

“We really need a new perspective”

Teens talk about gender and television

The project “Gender representation on television” sought to understand what young people across the world watched on TV, what bothered them about representations of gender, and what they wanted to see improved or changed in these representations. The 5th World Summit in Johannesburg in South Africa in 2007 provided a tremendous opportunity to come in contact with children from all over the world. 42 teenagers representing 10 countries (Tanzania, Lesotho, Botswana, Poland, South Africa, Ireland, Sweden, Palestine, Qatar, and the USA) participated in the project. Through focus-group discussions, individual responses, and essay and drawing exercises, the key objectives of this study were addressed.

More females (69 %) than males (31 %) were involved in the discussion groups. The age of the teenagers ranged between 11 to 18 years, with most in either the 10th or 11th grades. More than half of the respondents (approx. 60 %) were from African countries. Conversations during the one-hour focus-group sessions with around 8 teams each consisting of 5 to 9 teenagers were intense and animated.

What bothers you about how boys and girls are portrayed on television?

Textual analyses of television in various parts of the world point to the prevalence of gender and racial stereotypes (Zhong, 2004; Fernandes, 2000; McMillin, 2002; Lee, 2004;

Sutton, 2003; Ang, 1996; Signorelli, 2001). Almost all participants in this project echoed these observations. Young people from the United States said that they did not like the stereotypical representations of African Americans. Black males were portrayed as thugs or as unintelligent token black guys wearing baggy jeans and boots and eating fried chicken or watermelon. African American girls invariably had on skimpy little bathing suits and such teens are shown in a context of sexual activity or drug abuse. Teenagers in the Middle East and Africa echoed that on TV girls were treated like sex objects. Participants from Africa also pointed out that children were portrayed as if they followed a life crime and were influenced easily. The general focus of programmes was on children as victims, not as survivors. Overall, there were insufficient shows for teenagers.

What would you like to see changed on television?

Talking as a sort of activism (Quijada, 2007) is an important concept in the study of teens in a globalising world. For many, the distance between their world and that of the adults in their lives is vast; their sense of authoritative subjectivity (Demerath/Lynch, 2007) gains momentum in their discussions of self and in-



Teenagers writing their comments on a world map

terests particularly with adults. The question “What do you want to see on television?” was posed with the understanding that the respondents in this study were active audiences with agency in their interpretations and negotiations with the TV programmes they watched (McRobbie, 1994). Their views should therefore be received as important and practical strategies for producing better television programmes for children and youth.

Young people from Africa were most specific in their suggestions

While embedded in the statements on what bothered them about television are also lessons for what the respondents in this study would like to see changed on television, young people from Africa were most specific in

USA

- Black males are gangsters, all white males are racists.
- All black males don't support their families.
- TV presents girls as easily influenced.
- Black girls shaking their bottom on TV.
- All blondes are dumb.
- Girls are used at guys' disposal.

Europe (Ireland/Sweden/Poland)

- Men are portrayed as 'heroes' and 'jocks' who go out to work.
- In ads it's about what men do, and it's about what women look like.
- Stories, where you laugh AT women, laugh WITH men.
- In commercials it's all about how girls look.
- Women are portrayed as stay-home moms who cook, men go out to work.

Middle East (Qatar/Palestine)

- Boys who hit girls and make fun of them.
- Boys who smoke behind the school.
- Boys who dress funny or like girls.
- Boys who take drugs or drink alcohol.
- The way that they show girls, that they like kissing or that girls hit boys, etc.
- The programmes deal with subjects about girls being mad and not important or good for us.

Africa (South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Tanzania)

- When boys see girls they want to have sex with them.
- Boys who like alcohol and drugs, rape their mothers, like jewellery.
- Boys who are gay are always exposed.
- Girls who do not use their opportunity to succeed.
- Women are seen as the property of 'males' and seen as the housewives or poor.
- That girls are shown always on 2nd position.
- The way girls/women are portrayed as all being beautiful, curvy & dumb.

Teenagers from African countries, the US, the Middle East and Europe wrote on a world map what they disliked about the depiction of boys and girls on TV. Comments were compiled by IZI researchers from the delegates' entries on the world maps provided.

their suggestions. Briefly, they wanted shows on developmental issues such as puberty, menstruation, and sexual attraction. They wanted programmes where young people were involved in politics, in culture and tradition, and in fighting oppression. They wanted more participation of children and teens in media production. In general, they wanted more indigenously produced programmes, a greater variety of genres, and more documentaries.

Methodological limitations notwithstanding, the results discussed here provide a snapshot of perceptions of gender identity and the relevance of television to young people in various parts of the world. We certainly should seek opportunities wherever possible to include a range of voices that would be next to impossible with the traditional sources of academic funding that are available, funding that often limits study to one coun-

try, or at the most two or three. We also learn that as adult researchers in youth media, we should be mindful to place youth voices in context, interrogating their own ideological positions as we interrogate ours.

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Divya C. McMillin, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of International Media Studies in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Program at the University of Washington, Tacoma, WA, USA.