

# Gender and the Media

**by: Dr. Stacy L. Smith and Amy D. Granados**

A few years ago, I (Stacy) was asked to conduct a study on gender roles in children's media. Up until that point, I had not paid much attention to media portrayals of girls and women. By training, I was a violence researcher concerned with content patterns and effects of exposure to media depictions of physical aggression. As I started to watch television and film content with new eyes and think about how females appear, I was stunned. Four years and more than 10 content studies later, I'm still shocked by the way media constructs gender roles. In this essay, we will provide some answers to four questions about gender and the media.

## ***How often are females shown?***

Despite being 50 percent of the U.S. population, females are underrepresented in film and television. In one of our large studies assessing speaking characters in 400 top-grossing films released between 1990 and 2006, we found that males appeared almost three times as frequently as females (2.71 to 1).<sup>1</sup> This ratio did not vary with time or across rating (G, PG, PG-13, or R). In another study, we took a look at gender roles in one week of 1,034 children's television shows airing on broadcast and cable outlets. A slightly better, but still skewed, picture emerged: 1.72 males appeared for every one female.<sup>2</sup>

## ***How are females represented?***

The media still show many girls and women in a traditional and stereotypical light. Across G-rated films and children's TV shows, females are more likely than males to be caregivers and in a committed relationship.<sup>3</sup> These portrayals reaffirm women in emotionally centered roles, and shortchange males, who are less frequently shown acting as fathers and loving partners. TV shows and G-rated films tend to depict more working males than females,<sup>4</sup> which distorts the reality that women now comprise about half of the American workforce.<sup>5</sup>



Lookism also reigns in TV and film. Females are more likely than males to be younger and sexier.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, females in G-rated films are nearly as likely to be shown in sexually revealing clothing as females in R-rated films – 20.3 percent vs. 23.5 percent!<sup>7</sup> When looking closely at G-rated movies, animated gals are more likely than live action ones to be shown with an hourglass figure (unrealistically small waist, large chest) – the ideal body of the Disney Princess posse.

## ***What are the effects of viewing these types of portrayals?***

Does viewing these types of skewed and stereotypical depictions effect developing youth?

This is particularly important given that 0- to 6-year olds spend almost two hours per day with screen media and 8- to 18-year olds use the media over six hours per day.<sup>8</sup> There are at least four effects that may occur with exposure to film and TV's view of gender.

*Beliefs about self worth.* The lack of gender equality may communicate that stories about girls and women are not as important as stories about boys and men. This not only may have a negative effect on some girls' self-esteem, but also may contribute to the perception that boys are valued more than girls are.

*Beliefs about occupations.* The media can also affect children's perceptions of occupations. TV and film can function as a "window to the world," teaching young viewers about different types of jobs. Because occupations can be gender-typed on TV, heavy viewing may reinforce to some children that certain jobs are more or less appropriate for males and females.<sup>9</sup> A few, but not all,<sup>10</sup> studies have demonstrated this finding. It must be noted that seeing or reading about females in nontraditional roles and occupations in the media can *heighten* the suitability of women's achievement, confidence, and employment in nontraditional vocations, particularly among women.<sup>11</sup>

*Beliefs about bodies.* Exposure to thin and sexy female media figures may also affect children's beliefs about their own and others' bodies. Viewing media portrayals of attractive and thin females may contribute to and reinforce boys' beliefs that girls and women are to be valued for how they look rather than who they are. Seeing thin and idealized depictions also may contribute to boys developing unrealistic expectations about how future relational partners should look, dress, and act.

Viewing skinny and sexualized females may have different consequences for girls and young women. With some exceptions,<sup>12</sup> scholars have found a "small to moderate" association between media exposure and internalizing the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction.<sup>13</sup> Research with preadolescents is less substantial, yet it is clear that by age 3, children view fatness negatively.<sup>14</sup> One study found that 31 percent of girls ages 8–10 responded that they are "always" "very scared of being fat."<sup>15</sup>

*Beliefs about relationships.* Exposure to stereotypical portrayals may affect beliefs about interpersonal relationships. Fans of G-rated films will often see their heroines fall in love at first sight and subsequently risk life and limb for a chance to hear "I love you" or to say "I do." Still other stories depict young lovers as sparring partners who repeatedly betray and deceive one another until just before the credits roll. Research shows that overall TV viewing is associated with dysfunctional relationship beliefs (e.g., mind-reading, sexual perfectionism),<sup>16</sup> as is exposure to multiple types of "romantic media."<sup>17</sup> One study has found that viewing reality dating shows significantly and positively predicts endorsing attitudes that regard women as sex objects and men as sex driven.<sup>18</sup> It must be noted that media may be contributing to these types of beliefs, or those who hold such opinions may seek out content that confirms their world view.

## ***How can balance be brought to children's views?***

The best defense, in this case, is a strong offense. We know from research that viewing movies and TV shows with children and discussing the messages they contain may help reduce some of the negative effects.<sup>19</sup> Consider the findings from one recent experiment; younger children who heard simple contrary statements (i.e., “The show is wrong. Lots of girls do things besides paint their nails and put on make-up”) while viewing the TV program *One World* showed more acceptance of females engaging in stereotypically male behaviors than did younger children hearing neutral messages while viewing the same TV program, or seeing nothing at all.<sup>20</sup>

This is only one study, but the results do show that delivering messages while viewing can have a short-term impact on youth. Parents can also take a commonsense approach to sensitizing children to gender messages. For example, parents could ask their children to count the number of males and females in a scene or program. Such an exercise may help sensitize children to the gender imbalance on television. This strategy may also spill over into real world arenas. Children can count the number of women holding seats in Congress, reporting the news, or even running foreign countries. By doing such, boys and girls may become aware of gender inequalities still present in the United States and other parts of the world.

Overall, television and film present a skewed view of gender. Although negative effects of this skewed view can emerge, parents may be able to counteract some of the media's negative influence by viewing and discussing the content with their child.

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## **Endnotes**

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