

THE REP PROJECT

OSCAR REPORT

2023

This report analyzes representations of gender, race, disability, and LGBTQ+ status for leading characters and directors of Best Picture nominees and Best Picture winners from 94 years of the Academy Awards. This study tells us whose stories are elevated and who gets to tell these stories. The Best Picture Oscar is the most prestigious award of the evening, so it is especially significant in signaling whose stories and lives, and which storytellers, matter the most.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has diversified its voting ranks in recent years, and this report assesses whether these efforts to expand representation have been effective. 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

- Nearly three-in-four Best Picture nominees (71.5%) and winners (73%) revolve around the life of a man.
- Only 7% of all Best Picture nominees and 8.7% of Best Picture winners feature stories about the lives of BIPOC.
- In nearly a century of Academy Awards, only 1.9% of Best Picture nominees feature an LGBTQ+ lead. Only one Best Picture winner has ever featured an LGBTQ+ lead (*Moonlight*, 2017).³
- Only 4.8% of nominated and winning films feature a lead with a disability.
- Only 1.5% of Best Picture nominees tell the story of a BIPOC woman.
- No film featuring an Asian, Black, South Asian, Native American/ Pacific Islander, MENA, queer woman, or woman of size lead has ever won an Academy Award for Best Picture.
- Only two Best Picture winners (*Driving Miss Daisy*, 1990, and *Nomadland*, 2021) have ever centered the story of a woman over 50.
- Every Best Picture winner of the 20th century was directed by a white man.
- Only 3.1% of films nominated for Best Picture and 4.1% of Best Picture winners were directed by women.
- Only 4.8% of films nominated for Best Picture and 7.1% of Best Picture winners were directed by BIPOC.



FULL REPORT

Lead Analysis

Women make up over half the US population,⁴ but only one-in-four leads/co-leads (hereafter referred to as “leads”) in Best Picture nominees (28.5%) and winners (27%). 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 in leading roles by decade, we find a steady trend away from gender parity, especially in the 21st century. Only 10% of winning films from the last decade featured women leads. Although the two most recent Best Picture winners (*CODA*, 2022 and *Nomadland*, 2021) center the stories of women, these wins came from a limited nominee pool with only one-in-five (22.2%) films with 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 7% of leads in films nominated for the Best Picture category. Only 8.7% of winning films feature a BIPOC leading character. This means that nine times out of ten, the Academy gives the Best Picture Oscar to a film that centers the lives of white people.

We find large gaps in winning films featuring Asian (1.6%), Black (4%), and Latine (1.6%) leads compared to the US population (5.7%, 13.3%, and 18.3% respectively). Characters who are Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) and Native American/Pacific Islander are completely missing as leads in Best Picture winners.

Historically, BIPOC leads have been virtually erased when it comes to Best Picture nominees and winners, although we see some progress over the past two decades. So far, only one Best Picture winner awarded in the 2020s (*Parasite*, 2020) features a BIPOC lead. This win

