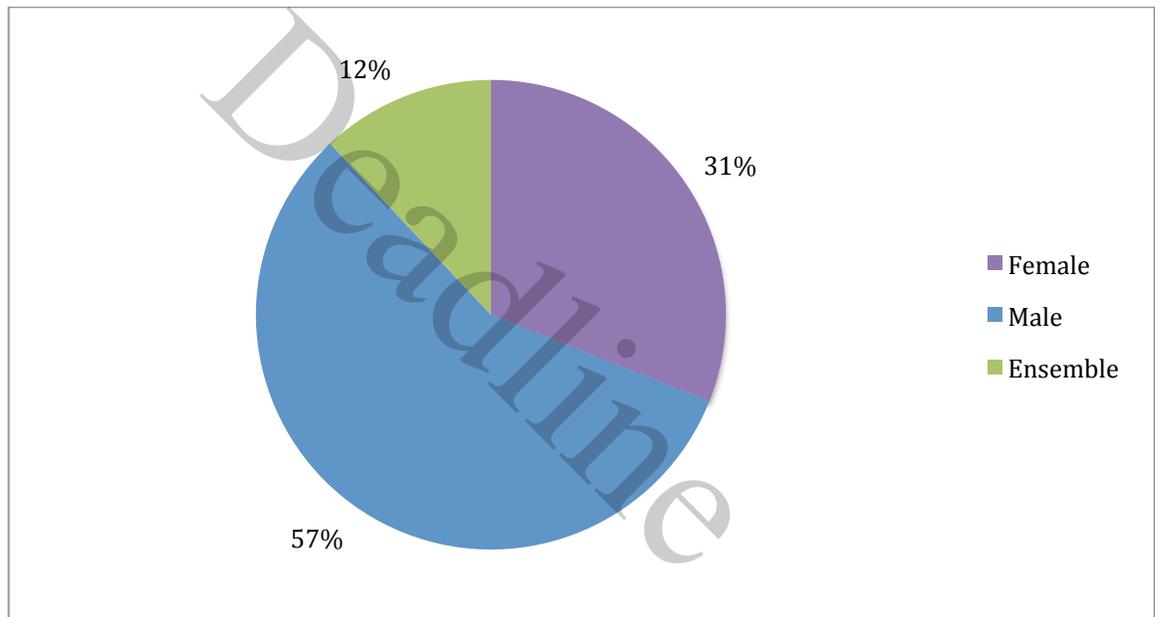
Deadline

Findings / Top Films at the Box Office

Female and Male Characters

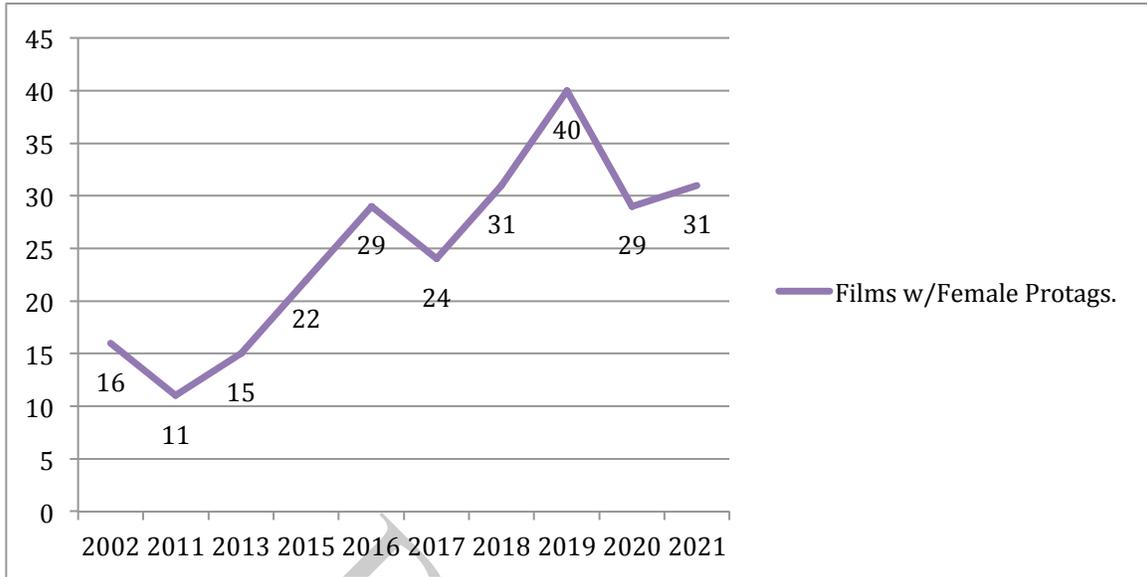
The percentage of U.S. top grossing films featuring female *protagonists* increased slightly from 29% in 2020 to 31% in 2021. 57% of films featured male protagonists, and 12% had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (see Figure 1). For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

Figure 1. Percentages of Top Grossing Films Featuring Females, Males and Ensembles as Protagonists in Top Grossing Films



