

SISTERS OF '77 Lesson Plan

Women in the Media

pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77

Grade Levels: 9-12

Estimated time: Two to three class periods, depending on whether you assign the assessment activity as classroom work or homework

Introduction:

We all see countless media images each day, many of them portraying women and girls in distinctive ways that are not necessarily representative of the “typical” woman or girl. This is also true of portrayals of men and boys, although this lesson will focus on women and girls.

A related issue is the fact that women are underrepresented in news and sports stories and, when they are included, they are often portrayed in stereotypically feminine ways. This was true of media coverage of the 1977 National Women’s Conference and the fight to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. Both stories were underreported and often did not receive adequate or accurate coverage in the stories that did discuss the event.

Students will read about the problems of underreporting women and women’s issues, and they will explore some of the stereotypical ways in which women and girls are portrayed in the mass media. They will analyze the covers of magazines that are popular with teenage girls and write paragraphs expressing their opinions about women and girls in the media.

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- List and discuss the ways they think women and men are portrayed in the mass media, based on their own experiences and observations.
- Read about the National Women’s Conference.
- Watch an excerpt from SISTERS OF '77 discussing media coverage of the event.
- Read and answer questions about an article concerning media coverage of women and women’s issues.
- Analyze the covers of magazines that are popular with teenage girls, describing how the magazines portray girls and girls’ issues.
- Write paragraphs describing their reactions to underrepresentation and misrepresentation of girls in the media and to the images analyzed.

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Materials Needed:

- Computers with Internet access
- TV and VCR
- SISTERS OF '77 video

Standards (from <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>):

National Language Arts Standards:

Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media

National United States History Standards:

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States

National Visual Arts Standards:

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts

National Behavioral Studies Standards:

Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior

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Teaching Strategy:

1. Write the words "Women" and "Men" on the board. Ask students to brainstorm some of the images that come to their minds when they think about how the two genders are portrayed in the mass media, including TV and magazines. Ask them to think about gender representations in news stories, feature articles, TV shows and advertisements. Write their ideas under each heading.
2. Discuss the representations students have contributed to these lists. Are they stereotypical? Are they flattering? Why do students think these representations are so commonly seen? How realistic are they? How do representations of women and men differ between news stories, TV shows, and advertisements? How are they similar?
3. If students aren't already familiar with the National Women's Conference and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), have them read the following sections on the SISTERS OF '77 Web site: The Film <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77/film.html> and The ERA <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77/era.html>.
4. Show the brief excerpt from the SISTERS OF '77 video in which Gloria Steinem states that the media bears a large responsibility in defeating the ERA (44:07–44:23). Discuss why students think this might be the case. In what ways could the media have influenced such a major political battle?
5. Have students read "Media Coverage of Women and Women's Issues" (http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_coverage.cfm) and answer these questions as they read. To save time, you might want to have half the class read the section entitled "Women, News and Politics" and the other half read the rest of the article. They should then share their answers to these questions with the rest of the class.

"Women, News and Politics"

- What does this article say about the amount of coverage women receive in the news?
- How do news stories about women differ from news stories about men?
- How are politically active women sometimes represented?

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“Women and Sports” and “Beauty Before Brains”

- What does this article say about the amount of coverage women’s sports receive as compared to men’s sports?
 - How does language differ in discussions of women’s versus men’s sports?
 - How do pictures of female athletes differ from those of male athletes?
 - How did TV legal analyst Great Van Susteran become “another cultural casualty?”
6. Discuss students’ responses to the above questions. Ask students what they think are the consequences of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in news and sports stories. How do they think these imbalances affect the public’s perception of both genders?
7. Although women are underrepresented and misrepresented in news and sports stories, it is certainly easy to find women and girls in many media images. One important question to consider is what types of female representations are common in the mass media. Ask students to return to the list on the board from step one; where have they seen these images? They will likely recognize the images they listed in step one as being prominent in advertisements, magazines and TV shows, since high school students tend to have substantial exposure to these forms of media.
8. Divide the class into small groups of three or four students each, and have each group take turns looking up the Web sites for these popular women’s and girls’ magazines. The sites generally contain the images and text from the current issue’s cover. If you’re short on time, you may want to assign each group to look up only one of these magazines. As an alternative, ask students to analyze the covers of magazines they bring into class.
- *Glamour*: <http://us.glamour.com>
 - *Teen Vogue*: <http://www.teenvogue.com>
 - *Seventeen*: <http://www.seventeen.com/issue> (look for one of the pictures of a magazine cover)

