

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

Statement by Dr Emma Williamson, Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol

Writing this talk for this evening's discussion was not easy. I have been described as an expert on gendered violence, but so much of what we are talking about is based in wider discussions about gender, sexuality, and self identity. I hope that the following talk, and forgive me for reading it, will go some way to explain why we have concerns about both sexual entertainment venues as well as those venues which sell something else through sexualized gendered identities.

I have been researching in the area of gender and violence for the past 16 years. I have researched both domestic and sexual violence looking at both their causes and impact on women and children and men (as victims and perpetrators) . I have looked at the historic and social contexts within which such abuse takes place and examined the legal and policy responses to the phenomenon of gendered violence and abuse. I would like to say that over the past 16 years things have got better – but sadly this is not the case. Gender inequality still exists , and the sexualisation of women – and men - in wider society is so pervasive now as to almost have become invisible. Venues which are defined as sexual entertainment establishments are explicit in their sale of female sexuality for monetary gain. As such, they should be subject to challenge within local communities. Venues and activities which use sexuality to sell something else should also be subject to challenge but within a culture of gender invisibility objectors are frequently ridiculed and undermined. This in itself is evidence that gender equality does not exist and that we are not dealing here with a level playing field.

Our society recognizes that domestic and sexual violence is wrong and criminal sanctions exist for those perpetrators deemed to have committed a crime, which falls within our legal system, and which can lead to a prosecution. We know from

our research that the way in which the legal system was originally designed makes it extremely difficult to address crimes against women and children. The legal system was never designed with domestic violence, rape, and child abuse in mind, because such acts were not even necessarily defined as crimes at that time. The legal system also assumes itself to be neutral and objective irrespective of the fact that it is enacted by socialized human beings who bring to it all that they learn and absorb into their identities.

Studies from early childhood show how boys and girls, from an early age, begin to enact gendered behaviours. Far from being a biologically determined phenomenon related to sexual difference, the development of this gendered identity comes from the social context within which children are raised.

Children learn to be gendered beings from the society within which they exist. And as they become adults they perpetuate and perform those gendered identities back to society. If we had gender and sexual equality in our society, this would not be a problem. But we don't. Women still earn comparatively less than men, are discouraged from certain professions, and when women become mothers they face discrimination in the form of a lack of available and affordable childcare, poorly paid part time flexible jobs, and an expectation that they, and not fathers, will take responsibility for their children at the expense of their jobs or education. But these are minimised or sidelined as 'liberal' concerns about equality of opportunity. Even more insidious is the internalization of cultural and social norms which impact on our sense of self. Irrespective of equality of opportunity, if you are taught to believe that you are a second class citizen then such opportunities are irrelevant.

It is within this context that children learn what it is to be a man and woman in our society.

Even where parents make great effort to challenge these 'liberal' realities by sharing responsibilities and opportunities, the images that children and young adults see in society teach them a certain view of what it means to be a successful male or female in our culture. And those images, specifically for girls and women are predominately sexualized images which sell narrowly defined notions of

beauty and perfection which very few of us will ever achieve – but that is the point. If we all identified with the gendered, sexualized images of what it means to be masculine or feminine we wouldn't need to buy anything. The images which sell are meant to exclude the majority so that the majority buy. The result is that we hold specific ideas about what it means to be a man or woman in our society and how those men and women should act. If you don't believe this statement then consider those who fall outside this prescribed 'norm'. Compare how women who commit acts of violence are described not just as being 'evil' in committing acts as human beings, but somehow worse because they are women. This is an extreme example but it rings true for all of us in our everyday lives.

Even when we are not conscious of our interactions with other men or women, our behaviours in such interactions are gendered. Research looking at lesbian women's experiences of employment (by Alison Parken) highlights how women are expected to behave in certain sexualized ways through their behavior, dress, and demeanour. What was interesting in this research was that lesbian women who did not buy into a heterosexualised notion of what it means to be a woman were able to see very clearly how other women enacted these behaviours almost unconsciously, on a daily basis. Think about it, from the way you talk to men or women, from the way you smile or respond to the other persons talk – every small minute detail is impacted by the notions of gender which we learn and internalize from a young age. That is why we object to lads mags being displayed in supermarkets where children can see them. That is why we object to page three in the sun, often found on coffee shop tables, and that is why we object to thongs, padded bra's and pole dancing kits for children. Because they present only a limited notion of sexuality. A limited ideal which perpetuates gender inequality.

