

**ROUND TABLE ON  
THE PORTRAYAL OF YOUNG WOMEN IN THE MEDIA**

**Convened by Secretary of State for the Status of Women,  
the Honourable Hedy Fry**

**6 March 1997 - Vancouver**

**Report prepared by Shari Graydon**

**March 1997**

## OVERVIEW

The Hon. Hedy Fry, Secretary of State for the Status of Women, convened a roundtable forum focusing on the portrayal of young women and girls in the media on March 6, 1997 from 9 am until 12 noon. Participants included representatives from the media, academia, health and community groups. They were provided with a 3-page backgrounder in advance of the session. (see Appendix A) The purpose of the session was to discuss dominant media trends and their social consequences in the context of measures that might be undertaken to facilitate change.

## INTRODUCTIONS

### **Hedy Fry**

- Introduced herself, thanked participants for attending and expressed her commitment to focusing some attention on the related issues of the exploitation of female children in the world sex trade, and in commercial media.
- Emphasized in particular the process whereby depictions of younger and younger girls as sexual (whether in movies, on television or in magazine advertisements) has lost the power to shock us by virtue of its pervasiveness, and has now come to be seen as normal.
- Noted that such media practices are a significant part of the larger problem reflecting a fundamental failure to value the world's children, and recognize that their health, welfare and self-esteem are crucially important in the common goal of building a global community of peace and harmony.
- Noted that media producers, be they in advertising, news or entertainment industries, are key influencers, and even when attempting to expose the problems, often end up sending mixed messages. Expressed the hope that participants would take the time to read "Prime Time for Children: Media, Ethics and Reporting of Commercial Sexual Exploitation" submitted by the International Federation of Journalists to the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm.

### **Shari Graydon**

- Participating in her capacity as Past President of MediaWatch, the national feminist organization dedicated to eliminating sexism in the media through research, education and consumer advocacy. Also brings to table perspectives as a Sessional Instructor at SFU's School of Communications, and media/women's issues columnist for *The Vancouver Sun*.
- Delivered a short slide-supported presentation providing an overview of dominant media portrayal trends of women and girls, in the context of related social implications. (See Appendix B)

**Tannis MacBeth**

- As moderator, described the agenda for the morning and expressed the goal of ensuring that all participants would have an opportunity to voice their concerns on the most salient issues.
- UBC Professor, Department of Psychology at UBC, who has conducted groundbreaking research into the social effects of television, and on gender portrayal issues.

**Helena Cynamon**

- Partner in Forefront Entertainment, which produces *Madison*, an award-winning TV series which portrays young women in very favourable ways, and *The Adventures of Shirley Holmes*, also featuring a smart, progressive heroine. Previously involved in MediaWatch.

**Dawn Currie**

- Sociologist and Chair of Women Studies at UBC, identified the media portrayal of women as a pressing concern for many of her department's students. Currently conducting a study into the meanings adolescent girls derive from the magazines they read.

**Deborah Folka**

- Independent PR consultant and immediate Past President of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Public Relations Society.

**Vicki Smye**

- Clinical director/provincial nurses coordinator of Eating Disorder Program, directly involved in advocacy for women severely affected by media images.

**Virginia Leeming**

- Fashion reporter for *The Vancouver Sun*, and the mother of an 18-year-old son.

**Shirley Stocker**

- Executive Producer, CKNW radio talk shows; also serves on the board of Crime Stoppers, and the Vancouver Urban Safety Commission (which is addressing issues relating to prostitution involving young women).

**Shazia Islam**

- UBC student, with a degree in political science; is concerned as a woman and consumer, and in particular about the portrayal and representation of women of colour. Hosts a radio show at UBC and believes that alternative media is one of solutions.

**Heather McLeod**

- Media Officer for the B.C. Teachers Federation and formerly a high school teacher and women's studies student. Also interested in pursuing alternative media.

**Darrel Shee**

- Partner in the advertising agency of Bryant, Fulton and Shee. Noted that he was the only male and only advertising industry executive present.

**Daphne Goldrick**

- Member of Actra and the Union of B.C. Performers, and co-chaired the B.C. Committee on Status of the Artist, which made specific recommendations regarding the treatment of children in the film and TV industries. Has also served as a delegate to the Federation Internationale des Acteurs, involving representatives from 54 countries, who are developing means of fighting discrimination against women and girls.

