

Hidden figures

The film *Hidden Figures* (*Il Diritto di Contare*, 2016), **loosely** based on the book by Margot Lee Shetterly, tells the true story of three African-American women engineers, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan, who face racial and gender prejudice working at NASA on a space mission project in the early 1960s. The film shows the segregation attitude that was prevalent in the USA in the 1960s; for example, Katherine is forced to walk eight hundred metres to use the nearest toilet designated for “coloured” people and only after she gets **scolded** by her team leader, she overtly explains the situation. Moreover, in their work teams, the three women often suffer **disrespect** and lack of esteem; for example, they have to make their way through the white male-dominated world they live and work in. Bit by bit, the film shows how they manage to prove their abilities and their knowledge, and their contribution to the space missions they were working at will prove vital for their success.

■ The “hidden figures” true story

The three women were hired by NASA as “computers” – people specifically employed to do calculations. Some of the characters the three women have to deal with in the film are fictional, but they represent the attitudes of American society of the time. For example, the character of statistician Paul Stafford was created to represent some racist and sexist attitudes that existed during the 1950s and 1960s. In the film, he contrasts every effort Katherine makes to improve her position, including reducing her job qualifications to secretarial duties, omitting her signature on official reports, and telling her that it was not appropriate for women to attend space programme **briefings**. The character of supervisor Vivian Mitchell is also a fictional character, created to represent some of the unconscious prejudices that existed among supervisors. Being a woman with a leadership role, this character underlines the racial **bias** that was very widespread at the time.



■ The importance of the “hidden figures”

However, despite some fictional additions, the film **sheds light** on the real conditions in which Afro-American people, and women in particular, had to live in. The film also makes people aware of the importance of these three women scientists, whose contribution was decisive for the American space missions of the 1960s. Katherine Johnson, for example, did the maths that allowed astronaut John Glenn to orbit into space in 1962. Dorothy Vaughan became NASA’s first black supervisor, while Mary Jackson became NASA’s first black female aerospace engineer. Yet, despite this, their stories were untold for decades and their place in history ignored; thanks to fiction, however, they are no longer “hidden figures”.

bias: *pregiudizio*
briefing: *riunione*
disrespect: *disprezzo*

loosely: *liberamente*
to scold: *sgridare*
to shed light: *fare luce*

1  **Complete the sentences with no more than four words.**

1. The film *Hidden Figures* is based
2. The three protagonists face
3. In the film, Katherine has to to go to the toilet.
4. The three women were hired at NASA as
5. Some of the characters in the film are, but they represent gender and racial bias of the time.
6. Katherine Johnson for John Glenn's space mission.
7. Dorothy Vaughan was named NASA's
8. NASA's first black female aerospace engineer.

2  **Write the words that correspond to the definitions.**

1. Setting someone or something apart from others.
2. Kept out of sight.
3. Invented for the purposes of fiction.
4. A meeting for giving information or instructions.
5. A way of thinking or feeling about something.
6. Prejudice for or against one person or group.
7. A person who oversees the work of other people.
8. Low regard and lack of courtesy.