

**Asymmetrical Academy Awards®?  
A Look at Gender Imbalance in Best Picture Nominated Films  
from 1977 to 2006**

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“Because the Academy numbers among its members the most gifted and skilled artists and craftsmen in the motion picture world, its Award stands alone as a symbol of superior achievement” ([www.3.oscars.org/aboutacademyawards/voting01.html](http://www.3.oscars.org/aboutacademyawards/voting01.html), ¶8). As the gold standard, we wanted to evaluate how acclaimed Oscar® films performed at issues of gender representation. To this end, we recently examined gender balance of characters in the best picture Academy Award® nominated films from 1977 to 2006. The total sample included 150 films (see Table 1). Only single, speaking characters were evaluated for their sex (male, female). Several trends emerged across the data.

### Key Findings

#### *#1 Gender Imbalance is a Trademark of Nominated Best Picture Films*

Of the 6,833 single speaking characters evaluated, only 27.3% ( $n=1,865$ ) were females. Stated differently, nearly three fourths (72.7%,  $n=4,968$ ) of the characters in nominated best picture films were males. These findings translate into seeing a ratio of 2.66 males to every 1 female. This finding is very close to the estimate obtained by our research team when we evaluated gender balance in 400 top-grossing theatrically released films (rated G, PG, PG-13, R) between 1990 and 2006 (<http://www.thegeenadavisinstitute.org/downloads/GDIGMARTICLE.pdf>). In that study, we found that single-speaking males outnumber females at a ratio of 2.71 to 1.

The distribution of gender is related to whether films actually receive the Oscar®. Films that win the Academy Award for best picture depict significantly fewer females (24.3% out of 1,608 characters) than do those that do not win the award (28.2%, out of 5,225 characters).<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that this finding is somewhat trivial as it demonstrates less than a 5% difference between those nominated and those receiving the distinguished accolade.

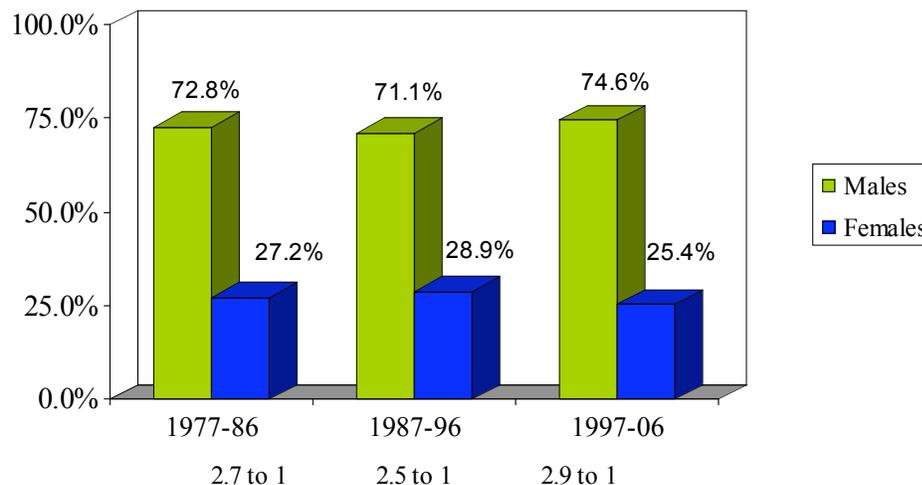
Gender imbalance is not the only variable askew in this elite group of movies. Examining the apparent ethnicity of characters using all available information from the plot (i.e. vocal cues, dress, geographical location), a full 83.3% of the characters were coded as “white.” This leaves only 16.7% of characters to represent all other ethnicities.

Clearly, the “character profile” of best picture nominated films selected by the academy is white and male.

### *#2 Gender Imbalance Has Not Changed Over Time*

To see if the status of women in film has changed over time, we sorted the sample into three bandwidths of time: movies nominated between 1977 and 1986 ( $n=50$ ), movies nominated between 1987 and 1996 ( $n=50$ ), and movies nominated between 1997 and 2006 ( $n=50$ ). We then looked at the distribution of gender across time. The analysis revealed a significant but trivial difference in the percentage of males to females by time (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Very simply, there has been no change in the frequency of roles for females in best picture nominated films in the last 30 years.

Gender Prevalence in Best Picture Nominated Films by Time  
Figure 1



### *#3 Gender Imbalance is Affected by Women in Positions of Power*

Some have argued that the gender imbalance seen on screen is a function of the gender of those working in positions of influence behind the camera. To see if this may be the case, we assessed the gender of directors, executive producers, producers and writers for each of the 150 films.<sup>4</sup> All information was gleaned from Baseline Studio System. A total of 4% of films featured one or more females as director ( $n=6$ ), 26% as writer ( $n=39$ ), and 41.3% as executive producer or producer ( $n=62$ ).

Table 2 presents a somewhat different picture of gender representation of *individuals* working behind the scenes. Examining the percentage of writers, directors, and producers, it is apparent that females hold substantially fewer of these positions than do males. Further, the ratio of males to females in these occupations is 6.50 to 1! Clearly, a lack of parity exists in front of and behind the camera in best picture nominated films.

