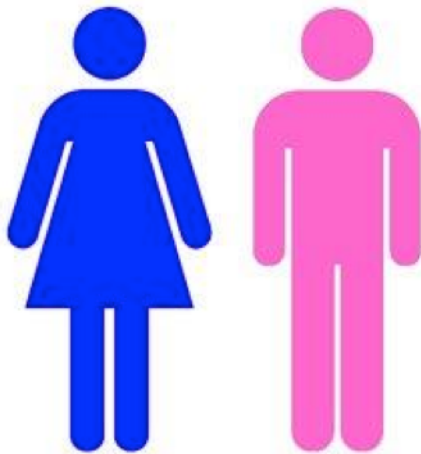# Government Equalities Office

The Watched Body: Gender Roles, Body Image and Public Intrusions

Report of Academic Seminar 27 October 2014

Foreword

Are men and women different? If so, how great is that difference, and does it go beyond natural variation between individuals? Does the difference justify the creation of rigid categories and expectations for men and women, and punishment for those who do not conform to these? Are gender stereotypes a benign representation of how things are, or a straitjacket on personal freedom? As individuals we will have our own views, but as Minister for Women and Equalities, my concern is that gender stereotypes that inhibit choice, potential and aspirations should not go unchallenged.

On 27th October 2014 I hosted an academic seminar, attended by a range of gender experts who came to contribute their knowledge and understanding, and discuss what implications their findings might have for government policies. There was general agreement that while we as a society have made great strides forward in our acceptance of diversity and in broadening the opportunities available to women and girls, in some areas there have been developments that are damaging to women and girls. In other areas we have made little or no progress at all. The continued location of feminine identity within physical appearance, the overwhelming scrutiny and policing of women in society and the media, alongside the continued existence of 'hypermasculinity', which is linked to misogyny, aggression and abuse, are prevailing barriers for women and girls- and indeed men and boys - that must be challenged once and for all.

These are not easy matters to discuss without emotion and sometimes anger, and I am hugely grateful to the speakers and participants for their intellectual input and generous contributions. Susie Orbach was an inspiring Chair, and I am grateful for her support. I hope you enjoy reading this report and find it as informative as we did.

Jo Swinson MP
Minister for Women and Equalities

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Introduction

The UK Government is committed to achieving a world where women and girls have equal access to opportunities and freedom as men and boys, and can live free from the threat of violence. We are concerned about the persisting social and cultural barriers that prevent this equality of opportunity and freedom. On the 27th October 2014, the Government Equalities Office held an academic seminar to gain a greater understanding of the relationships between how women are represented in culture and society, and key equality issues such as violence against women and girls; career aspirations; body confidence and homophobic bullying.

We invited leading experts from across the UK working on gender issues in diverse fields such as social sciences, health, and education to help us to identify good practice social policy responses and to inform our work in this area. Issues explored at the seminar included an appraisal of what progress has been made towards gender equality in the past forty years; where persisting barriers to equality exist and what new challenges women and girls face in an increasingly globalised and digital world.

A main concern emerging from all speakers' papers was the continuing objectification and sexualisation of women and girls not only in pornographic material but in everyday cultural forms such as music videos, magazines and social media forums and how this impacts on interactions between men and women. Specialist women's organisations argue that there is a correlation between sexualised representations of women and violence against women and girls. This was a key issue raised in the seminar and we were fortunate to have experts who work with women and girls on a daily basis, who could represent their experiences in the room.

Underpinning the day's discussion was an acknowledgement of the diversity of women and girls, and the impact of issues such as ethnicity, disability and sexuality on individual experiences. This included a consideration of what idealisations of the female form mean for women with disabilities, and how the inclusion/exclusion of LGBT identities in schools impacts experiences of transphobic or homophobic bullying. The following report Is a summary of the academic papers presented to the seminar, that outlines the key issues we discussed; the current academic and social work being undertaken in these areas; and suggested ways in which the invited speakers and participants believe the government can work with academia and women's organisations to develop policies to tackle gender inequality and discrimination in all its forms.

The Government Equalities Office would like to thank all participants for sharing their expertise with us, particularly our speakers who led the discussion.

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: is Gender Stereotyping Getting Better or Worse?

Concern about gender stereotyping isn't new – it has been widely discussed for at least 40 years – but there is little cultural consensus about how important it is, how widespread it is, and whether it is getting better or worse. The evidence suggests that it is getting both better AND worse, that as new choices and freedoms open up in some areas, pressures and restrictions are growing in others.

