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Female Sexualization: A Cultural Glass Ceiling

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Currents Magazine

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As a young, burgeoning actress in LA, Susan Salas sat across the table from her male interviewer during the audition process. The man looked Salas up and down and said, “If you got yourself a really big ‘tit-job’ and bleached your hair blonde, honey, you’re just gonna be huge.”

Salas, now a professor of Media Production and Director of Broadcasting at Pepperdine, stood up from the table, shook his hand and thanked him for his time. To which he replied immediately, “We aren’t done.”

“Yes, yes we are,” she responded, then walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“I would never want to work for a person like that. I don’t care how much money,” Salas said, recounting the incident.

Being sexual and being sexy are different. Being sexual involves males and females and the ability to reproduce. Being sexy involves attractiveness and exciting sexual appeal. Women are sexual creatures, but they don’t always have to be sexy.

At some point, society decided that certain body parts, other than sexual organs, were inappropriate and needed to be covered up. Much like foul language, sexualization is relatively arbitrary, a concept that evolved over time to become a cultural norm. Of course, the origins of modesty are deeply rooted in history, and modesty varies greatly between different cultures and religions. But for the most part, it seems to be something societies simply constructed.

It only takes one glance at popular culture to see that women are hypersexualized. From movies and video games to magazine advertisements and Instagram posts, one can easily find a plethora of scantily clad women posing in a variety of provocative positions. It has become so commonplace that most of us aren’t surprised. But why?

To start, let’s direct our attention to the entertain-

ment industry. If one has watched a single episode of *House of Cards*, seen Beyonce in concert or flipped through the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition, it is apparent that sex is everywhere — and it sells.

The problem isn’t the sexuality; it’s the effect it has on our minds and our perceptions of women in society.

Associate Professor of Psychology Jennifer Harriger said she believes this objectification of women is not only harmful to society as a whole but to each individual woman.

“When you treat a woman as an object, instead of viewing her as a full person, you are tearing her body up into parts, or you’re using her sexuality to represent the entire person,” she said.

You hear most people, not just men, talk about a woman having great arms or a nice butt or great boobs, Harriger added.

“But what we’re doing is objectifying that person, because now those parts of her come to represent the whole instead of looking at her as an entire person,” Harriger said.

Once a woman has become socialized to view other women in this way, it becomes easier to self-objectify. When a woman looks at herself through a third-person lens, it is more likely that she may become depressed, have body-image issues or an eating disorder.

Harriger said research has found that when women are exposed to just three to five minutes of various advertisements or images in fashion magazines, their rates of body dissatisfaction increases. Body dissatisfaction is the most salient risk factor for an eating disorder; eating disorders can be caused by a number of things, including genetics, familial relations, media and other sociocultural factors, and psychological factors, Harriger said.

“I don’t think that you can say the media is to blame, but it definitely adds to the risk,” Harriger said.

It can be really difficult for women to detach their sense of value from their sense of beauty, because they have been socialized to do so from such a young age.

Disney movies show princes falling in love immediately with beautiful princesses, strictly because of their appearances, not because of their abilities. Although some of the newer movies such as *Frozen* and *Brave* are challenging gender stereotypes, the classics still exist and affect those who watch them.

Harriger advocated being more aware about the amount of time and money spent focusing on things that will make us more “beautiful.”

“Nobody benefits when a woman doesn’t feel good about herself except advertisers and marketers,” Harriger said.

They are the ones creating the need for the product, and if we stop buying, maybe it won’t be so prevalent. Additionally, women who are valued for their beauty are often seen as less competent in society’s eyes.

“It’s difficult for women in society to be viewed as sexual beings, and attractive and competent at the same time,” she said. “And so what happens in the media is the more that we sexualize women, the more we take away any power that they may have.”

Attention is not real power. Real power comes from realizing that our inherent value is constant regardless of outward appearance.

One group that is advocating strongly against the sexualization of women is the Free the Nipple campaign. The campaign



Photo by Daniel Caso

encourages women to go topless in resistance to censorship and oppression of women, according to the website’s mission statement. Supporters not only fight for general female equality but specifically for breastfeeding rights, as women are still discriminated against for breastfeeding in public spaces.

