

OPTION C

'Miss Representation': A Theological Exploration of Sexism¹ in the Media

A study resource generated by the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ

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:

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 the 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. It is also available for DVD purchase and digital download at www.missrepresentation.org.

In Christ,

ELCA Social Statement Task Force on Women and Justice

¹ Sexism: 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?

Choose how you view:

There are three versions of this study for you to choose from.

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

Option B: 3 sessions, 1 hour each

Option C: 1 session, 3 hours

This is OPTION C

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 negative messages about women and girls that are not always obvious to everyone. 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 screen the movie beforehand 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 one session lasting three hours. In this option you will watch the entire film first. Then, after a bathroom break, you will begin discussion of the film using the questions found below. *If you are planning to do this study during a Sunday school period, you may want to use the three-session or four-session study.*

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 lead 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 and adequate seating where everyone can see and hear

Printouts of discussion questions (if desired)

Pens and paper

Two large poster-sized sheets

Markers

'Miss Representation'

"The media is the message and the messenger."²

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.
- Examine connections between media and female leadership.
- Reflect on faithful leadership and Christian responsibility to women and girls in leadership.
- Examine how a masculine worldview influences our media.
- Reflect on a faithful response to the way the media makes women and girls invisible or objects (sometimes called symbolic annihilation).
- Examine the ways in which we are all affected by media.
- Reflect on God's call to us.
- Ask ourselves what we can do together.

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 6:22-23a)³

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 film from the beginning. At the end of the film, allow 10 minutes for a bathroom break.

When they return, prioritize the questions according to your context.

² All introductory quotations come from the film, "Miss Representation."

³ We see when we are in light; we don't see well when we are in darkness. This verse refers to vision, not to skin color.

Discussion questions:

1. Reread Matthew 6:22-23a. 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? What do you think God might be calling your community to see?
2. The film states that 78 percent 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?
3. *If there are no teenagers in the group:* In what ways do you think these messages about bodies particularly affect children and teenagers? What do you think teenage 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? How do the messages you consumed during your youth impact your life and worldview today?

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? How do you think the adults in your life are impacted by media messaging?

4. 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?
5. 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?
6. We learned that the United States is 90th in the world in regards to women being in leadership positions. Were you surprised? Why or why not?
7. 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? Where else have you seen this happen?
8. How did you react when you learned that the number of women on the board of television broadcast companies was so low? What about the memo from the Disney Corp. stressing that their bottom line was only to make a profit? What does this say about media as an industry? Consider women who are people of color, LGBT or are differently abled.

9. The average number of news stories about women and girls is less than 20 percent, despite women and girls being 52 percent of the population. How is this indicative of a larger problem of misrepresentation? What other examples of “symbolic annihilation” (make invisible or objects) come to mind? Consider women who are people of color, LGBT or are differently abled.
10. 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 happen? Where else do you see this happening?
11. Geena Davis pointed out that G-rated female characters were 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 objectifies⁴ women? In what ways do we do so unconsciously?
12. 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? The ELCA’s responses to women and girls in leadership?
13. The film encourages us to lift up women in our communities for being strong leaders. What women do you look up to in your life for being strong leaders? How can you and your community support those leaders and nurture future leaders, especially young women and girls?

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)

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.

⁴ Objectify: to make an object out of; to act as if one possesses another or can control another.

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 enablers of the media?

Give the groups 5-8 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 equity.

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 enablers have power to change the system? Why or why not? What does it mean that we may be both victims and enablers 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 consuming 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. Please prioritize them according to your context.

1. From your perspective, what was the main point of the conclusion of the film?
2. What most helped you to see issues about women in the media? What was missing for you?
3. In pairs or in the whole group, share how these images affect you or make you feel.
4. Where is God in all of this? Is God on television or in magazines?
5. Where is the church in all of this? What roles does faith play in our daily interaction with the media?
6. 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 be a form of media that sometimes aligns with social media messages—and sometimes not?

7. In what ways do we carry the media's message to the election and treatment of leaders in the congregation? The synod? The ELCA?
8. We have observed that "the media we follow tell us what is important." In what ways have you found this to be true? What do you think we can do about these harmful messages?
9. 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? What do we hope for? To what does God call us?
10. How will we begin to act for change?

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 surprised you?
 - How did this experience 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 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. By the end of 2013, these will include study resources on human trafficking and a Bible study. 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.
- Contact the Women and Justice task force at 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 all people, regardless of gender—equity 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.

Optional participant handout

'Miss Representation' discussion questions

1. Reread Matthew 6:22-23a. 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? What do you think God might be calling your community to see?
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8. How did you react when you learned that the number of women on the board of television broadcast companies was so low? What about the memo from the Disney Corp. stressing that their bottom line was only to make a profit? What does this say about media as an industry? Consider women who are people of color, LGBT or are differently abled.
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15. What most helped you to see issues about women in the media? What was missing for you?
16. In pairs or in the whole group, share how these images affect you or make you feel?
17. Where is God in all of this? Is God on television or in magazines?

⁵ Objectify: to make an object out of; to act as if one possesses another or can control another.

18. Where is the church in all of this? What roles does faith play in our daily interaction with the media?
19. 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 social media messages—and sometimes not?
20. In what ways do we carry the media's message to the election and treatment of leaders in the congregation? The synod? The ELCA?
21. We have observed that "the media we follow tell us what is important." In what ways have you found this to be true? What do you think we can do about these harmful messages?
22. 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? What do we hope for? To what does God call us?
23. How will we begin to act for change?