**Grace Rosario**

- UBC student, youth coordinator for Turning Point, a Vancouver-based art and social action program, designed to give young women a voice, primarily through a public art performance being planned for May.

**Darlene Haber**

- Media consultant and television producer, currently involved in producing a documentary on the Turning Point project.

Also present in the room were Iris Communications staff, who had organized the round table, and journalists from Ming Pao and Sing Tao newspapers, CKWX and CKNW Radio, and Fairchild TV, attending in a reporting (versus participatory) capacity.

**ISSUES IDENTIFIED****Lack of men involved in seeking solutions**

- Acknowledging the gender imbalance of the round table participants, several people commented on the need for men to be involved in looking for solutions to issues of media discrimination against and exploitation of women and girls in the media, and for the matters being discussed to be seen as societal problems, as opposed to women's problems. The question was raised about how many men were, in fact, invited to participate. (Fry/MacBeth/Shee)

**Under-representation of women in high level, decision-making positions**

- Women remain seriously under-represented in media industries at higher management levels and in decision-making positions. Participants recognized that rectifying this imbalance would not, in and of itself, be sufficient to guarantee a more equitable environment for women, but nevertheless agreed that it remains a crucial step in the process. (MacBeth/Stocker)

**Distorted female body image**

- The prevalence of increasingly thinner and younger female models in fashion advertising is having a significant impact on the body image and self esteem of more and more girls and young women; girls as young as four are exhibiting dieting behaviour and eating disorder treatment programs cannot keep up with the demand for their services. (MacBeth/Smye)

### **Obstacles to consumer complaints**

- Although consumer complaints are sometimes an effective way for individuals to make their concerns heard by media producers and disseminators, participants identified the following limitations:
  - a) complainants (particularly women expressing concerns about sexist portrayal practices), are often not taken seriously by those to whom they direct their complaints;
  - b) exploited children typically do not have the buying power and consumer clout of adults, and are not as able to defend their interests;
  - c) the majority of consumers are unaware that broadcasters, newspaper publishers and advertisers have established processes whereby citizens can file complaints and have their concerns addressed in a formal manner;
  - d) even those who are aware of existing complaint mechanisms often do not have the time to document their concerns in writing in order to file a formal complaint;
  - e) industry body decisions about complaints often take months, by which time the offensive ad or program in question has finished broadcasting anyway;
  - f) even when a complaint is upheld, the result is often meaningless: in the case of the Canadian Advertising Foundation, for instance, adherence to the guidelines is voluntary, and an advertiser found in contravention is given the equivalent of a slap on the wrist. In the broadcasting environment, although the CRTC initially made adherence to the guidelines a condition of licence, this is waived for any broadcaster who is a member of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Branch; furthermore, CRTC staff have acknowledged when questioned that the political will does not exist to revoke a broadcaster's licence and such a scenario will likely never happen. (Graydon/Haber/Leeming/Shee)

### **Pornography/Internet**

- Concerns were expressed about the role the internet is now playing in making pornography even more accessible than ever before. In particular, the consumption of pornography by teenage boys (who constitute its largest audience), in addition to the pervasive depiction of sex in everything from prime time television and jean commercials to video games and escort service ads in newspapers, means that for all intents and purposes, "sex education" is being performed by profit-driven media organizations.
- Pornography and its sometimes only slightly more subtle mainstream equivalents frequently teach profoundly erroneous lessons to boys and men of all ages about what girls

and women are supposed to look like and desire sexually. Many of the depictions are either predicated on, or implicitly condone, the objectification and/or degradation and torture of women. At the same time, there is a dearth of portrayals involving sexual relations in the context of loving, stable, healthy and monogamous relationships.

- The apparently growing problem of sexual harassment being experienced by teenage girls in schools (in the form of rumour-spreading, sexual bullying, as well as date rape) is seen as a related issue that needs more attention.
- Brief allusion was also made to the phenomena of chat groups and the potential dangers women and children face in what is sometimes, at some sites, a hostile environment for women. (Graydon/MacBeth)

