

# Gender Bias in Advertising

Research, Trends and New Visual Language



**INNOVATION  
GROUP**

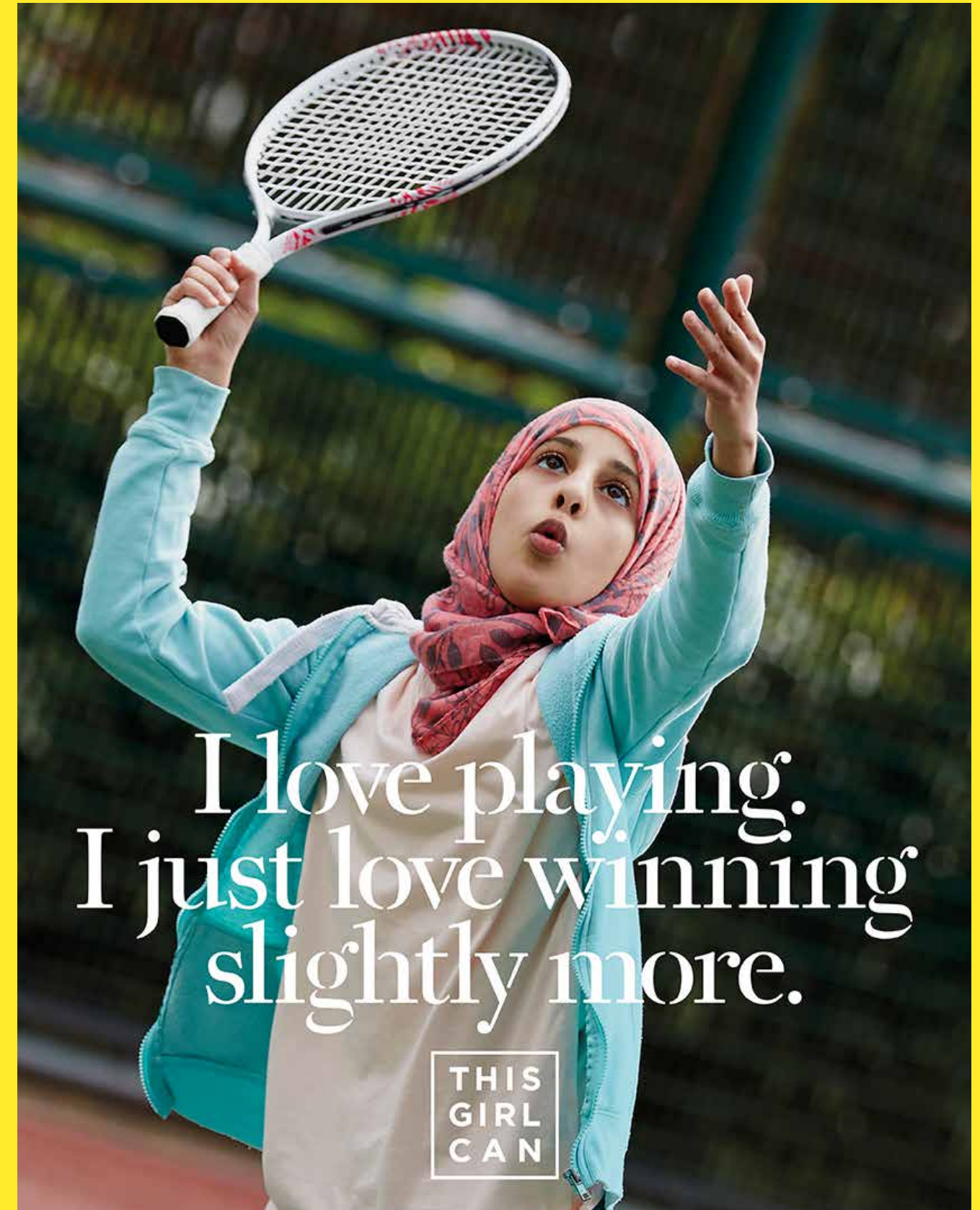
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**Geena Davis Institute  
on Gender in Media**

*If she can see it, she can be it.™*

In 2017, discussions around gender and media have reached a fever pitch. Following a bruising year at the ballot box, fourth-wave feminism has continued to expand. From the Women's March to high-profile sexual harassment trials to the increasing number of female protagonists gaining audience recognition in an age of "peak TV," women are ensuring that their concerns are heard and represented.