- ➤ More young women and men questioning traditional gender roles
- ➤ Higher employment rates for women
- ➤ Improved education and work opportunities for women
- ➤ Improved attitudes/greater acceptance of diverse sexualities
- ➤ Gender studies now a highly credible and successful field of academic study
- ➤ Shared parental leave, greater childcare support, flexible working

- ➤ Proliferation of gender stereotypical marketing aimed at children
- ➤ Gender stereotyping in social media and gaming
- ➤ Mainstreaming of pornography
- ➤ Persisting violence against women and girls
- ➤ Online misogyny and abuse
- ➤ Women still under-represented in senior management and leadership roles
- ➤ Increasing pressure and focus on personal appearance

The Watched Body

To be a woman today is still to be defined by your body. Cultural and social norms of femininity are located in 'appropriate' female behaviour and in an idealised body image. "Love your body, but hate it too" is the contradictory message heard by women as they attempt to combine self-esteem with achievement of an unrealistic beauty ideal. This conflict leads to high rates of anxiety, depression, eating disorders and self-harm.

Girls and women internalise street harassment, media obsession with celebrity bodies, and the 360-degree surveillance of social media into a hyper-vigilant inner eye that leads to constant self-consciousness and the performance of the self for the external viewer.

"Women are now expected to meet standards of physical perfection that only a mannequin could achieve"

Jean Kilbourne

Topshop was recently at the centre of a media debate on their use of extremely skinny mannequins, pictured here beside a size 8-10 woman.

Participants told us that while there is a mass of evidence about body image and sexualisation, it is not always robust and doesn't pay enough attention to issues such as gender, race or socio-economic status. Our understanding often falls into the chasm between the psychological tradition (which has at times a simplistic understanding of the media and how it influences us) and the media/cultural studies tradition (which is under-critical of self-report data and overplays the ability of individuals to deconstruct and critique media messages). We need to learn more about how media acts as a place where cultural pressures are both created and resisted.

Have we given up changing the world to focus on tweaking our responses to it? We put the responsibility on young women to remain impervious to the cultural messages that bombard them every day, but as a society we are all responsible for querying and challenging these messages.

The Watchers and the Watched

'The weight of evidence that we are causing irreparable damage to our children is becoming overwhelming' (Hazlehurst, 2010).

If young women feel like objects to be watched, then what is happening to the watchers? Boys, too, are raised in a culture that is awash with sexualised images of women, in which pornography is instantly available and influential across the mainstream. Boys learn from their peers and their elders that 'real men' survey and even prey on women, and that they are entitled to expect sexual practices that have been popularised by porn. While young men are also displaying a growing level of outspoken commitment to gender equality in the public and domestic spheres, this is undermined by the encouragement of a hypermasculine sexuality that is intrusive and aggressive. Representations of men and women in pornography also impact on young people's understandings of sexual consent: men are seen to be in control of when and how sex takes place, which justifies coercion.

"They [young men] expect the woman to have a perfect body and do things that women often wouldn't want to do e.g. anal sex" (Young woman, 21).

"Guys will expect the chance for rougher sex, or for a girl to be very flexible etc." (Young woman).

"You see yourself as an object to satisfy men and you start to view men and sex as rough" (Young woman, 18).

Women come to be seen as compliant objects to be used for men's sexual pleasure. This creates in women a sense of disconnectedness and alienation from their own bodies and their own sexual pleasures.

Entitlements and Intrusions

> **I hate my body, it doesn't belong to me anymore, not since everyone got their fingers on it (Hannah, 21)**

The people who are statistically most at risk from street violence are young men, but women's lives are blighted by the ever-constant threat of sexual violence. Every catcall or suggestive comment in a public place is a reminder of what could happen; to feel scrutinised and available for comment and abuse every time you leave the house, as many young women do, is itself a form of violence against women. Verbal intrusions, just as much as physical ones, can make women feel distressed and unsafe.

Women manage the constant threat of verbal and physical abuse by policing their own bodies – watching how they walk, who they make eye contact with, where they go, and what they wear. This once again leads to a sense of alienation from their bodies.

At its most extreme, male intrusion of the female body leads to physical abuse and violence, from unwanted groping to rape.

> **Like if I'm going to get the night bus, it sounds so extreme, but I won't go out wearing a dress, I'll wear jeans just because it's safer and in the back of your mind you're probably thinking at least I can run away if I don't wear a skirt and high heels (Young woman)**
>
> **I feel like I'm on a catwalk as I walk by because they're all lined up and I'm walking by... I notice them from far away and I start to become really conscious of how I'm walking and what I'm wearing and how I'm looking (Young woman)**

Bodies that Matter

Women and girls are not all the same, of course, and are differently affected by social and cultural pressures. Idealised images of beauty are unattainable for most women, but impossible to reconcile with personal identity for others. Age, disability, ethnicity and sexuality can isolate individuals even further from stereotypes of 'successful' femininity. If these images of women portray youth, beauty, health and a body able to perform their gendered identities in certain ways, what does that mean for girls and women with disability whose bodies fit outside perceived norms?

