The Sexualization, Objectification, and Harassment of Women and Girls: Taking a Deeper Look into Sexism

“Nearly one in five girls is sexually abused at least once in her life. In the United States, 18 percent of girls report that by age 17 they have been victims of a sexual assault or abuse at the hands of another adolescent.” – Researchers apart of UNICEF USA.

Why are women more prone to sexual harassment?

“What was she wearing?” This is a popular question many women receive when discussing events of sexual assault or harassment. Often, people are quick to assume that consent can be applied solely based on clothing. Sexism has always been an issue, and women have been fighting for equality for many years. During the Civil Rights Movement, “Many women experienced gender discrimination and sexual harassment within the movement and later turned towards the feminist movement in the 1970s.” Looking back at history, it is easy to see where these ideas stem from. For years, women were told to cover up and dress modestly. This has furthered the perception that women should be sexualized and showing their skin is revealing. As we have progressed as a society, we have failed to keep up with modern views and put an end to the discrimination women face.

Look at all the different women! Here, they are seen with different styles, outfits, and features. No matter what, each woman is important and has their own worth.
How does the American school system further sexism?

Dress Codes

“I remember every morning in the warm months of elementary school, I would stand right in front of my mirror measuring my shorts. Making sure they weren’t even an inch above my fingertips. My mom and I used to have to make special trips to find shorts and shirts that fit the outrageous dress code my school implemented.” Taylor Levine, a 19-year-old student at The Ohio State University, recounts the sexism she faced, and how it has affected her. Many schools all over the world set strict guidelines for what girls can wear to school. Too much skin exposure was seen as inappropriate and a distraction. Implementing a dress code isn’t completely out of line, but the issue arises when boys are not held to the same standards that girls are. Girls are told that their bodies are distracting for boys, so they should learn to cover up. Rather than just teaching boys and girls from the start that women’s body does not only serve for sexual purposes. Allie Haratman, another female student at OSU gave her insight and experiences regarding sexism. “At my school, they would remove the girls who violated the dress code from the classroom and make them put old, used clothes on in the office. Even on the hottest days girls would have to come back in sweatpants and sweatshirts.” Allie and Taylor have both realized the impact that these regulations in schools have had on their personal views and how they portray themselves. Taylor expressed that she feels “traumatized by these events, and they have had a huge impact on how I perceive my self-worth and my body”. She explains that these rules cause men and women to grow up believing that women showing skin is inappropriate and seen as seeking sexual attention from men. The strict dress code that Americans implement for girls furthers the separation between men and women and introduces the sexualization of their bodies at a young age.
Catcalling

A common problem is that women are objectified. Men typically see women as less in society and feel that they can take advantage and boss them around. Obviously, these statements are not true for all men, as many are respectful towards women in every way. However, in general, this is a common problem worth noting. Some men don’t see women for their personality and just see them for their bodies. Women, just like men, have feelings and so many wonderful qualities about them, but they are overlooked. For example, women frequently get “cat-called” by men, which is disrespectful and sickening. Women should be looked at in the same way men are looked at, instead of being looked at for what they are wearing and how their face or body looks. If a woman wears revealing clothing, men feel that they can comment on it and that women are only wearing those clothes to get attention. Actions of men that catcall needs to be fixed - not the clothes a woman is wearing. This occurs in all settings throughout the world. For example, it occurs in almost all workplaces with all different types of professions and people.

Personal Experiences

“I have been walking down High Street multiple times in outfits that make me feel confident. I don’t dress to impress other people but have had men roll down their windows and yell about the way I look. It happens to my friends too. It makes me feel uncomfortable and unsafe. I wouldn’t consider my outfit choices to be revealing. However, that doesn’t even matter. Men shouldn’t catcall regardless of what the outfit looks like” (Hartman).

“I can’t even imagine how many times I have heard a sexual or inappropriate remark as I have walked down the street. Since I have been on campus this number has increased being in a city setting, but what made me the most uncomfortable was having my picture taken. I have caught two men, who both looked to be about triple my age, take pictures of my front and back side. This terrified me because I had no idea who they were, where my picture would be, and what it might be used for” (Levine).

Question to Ponder

Do you think picture taking falls under the umbrella of catcalling, or do you think this might become its own independent issue?

Is sexism one sided?

How men experience sexism
It is also important to recognize men and think about how they are treated in society. When people think of sexism, they typically think about feminism and how women are treated unfairly in the world. However, men are also held to unrealistic standards. Men should know that their struggles are acknowledged as well, as they are usually held to specific stereotypes from society. It is commonly thought that men have an advantage in society. But they also have stereotypes that hold them back. This is not the case for everyone, but typically, it is thought that they work harder, are stronger, and are more athletic. Men also are expected to get jobs such as doctors and lawyers, and mostly have higher-paying jobs. In general, they are looked at more seriously in society. In comparison, women are seen are weaker, more emotional, and are expected to stay home with their families. Although society has evolved and stereotypes aren’t as prominent, they still exist. This creates a disadvantage for both genders and their mental health as they have certain expectations surrounding them.

**Conclusion/Solutions**

It is debatable whether progress has been made regarding this issue. Depending on someone’s gender, feelings, and stances, they can see these issues differently. There aren’t necessarily “right” or “wrong” ways to view gender inequality for the most part, as everyone can interpret things in a new way. According to Hartman and Levine, there hasn’t been a lot of progress regarding this issue, and change needs to be made. These issues are still very common in society, and they personally see them happen almost daily. One idea to create change is to potentially add more classes for children about respecting their bodies and other people’s bodies. Men and women should learn the correct ways to treat others and to know their self-worth. If they grow up familiar with topics such as gender inequality, they will understand and check their biases to be a better person to themselves and towards other people. Hopefully, these classes educated our youth to create a better future, as nobody deserves to be treated the way many women are in society. Furthermore, another solution to help further the sexualization and objectification of women would be to make public statements about the harassment women face. A trend began in the UK to help end street harassment. Women wrote on the sidewalks things that men have said to them as they walked down the street. Many women joined in on this trend and posted it to social media. Statements began flooding social media from all over the world of women sharing their experiences. Many men and people who don’t view catcalling as a form of harassment believe that they are complimenting women, or believe that women enjoy their remarks. But, the reality of street harassment is that many women become intimidated and feel vulnerable and intimidated. I think this mindset stems from the ideas that history carved - women are valued by their looks and their bodies. We need to break the belief that women’s bodies are objects, and one for the public to sexualize and comment on. I think spreading awareness like these women did on the sidewalk would help raise awareness, and make people realize the impacts these comments have on women. As a society, we must acknowledge the truth of how people are treated and be willing to adapt to new ways of thinking to end unfair treatment towards women.
This is an example of what women would write on the sidewalk, as discussed above. By making these visible statements, the public eye is opened to the harsh treatment that women face.
References:


