

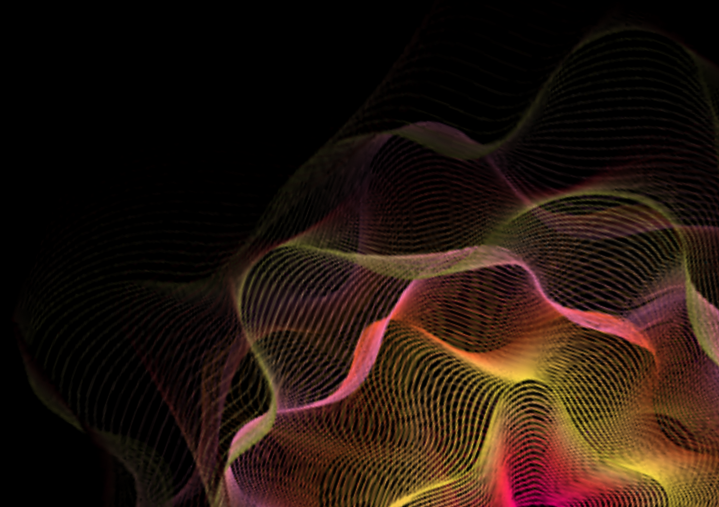


# SUPERPOWERING WOMEN in Science Fiction and Superhero FILM:

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## A 10-Year Investigation

A WMC REPORT IN ASSOCIATION WITH BBC AMERICA





## PROGRESSIVE WOMEN'S VOICES

### THE WOMEN'S MEDIA CENTER WORKS TO MAKE WOMEN VISIBLE AND POWERFUL IN THE MEDIA

Founded in 2005 by Jane Fonda, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem, the WMC is an inclusive and feminist organization that works to ensure women's realities are covered and women's voices are heard.

WMC works to make women visible and powerful in the media. We do so by promoting women as decision makers and as subjects in media; training women to be effective in media; researching and exposing sexism and racism in media; and creating original online and on-air journalism.

Our media programs that address the problems of unequal representation and misrepresentation of women in media include interconnected strategies that:

- Recruit and place diverse women experts in the media — print, broadcast, radio, Internet, social media, and media leadership — through WMC SheSource.
- Train diverse women experts to be effective in media, and increase their thought leadership through WMC Progressive Women's Voices and other customized training and leadership programs.
- Investigate, report, create, and publish original media to expand diverse women's voices and representation through WMC *Features*, WMC *Women Under Siege*, WMC *FBomb*, WMC *Speech Project*, and our syndicated radio program and podcast, *WMC Live with Robin Morgan*.
- Research, document, and produce reports that highlight the status of women in U.S. media, equip activists with evidence, and create benchmarks to hold media accountable for sexist and racist coverage.
- Advocate before government officials and agencies on policies affecting women's access to media and technology, ownership of media and technology, and safe and free speech in media and technology.



# SUPERPOWERING WOMEN IN SCIENCE FICTION AND SUPERHERO FILM

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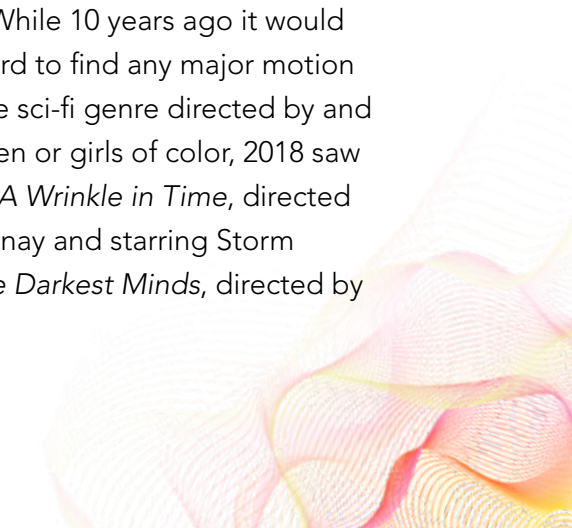
A WMC REPORT IN ASSOCIATION WITH BBC AMERICA

## INTRODUCTION

What are the roles for women and girls in science fiction and superhero films and television? Are they visible? Are they powerful? Are they inclusive? What do their representation, voice share, presence — or absence — mean to the stories that shape our imaginations of who we are and what is possible?

These are some of the questions we approached in a series of reports that the Women's Media Center and BBC America will release with a goal of expanding both the diversity and the representation of women and girls in front of and behind the camera. "SuperPowering Women in Science Fiction and Superhero Film — A Women's Media Center Report in Association with BBC America," our second joint study, explores the overall history of female representation in front of and behind the camera in the science fiction and superhero film genres and conducts a deeper dive into representation in the past decade.

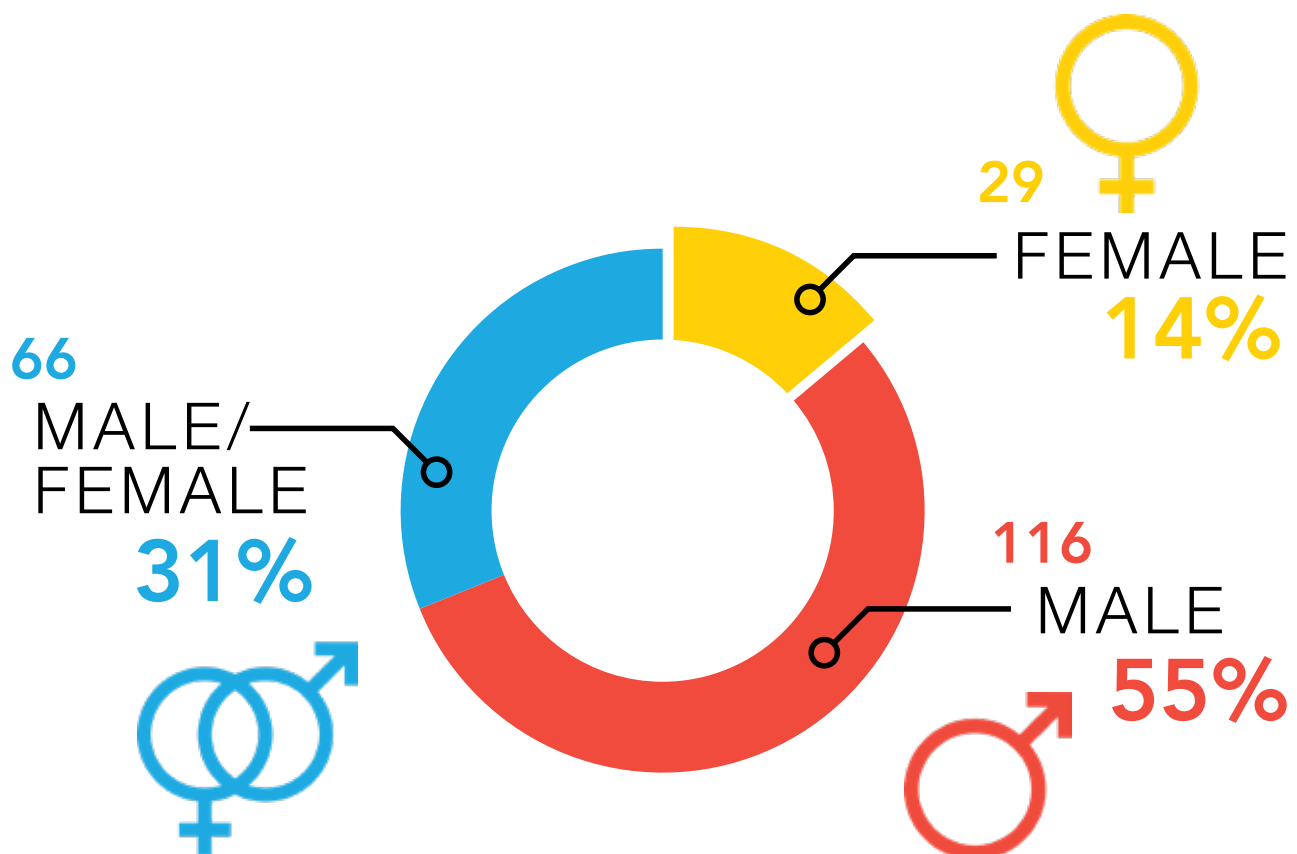
Throughout the history of science fiction and superhero films, women have rarely been the focus or the creators. These films have been mostly by, about, and for men or boys. Although films directed by **women still represent only 3 percent** of the science fiction films released over the last 10 years (men have directed a whopping 97 percent of the films), the situation is slowly changing, thanks to the activism of filmmakers, journalists, and feminist advocates; some action by studio heads; and demand from audiences whose evolving tastes crave more inclusion in front of and behind the camera. Though the industry is far from representative or inclusive, never before in the history of science fiction film have women had opportunities such as we're seeing now. While 10 years ago it would have been hard to find any major motion pictures in the sci-fi genre directed by and starring women or girls of color, 2018 saw two of them: *A Wrinkle in Time*, directed by Ava DuVernay and starring Storm Reid, and *The Darkest Minds*, directed by



