

Women in Television

Mittie 



Mittie Golding
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I have always loved watching TV. When I was younger it was a weekend morning staple, and now it is a daily one. I love that television allows me to escape into another world that I can immerse myself in and study every element of. While my interest in television has been lifelong, I've become interested in feminism only in the past few years. Sexism has become more and more apparent to me, especially through the objectification of women in advertising. As I became more attuned to these issues, I started to pick up on them in TV. I believe it is a topic that is not addressed enough, so I want to use my Oxbow Final Project as a social commentary on this issue.

According to a 2013 Nielsen report, the average American watches 5 hours and 5 minutes of TV each day.¹ Since we spend over one-fifth of our day in front of a television, it is undeniable that TV impacts society. So why is it that we allow something so influential to misrepresent over half the world's population? How would television, and the culture surrounding it, be different if female characters were represented the same way as their male counterparts? It is necessary to start projecting women in a more realistic and empowering light, as the ideas and themes displayed on television influence society's behaviors towards women.

¹ *The Cross-Platform Report: A Look Across Screens*, October 6, 2013, accessed April 29, 2014, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/reports/2013/the-cross-platform-report--a-look-across-screens.html>.

While some shows utilize sexism and objectification as an immature satirical device, others use it in order to underscore its wrongness. Similarly, shows such as *Mad Men*² and *Masters of Sex*³ are period pieces that portray the realistic treatment of women in a specific time period. Instead of manipulating the treatment of women to seem worse or sugarcoat it to make it appear as though women of the time were given more respect, period shows tend to act as “reports” of how women were treated. To the modern viewer, the treatment is viewed as poor and often horrific. To the women of the time period, it was reality. For example, one scene in the *Mad Men* episode “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” depicts Peggy (Elisabeth Moss) riding in an elevator while the men she’s riding with make snarky, objectifying remarks about her figure and how they are “enjoying the view.” After exiting the elevator, the men continue to nonchalantly talk about Peggy in a degrading fashion.⁴ While this is blatant objectification of women, it is necessary to the story because it informs the viewer of the bad workplace conditions for women during the 1960’s. I believe that the accurate portrayal of the historical treatment of women is necessary if society wants to strive towards further gender equality. The last thing we would want to do is to repeat our history of terrible treatment.

These reverse-psychology tactics may be effective when used in period shows, but are they the best way to get the point across in modern-based television? I believe that in modern shows, using sexism and objectification to make a point is unnecessary. Many modern shows

² *Mad Men*, AMC, first broadcast 2007, starring Jon Hamm and Elisabeth Moss, produced by Matthew Weiner, et al., written by Matthew Weiner.

³ *Masters of Sex*, Showtime, first broadcast 2013, starring Michael Sheen and Lizzy Caplan, produced by Michelle Ashford, et al., written by Michelle Ashford.

⁴ *Mad Men*, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," episode 1, AMC, first broadcast July 19, 2007, starring Jon Hamm and Elisabeth Moss, directed by Alan Taylor, written and produced by Matthew Weiner.

use graphic imagery and nudity for what they consider to be commentary on the objectification of women. For example, the HBO show *Girls* often depicts the female characters in scenes involving nudity or sexual innuendo in order to make points about living as a modern woman in New York City. But why must women be objectified in order to make the point that objectification is wrong? In the “Pilot” episode of *Girls*, Hannah (Lena Dunham) is objectified through an awkward sex scene with her boyfriend. While this scene contributed to the storyline through the dialogue, the objectification and sexual element was ultimately unnecessary in understanding the relationship dynamics.⁵ Show-runners may believe they are discreetly undermining sexist ideas and contributing necessary information to the plot, the average viewer does not understand these statements, so to them sexism is still being enforced.

Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, Ph. D. of San Diego State University’s Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film has — for many years — studied women’s role in television both on- and off-screen. Dr. Lauzen found that in the 2012-2013 Primetime TV season, females made up only 43% of all characters on television. Though this is a 2% increase from the 2010-2011 season,⁶ much progress still needs to be made. The current disproportionate representation of the male to female ratio demonstrates how society still favors men over women. Dr. Lauzen’s research also revealed that female characters were more likely than male characters to have an unknown occupational status and a known marital status.⁷ This demonstrates that women are

⁵ *Girls*, "Pilot," episode 1, HBO, first broadcast April 15, 2012, performed and written by Lena Dunham, produced by Judd Apatow, et al.

⁶ Martha M. Lauzen, *Boxed In: Employment of Behind-the-Scenes and On-Screen Women in 2012-13 Prime-time Television*, comp. Martha M. Lauzen (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University, 2013), 3, accessed April 29, 2014, http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2012-13_Boxed_In_Report.pdf.

