

GENDER ROLES & OCCUPATIONS: A Look at Character Attributes and Job-Related Aspirations in Film and Television

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Using a quantitative and qualitative approach, this study content analyzes 11,927 speaking characters for gender roles across three media: 129 top-grossing family films (G, PG, PG-13) theatrically released between September 2006 and September 2011; 275 prime-time programs across approximately a week of regularly airing series in the Spring of 2012 on 10 broadcast (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, CW) and cable (Cartoon Network, Disney, Nickelodeon, E!, MTV) channels; and 36 children's TV shows airing in 2011 across three networks (Disney, Nickelodeon, PBS). We focus on scrutinizing three specific types of information. First, the prevalence of male and female speaking characters in popular media is assessed. Second, the nature of those portrayals is examined by measuring common media stereotypes associated with male and female speaking characters. Third, the occupational pursuits of characters and the degree to which males and females are shown working in a variety of prestigious industries and STEM careers are evaluated. Below, we summarize five key findings from the investigation.

Key Findings

#1 Females are Still Sidelined in Popular Entertainment

Gender imbalance is alive and well across media. As shown in Table 1, multiple indicators point to the fact that females are not as prevalent as males on screen in popular media. This is illustrated by the percentage of speaking characters that are female in family films (28.3%), prime-time programs (38.9%) and children's shows (30.8%) as well as the percentage of narrated stories voiced by girls or women.



TABLE 1
Prevalence of Female Characters Across Media

Prevalence Indicator	Family Films	Prime-Time Programs	Children's Shows
% of female characters	28.3%	38.9%	30.8%
Ratio of male to female characters	2.53 to 1	1.57 to 1	2.25 to 1
% of stories w/female narrator	26.5%	44.2%	20%
% of stories w/gender-balanced casts	11%	22%	19%
Total # of speaking characters	5,839	5,520	568

Note: Across all three samples, only stories with a narrator are used to calculate row percentages. Thus, the findings should read "of those family films with a narrator, only 26.5% are female."

A gender-balanced cast is defined as featuring females in 45.1% to 55% of all speaking characters in a specific story, episode or movie.

Perhaps most problematic, few stories are "gender-balanced" or show females in 45.1-55% of all speaking roles. Only 11% of family films, 19% of children's shows and 22% of prime-time programs feature girls and women in roughly half of all speaking parts. Imbalance is far more normative. A large percentage of stories are "extremely" male centric, casting boys/men in 75% or more of the speaking roles (50% of family films, 20% of prime-time programs, 39% of children's shows). Looking across prevalence indicators, prime time is more egalitarian than family films or children's shows.

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TABLE 2
Gender Prevalence by Program Genre in Prime Time

Prevalence Indicator	Drama	Comedy	Reality	News Magazine	Children's
Males	59.7%	68.5%	51.9%	53.4%	69.5%
Females	40.3%	31.5%	48.1%	46.6%	30.5%
Total # of speaking characters	905	1,609	1,676	399	931

A few interesting differences emerge within medium. In family films, gender prevalence varies by MPAA rating. Female speaking characters are more likely to appear in G rated films (31.6%) than in PG-13 rated films (26.5%). The percentage of girls and women in PG rated films (28.9%) does not deviate from the other ratings by 5%, our criterion for documenting a meaningful difference. Thus, as ratings move up, girls move out.

Turning to children's shows, those rated TV-Y (35.4%) and TV-G (34.9%) feature substantially more female characters on screen than those shows rated TV-Y7 (16.2%). For prime time, we examine gender prevalence by genre. As shown in Table 2, near parity can be found in news magazines and reality shows. Children's programs (30.5%) and comedy series (31.5%) are the most imbalanced genres in prime time, with less than a third of all on screen speaking characters coded as girls or women.