# SCI-FI/SUPERHERO

FILMS WITH  
**FEMALE** SOLO LEADS,  
**MALE** SOLO LEADS, AND  
**MALE/FEMALE** CO-LEADS,  
2009–2018

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Jennifer Yuh Nelson and starring Amandla Stenberg.

With Kathleen Kennedy in charge at Lucasfilm, the studio decided to take a risk with a female protagonist for the reboot of the Star Wars franchise. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) now stands as the highest-grossing film of all time (not adjusted for inflation). Money talks in Hollywood, and with those kinds of numbers, studios rushed to repeat that success, and this has meant more films with women in the leading roles, even films in franchises that were traditionally aimed at primarily male audiences.

For women behind the camera, *Wonder Woman*, which was directed by Patty Jenkins, has ended the argument as to whether sci-fi films directed by and starring women can make money: Its domestic box office sits at nearly \$413 million. Disney greenlit Ava DuVernay's *A Wrinkle in Time*, which made over \$100 million domestically and settled the debate as to whether films directed by and starring women of color can make money. There are no more excuses for not having more women — of all races — both in front of and behind the camera in the sci-fi genre.

The bad news is that the overall percentage of sci-fi films directed by or starring women, especially women of

color, is still shockingly low. Of the 211 science fiction films with wide releases (1,000+ theaters) in the past 10 years (2009–2018), only **six (3 percent)** were directed by women. Only **29 (14 percent)** had a female solo lead; **66 (31 percent)** had a female co-lead. Just two films were directed by women of color, and these same two were the only ones that featured a female of color in a lead role: the aforementioned *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The Darkest Minds*.

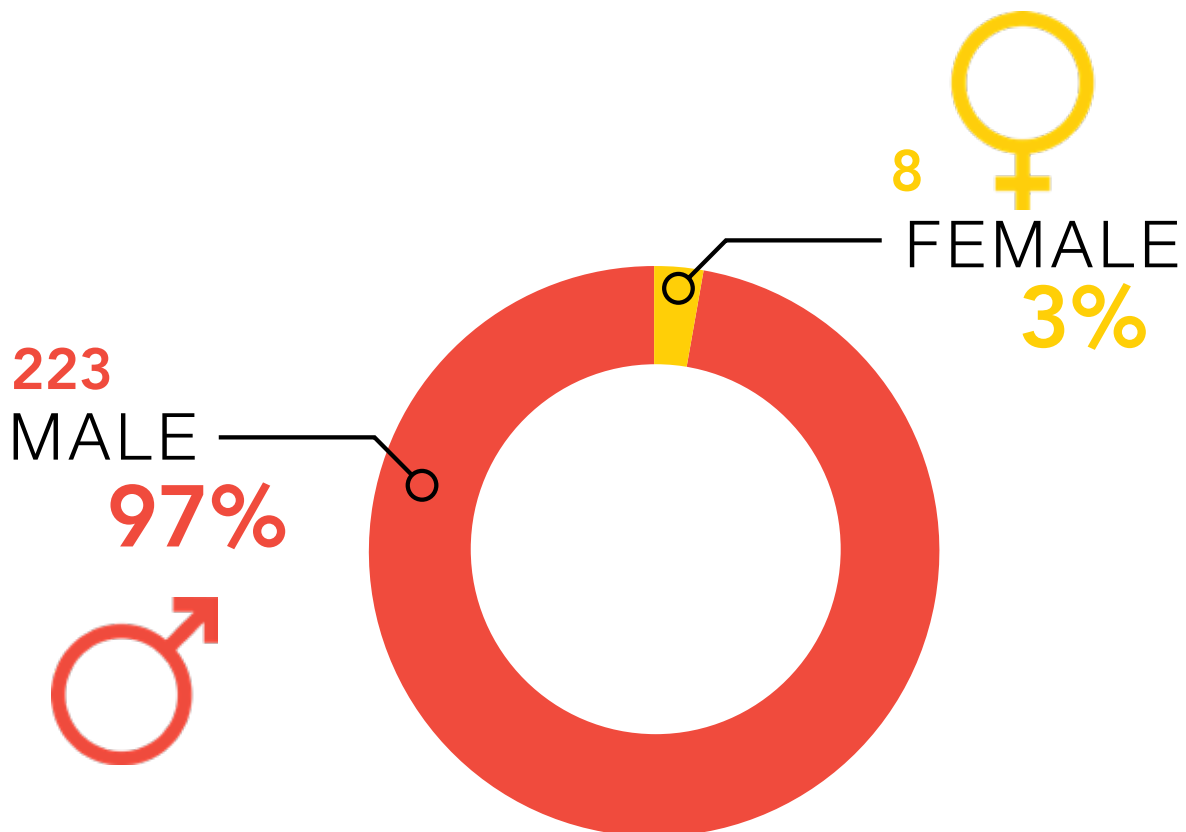
With the production of films such as *Annihilation*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Ex Machina*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*, there has been an encouraging uptick in opportunities for women in the last five years — particularly in front of the camera.

From 2009 to 2013, **35 out of 98 sci-fi films (36 percent)** had female leads, with only **10 solo leads**. But from 2014 to 2018, **60 out of 113 sci-fi films (or 53 percent)** had female leads, with **19 solo leads**. For comparison, **90 percent of sci-fi films** between 2009 and 2013 had male leads, and **94 of the 113 (83 percent)** of sci-fi films between 2014 and 2018 had male leads, with **53 solo leads**. This significant increase in films with female leads resulted from the new *Star Wars* films as well as the *Hunger Games* and other young-adult franchises that have proliferated.

Behind the camera, however, the change has been much more incremental, with an increase of a meager **3 percentage**

