Geena Davis: TV Shows and Movies Are Training Us to Be Sexist

Jon Kopaloff—FilmMagic; Photo Illustration by Lauren Margit Jones for TIME

By **GEENA DAVIS** February 4, 2016

MOTTO

Geena Davis is an Oscar and Golden Globe-winning actress and the founder and chair of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media. She is also the co-founder of the Bentonville Film Festival.

Unconscious gender bias is insidious. It can impact our actions and opinions profoundly, even when we're convinced that we have no bias against women and girls. (And it's not just men who are the problem—women have unconscious biases against women, too.) Employers can swear up and down that they have no gender bias, but studies show that if you put a male first name on a woman's resume, he'll get more job offers, and at a higher salary.

I've had a lot of personal experience seeing the power film and TV images can have on shaping cultural norms. *A League of Their Own* will be 25 years old next year, but I have the same number of girls approach me about it as when it first came out. They all want to tell me they play sports because of that movie.

Actually, *I* play sports because of that movie. Learning to finally play a sport led me to want to try others. When I first saw archery (on TV, speaking of media images), I really wanted to try it. I ended up a semi-finalist for the 2000 Olympics in archery (at 43!), which had a small impact on women and girls wanting to take up the sport, as well. What had a *huge* impact: Two movies that came out in 2012 featuring female archers (*Brave* and *The Hunger Games*). Girls' participation in archery shot up that year. My research institute will be releasing a study in a few months on the impact of female archer characters on girls' interest in playing the sport—stay tuned!

Why did women coming out of *Thelma & Louise* feel empowered and inspired by the characters, who make a series of horrible mistakes and finally kill themselves? While profoundly *not* role models, they remain, to the end, in charge of their own fates—which is very rare for female characters. That experience changed my life; I began to view media images as potential tools for change.

Fast-forward to when my daughter was born: I wanted to hold off on exposing her to princess movies until I could explain that they're to be taken...you know, with a grain of salt. One day, I was changing her Pull-Up diaper when she looked up at me, beaming. "Cinduwewa!" she said.

"Wha—? How do you know Cinderella??" I asked her.

"On my diapie," she said, patting the front of her Pull-Up.

When I started introducing Alizeh to some media made for kids—G-rated videos and pre-school programs—I felt it was very important to watch *with* her. Children, especially very young ones, don't have the critical-thinking skills or filters to understand and judge what they're watching; they just take it as fact. After all, what 2-year-old is going to say, "I'm not seeing myself accurately reflected in this show"? What I saw left me absolutely floored: It seemed obvious that there were *far* more

male characters than females, even in entertainment made for the youngest of kids. (There are exceptions, of course—the *Teletubbies* are gender balanced, though maybe you can't tell.) My concern was: How are media images contributing to unconscious gender bias if the female characters are one-dimensional, sidelined, stereotyped, hyper-sexualized or *not even there* in the very first programming kids see?

I talked to many people in my industry about it, and not one seemed to notice what I thought was glaringly obvious: In the 21st century, kids are being trained from the beginning to see women and girls as less important and as having less value. I thought, "Can I do an intervention to improve the media kids consume? Since no one is seeing what I'm seeing, can research make a difference and be a tool to create change?" So through my Institute on Gender in Media, I have now commissioned the largest body of research ever done on family and kids' entertainment, covering more than a 20-year span.

I decided the best use of the data was for me to go directly to the creators of kids' media and share it with them since I know pretty much everybody in my industry. And I decided to work closely and collegially and *privately* with the studios, networks and guilds—since I want to continue to work for all of these people! The reaction at the first meeting I took was the same as it has been at every meeting: They were absolutely stunned. The president of the studio said, "How is it that I'm a woman, I have a daughter and I've *never* thought about counting the female characters?"

Now, we're nearly 10 years in, and we've seen a tremendous response to our work: A survey showed that 68% of people in the entertainment industry who have heard my presentation say that they changed two or more of their projects because of what they learned; 41% said it's impacted four or more of their projects. We're seeing great progress; based on the reactions we get and the number of new shows and movies that we know we impacted, I'm very comfortable predicting that the percentage of female characters in children's entertainment will improve dramatically within the next five years, as will the quality of the characters.

Look at female representation in so many sectors of society, which has stalled at around only 17-20% women: Congress, corporate boards, C-suites, law partners, tenured professors...the list goes on. Progress in those sectors is glacial. So here's what I call my theory of everything: What if people are seeing women as less important, less skilled and less talented because the tremendous amount of media we've consumed—*from when we were very young*—has trained us to have an unconscious gender bias? Media images impact the real world tremendously; they shape how we see ourselves and what seems normal. It may take decades to reach parity in other sectors of society, but the ratio of male to female characters onscreen can change overnight. Consider this: I was the President of the United States on TV for only one season, about 10 years ago. But a survey by the Kaplan-Thaler group shows that people familiar with the show were 58% more likely to take a female candidate for president seriously.

Let's change what our kids see, and let's stop creating gender biases that we have to try to fix later on. As I always say, "If they can see it, they can be it."

Academy Award winning actor Geena Davis is the Founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and also the co-founder of the Bentonville Film Festival, which champions women and diversity in media.

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