



**GIRLS  
GET  
EQUAL**

Geena Davis Institute *of* on Gender in Media

# REWRITE HER STORY

How film and media stereotypes affect the lives and leadership ambitions of girls and young women

**THE STATE OF THE  
WORLD'S GIRLS**

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# REWRITE HERSTORY

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COUNTRIES FEATURED IN THIS RESEARCH



## THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS REPORTS

Plan International first published The State of the World's Girls Report in 2007. The 2019 report on girls' representation in the media is the second in a new series that each year will examine the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that limit girls' freedom and opportunities in specific environments or sectors.



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# FOREWORD

At the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, we've conducted numerous studies over the years showing that the entertainment media largely fails to produce high-quality portrayals of girls and women. This has a real impact on young viewers' ideas about themselves and the occupations they pursue. This is especially the case when it comes to representations of women's leadership.

We are thrilled with the opportunity to partner with Plan International to conduct the first global study of girls' leadership. This study is the most comprehensive to date, taking into account the attitudes and opinions of over 10,000 girls and young women across the globe. And it is also the first global analysis of how women's leadership is portrayed in the top-grossing films in 20 countries around the world.

Women are vastly underrepresented when it comes to leadership positions in both government and business. They constitute 51% of the population, but hold just 23% of legislative seats and only 11% of head of state positions. Fewer than 7% of CEO positions at Fortune 500 companies are held by women. In short, we have a long way to go before women are represented in positions of power in a way that reflects their presence in societies around the world.



The findings of this study show that media representations of women's leadership matter. While many factors discourage girls and young women from pursuing leadership positions, having women leaders as roles models in popular media, as well as in the community, inspires girls to aim high.

If we want to see more women in leadership positions in the real world, girls need to see more women leaders in the fictional worlds of entertainment media.

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**Geena Davis**  
Founder and Chair

**Madeline Di Nonno**  
CEO

# INTRODUCTION

**“Because usually when we talk about a leader I still come up with a man. I still think about a man. [This idea] It’s really popular... people think that men are more powerful.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 21, VIETNAM

This report by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary’s University and Plan International, is the second phase of a two-part research project commissioned as an in-depth and ambitious look at female leadership. In many ways the research makes disheartening reading because it tells us clearly that girls and women, as citizens and certainly as leaders, are still not seen as equal to boys and men.

The key research component, and the backbone of this report, is an analysis by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media of the 56 top-grossing films from across 20 countries. The analysis tracked time on screen, the gender of the characters and the portrayal of leadership. These films show a world which is run by men, for men. The filmmakers, too, are predominantly male. Women characters rarely lead a story line. They are sexualised and objectified in a way that men never are. Women are portrayed as leaders in their countries, workplaces and communities in these films, though there are not many of them. But the camera will linger on their bodies, they will be seen partially nude and wearing revealing clothing: these factors undermine their authority. And what they tell young people about the world they inhabit keeps girls and young women subservient and anxious. Female bodies are a commodity and their brains irrelevant. These stereotypes send signals to girls and boys about what they can expect and what is expected from them in their

careers and in other parts of their lives.

The scale of media influence on society is well-researched and well known and must not be underestimated:

- Media wields a significant influence on how we think and define our place in society.<sup>1</sup>
- Entertainment media is powerful: 54 of the 56 top-grossing films of 2018 earned a staggering \$21,691,475,835 at the box office.
- It is highly westernised and U.S. centric: there was a huge overlap of the top ten films in the 20 countries represented in our study in favour of films produced in the United States.

**“Film is the strongest media and global artform, it can have such a big impact. Art can create reality and influence how we can see each other. Film can create empathy, it can help change perspectives and help us see things from other points of view. That’s not just for girls, that’s for all of us, to see diversity.”**

ELLI TOIVONIEMI, 35, PRODUCER-DIRECTOR, FINLAND\*

For many years the representation of girls and women in the media has been the subject of debate: campaigning for change has been going on for decades and still in 2019 we can see clearly that very little has changed. Recently, there have been signs that perhaps, at last, the media industry itself is beginning to take a more critical look at the images on our screens and the stories they tell; not least because women in the entertainment industry are calling out the treatment they receive. But there have been signs before, and sexism and stereotyping in the media has still not been eradicated.

It may, finally, be time for change and this research provides clear evidence of how essential that is for girls and young women, and for society as a whole. To create an equal world, we need the whole picture, not just half the story.

**“It’s urgent that we no longer create stories that teach children to view women and girls as second-class citizens — not when we’ve seen the level of sexism in our culture so egregiously put on display.”**

**GEENA DAVIS, FOUNDER AND CHAIR OF THE GEENA DAVIS INSTITUTE ON GENDER IN MEDIA**

\* All interviews with women filmmakers, as included in the Special Feature on page 18, were conducted by Wendy Mitchell for this report, July 2019.

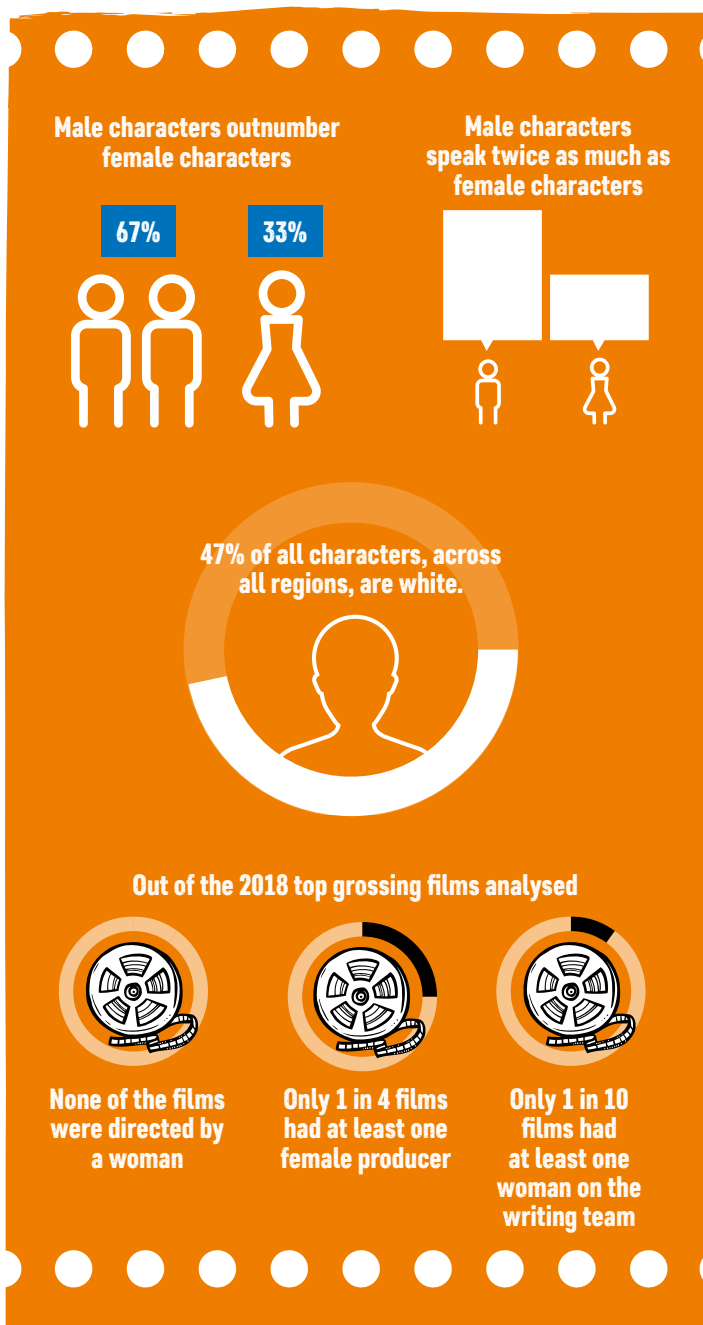
**KEY FINDINGS**

Girls and young women have told us clearly that they are influenced by what they see on screen. And the underlying messages of the films analysed have changed little for decades: male characters dominate the storylines; women leaders, where they do exist, may be portrayed as intelligent, likeable and effective but they are also sexualised and objectified; female leadership is rare and at national level women leaders are not up to the job.

The overall make-up of the characters in the 2018 top-grossing films analysed reflect the films’ producers rather than their audience: they are white, male and middle-class.

Where the films portray female leadership, women leaders are shown in some contexts – at work, in the community and the family – as more intelligent and more effective than male leaders. This changes at national level.

- In all contexts male leaders are much more visible: overall 42% of male, compared to 27% of female characters are shown on screen as leaders.
- Overall more female leaders are shown as intelligent than male leaders: 81% compared to 62%.
- Male leaders at national level are shown as more effective than female leaders: 57% compared to 44%.
- Female leaders are far more likely than male leaders to be shown wearing revealing clothing: 30% compared to 7%.
- Female leaders are nearly two times more likely to be shown as partially nude than male leaders: 15% compared to 8%.
- Characters who are female leaders are more likely to be shown completely naked at some point in the film than male leaders: 2% compared to 0.5%.
- Female leaders are more likely to be sexually objectified than male leaders: 15% compared to 4%.
- Female leaders are more likely to be sexually harassed than male leaders: 5% compared to 1%.



**WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE**

Girls and young women are also clear that they need role models on screen: they need to see themselves in the stories that surround them if they are to achieve gender equality, and their capacity for leadership is to be recognised and encouraged.

- **To be it, they must see it.** Make stories about female leadership visible and normal.
- **Stop the sexualisation and the objectification** of women and girls on screen.
- **Fund female filmmakers, programme makers** and content producers and **address harassment and discrimination in the workplace** to encourage girls and young women into the entertainment industry at all levels.

