

# Television programming for children reveals systematic gender inequality

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Programming children watch on American TV shows systematic gender inequality, according to new research co-authored by Dafna Lemish of the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University-

New Brunswick.

In a newly released report, "[The Landscape of Children's Television in the U.S. and Canada](#)," written mostly in order to reach the professionals creating children's content for television, Lemish, Associate Dean for Programs and Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at SC&I, and her co-author, Dr. Colleen Russo Johnson, of the Center for Scholars and Storytellers, based out of UCLA and Ryerson University, found startling new data revealing gender inequality in both the content children watch – and are greatly influenced by – and in the industry creating the content.

Their research, assisted by SC&I doctoral student Diana Floegel and Dan Delmonaco, a SC&I Master of Information student, reveals that in [television shows](#) geared toward children aged two to 12, 64% of [male characters](#) are still dominant on the screen, particularly for non-human characters (72%) and female human characters were more racially diverse (46%) than male human characters (25%).

"The fact that female characters are more likely to be portrayed as persons of color suggests that some shows might be trying to 'check two boxes' with one casting," Lemish and Johnson wrote in the report.

Their findings are significant, Lemish said, because "television is a major socializing force in children's lives – they spend more time watching and interacting with screens than in any other activity and they learn from TV about societal values, who matters in society, what one can aspire to become etc. 'What you can't see – you can't be' is a popular way of capturing this. It also matters because U.S. continues to be the major producer and exporter of children's TV and thus it continues to disseminate such misguided values to the rest of the world."

The report was commissioned by the International Central Institute for

Youth and Educational Television (IZI) as part of a larger study with eight participating countries: Belgium, Canada, Cuba, Germany, Israel, Taiwan, UK, and the U.S., led by Dr. Maya Götz of IZI.

It was published by the Center for Scholars and Storytellers, and will be disseminated to all the major children's industries (who were studied for this project), such as Disney, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, PBS, and many small production companies as well, Lemish said.

"We chose to first and foremost see the value of this study in its applied implications for calling the attention of the children's TV industry and encouraging change," Lemish said. "I am working with other partners on writing more academic articles as well."

Lemish and Johnson also found gender disparity issues within the industry responsible for creating the television content for children:

- Males dominate the professions behind the scenes (directors 80%, and creators 71%)
- Writers were 52% males with an additional 25% mixed teams, and only 18% women
- Producers were mostly mixed teams – 64% with additional 31% males

"Females and writers of diverse backgrounds should be appropriately represented in the room to reflect today's diverse audience, without the expectation that one woman can speak for all women," the report concluded.

Other insights Lemish and Johnson found are that children's shows should portray [economic hardship](#), mirroring the world outside of TV, which will help children who may "feel shame over economic issues."

Because Lemish and Johnson found that females are nearly 2x likely as male characters to be sexualized, they suggest that content creators show different body types, writing in the report, "The cultural glorification of female thinness and sexualization is correlated with the presence of eating disorders and low self-esteem. Showing realistic body types can help boost self-confidence in viewers and promote acceptance and tolerance toward self and others."

The authors also found that there is a gap in the children's TV market for non-fiction content; there is little content on television for tweens; while over half of the characters in children's shows are non-human, children learn social behavior best from human-like characters (not talking animals). They call for content creators to portray more diversity in their programming in order to better reflect the modern world which is growing increasingly more diverse.

The report also found that characters portraying disabilities are virtually absent, so characters with disabilities should be shown as part of everyday life in the [content](#) children watch.

What was especially surprising, Lemish said, was that "despite the 'MeToo' and 'popular Feminism' era, and the many efforts at advocacy and education around gender equality, we still have such unequal representation of gender in both the industry professions as well as in the representations on the screen. I was hoping to see so much more advancement."

Provided by Rutgers University

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