Coming to terms with sexualization

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Additional Information:

- This article was accepted for publication in the European Journal of Cultural Studies: http://ecs.sagepub.com/content/14/5/491

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/13277

Version: Submitted for publication

Publisher: © Sage

Please cite the published version.
Coming to terms with sexualization: AUTHORS

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Published as:

Coming to terms with sexualization: ABSTRACT

Not since the feminist pornography debates of the 1980ies, has there been such an outburst of discussion, research, and publications about the ubiquity and impact of sexualized images of women and girls. Unlike the 1980ies, however, nowadays the debate is carried by governments and other mainstream social actors, who have produced many regulatory and policy initiatives. Nevertheless, to hail the current attacks on sexualization as a belated victory for feminism is intellectually naive and politically problematic for a number of reasons we discuss in this article. First, we contend that the current sexualization policies, involve academic analyses and political solutions to sexualization which are firmly cast in the discourse of liberal feminism (equal opportunities) and neo liberalism (individual responsibility). Second, inevitable in the current work on sexualization is an identity of girls and young women as ‘victims’ in need of protection. We draw from our research among 12 and 13 year old Dutch girls to refute that construction and emphasise the tactics of resistance, negotiation and accommodation that these girls have developed. Third, we claim that current sexualization concerns are a-historical in their oblivion to similar sexualisation panics in the previous decades, and to the years of feminist cultural analysis and critique in this arena.
Coming to terms with sexualization: TEXT

Sexualization is firmly back on the agenda of feminist intellectuals and researchers from various academic backgrounds, particularly in the USA, the UK and continental Europe. Not since the pornography debates of the 1980ies, has there been such an outburst of discussion, research, and publications about the ubiquity and impact of sexual images of women and girls. Unlike the 1980ies, however, nowadays governmental, political and social actors share what previously seemed exclusively feminist concerns, and they have produced many a regulation and policy initiative. Nevertheless, to hail the current attacks on sexualization as a belated victory for feminism is intellectually naive and politically problematic for a number of reasons. For sure, one can be glad with the general critical mode towards representation, and the recognition of how annoying it can be to live in a culture so pervaded by images of perfect and (hetero)sexualized, predominantly female bodies. What is worrying, however, is that the current psychologised discourse of sexualization conceals its political allegiance, and that it is devoid of any intellectual memory, especially with respect to two axioms of media and cultural studies, namely that texts are polysemic and that reception is active.¹ In this article, we will therefore first criticize the current sexualization debates from a feminist historical and political perspective. We will then use our research about sexualization among 12 to 13 year old girls in the Netherlands to identify the academic problems of the current policy approaches; problems that have in its turn, political repercussions, which we will discuss in our conclusion.

Sexualization in perspective
A recent attempt to intervene in contemporary sexualized culture comes from the English Home Office which commissioned a review of sexualization research in the context of its

¹ Buckingham’s (2010) study for the Scottish Equal Opportunities Commission is an exception.
policies countering violence against women and girls (Papadopoulos, 2010). The Scottish Equal Opportunities Committee has similarly launched a review of the presence of sexualized products for children in toy, clothing and other stores (Buckingham, 2010). The Australian Senate commanded an inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment in 2008 (Sexualisation, 2008), while the Dutch government proposed a policy against the sexualisation of girls and young women in its Emancipation Strategy of 2008 – 2011 (Meer kansen, 2008). The American Psychological Association produced a thorough summary of psychological research about sexualization of the past decades, which received prominent media attention from across the globe, and has become a standard reference for the above mentioned reviews and campaigns, and many other initiatives (APA 2007). By and large, these research and policy reviews are informed by psychological effects studies, and conclude that girls are negatively affected by contemporary sexualized culture. Low self-esteem, a distorted body-image, promiscuous behaviour and diminished intellectual performance are only a few of the many effects attributed to sexualization. Each report is accompanied by numerous recommendations aimed at governments, education, media and cultural industries, and parents.

