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The Effects of Gender Representation
in Media on Young Girls

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The shows that dominated my pre-school years had an indelible effect on me. My first exposure to media was through 'Doraemon,' widely cherished as the premier kids' show in Asia. It revolves around a group of friends where Shizuka is the sole female character. The portrayal of Shizuka, characterized by her soft-spoken, docile demeanor and perpetual poise, inadvertently fostered the belief that such qualities defined the ideal behavior for girls. Shizuka's character in the show is primarily defined as an object of infatuation for the male protagonist Nobita. Moreover, she is depicted as a bright and industrious girl with a promising future, but when asked about her life's aspirations, she expresses a desire to be a good wife. In contrast, Nobita, the male protagonist, is portrayed as a laid-back boy who enjoys sleeping and lacks a clear life goal. However, when contemplating his future, he envisions himself married to Shizuka, with him working outside while she tends to their child at home. This depiction of gender roles in 'Doraemon' mirrors a recurring narrative present in other popular shows in India, such as "Chhota Bheem" where the male protagonist is shown engaging in heroic deeds while the female counterpart cheers him on.

I soon realized that the portrayal of women in popular cartoon shows consistently pigeonholes them into the role of homemakers, while the male characters are confined to their professional spaces, seldom contributing to the domestic sphere. For a long time, this depiction of gender roles appeared normal to me and being a homemaker was all I could imagine myself to be. I probably wasn't alone in holding this perspective considering studies show preschoolers spend an average of nearly 30 hours a week watching television; some spend more time watching television than doing anything else except sleeping (Anderson, Lorch, Field, Collins, & Nathan, 1986; Aulette, 1994; Kaplan, 1991)

As I transitioned into adolescence, my beloved cartoons made way for Marvel movies, which, to my dismay, seemed to reiterate the notion that women's roles were largely limited to being romantic interests or damsels in distress. This narrative reinforced a worldview where men were the dominant force, and women primarily existed to offer support and admiration. It made me question if being the side character to someone else's story was all that I was meant to be. It took 17 movies for the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to introduce a female villain (Cate Blanchett in 2017's *Thor*: *Ragnarok*) and 21 to debut a solo female lead (Brie Larson in 2019's *Captain Marvel*). Further, the recurring theme of female characters experiencing additional sacrifice raised the question of whether they were considered expendable.

"Gender stereotypes are common on daytime soap operas as well; women often are shown as hopeless individuals, unable to solve problems without assistance" (Basow, 1992). Children frequently watch these programs after school, reinforcing notions of women as subordinate, passive, and indecisive. "Female children are less likely to develop autonomy, initiative, and industriousness if they rarely see those traits modeled. Similarly, because male characters on television programs are more likely to

be shown in leadership roles and exhibiting assertive, decisive behavior, children learn this is the appropriate way for males to behave" (Cantor, 1977; Carter, 1991; Seidman, 1999).

The effects of this skewed portrayal of gender roles in the media followed me to my late teen years when I was exploring fields to major in. Historically, computers have always been represented as the exclusive domain of the stereotypical geeky guy with perms and thick glasses. "Computer scientists were perceived as having traits that are incompatible with the female gender role, such as lacking interpersonal skills and being singularly focused on computers" (Cheryan et al, 60). Despite developing an interest in coding, I found myself questioning too many times if it was the right path for me. The fact that I hardly had role models to look up to didn't help. The absence of representation left me questioning my capabilities and the potential acceptance of a woman in a predominantly male-dominated field.

Having been pushed towards certain roles throughout my life, it doesn't surprise me today when I walk into my Computer Science class in college with hardly any female students. Nor does it come as a shock when I see most of the power positions in the corporate world occupied by men. It is, in essence, an unsurprising manifestation of a lifetime steeped in the consumption of stereotypical media. The enduring impact of these portrayals is such that they don't merely shape our perceptions; they weave themselves into the fabric of our identities, influencing our career choices, determining our sense of self-worth, and inevitably shaping our ability to realize our full potential.

There is an urgent need for a fundamental transformation at the very core. It is high time for a profound shift in how mothers are depicted –not just as caretakers but as intelligent and resourceful individuals with personal ambitions. Similarly, fathers

should be portrayed not merely as providers but as figures of kindness and thoughtfulness. Let character aspirations break free from the confinements of stereotypes, allowing girls to dream of becoming engineers and boys to be nurses. It is time boys are told they shouldn't be embarrassed to cry and girls encouraged to be boldly opinionated. The potential of media is immense; within its realm lies the potent force capable of ushering in this transformative wave, rewriting the course of society, and bringing about a narrative that resonates with the depth of human emotions and aspirations.

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