Media portrayals of women—what are they doing to women and men?

The mass media – television, internet, radio, newspapers, magazines and film – is part of our everyday life. It is a powerful tool that provides us with information and entertainment. It reflects our society and it influences the way we think. The demonstrated gender inequality in the media has significant consequences.

Media affects our ideas of who we are and what we could be. We create our identity in relation to the images we see around us from a young age. The current widespread access to media’s limited representations of gender can have undesirable effects. When people are repeatedly shown images of women as victims, sexualised, or in domestic roles, they are more likely to accept these images as normal. When women are portrayed as passive, dependent or weak, it can seem unusual for them to be active, independent or powerful in society. This can affect both men’s and women’s ideas about which careers women might be good at, how important it is for women to be sexually attractive, and whether women should be in positions of authority.

The media has been criticised for its portrayal of women as objects whose value is measured in terms of their usefulness to others. It becomes difficult to see them as thinking, feeling, capable people. Constantly portraying women in a highly sexualised way makes it more likely all women will be seen as sexual objects. This then becomes a human rights issue. For example, in Western Australia 92.3% of sexual assaults are committed against women.

Minister’s Message

The portrayal of women in the media is an issue of growing concern. The world of mass media and its role and influence in our lives is increasing at a rapid pace.

The representation of women in the media is a focus of the Department for Communities, Women’s Interests Strategic Directions 2011-2014. This is an issue critical to women’s safety, health and wellbeing.

I hope this discussion paper will fuel debate about the way women are (and aren’t) portrayed in the media, to help encourage critical thinking by all of us when we engage with the media throughout our daily lives, and to offer people some tools to improve the situation.

I encourage you to take the ideas from this paper and start conversations with your friends and family about this critical issue.

Hon Robyn McSweeney MLC
MINISTER FOR CHILD PROTECTION, COMMUNITY SERVICES, SENIORS AND VOLUNTEERING, WOMEN’S INTERESTS, YOUTH.
Research has found...

The American Psychological Association’s Taskforce on the Sexualisation of Girls found that media sexualisation of girls and young women is linked to mental health problems including depression, anxiety and eating disorders in women.¹ The dangerous consequences of objectifying women are also highlighted by Dr Jean Kilbourne who notes that, “turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step in justifying violence against that person”.² A key criticism of media portrayals of women is that they reinforce negative stereotypes. There is a distinct lack of positive role models for women and girls in music videos, magazines, adverts and movies. Due to the widespread access to media in our society most people are constantly being exposed to skewed representations of gender. These portrayals are repeated thousands of times in the average person’s life. Women’s magazines are filled with advice on dieting, sex tips, fashion and the positioning of the body as the most important part of a woman’s life. The increasing use of Photoshopped images in these magazines adds to unrealistic perceptions of what women look like.

Research has shown that exposure to idealised images of women in magazines has negative effects on their self-esteem: a study in the Psychology of Women Quarterly found, “Women often feel dissatisfied with their appearance after comparing themselves to other females who epitomize the thin-ideal standard of beauty”.³

Women’s increased risk of sexual assault, domestic violence, and mental health problems, alongside the barriers they face to achieving leadership roles in employment and equal pay clearly indicate that women experience inequality in our community. The media is contributing to values that support these inequalities. While there are complex reasons for these real-life situations, it is a concern that the media promotes values that perpetuate this inequality.

³ Evans, Peggy Chin. “If Only I Were Thin Like Her, Maybe I Could be Happy Like Her”: The Self-Implications of Associating a Thin Female Ideal with Life Success.” Psychology of Women Quarterly 27.3 (2003): 209.

Snapshot 1

We looked at two leading women’s magazines for the month of October. Of a total of 14 story titles on their covers, 5 were on the topic of sex and 4 were about fashion. Only one headline was about career and one concerned health. What do these magazines tell us is important to women?

Snapshot 2

In the past few years increasing concerns have been raised about the sale of t-shirts which display sexually provocative imagery of women... Have you seen these shirts when you are out in public? What has been your reaction to them? Do you see similar shirts with men displayed in this way?

Images courtesy of City Beach Australia
Women in movies

In a study of top films across all ratings from 1990 to 2006, 73 per cent of the characters were men. The proportion of males to females did not change in this 16-year period.

