

THE REP PROJECT

OSCAR REPORT

2022

This report analyzes representations of gender, race, disability, and LGBTQ+ status for leading characters and directors of Best Picture winners for the 93 years the Academy Awards have been in existence. This study tells us whose stories are elevated and who gets to tell them. 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, and which storytellers, matter more in society.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has diversified its voting ranks in recent years, and this report assesses whether these efforts are working. The Academy increased the number of women from 25% in 2015 to 33% today, and members of color from 8% in 2015 to 19% today.¹ The Academy also recently announced that, starting in 2024, films nominated for Best Picture must meet specific diversity requirements on the screen and behind the scenes.² This push for greater inclusion is sorely needed given the findings we present in this study.



KEY FINDINGS

- Only one-in-four (26.4%) Best Picture winners revolve around the life of a woman.
- Only 8.8% 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).³
- Only 4.8% of winning films feature a lead with a disability.
- Only one Best Picture film (*West Side Story*, 1962) has featured the story of a BIPOC woman. The Latine lead, Maria, was played by a white actor (Natalie Wood).
- No film featuring an Asian, Black, South Asian, Native American/ Pacific Islander, MENA, lesbian, or larger woman lead has ever won an Academy Award for Best Picture.
- Only two Best Picture films (*Driving Miss Daisy*, 1990, and *Nomadland*, 2021) have ever centered the story of a female character over 50.
- Every Best Picture winner of the 20th century was directed by a white man.
- Only 3.1% of all Best Picture film directors are women.
- Only 7.5% of all Best Picture film directors are BIPOC.

FULL REPORT

Lead Analysis

Women make up over half the US population,⁴ but only one-in-four (26.4%) leads/co-leads (hereafter referred to as “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 we look at the percentage of women leads by decade, we find a steady trend away from gender parity, especially in the 21st century. Although the most recent Best Picture winner (*Nomadland*, 2021) centered the story of a woman, only 10% of winning films from the last decade featured women leads.

When it comes to race/ethnicity, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) are nearly 40% of the US population but only 8.8% of 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 winning films.

Historically, BIPOC leads have been virtually erased when it comes to Best Picture winners, although we see some progress over the past two decades. The only Best Picture winner awarded in the 2020s (*Nomadland*, 2021) features a white lead.

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+.⁷

FIGURE 1: WOMEN LEADS

WOMEN LEADS
IN BEST PICTURES

26.4%

WOMEN
IN THE US

50.8%

ROXIE, CHICAGO

FIGURE 2: WOMEN LEADS BY DECADE

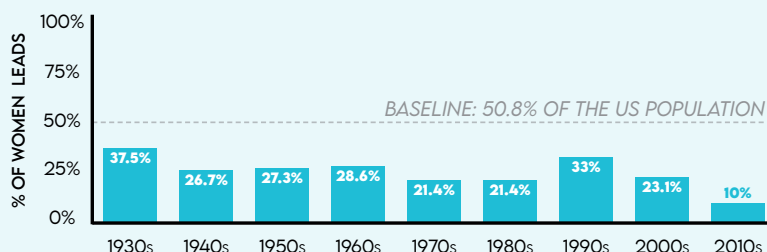


FIGURE 3: BIPOC LEADS

BIPOC LEADS
IN BEST PICTURES

8.8%

BIPOC
IN THE US

39.9%

SOLOMON, 12 YEARS A SLAVE
JAMAL, SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

FIGURE 4: RACE/ETHNICITY OF LEADS

RACE/ETHNICITY	FILMS	POPULATION ⁵
ASIAN	1.6%	5.7%
BLACK	4.0%	13.3%
LATINX	1.6% ⁶	18.3%
MENA	—	2.3%
NATIVE AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	—	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN	1.6%	0.1%
WHITE	91.1%	60.1%

