

# Hating Girls

*An Intersectional Survey of Misogyny*

*Edited by*

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# Objectification and Sexualization of Girls

## *A Case Study*

*Debra Meyers*

Twenty-first century scholars recognize the negative impact degrading females to mere objects or possessions has had on our entire society.<sup>1</sup> And female objectification has led to a significant increase in the sexualization of girls at younger ages. However, this phenomenon is not a recent development linked primarily to the media's representation of sexualized and objectified females as has been argued elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> We can see clearly the objectification and sexualization of girls in the mid twentieth century. Our case study from the 1960s and 70s illustrates the clear and oppressive presence of female objectification and sexualization through the lens of divorce, birth control, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Furthermore, the study illustrates Christianity's culpability for these developments and the devastating long-term effects on society's rape culture today. (Note: the names in the following case study have been removed to protect domestic abuse survivors.)

### 1 Objectification and Sexualization of Girls: A Case Study

After moving to Greece, New York in the early 1960s my father's appearances were few and far between. The situation lasted for several years until my mother shattered her relationship with the Roman Catholic priests who insisted that she hold the family together as her duty to God. Her current situation, they argued, was her just punishment from God for her own sinfulness. Priests unanimously said that a cheating husband who neglected his family

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1 See for instance, Linda Hatch, "The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: A Review, Update, and Commentary" in *The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* (Volume 18, 2011) and L. Monique Ward, "Media and Sexualization: State of Empirical Research, 1995–2015" in *The Journal of Sex Research* (Volume 53, 2016).

2 American Psychological Association, "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" Retrieved from the APA website on August 5, 2020 <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report>.

was a sinful wife's punishment to endure. She must, according to their directive, repent for her sinful behaviors if God was ever to grant her a reprieve from her punishment. I carried the guilt of pushing my mother into this drastic action that forced the church to excommunicate her.<sup>3</sup>

I forced my mother into this drastic position after I found an earring in the front seat of the family car. While I was thrilled to have found such a treasure, my mother was horrified. My mother didn't own any jewelry outside of her wedding ring. The next time that my father appeared in the house after the jewelry's discovery, my mother picked up a pot of boiling water off the stove and threatened to pour it on him. He grabbed her arm in time to avoid this ghastly outcome—it was the first time I witnessed such violence aimed at my father. Normally she focused all of her aggression and hatred on us. I thanked God that I never provoked her to such an act since I wouldn't be able to defend myself like my father had.

After the boiling water incident, my mother threw my father's clothes out into the garage. She screamed and threw things at no one and everyone throughout the day. The depth of her anger frightened all of us.

Begging money from all of her relatives in order to purchase the necessary proof of gross negligence and infidelity, she hired a lawyer and private detective to lay the groundwork for a divorce.

Once my father had moved out, he began picking us up on Sunday afternoons for scheduled visits during the legal separation period. All of my siblings and I were thrilled with this new arrangement since we rarely ever saw my father and now we would have his attention once a week for a few hours. For the first few Sundays, he took us to the park just outside of the zoo. The old dilapidated playground didn't have much to offer a hoard of children between the ages of three and thirteen, but we were in my father's presence and his attention was on us. It felt great!

On the fourth Sunday of these separation visitations, it rained. My father dutifully picked us up at the agreed upon time and drove us around for three hours before dropping us back home. My father lost his temper multiple times with six children in a car for three hours. It wasn't the best Sunday, but it certainly felt good to be included in my father's world even if he was just trying to convince a judge that he cared for his kids. The visits soon became more sporadic when it became clear to my father that he was not going to win the court battle or the best dad award.

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3 The Roman Catholic church reserves the rite of excommunication for the worst sins in which the excommunicated may no longer participate in the sacraments or services of the church.

On what would be our final Sunday visit with our father, he took us to his latest girlfriend's house. She seemed pleasant enough, but I could tell from her facial expressions that we were unwelcome guests in her home. She instructed us to sit quietly on the couch while the adults disappeared down a long hallway. Six children, however, couldn't remain quiet for very long. Minutes later, my angry father reappeared. He hustled us out of the house and into his car. We were all silent. He drove us home without saying a thing. He never picked us up for a Sunday visit again.

When my parent's marriage finally ended, my life changed dramatically. My mother began to leave us alone in the house more often as she searched for a new husband. Sometimes, she brought us with her to Parents Without Partners picnics or other single parent family events, but most times she left the house without us. My brother and I—thirteen and twelve respectively—were ill-equipped to care for our four siblings. Our three-year-old brother fell off the top of his bunk bed one of these evenings, and sliced his forehead opened with a gash that wouldn't stop bleeding. There was so much blood, I thought he might die. In desperation, I sought help from a neighbor who stopped the bleeding. I knew that I would be held responsible for my brother's gaping wound *and* my mother's embarrassment. I wasn't surprised. No more playing around when my mother was away, I vowed.

## 2 Objectification and Sexualization: Religious Dogma

The mother in our case study divorced her husband after eleven long years of having absolutely no control over her own body and her ability to limit her fertility. At the age of 19, she gave birth to her first child and additional children followed in regular intervals until she had amassed a brood of six children long before she reached her thirtieth birthday. Her religion told her that she must yield to her husband's demands for sex regardless of her own desires or the immense stress on her body each new pregnancy imposed upon her. She was an object, not a human being. If a middle-class woman wanted to end a pregnancy, she needed both a doctor and her husband to support a D and C procedure (dilation and curettage) for health reasons.