# MALE AND FEMALE DIRECTORS OF SCI-FI/SUPERHERO FILMS, 2009–2018

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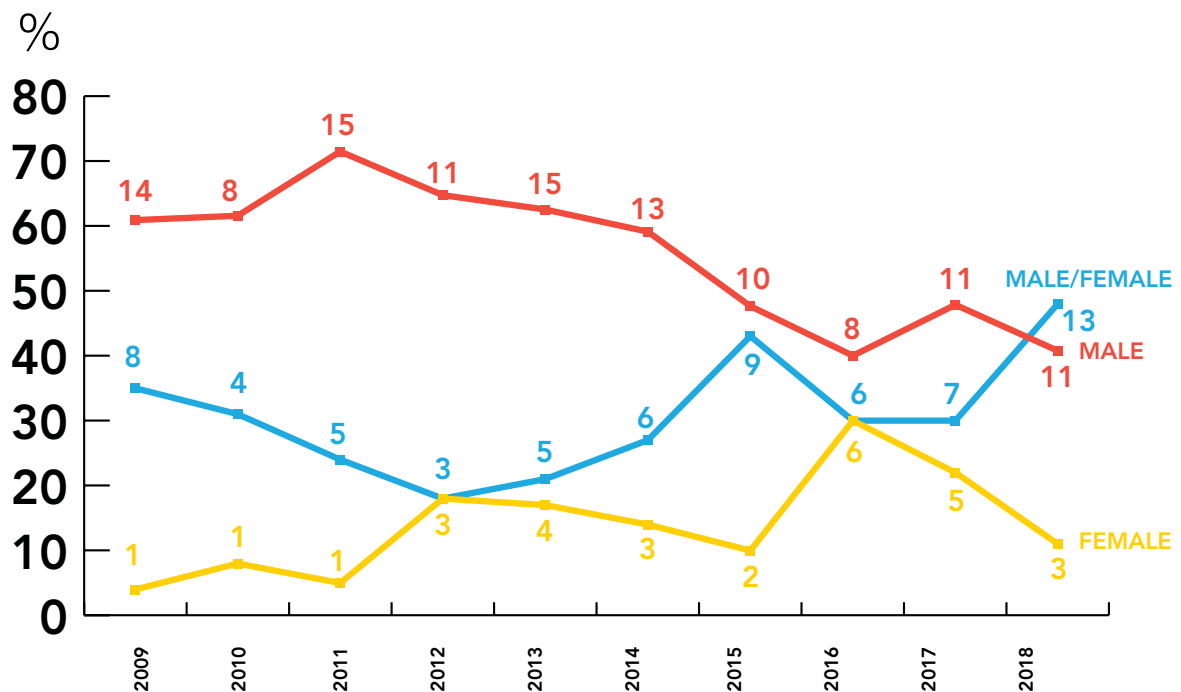


# NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF SCI-FI/SUPERHERO

FILMS EACH YEAR FROM  
2009–2018 WITH

**MALE** SOLO LEADS,  
**FEMALE** SOLO LEADS,  
**MALE/FEMALE** CO-LEADS

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Produced by the Women's Media Center and in association with BBC America  
Source: IMDb and Box Office Mojo; Analysis: Women's Media Center/BBC America

**points** in female directors (5 percent between 2014 and 2018 compared to 2 percent in the preceding five years); an increase of **5 percentage points** in female producers (20 percent between 2014 and 2018 compared to 15 percent between 2009 and 2013); and an increase of **3 percentage points** for female editors (13 percent between 2014 and 2018 compared to 10 percent between 2009 and 2013). **The percentage of women writers on sci-fi films actually decreased between 2014 and 2018 in comparison to the time frame of 2009 to 2013, from 8 percent to 7 percent.**

Even with these poor numbers, there are glimmers of hope behind the camera. In the last five years, five sci-fi/superhero films (4 percent) had a female director, compared to just one of the sci-fi/superhero films released between 2009 and 2013. In 2017, *Wonder Woman*, which was directed by Patty Jenkins, was the first big-budget film directed by a woman in this genre, and in 2018, the first woman of color — Ava DuVernay — directed a big-budget science fiction film, *A Wrinkle in Time*. In March 2019, Marvel released its first female-led superhero film, *Captain Marvel*, co-written and co-directed by Anna Boden. Its \$455 million opening weekend was the biggest ever for a female-led superhero movie.

Soon to come are *High Life*, by legendary French director Claire Denis; and the first big-budget superhero film directed by

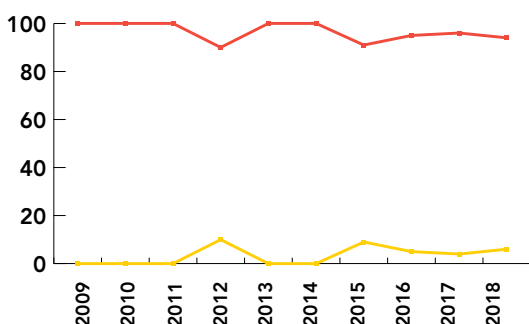
an Asian American woman — *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* — which will be directed by Cathy Yan and is due to be released in 2020.

We still have a long way to go to reach parity, but the future is beginning to look brighter.

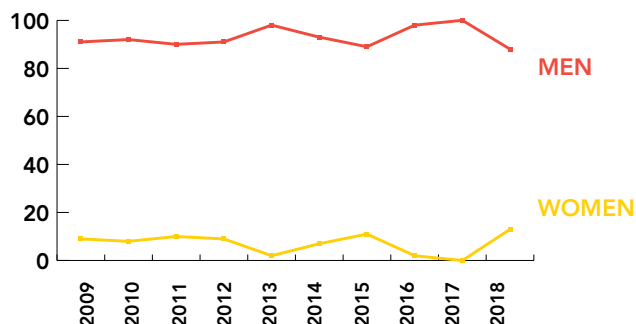
# PERCENTAGE OF DIRECTORS, PRODUCERS, WRITERS, EDITORS OF SCI-FI/SUPERHERO FILMS WHO ARE MALE AND FEMALE FROM 2009–2018

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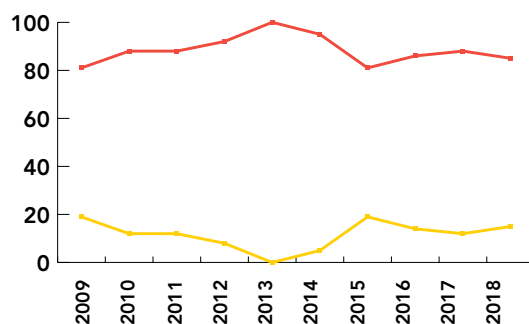
% DIRECTORS



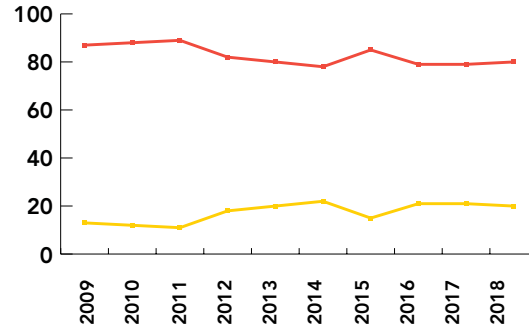
% EDITORS



% WRITERS



% PRODUCERS





# A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN SCI-FI FILM

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## HISTORY

The science fiction genre has traditionally served as fertile ground for storytellers to create imaginary creatures and worlds and, in so doing, offer reflections upon broader themes of human nature, society, and culture. Since the majority of those storytellers have been men, going all the way back to when movies were invented more than 100 years ago, the perspective on the world that those films have reflected has been almost exclusively male. Women have served male-driven plots, mostly appearing either to be rescued or to provide insight or greater understanding of an alien world for the world of men.

In his book *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses*, Dean Conrad says the default for the science fiction genre is “men do things, women assist them.” For much of the early development of the sci-fi genre in film, women were restricted by societal tradition and norms, functioning mostly as what Conrad calls “serviceable others” in the sci-fi films of the 1930s,

1940s, and 1950s. In those early days, as women fought for more power in society, sometimes they would be featured as scientists, but they were still not trusted to save the world.

The best role a woman could hope for in the golden age of sci-fi — the late 1950s through the 1960s — was to be a “mediator”: a scientist or a smart girl. The mediator is the character who remains compassionate toward the monster or alien force that threatens humankind while translating to the patriarchal forces on the human side of things. Conrad calls out *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) as the genre rarity that features a “woman who saves the world” — the woman in this case being Helen Benson, a young widow, portrayed by Patricia Neal, who mediates between humans and the alien visitor Klamath. Conrad likens Neal’s character to those female voices of reason that emerged in such high-profile sci-fi films as *Metropolis* (1927), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), and *Arrival* (2016).



On the other hand, many early sci-fi films replaced real women with representations of women who couldn't be expected to adhere to tradition: How can you tell a woman from another planet what is and isn't expected of her? Androids, AI, and women "found" on distant planets often served as convenient substitutes for human women in sex fantasies. During the 1950s, a whole subgenre of sci-fi cropped up that functioned as sanctioned softcore porn for a generation of young men for whom sex was supposed to be off-limits.

