



Persistence and change in age-specific gender gaps: Hollywood actors from the silent era onward



Robert K. Fleck, F. Andrew Hanssen*

John E. Walker Department of Economics, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, United States

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine a set of workers for whom age-based and gender-based discrimination has been widely alleged: motion picture actors. We document, measure, and consider possible explanations for age-specific gender gaps among Hollywood actors, using nearly a century's worth of data on films and film roles. Consistent with reports in the popular press, we find a large and very persistent gender gap: Of the nearly half-million different roles played in more than 50,000 feature films between 1920 and 2011, two-thirds have gone to males, and the average male actor is consistently older (by six to ten years) than the average female actor. Yet the age-based gender differences that we observe cannot be explained by a simple model of discrimination—while there are fewer roles for middle-aged women than for middle-aged men, there are *more* roles for young women than for young men. The fact that these patterns have held steady through major changes in the film industry – and in society as a whole – suggests that correspondingly stable aspects of moviegoer preferences contribute to the age-specific nature of gender gaps.

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1. Introduction

A growing literature provides evidence that older workers are treated differently than younger workers, particularly in the hiring process.¹ But determining how much of the difference is due to discrimination, in the sense that “personal characteristics of the worker unrelated to productivity are also valued on the market” (Arrow, 1973, 3) is difficult.² In this paper, we examine a set of workers for whom (1) age-based and gender-based discrimination has been widely alleged, and (2) there are a century's worth of data on age and gender mix. The workers are motion picture actors.

The paucity of roles for middle-aged actresses has been publicly lamented. For example, when interviewed at the 2006 Venice film festival (where she won an award for her role in *The Devil Wore Prada*), Meryl Streep remarked, “What films have you seen lately with serious roles for 50 year old women in the lead? These are roles they write for women my age, usually they are sort of gorgons or dragons or in some way grotesque.”³ Ms. Streep's remarks have been widely echoed in the popular press, and scholars from a variety of fields have joined to study the issue.⁴ Although not focused on the motion picture industry, a recent study by economists Neumark et al. (2015b) concludes that age discrimination is stronger for women than for men, consistent with what Meryl Streep claims.

We begin our analysis by using nearly a century of data on U.S. films and film roles to determine whether there is systematic evi-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: rfleck@clemson.edu (R.K. Fleck), fhanse@clemson.edu (F.A. Hanssen).

¹ See, for example, the studies highlighted in Table 1 of Neumark et al. (2015a,b). The evidence takes primarily two forms: surveys suggesting that older workers feel more badly treated, or that employers often have negative perceptions about older workers, and field experiments, where, for example, “matching” CV's are sent to prospective employers. See, e.g., the discussion in D'Addio et al. (2010). The problem the correlation of age and work experience creates is discussed in Neumark et al. (2016, 7).

² The classic work on taste-based discrimination is Becker (1971); classic works on statistical discrimination include Phelps (1972) and Arrow (1973).

³ <http://uk.movies.yahoo.com/08092006/5/streep-enough-middle-aged-female-roles-0.html>.

⁴ For an extensive bibliography, see Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film (2016). Also see the voluminous research produced by the Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative (Smith, 2016). Our analysis is unique in both the scope of our data set, which enables us to look systematically at changes over the very long run, as well as in our analysis of how gender gaps vary with age among a large set of actors – something very different from merely identifying an inter-temporally persistent gender gap.

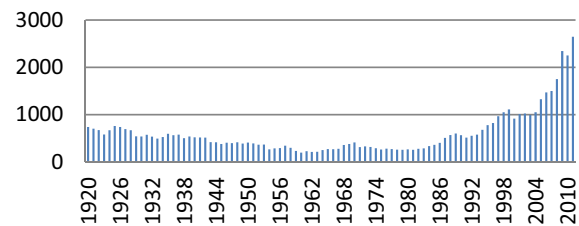
dence of gender and age-based differentials of the type alleged. We find two striking patterns in the data. First, the majority of roles are filled by men, and always have been—roughly two-thirds of all roles on average. Women account for a relatively larger proportion of leading roles than of all credited roles (40% versus 28%), but are a minority in either case. Second, over the entire period, male actors have been approximately six to ten years older than female actors (whether mean or median age is considered), although for both sexes, the average ages have increased over time. The patterns appear to be invariant to even such a major event as World War II.