TABLE 3
Females' Race/Ethnicity Across Media

Race/Ethnicity of Characters	Family Films		Prime-Time Programs		Children's Shows	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Caucasian	70.8%	29.2%	60.1%	39.9%	64.9%	35.1%
Black	69.8%	30.2%	54.7%	45.3%	68.3%	31.7%
Hispanic	71.5%	28.5%	57.9%	42.1%	40%	60%
Asian	65.5%	34.5%	57.7%	42.3%	47.4%	52.6%
Other	81.3%	18.7%	70.2%	29.8%	60%	40%

Note: Apparent ethnicity is evaluated for all speaking characters. The analyses only include characters whose race/ethnicity is ascertainable. Within medium, race/ethnicity percentages are calculated for males or females.

We also assess gender balance *within* racial/ethnic groups. Table 3 reveals that across media, the distribution of males and females within different racial/ethnic groups varies widely. Notably, prime time and children's shows are more likely than family films to depict Hispanic and Asian females. Additionally, prime time features the highest percentage of Black females across the three media. Two out of the three media show few female characters from "other" races/ethnicities. It should be noted that the number of male or female characters from "other" racial/ethnic groups in children's shows is low and thus the percentages should be interpreted cautiously.

Despite representing half the population, females are still sidelined in family films, children's shows and prime-time programs. The most gender *inequality* is observed in kids' shows rated TV-Y7, PG-13 rated family films, and children's and comedy series airing during prime time. It appears that, no matter their age, children and teens do not consistently see girls and women in the popular media they consume.

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TABLE 4
Appearance Indicators by Gender within Media

Appearance Indicator	Family Films		Prime-Time Programs		Children's Shows	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
% wearing sexy attire	8%	28.3%	8.4%	36.2%	10.1%	18%
% w/exposed skin	8.5%	26.6%	11%	34.6%	12.4%	17.2%
% referenced attractive	4.3%	14.9%	3.5%	11.6%	1.8%	5.6%
% w/thin bodies	10.7%	34.3%	13.6%	37.5%	18.7%	37.4%

Note: Across the three samples, all gender by indicator analyses within media are statistically ($p < .05$) and practically significant (5% difference) save two: attractiveness and amount of exposed skin in children's shows.

#2 Females are Still Stereotyped and Sexualized in Popular Entertainment

Traditional domestic roles are still gender linked in entertainment, but only in certain media and on certain indicators. In family films, females are more likely than males to be portrayed as parents (56% vs. 44.1%) and depicted in a committed romantic relationship (65.7% vs. 54.1%). In children's shows, only parental status varies by gender (females=60% vs. males=29.3%). Interestingly, no gender differences emerge in prime time across these two domesticity variables.

Sexiness is gendered across all three media. Table 4 reveals that females are far more likely than males to be depicted wearing sexy attire (tight or alluring apparel), showing some exposed skin (between the mid chest and high upper thigh region), thin and referenced by another character (verbally or non verbally) as physically attractive or desirous. Ten out of the twelve analyses comparing males and females within medium on each of the appearance indicators in Table 3 are statistically and practically significant. Females, when they are on screen, are still there to provide eye candy to even the youngest viewers.

Given the concern over the sexualization of girls and women in the U.S., we examine how females across three age groups (13-20 year olds, 21-39 year olds, 40-64 year olds) are depicted on the appearance indicators in family films and prime-time shows. Illuminated in Table 5, 13- to 20-year old females are less likely than 21- to 39-year old females in family films to be shown in revealing attire but are more likely to be thin. No meaningful difference (5%) emerges by nudity or attractiveness for females in these two age groups, however. Turning to prime time, adult females (21-39 yrs.) are more likely to be sexualized (wearing revealing attire, partially naked) than are younger (13-20 yrs.) or older (40-64 yrs.) females. Interestingly, across both prime time and family films, teenaged females are the most likely to be depicted thin. It seems that at every age, being female is about being sexualized.