In her [video essay](#) "Lady Lands," Catherine Stratton of the streaming channel and film site Fandor focuses on three films — 1958's *Queen of Outer Space*, 1953's *Cat-Women of the Moon* ("Incidentally, where are your menfolk?"), and 1956's *Fire Maidens of Outer Space* — as examples of what she calls a "subgenre of sci-fi B movies about worlds without men. ... Lady Lands are not-so-thinly-veiled fantasy stories for men, disguised by female empowerment." In

these movies, Stratton points out, the women who rule the planets at the start always end up destroyed, and the male protagonists end up with the power and a harem of docile women to adore them.

Sci-fi films often present this quandary: Are the women actual women, or are they just a component of a complicated male fantasy? Conrad calls several modern sci-fi films that star women "look-at-her-ass SF" because the movie posters always feature female actors in sexy costumes looking over their shoulders, their highlighted posteriors tightly encased in a sexy space suit. Presumably this is because the films — even if they now star women — are still aimed at mostly male audiences. To guarantee the highest opening-weekend box office numbers, the advertising message still must be that this is a transactional experience for young men: Come see this movie starring a woman, and you will not be disappointed.

Women have long fought against this



enduring notion that to be in sci-fi, they must offer up sexuality. The feminist movement had a significant impact on Hollywood, as did the Black Power and civil rights movements of the 1970s. Women in science fiction up to that point generally did not drive the narrative, although there were a few notable characters from the 1960s, such as Kim Hunter's Zira in *Planet of the Apes* and Jane Fonda's character in *Barbarella*. It really wouldn't be until Carrie Fisher played Princess Leia in *Star Wars* (1977), and especially when Sigourney Weaver starred as Ellen Ripley in *Alien* (1979), that women started to be thought of as protagonists in science fiction film. It is worth noting that Ripley's role was originally written for a man, which could account for the lack of female gender "norms" attached to the character and story.

In some ways, the history of women in science fiction film can be understood in terms of pre-*Alien* and post-*Alien*. After

Weaver showed everyone what she could do — and do mostly without makeup in a green flight suit throughout the film — her character became an icon of the genre. Even now, Ellen Ripley stands out in the history of sci-fi as one of the most compelling protagonists ever put to screen, and not just because she was a female in a traditionally male role. Weaver portrays Ripley as someone who is on the *Nostromo* because she, more so than many of her male counterparts, is a savvy, resourceful, and capable officer with an indomitable will to survive.

## SEXUALITY AND CHANGE

It is less rare now than it once was to see a female in a sci-fi film whose existence is not based on her sexuality. Those females tend to appear in films where there aren't male protagonists driving the plot or where the female protagonist is a pre-pubescent girl. Sexuality in a film where women are concerned is often like a loaded gun — sooner or later someone





is going to pull the trigger. Sex will be had because the female has appeared.

One of the best examples of this is the 1995 film *Species*, in which Natasha Henstridge plays a genetically engineered human-alien hybrid who tries to find a male mate in order to reproduce. Henstridge is the classic white male ideal: tall, buxom, blond, and aggressively sexual, showing her naked body throughout the film, although every so often, we also get a glimpse of the alien underneath. This same theme runs through *Under the Skin* (2013), with Scarlett Johansson covering up a not-so-appealing alien underneath. These films give women a chance to express that what is on the outside doesn't always reflect what is on the inside, even if many viewers write the characters off as yet another male sexual fantasy.

Scarlett Johansson in particular has functioned as a sci-fi archetype, particularly when one is looking at the

evolution of sci-fi films over the past five years. In addition to her role in *Under the Skin*, Johansson played a young woman injected with drugs to become superhuman in *Lucy*, an AI who connects on a deeply personal level with Joaquin Phoenix's character in *Her*, and an android in *Ghost in the Shell*. While Johansson's career in sci-fi has been prolific, it is not without controversy. Her role in *Ghost in the Shell*, which is based on a Japanese manga series, was faced with backlash after claims of whitewashing by critics who believed that the role should have gone to an Asian American actress instead. The whitewashing becomes obvious when we see that the film adaptation changes the character's name from Motoko Kusanagi to Mira Killian in order to change the role to suit Johansson. It has also been announced that Johansson will star in a film wholly dedicated to her Marvel character, Black Widow. If it's true, as Conrad observes, that sci-fi often reflects the anxiety of the patriarchy at a given point in time, then Johansson's persona



might be something they can't quite define — someone who is the patriarchy's sexual and physical ideal while also being someone who is clearly brilliant. That makes her a good fit for modern-day sci-fi, as are Natalie Portman, who starred in the *Star Wars* series and *Annihilation*, and Charlize Theron, who portrayed the lead character Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

In both *Annihilation* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*, what's going on in the hearts and minds of the female protagonists who drive the narratives is more important than what their bodies can do for men. (*Annihilation* is particularly notable for featuring a team of five women — played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, Natalie Portman, Tuva Novotny, Tessa Thompson, and Gina Rodriguez — who lead the adventure.) A handful of recent films have featured similar characters — women who are not obliged to pull the sex trigger — such as Dr. Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock, in Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, and Dr. Louise Banks, played by Amy Adams, in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*. Ridley Scott's *The Martian* features a male protagonist, but the commander (played by Jessica Chastain) is a woman, as in the book on which the film is based.

Emily Blunt has been a pivotal figure in the genre recently, having appeared in three high-profile sci-fi films in the past seven years. In 2012, she appeared as an iconic mother figure who helps to save the world in Rian Johnson's *Looper*. The film

is primarily about a hit man, the “looper,” played by both Bruce Willis and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, but Blunt plays a key role as the mother of the Rainmaker, the evil force of the future they're trying to kill. Her young son could grow up to become evil, or he could, as Blunt's character says, use the force for good. A couple of years later, Blunt established herself as an action heroine in Doug Liman's *Edge of Tomorrow*. Not many actors can steal a film when the lead is Tom Cruise, but Blunt's Rita Vrataski, the “Angel of Verdun,” is a no-nonsense, ass-kicking soldier who whips Cruise's snively William Cage into fighting shape. Finally, Blunt appeared in John Krasinski's 2018 sci-fi horror film *A Quiet Place*. Blunt and Krasinski, who are married in real life, play the heads of a family trying to survive an alien invasion. By the end of the film, Blunt and her deaf daughter, portrayed by Millicent Simmonds, become its heroes through their discovery of the key to defeating the extraterrestrial threat. (The fact that Millicent Simmonds is deaf was noted by observers who point out that although sci-fi often uses disability analogies, it offers few roles to actors with disabilities.)

Driving this change in how women are being portrayed is Hollywood's recognition that our culture is changing and that films with strong female characters can attract different types of ticket buyers. The young-adult genre is especially strong, primarily because of



female ticket buyers, with franchises such as *The Hunger Games*, starring Jennifer Lawrence, the *Divergent* series, starring Shailene Woodley, Ava DuVernay's *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The Darkest Minds*, directed by Jennifer Yuh Nelson. These films exist because Hollywood now knows that young girls in large numbers are a profitable demographic worth paying attention to.

Women in science fiction have been almost exclusively white, with a few exceptions, most notably Nichelle Nichols as Lieutenant Uhura in the first six *Star Trek* films (a role that originated in the 1966–69 television series). Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) represented a dramatic departure from this pattern. With a cast of black women driving the action, *Black Panther* has become the third-highest domestic-grossing film of all time — earning \$700 million domestically and an additional \$1.35 billion internationally — dispelling any questions about whether women of color can be a profitable draw

in the sci-fi/superhero genre. It also became the first superhero movie ever to receive an Oscar nomination for Best Picture. While the film's central hero is male, females do most of the heroic work. The tech whiz Shuri (Letitia Wright) outsmarts most of the male characters, the fierce warrior Okoye (Danai Gurira) is the most sought-after fighter, and Nakia (Oscar winner Lupita Nyong'o) drives the narrative toward using the power of Wakanda to help city-dwelling African Americans.

Disney's *A Wrinkle in Time* was the first sci-fi film backed by a major studio to star a black heroine, played by Storm Reid. Ava DuVernay's film earned over \$100 million at the box office, a fraction of *Black Panther*'s \$700 million but more than enough to indicate that there are ticket buyers out there who want to see sci-fi films by and about women/girls of color.



