



Miss Representation Discussion Guide

Directors: Jennifer Siebel Newsom,
Kimberlee Acquaro
Year: 2011
Time: 85 min

You might know Kimberlee Acquaro from:
100 Years (2011)

You might know Jennifer Siebel Newsom from:
The Mask You Live In (2015)

FILM SUMMARY

The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was the first women's rights convention ever held in the United States. Billed as a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of women in the United States, it attracted widespread attention and inspired a number of other conventions around the country.

More than 150 years have passed but modern-day American women still face many of the same issues. MISS REPRESENTATION, inspired by the impending birth of Director Jennifer Siebel Newsom's daughter, focuses on the continued over-sexualisation of women in the media, to the detriment of portraying them as figures of substance and power.

Newsom contemplates the world into which her child would be born, aiming to understand just who the teacher is in the modern day schoolroom. The damning evidence she unearthed - that an unregulated media is the head instructor leading today's youth - spurs Newsom to unveil the mechanisms behind media portrayals of gender. How can an American female leader hope to meet the international community when female play things, digitally retouched to a standard of unachievable perfection, are veritably the only role models being offered today's girls?

Interviews with powerful and influential women in politics, entertainment, and news, along with their male counterparts, are peppered with statistics sure to shake even the most hardened disbeliever. While MISS REPRESENTATION posits that continued negative portrayals of women in the media make the disproportionate political and pay landscape unsurprising the film does offer a host of options for achieving equality between the sexes.

FILM THEMES

The battle for women's rights has been waging for centuries. Why is 21st century America not closer to equality? The media, a lack of role models, and women themselves are some of the factors keeping progress at bay.

AN UNCENSORED MEDIA DEFINING GENDER

With state-promoted family values being a thing of the past, the power now rests in the hands of an unregulated free-for-all media machine. As children occupy much of their down time in front of the television and computer, the lessons they learn about what society expects from them is often media-driven. Girls are continually bombarded with unrealistic images of youth, beauty, and sexuality, while their male counterparts are indoctrinated to achieve power and money with sexually subordinate sidekicks. How can we expect the American political scene to mirror anything other than the unbalanced narrative that constantly surrounds us?

WOMEN AS THEIR OWN WORST ENEMY

When San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom appointed the first female police chief in the city's history as well as the first female fire chief in a major city, he stated it was women - not men - who most doubted their ability to perform. Having been discouraged, criticized, and limited by society's teachings, women find it difficult to trust their own abilities, and by doubting and critiquing other women as they do themselves, they perpetuate the vicious cycle and remain the ever-obedient underdog. By judging one another with a value system invented by a patriarchal society, women keep advancements at bay and extend inequality.

WHERE ARE THE RIGHT ROLE MODELS?

"You can't be what you can't see." The film relays its message in the simplest of terms: every girl in America is waiting for the path to power to be carved. There has never been a female president of the United States, and a disheartening lack of women serve in powerful positions in politics, business, and media. With Hollywood churning out a host of unhealthy role models, where do women begin to reach for something greater in life? If every girl waits for a role model before leaping into uncharted territory, no advancements will ever be made. By empowering oneself and setting an example of intellect over physique, the tides will begin to turn.

WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS?

Girls are not the only ones being hit by a barrage of negative media messaging. The other half of the population is also at its mercy. The boys of today become the men of tomorrow, and if boys are taught that women are less and should be treated accordingly, what is a young man to think when encountering a powerful woman? Rather than being threatened by empowered women, which may lead to a violent reaction to the perceived menace, boys must become an integral part of the discussion. Side by side, on an equal playing field, the messages being fed to American youth must promote the principles of equality required for a successful society.

"We tend not to write women as human beings. It's cartoons we're making."

Paul Haggis

"Without more women in politics, we just don't really have democratic legitimacy."

Jennifer Lawless

"Find your role models wherever you can find them."

Condoleezza Rice

FILM FACTS:

- MISS REPRESENTATION has won many awards, including an Official Selection at Sundance and Outstanding Documentary at the Gracie Awards.
- Director Jennifer Siebel Newsom was named one of the “Most Influential Women in Business” by the San Francisco Business Times.
- Female representation in newsrooms was 36.9% in 1999. By 2014, that number decreased slightly, to 36.3%. Gender disparity is widest among whites, and only slightly better among other races.
- Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first female head of government in the modern world, elected Sri Lankan Prime Minister in 1960. The following countries have also elected female leaders: India, Israel, Argentina, Central African Republic, Great Britain, Portugal, Bolivia, Dominica, Iceland, Norway, China, Yugoslavia, Malta, Netherlands Antilles, Philippines, Pakistan, Lithuania, Nicaragua, Ireland, Haiti, Germany, Burma, Bangladesh, France, Poland, Canada, Burundi, Rwanda, Turkey, Bulgaria, Bermuda, Guyana, New Zealand, Switzerland, Mongolia, Panama, Latvia, Finland, San Marino, Indonesia, Austria, Liberia, Chile, South Africa, South Korea, Malta, Malawi, Serbia, Mauritius, Kosovo, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Kyrgyzstan.
- Angelina Jolie, the world’s highest-paid female movie star, makes the same per movie as her lowest-paid male counterpart.
- The term “symbolic annihilation” was first used in 1972 by George Gerbner, who studied the long-term effects of television, to describe the absence of representation of some groups of people in the media. Feminists use the term to express the effect misrepresentation of women and girls in mass media has had on their ability to find secure employment, advance in the workplace, and create unique identities.
- Director Jennifer Siebel Newsom also directed the film *The Mask You Live In* (2015). The film explores how American culture’s narrow definition of masculinity is harming boys, men, and society at large, and considers what can be done about it.
- Plus-sized models averaged between U.S. size 12 and 18 in 2000. In 2014, the majority of plus-sized models are between U.S. size 6 and 14.
- The average U.S. model weighs 117 lbs. and is 5’11, while the average U.S. woman weighs 140 lbs. and is 5’4. The average model now weighs 23% less than the average woman, while she weighed just 8% less 20 years ago.
- In 2012, U.S. women had more than 9.1 million cosmetic procedures, while men fell far behind with 1 million procedures. The top five surgical procedures for women were breast augmentation, liposuction, tummy tuck, eyelid surgery, and breast lifts.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. The NOW (National Organization for Women) Foundation is devoted to achieving full equality for women in the United States. Join them in their quest.
2. Encourage children - both girls and boys - to treat one another as equals. Do not focus on traditional gender stereotypes. Instead, allow children to discover themselves and their passions regardless of their gender.
3. Involve yourself with the Global Fund for Women, which advances the rights of women and girls worldwide.
4. Watch the words you use when analyzing others. Are any of your judgements based on gender?