

# Beyond the Stereotypes?

## *Introduction*

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The initiation of this edited volume was motivated by efforts by many dedicated scholars, practitioners, and activists worldwide to rectify gender inequalities portrayed in the media consumed by children. While grateful that such initiatives are taking place, we continue to realize that making progress in this process is painfully slow.

There are two foundational assumptions shared by the volume's authors and editors underlying these state of affairs: First, we recognize that relationships children and youth have with media around gender related issues are intriguing but also complicated. Indeed, extant research in psychology, media studies, and feminist and cultural studies offer a host of possible explanations for the dynamic relationships between media representations, personal identity, and social reality. Second, based on evidence gathered in the significant body of scholarly research on representation of gender in the media, it is clear that the media have the potential to contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequity by continuing to present a stereotyped and segregated world for boys and girls.

This noted, we know much less about how media representations actually influence the construction of gender identities, particularly among children and youth from non-westernized societies. This is especially important given that, as noted above, there are many efforts by producers, worldwide, to advance media interventions that create counter-stereotypes and gender-fluid representations that can enrich children's understanding of not only what it means to be a boy and a girl today, but also what it could mean in a world in which gender equality thrives.

Admittedly, we also know very little about the effectiveness of alternative media texts, both at the micro-level in terms of the development of young viewers' gender identity as well as at the macro-level in stimulating change in a world dominated by an historical and structural gender inequity. Thus, much more research is required to provide evidence to assess the impacts of such alternative approaches, which in turn

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could help develop proposals for improving the effectiveness of these interventions as well as media policies that advance gender equity.

Given this background, the goals of our collection are, first, to present examples of interventions from around the world that attempt to break gender barriers; and second, to explore the influence and consequences of exposure to gender representations – both traditional as well as counter-traditional – on children and youth. This book is structured by these two goals.

Accordingly, the book's 21 chapters were written by authors from a variety of countries around the world, who in presenting their research also reference studies and/or media from Australia, Bangladesh, Botswana, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Israel, Norway, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands, New Zealand, UK, and US. These chapters explore a variety of domains: First, gender related topics include beauty, gender identity construction, gendered self-presentation, health, meaning making, production norms, romantic love, stereotypes and counter-stereotypes. Second, they explore different media and genres – television (reality TV, drama, animation, documentary, advertisements, music videos), web and social networking sites, selfies, books, and stories – across a range of ages spanning from babies to adolescents. Third, the authors use a host of research methodologies: interviews, focus groups, ethnography, analyses (content, discourse, drawings), survey, story-telling. Fourth, the work presented here is ground in diverse scholarly traditions: media studies, cultural studies, feminist studies, developmental psychology, health studies, as well as in professional experience in the industry. We also encouraged the authors to incorporate perspectives from the field of production as well as to include children's voices. Finally, it is important to note that the authors enable us, as a scholarly community, to extend ourselves beyond the male and female gender dichotomy to include hybrid and fluid identities, such as transgender and a-gender.

Overall, we hope that the breath and diversities of the book will make for fascinating reading as well as stimulate reflection, discussion, and, ultimately, contribute to advancing change so very necessary.

We begin by re-creating, in brief fashion, a common ground of understanding of the core issues at play here, assumed by all of the authors of this book: First, there exist gender inequalities and segregation in media for children and youth worldwide; and second, there are significant implications of these inequalities for the wellbeing of our children and our societies at large.

## The “What?”: Gender inequalities in media for children

The body of research documenting the gender inequalities in media for children globally is comprehensive and systematic (see, for example, these recent reviews: Baker & Raney, 2007; England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Götz & Lemish, 2012; Hentges & Case,

2013; Lemish, 2010; Smith, Pieper, Granados, & Choueiti, 2010; Velding, 2014). The main themes of this body of research for our concerns in this volume are quite clear. First, multiple studies demonstrate the dominance of male characters (most common finding is one female to two males) and that this disproportion is even more striking in animated non-human characters (animals, objects, “aliens”). This suggests that the more the animators have creative freedom – the more they default into male dominance, instead of the opposite!

