Changing the Status Quo:
Industry Leaders' Perceptions of Gender in Family Films

Executive Summary [*]

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One of our recent studies showed that females were grossly underrepresented across 122 G, PG, and PG-13 films theatrically released between 2006 and 2009.[1] That is, 2.42 male speaking characters appeared to every one female speaking character. What accounts for this gender gap in family films? We sought to answer this question by interviewing 108 male (60.2%) and female (39.8%) content creators (e.g., producers, directors, executives, writers, etc.) about gender in family films.[2] Using a convenience sample and guided by a semi-structured interview format, the participants were asked a variety of open-ended and forced-choice questions pertaining to the representation of males and females in G, PG, and PG-13 rated films. Below, we answer three key questions pertaining to the infrequency of females in film and the likelihood of industry change. Please see the final report for all of the details surrounding the study.[3]

Key Findings

#1 Are Content Creators Aware of Gender Imbalance in G, PG, and PG-13 Rated Films?

The answer to this question is a qualified *yes*. Though quite a few expressed uncertainty surrounding their answers, the average percentage of females estimated in the typical feature film was 30.7%,[4] with female leaders (27.8%) estimating a lower percentage of girls/women on screen than male leaders (32.4%). Our recent study of 122 G, PG, and PG-13 films showed that 29.2% of speaking characters coded were female. Thus, the content creators – on average and when directly asked -- were fairly accurate in their estimates of female speaking characters in family films.

When asked about whether the percentage of female speaking characters had changed in G, PG, and PG-13 films across the last twenty years, many content creators indicated that girls/women on screen had either increased (36.8%) or stayed about the same (48.1%). 15.1 percent stated that the percentage had decreased across the last two decades. According to our own content analytic research evaluating 448 G, PG, and PG-13 films released between 1990 and 2009, the percentage of female speaking characters has only changed 2.4% (see Table 1, last row).[5]

Together, these findings suggest that a large percentage of industry leaders were able to estimate relatively accurately about gender imbalance in family films.

Table 1
Percentage of Female Speaking Characters in G, PG, & PG-13 Film

	1990-95	1996-00	2000-06	2006-09
G	29.9% (*n*=339)	27.4% (*n*=392)	28.7% (*n*=396)	32.6% (*n*=262)
PG	28.3% (*n*=321)	29.8% (*n*=257)	28.1% (*n*=475)	30.0% (*n*=630)
PG-13	26.6% (*n*=143)	28.4% (*n*=399)	25.0% (*n*=590)	27.7% (*n*=730)
Total	28.7%	28.3%	26.9%	29.3%

#2 What Reasons are Given for the Imbalance of Males to Females in Family Films?

We asked content creators why they think that females represent less than 30% of all speaking characters.[6] Six spontaneous reasons emerged (see Table 2). Almost half (49.5%) of the industry leaders mentioned one or two revenue-related reasons, with most (43.7%) focusing on market forces that were positively associated with being male. This could have occurred by centering on the positive qualities or an increase in the quantity of male leads, male stars, or male-driven properties. It may have also been present if the response discussed the proliferation of traditionally male-oriented genres. Conversely, 15.5% of the participants commented on market forces that were negatively associated with being female.

Table 2
Reasons for the Infrequency of Females in Film

Reason	% of Responses
Positive Male Market Forces	43.7%
Male Dominated Industry	32.0%
Male Target Audience	20.4%
Males Resist Females' Stories	17.5%
Negative Female Market Forces	15.5%
Cultural Influence	8.7%

The second most frequently mentioned reason for the lack of female speaking characters in film was the male-dominated nature of the business. Almost a third (32.0%) of the industry leaders spontaneously gave this response, with 31.7% of males in the sample stating this reason and 32.6% of females.

Participants' perceptions regarding the effects of a male-saturated industry is right on point. Across our aforementioned study analyzing 122 G, PG, and PG-13 films theatrically released between 2006 and 2009, only 7% of directors were female, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers.[7] Yet the presence of women behind-the-scenes seems to matter. Films with one or more females in the position of director (female director present=35.1% vs. female director absent=28.8%) or writer (female writer present=36.4% vs. female writer absent=26.0%) had

significantly more female speaking characters on screen than did those films with only male direction or male writing.

