

Eye of the Beholder Brief

Engender's campaign to open up a public debate about sexualisation and objectification of young women and girls in 21st century Scotland.

The world is saturated by more media images today than at any other time in history. Behind each of these images lies a message about expectations, values and ideals. Women are revered – and rewarded – for their physical attributes and both girls and boys are under pressure to emulate polarised gender stereotypes from a younger and younger age. The evidence collected in this report suggests these developments are having a profound impact, particularly on girls and young women.

What is sexualisation?

There are several components to sexualisation, and these set it apart from healthy sexuality. Sexualisation occurs when:

- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, 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.

Anyone can be sexualised, but when children are imbued with adult sexuality, it is often imposed upon them rather than chosen by them.

Sexualisation, Learning and Development

Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health. When based on mutual respect between consenting partners, sex fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure. Sexualisation is the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically.

While sexualised images have featured in advertising and communications since mass media first emerged, what we are seeing now is an unprecedented rise in both the volume and the extent to which these images are impinging on everyday life. Increasingly, too, children are being portrayed in 'adultified' ways while adult women are 'infantilised'. This leads to a blurring of the lines between sexual maturity and immaturity and, effectively, legitimises the notion that children can be related to as sexual objects.

Children and young people today are not only exposed to increasing amounts of hyper-sexualised images, they are also sold the idea that they have to look 'sexy' and 'hot'. As such they are facing pressures that children in the past simply did not have to face. As children grow older, exposure to this imagery

leads to body surveillance, or the constant monitoring of personal appearance. This monitoring can result in body dissatisfaction, a recognised risk factor for poor self-esteem, depression and eating disorders. Indeed, there is a significant amount of evidence that attests to the negative effects of sexualisation on young people in terms of mental and physical health, attitudes and beliefs.

Sexualised Content and the Mainstreaming of Pornography

Children and young people are exposed to an unprecedented range of media content, through an ever-growing number of channels. Furthermore, the proportion of that content which is sexual or even pornographic is increasing at a dramatic rate, with very little checks and balances to counteract its influences. There is no 'watershed' on the internet or on music videos, which are two of the most popular forms of media consumed by young people.

With proliferation comes normalisation. It is no surprise therefore that when researchers examine the content of young people's web pages they find that young teens are posting sexually explicit images of themselves on social networking sites, and self-regulating each other with sexist, derogatory and demeaning language.

In order to genuinely understand one of the main factors at play here, namely how young people internalise the messages they are exposed to, it is important to look at the social scripts children are being influenced by and what makes children susceptible to them.

Magazines, Marketing and Advertising

A dominant theme in magazines seems to be the need for girls to present themselves as sexually desirable in order to attract male attention, with advice on hairstyles, cosmetics, clothing, diet, and exercise promoting premature sexualisation. For young boys, 'lads' mags' contain a proliferation of highly sexualised images that blur the lines between pornography and mainstream media. The predominant message for boys is to be sexually dominant and to objectify the female body.

New technologies

Over 80 per cent of young people use the internet daily or weekly and around a third of 8–11-year-olds and 60 per cent of 12–15-year-olds say that they mostly use the internet on their own. Almost half of children aged 8–17 and a quarter of those aged between eight and 11 have a profile on a social networking site such as Bebo, MySpace or Facebook. While sites set age limits (typically 13 or 14), these are not generally enforced. Social networking sites allow children and young people to create online identities. Girls, for instance, report being under increasing pressures to display themselves in their 'bra and knickers' or bikinis online, whereas boys seek to display their bodies in a hyper-masculine way showing off muscles, and posturing as powerful and dominant.

THE IMPACT OF SEXUALISATION

Body image and Gender Inequality

In the past it was adult women who felt the imperative to look 'hot' and 'sexy', now this imperative is being adopted by younger and younger girls who will inevitably face the same feelings of inadequacy and failure to live up to an unrealistic ideal. The mass media promotes and reinforces an idealised notion of beauty for both men and women, presenting standards – of thinness for women and of muscularity for men – that few can ever hope to achieve. The effects of this are apparent – eating disorders are on the rise. The eating disorder charity BEAT estimates that 1.6 million people in the UK have an eating disorder - the vast majority of these victims, 1.4 million, are female. However, the ideal has become even more demanding and complex with young women needing not only to be thin, but also sexually desirable.

Young women and girls are not the only victims, however, with the media messages for boys proving just as limiting and restrictive: be macho, be strong, and do not show your emotions. Hyper-sexualisation of femininity cannot exist without hypermasculinisation of males – they feed off and reinforce each other.

Repeated exposure to gender stereotypical ideas and images contributes to sexist attitudes and beliefs, and these lead to much more serious consequences: sexual harassment and rape; violence against women; and in the case of the children, abuse and unwanted sexual attention. Although sexual objectification is but one form of gender oppression, it is one that factors into – and perhaps enables – a host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment discrimination to the trivialisation of women's work and accomplishments.

THE PROJECT

The project is due to start August/September 2010, with funding being provided by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Engender will be carrying out participatory research with 3 groups of young women/girls, 3 groups of young men/boys and 3 groups of parents. We will be working with young people (S2-S6) at Broughton High School, and with students from Stevenson College. Parents will be invited to participate through Parents' Councils and local Community Councils.

Engender will then carry out participatory analysis with a number of individual from the focus groups who are particularly interested in the issue leading to the development of a campaign. We will support art work and/or theatrical productions suggested by the schools and colleges involved to promote further understanding and debate about the issue.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Early 2011, debates will be organised to take place in a number of educational establishments across Scotland. There will be a number of public exhibitions, possibly in shopping centres around Scotland, and a exhibition will be displayed in the Scottish Parliament. We will aim to broaden discussion networks to include MSPs, the Scottish Retail Council and others as appropriate. We also hope to organise a Parliamentary women's dinner with speakers for each of the research groups, to further engage the interested students, and also provide positive role models for the young women involved.

Ultimately it is our aim to involve the young people in particular, giving them a forum to air their own views, and give them the opportunity to get actively involved in developing a campaign to make real changes. Their engagement will hopefully help stimulate debate and discussion beyond the focus groups in their schools and colleges, and help inform as many students' opinions as possible.

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