

New Zealand Steps Up Fight Against Corporate Paedophilia

Auckland University and the National Council of Women of New Zealand champion new initiatives to combat the sexualisation of children in consumer culture

by Elizabeth Willmott Harrop

Historically New Zealand has been in Australia's shadow concerning action against the sexualisation of children. The Australia Institute's ground breaking 2006 report "Corporate Paedophilia" prompted a 2008 Senate Inquiry and the formation of advocacy group Kids Free 2 B Kids. However, awareness of the issue in New Zealand has now been stepped up a gear, with initiatives by Auckland University and the National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ).

Child sexualisation degrades childhood through for example sexualised clothing for girls, the presentation of children in advertisements as sexual beings and their exposure to sexually explicit music videos. Its effects are far-reaching and include eating disorders, low self esteem and self-justification for sexual offenders.

Undergraduates from Auckland University's Gender and Psychology department recently presented research on child sexualisation and strategies for change. The event was unprecedented, undergraduates not normally participating in public events. However the strength of their work was such that Associate Professor Nicola Gavey was determined to provide a forum for the students to speak to a wider audience.

Showing just how far-reaching the issue is in New Zealand society, a wide range of public sector representatives attended including from the police force, mental health experts, family planning and district health boards.

Courtney Ross, 20, one of the students presenting comments: "New Zealand has that green clean image which extends into the nostalgic idea of childhood: a beach filled wonderland of hokey pokey ice cream and playing in the street, and not coming home until dark. What gets forgotten is that childhood belonged to my father's generation, not to us."

Meanwhile at the recent International Council of Women (ICW-CIF) General Assembly in Johannesburg, a resolution on child sexualisation by NCWNZ was passed unanimously, demonstrating the level of international feeling on the issue and New Zealand's leadership in the area. The resolution calls on the 63 ICW affiliated members to urge their governments to ban products and advertising materials that enable children to be seen as sexual objects.

Elizabeth Bang, NCWNZ National President, comments "Although the issue has received international recognition, New Zealand must rise to the challenge by ensuring our domestic focus continues. Our current system relies on self-regulation, which allow the boundaries of what is considered socially acceptable to be pushed. NCWNZ wants to see the appropriate measures put in place to protect children, along with an education campaign that informs parents of the potential risks associated with the sexualisation of childhood."

In December, NCWNZ launched a Boycott the Sexualisation of Childhood page on its website www.ncwnz.org.nz and a facebook campaign page "Cotton Off Our Kids" - a campaign established in July 2009 by NCWNZ and supported by Family First and other organisations. Cotton On were boycotted for selling T-shirts for babies with slogans such as "I'm living proof my mum is easy" and "Mummy likes it on top".

Both websites are portals through which members of the public can inform NCWNZ of sexualising material. Each Christmas NCWNZ also actively looks for any products or advertising that are not age appropriate.

As a result of the Cotton Off Our Kids Campaign, many of the Cotton On t-shirts were slowly withdrawn from sale. However t-shirts with the slogans "I'm a Tit's Man", "I'm bringing sexy back" and "milk today, beer tomorrow" remain on sale in parts of New Zealand. The Australian Senate Inquiry goes as far as to say that "the purchase and forced wearing of such clothing by children constitutes child abuse... as important as the offensive nature of the message is what its selection conveys about the value the child's parents places on them ... and the degree of respect which they attribute to them".

Television and Music Videos

Sexualisation of children also manifests itself through television output including music videos and material on the internet, with media regulators acting as a key conduit for complaints. Critics of media regulators argue that the “case by case” approach used is inadequate, the Australia Institute saying that “harm is caused by cumulative exposure to sexualising material from a range of sources.”

The Auckland University students produced a montage of clips from music videos showing widespread sexualisation. In one clip a boy aged about 9 is seen dressed in adult business attire gyrating his hips to a barely dressed Fergie. Commenting on the clip, Courtney Ross, editor of the video says: “Boys are absolutely being provided with sexualised role models to aspire to, just as much as girls. Boys are taught how they should act around girls and how they should treat girls in sexual terms, just as much as girls are being taught to adopt sexualised behaviours.”

