

## **SEXUALISATION AND OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN – Position Statement**

Women's Forum Australia (Women's Forum) is deeply concerned that young girls and women are objectified and sexualised. Public images of women heavily focus on women's sexual features rather than other attributes such as intelligence or work capacity.

Women's magazines tend to portray women in demeaning ways, depicting them as objects in positions of inferiority, subordination and low social power.<sup>i</sup> Women's physical appearances – especially their sexual attributes – are portrayed as their most important assets. This is presented as liberating and empowering.<sup>ii</sup>

*Women's Forum acknowledges healthy sexual expression is important. However, a woman's value is not solely reliant on her sexual appeal.*

Sexual expression is inappropriate and unhealthy when:

- A person is viewed as a thing for others' sexual use, rather than as a person;
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person, particularly children and other vulnerable people who have limited or no control over these impositions; and,
- A person's value comes only from her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.

*Objectification occurs when a woman's body, parts of her body, or sexual capabilities are seen as her whole self, ignoring any other attributes.*

Women's Forum highlights that when women come to see themselves as objects to be evaluated (self-objectification) this creates a range of social and health problems including: feelings of body shame; increased anxiety levels; lack of awareness of body sensations; and decreased motivation.<sup>iii</sup> Self-objectification can cause women to perform worse in intellectual tasks<sup>iv</sup> and to be less physically active.<sup>v</sup> It can even motivate women to mistreat other women.<sup>vi</sup>

Women who make decisions based on self-objectification are less likely to make well-informed, reasonable choices. Individuals who feel unhappy with their bodies need the affirmation of others. They "do not make good decisions about partners, or about the kind of sexual activity that is in their best interests."<sup>vii</sup>

*Women's Forum wants women to receive messages that affirm their individual self-worth just as they are.*

Substantial psychological research clearly shows that mass media influences girls and young women's beliefs about themselves.<sup>viii</sup> This is particularly concerning given that women are portrayed in the media as physical objects that can be looked at and acted upon to satisfy male desire. They are not viewed as subjective beings with thoughts, emotions and experiences. The objectification of women sends a cultural message that a woman's worth is reduced *exclusively* to the level of her physical appeal.

Women's Forum highlights the following false and damaging messages that media presents:

- Women's (and girls') main concern should be to attract and sexually satisfy men.<sup>ix</sup>
- Women exist as decorative bodies to look good and sexually satisfy men.<sup>x</sup>
- The 'ideal' woman is 'thin, glamorous, sexy and shows plenty of flesh.'<sup>xi</sup>
- Females are inferior and flawed.<sup>xii</sup>
- Purchasing advertised products will make women sexy and beautiful, and thus happy and successful.<sup>xiii</sup>

***Women's Forum rejects the message sent by media and advertisers - in an attempt to sell products - that women are inferior and flawed.***

Women's Forum encourages women to be critical rather than passive consumers of popular culture – with the ability to accept healthy, positive messages, and reject fake or damaging messages. We exhort each woman to celebrate her own uniqueness and withdraw from conforming to the attractiveness ideal presented by marketers and media.

Women's Forum encourages women not to buy into a phenomenon that compromises them emotionally and cognitively. Instead, women need to recognise the true value and humanity of themselves and others. The result will be "higher self-esteem, lower levels of self-consciousness, and lower physique anxiety or dissatisfaction."<sup>xiv</sup>

Women's Forum believes that initiatives to reduce the sexualisation and objectification in society include:

- A Gender Portrayal Code of Ethics, to provide ethical guidelines for media, advertising and marketing to address:

*Authority and decision making* – men and women should be equally represented in roles of authority and decision making;

*Sexuality* – advertising and media should avoid the inappropriate use or exploitation of women's sexuality through dressing, posing or misrepresentative language.

*Violence* – neither sex should be portrayed as exerting dominance over the other by means of overt or implied threats, or actual force.

*Diversity* – women and men should be portrayed as competent in a wide range of activities both inside and outside the home.

***Women have much more ability and power than just their appearance.***

<sup>i</sup> Kang ME (1997) 'The portrayal of women's images in magazine advertisements: Goffman's gender analysis revisited,' *Sex Roles*, 37: 979-997; Lindner K (2004), 'Images of women in general interest and fashion magazines advertisement for 1955 to 2002,' *Sex Roles*, 51 (7/8): 409-421.

<sup>ii</sup> Brumberg JJ (1997) *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, Random House, New York; Levy, A (2005) *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Schwartz Publishing, New York.

<sup>iii</sup> Tylka TL & Hill MS (2004), 'Objectification theory as it relates to disordered eating among college women,' *Sex Roles*, 51 (11/12): 719-730.

<sup>iv</sup> Fredrickson BL, Roberts TA, Noll SM, Quinn DM and Twenge JM (1998), 'That swimsuit becomes you: sex differences in self-objectification, restrained eating, and math performance,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1):269-284.

<sup>v</sup> Strelan P, Mehaffey SF and Tiggemann M (2003) 'Self-objectification and esteem in young women: the mediating role of reasons for exercise,' *Sex Roles*, 48(1/2):89-95; Segar M, Spruijt-Metz D and Hoeksema S (2006), 'Go Figure? Body-shape motivations are associated with decreased physical activity participation among midlife women,' *Sex Roles* February, 54(3/4):175-187

<sup>vi</sup> Strelan P and Hargreaves D (2005), 'Women who objectify other women: the vicious circle of objectification?' *Sex Roles*, 52(9/10):707-712.

<sup>vii</sup> Brumberg (1997): 212.

<sup>viii</sup> American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007), *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*, Washington DC, American Psychological Association.

<sup>ix</sup> Krassas NR, Blauwkamp JM and Wesselink P (2001) 'Boxing Helena and corseting Eunice: sexual rhetoric in *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy* magazines,' *Sex Roles*, 44(11/12): 751-771.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xi</sup> Ewing, S. *Faking It: The Female Image in Young Women's Magazines*, Women's Forum Australia, Canberra, 2007; 24.

<sup>xii</sup> Lindner K (2004)

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xiv</sup> Thornton B & Maurice J (1997) 'Physique contrast effect: adverse impact of idealized body images for women,' *Sex Roles*, 37(5/6), 433-439.