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9. Ask groups to answer the following questions about what they see at the magazine Web sites:
 - What do the girls on the cover look like, including the way they're dressed? Do they look like most of the women or girls you know? In what ways do they differ from people you know?
 - What image do you think these girls portray? For example, do they look powerful, submissive, mature, childish, sexy? What words can you think of to describe their image?
 - What is the text about? What does this text say about what the magazines feel is important to young women?
10. Discuss students' responses to the above questions as a class. Ask them whether they noticed any similarities between the three magazines they saw. If you had different groups look at different magazine Web sites, ask groups to report their findings to the class.

Assessment:

Have students write paragraphs answering the following questions. When possible, students should use specific examples from media images they've seen in this lesson or elsewhere.

- What role do you think the media plays in creating images of women and girls?
- What role do you think the media should play?
- How do you think your own opinions of women and girls are affected by things you see (or don't see) in the media?
- What changes, if any, would you like to see in the media's representation of women and girls?

Extension Ideas:

- Have students bring magazines into class, particularly those that are written for women or girls. Have them work in groups to choose one magazine ad that represents women or girls in a stereotypical way, and ask them to create counter-ads based on the actual ad they've chosen. A counter-ad is an ad that counters, or parodies, the real ad.

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For examples of counter-ads parodying tobacco ads, see BADAdvertising Country <http://www.badvertising.org>. A few other examples of counter-ads can be seen in these downloadable PDF articles: "Satirical Counter-Ads As Critical Pedagogy" <http://www.educ.uvic.ca/Research/conferences/connections2003/17Zuk103.pdf>. This New Mexico Media Literacy Project document, which contains tips for creating counter-ads: <http://www.nmmlp.org/CreatingCounterAds.pdf>.

- Have students deconstruct magazine advertisements using the questions at the New Mexico Media Literacy Project Web site (<http://www.nmmlp.org/deconmedia.htm>). These questions allow students to think carefully and critically about what the ads are trying to sell, what they show, who the audience is, and the motivations behind the ads. Have them share their findings with the class.
- Have students read the following articles and write paragraphs stating their own opinions about what the articles say.

Anita Roddick.com: "Dispatch: Ruby, the Anti-Barbie":
<http://www.anitaroddick.com/readmore.php?sid=13>

National NOW Times: "TV Commercials Exploit, Ridicule or Sideline Women":
<http://www.now.org/nnt/spring-2003/superbowl.html>

- Have students perform the same type of analyses they have done in this lesson on magazine covers or advertisements featuring boys and men. What types of images do boys and men have in magazines and ads? How realistic are these representations? Why do students think boys and men are so frequently portrayed in these ways?
- Have students read the bullet points at "Food For Thought: The Shape Women are In" (<http://wetz.el.psy.ch.rhodes.edu/223webproj/bodyimage/food.html>) and discuss their reactions to these points. Can they relate to any of the points? Have they ever thought about these issues? Does knowing some of these facts change their perceptions of women's portrayal in the media?



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Online Resources:

Independent Lens: SISTERS OF '77:

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/sistersof77/>

National Organization for Women:

<http://www.now.org>

New Mexico Media Literacy Project:

<http://www.nmmlp.org>

Media Awareness Network:

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/english>

About the Author

Betsy Hedberg is a teacher and freelance curriculum writer who has published lesson plans on a variety of subjects. She received her secondary teaching credential in social studies from Loyola Marymount University and her master of arts in geography from UCLA. In addition to curriculum writing, she presents seminars and training sessions to help teachers incorporate the Internet into their classrooms.