

“Women in Refrigerators”: Depictions of Abuse in Media

In 1994, the comic book *Green Lantern #54* was issued. The storyline involved one of the versions of the titular superhero, Kyle Rayner, coming home to find out that his girlfriend Alexandra DeWitt had been killed by the villain Major Force and stuffed in a refrigerator. This gruesome incident is what motivates the rest of the plot.

This issue would go on to become rather infamous when comic book writer Gail Simone (author of several comic books including *Birds of Prey* for DC Comics and Marvel's *Deadpool*), included it in a list of instances in comic book history where fictional female characters were "killed, maimed or depowered", in particular in ways that treated the female character as merely a device to move a male character's story arc forward, rather than as a fully developed character in her own right. Simone and her colleagues were trying to make a simple point – "If you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won't read comics. That's it!".

The trope is now called “Women in Refrigerators” after the *Green Lantern* issue mentioned earlier. However, the maiming of women was not even limited to stuffing in refrigerators. Other high profile comic book instances involve the critically acclaimed Alan Moore *Batman* comic “*The Killing Joke*” that had Batgirl, Barbara Gordon, raped and left paralyzed by the Joker, just to get her father, Commissioner Gordon, turn to “the dark side”. Most recently, even *Deadpool 2* has been accused of using “fridging” to further the plot.

The trope is today not only common to comic books (although it is of particular abundance in that circle). It is not very difficult to think of our own regional movies where a woman’s rape or abuse is used as character motivation instead of an opportunity for real reflection on abuse and its nature. This is a harmful narrative that cheapens and sensationalizes rape and abuse. It reduces female characters to props, waiting to be manipulated in the right way to provide the right motivation for our hero, and ensure some “superhero”-esque showdowns. It is seldom the abused women or the victims who take agency in this case.

This is not to say that rape and abuse should be off-limits in media. Quite the contrary. What the “women in refrigerators” trope warns against is the depiction of abuse as a plot device instead of an actual storyline. The depiction of abuse for the sake of shock value or drama. Additionally, it is also not being said that the movies and other media that satisfy this trope are inherently bad. What is being discussed through this trope is the scope for better portrayals of stories of abuse in media. Better perspectives on this harrowing topic. We have reached a point in media where female-led narratives are becoming increasingly popular and as critical consumers of media we must be aware of where the media we consume could be improved to have a more inclusive experience.

Circling back to the origin of the whole thing, comic book and geek spaces are rather infamous for being largely male dominated and rarely inclusive of women. Women in comic book and game industries have to work harder to get the recognition that their male counterparts receive. They’re often belittled or considered not as adequate as the men in the industry. Incidents like GamerGate really highlight how female game developers and women in gaming spheres are affected by the misogyny that is within the community. With this in the background, it’s even more frustrating when the few women that do make it into pop culture depictions are “fridged”.

It isn’t very surprising that most (if not all) of the stories coming under this trope were written by men. And therein lies the crux of the whole issue. The only way to get more varied perspectives in our media is diversity in writer’s rooms and director’s rooms. Men in film have done a fine job of depicting women and their problems in media, but storytelling can only benefit from differing

perspectives and views on the same issue. Art requires a blend of different views on the same issues to be good. Art of any kind is used to give agency to those who create it. It is only natural that depictions of abuse could only benefit from a female voice or two at the creators table.

The “women in refrigerators” trope is a natural microcosm of the problem of the homogeneity that exists in writers’ and directors’ rooms. Better stories come from varied voices and perspectives – from more diversity. We, as consumers, need to push for better stories, and better stories come from more diversity.

Rape and abuse are extremely sensitive topics, but that doesn’t mean that we should shy away from depicting them on the screen. On the contrary, we should push for nuanced, well-rounded takes on these topics that don’t serve as lazy plot devices or cheapen it to sensationalist tactics. Stop “fridging” your female characters. Start giving them the agency to tell their own stories.