

# Thumbs Down 2020: Film Critics and Gender, and Why It Matters

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First conducted in 2007, *Thumbs Down* is the most comprehensive and longest-running study of women’s representation and impact as film reviewers available. This report considers individuals working for print, broadcast, and online outlets during January through March, 2020. It provides the most current information about gender and film critics before the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the film industry.

## Key Findings

•**Men continue to outnumber women as film reviewers in the U.S. There are almost 2 male reviewers for every 1 female reviewer.** Men comprise 65% and women 35% of all film reviewers (see Figure 1). For comparison, women accounted for 34% of reviewers in 2019.

•**Men wrote 66% and women 34% of reviews** (see Figure 2). For women, this represents an increase of 2 percentage points from 32% in 2019.

•**Male reviewers outnumber female reviewers in every job title category.** For example, men comprise 83% and women 17% of *film critics*. Men account for 70% and women 30% of *staff writers*.

•**With the exception of radio and television, male reviewers outnumber female reviewers in every type of media outlet.** Women comprise 58% and men 42% of individuals reviewing for radio and television. However, men account for 69% and women 31% of those reviewing for newspapers, news websites, and wire services.

•**Men comprise the majority of those writing reviews about films in every genre.** For example, men write 68% and women 32% of reviews about comedies. Men write 69% and women 31% of reviews about action features.

Figure 1.  
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers

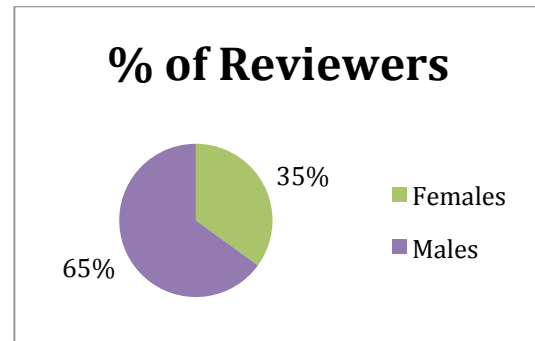
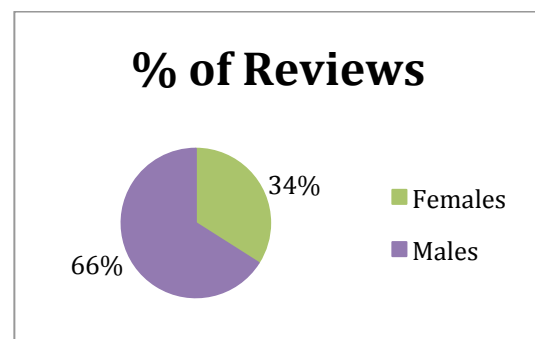


Figure 2.  
Percentages of Reviews by Males and Females



•**Both female and male reviewers of color remain dramatically underrepresented.** 70% of female reviewers are white, 23% are women of color, and 7% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity (see Figure 3). 73% of male reviewers are white, 18% are men of color, and 9% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity (see Figure 4).

•**A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists.** 54% of the reviews written by women but 45% of the reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist. Conversely, a higher proportion of the reviews written by men than by women are about films with male protagonists. 55% of the reviews written by men but 46% of those written by women are about films with male protagonists. It is not clear whether these differences are due to reviewer preferences or editorial assignments.

•**On average, women reviewers award slightly higher ratings than men to films with female protagonists.** Women reviewers award an average rating of 72% and males an average rating of 69% to films with female protagonists. Women reviewers award an average of 73% and men 67% to films with male protagonists.

•**More than twice as many of the films reviewed by females as males are directed by women.** 33% of films reviewed by women are directed by women. By comparison, women directed 14% of films reviewed by male critics. Conversely, 86% of reviews written by men but 67% by women have male directors. It is not clear if these

Figure 3.  
Percentages of Female Reviewers by Race/Ethnicity

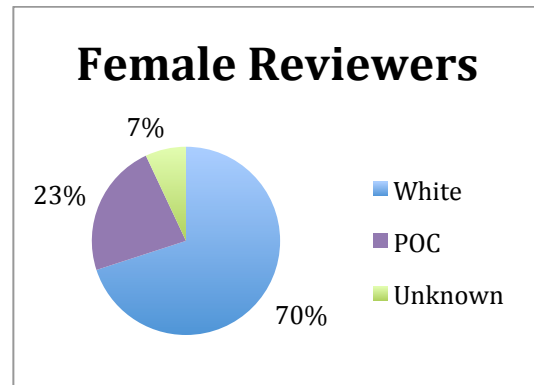
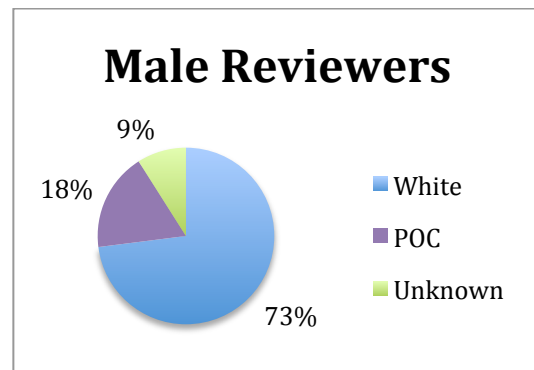