We've seen movements for gender equality in Hollywood, in Silicon Valley—and even on Madison Avenue. In response to longstanding sexism in advertising, industry leaders such as Madonna Badger are highlighting how objectification of women in advertising can lead to unconscious biases that harm women, girls and society as a whole.

Agencies are creating marquee campaigns to support women and girls. The Always #LikeAGirl campaign, which debuted in 2014, ignited a wave of me-too “femvertising” campaigns: #GirlsCan from Cover Girl, “This Girl Can” from Sport England and the UK’s National Lottery, and a spot from H&M that showcased women in all their diversity, set to “She’s a Lady.” Cannes Lions got in on the act in 2015, introducing the Glass Lion: The Lion for Change, an award to honor ad campaigns that address gender inequality or prejudice.

But beyond the marquee case studies, is the advertising industry making strides toward improving representation of women overall? How do we square the surge in “femvertising” with insights from J. Walter Thompson’s Female Tribes initiative, which found in 2016 that, according to 85% of women, the advertising world needs to catch up with the real world?



## TECHNOLOGY REVEALING BIAS

We're finally able to answer these questions with the same rigorous, data-driven approach that informs so many other important decisions in advertising.

New joint research from the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University and J. Walter Thompson New York, funded by Google.org and developed at the University of Southern California's Viterbi School of Engineering, analyzed more than 2,000 English-language films from the Cannes Lions archive to put numbers to the challenge of female representation in advertising, and get a sense of whether the situation is changing.

"Technology advances in data sciences and machine learning give us new ways of shining light on media content, at scale and with an unprecedented level of detail and accuracy," says Shri Narayanan, Niki & C. L. Max Nikias Chair in Engineering, University of Southern California. "It can give us novel insights not just by eliminating the mystery about potential unconscious biases in content, but in offering objective tools to shape content."

Or, in the words of Caroline Heldman, research adviser to the Geena Davis Institute and associate professor in the politics department at Occidental College, "more data means more light is shed on the problem, which inspires more activism around the issue."

"Gender Bias in Advertising" emerges from earlier work by the Geena Davis Institute to create a tool to analyze gender representation in entertainment media. The Geena Davis Institute partnered with the Signal Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory (SAIL) at USC and with funding from Google.org to create the Geena Davis Inclusion Quotient (GD-IQ), which Heldman describes as "a computer engineering tool that is able to automatically analyze the screen time and speaking time of characters in video down to the millisecond." Heldman says it's the only software in existence specifically developed to collectively analyze gender, screen time and speaking time in media and entertainment content.

Apart from automating the task of counting faces and voices, the GD-IQ is able to mark times with much greater precision than human researchers can achieve. "There's infinite possibility," says Madeline Di Nonno, CEO of the Geena Davis Institute. "We're excited because it allows us to reveal a level of unconscious bias that isn't possible with the human eye, and it's able to go much deeper."