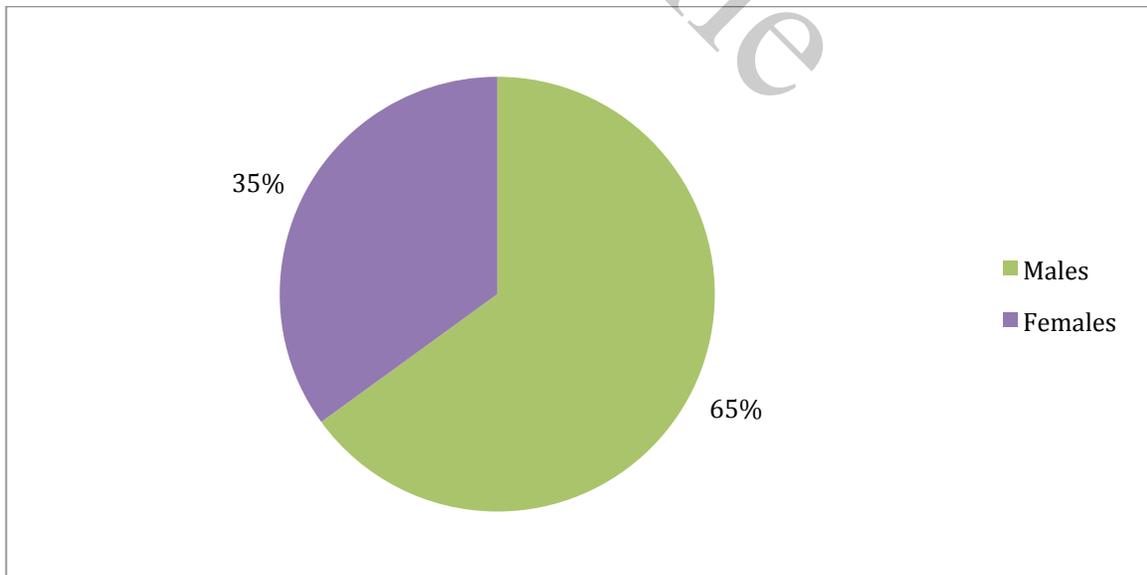
The percentage of female protagonists in 2021 remains well below the 40% achieved in 2019 but is even with the percentage reached in 2018 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Historical Comparison of Top Grossing Films with Female Protagonists



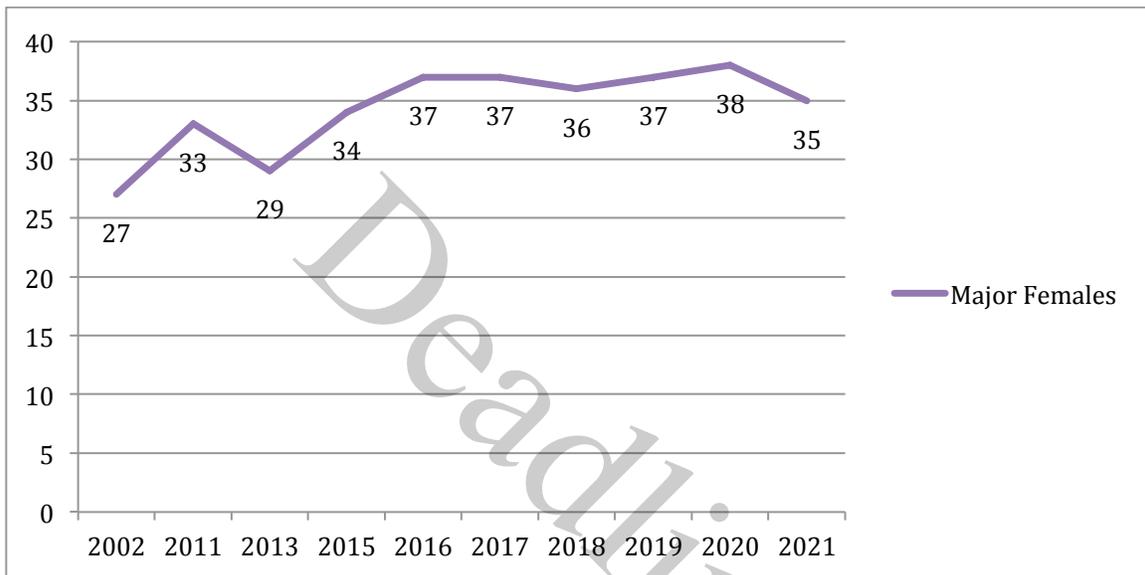
In 2021, females accounted for 35% of *major characters* (see Figure 3). This represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 38% in 2020. Males comprised 65% of major characters. For the purposes of this study, major characters appear in more than one scene and are instrumental to the action of the story.

Figure 3. Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters in Top Grossing Films



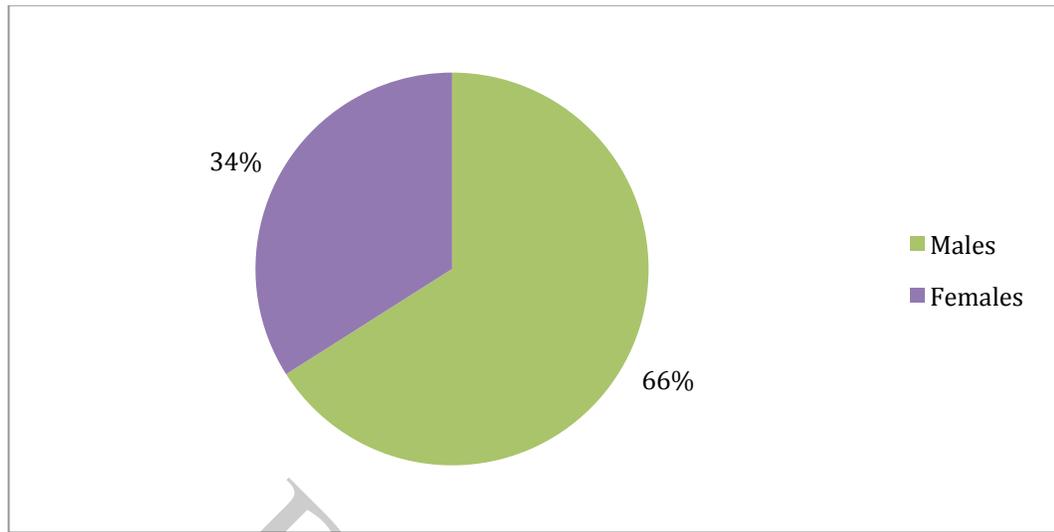
The percentage of female characters remains below the 38% achieved in 2020 (see Figure 4). As the figure illustrates, the percentage of females as major characters has been relatively stable since 2015, increasing or decreasing by 1 to 3 percentage points from year to year.