⁷ *Ibid.*

still expected to fit traditional stereotypes, and are not encouraged to strive for the same business and lifestyle goals as men. The marital status is seen as irrelevant for the stereotypical working man, but the women are expected to be housewives with no personal ambitions. By continuously projecting these old-fashioned ideas about what it means to be female, the media is enforcing gender stereotypes and inhibiting progression towards gender equality.

Beyond the preference for men, within female characters, there is not equal representation of all races. For the female characters in the 2012-2013 season, 78% were white, 12% were African-American, 5% were Latina, 3% were Asian, and 2% were of other races.⁸ Further, many actresses of color are typecast into roles that project racial stereotypes and often act as the token character of their race. Instead, writers should develop multi-dimensional individual characters in order to help break down the racial stereotypes still being displayed on TV. By refuting stereotypes and refusing to use them as a source of cheap jokes, the pressure to have token characters can be replaced by naturally diverse casts which celebrate characters for their individual personalities. By continuously projecting archaic ideas about race, viewers' self-image can be impacted. By perpetuating the stereotypical idea that gender and race defines success and beauty, those who don't fit the "ideal" can feel self-conscious. Some may even not seek out opportunities for success if they feel they aren't qualified because they are not worthy of it. If television creates more high-power roles for women of color — like Mindy Lahiri (Mindy Kaling) of *The Mindy Project*⁹ and Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) of *Scandal*¹⁰— viewers will

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Mindy Project*, Fox, first broadcast 2012, starring Mindy Kaling and Chris Messina, produced by Howard Klein, et al.

¹⁰ *Scandal*, ABC, first broadcast 2012, starring Kerry Washington and Tony Goldwyn, produced by Shonda Rhimes, et al., written by Shonda Rhimes.

feel inspired and encouraged to reach their full potential. These actresses continue to promote the importance of diversity in television off-screen. Kaling takes pride in being the first Indian-American to have her own network show,¹¹ but has said that she “never [wants] to be called the funniest Indian female comedian that exists,”¹² because being defined by race and gender would be limiting. Washington sees Olivia Pope as an important character because not only is she the first female African-American lead in a network drama in nearly 40 years,¹³ but Olivia also is “a woman and a person of color, so she’s not who you’d expect to be the most powerful person in the room, and yet she is.”¹⁴ Both Mindy Kaling and Kerry Washington prove that women can reach their goals when not inhibited by society’s outdated ideas about race.

While *The Mindy Project* and *Scandal* succeed in creating strong and female characters, they still fall into the trap of employing traditional romantic subplots through Mindy’s romantic chemistry with her co-worker Danny on *The Mindy Project* and Olivia’s affair with the President of the United States on *Scandal*. The television industry continues to project the idea that romantic subplots are necessary in order to maintain viewer interest in shows. No matter the genre, there is at least one romantic subplot in the majority of shows. From *Breaking Bad*, a drama about a cancer-ridden chemistry teacher who cooks meth to provide for his family, to

¹¹ Sandra Ballentine, "Mindy Kaling: Comedienne and Star of 'The Mindy Project' on Dressing with Confidence," *Vogue*, April 2014, [Page #], accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/mindy-kaling-comedienne/#1>.

¹² Jada Yuan, "The New New Girl: Mindy Kaling Promotes Herself Out of 'The Office' and Into 'The Mindy Project,'" *Vulture*, September 9, 2012, [Page #], <http://www.vulture.com/2012/09/mindy-kaling-mindy-project.html>.

¹³ Julie Zeilinger, "Kerry Washington, 'Scandal' Star: 'I Bring Something to the Table as a Woman of Color,'" *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/12/kerry-washington-scandal-interview_n_3428624.html.

¹⁴ Brandon Voss, "The A-List Interview: Kerry Washington," *Advocate.com*, October 31, 2013, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://www.advocate.com/print-issue/current-issue/2013/10/31/list-interview-kerry-washington>.

Broad City, a comedy about two female friends living in New York, many shows feel it is necessary to incorporate these ideas into their storyline. While these subplots are intriguing and may attract a larger viewership, romantic subplots hinder the ability for female characters to reach their empowerment potential. Incorporating these subplots into shows ultimately diminishes the strength of female characters, as their otherwise significant contributions to the show are overshadowed by the seemingly more interesting idea of romance. Many shows get caught up in the idea that these subplots are a necessity, but some manage to succeed in finding more empowering ways to keep viewers attracted.

I believe the CBS show *Elementary*¹⁵ does a great job of creating a strong female character and avoiding the romantic subplot trap. This Sherlock Holmes-based show not only gender-swaps but also race-swaps the role of Sherlock's sidekick Dr. John Watson into the female Dr. Joan Watson, played by Lucy Liu. While writers and producers could have taken this opportunity to create a romantic relationship between Watson and Sherlock, there are no romantic implications in *Elementary*, and Watson serves as a sidekick with intellectual contributions equal to those made by Sherlock. However, *Elementary* falls short in the respect that Watson — albeit one of the best female characters currently on TV — is the only female main character in the entire show.