The third reason pertained to the target audience of G, PG, and PG-13 cinematic fare: males. A fifth (20.4%) of all industry leaders spontaneously referenced that either 1) males attend movies more frequently than do females, 2) males decide which movies will be seen, or 3) content creators cater to the male audience. 16.7% of males in the sample gave this response whereas 25.6% of females in the sample gave this response.

The reliance on the male audience may have more to do with content rather than movie attendance, however. Some industry leaders believe that female-driven movies may repel the male consumer, which was cited as the fourth reason by 17.5% of the sample. The gender gap was wide on this reason, with a much higher percentage of females (30.2%) than males (8.3%) in the sample stating this explanation. A follow up question later in the survey asked if the "belief that girls will watch stories about boys, but boys won't watch stories about girls" could account for the infrequency of females in film. A full 86.7% responded "yes" and another 10.5% indicated "maybe." These findings suggest that this belief is almost axiomatic among many content creators.

Overall, the results presented above suggest that industry leaders were aware – when directly asked about -- gender imbalance in film and can give reasons for a lop-sided approach to story telling. Given this, we were curious about their thoughts on industry change -- which is the third question answered in this report.

#3 Would Industry Leaders Embrace Changing the Status Quo?

The answer to this question is also a qualified *yes*. We asked content creators to rate and discuss how important it is to achieve gender balance on screen.[8] 95.8 percent indicated that it would be anywhere from "a little bit important" to "extremely important." It must be noted that many of the responses were qualified, with 46.9% of content creators answering the question stressing that gender balance hinges on story "fit." The participants expressed that their primary responsibility is to protect and serve what is best for the story. As such, the issue of gender diversification has to be contingent on the story being told rather than a legislative mandate or an individual's personal agenda about equality.

Three main reasons were given for the importance of balancing the number of males to females in casts. First, 32.3% of individuals answering the question stated that gender balance is important because it reflects reality. Second, 15.6% indicated that it is important for females to be visible stressing a range of roles, casts, and storylines and/or the potential impact this may have on viewers. Some of these responses focused on leads, suggesting that salient roles are more important to diversify or increase in number rather than simply balancing background characters. Last, 10.4% of participants indicated equality was a reason for balancing males-to-females in G, PG, and PG-13 rated family films.

The industry leaders were also asked to rate how difficult it would be to balance males to females in G, PG, and PG-13 films.[9] A full 50% of the respondents that answered the question indicated that it would be "not at all" difficult. Of those giving this response, many (45.8%)

pointed to the availability of talent (e.g., adequate pool of female actors) or flexibility in the casting process (e.g., small parts). Others (39.6%) stated that it would involve being more mindful in the production process. It must be noted that more than half (54.2%) of interviewees who stated that gender balance would not be difficult to achieve also indicated that it had to be appropriate for the story.

Across the 48 industry professionals who thought there would be some degree of difficulty in balancing gender in family films, three main reasons were listed as potential roadblocks. First, the need to increase awareness and change the mindset of content creators or disrupt the status quo of the creative process was cited by 18 individuals (37.5%). Potential resistance or pushback from industry professionals was cited by 22.9% of those individuals who thought there would be some degree of difficulty. Finally, 22.9% of responses referenced the idea that changing gender balance would depend on story content.

A few other questions were asked to gauge industry leaders' perceptions regarding gender imbalance in G, PG, or PG-13 family films. We were curious if gender balance was something that content creators would notice or react to aversively. To this end, we asked if a gender balanced script would that be a red flag to content creators.[10] 97.8 percent of the industry leaders responding to the question indicated "no" and 2.2% said "maybe." Matter of fact, a full 31.9% of the participants spontaneously reported that they would not even notice if a script was balanced.

Finally, and knowing that market forces drive industry decision-making, our last question asked about the financial repercussions of balancing casts.[11] Over half (59%) of those responding to the question said it would have no impact, 30.1% said it would help and 10.8% said it would hurt the bottom line. Thus, content creators – on average – view balanced casts as having no impact or slightly helping ROI.

Conclusion

Together, the results suggest a few trends. When asked, content creators are fairly accurate in their estimates of females in film and can cite reasons for the dearth of girls/women on screen. However, gender balance in family films, in theory, seems to be important to industry leaders and something achievable without much difficulty. When appropriate, scripts and stories should reflect reality, provide visibility for a multitude of male and female voices, and strive for equity. Yet, story and creative license to tell narratives in the way content creators desire are paramount to the process and need to be protected. Despite this importance, many industry leaders indicated that balanced casts are not something to which they pay attention or will affect -- positively or negatively -- a studio's investment.