In addition to the physical abuse of successive pregnancies, the husband's emotional abuse as a serial adulterer took its toll on the young mother in our case study. She was powerless to stop her emotional abuser and she was powerless to provide for her expanding brood. She never had enough money to pay for clothes or food for her hungry family and working outside the home to supplement the family's income was not an option. White married women

with children did not work outside the home. It was not socially acceptable, and it was not feasible given the large number of children who needed supervision. After having to depend on male relatives to secure a lawyer and private detective, the photo evidence of his flagrant infidelity did not guarantee a divorce. The battle was long, expensive, and difficult. Courts assumed a husband behaved badly in response to a wife's deficiencies based on the religious dogma perpetrated in every church.<sup>4</sup>

Televised religious programs in the 1960s addressed marriage problems at a time when many wives sought solutions for their abusive relationships that were often sanctified by religious authorities.<sup>5</sup> In the minds of male ministers, male infidelities and their physical and emotional abuse of wives were all justified intimate partner violence. Male clergy cited biblical text, such as Ephesians 5:22–33 (NIV): “Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church ... and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” This immutable Christian mandate demanded that women be subservient to their husbands regardless of a husband's failure to provide for his family or his physical or emotional abuse. Indeed, male preachers also regularly pointed to a letter to the Colossians sometimes attributed to Paul demanding that “Wives be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord” (Colossians 3:18).<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the word of God transcribed in the Christian Bible formed the very foundation of the objectification and sexualization of females even in the mid-twentieth century. In particular, the Roman Catholic church's prohibition against divorce only reified the grave injustice against women imprisoned in

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4 Debra Meyers, “I Am Heartily Sorry: The Roman Catholic Church and Domestic Abuse,” in Debra Meyers and Mary Sue Barnett, eds. *Crisis and Challenge in the Roman Catholic Church: Perspectives on Decline and Reformation*. Pittsburgh, PA: Rowman and Littlefield (2020) 223–244.

5 Many of Bishop Sheen's televised programs on marriage have been uploaded into YouTube by far-right Catholic groups in their efforts to reinvigorate efforts to subjugate women. See for instance, Sensus Fidelium, “Marriage & Incompatibility—Archbishop Fulton Sheen,” (originally broadcast in 1964), YouTube video, December 29, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtMKPaG7vVA>.

6 Biblical scholars are deeply divided concerning the authorship of Colossians. Only seven of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament are widely judged to be Paul's writings; namely, Corinthians 1&2, Galatians, Philemon, Philippians, Romans, 1 Thessalonians. See for instance: James Dunn and John Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2003) and David Aune, *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

abusive marriages.<sup>7</sup> Religious dogma dominated our culture's objectification of women who existed only for the pleasure of men or for procreation.

Limiting an abused woman's access to divorce by placing the cost of a lawyer and private detective largely out of reach for most women provided another pathway for the patriarchy to control women. We can see this control in American history before the revolution when divorce was rare. For all intents and purposes, a woman's access to divorce rested on a woman's total dependence on a man for her economic survival after a husband's desertion. Under these circumstances, a divorce was a woman's pathway to subsistence in colonial America. Granting a divorce after desertion allowed a woman to remarry and thus, she and her children would pose less of a burden to her community.

Men, on the other hand, began to see divorce as their right to "liberty" on their road to their "pursuit of happiness" after the American Revolution. Men frequently left their wives to fend for themselves as they took all of the marital property—real estate, furniture, and other material goods—after a divorce. Some men had their wives committed to an insane asylum, but if they wanted to remarry, men had to file for a legal divorce. A man seeking divorce also legally owned the family's children. When a middle-class man sued for divorce, he typically only allowed his wife to leave the family home with her jewelry and her personal clothing. She had few options for financially supporting herself.

Women by the middle of the twentieth century had gained more opportunities to file for divorce and often had the ability to keep her children, but courts rarely granted divorce without solid proof of blatant infidelity as well as proof of a husband's failure to adequately provide food, clothing, and a suitable place to live for his family. Such obstacles proved insurmountable for most women who did not have access to bank loans, credit cards, or savings accounts. It wasn't until 1969 that a woman could file for a "no-fault" divorce in California on the basis of irreconcilable differences, but it took a long time for other states to grant women a way out of an abusive marriage without having to hire expensive private detectives.<sup>8</sup> Even then, a divorced woman faced social stigma and few economic pathways to support herself and her children unless she remarried.

Standardized tests revealed in the 1960s that scholastic achievement for girls declined by the time they reached high school as caregivers and teachers

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7 Hayley Gleeson and Julia Baird, "‘Their cross to bear’: The Catholic women told to forgive domestic violence," *ABC News*, November 4, 2017, [abc.net.au/news/2017-11-04](http://abc.net.au/news/2017-11-04).

