

# **How the Media Portrayal of Women Perpetuates Violence and Inequality**

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Around the world, girls and women are disproportionately affected by violence. Globally, one in three women will experience physical or sexual violence. 30% of women who have had a relationship report that they have experienced physical or sexual violence from their partner – in fact, 38% of all murders of women are committed by the victim's partner or ex-partner. Violence and discrimination don't just occur in the home or workplace and they aren't limited to attacks by an unknown assailant in the street. In this new age of mass media and computer technology, violence against women extends to cyberspace. Nearly all abusive language, aggressive behavior, harassment and negative or embarrassing images posted online are done so by a partner or former partner in an effort to exert power over, control or humiliate the person. At the same time the internet and television stations are flooded with programs depicting violence against women and advertising that turns such violence into a joke.

## **Why is Violence Such a Widespread Problem?**

There is no simple answer as to why violence against girls and women is so widespread as it is caused by many different factors. Circumstances that increase a person's likelihood of perpetrating violence include having had many partners previously, being suspected of infidelity, having an anti-social personality disorder, beliefs in sexual purity or 'honor', beliefs that men are more intelligent than women or that they are 'entitled' to sex and ineffective legal measures that women can take to protect themselves. Certain groups of people also have a higher risk of either becoming a victim of violence or becoming the perpetrator. Those from a poor background, with a low education, a history of childhood abuse, alcohol abuse or attitudes of gender inequality (for instance, believing that women shouldn't work). Relationships that are going through difficulties and problems with effective communication also put both parties at risk.

## **The Impact of the Media**

Television, magazines, newspapers and websites worsen an already existing culture of oppression of women through movies, violent or stereotypical advertising, video games and an onslaught of sexualized

images of women.

*Television* – In recent years the level of violence portrayed on television and in cinemas, has escalated rapidly. Age certifications placed on films are becoming less stringent – movies that are deemed suitable for a 13 year old now would not have been considered so 20 years ago. Programs depicting violence or sex are also aired at earlier times in the evening when children may still be awake and even toddlers or young school children may be exposed to highly sexualized advertising during daylight hours.

Many programs aimed at children are filled with violence – for instance, cartoons, and children have ever increasing access to it via computer advances. The more people view violence, the more sensitized they become to it, the less shocking it becomes and the more accepting they are of using violence against others. This may be one of the reasons why regulatory agencies are allowing young teenagers and children to view increasingly graphic material. Over three decades of research dating from the 1970's has shown that viewing violence hardens the person's views on violence and increases the chance that they will end up in a situation where they are a victim of violence or where they become violent to others. The effects on children can be profound. Child viewing of mass media violence increases aggressive behavior, changes personality and increases the likelihood that the child will resort to criminal behavior. The situation is similar for adults. Prolonged exposure to very violent films creates hostile behavior in both genders and that hostility can be exhibited even when the person is not provoked.

*Video Games* – Video games and computer consoles affect the development and intellectual functioning of children, including their emotional development. Playing violent video games triggers angry thoughts and aggression and decreases helpful behavior. Many video games depict girls and women in a stereotypical way and even include sexualized aggression against women, such as assault, rape and murder -presented in a humorous way. Research into the effect of video games has found that they increase violence towards women, acceptance of rape and anti-women feelings. Modern, interactive games are thought to be more harmful than watching violent films on TV because the player has to actively participate, practice and receive rewards for acts of violence. This may lead to heightening levels of aggression among children.

*Song Lyrics and Music Videos* – Song lyrics are increasingly explicit, as are the music videos that accompany them. While there are censored

versions of pop songs, almost any child can listen to the uncensored versions through the internet or their ipod. This encourages children to behave in a sexualized way as they attempt to mimic stars that they look up to. Many song lyrics put pressure on girls to look beautiful and be sexually alluring at an age where it is inappropriate. Boys might also feel pressurized into displaying sexual behavior towards girls.

### **Media and Body Image**

As well as broadcasting gratuitous amounts of violence and sexualizing young girls, the media portrays women as young, thin, white skinned, blond and big chested in magazines, newspapers and in the movies. Images of women are airbrushed to produce perfect skin, shiny hair and sparkling white teeth. The media's perfect woman is unobtainable for most women. While the average body size of women has increased, this change hasn't been represented in the media and wafer thin models are still used in advertising and on television. Constantly seeing images of beautiful and thin women increase body dissatisfaction, negative mood, lowered self-esteem and depression. Women who have insecurities about their body are highly likely to compare themselves with women in advertisements. It can affect their self-worth and lead to a preoccupation with dieting and weight loss. This can increase the chance of developing an eating disorder such as bulimia or anorexia.

### **The Sexualizing of Women**

A study in the journal *Sexuality and Culture* found that over the decades, women have become more sexualized in the media – to the point of it being soft porn. Using the magazine, *Rolling Stone*, researchers looked at the front covers of the magazine between 1967-2009 to measure the sexualization of both men and women. The men and women were represented in an increasingly sexual way over time but suggestive images of women were far more frequent. In the 2000's, 83% of women in the media were sexualized compared with only 17% for men.

The media often portrays women dressed in revealing clothing or posed in suggestive positions or it concentrates on body parts and objectifies the women. Female characters on television are sexualized and this isn't limited to adult women. Commercials sexualizing children are becoming increasingly common. When looking at 40 years worth of advertising, 1.5% of the advertisements featured children in a sexualized manner. The clothing industry has further reflected this by producing clothes for children that are suggestive, such as bikini's,

mini skirts, fish-net tights and T-shirts with explicit slogans like 'Future Porn Star'. This early introduction to sex has negative consequences for girls. Self-objectification impairs the ability to concentrate and affects mental performance and logical reasoning, undermines confidence in their body and leads to feelings of shame. Early sexualization can also cause mental health problems, most commonly eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. Viewing women in stereotypical and sexual roles can also deter women from pursuing technical or scientific careers, opting for more gender traditional roles. It may increase sexual violence or even the demand for child pornography.

### **Protecting Girls**

If you have a daughter you can help protect her from future violence by monitoring what she watches on TV. There are also parental controls you can put onto computers to stop your daughter surfing on a sexually explicit page. Put time limits on the amount of time she watches TV or uses the computer.

If she's shopping for clothes, advise her not to wear items that need adjusting as this may interfere with her school work. If you think the clothing she wants is too skimpy, have a conversation with her about why.

Complain to TV stations and manufacturers if they are sexualizing girls and explain to your daughter why you are doing it.

Remind her of her talents and academic achievements frequently

Support positive portrayals of women in the media and encourage her to do so – strong female characters have been shown to improve the perception of women

Make sure your teen daughter knows about sex as part of a long-term, intimate relationship and that she is aware of safe sex. Schools do teach this but there is no substitute for parental guidance.

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