

# *Miss Representation*

## A Theological Exploration of Sexism in the Media

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A study resource generated by the Women and Justice: One in Christ Social Statement task force  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Featured at the Sundance Film Festival, *Miss Representation* is a thought-provoking documentary that explores the media's effect on how men and women view each other and ourselves. It features many of America's most powerful and influential women, including Condoleezza Rice, Lisa Ling, Nancy Pelosi, Katie Couric, Rachel Maddow, Rosario Dawson, Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, Geena Davis, Margaret Cho, and others, as well as ordinary young people. As described on [missrepresentation.org](http://missrepresentation.org):

*Like drawing back a curtain to let bright light stream in, Miss Representation (90 min; TV-14 DL) uncovers a glaring reality we live with every day but fail to see. Written and directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the film exposes how mainstream media contribute to the under-representation of women in positions of power and influence in America. The film challenges the media's limited and often disparaging portrayals of women and girls, which make it difficult for women to achieve leadership positions and for the average woman to feel powerful herself.*

We watched the film and found the discussion so valuable that we are inviting others to discuss it as well, believing that a faith-oriented discussion could only be more helpful. We recommend this film to you in hopes that it will shed light on how women are portrayed in our homes, our society, our congregations and the Church. We hold special thanks to Rev. Daniel Pugh for preparing the study guide.

Copies of the film are available for use at each synod resource center, or by contacting the ELCA Women and Justice Social Statement task force at [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org). It is also available for DVD purchase and digital download at [www.missrepresentation.org](http://www.missrepresentation.org).

In Christ,

Women and Justice Social Statement task force

*Choose how you view:*

Eventually, this curriculum will come in three different timetables so that you may choose the one that suits your congregational or group's needs best. Currently, Option A is available.

Option A: 3 sessions, 1 hour each

Option B: 1 session, 3 hours

Option C: 4 sessions, 45 minutes each (recommended for Sunday school)

## Leader's Guide

Thank you for taking on the role of facilitating discussion of the film *Miss Representation*. The task force thought this film helped them see how negative messages about women and girls in the media affect us all and are not always obvious. The sessions and questions are appropriate for adults as well as teenagers, but please feel free to tailor the sessions to fit your group's needs. Please be advised this film is rated TV-14, and contains some rough language and sexual imagery, even though all of it is taken from publically available television.

*Please pre-screen the movie so that you are adequately prepared. You will find it helpful to be sure you are familiar in advance with the main point of each segment of the film to be discussed.*

This version of the study resource comes in three sessions. Each session contains a Bible verse and an opening prayer, about 30 minutes of the film, discussion questions, and a closing prayer. A full hour is ideal for each session. *If you are planning to do this study during a Sunday school period that has less than an hour, you may want to use the four-session study. If you'd like to show the film and discuss it in a one-day retreat setting, please check to see if the single-day study is available.*

This guide encourages participants to talk about what they have seen and to share their personal stories. Your primary goal should be to provide a sacred space for conversation and the sharing of such experiences. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to discuss all together or break into smaller groups.

You can affirm the participants' sharing by crafting the closing prayer using statements and concerns from the group. This must be done with great sensitivity. The closing prayer can be done by you, or you may invite someone else to lead it. Coordinate who will be leading the closing prayer in advance, so that the prayer leader can take notes informally during discussion.

Finally, you are encouraged to make this study your own. You neither need to ask the questions in a certain order nor do you need to use every question given. They should serve as your guide as you shape the sessions and questions for your context.

Supplies needed:

A television and DVD player & adequate seating where everyone can see and hear

Printouts of discussion questions (if desired)

Pens and paper

Two large poster-sized sheets (session three only)

Markers (session three only)

# Session One:

## Body Image

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“The Media is the message and the messenger.”

**Set-up:** Arrange seating around the television screen. If desired, provide copies of the discussion questions for all participants. Provide the leader of the closing prayer with paper and pen to take notes for the aforementioned petitions.

**Session objectives:**

- Examine body images in the media.
- Reflect on what God illumines so that we might see what we do not want to see.
- Ask ourselves what faith has to do with body image/s.

