

INEQUALITY ACROSS 1,200 POPULAR FILMS: EXAMINING GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY OF LEADS/CO LEADS FROM 2007 TO 2018

Research Brief

ANNENBERG INCLUSION INITIATIVE

2018 was a profitable year at the U.S. box office, with a 4% increase in ticket sales from 2016.¹ We also saw the pronounced success of films with casts from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, such as *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians*. Given these highly salient and historical triumphs, we were curious if the number and percentage of leads and co leads would reflect greater diversity than in previous years, specifically across the 100 top domestic movies of 2018.² The purpose of this research brief is to answer that very query.

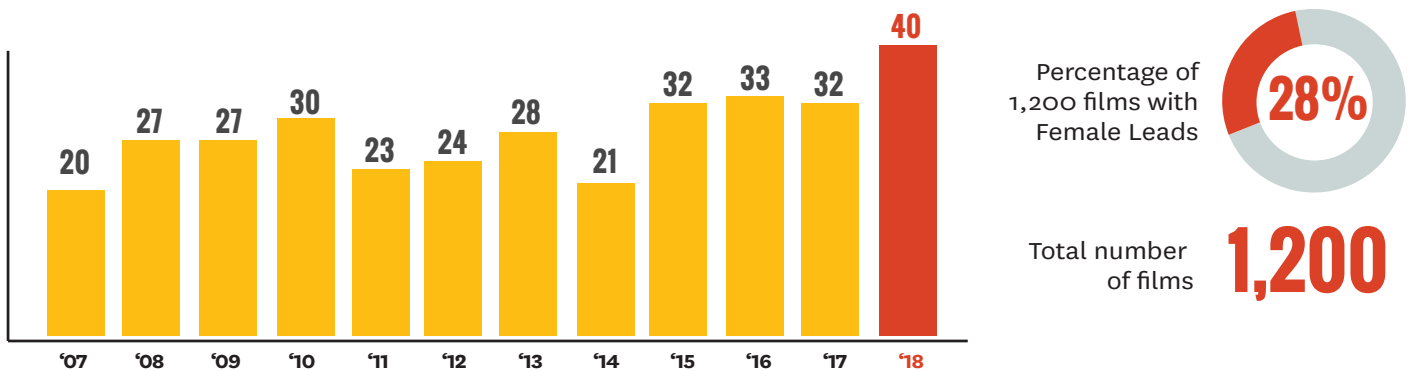
To this end, we examined the gender and underrepresented racial/ethnic status of leading characters across the 1,200 top films from 2007 to 2018.³ Films were categorized as featuring a lead/co lead or ensemble. Leads drive the storyline of the film and are usually central to the inciting incident as well as plot point one, two and the climax of the movie. Co-leads typically share the journey equally and appear prior to the inciting incident in the first act. For this analysis, we only report on movies with leads/co leads by gender and underrepresented racial/ethnic status (no, yes).⁴ Given this narrow focus, ensembles are not reported in this brief.

Gender. A total of 40 films featured a female in the leading or co leading role across the 100 top films of 2018. As shown in Infographic 1, this is an uptick of 8 percentage points from 2017 and 20 percentage points from 2007. Clearly, this is the highest percentage of female-driven films we have observed over the 12 years evaluated. It should be noted that this percentage is still below the population in U.S./Canada (51%) and the percentage of females buying tickets at movie theaters (50%) in these territories.⁵

