

## Feminism Through Television: A Critical Analysis of CW's *Supergirl*

Oftentimes, depictions of superheroes in the media ignore the other challenges and circumstances that they may have to deal with in their personal lives, negating key aspects of their personalities. This lack of focus on the “real world” problems that superheroes face outside of their secret identities reduces their existence down to their status as heroes and ignores the relatable/human parts of them. However, within the show *Supergirl*, there has been a focus on Supergirl's life outside of being a hero, with viewers being exposed to Kara Danvers' personal development and rising confidence as a woman in addition to Supergirl's increasing maturity and experience. Throughout her journey as a hero, Kara Danvers, the protagonist of the CW's *Supergirl*, explores her own womanhood alongside her super abilities, learning how to translate her strength as a hero into her confidence as a woman.

Within the first season of *Supergirl*, both Kara and Supergirl struggled with asserting their dominance and both doubted their own abilities as well. Following her emergence as a hero, Supergirl relied solely on her powers and immediately assumed that she could overcome any challenge just by using her abilities. Seeing the dangers of this false sense of confidence, her sister Alex (who works for a secret government agency called the Department of Extranormal Operations) used Kryptonite emitters to weaken her temporarily and then beat her in a fight. As Supergirl struggled to overcome Alex's rigorous training without the use of her powers, Alex tells her “You are relying on your strength without technique. When facing a superior opponent, you need to use their strength against them” (“Stronger Together” 00:15:27-00:15:34). While Supergirl was extremely frustrated after this encounter, she came to realize that her abilities were just one aspect of being a hero. Developing technique and utilizing different skills are necessary

in order to beat opponents, particularly those with powers who have had more time to master their abilities.

After learning this lesson about her powers, Kara was able to translate it into her identity as a woman, discovering that in a world that is consistently dominated by males, women must find alternative ways to prove themselves and gain recognition. Kara's boss, Cat Grant, is one of the female role models who help Kara realize her potential and eventually embrace her human talents, but at the beginning of the series Kara lacks confidence in herself and allows Cat to order her around. She even lets Cat call her Kera instead of Kara for much of the first season without ever correcting her. When discussing her job with her sister, Kara laments that she "is not living up to her potential" and admits that she "went to work for Cat Grant because [she] thought working in a media company run by a powerful woman who actually shapes the way that people think would be the way that [she] could make a difference, but instead [she] just fetch[es] layouts and coffee" ("Pilot" 00:09:11-00:09:22). Kara is noticeably frustrated by her inability to make a difference in people's everyday lives, but she continually confines herself to traditional female character traits, remaining submissive and weak as opposed to allowing herself to be outspoken and confident. On one hand, she presents herself as an inspiring and amazing hero, yet in her human life she closes herself off from opportunities to succeed and continues to let others criticize and devalue her. As seen in the quote above, Kara is angered by her lack of influence as a human being and as a woman, but throughout the first season she does not do much to change that situation, choosing to focus on her Supergirl identity instead.

At the beginning of the second season, Kara is faced with a choice about her career path at Catco, and in her quest to find a career that suits her, she learns to apply Alex's lesson to her

life and prove that she is just as worthy as anyone else and can do anything that she sets her mind to. Once Kara discovers that she wants to be a reporter, she stands by that choice and defends it honorably. She acknowledges that being a reporter “is about service, and telling stories that need to be told in order to make the world a better, more comprehensible place,” which is something that she is passionate about because she has always wanted to have an impact. She also tells Cat that being a reporter “will make [her] the best version of herself because it will definitely push [her] out of [her] comfort zone” (“The Adventures of Supergirl” 00:36:26-00:36:39). In the first season, Kara was reluctant to take any steps towards pursuing her own goals and realizing her own potential, but by the end of the first season and into the second season, she emerges as a woman who can articulate her desires and goals, because she knows what she is capable of.

