

***Toxic culture: the challenge of restoring dignity,
worth and value to women and girl***

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**The Pornification of Girlhood
*Melinda Tankard Reist***

IN HER BOOK *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1998), Joan Jacobs Brumberg examines the diaries of girls from the 1800s to the present. Extracts from two journals illustrate the significant shifts in the way girls see themselves and what they consider important. In 1882 a girl wrote:

“Resolved, not to talk about myself or feelings. To think before speaking. To work seriously. To be self restrained in conversation and actions. Not to let my thoughts wander. To be dignified. Interest myself more in others.”

A century later, another girl writes in her diary:

“I will try to make myself better in any way I possibly can with the help of my budget and baby-sitting money. I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got new hair cut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories.”

The adolescent female body is, observes Brumberg, a “template for much of the social change of the twentieth century”.

I am not lauding the 1800s as a paradise for women. Nor do I think any girl should be silent about herself or her feelings. What is disturbing, however, are the constraints under which girls struggle to develop and flourish today. Many girls now seem to value their physical appearance more highly than personal achievement. They've been led to believe their bodies are the most valuable thing that they have to offer the world. How has it come to this?

Trends in popular culture, the insidious creep of the cult of bodily perfection, the dominance of fad diets, billboards and magazines depicting flawless female forms, all play a part. Then there's the commercial interests of companies marketing the promise of success in life through the bowling-ball breasts preferred by readers of *Zoo*.

Another significant factor is that the movement for women's equality was overtaken by the movement for sexual licence—the sexual revolution. To be free has come to mean the freedom to wrap your legs around a pole, flash your breasts in public, girls-gone-wild style, or perform acts of the oral variety on school-boys at weekend parties in lieu of the (as traditionally understood) goodnight kiss.

IN AN AGE OF “Girl Power”, many girls are feeling powerless. They are facing unprecedented social pressure, their emotional and psychological well-being at risk in ways never before imagined.

To quote Brumberg, “More than any other group in the population, girls and their bodies have borne the brunt of twentieth-century social change, and we ignore that fact at our peril.” Part of that social change is the wallpapering of society with sexual imagery:

“We have backed off from traditional supervision or guidance of adolescent girls; yet we sustain a popular culture that is permeated by sexual imagery, so much so that many young women regard their bodies and sexual allure as [their] primary currency.”

This puts girls at risk. “Many young women ... do not have the emotional resources to be truly autonomous or to withstand outside pressures from peers and boyfriends, whom they desperately want to please.” Psychologist and therapist Mary Pipher shares Brumberg's concerns. In *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), she writes:

“girls are having more trouble now than they had thirty years ago ... Girls today are much more oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture ... as they navigate a more dangerous world, girls are less protected.”

Girls are endangered by those with a keen desire to break down taboos that previously helped keep them out of harm's way. The American Psychological Association (APA) quotes D.L. Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (2002):

“in the current environment, teen girls are encouraged to look sexy, yet they know little about what it means to be sexual, to have sexual desires, and to make rational and responsible decisions about pleasure and risk within intimate relationships that acknowledge their own desires. Younger girls imbued with adult sexuality may seem sexually appealing, and this may suggest their sexual availability and status as appropriate sexual objects.”

Girls are “being invited to see themselves not as healthy, active and imaginative girls, but as hot and sassy tweens on the prowl”, write Andrea Nauze and Emma Rush in *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia* (2006). Fifteen-year-old Miley Cyrus of Hannah Montana fame was simply following the script expected of her as a celebrity adolescent when she posed, topless and half-wrapped in a silky sheet, for *Vanity Fair*, with post-coital bed hair and ruby lips.

THE PRESSURE TO CONFORM to an idealised body type in a sex-saturated culture that values girls who are thin, sexy and “bad” is taking a massive toll. Despite the many opportunities available to them, girls today are struggling. Courtney E. Martin observes in her book *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* (2007) that self-hatred has become a rite of passage for teenage girls, pointing to “the frightening new normalcy of hating your body”. These girls may be good at lots of things. But that doesn’t really matter if their bodies are not like the images of thin airbrushed celebrities and models who are in their faces every day. Life seems to have become one big beauty pageant.

