

## Panel on Commercial Sexualisation, University of Bristol, 21/10/2010

### **Statement by Dr Helen Mott, Bristol Fawcett**

I think it's worth starting by addressing some of the commonly aired, and worrying, misperceptions about why feminists and gender equality experts feel strongly about Sexual Entertainment Venues and about the proliferation of establishments and businesses that trade on what is, in any case, a narrow definition of women as sexually available for a price.

Those misperceptions are: that we are against freedom of expression; that we dislike or are offended by sex; and that we think that men are innately bad, inadequate, violent, or sexist. Not true, not by a long way.

Bristol Fawcett exists because the society we find ourselves living in is one that is actively sexist, and we campaign for progress to change that.

Rigid ideas about what boys are like, what girls are like, what men and women are like, used to hold sway in our *past* – to the extent that women were not entitled to vote until just under a hundred years ago. But those ideas and attitudes - which restricted the possibilities for men and women alike to be who they wanted to be and to reach their potential as fully autonomous human beings – are still very much with us today.

We are all shaped by our experiences, and we build our notions of ourselves from observing the ways that we are treated by others, the ways that people like us are treated by others, and the social sanctions that are or are not applied when we are treated as lesser human beings or less deserving of respect, dignity or indeed the same pay packet as others around us. The flip side of the coin for men and boys is that if they see around them every day clear messages that women and girls are to be given less attention and airspace than them (except in their role as objects of sexual attention), less recognition for the work that they do, less respect (and I am thinking here of the sign up in Bristol Hooters that says "*Caution – blondes thinking!*" – the sign is upside down) - then of course that feeds in to a sense of entitlement to treat women and girls as somehow lesser beings than them. It would be impossible for it not to. That's why the legal duties on public authorities – which of course include local councils and their licensing committees, as well as the police – were introduced to require an active *promotion* of equality and an active position *against* discrimination and harassment – to tackle the unequal status quo.

This year saw the publication of Natasha Walter's book, *Living Dolls: the Return of Sexism*. She captures in her book the experience of many gender equality campaigners of her and my generation. In the 1990s many of us felt that real change was happening for women and men, in terms of economic justice, in terms of changes in the law (for example it finally became unlawful in the '90s for husbands to rape their wives – and men became entitled to paternity leave) and so on.

But with the strengthening of legislation that supports the equality of women and men in the home, in the workplace and in public life, we have seen at the same time a backlash in the form of a wholesale cultural push to separate boys and girls, men and women, into two classes of human being. At the forefront of this 'newly returned' sexism is the social pressure to define women by what they look like and to judge women by how well they perform as objects for male sexual gratification. (Before someone jumps in to say, "What about the men? This is happening to men too" I should say that what I am talking about here is the role of sexualisation in the context of wide-ranging and completely undisputed structural inequality that subordinates women to men, where women are valued beneath men).

The research evidence is clear on these points:

- Pressure on women and girls to look and behave in certain ways negatively affects their self-esteem and their mental health<sup>i</sup>.
- Gender inequality is reinforced, and hopes for a level playing field are dashed, when women are valued for their supposed sex appeal at the expense of their other attributes and qualities<sup>ii</sup>.
- After being exposed to images that sexually objectify women, men are significantly more accepting of sexual harassment, interpersonal violence, rape myths, and sex role stereotypes<sup>iii</sup>.

In rape and sexual assault cases, when women and girls have been blamed as the architects of their own misfortune for wearing certain clothes, or looking and behaving a certain way, it is NOT feminists who have made those pronouncements. It IS feminists who have stood up for the rights of women and girls to express themselves, and their own sexuality, on their own terms.

Women's control over their own sexuality is undermined, not enhanced, by pervasive messages in the media and in society about what women's sexuality 'should be' and when and how it 'should be' expressed.

The reason Bristol Fawcett is campaigning for a 'nil' cap on sex entertainment venues in Bristol is because we believe that sex entertainment venues:

- Exploit women and put women workers at risk<sup>iv</sup>
- Encourage sexism and harmful sexist attitudes that extend beyond the confines of those venues<sup>v</sup>.

Finally, I'd just like to quote a study from the Journal of Sex Research (Frank, 2003). Over half the men who were interviewed for this study who frequented lapdancing clubs said that one of their motivations for visiting clubs was to get away from what they saw as the rules for behaviour that constrained them, for example when interacting with female colleagues at work. One participant said:

"You can go in there and shop for a piece of meat, quote unquote, so to speak. I mean, you want to see a girl run around naked, have her come over, pay her to do a dance or two or three and walk away and not even ask her name. Total distancing."

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<sup>i</sup> See for example Sweeting, Young & West (2009); Tiggeman & Kuring (2004) and the Home Office Sexualisation Review (Papadopoulos, 2010) which quotes McKinley (1999); Moradi et al. (2005); Poliy, Herman et al. (2002); Tolman, Impett, Tracy & Michael (2006).

<sup>ii</sup> See for example the Home Office Sexualisation Review (Papadopoulos, 2010); Heflick & Goldenberg (2009); Heilman & Stopeck (1985); Nicolson (1996).

<sup>iii</sup> See the review of the American Psychological Association (2007) and see also for example Allen, D'Alession & Brezgel (1995); Lanis and Covell (1995); Zillman & Weaver (1989).

<sup>iv</sup> See for example Frenken & Sifaneck (1998); Holsopple (1998); Lewis (1998); Lilith Report (2003); Pasko (2002).

<sup>v</sup> See for example Cikara, Eberhardt & Fiske (2010); Fredrickson & Roberts (1997); Harris & Fiske (2006); Haslam (2006); Heflick et al. (under review); Loughnan et al. (2010); Rudman & Borgida (1995); Vaes, Paladino & Puvia (under review).