**A reading from Matthew:**

*“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness.”* (Matthew 6:22)

Opening Prayer:

**Let us pray.**

**God of all creation, you are the light of the world. Fill us with your light, O God, so that we may be a light for others. Open our eyes to new insights through this discussion together. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Start the video from the beginning. Watch the first 34 minutes, then stop for discussion. (If you are short on time, you can cue up the film to the two minute mark without losing too much content). Please prioritize the questions according to your context.

Discussion Questions:

1. Reread Matthew 6:22. God gives light to our sight; otherwise it is like we are sitting in a dark room where we cannot see. What did you see in this film so far? What do you think God might be calling your community to see?
2. The film tells the story of its creator, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, who channeled her pain inward from an early age and had to fight her way out of it. Newsom started to act, only to find that her agent wanted her to lie about her age and her Master’s Degree in Business. What does this say about Hollywood and bodies to you?

3. The film states that 78% of 17-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies. Why do you think that is? No matter your age, how do you view your own body? What did you learn – and what is missing – in the film’s portrayal about the ways age and race/ethnicity intersect with being female? In what ways can we encourage more positive self-images for everyone, no matter our gender, race and ethnicity, or age?
4. The film suggests that selling cosmetics and beauty products is a lucrative industry. How is the advertising for these products sending us detrimental messages about ourselves and our bodies? Did you realize how heavily advertisers touched up photos and photo-shopped models’ bodies? Does this change your perception of beauty as defined by the media?
5. In what ways do you think these messages about bodies particularly affect children and teenagers?
6. Think about what you think is most central to a Lutheran expression of faith. How might faith speak to the images we see and the problems we face?
7. *If there are no teenagers in the group:* What do you think teenaged girls and boys would say if they saw and talked about this film? What differences do you notice with your own reactions? In what ways do these differences matter?  
  
*If there are teenagers in the group:* What do you think older adults would say if they saw and talked about this film? What differences do you notice with your own reactions? In what ways do these differences matter?
8. Many of the people in the video were worried for someone. For whom are you worried?
9. What can you imagine could change because God gives light to the sight of the *whole* community?

Closing prayer:

**Let us pray.**

**God of all, we pray with concern that we are bombarded with the message that beauty is manufactured perfection. We lift up to you our fears that we all—young and old together—see ourselves through the eyes of the media. We pray for all of us who struggle with self-image and self-worth on a daily basis, especially children, teenagers, and young adults.**

*(Speak petitions here that came up in the discussion.)*

**God, we lift each other up into your loving care. Preserve us and bless us. Give us wisdom beyond our years, and work through us to encourage each other to see what you would have us to see, so that the whole body of Christ may be healthy. Amen.**

# Session Two: The Portrayal of Women in Leadership

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“We still observe the physicality, not the content.”

**Set-up:** Arrange seating around the television screen. If desired, provide copies of the discussion questions for all participants. Provide the leader of the closing prayer with paper and pen to take notes for the aforementioned petitions.

Cue the video to the 34 minute mark.

## Session objectives:

- Examine connections between media and female leadership.
- Reflect on faithful leadership and Christian responsibility to women and girls in leadership.

## A reading from Proverbs:

*“Charm is deceitful, and beauty empty; the woman who is wise is the one to praise.”*

(Proverbs 31:30, Jerusalem Bible)

*“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”*

(Proverbs 31:30, NRSV)<sup>1</sup>

Opening Prayer:

**Let us pray.**

**God of all, you created us in your own image. Through baptism we are all one in the body of Christ. You call us all to be co-creators with you and to witness to the presence of your kingdom in this world. Through Christ, we ask that you partner with us now, O Lord, and help us to strive for equality in our public discourse, our workplaces, and in our churches. In the name of the Triune God, Amen.**

Play the video until the one hour mark, stopping when Geena Davis finishes discussing the film *A League of Their Own*. Proceed to the discussion questions. Please prioritize them according to your context.

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What is one significant thing that struck you in this segment?

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<sup>1</sup> To fear the LORD does not entail fearfulness but fierce respect for the belief that God is God, and humans are not.