Second, female characters in children’s media are hypersexualized, from a young age, including exaggerated busts, wasp-like waistlines, long legs, flowing hair, long eyelashes, and red lips. Similarly, they “perform” their femininity by wearing revealing clothing in pink-purple-pastel colors, decorating themselves with “girly” accessories, and moving about in flirtatious poses. They often reveal themselves to be overly emotional, dependent, focused on their appearances and on the pursuit of romantic love, and engaged in a “bitchy” competition with other female characters to attract the attention of their male pursuits. They have no interest or aptitude for STEM professions (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), but instead invest in development of their domestic skills and interests. In many narratives, they are rescued by males, followers of their lead, and serve as adoring bystanders and caregivers. When girl characters are presented as strong and able, they are expected to also be perfect: beautiful, smart, successful, high achievers, and have supernatural or very unique talents. There seems to be no room for girl role models who own imperfections and are allowed to fail or just be mediocre in several aspects of their lives without threatening their self-esteem. The most common exception to these stereotypes is the redhead girl, who is “allowed” to break gender norms and thus serves as the other “other” (Lemish, Floegel, & Lentz, forthcoming).

Male characters in children’s media also fall into a restrictive model of hyper-masculinity, although it is expressed in a wider array of possibilities: occasionally in muscular chests and arms at other times with the mastery of technology, science, and weaponry. They appear as rational, brave, active, resourceful, and often as leaders. They have a tendency to resolve conflicts by aggressive use of physical force, for which they are often rewarded by the admiration of others. They do not exhibit emotion or vulnerability but rather strength and resolve. When male characters break these stereotypes, they fall into the “funny loser” type of male, the relaxed, easy going character, who does not care much about success and accomplishments and does not need to measure up to perfection of appearance, action, or character.

Accumulatively, the essence of these differences has been captured in the expression: while male characters “do” (focus on action), female characters “appear” (focus on passive being for others to look at). Overall, then, even including the dynamic of the more recent gendered characters, we can add that girls are allowed to act as long as they are perfect and beautiful; and boys are allowed to fail as long as they are perceived as being “cool”.

Third, production elements – such as music, sound effects, choice of colors, camera editing, use of camera filters – support segregation of girls’ screen world from that of

boys'. Such segregation is reinforced by clear gender divisions in the choice of toys, games, clothing, accessories, and activities offered to girls and boys in many stores, daycare centers, schools, and by their families at home from birth.

Admittedly, there are multiple nuances to these generalizations in the appearances and personalities of media characters, even in the most popular characters such as Disney princesses, action super heroes, and teen-soap protagonists. Indeed, over the years there have been plenty of striking exceptions to the stereotypical norms depicting boys and girls who deviate from traditional expectations and offer a vision of equality. So, there are multiple images of clever and brave girls, as well as of considerate and sensitive boys. Yet, most of these examples come from non-commercial private and public television productions and independent media producers (for examples from around the world, see Lemish, 2010; Reinhard & Olson, 2017). Thus, given that these productions have a smaller viewing audience, the overwhelming majority of screen content traveling the world remains segregated, highly stereotypical, and restrictive (e.g., Götz & Lemish, 2012).

### “So What?”: The implications of gender inequalities in media for children

So what? Why should these images concern us so deeply? Because there is also plenty of research to suggest that the gendered ideology depicted in media for children cultivates a differential worldview, with serious implications for children's wellbeing and potential for healthy development (see integrated reviews: APA, 2007; Dill-Shackleford, Ramasubramanian, Behm-Morawitz, Scharrer, Burgess, & Lemish, D., 2017; Ward & Aubrey, 2017). Among the key findings: Accumulated exposure to stereotypical gender portrayals and clear gender segregation, worldwide, have been found to be correlated: (a) with preferences for “gender appropriate” media content, toys, games, and activities; (b) to traditional perceptions of gender roles, occupations, and personality traits; as well as (c) to attitudes towards expectations and aspirations for future trajectories of life. Further, the impact of sexualization of girls has contributed to development of unhealthy and unrealistic attitudes about female sexuality and the role of sex in intimate relationships. Thus, the thin beauty model was found in research studies to play a significant role in girls' low body image and self-confidence, as well as more specifically contribute to eating disorders. Finally, in this overview of key findings, the common narratives of heterosexual romance and the “damsel in distress” continue to offer a limited array of aspirations and possibilities for a happy and fulfilling life.

While most of the research has focused on the implications of media content on the development of girls, there is much reason to believe that boys are just as vulnerable to its impact and the restrictive models of masculinity it offers them (Lemish, 2010). For example, for boys, the over-emphasis on violence, action, sports, and risk-taking

as defining masculinity, as well as the sanctioning of any forms of behavior deviating from normative heterosexuality, limit their own healthy development and impose on many of them roles and expectations that work against their inner self and wellbeing.