Black and minority ethnic women were, historically, often excluded from dominant beauty norms. That is changing, but what persists is the intertwining of racist and sexist tropes within a narrative of black women as hypersexual. Young black women are campaigning around how they are represented, particularly within music videos that reach new extremes in dehumanising women's bodies.

UK culture has become markedly and rapidly more accepting of sexual diversity over the last 30 years but change is not happening quickly enough. The peer policing of gender and sexuality within schools – including primary schools – remains a real issue of concern. Many young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people feel that their time at school is affected by hostility or fear, undermining their learning and their emotional wellbeing.

LGBTQ young people experience significantly higher levels of verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

Nearly 1 in 10 of LGBTQ young people (8%) have had to leave home for reasons relating to their sexuality or gender identity.

Most young LGBTQ people feel that their time at school is affected by hostility and fear, with consequences such as feeling left out, lower grades and having to move schools.

LGBTQ young people report significantly higher levels of mental health problems including depression and anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.
(Metro 2014)

"Get them out for the Lads"
Hypermasculinity in Further and Higher Education

The policing of gender and sexual norms is 'leaking' down from secondary schools into primary level, but also up into further and higher education. 'Lad culture' used to be focused on the 'cool to fail' culture among many boys in secondary school. Over the last 5 years it has exploded in Higher Education, expressed as a heavy-drinking pack culture saturated with sexist, homophobic and misogynist banter.

68% of women have experienced verbal or non-verbal harassment in and around their institution

More than 1 in 10 women were victims of serious sexual assault

12% of women respondents were subject to stalking

37% of women reported experiencing unwelcome sexual advances, e.g. inappropriate touching, bumping, groping
(NUS)

Laddism is an expression of hypermasculinity. The men involved are a minority, but they set a wider tone that is intimidating for women and for men who don't want to take part. Participants discussed recently-published research by The National Union of Students (NUS) that revealed women's discomfort with the sexualisation of women in promotional images around their university, and that the majority have heard a joke about rape or sexual assault on campus. Of the 2058 women students surveyed in the NUS Hidden Marks report of 2010, 1/3 felt unsafe when visiting their college or university buildings in the evening.

It is less well understood whether lad culture has a lasting impact on the attitudes of those involved, as they leave education and become partners, fathers, managers and employers.

"We Can't See what We Can't See"
Gender Roles, Body Image and the Workplace

Today's workplace is often seen as a neutral, professional space, where gender is subordinate to business concerns. But here, too, women's professional identities are gendered. Indeed, body image, sexuality and gender continue to play a significant part in workplace experience, particularly for women. Women in senior positions are under strong pressure to look a certain way – in particular, to be thin and groomed – and the way they look is often used to contest their legitimacy and credibility. How women manage their bodies and appearance, and how they respond to others' intrusions, are key to how they 'perform' management and leadership. Women now make up 50% of undergraduate and postgraduate business students, and business education insists it is gender-blind or gender-neutral. In practice, this means it remains largely a men-only space. Women are seen as bringing a gender dimension to spheres that are considered gender neutral, because men have traditionally been absent from discourses on gender. When women get respectable femininity 'right' they get respect as a woman and as a leader, but when they get this wrong their respectability as a woman and their credibility as a leader is at risk. The idea businesswoman therefore is professional without upsetting established gender norms.

Existing social and cultural norms expect professional women to appear feminine whilst simultaneously displaying business leadership masculinity. Women must police their body in the workplace so as they do not appear too sexy, motherly (too-feminine), fat (lack of control) or masculine. Women leaders have to show through their bodies and clothes that they can be taken seriously as leaders, but must also retain conventional elements of attractiveness. This is particularly an issue when women are pregnant, or after returning from maternity leave, when they have to ensure their bodies don't appear too leaky, too maternal, too womanly.

The 'flagship' MBA constructs business and management as masculinity (Simpson, 2006) and perpetuates gender stereotypes (Sinclair, 1995; Lämsä & Savela, 2014; Kelan, 2013).

UK Business Schools face a similar lack of gender diversity to business, with women holding 23% of UK Dean positions and 21.7% of Professorships (ABS, 2014b).

Women are scrutinised through gendering processes when they 'power dress' as honorary men (to be taken seriously/distracting from feminine difference),or when presenting themselves as 'too feminine' to be taken seriously (Brewis et al., 1997).