The most shocking clip shows the band Girlicious dressed as pornographic schoolgirls. Courtney Ross, continues: “What exactly are we saying to people about the sexual maturity of school girls when we portray them as adults infantilised in pigtails and school uniforms, and sexualised with panty flashing and stripping scenes?”

Her colleague on the project, Katie Malone, 21, adds: “The Girlicious clip sent the message that young girls who want to rebel should do so by presenting themselves as sexual objects. It further promotes the idea of the naughty school girl and makes potentially underage and vulnerable girls sexual targets.”

Parent and Child Education

If the Australian experience is anything to go by, what New Zealand needs is an individual to champion the issue. Dr Emma Rush, lead author of *Corporate Paedophilia* comments “Kids Free 2 B Kids founder Julie Gale is phenomenally effective. More than anything else, this is what the issue needed - a champion. Julie is a fantastic networker and has brought together a great range of people to act on the issue. She is also constantly talking about the issue to schools, at conferences and to the wider media”.

In her work in schools Julie tells young girls they are being manipulated to believe their value comes from how 'hot' and 'sexy' they look, talking about 'appearance culture' and the pressures on girls to conform. As a comedy performer and writer, Julie uses humour to get her message across, and dresses up as a cross between a Bratz doll and a Playboy bunny.

Julie comments “Marketers and advertisers aim to make girls feel they are not good enough so they have to buy products, and this process starts very early. It's important kids and adults understand that sexualisation is not about prudish, old fashioned adults, but about the mental health and well being of kids.”

Reflecting Elizabeth Bang's desire for an education campaign in New Zealand, the Auckland University undergraduates also identified parent and child education programmes as a key action for change. Nicola Gavey explains “the students concluded it is no use being didactic and saying to parents and children 'this is wrong'. Instead you need to teach critical literacy in terms of how media and advertising are viewed so that the messages portrayed can be unraveled.”

This is born out by a 2008 Canterbury University study “Innocence Lost” which revealed that many girls in the 8 to 12 year age group wanted adult type clothing “padded bras, sexy underwear/lingerie, boob tubes, mini skirts and high heeled shoes”. The good news is that for girls aged eight to 12 years, parents remain the most influential factor on clothing choices. Meanwhile studies into television viewing show that parents also have a powerful role in buffering children against inappropriate content.

However, Dr Emma Rush cautions against a reliance on education, saying “Media literacy as the answer is a common conclusion but a problematic one in that it puts the onus back on children, parents, teachers and other professionals working with children to 'deal with' the onslaught of premature sexualisation from the corporate world. Media literacy is important for all of us, but should pre-teen children really have to be responsible for de-coding premature sexualisation? This looks alarmingly like blaming the victims. Rather, the corporate world should back off - we need to stand up together as a community and tell them so, in no uncertain terms.”

Effects on Children

Consumer culture gives women and girls a narrow ideal with which to conform - that of a slim, pert breasted, sexually available late teen or twenty-something. As such women are asked to look younger and slimmer, and young girls are asked to adopt sexual markers which are well beyond their years. Innocence lost comments "as what is considered attractive and sexy in contemporary society is conflated more and more with youth, the line between sexual maturity and sexual immaturity is becoming more ambiguous." And hence the line blurs between young girls being sexually appealing, sexually available and appropriate sexual objects.

According to the Australian Senate report, there is evidence that those with paedophilic tendencies use sexualised images of children within advertising material. The report quotes a Police Manager of Forensic Interviewing of Sexual Offenders as saying that sexualised images of children in advertising "provide validation for those considering further exploration of children and sex, as part of a pernicious descending spiral". Meanwhile healthworkers report a marked increase in perpetrators of sexually abusive behaviour using the children's underwear section of home-delivered advertising magazines.

A growing body of organisations claim that because sex is widely represented in our culture as pleasing to adults, girls adopt sexy clothing and behaviour to gain societal and adult approval and are effectively being groomed for paedophiles. This is exacerbated by girls magazines encouraging readers as young as primary school age to have crushes on adult male celebrities.