But, not all research focuses on children as passive victims of media content. Studies ground in humanistic psychology as well as feminist and cultural studies have pursued questions related to children's active role in making meaning out of their media experiences in ways that serve their needs, creativity, and life experiences. These processes may include resisting traditional conventions of femininity and masculinity, interpreting them in creative ways, and experimenting with alternative forms of representations (see for example Götz, 2014; Mazzarella, 2010; Mazzarella & Pecora, 1999). While we are happy to celebrate these expressions of personal empowerment and inner strength, we also remember that children's inner worlds may be nevertheless constrained by their cultural milieu, including the media offerings available to them (Götz, Lemish, Aidman, & Moon, 2005).

Overall then, media play an important role in the construction of gendered identities of both girls and boys (Götz, 2014; Mazzarella, 2013). Thus, what they offer them – the characters, narratives, settings, possibilities – requires our careful scrutiny, if we are to actively work towards gender equality and healthy child development.

### “So Now What?”: The contributions of this book

As stated earlier, this book seeks to broaden the debate over gender representations and to showcase innovations in gender portrayals, as well as the challenges involved in breaking stereotypes. Thus, in the first part of the book, we document interventions from around the world that attempt to break gender barriers. From there, we move in the second section to explore the influence and consequences of exposure to gender representations – both traditional as well as counter-traditional – on children and youth.

#### *Interventions*

The first part of the book focuses on the content of media for children, and presents various creative innovations and conscious interventions that challenge conventional stereotypes and proactively attempt to bring about change in children's media content.

Dafna Lemish employs conceptual frameworks and criteria of gender equity to analyze four innovative case studies in media gender presentations. The four television programs she analyzes were finalists for the 2016 PRIX JEUNESSE Gender Prize.

Katy Day analyses a script disruption in a US book entitled *First Test* which features a girl who refuses to accept gender expectations. Day hypothesizes that offering such literary characters and narratives to young readers can contribute to their real-life choices and experiences.

Nancy A. Jennings explores transgender experiences as depicted in the US teen drama *The Fosters*. In doing so, Jennings suggests that television drama provides a safe space to experiment with sexuality and gender constructs for cisgender and transgender characters.

Lindsay Watson introduces new developments in the presentation of female lead characters in animation from a production perspective in the United Kingdom, pointing out pros and cons while introducing major new initiatives.

Anna Potter shares conscious producer efforts to include non-traditional gender representations in the re-booting of *Thunderbirds Are Go*, an action animation.

Alexandra Sousa and Srividya Ramasubramanian discuss the importance of media literacy and alternative on-line community-based initiatives for minority youth, in efforts to counter existing stereotypes of Latina girls in popular culture in the US.

Tamara Amoroso Gonçalves, Mariana Hanssen Bellei Nunes de Siqueira, and Letícia Ueda Vella examine a media change initiative advanced by a media advocacy organization in their debate with Brazilian authorities, with their particular focus on sexist advertising to children.

We conclude this section with an article by Nelly Elias, Idit Sulkin, and Dafna Lemish, who present their analysis of stereotypical gender representations on the international *BabyTV* channel that targets the audience of babies and toddlers. Their contribution documents the absence of an intervention, when it could have so obviously taken place.

Accumulatively, articles in this first section, critique traditional gender stereotypes and present a variety of role-reversal models. Some of them go further by analyzing examples that challenge our binary understanding of gender as comprised of femininity and masculinity, and introduce readers to alternative conceptualizations of gender, including transgender, gender fluidity, and even a utopian framework of an a-gendered character. We are also reminded about the complex ways in which gender intersects with other inequalities, such as race, ethnicity, and class, which are impossible to untangle in efforts to provide children with aspirational social realities.

However, we also note how few and far between are these efforts. Admittedly, we did not devote much attention in this collection of articles to the roles books can play as a change agent. Yet, literary initiatives have been leading the way in presenting children with strong, capable, and independent female characters. *Feminist baby* (Brantz, 2017) for the very young; *The paper bag princess* (Munsch, 1981), *My name is not Isabella: Just how big can a little girl dream* (Fosberry, 2008), and *She persisted: 13 American women who changed the world* (Clinton, 2017) for preschoolers; or *Good night stories for rebel girls* (Favilli & Cavallo, 2017) for elementary school children, are just a few of the many books available today that break gender stereotypes and serve to empower girls and to demonstrate to both girls and boys that they can – and deserve – to be equals. There is a lot that screen culture can learn from following such examples as well.

### *Consequences*

The second section contains a collection of articles that shift from discussion of media gendered content to actual consequences of exposure to that content for the real, lived experiences of children around the world.

