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What It Means to Be a Woman

Gender has a significant impact on an individual’s quality of life. There are many different expectations that come along with being either male or female. While these guidelines are set into place to ensure a tolerable life for a person, these rules often interfere with our ability to obtain happiness. Michael Kimmel’s “ʻBros Before Hos’: The Guy Code,” explains what determines a man’s masculinity and the long-term effects of trying to live up to such standards. Although there are definite positive and negative aspects to both genders, females tend to suffer more in every facet of life. This concept of inequality in society is best illustrated by Jean Kilbourne in her article “ʻTwo Ways a Woman Can Get Hurt’: Advertising and Violence,” in which she discusses how much male dominance is engrained into our thinking by advertising. These images we see transfer into our everyday lives, actions, and treatment of others, as is evident in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “The Story of My Body.” In this retelling of her youth, Ortiz Cofer conveys the many reactions to her appearance that she experienced as a little girl and young woman. Even though we often make first judgments based on what we see on the exterior, these thoughts are heavily influenced by the world around us. Although both males and females undergo the pressure of conforming to mainstream gender norms, women have the added threat of violence in relationship to how they are depicted and sexualized by the media.

Violence is a major part of today’s advertising. When we see these images, the messages are intentionally hidden behind the guise of sexuality, but they cultivate an attitude of hate towards women. There are many ways the media goes about doing this, starting with the objectification of women. Kilbourne explains why seeing a female as an object is a necessary part of enabling men to violate women. She states, “Turning a human being into a thing, an object, is almost always the first step toward justifying violence against that person” (Kilbourne 585). By seeing a person as a thing that does not possess feelings or emotions, it allows for the mistreatment of that thing. If this is seen as an acceptable thing to do, it relieves the abuser of any guilt that would normally come along with abusing another person. Concurrently, men are encouraged to be unemotional machines, only concerned with their social standing amongst their fellow males. In regard to the need to impress other men, Kimmel states, “While women often become a kind of currency by which men negotiate their status with other men, women are for possessing, not for emulating” (611). The opinion of a woman is irrelevant. Their only significance is for accumulation, resulting in a favorable social status amongst other males. Since men are not supposed to feel remorse, empathy, or any other emotion that could be considered feminine, promiscuity comes easily to men and, because the amount of women a man has conquered directly correlates to his masculinity, he is more likely to feel obligated to cave to these expectations.

Examples of the pressure to conform are present every day. Not only does it come from our peer groups, but also from the rest of society. Images of scantily-clad women clinging to a man that is seemingly unmoved by their show of affection plague the pages of magazines and are disturbingly commonplace. These types of advertisements are no longer shocking to us because we see them every day along with the messages they convey. Not only do they say to men that women are inferior and in need of controlling, but they also remind women that we should submit and do whatever it takes to earn attention from men. If a man is not ogling our bodies, then we have no purpose. This sense of only having aesthetic value tends to wear on females’ self-esteems if they do not measure up to society’s qualifications for beauty. Photoshopped pictures of tall, curvy, nearly-anorexic models are designed to make us feel like we can never attain happiness unless we do the same things and buy the same products to look like the models. These standards are especially hard on young girls as they transition into women. As an adolescent girl, Ortiz Cofer laments her lack of curves saying, “Although I wanted to think of myself as ‘intellectual,’ my body was demanding that I notice it…anybody can get fat. Right. Except me. I was going to have to join a circus someday as Skinny Bones, the woman without flesh” (541). Though intelligence is both important to her and her proudest asset, she is well aware that her skinny body does not fit America’s mold for beauty. In her mind, this makes her a freak, and leads her to disregard the fact that everybody matures at a different rate. In Ortiz Cofer’s story, she does not directly say whether her desire to be seen as attractive led her to dress or behave in a more promiscuous manner to try to win the affection of her fellow male classmates, but it is not uncommon for girls, or even women, to do so. While a woman’s choice of attire does not in any way make her to blame for any sexual crimes committed against her, it can make men more likely to see her as a target. Kilbourne explains this double-edged sword by saying, “Constantly exhorted to be sexy and attractive, they discover when assaulted that that very sexiness is evidence of their guilt, their lack of ‘innocence’” (580). Because the media tells us to place so much value on our looks and to be seen as visually appealing, women feel compelled to look and/or act accordingly. If females are violated, they feel as if their actions may have spurned the act of violence. Even if a woman does not initially feel guilty, others are likely to imply that she is accountable for her own safety and wellbeing by questioning her sobriety, behaviors, or dress code. Even as victims, women are blamed for the actions of their predators by society, effectively victimizing them again.

Although women tend to be the targets in sexual crimes, men could also be considered victims in this equation. Even from a young age, they are encouraged to be emotionless competitors in pursuit of having it all: women, cars, money and power. If a man possesses all of these things, he’s winning the game. Who is sending this message to young boys, shaping them into the men they will become? Simply put, every man that has ever come before them. Kimmel explains this occurrence stating, “Guys hear the voices of the men in their lives --- fathers, coaches, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, priests --- to inform their ideas of masculinity” (611). A man’s predecessors, though usually with good intentions, pass on the teachings they have learned from the men in their lives, continuing the cycle of misogyny. I remember a particular incident that happened to me when I was back in high school. I recollect walking down the hallway on my way to the cafeteria for lunch. A younger boy that had previously harassed me decided that the cat calls he’d given in the past were just not enough. As I walked by, he took his hand and reached up my skirt, grabbing my behind. I had never felt so violated before, but the shock subsided quickly enough for me to stand up for myself, and ensure he would never touch me again. Some may argue that because I was wearing a knee-length skirt and knee-high boots that I was “asking for it.” Some would even cite the old adage, “boys will be boys,” excusing him from any accountability. Some would even say it is all subjective. Like in Ortiz Cofer’s tale of the different interpretations of various parts of her body, society sets the standards. When describing her skin color she states, “I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States” (Ortiz Cofer 537). In her native land, she was considered to be lighter than average, but after arriving in the United States she was seen as darker-skinned. Neither perspective is wrong, but they are within social context. While it may be true that we are products of our society, the difference in the story from my childhood is that the boy involved had a choice in the situation. Regardless of what I was wearing, he consciously groped me without my consent and that should never be alright by any standard.

Violence against women is a standard that has been upheld through time; it is in our televisions, our books, our magazines, and even our homes. The media is the medium that advocates and ensures the suppression of the female gender. But as time progresses, so do the guidelines for what is acceptable. If, on an individual level, we take a stand against exploiting our women it could cause a ripple effect capable of stopping this culture of hate. If we teach our boys to treat our girls as equals, this will become the new standard. If we refuse to purchase products sold by companies that encourage violence or the sexual objectification of women, we send the message that this is no longer acceptable. But, on the same note, we, as women, must refuse to be used in this manner. When we stop limiting ourselves to these roles and truly embrace all of our capabilities, only then can we take our rightful place in society--on the same level as our men.

Works Cited

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