

## ‘Where My Girls At?’: When Pop Goes Political



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Like many Americans of my generation, I have become obsessed with the pop culture phenomenon, *Glee*. One needn't be a showtune nerd to appreciate the wonder that is *Glee*; the combination of pop music, bright colors, flashy dancing, quirky characters, and bold singing make the show as addictive as your favorite junk food. And similarly to such sugary snacks, the delectable candy-coated content of the show can render its fans oblivious to what they are actually consuming—which, in the case of much mediated entertainment, is often very political messages.

As a political scientist who studies the politics of subtle media representations, I like to think of myself as immune to this kind of unconscious consumption. Imagine my surprise when I woke up one Wednesday morning and realized that, in a giddy stupor, **I had posted the recent *Glee* cover of Beyonce's “Girls Run the World”** on my Facebook wall on Tuesday night without the slightest hint of irony. On its face, this video may appear empowering to women and girls. The lyrics speak of girls who “run the world.” Surely that's the battle cry of equality, right? Unfortunately, those of us who study gender disparity in the US know that women still make 70 cents to the male dollar, have a one in four chance of being sexually assaulted in their lifetime, and are represented at disproportionately low levels in positions of economic and political power (just to name a few of the most obvious indicators of inequity). **As Amber of NineteenPercent points out** it's “not right that [Beyonce's] out there promulgating historical inaccuracies to impressionable young women imparting the false belief that they run the world, thereby lulling them into a false sense of achievement and distracting them from the doing the work it takes to actually run the world.”

I should point out here, as Amber does, that I don't believe that “female domination” is the goal. I believe in gender equity for women AND MEN (yes, men are negatively affected by gender roles, as well—see **Jackson Katz** for more). Evident from examining traditional measures of progress, women, as a group, have not achieved near equity to their male counterparts. Moreover, more subtle disparities in the way we construct masculinity and femininity in the Western context continue to limit experiences, expression, and opportunities for both male and female-bodied humans. Neither of these statements is radical or new, and one needn't study gender to observe these realities in the world around us.

And yet, despite recognition of these truths, we lack any semblance of a movement that would address either the most obvious tangible inequities (like pay disparity and the pervasiveness of rape culture) or the more subtle negative effects of limiting gender binaries. Perhaps the lyric of choice should not be, “Girls Run the World,” but rather, “Where My Girls At?”

Distraction and placation of oppressed groups is a key ingredient to the perpetuation of discrimination in any society. As Amber points out, the song's message serves to distract listeners from the realities of inequity that exist. On its face, the falsehoods of the lyrics are problematic, but these lyrics combined with the saccharin pop-i-ness of their delivery produce a kind of pop-induced sugar coma, lulling listeners into a de-radicalized stupor. Who can help but sing along? And what a great message: girl power! (The use of the word “girls,” rather than “women” is revealing of just how elusive gender parity still is. The normalization of using a word used that describes a female child to describe adult women as a group—unless 12-year-olds are running the world—reveals that, in fact, women aren't even conceived of as fully human enough to be referred to as adults, let alone equal to men.) And while we feel engaged and affirmed through these empty messages of empowerment, it is this very feeling of having “arrived” that **sexes** to

de-energize and diffuse potential social movements. As listeners join our voices in song proclaiming that “girls run the world,” “girls,” in fact, continue to be raped, discouraged from pursuing positions of power, taught their bodies are more valuable than their brains, and abused by their partners. In other words, we are placated through what Marx might call “false class consciousness.”

*Glee*’s rendition is particularly problematic due to the packaging in which these messages are carried: a highly sexualized and objectifying dance sequence. Obviously, that’s what “girl power” looks like.

Research and theory about social movements teach us that oppression can only function so long as the oppressed group lacks cognizance about their state in society. This is often accomplished through adoption of societal norms that buttress existing systems of oppression. Minority groups actively participate in their own oppression by internalizing and adopting these norms. In a Western context, women and girls are taught that the value of the female body gives us power. This reinforces sexualization of the female form and leads women and girls to view participation in our own objectification and consumption as empowering (see Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs* for more). In this way, *Glee*’s objectifying rendition of the song, and my initial unquestioned love of it, are an internalization of gender discrimination embodied.

