

# WHY GIRLS?

## WHY MEDIA AND POP CULTURE?

### WHAT IS IT ANYWAY?

“Media” means a lot of things. It’s a term that refers to the Internet, social networking (like Facebook and MySpace), TV, magazines, the news, cell phones... anything that helps move ideas and information around. “Popular culture” is a result of those ideas and bits of information. It’s the shared vocabulary that we use to speak to ourselves about ourselves! Pop culture includes style, trends, art, stories, sports, and video games, as well as advertising, branding, and marketing. The overlap between media and pop culture is significant: you can’t have one without the other.

“ Just because I put my picture or information on Facebook doesn’t mean that it’s OK to stalk me or ask for naked pictures. I shouldn’t be blamed when other people are inappropriate or violent.”

- Young Woman, Montreal, QC

“ I get that Beyonce is a black woman, but she’s not as dark as I am and she can afford a weave.”

- Young Woman

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Because media and pop culture are so closely connected, they end up creating and maintaining norms, standards, stereotypes, and prejudices. Interacting with media and pop culture means interacting with systems of power. When seen from this angle, media and pop culture can be extraordinarily powerful tools of both oppression and liberation.



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# HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AGAIN?

When it comes to media and pop culture, girls are experts. Think about it: as the target of most media messages, girls and young women are uniquely positioned to understand and criticize the popular culture they are so much a part of.

Girls and young women are not simply passive consumers of the media: many critically read it and actively subvert it. Girls and young women aren't slaves to pop culture: many reinvent it on their own terms and explode the borders of what's conventionally offered to them from pop culture.

“ The experience and representation of people, especially youth in marginalized communities, is often hijacked by the media. What we see on TV is a reinforcing of many stereotypes. When we put cameras and the resources to make videos into the hands of girls, they can tell their own stories. They can share their amazing talent and potential with the world.”

- Sarah, Youth Worker & Artist, Wemindji , QC

“ We deconstruct fashion and support positive body images by being our own fashion designers. We nurture culture and build community through dance, and we amplify their voices through short documentaries written, co-directed and co-edited by the girls. These are acts of youth political agency and resistance; we deconstruct how we view the media and ourselves.”

- Melanie & Manjeet, Youth Facilitators, Antidote

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED WHAT WE KNOW

Media and pop culture sends limiting messages about girls' identities, their potential, and what matters to them.

The media loves to sensationalize, victimize, and create panic about girls and young women.

Media and pop culture is a big influence on girls but it is not the only influence.

Girls and young women are media savvy and understand, interact, and respond to media and pop culture in dynamic and complex ways. They aren't just passive consumers or victims of the media.

Media and pop culture images and icons are not always what they seem. Effective critiques need to look at the many facets of an issue.

Media doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is affected by the same issues that affect girls: sexism, racism, ageism, classism, and homophobia.

Media literacy and critical thinking reduce the negative impact of harmful media messages. They empower girls and young women to ask questions, deconstruct and analyze messages, see below the surface of issues, and make choices about what they like and why.

Supporting girls and young women to make their own media is a powerful way to develop new skills and foster self-esteem and empowerment. There is power in creating and owning representations of themselves that reflect their issues.

Girls and young women actively use media to their own advantage. They are organizing, mobilizing, expressing themselves, building communities, critiquing and creating something new.

# WHY GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN ARE TAKING BACK THE MEDIA!

There is a huge gap between what mass media presents about “girls’ lives” and what girls and young women themselves say about their own experiences.

“ Girls are consciously looking for sources that represent what they look like and identify with. Being a tall, white, blond female is not an option for the girls I work with, but they are repeatedly told, sometimes in violent ways, that that’s the ideal and they should aim for it.”

- Andrea, Youth Facilitator and Founder of Go Girls

“ The media gets freaked out when we talk about our bodies the way we want. It’s more sensational to blame girls and freak out than to listen to girls. You know, us girls with our naiveté and our good looks, luring in predators everywhere. It must be our fault.”