As a young woman, this movement makes me feel

two distinct ways: repelled and inspired. Although these may seem contradictory, let me explain.

Raised in a Christian household with four older brothers, I was taught how to act and dress appropriately as a woman. As a child, I found these rules quite frustrating. Why did my brothers get to run around shirtless, plunging into the pool in just their boxers when they got hot, while I had to be fully covered, and always change into a bathing suit before joining in the fun?

Why did I always wear pink and be deemed the “extra” player on the flag football team in the backyard? Because culture taught me to, and by age 11, I bought it. I no longer wanted to run around without my shirt on, because that was “weird.” I no longer wanted to be the quarterback on our backyard football team, because I believed I might get hurt.

Culture taught me what it meant to be a woman, and I thought accordingly. Cue my repulsed feeling when I first encountered the Free the Nipple campaign. Walking around topless is no way to be a proper woman, and frankly it feels incredibly inappropriate and jarring.

On second thought, however, why not shock the

public if you want change? The nature of the historical sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement was to jolt complacent individuals

into realizing the extent of racism. That being said, the shock factor makes sense, it just may not be the right move in this circumstance.

For one, the breast is culturally defined as valued, not only sexually but in relationship to the child it is feeding. Salas said she breastfed all three of her children but did it discreetly. Walking around shirtless is

offensive and offensive to the children being fed, Salas said.

Contrastingly, as a mother of twin girls, Harriger said a woman should certainly be able to breastfeed in public and that she should feel free to do what makes her comfortable in regard to modesty.

One glaring problem with going shirtless is that discrimination could still exist, if not intensify. Some women are often just as brutal as men in discrimination and can be quite cruel to one another, Salas said.

“We’re so judgmental of each other,” Salas said. “And I truly think [change] should start with women. I don’t think it needs to start with men or media; I think it’s about how women treat each other.”

As a producer, actress and current professor, Salas has seen much of the interaction between women and the media over the years. Her first job out of graduate school was producing for an ad agency in Chicago at 22 years old. She then went on to be an associate producer and full producer by the time she was 24. As a young woman, Salas was in charge of 50-man crews on production sites and felt very little discrimination based on her gender. She said she felt like she was considered one of the guys and was respected for it.

“I was valued. I was never hit on. I was respected, and on location it didn’t matter,” she said.

As an actress, however, Salas encountered firsthand the idea that women are valued for their bodies. The most bothersome part is that this sentiment instills in women the feeling that their self worth is judged by the size of their breasts and their artificial image. And it’s often women who are making that judgment, Salas said.

Salas said culture will hopefully change if women speak with more mindfulness to little girls. When our culture shows little girls dancing like strippers, that reinforces to younger and younger girls that value is based on appearance, Salas said.

“Mindfulness and loving each other: That’s where I think it will start, and it has to start with little girls,” Salas said.

One organization that is seeking to do this is the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, founded by Academy Award-winning actress Geena Davis to

promote improved gender balance in the media, especially in children 11 years and younger, according to the website.


The institute has conducted a number of studies, amassing the largest compilation of research regarding gender representation in the media. The goal of the institute is to provide “evidence-based solutions to systemically change gender equality issues in children’s media for the entertainment industry, businesses, educational institutions and the public,” according to the website.

Another organization promoting change is the SPARK Movement, which is an activist group working online to promote an anti-racist gender justice movement, according to their website. SPARK also promotes education and public dialogue as a way to become aware of and change the cultural attitude toward the sexualization of women.

A real surge of change will start with the youngest generation.

Education can only get us so far, as it is not enough to simply be

aware of this societal issue. We must put education into action and start treating one another as valuable human beings regardless of outward appearance. Whether that means joining one of these powerful organizations, leading a focus group with young girls or simply learning to love ourselves and reflecting that to other people, this issue can be solved.

Value does not come from beauty, nor does it come from feeling better or worse than the women and men around us. Value comes from love. Plenty of us believe this — it’s just a matter of modeling it. 

“Culture taught me what it meant to be a woman, and I responded accordingly.”