REPRESENTATIE in beeld

REPRESENTATION IN THE PICTURE

vrouwen in beeld

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Netwerk Scenario-schrijvers Auteurs Bond

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NL FILM FONDS

The representation of female* characters in the Dutch film and television sector is marked by a striking lack of diversity and a strong degree of stereotyping. This is evident from the study '*Just' a Dutch Woman ('Gewoon' een Nederlandse vrouw)* by Utrecht University, in which a large number of Dutch feature films and series from the period 2019 to 2023 were analysed. The research builds on the report *Better is Not Yet Good (Beter is nog niet goed*, Sanders, 2022) and arises from a need for more-in-depth insight. It serves as a starting point for further dialogue on the representation of women in Dutch fiction.

For this study, a representative selection of 112 feature films and series from 2019—2023 was analysed. Of these productions, 97 scripts were also obtained and examined. Two methods were applied: an automated dialogue analysis and a quantitative content analysis. The dialogue analysis provides insight into the presence of female and male characters on the basis of their dialogue. The content analysis focuses on the characteristics of female characters, including background, age, sexual orientation, setting, profession, and appearance.

Female Characters and Dialogue

Using the script software WriterDuet, the ten characters with the highest number of lines were selected from each of the 97 scripts examined. This yielded a total of 961 characters. Of this selection, 46% were women and 54% men, meaning female characters were slightly in the minority. Of these characters, women appear somewhat more frequently in series than in films. The differences are more pronounced at genre level: in Comedy and Romance, female characters form a small majority, while they appear less often in Youth and Drama. The gap widens further in Sci-Fi—Horror—Thriller and in Crime, where only one in three characters is a woman.

Strikingly, despite being fewer in number, on average, female characters have more lines of dialogue than male characters: 52% compared to 48%. This pattern can be seen in both films and series, and in both public and commercial productions. Abby Kaplan (2016) describes the idea that women talk more than men as a persistent popular misconception, and shows through linguistic research that such generalisation is incorrect. Yet, the stereotype that women speak more than men appears to be reinforced in Dutch fiction. What this difference means in substantive terms is not further examined here. Qualitative follow-up research into language use and meaning would therefore be desirable.

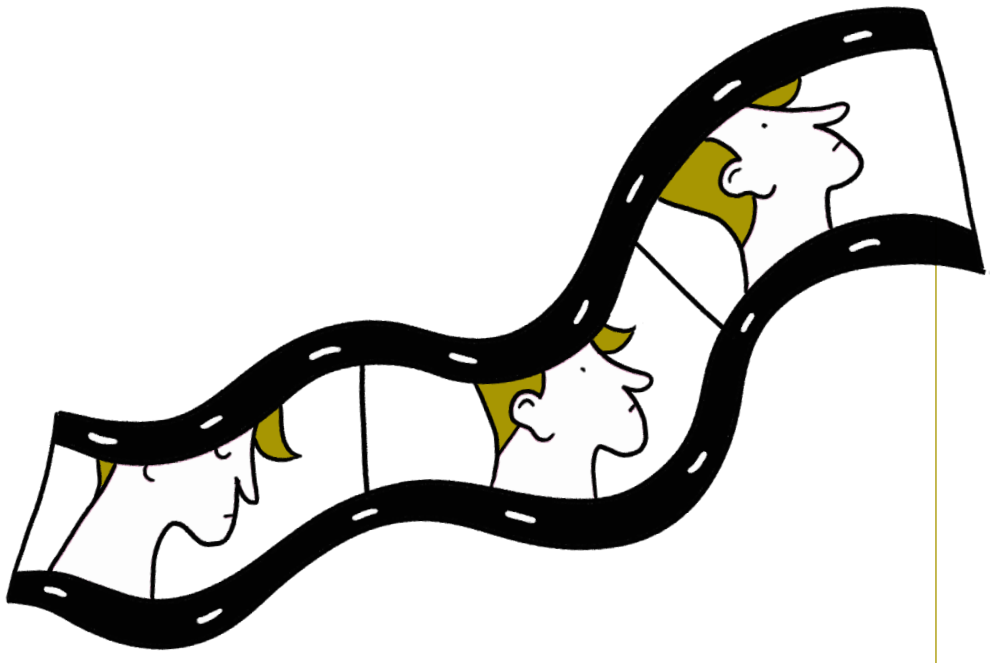
** Everyone who identifies as a woman, including trans women and people who identify as feminine.*