The first four articles focus on stereotypical representations of beauty and sexuality:

Kara Chan, Maggie Fung, and Tabitha Thomas explore how boys and girls in Hong Kong perceive physical beauty and its stereotypical association with personality traits, relationships, happiness, and materialism.

Maya Götz and Ana Eckhardt Rodriguez explore how German teenagers misinterpret and idealize the highly sexualized representations of women in music videos.

Carmen Llovet, Mónica Díaz-Bustamante and Kavita Karan analyze comments on Instagram pictures of a beautiful girl-model that confirm the negative effects of sexualization of children.

Johanna M.F. van Oosten investigates reciprocal relationships between adolescents' television diets and their endorsement of hypergender orientations in the Netherlands.

The next three articles discuss young audiences' reflections on stereotypes:

Ruchi Jaggi reflects on children's views of the highly gender-stereotypic content they consume on the dominant television fare that does not represent children's lived experiences in India.

Monica Barbovski, Tatiana Jereissati, and Graziela Castello share their study of how Brazilian teenagers reproduce and/or contest the hyper-sexualized and heteronormative discourses they consume regularly.

Ardis Storm-Mathisen analyzes influences of gender representations in media essays written by teenagers as they project into their future as adults, within an intersectional reality of Batswana.

The two articles that follow focus on pre-teen and teens' performance of gender while maintaining a degree of self-awareness:

Shiri Reznik explores the "perfect" love stories written by Israeli girls that reveal the possible influences of media on gender roles and romantic narratives embedded within them.

Michael Forsman describes how teens in Sweden use selfies for gendered self-representation in social networking with peers, reinforcing assumptions about stereotypes.

The next two articles illustrate children's own understanding of the direct impact that gender stereotypes have on their lives:

Maya Götz and Caroline Mendel give voice to German girls being treated for eating disorders. Their stories reveal the effects idealized beauty models and weight loss television programs have on their wellbeing.

Linda Charmaraman, Amanda Richer, Brianna Ruffin, Budnampet Ramanudom, and Katie Madsen present analyses of adolescents' attitudes toward gender and sexual orientation stereotypes in media in the United States.

Our concluding articles demonstrate the power of media to introduce children to new ideas about gender that challenge their taken for granted perceptions:

Sara L. Beck, Rebecca Hains, and Colleen Russo Johnson examine how children in the US reacted to exposure to an innovative Canadian children's series that presented an a-gendered character and their thinking about gender.

Finally, we bring the book to an end with a contribution from Aanchal Sharma and Manisha Pathak Shelat who take a broader look at theories explaining how media images cultivate gendered beliefs and attitudes among children with a view to effecting positive change.

Altogether, this research collection presents solid evidence that 'what' children view on their screens matters: They internalize stereotypes and learn to perform the gender-“appropriate” behaviors and appearances to which they have been regularly exposed. In some cases, the devastating effects are clear – such as the prevalence of eating disorders. In other areas, the effects may be subtler and less dramatic.

While our contributors unveil young people's ability to be critical of some aspects of the representations they consume, we clarified that being critical does not necessarily result in their developing resilience or resistance to them. Put simply, while we study and respect the processes of meaning-making in which children and young people are engaged when they consume media, we are also acutely aware that it is crucial to provide children with rich and inspiring material with which to make meaning. Thus, we celebrate the many forms of critique, interventions, and possibly resistance authors shared regarding representations of gender in children's media taking place around the world. We also believe they have demonstrated the value of offering children healthy alternatives to the common stereotypes to which they are exposed daily. Indeed, several of the media texts discussed in this volume offer a promising horizon, as they demonstrate what happens when the industry understands the value of early socialization to gender equity, is willing to take risks, and invests in the healthy development of children's identities.

When we embarked on the journey involved in advancing this book, we entitled it, optimistically: “Beyond the Stereotypes,” hoping to document significant positive change. Along the way, we found that young people, just like adults, are far from being “beyond” media stereotypes of gender; rather, they seem quite often to be trapped in them. Yet, with time, guidance, and experience, we also found that they are able to reflect on the stereotypes or even to critically oppose them.

More deeply, we also recognize that the structural gender inequalities these stereotypes represent are so deeply rooted that they make any form of resistance a hugely complicated task. The contributors and editors of this book hope that we are able to push the envelope a bit farther in these efforts by extending the limits of the conversation about boys, girls, and their images as we continue to question: how shall we get “beyond the stereotypes?”



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