The body has become a project that a girl has to work on full-time. If she stops to even take a breath, she might gain weight. Too many girls are trying to imitate half-starved celebrities, and are obsessed with trying to conform to impossible-to-attain highly sexualised images. Some sobering statistics:

- A Mission Australia national survey (2007) of 29,000 young people aged eleven to twenty-four found that body image was the most important problem for them—ahead of family conflict, stress, bullying, alcohol, drugs and suicide.
- The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health found that between 40 per cent and 82 per cent of young women were dissatisfied with their weight and/or shape.
- Close to 20 per cent of adolescent girls use fasting for two or more days to lose weight. Another 13 per cent use vomiting. Others rely on slimming pills, chewing but not swallowing food, smoking and laxative abuse, as found in the 2006 National Youth Cultures of Eating Study.
- One in 100 adolescent girls suffers anorexia.
- An estimated one in five is bulimic.
- One in four teenage girls wants to have plastic surgery, according to reports in August last year.

Body Image Dissatisfaction (BID) is associated with emotional distress, obsessive thinking about appearance, unnecessary cosmetic surgery, depression, poor self-esteem, smoking and poor eating practices.

Some magazines for young girls claim they want to address the limited range of bodies

shown in their magazines. For example, *Girlfriend* has what it calls a positive body image policy. Yet the *Girlfriend* editors also admit to digitally enhancing the women in its pages—including their own staff—with Photoshop.

Girlfriend says it wants to cater for women who are above a size 8, so it includes “large” women such as Scarlett Johansson, Kate Winslet, Beyoncé Knowles and Jessica Simpson. Well, that’s going to make average women everywhere feel better. Women with one or two curves and without a scarecrow profile are permitted coverage, provided they are extremely famous and beautiful—and not *too* “large”.

THE 2007 REPORT of the APA taskforce on the sexualisation of girls links the objectifying and sexualising of girls and young women with three of the most common mental health problems suffered by them: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression. Yet objectification is reinforced through embedded sexual content everywhere you look. According to the APA, “A culture can be infused with sexualised representations of girls and women, suggesting that such sexualisation is good and normal.” This leads to girls and women feeling bad about themselves:

“there is evidence that sexualisation contributed to impaired cognitive performance in college-aged women, and related research suggests that viewing material that is sexually objectifying can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depressive affect, and even physical health problems in high-school-aged girls and in young women.

“In addition to leading to feelings of shame and anxiety, sexualizing treatment and self-objectification can generate feelings of disgust toward one’s physical self. Girls may feel they are “ugly” and “gross” or untouchable ...”

The clearest evidence of pornography’s insidious take-over of the public space is billboards containing highly sexualised images of women and other forms of sexual messaging. Most complaints are dismissed by the Advertising Standards Board, which patronisingly implies that complainants are simply hung up about discussing sex with their children. The membership of the Board includes Catharine Lumby, who defends *Hustler*’s creator Larry Flynt as simply “bad taste”. Lumby has also provided evidence in support of Adultshop’s case for the loosening of restrictions on X-rated films.

Pin-ups in the office or workplace have been found in various cases in Australia to constitute sexual harassment. Why is it then that giant pin-ups in the public space do not? Dr Lauren Rosewarne asks this question in her 2008 book *Sex in Public: Women, Outdoor Advertising and Public Policy*. Dr Rosewarne highlights how the signs and symbols of pornography are now enmeshed in popular culture:

“While pin-up images are prohibited in a workplace, outdoor advertisements, which may contain references to pornography, are freely displayed ... pornography can be interpreted as being one of the most potent contemporary influences on advertising ... such advertisements are helping normalise pornographic images by displaying them in

places where they are unavoidable and thus encouraging the acceptance of them. This process is known as mainstreaming ... explicit sexual expression has become naturalised.”

So complete is the migration of images from porn into everyday advertising that an ad for hamburger company Bite Me features a woman in red bustier, her mouth perfectly rounded and amazed like a sex-doll, with meat spilling everywhere and tomato sauce splotched above her breast, all reminiscent of the classic porn “money shot”.