Figure 4.  
Percentages of Male Reviewers by Race/Ethnicity



differences are due to reviewer preferences or editorial assignments.

•**In 2020, women comprised 40% and men 60% of “top critics” as designated by Rotten Tomatoes.** For women, this represents an increase of 12 percentage points from 28% in 2019, and 6 percentage points from 34% in 2018.

This study considers more than 4,000 reviews written by over 380 individuals working for print, broadcast, and online outlets in January, February, and March 2020 and whose work is included on the Rotten Tomatoes (RT) website. Since the initial study in 2007, *Thumbs Down* has considered over 25,000 reviews written by more than 1,600 reviewers. The reviewers were chosen using a systematic random sampling method. Only U.S.-based critics who wrote a minimum of three reviews during January, February, and March 2020 were included in the study. For a description of the criteria RT uses to select critics, go to <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/helpdesk/critics>.

figures obtained in 2019, 2018, 2016 and 2013.

This report includes two major sections. The first section reports the findings on the *representation* of women among the population of film reviewers working for print, broadcast, and online outlets in 2020. Included in this section are the numbers of women and men providing reviews, their job titles, the type of media outlets they work for, and the film genres reviewed. This section also considers the *impact* of the gender imbalance, reporting on the relationship between the gender of film reviewers and the gender of protagonists; the relationship between the gender of reviewers and their quantitative assessment of films (i.e., assignment of stars, grades, etc.); and the relationship between the gender of reviewers and the gender of directors. The second section considers the representation of “top critics” on the Rotten Tomatoes website. This section also provides historical comparisons of the representation of women, comparing 2020 data with

**Findings/All Reviewers**

•The majority of print, broadcast, and online film reviewers in the U.S. are male. Male reviewers outnumber female reviewers by almost 2 to 1. Men comprise 65% and women 35% of all film reviewers. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 34% in 2019, and 8 percentage points from 27% in 2016 (see Figure 5).

•Men wrote 66% and women 34% of all reviews (see Figure 2). This represents a slight increase of 2 percentage points from 32% in 2019.

•On average, men wrote 11 reviews and women wrote 10 reviews during the study period.

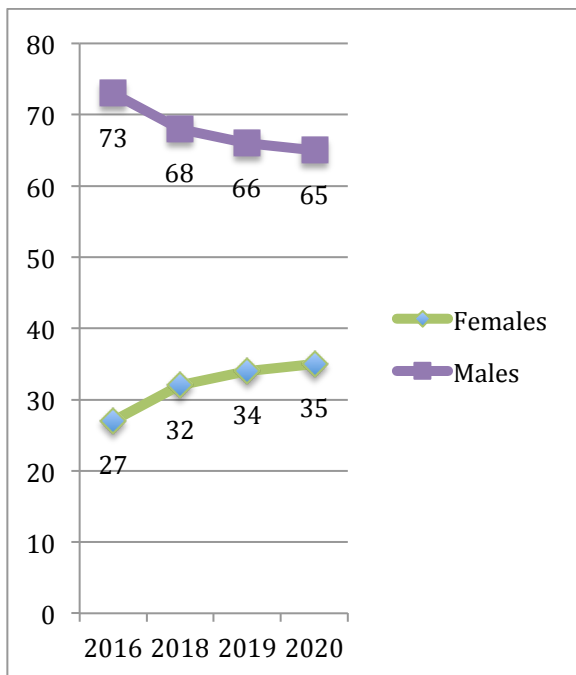
•73% of male reviewers are white, 18% are men of color, and 9% have an

unknown racial/ethnic identity. 70% of female reviewers are white, 23% are women of color, and 7% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