Figure 4. Historical Comparison of Percentages of Females as Major Characters in Top Grossing Films



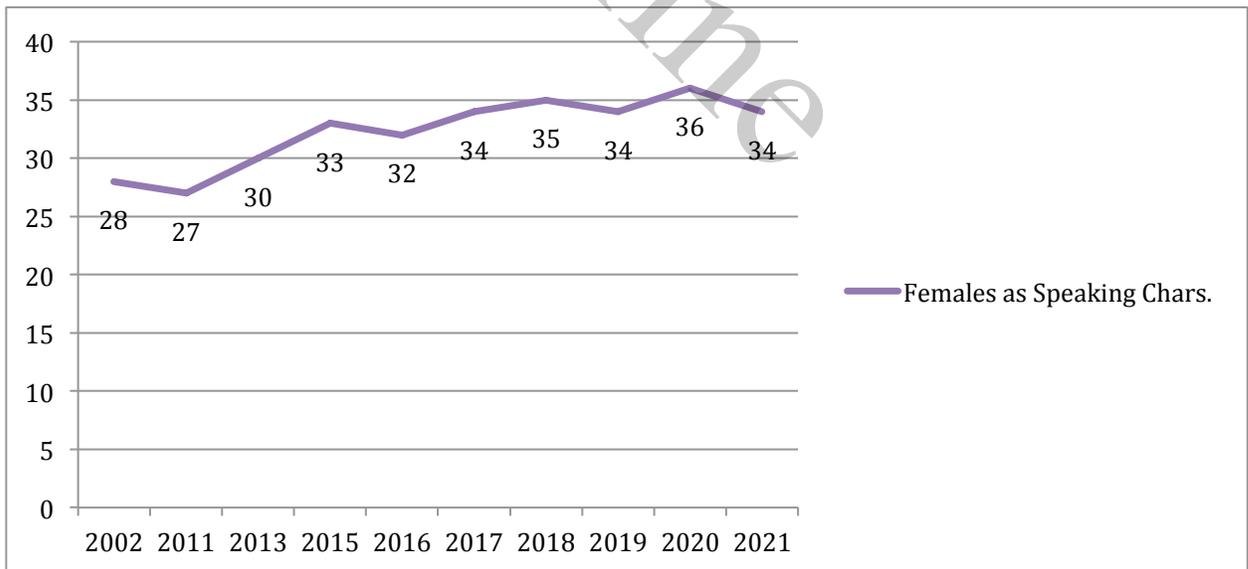
Females made up 34% of all *speaking characters*, a decline of 2 percentage points from 36% in 2020. Males accounted for 66% of speaking characters (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters in Top Grossing Films



The percentage of female characters in speaking roles in 2021 is even with the percentage achieved in 2019 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Historical Comparison of Females as Speaking Characters in Top Grossing Films



An astounding 85% of films featured more male than female characters. Only 7% of films had more female than male characters. 8% of films featured equal numbers of female and male characters.

14% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 53% had 5 to 9 females, and 32% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 4% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in speaking roles, 21% had 5 to 9 males, and 74% had 10 or more males.

Female protagonists were most likely to appear in dramas (36%), followed by horror features (21%), animated features (18%), action features (14%), comedies (7%), and documentaries (4%). Male protagonists were most likely to appear in dramas (35%), followed by action features (22%), animated features (12%), science fiction features (10%), horror features (8%), comedy features (8%), other genres (4%), and documentaries (2%).

