

Women Empowerment in Music: “Sit Still, Look Pretty”

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The Women’s Rights and Feminism movement have become exceptionally prominent in the last few decades, and as a result has produced a great number of musical hits that acknowledge the struggles that women experience in modern society. The Women’s Rights Movement can be dated back to major accomplishments as early as 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention, where the cause for women’s equality was given the spotlight. Throughout history there have been countless milestones that have propelled the fight for equality for women. These include women’s suffrage, the civil rights movement, and more throughout history. These accomplishments have led us to the 21st century, where the desire for equality is in full force. In 2015 and 2016, the feminist movement was extremely active as women were demanding for equal treatment in all aspects of life. At this time, President Obama was speaking out about feminism and released statements battling sexual assault, women were granted the right to serve all positions in the military, and more (Hallett, 2015). Many artists were creating hit songs fighting alongside this movement to bring attention to gender inequalities. These include “Formation” by Beyoncé, “Love Myself” by Hailee Steinfeld, “Scars to Your Beautiful” by Alessia Cara, and “Sit Still, Look Pretty” by Daya (Gbile, 2015). Many popular as well as underground artists were releasing hits paying homage to the movement. Daya was an up and coming artist in 2016 when she had her first successful release of her album “Sit Still, Look Pretty.” This album had a few hits, but the title track was getting noticeable attention, in part because of the message behind it.

Daya was only 17 years old when she began turning heads in the pop industry. She gave an interview with *TIME* where she discussed her movement towards feminist and women empowering music. She stated that it stemmed from some of the challenges she faced as a new

female artist in the industry (Bruner, 2016). She stated that sometimes people will tell you “you don't look the part” or “you need to wear make up for this interview” (Bruner, 2016). Daya grew up with four sisters and wanted them as well as the rest of her female audience to know that they can have confidence within themselves and not have to look or act a certain way for someone else (Bruner, 2016). Daya also gives attention to not being an accessory for men and not allowing women’s actions and appearance to be based on men’s opinions (PopCrush, 2016). While her parents raised her with this mindset, she wanted to pass the message onto her audience in order to empower her fans (Romano, 2016).

“Sit Still, Look Pretty” was written by Gino Barletta, Mike Campell, and Britten Newbill (Wikipedia, 2022). They are also responsible for numerous hits covered by artists such as John Legend and Christina Aguilera (Wikipedia, 2022). This song was specifically written to embrace female empowerment and send the message that women can follow their dreams and do whatever men can do. Daya specifically wanted this album and song to empower women and give them more confidence (PopCrush, 2016). While there can be other meanings extrapolated out of the song throughout the lyrics, this was her main purpose in creating the song. Mike Campell, one of the writers of the single, also said that he pulled inspiration from Pink (Hernandez, 2016). Pink is an artist who has surpassed so many boundaries when it comes to feminism and the music industry in general and is great inspiration for all women empowerment, which is reflected in Daya’s hit.

The first verse of “Sit Still, Look Pretty” includes Daya breaking down stereotypes about women. This also continues to be a theme throughout the song. She sings:

Could dress up, to get love

But guess what?

*I'm never gonna be that girl
 Who's living in a Barbie world
 Could wake up in make up and play dumb
 Pretending that I need a boy
 Who's gonna treat me like a toy*

The lyric “who’s living in a Barbie world” is in reference to Aqua’s “Barbie Girl.” When “Barbie Girl” was released in the late 90s, it was quick to turn heads and gain both positive and negative press (Greene, 2022). A lot of people were quick to point out the song’s clear lack of women empowerment. This song features lyrics such as “you can brush my hair, undress me everywhere.” This is implying that Barbie and women in general are just an object for men and can be easily controlled. Aqua’s lyrics also imply that women are nothing more than their bodies, equivalent to the plastic that Barbie is made of, with no real brains or personality inside.

However, some interpreted this song as being ironic and mocking what women are supposed to look like in a “Barbie world”, like the doll that was criticized for its lack of diversity in the late 20th century (Greene, 2022). In a recent *Rolling Stone* interview, one of the members of Aqua, René Dif, stated that “the message is that it’s OK to be the person you are and look the way you look and be confident in that.” (Greene, 2022). While this might have been the intention of the song, audiences received mixed messages from the song’s lyrics. “Sit Still, Look Pretty” addresses one of those messages, calling out harmful stereotypes of women.

Following up with the idea of not needing a man to be successful, her pre-chorus states that “I don't wanna be the puppet that you're playing on a string, this queen don't need a king.” This underscores an important message in the song that women can be successful without men. In addition, men in the relationship do not need to be controlling a woman's actions, she can be

her own person with her own personality. Relationships of celebrities are always prominent in the media and in a way, women are encouraged to be in some sort of relationship in order to seem “interesting” to the media, but Daya counteracts this and knows that she can be successful without a man in her life. The chorus is a very strong and straight forward homage to women empowerment:

Oh, I don't know what you've been told

But this gal right here's gonna rule the world

Yeah, that is where I'm gonna be because I wanna be

No, I don't wanna sit still, look pretty

The first two lines symbolize that while there are many stereotypes and misconceptions about women and their abilities in the world, they still have the capabilities to hold real power and make a difference. The lyric “I don't know what you've been told” is powerful in the sense that society as a whole thinks that the most successful people are always men, when there shouldn't be any reason to believe that women cannot have the same accomplishments. The remainder of the chorus says:

You get off on your 9 to 5

Dream of picket fences and trophy wives

But no, I'm never gonna be 'cause I don't wanna be

No, I don't wanna sit still, look pretty

This area of the song denotes that men live the 9 to 5 life with their dream family including a wife who is often there as an accessory, and shows no true substance. Daya counteracts that this is not what she's going to be for a man, and that she will actually be making a difference in the world for herself and by herself. This level of defiance from women is something that is heavily

frowned upon in society, but she is going against the standards and saying that she will not sit back and be an accessory. It's very common for women in the music industry who are defiant and demand equal treatment to be labeled as “difficult” or “hard to work with.” Meanwhile, with men it never seems to be the problem. Daya taking a risk with these lyrics and making sure that her message is heard is very powerful.

