

# It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing Films of 2019

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The percentage of top grossing films featuring female *protagonists* rose from 31% in 2018 to 40% in 2019, reaching a recent historic high. 43% of films featured male protagonists, and 17% had ensembles or a combination of male and female protagonists (see Figure 1).

In 2019, females accounted for 37% of *major characters*. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 36% in 2018. Males comprised 63% of major characters (see Figure 2).

Females made up 34% of all *speaking characters*, a decrease of 1 percentage point from 35% in 2018. Males accounted for 66% of speaking characters. Overall, audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters in the top grossing films of 2019 (see Figure 3).

The following summary reports the findings of a content analysis of over 2,300 characters appearing in the 100 top domestic grossing films of 2019. This report provides historical comparisons from last year with figures dating back to 2002. Overall, this analysis considers the representation of more than 20,000 characters appearing in approximately 900 films.

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

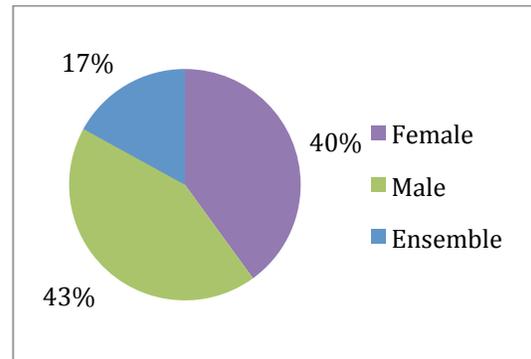


Figure 2. Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters

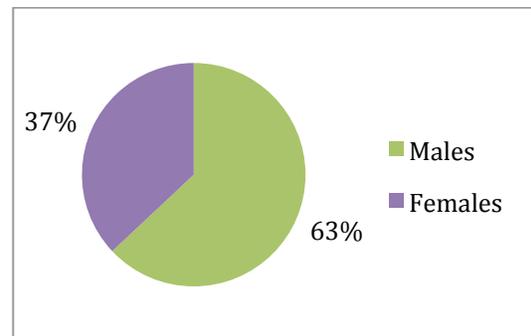
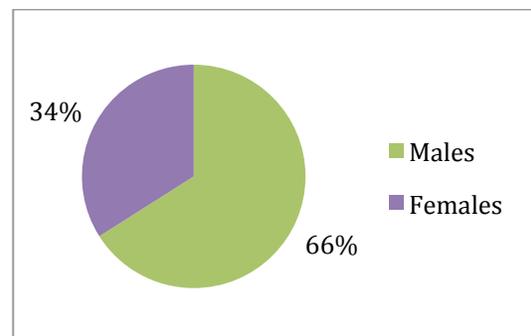


Figure 3. Percentages of Females and Males as Speaking Characters



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 roles and leadership positions 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.

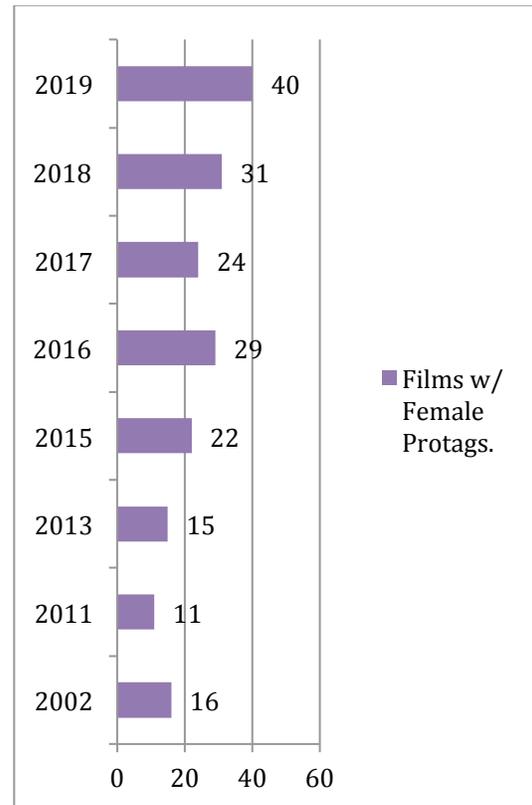
#### *Findings/ Female and Male Characters*

- In 2019, the percentage of top grossing films featuring female protagonists rose 9 percentage points from 31% to 40% (see Figure 4). This represents a recent historic high. 43% of films featured male protagonists, and 17% 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.