TABLE 5
Appearance Indicators by Females' Age within Media

Appearance Indicator	Family Films			Prime-Time Programs		
	13-20 yrs	21-39 yrs	40-64 yrs	13-20 yrs	21-39 yrs	40-64 yrs
% wearing sexy attire	31.6%	37.5%	21.9%	30.8%	45.5%	26.5%
% w/exposed skin	31.6%	34.5%	21.6%	26.9%	43.6%	26%
% referenced attractive	23.3%	19%	8.3%	11.4%	14.3%	5.8%
% w/thin bodies	49.6%	41.3%	16.5%	52.2%	40%	16.2%

Note: Children and elderly are excluded from these analyses. The percentages for these age groups are featured in the notes section of the full report. Because of the small sample size of female characters and a few low expected frequencies, the percentages for children's shows are not shown here.

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#3 Females Still Suffer From an Employment Imbalance in Film and Prime-Time TV

We analyze the role of gender in the workforce in two ways. First, we assess the percentage of all speaking characters within gender that are shown working. This analysis shows the percentage of all females (or males) depicted with an occupation. A higher percentage of male characters than female characters are shown working in family films and prime-time shows. Over half of the characters in the family film sample (60.8%) are employed, with males (66.6%) more likely than females (45.3%) to be shown working. Half of the prime-time speaking characters (50.5%) possess an identifiable job, with 44.3% of females and 54.5% of males gainfully employed. In children's shows, the presence or absence of a job is not statistically related to gender (40.7%=females, 47.7%=males). In contrast, unemployment indicators reveal that men, more than women, remain out of work in the current economy.

Another way to examine the data is to scrutinize the percentage of males and females in the total employment pool. We examine the gender distribution of those characters depicted with a job. Given that women comprised 47% of the U.S. labor force in 2011, it is surprising that they only hold 20.3% of the total on screen occupations in family films, 34.4% of all jobs in prime-time programs and represent 25.3% of those employed in children's shows. At a time when unemployment is so important in the public sphere, on screen women seem to suffer much more than on screen men.

#4 Females Still Slam into a Glass Ceiling, Particularly in Family Films

Qualitatively, we also assess occupations across different prestigious industries. We only focus on jobs in family films and prime-time shows as the number of jobs in children's series (see full report) is substantially smaller. In terms of family films, few females occupy clout positions across eight different sectors. As shown in Table 6, only two women are shown in the executive office of major corporations (i.e., CEOs, CFOs, Presidents, VPs, GMs). Not one female character is depicted at the top of the financial sector (e.g., investor, developer, or an economic official), legal arena (e.g., chief justices, district attorney), or journalism (i.e., editor in chief) across the sample of 129 G, PG, or PG-13 rated films. In comparison, women represented 25.5% of all chief executives in 2010.

TABLE 6 • Employed Characters within Sector by Highest Clout Position

Industry	Family Films		Prime Time-Programs	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
% in the C-suite	96.6%	3.4%	86%	14%
% of investors, developers	100%	0	57.1%	42.9%
% of high level politicians	95.5%	4.5%	72.2%	27.8%
% of chief justices, DAs	100%	0	100%	0
% of doctors, healthcare managers	78.1%	21.9%	70.4%	29.6%
% of editors in chief	100%	0	0	100%
% of academic administrators	61.5%	38.5%	61.5%	38.5%
% of media content creators	65.8%	34.2%	72.7%	27.3%

Only three female characters are at the pinnacle of the political sphere in family films: two U.S. Representatives (that did not speak but are *only* referred to by name) and one German Chancellor. All three of these characters are inconsequential to the stories they populate. Thus, not one speaking character plays a powerful American female political figure across 5,839 speaking characters in 129 family films. Men, however, hold over 45 different prestigious U.S. political positions (i.e., President, Vice President, Chief of Staff, Advisors, Senators, Representatives, Mayors, Governors) in G, PG and PG-13 movies.