Footnotes

[1.] Smith, S.L., & Choueiti, M. (2010). *Gender disparity on screen and behind the camera in family films; The executive report.* Report available at the Geena Davis Institute for Gender and Media website: http://thegeenadavisinstitute.org/

[2.] The average age of professionals was 47.13 (*range*=30-65 years) and the mean number of years working in entertainment was 23.41 (*range*=4-46 years). In terms of occupational titles, 41.7% (*n*=45) were producers, 25.9% (*n*=28) directors, 13% (*n*=14) executives, 8.3% (*n*=9) writers, 7.4% (*n*=8) casting directors, and 3.7% (*n*=4) work in other production and/or distribution jobs (i.e., marketing, acting, cinematography). Almost all (98.1%) of the industry leaders interviewed were white (1.9%=black). Just under two thirds (65.7%, *n*=71) of the professionals worked primarily in live action and 34.3% (*n*=37) worked in animation.

[3.] This study uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which are detailed in the Final Report by the study authors for the GDIGM. The analysis above only represents a fraction of the questions asked of content creators. Other reports on the data set will be issued at later dates.

[4.] To answer the question about prevalence and change over time, the industry leaders were asked two questions. The first was: "What percentage of all speaking characters – in the typical feature film – do you think are female?" The estimates ranged from 8-50. The second question asked: "Across the last twenty years, do you think the percent of female speaking characters has *decreased* (-1), *stayed about the same* (0), or *increased* (+1)?" On the -1 to +1 scale, the average response for females was a slight *decrease* (mean=-.05) whereas the average response for males was an *increase* (mean=.39).

[5.] Smith, S.L., & Choueiti, M. (2010).

[6.] To answer the second question posed in this report, the content creators were asked: "Why do you think that females represent less than 30% of all speaking characters?" Responses were scrutinized and a content coding system was developed to capture the breadth and depth of explanations. Two independent coders evaluated all of the responses. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

[7.] Smith, S.L., & Choueiti, M. (2010).

[8.] The content creators were asked the following question: "Using a 0 to 4 scale, with 0 signifying *not at all important* and 4 signifying *extremely important*, how important is it to fill roughly half of all speaking characters with females when appropriate for a film's subject matter?" Overall, 4.2% (*n*=4) of participants indicated that gender balance was "not at all" important. 6.3 percent (*n*=6) stated it was a "little bit" important, 22.9% (*n*=22) reported it to be "fairly" important, 43.8% (*n*=42) mentioned it was "very" important, and 22.9% (*n*=22) indicated it was "extremely" important. By gender, the average response for males was 2.68 and for females 2.94. We asked the industry leaders to explain their responses. Multiple members of the research team scrutinized the answers for themes or patterns to characterize the qualitative data.

[9.] We also asked the industry leaders how arduous it would be to achieve gender balance in family films (when appropriate for the story's subject matter). The interviewer stated, "Using a 0 to 4 scale, with 0 signifying *not at all difficult* and 4 signifying *extremely difficult*, how difficult would it be to fill half of all speaking characters with females when appropriate for a film's subject matter?" Fifty percent (*n*=48) of the respondents that answered the question indicated that it would be "not at all" difficult, 12.5% (*n*=12) stated "a little bit" difficult, 19.8% (*n*=19), remarked "fairly" difficult, 8.3% (*n*=8) selected "very" difficult, and 9.4% (*n*=9) mentioned "extremely" difficult. By gender, the average response for males was .95 and for females 1.47. Again, we asked content creators to explain their answers. We subsequently characterized the qualitative trends above. Given that roughly half of industry leaders said achieving gender balance would be "not at all difficult," we analyzed these responses separately from those specifying some degree of difficulty (a little, fairly, very, or extremely).

[10.] For this question, the interviewer asked: "Hypothetically, if a script or film came your way at whatever point you enter the process and it happened to be gender balanced, would that be a red flag to you?" Response options were yes, no, or maybe.

[11.] The interviewer asked: "Hypothetically, if it made sense for the story being told, do you think that balancing half of all speaking characters with females would *hurt* (-1), have *no impact* (0), or *help* (+1) a studio's return on investment (ROI)?"