Here, the actors sing about ruling the world while actively participating in their own sexualization. The performance draws attention to a barrier to and indicator of gender equity: objectification of the female form and the hyper-sexualization of women and girls. I believe, however, that these insidious systems also act as barriers to the formation of group identity/consciousness that a political movement to address gender inequity would require.

Increased sexualization and objectification of women and women’s bodies has been on the rise since the women’s movement of the 1960s. As many scholars note, these processes have undermined women and girls as a group by reducing female-bodied humans to their body parts. The pervasive construction of women and girls as little more than bodies or objects available for consumption by the male gaze is contradictory to beliefs that women are as capable or fully human as are men and, thus, deserve equity. In this context, claims of female empowerment delivered by scantily clad high school students are somewhat ironic at best.

This is a different kind of oppression than that taken on by the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s. In contrast to the traditional political and economic discrimination that existed during that era, this new form, which actively upholds discriminatory norms and behaviors, is neither easily identifiable nor addressed through policy changes. The difficulty in tangibly identifying these systems, however, should not obscure the very tangible macro and micro outcomes to which these new discriminatory norms and beliefs lead. Plainly, when women are sexualized and objectified, they are not taken as seriously as are men.

This has wide-ranging affects, resulting from subtle biases that affect hiring practices to individual-level effects in the form of self-objectification, which can lead to eating disorders, decreased sexual satisfaction, self-esteem and cognitive functioning. Research on which I am currently working also demonstrates that female self-objectification is associated with lower levels of political efficacy—both internally and externally. This means that the objectifying representations of women in the broader ethos is leading us to feel like we have less of a voice in the political world. It seems almost too obvious to state that women’s decreased belief in their own political power could contribute to the absence of a gender justice movement. Further, subconscious beliefs that women are just a little less than fully human may, in turn, decrease the urgency with which gender equity is viewed by both men and women. In these ways, female objectification is evidence of how much we need a reinvigorated women’s movement, and also a contributing factor to why we *lack* a women’s movement.

As a final nail in the irony coffin, the “Girls” scene in *Glee* is couched in a traditional political context: a school rally intended to galvanize the female vote to increase women’s influence in

student government. The irony here is that, within the American political system, societal beliefs resulting from pervasive gender stereotypes and female objectification more broadly, hamper women’s electoral success and power when in office. **A new documentary called *Miss Representation***, which recently premièred on the Oprah Network as part of Oprah’s documentary film club notes how representations of women in media—or lack thereof—decrease the likelihood that women and girls will seek positions of political power. This claim is supported by decades of political science research. Moreover, this research further demonstrates that the small handful of women who do decide to run for political office begin with a handicap. Female candidates are consistently perceived as less capable than their male counterparts in the areas of economics and war: the two most electorally significant issues. In order to overcome this baseline disadvantage, female politicians often take on very masculine attributes, which contradict ideal notions of femininity. In doing so, female candidates may garner more credibility, but they do so at the expense of personal likeability. Therein exists the rub: masculinity is favored in positions of leadership, but masculine females are not perceived as “likeable,” thus placing female candidates and representatives in something of a double bind.

Hilary Clinton’s run for the White House exemplifies the double bind that female politicians face. In order to be perceived as credible, Clinton needed to take on masculine characteristics. However, this masculinity performance generated an enormous amount of backlash and was used against her in ad homonym attacks—think cankles and pant suits. On the other side of the spectrum is Sarah Palin. Palin proved able to harness her femininity for popularity, but was unable to be perceived as both feminine and credible as a leader. We wait for a female politician who is able to successfully tiptoe the tightrope that this double bind creates.

Despite these inequities, when we look at popular representations of collective action around the issue of gender, we continue find scenes like *Glee*’s rendition of “Girls Run the World”. My own experience of being completely enticed by and sucked into this clip tells me that the answer is not for those of us who perceive these messages and representations as politically harmful to simply ignore them or “opt out” of the system. We need to acknowledge the reality of how women and women’s political power are represented in the broader culture, and not rely on notions of individual choice of how we live our lives to immunize us. We are all a part of a discriminatory culture, whether we like it or not. Rather than shut these images out, I contend that all those interested in social equity should use them as a rallying cry to come together, call out what’s wrong, reconnect with our political voices, and re-narrate the stories told about women and girls.

I still play this song during my morning workouts. What was once childlike giddiness when hearing the anthem has been replaced by outrage and fierce perseverance to effect change—a powerful emotion to power you through cardio. Or to change the world.

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