Another indicator of her growing confidence as a woman is also rooted in her choice of a career that she knows will be challenging, yet also rewarding. At this point in the series, Kara is more self-aware and comprehends how she can use her talents in order to grow as a person, which is a skill that she did not have in the first season. Supergirl’s initial lack of experience occurred because she was dependent on her powers for success, just as Kara expected that working for a powerful woman would help her to make a difference. Supergirl’s ability to save the world and her discovery that being a hero is more than just possessing special powers gave Kara the confidence that she needed to recognize her own strength as a human being and as a woman. Throughout the course of season two Kara reconciles both parts of her identity, continuing to investigate Supergirl’s strengths and weaknesses but also discovering her passion for writing and reporting aside from that. She comes to recognize that her special talent is her ability to instill hope in others and be a provider of truth for the people, and she is finally able to

see herself as a strong and formidable woman outside of her superhero identity. She understands that she can be both Supergirl and Kara, and she should not have to choose between one or the other in order to succeed.

By season four, one of the most remarkable changes in Kara's identity is her ability to stand up for herself and hold others accountable when she feels that they are doing something morally wrong. While season two marked a time of immense growth for Kara in terms of her opinions of herself, it took much longer for these traits to be seen by others on the show, especially those who attempted to stop her from achieving her goals. One of the main challenges that Kara had to face in season four was the portrayal of Supergirl as an enemy to the American people. This was initiated when Lex Luthor manipulated a clone of Supergirl and had her attack the White House while wearing a replica of Supergirl's suit. Since Supergirl was blamed for the attack, Kara was forced to temporarily put aside her identity as a superhero and depend solely on her skills as a reporter. When Kara was told that "the pen is mightier than the sword" by one of her interviewees, she responded with "maybe even mightier than a cape" ("Crime and Punishment" 00:41:46-00:41:53). By acknowledging the potential of her skills as a reporter out loud, Kara is clearly demonstrating her confidence and powerful personality. She recognizes her abilities as a reporter and even suggests that her writing could make more of a difference than Supergirl could at that moment. She stands up for what she believes in and works to bring Lex Luthor to justice as Kara the reporter instead of confronting him as Supergirl the hero.

As a result of Kara's transformation from someone who simply acknowledges her abilities (season two) to someone that displays them confidently (season four), she becomes a role model for many of the other characters, including Nia Nal, a new reporter at Catco. When

Nia chooses not to speak up and pitch her article idea because she does not want to cause problems with another reporter, Kara tells her “No matter how much we believe in ourselves, [fear] never really goes away...[so if] you’re afraid to make waves, make ‘em anyway! Make a tsunami” (“American Alien” 00:36:57-00:37:04). Through her talk with Nia, Kara conveys the important message that no matter how powerful one’s opponents may seem, the “bad guys” cannot stop others from achieving their goals and desires if they are determined enough. Kara asserts to Nia that she did not become a successful reporter and writer by letting people commandeer her life and devalue her personality; she was able to make her presence known by continually fighting for truth, justice, and morality. Kara reveals that fear and intimidation are very real threats, but they have little impact on people who are confident enough.

After a closer analysis of Kara and all of the female characters on the show, it is clear that each of the women possess traits that are both traditionally feminine and masculine, indicating that females can reach success by embracing both parts of their personalities, and are not confined to one side of the gender binary. One of the ways in which the show deconstructs the binary is through the complexity of Kara’s human identity. The main skill that is necessary for her job as a reporter is writing, which reflects the strong verbal abilities that women are generally known to possess. Kara also fits into a more feminine role after Lex framed Supergirl for the attack on the White House, as she was unable to rely on her physical strength/Supergirl identity to confront criminals like him. Although Kara is seen in these female positions, the way in which Kara conducts her investigation of Lex Luthor follows traditional male behaviors. After piecing together evidence, she travels to Lex’s secret compound in Kaznia and discovers that he plans to use the clone of Supergirl to attack the United States. Kara’s being able to discover the truth

about Lex's plans (masculine) and exposing him to the people with her skills as a reporter (feminine) is an example of the show's attempt to break down the binary because it demonstrates that a female who can adopt behaviors from both categories is successful. The fact that Kara has traits such as fearlessness/bravery that are generally associated with males does not make her any less female, because she still expresses her feminine side through her job and other aspects of her life.