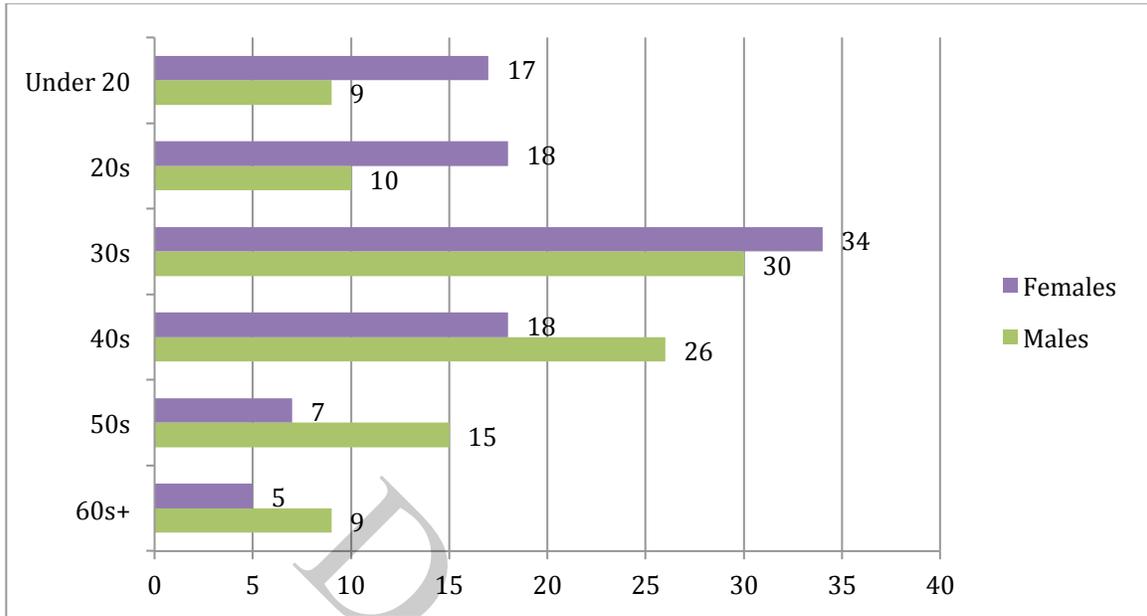
Demographic Characteristics

Female characters were younger than their male counterparts (see Figure 7). A higher percentage of female characters than male characters were in their 20s (18% females, 10% males). Male characters were more likely than females to be 40 or over (50% males, 30% females).

Female characters experienced a precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s (34% to 18%). Male characters also experienced a decline but it was not as dramatic (30% to 26%). Male characters experienced a more substantial decline in numbers from their 40s (26%) to their 50s (15%).

There were almost twice as many male characters as female characters aged 60 and over. 5% 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

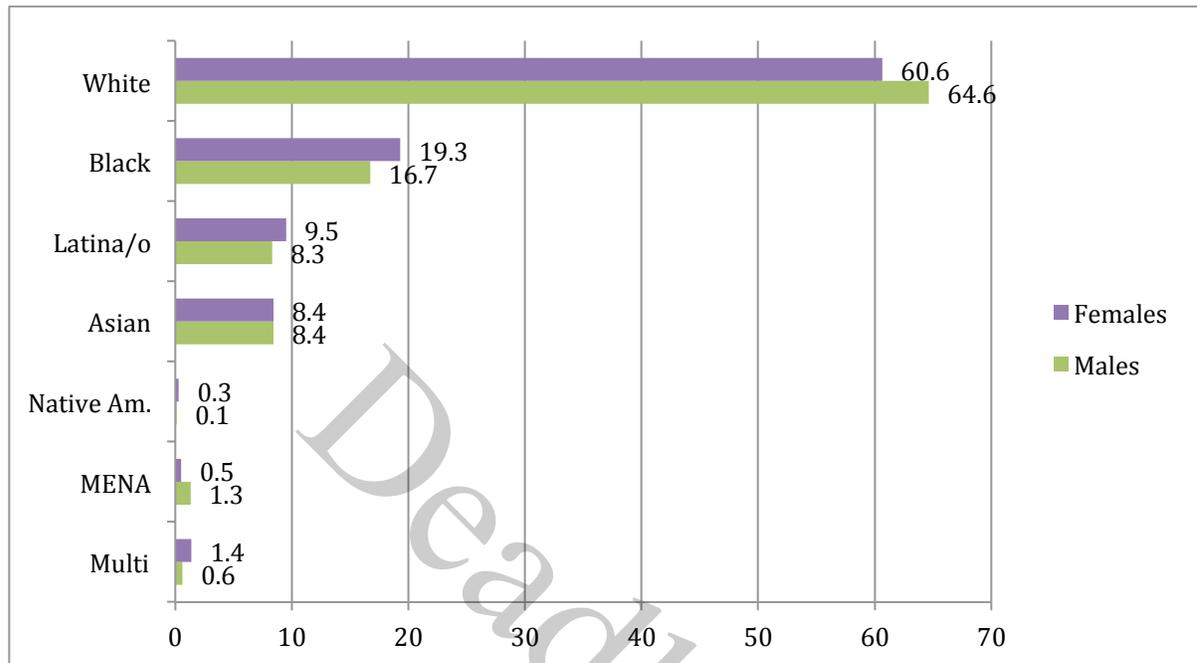


Findings for *major female characters* are similar to the findings for all females in speaking roles. Major female characters were younger than major male characters. 20% of major female characters were in their 20s, whereas only 10% of major male characters were in their 20s. 30% of major female characters but 55% of major male characters were in their 40s and older. The percentage of female characters declined dramatically from their 30s (33%) to their 40s (18%). The percentage of major male characters actually increased from 25% in their 30s to 28% in their 40s. There were almost twice as many major male characters (11%) as female characters (6%) aged 60 and above.

In 2021, 60.6% of *female characters in speaking roles* were White (down from 71.0% in 2020), 19.3% were Black (up from 16.9% in 2020), 9.5% were Latina (up from 5.8% in 2020), 8.4% were Asian or Asian American (up from 6% in 2020), 0.3% were Native American, 0.5 were MENA, and 1.4% were of multiple races or ethnicities. 64.6% of *male characters in speaking roles* were White (down from 73.4% in 2020), 16.7% were Black (up slightly from 16.0% in 2020), 8.3% were Latino (up from 6.0% in 2020), 8.4% were Asian or Asian American (up from 3.9% in 2020), 0.1% were Native

American, 1.3% were MENA*, and 0.6% were of multiple races/ethnicities (see Figure 8).

