

'Miss Representation' – a plea to stop exploiting women

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VALLEY – A mother of two young children is worried the 21st century is little better than the last 100 years when it comes to sexual stereotypes and the consequences that follow. Her daughter – the elder of the two – received compliments about her beauty when she was born in 2009. Her son (born in 2011) received letters from the president and vice president, and many predictions he would one day be president.

Jennifer Siebel Newsom told the more than 200 women at the Feb. 15 Queen of Hearts lunch at the Resort at Squaw Creek that she knows women have progressed, but fears the steps are not great enough to ensure her offspring will be offered equal opportunities.



Jennifer Siebel Newsom speaks Feb. 15 about her film "Miss Representation" at the Resort at Squaw Creek. Photo/Kathryn Reed

She laments the fact that girls are taught at an early age that looks are important – especially to be successful, while boys are told they are natural leaders. And with those teachings boys learn to treat girls as though they are not equals.

Newsom wrote and directed the film “Miss Representation”. It debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011. The 90-minute film was shown at the Wednesday lunch.

“This film is meant to be more than a film. It is meant to be a call to action,” Newsom said.

She spoke before the film was shown and then took questions afterward. Newsom shared stories from her youth. While she comes from a background of privilege, her life has not been easy. Being pretty did not shield her from tragedy or abuse.

But what bothers Newsom is the prolific exploitation of women in the media. The media being news outlets, television shows, Hollywood films – the whole spectrum.

“... the film exposes how mainstream media contribute to the underrepresentation of women in positions of power and influence in America. The film challenges the media’s limited and often disparaging portrayals of women and girls, which make it difficult for women to achieve leadership positions and for the average woman to feel powerful herself,” the movie’s website says.

Newsom doesn’t believe change will come until younger women – even girls – get involved in the discussion. That is why she and others involved with the film are promoting the movie to schools, with a curriculum component available.

She said it is time people standup to sexism.

The movie says women spend more money trying to look beautiful than they do on their education.

The film uses examples from most mediums to show sexism and sexual exploitation of women.

It also provides some statistics that aren't often reported in mainstream media.

- The number of youth getting cosmetic surgery tripled between 1997 and 2007.
- Seventeen percent of teen girls cut. Cutting is self-mutilation.
- Cuba, Iraq, China and Afghanistan have more women in politics than the United States.
- Nine states consider domestic violence a pre-existing health condition and therefore women can be denied health insurance.
- Films made in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s portrayed women as more capable and intelligent than what is produced today.
- G rated movies – especially animation – have female characters as scantily clad as R rated movies do.
- Twenty percent of teens have sex before age 14.
- More news outlets report on celebrity happenings and gossip because it's cheaper to produce.

“Miss Representation” also has interviews with Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi, Katie Couric, Rachel Maddow, Margaret Cho, Rosario Dawson, Dianne Feinstein and Gloria Steinem and others.

Pelosi talked about how when she ran for office and her youngest child was a senior in high school people asked her, “Who is going to take care of your children.”

In the film she says, “I don't think men are ever asked that question.”

Feinstein expresses her frustration with the media using the verb “complained” for women who are quoted and “explained” for male respondents.

Rice said no male presidential candidate is asked if they are tough enough to be commander in chief, but women are.

The images of women delivering television news were like watching soft porn with all the cleavage. The point was made that what’s being said is not important, but the dressing or package that delivers it is.

Couric winced at images of herself in short skirts on the “Today Show” – even questioning if she contributed to this need to wear something that really isn’t appropriate for the job.

Then there were the comments about and photos of female candidates – on both sides of the political aisle – that their male counterparts are never subjected to. The film makes a clear case that women’s looks and sexuality are part of what they do – even if they are running for president or vice president of the United States of America.

When it comes to Hollywood, it’s advertisers who are saying what goes on. Men in the 18-34 bracket have money to spend. Advertisers want the products those guys buy to be in films and the films to appeal to that age group. That is why there are so many films that lack substance.

Product placement is not new, but this line of advertising is a bit more covert. The movie points out how it’s similar to the early 1950s after World War II when women wanted to keep working, but instead the government and corporations wanted them back in the home.

The television show “Father Knows Best” came out and with it came advertisers placing their products to appeal to women – demonstrating the latest appliances, showing a happy family is

one where mom stays at home. This was a covert ploy to get women to get back to "where they belonged", according the men in power.

If change is to come, it will be from the consumer, the film pointed out.

"The consumer's voice is probably the most powerful voice, aside from the voters," the film says.

In other words, if people keep watching programs or movies, or buy print, or view online media that degrade women, then the practice will continue because there will be no financial incentive for the industry or corporate America to change.