

Object is a human rights organisation which campaigns against 'sex-object culture' - a culture in which women are increasingly sexualised as 'sex objects' in our media and every day lives.

OBJECT

**Women not
Sex Objects**

• **What do we mean by sex-object culture?**

You only have to go to your local corner shop or supermarket, turn on MTV, jump on a bus to get to school or work, and you will be bombarded with images of women in highly sexualised poses and with vacant expressions being used to sell products, music and films.

Girls are targeted at younger and younger ages as consumers of sex-object culture. WH Smith sell pink Playboy pencil cases – yet Playboy is a global pornography brand; Amazon sell pole dancing kits with paper money as toys; Tesco even sell 'Does my bum look big in this?' t. shirts for 3-6 month year old girls. Celebrities endorse the pornography industry and glamour models are held out as role models for young girls. The message is loud and clear:

To be validated as a female, you have to be 'hot'. This is increasingly the case as pornography and the sex industries (such as prostitution or lap dancing) become part of our mainstream

• **Doesn't Object just have a problem with sex?**

It's not sex we have a problem with - it is the sexualisation of women and girls in a way which has little parallel for men or boys. And it's not sex that's everywhere - it is images that originate from pornography. Sex and pornography are very different, although the mission of lads mags and the like is to persuade us otherwise. When we criticise McDonalds for its unhealthy food, environmentally destructive business practices and targeting of children through manipulative marketing, does anybody accuse us of being anti-food?

• **But, isn't it all just a bit of harmless fun?**

The sexualisation of women in the media and mainstreaming of the sex industry is filling the gap of sex education and shaping how sexual identities are formed. Alarming, 66% of young people say that they find out about sex, love and relationships through the media (Institute of Education, 2003).

This is harmful. As pornography infiltrates mainstream culture and the line between what used to be considered hard core and what is sold in newsagents and supermarket becomes increasingly blurred, the rape narrative which originated from porn has become increasingly acceptable. In fact, Maxim even tells teenage readers that 'a lot of women fantasise about things like being raped' and that 'it's a myth that women like soft sex'.

This message is reflected by statistics showing that almost half of all adult women in England and Wales have experienced domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking (British Crime Survey

2004) and a high proportion of people still think that women are at least partially to blame for rape, with rape conviction rates at an all time low (Amnesty International, 2005).

‘Sex-object culture’ also harms boys who are pressurised to act out a version of ‘being a man’ in which power over women is normal. The effect is demonstrated by the fact that only 8% of rapes are stranger rapes, meaning that it is ‘ordinary’ boys and men who are committing sexually violent crimes. The media’s portrayal of women as sex objects also harms girls’ mental and physical health leading to a lack of confidence with their bodies as well as eating disorders (American Psychological Association, 2007). Women and girls are comparing themselves with celebrities who have had plastic surgery and whose photographs have been airbrushed. It is no wonder that in the UK at least 1 million people have eating disorders (90% of whom are women) and that upwards of £1 billion pounds is spent on plastic surgery annually (90% of which is spent by women).

When women are overwhelmingly valued on the basis of their looks this has an impact on all spheres of life. Parliament is 80% male, and the gender pay gap means that in effect women are only paid till October whilst men continue to be paid until the end of the year.

- **But what if it’s a woman’s choice to be glamour models or lap dancers?**

Mainstream media outlets glamorise the ‘porn star’ life. For example even though much research shows that prostitution is overwhelming abusive and exploitative, the media friendly story is still one of the ‘Belle du Jour’ fantasy of a successful and glamorous call girl. Instead of showing the realities of lap dancing, page 3 or prostitution, the media focuses on discussions on women’s choice to participate in the sex industry.

Actually, the issue of choice is complex. We have to look at all the factors which influence our choices, including the way that the media and popular culture glamorises the sex industry. Even if we could establish that it truly was a genuine and empowering choice of a woman to go into one of these industries, the harmful impact that their normalisation has on society makes the issue much bigger than one of individual choice.

- **What about freedom of speech?**

We are talking about multi-billion pound media and sex industries backed up by big business. It is clear that it is the sex industry and all those making profit out of the sex-object culture that have the loudest voice. It is the women and men who want to challenge this culture that are silenced.

We are not calling for censorship. Object is calling for improved regulation of the media in relation to sexism and for people to understand the reality and effects of normalising words and images which reinforce and normalise inequalities between women and men. Quite rightly this has been recognised in the arena of racial equality, where legislation criminalises the incitement of racial hatred. Isn’t it time for such laws to be brought in to protect the rights of women?

Want to find out how to get involved in campaigning and activism? Contact:

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