

**The Huffington Post**

## **Gender Imbalance in Best Picture Nominated Films from 1977 to 2006**

By Melissa Silverstein

Posted March 5, 2008 | 03:18 PM (EST)

---

Now that this year's Oscars are over and the critics agree that the ceremony and the awards themselves are out of date (the ratings this year were lower than the first night of *American Idol*), the Academy will have to struggle to figure out how to make the Oscars, and the movies more relevant.

Here's my answer: Make more movies about women. Not just crappy reductive chick flicks (and I'm not saying all chick flicks are crappy), but movies about real women.

In this year's lead up to the Oscars there were several stories written (mostly in the British press) about how the Oscars had gotten so dark, and so male. (Imagine the conversation if *Juno* hadn't been included as a nominee.)

But is this year any worse than previous years, or did it just actually get some press this time around?

A new study by Stacy L. Smith and her colleagues at the Annenberg School of Communication at USC took a look at all the speaking parts in films nominated for the Best Picture award over the last 30 years (not including this past year) to see what the gender balance looks like. (This research is part of a larger research program on looking at gender roles in the media that is funded by actress/activist Geena Davis.)

The news is not good.

"Of the 6,833 single speaking characters only 27.3% were females." (The data set included anyone who spoke a line onscreen no matter how big or small their part was. The leading character counted just as much as the person who said one line.)

"Very simply, there has been no change in the frequency of roles for females in best picture nominated films in the last 30 years."

*Smith spoke with Women & Hollywood about the research.*

Women & Hollywood: How did this research come about?

Stacy Smith: We had been doing some other work on films and were curious about how these prestigious films might do in terms of gender balance. They often tackle controversial issues of historical import. We were looking to see where people are doing a good job and where there is room for improvement.

W&H: What did you learn?

SS: The previous 30 years don't look so great. Are things getting better? No, they're not. Now we have hard evidence to show that there is lots of room for improvement. Without the data it's hard to know. Any way you slice it up this representational portrait is out of balance.

W&H: Why did you decide to track the data this way?

SS: This is the whole bandwidth of characters from the most prominent to the least prominent not the amount of words they say. If we think about representation and that females should represent half the characters or half the space we want to make sure that it is across all characters not just the ones that have compelling lead roles.

Of the 150 films nominated for best picture from 1977-2006. Only 5 and a half of the films are directed by women.

These films are:

1986- Children of a Lesser God, directed by Randa Haines  
1990- Awakenings, directed by Penny Marshall  
1991- The Prince of Tides, directed by Barbra Streisand  
1993- The Piano, directed by Jane Campion  
2003- Lost in Translation, directed by Sophia Coppola  
2006- Little Miss Sunshine, co-directed by Valerie Faris

*W&H: "An analysis revealed a significant difference in the percentage of females depicted on screen by director sex. The proportion of females on the silver screen is significantly higher when a female is directing a motion picture than when a man is at the helm."*

The data clearly shows that when a woman directs, the number of female speaking parts is higher.

SS: We just know that the numbers make a significant jump when the female is a director and that's a positive. It would suggest that maybe we need more female directors.

W&H: What are your hopes for this research?

SS: I spend a lot of time educating my students and sending them into the film industry informed is really important. It's about empowering them and giving them the courage to tell stories that are rich and multi-dimensional. This data suggests that there is a lot of room for improvement and it's important to educate the next generation of filmmakers about these issues so they remember issues of representation and diversity when they are creating their scripts and pitching their stories. The goal is not to deal with this on the back end in the research, but that the next generation of content creators are thinking about these issues when they tell the stories.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-silverstein/gender-imbalance-in-best-\\_b\\_90072.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/melissa-silverstein/gender-imbalance-in-best-_b_90072.html)