**“When we see women playing secondary roles, young women can think it’s normal life to play a secondary role and lose ambition.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SENEGAL

## COLLECTING THE EVIDENCE<sup>2</sup>

The research that informs this report aims to fill the gap in our understanding of what it means for girls and young women to be leaders and what encourages and discourages their leadership aspirations. It cuts across economies, cultures and societies and includes the voices of over 10,000 girls and young women in 19 countries across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

The first phase of the research, launched at the Women Deliver Conference in June 2019,<sup>4</sup> looked particularly at how girls define leadership and at how they become leaders – what hinders them and what helps them – and phase two of the research, informing this second report, focuses on the specific role of media in shaping girls' aspirations and either restricting or enabling their success, responding to questions such as how

does media portray leadership? Are female roles powerful in all senses of the word or are they ornamental, subservient, underdeveloped or mainly missing? What does that teach girls and young women?

**“How can you imagine yourself doing these things if you can't see it? Representation matters for young women, especially those who exist on the margins.**

**In the Indigenous context, we have been misrepresented on screen for 100 years, those misrepresentations are damaging, they reinforce stigmas and feed into racist and sexist stereotypes.”**

ELLE-MÁIJÁ TAILFEATHERS, 34,  
WRITER-DIRECTOR-PRODUCER-ACTOR, CANADA

## COMPONENTS OF THIS REPORT

### WHAT GIRLS\* SEE

In the first phase of this research project girls and young women spoke about how media role models influence their aspirations to be leaders. As a result of this finding researchers conducted an analysis of the top grossing films in India, Dominican Republic, United States, Canada, Denmark, Honduras, Japan, Germany, Netherlands, Peru, Philippines, Vietnam, Sweden, Finland, South Sudan, Benin, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and Senegal – 56 films in total.\*\* What role models do these films provide, what are they telling young women about the lives they could lead? How prominent are the female roles and how, if at all, is female leadership portrayed? The films analysed will remain anonymous: the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University has a policy against naming and shaming film and television production studios for their content.

### WHAT GIRLS SAY

A series of key informant interviews, based around the central research question: How does media portray leadership? The purpose of these is to provide depth to the statistical analysis of media content, and to make that content more relatable. The interviews aim to gather girls' and young women's perspectives on how women

and men are portrayed in entertainment media, particularly in relation to leadership, by having them reflect on a film, or sometimes TV show, of their choice.\*\*\* How does what they watch have an impact on their lives and ambitions? All girls and young women taking part in this research have been promised confidentiality and will remain anonymous.

### EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

Asking girls and young women in five countries – India, Dominican Republic, Japan, Senegal, South Sudan – to scan the print advertising they are exposed to in their daily lives. What are the messages around women's roles found on the billboards and in newspapers and magazines? How do the research participants interpret and reflect on these messages?

### WOMEN FILMMAKERS

This report also contains the ideas and experiences of women film-makers with interviews specifically commissioned for this report. They too share their views of the industry they work in and the media they watch; they discuss the role models who influenced them and their ideas for change.

\* The research respondents for this report are aged between 15 and 25 and thus when we refer to either 'girls' or 'young women' in this report, we mean both girls and young women. \*\* The countries in which the research was undertaken were randomly selected from a list of countries in which Plan International has offices. \*\*\*The films and shows chosen by our interviewees do not form part of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media content analysis and are named.



# SETTING THE SCENE

## MEDIA, GENDER AND LEADERSHIP

Nearly 25 years ago, in 1995, during the Fourth World Conference on Women,<sup>5</sup> 189 UN Member States recognised the central role of media in shifting the gender stereotypes that influence how we think and act. Looking back is salutary because fundamentally little has changed:

- The UN Member States made women and media one of 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action and called on media everywhere to make a far greater contribution to women's advancement.<sup>6</sup>
- They agreed that the number of women in the media must increase, including in decision-making.<sup>7</sup> More should be done to present women as leaders and role models, and to do away with stereotypes.<sup>8</sup>
- It was argued that traditional perceptions of the roles of women and men in society must be rethought and that this involves the reorganisation of the basic institutions of society, including the media, which helps define what we think and has a crucial role to play in changing stereotyped views of the roles of men and women.<sup>9</sup>

**“Print and electronic media do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world.”**

BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION 1995



## THE POWER OF STORY

Discussion on how the media portrays women and girls did not start in 1995. It has been an issue for many years and was a key area of debate for the women's movement in the 1970s. In her seminal work, originally published in 1978, Gaye Tuchman analysed mass media – television, newspapers, magazines – and the advertising they carry to gather support for her argument that, by largely ignoring women or portraying them in stereotypical roles of victim and/or consumer, the mass media symbolically annihilate women.<sup>10</sup> Tuchman noted that most media portray women, if at all, in traditional roles: homemaker, mother, or, if they are in the paid workforce, jobs of a clerical nature and other positions which are seen as traditionally reserved for women: there are few, if any, depictions of strong female characters in positions of responsibility or authority, even inside the home. For Tuchman, given the role that the mass media plays in shaping young girls' wants, needs and expectations, this is cause for concern: the consistent repetition of such images can only encourage the maintenance of women's subordinate position in society.

These findings are backed up by a 2016 review of earlier research on advertising and gender stereotypes, which also noted that historically women have been portrayed in an inferior manner relative to their capabilities and potential, and that advertising contributes to gender inequality by promoting sexism and distorted body images as valid and acceptable.<sup>11</sup> In general, the review stated, gender stereotyping in advertising still exists and is prevalent in many countries around the world.

It is true, too, of film. In 2014 the study of representations of women's leadership in different countries, conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University, examined films in ten territories: Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> Across these ten regions, men dominated media portrayals of corporate (86%), political (91%), religious (100%), academic (71%), and entertainment (84%) leaders.

**In 2014, women in the top-grossing films were nearly three times as likely as men to appear partially or fully nude: 26% and 9%, respectively.<sup>13</sup>**

Media does not tell people *what* to think, but it tells people what topics to think *about*, and *how* to think about them by focusing on some aspects and not others.<sup>14</sup> Media, whether print, film, online or on television, shapes perceptions of who can be an authentic leader, and in most cases, this means men. Press coverage of politics clearly reinforces the idea that leadership is a male domain.<sup>15</sup> Research examining newspaper coverage of the Spanish elections, in France, Italy, Spain and the UK, found that while some coverage celebrates women politicians as standard bearers, others judge them more by their physical appearance or their performance as wives, mothers and mothers-to-be.<sup>16</sup> More attention is paid to their personality traits, personal lives, dress and appearance, all of which signals that female candidates are less serious contenders.<sup>17</sup> Female candidates also receive more coverage questioning their viability than male candidates,<sup>18</sup> and are covered as being less authentic than their male competitors.<sup>19</sup>

**In 2015, women made up only 24% of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television and radio news: in news about politics and government only 16% of people in the stories are women.<sup>20</sup>**

Online media has actually increased sexism in public discussion about female candidates.<sup>21</sup> Social media has become a visible forum for individuals to express bigoted beliefs, fueled by anonymity, and it presents a more hostile environment for female candidates who are not only discussed in more sexist terms than in legacy media,<sup>22</sup> but are subject online to threats of violence and sexual harassment: hostility which also has the potential to spill out into the real world.<sup>23</sup>

Media messages matter: they can affect our behaviour and form our opinions and it is alarming that what the new research for this report shows clearly is that we have not moved on: women are sexualised, objectified and their place is at home. Female leaders are a minority and, where they do exist, they are still sexually objectified. The films analysed include few characters whom girls can identify with and few who inspire them. Gender equality has not yet made a real impact on the stories told to our children.

**“There is so much in the culture that is quietly telling women that our stories don't matter.”**

LENA DUNHAM, FROM THE DOCUMENTARY,

HALF THE PICTURE, 2018<sup>24</sup>

THE IMPACT OF FEMALE STORYTELLERS

**“I don’t have another ground for comparison because I don’t know what it would be like to be a male director, but I think it is difficult for women to start out in any industry because the majority of the creative and financial control in most fields of work have been in the hands of men for centuries.”**

ASH MAYFAIR, 34, FILMMAKER, VIETNAM

Representations of women and girls in the media and how the media deals with female leadership in both popular culture and in the political arena are two aspects of gender bias but there is a third. One of the areas that the Beijing Platform called out in 1995 was that, while women were involved in careers in the media and communications sector, few had attained positions at decision-making level, nor did they serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy.<sup>25</sup> This is still true today.

**“I’ll work with male crew members and there is kind of this male brotherhood that happens between them – it’s often this unconscious internalised attitude toward women. I also feel that men are trusted more within the industry, regardless of their level of experience or skill.... But it has gotten slightly better since I first started and that has much to do with the advocacy work of women in the industry pushing for something more.”**

ELLE-MÁIJÁ TAILFEATHERS, 34, WRITER-DIRECTOR-PRODUCER-ACTOR, CANADA

Over the last four decades, numerous studies have identified a link between having more women in key decision-making roles on production crews and having more women in the cast.<sup>26</sup> These studies found that having a woman director and at least one woman on the writing team produces more female leads, more female characters, and more dialogue for these characters. Female directors are especially important when it comes to hiring more women, both as cast and crew: of the top 500 films of 2018, films with at least one female director employed a greater percentage of women editors, writers, composers and cinematographers than films directed by men.<sup>27</sup> The same study found that only eight percent of directors working on the top 250 films in 2018 were women. Why when this has been an issue for so long is change so slow? And what can be done about it?

**“It’s super important to see other women flourish, so they lead us, they encourage us, to use our full potential. Some people are telling me now that they are encouraged that I am the first Peruvian woman to show a film in Cannes.**

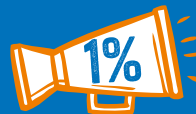
**I’m getting little notes and messages from younger women who say, ‘You are a woman and you made it!’”**

MELINA LEÓN, 42, FILMMAKER, PERU

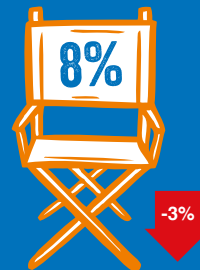
FACTS AND FIGURES<sup>28</sup>



In 2018, women comprised 20% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the 250 top US grossing films. This represents an increase of two percentage points from 18% in 2017.



