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The Humor Gap

In the world of entertainment, the amount of successful men and women is usually split. There are many successful male actors and many successful female actors. There are talented male singers and talented female singers. However, this trend is disrupted when it comes to stand up comedy. In the comedy industry, there are far more successful male comedians than there are female. Because of this, many people think that women are generally less funny than men. In this paper, I will attempt to explain this humor gap. Are women cultured out of being funny? Are they genetically built to be humorless? Or is it merely a common misconception and a self fulfilling prophecy that makes women generally less comedic than their male counterparts?

In order to fully understand this phenomenon, we must start by examining the history of standup comedy. Even since its earliest days, “standup comedy has been an important feature of American popular culture...Popular theater incorporated variety comedy as complement to the main plot. Circus clowns provided verbal standup comedy in the early years of these productions, as well as physical and prop comedy, in the tradition of fools, jesters, clowns, and comics, which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages” (Mintz). Ironically, as time progressed, we started to see a trend of acceptance in the field of comedy, very different from what we see today. According to Jerry Zolten, a professor at Penn State University, “the

business...has a history of being quite democratic, open to women, Jews, blacks and other marginalized groups, as long as they could make people laugh” (professor). Although it is true that Jews, blacks, and some other marginalized groups make up a large portion of popular comedians, the field is not as open to women as Zolten seems to think. Many “notable male entertainers such as John Carson, Jerry Louis, John Belushi, Al Franken, Christopher Hitchens, and Adam Carolla...say that women are not funny, [and] women, like the mythical Sisyphus, seem fated to continue their more than a century-long struggle to prove otherwise” (Krefting). While some women including Melissa McCarthy, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Sarah Silverman are breaking barriers, experiencing success in the field, and proving that women are, in fact, funny, there are legitimate reasons why there are so many fewer women in comedy than there are men. Possible explanations are that women are, in fact, less funny than men, they aren’t taken as seriously, or less women enter the comedy industry in general.

Some people choose to explain the lack of women in comedy by claiming that women are generally less funny than men. One controversial article written by Christopher Hitchens was called “Why Women Aren’t Funny” and claimed that women were naturally less funny than men. This article also spurred a backlash of articles defending women's ability to be funny and started a debate about whether men are indeed funnier than women.

I. Sex and comedy

As human beings, we have a primal instinct to make ourselves attractive to the other sex. For men, this means being witty and smart. Christopher Hitchens notes that “men are horribly

unattractive,' ... The only true hope that men have of bedding women is to demonstrate how intelligent they are, and this is most easily done through making women laugh" (qtd. in Webber). It is possible that since Hitchens claims that men have the edge when it comes to humor, he is only saying that they are unattractive to counteract his blatant generalization about women's inability to be funny. Nevertheless, it is true that women are sexualized, objectified, and appreciated for their physical beauty more often than men. Writer and Comic Fran Lebowitz thinks that "for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty" (qtd. in Hitchens). Essentially, it is argued by some that in order to make a good first impression, a man must be funny and a woman must be pretty.

Women don't need humor to attract men. In fact, many believe that humor is an unattractive quality in women. Humor is a sign of intelligence and wit and our culture teaches women that they become less attractive to men if they are highly intelligent. After all, intelligence can be threatening and challenges the age-long idea that men are superior to women. Hitchens says, "[men] want [women] as an audience, not as rivals" (Hitchens). Essentially, what Hitchens is saying is that men want women to listen to and appreciate them, not challenge them. Although many intelligent women would be happy to have the roles reversed, enough women have accepted their role as the audience that it has become the social norm. Now, women who conform to this gender role are thought of as more attractive than the women who refuse to be nothing more than an infatuated listener. In order to fulfill their primal instinct to procreate, "women are socialised out of being comedians" (A'Court). After all, comedians are powerful and command attention. Women, on the other hand, are expected "to facilitate power, rather than be the one with the power" (A'Court). It is an unfortunate truth that intelligence makes women

less attractive to men. But nevertheless, it is a fact that could explain the lack of women in comedy. Since women are socialized out of being smart and funny, they are less likely to have the comedic talent that men (who are socialized into being funny) may have. Therefore, with less raw talent and more pressure to conceal their wit, women are less likely than men to be successful comedians or even enter into the industry.

II. Women are born to take life seriously (more like women aren't taken seriously)

In his article, Christopher Hitchens also claims that women are less funny than men because their purpose in life is more serious. The biological purpose of life for women is to have children. This can be a very serious and daunting task. Hitchens remarks that “those who risk agony and death to bring children into this fiasco simply can't afford to be too frivolous” (Hitchens). Essentially what he is saying is that women are born with a very serious purpose in life and are therefore naturally more serious. In this case, his words could be mistaken for respectful and one might even think that he takes women seriously to an extent. However, later in his article, Hitchens remarks, “women also fall more heavily for dreams, for supposedly significant dates like birthdays and anniversaries, for romantic love, crystals and stones, locket and relics, and other things that men know are fit mainly for mockery and limericks” (Hitchens). This is a blatant and straightforward statement that women are not to be taken seriously. After all, the things some women feel are important are absolutely ridiculous and comical to men. Essentially, Hitchens is arguing that women are not funny, they are serious. But, they are serious about ridiculous things that fit to be belittled by men. Therefore, women cannot be comics

because they are too serious and female comedians should not be taken seriously because they are women.