8 See for instance, Stephanie Coontz, "The Origins of Modern Divorce" in *Family Process* (Volume 46, 2007).



inculcated their own low-level expectations on girls.<sup>9</sup> And yet even with low expectations for intellectual achievements, many women had to work to survive. These women were often paid much less than men. In response to this reality, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 required equal wages for men and women doing the same work. Further, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on sex for any companies that had more than 25 employees. But discrimination continued to exist long after these laws were adopted. In the 1970s women made approximately half of what their male counterparts earned, a trend that continues today.<sup>10</sup> Mid-twentieth century married women could not possess a credit card in their names, could not apply for a loan, and could not undergo elective surgery without their husband's permission. Divorced and single women found it nearly impossible to purchase a car or a house. And married women who did find work as teachers, nurses, librarians, clerks, retail saleswomen, and in the food service industry were summarily dismissed if they became pregnant. No one wanted to see a pregnant woman outside of her home. Society held women responsible and penalized them for their large bellies, but in actual fact women had very little choice in managing their fertility.

When methods of birth control were available, they remained largely under the control of men. After the first rubber condom infiltrated popular culture in the United States, male legislators adopted the 1873 Comstock Act prohibiting the sale of condoms via the US postal system. Male legislators also had the power to sterilize women who they deemed insane, diseased, or feeble-minded. These laws targeted women of color in particular and poor women in general. In 1914, Margaret Sanger used the term "birth control" to counter what many women believed to be forced motherhood and she began her campaign to educate women and provide clinics for women's healthcare. Women opened nearly 400 birth control clinics across the country by 1939 often providing diaphragms in order to give women real control over their fertility for the first time in history. The Food and Drug Administration approved the first oral hormone-based contraceptive in 1960, but a woman needed her husband's permission to gain access to the drug. Oral contraceptives for unmarried women would

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9 Bart Golsteyn and Trudie Schils, "Gender Gaps in Primary School Achievement: A decomposition into endowments and returns to IQ and non-cognitive factors," in *Economics of Education Review* (Volume 41, August 2014) 176–187.

10 See for instance, Marlene Kim, "Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work," in *Monthly Labor Review* (Issue 9, September 2000) 26–30 and Mahshid Jalilvand, "Married Women, Work, and Values" in *Monthly Labor Review* (Issue 8, August 2000) 26–31.

not be legalized until 1972.<sup>11</sup> The entire controversy over women's access to contraception and abortion always harkens back to the early Christian dogma placing females in subordinate positions objectified and sexualized until they become merely vessels for male sperm.

### 3 A Case Study Continued

Eventually, my mother found a suitable mate and they made plans to move us to his house in Webster, New York right after their nuptials. It seemed like a good plan to me at the time. This new man in my mother's life always greeted me with warmth and affection, something that I desperately wanted. He was tall, thin, balding, and had blond facial hair and soft hands. A stark contrast to my father's calloused hands, massive build, dark complexion, and clean-shaven face. My new stepfather always had a smile on his face. We didn't seem to annoy him—at least in the beginning.

His own daughter was exactly the same age as my youngest brother. She came to play several times at the house in Webster, but she was easily overwhelmed by our collective presence. And as quickly as she had entered our lives, she disappeared. No one explained her total absence from our new family, and we were not encouraged to talk about it. I had a terrible sense of foreboding. There was something that didn't feel quite right about the new situation. I just couldn't put my finger on it yet.

My stepfather's split-level house had a colossal fish tank near the front door with dozens of beautiful tropical fish, and a family room, and bathroom on the entry level. The second level contained the living room, dining room, and kitchen. Three bedrooms and another bathroom were on the third floor. My stepfather planned to build a fourth bedroom for his expanding family in the basement next to his workshop. It all seemed OK at first. Well, almost OK.

My mother had arrived home from a short honeymoon in Florida sporting a huge blackeye. She told everyone that she had fallen and that she was so glad that her new husband had been there to take care of her. But I knew that my new stepfather had established his dominance with this physical abuse. The message was quite clear for all of us. My mother was notably subservient in his presence after this first violent act. She waited on him with deference and kept his rules and daily schedule with marked precision from that day forward.

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11 Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

I met this new power hierarchy with a good deal of ambivalence. What could be worse than the mental and physical abuse my mother had doled out for years, I wondered. I didn't have long to wait to find out.

After preparing her clothes, hair, and makeup for an hour, my mother would meet my stepfather at the door with a warm smile, a freshly made cocktail, and kiss on the cheek when he came home from work every night at 5:30. He would sit in his living room recliner and listen to classical music with his perfect Manhattan in hand until my mother had dinner on the table at precisely 6:30. He encouraged me to sit with him and listen to the music before dinner. Starved for positive parental attention, I eagerly complied. I enjoyed the music and I took great pleasure in his undivided attention as he explained the composers' work. I felt special and valued for the first time in my life. After dinner, I would clear the table, wash the dishes, put them away, and then put my younger siblings to bed. If there was time after my chores were done, I did my homework. I felt grateful for the stable environment in this new life. This routine felt very comfortable and we appreciated the new regular dinner arrangements that included meat, potatoes, and vegetables every night.

I easily pushed my trepidation to one side when my stepfather invited me to a restaurant to celebrate my fourteenth birthday. I never had a birthday party. Indeed, my mother did not celebrate birthdays at our house. Having been deprived of parental affection up until this point, my stepfather's level of interest in me helped to push my reservations to the back of my mind. He took me to the Aloha! restaurant. Decorated as I thought a restaurant in Hawaii might look like, dimmed lights, a waterfall, soft ukulele music, and a wall painting of volcanoes filled me with awe. While we waited for our dinners to arrive, he took me to the dance floor for a slow dance. I welcomed this new level of affection, attention, and intimacy. I felt loved. But this satisfying feeling of love would not last long.