Last year, only 1% of films employed ten or more women in the above roles. In contrast, 74% of films employed ten or more men.



Women accounted for 8% of directors working on the top 250 films in 2018, down three percentage points from 11% in 2017. This is one percentage point below the 9% achieved in 1998.

**“I didn’t really think about women not being treated as equal. I felt more age discrimination – I was ignored because I was very young. The industry was ageist. I’ve noticed it more in the past year or two with #MeToo, how men control the narrative and women are subject to that narrative. I hadn’t noticed before just how few Indian films were being directed by women. I understand it now, and I’m producing work with a lot of women filmmakers.”**

GUNEET MONGA, 35, PRODUCER, INDIA

## SIGNS OF CHANGE

Ultimately, the issues of both how women and girls are represented in the media, how leadership is portrayed and who makes the decisions in media companies across all platforms has changed little since the Beijing Platform called for action in 1995. However, as women campaigners take to the streets and the internet, arguing for transformative and substantial change, recently there has been some progress, particularly for women in the media industry:

- The **Time's Up** movement has resulted in the launch of Time's Up2, a campaign aiming to double the number of women in leadership and in other spaces where they are under-represented.<sup>29</sup>
- The **4% Challenge**,<sup>30</sup> launched at the Sundance Festival, is challenging the industry to hire more women filmmakers. Universal Filmed Entertainment Group became the first major studio to sign up: Universal Pictures, Focus Features, and DreamWorks Animation have each committed to announcing a woman-directed project by mid-2020.<sup>31</sup>
- The **Danish Film Institute**, in partnership with the Danish Producers Association, have introduced a self-report form for production companies to keep track of the gender balance in film production.<sup>32</sup>
- The **British Film Institute** (BFI) – a charity that promotes and preserves film and which awards Lottery funding for film production, distribution, education, audience development and market intelligence and research – has, in response to the 2010 UK Equalities Act, developed a set of diversity standards that underpins the award of funds for making films. The standards encourage equality of opportunity and tackle under-representation in the film industry and are a contractual requirement for projects funded by the BFI.<sup>33</sup> The BFI has also committed to working with all active producers, film organisations and project leaders in the UK, to voluntarily adopt the standards by 2022, to ensure the sector is representative of the UK, both in terms of its workforce and the content it produces.
- The **Swedish Film Institute** launched a new initiative for professional women scriptwriters this year.<sup>34</sup> A recent study found less than 30 percent of Sweden's screenwriters are women – only one of Sweden's eight big-budget films in 2018 featured a woman writer. The initiative aims to increase the number of female voices in films and support them to develop and make bigger budget projects.

- **Sixteen of the eighty-seven studio films** slated for release in 2019 have at least one woman credited as director which is up from just three last year, when half of the major studios had no female directors on their wide-release slates.<sup>35</sup>

**“This is the start of a very exciting time for women filmmakers and I can only hope that this wave for change remains powerful and effective. It is so necessary for female artists to speak out and to speak in unison especially in our current political climate. I want to talk a little about the issue of equal pay as well...Economic support for women at all levels is the most powerful tool to achieve gender equality. We have to create jobs for women.”** ASH MAYFAIR, FILMMAKER, VIETNAM

There are, however, fewer attempts to tackle or acknowledge how the media affects gender stereotyping in society and its impact on the lives of girls and young women. As this research will show, the media – the stories we are told and the images that surround us – still plays a critical role in shaping girls and young women's aspirations. It can be a force for good but it can also perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes that prevent girls and young women from fulfilling their potential and making their ambitions a reality.

**“Hollywood has the ability to deliver dreams to girls and boys around the world about what they can be and what this world can be like. That is the power of story.”**

STACY SMITH FROM THE DOCUMENTARY, *HALF THE PICTURE*, 2018<sup>36</sup>

# WHAT GIRLS SEE

## CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BOX-OFFICE HITS



**“Knowing that young women need to see powerful females and more characters who look like them on the screen is the reason why I will never give up filmmaking.”**

ASH MAYFAIR, 34, FILMMAKER, VIETNAM

We know that the images and stories girls are surrounded by matter. They can be limiting: undermining ambition and self confidence in ways that girls and young women are often not even aware of. Or they can be inspirational. All of the interviewees acknowledged that entertainment media in general has a significant impact on the lives of young people in their society.

**“Here in Senegal young people are looking very often at programmes and TV series. It’s a part of their life, they make some role models through these series.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SENEGAL

**“I guess media does have a lot of power over our thoughts and how we see the world. I think it plays a significant part in my life.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA

A young woman from Senegal emphasised the importance of role models when she referred to a TV star as an inspiration: **“I can see she embodies power by combining her social and professional lives, and, in the future, I do not want to stay at home and just take care of children but do both things.”**

## ABOUT THE FILMS ANALYSED



**CREW:** none of the top-grossing films of 2018 analysed were directed by a woman. One-in-four had at least one female producer, and one in ten had at least one woman on the writing team.



**MONEY:** the top-grossing films of 2018 globally earned an average of \$402 million at the box office. Films with female lead(s) earned less than films with male leads (\$253 million compared to \$387 million), while films with male and female co-leads grossed the most (\$764 million).



**LANGUAGE:** the vast majority of top-grossing films, 81%, were English language films. 11% of the movies were Hindi language films, while the remainder, 9%, were Spanish language films.



**LOCATION OF MOVIE PRODUCTION:** the majority, 69%, of the top-grossing films across the globe were produced in the United States. Bollywood accounted for 11% of the top-grossing films in 2018.



**RATINGS:** 20% of films were rated PG, meaning they are appropriate for a general audience. Close to half, 47%, were rated PG-13: suitable for people aged 13 and older. 18% were rated R: suitable for people aged 17 and older. The remaining films were not rated.



**GENRE:** overall, 40% of the top-grossing films across the globe in 2018 were action/disaster films. Comedies and social dramas came in next, at 16% and 15%, respectively.

We also know, from our 19-country survey that 83% of girls and young women say they have women leaders they admire as role models.<sup>37</sup> They talked about the stories they had heard about women leaders: ranging from author and former first lady Michelle Obama to Kiran Bedi, retired Indian Police Service officer, social activist and politician; from Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai to Mariama Ba, Senegalese author and feminist; from actor and campaigner Emma Watson to Nunu Kumba, South Sudanese female politician.

**“In life one needs a person to give us an example and to tell us, ‘You can do it, you can do it.’ Someone to encourage us.”**

GIRL, AGED 15-17, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

In this next section we look at how the entertainment media portrays women. Are the stories in our most popular films providing girls with the role models they need or are women generally less successful, less visible and less powerful than the male leads?

Overall, the top-grossing films of 2018 reflect the same gender bias that researchers have documented for decades:

- male characters outnumber female characters two-to-one (**67% compared to 33%**)
- male characters speak twice as often as female characters (**67% compared to 33%**)
- male characters appear twice as often as female characters (**64% compared to 36%**)
- the top-grossing films in North America have **fewer female speaking characters** than the top-grossing films in other regions.

**“I’ve realised that men take it for granted that their voice is the only voice. That’s not necessarily part of their plan, they are not just trying to conquer. They just take it for granted that their voice is going to be heard, that they are going to have a place in this world, and they will be successful.”**

MELINA LEÓN, 42, WRITER-DIRECTOR, PERU

**“It is the same if you take the point of India, always males are very confident with their things where the females are being put down.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 20, INDIA

Alongside gender equality, social and ethnic diversity was a real issue for some of our interviewees.

**“All three [characters] are white and it’s this coming of age movie. I think, I also read an article on this so I’m a bit biased but a lot of these coming of age movies are about white young people.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 25, NETHERLANDS, DISCUSSING THE FILM THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER, 2012

**“I think people with different backgrounds [they] could do that better...Because we know people come from rich backgrounds, people come from poor backgrounds... So, if you pull these people together you can get a real thing.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA

Their concerns are not unfounded: in the films studied for this report not only are female characters less prominent than male characters, the analysis also revealed a lack of ethnic diversity in the heroes, heroines, villains and secondary characters on our screens: nearly half (47%) of all characters in the top-grossing films of 2018 were white, the largest ethnic group by a wide margin.

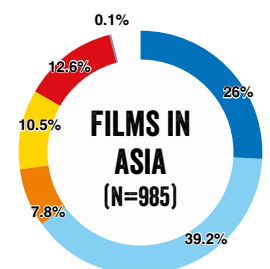
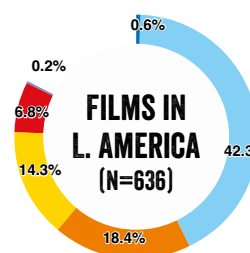
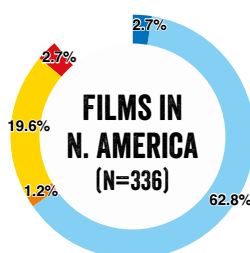
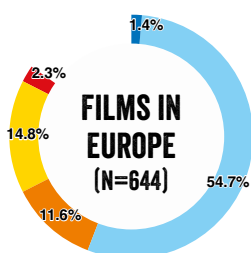
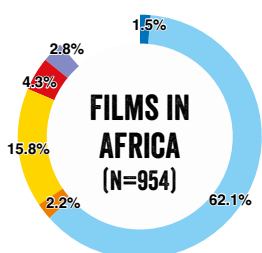
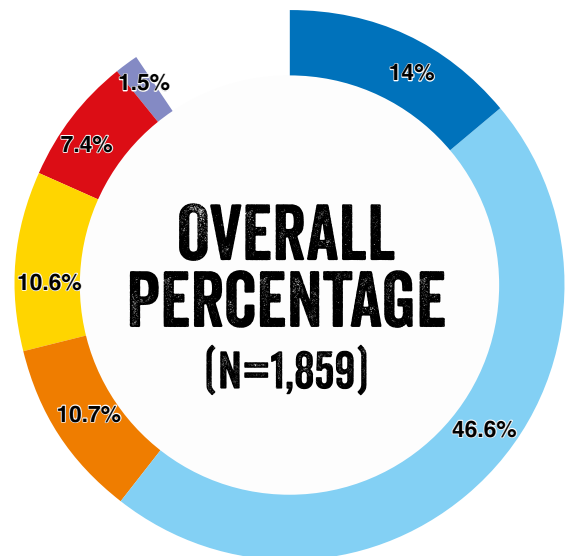
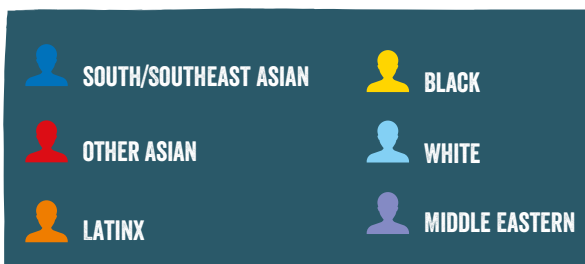
There are regional variations with the top-grossing films in Asia having more Southeast Asian, Indian and other Asian characters than films in other regions while the top-grossing films in North America (63%) and Africa (62%) had more white characters than films in other regions.