FIGURE 5: BIPOC LEADS BY DECADE

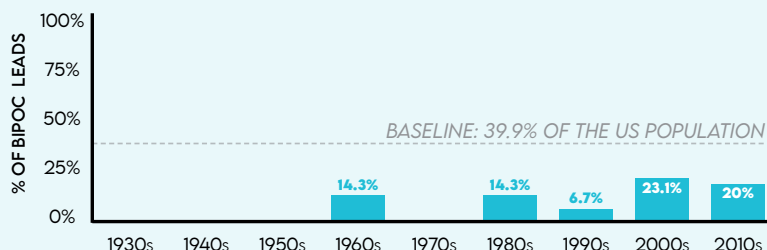


FIGURE 6: LGBTQ+ LEADS

LGBTQ+ LEADS
IN BEST PICTURES

0.8%

LGBTQ+
IN THE US

4.5%

CHIRON, MOONLIGHT

When it comes to disability representations, six Best Picture films have featured 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 representation falls far short of the one-in-four Americans with a physical, cognitive, communication, or mental health disability.⁸

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. In the Academy Awards' 93-year history, only one film centering the story of a BIPOC woman has ever won for Best Picture: *West Side Story* (1962), which features a Latine woman lead (Maria) played by a white actor (Natalie Wood).

In terms of sexuality, no film featuring an LGBTQ+ woman'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 two (*Driving Miss Daisy*, 1990, and *Nomadland*, 2021) center the story of a woman ages 50+, even though 34.2% of women are age 50+ in the US.⁹

No film that has won an Academy Award for Best Picture has ever featured the story of a woman who is fat.¹⁰ 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 people of size.¹¹

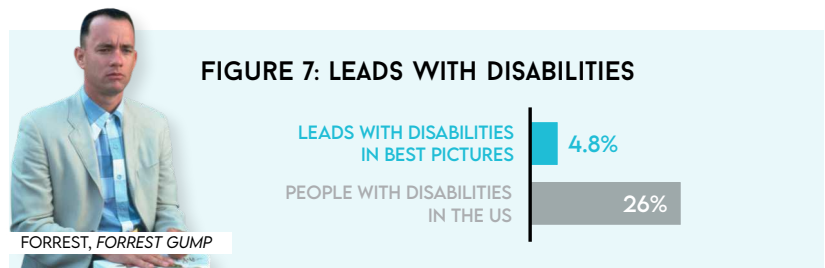
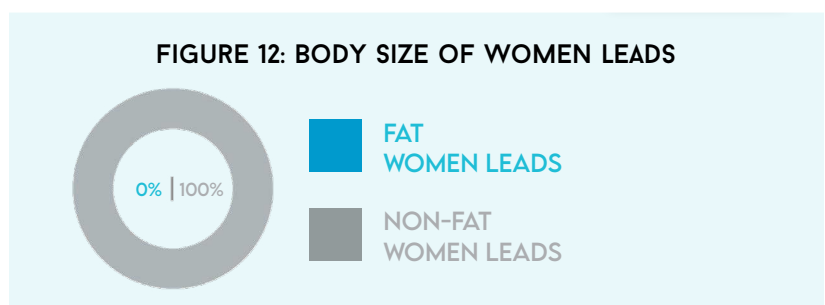
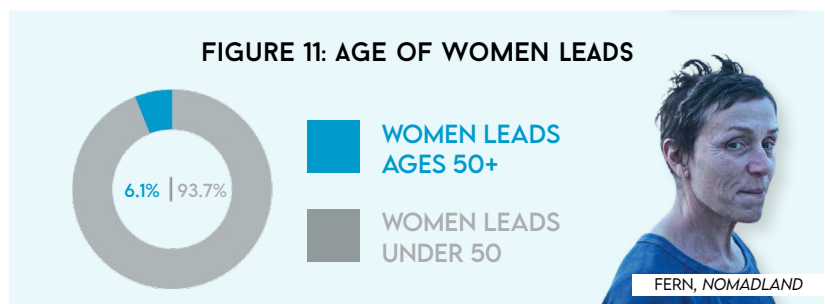
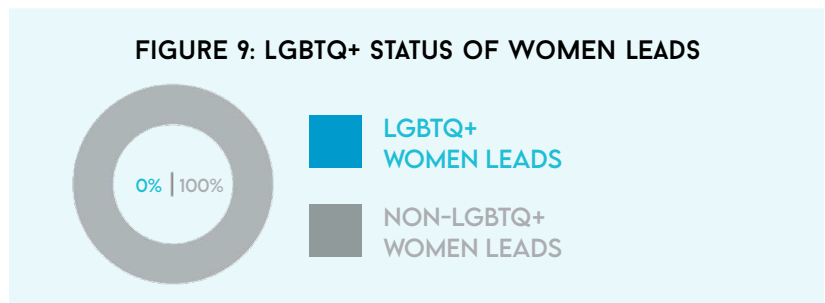