- Sole female protagonists were almost as likely to appear in studio features as in independent features in 2019. 45% of female protagonists appeared in studio features and 55% appeared in independent features. This marks a shift from 2018 when females were more than twice as likely to appear in independent features as studio features (68% vs. 32%).

In comparison, sole male protagonists were more likely to appear in studio features (57%) than in independent features (43%) in 2019.

*Figure 4. Historical Comparison of Films with Female Protagonists*



- Female protagonists were most likely to appear in horror features (26%), followed by dramas (24%), comedies (21%), action features (16%), science fiction features (8%), and animated features (5%). Male protagonists were most likely to appear in action features (26%), followed by dramas (24%), animated features (21%), comedies (14%), horror features (12%), and science fiction features (2%).

- Females accounted for 37% of *major* characters (see Figure 5). This represents a slight increase of 1 percentage point from 36% in 2018, but is even with the percentage achieved in 2017. Males comprised 63% of major characters. For the purposes of this

Figure 5. Historical Comparison of Percentages of Females and Males as Major Characters

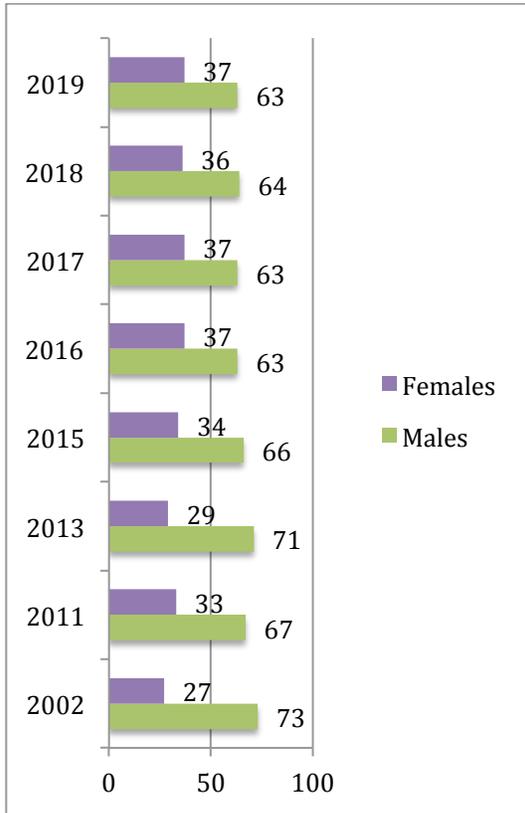
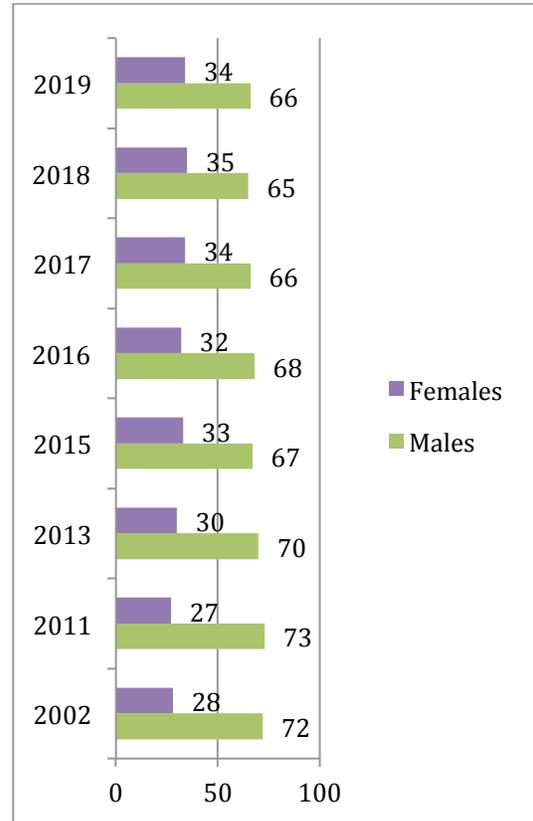


Figure 6. Historical Comparison of Female and Male Characters as Speaking Characters



study, major characters appear in more than one scene and are instrumental to the action of the story.

