

**MY MEDIA: EMPOWERING YOUTHS TO MODIFY THEIR VIEWS ON
SEXUAL VIOLENCE THROUGH AN EXAMINATION OF MEDIA
DEPICTIONS OF GENDER VIOLENCE**

Karen Hackler
Community Educator
Positive Youth Connections
Northland Family Help Center, Flagstaff, AZ
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In 2006, Northland Family Help Center (NFHC) in Flagstaff, Arizona, created its program targeting youth and the adults in their lives, the Positive Youth Connections (PYC) program. The PYC program is focused on preventing relationship and sexual violence, and includes various sexual violence prevention and education components. Northlands' PYC goals to positively impact the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of the youth community and associated adults through a comprehensive primary prevention program have been met through varied and creative methods in the past years, and we continue to try to expand our programs to reach an ever wider audience.

One of our curricula topics that generates the most impassioned discussions among youth is The Media & Sexual Violence. The objectives of teaching these topics are as follows: To explore how media portrays gender stereotypes; to identify gender stereotypes in the media; and to explore the harmful effects of media in relation to gender stereotypes and violence and how this affects individuals.

According to *Sexual Violence and the Spectrum of Prevention: Towards a Community Solution*, sexual violence prevention efforts should not focus solely on the individual but should focus also on family relationships, community factors, and societal factors (Davis, Parks, & Cohen, 2006). One of the most effective strategies in primary prevention of sexual violence involves changing the social norms in our society that normalize, trivialize, and perpetuate sexual violence. Certainly one of the easiest and most visible ways to evaluate a society's norms on a given issue is to examine its media representations of that issue. That violence, including sexual violence, is commonly portrayed in the media and used to sell everything from fashion to food, demonstrates that violence *is* normalized in our society; it may not be a "good" normal, but is it normal nonetheless. Perhaps less obvious than ads blatantly depicting violence, but no less powerful as a contributing factor to sexual violence, are media images depicting gender stereotypes and roles. According to researcher Alan Berkowitz, one of the "critical elements of sexual assault prevention and risk reduction program" for audiences comprising of women and/or men is to "Explore relevant aspects of male and female gender socialization and the role of sexism in facilitating sexual assaults"(2002). In order to replace such damaging norms with more healthy norms, audience members need first to be able to recognize these damaging norms and understand how they contribute to a society in which sexual violence is trivialized.

During our PYC trainings on Media and Sexual violence, NFHC's community educators use a variety of training materials and activities. The following activity and follow-up discussion is one we use at NFHC to engage high school-aged audience participants:

ACTIVITY: Describing Personal Attributes

We commonly use this activity for groups of teens that all identify as female, but it can certainly be used with mixed-gender audiences:

- 1.) Ask the girls to make a list of positive qualities that they admire in themselves.
- 2.) Pass around magazines (preferably fashion or beauty magazines, although any color copy will work) and ask the participants to flip through them slowly, paying careful attention to the ads.
- 3.) Now ask the teens to make a second list of all the attributes they *wish* they had.

4.) With their consent, ask the participants to read aloud to one another both lists. Most commonly, the first lists the girls write contain mostly physical characteristics. Common examples include “My hair,” “my smile,” “my eyes”, etc. Their second lists usually contain almost 100% physical characteristics, especially features that typify the notions of what constitutes a “sexy” or desirable female. Common examples include, “longer legs,” “much thinner,” “bigger lips,” “bigger boobs,” etc.

5.) After sharing their lists, either show Jean Kilborne’s video on female gender stereotypes in the media, *Killing Us Softly 3, Advertising’s Image of Women*, or launch into a discussion on the media’s role in defining societal norms of gender roles, normalcy and beauty. Included in this discussion are statistics from the National Eating Disorders Association and the Center for Disease Control on American women’s perception of their bodies as overweight, and the number and ages of women who try to control their diet to avoid weight gain, ad images from the website www.genderads.com, and images cut out from magazines.

6.) Finish the discussion with a talk on the value of healthy, positive self-esteem, internal and external assets, and a “what we can do about it” discussion: boycotting brands or products that use such forms of advertising, examples of companies that have made a concerted effort *not* to use blatantly hetero-sexist images that contribute to gender stereotyping and narrow definitions of beauty (such as the Dove “real woman” campaign), and becoming an active bystander about the issue by recognizing media stereotyping, pointing it out to others, and taking a stand against it.

7.) Lastly, have the participants take third pieces of paper and make a revised list of the positive attributes they value in themselves, and read them aloud for the group. Usually these final lists contain more internal qualities and fewer physical qualities, are much longer lists, and contain overall more positive outlooks on body image.

This activity is one of the trainings we do that result in the most open dialogues among participants about gender and sexual violence. After these activities, I usually have three to four youths come up to me and thank me for the presentation. I often receive comments such as, “Wow. I never thought of things that way,” “I always feel so ugly and dumb after reading those magazines and I never really knew why. But now I get it,” or, “that was really cool. I don’t want my little sister reading my magazines now or watching TV.” The outcome of this training leads to an understanding of the ways in which societal norms are propagated and created by the media, and allows the participants to challenge societal norms and examine them in detail in a fun, familiar format. Since ads are prominent everywhere in life---on billboards, on television, movies, magazines, radio, books, clothing, music, and food---teens are already familiar with their presence and even with some of their techniques. But what many of them are not aware of, before these trainings, are the ways in which their own perceptions and values are shaped by the advertising. Drawing attention to and promoting critical thinking about such familiar images directly results in reflection on gender normalization on a personal level, inspiring Youth to take action on a wider level within the ecological model of social change.

While Gender Images and the Media is only a small slice of NFHC’s PYC program, it is the topic that generates the most discussion among teens, raises the most spoken questions in their discussions, and makes them feel the most empowered to change not only their personal perceptions of gender and gender violence, but to change their world. As a direct result of this training, many of the participants have begun awareness campaigns within their own communities and schools, fostering dialogue on media portrayals of gender violence and promoting the portrayal of healthy relationships in the media. And preventing relationship and sexual violence and fostering healthy relationships on a personal and societal level is exactly what Northland Family Help Center’s community education program is all about.

REFERENCES

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