In addition to the gendered complexity of Kara's character, the personality traits of her sister Alex also serve as another example of the show's rejection of the binary. Alex exhibits more feminine qualities in her attempt to teach Kara how to be more than just a physically strong hero. Women are often known for their ability to instruct and nurture those who are more naive/immature. Early in the show, Supergirl assumed that her powers would allow her to beat any of her opponents, but she failed to recognize that many of the aliens that she would be fighting had much more time to master their powers as well as their fighting technique. Alex teaches Supergirl that she cannot rely solely on her powers, and while this is a feminine action, she gets this lesson across by physically beating Kara in a fight. Another instance where Alex expresses her more feminine qualities is when she helps Kara pick an outfit for a blind date. Kara is noticeably nervous about what to wear in order to make a good impression, but Alex comes to her apartment and picks a blue shirt for her to wear, telling her "When in doubt go with blue. It is your color" (Pilot 00:10:04-00:10:07). Women are often thought to be more knowledgeable about fashion, so the advice that Alex offers is a reflection of her femininity. However, throughout the series, Alex asserts herself as one of the most skilled and fearless fighters at the DEO, repeatedly putting herself in danger and jumping off of buildings without a moment's

hesitation. These qualities are generally attributed to men, yet Alex possesses even more skill and experience than most of the men at the DEO, eventually becoming the agency's director at the end of season 3. The fact that Alex can simultaneously express her feminine side but excel at traditionally male dominated forms of combat while displaying extreme amounts of bravery further destroys the restrictive roles set up by the gender binary. Alex is able to use her "masculine" traits to rise to the highest position at the DEO and does not let anyone stop her, human or alien alike, but she still shows viewers what it is like to be feminine, dressing up for parties/events and giving fashion advice to Kara. Alex is yet another example of how women can use their feminine and masculine qualities to their advantage, reaffirming the show's message that women do not have to feel confined by the restrictions that the binary constructs for them.

Along with Kara and Alex, the character Lena Luthor also makes use of her feminine and masculine attributes to preserve her position as a successful CEO, demonstrating once again that the binary is flawed and that women do not have to exclusively exhibit traditionally feminine characteristics. Although Lena only emerges as a character in season two, her determination to change the course of her brother's former company, LexCorp, from an evil corporation to a force for good is apparent. The fact that Lena becomes a CEO and radically changes the company's direction to reflect her own goals for it is a clear example of a woman taking over the position of a man and overruling his previous wishes/influences. Holding the position of a CEO and taking on the responsibility of running a company is an attribute that is normally associated with males, but the show proves that women are just as capable of performing the same tasks. While Lena's character is able to disprove the binary through her more "masculine" actions, she does not sacrifice her femininity despite being in this position of power, revealing that people do not have

to stick to one side of the binary. Almost every time that Lena appears on screen she is wearing a tight fitting dress that has a lower cut front, providing a clear display of her female figure. While her outfits still remain professional they do emphasize her female physique, further suggesting that a person can possess both “male” and “female” traits and still achieve success; people do not have to adhere to one side of the binary due to what their gender(s) dictate.

As seen in the examples presented above, Kara was able to grow from a timid and self-conscious woman (traits that she did not exhibit in her identity as Supergirl) to a woman who is confident in both aspects of her personality. While she struggled to make her presence and ideas known in season one and was just beginning to gain more confidence in season two, season four marks a crucial change in Kara’s independence. Not only does she understand the full range of her abilities as Supergirl, but she knows that she can make just as much, if not more of a difference in the world as Kara. For the first time she learns to value the female/human side of her, and once she gains this confidence, she becomes a formidable force for anyone who stands in her way. Through an analysis of Kara’s personality as well as the other female characters on the show, such as Alex and Lena, it is also clear how *Supergirl* strives to destroy the ideas of the gender binary. By including female characters with traditionally feminine and masculine traits, the show successfully proves that people do not have to remain confined to one side of the binary. It also sends the message that in order to succeed, women do not have to sacrifice the female parts of themselves; they can use both their feminine and masculine qualities to their advantage. This show is particularly inspiring for me because aside from all of the good that Supergirl does in the world, Kara’s personality and success have taught me that individuals can make a difference in the world too. I am also empowered by the fact that I do not have to



solely rely on “feminine” qualities in order to achieve success, and that there is nothing wrong with being a woman with traditionally “masculine” traits. I know that as a woman I can do anything I set my mind to, and no one can stop me if I believe in myself enough.

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