Female Characters and Their Characteristics

Subsequently, a quantitative content analysis was used to conduct in-depth research on the female characters in the 112 feature films and series. One character was selected per production. The researchers first looked for a solo/duo lead character; if there was none, they selected a lead character within a group; and if this was also absent, a supporting character. The characters were analysed on features such as age, colour, cultural background, social class, sexual orientation, relationship status, children, work, appearance, actions, setting, and emotion. Both the productions themselves and the received scripts were examined: in total 97 scripts from the 112 productions. In all cases, the analysis focused on the introduction of the female characters. That is, the first time they appear on-screen or are mentioned in the script.

Lead and Supporting Characters

The analysis indicates that only 30% of the selected female characters occupy solo/duo lead roles. This share declined further between 2019 and 2023. Nearly half of the female characters serve as group leads, a proportion that increased over the same period. In almost a quarter of the productions, no female lead could be identified, meaning that a supporting role had to be analysed instead. Female solo/duo leads appear relatively more often in feature films and public productions than in series and commercial productions, while group leads are more common in series and commercially financed titles.

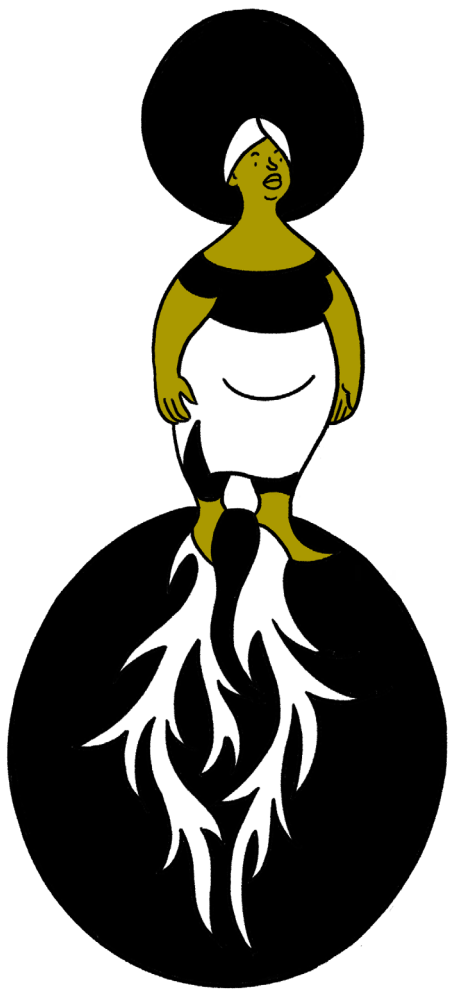


Differences across genres are equally striking: Drama, Youth, and Romance contain relatively many female solo/duo leads, whereas Comedy and Romance feature relatively many female characters within groups. In Crime, women are almost entirely absent from leading roles and appear predominantly in supporting parts, reinforcing the stereotype that this genre is 'masculine'.

Colour and Cultural Background

The analysis shows that more than three quarters of all characters are white, while fewer than a quarter are characters of colour. Characters of colour appear particularly in less central roles: female characters of colour are most often supporting characters, occasionally group leads, and only rarely solo/duo leads. In terms of cultural background, characters with a Dutch background form the majority. As roles become less central, the proportion of non-Dutch backgrounds increases slightly, but the diversity decreases. While the small number of solo/duo leads still display relatively varied backgrounds, Surinamese/Antillean and Moroccan backgrounds dominate among group leads and supporting roles.