Conclusions: working together to achieve gender equality

The discussion highlighted the necessity for government and partner organisations in business, academia and the women's sector to work together to:

continue to build our evidence base on what works in improving equity to inform policies and practice

change the cultural and social stories of what women's bodies are for – women are not objects

ensure young people understand that gender identities are social constructions that can, and should be, be challenged

raise men's awareness of behaviours that make men feel unsafe and engage men and boys in achieving gender equality

confront the underlying structural causes that lead to the existence of sexualised images of women

include greater diversity in cultural and media representations

Participants

Becky Francis, Kings College London
Carolyn Jackson, Lancaster University
Eleanor Formby, Sheffield Hallam University
Emma Rich, University of Bath
Fiona Vera-Gray, Rape Crisis South London
Gabriele Griffin, University of York
Helen Malson, University of the West of England
Maddy Coy, London Metropolitan University
Meg Barker, Open University
Phillippa Diedrichs, University of the West of England
Rosalind Gill, City University London
Sharon Mavin, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University
Susie Orbach, psychotherapist, psychoanalyst, writer and social critic
Rachel Calogero, Kent University
Tina Miller, Oxford Brookes University

Speaker Biographies

Professor Becky Francis is Professor of Education and Social Justice at King's College London. She has followed a research career focusing on education and social justice, but has also incorporated education policy work, for example in her previous role as Director of Education at the RSA, and in her current Advisory role to the Education Select Committee. Becky is best known for her work on gender and educational achievement, and gender identities in the classroom. Her policy research and analysis includes her influential work on 'Satisfactory' schools in relation to social disadvantage, work for ASCL and the Sutton Trust on education and social mobility, and her direction of the Academies Commission. Her academic expertise and extensive publications centre on social identities (gender, 'race' and social class) in educational contexts, social in/equalities and social identity in relation to educational achievement, and gender theory. She has written many books on these topics, including the most recent *Identities and Practices of High Achieving Pupils* (2012, Continuum, with Christine Skelton and Barbara Read); and co-edited *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Education*.

Dr Maddy Coy is a Reader in Sexual Exploitation and Gender Inequality at London Metropolitan University and Deputy Director of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU). Her background is in working with sexually exploited women and girls and she has published widely on the experiences of women who sell sex and men who buy, including editing a book bringing together international scholars to explore prostitution as cause and consequence of gender inequality. More recently Maddy has focussed on developing a feminist analysis of sexualised popular culture as a conducive context for violence against women and girls and has written several papers exploring and extending this framing. Her current research projects include two evaluations of specialised support projects for sexually exploited young women and a European collaboration on interventions against violence. Maddy works closely with the End Violence Against Women coalition, and co-ordinates and teaches on CWASU's M.A. in Woman and Child Abuse and associated courses.

Dr Fiona Vera-Gray's work focuses on bringing together philosophy and empirical research into violence against women: building a phenomenology of violence against women and girls. Recently completing her doctoral research at the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit (CWASU) focusing on the impacts of men's violence on women's embodiment/s, Fiona also worked on a report for the Office of the Children's Commissioner into young people's understandings of sexual consent, and this, combined with her experience delivering prevention workshops, has given her particular expertise in working with young people around most forms of VAWG. Additionally, Fiona is Operations and Research Coordinator at Rape Crisis South London, one of the largest and oldest Rape Crisis Centres in England and the centre for the National Rape Crisis Helpline. Here she has gained over 8 years experience delivering frontline support services to female survivors of rape and childhood sexual abuse aged 14 years and over, as well as training frontline professionals including support workers for the National Helpline, the police, social services, general practitioners and private therapists.

Professor Carolyn Jackson is Professor of Gender and Education in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, where she is also co-director of the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education. She has researched and published on numerous gender and education issues, including fear; constructions and performances of 'laddish' masculinities and femininities; and single-sex and mixed-sex learning environments. She has published books including '*Lads and Ladettes in School: Gender and a fear of failure'* and *'Girls and Education 3-16'* (co-edited with Carrie Paechter and Emma Renold). She is currently working on a research project (with Vanita Sundaram, University of York, funded by SRHE) entitled 'Are 'lad cultures' a problem in higher education? Exploring the perspectives and responses of HEI staff'.

Dr Eleanor Formby is a Senior Research Fellow at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Her research interests centre on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) wellbeing and health inequalities, and on young people's learning about sex and sexualities. She has published a range of journal articles and research reports in these fields. Recently, she has carried out a needs assessment for trans young people, led research on the impact of homophobic and transphobic bullying in Europe, and examined the barriers and facilitators to issues about gender and sexual identities being included within teaching and youth work practice. Eleanor has previously conducted research on understandings and experiences of LGBT 'communities' in the UK, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the subject of a forthcoming book (Exploring LGBT spaces and communities, Routledge). For more information see: www.shu.ac.uk/ceir/sp-eleanor-formby.

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