



SEXUALISED SEXISM: POPULAR CULTURE, SEXUALISATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

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As of July 2014, there have been a slew of campaigns, two Westminster government reviews¹ and countless papers and books which have catapulted the issue of sexualisation into public, policy and academic arenas.² The result is a range of perspectives which speak to differing priorities: much current policy concern is about 'contamination' of childhood; for some commentators, sexualised popular culture is evidence of progressive liberalisation of social attitudes; critical feminist analysis views the sexualisation of women and girls' bodies in public space as part of ongoing social inequalities between women and men. Women's organisations which are experts on violence against women and girls (VAWG) see similar patterns in sexualised popular culture as those that underpin the perpetration of VAWG: masculinity equated with sexual conquest, representations of women and girls as perpetually sexually available.

This briefing makes a case for understanding and naming sexualisation as 'sexualised sexism' in order to make clear its gendered dynamics and role as a conducive context for violence against women and girls. A final section outlines how international human rights approaches support this analysis.

WHAT IS MEANT BY 'SEXUALISATION'?

There are multiple possible interpretations of 'sexualisation'; as Julia Long points out, the term can mean sexualisation of individuals, or of popular culture more broadly.³ In policy and public language, 'sexualisation' refers to the ways in which popular culture is saturated with sexualised motifs: in advertising, music videos (and lyrics), computer/video games; the presence and expansion of sexualised dance clubs (lap/pole/strip dancing) in city high streets, including billboards for clubs; ideas – and 'ideals' – about women's bodies that lead

¹ Bailey, R. (2011) *Letting children be children – report of an independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood* London: Department of Education; Papadopoulos, L. (2010) *Sexualisation of young people review* London: Home Office

² Coy, M. & Garner, M. (2012) Definitions, discourses and dilemmas: policy and academic engagement with the sexualisation of popular culture *Gender & Education* 24(3) 285-301

³ See Long, J. (2012) *Anti-porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism* London: Zed Books

to padded bras for girls periodically surfacing on the high street. The sexual and digital 'revolutions' have transformed *what* it is possible to represent about sex in popular culture and public space, and *how* these representations are created and disseminated.

A useful definition by Rosalind Gill suggests that sexualisation refers to: 'the extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms. . . as well the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls', women's and (to a lesser extent) men's bodies in public spaces'.⁴ However, she has subsequently asked if the term sexualisation might be too unclear, and if 'sexism' is more fitting to capture the gendered inequalities reflected and reproduced in much popular culture.⁵ Mostly, when we talk about sexualisation of popular culture we are talking about the (hetero)sexualisation of women and girls' bodies.

This is why the term 'sexualised sexism' might be more helpful, for two reasons: first, it makes clear that sexualisation is deeply gendered, and that its limited and reductive portrayals of women and girls reinforce gender as a social hierarchy. The gender pay gap persists, women are significantly under-represented in political decision-making and positions of power, VAWG is endemic in all communities, and 'to-be-looked-at-ness'⁶ is remains promoted as an aspiration for women and girls. This has individual and social dimensions, as Lauren Rosewarne notes:

*sexualised outdoor advertising displays work to make public space a gallery for men where women are used to decorate space in a way that sexually objectifies women and offends and harasses female public space users, thus making it less pleasant - and even impossible - for women to enjoy public space.*⁷

bell hooks talks of 'racialised sexism'⁸ where race and gender intersect to perpetuate stereotypes which become archetypes- for example, the strong black woman, submissive Asian woman. How sexualised sexism is racialised is critically important: there are race and class distinctions in *how* women are portrayed as sexually available. While much feminist critique is concerned with women being presented as *desirable* not *desiring*, black women are often shown as always 'wanting it'. Similarly the figure of a female 'chav' is a woman tainted by material and sexual excess, of being 'too much' (while often wearing too little).

Secondly, it follows from this concept of sexualised sexism that a feminist critique of sexualisation is concerned with women's equality, not with notions of obscenity and morality, although it is sometimes misrepresented as such.

Discussions about sexualised sexism often slip into the harms and impacts of pornography, although it is more precisely the creep of conventions of pornography into popular culture

⁴ Gill, R. (2007) Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2) 147-66 p.151

⁵ Gill, R. (2011) Sexism reloaded, or, it's time to get angry again! *Feminist Media Studies* 11(1) 61-71

⁶ Mulvey, L. (1999) Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In L. Braudy & M. Cohen (eds) *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* Oxford: OU Press p 833-44.