- 2) In one or two sentences, what do you think the main point of this segment is?
- 3) The narrator in the film states: “The emphasis on women's appearance affects more than just women on screen. It is affecting women's ability to participate in the political process. Yet the more power women gain, the stronger the backlash against them.” In general, do you think that society treats female leaders more harshly than male leaders? What about in the ELCA? What examples come to mind?
- 4) In Session 1, we learned that the United States is 90<sup>th</sup> in the world in regards to women being in leadership positions. Were you surprised? Why or why not?
- 5) The film discusses how women in politics are treated poorly by the media. One example was using the title “Mrs. Clinton” in referring to Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. Do you think using a title that indicates her marital status (especially since she uses the title “Ms.”), rather than her title in the government, is a way to diminish her accomplishments? Why or why not?
- 6) Reread the quote from Proverbs 31. Having seen the film, how do you read the passage differently? In your congregation are women lifted up for their leadership, strong faith and God-fearing ethics? How can you do it more often?
- 7) The film suggests that as women gain power in public office and private businesses, they are symbolically losing power in the media. The film specifically points to reality television as the “contemporary backlash against women’s rights.” Why do you think backlashes might happen? Do you believe this is a coincidence or intentional?
- 8) Geena Davis points out that G-rated female characters are just as likely to be shown wearing sexually revealing clothing as characters in R-rated movies. In what ways do we *all* feel pressured to perpetuate the current system that objectifies<sup>2</sup> women?
- 9) The film points to a high number of female journalists and news anchors who are or were objectified and sexualized. Why does this happen? What does this suggest about news shows as information versus entertainment? What can be done about it?
- 10) In what ways do you think the media’s portrayal of women as “perfectly beautiful,” vapid, and sexualized influences your personal and communal views of women as leaders? In other words, how do these images affect women and girls themselves? And how do you think these images affect your congregation’s responses to women and girls in leadership? –and the ELCA’s responses to women and girls in leadership?
- 11) The film encourages us to lift up women in our communities for being strong leaders. Whom in your life do you look up to for being a strong woman? Think also of some women of all ages who with a little support could go on to do great things.

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<sup>2</sup> Objectify: to make an object out of; to act as if one possesses another or can control another.

Closing prayer:

**Let us pray.**

**God of mercy, you created us to support each other. Yet we find ourselves in a world with too little support for women in leadership. Help us not only to see these injustices in our society but also to speak out against them. Allow us not only to raise awareness for strong women in leadership, but also to celebrate them. We especially lift up:**

*(Speak petitions here that came up in the discussion.)*

**We give thanks for the calling you have given to the strong women in our lives. Support all of your people to see them as you see them, as God-fearing women worthy of our trust, admiration, and respect. Amen.**

## Session Three: The Media and the Church

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“We see the world and we replicate the world we grew up in.”

**Set-up:** Arrange seating around the television screen. If desired, provide copies of the discussion questions for all participants. Provide the leader of the closing prayer with paper and pen to take notes for the aforementioned petitions.

\*\*You will need two poster-sized sheets and some markers for a group activity. Set them up in different rooms or opposite sides of your room.

Cue the video to the one-hour mark and watch the movie to the end.

### Session objectives:

- Examine the ways in which we as individuals and as the body of Christ are affected by sexism in the media.
- Reflect on God’s call to us.
- Ask ourselves what we can do together.

### A reading from Romans:

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. . . . We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to [God’s] purpose. (Romans 8:24-26, 28)*

Opening prayer:

**Let us pray.**

**Dear God, you have saved us from sin. Yet we repent that we often do not learn from our mistakes. We lament that we often replicate what harms others. Still, your Spirit gives us hope for the future that can be better for all. Send your Spirit to intercede for us, so we may be called according to your purpose.**

After the video, divide everyone into two groups. Give each group a large poster-sized paper to write on. Ask the first group (*so that the other group cannot hear*) to compose a list of responses that address the question:

*In what ways are we victims of the media?*

Then, go to the second group and tell them to compose a list answering the question:

*In what ways are we consumers of the media?*

Give the groups five to eight minutes to write. Each group will need a secretary and a presenter. If there are men and women in the room, encourage sharing the two leadership roles in a way that models gender equality.