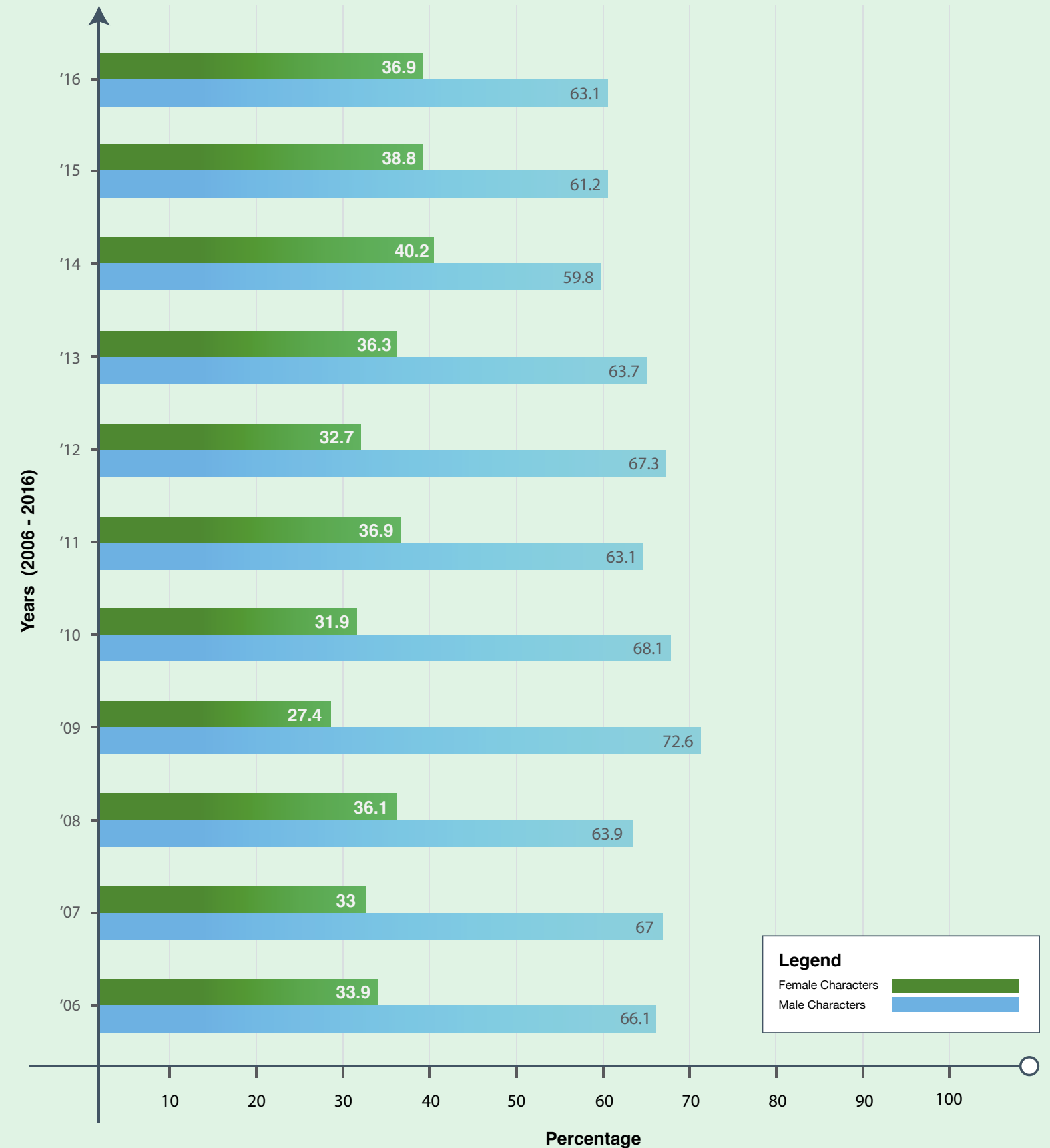
## GENDER BIAS IN ADVERTISING: FINDINGS

The research analyzed more than 2,000 Cannes Lions films from 2006 to 2016, focusing on winning and shortlisted entries in the Film and Film Craft categories from five English-speaking markets: the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The sample included ads across 33 different categories, from cosmetics to insurance to social causes.

Supporting the automated analysis, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media research team conducted additional research, identifying age, location, objectification, and other personal characteristics associated with prominent characters. This analysis was based on verbal, physical, occupational, and social cues plus other factors.

The research found that women consistently accounted for only about one third of all characters in commercials, across all years tested. In 2006, 33.9% of characters were women. Ten years later, the figure had barely budged, reaching only 36.9%.

“We assumed that in advertising, given that women dominate purchasing, that commercials would have much greater female representation,” says Di Nonno. “To find out the reverse was quite surprising.”



Moreover, when it comes to women's screen time and speaking time in commercials, no statistically significant change has occurred in 10 years. In 2006, 43.6% of all commercials featured women on screen for 20% or less of their duration. In 2016, the figure was 44.2%. Ads depicting men only were five times as common as ads depicting women only: 25% and 5% of all ads, respectively. Men get about four times as much screen time as women.

The study found similar percentages when it comes to speaking time. In 2006, 42.3% of commercials featured women speaking for 20% or less of the time spent on dialogue, compared to 41.7% in 2016. Analyzing the number of utterances, our research counted about three times as many for men as for women. Ads with only male voices were much more common than ads with only female voices, accounting for 18% and 3% of ads, respectively. Men speak about seven times more than women.