- Sarah, Montreal, QC

“ I asked some of the youth I work with to tell me about how they use the Internet. The top two reasons: homework and bus schedules. I guess that doesn’t really spark the interest of mass media.”

- Jess, Youth Facilitator, Montreal, QC

Women’s sexuality (most often portrayed as heterosexuality) is shown to be the road to romance, love, immense pleasure, and even liberation. While at the same time, it is described as leading to unwanted teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and irreparable damage to reputation.

- Janet Shibley Hyde & Sara R. Jaffee, “Becoming a Heterosexual Adult: The Experiences of Young Women”

Editors and journalists constantly deny that racism exists outside of isolated instances by aberrant individuals or acts of extremist groups. In fact, there is a huge body of evidence of racial prejudice and discrimination... Media discourse is not just a symptom of the problem of racism: it reinforces individual beliefs and behaviours, collective ideologies, the formation of public policies and organizational practices.

- Frances Henry & Carol Tator, The Canadian Race Relations Foundation

Sexualized by the media, constructed as commodities and markets, trained to be nurturers and caregivers with their needs and voices trivialized and dismissed: it’s no wonder girls and young women want some kind of power and self-respect.

- Yasmin Jiwani, “The Girl Child: Having to ‘Fit’”

# WE SUPPORT GIRLS TO CREATE AND CRITIQUE MEDIA THROUGH...

## POPULAR EDUCATION: GIRLS EMPOWERING THEMSELVES

The popular education approach emphasizes that learning is not a top-down process. It starts with what is important in the lives of each of us. In popular education, the main goal is to create positive social change based on the needs of those who are learning.

- Engaging with the media and pop culture in meaningful ways requires listening, understanding, and validating how girls and young women are already engaged; and then offering the tools, space and information to support them to take their learning further and take action.
- Strong media literacy tools are the ones that have been developed with girls and young women.

## GIRLS & SOCIAL JUSTICE

Often girls and young women express having trouble “fitting in.” It is crucial that we ask ourselves: “Trouble fitting into what?”

Harmful and often violent stereotypes about girls and young women are about more than being slim and sexy; they are about presenting a universal image which draws on racial, sexual, religious, and class stereotypes.

Girls and young women are inspired by realistic, relatable, and empowering images of a diversity of girls and young women; images that are few and far between in pop culture and the media.

## GIRLS MAKING CHANGE

Blaming the media for the issues faced by girls and young women is not the answer. When girls and young women are given the tools and space to critique and create new media, they engage in broader social issues like violence, sexism, poverty, and racism. They engage with the issues and create alternatives and change.

## THE POWER OF GIRLS: ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Girls are not passive recipients of media and pop culture messages. Girls think for themselves and make meaningful critiques when they have the tools, resources, and space.

Celebrate what girls like and enjoy about media and pop culture. Shine light on their creations, engagements, and interactions.

## ALL-GIRL SPACES

Different types of conversations happen in gender-specific spaces and mixed groups. In all-girl spaces, girls and young women can talk about the media on their own terms. They can think about how girls see girls in the media, rather than how they are seen by boys.

Most media treats girls and young women as objects. In all-girl spaces, they are subjects.

# HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

Offer an all-girl space or moment that is facilitated by a diversity of women.

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Try not to make judgments or assumptions about what girls and young women like.

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Make the effort to connect to and understand girls and young women's realities.

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Rather than trying to shut off access to media like TV, the Internet, and phones, arm girls and young women with the knowledge, tools, and information they need to navigate and use them safely.

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Offer media arts and opportunities for girls and young women to express themselves creatively. Try using cell phones to make videos or purchase disposable cameras; make 'zines; write original song lyrics; find free software online; make posters. It doesn't have to be created with high-tech equipment. Don't be afraid to get creative.

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Encourage girls and young women to interact directly with the media: write letters to journalists, TV stations, and companies. Better yet, ask the girls and young women what they want to do.

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Introduce girls to alternative media. Some of our favourites are listed on the next page!

