Gender Oppression in Cinematic Content?
A Look at Females On-Screen & Behind-the-Camera in Top-Grossing 2007 Films

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The aim of this research is to examine the status of females in 100 top-grossing films in 2007. We completed three investigations, each applying a different lens to look at gender roles in motion picture content. Study 1 examined the prevalence and nature of male and female speaking characters across the 100 films. Study 2 looked at the biological sex of behind-the-scenes workers and assessed the relationship between gender of industry worker and gender of speaking character. We looked at female protagonists in depth in study 3. Here, we sum across the studies and provide the main findings.

Key Findings

#1 Females in Film Do Not Represent 'Half the Cinematic Sky'[1]

Only 29.9% of the 4,379 speaking characters[2] coded across the 100 films in study 1 are female. These findings are strikingly similar to the results we found examining over 15,000 speaking characters (27% are female) in 400 G, PG, PG-13, and R rated films[3] released between 1990 and 2006 as well as 6,833 speaking characters (27.3% are female) in 150 Academy Award® Best Picture nominated films from 1977 to 2006.[4]

Table 1
Occupational Title by Employee Sex for 100 Top-Grossing 2007 Films

|	Males	Females	Total
Directors	97.3% (*n*=109)	2.7% (*n*=3)	112
Writers	88.8% (*n*=278)	11.2% (*n*=35)	313
Producers	79.5% (*n*=674)	20.5% (*n*=174)	848
Total	83% (*n*=1,061)	17% (*n*=212)	1,273
Ratio	5.00	1	

Turning from all speaking characters to protagonists, we see even fewer girls/women on-screen. Less than a fifth of the films in the sample (*n*=18) featured a solo female as the main character. One reason for the lack of gender symmetry on-screen may be the biological sex of behind-the-camera content creators. Study 2 showed that males are

overwhelmingly the directors, writers, and producers of the top-grossing films in 2007. Only 2.7% of directors (*n*=3), 11.2% of writers (*n*=35), and 20.5% of producers (*n*=174) are women (see Table 1). Stated differently, 17% (*n*=212) of all (*n*=1,273) directors, writers and producers are women. This calculates into a ratio of 5 males to every 1 female in these revered jobs, revealing that employment in the upper echelons of movie making is anything but a "fempire."[5] As women inhabit these prestigious posts, we may begin to witness a representational sea change on-screen. This was our major finding from study 2, which we turn to now.

#2 Behind-the-Scenes Females are Small in Number but may be Large in Influence

Biological sex of industry worker is associated with on-screen portrayals of character gender (see Figure 1). Films with at least one female director depicted significantly more girls and women on-screen (44.6%, *n*=70) than did those with only male directors (29.3%, *n*=1,238).[6] These findings should be interpreted with caution, as only three films featured a female director. However, we observed a similar interaction between director biological sex and character sex in our research on Academy Award® Best Picture nominated films from 1977 to 2006.[7] In that study, films with at least one female director had significantly more girls/women on-screen (41.2%) than did those films with only male directors at the helm (26.8%).

Figure 1
Percent of Female Characters by Presence of Female(s) Behind-the-Scenes


% of female characters
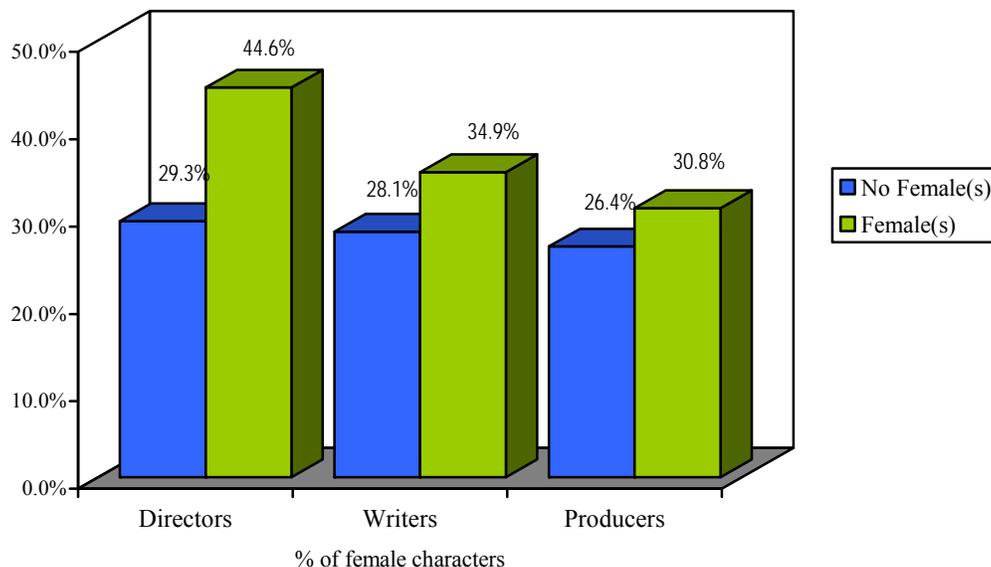
A similar but less pronounced pattern is detected for writer sex, with films featuring one or more female screenwriters depicting a higher percentage of females on-screen (34.9%, *n*=397) than films featuring only male screenwriters (28.1%, *n*=911).[8] Sex of the producer also is associated with gender representation on the silver screen. Films produced by one or more females showed a slightly higher percentage of female characters on-screen (30.8%, *n*=1,069) than did those films produced by males only

(26.4%, *n*=239).[9] These findings suggest that b-t-s women may represent what M. Gladwell[10] refers to as the "law of the few" in the film industry, those females that shape shift on-screen portrayals of gender as they infiltrate above-the-line ranks.