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.

When the limited number of films centered on Latina/Latino characters -- including *Encanto*, *West Side Story*, *Spirit Untamed*, *Cry Macho* and *In the Heights* -- were excluded from the analysis, the percentage of Latina characters in speaking roles fell from 9.5% to 5.7%, and the percentage of Latino characters declined from 8.3% to 6.1%. The resulting numbers were approximately even with the percentages from 2020 (5.8% females, 6.0% males). In other words, a handful of films featuring larger numbers of Latina/Latino characters were responsible for the gains experienced by Latina/o characters in 2021.

When the limited number of films centered on Asian and Asian American characters -- including *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *Minari*, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, and *Mortal Combat* -- were excluded from the analysis, the percentage of

Asian and Asian American female characters in speaking roles fell from 8.4% to 5.9%. The percentage of Asian and Asian American male characters declined from 8.4% to 6.4%. While the exclusion of a few films reduced the representation of Asian and Asian American females in 2021 films to 2020 levels, the percentage of male characters remained above 2020 levels. In 2020, Asian and Asian American characters comprised 3.9% of all male characters. In 2021, even with the exclusion of films centered on these characters, Asian and Asian Americans accounted for 6.4% of male characters.

In 2021, 57.6% of *major female characters* were White (down from 74.4% in 2020), 16.4% were Black (up from 13.2% in 2020), 12.8% were Latina (up from 5.7% in 2020), 10.0% were Asian or Asian American (up from 5.7% in 2020), 0.4% were Native American, 0.0% were MENA, and 2.8% were of multiple races/ethnicities. 64.3% of *major male characters* were White (down from 71.3% in 2020), 17.0% were Black (up slightly from 16.5% in 2020), 6.8% were Latino (down slightly from 7.0% in 2020), 10.2% were Asian and Asian American (up from 4.1% in 2020), 0.4% were Native American, 0.4% were MENA, and 0.9% were of multiple races/ethnicities.

When the limited number of films centered on Latina/Latino characters were excluded from the analysis, the percentage of Latina characters in *major roles* fell from 12.8% to 5.3%, slightly below the 5.7% achieved in 2020. The percentage of major Latino characters declined from 6.8% to 6.5%, slightly below the 7.0% achieved in 2020. These findings suggest that Latinas in major roles were concentrated in a few films, rather than being integrated in a wide variety of films.

When the limited number of films centered on Asian and Asian American characters were excluded from the analysis, the percentage of Asian and Asian American females in major roles fell from 10.0% to 6.7%, up slightly from 5.7% in 2020. The percentage of Asian and Asian American males fell from 10.2% to 7.3%, above the 4.1% achieved in 2020. These findings suggest that much of the increase for Asian and Asian American females is due to their roles in a few films. The percentage of Asian and Asian American males in major characters does not appear to be as dependent on their roles in a limited number of Asian and Asian American centered narratives.

Female characters in speaking roles were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 44% of female characters but 35% of male characters had a known marital status. Similarly, *major female characters* were more likely than males to have a known marital status (71% females, 65% males).

A larger percentage of *male than female characters in speaking roles* had an identifiable occupation. 77% of male characters but 61% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation. Similarly, *major male characters* were more likely than major females to have an identifiable occupation (83% males, 66% females).

A larger percentage of *male than female characters in speaking roles* were seen at work, actually working (65% of males, 47% of females). Similarly, a larger percentage of *major male than female characters* were seen at work, actually working (71% 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, 32% of females). Female characters were more likely than males to have primarily personal life-related goals (40% of females, 24% of males). The findings are similar for *major characters*, with males being more likely than females to have primarily work-related goals (males 33%, females 21%). *Major female characters* were more likely than males to have primarily personal life-related goals (females 55%, males 34%).

In addition, *male characters were more likely than females in speaking roles* to have anti-social goals such as fighting and crime (18% males, 9% females). This is also true for *characters in major roles* (males 23%, females 12%).

Male characters were more likely than females in speaking roles to be seen in primarily work-related roles (64% males, 43% females). Female characters were more likely than males to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (49% females, 29% males). The findings were similar for *major characters* with male characters more likely

than females to be seen primarily in work-related roles (53% males, 32% females). *Major female characters* were more likely to be seen in primarily personal roles (45%) than major male characters (29%).

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 57% 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 41% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 33% of major characters.

