



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 6 to 10

About the Author: Adapted by MediaSmarts, from “Gender Issues in *Sailor Moon*,” by Alice Te of the Toronto Board of Education.

Female Action Heroes

Overview

In this lesson, students identify stereotypical images of girls and women as represented by female action heroes. After viewing an excerpt from children’s television programs that feature male or female action heroes, students deconstruct the traits of the main characters and compare the female action heroes to their male counterparts. Students discuss the purpose of television stereotypes, and whether these gender stereotypes influence the attitudes or behaviour of boys or girls. In small groups, students then assume the role of television producers who wish to create a television series about male or female superhero free of gender and other stereotypes.

Preparation and Materials

- For the extension activity, or to use as a teaching background, photocopy the student handout *From Sailor Moon to The Legend of Korra*
- For more information about television stereotypes, photocopy the *Stereotypes* teaching background
- Locate a short clip of a TV program featuring a female superhero

Procedure

Note: The point of this lesson is for students to articulate what qualities they enjoy or admire in a female action hero, and why. The teacher should point out that it’s not “bad” to enjoy such attributes — but that it’s important for students to be aware of the ways in which girls and women are (or are not) portrayed.

Explain to students that although cartoons featuring male action heroes have been a staple of children’s television for over fifty years, the idea of female action heroes is fairly new: it’s only recently that they’ve achieved any presence on children’s TV. As a result, this lesson will focus primarily on the images of girls and women appearing in these programs.

Guided Discussion

- Divide your blackboard into two sections, headed “Male Action Heroes” and “Female Action Heroes.”
- Ask students to think of television programs that feature action heroes, and list them under the appropriate heading.



- Have students analyze why they enjoy watching these programs, and get them to pinpoint the characteristics that make male and female protagonists into true action heroes/heroines. List these qualities under the appropriate column heading.

Look at the two headings, and decide:

- What are the similarities between male and female superheroes?
- What are the differences?

Show a short clip of a television program that features a female superhero. Before viewing the clip, ask the students to note down the characteristics that are associated with the girls and women appearing in the program, as well as those of any boys and men. What are some points they might be concerned about? Make sure that they consider aspects such as appearance, behaviour and attitudes.

After the clip, list the students' findings and discuss the characteristics they noted.

Ask:

- Did you find that the characteristics of boys and men, and of girls and women, were stereotypical?
- Which of these characteristics might be limiting? How?
- Which of these characteristics might be positive? How?
- Do any of these characteristics accurately reflect the qualities of real girls and boys?
- What might happen if most children's programs portrayed boys and girls in a stereotypical manner?
- Do the toy action figures of these superheroes counter these stereotypes, or reinforce them?
- If students have younger siblings who play with television action figures, do they create their own stories or stick with the plot lines of the program?

Activity

Divide the class into small groups, with each group assuming the role of television producers who have been asked to create a new superhero cartoon series for kids aged 5-8. These producers want the program to be entertaining, and also to be non-stereotypical: it should provide good role models for young viewers. Tell the students to be creative!

- Make a list of the various positive characteristics your female or male action hero should have. Some examples might be: girls and women leading others, fighting for important causes, showing bravery, caring about their female friends, and being interested in matters other than attracting the attention of boys or men. Examples of positive characteristics for boys and men might be taking care of others, finding ways of solving problems other than fighting, and being sensitive and caring.
- Every heroine or hero needs a trusty sidekick. What might her/his non-stereotypical traits be?
- Draw pictures of your female/male action hero and her/his friends. Remember to incorporate characteristics that challenge conventional stereotypes.
- Create a storyboard for an episode of the new TV program. What happens in it? What action elements are different from a conventional show?
- Have each group present its work to the rest of the class.



Extension Activity: Grades 7 and 8

- Distribute the handout *From Sailor Moon to The Legend of Korra*
- Have students read the essay, and then complete the accompanying questions.

Evaluation

- Group superhero assignment
- Completed questions for *From Sailor Moon to The Legend of Korra*



From Sailor Moon to The Legend of Korra: Female Action Heroes

The study of gender, action heroes and cartoons offers tremendous opportunities to reflect on cultural gender stereotypes, and what it means to be male or female in today's society. As we explore and compare cartoons, we can deconstruct media messages about gender stereotypes that perpetuate traditional male and female roles — and contemplate alternatives to them.



Before *Sailor Moon* hit North American airwaves in 1995, there were few female heroes in Saturday morning cartoons. At that time, in TV shows designed specifically for kids, only 23 percent of the characters – and even fewer of the major characters – were female. "In cartoonland, all the girls are sidekicks and there's no doubt who's in charge," said ABC news anchor Carole Simpson. And they were stereotyped, too: the lone Smurfette was blond and all too caring; Scooby Doo's Velma was smart but unattractive; and a female Power Ranger was, of course, dressed in pink. (Source: Doherty, Shawn and Nadine Joseph. "From Sidekick to Superwoman: TV's Feminine Mystique.")

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Because producers of children's television believe that girls are less likely to watch TV, and more likely to listen to CDs, tapes or the radio, they have traditionally catered to young boys. But the popularity with young girls of the *Sailor Moon* cartoon series made those producers realize that there was an untapped market of young females that would watch TV – if they had the right program to attract them.

Sailor Moon's appeal to young girls was not just the fact that she and her fellow "sailors" were female, but also the style of storytelling inherent in the Japanese tradition of anime. Unlike traditional North American cartoon characters, *Sailor Moon's* character evolved as the series progressed, rather than remaining static.