The *Brisbane Times*, after publishing an article titled “Beauties brave brazilian wax” in June last year, asked readers which they preferred, “bald” or “au naturel”? It gave lots of men the opportunity to rhapsodise about why they liked to have a “good perv” and didn’t like hair caught in their teeth.

Not long ago the *Age* embedded on its home page a video clip of a porn industry award show in the USA, with writhing porn stars grinding away, easily accessible for anyone visiting the *Age* online for a school project. The *Age* Life&Style blog “Ask Sam” ran a story, “Is porn making men too picky” in April 2008. It attracted forty pages of posts, most from porn devotees, including one man who declared, “porn is fantastic ... hardcore is the way to go”.

This stuff is rife on television too. SBS screened the British documentary “Obscene Machines” in June 2005, repeated in April 2007. This film depicted women being penetrated by giant mechanical dildos with names like The Monster, The Intruder, The Probe, The Snake and The Trespasser. It also featured an older man showing us how he had sex with a life-size sex doll called Emma. Emma is wearing school uniform.

It was rated M15+. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) found in February this year (almost a year after the film was screened the second time—it got away with it the first time) that it breached the code of practice. There were no penalties, no fines. SBS must have been trembling when it received ACMA’s letter.

It is often said that young people have to go “searching” for porn. More often now, it seems that the porn is searching for them, so ubiquitous and commonplace has it become.

WHAT WAS ONCE CONSIDERED unthinkable is now ordinary. Children are no longer out of bounds for anything. Here are some examples, by no means an exhaustive list:

- A British web search company, Jellydeal, introduces the latest trends in little girls’ underwear: “Gone are the days of voluminous, bulky and cumbersome underwear meant to be worn under layers of clothing. These days underwear has become briefer, bolder and more stylish. There is even underwear to complement different moods you wish to portray: frisky, seductive or mysteriously alluring.”

- The children’s wear sections of department stores sell “Bralettes”, padded, decorative bras and g-strings featuring cherries and the words “eye candy” and “wink wink”.

- Merry slogans on Christmas undies for children in a Hobart store include “Try Jingle These” and “Unwrap Me”.
- Slogans on children’s T-shirts include “Breast Fed Baby: Stick around for the show”, “All daddy wanted was a blow job”, “All mummy wanted was a backrub”, “Hung like a five year old”, “F!# the milk, where’s the whiskey tits”, “I enjoy a good spanking”, “I’m too sexy for my diaper”.
- T-shirts for girls imprinted “Porn Star”, “Hotter Down Under”, “My Name Sounds Better Screamed”, “I wanna do you now”, “Miss Wasted”, “Drink until he’s cute”.
- Ads for downloadable mobile phone wallpaper in teen magazines include “Save a virgin, do me instead”, “Sex—when it’s good it’s bad, when it’s bad it’s still good”, “Instant slut—just add alcohol”.
- The Playboy makeup line sold in Priceline includes “Tie me to the bedpost blush” and “Miss Playboy lip gloss”. There are also Playboy doona covers and Playboy pencil cases. Girls are wearing the brand of the global sex industry, directed by an eighty-year-old man in pyjamas, and they think it’s about cute rabbits.
- The “Peek-aboo” pole dancing kit was marketed online for children through a British toy company. With it came a “sexy” garter belt and a DVD “demonstrating suggestive dance moves”. Its users could “Unleash the sex kitten inside” and flaunt it to the world. There are also pole “fitness” classes for children in Sydney.
- *Girlfriend* informs readers that a dancing pole is, like, a really good present to give a girl. In fact, it’s “The #1 item on every girl’s wish list. She gets fit ... you get to watch”. The number one item on a girl’s wish list? That must have been a massive survey.
- Become the world’s hottest Bimbo—that’s the aim of the online MissBimbo.com game being played by little girls around the world. Girls advance in the game by losing weight, having makeovers, including breast enhancement, and picking up boys in the Bimbo club.
- What’s New, the “official home of the Beanie Baby”, also sells sex toys including blow-up dolls, including a G.I.L.F. (you may not have heard about the M.I.L.F phenomenon, which stands for Mum I’d Like to F***. Substitute the word *grandma* and you get the idea). And she’s not in the shop to look after the Beanie Babies. (If you want to see how vile the G.I.L.F. sex doll is, go to Julie Gale’s Kids Free 2B Kids submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment: http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/submissions/sublist.htm.)
- Bratz dolls in sexualised clothing, miniskirts, fishnet stockings and feather boas look