## THE HERO'S JOURNEY / GENDER SWAP

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In his book, Dean Conrad summarizes Joseph Campbell's definition of the hero's journey as follows:

1. The Call to Adventure
2. Refusal of the Call
3. Supernatural Aid
4. The Crossing of the First Threshold
5. The Belly of the Whale

In looking over sci-fi film history, it is striking to see just how few women have been granted such a journey. Women are most often aiding the journey of the film's hero. But there have been a handful of female characters whose own journey is at the film's center, including those played by Jodie Foster in *Contact*, Sandra Bullock in *Gravity*, and Natalie Portman in *Annihilation*.

The *Terminator* character Sarah Connor, portrayed by Linda Hamilton, marked a breakthrough for female characters in this respect. Before *The Terminator* (1984), even under the best of circumstances (think Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia in *Star Wars*), women were generally excluded from the hero's journey. But in *The Terminator*, Sarah Connor goes from naive waitress to hardened warrior. In the follow-up *Terminator 2*, Sarah Connor is sidelined for the father/son story between her son and a machine, but her role in the original film was the first of its kind.

One way that filmmakers have been able to introduce women as heroes is with gender swapping — taking a traditional character, such as Luke Skywalker in the *Star Wars* series, and substituting a female, such as Daisy Ridley as Rey.

This form of gender swap shows up in films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road*. In that film, Mad Max himself is sidelined, and Charlize Theron's Furiosa is the driving force in the film to lead what's left of humankind toward survival and redemption.

With regard to the superhero franchises that dominate mainstream releases, it is worth noting that Hollywood's obsession with superhero films has revolved almost exclusively around the male characters, such as Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man. Catwoman was played by Michelle Pfeiffer in 1994's *Batman Returns*, and by Halle Berry in an eponymous 2004 movie. But those brief appearances were the exception. In 2017 DC finally allowed Wonder Woman to have her own movie, starring Gal Gadot and directed by Patty Jenkins. This will be followed this year by *Alita: Battle Angel*, starring Rosa Salazar, and in 2020 by a film featuring Harley Quinn. Like *Wonder Woman*, it will have a female director, Cathy Yan. *Wonder Woman 1984* — a sequel to the first *Wonder Woman* film and again starring Gal Gadot and directed by Patty Jenkins — is also due to be released in 2020.





This year, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has finally released its first female-led film, *Captain Marvel*, starring Brie Larson and directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck. Marvel will follow up with *Black Widow*, directed by Cate Shortland. It took a movement by Marvel fans to push for the *Black Widow* movie to be greenlit, even though its star, Scarlett Johansson, has had prominent roles in numerous science fiction and fantasy films (as discussed above). As of late 2018, Screenrant, an independent movie and TV website, was reporting that there are 11 female superhero movies in the works, including those featuring *Black Widow*, *Silk*, *Batgirl*, *Ironheart*, and *Gotham City Sirens*.

Even as women are getting key roles in some sci-fi films, there are more than a few high-profile examples of recent films in which the role of women has been greatly diminished. Denis Villeneuve's 2017 release, *Blade Runner 2049*, turned the iconic female replicants from both Phillip K. Dick's source material and Ridley Scott's 1982 cinematic version into nothing more than submissive eye candy. Although *Blade Runner 2049* does have some female characters who are controlling, evil, monstrous people or replicants, the main female character, the one Ryan Gosling's character falls for, is nothing more than his fantasy. This contrasts strongly with Sean Young's Rachael from the first *Blade Runner*, who did not know she was a replicant but

who had a vivid and memorable sense of self; she didn't exist merely to complete the male protagonist, as the female AI in *Blade Runner 2049* does.

The agency of female leads was also greatly diminished in *Jurassic World*. The female characters in *Jurassic Park*, Arianna Richards' computer nerd Lex and Laura Dern's Dr. Ellie Sattler, were swapped for a boy dinosaur nerd and Bryce Dallas Howard's Claire Dearing. Dearing is a walking cliché, an oblivious female who knows next to nothing about paleontology and cares only about driving profit, until (of course) she falls in love with the much smarter and physically endowed male hero. Dern's character, which sprang from Michael Crichton's book, is strong, complex, and competent. Lex was rewritten from the novel to be savvy with computers, and ends up saving the day with tech smarts, even if she doesn't seem to get dinosaurs or the natural world. To replace these characters with an awkward boy geeking out about dinosaurs and a feckless female out of her depth was a major regression in terms of gender representation.

Sigourney Weaver's Ripley notwithstanding, much of the time in sci-fi the female character fades as the male hero rises. For instance, in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, by *Return of the Jedi*, Princess Leia was known primarily for her skimpy metallic bikini — a far cry from the tough-talking princess from the first

film. In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor emerged toned and muscular and toting a gun as a new feminist film icon. But her physical transformation really served only to help protect her son, John. And in the end, she wasn't the one who defeated the T-1000 cyborg sent to kill John, whereas at the end of the first *Terminator*, she single-handedly destroyed the killer cyborg chasing after her.

The problem with *Terminator* when it comes to women is that Sarah Connor, like the Virgin Mary, seems to exist only to give birth to the future savior of mankind: Even John Connor's initials match those of Jesus Christ. She is only known or appreciated or saved because she ultimately gives birth to him. As such, each *Terminator* sequel after the first two revolved around John Connor or the Terminator, with Sarah Connor there only as background material. That said, James Cameron is writing and producing a sixth *Terminator* film, and Linda Hamilton will return as Sarah Connor. Given the greater status being given to women in recent sci-fi films, will she play a more prominent part?

## BEHIND THE CAMERA

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Finding sci-fi films directed by women over the past 10 years is not easy. Of 211 sci-fi films in wide release in the last 10 years, only six were directed by women — a shockingly low figure.

Other films with female writers/directors were ignored, sent straight to video on demand, or panned by critics. The limited opportunities for female directors in the genre are reflective of both a male-dominated filmmaking legacy and a risk-averse Hollywood economy.

Sci-fi films have traditionally been a place where male fantasy has been explored; flipping that perspective to show the fantasy worlds women want to explore has been rare. This is especially puzzling given the legacy of the female voice in science fiction literature, which boasts high-profile women writers such as Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, and N.K. Jemisin. However, movies based on their work have yet to make it to the forefront. The wild success of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Hulu series adapted from the Margaret Atwood novel, suggests that television and streaming may allow for more risk-taking without the pressure of a big box-office opening. It's worth noting that DuVernay's *A Wrinkle in Time* was based on Madeleine L'Engle's classic young-adult book, adapted by Jennifer Lee and Jeff Stockwell. On the whole, though, in the sci-fi film genre, women as visionaries have been locked out.

In many ways, the exclusion of female directors in Hollywood is due to box-office pressure and the long track record of male directors in the genre. Studios' adherence to the model of male artists monopolizing sci-fi films comes down to economics.

When a formula worked, they stayed with that formula until it no longer made money. And the formula was: Men can direct sci-fi that makes money, and women can't.

In her March 16, 2018 [piece](#) for *The Guardian*, "The Final Frontier: How Female Directors Broke Into Sci-Fi," film critic Anne Billson wrote, "It was seen as a job for the boys. That's changing thanks to the likes of Ava DuVernay, Patty Jenkins, and Claire Denis being given opportunities to oversee big-budget productions."

Films like Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) and Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact* (1998) were not seen as game changers, even though *Deep Impact* cost \$75 million and made \$140 million domestically, delivering a notable profit for the studio. *Strange Days*, however, cost \$42 million and earned only \$8 million domestically. Billson wrote, "It was a resounding flop, which no doubt convinced studios that

women should not be allowed to direct the genre at all. Since then, we have also had *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and *Jupiter Ascending* (2015) from the Wachowskis. But one can't help wondering if, back in 1999, Warner Bros. would have entrusted *The Matrix*'s \$60m budget to a couple of relative unknowns if they had been called Lilly and Lana, instead of Larry and Andy." And while male directors can have one box office failure and still get work, women often don't.

