

New research finds gender inequality extends beyond the grave

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Ghosts of sexism past haunt the world's most famous rich list for dead celebrities, according to a new study from the University of York.

The study analyzed the *Forbes* "Top Dead Earning Celebrities List" between 2001 and 2018 and found that a vast inequality of earnings

persists between deceased [celebrity](#) men and women.

Of the 49 individuals who have featured over that period, only four were women—Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Bettie Page and Jenni Riviera.

Lack of ownership

The stark absence of more women from the list is because many have historically not been able to own and control the wealth produced by their celebrity status. This lack of ownership in life continues to impede women's earnings in [death](#).

According to the research, where women have ended up on the list, it has been largely as a result of their immortalization as an iconic symbol of youth, beauty and glamor rather than for their artistic performances.

Conflict over who benefits from generated wealth and what "work" a dead celebrity does after death often impact on the earnings of dead celebrity women. For example, the posthumous career of Marilyn Monroe—which has included her appearance in adverts for Coca Cola, Max Factor and Chanel No 5—is the subject of continuing public litigation for ownership of her image.

Men, on the other hand—including Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson (who topped the chart in 2016 with earnings of \$825 million)—dominate the list because they have gained possession of capital such as record rights and movie stakes beyond the value of their physical bodies, which continue to generate revenue for their estate in death.

Wealth for others

Author of the study, Dr. Ruth Penfold Mounce from the Department of Sociology at the University of York, said: "For some celebrities who have achieved iconic status, death does not signal the end of their commercial success. In fact, it can be an excellent career move.

"Women, however, still do not have the posthumous career success their male counterparts have enjoyed.

"In life, the careers of iconic famous women like Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn were often controlled by male agents meaning their talents were not the key source for the production of wealth for them, but rather a means of generating wealth for others. This research shows how this inequality continues in death, limiting women's posthumous earnings."

Next generation

However, the study notes that 21st-century culture has witnessed the emergence of perceptive and well-informed celebrity women who own the sources of production of wealth and are not restricted to just their "bodily capital."

Women such as Oprah Winfrey and JK Rowling are in firm control of the economic and symbolic value of their celebrity status—something they can take forwards into death.

Dr. Penfold Mounce added: "We are now getting a smarter generation of celebrities who are taking control of their celebrity status and the revenue generated by their talents. These women may decide to follow in the footsteps of celebrities like Robin Williams, by taking steps to protect their posthumous careers and leaving clear legal instructions with charitable foundations set up in their names how to manage their affairs in the "afterlife."

"However, all the possible women candidates for the Dead Rich List still have long lives ahead of them, barring illness or accident, so it will be many years before the gendered inequality of value is challenged on the list.

"As it stands, the gendered inequality of bodily capital means that for celebrity [women](#), death is not the last great equalizer—inequality continues in death."

More information: Ruth Penfold-Mounce. Value, Bodily Capital, and Gender Inequality after Death, *Sociological Research Online* (2019).

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Provided by University of York

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