

# **Multi-faceted Me: Why Media Must Drop its Stifling Female Stereotypes**

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## **Abstract**

Women face gross misrepresentation in media today. In this essay I argue that the fight against misrepresentation has gone on for millennia and constitutes an integral part of the process of feminine identity formation. Women form their sense of self-worth and legitimate purpose in spite of the media's degrading and dismissive treatment. Establishing legitimacy in the face demeaning media depictions is a formative process for a woman, challenging her to ask weighty questions ("What is my role?") and seek true self-awareness ("Does this depiction describe how I feel?"). Media depicts women as static objects, but the feminine experience is a turbulent one. Media implies that if woman does not look [perfect] or feel [nothing] like the woman in the image, she is abnormal.

All women navigate mass media while searching for their feminine identity. This journey represents a vast realm of shared experience that crosses cultural and geographic boundaries. Too often, though, women navigate mass media alone, and the cacophony of mixed messages bears down on a woman's consciousness unchallenged. There is an opportunity to fight fire with fire though: women can use media as a means to connect women to other women who face the same daily challenges inherent to the female experience and provide them with a sense of solidarity. By claiming a seat at the production table, participating more fully in the media sphere and promoting legitimate portrayals of the variations in the feminine experience, women can turn media into a tool for finding answers and gaining confidence.

Growing up I came to love Ramona Quimby. Beverly Cleary captured, in that young girl character, the topsy-turvy adventure that is growing up. In her changing world, Ramona changes too. Sometimes she is “Ramona the Brave;” sometimes “Ramona the Pest.” One day she is thrilled to play with her neighbor Howie; the next she finds him tiresome. I liked Ramona because I related to her ever-changing moods and opinions. It’s hard to find portrayals of women in today’s media that convey the same emotional dynamism that made Ramona a compelling and instructive character to grow up with.

Women are too frequently funneled into defined roles, which, as any girl or woman can attest, is an odious denial of the complexity inherent in being a woman. In addition, the one-dimensional portrayals send contradicting messages about a woman’s worth, alternately hailing and degrading her role in society. Misrepresentation is a foe women have faced throughout history. Deeply ingrained cultural biases, ubiquitous stereotypes and the prominence of male power in media production all hinder efforts to present a more realistic picture of women. All is not lost, however, since the quest to establish oneself in the face of false depictions is a formative one and helps many women become stronger individuals and leaders. But the journey must be shared with other women. Solidarity with others who are finding their place as women in the world provides the reassurance and encouragement girls and women need to turn media into a tool for advancement. The media should abandon its portrayal of women as one-dimensional objects and promote images and discussion of women in their varied roles. Such content helps women determine the mark they choose to leave on the world. This constructive media exists in niches today. It’s time mainstream media embraced the same honest and personal representation.

While mass media and aggressive marketing have exacerbated the objectification of women in recent decades, negative and contradictory messages about a woman’s value to society have existed for millennia. Ancient Greek drama was characterized by “the strange paradox of on the one hand admiration and reverence for women,

and on the other hand segregation and misogyny” (Des Bouvrie 59). For example, Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* is an influential female character who wields political power and speaks to men as equals. She organizes Athenian women in an unconventional campaign to force their husbands to end the war: the women refuse to have sex until a treaty is signed. A contradiction over a woman’s worth arises in the first lines of the play, as *Lysistrata* laments that “There are a lot of things that sadden me about us women, considering how men see us as rascals” (lines 10-11). “As indeed we are!” responds *Lysistrata*’s friend without hesitation (line 12). While the play unfolds, the plan to withhold sexual privileges proves successful in reconciling the opposing sides of the interminable Peloponnesian War, but despite this impressive achievement women are repeatedly characterized as tiresome rascals. What should women glean from this outcome? That their sexuality is their only potent tool; that they constitute a sexual pleasure to the men they live with, and nothing more? Or that women united in the face of an insurmountable foe are capable of great feats? Moreover, the women’s on-stage sexual influence contrasts with the decidedly subordinate role women played in Ancient Greece, where they received neither citizenship nor voting rights. Greece’s patriarchal society had the same impact on women’s portrayal as ours does today: to preference male perceptions of women that at once affirm women’s sexual power and degrade their value as beings and citizens. Greek scholar Phillip Vellacott argues that even in the fifth century BCE, Greek playwright Euripides “was well aware that the world as he knew it was unalterably committed to male ascendancy and that most people...were concerned only with superficial injustices... but the real problem was a tension which men and women must endure as long as the race continues” (82). This “tension” manifests today in the portrayal of women in static, overly simplistic roles that convey contradictory messages about what a woman should be and how her worth is measured. As Euripides foresaw, the patriarchal framework of society will endure beyond our lifetime, but rather than promote the objectification and subservience of women, the media should help women navigate the challenges they face.