THE FUTURE IS FEMALE: INCREASE IN FEMALE LEADS

Infographic 1

Prevalence of female leads or co-leads across 1,200 films,
in percentages

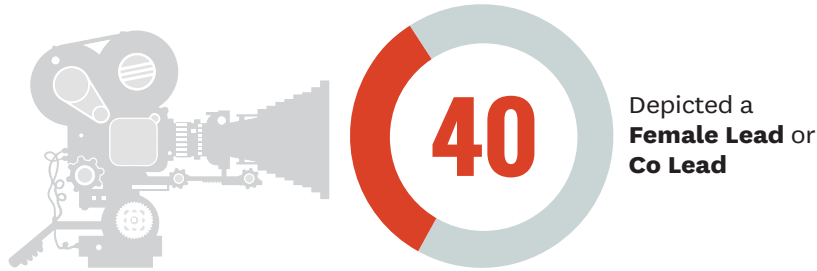


Because women often experience a sell by date on screen as leading ladies, we looked at the number of protagonists that were 45 years of age or older at the time of theatrical release.⁶ Depicted in Infographic 2, 11 movies across the 100 top films of 2018 featured a female lead or co lead 45 years of age or older. This number has more than doubled since last year, when the total number of films with a female 45 years of age or older was 5.

IN 2018, AN UPTICK IN UNDERREPRESENTED FEMALE LEADS

Infographic 2

Of the 100 top films in 2018...



And of those Leads and Co Leads*...

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

In 2017, there were 4.

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

In 2017, there were 5.

Besides age, we were interested in the total number of women of color that were leads or co leads. Also shown in infographic 2, a total of 11 movies featured underrepresented female leads or co leads commanding the plot. This is almost three times the number of films featuring a woman of color as the protagonist from 2017 (4). In 2007, only 1 film portrayed a female lead or co lead from an underrepresented racial/ethnic group on screen. It must be noted that in 2018, only 4 women of color were shown driving the action that were 45 years of age or older. Three of these roles were filled with Black women and one cast a Latina.

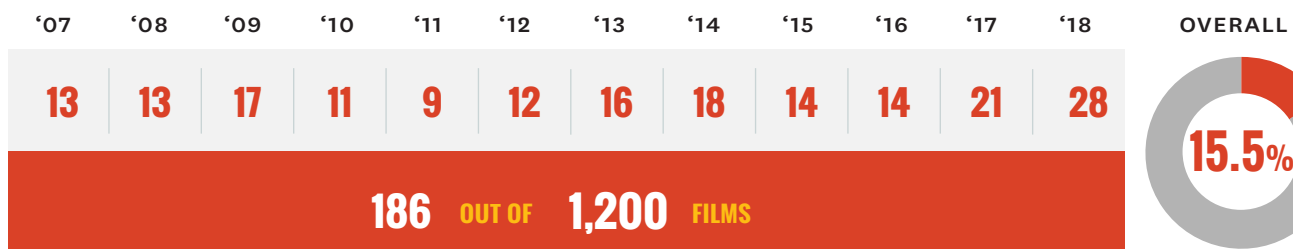
Race/Ethnicity. Across 100 movies of 2018, a total of 28 featured an underrepresented lead or co lead driving the storyline. This is a gain of 7 percentage points from 2017 (21%) and a 15 percentage point gain from 2007 (13%). Though there is clearly an uptick in the percentage of underrepresented leads and co leads in 2018, the overall percentage is still below U.S. Census (39.3%) by 11.3 percentage points.⁷ Sample wide, only 15.5% of all 1,200 movies featured an underrepresented lead or co lead.

As in our longer report, we examined the racial/ethnic background of the underrepresented female **actors** in lead or co lead roles. In 2018, 5 were Black/African American, 3 were Mixed Race, 2 were Hispanic/Latina, and 1 was Asian/Asian American. Unlike in previous years, women from a variety of different backgrounds were represented in top films, though Native women and women from the Middle East are still largely absent from leading roles.

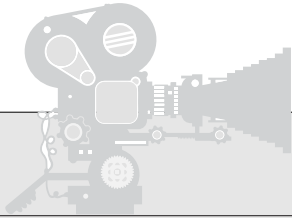
DOUBLING DOWN ON DIVERSITY: GAINS IN LEAD CHARACTERS

Infographic 3

Number of Films with Underrepresented Leads or Co Leads by Year



Distributor. The distribution company associated with each top-grossing film in the sample was ascertained.⁸ Information on the performance of distributors across the 12-year sample can be found in infographic 4. In 2018, all but three companies (Sony, Fox, and Warner Bros.) were at or near proportional representation to the U.S. population when it comes to movies with **female lead or co lead characters**. In terms of **underrepresented leads and co leads**, the top performer was Sony, followed by Lionsgate, Paramount, and Universal. The remaining companies have room for significant improvement in this area. Turning to **women of color**, companies greenlit 1 to 2 movies with underrepresented females in the leading roles. It is important to note that every major studio had at least one woman of color in a leading role, which contributed to the increase in 2018.



