

THE GEENA BENCHMARK REPORT

2007-2017



Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media

IF SHE CAN SEE IT, SHE CAN BE IT.

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MAJOR FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to establish benchmark measures for the percentage of protagonists who are women, people of color, LGBTQIA, and people with disabilities in family films so that we can quantify progress over time.

- Male leads outnumber female leads

TWO-TO-ONE

although this has improved slightly in the last decade

- Family films with female leads closed the gap in domestic box office revenue over the past decade and now earn more than family films with male leads
- When it comes to race, white leads outnumber leads of color

FOUR-TO-ONE

- Box office revenue for family films with leads of color and racially diverse co-leading casts have caught up with and surpassed family films with white leads

- **FEWER THAN 1%**

of family films feature a LGBTQIA lead, and we have seen no progress in the past decade

- **FEWER THAN 1%**

of family films feature a lead with a disability, and this has not improved in the past decade



INTRODUCTION

This report examines media representations of gender, race, LGBTQIA, and ability in family films from the past decade. More specifically, we analyze the identity of leads in the top grossing family films from 2007 to 2017 to see whether Hollywood content creators have made progress when it comes to telling the stories of traditionally marginalized groups. This study is the first to take a long-term view of the main characters in family films. Our four benchmark measures— the percentage of leading characters who are women, people of color, LGBTQIA, and people with disabilities— provide a straightforward way to quantify whether progress has occurred over time.

This study is important because the stories that we tell in entertainment media send a clear message about who matters most in our culture. When the lion's share of the stories we tell revolve around the lives of straight, white men without disabilities, children learn that people of marginalized identities simply matter less in our culture.

METHODOLOGY

We analyzed the top 100 grossing animated and non-animated family films (rated G, PG, PG-13) from 2007 through 2017, as reported by *Variety*. We selected the top grossing family films in order to examine the movie content viewed the most by young children, tweens, and teens in the U.S.

We conducted a content analysis, which entails systematic observation of characters and images. We classified character prominence based on their role as leads or co-leads. Leading characters drive the unfolding story line, while co-leading characters drive the unfolding story line together and share roughly equal screen time. We analyzed 1,115 leading and co-leading characters, which we refer to as just “leads” throughout this report.

In addition to measuring character prominence, we identified our primary measures of interest: characters' gender, race, sexual orientation, and ability. Race/ethnicity was determined from skin color, maxillofacial features, and context markers within the film (e.g., the race of the character's family). Sexuality is defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA). People with a disability were coded using cues about the character's physical and cognitive abilities.

FINDINGS

In this section, we examine the prominence of leading characters in family films by gender, race, sexuality, and ability between 2007 and 2017.

