

CHANGING THE STATUS QUO: Industry Leaders' Perceptions of Gender in Family Films

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stacy L. Smith, PhD | Amy Granados
Marc Choueiti | Sarah Erickson | Allison Noyes

**Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism
University of Southern California**

Our October 2010 research showed that females were grossly underrepresented across 122 G, PG and PG-13 films theatrically released between 2006 and 2009. That is, 2.42 male speaking characters appeared to every one female speaking character. Previous research shows that this statistic remains constant and has shown very little change across twenty years. Additionally, female portrayals continue to remain stereotypical and hypersexualized.

What accounts for this gender gap in family films? Why do female characters in family films still so often serve as eye candy? This study aims to answer these questions through examining content creators' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about gender equality and the construction of and/or resistance to representation of female characters in family films.

We interviewed 108 male (60.2%) and female (39.8%) content creators (e.g., producers, directors, executives, writers, etc.) from the leading box office family films from 2006 to 2009 about gender and female character portrayals in family films. Below, we answer three key questions pertaining to the infrequency of females in film and the possibility of industry change.



KEY FINDINGS

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

The answer to this question is a qualified yes. Female content creators estimated, on average, that the percentage of females in the typical feature film was 30.7%. Male content creators estimated 32.4%. Our research has shown that 29.2% of speaking characters were female.

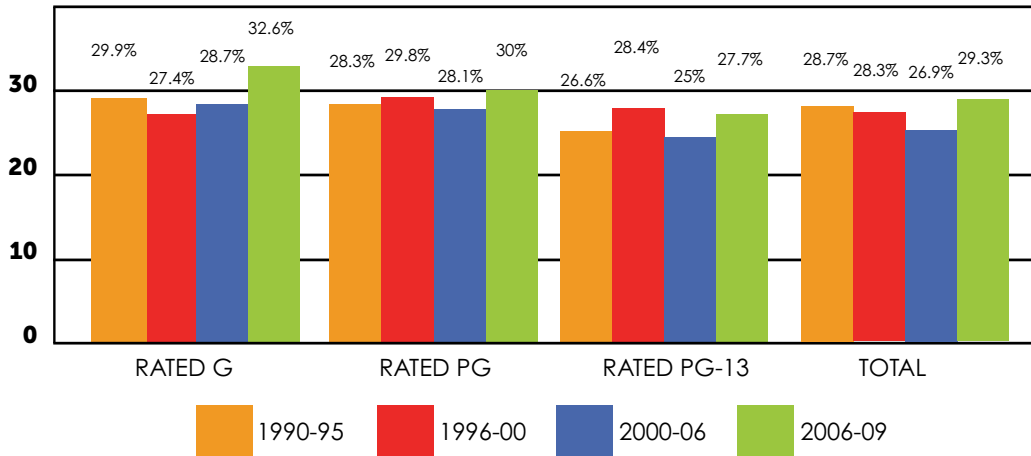
When asked about whether the percentage of female speaking characters had changed in G, PG and PG-13 films across the last twenty years, many content creators indicated that girls/women on-screen had either increased (36.8%) or stayed about the same (48.1%). 15.1 percent stated that the percentage had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

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

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Figure 1

Percentage of Female Speaking Characters in G, PG & PG-13 Films

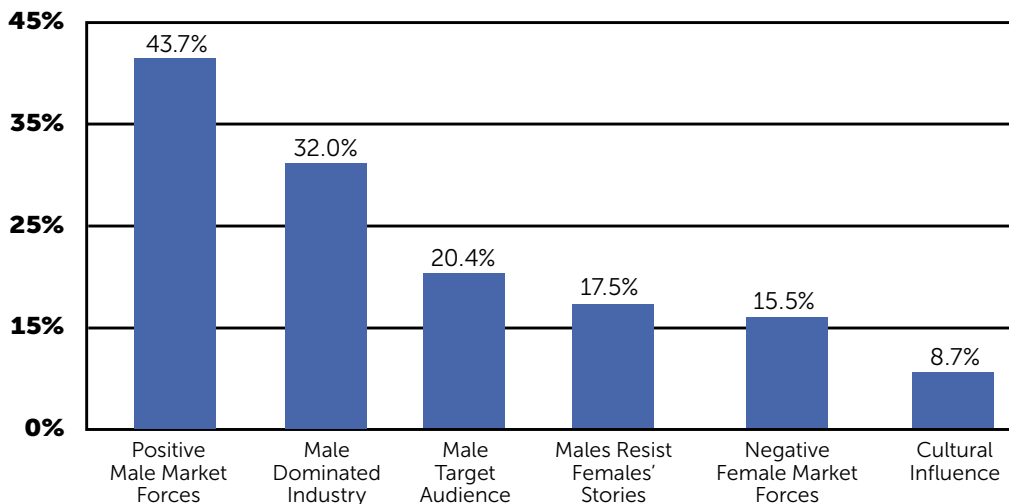


What Reasons are Given for the Imbalance of Males to Females in Family Films?

Content creators were asked why they think that females represent less than 30% of all speaking characters. Six spontaneous reasons emerged (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Reasons for the Infrequency of Females in Film



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, 31.7% of males and 32.6% of females stating this reason.

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. Yet the presence of women behind-the-scenes seems to matter. Films with one or more females in the position of director or writer had significantly more female speaking characters on-screen than did those films with only male direction or male writing.

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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 females do, 2) males decide which movies will be seen or 3) content creators cater to the male audience. However, data collected by the Motion Picture Association of America shows that a heavy reliance on male moviegoers domestically is short sighted. In 2010, females were responsible for purchasing 50% of all movie tickets. Females are also more frequent moviegoers than males in the 18-24 year old demographic (4.2 million vs. 3.3 million). Women also made up 51% of the moviegoers in 2010 compared to 49% of men.

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 of gender imbalance in film when asked directly and can provide reasons for a lopsided approach to storytelling. Given this, we were curious about their thoughts on industry change—which is the third question answered in this report.

Is Gender Equality Possible?

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. 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. 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. 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.

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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 be a red flag to content creators. 97.8 percent of the industry leaders responding to the question indicated "no" and 2.2% said "maybe." As a 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. 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.

Together, the results suggest a few trends. When asked, content creators are fairly accurate in their estimates of the percentage of females in film and can cite reasons for the dearth of girls/women on-screen. When appropriate for the story being told, many indicated that gender balance is important and not that arduous to accomplish.

- **95.8% stated it was a little bit to extremely important**
- **50% stated it was achievable without much difficulty**

Some content creators, when explaining why gender balance is important, indicated that 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.

Given the wealth of information we culled in the interviews about gender balance and character attributes of females in film, this is only a small fraction of our findings. Over time, we will be releasing a series of reports that focus on content creators' perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about the stereotypical and hypersexualized nature of females in storytelling. In light of the findings from the industry leaders above, along with the continued advocacy efforts of the Institute and the See Jane program, it is possible that in our next content analysis study, we will note an improvement in the number of females in film by 2015.

A full report of the details of this study and footnotes can be found at www.seejane.org.