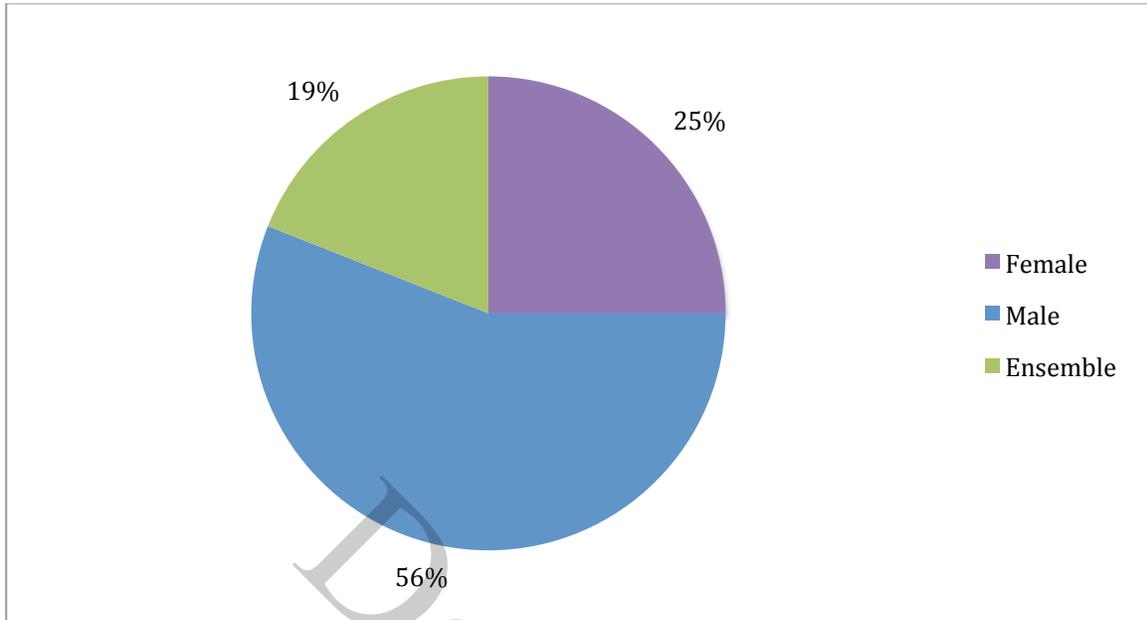
In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 38% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of all speaking characters.

Findings / Films Watched at Home

Female and Male Characters

In 2021, 25% of films watched at home featured female *protagonists*. This is below the 31% featured on top grossing films. 56% of films featured male protagonists, and 19% had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (see Figure 9).

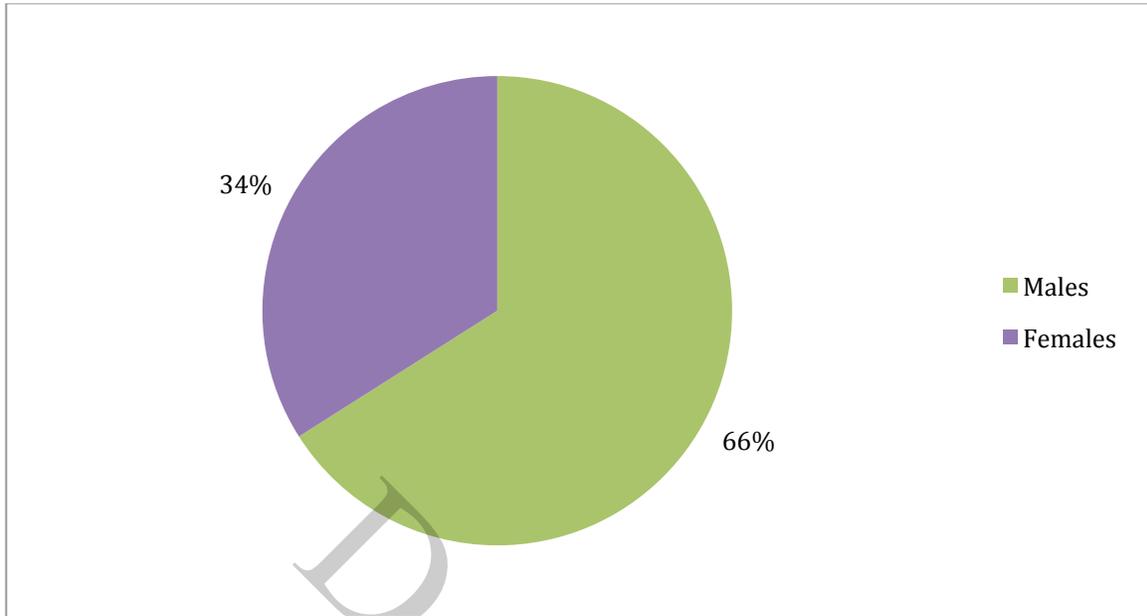
Figure 9. Percentages of Films Featuring Females, Males, and Ensembles as Protagonists in Watched at Home Films



For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told.

