The Girl in the Mirror

Overview

In this lesson, students look at how gender stereotyping may discourage young women from becoming involved in politics. Students begin by discussing what is meant by the terms "politics" and "political action." With those definitions in mind, they create a "portrait of a politician" based on the traits and characteristics that are needed to be a political agent. Students then deconstruct media products aimed at girls and young women in order to identify the stereotypes contained within and understand how these may raise barriers to being politically active.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Discuss stereotyping
- Define political terms
- Analyze media products
- Identify stereotypes

Preparation and Materials

- Photocopy the *Influencers on Social Networks Popular with Girls* handout

Procedure

What is Politics?

Write the words "Politics" and "Political Action" on the board as list headings. (These headings should top the first and second columns of the board, so there is room for a third, fourth and fifth column to be added later.) Ask students what they think these two ideas mean: what is politics? What does it mean to take political action and how is this done? (Most likely, politics will be seen as a way of changing the laws of a nation or changing society, a way of managing or running a nation, and a way of obtaining and keeping the power to do these things; political action will likely be seen as winning power through a formal process such as elections, influencing public opinion, and defeating or outmaneuvering political opponents.) List suggested elements on the board under each heading. A final definition of politics might read something like this one, from *Princeton WordNet*: "The activities and affairs involved in managing a state or a government."

Stereotype of a Politician

Ask students if they know what the word *stereotype* means. With the class's participation, explain that it means an idea of what a person is like based on what group s/he belongs to, rather than his/her individual qualities. To make sure students get the idea, ask if they know of any *stereotyped* ideas adults have of young people.

Ask students where stereotypes come from, and make sure that in the following discussion the media are listed as a source.

Based on the class's discussion of the nature of politics and political action, ask students, "Who would be able to succeed at politics as you have defined it? What characteristics would s/he have? What strengths or qualities would she or he need to succeed?"

Write the heading "Stereotype of a Politician" over the third column on the board and list the students' suggestions below it. (Likely suggestions: a successful politician must be confident, forceful, willing to fight for what s/he believes in, good at tactics and strategy, persuasive, charismatic, well organized, ruthless, a leader, inspiring, committed.)

Stereotypes in Media Products

Ask students what media products girls and young women consume. The list will likely include the following:

- Disney products
- Family Channel, YTV and other tween-oriented shows
- Tween and teen movies
- Streaming services (Netflix, Crave, etc.)
- "Grown-up" TV (make sure to get details on different kinds of shows – sitcoms, dramas, reality, etc.)
- Music (again, get details – what genres, sources)
- Ads for youth-focused products
- Influencers and ads on social networks (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, etc.)

Now ask students what media products boys and young men consume. The list will likely include the following:

- Video games
- Comic books
- Streaming services (Netflix, Crave, etc.)
- Action movies and TV shows
- Sports and sports-related media (*Sports Illustrated*, etc.)
- "Grown-up" TV (make sure to get details on different kinds of shows – sitcoms, dramas, reality, etc.)
- Music (again, get details – what genres, sources)
- Ads for youth-focused products (distinguish between what products are advertised to boys, as opposed to ones advertised to girls)

Make a column headed "Male Stereotypes" on the fourth column of the board and have the class develop a list of stereotypes of boys and men based on the media identified above. Ask students: how many stereotyped qualities came from more than one source? Do some sources give substantially different pictures of what boys and men are like, or do the different media generally agree? **Make sure students understand that they are not listing which qualities *they* believe boys and men possess, but which qualities these media products suggest they do.**

Divide the class into five groups (or more if the class suggested other media products you think are worth considering). Have each group discuss one of the media products and develop a list of the stereotypes of girls and women that particular medium or media product communicates. (Provide the group doing influencers on social networks with a photocopy of the handout *Influencers on Social Networks Popular with Girls*.) **As you did with the male stereotypes, reiterate to students that they are not listing which qualities *they* believe girls and women possess, but which qualities these media products suggest they do.**

Once the groups have made their lists, write the heading "Female Stereotypes" on the fifth column of the board and collect each group's findings under it. Ask students: how many stereotyped qualities came from more than one source? Do some sources give substantially different pictures of what girls and women are like, or do the different media generally agree?

