

# THE REP PROJECT

# OSCAR REPORT

# 2021

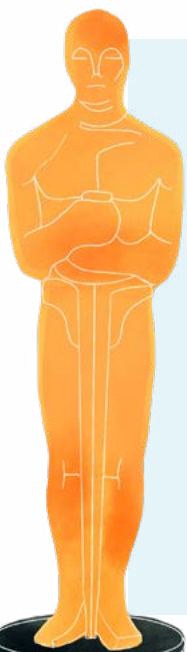
## INTRODUCTION

This report analyzes representations of gender, race, disability, and LGBTQ+ status for leading characters in Best Picture winners for the 92 years the Academy Awards have been in existence. This examination tells us whose stories have been elevated and whose stories remain invisible. The Best Picture Oscar is the final and most prestigious award of the evening, so it is especially significant in signaling whose stories and lives matter more in society.

In this report, we analyze the identities of the leading and co-leading characters from the 92 films that won an Oscar for Best Picture each year. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has diversified its voting ranks in recent years, increasing the number of women from 25% in 2015 to 32% today, and members of color from 8% in 2015 to 16% today.<sup>1</sup> Starting in 2022, films nominated for Best Picture must meet specific diversity requirements on the screen or behind the scenes. The Academy's push for greater inclusion is sorely needed given the findings we present in this study.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Only one-in-four (25.8%) Best Picture winners revolve around the life of a woman lead or co-lead.
- Only 8.9% of Best Picture winners feature stories about the lives of people of color.
- In nearly a century of Academy Awards, only one film has ever featured an LGBTQ+ lead (*Moonlight*, 2017).<sup>2</sup>
- Only 4.8% of winning films feature a lead with a disability.
- No film featuring an Asian, Black, South Asian, Native American/ Pacific Islander, MENA, lesbian, or larger woman lead/co-lead has ever won an Academy Award for Best Picture.
- Only one Best Picture film, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1990), has ever centered the story of a female character over 50.



# FULL REPORT

## Identity Analysis

Women make up over half the US population,<sup>3</sup> but only one-in-four (25.8%) leads/co-leads in Best Picture winners. This means the Oscar for Best Picture is almost always awarded to films that tell stories of men’s lives and their experiences.

When it comes to race/ethnicity, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) are nearly 40% of the US population but only 8.9% of leads/co-leads in Best Picture winners. This means that nine times out of ten, the Academy gives the Best Picture Oscar to a film that revolves around the lives of white people.

When it comes to the details of how BIPOC stories are erased in the most honored films in Hollywood, we find large gaps in representations of all characters of color, but characters who are Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) and Native American/Pacific Islander are completely missing as leads.

In terms of representations of sexuality, only one Best Picture winner, *Moonlight* (2017), has ever featured the story of an LGBTQ+ person. In the US, 4.5% of people identify as LGBTQ+.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to disability representations, six Best Picture films have featured leading/co-leading characters with disabilities: *Rain Man* (1989), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1990), *Forrest Gump* (1995), *A Beautiful Mind* (2002), *The King’s Speech* (2011), and *The Shape of Water* (2018). At 4.8% of winning films, this is far below the one-in-four Americans with a physical, cognitive, communication, or mental health disability.<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 1: WOMEN LEADS/CO-LEADS

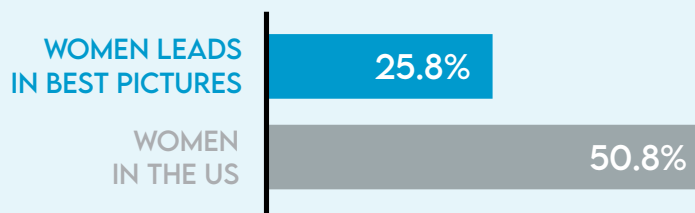


FIGURE 2: BIPOC LEADS/CO-LEADS

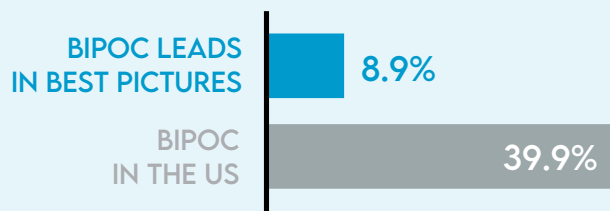


FIGURE 3: RACE/ETHNICITY OF LEADS/CO-LEADS

RACE/ETHNICITY	FILMS	POPULATION*
ASIAN	1.6%	5.9%
BLACK	4.0%	13.4%
LATINX	1.6% <sup>5</sup>	18.5%
MENA	0.0%	2.5%
NATIVE AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	0.0%	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN	1.6%	0.1%
WHITE	91.1%	60.1%

