



Leslie Jones, Melissa McCarthy, Kristen Wiig and Kate McKinnon from the film, "Ghostbusters." — AP

# Hollywood's latest love: Gender-swapping

In November 2014, then Sony chief Amy Pascal sent an email to the team behind their planned "Ghostbusters" reboot. "I saw (Jerry) Weintraub last night and he told me that he and (Warner Bros.) were doing a female version of ('Ocean's Eleven'). We gotta beat everyone," Pascal wrote.

The twist on their new "Ghostbusters," of course, was that it was to star women as the paranormal hunters instead of men. Director Paul Feig emailed back: "Oh, sure, NOW they're doing one. Although I am worried it's going to conflict with my all chimp Robin and the Seven Hoods." Pascal: "It's like everywhere you turn around, everyone just realized women are half the population of the world."

Indeed, Hollywood has turned to gender-swaps as the latest ploy to refresh dusty movie properties. If audiences are growing tired of reboots - whether traditional (name the "Spider-Man"), meta ("21 Jump Street") or revisionist ("Magnificent Seven") - why not play around with gender? And it's no surprise that in a business that makes a disproportionate number of films starring and about men, flipping means more female roles. Now it's clear, "Ghostbusters" was just the beginning. There's that female-led installment of the "Ocean's Eleven" series on the way, "Ocean's Eight" starring Sandra Bullock, Anne Hathaway, Cate Blanchett and Rihanna. Also in various stages of development: "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels" with Rebel Wilson, a "Rocketeer" reboot with a female lead, and in a reverse flip, a "Splash" remake with Channing Tatum as the mermaid.

## Small screen too

Flipping is finding its way to the small screen, too, with projects like "Twist," described as a "sexy, contemporary" take on Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist" starring

a woman. The gender-swapping of film characters before the cameras roll, however, is nothing new. Sigourney Weaver's character in "Alien" was originally envisioned as a man. The same for Angelina Jolie's role in "Salt," Sandra Bullock's in "Our Brand Is Crisis," Jada Pinkett Smith's in "Magic Mike XXL" and Tilda Swinton's in "Doctor Strange." "His Girl Friday's" Hildy Johnson, immortalized by Rosalind Russell, was written as a man in the play "The Front Page."

What's new, as Fandango correspondent Alicia Malone points out, is taking entire casts and flipping them in already-proven properties. For the creatives behind the projects, it's a no-brainer.

"It makes a lot of sense," said Ron Howard, who directed the original "Splash" and is producing the remake. "The entire community and the medium (are) looking for opportunities to do two things: One is to refresh ideas that people already know something about - titles that they already understand, relate to, remember (and) have a fondness for. And then also find better roles for women, create better roles for women." As with many spin-offs, reboots and sequels, some will always seem more natural than others. "Ocean's Eight," for example, isn't considered by its studio to be a gender-swap or a remake at all, just an extension of the established world. "We are really committed to creating more opportunities for women in the film business," said Greg Silverman, Warner Bros.' president of creative development and worldwide production. "This one just felt so organic and so right for the brand that this is where it would go next."

Silverman, however, doesn't necessarily see the gender-swapped casts as a broad industry trend. He also noted that Warner Bros. doesn't have a "strategy of flipping

franchises either way."

Whether gender-swapping is organic, gimmick or studio strategy, screenwriter Kirsten "Kiwi" Smith, whose "Expendables" spinoff "Expendables" has been on and off for years, is optimistic that it can be a means to an end. "If that's how we're going to be able to write a kick-ass female action comedy and this is the title we use and this is our kick-off point, then let's go for it!" Smith said "The most important thing is: how can we put more films out there that feature smart, funny, strong and fiery women? However it takes to get there."

Fandango's Malone is reserved about what flipping might mean in the long run. That it gets this much attention, Malone says, "shows just how rare an all-female cast is in Hollywood." There's the financial aspect, too. This summer's "Ghostbusters" failed to impress at the box office. With a reported \$144 million budget (not including marketing expenses which can sometimes cost as much as the film) the would-be "biggest franchise in Hollywood" has made only \$128.3 million domestically and \$100.8 million internationally. It's not a flop, but it's not a blockbuster, either.

The problem is that the femaleness of a project is sometimes used as a scapegoat for box office disappointments and there's a worry they may all go away if one fails.

At the heart of it all lay the dreary statistics about leading female roles. "The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that out of the top 100 grossing films in 2015, just 22 percent had female protagonists. This is a 10 percent rise from 2014, but still a big imbalance," Malone said. "It's not the ultimate fix Hollywood needs to correct the huge gender inequality in American movies ... but it's a start, a temporary stop-gap to ensure more women are on screen." — AP

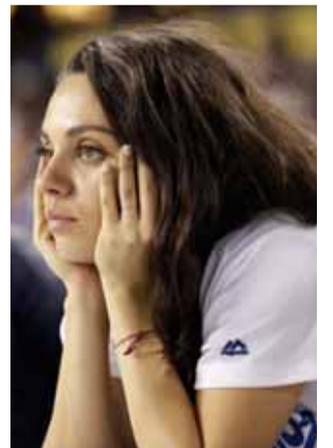
## Mila Kunis pens essay promising intolerance for gender bias

Mila Kunis says in a new essay that anytime she experiences gender bias at work, she's going to speak up about it. The 33-year-old actress-producer says in the essay published on the Medium website Thursday that women have been conditioned to believe that their livelihoods might be threatened if they speak out against sexist behavior.

She says a producer once told her she'd "never work in this town again" when she refused to pose "semi-naked" for a men's magazine to promote a film. More recently, she says, another producer described her in a business email as "One of biggest actors in Hollywood and soon to be Ashton's wife and baby momma!!!"

Kunis, who is expecting her second child with husband Ashton Kutcher, said the comment "reduced my value to nothing more than my relationship to a successful man and my ability to bear children." She pulled out of the project.

She characterized the remark as one of the "micro-aggressions that devalue the contributions and worth of hard working women" and promised not to stand for it anymore. Kunis writes that she is "fortunate that I have reached a place that I can stop compromising and stand my ground, without fearing how I will put food on my table." She says she hopes that by adding her voice to the conversation, working women feel more empowered and "a little less alone." — AP



Actress Mila Kunis