### **Economic Issues**

- Several participants commented on the role that economic inequities continue to play in the employment and portrayal of women in the media. For instance, not only does the glass ceiling prevent many women from being represented at higher paying levels, but the wage gap between male and female performers remains significant (with women earning more money only in the areas of modelling, stripping and prostitution).
- This, in combination with the lack of strong female roles, and the relentless reinforcement of a narrowly defined ideal of feminine beauty, ensures that the incentives remain high for female models and actors trying to survive in an extremely competitive industry to: a) undergo plastic surgery; b) risk breast implants; c) engage in obsessive dieting and exercise behaviour; and d) be willing to participate in the production of imagery that perpetuates destructive stereotypes of women. (Graydon/Stocker)
- The profit motive and quest for ratings which drives mainstream commercial media remains a constant factor mitigating against progressive change and the willingness to support more responsible and balanced programming. This makes non-commercial media, such as public broadcasting, more important than ever before. (Cynamon/Graydon)

### **American Influence**

- The vast majority of complaints made to MediaWatch about sexist portrayals in mainstream media are in reference to depictions that have been created in the United States. Many are also being disseminated by U.S. media, although sometimes Canadian broadcasters, magazines or billboards are involved in disseminating the offending material.
- This is significant in terms of directing strategy (eg. Canadian advertisers are perhaps less important to reach than magazine publishers), and in terms of how much can actually be accomplished, given American dominance of the Canadian media environment. (Graydon)

### **Power Issues**

- Several participants pointed out that systemic power relations are central to the issues under discussion.
- The general voicelessness of young women, dominant portrayals of women and girls as passive and vulnerable, the backlash phenomenon in which the gains in independence which women have made are seen as threatening to existing power structures and the status quo -- these were cited as symptomatic of the pervasive problem. (Islam/Smye)

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Media Education in Schools**

- Existing media education initiatives in schools need to be supported and maintained. In Ontario, for instance, media literacy is a mandatory component of the English curriculum; in B.C., media education components and prescribed learning outcomes have been integrated into the language arts, visual arts, personal and career planning, drama, and social studies curricula.
- It is important that media education concepts relating to gender are introduced to both girls and boys, and starting at the elementary school level. By the time children reach puberty, they are so heavily targeted by advertisers and by media, and so preoccupied with issues relating to body image, sexual identity, belonging and peer pressure, that it's much harder to get them to step back and be critical of popular culture.
- In addition to making media education a part of the required curriculum for students, it is important that those assigned the responsibility of teaching critical media skills are also given the necessary training and support to allow them to do so. As well, students themselves can be particularly effective at peer education on media/gender issues.
- Alternative media also have a role to play in media education. Programs like the Rogers Cable show, "Working TV" (which is supported by the B.C. Teachers' Federation), provide alternative perspectives on a variety of issues which challenge those disseminated by most mainstream media.
- Guest visits to schools from members of the advertising community, plus-size fashion models, broadcasters, and media critics should be encouraged, so that students can ask questions and learn about the factors influencing what they see in the media.
- Media education lessons addressing gender portrayal issues must also be delivered in the context of broader lessons dealing with historical and systemic discrimination against women which address why images featuring violence against, and degradation of women and girls are considered entertaining or appealing in the first place. (Fry/Graydon/Islam/Leeming/MacBeth/McLeod/Rosario/Shee)

### **Public Education**

- The initiatives identified above should be supplemented by media education efforts targeted to adults who are no longer in school, and in particular to parents and media producers.

### **Industry involvement and change is crucial**

- At the same time, as important as media education is, if the external environment continues to perpetuate a retrograde image of femininity, contradicting everything taught in school, the pervasive and appealing messages of popular culture will arguably have a bigger impact on influencing attitudes and behaviour.
- Members of the Canadian advertising industry need to be reminded of the power and influence they wield, and encouraged to take issues relating to the portrayal of women and girls more seriously, so that the sex role stereotyping guidelines are enforced with as much rigour as the rules relating to non-prescription drugs, and children's toy ads.
- We need to go beyond criticizing existing trends and work to replace the offending images with more progressive, diverse, realistic images that honour and celebrate how women actually look and behave. (Fry/Graydon/Haber/Shee)

### **Consumer Complaints**

- To this end, and despite the obstacles cited above, there was some consensus about the value of voicing complaints, since most organizations -- government, corporate and media -- assume that individual complainants are expressing concerns also held by others.
- Appreciating that often the creative production of an ad or programme is done in the U.S., it is important to encourage Canadians to complain to the people in charge of the delivery vehicle involved (requesting that, for instance, *Saturday Night* magazine be selective about which Calvin Klein ads it carries, or that WTN not broadcast *Silk Stalkings*).
- In particular, people should be reminded that citing their consumer status and intention to boycott a manufacturer or cancel a subscription is known to have an impact.
- One idea is to develop a kind of consumer network which would amplify the voices of individual women who wish to avoid being dismissed as unrepresentative, and serve to remind advertisers and disseminators that women do object to sexist and exploitive portrayals.
- This could involve the development of a system of "phone trees", which would essentially consist of concerned consumers who would each be prepared to phone two other people about a given offending portrayal, in addition to complaining to the source.  
(Graydon/Haber/MacBeth/Shee/Smye)