As a result, Hollywood has been notoriously gun-shy when it comes to female directors, especially women of color. This is why Disney's investment in Ava DuVernay's vision for *A Wrinkle in Time* was viewed as a gamble, even though DuVernay was already a proven success by the time the film was made. The studio had the money and the bold vision to take what was perceived as a risk and, in giving DuVernay such a big-budget concept sci-fi film, helped kick down a door. DuVernay herself has



said, “I think that black people making art, women making art, and certainly black women making art is a disruptive endeavor.”

Like *Strange Days* and *Deep Impact*, *A Wrinkle in Time* had a mixed critical reception. But its \$100 million box office take ensures DuVernay’s place as one of the few women behind the camera who can drive box office with her name and innovative subject matter.

In the past 10 years, there has been a slow and steady increase in female filmmakers bringing their vision to the big screen, and even though their films aren’t well known or celebrated with the same kind of fanfare as those of their male counterparts, they are worth noting.

Jennifer Phang directed and co-wrote *Advantageous*, released in 2015. *The New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis wrote about it, “Every so often, though, a small-scale, thoughtful movie like *Advantageous* comes along and summons up a speculative new world with brains, some frugal sleight of hand and the cool confidence that, in the future, our greatest threat won’t be rampaging robots or alien invasions but the same hard-charging menace that’s haunted the planet since time immemorial — people.”

*Advantageous* was Phang’s second sci-fi film, after *Half Life*, released in 2008. *Half Life* won the Gen Art Film Festival Acura Grand Jury Award, the San Francisco

International Asian American Film Festival Best Narrative Feature Award, and several others. Yet Phang’s career did not take off. Phang didn’t make another feature until *Advantageous*, seven years after *Half Life*.

Other female sci-fi auteurs of note include Sophie Barthes, whose *Cold Souls* (2009), starring Paul Giamatti, made just \$1.13 million, Marina Kunarova, director of *Hunting the Phantom* (2014), and Claire Carré, whose well-reviewed *Embers* was released in 2015.

Additionally, the December 2018 release *Bird Box*, directed by Susanne Bier and written by Eric Heisserer (who also wrote *Arrival*), broke Netflix records with more than 45 million accounts watching the film in its first week of release.

Women screenwriters for sci-fi films have been just as rare as women directors for sci-fi films, with a few notable exceptions over the past 40 years. Melissa Mathison wrote the screenplay for *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), a massive blockbuster that netted her an Oscar nomination. With Lawrence Kasdan, sci-fi author Leigh Brackett co-wrote the screenplay for *The Empire Strikes Back*. Suzanne Collins, the author of the *Hunger Games* series, co-wrote the adapted screenplay for the first *Hunger Games* film. Amanda Silver, along with her writing partner Rick Jaffe, has written the screenplays for a number of recent sci-fi blockbusters, including *Jurassic World* and all three of the new





*Planet of the Apes* trilogy.

For the number of female-written and -directed science fiction films to increase, studios and audiences need to be open to different perspectives. As Billson points out, this is not going to happen easily. Men tend to be territorial when it comes to the genre, in terms of both the superhero empires and traditional science fiction. “Sci-fi is a cultural Custer’s Last Stand for bigotry,” says Billson.

What women directors need more than anything is acceptance that their vision of sci-fi is valid, even if it is different from what has come before. In 1968, Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* shocked audiences with its bold new vision of what sci-fi films could be, but its release is now viewed as a turning point in the history of sci-fi. Surely its impact is an argument for people to keep minds open to the different perspectives that might be coming from the other 50 percent of the human race.

## BOX OFFICE

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Box office has become even more important than winning Oscars in determining who gets the power in

Hollywood. According to box office tracking site Box Office Mojo, of the 211 sci-fi and superhero films with wide releases (1,000+ theaters) in the last 10 years, 104 made at least \$100 million domestically at the box office. A little less than half of these 104 films (48) have starred women in lead roles. But looking more closely, it becomes clear that films grossing \$100+ million starring *only* women in the lead have been rarer — 14 films, several of which are from the *Hunger Games* or *Divergent* series or the new *Star Wars* films.

A female character leading a major sci-fi franchise has been rare. For the longest time there really was only Sigourney Weaver in the *Alien* series. Jennifer Lawrence, however, with the *Hunger Games* series, has reset the bar for what is possible for women in the era of high-concept sci-fi, franchises, and sequels. *The Hunger Games* opened the door for the *Divergent* series and a slew of other sci-fi films adapted from young-adult novels. Meanwhile, *Wonder Woman* was the first superhero movie to star a woman in over a decade, and now the sequel is in post-production. *Captain Marvel* followed in 2019, and all of these films were backed up by an impressive box-office take. Marvel’s *Black Widow* and Warner Bros./DC’s *Birds of Prey (And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* need only make the same kind of money to provide justification for making more films of this kind.

In 1979, *Alien*, which revolutionized how women in sci-fi were portrayed, was the fifth-highest grosser of the year, earning \$80 million domestically (*Kramer vs. Kramer* topped the domestic box office at \$106 million). When James Cameron's *The Terminator* came out in 1984 and gave sci-fi its first female with her own hero's journey, it earned just \$38 million and ranked 21st at the box office for the year. But in the era of VHS, *The Terminator* became a cult classic. In 1991, when Cameron brought back Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2*, it easily topped the box office and earned a then-record-breaking \$204 million.

In 1993, *Jurassic Park*, starring Laura Dern as a feisty paleobiologist, easily topped the box office with \$357 million. After *Jurassic Park*, there wouldn't be another film with a female lead taking the number one spot for the year until *Avatar*, also directed by James Cameron, appeared in 2009. It was another four years before *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, with Jennifer Lawrence, topped the domestic box office with \$425 million in 2013, making it the first sci-fi film with a solo female lead to reach number one for the year. That was the same year that *Gravity*, starring Sandra Bullock, topped out at number six at the box office with \$274 million domestically. *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, with Felicity Jones, would later match *Catching Fire*'s feat and top the 2016 domestic box office with \$532

million, which also makes it the highest-grossing sci-fi film with a solo female lead of all-time.

Ava DuVernay's *A Wrinkle in Time*, the first wide-release sci-fi film directed by a woman of color, is also the first sci-fi film directed by a woman to make \$100 million at the domestic box office. On the superhero film side, Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* became the highest domestic-grossing female-directed film of all time at \$413 million.

