

Addressing the sexualization of women and girls

Executive Summary

The presence of sexually objectified women and girls is widespread and as a society we are confronted daily with images, video, and behaviours that serve to reinforce the value of women and girls solely as sex objects or things.

The sexualization of women and girls creates and perpetuates an imbalance of power and gender equality. It has consequences for both men and women, boys and girls entangled in the gender roles established by objectification.

Research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems experienced by girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. Sexualization is also known to cause:

- Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and body dissatisfaction
- Reduced cognitive development
- Poor sexual health, including diminished sexual assertiveness and decreased condom use
- The endorsement of sexual objectification and sexist attitudes
- Problems with intimacy

There are indications that sexualization of girls is linked to the hypermasculinization, or overexpression of masculine stereotypes in boys, further perpetuating violence against women.

In early 2016, the YWCA Metro Vancouver commissioned a research project to establish the connections between

sexualization and hypermasculinization of girls and boys and violence against women, and to demonstrate how they create an environment that supports violence against women.

The purpose of the research project was to define and confirm these links and develop recommendations for action in four key sectors:

1. Policy
2. Public Education and Awareness Initiatives
3. Curriculum
4. Program

The recommendations for action are intended to inform the development of the YWCA's Culture Shift Project, a three-year initiative to:

- Bring attention to the link between hypermasculinization, sexualization and violence against women
- Influence attitudes and behaviours related to gender over time
- Increase equality between men and women

Through a literature review, interviews with key experts and focus groups with youth, the research project examined findings, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours about sexualization and hypermasculinization and how they relate to violence against women in society.

The report presents findings and a list of recommendations for action for consideration by the YWCA.

The goals of the research project are to:

- Highlight how hypermasculinization and sexualization create an environment that supports violence against women
- Identify recommendations for how government and community leaders, decision makers in business, educators and youth can start a dialogue and take action

Our approach was to balance the perspectives of lead researchers in the area with the real-world experiences of program developers and young people. The synthesized research gathered from these multiple sources was used to generate ideas for action.



THE CULTURE SHIFT PROJECT

The YWCA is committed to taking action to end violence against women by addressing sexualization of girls and hypermasculinity of boys.

Key Findings: Recommendations for Action

We believe actions should focus on influencing social norms about shifting systems that perpetuate violence against women. We considered the possibility of impact across the societal, community, interpersonal and individual levels in creating the recommendations.

Of all the possibilities, we have put forward recommendations that we see as having the most potential for implementation by the YWCA and their partners, because they achieve one or more of the following criteria:

- Have a solid rationale grounded in the research
- Build on existing programs
- Act at the individual, interpersonal, community and societal level aligned with a multisectoral approach

The purpose of the research report is to deliver relevant recommendations based on our review of the literature, interviews with experts and specialists, and focus groups with youth. We were guided by the YWCA's mission to build better futures for women and their families through advocacy and integrated services that foster economic independence, wellness and equal opportunities.

The outcomes of the research are intended to inform the course of action the YWCA will take through the Culture Shift Project to begin to shift attitudes and practices that perpetuate the sexualization of women and girls and corresponding hypermasculinization of men and boys.

It is intended the YWCA build implementation plans for their prioritized recommendations for action that suit the context and mission for YWCA work over the next few years.

IDEA STATEMENT

Videos and images in the media often use blurred areas to cover up nudity or something gratuitous. When taken out of this context, a blurred area symbolizes a deliberate attempt to obscure. In this case, we are covering up the gender, allowing the person and the mind to remain. When we are not labeled by our gender and sexual bodies, we are seen for our individual thoughts and ideas.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Policy:

1. Advocate for a renewed gender portrayal policy for Canadian broadcasting
2. Identify opportunities to advocate for gender portrayal policies within other media
3. Advocate for gender equity in public institutions and private businesses

Public Education and Awareness Initiatives:

4. Build public awareness about the impacts of sexualization and hypermasculinization

Curriculum:

5. Advocate for updates to provincial curriculum that address issues of sexualization, hypermasculinization and healthy relationships. Promote media literacy in sexual health education as a tool to mitigate the impacts of sexualization and hypermasculinization

Programs:

6. Use physical activity and wellness programming to empower young girls, develop physical competency, and curb the impact of hypersexualizing influences
7. Use physical activity and wellness as a platform to empower boys, assist with development of healthy masculinities and curb the impact of hypermasculinization
8. Engage parents through schools, community organizations and public awareness initiatives to educate them about healthy sexuality for all children and youth, including the influences of sexualization of girls, hypermasculinization of boys and pornography