⁷ Rosewarne, L. (2005) The Men's Gallery: Outdoor Advertising and Public Space *Women's Studies International Forum* 28: 67-78

⁸ hooks, b. (2004) *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* London: Routledge

that is referred to in the sexualisation debates. These include porn aesthetics (for example, removal of women's pubic hair becoming a normalised beauty practice) and porn practices (for example, the creation of porn genres - 'revenge porn' and 'creepshot' websites - where sexualised and often pornographic photographs of women are circulated by and among men without her consent). Far from a glib mantra of the mainstreaming of sex, what is mainstreamed are 'certain versions of sex – those constructed and distributed by pornography and the sex industry'.⁹ In this commercial story of sex in both pornography and wider sexualised sexism, women's bodies are relentlessly commodified. For instance, content analyses of music videos highlight their 'pornographic performances'¹⁰ where sexism and racism intersect in particular representations of black women's bodies that echo histories of colonialism.

Current debates about the impact of pornography on young people have (re)opened a window in for critical feminist perspectives to be heard. However, the policy focus - and much of the research - is on the dangers to mostly ungendered children, rarely young women and young men, and rarer still adult women, or adult men in the form of influencing values and perceptions. Much sound and fury about sexualisation pivots around alarm that it is premature and inappropriate for children and young people. Generation is an important factor in addressing how young women and men's views, beliefs and values are formed, but as the overarching theme of sexualised sexism is the perpetuation of stereotypes about women and men, a gender analysis is absolutely critical.¹¹ Cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie has argued that how we learn about gender used to be rooted in social institutions such as schools and churches, but as the importance of these institutions has been diminished, popular culture has become a conduit for instilling gendered codes of behaviour.¹² The stories that are told about women/girls and men/boys in the images, characters and symbols of popular culture shape perceptions of ourselves and others, according to what are often 'unwritten rules'.¹³

Since violence against women and girls is defined by the United Nations as cause and consequence of gender inequality, rooted in, and also reproducing, disparities in power, economic resources and respect¹⁴, sexist, sexualised representations of gender play a part in creating environments where violence becomes possible.

⁹ Long, J. (2012) *Anti-porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism* London: Zed Books p.111. See also

Boyle, K. (2010) Introduction: Everyday Pornography in K. Boyle (ed) *Everyday Pornography* London: Routledge

¹⁰ This phrase was coined by Mireille Miller-Young (2008) *Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography* *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8 (1) 261-292

¹¹ Coy, M. (2013) Children, childhood and sexualised popular culture in Wild, J. (ed) *Exploiting Childhood* London: Jessica Kingsley

¹² McRobbie, A. (2009) *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change* London: Sage

¹³ Powell, A. (2010) *Sex, Power and Consent: Youth Culture and the Unwritten Rules* Cambridge: University Press

¹⁴ United Nations (2006) In-depth study on all forms of violence against women: Report of the Secretary-General. New York: UN. See www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/v-sg-study.htm

SEXUALISED SEXISM AS A CONDUCTIVE CONTEXT FOR VAWG

EVAW has long framed sexualised sexism as a ‘conductive context’¹⁵ for violence against women and girls (VAWG).¹⁶ A ‘conductive context’ means building foundations which are necessary for violence to be possible; influencing attitudes and expectations and normalising certain practices. This is not to claim a causal relationship between sexualised popular culture and VAWG: men who perpetrate violence make a choice to do so. Yet to dismiss possible associations between representation of women’s bodies as sexualised commodities, and practices of gender where men sexually violate women’s bodies is intellectually evasive. For instance, images of female bodies as fragmented curves to be judged and admired by an (assumed) male audience and an equation of masculinity with sexual conquest do not exist in a vacuum, but in a social context where young men are lauded as players, dons, legends for having sex, and young women are judged as sluts and jezebels. Recent research with young people in England reveals that this sexual double standard is alive and well in their perceptions of how women and men should behave.¹⁷ So too are these representations part of the same socio-cultural landscapes in which rape myths remain tenacious, with significant proportions of the population believing that women’s clothing choices render us at least partly to blame for being raped.¹⁸ Ideas about how to be a man continue to be associated with winning both physical and visual access to sexualised female bodies; for some young men collecting ‘man points’ – rating from their peers – is dependent on persuading and often harassing young women to send ‘sexts’, and on sharing pornography with each other.¹⁹ Women’s decisions to participate in sexualised sexism – for example in glamour modelling - are situated in contexts where sexualised representations are equated with female empowerment. Persistent social, economic and political inequalities experienced by women and girls are rarely interrogated during discussions of what constitutes power and empowerment.

