

UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 57th Session
Parallel Event Panel on Gender Stereotypes
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My name is Kathleen Sloan and I am a member of the Board of Directors of the National Organization for Women or NOW, the largest and oldest feminist organization in the United States. Since 1966, NOW has been the leading advocate for equality and justice for American women and girls and is actively engaged in global feminism. As part of the NOW Foundation's Love Your Body Campaign, the presentation you are about to see was created to engender action against the media's pervasive sexual objectification and commodification of women and girls and broaden awareness of its impacts on their human rights. It is our greatest hope that the presentations of this panel will produce tangible and immediate action by the United Nations on this grave assault on women's human rights.

Sexual objectification refers to the practice of regarding or treating another person merely as an instrument towards the consumer's sexual pleasure. Objectification is an attitude that regards a person, generally always a woman or girl, as a commodity or an object for use, with no regard for the person's humanity. Objectification is most commonly examined at a societal level but also arises at an individual level. The concept of sexual objectification of women is an important idea in feminist theory and psychological theories derived from feminism. Sexual objectification dehumanizes women, plays a significant role in the inequality of the genders and contributes to violence against women.

Objectification of women takes place in the sexually oriented depictions of women in advertising and media, women being portrayed as weak or submissive through pornography, images in mainstream media such as advertising and art, stripping and prostitution, with men evaluating or judging women sexually or aesthetically in public spaces, and the associated perceived need for cosmetic surgery, particularly breast enlargement.

Women have historically been valued mainly for their physical attributes. Such objectification leads to negative psychological effects including depression, hopelessness and negative self-images due to the impression of forever failing to measure up to standards of physical beauty and sexual attractiveness to men. Girls are acculturated at ever younger ages to view other females as competitors for the attention and attraction of males rather than as collective victims of male dominated patriarchal culture. They are also taught by pervasive, intrusive media images and messages that they are not valued for their intellect or competence but for their physical, sexualized appearance. Girls' understanding of the importance of appearance in society contributes to feelings of fear, shame and disgust. They are simultaneously taught that power, respect and wealth are derived from their physical appearance. Mass media promotes these messages to sell products. The ultimate manifestation of the sexual commodification of females is pornography which plays an egregious and increasingly ubiquitous role in habituating males to objectify women.

Extensive research has demonstrated the negative effects of female objectification in the media. Depression, appearance anxiety, body shame, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders are only a

few among the growing list of repercussions. In addition to the sexual objectification of women, the media commits another assault on the dignity of women by their dismemberment, an area that has received very little attention.

Advertising is a \$100 billion a year industry. Each day we are exposed to more than 2,000 ads. Advertising is one of the most powerful sources of education in society. Countless women feel pressured to conform to the beauty standards of the culture and are willing to go to great lengths to manipulate and change their bodies and faces. Women are conditioned to view their faces as masks and their bodies as objects. Through the mass media, women discover that their bodies and faces are in need of alteration, augmentation, and disguise. In addition, women are taught to internalize an observer's perspective of their own bodies. Advertisements are loaded with objectified women and the growing dismemberment of women is only beginning to be noticed. Dismemberment ads highlight one part of a woman's body while ignoring all the other parts of her body. Dismemberment ads portray women with missing appendages or substitute appendages. While the ads are only symbolic of dismemberment, the symbolic imagery creates the same effect. It is important to note that ads are not the cause of the problems, per se, but they contribute to them by fostering an environment in which the selling of women's bodies is seen as acceptable.

When young girls and women internalize an observer's perspective of their own bodies, they live much of their life in the third-person. This is called self-objectification. In other words, females learn to be more concerned with observable body attributes than focusing on non-observable body attributes such as feelings and internal states. Appearance monitoring increases shame and appearance anxiety and diminishes awareness of other facets of the self such as intelligence, intellectual curiosity and a desire to develop the whole person.

Studies have found that body shame and appearance anxiety is only true for women. It is noteworthy that men have shown no presence of self-objectification, suggesting that women are overwhelmingly more likely to experience self-objectification and self-surveillance. In this context, it is imperative to note a study conducted by Baker, Towell, and Sivyer in 1997 that investigated the role of visual media by examining the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and abnormal eating attitudes in visually impaired women. The results revealed that congenitally blind women had significantly lower body dissatisfaction and more positive eating attitudes compared to women who were blinded later in life and sighted women. The results demonstrate that visual media play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

In a study conducted by Gettman and Roberts in 2004, a state of self-objectification was induced in a sample of 90 women. The results demonstrated that the self-objectification prime led to decreases in the appeal of physical aspects of sex. This is the first piece of evidence that lends support to the prediction that sexual objectification contributes to sexual dysfunction. In 1970, Masters and Johnson identified self-consciousness and "spectatoring" as key barriers to women's comfort with sex. In addition, the shame and disgust many women experience about their bodies shapes their sexual attitudes and experiences. A negative correlation is present between shame and self-disgust and the appeal of physical sex.

In relation to intimacy and sexuality within male and female relationships, Brooks discussed the effects of the Centerfold Syndrome that is defined by 5 principal characteristics: voyeurism, objectification, trophyism, the need for validation, and the fear of true intimacy. Brooks mentioned several possible causes of the Centerfold Syndrome such as biology, instinct, and survival of the fittest. However, it is exceptionally important to note that of all the possibilities mentioned, Brooks found the socio-cultural explanation to be the most probable. The Centerfold Syndrome is a product of the way in which men have been taught to think about and experience relationships, intimacy and sex. The widespread sexualization of women in our patriarchal culture easily lends itself to the adoption of the Centerfold Syndrome. Men are not the only ones who have adopted this harmful attitude towards relationships, intimacy and sex. Women have adopted a negative self-image and attitude, perpetuating the negative stereotypes about women, sexuality, intimacy, and relationships.

In summation, the sexual objectification and commodification of women and girls has produced disastrous results, not only for females but for the healthy functioning of society as a whole. Without respect, dignity and the valuing of the unique qualities and possibilities of the human person, relationships and families are destroyed, potential is thwarted, and hatred and violence toward the objectified is assured. As the highest level human rights body in the world, it is incumbent upon the United Nations to take concerted action on this grave affliction of half of the human species to engender balance, respect, dignity and the basic human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promulgated at the UN's inception.