The lack of diversity is further compounded when it comes to the sexuality of characters in the top-grossing films of 2018. Very few characters, only one percent, are portrayed as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or queer.

**“There is one black woman character but, I think, other than that, all female and male characters are white. They are all typically or conventionally attractive, all quite skinny. They all have their own cars and everything. So, they are all stereotypical, I guess, middle class, white and straight.”**

GIRL, 17, CANADA, DISCUSSING THE FILM TEN THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU, 1999

## PERCENTAGE OF CHARACTERS BY ETHNICITY AND REGION\*



\*Percentages may not add up to 100% because some characters are another race/ethnicity or mixed.

## MEN LEAD, WOMEN FOLLOW

Across our 19-country survey an overwhelming 94% of respondents believe that women in leadership are treated less well because of their gender.<sup>38</sup>

The film analysis however is less clear cut: in the **workplace** and the **community** although there are nearly twice as many male leaders on screen as female, women leaders are in fact more respected and portrayed as more likeable, intelligent and effective. The one thing they are not is more visible.

**“Of course, it hurts me because... even if I know I could be a leader, I won't do it because I see it is just for men, not for women. So that affects me. I'll have to sit back and watch men doing it, even though I am capable of doing it too.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, UGANDA

It seems a little counterintuitive, but in a world where female leaders of countries are still fairly rare, across the top-grossing films men and women are equally likely to be shown as **leaders of their country**.<sup>39</sup> However, here it is the men who come across as more effective and more respected: on screen, women presidents and prime ministers are ineffectual – not really up to the job.

It is only **at family level** where the films analysed show women in the majority as leaders – 18% compared to 13%. The family remains securely a female domain: here women are shown as better leaders, more intelligent, more likeable, more effective, harder-working and equally likely to be respected as male leaders.

The prevalence of women leaders at home fits with cultural stereotypes of the female caregiver but the films do show that the idea of a male “head of the household” is on the wane. However, not without a struggle: no male family leaders are portrayed as experiencing sexual harassment, 5% of female leaders are.

Interestingly “only” 5% of the female characters portrayed in leadership positions are shown as experiencing sexual harassment which again contrasts with the results from our 19-country survey where 93% of the young women believe that women across all areas of leadership experience sexual harassment or “unwanted physical contact”. Are the films we watch ignoring a major issue that young women are only too aware of?

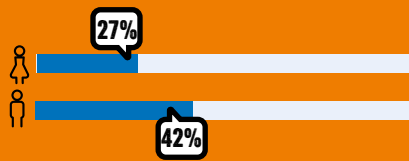
As we have seen overall in these films' characters, there are also issues of diversity in the characterisation of female leaders: of the 60 women portrayed as leaders nearly half, 48%, are white; very few are Hispanic/Latinx, Southeast Asian or Indian and none of the female leaders in the top-grossing films of 2018 are from the Middle East. Only one of the 60 female leaders in the top-grossing films of 2018 is LGBTQI+ – a bisexual woman.



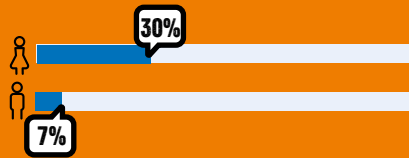


# LEADERSHIP BY NUMBERS

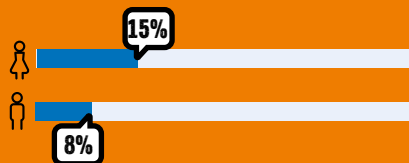
Female characters are less likely to be shown as leaders than male characters



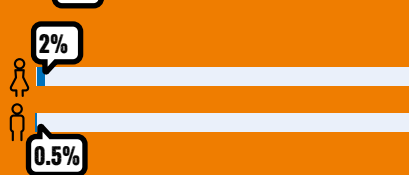
Female leaders are far more likely than male leaders to be shown wearing revealing clothing



Female leaders are nearly twice as likely to be shown as partially nude than male leaders



Characters who are female leaders are more likely to be shown completely naked at some point in the film than male leaders



Female leaders are more likely to be sexually objectified using camera angles than male leaders<sup>40</sup>



Female leaders are more likely to be verbally objectified by other characters than male leaders<sup>41</sup>



Female leaders are more likely to be sexually harassed than male leaders



More female leaders are shown as hard working than male leaders



More female leaders are shown as intelligent than male leaders



In general our most popular films are sending the message that leadership is primarily a male domain: female leaders may be seen as hard working and more likeable than their male equivalents and even, in some environments, more effective but they are also far more likely to be sexually harassed, shown in revealing clothing and partially or fully nude. Women leaders are subject to the male gaze and not really “in charge”. They come with the label “sex object” still attached and these conditions are not encouraging for girls and young women.

Additionally, what these popular films are failing to do is to portray women and girls in general, and women leaders in particular, in all their variety. This may be due mostly to the dominance of Hollywood and the U.S. in the production and marketing of the top-grossing films, and to the lack of overall diversity in the storytellers: as we have seen the writers, directors, executives and studio bosses are predominantly male and white.

There are films, as the young women taking part in the research acknowledge, that speak across gender and culture to provide inspiration and ambition to young people everywhere. But when you cannot see yourself – people who look and sound like you – in positions of power and influence, playing their part in the lives of their countries and communities, you may lose faith in your own dreams and abilities.

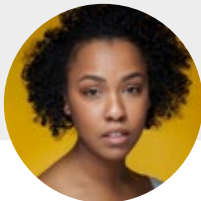
**“This one shoe fits all, one-character fits all for women: they almost always have the same character and are seen usually as the ones who have to fix the men or who help the men develop better personalities. I think it is really harmful for young girls, or young boys, growing up watching these movies and are only seeing this representation of women... As a visible minority I can say that I never saw anyone that was on screen that looked like me. I think that is a harmful narrative, that young girls are growing up never seeing themselves on TV.”** GIRL, 17, CANADA

**“I was never seeing myself [on screen] if I’m honest. What I was seeing was that Africans were poor and I didn’t grow up poor. As a black African woman, the characters I was seeing were constantly dealing with oppression. And that’s not the whole story. I was seeing a very limited idea of what it was to be an African woman. It was always through the eyes of the western gaze. And what I’m trying to do is to tell these stories from my lens.”**  
KEMIYONDO COUTINHO, 30, WRITER-DIRECTOR-ACTOR

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# SEEING AND BEING THE CHANGE:

## FEMALE FILMMAKERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



**KEMIYONDO “KEMI” COUTINHO**, 30, writer-director-actor, was born in Uganda, raised in Swaziland, and now lives in Los Angeles while making films in Uganda. In 2018, she wrote and directed her first short film, *Kyenvu*, which won the Pan African Film Festival’s Best Narrative Short Film award and was the first Ugandan film to ever qualify for an Oscar.

“You can develop inner hate when you don’t see yourself in a story. When you’re constantly watching other people’s lives in film and TV, you are aware your life is not worthy of being seen... What’s more important to me now is for little girls to see themselves in multiple ways. That way they can start to imagine themselves in many ways.”

“What I think needs to change is at the top. If I walk into a board room filled with white men, that will greatly influence what my film will look like.”



**GUNEET MONGA**, 35, is one of India’s top independent film producers, working on international hits such as *The Lunchbox*, *Peddlers*, *Gangs of Wassey-pur*, *Monsoon Shootout* and the 2019 Oscar-winning short, *Period. End of Sentence*.

“For so many years, the female characters were always submissive, pleasing the men. It was always that women were fighting for male attention. But in this last decade there has been substantial change. A conversation has started... women writers and women directors are creating powerful, complicated women on screen.”



**ELLE-MÁIJÁ TAILFEATHERS**, 34, is a Vancouver and New York-based writer-director-producer-actor. She is a member of the Kainai First Nation. She started making films in 2011 with the experimental short *Bloodland* and later directed the award-winning shorts *A Red Girl’s Reasoning* and *Bihttöš (Rebel)*.

“There has definitely been a dramatic shift since I was a child, and that has much to do with the advocacy and activism of indigenous people working in film. Also, the way that people are consuming media content allows for more stories to be told – stories that hadn’t had the space before.”

“If you grow up seeing ugly misrepresentations of yourself and your community on screen, how can you not internalise some of that? Now I look at my five-year-old niece and she knows I make films for a living – she knows that she has a place in this industry if that’s what she decides to pursue. It’s within her realm of possibility. We’ve entered a really great time.”



