

*Stuck in Prime Time:  
Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes  
in the 1998-99 Season*

**Executive Summary**

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Diversity. The topic spawned countless articles in the entertainment trades and popular press this summer, sparking defensive debates about what diversity is and how or even whether it should be achieved. Prime time's lack of diversity inspired a multi-article series in the Los Angeles Times, entitled "TV's Diversity Dilemma." The series discussed racial stereotyping and the increasing acceptance of gays on television, but, other than a couple of fleeting mentions, failed to address gender diversity. Considering that women are the largest under-represented group on screen and behind the scenes in prime time, and that women comprise the majority of the prime-time viewing audience, this seems to constitute a rather substantial oversight. Quoting a network executive, one article in the series (7/20/99) stated, "Women have made vast strides [as decision makers] in recent years." No mention of employment statistics. No mention of exactly which women the executive was referring to.

In fact, while the number of female executive producers working on top-rated programs increased over the last year, the numbers of women directors and creators declined slightly, and the numbers of female writers, producers, and editors remained stable. There wasn't a single female director of photography working on any of the programs considered in the 1998-99 season. Women's representation on screen remains virtually unchanged from last season at 38%. Rather than achieving "critical mass," as some in the industry have optimistically noted, "gender inertia" seems to have set in, keeping the numbers of women low on screen and behind the scenes.

However, when women are employed in key behind-the-scenes roles, they do make a difference. The results of this study add to a growing body of evidence that women behind the scenes create more parts for women on screen. This study found female creators were almost able to achieve gender parity for female characters on their programs. On programs employing no female creators, female characters accounted for only 36% of characters. In contrast, when programs employed at least one female creator, women

accounted for 49% of all characters. Gender diversity behind the scenes translates into greater gender equity on screen.

And yet, with women accounting for only 21.5% of all behind-the-scenes workers on the programs considered, gender diversity remains far from a foregone conclusion. “Stuck in Prime Time” considers the representation of women on screen and behind the scenes in the 1998-99 season.

### Methods

This study examined entertainment series (situation comedies, dramas, animated) ranked among the top 100 programs of the 1998-99 prime-time season. The sample consisted of a constructed week of prime-time programming compiled from a three-month sampling period (March, April, May). One episode of each series was recorded according to a randomly assigned week within the 12-week sampling frame.

### Findings/On-Screen Representation of Women

- This study examined 888 characters on 59 top-rated prime-time entertainment series.
- In the 1998-99 prime-time season, male characters outnumbered female characters, 62% to 38%. Similarly, males accounted for 60% and females 40% of major characters.
- Female characters tended to be younger than their male counterparts. While female characters in their 20s outnumbered male characters in the same cohort by nearly two to one (20% women, 11% men), male characters in their 50s outnumbered female characters in their 50s by more than two to one (14% males, 6% females).
- Seventy-eight percent (78%) of female characters were white, 16% were African American, 3% were other-worldly (e.g., ET s, witches), 2% were Asian, 1% were Hispanic, and .3% were Native American. Viewers were more likely to see a female ET or angel in prime-time television than they were a female Asian or Hispanic character.
- Female characters were more likely to be identified by their marital status, while male characters were more likely to be identified by their occupation. Whereas, 46% of female character’s marital status could not be identified, 58% of male character’s marital status was unknown. In contrast, 33% of female characters but only 27% of male characters had occupations that could not be identified.
- Female characters were more likely than male characters to be single (36% of females vs. 31% of males) or married (18% of females vs. 11% of males).

- While men and women were equally likely to hold powerless positions (e.g., student, retail clerk), male characters were much more likely than female characters to hold powerful jobs (e.g., doctor, lawyer, business owner). Men were twice as likely as women to perform “macho jobs” or positions requiring physical prowess and strength (e.g., fire fighter, uniformed police officer, manual laborer, athlete). In contrast, female characters were much more likely than male characters to do traditional “women’s work” such as homemaker or child caretaker.

