

Funny girls

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue



HOT OR NOT? Amy Schumer and Dennis Quaid in a *12 Angry Men* parody on *Inside Amy Schumer*, in which an all-male jury debates whether Schumer is attractive enough to be on TV. © Comedy Central. All rights reserved.

Female comedy is having a moment. A moment without a lot of clothing. If you watch *Inside Amy Schumer* and *Broad City*, two of Comedy Central's most successful shows, or *Girls* on HBO, you might conclude that sex is the only thing young women think about.

Not romance—sex. In these comedies, sex is not part of a conventional romantic comedy narrative, leading to marriage or serious commitment, but a source of comedic material in and of itself. The graphic details of sexual experiences are the backbone of these comedies.

There is something fantastically refreshing about this. If it's alarming to hear a whole routine about NuvaRings, dildos, and cunnilingus, think how many careers have been built around the woes of male genitalia. These women are just playing catch-up.

But are the raunchy sex jokes the sum of the feminist revolution? Critics worry that these shows glorify misogynistic sex with no attachment. “Outslutting” your girlfriends may be a way to participate in one’s own objectification, not in one’s liberation.

These comedies seem aware of this danger. Amy Schumer addresses it headfirst in a series of sketches that mock her desire to be desired by men. And every time Hannah (Lena Dunham) takes off her clothes in *Girls*, she upsets mainstream narratives about the desirable body. Women who look like Hannah don’t star in underwear ads. On *Broad City*, Abbi (Abbi Jacobson) and Ilana (Ilana Glazer) can’t decide if they are trying to be like men in their cavalier attitudes toward sex, or if they’re weaving their own paths through modern hook-up culture.

Perhaps all this sex is a red herring. After all, fully clothed women have recently had a moment in network comedies too. Ambitious, talented, and energetic characters Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler in *Parks and Recreation*) and Mindy Lahiri (Mindy Kaling in *The Mindy Project*) navigate professional advancement and personal blunders, searching for a “happily ever after” that blends romance, success, and friendship. (Think *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the 21st century.) The biggest difference between Knope and Lahiri and their bawdier peers on other cable channels is not so much sex as it is confusion. What do they really want?

Leslie and Mindy seem to know; Ilana, Abbi, Hannah, and Amy don’t. Their humor explores the disconnect between former narratives of the good life and the confusion of early adulthood.

Maybe these women are suspended in a perpetual adolescence of their own making. Maybe they are the products of advanced capitalism, where moral character is hollowed out into a series of consumer choices. But bromides about irresponsible youth and self-centered consumer culture miss the larger point: the institutions that are supposed to help us grow up are no longer compelling.

For people who track the fate of religion in America, this should come as no surprise. These women, after all, would show up as “nothing in particular” on surveys of religious affiliation. But “nothing in particular” is not “nothing at all.” As observers have pointed out about the rise of the nones, survey data can mask the complex variety of spiritual practices that exist alongside widespread suspicion of traditional institutions. The same might be said for attitudes toward sex, romance, and

commitment. Mocking older conventions might be a step toward forming new ones. Most mainstream comedies still assume that women are desperate to get married, men are scared to commit, and both women and men need to be tamed by the mundane trials of domesticity. *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Broad City*, and *Girls* all suggest that this narrative isn't very funny anymore.

Maybe this line of comedy does need to grow up. But I hope it doesn't settle down.