the sum of your body parts

(Reducing women to sex objects: how it happens and how it hurts us)
“People see you as an object, not as a person, and they project a set of expectations onto you. People who don’t have it think beauty is a blessing, but actually it sets you apart.” Candice Bergen, actress

“Beauty is within the soul and shows through by calmness, kindness and peace.” Gillian Laub, photographer

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THOUGHT you just weren’t pretty or ‘hot’ enough? Were you ever devastated by a single pimple or cold sore? Did you ever feel that everyone was watching and judging you? You might have been painfully self-conscious, spending hours scrutinising face, body and hair in the mirror.

Many teenagers and women can experience crippling feelings of inadequacy. They struggle to appreciate their worth.

Popular culture might have the public believing that this is a normal and acceptable existence for a teenage girl and even for women throughout their lives. But historical evidence and current research suggest otherwise.

Brumberg writes that for modern girls, the body has become an all-encompassing project:

The process of sexual maturation is more difficult for girls today than it was a century ago because of a set of historical changes that have resulted in a peculiar mismatch between girls’ biology and today’s culture...Every girl suffers some kind of adolescent angst about her body; it is the historical moment that defines how she reacts to her changing flesh.

Brumberg identifies several causes of girls’ growing obsession with their bodies. One is the loosening of the mother-daughter connection, especially regarding sexuality. Another is how doctors and marketers have come to replace the role which female relatives and mentors once had in educating girls about their bodies and sexuality.

Both Brumberg and Ariel Levy - author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs* - argue that girls and young women are today objectified as never before. Their physical appearance - especially their sexual attributes - are portrayed as their most important assets. This is presented to us as liberating and empowering.

Objectification: when a woman’s body, parts of her body, or sexual capabilities are seen as her whole self, ignoring any other attributes.

Sexual conformity

Levy argues strongly that today’s popular culture has an extremely narrow view of ‘sexuality’. She says that exhibitionism, raunch and objectification have become the only accepted ways to be sexual, and the prime source of empowerment for women.

Her book explains why this view of sexuality has become particularly disempowering for women. Instead it has become a monoculture, and an expectation to conform.

“Shape shopping: flaunt your best features with these cuts, styles and accessories to suit every body type. [for a big bust] Choose low necklines, like V-necks or scoop necks, that show a bit of cleavage (but not too much)...Wear miniskirts or short shorts to play up your legs.”

Making objects of ourselves

Objectification exists when a woman is treated as a body to be looked at and used by others.

Objectification is, at present, an academic theory. But research continues to show that it is grounded in the real, everyday experiences of girls and women. It is directly related to the sexualised images of women that are all around us.

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Pornography is an obvious example. But so is the relentless use of women to sell products, especially when the woman in the advertisement is merely decorative, made to look perfect and sexy and not actually doing anything. When ads and articles suggest that we must improve our appearance in some way to be happy, they inadvertently make objects of women.

But women are sexual...

It could be argued that any sexual material is OK for adult women, because women are by nature sexual beings. So...
here it’s important to recognise how sexualisation and sexual objectification are different from healthy sexuality...

The American Psychological Association explains that inappropriate sexualisation can happen when any of the following occur: 6

* A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.
* A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy.
* A person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.
* Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

Psychologists identify serious outcomes from self-objectification. Body shame, anxiety, lack of awareness of body sensations, and decreased motivation are some potential consequences.6 Women learn to equate their own self-worth with their appearance. Given that women can never look like an airbrushed model in a magazine, this is a terrifying prospect.

“ ‘A stealth moose is a girl who looks good from far away, but bad up close’ – male editor of Picture magazine.” 5

It is normal to wonder what others think of us, but there are varying degrees to which we internalise, or really believe, the way others see us. 7 A self-view based on what others think of us might reflect prejudices and be wrong. When we adopt the view of ourselves that is projected through advertising and pop culture, we take on an unreal image with unattainable expectations. It’s an image mainly designed to sell products.

Is it natural, or even simply a matter of choice, for girls and women to pay excessive attention and attribute enormous importance to their appearance? Fre-