**MELINA LEÓN**, 42, is a writer-director living in Lima, Peru. Her debut feature film *Canción sin Nombre* (*Song without a Name*), premiered at the Cannes Film Festival 2019, making her the first female Peruvian filmmaker to present her work at the festival.

**“I think many women have this idea that we have to become a bit tough, to take on certain attitudes, to fit into this world dominated by men. You are supposed to be very rational and assertive, not too emotional, always have an answer for things. I felt like I had to act a little like my father to survive in this industry. To get jobs, to be considered for jobs.”**

**“The first thing is just to give them [women] a voice. Become part of juries. Encourage each other, read books by women, watch films by women, know the work and know what’s happening. Read articles about the work. That’s the way we are going to help each other. We must recover our collective spirit.”**



**ELLI TOIVONIEMI**, 35, is a Finnish producer and director who is one of the co-founders of Tuffi Films. This groundbreaking female-led production company has worked on award-winning films like Selma Vilhunen’s *Hobbyhorse Revolution* and, *Stupid Young Heart* and the Oscar-nominated short *Do I Have to Take Care of Everything?*

**“We should just believe in women, take them seriously... For all the levels and roles in the film industry – screenwriters, distributors, film critics, we need to give the space and the possibilities. That’s the only way it will happen... It’s about really questioning your own thinking when you’re in a decision-making position. The more power and the more money you have, the more you should think about this.”**

**ASH MAYFAIR**, 34, was born in Vietnam and is now based in New York City. She made her feature directorial debut with *The Third Wife*. The award-winning 2018 film is a coming-of-age drama about a 14-year-old girl thrust into an arranged marriage in 19th-century Vietnam.



**“It requires concerted effort in all aspects of society not just in the film industry. It starts with education, treating young boys and girls equally at home and at school. It continues with government and policies, fighting for gender equality and basic human rights like abortion. It filters into all social expectations and prejudices we have about male and female and every gender in-between. Representation and gender parity need to be widespread and not just in the media.”**

**“I will never stop working to bring more women’s stories out into the world, not only because they are tales that belong to my gender, but also because they are powerful stories and precious to the experience of being human.”**

# WHAT GIRLS SAY

## REFLECTIONS ON THE STORIES BEING TOLD



What do girls want from the films and TV programmes they watch and what are they getting? The conversations we had with our interviewees were revealing. They chose the films that they wanted to discuss, often because the characters in them were interesting and inspirational even though they acknowledged a lack of diversity in the characters overall and an assumption of superiority in many of the male ones.

**“When he was investigating the case he would never take a step back but he wants his wife to take her step back...that shows that he has superiority over her... It shows masculine behaviour, he shows authority over his wife. She needs to compromise around her career but he does not.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 20, INDIA,  
DISCUSSING THE FILM VIKRAM VEDHA, 2017

Despite the presence of these stereotypical male characters most interviewees said that their chosen female characters were a positive representation of women: intelligent, determined, confident, fierce and independent.

**“She shows she doesn’t need a man in her life. She wants to be powerful. She has a good job, also her work is not typical in Senegal for a woman, it is work for men because she works building houses.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SENEGAL

Their favourite female characters were role models who they thought acted in ways that were different from both society’s expectations of women and the usual representations of women in entertainment media.

**“Hermione is determined, she’s intelligent and smart and for me she does not act as society wants girls or women to act.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 22, SENEGAL,  
DISCUSSING HARRY POTTER FILMS

**“She’s really confident in herself. She gets a little bit angry when she is faced with people who are kind of ignorant or patronising and misogynistic... I think they’ve done a really good job of making a female character who has her own personality and her own characteristics that don’t necessarily fit with how we usually see women.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 17, CANADA, DISCUSSING THE FILM  
TEN THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU, 1999

Overall, however, interviewees also recognised that these role models were quite rare, with a number of female characters reflecting stereotypical behaviours or traits, including being caring and respectful.

**“Her main characteristic is that she’s really good to other people and she has good behaviour... especially to her boss.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 21, VIETNAM,  
DISCUSSING HER PRIVATE LIFE, TV SERIES, 2019

They also noticed that, particularly in terms of image and appearance, female characters tended to stick to established conventions and even those described as demonstrating non-gender stereotypical behaviour, often conform to notions of beauty and femininity in their looks.

**“So, the character’s name is Black Widow and well, she has, you know, the body structure that supposedly every woman would like to have. She has fair skin, green eyes and red hair. Well, she is definitely not very feminine. Especially when she gets involved in the battle because she is very... fierce and she fights like she was any other guy, and so that is not typically very feminine.”**

GIRL, 17, PERU, DISCUSSING  
THE FILM THE AVENGERS, 2018

**“But one characteristic I think that is quite different is probably the fact that she’s brave and continues to do things that people aren’t 100% accepting of... I do think that her appearance is pretty stereotypical with the brown hair... and a slim body and all of that.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA, DISCUSSING  
THE FILM BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, 2017

## MEN TAKE CHARGE, WOMEN LOOK NICE: ON SCREEN STEREOTYPES

**“In all the movies I see the girls need help from the male or the boys. And girls don’t end up achieving, but boys end up achieving what they want in the movies.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA

In other words, outside their chosen films, the interviewees reported stereotypical portrayals of women and girls often in traditional domestic roles.

**“Women and girls in general are taking care of the household and looking nice and sort of like... just doing the basic things that people expect a female to do. I don’t really see women doing anything outside the stereotype...”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA

Consequently, as some interviewees noted, there are fewer women in leading roles: even when women and girls are given more prominent roles, they are often secondary to the man – his romantic interest for example – and lack depth of character.

**“It’s a rarity to find a movie where it’s an all-female cast or mostly female cast, usually the women are just additions and for the most part as a romantic interest. They can easily be taken out of the movie and the movie will do just fine.”**

GIRL, 17, CANADA

**“Yes, in all the movies that I have seen that I have watched... when it comes to a girl or female character its always about her love life story or love story or something related to her marriage.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 21, VIETNAM

Other girls and young women from Canada and the Netherlands discussed the sometimes quite subtle, sexual objectification of women in entertainment media which focuses on appearance and ranges through nakedness to cat-calling and staring.

**“A lot of the times we see men objectifying women in [TV] shows... we often see women walking and a man watching her as she walks away, that’s a very common scene we see in movies and shows... and things like that sort of just add to the discrimination and this unequal power balance.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA

Other interviewees noted that this “unequal power balance” means that female characters are not shown, or rarely shown, as leaders, or in leadership positions.

**“Yeah! Men are in more leadership posts than women. Let me say, even other movies that I watch, it’s very hard to watch a movie saying that the president... is a woman, he’s a man! So, I think men are taking charge.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA

**“They don’t show women in leadership, and they don’t show women as role models, they just show them as sort of the followers of men, in a sense.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA



A number of them picked up the theme of how entertainment media mirrors reality.

**“Because it’s also what we see in the real world today as well. Like right now... females aren’t in the top leadership positions almost anywhere in the world, and... even female representation in politics is much lower than men, and I think that sort of translates onto our entertainment. And I think it creates this vicious cycle.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA

**“Actually, that’s how it has been. I’ve been seeing this all the way from my childhood, seeing that women are not given the opportunity to speak.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA

And according to one interviewee, when women are given leading roles in films there is generally a backlash from the public.

**“So, in *Captain Marvel*... it came out recently and it’s one of the first superhero movies where it’s just a female other than *Wonder Woman* and she really has this quality of character and she’s incredible and it’s a role model for so many girls. [But] Everyone is talking about how she is controlling, and other people are saying her character is too much but, when we have these male characters in those position of power, they are applauded... These are the characters we like to see in men on film but when they are portrayed in women, we get uncomfortable.”**

GIRL, 17, CANADA

## EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY: IT'S NOT JUST THE MOVIES

Entertainment media is only part of that story. Girls and young women are also bombarded by images – on advertising hoardings, in shopping centres, along the roads – invading all aspects of their daily lives as they go to school, college or work.

**“Advertisements are the mirrors of society because those that do not reflect reality are meaningless. Advertisements tell us what society expects from women.”** YOUNG WOMAN, JAPAN

Do these images tell the same story as the entertainment media we are analysing, portraying women as secondary characters, giving them domestic roles and concentrating on what they look like rather than what they think or say?

To find out, groups of girls and young women from five different countries – the Dominican Republic, India, Japan, Senegal, and South Sudan – collected and talked about 108 advertisements.<sup>42</sup>

This is what they found:

- Women's bodies are used to sell products
- Girls have to be pretty
- Men are more intelligent than women
- A woman's place is in the home
- Leadership is for men.

**“I have learned that most products are advertised using girls' pictures.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, SOUTH SUDAN

Young women in all five countries were quick to assess that, overall, the adverts they saw demonstrated that the bodies of women and girls were being used to sell products, even where the image of a woman bore no actual relation to the product being sold.

**“The girl is ready to put forward her beauty not her personality and her human qualities.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, SENEGAL



SENEGAL

**“It's a phone advertisement but there's a woman next to you as if you think of it as an object of attraction.”**



INDIA

**“Attractive female model with modern dress and heavy jewellery is shown which is not at all related to the products advertised [...] Model is wearing off shoulder dress which is totally mismatched and unrelated to the product advertised.”**



**“They use us like sex objects.”**  
 YOUNG WOMAN, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

**“Girls are used as a commodity or brand in advertisements.”** YOUNG WOMAN, INDIA

Their analysis also uncovered high levels of sexualisation and female nudity:

- One-in-five women in these advertisements are sexualised: none of the men are.
- Women are also three times more likely than men to be shown partially nude.

The use of the female body to sell goods is not new. These research findings underline just how persistent and ubiquitous it is. Attempts by regulators and legislators to curb the use of harmful stereotypes in advertising have been many and varied but appear unsuccessful. Young women worldwide are still learning from advertising how important their looks are

– **“we have to be pretty”** – and that their place is at home:

- In the advertisements analysed there are no men shown in a kitchen and few women in an office.
- Men are three times more likely to be shown working than women.

This office/kitchen imbalance was not lost on the girls and young women we spoke to.

**“A woman next to household appliances can be interpreted as wanting to show that the place of the woman is at home, taking care of household chores.”** YOUNG WOMAN, SENEGAL

**“The term ‘working mothers’ is disturbing. There is no such term as ‘working fathers’, so working mothers makes women who work look special.”** YOUNG WOMAN, JAPAN



**“** When one speaks about power one thinks of the man. **”**  
 Power = man. **”**

**“** We should buy electro-domestic products for our mums. That’s what it means... because women do those domestic tasks. **”**



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

They are aware, too, that on advertising boards, men lead while women serve.

**“Males are always dominating in business as names of only males are displayed on boards.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, INDIA

**“Some advertisements show women taking leadership roles, but most of them show women being a good wife and mother and being passive.”** YOUNG WOMAN, JAPAN

As with entertainment media, advertising makes girls and young women doubt their abilities as leaders.

**“Women can also take top leadership positions such as the general secretary of the bank, though most of them doubt themselves that they can do it.”** YOUNG WOMAN, SOUTH SUDAN

Overall the message of the advertisements surrounding girls and young women is similar to that of the entertainment media that they watch. Both reinforce

existing stereotypes which see women as followers, secondary and domestic characters. Like the films discussed, the adverts also reinforce unrealistic expectations of female beauty: nearly everyone is fair, slim and pretty and girls can feel the pressure to conform.

**“We’d like to be like her, to look like her if we wore those clothes. That’s why we have to keep our bodies in good shape.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Persistent stereotyping is damaging and the images girls and young women are currently surrounded by limit their ambitions and undermine their confidence. Conversely, it is very clear from their comments that when women are shown in positions of power it is inspiring: changing the images has the potential to change lives. So, why don’t we?

**“It’s positive because it makes you feel strength. Sometimes I feel like... wow, because I’d like to be like that.”** YOUNG WOMAN, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

INDIA



**“It shows women having due equality as they deserve... The women in the advertisement look confident as they walk side by side with men... The clothes, the females are wearing, are defying the dress codes imposed on women generally in our country.”**



## **MEDIA MATTERS:** **“IF YOU CAN SEE IT, YOU CAN BE IT”<sup>43</sup>**

This is the motto of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, and signals the scale of impact that media has. The findings from all the research for this project confirm that media in general, and entertainment media in particular, has considerable impact, for both good and bad, on the girls and young women watching.

For some of our interviewees, their chosen movie provided a positive role model, with a few describing the main characters as particularly inspiring. This power needs to be put to wider use.

**“When I was younger some of my friends called me Hermione... I think that by reading it [Harry Potter] when I was a kid and watching the movie it influenced my personality... First by being ambitious, to say to myself ok that I do not want to be like a woman or like a girl who does what boys want her to do but that people see me as a human.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 22, SENEGAL

**“Actually, this movie inspired me a lot. First, the girls came from a different background, they had a strong relationship, that friendship... They could help each other to see that the other one succeeds and see that no one is left out.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA, DISCUSSING  
THE FILM SUMMER FOREVER, 2015

Others spoke about the role that films have in entrenching gender stereotypes, defining, for both girls and boys, what they come to accept, as normal.

**“If through all the years you watch a lot of movies and shows about women who start a family, and who are looking for a man and want to marry, and all the guys are watching movies where the guy has to be a hero and has to save others ... you begin to think in stereotypical ways about how a man should be and how a woman should be. And I think that also has an effect, in the end, on behaviour.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 25, NETHERLANDS

**“Girls are seen in cooking, are seen in farming.... And the men are seen in big pictures. It means that even a young girl will grow up saying that actually... I’m to be a cleaner, I’m to be in a kitchen!”** YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA

**“They [media] have a lot of influence on how our society functions... First for the young women and girls, and for all the women, it makes them lacking in confidence and also thinking that all the stereotypes in their lives are true and unconsciously they will accept [them].”**  
YOUNG WOMAN, 19, SENEGAL

Across all the participating countries, girls and young women strongly believed that when they cannot see women as leaders on screens or cannot identify positive role models, they lose confidence and ambition.

**“I think it might have negative impact on young women, because they may think they are not really a good fit for leadership roles, for example. And they may think that they don’t need to try hard in their career and just live a normal life and just stay at home and take care of their children. They don’t need to have like big ambitions.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 21, VIETNAM

**“Definitely there’s an impact because indirectly the movies are telling women that they are not able to take leadership roles in the same way that men can.”** GIRL, 17, PERU

Young women also spoke about how lack of diversity in the media means this effect is amplified for women of colour.

**“I guess for women of colour it’s even more difficult to find a good example. I think especially for women of colour and for girls of colour, if you don’t have a good example or a strong example [of women in leadership]... you probably would have question marks there about whether you can make it to the top.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 23, NETHERLANDS

**“My mother says, ‘If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.’ I remember a TV show called *North of 60* that we would tune in every week to see Tina Keeper, who played a cop. She was a contemporary indigenous woman playing a character who wasn’t a one-dimensional stereotype. It meant a lot for me as a young girl to see a woman like her on the television screen.”**

ELLE-MÁIJÁ TAILFEATHERS, 34,  
WRITER-DIRECTOR-PRODUCER-ACTOR, CANADA

*Mayye Zayed, 34, is an Egyptian filmmaker. She studied electronics and telecommunications before switching to filmmaking and, in 2011, won a Fulbright scholarship to study cinema and media at Wellesley College in the U.S. She is a film director, producer, director of photography and editor and works across documentary and fiction. She is co-founder of Rufy's, an independent film production house based in Alexandria, Egypt.*

**May Ziade**, almost my name-sake, was a Lebanese-Palestinian writer, poet and translator, who lived in Egypt in the early 20th-century. Despite the fact that she introduced feminism to the Arab culture, and was considered “the pioneer of oriental feminism,” the only thing most Egyptians know about May Ziade is that she loved Khalil Gibran, the renowned writer of *The Prophet*.

As a kid growing up, I didn't know her history or anything about feminism. All I knew was that May Ziade was one of my favourite writers and I really enjoyed reading her work. I didn't have any other female role models. The rest were just male writers, male directors, male scientists... Despite the great quality of their work, most of them had one thing in common, which was that I simply couldn't find myself or my friends in most of their work. I couldn't fully relate to any of their stories. So, as a kid, I started writing my own stories, hoping that one day someone would read them.

Throughout my teenage years, that search for someone I could relate to continued in all the books I was reading and all the films and TV programmes I was watching. Women were, and still are, always portrayed in the media in Egypt from a solely male perspective that is narrow, stereotypical and sexualised most of the time. Like many parts of the world, women and girls are socially pressured to only be interested in marriage, fashion and makeup. Many of the women I know are smart, strong, independent and career driven, but they are never represented. Most of the TV shows for women in Egypt are about cooking, fashion and relationships, but the women I know don't usually watch them. So, the stories I used to write as a kid, started to become films I dreamt about making as a grownup. I wanted to simply tell stories about myself, my family, my culture, my social class and the things that matter the most to me.

In the early years of the Egyptian cinema, women did have high-level positions as producers, directors, distributors and editors. *Laila*, the first Egyptian and Arabic feature ever, was produced and directed in 1927 by Aziza Amir, who also acted in it. She founded a production company, Isis Films, that produced other early Egyptian films. There was also Assia Dagher who produced over 100 films and her niece Mary Queeny, another producer and the founder of Studio Galal: one of the largest film studios during the Golden Age of the Egyptian cinema. The industry was built and dominated by pioneering women in the twenties, thirties and forties of the last century. Sadly, that is not the case anymore.

Nowadays, most Egyptian films are written, directed and produced by men; the presence of a female leading character

is rare, and male leading characters delve into the worlds of crime, drugs, corruption and other topics I am not the least bit interested in. Usually, the secondary female characters in these films are two dimensional and just props for the men to show off to or win in the end. In a country where filming a love scene is frowned upon, domestic violence and physical abuse are openly portrayed and accepted. Even in films that were made very recently and define themselves as “empowering

women”, the male gaze is very present as the female lead character is always sexualised, victimised, helpless and needing a man to rescue her. Despite the international recognition some of these films have received, I find they misrepresent the women of this country and feed the stereotypes of Western audiences regarding the Arab region in general. I cannot deny the fact that women's rights in the Arab world are limited. Yet there are amazing, strong women, coming from all the different social classes and backgrounds, fighting these limitations and breaking social taboos, whose lives are truly inspirational.

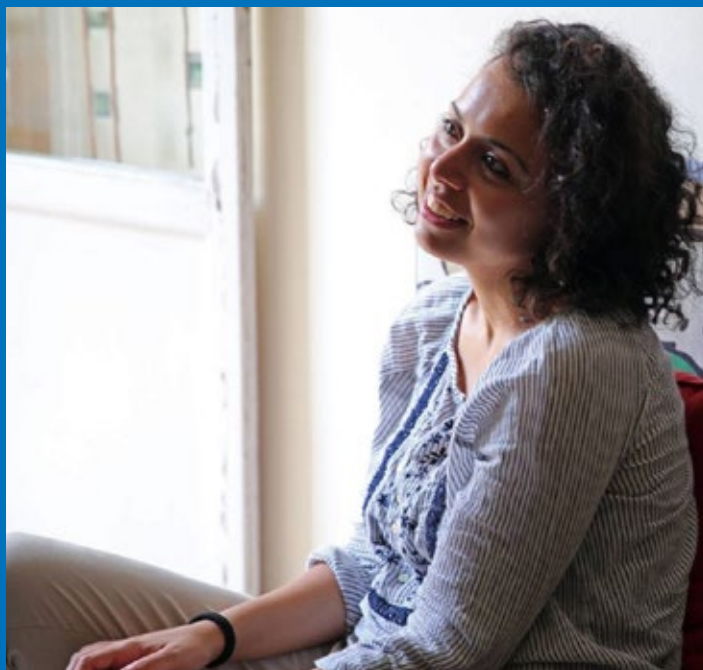
That's why I have been making films since 2010, because these are the characters I can relate to and love to make films about. Since cinema is embedded strongly in the Egyptian culture, it was not that unthinkable to become a female director and producer. Having progressive open-minded

parents also helped, but not all families are like mine. Without support many young girls, will dismiss the idea of being a filmmaker or a story teller. I believe it all starts at home and that's why the media plays an important role. It is such a powerful tool, capable of changing society's rules and perceptions. If little girls and their parents start seeing strong unconventional female role models on TV, in cinemas and books, their self-image and their ideas can be altered and, hopefully, the lives of girls and women transformed.