The reports, recommendations and ensuing government policies, may be taken as evidence that, after some 30 years, feminism finally achieved the common acceptance of one of its main goals, namely improving the portrayal of women and girls in media and culture. Not so long ago, criticism about the sexualized images of women in the media, could be put away as an obsession of radical activists who were regularly accused of being frustrated ‘killjoys’. The fate of UK Labour MP and feminist Claire Short who, in 1986, tried to introduce legislation against the standard display of topless models in British tabloids (the Page Three Girls) is telling: the tabloids vilified her as ‘fat, jealous and ugly’ (Short, Tunks and Hutchinson, 1986). In contrast, the 2010 Papadopoulos report of the English Home Office, received neutral to supportive coverage from the UK tabloids.
and its readers. Yet, the previous claims of feminists seem hardly different from the current analyses of governments. While authors such as Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in the 1980ies introduced the slogan ‘Porn is the theory, rape is the practice’, current policy research identifies a ‘continuum of sexualization’ that starts with the sexual evaluation of girls and young women, and ends with their physical sexual exploitation; the terminology may be different, the identification of a mechanism of sexualization that develops from bad to worse is similar. Another example of different terminologies but similar assessments comes from a comparison of the APA conclusions of 2007 with the findings of a UK Media Monitoring group published in 1987 (Davies, Dickey and Stratford, 1987).

<table>
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<th>Davies, Dickey and Stratford, 1987 (p. 72)</th>
<th>APA, 2007 (p.15, p.35)</th>
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<td>The portrayal of women as sex objects trivialises, degrades and dehumanizes us. This affects the way we are viewed by men and the way we view ourselves. … Failure to achieve his idealised image results in feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.</td>
<td>Women and girls are more likely than men and boys to be objectified and sexualized in a variety of media outlets. … Girls exposed to sexualizing and objectifying media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction, depression and lower self esteem.</td>
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These two quotes demonstrate that the assessment of the ubiquity and negative impact of sexual images of women is still the same; the main difference between the 1980ies feminism and the current APA report is the discourse in which this is articulated. More generally recent policy reports are informed by the neutral academic language of the psychological research most of them are based on. It identifies ‘sexualized culture’ affecting ‘girls’ and ‘young women’, while the feminism of the 1980ies was written in

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politicized language about ‘patriarchal culture’ that affects ‘us women’. This might be one reason why the feminist movement did not succeed in the construction of sexualization as a general problem that needs public debate and policy intervention. Seemingly neutral governments publications apparently carry more weight than the pamphlets of feminist interest groups; the APA review, coming from an old, big and established association of some 150,000 psychologists that has set professional and academic standards for its members (both practitioners and researchers) since 1892, more easily takes on ‘truth’ status than the political claims of feminists.

Yet, despite its neutral overtones, the current consensus about sexualization as a cause for concern and government action, offers particular but concealed political analyses and solutions to sexualization which are firmly cast in the discourse of liberal feminism (equal opportunities) and neo liberalism (individual responsibility). This shows especially by contrasting the policy reports with other feminist analyses of sexualization. While similarly identifying ever increasing arenas of sexualization that negatively affect girls’ and women’s sense of self and their achievements, scholars using a cultural instead of a psychological approach articulate sexualization explicitly with the wider context of neo-liberalism as the dominant economic and cultural modus of contemporary western societies that encourages girls to turn themselves and their bodies into a vehicle for individual achievements. It is an aspirational model of equal opportunities and advancement, that not only pervades current post-feminist popular culture with its ubiquity of successful single career women, but also informs governmental emancipation policies (see for instance the debate between Lisa Henderson and Angela McRobbie in a special issue on the sexuality debates in The Communication Review (2008)). In that context, it is not surprising that, the consultation of the British Home Office was headed by a practicing psychologist who is known for her media appearances and academic work on dermatology, but who has no track record in studying representation, or in feminist academic research. Evidently, the report neither makes nor discusses a possible connection between sexualization and the liberal models of aspiration upheld by the government as more critical feminist scholars have done (cf. McRobbie, 2008b).
The individualised, psychological research in the government reports, however, seem a prerequisite for its wider acceptance. The straightforward cause and effects model of sexualized images producing sexualized girls, meets cultural demands for simple understandings and solutions to complex social problems (cf. Anderson, 2007). In addition, attributing a lack of self-esteem, promiscuous behaviour or sexual victimization of girls to sexualized media and culture, is easily congruent with the needs of neo-liberal governments to uphold models of individual control and resilience to risks and other social and political threats; in the case of empowering girls against sexualization, media literacy projects and curricula are thus standard propositions to regulate the possible damages of media output. Such literacy projects lay the responsibility for media effects with the individual media consumer, and refrain from holding media industries accountable (see also Livingstone, VanCouvering and Thumin, 2008). Typical, in this respect, is that the Padapolous review ignores a blatant and typically British case of in-your-face-sexualization, the semi-naked Page Three Girl published daily in tabloid The Sun, since 1970.

