

Is creating tough women in films such a tough job?

Looking for a good movie to watch? For International Women's Day this month, pick a film that has passed the **Bechdel Test**. If you have kids, whether boys or girls, find a family film that avoids the frequently-used, stereotypical female characters and instead find one that portrays women as they are – strong, smart and capable!

Sadly, this wasn't always an easy option. Disney, one of the main film studios 30 to 40 years ago, consistently reinforced gender stereotypes in film after film that portrayed women with unrealistic body shapes dressing nicely at home, readying themselves to be rescued by Prince Charming.

Since then, Disney films like *Frozen* (2013) and *Moana* (2016) have instigated a positive shift in the representation of women in films. And more recently, *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) impressed the critics; it passes the Bechdel Test with flying colours. All these films show active female characters and focus on the relationships between sisters, mothers or female friends/rivals. The main character in *Frozen*, Elsa, breaks the stereotype mould with her complex emotional journey and her role as a queen, rather than a princess waiting for a prince. This makes young female audiences feel empowered and confident. *Moana* took this idea further by presenting a lead character who is on a quest to save her people. The film celebrates her as a female who is a leader, adventurer and hero in her own right, creating a sense of pride and validation. *Raya* is one in a cast full of other female characters. These female relationships anchor the movie, and while *Raya* wishes to save her father, the main focus is on *Raya* and her own heroic journey, with particular attention given to how she and her female rival, *Namaari*, start learning to trust one another again. These blockbuster films, aimed at the next adult generation, all represent a significant milestone in how Disney (and hopefully other studios) characterise women. These films emphasise the capabilities of women, and the importance of their individual journeys, and, as a result, inspire women to be themselves and recognise their strengths.



The evolving female depictions of women in Disney's storytelling is significant as it not only influences the young audience's perception of gender roles but also contributes to a larger societal conversation about judging people based on their actions, not on their gender. This much-needed discussion will make many of us feel optimistic about the future of young girls. One woman who is helping the cinema industry to undermine stereotypical attitudes about women is writer and activist *Melissa Silverstein*. She's one of the most influential critics of gender issues in contemporary cinema and says, 'Girl characters need to be as fully fleshed out as male characters ... we need boys to ... understand [that] in real life girls are equal.'

So does this mean we'll be seeing more films that replace powerless female characters with stronger ones? Perhaps not quite yet. Disney's output of strong, pragmatic females is still few and far between, suggesting the industry still needs to give the area more attention. Particularly, as the representation of women in films heavily influences society's view of women, studios should take their responsibility more seriously and work harder to set realistic standards for our children and their future, encouraging both strong girls and boys.

Making exclamations!

We use exclamations to express surprise, shock or a strong emotion about something. We often form exclamatives with *what* or *how*. In writing, we usually put an exclamation mark (!) at the end of the exclamative, so if you see this punctuation, you should read the sentence with emotion.

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| 1. That's really shocking! | 6. That's really good to see! | 11. Oh my goodness! |
| 2. What a disappointment! | 7. What a great step forward! | 12. What a surprise! |
| 3. That is so ridiculous! | 8. Amazing! | 13. How crazy is that! |
| 4. How awful! | 9. How wonderful! | 14. What a letdown! |
| 5. What a shame! | 10. That's cool! | 15. Oh dear! |

Look at the photos. They're scenes from a TV series or film. How well do you feel they show a positive representation of women? Use language you've learned in the lesson to comment on them. Use tone and intonation to show your feelings and emotion.