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# FILMS I DREAMT ABOUT MAKING

BY MAYYE ZAYED



# THE WAY FORWARD

## WHAT GIRLS WANT TO SEE

**“We often underestimate the impact that movie and films and shows have on our culture as a whole. I think that if we tap into that, it’s a wonderful resource where we can really portray these different characters because they exist. And to portray them on TV and the big screen is really allowing people to see themselves and to accept who they are and to not be afraid of being their true self and not having to hide themselves.”**

**GIRL, 17, CANADA**

Interviewees reported wanting to see women as lead characters in films and TV series: with roles which did not centre around the storyline of a man.

**“When we give the roles, we can show women and give them the first role, not every time the second role.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SENEGAL

**“Women should also be given the right to act that bigger part in the movie.”**

YOUNG WOMAN, 19, UGANDA

**“So, I definitely think that there should be more female leads in movies rather than them acting as sort of like the backbone for the male characters.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA

A number of interviewees also wanted female characters to be shown as leaders and to hold power. And they want too a different concept of leadership, one that aligns with the listening, compassionate leadership model of service to the community described also by the young women taking part in our survey.<sup>44</sup>

**“I want more shows focused on women and how women are doing things to help society and help the people around them, because most shows do focus on men in many different leadership positions or non-leadership positions, how they make their way and become successful.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 18, CANADA



**“When we do movies, we can try to show their power, not every time here, looking like flowers in the movies.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 23, SENEGAL

Some interviewees also wanted to see more diversity in terms of ethnicity and social background: both in terms of the cast and behind the scenes, recognising that positive representation of women starts with the film crews and production teams.

**“I think there is a lot of work for people who are directing films but basically it starts there. It starts at the writing tables and at the media companies... Make sure that there is a diverse group of people that you get your ideas from. I think that helps because you get different perspectives. That’s basically what I think needs to change but that is of course the underlying power structure and that is not easy to do.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 23, NETHERLANDS

They wanted movies to show the female character’s storyline in more depth, one which would emphasise their leadership potential, rather than their romantic dreams.

**“Make sure that it’s more about strong women and independent women and that they can make it on their own.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 23, NETHERLANDS

**“I think the film directors should also focus on the careers of the girls... not only about their love story, their families and their marriage story, but also their dream, their ambition and their career too.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 21, VIETNAM

A couple of interviewees also mentioned how masculinity might be portrayed differently: with men and boys in films not automatically in control or forced into the stereotype of ‘action hero.’

**“I think for the most part they [men] are portrayed as these kinds of strong guys that don’t have any flaws in a sense that they are kind of seen as perfect as well....You don’t really have a lot of movies about guys where there is a chance to explore their emotions or being seen in ways that aren’t this huge action guy or something like that.”** GIRL, 17, CANADA

**“About the male, I think they should be portrayed in a more emotional way, usually the film is not focused about their emotion. So, I think we should let them to express more emotion.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 21, VIETNAM

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the research undertaken for this report, several key themes have emerged which, rather depressingly, point to a common conclusion: media influence on our lives is huge and in terms of gender equality not benign. What has also emerged, throughout the research project, is that girls and young women know what they want to see. It is time to listen to them.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of entertainment media, to them and to other young people in their societies: reporting that they generally engage with it in some shape or form on a daily basis. They also said that children and young people look up to and are inspired by the role models they identify in characters on their screens and are influenced by the advertising images that surround them as they go about their everyday lives. According to participants in the girls' photo project, advertising media teaches girls and young women what society expects of them. And society does itself no favours when it expects so little – only that they are pretty, supportive and domestic.

As one young woman commented earlier the problem is that “...**females aren't in the top leadership positions almost anywhere in the world, and... I think that sort of translates onto our entertainment. And I think it creates this vicious cycle.**” There are films with strong female characters like *Black Panther*, the top-grossing film of 2018 with a predominantly black cast and four powerful women, and *Wonder Woman*, a character first created in 1942 but still alive and kicking in 2017; there is Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter films and Jo Marsh in *Little Women*, but they are rarer than they should be and on closer analysis still operate in a man's world and often an unreal one at that.

Entertainment media, as our interviewees noted, tends to reflect the status quo, and, in doing so reinforces it. This inevitably has an influence on girls and young women. When people who look and sound like them never, or rarely, play a leading role, it can shape the way they think, act and value themselves. For women and girls there is never safety in numbers. When they are leaders, they are the exception rather than the rule – conspicuous and vulnerable. We know from earlier research<sup>45</sup> that this makes young women, as they get older, more nervous of putting themselves forward. Female leadership needs to become normal: changing the stories that girls – their families too, and society as a whole – are restricted by, is key to changing lives.

**“I hope we are seeing better representation of female characters, but sometimes we need to examine further the arc or function of female characters in a story. There are a lot of things that can be done better and more bravely... I'm not interested in seeing the same stereotypes anymore. These amazing women who are going to sleep in their makeup and bra. Why is this? That focus on appearance is something that I haven't seen really changing. These are toxic stereotypes.”**

ELLI TOIVONIEMI, 35, PRODUCER-DIRECTOR, FINLAND



Twenty-five years after the call for action on women and media in 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the issues identified for change back then remain essentially in place, keeping women and girls firmly in theirs:

### ➡ GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER

**STEREOTYPES STILL DOMINATE** both on screen and behind the scenes. Male characters take up the most time and space on screen and in 2018 men produced, directed and wrote most of the top-grossing films. Women's roles in entertainment media are often defined in relation to a man: girls and young women reported that women are often portrayed as a male character's romantic interest, or are supporting characters whose objective is to help a man. Female leadership is not a prominent part of the picture.

**“Let more women take charge behind the camera. And I mean this at every level. Trust in them to share diverse and interesting female experiences. Women can create more complex and rich female protagonists if they have access to the decision-making process. Employ more women to be directors, show-runners, writers, producers, cinematographers, or film critics.”**

ASH MAYFAIR, 34, FILMMAKER, VIETNAM

### ➡ SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN ACROSS THE MEDIA REMAINS VERY MUCH IN PLACE:

female characters are more likely than male characters to be sexually objectified or sexually harassed, as is clear from the prevalence of the nudity, or semi-nudity, of female characters compared to male. This also applies to on screen women leaders, where they exist, and this implies that leadership is a more hostile environment for a woman.

**“It's been important to see the government's POSH Act [a ground-breaking anti-sexual harassment law established in 2013]. Every office in every company [with 10 employees or more] has to have anti-harassment guidelines and clarity. I've done those workshops, and I know that I'm going to introduce these ideas on every film set.”**

GUNEET MONGA, 35, PRODUCER, INDIA

### ➡ THERE IS A CONTINUING LACK OF DIVERSITY ON OUR SCREENS:

too many young women and girls are unable to see their lives reflected on screen and are unable to identify the positive role models who are critical to nurturing confidence and ambition. Interviewees commented on the lack of diversity in films generally, and in portrayals of female leadership in particular, and this is backed up by the film analysis.

This research demonstrates just how big an impact on girls' ambitions the media can have. Girls and young women know that they have the capacity for leadership – they do not see why gender should hold them back – but the world around them, and the media they consume, is not encouraging. What emerges from the objective content analysis of both films and advertising images is a picture of a male-dominated world where, most of the time, men lead and men still hold power.

The media, for the most part, is currently a barrier to gender equality: it has the power to support girls and young women to become leaders in society, but chooses not to use it.

**“It's a big complicated issue... there aren't simple, nice solutions to this. It's uncomfortable but we should face it and move on.**

**It's not about blaming and making people feel guilty. That won't make us move further. Statistics and data are a good tool to give us a full picture of things. That's our power, when we have the facts... It might be that there is a backlash later, but at least for now there is a movement and that's great.”**

ELLI TOIVONIEMI, 35, PRODUCER-DIRECTOR, FINLAND

The girls and young women taking part in the research for this report, including the female filmmakers interviewed, are well aware of the power of storytelling. They all recognise the impact that media stereotyping and the objectification of women and girls has on their lives and on their ambitions. Movements like Time's Up are challenging the treatment of women on screen and in society, and pushing for the kind of diversity in the entertainment industry which could have a profound influence on society at large. Girls and women are fighting back and the recommendations that follow are specifically designed to transform the media landscape for their benefit.

Three overarching objectives have emerged from the research and it is the responsibility of us all to fight for change.

## CALLS TO ACTION:



**To be it, they must see it.** Make stories about female leadership visible and normal. Stories need to encourage young women's aspirations and ambitions, not undermine them.



**Stop the sexualization and the objectification** of women and girls on screen and ensure that content doesn't discriminate or reinforce negative stereotypes and behaviour.



**Fund female filmmakers,** programme makers and content producers. Invest more time and money in women and girls as storytellers while addressing harassment and discrimination in the workplace to encourage girls and women into key positions in the media industry.

## National governments must:



Partner with media bodies and civil society to run **public campaigns that promote and increase the number of women leaders and the visibility of women's leadership** in the media industries, sending the clear message that women and girls belong in all spaces and places of power.

