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Women and the Law

*Research Paper*

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**Women in the Media and Advertising**

American teenagers spend 31 hours a week watching television, 17 hours listening to music, 10 hours online, and 4 hours reading magazines. That’s 10 hours and 45 minutes a day using the media. The media is a powerful messenger. People learn more from media more than any other single source of information. It delivers the content that is shaping our society. Whether it be politics or children’s brains, lives and emotions.

From a young age, girls get the message that what’s most important is how they look and that everything depends on that. Boys too get the message that this is what’s important about girls. They learn this from advertising, films, television, video games, everywhere they look. There is no appreciation for women intellectual; it’s all about the body, not about the brains. No matter their achievements, it still only matters how they look.

Girls, young and old, believe in a concept of what they think is the “perfect woman”. This so-called “perfect woman” looks a certain way and because most human beings don’t and never will look that way, are scrutinized. The ideal image of beauty is more impossible than ever before. Not only is there the use of cosmetics and airbrushing but also now it’s impossible for that image to be absolutely perfect because of computers. In magazines or billboards you never see a picture of a woman that hasn’t been digitally altered to make her “perfect”. From these pictures, girls are being encouraged to achieve this ideal all the time. They are comparing themselves to something that is an impossible standard.

From this pressure, girls are becoming more and more upset with the way they look. 53% of 13-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies. That number increases to 78% by age 17. If young girls are exceptionally upset with their bodies and think that there is nothing they can do about it, they may result in unhealthy actions. This can include eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia, and self-injurious behavior like cutting. These actions occur more than we think. 65% of women and girls have an eating disorder and 17% of teens engage in cutting or related behavior. Feeling this way is not only a risk to your physical health but also to your mental health. Rates of depression among girls and women have doubled between 2000 and 2010.

In a society that features anorexic actresses and models we get conditioned to think that this is what women should look like. So even women of average weight and size are being detected as not being “skinny enough”.

In every type of advertising, especially beauty advertising, we see the same types of bodies. This is because those are the types of bodies that generate all the purchases of the beauty products. It is a huge profitable pursuit for all advertisers but also a lengthy cost. U.S. advertisers spent $235.6 billion dollars in 2009. 80% of the countries in the world have GDPs less than that. But advertisers aren’t the only guilty ones when it comes to spending. U.S. women spend $12,000 to $15,000 a year on beauty products and salon services.

Not only are women spending loads of money on the newest beauty cream, but also on cosmetic surgery. The number of cosmetic surgical procedures performed on youth under the age of 19 more than tripled from 1997 to 2007. That is absolutely ridiculous considering that the average facelift costs $11,429. That is enough money to pay for: 5 years at a community college, 2 years at a state university, or 1 year at the University of California. American women spend more money on beauty and the pursuit of these myths, than their own education, which, would help them out more in the long run. This not only proves that other people see girls as objects, but that girls see themselves as objects too.

If the media sends the message that their [women’s] power lies in their body, this can only leave them feeling disempowered and distract them for making a difference and becoming leaders. This is true because women make of 51% of the U.S. population yet comprise only 17% of Congress. The 2010 midterm election was the first time women have not made gains in Congress since 1979. Only 34 women have ever served as governors, compared to 2,319 men. These numbers are astonishing considering 67 countries in the world have had female presidents or prime ministers, the U.S. not being one of them. Even more shocking, the U.S. is 90th in the world in terms of women in national legislatures. Without women in politics, we don’t really have democratic legitimacy. Nothing is being told from a women’s perspective or is getting women’s insight. Something looks fundamentally wrong with our political institutions.

When you ask little boys and little girls about 7 years old an equal number, about 30%, want to be President of the United States when they grow up. But when you ask the same question when they are 13, you see a massive gap. We have a gender socialization that politics is for men, leadership is considered to be a masculine pursuit and women are then discouraged from pursuing ambitious positions.

Young girls believe that they can only accomplish so much because that is what they are seeing. When it comes to movies and television, 68% of viewers were more likely to accept a female president. Having the opportunity to see women in leadership in television or film is a huge deal because we don’t have many women in leadership. So the way that it gets done to a certain extent has to do with Hollywood. And while some television shows and films include powerful women the situation in Hollywood is pretty bleak. None of us should be surprised, when you really look at Hollywood and the films that are being made, you see the same stereotypes repeated.