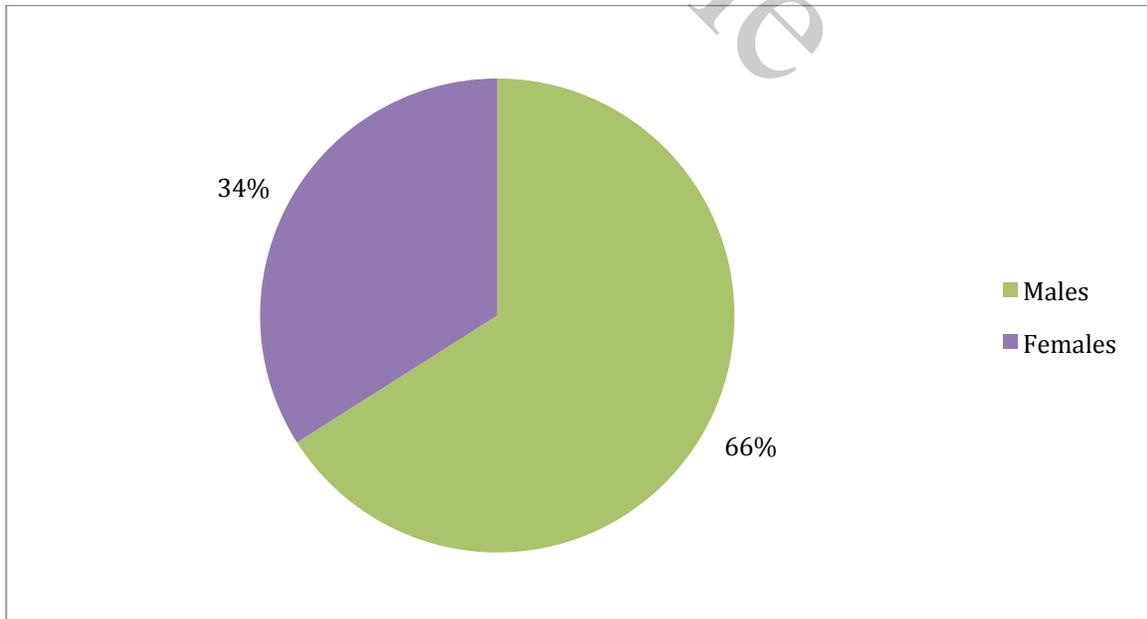
Females accounted for 34% of *major characters* in watched at home films, just 1 percentage point below the 35% achieved on top grossing films (see Figure 10). Males comprised 66% of major characters. For the purposes of this study, major characters appear in more than one scene and are instrumental to the action of the story.

Figure 10. Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters in Watched at Home Films



Females comprised 34% of all *speaking characters* in watched at home films in 2021, the same as in top grossing films (see Figure 11). Males accounted for 66% of speaking characters.

Figure 11. Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters in Watched at Home Films



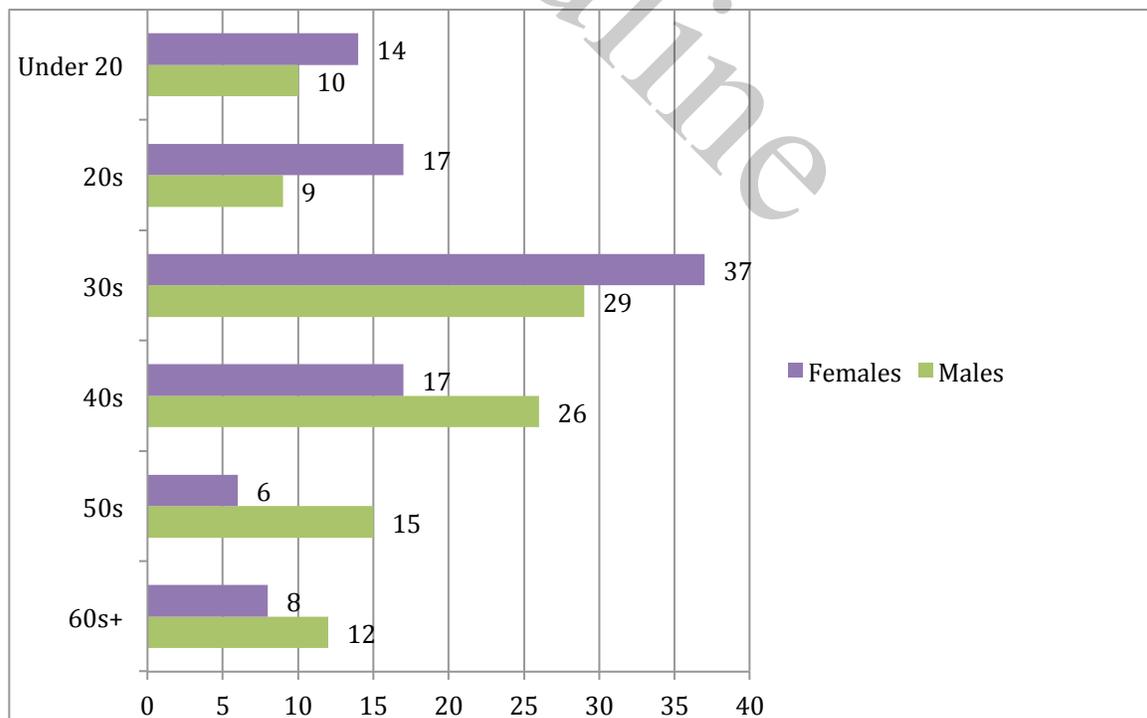
19% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 51% had 5 to 9 females, and 30% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 4% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in speaking roles, 26% had 5 to 9 males, and 70% had 10 or more males.

Demographic Characteristics

Female characters in speaking roles were younger than their male counterparts (see Figure 12). A higher percentage of female characters than male characters were in their 20s (17% females, 9% males) and 30s (37% females, 29% males). Male characters were more likely than females to be 40 or over (53% males, 31% females).

Female characters experienced a precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s (37% to 17%). The percentage of males also declined but it was not as dramatic (29% to 26%). Male characters experience a more substantial decline in numbers from their 40s (26%) to their 50s (15%). There were more male characters than female characters aged 60 and over. 8% of female and 12% of male characters were in their 60s or older.