- Females comprised 34% of all *speaking characters* in 2019 (see Figure 6). This represents a slight decrease of 1 percentage point from 35% in 2018. Males accounted for 66% of speaking characters. Overall, audiences were almost twice as likely to see male characters as female characters.

- 16% of films featured 0 to 4 female characters in speaking roles, 48% had 5 to 9 females, and 36% had 10 or more females. In contrast, 6% of films featured 0 to 4 male characters in

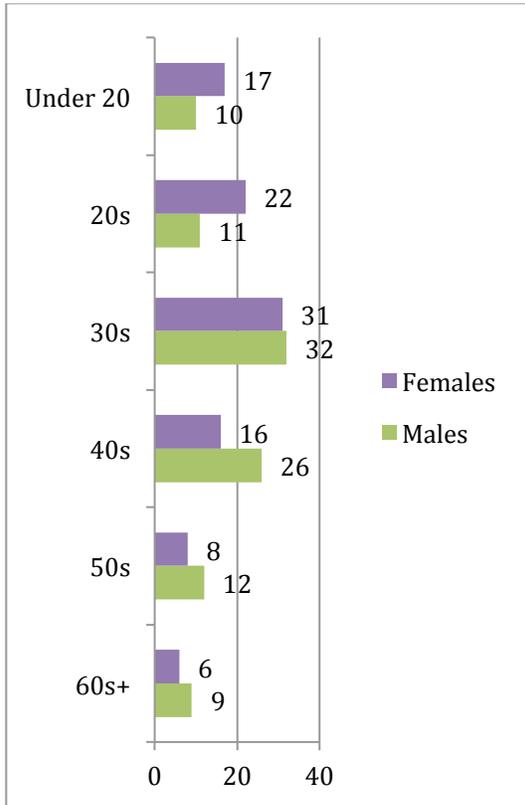
speaking roles, 16% had 5 to 9 males, and 77% had 10 or more males.

#### Findings/Demographic Characteristics

- Female characters remained younger than their male counterparts (see Figure 7). The majority of female characters were in their 20s (22%) and 30s (31%). The majority of male characters were in their 30s (32%) and 40s (26%).

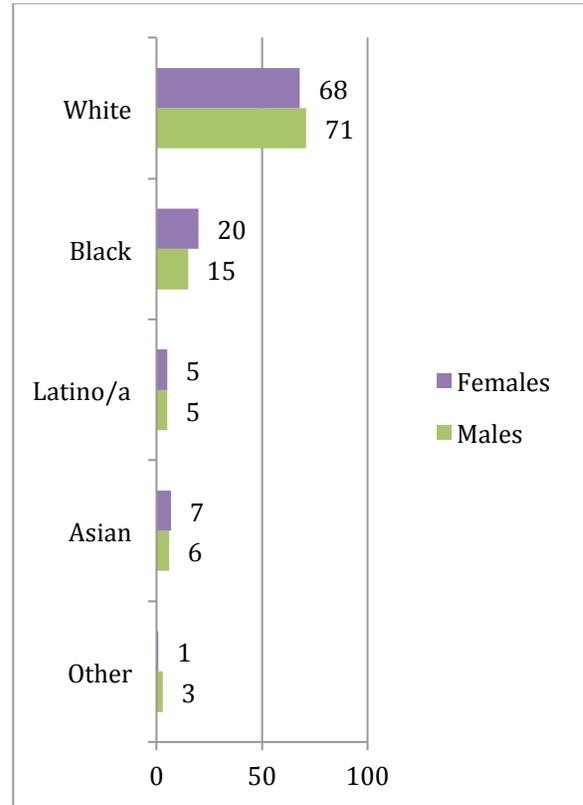
- Males 40 and over accounted for 47% of all male characters. Females 40 and over comprised 30% of all female characters.