A woman’s process of identity formation starts in adolescence and continues for the rest of her life. Since identity formation depends on innumerable sources and occurs over a period of time, it “tends to occur gradually, incrementally, often unintentionally” (Josselson 15).

Media plays a significant role in this process, since women “are likely to choose a social role from those that their society offers readily” (Josselson 13). As for what roles society offers readily today, stereotypes are rampant and representations are riddled with contradictions that fuel feelings of insecurity and inferiority. As Theresa Carilli and Jane Campbell note, “Women appear as saviors and sex objects, villains, vixens and forces to be squelched. Rarely do they have an opportunity to express their unique experience and strength” (xiv). Such typecasting impacts cultural perceptions of women’s potential. A 1993 study on women in the corporate world found that when hiring, firms tend to categorize female applicants as one of four types of women: the Pet (liked but incompetent; naive); the Mom (nurturant but not viewed as competent); the Seductress (the sex object, desirable but not competent); or the Iron Maiden (competent but unfeeling and unlikeable) (Paludi and Coates 59). These views inform women in the public sphere as well. The authors point out that the two most prominent women seeking public office in 2009 were pigeonholed into these roles. Media classified Hillary Clinton as an Iron Maiden and criticized her for wearing pantsuits and for a lack of warmth. Sarah Palin was alternately cast in three roles: “the Pet (cute but not very smart), the Seductress (emphasis on her beauty pageant experience and looks), or the Mom (emphasis on her family role and children)” (Paludi and Coates 59). The continuity of the “typecast” mentality between media’s images of women, corporate hiring practices and public conceptions of female politicians highlights the power of media to impact cultural understanding of women.

The contradictions inherent to the media’s incomplete depictions of women create confusion and discourage honest communication among women. For instance, mixed messages abound regarding a woman’s source of power and legitimacy. Japanese comics often depict “fighter girl” characters, who provide girls with social participation and empowerment while simultaneously teaching them that their power is a function of their sexuality. “The femininity of Sailor Moon and other fighting girl characters is expressed by their big breasts, long hair, long eyelashes, high toned voices, and mini skirts,” remarks researcher Kimiko Akita, “but their fertility and menstruation are completely eliminated” (Carilli and Campbell 49). This example contains two common offenses: the restriction of a

woman's role to the cute object, and the confusing portrayal of a "strong" woman's identity as dependent upon her appearance rather than her physical and emotional experience. Girls and women have dynamic relationships to their bodies, their capabilities, and their roles, sometimes embracing them, sometimes frustrated by them. This depiction of a woman whose role is simply defined (cute superhero) and whose physical self is perfectly consistent contrasts completely with the real experience of girlhood and womanhood. Emotional and physical fluctuations are simply not tolerated by the media, where female newscasters, actresses and models flash the same bright white smile and the same flawless thigh every day of the week. The antidote to these isolating portrayals is honest conversation among real women.