### **Alternative media as a means of expression**



- Alternative and publicly-funded media (such as campus and co-op radio stations, the CBC, Knowledge Network and TV Ontario) tend to provide more balanced gender portrayals, better access to women's perspectives and more coverage of so-called "women's issues" than mainstream commercial media. In light of this they should be both supported and utilized more in educational contexts.
- Indeed, because the job of teens is to do things differently, alternative media which challenge the status quo and are not seen as being a part of adult (or parent) oriented culture, are potentially attractive options for educating young people to be more critical media consumers. (Islam/MacBeth)

#### **Prosocial programming as a counteracting force**

- Advertising time on television constitutes a fraction of the time allocated to programming, and so the latter should be able to counteract some of the destructive messages commercials contain. But political will is needed to fund and produce responsible, educational programming for children and teens. (Cynamon/Shee)

#### **Government initiatives and regulatory measures**

- When the CRTC introduced sex role stereotyping guidelines and made adherence to them a condition of license, Canadian broadcasters began to take seriously portrayal concerns that women had been expressing for decades. Regulations (whether they relate to gender depiction or Canadian content) do make a difference if they have some significant consequences attached. Similarly, research done by Tannis MacBeth demonstrated that CBC, which had internal guidelines regarding the portrayal of women, was much more responsible in its depictions than CTV, which had none.
- Unfortunately, it is now well known among broadcasters that the condition of license will never be enforced, so there is no incentive for them to adhere to the guidelines and improve the portrayal and representation of women and girls. This needs to be rectified. Broad-casters currently oppose anything other than voluntary and industry-administered codes, and their concerns -- as opposed to the broader societal issues -- have taken precedence.
- Questions were raised about how and by whom appointments are made to the CRTC -- the implication being that commissioners should include individuals who are aware of broadcasting's social implications, particularly those affecting the equitable and responsible treatment of women and girls.
- Dawn Currie's work with the periodical review board attempting to regulate pornographic magazines demonstrated how difficult and costly it is to administer what can be subjective and ambiguous criteria. Furthermore, publishers were constantly inventing new ways of

circumventing specific regulations (relating to, for instance, the use of underage models, by employing majority age models and dressing them to look underage).

- Nevertheless, even the Canadian Advertising Foundation's code incorporates a reference prohibiting the depiction of under-age *looking* models in sexualized poses. And the very existence of guidelines, especially if the public is made aware of them, does serve as a standard against which the acceptability of images can be measured.

(Currie/Cynamon/Graydon/MacBeth/Stocker)

### **Industry education and responsibility**

- Incorporate lessons on/discussion about gender portrayal issues into the curriculum of journalism programs (addressing, for instance, the use of sexist language, the tendency to define or describe women in terms of their physical appearance, even when it is irrelevant, the importance of seeking female sources and perspectives, etc.).
- This could be done by approaching the advisory boards of journalism schools and programs with recommended guest speakers, curriculum resources and/or a rationale explaining the importance of addressing such issues.
- Ensure that journalism training programs devote more attention to ethical questions relating to the challenges of covering complex and sensitive issues in a responsible way.
- Create more opportunities for working journalists to discuss ethical issues in their workplaces (eg. Encourage management to develop and circulate an organizational statement of principles. CBC has such a document and reporters who have joined the public broadcaster after working at private stations report a significant difference in the collective attention paid to ethical questions.)
- Encourage news media organizations to adopt the recommendations made by the International Federation of Journalists at the Stockholm conference on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.
- Arrange for educational seminars relating to the portrayal and representation of women to be presented at industry conferences such as the annual Banff television festival and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters conference.
- Ask for a commitment from all relevant industry organizations to support the ratification of the Charter for Women Performers developed by the Federation Internationale des Acteurs. (Cynamon/Fry/Goldrick/Graydon/Haber/Stocker)

### **Mentoring and networking**

- Identify and encourage leadership and involvement in these issues from the most powerful media women in Canada.

