

Women and people of color remain 'invisible' as most people pick white men as their heroes, researchers say

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Women and people of color remain invisible to many people in Britain and the U.S. as people pick white men as their heroes instead, a study shows. Their achievements are often forgotten or not recognized when people are choosing who inspires them, researchers have found.

Most people said their family and friends, people closest to them, were their heroes. These 'everyday' heroes accounted for one in three choices in Britain and 41% in the US.

In both countries, politicians were popular as heroes, with more common choices including Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln, and Barack Obama, and British Prime Ministers such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher.

Human rights activists and campaigners were the sixth most popular category in both countries. This included Martin Luther King Jr, whose popularity competes with Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai in the UK, and Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X in the US.

But there were striking differences between the two countries. Celebrities, actors, and TV presenters were the second most popular category of [hero](#) in Britain, with only 1.2% choosing religious figures. Religious figures were the second most popular type of hero in the US, reaching almost 7% of all reported heroes. British respondents tended to choose living religious leaders such as the Pope compared to the US respondents' affinity with Biblical figures.

British and US [women](#) were more likely than men to have women heroes. American and British men were around four times less likely to have a woman hero than women—9% to 34% in the US and 9% to 40% in Britain.

The analysis by Ekaterina Kolpinskaya from the University of Exeter and Nataliya Danilova from the University of Aberdeen is based on YouGov surveys that asked 1,686 adults in Britain and 1,000 in the U.S. who their biggest personal hero was.

Dr. Kolpinskaya said, "The allure of heroes is enduring. We have found

people's gender and ethnicity have an impact on who their hero is. There is a persistent gap between the publicly prominent white male hero figure and a perpetually 'invisible,' and 'forgotten' heroine. People's choice of hero reflects their own sex and race and ethnicity."

Only one in four Britons and one in five Americans said they had a heroine.

When [family members](#) were excluded, only 11% of Americans chose a women public figure hero, compared to one in five Britons. The under 25's in the US were more likely to have a women-hero than those who were older while rates for older and younger people were similar in the UK at 25%.

In Britain, supporting the Conservative Party increases the probability of having a woman hero—27% chance compared to 13% for Labour, 22% for Liberal Democrats and 14% for UKIP. Researchers believe this represents a "Thatcher effect"—with Margaret Thatcher accounting for 18% of all women heroes listed by Conservative supporters.

Supporting the Republican Party in the US substantially reduced the chance of having a woman hero with the Republicans having a 13% chance of having a woman hero compared to the Democrats' 25%.

In Britain, although racial prejudice is declining, non-white minority heroes account for only 15% of all heroes compared to 31% in the US. This includes 21% for women. Ethnic minority hero figures tend to include non-British political activists such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Malala Yousafzai, Mahatma Gandhi, and Muhammad Ali, while only three Britons made it to the list, including boxer Lennox Lewis, Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton and a Victoria Cross recipient Johnson Beharry. The study says there is an acute need for the public recognition of ethnic minorities in the fabric of British society.

Dr. Danilova said, "In both countries, ethnic minorities belong to another group of 'invisible,' and often overlooked heroes. But there was a much wider presence of non-white Americans in the 'pool' of the US heroes. This included prominent public figures such as Barack Obama and Martin Luther King Jr.

"As in Britain, American women are disproportionately—and statistically significantly—more likely to have ethnic minority heroes with one in three women declaring an ethnic minority figures among their family and friends."

African Americans (88%), Hispanics (70%) and Americans belonging to other ethnic minority groups (89%) had a strikingly higher probability of having a non-white hero compared to white Americans (6.5%).

The study is [published](#) in the *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*.

More information: Ekaterina Kolpinskaya et al, Heroes as Harbingers of Social Change: Gender, Race, and Hero Choice in the USA and Britain, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* (2024).
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