Female lead characters with a Turkish background appear in just under 3% of productions, despite this group forming a substantial part of the Dutch population. Characters with an Asian background are entirely absent, despite the long-established presence of especially the Indo-Dutch and Chinese communities in the Netherlands.



Age

Female characters are overwhelmingly young: nearly 70% are between the ages of 16 and 45. Above the age of 60, they almost disappear from the screen altogether: only around 5% of female characters are 60 years or older. In the productions analysed, they appeared mainly in supporting roles, and in the scripts analysed they did not appear at all. This stands in stark contrast to the Dutch population, in which 20% are older than 60 (CBS[1], 2022). These findings align with a broader trend in Western societies, where women over 50 are structurally less visible.

German research shows that women gradually disappear from screens after their thirties: at age 35 the ratio is still 1 woman to 2 men; from 50 onwards it becomes 1 in 3, and from 60 onwards 1 in 4 (Prommer & Linke, 2019). Similar patterns have been found in American films and series (Geena Davis Institute, 2024) and in Dutch non-fiction (Scholtens & Slabbekoorn, 2024).

Hair, Make-up, and Clothing

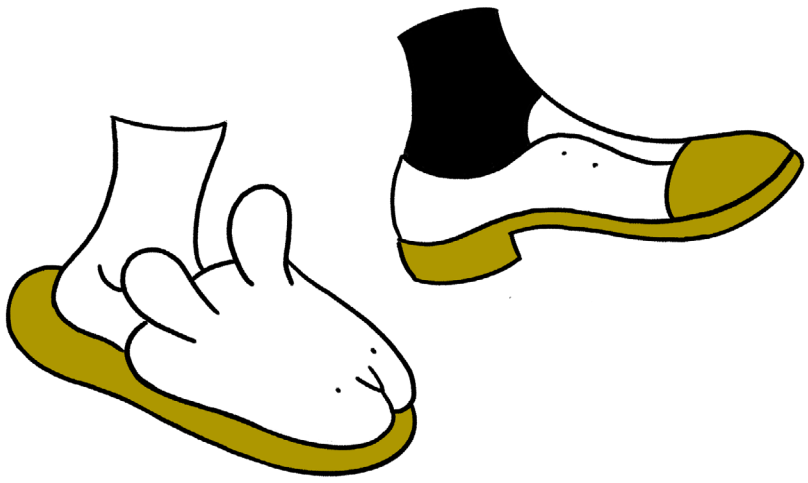
In the productions, female characters were frequently shown with long, blond or brown hair, dressed in trousers and a shirt in black, white, pink, or blue. It is noticeable that in the scripts, descriptions of hair, make-up, and clothing were generally sparse. When appearance was described, it was mostly limited to terms such as blond or dark, and to more stereotypically feminine clothing items such as a little dress, pyjamas, a small bra, or a bikini. This suggests that when screenwriters do describe appearance, they tend to do so in stereotypical terms. Because screenwriters also often leave appearance undescribed, productions may introduce elements that reinforce stereotypes. For example, the colour pink was mentioned only seven times in the scripts, yet appeared in the introductions of female characters in 27 productions.

Active Versus Passive

In the scripts analysed, female characters were introduced slightly more often with passive actions (looking, standing, sitting) than with active ones (going, walking, doing). In the productions, the reverse occurred:

1 CBS: Statistics Netherlands. The organisation's role is to publish reliable, cohesive statistical information that serves the needs of society.

female characters were introduced more frequently with active actions. This suggests that screenwriters present female characters less actively at the moment of their introduction.