like they should come with a pimp. “All nine Bratz Babyz™ know how to flaunt it, and they’re keepin’ it real in the crib!” say their manufacturers. It’s the sluts-r-us approach to childhood play.

- A content analysis by the Australia Institute (reported in *Corporate Paedophilia*) of girls’ magazines found that approximately half of the content of *Total Girl* and *Disney Girl*, and three quarters of the content of *Barbie Magazine* is sexualising material.
- Cartoon characters like Dora the Explorer and Kimpossible have been made into porn characters with their own porn sites. Options in the drop-down search box for Kimpossible include “Kimpossible porn”, “Kimpossible sex” and “Kimpossible XXX”.

THE SEXUALISATION OF CULTURE has contributed to a rise in cosmetic surgery procedures. A study published in late 2007 found one in four twelve-year-old Australian girls expressed a desire to have plastic surgery. A recent *Sunday Mail* investigation reported a 20 per cent increase in enquiries from teenage girls for plastic surgery. Cosmetic surgery practitioners are cashing in, with growing numbers of teenage girls having breast implants. *Zoo Weekly* held a competition last year for readers to “win” \$10,000 worth of breast implants for their girlfriends, as a prize for the girl “who deserves it most”. Readers voted on who should win. “It’s impossible to think of a more romantic gift than new breasts. It’s the gift that keeps on giving,” the editors wrote.

A Queensland surgeon was quoted in the *Sunday Mail* report as saying that between 5 and 10 per cent of young women want to look like the former *Big Brother* contestant Krystal Forscutt. When Rebecca (whose occupation appears on the *Big Brother* fan site as “skimpy waitress”) exited the show in May, viewers were treated to a (very) up-close interview with her. There was little doubt her artificially enlarged breasts were about to launch her a magnificent career as a model for lads’ magazines.

We are witnessing the mainstreaming of cosmetic surgery. *Cosmetic Surgery Magazine* can be found in the women’s magazine section in newsagents, featuring hundreds of pages of swollen breasts and features on vaginal rejuvenation. *My Beautiful Mommy* is a book by a Florida plastic surgeon, Michael Salzhauer, to explain mummy’s new makeover. The book’s front cover shows mummy in body-hugging pants and snug top, enhancing her pert new breasts. Surrounding her is pink stardust, as though she’s been touched by a fairy. What child wouldn’t find sparkly stardust appealing? Maybe the magic cosmetic surgeon will visit them too one day?

The nerve-paralysing poison Botox is being pitched to young women as a “preventative” against wrinkles. Teenage girls are also undergoing brazilian waxes. Girls describe feeling ashamed if they aren’t shaved. Thirteen-year-old girls receive pictures of shaved genitals on their mobile phones, sent to them by boys at school, who ask them when they’re going to get theirs done. The girls rarely complain. It’s common, they say. They seem unaware of their right not to be sexually harassed.

Brazilian waxes are now widely advertised to teenagers in the print and online media. Promoting hairless genitals to young girls causes them to despise their natural bodies—increasing their angst by making them feel they aren't normal if they don't hop on the brazilian wax bus. Now there's a new pill to stop girls menstruating entirely, so they don't have to feel "fat and messy" every month.

WE ARE ALSO SEEING the normalisation of male violence against women: violence and sex have merged. Soft-porn flicks masquerading as music videos can be seen on weekend morning television, featuring the gyrating hips, cleavage and pelvic regions of women depicted as sexually hungry and insatiable. Lyrics feature men doing it to women and women begging for more, feeding the notion that violence is sexy. In 1962, the girl group the Crystals released a song entitled "He Hit Me (and It Felt Like a Kiss)", produced by the notorious Phil Spector. The song gained little airplay after widespread protests. Twenty-five years later, girls were singing along with gusto to the Prodigy's hit "Smack My Bitch Up".

