



Community Assembly: The Financial Time's 25 Most Influential Women of 2021



The FT's annual Women of the Year has long celebrated achievement and influence. With the same objective in mind, we've expanded the list for 2021 and asked some of the most influential women in the world to write the entries, including Jane Fraser, Christine Lagarde, Elizabeth Warren, Billie Jean King, Malala and Greta Thunberg. Women of the Year is a celebration, of course. But it is also a lens through which to understand the dynamic nature of leadership and power. To ask "Who was influential in 2021?", you must grapple with "What is influence?" and "How is it changing?" We put the list together in collaboration with FT journalists from dozens of international bureaus, former women of the year and readers. Across continents, industries and issues, all of these remarkable women have shaped this tumultuous year. Each of them is sure to help shape the better ones to come.

Roula Khalaf, editor of the Financial Times

**NB: This is an unranked list.*

Creators



Chloé Zhao, Film-maker

BY JO ELLISON

The first Asian woman, the first woman of colour and only the second woman ever to win the Academy Award for Best Director, Chinese-born Zhao was propelled into the spotlight in April for *Nomadland*, a docudrama that exploded every kind of cliché one might assume about the homeless, and offered the most interesting protagonists to have emerged on screen in the past 10 years. Quiet, independent, with a creative focus fixed on social issues, Zhao ticked all the boxes for the noble worthiness of film-making and represented it wearing pigtails, braces, sneakers and an off-white Hermès gown.

She then upended expectations by delivering *Eternals*, the 26th outing from Marvel, a critical failure and now anticipated to be one of the superhero franchise's lowest-grossing films. All the more reason to love her. Some might want to cocoon Zhao in the bubble of indie director darling. But she is forging her own path through the Hollywood studio system – and proving that her genre game is wide. Besides, she's only getting started. Recently, she posted a picture of *Count Dracula* on Instagram. A teaser for her next film, a science-fiction western horror genre mash-up. This is one director I can really get behind.

Jo Ellison is the editor of the FT's How to Spend It



Sally Rooney, Author

BY OLIVIA SUDJIC

I read Sally Rooney's first novel in 2017, the week it was published, as we were supposed to do a debut fiction showcase together in London. When Sally had to pull out, I was partly relieved. I'd have found it difficult not to gush. I'd read her electric novel in a day and felt simultaneously affirmed and attacked by it. That or I'd have gone into a K-hole of mute anxiety as the former "number one competitive debater on the continent of Europe" wiped the floor with me in unsparing, affectless prose.

Rooney's third novel was published this year (featuring an author grappling with celebrity), so in addition to screen adaptations there are now Rooney tote bags and bucket hats. Mysteriously, she posed for a photo shoot holding an owl. I'm glad I came to her books before her reputation metastasised into fame, unencumbered by Twitter discourse and the reactions-to-the-reactions-to the books. Studying the owl photograph, it's tempting to see the chained bird as Rooney's familiar. Longing to fly from the spotlight and observe us, her prey, under cover of darkness.

Olivia Sudjic's latest novel is "Asylum Road"



Shonda Rhimes, Television producer, screenwriter and author

BY AMMA ASANTE

Shonda Rhimes's ability to not just change but create the conversations around storytelling and television is unprecedented. Her body of work has shown the power of not only joining the table but creating one of her own. When *Bridgerton* hit our screens, she once again displayed her deft touch at identifying the public mood and the gaping hole that existed in television for costume dramas that go beyond whiteness at their centre.

She has always understood the power of a story that is at once inclusive and escapist, while burying her social commentary deep within narratives that entertain and provoke. That is no easy feat! She is a modern-day icon, inspiring beyond her own race and gender, yet invaluable to those who most see their identity in her. As she marches to the beat of her own drum with the power of her pen and her might as a producer, she continues to challenge and dilute the strength of stereotypes that have confined black women. With her existence, it's a thousand times more difficult to make a single race and gender the requisite for what talent looks like.

Amma Asante is a Bafta-award winning director and writer



Scarlett Johansson, Actor

BY BROOKE MASTERS

Hollywood's highest-paid actress for three of the past four years, Scarlett Johansson is nobody's patsy. She eschews social media and has said she finds her fan nickname "ScarJo" insulting. A self-described feminist, she nonetheless outraged progressives earlier in her career by defending Woody Allen against sexual abuse allegations, accepting a role as a transgender man and another that had been Japanese in the source material. (She withdrew from the trans role after a backlash.)

This year, she challenged the cinema establishment by suing Disney for releasing her film *Black Widow* on its streaming channel and in cinemas simultaneously. She argued that Disney had used the film — part of its highly lucrative Marvel universe — to boost its fledgling streaming service and stock price at her expense, as her bonus was tied to box office sales. Disney billed the move as a necessary response to Covid-19 and tried to paint Johansson, who received \$20m upfront for the film, as greedy and insensitive. The two sides settled in September for an undisclosed sum. But not before Johansson struck a blow for "talent" against a studio trying to throw its weight around.

Brooke Masters is the FT's chief business commentator



Paula Rego, Artist

BY JAN DALLEY

“I try and get justice for women . . . at least in the pictures . . . Revenge too,” Paula Rego has said. Revenge is a strong word, but this artist’s haunting images pack enormous, often unsettling, power. Struggling through a deeply conventional religious home in her native Portugal, later through a male-dominated London art world in her mid-career, Rego has risen to become probably the most significant figurative painter of our times.

Her intense, hard-hitting images — darkly sexual, deeply ominous, packed with drama, violence and symbolism, drawing on fantasy and myth while also celebrating the gorgeous richness of life — take inspiration from her Portuguese upbringing, as well as her own later life. This year, a slew of important exhibitions, most recently the stunning, 100-work Tate Britain retrospective, sealed her reputation. Her influence runs deep. As curator Elena Crippa puts it, “I would struggle to think of a significant painter, particularly in Britain, where I can’t see a connection to Paula.”

Jan Dalley is the FT's arts editor



Gabriela Hearst, Creative Director, Chloé; Founder and Creative Director, Gabriela Hearst

BY DIANE VON FÜRSTENBERG

When I met Gabriela, I remember her showing me a picture of her mother, who lives in South America. So I have an image of Gabriela riding a horse in an open field, and I think that's exactly what she's doing at Chloé. She's riding it beautifully. She has brought energy and yet kept the femininity that is so synonymous with Chloé. I grew up with Chloé and it has been in the hands of many different people. Gabriela's vision is about femininity, but it's practical at the same time. She has brought a fresh, modern energy to femininity – it's a big deal! It's feminine without being girly. It's visual and true.

Diane Von Fürstenberg is a designer and philanthropist

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