

INEQUALITY ACROSS 1,300 POPULAR FILMS: EXAMINING GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY OF LEADS/CO LEADS FROM 2007 TO 2019

Research Brief

ANNENBERG INCLUSION INITIATIVE¹

The goal of this research brief was to examine gender and race/ethnicity of leads/co leads in popular motion pictures. Our analysis involved the 1,300 top movies, focusing on the highest earning 100 films from 2007 through 2019.² Every film was categorized in one of two ways, featuring a lead or co lead driving the action or as an ensemble storyline. Only those films featuring a lead/co lead are discussed in this brief. Put differently, ensembles were excluded but will be represented in our longer report released in the summer.

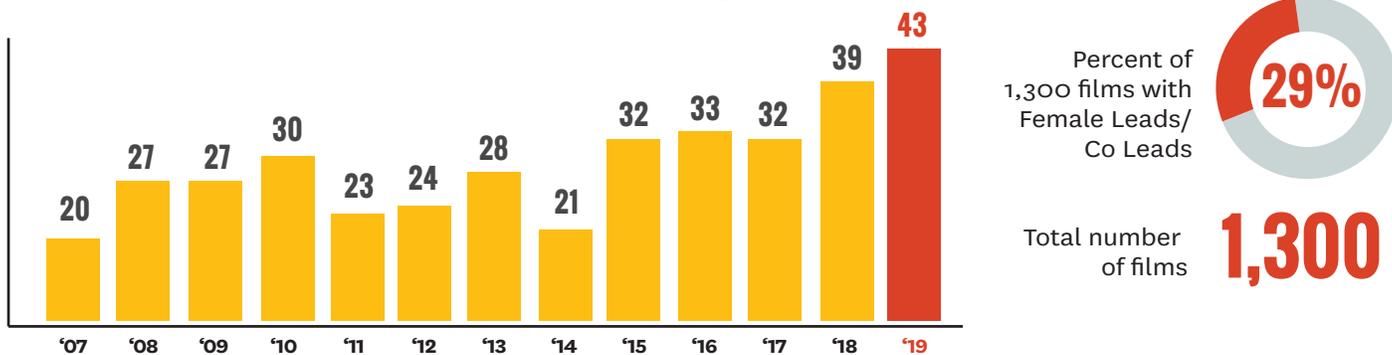
The sample for 2019 movies was pulled on January 29th 2020, as the domestic box office is still open for several films theatrically released last year. **Clearly, this is the most comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of gender and race/ethnicity of leading/co leading characters in Hollywood films.** In the section that follows, we present the trends for 2019 first followed by a comparison to 2018 and then 2007. Only differences of 5 percentage points or greater are noted as significant. This approach is taken in all of our reports to avoid making noise about trivial deviations (1-2%).

Gender. A total of 43 of the 100 top movies of 2019 featured a female lead or co lead.³ This is a 13-year high, as shown in Infographic 1. 2019 was 4 percentage points higher than 2018 (39 films) and more than twice as high as 2007 (20 films). Despite this historic high, this percentage is still below the female population per the U.S. Census (51%) and the percentage of tickets sold at the box office in North America to females (47%).⁴ For the first time ever, the percentage of leads/co leads in popular film approximates the percentage of leads/co leads in television.⁵

THE FUTURE IS FEMALE: INCREASE IN FEMALE LEADS

Infographic 1

Prevalence of female leads or co-leads across 1,300 films, in percentages



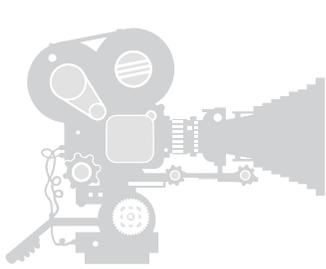
It was important to look beyond gender to additional demographic characteristics that may affect hiring practices. Race/ethnicity is one of those factors, particularly for female actors. As shown in infographic 2, a total of 16 female leads/co leads were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. This finding is 5 percentage points higher than 2018 (11 movies) and 15 percentage points higher than 2007 (1 movie). While there was increased representation of underrepresented female actors in 2019, no girls or women identifying as Native American/Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern/North African, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander filled a leading or co-leading role in 2019.

Turning to age, we looked at the number of female leads/co leads across the 100 top films that were 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release. Infographic 2 reveals that only 3 of the 100 top films of 2019 with a female lead/co lead met this criterion. Only 1 of the female leads/co leads in 2019 was an underrepresented woman 45 years of age or older. And, 2019 was a significant decline from 2018 (8 percentage points), when 11 movies featured a female 45 years of age or older, but a slight increase from 2007, when 1 film featured a female lead or co lead 45 years of age or older.

IN 2019, AN UPTICK IN UNDERREPRESENTED FEMALE LEADS

Infographic 2

Of the 100 top films in 2019...



Depicted a **Female Lead or Co Lead**

And of those Leads and Co Leads*...

16 Female actors were from **underrepresented racial / ethnic groups**

In 2018, there were 11.

3 Female actors were at least **45 years of age or older**

In 2018, there were 11.

Race/Ethnicity. There were a total of 31 movies with a lead or co lead actor from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group across the 100 top-grossing films of 2019.⁶ This is an increase of 4 percentage points from 2018, and 18 percentage points since 2007. The slight gain from last year makes 2019 a 13-year high in the representation of people of color in leading or co leading roles. However, the figure still falls below the U.S. Census (39.6%) by 8.6 percentage points.⁷ Across the entire sample, 17% of leading/co leading roles cast actors from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

DOUBLING DOWN ON DIVERSITY: GAINS IN LEAD CHARACTERS

Infographic 3

Number of Films with Underrepresented Leads or Co Leads by Year



Financial Performance. Finally, we examined how female-driven films from 2019 performed at the box office based on distributor.⁸ We assessed overall domestic and international box office earnings per film, and then added those totals by distributor. A total of 7 distributors were assessed: Walt Disney Studios, 20th Century Fox, Lionsgate, Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures, Universal Pictures, and Warner Bros. Pictures. Earnings from films distributed by other companies are not reported.