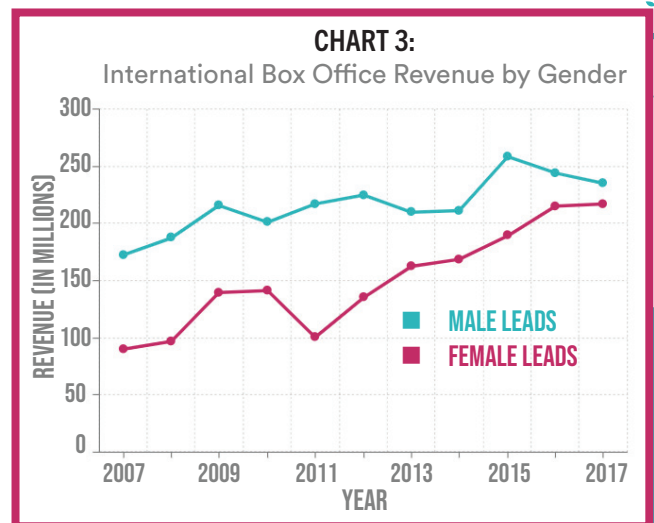
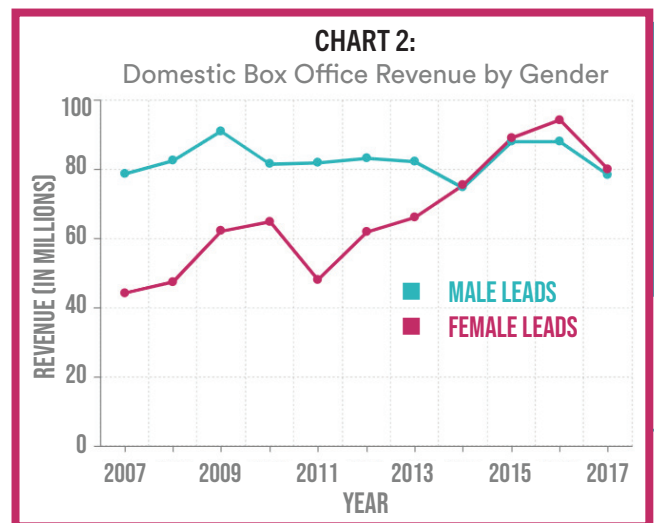
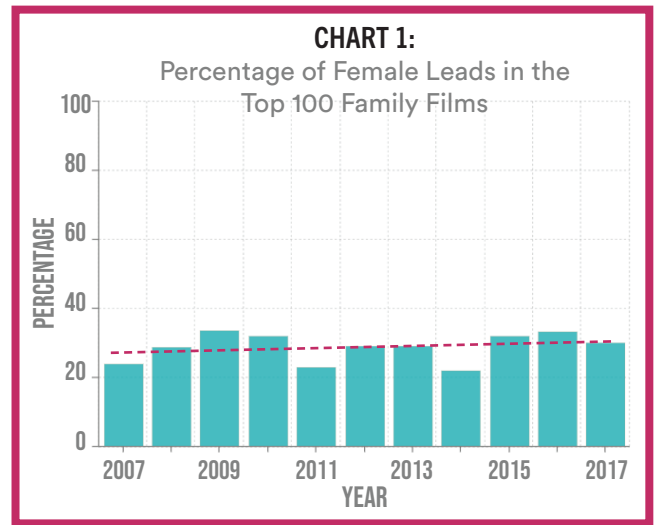
Women Leads

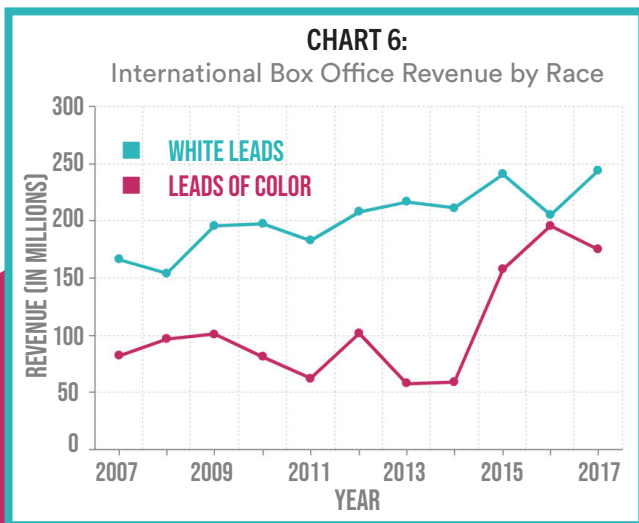
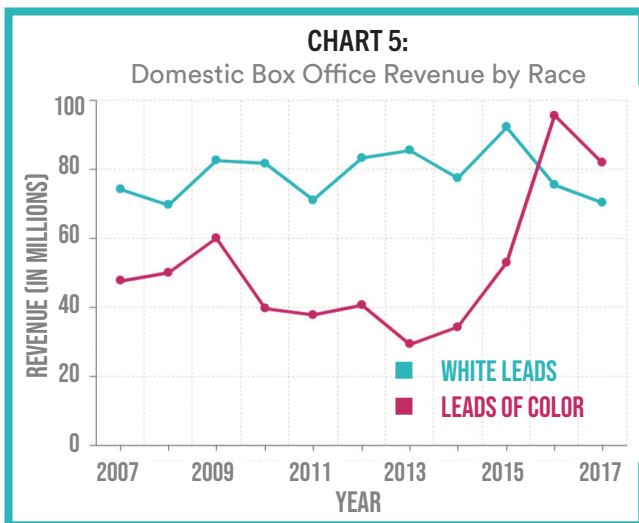
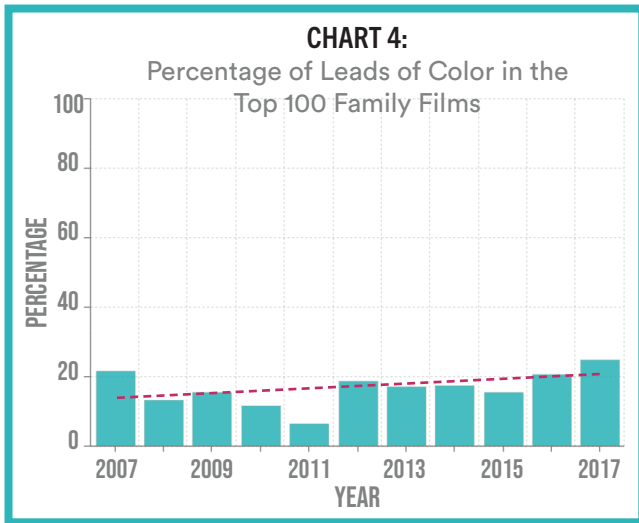
Women constitute 51% of the U.S. population,¹ but most family films tell the stories of men's lives:

- Male leads vastly outnumber female leads—71.3% compared to 28.8%. This means that men's stories were featured twice as often as women's stories.
- Female leads are the least represented in the action (9.4%), adventure (23.6%), and comedy (28.7%) genres. However, women are equitably represented in horror (55.9%) and romance (46.3%) films.
- We see fluctuations in women's representation from 2007 to 2017, but the trend is upward, meaning that more women were cast in leading roles by the end of the decade than the start of the decade. In 2007, 23.8% of leads were women compared to 30.1% in 2017, with a high of 33.3% in 2016 (Chart 1).

Previous studies find that women represent half of the film-going population,² and that gender diversity on screen translates into higher revenues at the box office.³ We find that the gender diversity bonus at the box office is a relatively recent phenomenon:

- The amount of money female-led films make has increased over the last decade. In 2007, female-led films grossed an average of \$44.3 million, and in 2017, they grossed an average of \$80.1 million (Chart 2).
- Family films with female leads caught up with and surpassed films with male leads in the past decade. A decade ago, family films with male leads earned significantly more revenue than films with female leads, but this reversed by 2016 when female leads grossed \$94.3 million compared to \$88.0 million for male leads. In 2017, female leads surpassed male leads again—\$80.1 million compared to \$78.4 million.
- International box office revenues tell a similar story. As Chart 3 shows, films with female leads have mostly closed the revenue gap with male-led films in recent years.





Leads of Color

Although people of color comprise 39.0% of the population in the U.S.,⁴ previous studies find that they remain underrepresented in every form of entertainment media. Our analysis shows that this is true of leading roles in family films as well:

- The vast majority of leads from the past decade are white (83.4%), while less than one-in-five are leads of color (16.7%). Therefore, white leads outnumbered leads of color four-to-one in films from the past decade.
- When it comes to the race/ethnicity of leading characters of color, the majority are Black (60.4%), followed by Latinx (15.4%), Asian American/Southeast Asian (14.2%), Middle Eastern (3.6%), Native American/Hawaiian/Asian Pacific Islander (2.4%), and “Other” (4.1%).
- Among leads of color, 74.0% are male, while 26.0% are female. This means that the gender gap in leading roles is even more pronounced for leads of color than white leads.
- The percentage of leads of color has fluctuated over the past decade, and was especially low from 2008 to 2011. We see an upward trend starting in 2011, but progress has not been steady over the decade (Chart 4).

Forty percent of filmgoers today are people of color,⁵ and previous studies find that racial diversity in leading and major roles is more profitable at the box office.⁶ We find a similar pattern for family films in recent years:

- While films with white leads have grossed more than films with leads of color for most of the past decade, this reversed in the past two years. In 2017, for example, films with leads of color earned \$81.8 million compared to \$70.3 million for films with white leads (Chart 5).
- We find a similar pattern with international box office revenues and race. Films with a lead of color are closing the box office revenue gap with films that feature white leads (Chart 6).

LGBTQIA LEADS

In the U.S., 3.4% of people identify as LGBTQIA,⁷ but they barely exist as leading characters in family films:

- In the last ten years, only 0.4% of leading characters were LGBTQIA.⁸
- Family films with LGBTQIA leads were scattered across the decade – in 2007, 2009, 2014, and 2017— so there is no clear progress for this group in the last ten years.