T-shirts for men proudly designed and made in Australia bear the slogans: "Show us your flaps" and "M.I.L.F. Hunter" (see above, and watch out for the G.I.L.F. version). And the third T-shirt on the website reads: "It's not rape, it's surprise sex". And what girl doesn't like a surprise!

America's Next Top Model, then shown at 6.30 on a Sunday night before *Australian Idol*, had a "crime scenes" episode in which the aspiring model had to pretend she'd been brutally murdered. The model who looked the sexiest in death was the winner of that episode. The categories were: "pushed off rooftop", "organs stolen", "electrocuted", "stabbed", "decapitated" and so on. Girls, you must look sexy all the time—even when you're dead.

Then there was the Loula advertisement for the opening of a new Melbourne store, in the March issue of *Harper's Bazaar*—out just in time for International Women's Day. The ad depicted the body of a murdered woman in the boot of a car. Her legs were trussed with rope, her hand and feet hanging from the boot as though trying to escape. She was wearing leather boots from Europe—the product being advertised. Due to the combined efforts of a number of women's organisations, including the peak domestic violence body in Victoria, the ad campaign was pulled. But why was the campaign staged in the first place? Which part of murdered woman in boot of car didn't the company find offensive?

The words of Bob Herbert in the *New York Times* in October 2006 come to mind: "The disrespectful, degrading, contemptuous treatment of women is so pervasive and so mainstream that it has just about lost its ability to shock."

The objectification of women and sexualisation of girls contributes to exploitation and violence. It puts girls and women in danger. It socialises boys to think that's all women are good for. The APA found that the sexualisation of girls can both reflect and contribute to sexist attitudes, a societal tolerance of sexual violence, and the exploitation

of girls and women:

“studies have generally found that after men are exposed to sexualised content, their behaviour toward women is more sexualized, and they treat women like sexual objects. “Pressing social problems that disproportionately affect girls both directly and indirectly, including violence against girls and women, sexual exploitation of girls, forms of pornography, and prostitution of girls, may be maintained or even increased if there is a continued and escalating sexualization of girls ... The sexualization of girls and women may contribute to broader societal consequences such as sexism, sex bias, and sexist attitudes.”

But beyond this, what has to be understood is that the objectification of women and the sexualisation of girls *is* a form of exploitation and violence. The Abu Ghraib scandal has shown us that photos can perform degradation and do not simply reflect or document it. At the other end of the world, the Werribee (Victoria) incident involving boys videotaping a sexual assault of an intellectually-impaired sixteen-year-old girl, in which they urinated on her, torched her hair and forced her to perform oral sex and expose her breasts and then circulated the videotape, provides a smaller-scale example of the same point. Has society become one big porn movie?

YOUNG WOMEN ARE PRIMED to expect meaningless sexual hook-ups, no strings attached. Many feel like little more than crash-test dummies for men who know all about f***ing and little about loving. These emotionless encounters make them feel used and dirty; they no longer expect love and romance. If they desire such old-fashioned notions, they have to offer something in return. Witness this advice provided by *Famous* magazine in 2006:

“Q: How can I get my partner to do more romantic things?

“A: Promise him wild sex in return for romance and be sure to deliver—then keep rewarding him like that.”

But what if “wild sex” includes a sex act (now, incidentally, being linked to a rise in throat cancer) that a woman may not want to perform? *Famous* offers this sage wisdom: “you have to learn to appreciate the intimacy that comes with it ... If it’s a hygiene issue, do it in the shower. Or if you don’t know what you’re doing, ask for guidance.”