Prime-time is doing a much better job portraying powerful women, with females shown in leadership positions across seven out of eight industries listed in Table 6. Prime-time females are portrayed as 14% of corporate executives, 42.9% of characters with financial clout (e.g., investors, economic officials), 27.8% of high level politicians, 29.6% of doctors/hospital managers/CMOs, 38.5% of academic administrators, 27.3% of media content creators and the only "editor in chief" in journalism. However, prime-time females are still not on par with prime-time males in the number of clout positions held across industries.

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#5 Few Females Find Work in Scientific Fields

STEM careers are also examined. In 2009, females held 24% of all STEM jobs in the U.S. The percentage of STEM females in prime time is just slightly lower than this point statistic (-2.9%), whereas a larger gap exists for family films (-7.7%). Eight characters are featured with STEM jobs in the children's shows assessed and only one is female (12.5%). Examining main characters in family films, not one female protagonist or co-lead is shown with a STEM career. Yet there are 14 male protagonists or co-leads with STEM careers across the 129 G, PG and PG-13 rated films. STEM males outnumber STEM females in family films by a ratio of over 5 to 1.

Table 7 illustrates the types of STEM occupations portrayed by male and female characters. Two trends are immediately apparent. First, males and females are most likely to be depicted working in the life/physical sciences than in other STEM careers in family films and prime-time shows. Yet computer science and mathematics comprise the largest percentage of the U.S. STEM workforce. Even though female characters infiltrate the life/physical sciences, males are almost four times as likely as females to be shown on screen in this line of work in family films and 2.6 times as likely in prime time. Summing across computer science and engineering, the ratio of males to females in these arenas is 14.25 to 1 in family films and 5.4 to 1 in prime time.

Second, and in comparison to family films, prime time does not portray females in the full range of STEM careers. Not one female engineer or mathematician is shown across the sample of working prime-time characters. Perhaps in media, "women's work" is still defined in a way that excludes decision-making roles or aptitude in the applied sciences. Over half of STEM females work in the medical jurisprudence arena as forensic pathologists or medical examiners and all appear in dramatic programming. Crime dramas are also responsible for the five females working in computer science and/or technology. Outside of the dramatic series genre, only one comedy show and one news magazine depicts women in STEM. For females, excising dramatic programs eliminates STEM.

TABLE 7 • STEM Characters by Media, Gender and Job Type

Industry	Family Films		Prime-Time Programs	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
% in STEM careers	83.8% (134)	16.3% (26)	78.9% (56)	21.1% (15)
% in life/physical sciences	49.3% (66)	65.4% (17)	46.4% (26)	66.7% (10)
% in computer science	23.1% (31)	7.7% (2)	32.1% (18)	33.3% (5)
% in engineering	19.4% (26)	7.7% (2)	16.1% (9)	0
% of other STEM Jobs	8.2% (11)	19.2% (5)	5.4% (3)	0

Note: The actual frequency count is in parentheses within each cell. "Other" is used when a character's occupation portrayal made it impossible to ascertain which of two STEM categories to use (i.e., physical science vs. engineering). At analysis, mathematics is collapsed into "other" given that only two characters (one male and one female) in family films and only two male characters in prime time are shown working in this arena.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this investigation is to examine gender roles and the world of work in media popular with youth. A few major themes emerge across the study. Female characters are still sidelined, stereotyped and sexualized in popular entertainment content. Fewer females than males work in family films and prime-time shows, with the former showing fewer women in prestigious occupational positions than the latter. Females are not only missing from popular media, when they are on screen, they seem to be there merely for decoration—not to engage in meaningful or prestigious employment, particularly in STEM fields.

The results show that young females need more aspirational role models inhabiting a greater range of leadership positions across a variety of occupational sectors and media platforms. Both young girls and boys should see female decision-makers, political leaders, managers, and scientists as the norm, not the exception. By increasing the number and diversity of female leaders and role models on screen, content creators may affect the ambitions and career aspirations of girls and young women domestically and internationally. As Geena Davis frequently states, "If she can see it, she can be it."

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