Reaffirm and **accelerate action on existing commitments** pertaining to girls and women, the media and equal representation as outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. There is much more work to be done: ending the use of degrading and inferior portrayals of women and girls; promoting gender equality and women's leadership, and increasing the participation of women in decision-making spaces within media industries.



Introduce, **monitor and enforce legislation around anti-gender discrimination**, harassment and diversity in the workplace, to address why it is often a hostile environment for women. Encourage content creators to depict the workplace as a positive place for women and female leadership.



Make funding to public and private media bodies dependent on **the uptake of diversity standards**, as with the British Film Institute in the UK, and encourage more funding be earmarked for the creation of content that celebrates diversity, promotes gender equality and encourages younger voices in storytelling.

Understand the role of education in preparing girls and young women to have future careers as leaders and storytellers in media industries by ensuring subjects **such as the creative arts and media literacy are part of national curricula in schools** and in non-formal settings. Also invest in educational materials that do not promote gender stereotypes but show girls and women in positions of authority.

Work with media bodies to **drive increased and diverse representation within production teams** including apprenticeship and mentoring schemes.

Media bodies and organisations, including regulators, funders, commissioners and film and television productions companies, must:



Set diversity and inclusion targets and key actions that **drive increased and diverse representation both on screen and behind it**, including apprenticeship and mentoring schemes for younger women.

Endorse and support champions within the media industry, especially those who are seen as role models by girls, young women and other marginalised groups, **to influence wider recognition of representation issues** in the industry and public arena.



Take up self-regulatory measures such as **gender audits and codes of conduct** on all productions in order to: address discrimination and harassment in the workplace; the lack of diversity in crew, cast and script; the negative portrayals of women leaders, and the sexual objectification of women and girls, within scripts and other media content.



Create **awards and other incentives** to share best practice in fostering women's leadership in the media industries and celebrate women storytellers from a diversity of backgrounds.

Regularly **consult with girls and young women** as consumers in order to produce the different stories they are asking to see on platforms that are accessible and favoured by them.

Ensure that **films and other entertainment content produced and directed by women** have production and marketing budgets equal to those of male filmmakers and creators.

**“We also have to bring men to our cause, and free them in a way! I couldn't have made my film without some wonderful feminist men.”**

MELINA LEÓN, 42, FILMMAKER, PERU

Individual champions – filmmakers, talent, executives, producers, activists and politicians must:



Be the role model girls need: **scrutinise scripts, speak out at industry and political events** and, where they have the power, publicly make diversity and gender equality a condition of their involvement in a media production.

**“We recruited 11 young indigenous people – many of them young women -- to work directly with the head of each department... Also, we did a script workshop working with young indigenous women... We tried hard to avoid that top-down mentality that exists in the film world. We also hired as many women and non-binary folks as possible and made a concerted effort to inform our crew that toxic attitudes were not going to be tolerated on our set. We established a code of conduct with a sense of respect to one another and the content of the story.”**

ELLE-MÁIJÁ TAILFEATHERS, 34,  
WRITER-DIRECTOR-PRODUCER-ACTOR, CANADA

**“We could switch up these stereotypes of the leadership role and how that should look... women can stand up for themselves and take the lead and that could be very inspirational I think for young women to see.”** YOUNG WOMAN, 24, NETHERLANDS

# METHODOLOGY

This research sought to answer the research questions using mixed methods – quantitative, qualitative and content analysis – in order to be able to demonstrate the findings from an objective, expert content analysis, alongside the subjective views and perceptions of girls and young women.<sup>46</sup>

The research components include:

- **Global Survey:** findings from a global survey in 19 countries<sup>47</sup> and focus group discussions (FGDs) in a randomly selected sub-set of 5 countries<sup>48</sup> from the first part of the research: the overall survey sample size was 10,064, with approximately 400 focus group discussion participants.<sup>49</sup>
- **Film Content:** expert film content analysis of 56 top-grossing films.
- **Photo Project:** expert media content analysis and girls and young women's reflections.
- **Key Informant Interviews** with a small sample of girls and young women.

Girls and young women aged 15-24 were the target for the survey, focus groups discussions, photo project and key informant interviews. However, the survey data also contains responses from 317 25-year-olds which are included in the analysis. Similarly, the key informant interviews also included one young woman aged 25.

**The global survey** included demographic questions and ten questions on aspirations to lead, experience of leading, confidence, encouragement, role models – including in the media – and discrimination. The survey asked young women about their leadership aspirations in terms of career, country, community and family. **The focus group discussions** sought to gauge the main sources of influence and inspiration in the lives of young women and participants were asked to reflect what kind of characteristics and attributes a young female leader might have in order

to understand how young women define leadership and the qualities involved in it.

**The film content analysis** is based, where the data was available, on the top ten grossing films from the 20 countries studied. Data was located via film box office data through Comscore and Box Office Mojo. Many of the top ten grossing films in each country overlapped with the top grossing films in other countries, so a total of 56 films was analysed for this report.<sup>50</sup> The final dataset includes 1,859 characters from the top-grossing films. The analysis is based on the 682 leading and supporting characters in the dataset, which excludes minor characters.

A revolutionary new automatic audiovisual tool, the **GD-IQ** was used to measure the relative on-screen and speaking time of male and female characters. This data was combined with analysis from a team of ten researchers who coded the film content and provided a robust picture of the gender balance or bias in the selected films.

**The girls' photo project** involved a content analysis of gender representations in visual advertisements – including on billboards and in magazines – identified and photographed by girls and young women in and around Plan International offices. This took place in five countries (the Dominican Republic, India, Japan, Senegal and South Sudan) – the same five countries as the focus group discussions in the earlier research.

The final dataset includes 205 characters from 108 advertisements across the five different countries. Girls in the Dominican Republic and Senegal gathered more than twice as many girls in the other countries. Expert analysis was conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media during April 2019. This was complemented by thematic analysis of girls' and young women's own reflections and interpretations of the advertising images that they photographed.

**Key informant interviews with girls and young women** sought to complement the statistical film analysis by including girls' and young women's perspectives on how women and men are portrayed in entertainment media, with relation to leadership in particular. Participants were asked to reflect on and explore themes and characters from their chosen film or TV show. In total, 13 key informant interviews were conducted with girls and young women between the ages of 15-24 across seven countries: Canada, India, Netherlands, Peru, Senegal, Uganda, Vietnam. Respondents were identified by staff at the Plan International office in each country and were already involved with the organisation in some capacity.

**All processes in this research were approved by independent child rights experts who conducted an external ethics check for the project. Additionally, where possible or required, the research was submitted to the external approval bodies for the countries concerned.**

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

- The survey methods used included only young women who were literate and had access to the necessary technology. Though the use of SMS will have increased access to some extent, the methodology will not have allowed access to the most marginalised young women and therefore the data is not generalisable across whole populations.
- Focus group discussions did include some of the most marginalised populations as participants were from Plan International programmes. However, recruitment methods varied and this may have affected the findings in each country and, in some countries, participants have had access to Plan International programming, which may have increased their awareness of issues around gender and equality. Participants in the key informant interviews were selected by Plan International staff and as participants in Plan International programmes they too had an awareness of gender and gender issues.
- Levels of experience and confidence in facilitation and notetaking skills varied considerably between the researchers across all five countries and sometimes within countries and there was some variation in the quality of the transcriptions and the translations into English.
- For the girls' photo project, there were variations in terms of photographs taken, and consequently the comparability of the photographs.
- Questions for the key informant interviews were centred around gender roles and female under-representation in relation to the girls' and young women's chosen films or TV series. Consequently, some responses relate to the film specifically rather than the media more widely. This is taken into consideration during analysis and report writing.

## ENDNOTES

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- 39 A character is considered to be a leader if others followed his or her behaviour and/or directives in a political job, such as Prime Minister or member of congress, or other national leaders.
- 40 Sexual objectification is the act of treating a person as an instrument of sexual pleasure. Objectification more broadly means treating a person as a commodity or an object without regard to their personality or dignity.
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- 46 For more details on the methodology go to p.36.
- 47 Benin, Canada, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Finland, Honduras, India, Japan, Netherlands, Peru, Philippines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sweden, Vietnam, Uganda, USA, Zimbabwe.
- 48 Dominican Republic, India, Japan, Senegal, South Sudan.
- 49 For further information about this section of the research please see: Plan International and Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, *Taking the Lead: Girls and young women on changing the face of leadership*, Plan International, Woking, 2019.
- 50 The total number of top grossing films was 61, but five films could not be located for analysis, so the final dataset was 56 films.



**GIRLS  
GET EQUAL**

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media

## PARTNERS

This report is based on research produced by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University and Plan International.

The mission of the **Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media** is to engage, educate, and influence media content creators, marketers and audiences about the critical need to eliminate gender bias and negative stereotypes in media. To this end, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media has pioneered the field of research on gender inequity in media and has been dedicated to conducting intersectional analysis of representations of gender, race, ability and sexuality. It has amassed the largest body of research on gender prevalence in family entertainment, spanning more than 20 years. Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media's research serves as the basis for education and outreach programmes that help families, studios, educators and content creators become critical consumers and producers.

**Plan International** is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, Plan International drives changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children and we are active in more than 75 countries.

**Girls Get Equal:** Plan International has been campaigning for girls' rights for over a decade and the current Girls Get Equal campaign aims to ensure girls and young women have power over their own lives and can help shape the world around them. Promoting young female leadership is central to the Girls Get Equal campaign. While this includes access to formal positions of power and authority, such as increasing the numbers of young women and girls in decision-making roles in public life, it also looks beyond this. The campaign seeks to redefine leadership to better reflect how girls, young women and young advocates and activists are choosing to lead: working with them to ensure that leadership is feminist, gender transformative and inclusive. It means not reinforcing a narrow male-defined set of leadership skills and behaviours or replicating the male-dominated power and leadership structures that currently exist. Throughout the campaign there will be ongoing research, partnering with girls and young women to fully understand what it means to them to be a leader.

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