Table 2  
% of Males and Females Working by Job Title

Measure	Males	Females	Total
Directors	96% ( <i>n</i> =148)	4% ( <i>n</i> =6)	154
Writers	86.3% ( <i>n</i> =286)	13% ( <i>n</i> =45)	331
Producers	84% ( <i>n</i> =457)	16% ( <i>n</i> =86)	543
Total	87% ( <i>n</i> =891)	13% ( <i>n</i> =137)	1,028

Next, we examined to see if the distribution of on screen portrayals of gender varies when a woman holds one of these three positions of influence (e.g., writer, director, producer) in the industry. An analysis revealed a significant difference in the percentage of females depicted on screen by director sex. The proportion of females on the silver screen is significantly higher (females = 41.2%, *n*=87) when a female is directing a motion picture than when a man is at the helm (females = 26.8%, *n*=1,778).<sup>5</sup>

A marginally significant relationship ( $p < .10$ ) emerged between producer sex and character gender shown on screen.<sup>6</sup> Females are slightly more likely to be shown in films produced by one or more women (28.4%, *n*=813) than in films produced by all men (26.5%, *n*=1,052). No difference in gender emerged by writer sex, however.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this report show that Academy Award® Best Picture Nominated films are anything but gender balanced. Males dominate in films given this prestigious nomination, in terms of both on screen portrayals as well as behind the scenes employment as writers, directors, and/or producers. These findings are consistent with a great deal of other research examining gender roles in television and film and suggest that very little progress has been made in roughly thirty years.

One notable finding is that women working behind the scenes in the entertainment industry can affect gender representation on screen. However, this is not true for all above the line employment. We found that only the presence of a female director in a nominated best picture film had a significant impact on female roles. Though the number of women directors in this sample of films was very small, these few women seem to be powerful players in the representation of females shown in film. Perhaps with time and more women moving into this key position of power, a tipping point will be created whereby females occupy half of the roles behind, and in front of, the camera.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>. Stacy L. Smith (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1999) is an Associate Professor of Entertainment at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Her research focuses on children's responses to mass media portrayals (television, film, video games) of violence, gender and hypersexuality. Dr. Smith has written almost 50 journal articles and book chapters on content patterns and effects of the media on youth. Most recently, she has been working with a team of graduate and undergraduate students to assess portrayals of males and females in cinematic content and TV programming for children. Marc Choueiti (M.A., University of Southern California, 2007) is a project manager at the Annenberg School for Communication at USC where Amy Granados is a doctoral student and Sarah Erickson is an undergraduate.

<sup>2</sup>. We determined the significance of any particular finding in two steps. First, we conducted a chi-square test and examined to see if it was significant at the  $p < .05$  level. If this level of significance was met, we then assessed whether a 5% difference between row percentages emerged. When these two conditions were met, we were willing to say a significant and practical difference was observed. For the first analysis, a significant chi-square was revealed for character sex (male, female) by the presence or absence of award,  $X^2(1, 6,833) = 9.40, p < .01, \phi = -.037$ .

<sup>3</sup>. Chi-square analysis demonstrated a significant effect for character sex by epoch of time,  $X^2(2, 6,833) = 7.49, p < .05, \phi = .033$ . As noted above, the difference between percentages of females failed to meet the practical level of significance stated in Note 1.

<sup>4</sup>. These categories were first evaluated by listings from Baseline Studio System. However, there were some discrepancies between Baseline's data and the producers listed on the website for the Academy Awards®. To accommodate these differences, we first ran the analyses involving only Baseline estimates. Those results are reported above. As a subsequent analysis, we examined the gender of the Academy's listing of producers. The results showed that a total of 34 films featured a producer that was female. A total of 289 individuals were listed as producers or co-producers, with 13% female and 87% male. When examining the relationship between academy producer gender and character sex, a non significant chi-square emerged,  $X^2(1, 6,833) = 1.457, p = .23, \phi = .015$ .

<sup>5</sup>. The analysis yielded a significant chi-square for character sex by director sex,  $X^2(1, 6,833) = 21.315, p < .01, \phi = .056$ .

<sup>6</sup>. A chi-square revealed a significant effect for character sex by producer sex,  $X^2(1, 6,833) = 3.29, p < .10, \phi = .02$ .

<sup>7</sup>. The chi-square obtained for writer sex by character sex was,  $X^2(1, 6,833) = 2.047, p = .152, \phi = .017$ .

## Methodology

During the 2006/2007 academic year, two large groups of students were trained (by Marc Choueiti, Amy Granados, and Stacy Smith) to evaluate Academy Award® best picture nominated films. The training taught students to master the study's codebook as well as apply the conceptual and operational definitions in the scheme reliably. Coder agreement on identifying single-speaking characters in the film as well as evaluating the measures reported above (e.g., gender, apparent ethnicity) was at an acceptable level (i.e., above .70). After training deemed the coders reliable, the students were randomly assigned the best picture films to evaluate. Information pertaining to the gender of individuals involved with the production of the films was obtained from Baseline Studio Systems. Towards this end, only the gender of directors, writers (e.g., story by, screenplay, adapted from, source material), executive producers, and producers was noted by the first author. No "co" or "associates" were written down or coded.