The need for female communities of solidarity is paramount in a society where men dominate and women's success depends upon their joint action. The media can be instrumental in forming communities based on shared experience. Nineteenth century suffrage newspapers helped women's rights advocates "achieve a sense of community and common purpose" (Byerly and Ross 116). In apartheid South Africa feminist journalist Ruth First sought through her writing to "build and identity for African women" (Byerly and Ross 116). These instances represent great media victories for women, but they are isolated examples in an otherwise hostile media culture. Today's citizens consume media constantly, and the messages they receive inform their outlook on women. A realistic construction of women must infiltrate media on an ongoing basis. Some media come closer to realistic representation than others, but they remain marginalized.

The soap opera, while routinely derided as low-grade entertainment, is highly popular among women because it portrays women's real life struggles. In a study by Ien Ang, soap viewers "believed the show to be 'realistic' and congruent with their own lives and experiences" (Byerly and Ross 59). Another study by Dorothy Hobson examined the social glue of watching soap operas, and found that women enjoyed watching soaps but "were embarrassed to admit that they watched, or defensive about their guilty pleasure, expressing an internalized disdain for the series, which they had 'learned' from cultural critics" (Byerly and Ross 58). It is unfortunate that a medium whose depiction of women is at least in some respect realistic should

be shunned in cultural discourse as “low-grade.” What’s more, the participants in Ang’s study were Dutch women responding to a soap opera about glamorous women in Dallas, Texas. That the Dutch women connected with the show’s characters despite the cultural divide attests to the universality of much female experience. The potential, then, for media to create meaningful, even cross-cultural solidarity rooted in a realistic feminine experience is enormous.

Women all over the world acknowledge that women’s fight for greater voice in society must use good media to fight bad media. In a study on female media activism, ninety women involved in media production all over the globe identified the two greatest challenges to the advancement of effective media activism to be 1) securing “greater coverage of women’s lives and concerns in the news media” and 2) “continuing to advance women into decision-making roles within the industry” (Byerly and Ross 111-112). One type of grassroots project that furthers both these goals places the video camera in the hands of female participants and gives them the chance to create their own representation. The Drishti Media Collective in India uses video as a networking tool “so that women in small Indian villages can learn to use the technology to speak to each other, share experiences, and form self-help groups to deal with discrimination and other daily problems” (Byerly and Ross 123). The focus on “daily problems” and experiences promotes realistic representation. Latin American women who participated in a video-production project found themselves unsure if their daily tasks merited screen time. Researcher Clemencia Rodriguez notes that “Suddenly, everyday life, generally taken for granted, becomes the focus of attention: How do we dress? How do we eat? How do we love?” (Rodriguez 155). These hesitations underscore the unreality that characterizes media images of women. The opportunity to look closely at the female experience in a creative group setting encourages female solidarity through acknowledgement of a shared reality.

The act of producing media also teaches women to take charge of their own lives. The process of transforming “experience, facts, places, people, feelings, and ways of thinking into a story...serves as a catalyst for reevaluating [women’s] ability to transform” (Rodriguez 159). A video project in Nepal gave women the analytical tools and the collective agency to see solutions to their problems, and in spite of their lack of education and position they were able to participate in

local political meetings which had formerly been an exclusively male right (Rodriguez 159). These are small projects, but given the participatory nature of today's world, mass media is in an excellent position to invite more women into the media process and in doing so allow them to redefine their representation.

The challenge to mainstream media is to change women's *portrayal* into women's *representation*. In order to do justice to the ways in which women contribute to today's reality, media must give women greater voice by refocusing its efforts on production, participation and portrayal.

*Production:* Women suffer from under-representation in key media positions, and consequently images of women reflect and favor the male gaze and the patriarchal power structure. A 2002 report found that women make up only 26 percent of local TV news directors, 17 percent of local TV general managers, and 13 percent of general managers at radio stations (Byerly and Ross 78). But simply hiring more women will not solve the stereotype problem, for as Jane Arthurs writes, "there need to be more women with a politicized understanding of the ways in which women's subordination is currently reproduced and with the will to change it" (Byerly and Ross 91). Such "will to change" comes from the opportunity to collectively examine a group's media experience, just as the Nepalese video project participants did. In the UK, a "Women in Journalism" group has become a "forum for women journalists at all levels across all media" offering opportunities for women to discuss career issues with their peers (Byerly and Ross 92). Such opportunities for mentoring, networking and problem solving help women leverage their numbers for greater impact as leaders. Each media platform should establish such a forum for women.