"You stink," my mother said matter-of-factly one day when I arrived home from school. She presented me with a can of deodorant spray and told me that I needed to apply this liberally before sitting with my stepfather in the evening. I dutifully complied.

The next rule applied to all six of us. My siblings and I must only use the first-floor bathroom because we left the upstairs bathroom in a mess constantly. No problem. I would comply with that rule too.

And then I heard the noise. I sat down on the toilet and heard metal scraping metal. It wasn't a loud noise, but it was real. Strange, I thought to myself.

Another evening after I had cleaned the kitchen and put the youngest siblings to bed, I thought I'd take a shower. As I removed my clothes in the

downstairs bathroom, I took the opportunity to stare at myself in the mirror. My body was changing.

And then I heard the now familiar metal scraping sound. Odd, I thought. The metal scraping sound occurred with some regularity now, but only in the evenings. It seemed to be coming from the heating vent located on the wall near the floor.

Curious, I went into the basement to investigate the heating vent after school one day. I opened the often-locked door to my stepfather's workshop and much to my horror I found a flange on the sheet metal that covered the heating vent for the main floor bathroom. The sheet metal could be moved back and forth to provide an unobstructed view into the first-floor bathroom. I vomited when I replayed in my mind the many times I heard the metal scraping noise while I was naked. Welcome to a new kind of hell, I thought.

I quickly cleaned up the vomit and placed everything back exactly as I had found it so that he wouldn't know I had discovered his secret. Should I say something to my mother? Should I tell my sisters? Even if someone believed me, what good would come of it? He might just retaliate in ways that I couldn't imagine. Best to keep quiet right now, I thought.

From then on, I only used the toilet and shower before he arrived home from work or after he went to bed. When my sisters used the bathroom when he was home, I would distract him with questions about classical music. Problem solved, I thought.

And then he implemented rule number three: no locks on the doors. My stepfather spent an entire Saturday taking the locks off of the bedroom and bathroom doors. He did not, however, take the locks off his bedroom, his bathroom, or his basement workshop. He never said why he was taking this peculiar action and my mother didn't seem to care one way or another. Everyone went about their day without even acknowledging my stepfather's predatory actions. This new development didn't bode well for me. I knew instinctively that he was coming for me.

I felt like my personal hell was spiraling downward at a faster pace. But why? What had I done to deserve this horrendous hell? My Catholic upbringing told me that I was being punished for my actions, my beliefs, or my thoughts. I needed to figure out what kind of sin I was committing before my punishments spiraled out of control.

God was punishing me for something terrible—I just wish I knew what it was. Was I so evil that I couldn't even identify my sin? Oh God. Perhaps that was it. But whatever action I thought I could take to avoid my stepfather's next step was too little, too late.

It was late, nearly midnight, when he quietly opened the door to the room I shared with my sisters. The moonlight streaming through the window lit up the room well enough for me to see who the intruder was. My stomach contents started creeping up into my throat. I held my breath in anticipation of his next move. Should I scream? Should I comply? Would my sisters wake up before he was done with me? Would he touch my sisters too? So many questions and absolutely no answers. My previous experiences didn't prepare me for what would happen next. I squeezed my eyes tightly closed. Silent obedience would be my default setting.

The assault ended quickly. He stood up and adjusted his clothes before opening the door. He left without saying a word. I could still feel his hot moist breath on my neck and the disgusting slime between my legs. I thanked God that he didn't touch my sisters.

I instinctively knew that my mother would blame me if I told her what happened. She witnessed and encouraged my nightly classical music liaisons with my stepfather. She would point to my daily practice of sitting on the arm of his recliner every evening before dinner. And wasn't I the one who carefully sprayed deodorant under my arms every evening before he arrived home? It was entirely my fault. I asked for his sexual assaults. There would be no reason to blame her husband and there was the real possibility that she was an accomplice in this.

Of course, I couldn't tell anyone else. First, there was no one else to tell. My father, who never actively participated in my life, had disappeared from our lives entirely. No loving extended family members ever materialized in my life to provide safety and security. I had no teacher or counselor take an interest in me at school. There was no one to tell and even if there was, they would just confront my mother and stepfather. I was mature enough to know that a confrontation would make my life worse.

And when all was said and done, I truly believed that I had asked for this situation. I had to take the blame for wanting someone to hold me, value me, love me. So, I kept our secret meeting to myself.

#### 4 Objectification and Sexualization: Grooming Girls

Older men intent on exploiting young girls for sexual satisfaction often possess a keen eye for vulnerable girls desperate for adult attention.<sup>12</sup> Offenders

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<sup>12</sup> See Jennifer E. O'Brien and Wen Li, "The Role of the Internet in the Grooming, Exploitation, and Exit of United States Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims," in *Journal of Children*

condition their victims in a process that is often referred to as grooming. After having selected a malleable target, the pedophile watches the victim carefully in order to identify specific needs of his victim. Once identified, the offender takes on the role of caretaker when he attends to the victim's needs—in this case, providing attention and affection. Once he has established trust as the victim's caretaker filling a social or psychological void, he can create intimate space in which to foster a strong connection with the victim to cement emotional dependence, such as the daily classical music liaisons in our case study. Once the perpetrator has created emotional dependence, he initiates sexual contact. This process ensures, to a certain degree, the predator's ability to maintain control over the victim. It is difficult for a child entangled in this sexualized relationship to call for an end to the relationship which would mean an end to the emotional and material needs that the perpetrator is providing. Children may often feel that the loss of this relationship and the consequences of exposing it may actually make the child feel more unwanted and unloved.<sup>13</sup> This prevents most women from coming forward even decades after they have been violated.