Implicit in Meryl Streep's complaint (and explicit in much scholarly writing on the topic) is the notion that older actresses face discrimination.⁵ Yet economic logic would suggest that the motion picture industry is an unlikely venue for persistent large-scale discrimination. Notably, entry is relatively unrestricted, and technological innovation has greatly lowered the cost of producing and releasing films, leading to a tremendous rise in the number of films distributed (see Fig. 1). Competition among filmmakers for talent would thus be expected to reduce the scope for discrimination. Furthermore, half of all moviegoers are women.⁶

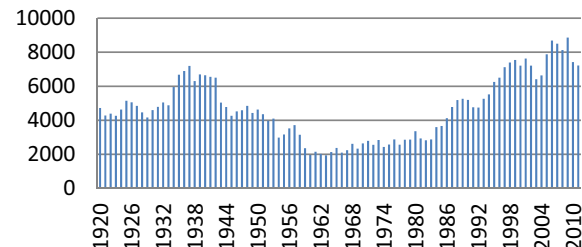
In order to explain the persistent gender and age-based differences, we delve deeper into their nature. We find that female actors are not only younger than male actors on average, but also start their careers and finish their careers at earlier ages. As a result, a female in her 20s is much more likely to play a leading role than is a male in his 20s. By age 29, the split is roughly 50:50; thereafter, males make up a greater proportion of leading roles than females, accounting by age 40 for eighty percent of lead roles played. And the differential grows larger still as actors age further (although even the number of lead roles for males declines sharply after the mid-40s).⁷

The fact that more roles could be played by either males or females, depending upon their ages, makes it doubtful that a simple theory of discrimination can account for the age-specific gender gaps we document (the theory would have to explain why both younger men and older women are “discriminated against”). But if discrimination is not the answer (or at least not the whole answer), what then explains the persistent age/gender differences? We cannot provide a definitive answer, but we highlight factors suggesting the importance of a corresponding persistence in genre preferences among customers. In essence, the vast majority of popular films have plots that involve one (or both) of two basic themes, broadly defined: “romance” and “action.” Films that have predominantly romance-centered plots tend to employ roughly equal numbers of men and women (not surprisingly), while action (and, more generally, most films without much romance) employ more men than women. And this has long been the case. As we will show, each of

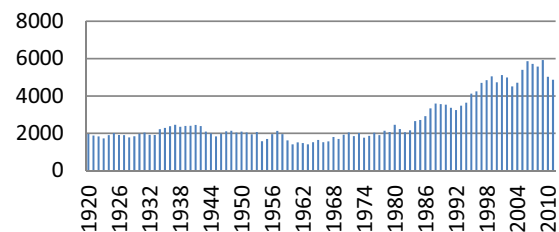
Motion pictures by year



Roles by year



Actors by year



Roles per actor per year

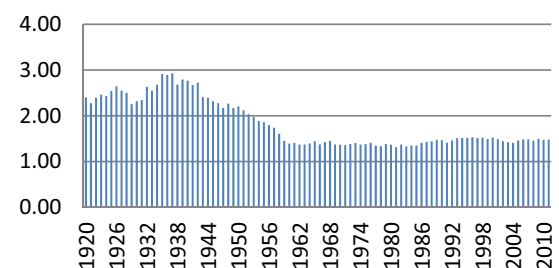


Fig. 1. Overview of IMDB data.

⁵ Furthermore, there have been calls for government investigation into “discriminatory hiring practices” in the motion picture industry. Notably, the American Civil Liberties Union requested an investigation and reports that “the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs gave careful consideration to our findings and responded by launching a wide-ranging and well-resourced investigation into the industry’s hiring practices” (*American Civil Liberties Union*, 2016).

⁶ On the gender composition of moviegoers, see *Motion Picture Association of America* (2012).

⁷ *Lincoln and Allen* (2004) provide a nice review of the sociological literature on “double jeopardy” – the idea that women face a combined disadvantage (sexism and ageism) as they get older – and analyze how gender and age predict the number of roles (and “star presence”) for a sample of 318 stars. Their purpose, data, and empirical approach differ substantially from ours; notably, they focus on the “double jeopardy” idea, look at a sample of stars, and econometrically specify age effects as linear. Nevertheless, they conclude, as we do, that women (relative to men) experience a more rapid age-related decline in the number of roles. For similar work on the age and gender mix of screenwriters, see *Bielby and Bielby* (1996). *Lauzen and Dozier* (2005) examine how age and gender relate to the type of roles played (e.g., characters exhibiting leadership or occupational power).

these genres manifests itself in a gender mix that is quite stable over time; furthermore, the mix of genres (as it pertains to gender mix) has been relatively stable over time, as well. With the overall gender mix’s two key components (the gender mix within genres and the mix of genres) remaining stable, the overall gender mix has remained stable, too, despite many changes in society and in the nature of the motion picture industry.

We conduct several robustness tests. First, we examine movies directed by women. A growing literature emphasizes the importance of female “empowerment” to economic outcomes (see *Duflo* 2012 for a review), and directors today typically have substantial latitude over casting decisions. Do female directors cast older women? The answer is no—we find that although there are more roles for female actors in films directed by women than in films directed by men, the mean ages of the actors are about the same.

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