

HYPERSEXUALIZATION: COUNTERING EXPLOITIVE CHILD IMAGES

Proposed by Cornwall & district CFUW

RESOLVED, That the CFUW recommend a nation-wide education program be designed to raise public awareness of the hypersexualization of children, especially girls in advertising, commercial products, and mass media, to Canadians.

RESOLVED, That the CFUW urge the Government of Canada to develop media literacy that counters sexist conditioning and provides positive role models.

RESOLVED, That the CFUW urge the Government of Canada to allocate resources to support programs that expose the relationship between hypersexualization and gender inequality in society.

RESOLVED, That the CFUW urge the Government of Canada to allocate resources to programs that support the positive depiction of women.

RESOLVED, That the CFUW urge the Government of Canada to implement and enforce laws that prohibit the use of sexualized images of prepubescent and adolescent children in media.

BACKGROUND

Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health, fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure and involves mutual respect between consenting partners (Satcher, 2001; Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SEICUS], 2004).

In contrast, sexualization occurs when:

- a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- a person is sexually objectified – that is made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person

For some time women have argued that young girls are becoming sexualized at younger and younger ages. There are consequences which include harm to the sexualized individuals themselves, to their interpersonal relationships, and to society. This increased sexualization and objectification of girls and women is occurring through North America culture, and particularly in mainstream media. These representations can be seen in virtually every medium, including prime-time television programs (e.g., Grauerholz & King, 1997; L.M. Ward, 1995), television commercials (e.g., Lin 1997),

music videos (e.g., Gow, 1996; R.C. Vincent, 1989), and magazines (e.g., Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2001, 2003; Plous & Neptune, 1997).

Even when women's sports are featured, coverage is often selective (Kane, 1996) and commentary often sexually objectifies female athletes, as well as, female fans in the audience (Messner, Duncan & Cooky, 2003; Schultz, 2005). Although scholars have documented differential and sexist treatment of female athletes for over a decade (e.g., Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Messner et al., 1993, 2003), available evidence suggest a trend for increasing sexualization of female athletes comparable to their overall increasing visibility.

The sexualization of girls can be defined occurring along a continuum, with sexualized evaluation (e.g., looking at someone in a sexual way) at the less extreme end, and sexual exploitation, such as trafficking or abuse, at the more extreme end. Here are several examples appearing of the sexualization of girls to clarify the above definition:

- A 5-year-old girl walking through a mall wearing a short T-shirt that says "Flirt."
- Instructions given in magazines to preadolescent girls on how to look sexy and get a boyfriend by losing 10 pounds and straightening their hair.
- Print advertisements that portray women as little girls, with pigtails and ruffles, in adult sexual poses.

A central concern is that frequent exposure to media images that sexualize and degrades girls and women affect how girls conceptualize femininity and sexuality, leading them to accept more constrained and stereotypical notions about gender roles and sexual roles (i.e., that females are sexual objects). Findings across several studies indicate that this appears to be the case. Girls and young women who more frequently consume or engage with mainstream media content also offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that paint females as sexual objects. (e.g., L.M. Ward, 2002; L.M. Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

There is also evidence that sexualization contributes to impaired cognitive performance in college-aged women, and related research suggests that viewing material that is sexually objectifying can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depressive affect, and even physical health problems in high school-aged girls and in young women.

In one study on adolescent ethnic Fijian girls in Western Fiji, Becker (2004) found that the beginnings of weight and body shape preoccupation, purging behavior to control weight, and body disparagement were linked to the introduction of television. Before television, traditional Fijian culture emphasized a robust body shape and based notions of identity not on the body but on family, community and relationships. Three years after television was introduced, girls' eating behaviors and attitudes about their bodies had shifted and rates of disordered eating had increased.

Studies based on objectification theory have shown that the near-constant monitoring of appearance that accompanies self-objectification leads to increased feelings of shame about one's body (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 1998; McKinley, 1998, 1999; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). Shame is an emotion that occurs when one perceives one's failure to meet cultural standards of conduct (Lewis, 2000). Individuals who feel shame deem the whole self as deficient and typically have the urge to hide or disappear. Given that so few women meet the dominant cultural standard for an attractive, sexy appearance (Wolf, 1991), it is not surprising that a girl's chronic comparison of her own body to this impossible cultural standard would result in feelings of inadequacy and shame.

The sexualization and objectification of women in the media appears to be teaching girls that as females, all they have to offer is their body and face and that they should expend all their effort on physical appearance.

There is empirical evidence that children, girls especially, are sometimes depicted as sexual objects or as counterparts to adult versions. In an analysis of children appearing in advertisements drawn from five popular magazines (e.g., Ladies Home Journal, Newsweek) over a 40-year period, O'Donohue, Gold and McKay (1997) found 38 ads (1.5%) that portrayed children in sexual ways. Moreover, 85% of these ads focused on girls and this depiction of sexualized girls was found to increase significantly over time. A recent study by the Parents Television Council found that since 2004, there has been a 120% increase in depictions of violence against women on television and even more disturbingly, there was a 400% increase in the depictions of teen girls as the victim of violence.

There are mounting concerns about the social cost of the exposure to this type of media. It has been shown to have a direct effect on boys' and girls' views on dating, boys' sexual harassment of girls and attitudes toward sexual violence. Objectifying girls and women gives boys and men permission to view them as sexual objects and can increase the propensity of: violence towards girls and women; the sexual exploitation of girls; and rape culture.

We believe that the Canadian federal government through the Status of Women Canada, is in the best position to:

- develop nation-wide education media literacy training programs which could be key in combating the influences of sexualization. We believe that media literacy training can provide media consumers with analytical tools that promote autonomy and critical understanding of the media.
- organize forums that will bring together members of the media and a panel of leading experts to discuss strategies on increasing awareness about this issue and reduce negative images of girls in the media.

- implement a public awareness campaign to help facilitate effective conversations about the sexualization of girls and its impact on girls, as well as on boys, women and men.
- build linkages and partnerships with like-minded organizations that promote positive depictions of girls in the media and to provide support to organizations that develop and implement media literacy programs.
- create policies that prohibits the presentation of sexualized images of girls in all forms of media and products.

With the passing of this resolution, the Canadian Federation of University Women will be at the forefront of a movement to deconstruct the limiting images of girls in mainstream media, as well as, promote positive representations of females for the betterment of all.

REFERENCES:

All URLs confirmed as of October 24, 2012. If links are not working, copy and paste them into your browser. Please note that some of these electronic publications are in PDF format. You will require a PDF reader which can be downloaded for free from <http://get.adobe.com/reader>

American Psychological Association. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. February 2007. <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

Chiu, Joanna. (2012) Media Literacy Can Help End Violence Against Women. Battered Women's Support Services. Vancouver. Retrieved from <http://www.bwss.org/2012/04/how-media-literacy-can-help-end-violence-against-women/>