This grooming process proves to be efficacious as vulnerable girls seeking compassion and love, once violated, struggle with the emotional attachment the grooming process created alongside the knowledge that they were violated by an adult they trusted. These conflicting perceptions lead to guilt feelings that prevent victims from reaching out for help even years after the assaults. Indeed, they often feel that they have initiated the abuse by their own desire to feel valued and loved as we see in our case study.<sup>14</sup> Manipulating the victim into essentially a cooperative partner reduces the likelihood that the victim will ever disclose the violations to anyone of consequence. And in our case study scenario, our predator appears to have sought assistance in the grooming process from the victim's mother relying on her own low self-esteem and

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*and Media* (Volume 14, issue 2, 2020) and Cindy Miller-Perrin and Sandy Wurtele, "Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children," in *Women and Therapy* (Volume 40, issue 2, 2017) 123–151.

- 13 Michael Welner, "Child Sexual Abuse: 6 Stages of Grooming" Retrieved from website on August 10, 2020 <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/child-sexual-abuse-6-stages-of-grooming/all>.
- 14 See for instance, "What is Grooming of Sexual Abuse Victims?" From the Doan Law Firm website accessed August 14, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.thedoanlawfirm.com/blog/2020/july/what-is-grooming-of-sexual-abuse-victims-/>. See also "The Scope of Child Sexual Abuse Definition and Fact Sheet," Retrieved from Stop it Now! Website accessed August 14, 2020 at <https://www.stopitnow.org/faq/the-scope-of-child-sexual-abuse-definition-and-fact-sheet>.

his physical dominance over her to gain her cooperation.<sup>15</sup> All the while, both mother and daughter accepted the sexual and emotional abuse as righteous punishment for their sins as they had been directed to do after years of religious indoctrination.

## 5 A Case Study Continued

I didn't tell anyone what had happened. Instead, I continued to work on becoming a better Catholic as a means to a better and safer life. I cleansed myself of bad thoughts and deeds and prayed the Act of Contrition every day: "Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin." And yet, my hellish punishments didn't subside regardless of how "heartily sorry" I was.<sup>16</sup>

I ran away from home (twice) thinking that I could escape my punishment from hell, but the police returned me home both times—even when I got as far away as South Carolina. True to form, my mother punished me for my lack of concern for others and the cost of my plane ticket home. I would do my regular chores after school and then spend my weekends in my room. No bathroom privileges, no food, no contact with others from sundown on Friday until Monday morning. I took this new hell in stride. I squirreled away crackers and containers of water in several different places in my room. I kept a pee pot and toilet paper under my bed, and I made sure that I had all the materials necessary for completing my homework before the end of the school day on Fridays. This hell was manageable. My stepfather's punishments, however, would not be.

Once a week while I was sequestered in my room for the weekend, my stepfather would take me into his basement workroom and lock the door. He

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15 Martin Shawn Rutledge, "Biological Father/Daughter Sexual Abuse and Step-Father/Step-Daughter Sexual Abuse Compared" thesis for Master of Social Work at the University of Manitoba (1991).

16 The Act of Contrition is part of the Roman Catholic ritual of reconciliation in which the sinner repents for all of their sins and is then absolved by a priest. This is a necessary prerequisite to receiving the sacrament of the holy Eucharist (bread transformed through the process of transubstantiation into the body of Christ) symbolizing one's communion with the congregation and God as a visible sign of God's grace.

demanded that I remove all of my clothes and bend over for the paddling I so righteously deserved. This somehow felt more degrading, disgusting, and disabling than the sexual assaults that continued unabated. But it also reinforced the notion that I was the sinful accomplice. Indeed, the message clearly conveyed that I was responsible for *his* behavior.

And then there was rule number four. If you are not useful to the head of household, you are not welcome in his house. Few of my father's children made the cut and they were abruptly shipped off to other relatives to live. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye to my brothers and sisters. Once my stepfather determined that one of my siblings had no value, he or she was gone the next day. Of course, possible witnesses to his sexual assaults, such as my sisters, were the first to be sent away. I prayed that their lives would be better in their new homes. In the end, my new half-brother, still in diapers, my older brother, and I were the only children in the house.

Let me rephrase that. My two brothers were children, I never felt like a child. I felt more like an unwanted dog. Useful for a short time and then totally valueless—that was how I would characterize myself. Like an unwanted dog, I knew that I had to provide some valuable service in order to survive.

So, I cleaned, cooked, did the laundry and the ironing, babysat my youngest brother, and serviced the master of the house while my older brother mowed the lawn, shoveled the driveway, painted, took care of the garbage, and cleaned the garage. My older brother often had free time after completing his chores. He joined the school wrestling team and attended events with friends. My usefulness took up nearly all of my time. I hardly had time to complete homework and I definitely did not have time for friends.