Like *Elementary*, many shows continue to unknowingly follow the “Smurfette Principle.”¹⁶ Named after Smurfette — the only female character on the animated children's

¹⁵ *Elementary*, CBS, first broadcast 2012, starring Jonny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu, produced by Robert Doherty, et al., written by Robert Doherty.

¹⁶ "The Smurfette Principle," TV Tropes, accessed April 29, 2014, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheSmurfettePrinciple>.

show *The Smurfs* — ¹⁷ this principle identifies shows in which the ensemble cast contains only one female character. When this happens, an unrealistic male-to-female ratio is created, and the female character becomes a type of token character in itself. Fulfilling the “Smurfette Principle” is still a common practice in television shows, especially in shows with strong female characters. For instance, one of my personal favorite shows *Veronica Mars* ¹⁸ is centered around possibly the strongest female character I’ve ever seen on TV. Veronica, played by Kristen Bell, is smart, sassy, and independent, but the only significant female role. Many show-runners continue to be under the false impressions that: a) making a admirable female character makes up for the lack of any more females, and b) supporting female characters undermine the main character’s ability to be empowering. These outdated ideas ultimately hinder a show’s ability to create realistic and strong female characters that can help enhance gender equality. I believe that having multiple empowering female characters in a show proves that strong women are not the “exception to the rule,” but instead allows viewers more opportunities to find role models in the characters they see on television.

The industry has undoubtedly made much progress when it comes to the representation of women in television, but it is undeniable that there is still much work to be done. Because of television’s societal impact, changing the portrayal of women in television can help improve the treatment of women in the real world. While it is the behind-the-scenes members of the industry who ultimately create the more empowering characters, the viewers hold the power to help this change occur. The success and survival of a television show is based almost completely on

¹⁷ *The Smurfs*, Warner Bros., first broadcast 1981, produced by Hanna-Barbera Productions, William Hanna, and Joseph Barbera.

¹⁸ *Veronica Mars*, UPN, first broadcast 2004, starring Kristen Bell, produced by Rob Thomas, et al., written by Rob Thomas.

viewership, so if viewers refuse to watch shows which objectify women and include sexist undertones, these types of shows will no longer be written. If we demand shows to have realistic depictions of women, the television industry will inevitably comply.

For the creative portion of my project, I decided to edit the "Pilot" script of the show *Modern Family*. I make annotations on the original screenplay which pointed out both positive and negative elements, as well as my edits. I then retyped the scenes incorporating the edits I made.

ANNOTATION KEY:

positive elements

edits/negative elements

comments/observations

male to female ratio: 6-5 ^{pretty good. nearly equal.} (including baby)

characters are all very stereotypical. By creating archetypal, one-dimensional characters, improper gender stereotypes are enforced.

Characters:
The Dunphy Family

Claire - Late 30s, ~~uptight~~ suburban mom, ~~tries to make~~ everyday special for her kids, ~~needs control.~~ ^{needs some ambition of her own, as well.}
workout enthusiast. → adds another element to personality.

Phil - Late 30s, real estate agent, upbeat, goofy, thinks he's cooler than he is.

Haley - 16, social, ^{opportunity for individuality} fashion-conscious, rebellious, has a wild streak. ^{typical "teen girl" character → being feminine can still be feminist}

Alex - 13, (girl), smart, cynical, insightful for her age. ^{strong female character!}

Luke - 10, immature, simple, not the brightest bulb.

The Pritchett-Delgado Family

Jay - 60s, successful businessman, divorced. Recently married Gloria, struggles to stay "young" for her.

Gloria - 30s, ^{diversity!} Hispanic, (beautiful), strong, quick-tempered. Protective mother. Divorced six years ago. ^{OK to be pretty, as long as not oversexualized} → "bombshell" stereotype objectifies women
^{good to encourage women to share opinions}

Manny - 12ish, Gloria's son - Jay's stepson. Old soul, sensitive, passionate, a young romantic.

Mitchell & Cameron's Family

Mitchell - Mid-to-late 30s, dentist, gay, emotionally restrained, worrier.

Cameron - Mid-30s, gay, free with emotions, lives in the moment, surprisingly strong.

Lily - Baby girl, adopted from ^{diversity!} Vietnam. ^{adds female character, but makes no contributions}

ACT ONE

1 EXT. SUBURBAN AMERICAN STREET -- DAY

The camera pushes in to a SUBURBAN HOUSE.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Kids! Breakfast!

2 INT. KITCHEN -- CONTINUOUS

Claire is busy making breakfast for the family. Phil enters in workout clothes.

CLAIRE

What's with the workout clothes?