Encourage Critical Thinking and Media Literacy:

-Have faith in the fact that girls and young women can read and decipher media and pop culture messages.

-Engage in media and pop culture with girls and young women.

-Encourage girls and young women to make the links between media, pop culture, and forms of oppression and privilege.

-Ask questions like:

- Who is making this image/statement?
- What is the message being portrayed?
- Who is the message for? Who does the message benefit?
- Who gets to speak? Whose voices are left out?
- What is being said about this group of women?
- Do you see yourself represented in it?
- How does this make you feel? Why?

-Find local organizations that offer media literacy workshops if you do not have the capacity to do it yourself.

# WHERE YOU CAN GO FOR SUPPORT

## THE GIRLS ACTION RESOURCE CENTRE

A comprehensive collection of documents, websites, and organizational listings that can help you start and strengthen girls' spaces. It includes information and strategies in popular education, anti-oppression, facilitation, and program design.

## AMPLIFY TOOLKIT

Our user-friendly guide to creating and facilitating girls' programs. It includes a "how-to" Manual and Workshop Guide with activities on media literacy and critical thinking.

## WHY GIRLS?

Check out our other Why Girls? publications on topics such as Violence Prevention, Leadership, and Sexual Health.

## KEEP IT REAL: MEDIA LITERACY MANUAL BY YOUTH ACTION NETWORK

A manual for teachers and students who want to bring issues of hip hop, commodification, and gender into the classroom. It is made possible by Youth Action Network, a national not-for-profit organization helping youth become more informed and actively involved in order to move towards a just and sustainable society. [www.youthactionnetwork.org](http://www.youthactionnetwork.org)

## GREAT STUFF FOR GIRLS & YOUNG WOMEN

### KICKACTION.CA

Kickaction is an online community space for girls and young women who think for themselves, take a stand, and act creatively to bring positive change to their communities and across the globe. Girls create their own media by writing blogs, by submitting videos and art, or they can connect with girls and young women from across the country in critical discussions about media, pop culture, and what really matters to them. [www.kickaction.ca](http://www.kickaction.ca)

### MAKE SOME NOISE: A YOUNG WOMAN'S GUIDE TO MEDIA ARTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A do-it-yourself guide for girls and young women who want to create media arts projects that make a difference. Inside, find "how-to's" on photography, cyber activism, spoken word, radio, and hip hop. There are also profiles of female media artists and online resources to get you started.

DOWNLOAD ALL OUR PUBLICATIONS FOR FREE AT [GIRLSACTIONFOUNDATION.CA](http://GIRLSACTIONFOUNDATION.CA)



### **SHAMELESS MAGAZINE**

Shameless is Canada's independent voice for smart, strong, sassy young women. It's a fresh alternative to typical teen magazines, for girls who know there's more to life than makeup and diet tips. Packed with articles about arts, culture, and current events, Shameless reaches out to readers often ignored by mainstream media. [www.shamelessmag.com](http://www.shamelessmag.com)

### **RACIALICIOUS**

Racialicious is a blog about the intersection of race and pop culture and it collaboratively discusses media coverage of the multiracial community. Check out its daily no-holds-barred critique of questionable media representations and newsflashes. [www.racialicious.com](http://www.racialicious.com)

### **BITCH MAGAZINE**

Bitch Magazine's mission is to provide a feminist critique and analysis of pop culture, encourage discussion about how the media influences us, and promote connections between cultural critique and social-justice activism. [www.bitchmagazine.org](http://www.bitchmagazine.org)

**KICKACTION.CA** is a bilingual online community for girls and young women who think for themselves, take a stand, and act creatively to bring positive change to their communities and across the globe. Kickaction.ca is a Girls Action initiative.

**GIRLS ACTION FOUNDATION** is a national charitable organization. We lead and seed girls' programs across Canada. We build girls' and young women's skills and confidence and inspire action to change the world. Through our innovative programs, research, and support to a network of over 200 partnering organizations and projects, Girls Action reaches over 60,000 girls and young women.



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