I didn't really recognize my resentment toward my brother until his 16th birthday. My mother spent a day decorating the house. She had scrimped on the family's meager food budget for weeks in order to buy enough ground beef, hamburger buns, soda pop, and potato chips for the special occasion. And of course, there was cake. A beautiful vanilla cake with chocolate frosting—enough for two dozen teenagers.

I was responsible for inviting all of my brother's friends to his surprise party. With a blatant disregard for my most important survival strategies—silent obedience—I only invited one person, a neighbor that my brother disliked. My brother was deeply hurt. I had ruined his birthday. I had ruined his life.

My mother was furious. Absolutely furious. She worked so hard to make this 16th birthday party special and I had ruined everything. My inability to adequately assess the ramifications of my actions had been superseded by my need for revenge. Or was it an unconscious death wish?



My mother grew increasingly hostile after this event. In addition to my weekend incarcerations, she began to crash through my bedroom door in the middle of the night to yank me by my hair to redo a cleaning task that did not meet her approval. Scrubbing the kitchen floor at two o'clock in the morning became a fairly regular part of my daily routine.

If only my knight in shining armor knew my situation. All of the fairy tales I had ever heard assured me that he would come and save me. But he never came. I began to wonder if he ever really existed at all.

## 6 Objectification and Sexualization of Girls: The Media

Our case study survivor waited for her knight in shining armor to save her. Films, fairy tales, and television shows all shared that same message for young girls—a man will save you from the abuses you suffer.<sup>17</sup> But no one acknowledged our survivor's abuses. And certainly no one came to rescue her, or her mother, or her siblings.

The 2007 landmark American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force report on the sexualization of females highlighted the role the media plays in objectifying and sexualizing girls at a young age that in turn contributes to the abuse of women and girls in a rape culture society. Oversexualizing females in the media, according to the study, contributes to attitudes and assumptions in both males and females that promote sexism leading to significant mental health problems. Some of the most detrimental mental health issues, according to the study, that stem from hypersexualized media and marketing include feelings of shame, body appearance anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, and injurious ideas relating to sexual consent. The hypersexualization of females in the media and marketing directly impact the objectification and dehumanization of females that can manifest in pervasive violence against females.<sup>18</sup> According to the National Statistics Domestic Violence, *one*

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17 See for instance, Bell, Haas, et al., *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, Johnson Cheu, *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, Holtzman and Sharpe, *Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, and Benschoff and Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*.

18 American Psychological Association, "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" Retrieved from the APA website on August 5, 2020 <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report>.

*out of every five women* in the United States has been raped and these women suffer from much higher rates of depression and suicide than other females.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, the findings in the American Psychological Association Task Force report are not unique to the United States and they do not depend entirely on the media. Our case study survivor, for instance, had very little access to the media. She saw one movie during her childhood, the household did not have books, and they often had no working television. Moreover, many places throughout the world have little access to the media. And yet, the objectification and subsequent dehumanization of females forms the basis of rape culture that pervades the globe. According to UNICEF, “The objectification and sexualization of girls in the media is linked to violence against women and girls worldwide. Media normalizes the act of dominance and aggression against women by constantly showcasing them as objects of pleasure and associating them with commodity.”<sup>20</sup> Patriarchy across the globe appears to be the foundation of this objectification and sexualization. And the patriarchy is supported and empowered by Christianity.

Christian dogmas for more than a thousand years have marginalized women as a means to solidify cultural patriarchy that forms the foundation of the major religious sects in the United States.<sup>21</sup> The central premise of women

19 NCADV, *National Statistics Domestic Violence Fact Sheet*. NCADV webpage retrieved August 19, 2020 from <https://www.ncadv.org/statistics>.

20 Jaimee Swift and Hannah Gould, “Not an Object: On Sexualization and Exploitation of Women and Girls” (January 2020) Retrieved from UNICEF USA’s website on August 5, 2020 [https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/not-object-sexualization-and-exploitation-women-and-girls/30366?webSyncID=7b2514a7-6d5d-6ec1-a073-b5571d0576a8&sessionGUID=65879593-3442-144b-6887-053827d3ec94&\\_ga=2.121551435.2132436888.1596722461-858287951.1596722461](https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/not-object-sexualization-and-exploitation-women-and-girls/30366?webSyncID=7b2514a7-6d5d-6ec1-a073-b5571d0576a8&sessionGUID=65879593-3442-144b-6887-053827d3ec94&_ga=2.121551435.2132436888.1596722461-858287951.1596722461).

21 See for instance, Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, eds. *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press (2012) and Loreen Maseno and Elia Shabani Mligo, *Women within Religions: Patriarchy, Feminism, and the Role of Women in Selected World Religions*, Wipf and Stock (2019). Karen Armstrong argues that it was the development of monotheistic religions, with their all-powerful male Gods (such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam) that directly led to the patriarchal and sexist core or religious dogma when goddesses and priestesses were summarily replaced with male prophets and gods. [Karen Armstrong, *History of God: The 4000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Vintage (2004).]. See also Judith Plaskow, “Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7, no. 2 (1991): 99–108. Accessed August 18, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/25002158](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002158). Nawal El Sadaawi, on the other hand, argues that religions do not cause women’s exploitation and oppression. But rather, patriarchal societies cause this exploitation and oppression. Sadaawi argues that men use religious beliefs and ideas to control women. Nawal El Sadaawi, *Women at Point Zero*, Zed Books (2015). Feminists, such as Simone De Beauvoir, have long argued religion targets women with messages that

as evil and useless outside of procreation allowed men in power to solidify and expand their power and authority once 51% of the population was essentially neutralized. Early Christian theology proscribed obedient helper status to women whose primary purpose centered on her ability to produce viable male heirs. St. Jerome in the fourth century labeled women as “gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of a serpent.” In other words, a woman was a “perilous object.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Thomas Aquinas (c. 1239), referred to a woman as “a man’s helpmeet” made expressly for procreation “since for other purposes men would be better assisted by other men.”<sup>23</sup> These efficacious ideas for maintaining patriarchy permeated both Catholic and Protestant thought and came to influence cultural attitudes concerning contraception and women’s bodies as objects to be controlled, while condoning intimate partner violence as a means of controlling females in the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

## 7 The Case Study Conclusion

As my mother’s second marriage crumbled, she targeted me as the whipping post of least resistance. When my stepfather moved out of the house, his sexual assaults were soon replaced with my mother’s ramped up physical abuse. Sleepless nights scrubbing floors often had me thinking about the best, least messy, methods of suicide. God forbid that I leave a mess behind when I died. If I did, she would probably follow me to hell and drag me back by my hair to clean up my mess.

And then my mother took a job outside of the house for the first time ever. She worked for a small company only a few miles away. I felt like I hit the jackpot. Of course, it meant more work for me after school, but my mother was often too tired to beat the daylights out of me in the evening. The night terror of being pulled by the hair to clean the kitchen floor stopped. I thanked God for allowing me to sleep through the night again. One by one my siblings returned

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focus on their duty to cook, clean, have babies, and tolerate inequality and oppression in the hopes of a reward in heaven. [Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage (2011).]

22 St. Jerome, “Woman,” Retrieved from Statusquoteswishes.com website (December 2019). Retrieved from <https://statusquoteswishes.com/st-jerome-quotes/>.

23 Kristin Popik, “The Philosophy of Woman of St. Aquinas.” Catholic Culture Website retrieved July 2020 <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=2793>.

24 Approximately half of all rapes are perpetrated against females by someone they know. [NCADV, *National Statistics Domestic Violence Fact Sheet*. NCADV webpage retrieved August 19, 2020 from <https://www.ncadv.org/statistics>.]

from their banishment. It was good to have my brothers and sisters living in the house again. Nothing was said about their return. Life seemed good, perhaps for the first time. God had finally heard my prayers and Acts of Contrition.

My mother met a young handyman who worked for her employer. He was closer to my age than to hers, but she seemed quite happy with her new beau. I wasn't going to stick around to see what new kind of hell this would bring to my bedroom, so I moved out the moment that I graduated high school.

My mother, her five young children, and this handyman moved to Sodus, New York. It was a quiet little town where many people from Rochester owned summer cottages on Lake Ontario. Housing was old and cheap for the sturdy people who chose to live there year-round. The winters were brutal, but the summers were pleasant.

There were times when I felt like I had abandoned my younger siblings, but the new guy seemed OK and my mother appeared happy and less violent. I wouldn't find out how this third husband groomed one of my sisters for sex until years later.

I had very few employment options since I wasn't male, and I didn't have a family member who worked for Kodak that could get me into an entry level position on the night shift. So, I worked at a fast-food establishment. I worked hard and showed up for my shifts on time.

I felt free. Free from violence for the first time in my life. After only a few months, the manager asked if I would be interested in taking the assistant manager training. I thought long and hard considering my options carefully. I often closed the store with our assistant manager. She didn't work as hard as I did, but she stayed well beyond the time when I left the store and she closed every weekend. And while she did have to practically climb into the shake machine to clean it every night, she spent a good deal of her time counting inventory and filing paperwork.

I hated cleaning the public restrooms, scooping maggots from the meat discard container, and closing down the greasy hot fryer. But the worst part of my job was cleaning the slicer. It was so sharp, I never felt the deep cuts into my fingers—nearly down to the bone—until the blood was dripping profusely down my arm and onto my grungy, smelly uniform.

Clearly, an assistant manager's job was easier, but I wasn't willing to give up my new-found pleasure—bar hopping in the evenings. So, I declined my manager's kind offer. But the cost/benefit analysis left me contemplating my future for the first time. For the first time, I believed I *had* a future.

For sure, I didn't want to be shoveling fake roast beef sandwiches for the rest of my life and cleaning public toilets. Fortunately, one of the other servers at

the store attended the local community college. She would go on and on about the difficult classes she was taking to become a dental hygienist. Without a working television most of the time while I was growing up and living in a blue-collar community where higher education wasn't an option for the majority of high school graduates, I never knew that there was a community college just 20 miles from my high school.

I began asking the community college student questions, soaking in all of the information. I drove to the college one morning before work in my less than dependable "rot box" car and I parked right in front of the center of a very long building. When I walked through the doors, it felt rather similar to the high school I had attended—similar enough that I could imagine myself coming to this place. I talked to one of the friendly office staff and immediately signed up for the mechanical technology program. No one discouraged me even though it was an overwhelmingly male program.

And no one discouraged me after looking over my transcripts *that didn't include any high school science*. My high school guidance counselor didn't think a girl like me was going to need science classes in high school and they weren't mandated by the state for graduation. I had a strange suspicion that I would regret not taking the science classes, but I was in too much of a hurry to graduate early to care about the details. Fortunately, I had all of the required math for this math and science focused program, and I was smart enough to pick up the science that I needed.

I finished this program in two years while working full time. This educational opportunity gave me a better income, a better life, and the promise of a better future. I had never dreamed of having a real future. I never dreamed at all. Now, I had a great career, a lovely townhouse, a new car, and a future. This community college saved my life.

## 8 Objectification and Sexualization: The Impact

Our case study suggests that females, despite the pervasive cultural objectification and sexualization of girls, can and do persist in our rape culture. Despite having lived through hell, our case study survivor never killed anyone (or even contemplated killing anyone other than herself), she never succumbed to addiction, and she did not end up living on the streets. But she did sever all ties with her parents and the siblings who did not live up to our survivor's expectations regarding trust and loyalty. When she heard that her mother and father had died decades later, she did not shed a single tear and she did not spend a second grieving. Not a second.

Since that pinnacle moment at the fast food store when she realized *that she had a future*, she never looked back. However, the scars of her objectification and sexualization remained. She has an unbounded empathy for the downtrodden and abused. Her life's work often focuses on helping single moms build their self-esteem and break the constraints of poverty through higher education. She also devotes herself to assisting domestic abuse victims and promulgating equal rights for the LGBTQ community. Her deep empathy propels her to work for social justice on many levels. Her social justice work often rests on her problem-solving skills and her ability to critically analyze verbal and nonverbal cues. All of these skills and character traits can be directly linked to survival strategies formed during an oppressive childhood of objectification and sexualization.

Needless to say, her negative character traits also have their antecedents in her destructive childhood experiences. While she takes an intense interest in listening to the problems and concerns of others, she rarely shares her own private thoughts and feelings. An administrator once told her that she would increase her chances of promotion if she socialized with and befriended her co-workers. Good advice to be sure, but if her continued employment depended on making friends, she was in real trouble. Making friends and trusting people with her vulnerabilities continues to be a challenge throughout her life's journey.

Additionally, our case study survivor's childhood experiences have prevented her from taking risks—risks with her career, her financial goals, as well as her family plans. Safe, reliable, predictable, and steady decisions rule her adult life. She does not take chances. Controlling her environment, her actions, and outcomes provides our survivor with the stability, safety, and peace of mind that eluded her throughout her childhood. Yet, her need for safety and control held her back from being the best that she could be and probably prevented her from encouraging her own children to take more chances. That is perhaps her deepest regret even though she recognizes that there was little she could change about her inability to embrace risk-taking given her childhood experiences.

Our case study survivor's early experiences helped her to create and hone analytic skills that have aided her in many ways, but they have also created a pesky and off-putting requisite to overthink everything—literally everything. Overthinking prevents our survivor from taking any risks at all when it comes to life-changing decisions, but it impacts even the smallest decisions to the point of preventing quick and decisive actions when circumstances demand immediate action.

But perhaps the most negative impact of our survivor's childhood has been her inability to feel happiness and satisfaction because of a sense of limited self-worth coupled with a sense of shame and guilt—all harkening back to her parent's Catholic upbringing and their imposition of the man-made dogma on their family that emphasized human wickedness and punishment.<sup>25</sup> Never having felt worthy of anyone's love, affection, or attention has been our survivor's biggest regret and perhaps the most unavoidable consequence of her lost youth.

The objectification and subsequent dehumanization of females, however pervasive around the globe, did not begin in the twenty-first century. Its roots lie in the previous century where we can see the effects in the 1970s clearly in our case study. Religious dogma formed the foundation for hypersexualized females in the media eons before our modern media materialized.<sup>26</sup> I have argued here that the sexual abuse of objectified and sexualized girls by older men stems from Christian doctrine's emphasis on females as evil and sexually promiscuous. Media normalizes the act of dominance and aggression against women by constantly showcasing them as objects of pleasure and associating them with commodity. This objectification often finds its genesis in all of the major religions.<sup>27</sup>

So, how do we move forward from this decidedly repulsive rape culture that objectifies and sexualizes girls? First and foremost, we need to educate. Everyone must acknowledge the objectification and sexualization of girls that creates the foundation for our social attitudes toward females stemming from Christian misogynist religious dogma. Next, we need to refuse to tolerate objectification and sexualization of girls in the media, in our religious beliefs, as well as our culture more generally. And finally, we need to provide healing for victims who might be our best hope for educating communities to bring this destructive patriarchy to an end.

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25 Debra Meyers, "I Am Heartily Sorry: The Roman Catholic Church and Domestic Abuse," in Debra Meyers and Mary Sue Barnett, eds. *Crisis and Challenge in the Roman Catholic Church: Perspectives on Decline and Reformation*. Pittsburgh, PA: Rowman and Littlefield (2020) 223–244.

26 Ibid.

27 Michael J. Formica, "Objectification and Sexualization of Women," *Psychology Today* (June 2, 2008). Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/enlightened-living/200806/objectification-and-sexualization-women>.

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