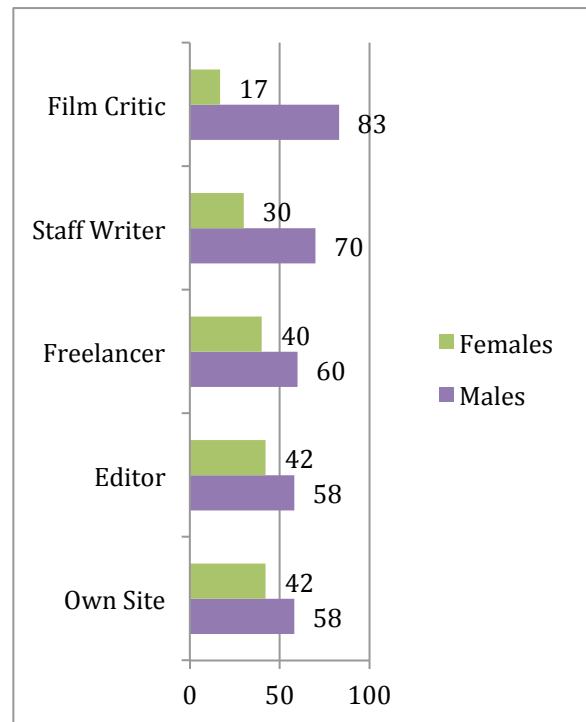
•Men outnumber women reviewers in every job category considered. Men comprise 83% of film critics, 70% of staff writers, 60% of freelancers, 58% of editors, and 58% of those with their own site. Women account for 42% of those with their own site, 42% of editors, 40% of freelancers, 30% of staff writers, and 17% of film critics (see Figure 6).

•With the exception of radio and television reviewers, men outnumber women in every type of media outlet considered. Men account for 72% of those reviewing for general interest

*Figure 5.  
Historical Comparison of Percentages of Reviewer Gender*



*Figure 6.  
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Job Title*



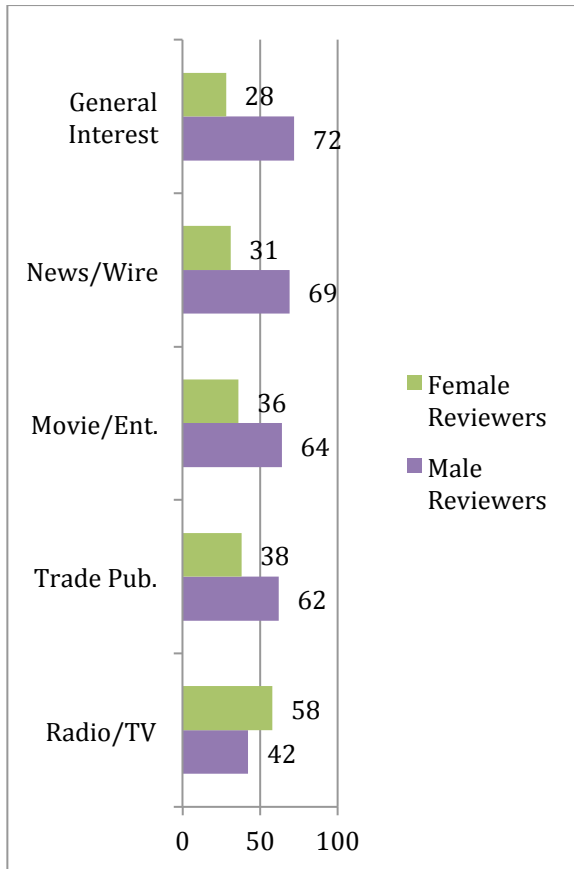
magazines and websites, 69% reviewing for newspapers and wire services, 64% reviewing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, 62% reviewing for trade publications, and 42% reviewing for radio and television outlets.

Women comprise 58% of those reviewing for radio and television outlets, 38% reviewing for trade publications, 36% reviewing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, 31% reviewing for newspapers and wire services, and 28% reviewing for general interest magazines and websites (see Figure 7).

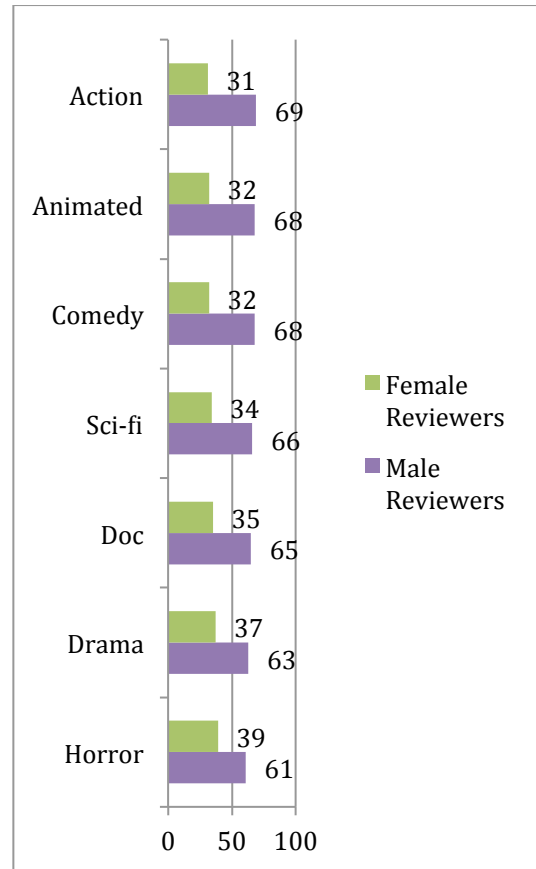
•Men wrote the majority of reviews about films in every genre. Men penned 69% of reviews about action features, 68% about animated features, 68% about comedies, 66% about science fiction features, 65% about documentaries, 63% about dramas, and 61% about horror features.