DIVERSITY BY DISTRIBUTOR ACROSS 12 YEARS

Infographic 4

	TOTAL # OF FILMS DISTRIBUTED	FILMS WITH A FEMALE LEAD/CO LEAD	FILMS WITH AN UR LEAD/CO LEAD	FILMS WITH AN UR FEMALE LEAD/CO LEAD
20TH CENTURY FOX	163	37	21	5
PARAMOUNT PICTURES	125	26	16	3
SONY PICTURES	180	56	39	14
UNIVERSAL PICTURES	185	59	28	5
WALT DISNEY STUDIOS	118	37	13	5
WARNER BROS. PICTURES	208	49	25	3
LIONSGATE	106	34	28	9
OTHER	115	39	16	4
TOTAL	1,200	337	186	48

This research brief was designed to provide a snapshot of the gender and racial/ethnic breakdown of leads and co leads across the top films of 2018 as well as those from the preceding 11 years. It is clear from the findings that 2018 was a notable year for storytelling with female characters and individuals from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. In particular, the intersectional gains surrounding the increase in women of color are worth celebrating. The film industry is engaged in months of celebration of its 2018 achievements, with the pinnacle the upcoming Academy Awards. This research brief offers reason to congratulate those who have created change, and challenges them to continue to do so in the years ahead.

Footnotes

1. Fuster, J. (2019, January 2). *2018 Domestic Box Office Finishes With Record \$11.85 Billion*. Available: <https://www.thewrap.com/2018-box-office-finishes-with-record-11-85-billion/>
 2. U.S. domestic 100 top fictional films from 2018 was retrieved from Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2018&p=.htm>
 3. Consistent with our other research reports, we determined the lead/co lead for every film focusing on the three act structure. As such, other definitions of leads/co leads may yield different results. Given that animation appears in the sample, we used the actor's gender and race/ethnicity for all judgments. This information was obtained online from Variety Insight, Studio System, IMDbPro, and other websites. Given the reliance on these "other reports" rather than directly interviewing the actors themselves (which would be time intensive and difficult in terms of access), the results should be interpreted with caution. That is, there may be minor deviations from what is reported online and the actors own self preference with how they identify.
 4. Only gender and race/ethnicity are included in this research brief. Our full analysis with LGBT and disability will be included in our comprehensive report later this spring. Coding those measures requires having access to all of the content, which was not possible at the time of release.
 5. 2017 Theme Report. Motion Picture Association of America (n.d.). Retrieved on February 11th, 2018. https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MPAA-THEME-Report-2017_Final.pdf
 6. The date of birth was found online for every leading and co leading actor. Age was calculated from date of birth until the release date of the movie.
 7. U.S. Census (2019). Quickfacts. Available: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045217>
 8. For information on this process, see Smith, S.L., Choueti, M., & Pieper, K. (2019). *Inclusion in the Director's Chair? Annenberg Inclusion Initiative*. University of Southern California. Available: <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inclusion-in-the-directors-chair-2019.pdf>
- It must also be noted that films with male actors playing female characters (e.g., *Madea* Franchise) do not constitute a "female lead or co lead" in this study. This decision was made as we are interested in the employment opportunities given to underrepresented talent. Most of the films were evaluated in our laboratory at USC by multiple researchers. In cases where films were not yet available, we sent our research team to the theatres to make judgments based on leads only. These decisions were supplemented by online materials detailing plot summaries, critics reviews and interviews with directors. For only one film in the sample (*Holmes & Watson*), we had to infer the leading characters from online sources.

There were two double features in our sample of 1,200 movies. For this analysis leads were analyzed across both films that were screened back to back in theaters.