Infographic 4 provides insight into top performers for female leads and co leads in two ways. First, in terms of the number of films with girls and women at the center, Universal Pictures was a top performer with 9 films, followed by Sony Pictures (6 movies) and Lionsgate (5 movies).

However, a second way to think about infographic 4 is to assess the financial impact of films with female leads/co leads. In this light, Walt Disney Studios was far and away the top performer, with more than \$4 billion in receipts for 4 female led/co led films in 2019. Furthermore, Disney earned more than 4 times as much in box office revenue as Universal Pictures last year for their female-driven content. The remaining studios brought in between \$400 million and \$893 million for their female-led films. Notably, when the average revenue per film was calculated, Disney's films earned roughly \$1 billion each—this figure reflects how important it is to measure both the number of films released and the impact these movies have on revenue and audiences.

Taking a similar approach, we repeated the analysis on content with underrepresented leads. Once again, Universal Pictures (8 films) led the distributors in the volume of content with underrepresented leads they produced in 2019 followed by Sony Pictures (4 films).

In contrast, financial impact was clearly in favor of Walt Disney Studios, which earned \$2.7 billion for its 2 films, while Universal Pictures brought in \$1.5 billion for its 8 movies. Disney's earnings were again roughly 4 times as much as the third-largest grossing distributor (Lionsgate). Apart from Disney and Universal, their 5 competitors amassed between \$365 and \$689 million for films with actors of color in leading roles. Per film, Disney's draw was slightly more than \$1.3 billion. As with content featuring female leads/co leads, this analysis reflects how crucial it is to examine both the number of films released each year with underrepresented talent at the center, as well as the financial impact each movie has on its distributor's bottom line.

2019 BOX OFFICE REVENUE FOR FILMS WITH FEMALE AND UNDERREPRESENTED LEADS BY DISTRIBUTOR

Infographic 4

FEMALE LEAD/CO LEAD				UNDERREPRESENTED LEAD/CO LEAD			
DISTRIBUTOR	GLOBAL REVENUE	# OF FILMS	\$ PER FILM	DISTRIBUTOR	GLOBAL REVENUE	# OF FILMS	\$ PER FILM
WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	\$4.1B	4	\$1.02B	WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	\$2.7B	2	\$1.3B
UNIVERSAL PICTURES	\$893M	9	\$99M	UNIVERSAL PICTURES	\$1.5B	8	\$195M
20TH CENTURY FOX	\$765M	4	\$191M	LIONSGATE	\$689M	3	\$230M
SONY PICTURES	\$698M	6	\$116M	20TH CENTURY FOX	\$586M	3	\$195M
LIONSGATE	\$581M	5	\$116M	WARNER BROS. PICTURES	\$484M	3	\$161M
PARAMOUNT PICTURES	\$404M	4	\$101M	SONY PICTURES	\$469M	4	\$117M
WARNER BROS. PICTURES	\$402M	3	\$134M	PARAMOUNT PICTURES	\$366M	3	\$122M
TOTAL	\$7.8B	35	\$223M	TOTAL	\$6.9B	26	\$265M

Films distributed by other companies are not included in this graphic.

Conclusion

This research brief offers a glimpse into the gender and racial/ethnic breakdown of leading and co leading characters across the top films of 2019. Additionally, it provides data to compare progress in the film industry over the last 13 years. Most importantly, this report reveals that for the first time in more than a decade, film is on par with television with regard to the quantity of stories about girls and women. The percentage of leads/co leads from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups also increased slightly in 2019. Moreover, 16 underrepresented female leads/co leads worked across the top 100 films last year. The continued progress toward greater inclusion is important to celebrate, even as we urge ongoing change—particularly for women age 45 and over, and for individuals (especially women) from racial/ethnic groups who are routinely erased in popular film.

Footnotes

- The authors of this report include: Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Dr. Katherine Pieper, Marc Choueiti, Kevin Yao, Ariana Case, Hannah Clark, Karla Hernandez, Emma Vranich, and Sarah Voss.
- Every year, we adjust our top-grossing reports in the summer to account for the final accruals at the domestic box office. Put differently, the 100 top films in January may very well be different than the final 100 top films in May of the same year.
- Each film assessed the leading/co leading character by examining the three act structure. Details can be found on how we make this judgment in our top-grossing film reports. Then, we assessed the gender (male, female) of the actor playing the leading/co leading character on screen. This way, actors driving the story line in animation and live action were both accounted for in this research brief.
- MPAA (n.d.). 2018 *Theme Report. A Comprehensive Analysis and Survey of the Theatrical and Home Entertainment Market Environment*. <https://www.motionpictures.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MPAA-THEME-Report-2018.pdf>
- Our own research as well as reports by other scholars suggest that women comprise 40-45% of series regulars or major characters in popular television content. Recently, one study found that 45% of major characters were female across the 2018-2019 season (See SDSU, 2019).
- Similar to gender, judgments about race/ethnicity were based on the actor's background. To obtain this information, we utilized online databases (e.g., Variety Insight, Studio System, IMDbPro) and other sources. For this report, we only focused on evaluating gender and race/ethnicity of leading/co leading character. In our top grossing report, we also assess LGBTQ leads and co leads as well as protagonists with disabilities.
- U.S. *Census Quick Facts*. (n.d.) <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>
- Box office information was obtained from Box Office Mojo on January 29, 2020. As some films were still in theaters, revenue per distributor is expected to increase.