The second verse also underscores how a man in a woman's life is not mandatory for success.

Mr. Right could be nice, for one night

But then he wanna take control

And I would rather fly solo

That Snow White, she did right in her life

Had 7 men to do the chores

'Cause that's not what a lady's for

She emphasizes that men often take great control over a woman's life and this can often lead to their downfall. Flying solo for a woman can often be what's best for her so she can focus on herself. She references Snow White and the seven dwarves to say that women are not only good for doing chores, men can do that as well and women can have the success that men can.

Daya's pre-chorus states that “the only thing a boy's gonna give a girl for free's captivity.” This is a strong theme in the feminist movement. Piwe Cengimbo wrote about her relationship with male dominance as she analyzed the lyrics of Destiny Child's “Independent Woman.” She states that the only way men will ever see women as equals is if they are completely independent and do not rely on male dominance (Cengimbo, 2002). She also states that independence allows for women to have full control over their life, body, actions, etc., which

is crucial in the realm of feminism (Cengimbo, 2002). Before women can get treated equally, they must become independent.

The last section of Daya's song containing unique lyrics is the bridge, containing the following lyrics:

I'm a pretty girl up in a pretty world

But no, I won't sit still, look pretty

Sure, I'm a pretty girl up in a pretty world

But they say pretty hurts

Here, Daya is saying that while she does have a pretty face, that isn't going to be all she is to the world. This is telling the message to her audience that you can be a pretty girl without making it your entirety. Women are worth so much more than just their looks. She also says that pretty hurts, meaning that it takes a lot for women to present as pretty constantly. The song "Pretty Hurts" by Beyonce tackles this idea that it takes a lot to be a pretty girl and it shouldn't take all that pain and work just to be the "pretty" that society wants.

Another aspect of "Sit Still, Look Pretty" that grabbed attention from audiences is the music video. The video begins with her singing in this clear box, while watching another version of herself sitting on a pedestal surrounded by men. The men are in a way "programming" her to be a "fashionista," "runaway covergirl," "golden girl," etc. Essentially everything that men want women to be is what they are trying to make her into. Eventually, Daya is able to override the system and become defiant to the people trying to make her something she's not. The tables then turn and she begins to expose the men and actually put them in the box. This video was a high energy, futuristic take on how women are often treated and seen by men. With her being controlled by these computers and programmed a certain way, she is bringing light to how

women are often given a personality and role in life based on what the men in their life want them to be. We can see in the video that her finally breaking out of this idea actually created the best version of herself where she looked so much happier and free. She also reverses the roles and possibly gives perspective to men to understanding how it feels to be controlled in the way that women so often are. At the end of the music video, the men are also in the clear box without shirts on, heavily sexualized. This also emphasizes how women are often oversexualized both by men and in the media.

Another way Daya used this single to combat gender stereotypes and embrace feminism was through her photoshoots for the song. She said in an interview through PopCrush that she wanted the cover art and shoots to portray her as an average girl, rather than a pop star who was glammed up (PopCrush, 2016). It is seen in many of her photoshoots that she is wearing casual clothing and very little makeup. She wanted to symbolize that success and beauty can still be found in someone who looks more like women really look, without the makeup and fancy outfits. There is also a lot of simplicity to the album cover specifically. It emphasizes the beauty in simplicity in women and encourages them to not feel pressured to dress a certain way for a man or for society, but to do what you want for yourself.

“Sit Still, Look Pretty” was quickly determined to be an all-out feminist song that does not hold back. *Rolling Stone* claimed that the song “hit all the right notes” and was an “empowering title track” (Spanos, 2016). It was quickly used in the movie *Pitch Perfect 3* that came out in 2017. The *Pitch Perfect* franchise knows the importance of women empowerment, as that is the center of the movies. With a majority female cast, female director, and female writer, “Sit Still, Look Pretty” was the perfect song to include in a movie that praises women and their accomplishments.

Feminism is the past, present, and future. Many women are waking up to the fact that they will no longer sit back and be in the background in a man's world. Women are becoming more and more important in all aspects of society; political, medical, business, etc. For this reason, it is important for women to know their own worth and their importance. Most importantly, women and allies need to stick together. When the women's liberation movement was taking place in the 60s, the alliance of those with similar views was extremely strong and was what made the movement so powerful (Delmar, 2018). Daya also emphasized the importance of unity and sticking together in order to achieve something bigger through her music as well as other pop artists. Incorporating these ideals into the media is crucial to getting the theme into society and having everyone wake up to various inequalities that certain groups of people deal with. The feminist movement has come a long way, but there is still so much more to be accomplished. For example, the wage gap in the United States for men and women still has a notable difference. This is a major problem, as women are getting paid significantly less than men who are doing the exact same job. In addition to the wage gap, specific groups such as women of color also suffer from more discrimination and inequalities than white women. This inequality is something that needs to be brought more to the media's attention in order to work towards equality.

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