The research also examined the content of speech for men and women in ads. Lines of dialogue spoken by men were about 29% more likely than lines spoken by women to contain words associated with power, and 28% more likely to contain words associated with achievement.

The research also measured the dialogue's complexity using the Flesch-Kincaid readability test. While both genders spoke lines that could be understood by the average fifth grader, women's spoken dialogue was slightly simpler than men's.

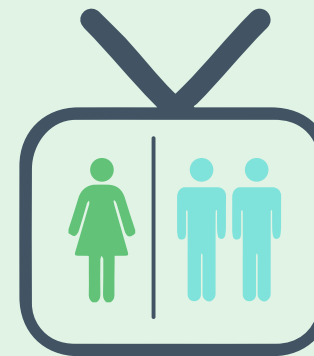
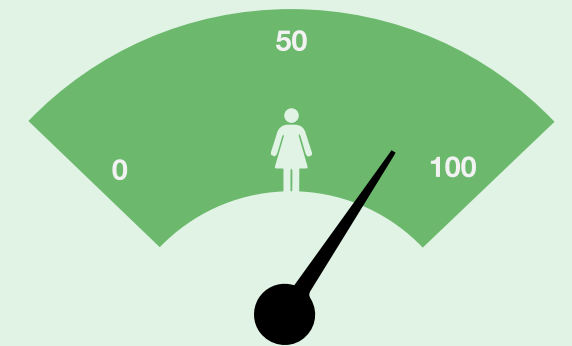
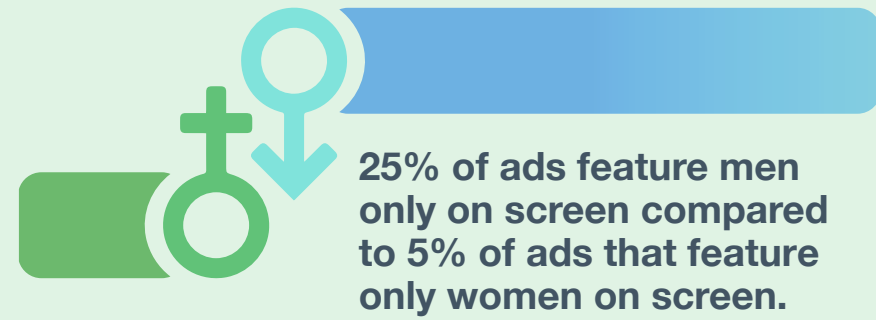
"What this research shows is that our industry has 'tent-pole moments'—amazing actions or campaigns when we all rally around women," says Brent Choi, chief creative officer of J. Walter Thompson New York, "but when it comes to creating our 'regular' ads for our 'regular' clients, we forget about them."

Our research focused on analyzing advertisements themselves, rather than the industry that produces them. But the experience of the Geena Davis Institute has shown that the systemic problems that produce skewed gender representation can't be solved simply by adding female characters. More info: <https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/data>

"We now know that simply adding women to scripts will not solve gender inequality in entertainment media," says Heldman. "We have to write female characters with more screen time, more speaking time, more prominence in the storyline, with more personal agency, and without objectifying them."

The Geena Davis Institute's prior analysis of Hollywood films has also shown that the gender composition of the teams behind them has a powerful effect on how they turn out. "On the film side, we learned that when there was a female writer attached, we saw a 7.5% increase in on-screen roles for women across the 10 largest film markets," Di Nonno says. Considering the extremely low percentage of female creative directors in advertising, she adds, the results of the latest study may not be so surprising.







## WOMEN BEHIND THE SCENES

In the current feminist moment, people are paying more attention than ever to women working behind the scenes in film, media and photography, and how this ultimately affects these industries' output.

The most recent example is *Wonder Woman*, which made headlines for taking \$103.1 million in its debut weekend in the US alone. It was trailblazing not only for being the first DC/Marvel superhero film to feature a female protagonist (following 19 male-led films since the movie franchise launched in 2008), but also because its director, Patty Jenkins, is one of only three women to direct a live-action film with a budget of over \$100 million.

The success of *Wonder Woman* sparked discussion about the need for more female directors, writers and producers. Fans and critics have also widely recognized how a woman behind the lens affected important choices and nuances in the movie that were central to its triumph.