Most of all, this sexualised sexism is pervading popular culture in contexts where significant proportions of women and girls experience some form of violence, violation and bodily intrusion.

- Crime surveys indicate that approximately 404,000 women experience sexual violence every year in England and Wales. 85,000 women are raped every year.²⁰

¹⁵ This concept was developed by Liz Kelly in relation to trafficking, and has been applied to various forms of violence. See Kelly, L. (2007) A conducive context: Trafficking of persons in Central Asia. In M. Lee (ed.) *Human trafficking* Cullompton: Willan Publishing 73–91.

¹⁶ See Coy, M., Lovett, J, Kelly, L. (2008) *Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations: A Template Integrated Strategy on Violence Against Women for the UK* London: EVAW; End Violence Against Women (2011) *A different world is possible: A call for long-term and targeted action to prevent violence against women and girls* London: EVAW.

¹⁷ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013) *Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: how young people in England understand sexual consent* London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner

¹⁸ See Amnesty International/ICM (2005) *Sexual Assault Research Summary Report* London: Amnesty International/ICM; Opinion Matters (2010) *Wake Up To Rape Research Summary Report* London: Opinion Matters, available at:

www.vawpreventionscotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/Havens_Wake_Up_To_Rape_Report_Summary.pdf

¹⁹ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013) *Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: how young people in England understand sexual consent* London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner

²⁰ Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics (2013) *An Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales* London: Ministry of Justice

- One in five women in England and Wales report being subject to sexual violence, including sexual threats, unwanted touching or indecent exposure, since the age of 16.²¹
- One in three girls aged 13-17 in England, Wales and Scotland report some form of sexual violence from partners.²²
- Over two fifths (43%) of women aged 18-34 in London have experienced sexual harassment in public space.²³
- Almost one in three girls aged 16-18 have been subject to unwanted sexual touching at school.²⁴

Thinking about sexualised sexism as a conducive context for VAWG means recognising how gendered templates for what it means to be a woman/girl and man/boy have consequences for sexual encounters, and how these templates are further inflected by race and class. It alerts us to connections between men's non-consensual and abusive practices, from well codified criminal forms such as rape and sexual assault, to those that are less understood and/or enabled by new technologies, such as 'creepshots', sexting and 'revenge porn'. How men and boys make sense of representations of masculinity, not just femininity, in sexualised popular culture, and how they interpret possible implications for their own lives, is barely explored.²⁵ The expertise of women's organisations in these dynamics is, however, an often unacknowledged piece of the jigsaw here.

EXTENDING THE KNOWLEDGE BASE: DRAWING ON PRACTICE-BASED EVIDENCE

What can be included as evidence of 'impact' is at the heart of many discussions about sexualised sexism. Research on elements of sexualised popular culture provides many pieces of a jigsaw, and while too broad to cover in depth here, key findings underline the importance of a gender analysis. Studies with men who visit sexualised dance clubs - contexts where women who dance are constructed as a 'particular commodity, a body that can be viewed upon demand'²⁶ - reveal that some men are explicitly seeking 'masculine spaces' where they are not required to interact with women as equals.²⁷ Investigation into the textual content of lads mags shows that quotes from articles in them are often

²¹ Ministry of Justice, Home Office & the Office for National Statistics (2013) *An Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales* London: Ministry of Justice

²² Barter, C., McCarry, M., Berridge, D., & Evans, K. (2009) *Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships* London: NSPCC

²³ A YouGov survey of 1047 adults including 523 women, commissioned by the End Violence Against Women Coalition in March 2012, weighted to be representative of London adults. See www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/news/20/4-in-10-young-women-in-london-sexually-harassed-over-last-year.

²⁴ A YouGov poll of 788 16-18-year-olds around the UK in 2010, commissioned by the End Violence Against Women Coalition in October 2010, weighted to be nationally representative on age and gender. See www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/2010-poll-on-sexual-harassment-in-schools.