Whatever, just don’t get too emotionally attached. “Buddy sex”, or “friends with benefits”, is a phenomenon in which young people hook up with each other for intimacy-free sex. The rules, as outlined in the *Courier Mail* (“Play By the Rules”, October 2007), are: “NEVER sleep with a friend who has romantic feelings for you”, “ONLY sleep with a friend who has had ‘just sex’ before with other people. Make sure they can handle a sexual relationship without emotional commitment.” And how do you establish that exactly? And “EVEN though you may go into the relationship with the *best intentions* [italics mine], sex will change the relationship and your feelings sometimes. Be prepared for this and ensure the communication channels stay open.” As one woman plaintively

asked author Wendy Shalit in *Girls Gone Mild* (2007), “How come he gets all the benefits and I get none of the friendship?”

In the 2007 book *Sex Lives of Australian Teenagers* by Joan Sauer, many young people expressed a desire for intimacy and emotional connection. One of Sauer’s respondents wrote, “I want someone to settle down with, whos [*sic*—the author maintained her respondents’ style] devoted and faithful to me.” Devotion? Faithfulness? We don’t hear too much about such concepts these days. “Putting out” is what’s expected now. A review of the musical *Debbie Does Dallas* described it as being about “girls offering small sacrifices—such as losing their virginity”. A significant proportion of young women regret their first sexual experience, which is often marked by drunkenness and force.

Sex Lives of Australian Teenagers takes a very liberal line on teenage sex, including for those who are what is quaintly known as “zoo curious”, with the Peter Singer proviso that anything goes as long as the animal isn’t hurt. However, the book is honest in relaying the life-reducing rip-offs experienced by many young women in impersonal sexual hook-ups, for example:

“One girl described how she was ashamed to still be a virgin at the age of 19, so she had intercourse with a random guy she met at a club and got ‘a pounding’. Afterwards, she bled a lot and became depressed to the point of feeling suicidal. A 14-year-old who did it with a boy who meant nothing to her in the back of his car was angry at him and felt like she wanted her innocence back. She said the experience made her feel old and guilty. Another girl had intercourse with a boy on their first date and he dumped her the next day. She said, ‘I felt like shit, it still sticks with me, I regret it a lot’.”

Some girls in Sauer’s study reported being in pain but allowing their partners to continue to make them happy, “putting up with it” to make it enjoyable for their boyfriend.

Pain, blood, regret ... you won’t read about that in *Girlfriend* and *Dolly*. Sometimes I wonder if these magazines care about their readers at all. A recent issue of *Dolly* contained a section entitled “OMG my boyfriend wants me to ...”, followed by three sexual acts—“Give him ‘head’”; “Have anal sex” and “Give him a hand job”. Does *Dolly* tell dear reader that she can refuse such demands? No. Does it suggest that this could constitute a criminal act depending on their respective ages? No. Does *Dolly* suggest a new boyfriend who respects her wishes if she doesn’t want to engage in these acts? No. It just gives a clinical description of head, anal and hand job, with no advice at all apart from using a condom or dental dam. Throw the girl to the wolves ... but make sure she is using “protection”.

Girlfriend magazine (which claims that its readers are sixteen years and older, yet recently profiled girls aged twelve and thirteen) once had a correspondent ask about her boyfriend who was pressuring her to have sex. *Girlfriend* responded: “I am sure he really does care for you. It’s a pity you don’t believe him coz maybe he really does love you.” Is this how we empower young women?

Steve Biddulph made a poignant observation in a letter published in the *Australian* in May last year: “when sex is presented as a trading chip for those who haven’t been loved enough, then millions of young lives are diminished, harmed and sometimes thrown away”. Mary Pipher, quoted in Shalit’s *A Return to Modesty* (1999), sees a “deadness” in her young clients’ demeanour “that comes from inauthenticity, from giving too much away”.

Pornography has become the sex handbook for many boys. It is not often noted that pornography is detrimental for boys, who are fed distorted images of women—who they are and what they want. Women are reduced to sex toys and masturbatory aids. And men are portrayed as predatory and masterful, never as gentle and considerate lovers.

In a May 2008 *New York Magazine* article, “The Myth of Porn”, Naomi Wolf wrote: “Today, real naked women are just bad porn.” This is echoed in the comments of a woman who posted a comment on the *Age* “Ask Sam” blog in April this year:

“One man I slept with wanted to know why my breasts ‘lay down’ when I did, and another thought my silver stretch marks (from my adolescent growth spurt) were self-harm scars because ‘no women have marks like that.’ That was after he demanded to know why I had pubic hair.”