The Getty Images Lean In Collection, a collection of realistic, authentic images of women and the communities that support them, is in many ways the opposite of a flashy nine-figure Hollywood blockbuster. But its reach is no less impressive: since launching in 2014, nearly 40,000 images have been downloaded through the collection, while Lean In images have been licensed in more than 95 countries.







“We’re beginning to understand that it’s not just about high profile wins, or campaigns, but it’s about creating a mass volume of images that present positive alternatives and about having a relentless commitment to the normalization of female power in all forums and spheres,” says Pam Grossman, director of visual trends at Getty Images.

“It’s also about representing the nuance of the female gaze,” she continues. “A female director will most likely shoot the same scene in an entirely different way and with a different perspective—one that takes into account female ambition, desire, fantasy, agency, not to mention realistic physiology.” Grossman notes that academic concepts such as the “male gaze,” once little-discussed outside liberal arts campuses, are now part of mainstream cultural discourse in a way that seemed unlikely until very recently.

Left: Photography by Klaus Vedfelt. Courtesy Getty Images

Right: Rockie Nolan / Refinery29 for Getty Images





“In 2016, only 7% of the top films were directed by women. Representation starts with content creators, which is why it’s so critical to have diversity behind the lens as well as in front of it,” says Piera Gelardi, executive creative director and cofounder of Refinery29. In response, Refinery29 launched Shatterbox Anthology, a film series “working to cultivate and spotlight the voices of women behind the camera, telling stories outside the narrow lens of the overwhelmingly male-dominated industry.” Films supported so far include *Kitty*, Chloë Sevigny’s fantastical meditation on childhood; *The Tale of Four*, a poetic rumination on dignity in crisis by Gabourey Sidibe; *Come Swim*, a surreal vision by Kristen Stewart; and *50/50*, a timely women’s rights documentary by Tiffany Shlain.

Girlgaze, a project by the English photographer and media entrepreneur Amanda de Cadenet, bills itself as “the first multimedia platform committed to supporting girls behind the camera.” The project aims to help women break into the photography industry by raising awareness of how women tell visual stories. It features curators including supermodel Amber Valletta and photographer Inez van Lamsweerde. Contributors include Yara Shahidi, an idol for generation Z, dancer Maddie Ziegler, and TV host Alexa Chung, while a roster of female-identifying photographers rounds out the group.









Thalia Mavros, founder of media platform The Front, places female ownership at the core of her business model. “Even though we see a huge disparity in ownership, we still had a few potential investors aggressively challenge the importance of investing in female media entrepreneurs,” says Mavros. “A few heated arguments and door slams later, I am proud to say we are founded and run by women, our investor has a female chief executive at the helm, and even our board of directors is all-female.”

Heldman notes that this year the number of female leads in the top-grossing Hollywood movies broke 30% for the first time since the Geena Davis Institute began measuring the percentage. But she cautions that in Hollywood, even a huge success like *Wonder Woman* may not be enough to tip the scales in favor of more women-led action films.

As in so many other areas, it will come down to who’s making the films. “I think Hollywood could be making a lot more money if they did a better job of telling more and more authentic stories of women’s lives,” Heldman says, “but without more women behind the scenes, we won’t see more women on the big and little screens.”

Grossman agrees: “Everyone likes great storytelling, and we all empathize with nuanced characters. But we’re more likely to see that sort of work created *about* women if it is created *by* women.”

Top left: Photography by Thomas Barwick. Courtesy Getty Images

Bottom left: Photography by Hero Images. Courtesy Getty Images



# TRENDS





## DIVERSE HOLLYWOOD

It's no secret that Hollywood has a diversity problem, but the industry may finally be taking steps to address its shortcomings and become more relevant to the women and minority groups that also buy tickets. And *Wonder Woman* is only the latest in what looks like a Hollywood sea change.

In 2016, a variety of minority-directed movies were critically acclaimed, including *Moonlight*, a coming-of-age story about a young African-American man, and *Fences*, starring Denzel Washington. In January, *The Birth of a Nation*, the story of the Nat Turner rebellion, smashed Sundance records when Fox Searchlight bought it for \$17.5 million.

2016 also saw advances for women in lead roles. There was a female-led *Ghostbusters* reboot, and women will also front the upcoming *Ocean's Eleven* spin-off, while 2019's *Captain Marvel* with Brie Larson will ensure that more female leads are added the superhero blockbuster genre.