Column headings will look as follows:

Politics	Political Action	Stereotype of a Politician	Male Stereotypes	Female Stereotypes

Comparing Stereotypes

Have the class look over column three ("Stereotype of a Politician") and column four ("Male Stereotypes"). Are there any qualities or characteristics that are found in both columns? (Probably several, such as "willing to fight," "confident," "charismatic.")

Have the class look over column three ("Stereotype of a Politician") and column five ("Female Stereotypes"). Are there any qualities or characteristics that are found in both columns? (Probably few or none.) Are there any qualities or characteristics found in one column that are the **opposite** of those found in the other? (Examples: ruthless/caring; well organized/ditzy; willing to fight/wanting to please.)

Based on this comparison, ask the class: what do you think about the picture of girls and women and of politicians presented in the media? What effect do you think it has on women getting involved in political action?

Ask the girls: What effect do these stereotypes have on your interest in getting involved in political action? Why?

Women in Politics

Read the class the following mini-profiles:

- Emily Murphy helped win the right for Canadian women to be considered legal "persons" and to keep their right to property after marriage.

- Karen Silkwood risked her life to reveal contamination and unsafe practices at the nuclear plant where she worked.

- Rachel Carson wrote the book *Silent Spring* which led directly to the banning of the toxic pesticide DDT and inspired the environmental movement.

- Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, refused to obey a law that required her to stand up if a White passenger wanted to sit. Her action inspired a boycott of buses in Montgomery, Alabama, and helped to spark the American Civil Rights Movement.

- Molly Brant helped to secure land for Indigenous refugees in Canada after the American Revolution.

- Françoise David led thousands of women in *The March Against Poverty* and addressed the United Nations on the subject.

- Buffy Sainte-Marie, an accomplished musician and actress, raised awareness of Indigenous issues and organized educational support for Indigenous peoples.

- Sandra Lovelace petitioned the United Nations Human Rights Commission to convince the Canadian government to allow Indigenous women to marry non-Indigenous men without losing their status under the Indian Act.

Ask the class:

- How much do these women resemble the stereotypes communicated by the media?

- How much do they resemble the "Stereotype of a Politician"? (For example, Emily Murphy was well organized and good at strategy and tactics; Karen Silkwood was committed; Rachel Carson was persuasive; Rosa Parks was inspiring and willing to fight for what she believed in.)

Redefining Politics

Point out to students that none of the women you've just mentioned were directly involved in electoral politics. (Emily Murphy lobbied the Prime Minister and served as a magistrate, but was never in any legislature or in the Senate, despite leading the fight to allow female senators; Rachel Carson was a biologist and writer; Karen Silkwood and Rosa Parks were private citizens.) Have students create new definitions of the terms "politics" and "political action" which will include people like Murphy, Carson, Silkwood and Parks. Have them list and describe people whom they know or have heard of who fit this redefined concept of political activism. Can they think of any examples of important men in history who don't fit important aspects of the male stereotype? (For instance, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi stressed non-violence instead of conflict.)

Women in Politics: Breaking the Stereotype

Ask students if it is possible to be successful in electoral politics without conforming to the stereotype of the politician. Have each student research one of the following politicians (you may add or subtract from this list at your discretion) and prepare a *mini-profile* of her:

- Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
- Gro Harlem Brundtland
- Nancy Pelosi
- Sandra Day O'Connor
- Corazon Aquino
- Agnes Macphail
- Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- Rosalie Abella
- Greta Thunberg
- Kamala Harris
- Hilary Clinton
- Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
- Angela Merkel
- Elizabeth Warren

The mini-profile should include:

- A brief biography
- A summary of her political career
- A brief analysis of how well (or poorly) she fits the stereotype of the politician

Influencers on Social Networks Popular with Girls