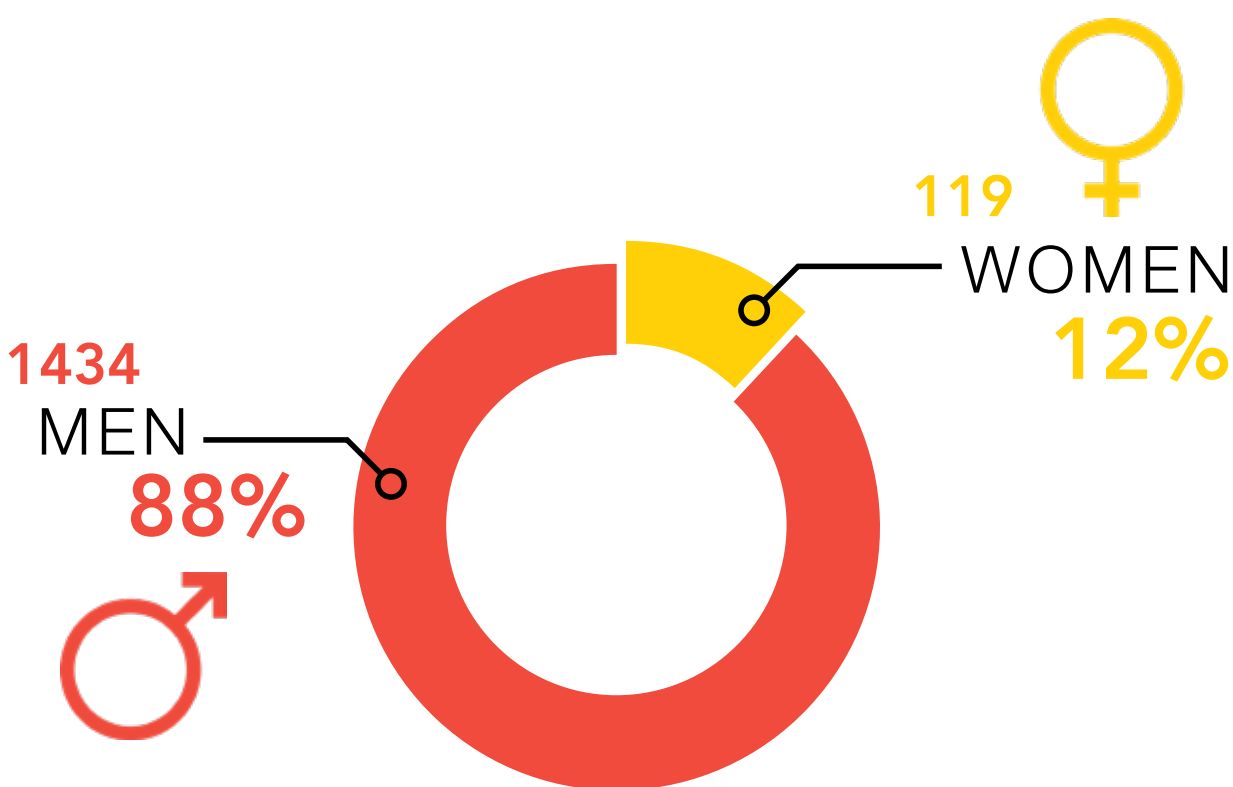
International box office is growing in importance. What both domestic and international numbers tell us is that films based on comic books, toys, or previous films tend to do better. High-concept sci-fi is almost guaranteed to make money overseas even if it doesn't make money in the U.S. For example, *Mad Max: Fury Road* earned \$154 million domestically and \$224 million overseas, and *Wonder Woman* made a whopping \$413 million in international box office.

As long as women are given the chance to continue to work in high-concept sci-fi, especially when those films are attached to a franchise, they will have a better chance of achieving parity in the genre.



# NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF MEN AND WOMEN DIRECTING, PRODUCING, WRITING, AND EDITING SCI-FI/SUPERHERO FILMS BETWEEN 2009–2018

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Produced by the Women's Media Center and in association with BBC America  
Source: IMDb and Box Office Mojo; Analysis: Women's Media Center/BBC America



## CONCLUSION

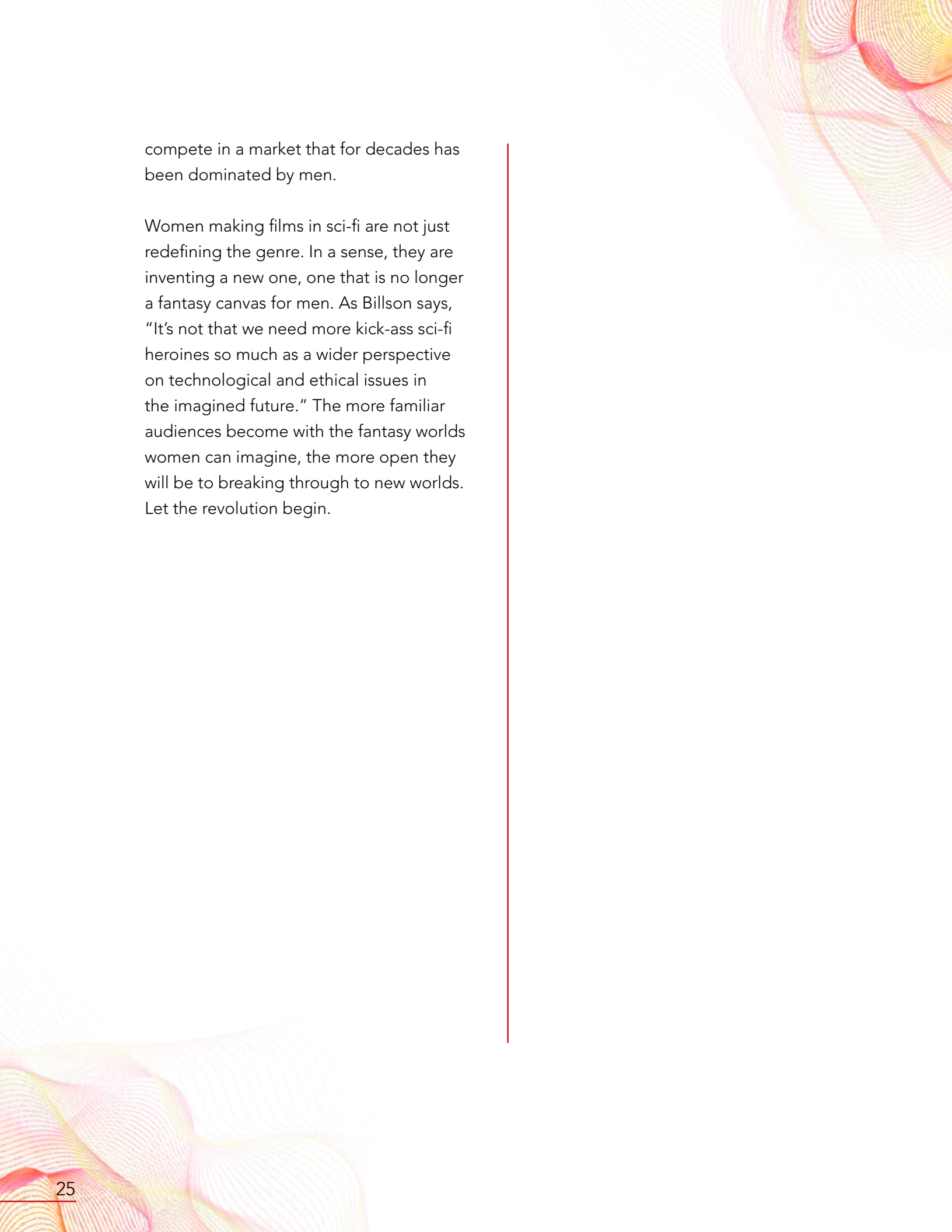
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When you start at representation of only 3 percent, moving the dial up should not be a heavy lift. The forecast for sci-fi and superhero films by and about women looks promising, and there appears to be some momentum — and a demonstrated audience. More women are buying tickets to see movies they're interested in, rather than those that follow the same reliable formula delivered every summer, with plots that revolve around a male hero. The *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* franchises are successful because of female ticket buyers. *Wonder Woman*, *Black Panther*, and even the updated *Star Wars* franchises all prove that when women participate as ticket buyers, profits rise significantly. The question is how to make this a lasting change rather than just a trend.

What makes it a trend is the excitement around successful films. But diligence and activism are needed for lasting change: actresses speaking out against pay inequality, the focus of the 2018 Golden Globes and Academy Awards ceremonies on the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, studio heads such as Lucasfilm's Kathleen Kennedy pushing for more inclusion in franchise films, and ticket buyers who have organized boycotts and supported films and film projects that offer more parity. While the feminist movement in the 1970s gave rise to one of the best eras for women in

film in terms of representation in front of the camera (and behind the camera, as Lina Wertmüller became the first female director to be nominated for an Academy Award in 1977), it did not last. No woman would even be nominated again for Best Director until Jane Campion got the nod in 1994, 17 years later. Women, especially women of color, still face a dearth of opportunities compared to their male counterparts in Hollywood. Too often they're given just one chance to prove themselves. Fortunately, those who are leading the charge for change — activist filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay, actresses such as Jessica Chastain, fast-growing communities on social media, studios that have implemented direct action campaigns for inclusion riders — do not appear to be stopping any time soon. The factor that can give these changes staying power is impressive box office numbers.

With filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay, Patty Jenkins, Cathy Yan, Claire Denis, and Jennifer Yuh Nelson continuing to redefine what women can do behind the camera, and with their films drawing impressive box office numbers, there is no reason why there should not be more women directing both superhero and science fiction films. Female-driven sci-fi and superhero films are even more on the rise, with the success of *The Force Awakens*, *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, and so many more. Their success could give women the power they need to

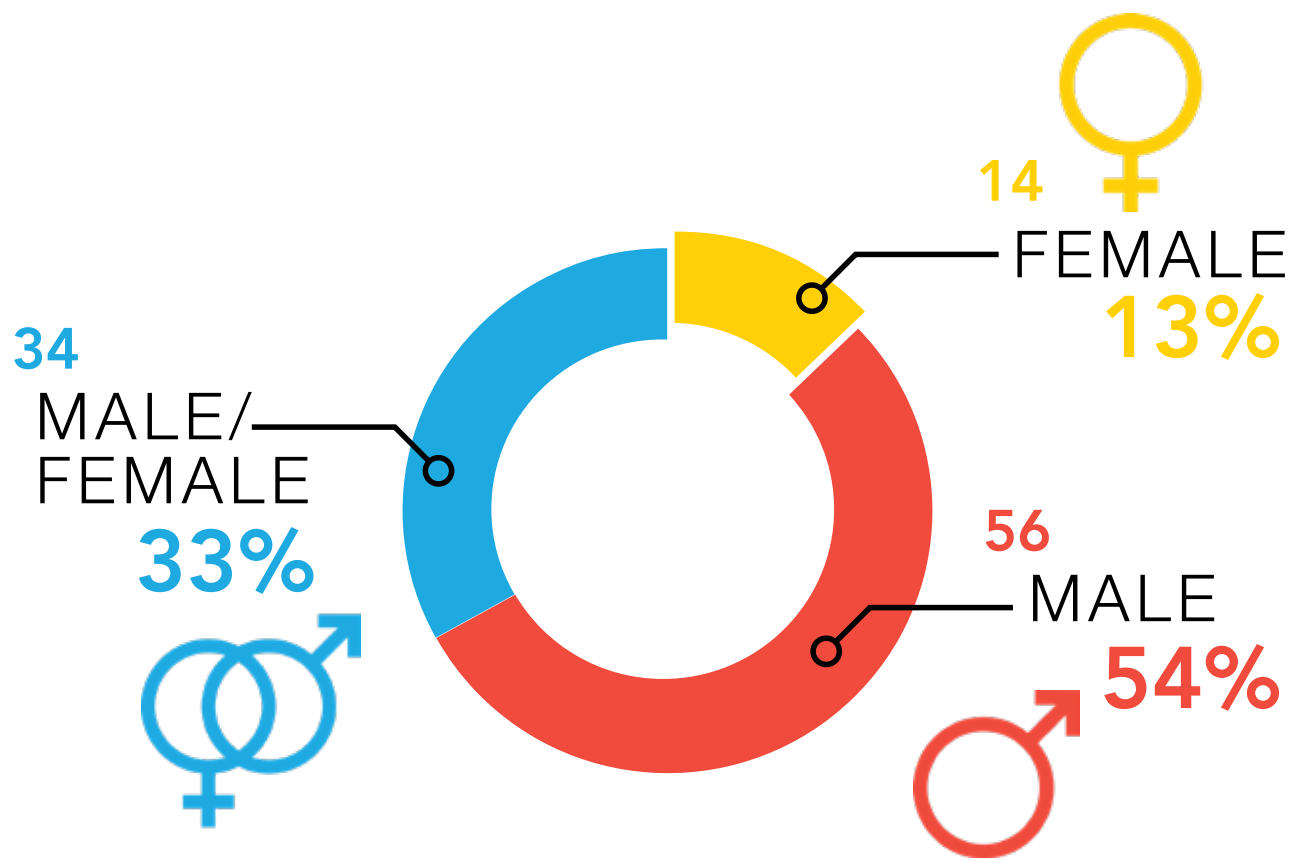


compete in a market that for decades has been dominated by men.

Women making films in sci-fi are not just redefining the genre. In a sense, they are inventing a new one, one that is no longer a fantasy canvas for men. As Billson says, "It's not that we need more kick-ass sci-fi heroines so much as a wider perspective on technological and ethical issues in the imagined future." The more familiar audiences become with the fantasy worlds women can imagine, the more open they will be to breaking through to new worlds. Let the revolution begin.

PERCENTAGE OF  
FEMALE SOLO LEADS,  
MALE SOLO LEADS, AND  
MALE/FEMALE CO-LEADS IN  
SCI-FI/SUPERHERO FILMS  
GROSSING OVER \$100M FROM  
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Produced by the Women's Media Center and in association with BBC America  
Source: IMDb and Box Office Mojo; Analysis: Women's Media Center/BBC America



# METHODOLOGY

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## METHODOLOGY

This analysis was conducted using data primarily from the websites Box Office Mojo and IMDb on science fiction and superhero films receiving wide release (1,000+ theaters) domestically from January 2009 through December 2018. Although there is considerable overlap of genre classification between the two sites, there is still an inherent degree of subjectivity when determining whether a film falls under the umbrella of science fiction. Consequently, there are a number of films where genre assignment was determined by the researchers' best judgment. Similarly, determining whether a performance is lead or supporting and a co-lead or a solo lead is, to a certain extent, a matter of interpretation, so again the researchers' best judgment was relied upon in classifying certain roles.



## Research, Reports, Publications, and Content Channels

*Women's Media Center Status of Women in U.S. Media* ([2019](#), [2017](#), [2015](#), [2014](#), [2013](#), [2012](#))

*WMC Divided: The Media Gender Gap* ([2019](#), [2017](#), [2015](#), [2014](#), [2012](#))

*Women's Media Center Status of Women of Color in the U.S. News Media* ([2018](#))

*Media and #MeToo: The WMC Report* ([2018](#))

*SuperPowering Girls: Female Representation in the Sci-Fi SuperHero Genre"* ([2018](#) — [WMC and BBC America Report](#))

*WMC Media Watch: Women & Elections — Where Voters Saw the Most Sexist Treatment of Women Candidates in Media* ([2016](#))

*WMC Media Watch: Women & Elections — #WhoTalks — U.S. Presidential Election Tracking of Cable/TV News Show Analysts by Gender and Race* ([2016](#))

(Partnership project with the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics and GenderAvenger)

*WMC Investigation: Analysis of Gender & Non-Acting Oscar Nominations* ([2019](#), [2018](#), [2017](#), [2015](#), [2014](#), [2013](#), [2012](#), [2010](#))

*WMC Investigation: 10-Year Review of Gender & Oscar Nominations in Non-Acting Categories* ([2016](#))

*WMC Investigation: Analysis of Gender & Primetime Non-Acting Emmy Nominations* ([2018](#), [2017](#), [2016](#), [2014](#), [2013](#), [2012](#))

*WMC Investigation: 10-Year Review of Gender & Emmy Nominations in Non-Acting Categories* ([2015](#))

*WMC Media Watch: The Gender Gap in Coverage of Reproductive Issues* ([2016](#))

*WMC Media Watch: Writing Rape — How U.S. Media Cover Campus Rape and Sexual Assault* ([2015](#))

*The Women's Media Center Guide to Covering Reproductive Issues*

*Name It Change It: The Women's Media Center Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Candidates*

*10 Do's and Don'ts on How to Interview Sexualized Violence Survivors* ([2017](#))

*Name It Change It: An Examination of the Impact of Media Coverage of Women Candidates' Appearance*

*Name It Change It — WMC Infographic — Stick Figures Explain Negative Impact of Appearance Coverage on Women Candidates* ([2013](#))

*Bias, Punditry, and the Press — Where Do We Go From Here?* ([2008](#)) (Report from the Women's Media Center, the White House Project, and the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education)

*Unspinning the Spin: The Women's Media Center Guide to Fair and Accurate Language* ([2014](#))

*WMC Women Under Siege Syria Crowdmapping*

*WMC Women Under Siege Reports: Sexualized Violence in Conflict Zones*

*WMC Speech Project Wheel of Online Abuse and Harassment* ([2016](#))

*WMC News and Features*

*WMC FBomb*

*WMC Speech Project*

*WMC Live with Robin Morgan*



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