



## Sexual Violence Harassment Roundtable Discussions

Sudbury, April 8, 2015

Presentation by the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) Sudbury

*“The powder keg that is porn culture has exploded in the lives of North American children.”*

This is a quote from the CBC documentary, *Sext Up Kids*<sup>1</sup>, directed by award winning documentary filmmaker, Maureen Palmer and presented on the CBC’s Doc Zone.

In November of 2014, CFUW Sudbury, in partnership with the Sudbury Teachers Lions Club and ETFO Rainbow Teacher Local invited the public - parents, grandparents and educators- to join them in viewing and discussing the documentary **Sext Up Kids: How Kids are Becoming Hypersexualized**. For every person who said “That couldn’t be my son or daughter, that couldn’t my grandchild”, we had a wakeup call that evening.

### **What is Hypersexualization?**

According to the Canadian Women’s Health Network, the hypersexualization of children, particularly girls, is the process of inappropriately imposing sexuality on children, through media, marketing, products or other means, which encourages them to act in adult sexual ways. It also refers to the treatment or depiction of children/girls as sexual objects.<sup>2</sup> Examples are things marketed to 6-year old girls, ads of young girls in ‘sexy’ poses, and girls dressing up and dancing porn-style to their favourite pop star’s very adult lyrics. One that really sticks with me is an early evening Dairy Queen ad depicting a pre-teen boy buying a milkshake for a young girl, winking to his father and saying, “Like shooting fish in a barrel.”

Studies have shown that frequent exposure to media images that sexualize and degrade girls and women can affect how girls conceptualize femininity and sexuality, leading them to accept more constrained and stereotypical notions about gender roles and unhealthy sexual roles. Girls and young women who more frequently consume or engage with mainstream media

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<sup>1</sup> *Sext Up Kids: How Kids are Becoming Hypersexualized*. [www.cbc.ca/doczone/episodes/sext-up-kids](http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/episodes/sext-up-kids)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Women’s Health Network (CWHN). <http://www.cwhn.ca/en/hypersexualizationprimer>



content also offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that paint females as sexual objects.<sup>3</sup>

Across several studies, women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media -including R-rated films, magazine advertisements, and music videos- were found to be significantly more accepting of rape myths (i.e. the belief that women invite rape). They were also found to be more susceptible to sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and to adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships.<sup>4</sup>

Sexualizing young girls and depictions of violence against girls and women have also been shown to have a direct impact on how boys and girls view dating, and boys' attitudes toward sexual violence and sexual harassment. Objectifying girls and women can therefore contribute to sexual violence against girls and women, the sexual exploitation of girls, and rape culture.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

The sexualization and objectification of girls and women is pervasive in North American culture, particularly mainstream media (e.g. prime-time television programs, television commercials, music videos, and magazines). Our children are exposed whether they live in big-city Ontario or rural Ontario. Just take a walk through the mall and look at the female teen clothes on sale. Look in the children's clothing store at the sexed-up tops, dresses and pants available for 6 to 12 year old girls. Many of these styles are copied from the clothes worn by children's favourite TV and music stars. This year I had a look at Halloween costumes for my granddaughter. One "police woman" costume looked like it came right from the page of a porn magazine...I am not sure how a police officer could catch a criminal in the stiletto boots that were depicted...and

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<sup>3</sup> Ward, L. M. (2002). Does television exposure affect emerging adults' attitudes and assumptions about sexual relationships? Correlational and experimental confirmation. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 31, 1-15.

<sup>4</sup> Milburn, M., Mather, R., & Conrad, S. (2000). The effects of viewing R-rated movie scenes that objectify women on perceptions of date rape. *Sex Roles*, 43, 645-664.

<sup>5</sup> Chiu, J. (2012) Media Literacy Can Help End Violence Against Women. Battered Women's Support Services. Vancouver. <http://www.bwss.org/2012/04/how-media-literacy-can-help-end-violence-against-women/>

<sup>6</sup> American Psychological Association. (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls. <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>



this costume was sized for ages 3 to 6! In comparison, the boy's costume looked just like one a real police officer would wear.

The technology, of course, adds to the problem. At our community showing of *Sext-Up Kids*, one mother talked about her 6-year old daughter ending up on porn sites by starting off with a simple log-in to a children's TV program that she likes. A high school student talked about the pressure of the media and texting on teen girls. A father of several young children expressed grave concerns over the sites his children were seeing on the internet...sites that are deemed safe for children. We were pleased to see that he spent some time after the film talking to the police officer who was on our discussion panel.

The main question asked by the parents who came to see and discuss the *Sext Up Kids* documentary was, "What can we do?" They looked to the police officer and the teachers on the panel for an answer. The police officer said, and I quote, "If you are coming to me with the problem, then it is already too late." The teachers said, "We are talking about it at school as much as possible. We are putting rules about media use into place. But we cannot do it without the help of parents." The high school student said, "Talk to your kids. It may seem they are not listening and they will argue with you and give you a hard time, but secretly they will thank you for caring. "

Some say we can do nothing about it because "it's all about the bottom line"; that, because 'sexy sells', the fashion and toy industries are targeting girls for new markets in the same way the tobacco and alcohol industries target adolescents.<sup>7</sup> In 2011, one study found that almost a third of girls' clothing for sale at 15 major retailers has sexualizing characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

Will boycotts change their marketing strategies? will shaming? In 2007, Wal-Mart pulled a pair of girls' underwear with the words "Who needs credit cards ... " on the front and "when you have Santa" on the back from the shelves after parental outcry. In 2011, JCPenney had attempted to market to tweener girls a shirt trumpeting the stereotype that girls can be smart or they can be pretty. But never both. Its slogan, emblazoned front and center in colorful girly writing, was:

"I'm Too Pretty to Do Homework, So My Brother Has to Do it For Me." After the outcry, JC Penny discontinued the shirt and issued an apology.

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<sup>7</sup> Canadian Women's Health Network (CWHN) <http://www.cwhn.ca/en/hypersexualizationprimer2>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.livescience.com/14249-girls-clothing-sexualized.html>



And, by the way, I don't think I was the only outraged person to contact Dairy Queen after seeing it for the first time. The TV ad was pulled.

We can talk to our children. We can complain to companies and refuse to buy their products or watch their programs.

But what can the Ontario government do? We know that we cannot address the issue of violence against women without addressing one of the problems that fuel it....hypersexualization of children.

CFUW recommends that the Government of Ontario

- Develop and fund an Ontario--wide education program for the public designed to raise awareness of the hypersexualization of children - especially girls - in advertising, commercial products, and mass media
- Create and enforce laws that prohibit the use of sexualized images of prepubescent and adolescent children in media;
- Allocate resources to support programs that expose the relationship between hypersexualization and gender inequality in society.

Thank you for your attention.

Susan Stuart

Vice-President  
CFUW Sudbury