As with a soap opera or a mini-series, each character develops personality and maturity as the series continues. For example, *Sailor Moon* goes from being a frightened teen in the show's initial episode, "to developing into a more mature and caring heroine in later shows. She essentially 'grows up' on the screen each day, until eventually she becomes a queen and a mother." (Source: Gauntlett, Dr. David. "Gender and Sexuality in Japanese Anime." www.theory.org.uk/ctr-rol4.htm)



With the success of *Sailor Moon* and other anime cartoons in North America, there has been an increase in female action heroes in children's cartoons. However, increased representation doesn't always guarantee a decrease in gender stereotypes.

For example, although *Sailor Moon* achieves maturity and has tremendous powers, most of her young viewers still relate to her as a giddy love-starved girl with superpowers.



Many popular series from the last decade, such as *Kim Possible* and *Atomic Betty*, have female leads who take care of villains while retaining "girly" interests like makeup and cheerleading. The tension between their "masculine" role as heroes and the perceived need to keep them sufficiently feminine is stretched to the limit in the series *Totally Spies!*, where the title characters' gadgets are disguised as hairdryers, compact mirrors and other stereotypically girly accessories. Even the Disney movie *Mulan*, which was based on a young girl's quest to break out of rigid social gender expectations, was undercut by the marketing of its lead character in stereotypically feminine "princess" clothing.



More recently, though, some TV shows and movies aimed at young people have featured female leads whose heroism does not have to be "balanced". The most successful new kids' show of 2012 was *The Legend of Korra*, featuring a lead character whose appearance is based more on by female snowboarders and Mixed Martial Arts stars than on models or cheerleaders. As Brian Konietzko, one of the show's creators, puts it, "She's muscular, and we like that."



Perhaps the biggest difference between *The Legend of Korra* and shows such as *Sailor Moon* or *Totally Spies!* is that *Korra* is not aimed primarily at a female audience. It's a popular belief in the TV business that boys won't watch a series with a female lead, and making *Korra* the star of the show met with some resistance at Nickelodeon, the channel that produces the series. Michael DiMartino, the show's other co-



creator, said that executives were swayed by the success of movies such as *Brave* and *The Hunger Games*, which both feature female leads who make few concessions to femininity: "The time is right in the cultural zeitgeist for all these female heroes to come out." In fact, nearly two-thirds of the show's viewers are male -- which proves that boys are happy to watch shows with female leads, so long as they kick butt. (Sources: Ulaby, Neda. "Airbender Creators Reclaim Their World in Korra" *All Things Considered*, April 13 2012; Farley, Christopher John. "The Next Airbender Gets Older, Wiser and Adds a Feminine Touch." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 8 2012.)



From Sailor Moon to The Legend of Korra: Female Action Heroes

Discussion Questions:

1. According to the article, why have television producers traditionally been reluctant to create children's programs that feature girls or women as superheroes? Do you think that they're right? Why or why not?
2. Stereotypes are common story-telling tools, but they can also be limiting. How can male and female stereotypes be limiting in terms of how the characters are described, what characters are able to do, and the stories that can be told?
3. How was *Sailor Moon* different from traditional North American cartoons? In what ways was she a non-stereotypical action hero, and in what ways was she a stereotypical female action hero?
4. According to the article, Korra is an example of a female action hero who does not have very many stereotypically female characteristics. Can you think of any male action heroes who have few or no male characteristics? Do you think such a character would be successful? Why or why not?
5. In a short paragraph, respond to the following statement:
"Television clearly makes an impression on kids today, whether it's in what they think they should look like, or the qualities they associate with women and men. The media are powerful tools that can either reinforce negative stereotypes or present strong role models for young girls and boys today."

Matt James
Senior Vice President
Kaiser Family Foundation



Stereotypes

Because most television programs are quite short, the identities of characters must be established as quickly as possible. To do this, television writers often use stereotypes. A stereotype is a fixed or conventional image of a person or group of people. Stereotypes generally conform to a pattern of dress and behaviour that is easily recognized and understood. Often, a judgment is made about the person or group being stereotyped. That judgment may be positive or negative.

Generally, stereotypes are less real, more perfect, (or imperfect) and more predictable than their real-life counterparts. A typical male stereotype, for example, is of a "real man" who is adventurous, masterful, intelligent, and unshakable. Such sex-role stereotypes are intended to present viewers with a character they can easily recognize and relate to. Their danger, however, is that, if seen often, they can affect the way a viewer perceives men in general. Male stereotyping can narrow one's notion of what men can be and do; it can affect women's and children's expectations of men; it can even shape men's and boys' own views of themselves and of how they should behave.

While commercial television has improved in its portrayal of females, many of the women featured on TV continue to be depicted as someone's wife (apron-clad) or girlfriend (barely-clad). Television children are generally cast in gender-related roles – the girls playing with dolls while the boys play at sports – and all are "cutesy" and talk as though they were insightful adults. Similarly, the characterization of mothers-in-law, the elderly, gays, police officers, and truck drivers tends toward the stereotypical.

Culture and class stereotypes are also prevalent in television. Traditionally, blacks were portrayed as either happy-go-lucky servants or dangerous criminals, and while these stereotypes linger, we are now seeing what might be described as upright, intelligent, middle-class black characters. Similarly, North American native peoples are now being portrayed as something other than buckskin-wearing teepee dwellers.

Too often, however, minorities are portrayed stereotypically and almost never as powerful or rich as the white majority. Because stereotyping can lead children to form false impressions of various societal groups, it is important that students recognize stereotypes and understand the role they play in television's portrayal of life. To become television-wise, then, students must tune in to the ways television treats people, recognize how they themselves relate to TV characters, and understand how these characters can influence their ideas about the real people in their communities.

Source: TVOntario, Let's Play TV: Resource Kit For Television Literacy, © 1995.