Despite corporate appeals that their products are demanded by parents and children, there is damning research into the effects of the sexualisation of children. A report by the American Psychological Association catalogues a range of adverse effects resulting from girls' exposure to sexually objectifying images, including "development, self-esteem, friendships and intimate relationships, ideas about femininity, body image, physical, mental and sexual health, sexual satisfaction, desire for plastic surgery, risk factors for early pregnancy, abortion and sexually transmitted infections, educational aspirations and future career success."

The direct physical abuse of children lies at the hard edge of child sexualisation, which contributes to a climate in which child sex trafficking, child pornography, child sex tourism, child prostitution and child rape thrive. Auckland-based StopDemand.org is actively campaigning on these issues and says that of 20,624 sex offence convictions in New Zealand 1992-2001, 78% involved victims aged 16 years and younger.

The Auckland University students also recommended that sex education programmes be developed in schools to stop sex education happening through reading pornographic material. With pornography as unofficial educator, children not only learn about sex, but about male and female stereotypes and about what constitutes normal sexual behaviour – for example multiple partners and anal sex.

Nicola Gavey observes "Much of the debate at the seminar focused on where pornography stops and mainstream sexualising culture starts. The fact pornographic aesthetics have become so mainstream and normative is a problem in itself because it becomes harder to critique and resist."

Celebrity Culture

A case in point is a poster of Rihanna in the November 16 issue of Woman's Day, which uses the Russian Roulette album cover photograph. She is pictured topless wearing only a wide corset belt and an eye patch – her breasts barely covered by mock barbed wire. The image is reminiscent of sadomasochism and bondage, the eye patch a grim reminder of her recent assault at the hand of her then partner Chris Brown. Yet it sits happily in the magazine alongside a recipe for Broccoli, Sausage and Cheese Popovers.

Corporate Paedophilia documents countless examples of how celebrities such as Rihanna are marketed as aspirational models for girls as young as five, via their inclusion in "tween magazines" aimed at the pre-teen market.

However while many celebrities are happy to be sexualised as part of their branding effort, there is a growing celebrity backlash. Kate Winslet is now as famous for her no-airbrushing stance as she is for her acting. In 2003 she caused an international media storm when she criticised GQ Magazine for digitally altering her physique so that her legs appeared much longer and thinner than in real life. Meanwhile Peaches Geldof is

often quoted defending the right to a healthy body image.

Disney Girl magazine also made a recent stand when it refused to print a photograph of nine year old Noah Cyrus, sister of Miley Cyrus, wearing a dominatrix style halloween costume. The editor of Disney Girl Fiona Wright, said of the photos "Being a Disney publication we stress family values and no, we definitely wouldn't run these pictures."

However, look at any Disney cartoon of a female figure, from Cinderella to Pocahontas, and you'll notice that just like Barbie, their waists are narrower than their heads. Anatomically impossible and again providing body image ideals which are at best unrealistic and confusing. A Picasso painting offers as much realism as an aspirational body model.

The issue of eating disorders, one of the many harmful effects of child sexualisation, is a serious one with children as young as five suffering from early onset eating disorders.

Katie Malone comments "When young people start to define their feelings of self-worth in terms of what they look like rather than in terms of their talents and individuality, this can lead to the development of other issues such as eating disorders. There is a lack of adequate support for people with eating disorders in New Zealand - many young women have been sent to Australia for inpatient treatment - so it is important that as a society, we work to prevent the incidence of eating disorders".

Courtney Ross adds: "I want to see children receiving multiple examples of body types and looks, to know that they're not fat and ugly just because they aren't the type of girl who is on television and in fashion".

As a society we would do well to take the advice of Eden, the Eating Difficulties Education Network. Their alternative New Year's resolutions include "Love your body and love yourself, give dieting the boot for good, and instead of putting your life on hold until you've reached your 'ideal weight', start living... RIGHT NOW!"

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