LEADS WITH DISABILITIES

In the U.S., 18.7% of people have a physical or cognitive disability, but their stories are rarely told in family films:⁹

- Fewer than 1% of leading characters (0.9%) were shown as a person with a disability in the top grossing family films of the last decade.¹⁰
- The representation of leads with disabilities has not improved in the last decade.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This benchmark study finds that while progress has been made for female leading characters, women are far from achieving parity with men as leads in family films. Leads of color remain underrepresented in family films, although this has improved somewhat in the past few years. LGBTQIA individuals and people with disabilities are rarely featured as protagonists in family films, and no measurable progress has occurred in the last decade. The film industry largely prides itself on being progressive, but continues to tell mostly stories about the lives of straight, white men without disabilities in family films.

We recommend the following actions to move the needle on lead representations:

- **Diversify hiring in film production.** Diversity in writing rooms and throughout the creative process translates into more diversity on the screen,¹¹ so the problem with representation starts with inequitable hiring decisions. Hiring practices in the film industry have seen no improvement

in the last two decades.¹² Studios must truly commit to anti-discrimination in their hiring practices, and set goals to diversify their workforce.

- **Commit distribution and marketing resources equally.** Another foundational problem with representation on the screen is that films directed by women do not receive the same distribution and marketing resources as films directed by men.¹³ Despite this, films written, directed, or starring women enjoy a greater average return on investment. Studios must commit to making more family films about the lives of women, people of color, LGBTQIA individuals, and people with disabilities, and ensure that these films reach the widest audience possible by equitably promoting them.
- **Tell stories that reflect the real world.** Studios could make the representations in family films equitable overnight by making sure that the worlds they are re-creating in family films look like the real world in terms of whose stories are told. Is it especially important to have diversity with leading characters since plotlines and narratives revolve around their stories.

ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau (2018). Quick Facts. Retrieved on December 23, 2018: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>
- 2 Montpelier, Rachel (2017). *MPAA Report 2016: 52% of Movie Audiences are Women & Other Takeaways, Women and Hollywood*, Retrieved on December 23, 2018: <https://womenandhollywood.com/mpaa-report-2016-52-of-movie-audiences-are-women-other-takeaways-12320da989b4/>
- 3 Anderson, Tre'vell (2017). New CAA Study Says Diverse Casting Increases Box Office Potential across Budgets, *The Los Angeles Times*, June 21, retrieved from <https://latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-caa-diversity-study-exclusive-20170622-story.html>. Also see our previous reports: "The See Jane 100: Gender and Race Representation in the Top Family Films of 2017" (2018). The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/the-see-jane-100/>; "The See Jane Top 50: Gender Bias in Family Films of 2016" (2017). The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, <https://seejane.org/the-see-jane-top-50-gender-bias-in-family-films-of-2016/>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Motion Picture Association of America (2018). *Theme Report 2017*. Retrieved on December 23, 2018: https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MPAA-THEME-Report-2017_Final.pdf
- 6 Anderson, New CAA Study Says Diverse Casting Increases Box Office Potential Across Budgets
- 7 Ward, Brian W., James M. Dahlhamer, Adena M. Galinsky, and Sarah S. Joestl (2014). "Sexual Orientation and Health among U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2013," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 77, July 15, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr077.pdf>.
- 8 We cannot perform additional analysis given the small number of LGBTQIA leads in our dataset.
- 9 U.S. Census Bureau (2005 and 2010), Survey of Income and Program Participation, June-September 2005, May-August 2010.
- 10 We cannot perform additional analysis given the small number of leads with disabilities in our dataset.
- 11 Lauzen, Martha. (2015). *Women and the Big Picture: Behind-The-Scenes Employment on the Top 700 Films of 2014*. Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, San Diego State University. https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2014_Women_and_the_Big_Picture_Report.pdf.
- 12 Cills, Hazel (2018). "The Percentage of Women Working Behind the Scenes in Film Hasn't Increased in 2 Decades." Jezebel. <https://themuse.jezebel.com/percentage-of-women-working-behind-the-scenes-in-film-h-1821947024>
- 13 Sun, Rebecca (2016). "Study: Films Directed by Women Receive 63 Percent Less Distribution Than Male-Helmed Movies (Exclusive)." Slate.com. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/study-films-directed-by-women-907229>