

**Geena Davis**  
**Founder, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media**  
**Closing Keynote Address**  
**International Corporate Philanthropy Day**  
**The United Nations**  
**New York, New York**  
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President Ali, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen ...

I am honored to be with you at The United Nations this afternoon, joining with such distinguished colleagues to help achieve the Millennium Development Goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women. I'm here to spotlight the importance of positive gender representations in media from an early age.

I've spent most of my adult life advocating for women and girls, in part by seeking roles I believed were constructive for women. (pause) OK, I was in a movie, called "Earth Girls are Easy?" But that was very early on...

I've partnered for many years with the Women's Sports Foundation, including ten years as a trustee, advocating for girls' rights and equal participation in sports. I'm on the board of the White House Project, a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization where we work to advance women's leadership in business, politics, and media.

And five years ago, I launched the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and its programming arm, called "See Jane." It first came about from watching children's preschool programs, videos, and G-rated movies with my then-two-year-old daughter, Alizeh. I was stunned to see that there seemed to be far more male characters than female characters in these entertainments aimed at the youngest of children.

Media images are a powerful force in shaping how women are viewed around the world. The stark gender inequality in media aimed at *children* is of significant importance to our discussion of MDG 3, as TV and movies can wield enormous influence on young children as they are developing a sense of their role in the world. And because children tend to watch the same TV shows and movies again and again,

negative stereotypes are repeatedly imprinted on them from a vulnerable age.

It occurred to me, that it was high time for our kids to see boys and girls sharing the sandbox equally.

In partnership with the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, See Jane sponsored the largest research analysis ever done into the content of movies and children's television programs.

The results were stunning – even though I knew in my heart what they would likely be: at the dawn of a new millennium – in a world that is over 50 percent female – the message the media send is that women and girls have far less value than men and boys.

We found that for every one female character there are *three* male characters. That sorry statistic applies across all ratings, including G-rated films. In group scenes, less than one out of *five* characters are female. These imbalances saw *no* improvement over the 17 years that we studied.

Our research also revealed that when female characters *do* exist in media, the vast majority are highly stereotyped and/or hypersexualized. Consider this: the female characters in G-rated films wear virtually *the same amount* of sexually revealing clothing as female characters in R-rated films.

With such disempowering images, what message are girls absorbing about their value to society?

What message are *boys* absorbing about the worth and importance of girls, if media doesn't show girls taking up space equal to their numbers; if the world-view reflected to them is that boys are the ones who do important, difficult, exciting, challenging, and wonderful things in life.

That's why I launched the Institute. Armed with our research, we partner with the decision makers of children's entertainment to encourage and

foster a dramatic improvement in the gender balance our youngest children see.

The images most promoted today codify negative beliefs about self-worth and communicate to both girls and boys that women are not as important as men. In fact, studies have shown that the more girls watch stereotypical portrayals on TV, the more limited they think their options are in life, the more boys watch, the more sexist their views become.

Of course, the antidote is *positive* media images, where children would see an abundance of female characters of every kind, occupying the space that is rightfully theirs.

Girls shown engaging in unsteretyped activities in the media can *heighten* the suitability of women's achievement, confidence, and employment in nontraditional vocations. If they see it, they can *be* it.

Clearly, gender equality is an idea whose time has come. Which begs the question, why hasn't it?

In many areas of society, there's a common belief that progress happens naturally. On its own. That as time goes by, things change, and change for the better. Or perhaps we believe that the necessary change has already taken place.

This is certainly true in my industry, where it is periodically announced that things are better now for women actors. Sadly, that is just not true. The fact is the dismal ratio of female to male characters has remained stagnant since 1946.

The invisibility, hyper-sexualization, and disempowerment of women and girls in media cry out for change; but as we know, change doesn't happen easily. In fact, where gender equality is concerned, the tendency has been for progress to utterly stall.

But like Bill and Melinda Gates -- and no doubt all of you -- I am an "impatient optimist."

The time for change is now, and the powerful agents of change – are in this room today, non-profits, private foundations, corporations,

community leaders, and the U.N. itself – must and will leverage their influence by partnering and advocating for gender equality.

We will embrace what Martin Luther King called “the fierce urgency of now.”

We will not wait to see if real gender equality happens in the natural course of time, when all evidence tells us it won't. The lives of too many girls are at stake. As the Nobel Prize-winning economist Professor Amartya Sen tells us, every year at least 2 million girls die worldwide because of inequality and neglect. Women and girls are *missing* – not merely as fictional characters, but in the cold light of day.

Now is the time to achieve a critical mass of women in positions of leadership and authority.

What we need – across all sectors of society – is to add women.

More women in media, both in front of the camera and behind the cameras in the realms of academia, business, non-profit, the military – add women.

From the people reporting the news, to the people making the news.

To the ranks of policy makers, corporate boards, justices, presidents and prime ministers add women, include women, encourage women, vote for women, hire women.

I want the day to come soon, when I can share with my daughter the story I most want to tell her: Once upon a time, women held a lesser position in the world than men. And because, she will be living in a world where all girls and women are seen as important, respected, and fully-valued citizens of the world, she'll turn to me and say, “Mom, that's just a fairy tale.”

Let us all continue working together to turn our current reality into just a story from the past.

Thank you very much.