FIGURE 1: WOMEN LEADS

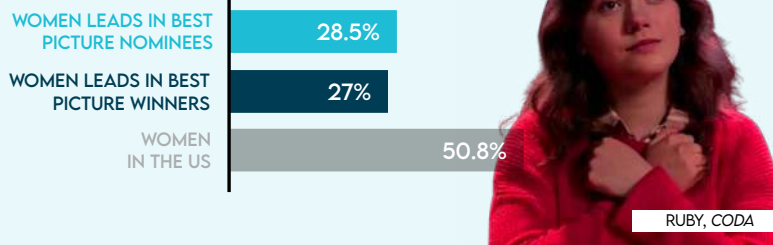


FIGURE 2: WOMEN LEADS BY DECADE

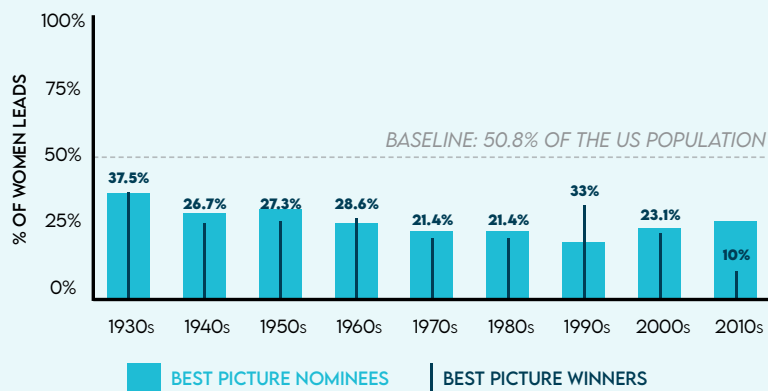


FIGURE 3: BIPOC LEADS

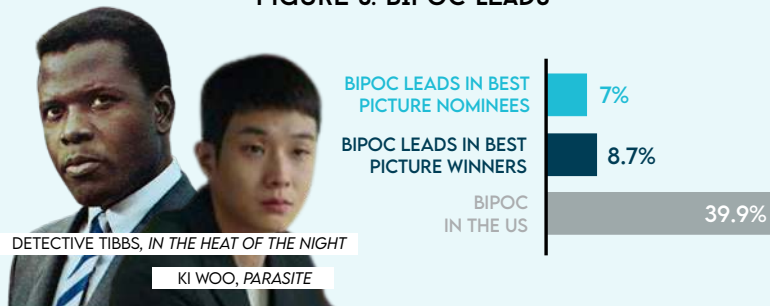


FIGURE 4: RACE/ETHNICITY OF LEADS

RACE/ETHNICITY	NOMINATED FILMS	WINNING FILMS	POPULATION ⁵
ASIAN	1.5%	1.6%	5.7%
BLACK	3.2%	4%	13.3%
LATINX	1.1%	1.6%	18.3%
MENA	0.4%	—	2.3%
NATIVE AMERICAN/ PACIFIC ISLANDER	—	—	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN	0.8%	1.5%	0.1%
WHITE	93%	91.3%	60.1%

came from a limited nominee pool with less than one-in-five (19.4%) films featuring BIPOC leads.

7.1% of people identify as LGBTQ+,⁷ but only 1.9% of films nominated for Best Picture center the life of an LGBTQ+ person. In 94 years of Oscar history, only one Best Picture winner (*Moonlight*, 2017) has ever featured an LGBTQ+ lead.

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 nominated and winning films, this representation falls far short of the one-in-four Americans with a physical, cognitive, communication, or mental health disability.⁸ Although the most recent winner (*CODA*, 2022) involved themes of disability, the story was told from the perspective of the leading character, a non-disabled teenager who is the child of deaf parents.

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' 94-year history, only eleven films centering the story of a BIPOC woman have ever been nominated for Best Picture. No film featuring a MENA, Native American/Pacific Islander, or South Asian woman has ever been nominated for Best Picture.

Only one film centering the life of a BIPOC woman has ever won Best Picture, *West Side Story* (1962). This film features a Latine woman lead (Maria) played by a white actor (Natalie Wood).

