Men still upstage women on screen—but things are getting better

August 14 2018

Only three out of every ten characters seen in the top 50 grossing movies of 2016 were played by women. According to Conor Neville and Phyllis Anastasio of Saint Joseph's University in the US, this in no way reflects real world demographics. In a study in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*, the researchers analyzed how gender and age are presented in popular films. They found that although women and older people are still in the minority on screen, over the past fifteen years there has been an improvement in how these groups are portrayed. Women, in particular, are nowadays more often cast as characters holding positions of power.

Neville and Anastasio analyzed 50 of the 56 top-grossing US films released in 2016 by examining all speaking roles. They counted 986 characters, 323 (32.8 per cent) of which were played by women. Of the 484 main characters, only 154 (31.8 per cent) were female leads. Although women are still under-represented in film, this is a significant improvement on the 28 per cent for all characters and 27 per cent for main characters found in similar analyses conducted in 2005 using the 88 box office hits of 2002.

More heartening results were found when the diversity of main characters in 2016 films was compared with diversity in 2002 movies. Women were on equal footing with men when it came to leadership roles, social aggression, and setting goals. Female lead characters were more likely to hold high-ranking positions and were more regularly seen displaying physical aggression. Additionally, women outperformed men in terms of goal achievement, succeeding more often than their male

counterparts.

The current analysis further found that women in their thirties and men in their forties were over-represented in films when compared to the actual American population, especially in terms of the leadership positions they held. While the overall characterization of older people has improved since 2002, women older than sixty were still underrepresented in movie roles.

"Progress has been made but men still outnumber women 2:1 in film, which means that the more powerful representations of women seen in our sample are not getting the screen exposure comparable to their proportion in the real world," Neville says. "These more powerful portrayals need to be seen more often in order to reduce the gender inequality that leads to women being perceived as less important than men."

"It is our hope that with the momentum from the Harvey Weinstein scandal and subsequent social movements, those in Hollywood will make the necessary changes that will lead not only to a reduction of stereotypes in film, but also to gender equality in all movie casting," adds Anastasio.

"Although on the surface, not being portrayed as equal to men in film and television may seem rather inconsequential, inequality is the first step towards violence against any person or groups of people. As subtle as gender inequality is in film, it is just that—inequality—and as such, it contributes to the overall dehumanization and victimization of women."

More information: Conor Neville et al, Fewer, Younger, but Increasingly Powerful: How Portrayals of Women, Age, and Power Have Changed from 2002 to 2016 in the 50 Top-Grossing U.S. Films, *Sex Roles* (2018). DOI: 10.1007/s11199-018-0945-1

Provided by Springer

Citation: Men still upstage women on screen—but things are getting better (2018, August 14) retrieved 19 September 2024 from
https://phys.org/news/2018-08-men-upstage-women-screenbut.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.