FIGURE 4: LGBTQ+ LEADS/CO-LEADS

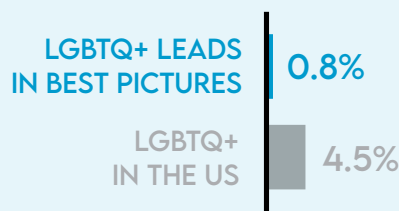
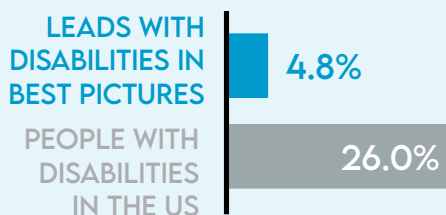


FIGURE 5: LEADS/CO-LEADS WITH DISABILITIES



## Intersectional Analysis

As an organization dedicated to intersectional gender justice, The Rep Project is especially interested in how women of different backgrounds are represented.

As noted above, only one-in-four Best Picture winners tell the stories of women’s lives. Of the films that feature women, most center on the lives of white women. No film featuring a leading Asian, Black, South Asian, Native American/ Pacific Islander, or MENA woman has ever won an Academy Award for Best Picture.

In terms of sexuality, no film featuring a lesbian’s story has ever won for Best Picture.

Only two films, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1990) and *The Shape of Water* (2018), have ever centered the story of a leading woman with a disability.

Among films with female protagonists that have won for Best Picture, only one (*Driving Miss Daisy*) centers the story of a woman ages 50+, even though 34.2% of women are ages 50+ in the US.<sup>8</sup>

No film that has won an Academy Award for Best Picture has ever featured the story of a woman who is fat.<sup>9</sup> This is an important finding because it reinforces the idea that the lives of fat women matter little in US society, despite the fact that over 40% of Americans are classified as fat.<sup>10</sup>

## Recent Best Picture Analysis

The #OscarsSoWhite movement pushed for greater diversity in Hollywood starting in 2015 and the #TimesUp campaign launched in 2018 with a gender inclusion focus. The Academy has acknowledged widespread

FIGURE 6: WOMEN LEADS/CO-LEADS BY RACE

RACE/ETHNICITY	FILMS	POPULATION
ASIAN WOMEN	0.0%	5.9%
BLACK WOMEN	0.0%	13.4%
LATINX WOMEN	3.1%	18.5%
MENA WOMEN	0.0%	2.5%
NATIVE AMERICAN/ PACIFIC ISLANDER WOMEN	0.0%	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN	0.0%	0.1%
WHITE WOMEN	96.9%	60.1%

FIGURE 7: LGBTQ+ STATUS OF WOMEN LEADS/CO-LEADS

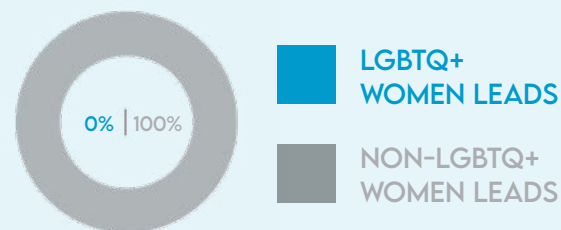


FIGURE 8: DISABILITY STATUS OF WOMEN LEADS/CO-LEADS

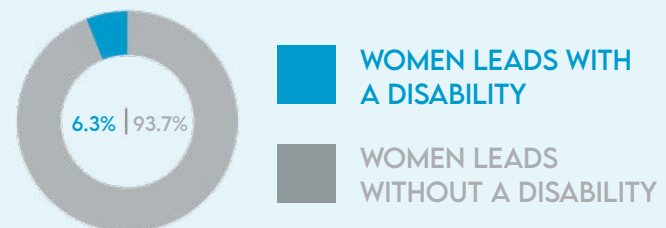


FIGURE 9: AGE OF WOMEN LEADS/CO-LEADS

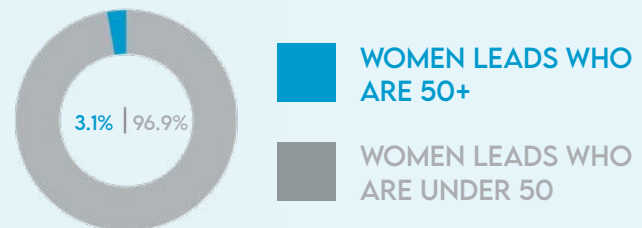
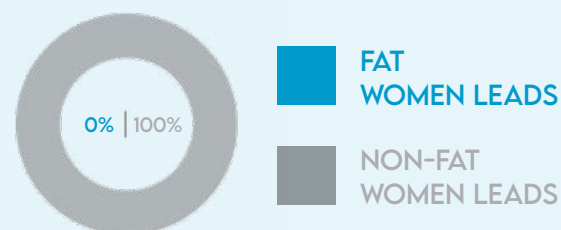