So, it is within this context that we find ourselves faced with the opening of a Hooters restaurant in Bristol. A restaurant which purports to be a family friendly restaurant but which portrays a specific and very limited version of what it means to be a woman. It is also within that context that students at the University of Bristol were faced with a pole dancing stall, complete with pole and demonstration, at the Students' Union freshers' fair last week. I wrote to the

Students' Union to ask about how they came to a decision to allow such a stall and am happy to share an extract from that response with you.

We certainly don't believe that Pole Dance Society is in any way counter to the ideals of equality. They [the pole dancing society] state that it is an expression of greater empowerment of women over the traditional male-dominated gym.

Pole fitness has increased in popularity dramatically in the last few years as a new form of intense workout which can burn 300 calories per class. It is a great form of exercise and certainly causes no harm. The society does not discriminate against men either and allow anyone to join, and a colleague of mine reports that men can be seen practising pole fitness at a gym she frequents.

And herein lies our problem. Gender and sexuality are so intrinsically linked to our notions of self, our very identity that for the most part we don't even see it. The argument above is that as a great form of exercise pole dancing causes no harm – and this is where we disagree.

Firstly, portraying pole dancing - primarily a representation of female sexuality found in sexual entertainment venues - as a 'bit of fun' underestimates the danger that normalizing certain forms of sexual entertainment has on both women and men. If pole dancing is an expression of greater empowerment of women, then presumably the students' union at Bristol would advocate its students doing it for real? And for others to go and pay to watch them? How would that situation equate with notions of equality for students? Irrespective of whether men engage with pole fitness it would be female students whose sexual and gendered identities were being sold to men, including their equality minded fellow male students.

Secondly, pole dancing is described as empowering because it counters the traditional male-dominated gym. Surely empowerment for women would be that gyms were not male dominated in the first place and that women could exercise in a way which reinforced a positive self image. One which isn't linked to the idea of women selling the image of their bodies to others.

Thirdly, just because something is popular does not mean that it is equal.

And finally, pole dancing – and specifically in the way it was represented at the freshers' fair – does cause harm. It says to women that even their exercise is a sexual thing. They can't even enjoy their own bodies in the form of exercise without it being defined in gendered and therefore sexual terms.

And so to Hooters. It is difficult to believe that in the year 2010, a restaurant which sells itself on the bodies of its female employees would be opening in the city where I live. I, and I'm sure many here, are still in shock. We object. But how we object is important. We are told that in the world of local council licensing that we cannot make moral objections only legal ones. I understand why and agree, but I am not convinced that our legal arguments are taken seriously.

Whenever we talk about gender inequality, whether in relation to pole dancing or Hooters, we are using a concept of gender inequality which is more sophisticated than that inherent within the legal system. That system, designed by predominately white, male, privileged men assumes that a level playing field exists. Take the guidance relating to protections for victims of rape or the training of judges in specialist domestic violence courts. There was an outcry from defence lawyers who claimed it was biasing the judges, with no recognition that by failing to rectify the bias that already existed so-called level playing field was itself tilting at a disturbing angle.

Similarly, when we object to Hooters on the basis that it represents a negative sexualized view of women, which damages women and men in wider society, we are ignored. That women should sell the representation of their gendered and sexualized bodies is so normalized that any objection is ridiculed and undermined. We object because it contributes to gender inequality. As such we have a legal

objection to the objectification of women's (and men's) sexualized bodies for monetary gain.

Furthermore, and returning to my so-called area of expertise, we come to the issue of violence and abuse. Studies of young people (McCarry) show that they hear the messages we give about violence to their girlfriends being wrong - but there is a BUT. Young men and women still think that abuse is acceptable if women stray from gender norms. If she wears something her boyfriend doesn't like, or tells him what to do, or he thinks that she is flirting with someone else, whether that is true or not.

Gender inequality causes gendered violence because it normalizes certain gendered behaviours.

So, to conclude, the council shouldn't even need a consultation on whether to deal differently with sexual entertainment venues. They sell sexualized notions of gender which perpetuate gender inequality. This council should begin to take seriously the concerns of women and men who want to challenge the inequality which causes violence and abuse by looking at what they currently choose not to see. Hooters is not a family friendly restaurant. Gender inequality does exist. And like the domestic violence perpetrator who asks the bystander to do nothing, the licensing committee was asked to see nothing and they chose to do so.