
Sexism in Hollywood and Its Effects on Society

Introduction

Society's view of women creates a phenomena of women being perceived as weaker and being oppressed. Sexism creates the divide between women's rights and men's rights and women's stereotypes and men's stereotypes. The rights that women have had to fight for, and those that they have still yet to receive are very obvious in Hollywood and the entertainment business. As Rebel Wilson put it, an upsetting reality that women have learned to accept is that, "they are there to support the male actor" (Leal). Fortunately, women in Hollywood and elsewhere have become beyond frustrated with this fact and have worked harder than ever to overcome the barriers that have been set by society.

In this paper, I will examine the wage gap in Hollywood, the proportions of females in movies and award shows, the treatment of women in casting, and interview questions and how they all negatively affect women in the industry and their confidence. The Hollywood sexism that our society has created does not only affect the obvious victims, the actresses and female directors, it also affects those outside of Hollywood. Women, who, as a gender, struggle with confidence already, are torn down even more when they see how actresses are treated and how women are portrayed. Another group of people that are indirectly affected by the sexist culture are the children, of both genders. Girls are being taught that they are worth more when they are with a man, and boys grow up learning that they are allowed to treat women the way that they see in movies and media, in a manner that is completely inappropriate.

Pay Gap

The wage gap exists in nearly every occupation, but it is especially wide in Hollywood and can be seen in examining pay roles, released emails, pay raises, and top paid actors lists. Gal Gadot, who recently debuted as Wonder Woman earned \$400,000 for her role even though the movie made \$300 million in its opening weekend. On the other hand, Robert Downey Jr. was paid \$50 million for Captain America: Civil War even though he was not the main actor (Carmbody). This wage discrepancy, however, could be influenced by a confounding variable, that Robert Downey Jr. is much more well known than Gal Gadot, but regardless of the reasoning and this specific case, there are many other examples of actresses being paid far less than actors.

Sony Pictures accidentally released an email that discussed pay for the actors and Jennifer

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Lawrence discovered that her costar in *American Hustle* made significantly more money than she did for that movie. She said that another email revealed that a producer called a woman a “spoiled brat” for attempting to negotiate her salary, and RedState, a news source, called Lawrence’s comments about the wage gap “a bratty display from a wealthy youngster” (*Fight Against Wage Gap in Hollywood May Inspire Others to Fight for Rights*). Regardless of whether or not Sony meant for the public to know about the gap between Jennifer Lawrence’s and Bradley Cooper’s pay for the movie, the revelation of the difference received an immense amount of backlash.

Evidence for the wage gap between men and women includes that being nominated for an Oscar increased a male’s pay by an average of \$3.9 million, whereas female frontrunners are told to expect an increase of about \$500,000 (Kalb). Because of the relatively low value of Oscar nominations and wins for women, many women who have a few Oscars still make less than men who have none. Hilary Swank, who has two Oscars, was offered \$500,000 for the “hot” female lead in a movie and the man who was offered the male lead, who earned no major awards, was offered \$10 million. The role that Hilary Swank auditioned for ended up going to an actress who accepted the role for \$50,000 (Esquibel). Some would argue that the wage gap could be a coincidence and that there are other variables that determine the pay for actors, which was confirmed by former head of marketing for Columbia Pictures, Peter Sealey. Sealey claims that the salaries are based off of many variables, the biggest being how popular the actor is in the target audience.

The pay gap between men and women in acting careers is very visible in Forbes Top Paid Actors lists and other similar rankings. Men have to have \$9.5 million to make the Forbes list, but women have to have \$5 million to make the list (Esquibel). Jennifer Lawrence sat on the top of the highest paid actress list and had \$46 million, but Dwayne Johnson topped the actors’ equivalent with \$64.5 million. The lists also provide evidence of the proportion of high paid actors compared to high paid actresses. The first woman on the highest paid list is found at number six, which means that even the richest actress is not as rich as the fifth richest actor (Fuente).