Women are rarely the protagonist and if they are it’s some drama about getting the right guy. It’s never about a girl or a woman finding her own destiny. Only 16% of protagonists in film are female. Between 1937 and 2005 there were only 13 female protagonists in animated movies. All of them except one had the aspiration of finding romance. As a culture, women are brought up to look for the time when that knight and shining armor will come and rescue them or provide for them. When it comes to female leaders in entertainment media we see the bitchy boss who has sacrificed family and love to make it to where she is. In any music video or summer blockbuster, women are basically just body props for young male viewers to look at. She is always put there as a desire for men. Recently there has been a new movement where women appear to be empowered. They are carrying the story and they are the action hero but when you peel back a layer it’s simply not so. Even though she is doing things supposedly on her own terms, she is very much objectified and exists for the male viewer, wearing skimpy or very little clothing.

Something else that can be surprisingly disheartening is watching the news. Many female journalists are objectified or sexualized. When a woman is talking about the news viewers aren’t so much paying attention to what she is saying like they would if she were a male, but are more interested in how she looks or what she is wearing. You don’t ever see gossip columns on someone like Brian Williams yet you do with Katie Couric on what she’s wearing or whom she’s dating. Not only are they being gossiped about their personal lives but also about how they act with others in the workforce. Katie Couric and Diane Sawyer were pitted against each other like they were going to have a catfight on the weekends but you never saw that with two men news anchors.

If you turn on the news and look at the two news anchors it looks like it is somebody’s grandfather and his second wife. The women are seen wearing very low-cut shirts, a lot of makeup, their hair is kind of tousled and they look like they’re working as cocktail waitresses instead of newscasters. It sends a very mixed message. Television is a very visual medium and it walks the fine line of looking visual appealing but also looking professional.

The emphasis on women’s appearance affects more than just the women onscreen. It’s affecting women’s ability to participate in the political process. Ironically, the more power women gain, the stronger backlash they receive. Nancy Pelosi, Sonya Sotomayor, Sarah Palin, and Hilary Clinton have all been dissected by others in the media. Theses women have achieved very crucial roles in our politics and instead of being praised, they are getting picked on for how they look and what they are wearing. In John Boehner’s first four weeks as Speaker of the House, he was on the cover of five national weekly magazines. In Nancy Pelosi’s four years as Speaker of the House, she has been on zero national weekly magazines. Even in stories written about the meetings in politics the male senator will get the “stated” and the female senator will get the negative verb like “complained”. Women are twice as likely to be described emotionally as men are. Making women seem this way just inhibits the stereotype that women are more emotional therefore they’re irrational, therefore they shouldn’t be in charge of making major decisions. When Hilary Clinton was campaigning she had hecklers following her saying “iron my shirt” and was called a bitch by the mainstream media. Sarah Palin campaigned as a “real woman” and the mainstream media called her a ditz. Both women, lost in their campaigns.

So who’s deciding what is and what is not presented in the media? The answer is men. Women only own 5.8% of all television stations and 6% of radio stations. Women have tried to get a television station directed towards female, but most already believe there is one, Lifetime. Meanwhile, there are 22 ESPN sports channels. Women comprise on 16% of all writers, directors, producers, cinematographers, and editors. Only 7% of directors and 10% of writers in film are women. Men control the media and by that are controlling what people see.

We have to find a way to change our culture. We need to challenge the media, to value women for more than their youth, beauty, and sexuality and hold the mainstream media companies accountable. We need to encourage young women to discover their true power so they can become leaders and we need to support them throughout. Most importantly we need to live out our own vision of what women can be. I’m not saying that we can never read a gossip magazine or watch reality television ever again. Watching an hour can be fun, but watching 4 hours can be destructive.

If women don’t stand up for each other then no one else will. No one is going to look out for the interest of women except other women. If women spent a tenth of their time thinking about something like helping others than their weight, we could solve many problems. Women in America will be more encouraged if they see more women share their experience and aspirations. As cliché as it sounds, women need to remember that it’s what’s on the inside that counts. We need to teach young girls to value themselves and their accomplishments and that they are capable of doing anything they desire.

# Works Cited

*Miss Representation*. Dir. Jennifer Siebel Newsom and Kimberlee Acquaro. Perf. Geena Davis, Jane Fonda, Condoleezza Rice, Katie Couric, Etc. 2011. Netflix.