FIGURE 10: BODY SIZE OF WOMEN LEADS/CO-LEADS



issues with representation, but little progress has been made when it comes to whose stories are told in the Best Picture winners of the past five years.

- Few women, LGBTQ+, or people with disabilities are featured as leads/co-leads in Best Picture winners.
- Representations of race do seem to have improved in the past five years, with two films centered on the lives of BIPOC characters (*Parasite* and *Moonlight*).

FIGURE 11: RECENT BEST PICTURE REPRESENTATIONS

YEAR	FILM	WOMAN LEAD	BIPOC LEAD	LGBTQ+ LEAD	LEAD WITH DISABILITY
2020	<i>PARASITE</i>	NO	YES	NO	NO
2019	<i>GREEN BOOK</i>	NO	NO	NO	NO
2018	<i>THE SHAPE OF WATER</i>	YES	NO	NO	YES
2017	<i>MOONLIGHT</i>	NO	YES	YES	NO
2016	<i>SPOTLIGHT</i>	NO	NO	NO	NO

## METHODOLOGY

The data in this report was produced through a content analysis conducted by trained researchers with 30+ years of combined professional experience. Our final dataset included 124 leading and co-leading characters from the 92 Best Picture winners from 1929 through 2020.<sup>11</sup> For this analysis, leading characters are coded as characters that drive the story. Co-leads are defined as two characters who drive the storyline equally. For ensemble casts, the leading character is the character who is most driving the story. Characters nominated in the Best Actor/Actress in a Leading Role categories were automatically considered leads/co-leads for the Best Picture films in which they appeared.

## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

The Representation Project is a leading global gender justice non-profit organization. We use films, education, research, and activism to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes. In 2011, Jennifer Siebel Newsom founded The Rep Project in response to the overwhelming public demand for ongoing education and social action in support of her first film, *Miss Representation*. Since then, Siebel Newsom has released two more acclaimed films, *The Mask You Live In* (2015) and *The Great American Lie* (2019). The organization also runs a global youth filmmaker program to train the next generation of change agents. The Rep Project is also known for its impactful social activism campaigns, including #NotBuyingIt, #AskHerMore, and #RepresentHer.

## ENDNOTES

1. Bahn, L. (2020). Oscars to Set Best Picture Noms at 10, Inclusion Standards. The Associated Press, June 12, <https://apnews.com/article/5587ee57833d0ff-52978b8c1f457d85a>
2. Throughout this report, we reference the year the film won Best Picture (a year after the film was released).
3. Howden, L.M. and J.A. Meyer (2011). Age and Sex Composition: 2010, 2010 Census Briefs, United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-03.pdf>
4. United States Census (2019). Quick Facts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>
5. We are measuring representations of race in the Best Picture winners for this report. It is important to note that one of the leading characters depicted as Latinx was played by a white actor— Natalie Wood as “Maria” in *West Side Story* (1962).
6. Newport, F. (2018). In U.S., LGBT Rises to 4.5%. Gallup, May 22, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/234863/estimate-lgbt-population-rises.aspx>
7. Centers for Disease Control (2020). Disability Impacts All of Us. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/documents/disabilities\\_impacts\\_all\\_of\\_us.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/documents/disabilities_impacts_all_of_us.pdf)
8. Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (2014). Demographics of an Aging America, [https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/jchs-housing\\_americas\\_older\\_adults\\_2014-ch2\\_0.pdf](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/jchs-housing_americas_older_adults_2014-ch2_0.pdf)
9. We are intentionally using the word “fat” because it is not an insult. We are part of a growing number of organizations and individuals reclaiming the word “fat.” We celebrate bodies in whatever form they come, with bumps, lumps, stretch marks, and curves.
10. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018). FastStats: Obesity and Overweight, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/obesity-overweight.htm>
11. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences started the Academy Awards in 1929, honoring the best film of 1928.