- Develop more mentoring and networking opportunities for women working in media industries to learn from and be supported by one another. (Several years ago, for instance, Actra sponsored a series of such seminars given by and for women. The seminars spawned another workshop, "women in the directors chair," based on the theory that if more women were in the director's seat, there would be more and better opportunities for women in the business all around. The workshop generated overwhelming response.)
- Host a forum for women in the media whereby executives who may be isolated within their own organizations feel safe enough to talk about the issues they face together. (The CAJ Women's conference already does this to some extent.) (Fry/Goldrick/Stocker)

### **Monitoring and Research**

- Support more research into pertinent issues and make the results of the research more widely available, through publicity campaigns. (For instance, Tannis MacBeth, Dawn Currie and Shari Graydon/MediaWatch are all conducting research related to the issues discussed which will contribute to our collective understanding of the impact of media portrayals of women on society.)
- Learn from the experiences of women in other countries. In Australia, for instance, a group monitored commercials aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, adjudicating each one as either good or bad, and publishing the results in daily newspapers. The grassroots campaign had an enormous impact, causing some advertisers to backtrack and change their approach.)
- MediaWatch conducted some audience research several years ago that effectively challenged the commonly held wisdom that the few women complaining about sexist portrayals were not representative of the broader population. (In fact, 75% of Canadian women indicated that they were sometimes or often offended by media portrayal practices, although only 8% had ever complained in writing.) Research like this should be more widely disseminated in order to maximize its potential impact on industry attitudes and practices. (Currie/Goldrick/Graydon/MacBeth)

### **Support of existing organizations**

- There are a number of organizations in various sectors already addressing the issues under discussion. They should be supported to continue the education and advocacy work they're doing, and include:
- The Canadian Association of Journalists (which hosts an annual Women in the Media conference);
- The Canadian Association of Media Education (educators and media producers working at the provincial level to integrate critical media studies into elementary and secondary schools);

- MediaWatch, specifically dedicated to the elimination of media sexism (which conducts research about related issues, develops curriculum materials for teachers and parents, delivers educational workshops to a range of audiences, and lobbies industry and regulatory bodies, in addition to facilitating consumer advocacy).
- All of these organizations have conducted research and/or developed educational materials that could have a much greater impact if they were more widely available. However, as non-profit, volunteer-based organizations, they have not had the resources necessary to make the most use of their labours. (Goldrick/Graydon/Haber/McLeod)

### **Reframing the freedom of expression debate**

- It is important that women's voices are heard regarding issues relating to freedom of expression, which tends to get defined in anti-censorship terms. This definition ignores the reality in which women's perspectives are already frequently "censored," by virtue of our not being represented in sufficient numbers or positions of power in major media industries.
- This translates into our freedom of expression being compromised in myriad ways, not just in the sense that our voices are absent or hard to find, but also because depictions of who we are or what we want are so often written and directed by men whose notions of femininity or female sexuality reflect their fantasies, versus our realities.
- Debates about censorship and freedom of expression must be challenged to include this perspective (which also affects people of colour, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities...) (Currie/Fry/Graydon/MacBeth)

### **NEXT STEPS**

- Convene a follow-up meeting in Toronto building on the recommendations of this one.
- Encourage the participation of more senior industry decision-makers who, individually and collectively, have the power to implement change (eg. CAB board members, agency presidents, network executives, publishers, journalism school deans, etc.)
- Consider hosting separate meetings for different sectors to as to provide the opportunity for a more focused discussion (perhaps broken down into news media, entertainment media, advertising categories).
- Meeting participants who identified particular actions within their respective areas of influence to pursue those actions (for instance, Darlene Haber and Helena Cynamon to investigate the possibility of a seminar at the Banff Television Festival for 1998.)

## **Appendix A**

### **Women in the Media Backgrounder**

prepared by Shari Graydon

#### **Overview**

Mass media and popular culture exert an enormous influence over our social environment. Television alone has dominated our leisure time since the 1960s. The average North American child spends more hours watching TV than attending school, and is exposed to literally thousands of advertising messages each day. Such media, in conjunction with additional time spent with video games, movies and teen magazines, arguably comprise an alternative -- not to mention more engaging -- curriculum; and one that is informed not by educational or social values, but rather by the commercial interests of multinational media conglomerates.