In contrast, women wrote 39% of reviews about horror features, 37% about dramas, 35% about documentaries, 34% about science fiction features, 32% about animated features, 32% about comedies, and 31% about action features (see Figure 8).

*Figure 7.  
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Type of Media Outlet*



*Figure 8.  
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Genre*



- A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told. 54% of the reviews written by women but 45% of the reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist.

Conversely, a larger proportion of films reviewed by men than by women have male protagonists. 55% of the reviews written by men but 46% of those written by women are about films with male protagonists. It is not clear whether these differences are due to reviewer preferences or to editorial assignments.

- On average, women reviewers award slightly higher quantitative ratings than men to films with female protagonists, whether they are expressed as stars, reels, grades, or some percentage score. When all of the various scoring systems used by reviewers are standardized into a percentage system, females award an average rating of 72% and males an average rating of 69% to films with at least one female protagonist. Women reviewers award an average of 73% and men 67% to films with male protagonists. (65% of reviewers provide quantitative scores for the films they review. Only these individuals are included in the analysis provided in this paragraph.)

- A substantially higher proportion of films reviewed by females than by males are directed by women. 33% of the reviews written by women but 14% written by men have women directors. Conversely, 86% of the reviews written by men but 67% by women have male directors. It is not clear whether these

differences are due to reviewer preferences or to editorial assignments.

### *Findings/“Top Critics” Only*

The Rotten Tomatoes website states, “Top Critic is designated by Rotten Tomatoes staff on a publication basis. It is not a distinction critics or publications can apply for” (see Frequently Asked Questions). According to the criteria formerly listed on the website, a top critic “must be published at a print publication in the top 10% of circulation, employed as a film critic at a national broadcast outlet for no less than five years, or employed as a film critic for an editorial-based website with over 1.5 million monthly unique visitors for a minimum of three years. A top critic may also be recognized as such based on their influence, reach, reputation, and/or quality of writing, as determined by Rotten Tomatoes staff.” It is not known whether this is still the criteria necessary to achieve “top critic” status.

- In 2020, women comprised 40% and men 60% of “top critics” (see Figure 9).

- The percentage of female reviewers among “top critics” is higher (40%) than the percentage of females in the larger population of reviewers on the site (35%).

- Female “top critics” wrote an average of 12 reviews, while male “top critics” wrote an average of 14 reviews over the study period.

- Male “top critics” wrote 64% and females 36% of reviews (see Figure 10).

Figure 9.  
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics”

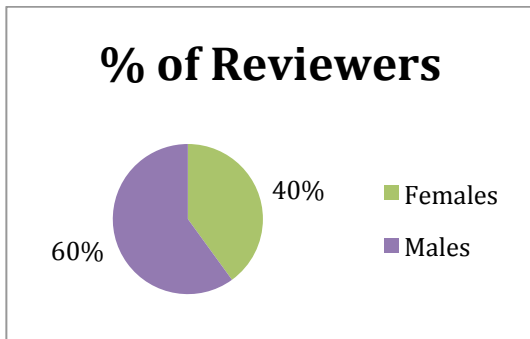
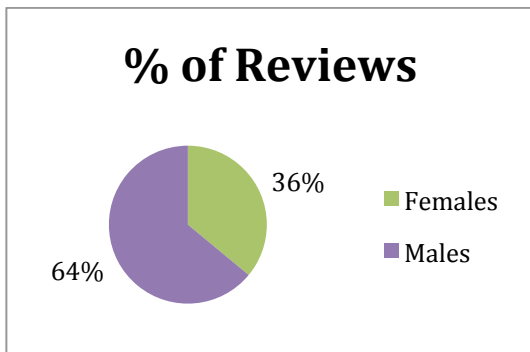


Figure 10.  
Percentages of Reviews Written by Male and Female “Top Critics”



•The percentage of female “top critics” increased 18 percentage points from 2013 to 2020. Women accounted for 22% of “top critics” in 2013, 27% in 2016, 34% in 2018, 28% in 2019, and 40% in 2020 (see Figure 11).