Mass media should also commit to feature content from grassroots media projects promoting women's voices. Certain Latin American news sources incorporate women's periodicals as supplements to papers with larger audiences. Peru's daily newspaper *La Republica* has featured a once-monthly *Mujer y Sociedad* [Women and Society] insert. Mexican and Bolivian papers have had similar supplements. The advantages for the grassroots media are enormous: "the periodicals solve their sales problems and reach a wide readership over and above active and organised feminist groups" (Hernandez 146). By establishing partnerships between mainstream and grassroots

media, women in the industry can bring the conversation about real women closer to center stage.

*Participation:* The emphasis on participation seeks to increase women's influence in the public sphere. Sociologist Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Thornham 92). Media not only occupies this sphere, but it dominates the formation of public opinion. The difficulty for women is that in the eighteenth century this public sphere "was constructed in opposition to the feminized salon culture it replaced" (Thornham 94). The private, domestic sphere of the "feminine" was the opposing binary against which public discourse established itself. Now media must undertake to make today's public sphere compatible with today's feminine reality. Where participatory media is already in use, "common knowledge and everyday experience play a much larger role" (Thornham 103). ABC's *Dr. Oz*, for example, offers accessible, practical solutions to everyday health issues. NPR's "Talk of the Nation" solicits the real world experience of listeners. Media should extend the participatory model to coverage of women's issues so that women can escape portrayal as victims and sexualized objects and connect with other women about their own efforts to buy a house, achieve financial independence, or maintain emotional health. Women's opportunity to participate in the production of the public sphere will ensure their fair representation within it.

*Portrayal:* All forms of media, whether characterized as fictional or not, inform cultural perceptions of reality and "what ought to be." This is particularly important regarding news media, which does claim to portray reality, but whose content is just as "created" as other media. "There is never any acknowledgement," writes Carolyn Byerly, "that what we see, read and listen to in the news is the result of myriad selection decisions that follow journalistic conventions in terms of what constitutes a 'good' news story" (Byerly 39). Media should abandon those conventions that confine women to typecast roles, in favor of real women whose unique intellect and awareness of shared experience gives them powerful perspective for leadership. One study that examined women's leadership in social movements recognized that women in developing countries practice leadership on three levels: "reproductive (childbearing and child rearing), productive (as secondary income earners through informal activities and agricultural



work) and community management work (allocation of limited resources to ensure the survival of the household)” (Riaño xiv). Women assume great leadership responsibilities in each of these realms, but media scarcely recognizes the magnitude of this work. Women’s work and leadership will gain cultural significance when the media legitimizes it by portraying it accurately.

*In conclusion:* Women use media’s portrayals to inform their sense of identity and self-worth; as W.L. Bennett writes “Images of reality in [media] set the limits on who in the world we think we are and what in the world we think we are doing... by regulating the flow of ‘who’ and ‘what’ pass through the public information gates” (Carilli 120). Today, women who pass through the gates of business, politics, philanthropy, diplomacy, health, policy and activism are held up at the gates of public information, where they are whittled into predetermined molds. Few forms of media convey the nonlinear, dynamic nature of womanhood. We must recognize the potential for leadership women gain through legitimate exposure. A 1992 study examining the ability of women’s colleges to produce leaders highlighted the importance of “role models who live women’s experience and support women’s achievement, research and knowledge about women, and the development of strong women’s communities” (Tidball 69). Like the successful colleges in the study, media must make “a fundamental commitment to women as women” by promoting all these ingredients for female leadership (Tidball 69).

Today’s media alienates women from one another by implying that any woman whose expe

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