Many women feel cheated on by their compulsive porn-consuming partners. Yet they are made to feel there is something wrong with *them*. A friend who discovered early into her marriage that her husband had a massive porn habit, said that every counsellor she saw told her this was normal and she had to get over her hang-ups. Some women try to compete with the porn stars for their partner’s love, attempting to imitate them so as not to lose the relationship. A woman was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2007, saying, “I felt unwanted. I found myself going to the internet and asking, ‘What is it those women have I don’t?’ I felt worse about myself. I told him, I’ll give you whatever you want. What can I do to make it more like porn?”

Even fourteen-year-old girls look to porn for guidance. “I just copied what I had seen from porn, he enjoyed it,” a girl this age told Joan Sauers. Him enjoying it seems to be the main aim.

The Bom Chicka Wah Wah’s, a group of girls used to promote Lynx/Axe deodorant, sum up current attitudes to female behaviour inspired by the sex industry. Lynx/Axe is a brand targeting teen boys that is made by Unilever, which promotes highly degrading portrayals of women with this brand while claiming to care about self-esteem in women and girls through its Dove body love program. These panting, gyrating sexual evangelists are out to liberate girls from old-fashioned notions of love and romance. “But I want true romance, like Romeo and Juliet,” says the hapless victim. She protests, “It isn’t right, what would mother say?” The Bom Chickas respond that it’s hopeless to resist: “your libido’s in control”, the smell of Lynx “invades a woman’s brain” making her act “so profane”. They are quite clear about their goal: “to ruin all you girls”. Their quest is

successful, and the once-seeker-of-true-love is transformed into a raging sex bomb.

To apply a question Ariel Levy put in an interview in the *Australian* in 2005: “Why is this seen as the ‘new feminism’ and not what it looks like: the old objectification?” Or in the words of a fifteen-year-old in *Sex Lives of Teenagers*: “I’ve had friends who were raped, sexually abused, I’ve been molested, it’s just really sad to feel disconnected from your own self ... we’ve come nowhere from the sexual revolution ...”

THE MESSAGES DELIVERED by a culture obsessed with body image and exhibitionist sex to please men limit the freedom of girls to explore other facets of their lives. The American Psychological Association makes the vital point that “sexualization practices may function to keep girls ‘in their place’ as objects of sexual attraction and beauty, significantly limiting their free thinking and movement in the world”.

It appears we are producing homogenised girls—girls who look, act and talk the same. We should be encouraging them to think for themselves and explore meaning and values and make a mark in the world that goes beyond the airheaded cult of celebrity and fashion—to have aspirations beyond being Miss Silicone 2008.

Women can be engineers, scientists, lawyers and politicians. They can be hairdressers, teachers, army officers, journalists and mothers. They are valued in boardrooms, universities, the media, sport, banking, disaster relief and international diplomacy. But just when it seems we have made so much progress, young women are reduced to the sum of their body parts, told that *the* most important thing is to be hot.

A young artist I know who struggles with an eating disorder and exercise addiction expressed it this way: “I feel it’s essential that not only girls, but women, are able to identify the real values we should nurture and the deeply dishonest images and ideas we are fed.”

What can be done to address the dehumanisation of women and girls?

Fortunately, a new movement is taking shape against objectification and sexualisation, one that goes beyond the usual polarities of left and right. A diverse collection of organisations and individuals have come together to agitate for the dignity and worth of women, using everything from culture-jamming grassroots activism to more formal lobbying and advocacy.

This movement presents hope. It is helping girls see that succumbing to the demands and dictates of popular culture causes them to live limited and constricted lives. Perhaps the diary writings of the next generation of girls will reflect their real value and worth as they come to know what freedom and fulfilment really mean. And that has to be good for all of us.

Melinda Tankard Reist is the Director of Women’s Forum Australia. She is currently

working on a new book about girls and popular culture. This article is based on a talk she gave to the St Thomas More's Forum in Canberra in April.