Many argue that the crafted images and constructed messages of mass media effectively allow society's dominant forces to further entrench attitudes and behaviours which are often destructive to those with less power. The widespread use of stereotypes by news and entertainment media serves to foster and reinforce systemic discrimination already experienced by women, racial and ethnic minorities, aboriginal peoples, the elderly, gays and lesbians and people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

Although the debate over televised violence has made it onto the national agenda in recent years, relatively little attention has been paid to the influence of media messages about gender. Yet from the cradle, mainstream media reinforce constructed ideals about what constitutes appropriate behaviour for girls and boys, for women and men. TV commercials on Saturday mornings are relentlessly sex-stereotyped, and toddlers and teens alike are exposed to pervasive messages across all media forms about tough, independent and aggressive men, and their uncontrollable desire for young, beautiful, well-endowed and often passive women, whose primary function is sexual.

The impact of media industries on the lives of girls and young women is of particular and increasing concern. In the context of evidence that one in four young women under the age of 18 is sexually assaulted, the growing practice of transforming pre-pubescent girls into sexualized fashion models is especially troubling.

#### **Trends**

MediaWatch, a national, volunteer-based feminist organization established in 1981 to work for change in the media's treatment of women, identifies some of the most pervasive trends, especially in advertising, as follows:

Objectification - Equating women with objects is dehumanizing and encourages the notion that women can be bought, owned and disposed of.

Irrelevant sexualization - Using women's bodies in a sexual way in order to attract attention perpetuates the attitude that women's primary function is to serve men sexually.

Infanticization - Presenting women as silly, childish and coy, or passive and vulnerable, waiting to be rescued (especially in contrast to men, who are generally portrayed as strong, serious and assertive) undermines women's need for independence and reinforces the perception of women as victims. Even more disturbing is the presentation of children as made-up, sexually available adults.

Domestication - Defining women and girls always in relationship to their husbands, children or parents, and showing them predominantly in a home environment, denies the complexity of women's lives and their contributions to society.

Victimization - Portraying women as the natural victims of male brutality, either overtly or by implication, is particularly troubling given the incidence of violent acts experienced by women both within and outside of their homes.<sup>2</sup>

These trends have been identified both informally by women's groups, and through a wealth of content analyses research documenting that women in the media are, on average portrayed as: young-er, more attractive and more nurturing than men; more likely to be victimized, married or involved in romantic activity; and, when married, less likely to work outside the home, or if they do, more likely to be employed in traditionally female occupations such as nurses or secretaries. Although aspects of this picture are improving somewhat, particularly in television, many troublesome trends remain.

Moreover, women remain significantly under-represented in most forms of media, such that each portrayal has proportionately greater impact on defining our collective perception of appropriate roles and realistic aspirations. For instance, even in the 1990s, female characters make up only 35% of all of the people seen on television during prime time. (In news and children's programming, the ratio of men to women is even greater.)<sup>3</sup> As a concrete example of the implications of this, consider that a 1989 Screen Actors Guild study found that only 14% of all Hollywood movies made that year had lead roles for women, and a disproportionately high number of those roles were for prostitutes and rape victims.<sup>4</sup>

### **Social Impact**

Such distorted imagery has the capacity to reinforce sexist attitudes and exacerbate discriminatory conditions and behaviour. For instance, hundreds of studies exploring the impact of television have found a correlation between heavy TV viewing in children and teens and: stereotyping of occupational roles and domestic chores; increased agreement with statements such as "women are happiest at home raising children" and "men are born with more ambition than women"; and the exhibition of greater sex- typing behaviour for gender related

qualities and activities (eg. independence and an affinity for sports in boys; warmth and an interest in cooking for girls).<sup>5</sup>

Teenagers are especially targeted by advertisers and therefore by the media they support. And the dominant messages embodied in the media most popular with kids -- video games, movies, magazines -- are often the most profoundly anti-social. This is doubly disturbing considering that teenagers are at an unusually vulnerable stage in their developmental process, making them more sensitive than ever to messages about physical appearance, identity and peer acceptance.

For girls, in particular, these trends appear to have increasingly significant consequences. Appreciating what is known about the self-esteem issues faced by girls as they move through their teens to young adulthood, the preponderance of messages about the impossible-to-attain feminine ideal (constructed through the use of exceptionally thin models who have invariably been graphically enhanced), expected sexual availability, and limiting career opportunities need to be challenged and counteracted. And although the precise extent to which mainstream advertising and entertainment products exert a negative influence on young women's self-esteem and body image is difficult to determine (and complicated by many other variables), health professionals, educators and parents readily recite the consequences observed anecdotally.

