



GENDERHOPES
WORKING TO END GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Interview of the Month, October 2014
Jennifer Siebel Newsom,
Director, Writer and Producer of Miss Representation

1. GenderHopes: You wrote, produced and directed the 2011 documentary Miss Representation. What inspired you to undertake this project?

Jennifer Siebel Newsom: When I went into acting, my agent told me to lie about my age (I was 28), and take my Stanford MBA off of my resume. It didn't make sense to me that I should be devaluing my accomplishments to achieve "success". So I took a different path, questioned how our culture operated, and made *Miss Representation*, which looks at the ways in which women are under-or-misrepresented in mainstream media and in our larger culture.

2. Can you tell us about the film and the key messages you wanted to communicate to the public when making it?

Miss Representation exposes how mainstream media contribute to the under-representation 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 or girl to feel powerful herself. In a society where media is the most persuasive force shaping cultural norms, the collective message that our young women and men overwhelmingly receive is that a woman's value and power lie in her youth, beauty, and sexuality, and not in her capacity as a leader. While women have made great strides in leadership over the past few decades, the United States is still 90th in the world for women in national legislatures, women hold only 5% of clout positions in mainstream media, and 65% of women and girls have disordered eating behaviors.

3. Many famous, powerful women appear in the film. Was it difficult to engage them to speak about their views and experience?

Quite the opposite: so many people were eager to talk about the way they've been marginalized. The unfortunately unifying aspect of *Miss Representation* is that we've all experienced being devalued by media and the larger culture, so people thought it was great to have a venue through which to bring that to light. Hollywood and media organizations were not always thrilled that we were opening up that conversation, but it's a vital topic that needs to be discussed. And look how it's resonated - all the way to Monaco!



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4. What impact do you feel the film has had? Are you satisfied with the outcome?

Miss Representation has been screened in 49 countries to-date, so that's certainly something to be proud of! The fact that we're talking about women's leadership and changing culture all around the world is very hopeful. But I'm always thinking of ways to get more people involved in the conversation.

5. You've also produced the movie "The Mask You Live in" which addresses challenges faced by men and boys. Can you tell us more about how gender stereotypes also affect boys and men?

To get the full answer, you'll have to go see the film! However, compared to girls, research shows that boys in the U.S. are more likely to be diagnosed with a behavior disorder, prescribed stimulant medications, fail out of school, binge drink, commit violent crimes, and/or take their own lives. *The Mask You Live In* explores the ways in which America's narrow definition of masculinity is harming boys, men, and society at large. It also follows personal narratives of diverse young boys alongside expert thought leadership in this space, for a thorough look at how gender stereotypes and a narrow definition of masculinity are creating a "boy crisis".

6. Both films are supported by a social action campaign, The Representation Project that uses film and media to expose injustices created by gender stereotypes. Can you tell us more about this?

After *Miss Representation*, I heard from so many people who truly wanted to change culture, so I started The Representation Project to shift people's consciousness towards change so that everyone, regardless of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation or circumstance, can fulfill their potential. I encourage everyone to get involved: it's as easy as going to our website (www.therepresentationproject.org) and taking the pledge to sign up for our mailing list where you'll get an email once a week with a tangible action you can swiftly take to lend your voice (or Twitter account, or wallet, among many options) to help create positive change.

7. What is next on your agenda?

I would love to engage more men in the issue of positive leadership, domestic violence, and masculinity, and I hope that *The Mask You Live In* will spark that conversation. I'm quite excited for people to watch the film and get engaged helping us change culture towards the positive.