Figure 7. Comparison of Ages for Female and Male Characters



- 17% of females were under 20, 22% were in their 20s, 31% were in their 30s, 16% were in their 40s, 8% were in their 50s, and 6% were in their 60s or older.
- 10% of males were under 20, 11% were in their 20s, 32% were in their 30s, 26% were in their 40s, 12% were in their 50s, and 9% 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. 21% of *major* female characters were under 20, 22% were in their 20s, 27% were in their 30s, 14% were in their 40s, 8% were in their 50s, and 9% were in their 60s. In both samples, female characters experience a

Figure 8. Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female and Male Characters



- precipitous drop from their 30s to their 40s, and few women age into their 60s.
- For comparison, *major* male characters experience a drop from their 40s into their 50s. 12% of *major* male characters were 19 and under, 12% were in their 20s, 26% were in their 30s, 25% were in their 40s, 14% were in their 50s, and 12% were in their 60s.
- In 2019, 68% of all female characters with speaking roles were White, 20% were Black, 5% were Latina, 7% were Asian, and 1% were of some other race or ethnicity (see Figure 8). 71% of all male characters were White, 15% were Black, 5% were Latino, 6% were Asian, and 3% were of some other race or ethnicity.

- 68% of all female characters were White in 2019. This represents an increase of 3 percentage points from 65% in 2018 and is even with the percentage from 2017 (see Figure 9).

- 20% of all female characters were Black in 2019. This represents a slight decline of 1 percentage point from 21% in 2018.

- 5% of all female characters were Latina in 2019. This represents a slight increase of 1 percentage point from 4% in 2018.

- 7% of all female characters were Asian in 2019. This represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 10% in 2018, and is even with the level achieved in 2017. It should be noted that the increase in 2018 was due largely to one film, *Crazy Rich Asians*.

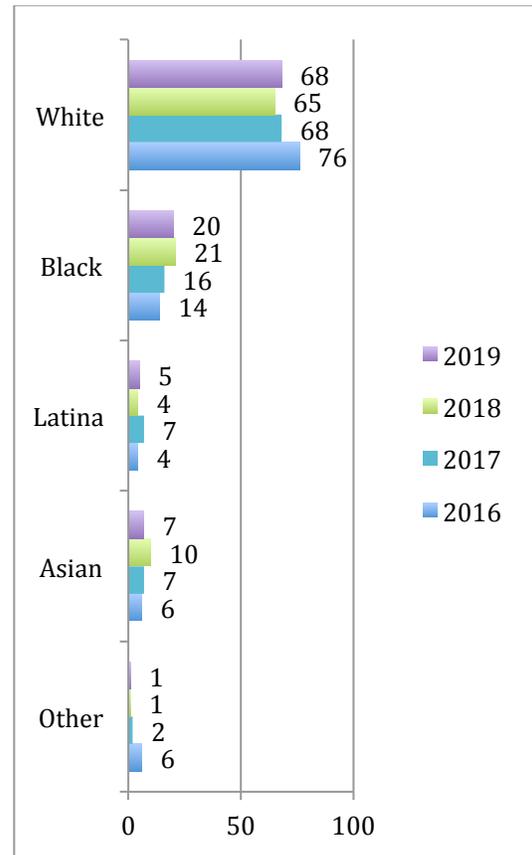
- In 2019, 70% of *major* female characters were white, 18% were Black, 6% were Latina, and 5% were Asian.

- Female characters were more likely than male characters to have a known marital status. 46% of female characters but 34% 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 61% 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. 43%).