Statistical analysis blog FiveThirtyEight has found that films that pass the Bechdel test had a higher return on investment than the median (a film passes if it contains dialogue between two women about something other than a man).

The same trends play out at the box office: The female-fronted *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was 2015's highest-grossing movie, taking more than \$2 billion worldwide. Rap biopic *Straight Outta Compton* made almost \$200 million, becoming the highest-grossing biopic of all time. And according to data from the Geena Davis Institute, out of the top 100 films of 2015, female-led films generated nearly 16% more at the box office than movies with a male lead.

"If you try to be diverse for the sake of being diverse, it's going to fail," Jeff Shell, chairman of Universal, the studio behind *Straight Outta Compton*, told *Variety*. "The real reason to do it is that it's good business. Our audience is diverse."







## NEW WOMEN'S INTEREST MAGAZINES

Recent years have seen a plethora of new women's print magazines and platforms presenting an expanded view of women, while traditional women's glossies are struggling to keep up.

"Women's interest" titles have suffered declining fortunes in recent years on both sides of the Atlantic. In August 2016, UK media measurement body ABC reported that women's weeklies had registered an 8.4% year-on-year decline in circulation for the first half of the year. US publishing trade group MagNet found that, in 2015, newsstand revenues from women's magazines declined by around 14.5% on the previous year, outpacing the 13% overall decline in newsstand magazine sales.

Part of this is to do with the decline of print overall, of course, but something more fundamental is also happening: women simply refuse to consume media in publications that reflect the silos that are convenient for advertisers.

"There was this idea that if you're interested in fashion, you couldn't also be interested in politics," explains Sam Baker, a former editor of *Cosmopolitan* and *Red*. "The idea was that the people who wanted to buy lipstick were in some way stupid, and the politics people were much too serious for lipstick."







Fed up with such notions, Baker launched The Pool, a multi-media site for women on the move, in 2015. Articles cover topics from Scandinavian fashion and UK prime minister Theresa May to sexism in sports and the latest buzzworthy binge-watch on Netflix. “Obviously, we have a targeted user who is predominantly female,” Baker says. “But I think the whole idea of the ‘women’s interest’ magazine section is just gone.”

*Ladybeard*, a UK print title launched in 2015, has the high-quality production values of the standard glossy but aims to “revolutionize the content.” Coeditors Kitty Drake, Madeleine Dunnigan and Sadhbh O’Sullivan chafe at “women’s interest” media, finding its financial motives all too apparent. “It’s in their interest to promote certain ‘interests’ to women, and therefore define an idea of ‘womanhood,’ which leads to the kind of prescriptive, heteronormative, reductive portrayals of women that we see today—the ‘beach body ready’ ladies, the ‘girl squad’ feminism,” the editors tell us. “These images of empowerment are simply commercial gimmicks—to sell us more products and make us feel lacking.”

Some of the more experimental print-only outlets draw their aesthetic cues, ironically enough, from the internet. *Mushpit*, a women’s magazine that satirizes the fashion industry, has tapped into digital nostalgia, drawing design cues from early clip art and vaporwave aesthetics. The editors of *Hotdog* magazine, a poetry journal, draw design references from brutalism, DIY/zine culture, QR codes, cursors, and grid lines.



Top left: *Ladybeard* magazine  
Bottom left: *Mushpit* magazine



Megan Conery and Molly Taylor, the editors of *Hotdog*, created their journal as a joyful antidote to the fustiness of most poetry publishing, and a product of women's creativity for everyone to enjoy. "We still see a huge discrepancy between the number of women and men published in journals. So by having a completely female-identifying contributor base, we are acknowledging that fact as well as working to rectify that," they say. "We have more female readers than male, but *Hotdog* isn't directed at any gender—and we would say that it's part of the problem if male readers aren't interested in reading female writers."

Winter Mendelson, founder and editor-in-chief of *Posture* magazine, sees the next generation of readers as far less beholden to conventional gender standards than those who came before. "If you're born with internet access and you have an iPad from when you're five years old, you're going to see things that help you feel more like yourself," says Mendelson. "Social media and Tumblr and all these creative platforms have helped these kids even subconsciously be like, 'Oh yeah, I don't relate to gender.'"