### Findings/Behind-the-Scenes Representation of Women

- This study examined 1,059 behind-the-scenes workers on 59 top-rated prime-time entertainment series.
- Overall, women comprised only 21.5% of all creators, executive producers, producers, directors, writers, editors, and directors of photography on the top-rated programs considered. The figure is virtually unchanged from women’s representation last season.
- Broken down by role, the percentages of female creators and directors declined over the last year, while the percentage of female executive producers increased. The percentages of female producers, writers, editors, and directors of photography remained relatively stable.
- On the programs analyzed, women fared best as producers (31%), followed by executive producers (24%), writers (21%), editors (16%), creators (15%), directors (3%), and directors of photography (0%).
- Women were more likely to create, executive produce, produce, direct, and write situation comedies than dramas or animated series.
- No network emerged as being particularly “female friendly” by hiring substantially larger numbers of women in the behind-the-scenes roles considered.
- Women comprised only 15% of creators on the programs considered, down from 18% in the 1997-98 season. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the programs had no female creators.
- Women accounted for 24% of executive producers, up from 19% in the 1997-98 season. Forty-six percent (46%) of the programs had no female executive producers.
- Women comprised 31% of producers on the programs considered, up slightly from 29% in the 1997-98 season. Seventeen percent (17%) of the programs had no female producers.
- Women accounted for 21% of writers on the programs considered, approximately the same percentage as last season (20%). Fully 73% of the programs had no female writers.

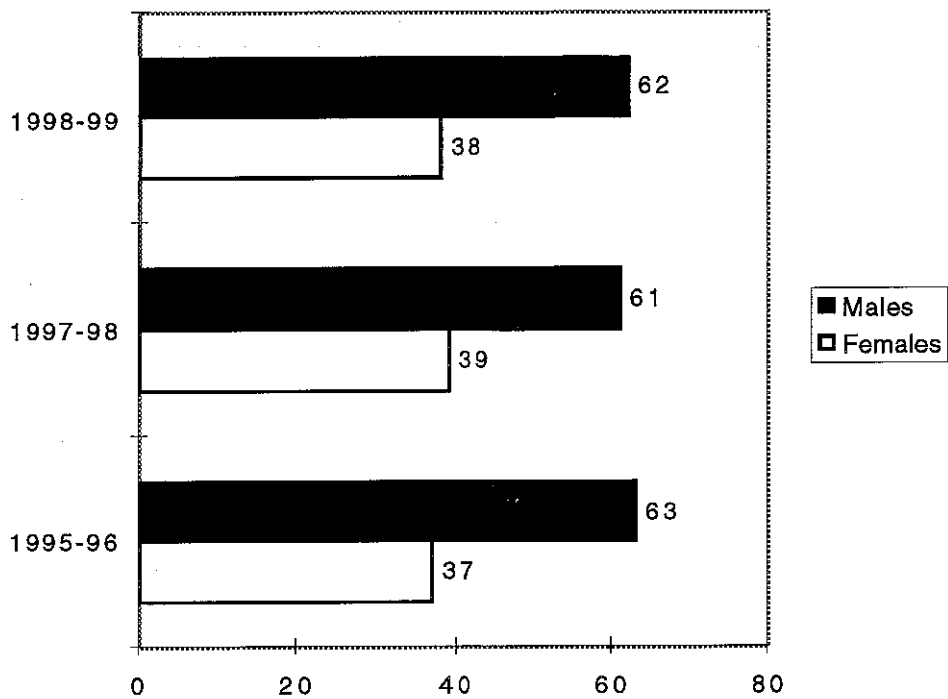
- Women comprised 3% of directors on the programs considered, down from 8% in the 1997-98 season. Fully 97% of the programs had no female directors.
- Women comprised 16% of editors on the programs considered, approximately the same percentage as last season (15%). Fully 83% of the programs had no female editors.
- There was not a single women director of photography working on any of the programs considered, repeating last season's findings. One hundred percent (100%) of the programs had no female directors of photography.

#### Findings/The Relationship Between Women On Screen and Women Behind the Scenes

- Women working behind the scenes influenced the numbers of on-screen women. When a program had no women executive producers, females accounted for 36% of characters. However, when a program employed at least one women executive producer, females comprised 41% of characters.
- On programs with no women writers, females accounted for 37% of characters. When a program employed at least one woman writer, the percent of female characters increased to 43%.
- Programs with no women creators featured casts that were 36% female. However, when programs had at least one woman creator, females comprised 49% of all characters. In other words, in the 1998-99 season, women creators were almost able to achieve parity for female characters on their programs.

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### Percent of Women and Men On Screen: A Recent History



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**Percent of Women Working Behind the Scenes:  
Comparison of 1997-98 and 1998-99 Prime-time Seasons**