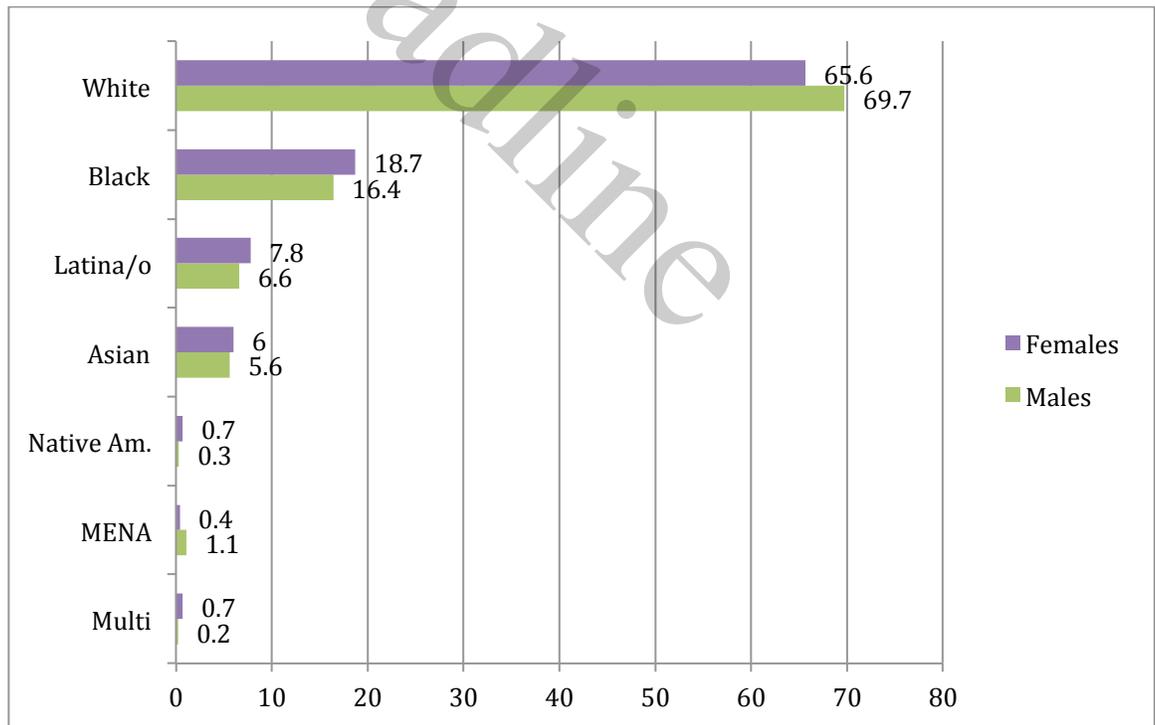
Figure 12. Comparison of Ages for Female and Male Characters in Watched at Home Films



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. 21% of major female characters but only 11% of major male characters were in their 20s. 30% of major female characters were in their 40s and older, whereas 53% of major male characters were in in their 40s and older. 8% of major female characters but 12% of major male characters were 60 and older.

In 2021, 65.6% of *female characters in speaking roles* were White, 18.7% were Black, 7.8% were Latina, 6.0% were Asian or Asian American, 0.7% were Native American, 0.4% were MENA*, and 0.7% were of multiple races/ethnicities. 69.7% of *male characters in speaking roles* were White, 16.4% were Black, 6.6% were Latino, 5.6% were Asian or Asian American, 0.3% were Native American, 1.1% were MENA, and 0.2% were of multiple races/ethnicities (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female and Male Characters in Watched at Home 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.

67.0% of *major female characters* were White, 17.2% were Black, 7.2% were Latina, 6.3% were Asian or Asian American, 0.9% were Native American, 0.0% were MENA, and 1.4% were of multiple races/ethnicities. 67.1% of *major male characters* were White, 17.4% were Black, 6.5% were Latino, 7.4% were Asian or Asian American, 0.7% were Native American, 0.5% were MENA, and 0.5% were of multiple races/ethnicities.

Female characters in speaking roles were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 43% of female characters but 34% of male characters had a known marital status. *Major female characters* were also more likely than male characters (72% females, 67% males) to have a known marital status.

A larger proportion of *male than female characters in speaking roles* had an identifiable occupation. 73% of male characters but 56% of female characters had an identifiable job or occupation. *Major male characters* were also more likely than major female characters to have an identifiable occupation (80% males, 58% females).

A larger proportion of *male than female characters in speaking roles* were seen at work, actually working (60% males, 40% females). Similarly, more *major male than female characters* were seen at work, actually working (67% males, 43% females).

Goals and Roles

Male characters were more likely than females in speaking roles to have primarily work-related goals (42% males, 29% females). Female characters were more likely than males to have primarily personal life-related goals (46% females, 27% males). Similarly, *major male characters* were more likely than *major females* to have primarily work-related goals (31% males, 17% females). Major female characters were more likely than major male characters to have personal life-related goals (63% females, 38% males).

In addition, *male characters were more likely than females in speaking roles* to have anti-social goals such as fighting and crime (20% males, 9% females). Similarly, *major male characters* were more likely to have anti-social goals than major female characters (24% males, 12% females).

Male characters in speaking roles were more likely than females to be seen in primarily work-related roles (60% males, 39% females). *Female characters in speaking roles* were more likely than males to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (55% females, 34% males). Similarly, *major male characters* were more likely than females to be seen in primarily work-related roles (50% vs. 28%). *Major female characters* were more likely than *major male characters* to be seen in personal life-related roles (54% vs. 33%).

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 44% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 18% of protagonists.

In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 39% of major characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of major characters.

In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 39% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of all speaking characters.