Proportions of Men to Women

However, this gap may not be so clear cut as it seems because it could be due to the fact that most of the high-budget movies contain mostly male roles and fewer female roles, which leaves women having fewer opportunities to make money and be in movies that break box office records (Fuente). In fact, females only make up 33% of speaking characters in movies and TV shows (Esquibel). Other interesting statistics are the percentage of dialogue in movies being female or male dialogue. Twenty-two of thirty popular Disney films have much more male dialogue, even though nearly all of them were movies in which the main role was a female, such

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as Mulan (Tremeer). This discrepancy has become so evident that Alison Bechdel invented the Bechdel Test for movies. This test outlines three requirements for movies to meet: movies must have at least two women, the women must talk to each other, and the conversation must be about something other than a man. Of the nearly 8,000 movies currently in the database on the Bechdel Test website, only 57% meet all three of the requirements and the amount of movies that pass each year is decreasing (“Bechdel Test Movie List”).

The roles that women are offered usually have a pattern of stereotypes, such as objects of desire or mean girls, whereas men’s are able to choose from a diverse variety of roles, including villains, good guys, sweethearts, and more. Lena Dunham, creator of *Girls*, commented on this trend, when she pointed out that the two main female leads of the show, Allison Williams and Zosia Mamet, are consistently offered roles that fit their stereotypes, sweethearts and flighty girls, respectively. Contrarily, Adam Driver, the male lead, has been offered a variety of roles, from villains and bad guys to nice guys and sweethearts (Lena Dunham Calls Out Hollywood Sexism in SXSW Keynote Speech). This specific example, where two talented women are repeatedly offered the same stereotypical roll for every movie but a talented male is offered nearly every type of character, is evidence that finding an acting opportunity is much harder for a woman than a man because of the preconceived ideas of actresses that will play each role. Women of color face this issue even more harshly and evidently than white women. While talking about sexism in Hollywood, Reese Witherspoon noted that she once asked Mindy Kaling if it gets exhausting having to create her own roles and Mindy responded that she had never played a role that she did not create for herself (Reese Witherspoon Slams Hollywood Sexism).

Awards Shows

Awards show statistics are an example of concrete evidence that support the claim that sexism is prevalent in Hollywood. For example, Cheryl Strayed claims that her movie *Wild* failed to receive Oscar nominations for Best Picture and Best Director, even though the movie was one of 2014’s best acclaimed movies. She suggests that the reason for this lack of nomination was due to the fact that the movie portrayed a strong female lead and that the Academy prefers movies about strong men because “men are the universal figure that either gender can identify with.” Her bold claim is supported by the movies that were nominated for Best Picture that year, *American Sniper*, *The Imitation Game*, *The Theory of Everything*, *Whiplash*, *Birdman*, *Selma*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, and *Boyhood*, all of which contain stories of men, a Navy SEAL, two geniuses, a drummer, an actor, a political figure, a concierge, and a boy turning into a man, respectively. If the fact that every single movie in 2014 that was nominated for the ultimate Oscar contained a male lead is not enough evidence that the Oscars love men, Dan Kois, a columnist for *Slate*, found that only 21 of the 125 movies that have been nominated for Best Picture in the past 20 years have portrayed stories of females (Meares).

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Treatment of Women

Women in Hollywood have received much harsher and much more inappropriate treatment than men have. In particular, women in auditions have had it much harder than men in auditions simply because of some of the tasks that they are expected to do. For example, when Rose McGowan was invited to audition for a certain role, she received a casting note that suggested that the actresses auditioning should show cleavage and wear tight clothes. Naturally, she was offended and commented on this note publicly and when she criticized it, her agent fired her (Monzon). Casting directors and producers seem to put so much more effort into finding the perfect male lead than female lead. Kate Bosworth stated in a PEOPLE Now article that every single audition that she went to ended with the casting director telling her that they cannot make any decisions about female leads yet because they must cast the man first because that is more important (Price).