²⁵ For an exception, see Garner, M. (2012) Garner, M. (2012) The missing link: The sexualisation of culture and men *Gender and Education* 24(2) 325-331

²⁶ Frank, K. (2005) 'Exploring the Motivations and Fantasies of Strip Club Customers in Relation to Legal Regulations', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34(5): 487-504 p.495

²⁷ Frank, K. (2003) Just Trying to Relax: Masculinity, Masculinizing Practices, and Strip Club Regulars *The Journal of Sex Research* 40(1) 61-75; Frank, K. (2005) 'Exploring the Motivations and Fantasies of Strip Club Customers in Relation to Legal Regulations', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34(5): 487-504

indistinguishable from statements by convicted rapists.²⁸ The evidence base on exposure to sexualised music videos, albeit small, is consistent and persuasive about associations with attitudes that condone or tolerate sexual violence, including endorsement of the sexual double standard, and acceptance of rape myths.²⁹

A narrow interpretation of evidence as generated solely by academic research is common in the sexualisation debates. Yet just as it is through the collectivised voices of women and girls that we learned so much about VAWG, we can also build knowledge of how sexualised sexism manifests in everyday lives. The experiences of young women subject to coercion to send sexually explicit photographs ('sexts'), often shared without their consent³⁰, alert us to how representations of sexualised sexism (images) can be linked to practices where sexism is sexualised (sexual harassment). The 'total normalisation of sexualised communications and imagery that young people are receiving and negotiating in their day to day lives' is documented in research.³¹ This knowledge has also, often, reached us through women's organisations, whose everyday work is peppered with examples of connections between sexualised sexism and VAWG: men sharing sexualised images of women on social media without their consent; women and girls discovering that films of them being raped are circulating on the internet as 'porn'; evidence that pornography influences not just men and boys' expectations of sex, but also those of women and girls. The common thread here is entitlement to women's bodies that is visible in so much popular culture, and underpins, and justifies, men's violence.

This is not 'anecdotal', although it is often dismissed as such by elitist conceptions of academics as the only 'knowers'. It is expertise accumulated through decades of direct intensive, reflective interactions with women, young people, children, men. It is knowledge derived from patterns in what specialist organisations have heard and observed that 'draws us ever closer to understandings... which have the authority of commonality'.³² This is *practice-based evidence*,³³ from organisations which promote a model of sex based on mutuality and equal respect, in which women and girls experience, and express, desire and pleasure. That organisations grounded in respecting, maintaining and expanding women and girls' choices see that sexualised sexism diminishes possibilities for women to achieve meaningful equality should give us all pause for thought.

²⁸ Horvath, M.A.H., Hegarty, P., Tyler, S. & Mansfield, S. (2012) "Lights on at the end of the party": Are Lads Mags' Mainstreaming Dangerous Sexism? *British Journal of Psychology* 10: 454-471

²⁹ See Coy, M. (2014) *'Pornographic Performances': a review of research on sexualisation and racism in music videos* London: End Violence Against Women

³⁰ Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. & Kanyeredzi, A. (2013) *Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: how young people in England understand sexual consent* London: Office of the Children's Commissioner; Ringrose, J., Gill, R., Livingstone, S., & Harvey, L. (2012) *A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting'* London: NSPCC

³¹ Ringrose, J., Gill, R., Livingstone, S., & Harvey, L. (2012) *A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting'* London: NSPCC p.39

³² Price, L. (2005) *Feminist Frameworks: Building Theory on Violence Against Women* Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing p.15

³³ Coy, M. & Garner, M. (2012) Definitions, discourses and dilemmas: policy and academic engagement with the sexualisation of popular culture *Gender & Education* 24(3) 285-301

INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS TO ADDRESS SEXUALISED SEXISM

Requirements to address sexualised sexism are enshrined in several international human rights protocols on gender equality.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a legally binding treaty, which the UK signed in 1981,³⁴ requires states to ‘modify the social and cultural patterns of men and women with a view to eliminating prejudices and practices based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either sex and/or on stereotyped roles for men and women’. While this does not specially refer to sexualisation or objectification, commentary on CEDAW’s General Recommendation 19 extends the analysis: ‘traditional attitudes by which women are regarded as subordinate to men or as having stereotyped roles... contribute to the propagation of pornography and the depiction and other commercial exploitation of women as sexual objects, rather than as individuals. This in turn contributes to gender-based violence’.³⁵ Here an explicit link is made between gender inequalities, gender stereotypes (e.g. masculinity equated with sexual conquest, and femininity with sexual availability), sexualised sexism, and VAWG. The CEDAW committee also urges that states ensure ‘the media respect and promote respect for women’.³⁶