Mendelson adds: "If we were moving toward gender neutrality, and everyone targeted the same and treated the same, that sounds like utopia. The point of *Posture* is to bring together all these people of different genders and backgrounds into one place, because it's a huge statement: we all really are in it together."



## WOMEN-FIRST BRANDS

Why should underwear ads always feature perfect bodies? Why should condoms be black, gold, and marketed toward men? Why are incontinence pads shrouded in secrecy, packaged with discretion, and marketed toward older consumers when up to one in three women suffers from this problem? Who makes these decisions?

In many instances—from the directors to product developers—it is men.

On cue, a wave of female-founded challenger brands is creating a new visual language of women in campaigns and also redefining product categories with a female-centric lens.

Lena Dunham and *Girls* co-star Jemima Kirke drew positive attention for starring in a campaign for Lonely, the New Zealand-based lingerie brand. From the lack of retouching, to the confident poses (forget the male gaze), the campaign was celebrated for championing body positivity for women of all shapes and sizes.





“Victoria’s Secret holds over 50% market share in the US and has so many problem areas, from their stereotypical marketing and receiving the lowest rating for production practices to their hugely disproportionate CEO pay, which was over \$40 million in 2014,” says Lonely founder Helene Morris, quoted on Forbes.com. “We wanted to show women that there is another way to build and sustain a company; strengthening and supporting our manufacturers’ businesses and lives, producing imagery that gives our daughters confidence, not insecurities, and not being greedy as a company and as individuals. All of these things are so important to us and essential if we want to make this world a better place to live in.”

Media display of products related to menstruation is often veiled in bizarre euphemisms. Thinx underwear is changing that. From its first campaign for menstrual underwear, which featured bold, suggestive images of dripping egg yolk, to its sleek design, to its pithy tagline “Underwear For Women with Periods”—later updated to “Underwear For People With Periods” to include the trans community—the emphasis was on reality.

Why do tampons come packaged in turquoise and pink, with designs featuring silhouettes of women running? No wonder women hide them in the bathroom cabinet. A wave of female entrepreneurs is introducing a new visual language for feminine care, with tampon and menstrual underwear startups that are redefining the category.



Thinx



They share a frank, sophisticated, empathetic tone, convenient subscription models—and sleek designs akin to beauty products and luxury personal care. Cora organic tampons are presented in chic black and white packages with minimalist copy. Lola, whose tagline is “This too shall pass” offers organic cotton tampons by subscription, packaged in pale blue and white. Fémme and Kali, packaged in understated pastels, are two additional recent additions to the tampon market. None of these brands would look out of place among fragrances and luxury skincare products.

Women’s consumer technology is also witnessing a new wave of female-centric products—sleek, ergonomic, and designed to fit into women’s lives. Elvie was among the first. This connected kegel exerciser, described as “your most personal trainer,” is a curved, mint-colored device that comes with a coordinated app. Part of its mission is to help women take control of their pelvic floor strength after giving birth.

Willow, a smart connected breast pump, was named the best wearable device of CES 2017 by the tech site Digital Trends. Willow is billed as “the only wearable breast pump that fits in your bra, moves with you, and goes wherever the day takes you.” It helps track the amount of milk collected, the collection date, and the length of each session.





The product launched in spring 2017 at a price of \$430 and was designed with the mother in mind. “In this space, normally, everyone focuses on the baby. We’re really focused on the mom,” says Naomi Kelman, CEO of Willow. “It’s subtle but it’s different. In particular, we say, ‘How can we make moms’ lives easier and better?’”

This kind of thinking is not confined to tech. Ritual, a vitamin delivery startup “created for and by women who wouldn’t settle for less than the truth,” offers Essential for Women, a daily vitamin dose designed for women (men can take them too, of course, but Essential for Women “provides a little more iron than the average guy needs”). The platform emphasizes supply chain transparency, ingredients with benefits “backed by real science,” and simple, clear aesthetics. The brand’s online journal features interviews with female entrepreneurs who benefit from the product.



## TAKEAWAYS

Women-led Hollywood blockbusters and flashy “femvertising” campaigns command our attention as powerful examples of female representation. Paradoxically, they may make it easier to overlook the fact that, on the whole, the advertising industry has stalled in its efforts to represent women proportionally and realistically.