(This is not to say that the growing tendency to depict sculpted male torsos in advertising is not also having an impact. There is preliminary evidence suggesting a relationship between this increase and the abuse of anabolic steroids among young men. However, when it comes to the portrayal of men, the stereotyping is not nearly as narrow or as oppressive as the portrayal practices relating to women. And the dominant messages to men remain centred on empowerment, as opposed to objectification and victimization.)

Also of relevance are several recent studies into the increasing incidence of sexual harassment experienced by both secondary and elementary school girls. These studies provide even more incentive to investigate the impact of contemporary media messages about romance and sexuality on teen relationships (or on attitudes about relationships). Little work has been done in this area.

Our nation's governments and schools invest enormously in programs and approaches designed to overcome systemic sexism and encourage boys and girls to grow up as whole individuals, able to express a range of emotions, participate in a range of activities, and identify with a range of attributes that we understand are not biologically determined. The extent to which those initiatives are constantly undermined by the dominant cultural environment clearly demonstrates that additional measures are desperately needed.

## Appendix B

### "Sex, Lies and the Media-scape "

Speaking notes from Shari Graydon's Illustrated Presentation

6 March 1997

#### Introduction

- Will try to do in 15 minutes what I usually do in an hour... paint a picture of some of the dominant trends in the portrayal of women and girls, particularly in media targeted to and seen by children and teenagers.
- Assume that the discussion following the slides will amplify the themes that I am only able to introduce... That the knowledge and perspectives resident around this table will take us in the directions necessary to focus on solutions, as opposed to merely lamentations -- of which there are many.
- Want to be clear that I'm not suggesting that the prevalence of these images in any way implies a simple cause and effect relationship, but rather that cumulatively and unconsciously, the aggregate image of femininity is a significant factor in shaping both the expectations girls and young women have of themselves, as well as the attitudes that boys and men have towards them.

#### Role models

- Throughout entertainment and news media, women and girls remain significantly under-represented, making up on average only 35% of all characters and commentators seen on prime time television, and less than 25% of those seen on children's television. At the movies, women and girls are relegated primarily to secondary and supporting roles. Exceptions appear to be made for female stars who are able to conform to the current physical ideal, and who are willing to submit their conformity to close inspection. Indeed, one study of Hollywood films found that a mere 14% of all lead roles were female, and that a disproportionate number of these were for prostitutes and rape victims.
- Women and girls of colour are doubly disadvantaged in mainstream North American, and especially Canadian, media -- to the point of being virtually invisible. This under-representation means that each individual portrayal has a much greater impact than it otherwise would. Let me give you an example of how this translates into real life experience. Several years ago in Toronto, a researcher conducted focus group studies with 75 kids between the ages of 8 and 11. She asked them what media they liked and who their heroes and role models were. The little boys named 15 or 20 with ease, including athletes, politicians, movie stars. The girls had great difficulty identifying any female equivalents, and only when pressured came up with three names: Marilyn Monroe, who's



been dead for 30 years; Wonder Woman, because of the stars on her dress; and Julia, "but-I-could-never-look like her Roberts. And that's how they described her.

### Body Image

- (Speaking of prostitutes...) The girls' characterization of Julia Roberts is particularly ironic, given that in this particular image of the actress -- the most prevalent one at the time of the study -- not even Julia looks like her: this is Julia Roberts' head on somebody else's body. As appealing as she is, she wasn't considered perfect enough to appear in the promotional photograph for her own film.
- Increasingly, the female ideal is, in fact, physically unattainable, even by the certifiably beautiful. As this Adbuster's expose documents, Michelle Pfeiffer requires an entire page of computer manipulation instructions in order to make it onto the cover of GQ magazine.
- And there's more bad news for the young girls in search of role models. Not even Marilyn Monroe, sex icon of the 1950s, would cut it in today's media environment. Her 1990s equivalent is about five inches taller and weighs 25 pounds less.
- Indeed, the diminishing ideal of femininity has been well-documented, with research pointing to a contemporary model who, on average, weighs 25% less than what is considered to be a healthy weight for women. The so-called "right shape" is reinforced in both advertisements and in fashion editorial spreads, which -- in presenting images reminiscent of concentration camp survivors, often appear blissfully oblivious to the young lives being devastated by anorexia and bulimia.
- Furthermore, the hopes of young women focused on achieving the desirable physique, are fanned by tobacco companies who carefully target them with campaigns deliberately associating slimness with smoking.

