

# Sexualization of Girls: Why It Matters

By Mary Bailey

## Relentless sexualizing

How do you feel when you see fashion ads in girls' magazines that advise girls to look "hot" if they want to attract boys? Or those music videos girls watch that emphasize female bodies and their sexual readiness? And how about cartoons for children that show women acting "sexy," complete with cleavage and few clothes?

The entertainment, fashion, and advertising industries are relentless in making money off the sexualization of girls. One advertising CEO praised as "brilliant" the marketing concept that focuses on younger and younger girls. He calls this concept "KGOY," or Kids Get Older Younger. "Historically," he said, "marketing rules have said that up to a certain age boys and girls were the same." Now, "a 6-year-old girl tunes into the same pop sensations a 10-12 year-old might have listened to a generation ago," thanks to KGOY marketing.<sup>1</sup>

Or consider the recent marketing of Miley Cyrus, the star of "Hannah Montana," the popular Disney show. Miley has been a healthy role model for girls in their early teens. But at 15 she was posed semi-nude by photographer Annie Liebovitz for Vanity Fair. Miley, according to reports, was "draped in a sheet, bare backed, hair tousled, with a come-hither smile." In another picture, she is "baring her midriff while sprawled on her father's lap." Her youth didn't stop her parents, the photographer, the Vanity Fair editors, or the Disney PR people – all over 15 – from encouraging Miley to say that posing was her decision and she thought the photo was "artistic." One journalist even wrote that Miley is a budding billionaire who "knows a thing or two about manipulating the media."<sup>2</sup> This year, at age 17, Miley was dancing "against a pole as if she were a stripper" at the Teen Choice Awards.<sup>3</sup>

## Deeply troubled

Many of us are deeply troubled. We feel that something essential is being violated. Yet, we live in a society that seems to take the sexualization of girls in stride. It seems we are expected to "absorb" such blatant exploitation and to accept our status as bystanders.

We may be bystanders, but we are not necessarily indifferent to what we witness. Psychologists tell us that when people are confronted with what seems to be a social consensus, they tend to rely on the consensus rather than on their own perceptions. The results of this tendency are usually pretty harmless. But in the case of the sexualization of girls, our silence may mean we are unsure of how and when to intervene, or even if we should intervene. After all, we live in a nation that honors free speech rights, and we are uncertain what would constitute appropriate action. So, as bystanders, we tend to accept the status quo, even though we feel that something is not quite right.

Now, human rights belong to every person in society. But sexualized children don't think in terms of their rights. They do what they are told, believe what they are shown, and don't understand that adults have responsibilities to protect children as their sexuality emerges. In effect, such children, girls mostly, can be sitting ducks in a sexually predatory culture. Not only

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are their rights as persons not recognized, but in some cases, such as child abuse or child pornography, they may not even be seen as persons at all.

There are organized groups that oppose child pornography and child abuse, but our society is largely silent about the depiction of girls in our mainstream culture, our everyday world, the world most little girls inhabit. The American Psychological Association's report, "The Sexualization of Girls," lays it out plainly enough. It shows that our culture is not sustaining girls in their development, but rather, is undermining their personhood.<sup>4</sup>

A child's right to personhood<sup>5</sup> is a principle upon which to address the sexualization of girls. It is a concept we can build and act upon. The political philosopher Ronald Dworkin articulated this when he said that the most fundamental right we own is "the right to equal concern and respect." Calling it the paramount right, Dworkin said equal concern and respect is the pre-condition of every other right, including justice and liberty. Free speech, for instance, does not derive from an abstract right to freedom. Behind every demand for liberty and justice is the basic need to have our personhood acknowledged. We cannot even conceive of freedom without that gut-level, core desire for concern and respect. As the necessary condition for all other rights, surely it includes the right of girls to develop an understanding of themselves and define their own life goals free from the sexualizing views of others.

If Miley Cyrus is scripted to follow the career paths of Britney Spears or Lindsay Lohan, does the personhood of Miley -- and of the young girls who watch her show -- ever cross the minds of Miley's handlers? Can they and other such handlers be persuaded that a girl's right to personhood is a valid human right? In my view, this is the task.

But how are we to defend the right to personhood in the face of other people's claims to rights? For instance, there's that advertising CEO's claim to free speech as he focuses his ads on ever younger and younger girls. Rom Harre, a scholar at Georgetown and Oxford, articulated it succinctly. He pointed to the obvious problem: Rights, he says, "can easily be turned into unreasonable demands" when they are not "tempered by good sense." "There is no end," he said, "to what can be demanded by those who think their right unbounded."<sup>6</sup>

In summary, it comes down to one simple principle – the principle of personhood that guarantees the right of all children to respect and concern and the concomitant freedom from sexualization. Most Americans believe in the right to free speech to protect political and religious liberty. I submit that, if they think about it, most Americans also will agree that sexualizing a generation of young girls isn't just exercising free speech rights, it's crossing a line. And, if children do have a paramount right to concern and respect, then we have a right to *see that they get it*.

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1. *Time*, October 29, 2007, p.63

2. *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2008, page C1

3. *Parade*, March 21, 2010

4. [www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization](http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization) or the summary on [www.mcmandnow.org](http://www.mcmandnow.org)

5. R. Dworkin, "Freedom's Law" (Cambridge, MA, 1996), page 17. Dworkin limited the "right to concern and respect" to adults, perhaps wanting to avoid extending the right to fetuses, a position now adopted by anti-abortion forces. Whatever his concern, we believe that children need the equal protection this right provides.

6. Finkel and Moghaddam, editors, *"The Psychology of Rights and Duties,"* 2005, page 233

**"We may be confused about the distinction between tolerance and the refusal of evaluation, thinking that tolerance of others requires us not to evaluate what they do."** (Philosopher Martha Nussbaum)