However, it is not only in the field of comedy that women aren't taken seriously. For years, women have faced an uphill battle when trying to gain respect in the workplace. Doctor Katie Lee explains, "Women are expected to earn respect when we are appointed—men get respected because they have been appointed" (qtd. In Lambert). In the workplace and in life there is a double standard for respect. Women need to do much more than men to prove their worth and gain respect. Since comedy is already an area where it's hard to earn respect, women have a very difficult time making it as comedians because from the get go, they are not taken seriously. This makes it harder for women to make it in comedy, and it also makes it less likely for women to enter into the industry. This is because women are generally more risk averse and they take negative feedback more personally than men.

III. Fewer women enter the industry than men

One of the main reasons that the comedy industry is predominantly male is that women don't enter into the industry as often as men. Women are socialized out of being comedians because intelligence and wit is thought of as being unattractive. This plus the fact that women aren't taken as seriously as men make it extremely difficult for the women who do attempt to be comedians to become successful. However, there are also other reasons why women may avoid the field of comedy.

One argument for why this is that women tend to be more risk averse than men. Researchers on risk aversion, "Eckel and Grossman [2002a], [summarized] the experimental

literature in economics and [concluded] that women exhibit greater risk aversion in choices” (Niederle) when compared to men. But how does this have to do with comedy? Well comedy is extremely risky and not only because it is a competitive field with little to no job security. Some of the funniest topics for comedians are risky topics that rely heavily on tragedy and misfortune. Writer and humorist Jesse Bier notes that “[Humor] is filled with skepticism, cruelty, and derogation, a means of perspective between exaltation and destruction.” (qtd. in Dudden). What he means is that the best humor teeters precariously on the precipice of tragedy, but does not fall and instead remains gut-wrenchingly hilarious. However, if a stand up comic tells a joke like this with a few misplaced words, it can easily topple towards the depths of tragedy and destruction and completely change the energy in the room. If women are more risk averse, they may shy away from precipices and high-stake jokes that are necessary for success in standup comedy. Additionally, the fact that women generally aren’t respected or taken seriously makes them less inclined to risk standing up in front of a room full of people who will disrespect them from the moment they walk on stage.

Another argument for why less women enter into the industry is that women are more likely to take criticism differently, and more personally, than men. Although this is a generalization and there are many tough women who take criticism very well, in general when compared to men, women “may view a negative signal as indicative of their self-worth rather than simply their one-time performance on a task” (Niederle). Comedy is a field in which negative feedback is in no way lacking. Gil Greengross, a psychologist who studies humor, notes that “being a stand-up comedian is a very tough job. Standing in front of people is never easy, but standing in front of people who judge everything you say and expect to laugh every few

seconds is much harder” (Greengross). The ability to be funny under pressure seems inherently difficult. But it gets harder. In addition to this, comedians have to deal with hecklers in the crowd who are constantly trying to prove themselves funnier than the comedian and political correctness police who can’t seem to take a joke. Also, since women face a constant uphill battle to prove their worth, they face even more negative feedback than the average male comedian. When combined, all of these factors ensure that comedians, especially female comedians, get enormous amounts of negative feedback when performing standup. Since (shocker!) women are not actually brainless, they fully understand what they are bound to endure if they enter into comedy. In an effort to shelter themselves and their self esteem, many women will avoid the risk altogether and choose to enter into a different profession. This means that the lack of female comedians might not have anything to do with women’s capability to be funny, but instead have to do with the fact that there are very few women who choose to be comedians.

IV. How women are overcoming

Women have been told for years that they are not funny. Society expects men to be in the spotlight and women to content themselves with being the audience. Many women who do try to defy these gender roles are not taken seriously and have to deal with enormous amounts of sexist heckling. However, with each woman who makes it into the industry, we are taken a step further towards accepting women as being equals to men. Now, our job is to “disabuse people of their misguided assumption that women aren't funny and to save future "funny women" from having, constantly, to reinvent the connection between women and comedy” (Carlson).

Although generally, there are more male comedians than there are female there are women who are taking on the challenge of comedy and who are succeeding. Among these are well known comedians like Amy Schumer, Tina Fey, and Sarah Silverman. .

Silverman, an especially interesting case, has an unique style when it comes to comedy. She is already breaking down barriers by being a female comedian, but she goes a step further by “taking on the foul language, political incorrectness, and gross-out humor that had once been a boys-only zone” (Mizejewski). Silverman isn’t afraid to use aggressive, unlady-like humor and it does her credit! Instead of performing a clean, benign act, she “takes on the extremes of how women's bodies are stereotyped, as messier than male bodies because of menstruation, childbirth, and lactation yet more idealized in versions of femininity that deny bodily functions altogether” (Mizejewski). Silverman is inspiring in that she uses her comedy to break into the boy’s club and she brings up double standards and other important issues that affect women. Hitchens wrote in his infamous article, “For some reason, women do not find their own physical decay and absurdity to be so riotously amusing” (Hitchens). However, Silverman does. And how about Amy Schumer and Lucille Ball? Although it’s true that there are less female comedians, women are breaking into the industry and proving that comedy is really no man’s land.

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