#3 Females not only Lack Equity On Screen, But Sometimes They're Eye Candy

Our results revealed that on-screen females sometimes function as eye candy. In specific, female characters are more likely than their male counterparts to be depicted wearing revealing outfits (27% vs. 4.6%), exposing skin (21.8% vs. 6.6%), thin (32% vs. 8.5%), and as physically attractive (18.5% vs. 5.4%).[11] We have found similar trends in our other research. Across the aforementioned 400 film study,[12] 21.3% of females wore sexualized attire and 33.5% were thin. The findings for males on these variables were 3.9% and 11.9% respectively. These trends, combined with the fact that females tend to be younger in motion picture content than males,[13] reinforce standards and practices of lookism in the industry.

Figure 2
Appearance Indicators by Character Gender
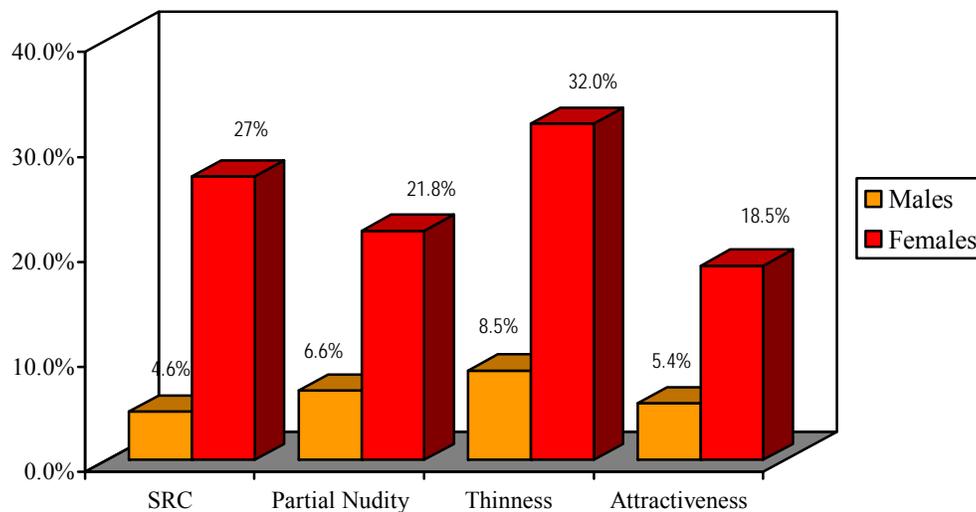
#4 Female Protagonists Lives are Messy and Multidimensional

When we examined on-screen female protagonists, however, a less sexualized scenario emerged. Although many of the females pursued love and romance (88.8%), the lion share of main characters (44.4%, *n*=8) are on heroic journeys fighting institutional racism, community crime, and local/global paranormal activity. These gals had little time to hook up with their male counterparts. As such, romance was relegated to the back seat in many of the female-driven properties. It appears that when our main characters are lost (*n*=6), many turn to a man or an employment path to fill their void. Overall, the female protagonists in the sample represent a multi-dimensional mix of strong and weak, lost and found, and heroic and villainous.

In sum, females are infrequent in film – whether it is on-screen, behind-the-camera, or as the protagonist pushing the plot. The solution to this imbalance seems to lie within the industry itself. Films featuring women working as directors, writers, or producers are associated with higher percentages of girls and women on the silver screen than those films with only men in these sacrosanct positions. Future research should explore women's experiences in film -- both on-screen and behind-the-camera -- as well as the relationship between the biological sex of studio executives and portrayals of character gender in cinematic content.

Endnotes

[1] Kristof, N. D., & WuDunn, S. (2009). *Half the Sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide.* New York: Random House.

[2] Only characters that spoke one or more words discernibly on-screen (or were named) were coded in study 1. For more information on the study including the methodology, sample of films coded, and training/reliability, see the full report.

[3] Smith, S.L., & Cook, C. A. (2008). *Gender stereotypes: An analysis of popular films and TV.* Los Angeles, CA: The Geena Davis Institute for Gender and Media.

[4] Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Granados, A. & Erickson, S. (2008). *Asymmetrical Academy Awards? A look at gender imbalance in best picture nominated films from 1977-2006.* http://annenberg.usc.edu/Faculty/ Communication/~/media/93914B E9EB5F4C2 795A3169E5ACDB84F.ashx.

[5] Schoenman, D. (March 20, 2009). An entourage of their own. *New York Times*, Fashion & Style. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/fashion/22fempire.html?_r=2

[6] A chi-square test yielded a significant association between *director sex* and *character sex*, $X^2(1)=16.835$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.06$.

[7] Smith, S. L., et al. (2008).

[8] The chi-square test for *writer sex* and *character sex* was significant, $X^2(1)=18.67$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.065$.

[9] Chi-square analysis for *producer sex* and *character sex* was significant, $X^2(1)=6.52$, $p<.05$, $\varphi=.04$.

[10] Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point*: *How little things can make a big difference.* New York: Little, Brown and Company.

[11] For definitions of the appearance indicators, please see the full report. A series of chi-squares were conducted on each of these variables. Significant associations with *character sex* were found across all four of the measures: *sexually revealing clothing*, $X^2(1)=440.06$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.325$; *partial nudity*, $X^2(1)=203.47$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.22$; *thinness*, $X^2(1)=288.99$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.30$; and *physical attractiveness*, $X^2(1)=187.49$, $p<.01$, $\varphi=.21$.

[12] Smith, S.L., & Cook, C. A. (2008).

[13] Smith, S. L., & Granados, A. D. (2009a). Content patterns and effects surrounding sex-role stereotyping on television and film. In J. Bryant & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 342-361). New York: Routledge.