In a study of all G-rated films from 2006–2009, 80.5% of working characters were male and 19.5% were female.

The same study also found there were no representations of women working in medical science, executive business, law or politics.

Be the media analyst: ask yourself these questions

- How many female characters are there compared to male characters?
- Is the focus on women’s bodies or on their characters, achievements or jobs?
- Are women shown as victims of violence?
- Are any female characters leaders – such as political leaders, business professionals, employers, or other positions of authority?
- Does the absence of women in these roles in film and television shows affect women’s roles in the real world?

Research has found

- Women and girls appear less frequently than men and boys in the mass media and when they do appear, they speak less.
- There is more focus on women’s appearance, with the ‘ideal’ woman often depicted as extremely thin.
- Women are also more likely to be shown in ways that focus on sexual availability, passiveness, and dependence on other people – they are motherly or domestic, sexualised, or too often represented as victims.
- Even when women are portrayed in active roles, they are often cast with hypersexual characters.

Bechdel Movie Test

The Bechdel Test is used to identify gender bias in films. See how many movies you know that can pass the Bechdel Movie test by answering ‘yes’ to these three questions:

- Are there two or more women in the movie with names?
- Do they talk to each other?
- Do they talk about something other than a man?

A movie passes if you can answer yes to all three even if it is only one scene that passes. Give your opinion on this year’s films at bechdeltest.com.

2012 Movies

Passed: The Hunger Games, The Bourne Legacy, Dark Shadows

Failed: The Dark Knight Rises, The Avengers, The Amazing Spiderman

In news media

A study of Australian media in November 2009 found that only 24% of people who were heard, read about or seen in news stories were female. In sports stories this figure fell to 1%.

Of the 24% of females in news stories, 44% were victims of crimes, accidents, war, health problems or discrimination.

Family status (mother, daughter, wife, sister, or other family relationship) was mentioned for 33% of women quoted or discussed in the news stories. Only 13% of men had their family status mentioned.

In 75% of news articles women were described as homemakers or parents.

Only 32% of the stories were presented or written by female reporters and newsreaders.
You can’t be what you can’t see—where are the role models?

For the last decade women have outnumbered men in higher education but in Australia’s top ASX 200 companies:
- Only 3 per cent of Chief Executive officers are women.
- Only 8 per cent of Board Directors are women.

Nationally, women’s average earnings are 18 per cent less than men’s. In WA the figure is 28 per cent.
- Women more often work in areas that pay lower wages.
- Women occupy less senior positions and take more time out for family responsibilities.

Be the media analyst

- How does the mass media represent female politicians and women in power?
- What types of women are featured in the evening news and in the paper each day?
- Is there any difference between the ways women are represented in advertising media and entertainment media such as movies or TV?

References

Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
www.thegeenadavisinstitute.org/research/
Occupational Aspirations: What are G-rated films teaching children about the world of work?
http://www.mediaed.org/wp/study-guides
Women’s Report Card:
WA Police Business Analysis and Evaluation Unit. WA Police Frontline Management System (IMS) and Offence Information System. Customised Data. 2012

Take action

Media is a business. It is sensitive to the responses and buying patterns of its consumers. Ratings are very important to television stations and programmes are often dropped if they don’t rate well. You do have a say.

- **Tell the media** – send feedback; write letters to editors and comment online.
- **Complain** – the Australian Communications and Media Authority, the Australian Press Council, Independent Media Council and the Advertising Standards Board are waiting to hear from you. Visit www.acma.gov.au.
- **Do it yourself or find alternatives** – talk on your own blog, videos or zines.
- **Tell your friends** – use social media, Facebook and Twitter to get people thinking, boycotting and complaining. Big companies monitor social media so it’s a good place to get heard.
- **Feed good news stories to the media** – contact your local media if you have good news stories about women, and if there is a photo opportunity, it’s even better.
- **Join or support a lobby group** – www.collective.shout.org uses online forums to help women take action.
- **Talk to men** – It is well evidenced that the media portrayal of women as either sexualised or insignificant is targeted mainly at male consumers. Men need to let media know they want respectful representations of women as equals.
- **Tell the company, boycott the product** – Let companies know you aren’t happy, and why; use social media or write on their Facebook page.

For more information

For more information on how the Department for Communities is supporting women’s interests visit: