I have felt for a while that the largely growing movement against the sexual portrayal of women by and in the media is somewhat narrow, often making biased analyses informed largely by the personal. Of course the issue, in and of itself, is extremely personal as well as political in the broader sense. It is personal in that it is informed by gender activists’ opinions, which are often validated by data. According to these activists, many women, including those whom they purport to represent, should support their opinions.

It is true that in the quest for gender equality it is pivotal that the media become more gender sensitive and not only practice but also encourage gender parity in its operations, publications and programming. However, as gender activists, we need not lose sight of what we mean by gender equality. Although the media in many instances presents a diminutive picture of women, the war waged against its portrayal of women ultimately makes collateral damage of those women who practice their right to freedom of expression and choice.

The absolute empowerment of women means giving them a choice in all aspects of their life. That is what freedom of expression is about. Most feminists tend to be very prescriptive and by doing so tend to have an approach that appears to reinforce the same patriarchal views that we fight against, only in a different way.

The gender movement in Africa seems mainly made up of the middle class academic elite, or the cultural or traditional moralists, who feel they...

Sexualisation of women in the media: Freedom of expression or oppression?
By Doreen Gaura

Abstract
While many activists denounce the role played by the media in perpetuating stereotypes, the gender movement in Southern Africa seems to be missing the point of what freedom of expression really means. This article is a personal opinion about freedom of expression, what the author thinks it means and how it should be understood. It analyses three examples: imagery and lyrical content in hip-hop music; sexualised images of women in advertising; and pornography.

Key words
feminism, media, hip-hop, pornography, advertising
know better about what it is that “less empowered” women should want. A case in point is the issue of sex, sexuality and sensuality and the expression thereof. Patriarchy, as a way of duct-taping female expression, has entrenched in society the archetypal “lady” - basically a woman who is modest, demure, and sexually “pure,” who never aspires to sexual gratification or pleasure. This woman should view sex as a way of fulfilling her maternal and reproductive roles. Anything more, we are led to believe, would make her a whore.

Media in the region should be monitored and taken to task for its contribution to negative and harmful reinforcements, especially because it has a responsibility bestowed on it by article 30 of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. However, we should be careful not to wage a war on women who would rather subscribe to these stereotypes - the same women we claim to be representing, and yet we often have very little knowledge, understanding or acceptance of them.

The hip-hop scene, pornography and advertising have been identified as the biggest culprits of perpetuating stereotypes. I attempt to look objectively at these three areas, taking into consideration both sides of the argument before drawing my conclusions.

**Imagery and lyrics in hip-hop**

Over the past two decades hip-hop has grown from its roots in black culture to a multimillion dollar industry that now champions materialism, violence, sex, drugs and misogyny. The videos for most hip-hop songs feature women wearing less and less with each new release. They portray women as sexual objects and commodities. This visual imagery is accompanied by denigrating lyrics that reduce these women to “bitches” and “hos.” This trend has understandably been the source of much dismay and anger for both feminists and moralists alike. However, we need a more analytical approach to understand women in these videos.

In his online blog *Hip Hop News*, Khalil Amani tackles the denigration and abuse of these women at the hands of both the public and the media. At one point he writes:

“These are grown... women who choose (some out of necessity and some because they love it!) to expose their bodies for our consumption! It is art! We certainly don’t view male strippers as exploited! (Having been a male stripper myself, it was the most liberating feeling to shake my tallywacker in the faces of adoring women!... and get paid!)”

---

**Sexiest advert: What has a half-naked woman got to do with police sunglasses?**

Photo: Trevor Davies
Amani notes that women who expose their bodies in music videos still deserve respect. In the same article, he berates a fellow blogger, Juan, for his disparaging remarks against Buffie the Body, a well-known video vixen (as these women prefer to be called). Juan accuses her of being “ghetto trash” and having an “offensive face” and a “skewed perception of her worth in this world.”

Amani points out that Juan’s opinion of Buffie the Body, and other brown-skinned women, is a racist one he would not apply to Caucasian women with the same physique and in the same profession. He encourages people to look at these women as a symbol of black sexual womanhood instead of as sluts or victims.

He also makes reference to the “ho” paradigm, which he says “is an old one used to keep women as second class citizens in a patriarchal society.” The same can be said of the feminist movement’s attempt to deter women from expressing their sexuality and claiming ownership of their bodies. The lines are blurry when it comes to determining whether or not these video vixens, who have been belittled by society, are disempowered and ultimately denied the right to freedom of expression through sexuality. Again, there are no set parameters that divide what is, and what is not, sexual expression. Sexuality is a very individual concept.

Sabrina Ford (2004), writing on the Golden Gate X Press website, acknowledges that for all its misogynistic content, hip-hop has awarded women of colour and women with fuller figures the chance to have a more positive view of their bodies in a world laden with a history of determining the beauty of women by a European standard. This is important given the history of treatment of brown-skinned women, including the example of Saartjie Baartman, who was exploited and treated as a freak because of her physique. The hip-hop scene takes back the reverence of that stature and build, with women across all races now aspiring for a big “booty.”

Ford states that hip-hop has in some ways reinforced a sense of sexual empowerment in women. She cites female rappers such as Trina, Foxy Brown and Lil Kim, who have never shied away from sexual themes. These women have defended their images and their lyrics are believed to have led women to realise sex is one tool that renders men helpless and makes women powerful.

Further, she says many women reference sex in their music, and they are as cavalier and unashamed as their male counterparts. Ford is of the view that this is an attempt on the part of these female artists to position themselves as equals - the hip-hop version of a feminist movement.

The Hip Hop Summit South Africa 2011 website sets out pointers for aspiring video vixens that may shock some feminist groupings. The how-to guide opens like this:

The coolest thing about hip-hop modelling is that rap video vixens come in all shapes and sizes. In the vast majority of the modelling world, they’re really only looking for a very specific type of girl, they all want someone who’s impossibly tall and stick thin. Hip-hop honeys, on the other hand, can have a shapely figure, they can be tall or short, thick or thin and everything in between.

The British documentary Music, Money and Hip Hop Honeys looks into the lives of some of these hip-hop women. It finds that most “hip-hop honeys” not only purposely chose their career
path, but also dedicated a lot of time, and invested a lot of money, so they could become a video vixen. Many achieved this goal with as much tenacity and perseverance as a law student or aspiring biologist achieves theirs.

However, there is always a dark side. For all the aid in shifting society’s idea of what constitutes women’s beauty, this movement has also dictated how women should look. This has resulted in many going under the knife to get “butt” implants. Something that began as a celebration (if you choose to view it as such) of the natural physical build of some women has now created its own model of what an attractive woman should look like. Some women now feel pressure to subscribe to this model, which has negative financial, emotional and physical implications.

Inasmuch as these video vixens have made these choices and taken up their own agency by taking part in these videos, this does not change the fact that the videos they appear in (and the song lyrics) are misogynistic. Most of the songs refer to women as hos, sluts and bitches. They imply that women are not worthy of respect, and they objectify women and treat them as commodities. Although some hip-hop artists and their fans argue that this is simply entertainment, and fine because of freedom of expression, many hip-hop lyrics are tantamount to hate speech. This has a negative impact on societies, particularly those with high incidences of gender-based violence like South Africa.

The lyrics provide inconsiderate and harmful entertainment and also send a message to hip-hop fans. Young men and boys may begin to believe that women are nothing more than sexual possessions and young women and girls may feel that their entire worth is determined by how sexy they look and how sexy men consider them to be. This can result in self loathing and low self esteem, which is documented in filmmaker Tamika Guishard’s Hip Hop Gurlz: “Girls do what they see in videos,” a black, pre-teen girl says in the film. “If I can get skinny, dress, and dance like that, I can be in videos too.”

Participants watched this eight minute film at a US conference called “Feminism and Hip Hop,” which was hosted by the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture (CSRPC) in Chicago.

Facilitators then asked participants where objectification and anger towards women comes from. Their answers ranged from “the capitalist influence of the corporate enterprise on the music industry, sexuality, drugs, crime, misogyny, consumerism and nihilism” to the complexities of American black masculinities as suggested by Byron Hurt, a former marine and current antisexism activist (Brown, 2009).

Whatever the reasons, it goes without saying that there needs to be a paradigm shift in the hip-hop industry. Calling for the end of the sexualisation of women is not the ideal way to actually end the sexualisation of women. More spaces need to be created where women can address their issues;
reclaim their dignity as defined by themselves; empower other women, including those who choose different lifestyles, for example video vixens; as well as challenge the way they are presented by hip-hop artists who undeniably have a lot of influence.

**Sexualised images of women in advertising**

Much like the world of hip-hop, advertising is under attack. In Southern Africa, media and feminist networks have long played a watchdog role. They have succeeded in getting some advertisements stripped from billboards or removed from the airwaves on the grounds of objectification and sexualisation of women.

In 2009, a South African billboard advertising the Sexpo adult exhibition came under scrutiny because it depicted a woman taking off her underwear. The picture showed only the lower half of the woman’s body, which prompted the Advertising Standards Authority to pull it down and ban the advertisement.

Those objecting were angry because the advert did not show the woman’s upper body or face, therefore marring all identity. Nevertheless, it was not surprising that a sexualised image was used to publicise an event dedicated to sex. Activists, however, should have questioned why the Sexpo ad campaign only featured women and not men. This is not to say that there are no sexualised images of men in the media, just fewer than those depicting women. Media watchdogs remain mum on this issue, which makes one wonder if, consciously or not, gender activists also consider women the weaker sex.

There is generally little consideration of the women who appear in these ads, nor acknowledgement that they have the aptitude to decide for themselves what career path they want to follow or what advertising campaign they want to take part in. Instead of belittling, judging and vilifying these women, activists should help empower them so they can avoid exploitation.

While this argument might appear to reinforce the idea that women are only valued for their physical appearance, it can also be argued that it is acceptable to value a woman for this quality among others. This might be compared to the academic or professional woman who prefers acknowledgement for her intellect and is not interested in being judged on how she looks. In order to support and represent the former woman, it is important to help empower her to realise her worth so she does not sell herself short. To let her know her power lies in her hands and not in the hands of men who would exploit her.

There is a great need to inform women of their options and show them how to protect themselves. I concede that many women feel the only option they have involves exploiting themselves. This is thanks to socialisation and messaging in our society, which typically endorses misogynistic views.

In addition, we need a commitment from the...
media that it will stop propagating and normalising harmful practices and beliefs in its messaging (and this is not to say that this should be done by splitting hairs and pushing individual ideas and agendas). The media plays an integral role in how information is disseminated and its messages are far reaching and taken as the gospel truth by most. The media can achieve this by maintaining a balance between the sensuality and the intellect and strength of women. There is a need, in its messaging, to deconstruct the belief that women’s bodies are products to be acquired, or something men are entitled to.

**Pornography: friend or foe?**
The concepts highlighted above also apply to this industry. This topic has been the cause of many a divisive debate amongst feminists since the 1980s. It can be seen in the outbreak of what is known today as the “feminist sex wars” which resulted in the feminist movement being split into the categories of Anti-Pornography Feminism and Pro-Sex Feminism, or Sex Positive Feminism.

Those who see pornography as a form of sexual liberation and freedom for women say that attacks on the sex industry trivialise the agency of women in this industry. The argument that pornography is synonymous with violence against women reinforces the neo-Victorian idea that men want sex and women merely endure it, or, in the cultural context in Africa, women should not want it because sex is not for women to enjoy. This ignores the fact that women also like to watch other people have sex. While the opposite is the norm, there are many pornographic films in which women play the dominant role.

The 1990s saw the emergence of the sexually-empowered woman in the form of pop culture figures like Madonna and Sharon Stone. Although these women have come under much scrutiny and been accused by the more scholarly feminists of bringing about the death of feminism, these women are anything but disempowered. They are sexually liberated.

The same can be said for self-described sex-positive feminist porn stars like Nina Hartley, Ovidie, Madison Young and Sasha Grey who do not see themselves as victims of sexism. In fact, they defend their decision to star in pornography and maintain that much of what they do on camera is an expression of their sexuality. They also maintain that in most cases women get paid more compared to their male colleagues.

On the other hand, the anti-pornography feminist faction claims women are coerced into pornography, either by a male figure or because of unfortunate circumstances. They feel the industry should be regarded as violence against women. These feminists would hold up the book *Ordeal*, about the life of former porn star Linda Boreman, as one example of this. The book is Boreman’s story of being pimped out by her husband, who also forced her into pornography and raped and physically abused her.

Of course there is a risk of abuse and exploitation in any profession. The risk of encountering unscrupulous and violent people is present in all spaces, public or private, and our focus should be to ensure safety in all spaces, rather than trying to remove spaces altogether.

Feminist scholars like Catherine Mackinnon believe that pornography enforces a male-dominated social hierarchy in which rape is socially acceptable. Others believe that the sometimes violent nature in some of these films desensitises viewers to violence against women. I cannot dispute the
validity of these concerns, as I share many of them, but only as far as the narrative is concerned, not regarding the industry as a whole.

The debate about whether pornography consumption increases the likelihood a man will rape women is ongoing. In a paper on the subject, Todd Kendall (2007) cites a study which notes that pornography and rape are economically complementary: one is used to arouse the consumer, who will then channel that arousal into a demand for sex. However, Kendall cites another study which claims the opposite: that consumers are already aroused when they seek out pornography, which then acts as a function to relieve their arousal, thereby making pornography a complement of masturbation and consensual sex, and a deterrent of rape.

I believe the more productive endeavour, which serves both the women who choose to work in this industry and all other women, is the approach taken by filmmakers like Erika Lust, Petra Joy and Anna Span. These women make porn for women, which can be enjoyed by women.

They acknowledge that women use pornography as an avenue of sexual expression and therefore they should be able to consume it without feeling violated. In an interview with the Guardian⁴, Lust says she realised pornography has historically been made by men for men and she identified a gap that needed to be filled. This, in my opinion, is more productive than calling for a ban of pornography. We should instead demand that pornography producers use a more gender-sensitive approach.

I appreciate that in most societies, particularly in the South African context, gender-based violence is an epidemic and some believe the sex industry perpetuates this. But in fighting GBV by demonising sexuality, are we not, much like patriarchy, stereotyping women as victims and depriving them of their sexual rights and the freedom to express these rights?

What now?

Sexuality and sensuality and the expression thereof are still mostly unattainable and taboo for women, even in the eyes of many women’s rights activists. Some gender activists maintain that those who choose to embrace their femininity, sexuality and sensuality, as prescribed by patriarchy, do so as a result of patriarchal social conditioning, which renders these women disempowered. To some degree this is true but it ignores the possibility that these women may have also considered this and made a conscious decision that it is what they want. We need to ask ourselves: when does socialisation stop and when does preference begin?

Does pornography fuel incidences of rape in society?

Photo: Sikhonzile Ndlovu
In my view, instead of shaming these women or relegating them to victim status, desperately in need of rescuing, we should applaud and encourage their agency. We should appreciate that the beauty and sensuality of a woman and her body, whatever shape or size, is neither a curse nor something to be ashamed of.

Indeed, we must encourage women to realise that their potential is not limited to their sensuality and sexuality. We must make men see that a woman is much more than her body; that her strengths lie in so many other places too. If a woman chooses a career as a video vixen she should not be judged as a result of that choice.

Rather than calling for the removal of advertisements showing women who have decided to celebrate their physical attributes, we must focus our efforts on ensuring that the media delivers a message of non-violence and respect for all women.

References


Notes
1 http://hoodgrownonline.com/duffle-the-body-hip-hop%25E2%2580%2593-mary-magdalene-hottentot-venus.html
2 http://www.hiphopsummitsouthafrica.com/
4 http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/mar/22/porn-women?INTCMP=SRCH

Writer's Bio
Gaura is a gender activist and writer based in Cape Town.