FIGURE 8: WOMEN LEADS BY RACE

RACE/ETHNICITY	FILMS	POPULATION
ASIAN WOMEN	—	5.7%
BLACK WOMEN	—	13.3%
LATINX WOMEN	3.0%	18.3%
MENA WOMEN	—	2.3%
NATIVE AMERICAN/ PACIFIC ISLANDER WOMEN	—	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN	—	0.1%
WHITE WOMEN	96.9%	60.1%



Director Analysis

Another way of understanding whose voices are deemed valuable by society is by analyzing who is elevated as storytellers. Only three Best Picture winners in Oscar history have been directed by women (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 2009, *The Hurt Locker*, 2010, and *Nomadland*, 2021).

When we look at the percentage of women directors by decade, we find that men directed 100% of Best Picture winners in the 20th century. Only one-in-ten Best Picture winners were directed by women between 2000-2009 and 2010-2019. The most recent Best Picture winner (*Nomadland*, 2021) is the first winner that was directed by a woman in over ten years.

BIPOC Directors are also vastly represented when it comes to Best Picture winners (7.5% compared to 39.9% of the US population).

When it comes to the details of how BIPOC directors are erased in the most honored films in Hollywood, we find large gaps in representations of all people of color, but MENA and Native American/Pacific Islander people are completely missing as directors.

When we look at BIPOC directors by decade, we find that 100% of 20th century Best Picture winners had white directors. While we saw small progress from 2000-2009, we found a major improvement between 2010-2019, with BIPOC accounting for 40% of winning directors. The trend continues in the 2020s, with the two most recent winners (*Parasite*, 2020, and *Nomadland*, 2021) having BIPOC directors.

Only two films with BIPOC women directors have won for Best Picture in Oscar history (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 2009, and *Nomadland*, 2021). No film featuring a Black, Latinx, Native American/Pacific Islander, or MENA woman director has ever won an Academy Award for Best Picture.

FIGURE 13: WOMEN DIRECTORS

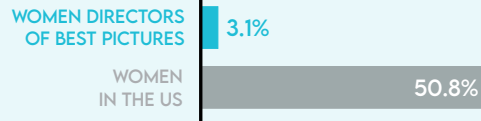


FIGURE 14: WOMEN DIRECTORS BY DECADE

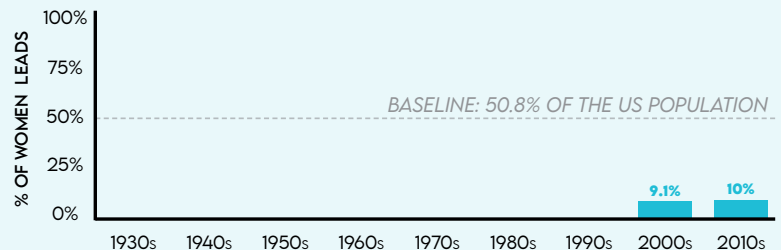


FIGURE 15: BIPOC DIRECTORS

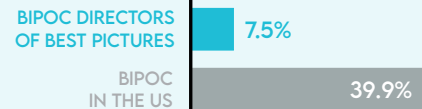


FIGURE 16: RACE/ETHNICITY OF DIRECTORS

RACE/ETHNICITY	FILMS	POPULATION
ASIAN	2.2%	5.7%
BLACK	2.2%	13.3%
LATINX	2.2%	18.3%
MENA	—	2.3%
NATIVE AMERICAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	—	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN	1.1%	0.1%
WHITE	92.5%	60.1%