Figure 9. Historical Comparison of Race/Ethnicity for Female Characters



### Findings/Roles and Leadership

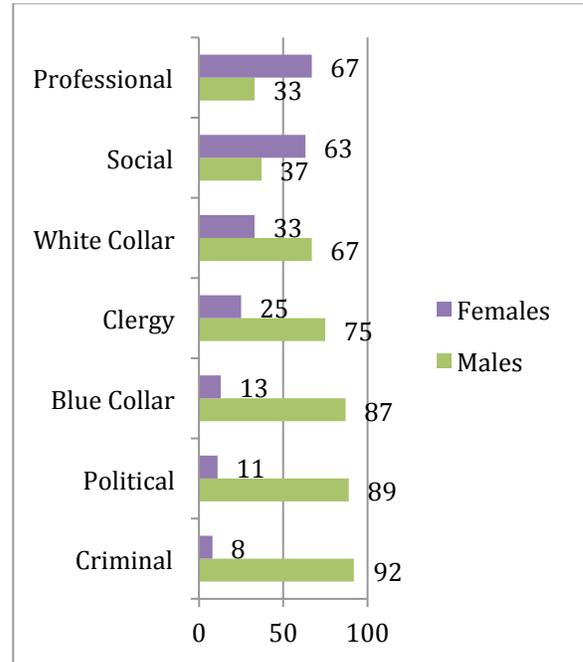
- Male characters were more likely than females to be seen in primarily work-related roles (60% vs. 40%). Female characters were more likely than males to be seen in primarily personal life-related roles (52% vs. 34%).

- Overall, 5% of characters were leaders. For the purposes of this study, leaders are those individuals occupying a leadership position in an organization, government or group and whose instructions and/or behaviors are followed by two or more other characters.

- Females comprised 26% of leaders, while males accounted for 74% of leaders. Females were more likely than men to be portrayed as leaders in two groups, as professionals (ex., doctor or lawyer) and as social leaders (ex., leaders in a neighborhood). Females were least likely to be portrayed as political leaders or leaders of criminal groups.

- Females were most likely to be leaders in professional jobs (67% vs. males 33%), followed by social leaders (63% vs. males 37%), white collar leaders (33% vs. males 67%), religious/spiritual leaders (25% vs. males 75%), blue collar leaders (13% vs. males 87%), political leaders (11% vs. male 89%), and criminal leaders (8% vs. males 92%) (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Comparison of Female and Male Characters Portrayed as Leaders

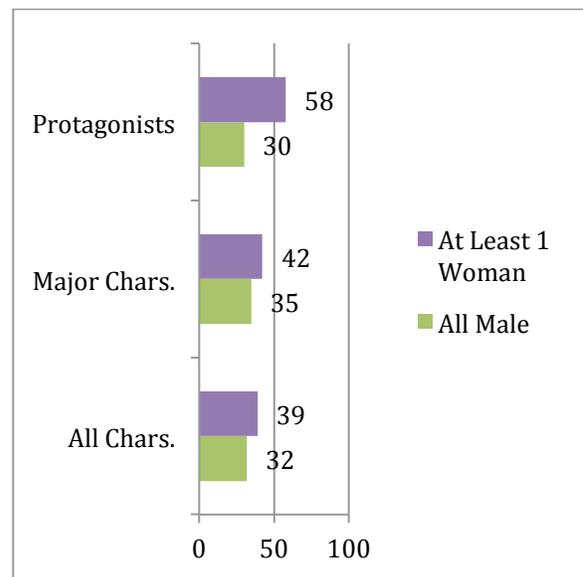


*Findings/Behind-the-Scenes Employment and On-Screen Representation*

- 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 58% of protagonists. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 30% of protagonists (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. 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



•In films with at least one woman director and/or writer, females comprised 42% 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 39% of all speaking characters. In films with exclusively male directors and/or writers, females accounted for 32% of all speaking characters.

*Figures based on top grossing films as rated by Box Office Mojo, January 1, 2020.*

*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.*

*Characters classified as leaders are those individuals who occupy a leadership position in an organization, government or group and whose instructions and/or behaviors are followed by two or more other characters.*