

Lady on Set: Women's Representation In Film

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The Bechdel Test

The Bechdel test is a widely known and commonly used form of evaluating how forward thinking and feminist a piece of media is, but is it really the best way to determine the importance of the female role? Originating from a comic strip highlighting the rarity of women characters conversing in film, it was never meant to be a tool to measure gender imbalances, as it is often used as today, (Micic, 2015).

The Bechdel test, while widely used and commonly known as a benchmark for feminism in film, has several flaws.

- The test does not take into account if the women in the film are portrayed stereotypically or are repressed.
- Additionally, a film can meet the bare minimum criteria and pass the test with only one singular line of dialogue between two women.
- The test does not take into consideration what kinds of women have dialogue: ignoring the silencing of women of color, (O'Meara, 2016).

Bechdel fun fact: historically, war movies have the lowest probability of passing the Bechdel test, (Kagan, 2020).

The Gender Gap

Films are produced to match the vision of the director, so with roughly 85% of directors being male, it is no surprise that there is such a strong gender dominance in film, (Kagan et al., 2020).

- Media misrepresents women through underrepresentation and stereotypical representation, (Wood, 1994).
- In a data set of 15,540 movies, only 5 movies had females as the top 10 characters, (Kagan, 2020).
- There are twice as many male speaking characters as female in the average movie, (Lauzen, 2018).
- In 2018, female characters comprised only 35% of all speaking characters in film, (Lauzen, 2018).
- In character social triangles, only 3.6% of interactions take place between 3 women - indicating that women are more often given smaller, less central roles (Kagan, 2020).
- In movies released in 2018, 30% of films featured women in their top-10 most central roles, (Kagan, 2010).

Representation Matters

"Mass media in general and film in particular creates a world and contributes to us making meaning of our world and shaping what we experience as our 'reality,'" (Micic, 2015).

- Per cultivation theory, people's ideas are shaped and maintained primarily through TV and film, (Baran, 2021).
- Because of the influence film can have on us, it is just as important to question what is purposefully being excluded from film as what is being presented.
- The underrepresentation of women in film positions men as the cultural standard and women as unimportant or invisible, (Micic, 2015).
- Depictions of relationships between men and women that emphasizes traditional roles normalizes violence against women, (Micic, 2015).
- Accurate and positive representation of women in film is a good way to prevent reinforcing social norms that repress women.

Women's Role

Degree of centrality for a female character plays a huge role in whether or not a film will pass the Bechdel test.

- Films with more centrally connected, and therefore more important, female characters are more likely to pass the test (Agarwal et al., 2015).
- Genres with a higher percentage of movies that pass the Bechdel test also have a higher percentage of triangles with a majority of women, (Kagan, 2020).
- Generally, two female characters will have significant interaction with each other in a film if the main character is female, (Micic, 2015).

Analyzing the top 20 films of 2015, there was only 1 film that contained a scene where women are seen fighting. Most often, despite the violent nature of many of these films, women are seen conversing with each other, never fighting, (Micic, 2015).

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Looking Forward

All this being said, there is evidence that the gender gap is improving.

- From 1965 to today, there has been a constant rise in the number of women in top-10 most central roles for all genres, (Kagan, 2020).
- Kagan's study also showed that there has been increasing women's interaction in film, (Kagan, 2020).
- While the gender gap remains prevalent in nearly all genres of film, women today hold more important roles than in the past (Kagan, 2020)