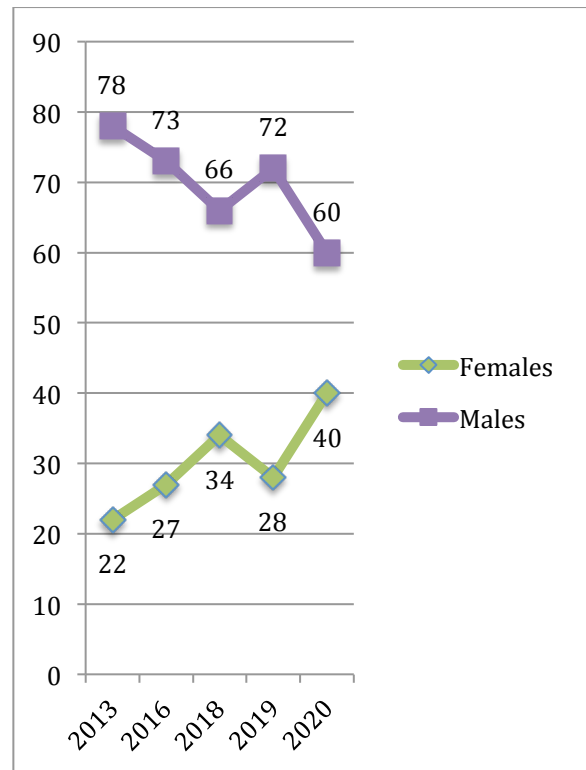
•The majority of “top critics” are white. 64% of female “top critics” are white, 33% are women of color, and 3% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity. 76% of male “top critics” are white, 10% are men of color, and 14% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity. For comparison, in 2019, 78% of female “top critics” were white, 17% were women of color,

and 5% had an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

•Among “top critics,” men comprise 79% of film critics, 67% of staff writers, 50% of editors, and 43% of freelancers. In contrast, women account for 57% of freelancers, 50% of editors, 33% of staff writers, and 21% of film critics (see Figure 12).

•Male reviewers outnumber females in almost every type of publication considered. Men comprise 75% of those reviewing for general interest magazines and websites, 75% reviewing for radio

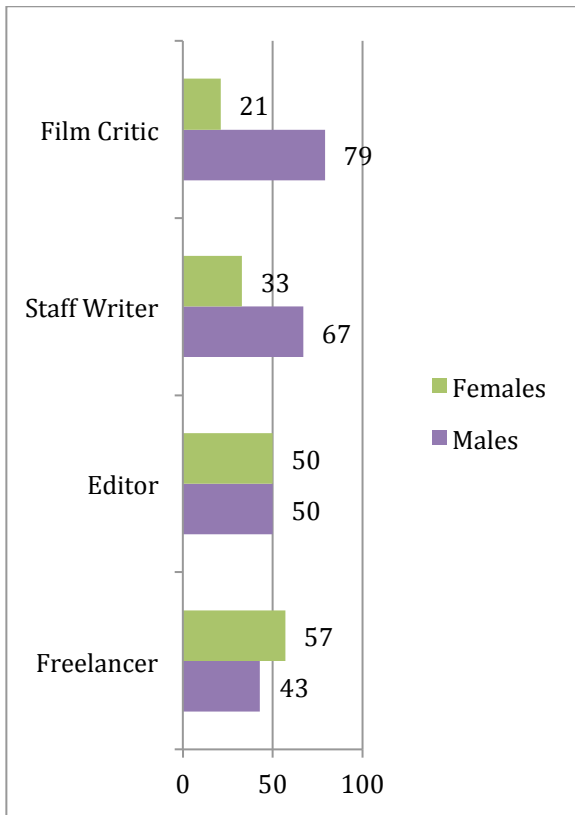
Figure 11.  
Historical Comparison of Gender of “Top Critics”



and television, 66% reviewing for newspapers and wire services, 61% reviewing for trade publications, and 37% reviewing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites.

In contrast, females account for 63% of those reviewing for movie and entertainment magazines and websites, 39% reviewing for trade publications, 34% reviewing for newspapers and wire services, 25% reviewing for general interest magazines and websites, and 25% reviewing for radio and television (see Figure 13).

*Figure 12.  
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics” by Title*



*Figure 13.  
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics” by Type of Publication*