### Sexual Objectification

- The sexual objectification of women that has been a dominant feature of advertising and entertainment media for the past 30 years gives a lie to Virginia Slims' claim that women "have a come a long way, baby."
- From the cradle, in everything from the ubiquitous Barbie to Disney cartoons, little girls are encouraged to identify with female stereotypes that are either implicitly or explicitly objectified for the benefit of the male gaze. At the same time, boys' culture incorporates the distortions, repeatedly casting female characters as sexually provocative "babes" and/or as victims in need of rescue.
- The messages in teen-oriented media are both more blatant and more sophisticated in reinforcing for young women the extent to which their existence is defined by their ability to attract and maintain the attention of men.

- Advertising's dismemberment of the female body into discrete, sexualized parts, is complemented by other more overt messages to girls of the need to transform themselves for this primary purpose. Even messages which seem to offer attitude and empowerment to girls, simply serve to replicate entrenched relations of sexual exploitation and submission.

#### Relations between the sexes

- In advertisements targeted to teenagers in particular, the dominant theme remains one of male dominance and female vulnerability. Even when the man is hardly in the picture... or completely absent, the disturbing nature of the relationship between the sexes is clear.
- Indeed, the linking of sex and violence throughout contemporary popular culture -- in mainstream movies and music videos, as well as advertising -- is so pervasive that the woman doesn't actually have to be tied to the bed, or threatened at gunpoint for the message to be communicated.
- And the message is too often one that directly contradicts the experience of real girls, who don't find danger fun; who don't really mean yes when they say no; who don't dress provocatively in order to be kicked and beaten by men; who don't envision their ideal date as ending in sexual assault... or death.

#### Sexualization of children

- Even more disturbing is the trend towards using younger and younger models who are eroticized in their vulnerability... Or actual children who are equated with adult women, posed suggestively... (2)... or made-up and surrounded by *double entendre*...
- Such images must invariably be read in the context of a social environment in which a Canadian judge ruled not too long ago that a 3-year-old girl was partially responsible for her drunken caregiver's sexual assault... In which publishers readily feature a 6 year-old rape and murder victim in lipstick and eye shadow on the cover of news magazines, and newspapers persist in describing the victim as a "beauty queen", as opposed to a child.
- Clearly media images don't cause men to abuse children, but they do contribute to creating an environment in which the sexualization of little girls is seen on some level as natural; and in which young adults who resemble teenagers can be promoted as appropriate sexual obsessions for men.
- The good news is that even Calvin Klein has crossed one too many lines, and been forced by a disgusted public to cancel a costly campaign that was interpreted by many as pornographic. Billboards in downtown Toronto have been taken down; magazine ads in hip publications like *Details* have elicited apologies from publishers; and more and more, women and men are reminding media creators and disseminators that their images are being read in the context of the real violence women are experiencing at the hands of men.

- But sporadic consumer activism seems hardly sufficient to address an issue of such significance. Which is where we come in... To examine the roles that government and industry, educators and activists can play in challenging and changing this environment.
- These are my nieces, Shannon and Stephanie. They are two of the many reasons I do this work. And I thought it important to leave you with an image that would counter those that preceded it. Which I apologize for having exposed you to.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gramsci's concept of hegemony informs and is central to a large body of work; see for instance Todd Gitlin, "Television's Screens: hegemony in transition" in *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education*, ed. M.Apple, (London: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 203; and, especially relevant to this paper, Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1993), p. 3., and Karen M. Stoddard, *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), p. 5

<sup>2</sup> These categories represent a condensed version of trends described in MediaWatch's *Objection Letter Guide*, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> George Gerbner, "Women and Minorities on Television: A study in casting and fate", A report to the Screen Actors Guild and The American Federation of Radio and Television Artists, June 15, 1993, pp. 1 - 14

<sup>4</sup> As cited in Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1990), p. 137

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Signorielli, "Children, Television, and Conceptions about Chores: Attitudes and Behaviours" in *Sex Roles*, Vol. 27, Nos. 3/4, 1992, pp.157 - 170.