

## Activity – Women in music

Journalist and activist Ellen Willis created The Willis Test, in which you swap the gender being sung about (or being sung to) in song lyrics to see if the song still makes sense or not. Willis pointed out in her essay “Now I’m Gonna Move” that it isn’t always the songs you expect that sound weird when the genders are flipped – “[The Rolling Stones’] Under My Thumb is not nearly so sexist in its implications as, for example, Cat Stevens’ gentle, sympathetic Wild World; Jagger’s fantasy of sweet revenge could easily be female... but it’s hard to imagine a woman sadly warning her ex-lover that he’s too innocent for the big bad world out there.” (fanlore.org) Ask the group to try this with a few different songs they know and discuss how the meaning of the song might change or no longer work in each instance. The Willis test can also be used on films and books – does the story still work when the genders are switched?

Another activity that you can do with a group is to look up the lyrics for or listen to a variety of songs and note the words that are used about women. Are they mostly positive or negative words? How does it make you feel as a woman to hear those words being used about you? Are certain types of music worse for degrading women than others? You could find music videos online and see if the way women are portrayed in them is positive or negative. Again, facilitate a discussion as you watch the videos and invite the group to debate and discuss their thoughts with each other.

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