FIGURE 17: BIPOC DIRECTORS BY DECADE

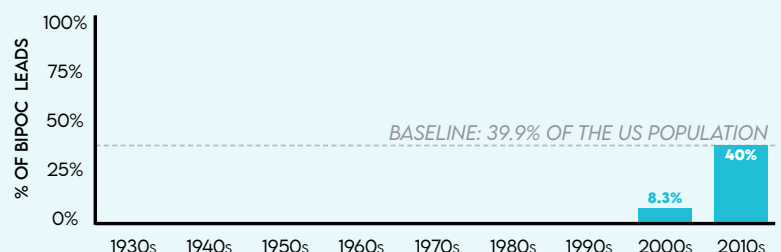


FIGURE 18: BIPOC WOMEN DIRECTORS





Recent Best Picture Oscars

The #OscarsSoWhite movement pushed for greater diversity in Hollywood starting in 2015, and the #TimesUp campaign launched in 2018 pushed for more gender inclusion. The Academy has acknowledged widespread issues with representation, but progress has been mixed in the the past five years:

- Few LGBTQ+, or people with disabilities are featured as leads in Best Picture winners.
- Representations of gender have improved in the past five years, with two films centered on the lives of women characters (*The Shape of Water*, 2018, and *Nomadland*, 2021).
- Representations of race have improved in the past five years, with two films centered on the lives of BIPOC characters (*Parasite*, 2020, and *Moonlight*, 2017).

FIGURE 19: RECENT BEST PICTURE LEADS/CO-LEADS REPRESENTATIONS

YEAR	FILM	WOMAN LEAD	BIPOC LEAD	LGBTQ+ LEAD	LEAD WITH DISABILITY
2021	<i>NOMADLAND</i>	YES	NO	NO	NO
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

When it comes to who gets to tell the Best Picture stories from the last five years, we see mixed findings:

- Major progress has been made for BIPOC directors with four of the last five winning films being directed by BIPOC directors (*Nomadland*, 2021, *Parasite*, 2020, *The Shape of Water*, 2018, and *Moonlight*, 2017).
- We see little progress in the past five years for women directors, who directed only one out of the five most recent winning films (*Nomadland*, 2021).

FIGURE 20: RECENT BEST PICTURE DIRECTOR REPRESENTATIONS

YEAR	FILM	WOMAN DIRECTOR	BIPOC DIRECTOR
2021	<i>NOMADLAND</i>	YES	YES
2020	<i>PARASITE</i>	NO	YES
2019	<i>GREEN BOOK</i>	NO	NO
2018	<i>THE SHAPE OF WATER</i>	NO	YES
2017	<i>MOONLIGHT</i>	NO	YES



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 125 leading and co-leading characters and 98 directors from the 93 Best Picture winners from 1929 through 2021.¹² 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). Her latest film, *Fair Play*, is premiering in 2022. 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. Oliver, D. (2022). Oscar Nominations in 2022 fail to build on diversity momentum. What needs to happen next. USA Today, March 12, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2022/02/08/oscar-nominations-diversity-efforts-2022-oscars/6662632001/>
2. Mandell, A. (2020). Best picture race to get a shake-up in 2024: Academy announces new diversity and inclusion standards. USA Today, March 12, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/movies/2020/09/08/oscar-best-picture-hopefuls-must-meet-new-inclusion-standards-2024/5753230002/>
3. Throughout this report, we reference the year the film won Best Picture (a year after the film was released).
4. 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>
5. United States Census (2019). Quick Facts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>
6. 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).
7. 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>
8. Centers for Disease Control (2020). Disability Impacts All of Us. https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/documents/disabilities_impacts_all_of_us.pdf
9. 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
10. 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.
11. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018). FastStats: Obesity and Overweight, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/obesity-overweight.htm>
12. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences started the Academy Awards in 1929, honoring the best film of 1928.