(then)

giving line to Phil demonstrates equal roles in parenting

~~Kids!!!~~

PHIL

What? I work out.

(glances toward the camera)

Just because I don't run six miles a day like you --

CLAIRE

Eight.

PHIL

You run eight miles a day? That's like three-thousand miles a year. You could have run to Hawaii.

CLAIRE

I think about that every single day.

(shouting out)

BREAKFAST!!!

Haley enters in a ~~short skirt~~ *boho-chic outfit* *forced objectification by making a point of it*

HALEY

I'm having a friend over today.

CLAIRE

~~Haley, you're not wearing that skirt.~~

what's with the new look? Last week the look was 90's grunge.

HALEY

What's wrong with it?

CLAIRE

~~It's too short. People can tell you're a girl, you don't have to prove it to them.~~ *implying that it's wrong for women to express themselves and their sexuality*

Alex enters. ~~Clothes yourself.~~ *What's next, goth? If you want a whole new wardrobe every week you'll need to start paying for it.* *Creates a conflict (necessary for story progression), but directs it to a non-gendered issue.*

ALEX
(matter of fact)
Luke got his head stuck in the
banister again.

PHIL
I got it. Where's the baby oil?
men & women sharing household responsibilities → but... breaking traditional gender roles! *implying that men cannot manage a household without women's help. enforcing traditional gender roles.*

CLAIRE
It's in our night stan--
(eyes camera)
I don't know -- find it!

3 INTERVIEW -- PHIL & CLAIRE

SUPER: "Phil & Claire"

CLAIRE
Raising kids is like building a car.
You only have so much time to make
sure the steering works and the brakes
stop and the engine is dependable
before you send it out on the road,
and (if you get one little rivet wrong,
it will drive off a cliff and explode.)

Awkward beat.

PHIL
CLAIRE: We have a lot of fun.
still has humorous line, but with new tone & even parenting display

displaying an uneven balance of parenting duties

INTERVIEW -- JAY AND GLORIA

SUPER: "Jay and Gloria"

JAY

Gloria and I met the day my ex-wife moved to Florida. I was feeling pretty emotional and Gloria was one of the bikini bartenders at the giant pool party I threw.

objectifying Gloria, implying a relationship based on physical appearance.

GLORIA

He came over to order a drink and we ended up talking all night. We had an instant connection even though

GLORIA

We're very different. / Jay: ^{I'm} is from the city, he has a big business, ~~I~~ she comes from a small village. ^{it's} very poor but very, very beautiful. It is the number one village in all of Colombia for the... what's the word?

JAY

Murders.

GLORIA

Yes, the murders.

SFX: DOOR SLAM!

ALEX

Mom! Dad!

Alex appears in the doorway, holding her arm.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Luke just shot me!

Luke enters carrying an air-soft gun.

LUKE

I didn't mean to.

Annoyed, Haley crosses upstairs.

CLAIRE

(to Alex)

Are you okay?

ALEX

No, the little bitch shot me.

LUKE

They're just plastic BB's. It was an accident.

CLAIRE

(to Phil)

(OMIT) { What did I tell you would happen if you bought him a gun? *negative "nagging wife" stereotype*

PHIL

(to Luke)

What did ^{we} I tell you would happen if you shot any animal or any person? *equal responsibility*

LUKE

That you would shoot me.

PHIL

That's right! Come on. Let's go.

He starts for the backyard.

CLAIRE

Are you insane, you're going to shoot him?! He's got a birthday party. *We'll do it tonight.*
now

MODERN FAMILY SCRIPT RE-WRITE

Characters:

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Phil - Late 30s, real estate agent, upbeat, goofy, thinks he's cooler than he is.

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(then)
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CLAIRE
Eight.

PHIL
You run eight miles a day? That's
like three-thousand miles a year.
You could have run to Hawaii.

CLAIRE
I think about that every single day.
(shouting out)
BREAKFAST!!!

Haley enters in a boho-chic outfit.

HALEY
I'm having a friend over today.

CLAIRE
Haley, what's with the new look?
Last week it was 90's grunge.

HALEY
What's wrong with it?

CLAIRE
What's next, goth? If you want a
whole new wardrobe every week you'll
need to start paying for clothes
yourself.

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ALEX
(matter of fact)
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PHIL
Nevermind, found it!

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Gloria and I met the day my ex-wife
moved to Florida. I was feeling
pretty emotional so I threw a giant
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the bartenders.

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we're very different.

JAY
I'm from the city, she comes from a
small village in Colombia.

GLORIA
It's very poor but very, very
beautiful. It is the number one
village in all of Colombia for the
... what's the word?

JAY
Murders.

GLORIA
Yes, the murders.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

SFX: DOOR SLAM!

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Alex appears in the doorway, holding her arm.

ALEX (CONT'D)

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(to Alex)

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