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*Table 1 – Academy Award Nominated Best Picture Films from 1977 - 2006*

1977 – Annie Hall*	1987 – Broadcast News	1997 – As Good As It Gets
1977 – Julia	1987 – Fatal Attraction	1997 – Good Will Hunting
1977 – Star Wars IV	1987 – Hope and Glory	1997 – L.A. Confidential
1977 – The Goodbye Girl	1987 – Moonstruck	1997 – The Full Monty
1977 – The Turning Point	1987 – The Last Emperor*	1997 – Titanic*
1978 – Un Unmarried Woman	1988 – Dangerous Liaisons	1998 – Elizabeth
1978 – Coming Home	1988 – Mississippi Burning	1998 – Life is Beautiful
1978 – Heaven Can Wait	1988 – Rain Man*	1998 – Saving Private Ryan
1978 – The Deer Hunter*	1988 – The Accidental Tourist	1998 – Shakespeare in Love*
1978 – Midnight Express	1988 – Working Girl	1998 – The Thin Red Line
1979 – All That Jazz	1989 – Born on the 4 <sup>th</sup> of July	1999 – American Beauty*
1979 – Apocalypse Now	1989 – Dead Poet’s Society	1999 – The Cider House Rules
1979 – Breaking Away	1989 – Driving Miss Daisy*	1999 – The Green Mile
1979 – Kramer vs. Kramer*	1989 – Field of Dreams	1999 – The Insider
1979 – Norma Rae	1989 – My Left Foot	1999 – The Sixth Sense
1980 – Coal Miner’s Daughter	1990 – Awakenings	2000 – Chocolat
1980 – The Elephant Man	1990 – Dances with Wolves*	2000 – Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
1980 – Ordinary People*	1990 – Ghost	2000 – Erin Brockovich
1980 – Raging Bull	1990 – Good Fellas	2000 – Gladiator*
1980 – Tess	1990 – The Godfather, Part III	2000 – Traffic
1981 – Atlantic City	1991 – Beauty and the Beast	2001 – A Beautiful Mind*
1981 – Chariots of Fire*	1991 – Bugsy	2001 – Gosford Park
1981 – On Golden Pond	1991 – JFK	2001 – In the Bedroom
1981 – Raiders of the Lost Ark	1991 – The Prince of Tides	2001 – Moulin Rouge
1981 – Reds	1991 – The Silence of the Lambs*	2001 – The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship
1982 – E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial	1992 – A Few Good Men	2002 – Chicago*
1982 – Gandhi*	1992 – Howards End	2002 – Gangs of New York
1982 – Missing	1992 – Scent of a Woman	2002 – The Hours
1982 – The Verdict	1992 – The Crying Game	2002 – The Lord of the Rings: Two Towers
1982 – Tootsie	1992 – Unforgiven*	2002 – The Pianist
1983 – Tender Mercies	1993 – In the Name of the Father	2003 – The Lord of the Rings: Return*
1983 – Terms of Endearment*	1993 – Schindler’s List*	2003 – Lost in Translation
1983 – The Big Chill	1993 – The Fugitive	2003 – Master and Commander
1983 – The Dresser	1993 – The Piano	2003 – Mystic River
1983 – The Right Stuff	1993 – The Remains of the Day	2003 – Seabiscuit
1984 – A Passage to India	1994 – Forrest Gump*	2004 – Finding Neverland
1984 – A Soldier’s Story	1994 – Four Weddings and a Funeral	2004 – Million Dollar Baby*
1984 – Amadeus*	1994 – Pulp Fiction	2004 – Ray
1984 – Places in the Heart	1994 – Quiz Show	2004 – Sideways
1984 – The Killing Fields	1994 – The Shawshank Redemption	2004 – The Aviator
1985 – Kiss of the Spider Woman	1995 – Apollo 13	2005 – Brokeback Mountain
1985 – Out of Africa*	1995 – Babe	2005 – Capote
1985 – Prizzi’s Honor	1995 – Braveheart*	2005 – Crash*
1985 – The Color Purple	1995 – Sense and Sensibility	2005 – Good Night, Good Luck
1985 – Witness	1995 – The Postman (Il Postino)	2005 – Munich
1986 – A Room with a View	1996 – Fargo	2006 – Babel
1986 – Children of a Lesser God	1996 – Jerry Maguire	2006 – Letters from Iwo Jima
1986 – Hannah and Her Sisters	1996 – Secrets & Lies	2006 – Little Miss Sunshine
1986 – Platoon*	1996 – Shine	2006 – The Departed*
1986 – The Mission	1996 – The English Patient*	2006 – The Queen

\* = winner of Best Picture Category