FIGURE 5: BIPOC LEADS BY DECADE

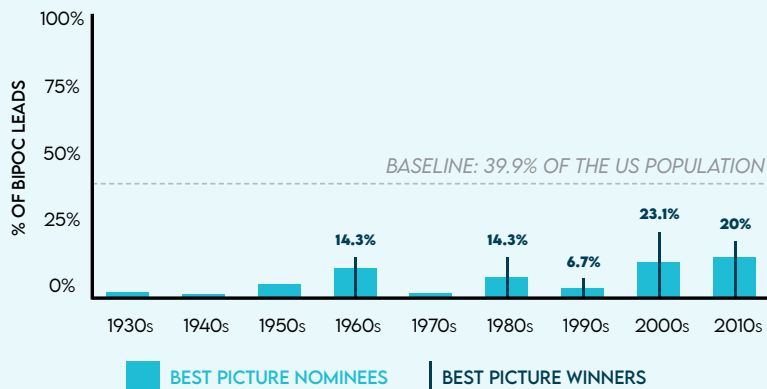


FIGURE 6: LGBTQ+ LEADS



FIGURE 7: LEADS WITH DISABILITIES



FIGURE 8: WOMEN LEADS BY RACE

RACE/ETHNICITY	NOMINATED FILMS	WINNING FILMS	POPULATION
ASIAN WOMEN	1.9%	—	5.7%
BLACK WOMEN	1.9%	—	13.3%
LATINX WOMEN	1.4%	2.9%	18.3%
MENA WOMEN	—	—	2.3%
NATIVE AMERICAN/ PACIFIC ISLANDER WOMEN	—	—	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN	—	—	0.1%
WHITE WOMEN	94.8%	97.1%	60.1%

In terms of sexuality, only two films with an LGBTQ+ woman lead have ever been nominated for Best Picture (*The Color Purple*, 1986, and *The Kids Are Alright*, 2011), and none have won.

Only ten films centering the life of a disabled woman have been nominated for Best Picture, and only two of those films (*Driving Miss Daisy*, 1990, and *The Shape of Water*, 2018) have ever won.

Only 8% of nominated films with women leads centered the stories of women ages 50+. Among films with women protagonists that have won for Best Picture, only two (*Driving Miss Daisy*, 1990, and *Nomadland*, 2021) feature woman leads ages 50+, even though 34.2% of women are 50 or older in the US.⁹

Only one film centering the life of a fat woman has ever been nominated for Best Picture (*Precious*, 2010), and the film did not win the award.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 42% of Americans are classified as people of size.¹¹

Director Analysis

Another way of understanding whose voices are deemed valuable by society is by analyzing who is elevated for their storytelling. Since 1929, only 3.1% of films nominated for Best Picture have had women directors. Only four films with women directors have won for Best Picture in Oscar history (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 2009, *The Hurt Locker*, 2010, *Nomadland*, 2021, and *CODA*, 2022).

When we look at the percentage of women directors by decade, we find that men directed every single Best Picture winner in the 20th century. While we have made progress since this time, only one-in-ten Best Picture winners were