Locations

In both productions and scripts, female characters were introduced more often in private spaces (home, living room, bedroom, kitchen) than in public settings (school, lecture hall, car, street). This aligns with a broader representational pattern: since classical antiquity, women have been more closely associated with the private sphere and men with the public one (Wiesner-Hanks, 2022). *The Monitor Representatie 2023*[2] likewise shows that, in non-fiction, women appear more often in the private sphere than in public settings (Scholtens & Slabbekoorn, 2024). The representation of female characters in fiction thus appears to reproduce this gender-stereotypical association between women and private spaces.

Social Class and Work

The middle class is strongly represented in the films and series analysed: 56% of characters belong to this group. Other classes, such as poor, working class, upper class, and extremely wealthy, are represented to a lesser extent. This pattern aligns with a broader Western European tradition of producing television primarily for a middle-class audience (Jensen, 2023). In terms of employment, half of the female characters have a job, compared to nearly 70% of women in the Netherlands (CBS, 2024), meaning working women are underrepresented in fiction. Over 40% of these working female characters are active in the care, education, or cultural sectors, a distribution that reflects the real labour market (CBS, 2023). Since these sectors employ more women than men, they are often labelled 'feminine' sectors (de Blank et al., 2020) and associated accordingly.

Sexual Orientation

Of the female characters whose sexual orientation could be determined, nearly 5% are lesbian, 2% bisexual, and 2% queer. For comparison: according to recent CBS figures, just under 1% of Dutch women identify as lesbian and 6% as bi+ (which includes queer). Lesbian characters are therefore overrepresented in fiction, while bisexual and queer characters are underrepresented compared with CBS data. Sexual diversity appears almost exclusively among characters aged 16–30; from age 30 onwards, traditional heteronormative representations dominate. No non-heterosexual female characters over 50 were found at all, indicating an even stronger underrepresentation than identified in international studies (Geena Davis Institute, 2024).

2 Report by the Dutch Media Authority (CvdM). The monitor is part of the Media Monitor and provides insight into the representation of women and of people with a (visible) disability in non-fiction programmes.

Relationships and Children

Of the female characters whose relationship status was known, nearly half were in a relationship (married, engaged, or together) and nearly half were without a partner (single, divorced, or widowed). This distribution closely matches reality: according to CBS (2023), just under half of Dutch women over 15 are married and over 40% are unmarried, divorced, or widowed. Notably, lead characters are depicted slightly more often as being in relationships, while supporting characters are more often portrayed as single. Around one third of female characters have children, which also corresponds to recent CBS figures (2024b).

Emotions and Character

Female characters are more often introduced with positive emotions (happy, cheerful, enthusiastic, lively) than with negative ones (irritated, worried, frustrated). Further qualitative analysis would be desirable to understand what this pattern signifies and whether it differs from the introduction of male characters. At the same time, at their introduction female characters display traits that, according to Holtzman & Sharpe (2014), are generally not specifically associated with women (competent, confident, rational, tough, adventurous, strong), and less frequently traits stereotypically considered ‘feminine’ (caring, sweet, charming).

Recommendations

The study results demonstrate that there remains considerable room for improvement in the representation of female characters, both in terms of diversity and in breaking stereotypes. Key opportunities include:

1. More Leading Roles

Prioritise solo/duo female lead characters, including in series and commercially funded productions, to create more space for stories in which women are central.

2. Colour, Roots, and Appearance

Offer a broader perspective on women, by creating more room for female (lead) characters of colour and from a variety of backgrounds. Ensure greater diversity and less stereotyping in appearance and styling.

3. Age

Increase the age range of characters, especially those aged 60+. Ensure these characters receive central roles, rather than only supporting parts.

4. Social Class, Work, and Location

Ensure that women from all social classes are represented in stories, and that women working across a range of sectors are portrayed — not only in sectors stereotypically seen as ‘feminine’. Additionally, situate female characters more often in public spaces.

For this study, researchers at Utrecht University analysed the scripts and realised productions of a total of 112 feature films and series. The research was commissioned by Stichting Vrouwen in Beeld and carried out in collaboration with the Network of Screenwriters.

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