This blind spot puts brands in danger not only of consumer backlash, but also of overlooking a massive market opportunity. Globally, women control \$39.6 trillion (about 30% of the world’s wealth) and by 2020 they will control \$72.1 trillion, according to Boston Consulting Group.

“The female experience has always been seen as niche, whether on film, in literature, or by industries other than beauty and fashion—which is ridiculous,” says Pam Grossman of Getty Images. As she points out, a group that

comprises around half of the world’s population is not “niche.” “It’s because so many of the people at the top of these industries are still straight, white older men,” adds Grossman. “We need to move beyond the ‘niche-ification’ of the female experience.”

Improving women’s representation in film is a long-term task, but the advertising industry could effect change sooner. Madeline Di Nonno of the Geena Davis Institute points out that, while advertising is often created on short timelines, films can take two

years or longer to complete. “Even TV can take longer, so when you think about the mass volume of production of advertising, advertising can take advantage of cultural trends far easier than scripted television and film,” she says.

“It’s really disappointing that despite increased awareness of the issue, women are still not being represented in advertising with the frequency, intelligence, or gravitas as men,” says Piera Gelardi of Refinery29. “Representation matters because the stories and images we see have the power to shape how we view ourselves, each other, and the world around us. By creating responsible, inclusive, and complex stories and images we can overturn stereotypes, make people feel valued, and change the way the

world sees. I want to see more brands committing to real action here.”

Ultimately, better advertising can lead to better content across the board. “Advertising can be the most powerful change-maker in the world because of its unique relationship to television,” says Di Nonno. Right now, agencies can decide to consciously shift their next pieces of work—to break the norm by creating something different.



# TAKEAWAYS

## What can agencies and brands do to address gender representation in advertising?

### **Think beyond short-termism.**

“Femvertising” ad campaigns can generate great press, and may even cause real change in society. But is that enough to ensure real representation in the long run? Challenge creatives and designers to bring the same energy to everyday ads and accounts. At Refinery29, editors committed to publishing 67% of images of plus-size women—the same percentage of the female population that is size 14 and up. Can agencies commit to similar targets?

### **Build women into the process, not just the results.**

Behind the camera. In the studio. On the board. Wherever decisions are made. Placing women in decision-making roles encourages more representative creative work, and can add new dimensions to outdated, gender-based stereotypes. Representation behind the scenes is just as important as representation on screen.

### **Look to the challengers.**

Women today demand more from brands than ever before, and the norms are shifting faster than many can keep up with. Watch the challenger brands springing up to fill (or even create) a niche market—they’re often a valuable indicator of where culture is headed.



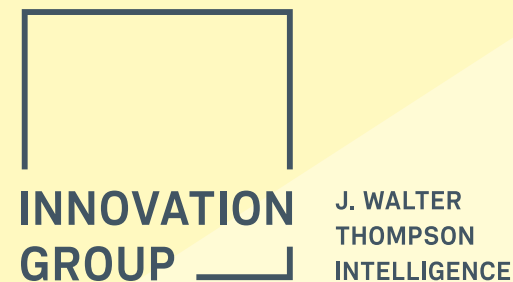
### **About the Innovation Group**

The Innovation Group is J. Walter Thompson's futurism, research and innovation unit. It charts emerging and future global trends, consumer change, and innovation patterns—translating these into insight for brands. It offers a suite of consultancy services, including bespoke research, presentations, co-branded reports and workshops. It is also active in innovation, partnering with brands to activate future trends within their framework and execute new products and concepts. It is led by Lucie Greene, Worldwide Director of the Innovation Group. For more information, visit [jwrintelligence.com](http://jwrintelligence.com)

### **About the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media**

Founded by Academy Award®-winning actor Geena Davis, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media at Mount Saint Mary's University is the only research-based organization working with media and entertainment companies with cutting-edge research, education and advocacy programs to dramatically improve how girls and women are reflected in media targeting children 11 and under.

Research for this report was led by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and J. Walter Thompson, and conducted by Dr. Shri Narayanan, Krishna Somadepalli, and the team of Engineers at the University of Southern California's Signal Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory (SAIL), in collaboration with Dr. Caroline Heldman and the team of researchers at the Geena Davis Institute.



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