Interview Questions

Interviews and red carpets are used as a way to create even more of a gap between actresses and actors. For example, when men are interviewed on red carpets, they are usually asked about preparing for their roles and what it was like to film such a difficult movie, but women's interviews are usually full of questions about their outfits and other superficial questions. In his 2016 Oscar Red Carpet interview, Leonardo DiCaprio discussed the making of the movie, how much of himself he gives in his films, and how he came to be the actor he is (Roberts). Contrarily, in Emma Stone's BAFTA Red Carpet Interview in 2017, she was congratulated on her appearance before her accomplishment with the movie, asked about how she feels consistently playing Ryan Gosling's love interest, and asked if she has prepared her speech already (Ball). Specifically when the interviewer opened the interview by congratulating Emma Stone on her dress before her nominations, the sexism found in Red Carpet interviews is clearly portrayed in the contrast between these two interviews. Other than the appearance aspect of the interview, Emma Stone faced sexist questions because she was not asked to talk about the making of the movie or her thoughts on the movie, but was rather asked about how she feels being Ryan Gosling's lover in three movies.

Affect of Sexism

Sexism is not merely an aspect of Hollywood that people acknowledge, it is an aspect of Hollywood that negatively affects and offends women. Jennifer Lawrence, Hilary Swank, Lena Dunham, Cheryl Strayed, Mindy Kaling, Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow, Emma Watson, Meryl Streep, and Zendaya are only several of the actresses that have spoken out against sexism in Hollywood. Although it is possibly the least dehumanizing aspect of Hollywood sexism, the wage gap has been said to be very frustrating because as Gwyneth Paltrow said, "salary is a

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way to quantify what you're worth" and that the wage gap makes her "feel shitty" (Setoodeh). The stereotypical female character, a girlfriend or a sexual desire, is a trend that negatively affects women's views of themselves and their femininity. Because men's roles vary from villains to sweethearts to heroes, and women's roles remain pretty much the same, women are being taught that they are most valuable when they are objectified. Actresses and actors differ, but so do female directors and male directors because the proportion of successful and well-known female directors is not comparable to that of male directors. The lack of successful female directors and award show nominations and wins suggests that men are better at directing and producing, which also negatively affects women's confidence. However, when their hard-work does turn into nominations and even wins, their awards are undermined by superficial interview questions. When their accomplishments are brushed to the side to talk about their dresses and their personal life, their confidence in their skills decreases due to the fact that interview questions still make it seem like they are only worth their appearance. These are only some of the many ways that Hollywood's tendency to prefer men has affected women.

Future of Sexism

Although some people seem to think that women's struggles are decreasing, many, including many actresses that have spoken out against Hollywood's sexism, claim that sexism is in fact getting worse. Because most movies are made by men, the opinions of the producers tend to be that what makes a movie successful is a strong male lead, which leads to supporting men more than women due to a fear of losing box office success (Tremeer). Melissa Silverstein, founder of feminist Hollywood website, Women and Hollywood, believes that many people assume sexism in Hollywood is decreasing, but that this is a false assumption, likely caused by the increased amount of talk about sexism. Because a few women are very successful, many people think that that implies that men and women are starting to become equal in Hollywood, but the opposite is true. Women make up half of the world and should therefore make up half of the successful people in Hollywood (Cohen). Emma Thompson, who has been in the industry for almost three decades, says that the expectations of women's appearances, along with other aspects of Hollywood's sexism, are worse than they were when she started in the industry (Robinson).

Conclusion

Many women, nearly all A-list actresses, have spoken out about the sexism and the bias that they face in their everyday lives, but specifically when they are on set, in auditions, at awards shows, or in interviews. While many of the challenges that women once faced have decreased majorly, new struggles, such as sexual harassment and treatment of women, have increased as time has gone on. The trends of sexism and female struggles is very present in Hollywood and the entertainment industry and is now being brought to an especially new light due to the

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rise of sexual assault allegations against directors and producers in Hollywood. Whether or not the numbers are beginning to even out, which they are not, treatment of women is becoming increasingly more problematic. More and more actresses are engaging in the conversation against sexism, but it continues to be an issue that women of all ages and races are dealing with and struggling with. Because most power positions in film are dominated by men, women's success and standings in the entertainment business depend on men's cooperation, which many are reluctant to accept.

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