That sexualised sexism creates a conducive context for VAWG is acknowledged in human rights instruments. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) (1995), for example, stated that ‘images in the media of violence against women, in particular those that depict rape or sexual slavery as well as the use of women and girls as sex objects, including pornography, are factors contributing to the continued prevalence of such violence’.³⁷ BPfA strategic objectives on the media reiterate this more explicitly, requiring states to ‘encourage the media to refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities, rather than presenting them as creative human beings’ and ‘promote the concept that the sexist stereotypes displayed in the media are gender discriminatory’.³⁸

In these approaches, sexualised sexism in the media and popular culture is recognised as part of a spectrum of commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls. Its harms are noted as the perpetuation of discrimination against women and girls and reinforcing stereotypes about both women and men. Connections with VAWG are explicitly identified. These were reaffirmed in the agreed conclusions from the 2013 Commission on the Status of Women under the aim of preventing VAWG: ‘to train those who work in the media and to develop and strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms to promote balanced and non-stereotypical portrayals of women, with a view to eliminating discrimination against and the exploitation of women and girls and to refraining from presenting them as inferior beings

³⁴ Signed by the UK in 1981, and ratified in 1986. See www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw.

³⁵ Comments on Articles 2(f), 5 and 10(c), para 12, General Recommendation No. 19 (11th session, 1992) Violence against women. See www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm

³⁶ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation 19 on Violence Against Women (1992) para 24 (d).

³⁷ Beijing Platform for Action, Chapter IV D. Violence against women, para 118.

³⁸ Beijing Platform for Action Strategic objective J.2: Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media para 243.

and to exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities'.³⁹ The 2014 preliminary report on the UK by Rashida Manjoo, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, also singled out 'negative and over-sexualised media portrayals of women and girls' as 'cultural practices' that 'facilitate violence against women and girls'.⁴⁰

A final note is that sexualised sexism in popular culture has reinvigorated feminist organising and activism, with many notable victories: restrictions on the sale of lads mags⁴¹; changes in the licensing of sexualised dance clubs⁴²; a Bill proposing to criminalise the possession of pornographic simulations of rape in England and Wales⁴³; considerable public support for Page 3 to be withdrawn from national newspapers⁴⁴; a platform for young women to challenge racism and sexism in music videos⁴⁵; the creation of a website to support women subject to revenge porn.⁴⁶

It is now time for governments to also take seriously the array of international obligations on addressing sexualised sexism. These international obligations make a clear call for all political parties to develop policies on sexualised sexism, linked to strategic approaches to end and prevent VAWG and underpinned by a gender analysis. If commitments to eliminating gender inequality and VAWG are to be met, sexualised sexism requires action.

³⁹ United Nations (2013) *Agreed conclusions on the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls*. Available at:

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_\(CSW_report_excerpt\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_(CSW_report_excerpt).pdf)

⁴⁰ For the full preliminary statement, see

www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/data/files/Final_press_statement_UK_15_Apr_VAW.pdf.

⁴¹ The 'Lose the Lads Mags' campaign by Object and UK Feminista led to a number of retailers introducing age restrictions, requiring lads mags to be covered, or delisting titles that refuse, again challenging their normalisation. See www.losetheladsmags.org.uk.

⁴² See www.object.org.uk/about-the-campaign for more information.

⁴³ Rape Crisis South London spearheaded this successful campaign, which sprang from their practice-based evidence of working with survivors. See www.rapecrisis.org.uk/news_show.php?id=93.

⁴⁴ For example, campaigns by Object, and 'Turn Your Back on Page 3' and 'No More Page Three'. By May 2014, a petition started by No More Page Three has attracted almost 200, 000 signatures and attention of high profile celebrities and politicians wearing the campaign's distinctive t-shirt.

⁴⁵ A partnership project between Imkaan, End Violence Against Women and Object. See www.rewindreframe.org.

⁴⁶ Scottish Women's Aid have developed a resource to support women subject to revenge porn. See <http://stoprevengepornscotland.wordpress.com>.