Once the groups have finished, hang the two lists next to each other on a wall and gather both groups together.

Ask the questions:

**What do you see in these two lists? What are the similarities and differences?**

**Do you feel that victims and consumers have power to change the system? Why or why not? What does it mean that we may be both victims and consumers at the same time?**

*[Leaders, many ideas will come up here, but among others it is critical to challenge participants to think about how all of this is about a system; that is, in the end, **all** of us engage in passive consumer behavior **and** we contribute to the problem. The problem is a system in which we all participate, but, importantly, systems can be changed.]*

When that conversation has run its course, you can ask some of these questions with your remaining time. As in previous sessions, please prioritize them according to your context.

- 1) From your perspective, what was the main point of the conclusion of the film?
- 2) How do you define *sexism*?
- 3) Compare what you think with one way *sexism* has been defined by sociologist Allan Johnson. He describes it as the promotion of male privilege, found most notably in patriarchal social systems, which are male dominant, male identified, and male centered.

Although this stark definition can be a bit jarring, think about what each phrase means. For instance, in the United States, which sex dominates politics, the media, money, and church leadership? By which sex is “good” or “right” leadership identified? From whose perspective is the world seen and ordered—whose view of the world is most commonly promulgated—from whose eyes and in whose voice is reality seen and talked about?

- 4) What connections does the film make between sexism in the media and violence?
- 5) Now that you have seen the film in its entirety, what most helped you to see issues about women in the media? What was missing for you?
- 6) In pairs or in the whole group, share how these images affect you or make you feel.
- 7) Where is God in all of this? Is God on television or in magazines?

- 8) Where is the Church in all of this? What roles does faith play in our daily interaction with the media?
- 9) In what ways do we carry the media's message of objectifying and degrading women into the sanctuary or Bible study? In what ways might the Church itself be a form of media that sometimes aligns with media messages—and sometimes not?
- 10) In what ways do we carry the media's message to the election and treatment of leaders in the congregation? The synod? The ELCA?
- 11) We have observed that "the media we follow tell us what is important." In what ways have you found this is true? What do you think we can do about what is harmful in the media?
- 12) Reread the passage from Romans 8. How do you read the passage now? What do you think about the tension represented in this verse between God's action and human waiting or passivity? For what do we hope? To what does God call us?
- 13) How will we begin to act out for what we hope?

**Encourage the group to think about what everyone can do next.**

*Some suggestions might include the following:*

- *Spend a week (or some other amount of time) looking at media and messages about women and men in your home, congregations, neighborhoods, and schools and regroup to discuss what you saw. Questions for that discussion may include things like:*
  - *What did you see? What did you see that you had not noticed before? What did you see differently that you had noticed before?*
  - *What surprised you?*
  - *How did what you saw make you feel?*
  - *What needs to be different?*
  - *What can you do about it?*
- *Contact the Women and Justice task force at [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org) to suggest holding a social statement process listening event in your area or congregation.*
- *Participate with others in further dialogue on women and justice, giving attention to the ways sexism affects everyone. Other social statement process study resources are available at [www.elca.org/womenandjustice](http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice). By the end of 2013, these will include study resources on human trafficking, a Bible study, and a discussion guide for Half the Sky. Other resources on domestic violence, theology, social analysis, and Bible study are available from the ELCA Justice for Women program at [www.elca.org/justiceforwomen](http://www.elca.org/justiceforwomen).*
- *Contact the Women and Justice task force at [womenandjustice@elca.org](mailto:womenandjustice@elca.org) with your suggestions and feedback.*

Closing prayer:

**Let us pray.**

**God of justice, you call us to work for change in a hectic world. We strive for equality of women and men that we don't always find on TV, in film, on the internet, and in print. And still, we have hope. We have hope in the future, because your Spirit intercedes on our behalf.**

**We especially have hope for:** (*Speak petitions here that came up in the discussion.*)

**Thank you, God, for entrusting us with your work in the world. Grant us strength to have hope in things yet unseen and the courage to get us there. Amen.**