



# The Watchful Eye

Newsletter of the Sexualization of Youth Project

Montgomery County (MD) NOW



## Teen HOT Lane No Route to Empowerment

By Mary Bailey  
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In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* burst upon a somnolent America. Friedan answered Sigmund Freud's most famous puzzle: "The great question that has never been answered," he said, "and which I have been unable to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?'" To which Friedan replied, "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home." She then described American women as victims of a sexual sell that hampered their intellectual growth and barred women from realizing their complete human potential.

In the world of 1963, women's magazines, television, and advertisers aimed at persuading women to find their true fulfillment in the home. Today, these same industries are at it again. Only this time their sexual sell is to persuade females to find true empowerment in looking "hot" -- and this time their targets are not just women, but girls.

Gail Dines's *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* does not focus on the sexualization of girls, although it does discuss it. Instead, it mostly covers the increasingly degrading, humiliating, and cruel images of women found in online pornography. Although those images are available to any child or teen who can maneuver through the Internet, they are not the subject of discussion here. Such emotionally tough-to-read material can be found by picking up her book or its brother publication, Robert Jensen's *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*.

Instead, I've extracted Dines' account of how the TV, fashion, and advertising industries are sexualizing girls to be "hotties" while Internet pornography sites are sexualizing boys to become amoral and unfeeling men.

### Girls as Stepford Candidates

Girls are not major consumers of pornography, Dines writes, but they are being "inundated with pop culture images that just a decade ago would have been seen as soft-core." She acknowledges that the fashion industry has always pushed clothes that sexualize women, but that today the hotness "look" seen everywhere: in school, on the street, and at work. "It is as if we females now have to carry the marker of sex on us all the time, lest we forget (or men forget) what our real role is in society."

Those of us not immersed in today's pop culture are probably unaware of the extent to which mass-produced images have become hypersexualized and the degree to which they have crowded out other, healthier, images of being female. "Today's tidal wave of soft-core porn images has normalized the porn star look in every culture to such a degree that anything else looks dowdy, prim, and downright boring. Today, a girl or young woman looking for an alternative to the Britney, Paris, Lindsay look will soon come to the grim realization" that the only alternative is to "be invisible."

Those ubiquitous soft-core messages have become so familiar that girls and women come to think of them as part of their own individual, freely chosen identities, and this makes them "feel confident, desirable, and happy." But Dines, a women's studies professor at Boston's Wheelock College, has seen many

students with a long list of health problems brought on by starvation. “We need to see the society as pathological rather than the adolescent girl in the hospital ward who is being diagnosed with multiple disorders.” Most recovery programs ignore our culture’s obsession with thinness and don’t provide classes on media literacy or cultural constructions of gender. Instead, they focus on the individual female and her assumed psychological problems, “which somehow dropped from the sky.”

### **So What Did We Expect**

While fashion and advertising are teaching girls to be hotties, boys too are inundated with narratives from video games, movies, TV ads, men’s magazines and the increasingly soulless online sex sites. Violent video games such as the Grand Theft Auto series are targeted at boys and help shape their masculine identity. Stories in pornography create a worldview that boys integrate into their system of sexual beliefs. By the time they are adults, Dines says, they easily can have internalized and consolidated porn’s often degrading ideas about sex with females. And, unfortunately, “it does this in a way that gives them intense pleasure.”

Boys first encounter pornography as young as age 11, Dines says. And because porn is the only type of sex education many young men ever receive, they envision having the same kind of sex in real life. Or, as one boy told Dines, “I started looking at porn before I had sex, so porn is pretty much how I learned about sex. It can be a kind of problem to think about porn as much as I do, especially with my girlfriend. It means I am not really present with her, my head is somewhere else.” Or, as female students have told Dines, their boyfriends are beginning to demand porn sex from them. And what’s in the boyfriends’ heads are not “fantasies” based on their own creative imaginings and longings, but “highly formulaic, factory-line images created by a savvy group of capitalists,” images that actually limit imagination and feeling.

### **One Big Cultural Perpetrator**

How to understand so complex a set of circumstances as sexual socialization? After all, one girl conforms to today’s soft-core images and another resists. Much depends on her family relationships, media consumption, peer groups, and racial and class identity. The person who best described the process to Dines was John, an incarcerated child rapist she interviewed in a Connecticut prison:

“John told me how he carefully and strategically groomed his ten-year-old stepdaughter into ‘consenting’ to have sex with him, and then casually mentioned that his job was made easy because ‘the culture did a lot of the grooming for me.’...John was very clear that the sexualized pop culture images his stepdaughter had been exposed to from an early age, as well as the sexualized conversations that such images generated in her peer group, had developed a precocious sexual curiosity that ‘made grooming her easy.’”

We need to ask ourselves whether, by inundating girls and young women with the message that their most worthy attribute is their sexual hotness, our pop culture is “grooming them just like an individual perpetrator would.” Pop culture, Dines says, is “slowly chipping away at their self-esteem, stripping them of a sense of themselves as whole human beings, and providing them with an identity that emphasizes sex and de-emphasizes every other human attribute.” She argues that our “culture is now one big cultural perpetrator, [and] we can assume that an ever-increasing number of girls and women are going to develop emotional, cognitive, and sexual problems.” And heaven help us if our boys become, like the soulless and amoral men in porn, unable to love, respect, and empathize with the women they have sex with.

“Where is the female sexual agency in all this,” Dines asks. “When feminists in the 1960s and 1970s fought for sexual liberation, they fought for the right to want, desire, and enjoy sex---but on their own terms. They argued that their sexuality had been denied by men, and they wanted it back. What they got was not what they expected: a hypersexuality that is generic, formulaic, and plasticized. It is a sexuality has that its roots in porn and is now so mainstream that it is fast becoming normalized. One of the men interviewed [in Kathleen Bogle’s *Hooking Up*] said he saw hookup culture as a ‘guy’s paradise.’ Yes, Pornland is indeed paradise for these men, as it is sex with no strings attached. And for women it is business as usual: men defining our sexuality in ways that serve them, not us. Only now this sexuality is sold to us as empowering. A new twist on an old theme.”

What we need is another wave of feminist activism, one that answers Sigmund Freud’s question once and for all. Listen up, Messieurs Media-Fashion-Advertising, it should say: We want something more than a

boyfriend and clothes and looking sexy. We want a healthy love life and personal growth and complete recognition of our humanity. For this message to sink in, such activism will have to come from the targets of the sexual sell, the young women and girls themselves. The Messieurs will not listen to anyone else.