FIGURE 9: BEST PICTURE NOMINEES WITH WOMEN LEADS, BY INTERSECTING IDENTITY

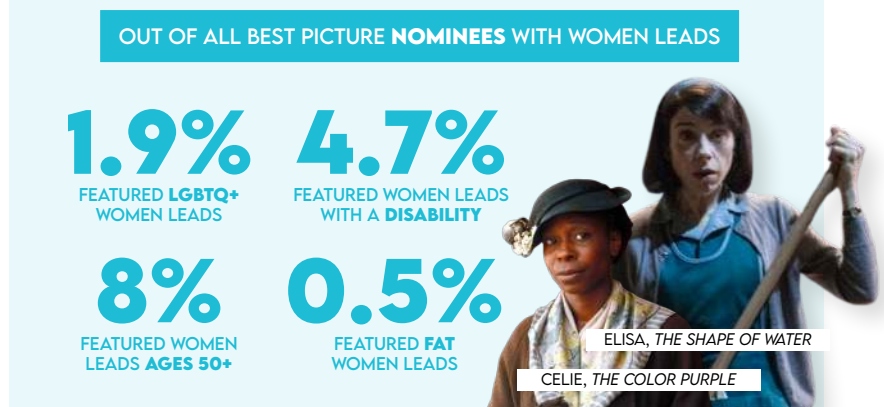


FIGURE 10: BEST PICTURE WINNERS WITH WOMEN LEADS, BY INTERSECTING IDENTITY

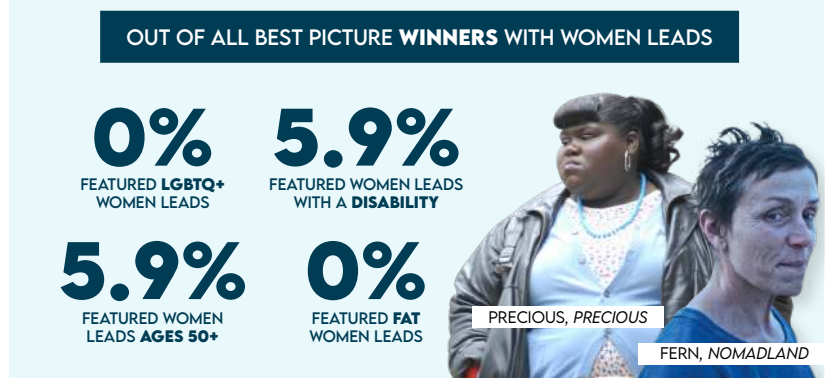


FIGURE 11: WOMEN DIRECTORS

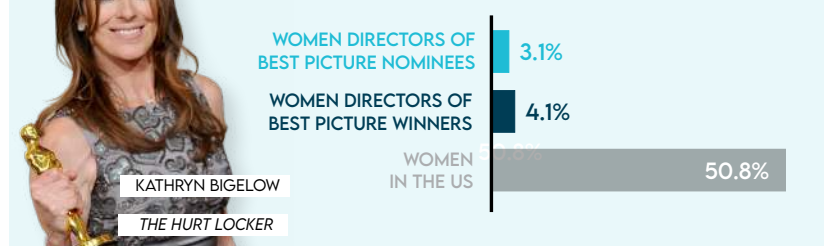
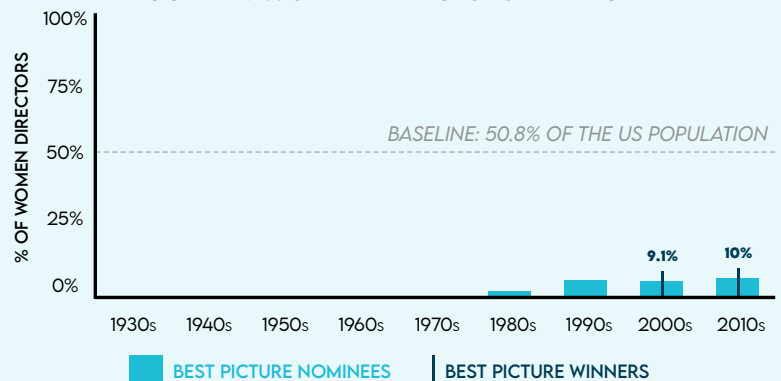


FIGURE 12: WOMEN DIRECTORS BY DECADE



directed by women from 2000 - 2019. Although the award for Best Picture was given to films directed by women for the past two years (*Nomadland*, 2021, and *CODA*, 2022), only 18.5% of all Best Picture nominees in the 2020s have had women directors.

BIPOC Directors are also vastly represented when it comes to Best Picture winners (7.1% 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 of Best Picture winners.

When we look at BIPOC directors by decade, we find that 100% of 20th century Best Picture winners were directed by white people. 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 one-in-four nominees, and two of the three most recent winners (*Parasite*, 2020, and *Nomadland*, 2021) having BIPOC directors.

Intersectional Analysis

Turning now to an intersectional analysis, in Oscar history, less than 1% of Best Picture nominees were directed by BIPOC women. Only two films with BIPOC women directors have ever been won for Best Picture (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 2009, and *Nomadland*, 2021). No film featuring a Black, Latine, Native American/Pacific Islander, or MENA woman director has ever won an Academy Award for Best Picture.

FIGURE 13: BIPOC DIRECTORS



FIGURE 14: RACE/ETHNICITY OF DIRECTORS

RACE/ETHNICITY	NOMINATED FILMS	WINNING FILMS	POPULATION
ASIAN	1.2%	2%	5.7%
BLACK	1.5%	2%	13.3%
LATINX	1.4%	2%	18.3%
MENA	—	—	2.3%
NATIVE AMERICAN/ PACIFIC ISLANDER	0.2%	—	0.2%
SOUTH ASIAN	0.5%	1.1%	0.1%
WHITE	95.2%	97.1%	60.1%

FIGURE 15: BIPOC DIRECTORS BY DECADE

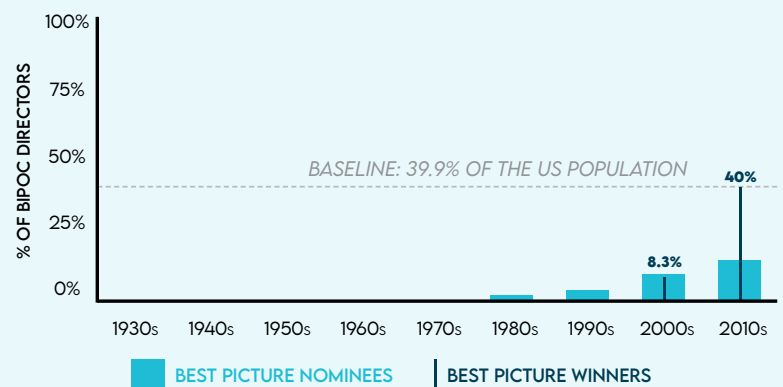
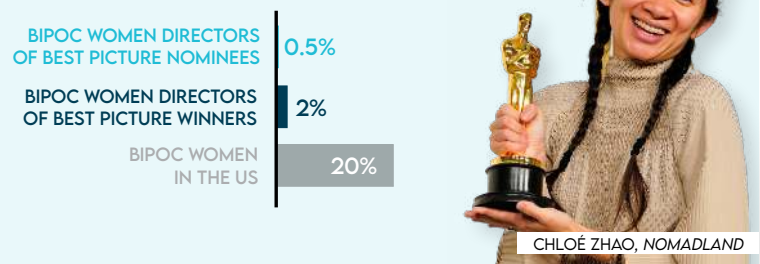


FIGURE 16: BIPOC WOMEN DIRECTORS





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:

- No LGBTQ+ people are featured as leads in recent Best Picture winners.
- Few BIPOC and people with disabilities are featured as leads in recent Best Picture winners.
- Representations of gender have improved in the past five years, with three films centering the lives of women characters (*The Shape of Water*, 2018, *Nomadland*, 2021, and *CODA*, 2022).

FIGURE 17: RECENT BEST PICTURE LEADS/CO-LEADS REPRESENTATIONS

YEAR	FILM	WOMAN LEAD	BIPOC LEAD	LGBTQ+ LEAD	LEAD WITH DISABILITY
2022	<i>CODA</i>	YES	NO	NO	NO
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

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

- Major progress has been made for BIPOC directors with three of the last five winning films being directed by BIPOC directors (*Nomadland*, 2021, *Parasite*, 2020, and *The Shape of Water*, 2018).
- We see progress in the past five years for women directors, who directed two out of the five most recent winning films (*Nomadland*, 2021, and *CODA*, 2022).

FIGURE 18: RECENT BEST PICTURE DIRECTOR REPRESENTATIONS

YEAR	FILM	WOMAN DIRECTOR	BIPOC DIRECTOR
2022	<i>CODA</i>	YES	NO
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



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 747 leading and co-leading characters and 581 directors from the 94 Best Picture winners from 1929 through 2022.¹² 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 three more acclaimed films, *The Mask You Live In* (2015), *The Great American Lie* (2019), and *Fair Play* (2022). 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. Jones, J. (2022). LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.1%. *Gallup*, April 13, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.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.