The psychological approach to sexualization, as in evidence in most governmental reports and policies, thus fits nicely with the political project of neo-liberalism that entails a withdrawal of the state in favour of increased individual responsibility of citizens for their economic, physical, social and cultural well being. The specific politics of the current anti-sexualization waves become even clearer if one includes girls’ own understanding and responses to sexualization into account, as we will do in the next paragraph.

**Researching sexualization**

The standard criticism of media effects research apply to most of the research in the government reviews of sexualization and need not be repeated in extensor here ³(see Gauntlett, 1998; Van Zoonen, 1994). Suffice it to say that the necessary socio-psychological assumptions of a unisemic text (stimulus) and stable patterns of reception

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³ See note 2.
are profoundly undermined by the customary outcomes of research from the feminist media and cultural studies paradigm, mostly ethnographically oriented, that invariably displays how gendered readings of media texts are disparate and contradictory in the course of one conversation with a researcher or in a focus group (cf. Frazer, 1987; Barker, 1997). Receptions of media texts have been approached as a social and cultural process articulated in individual biographies and practices, rather than in psychological states or traits; the products of their particular social locations within their families, among their peers, of the cultural capital at their disposal. Girls reactions to sexualized culture should thus be considered as discursively and socially situated, which – of necessity - will lead to different understandings and appropriations of sexualization, and not necessarily contribute to ‘an internalization that produces self-sexualization’ as most current policies assume (cf. APA, 2007, p.19). The empirical identification of these socially and culturally specific appropriations of sexualized culture, is imperative to further deconstruct the political agenda behind the current sexualization consensus.

For this purpose, we use Duits’ (2008) ethnographic research in two Dutch schools among girls of 11 and 12 about the ways they come to terms with sexualized culture. Our approach is informed by our desire to treat these girls as relatively autonomous individuals able to reflect on themselves, their peers and their cultural environment. Therewith, we aimed to do justice to one of the classic goals of feminist research, i.e. to give otherwise ignored or silenced groups a voice (Reinharz, 1992). In contrast, the media effects research does put girls in the centre of attention, but within a framework set out by the researchers and psychological theory and confined in the standardized measurements of experimental and survey research. The ethnographic, feminist approach allows for research participants (girls) to reflect on the research issue (sexualization) in their own words and frames of reference. At the time of the fieldwork, sex in music videos was widely debated in the Netherlands and it was made into an explicit topic in the observations, interviews and focus group discussions with the girls. In line with our aim to address them as reflexive actors in the debate we asked them the following question: ‘Lately, the media have paid much attention to sex in music videos.
They say this is bad for young people. What do you think about that?’ The answers to this question form the data for the remainder of the article, and enable an intervention in the sexualization debates using the voices of girls themselves. Our work with the girls is presented in two parts, consisting of their reflections and discussions of sexualization as expressed in interviews and focus groups, and of three mini-biographies of girls who embody and signify distinct tactics to come to terms with sexualization, tactics that are articulated with particular discourses of femininity and situated in specific social and material positions of the girls in their families and among their peers, the cultural capital at their disposal, and their individual life histories and practices.4

**Girls’ reflections on sexual music videos**

Many girls seemed quite familiar with the societal concerns about sex in music videos. ‘Yes, I know’, or ‘Ooh, yes’ were common responses when this topic was raised. Bianca, for instance, said she read about it in a supermarket magazine her mother brought home, other girls said their mother had remarked on sexual images when they were watching music channels and one girl said her mother switched channels when such videos came up. However, for some girls the topic was new and they had never thought about it. Marisol answered that she never heard those concerns and that she did not watch videos anyway because she preferred the drama series of other channels. When probed whether she nevertheless could say a little more about it she replied: ‘No actually not’.

In all other interviews girls expressed their opinions about sexualization either voluntarily or after an explicit invitation of the interviewer. Their reflections by and large tend to mirror the societal discourse about the objectionable content of the videos. Within that general discourse, there were many variations that moved between objections and indifference. Sophie (Kantlijn) was exceptionally articulate in her answer. She used the term ‘sexist’ to identify inequalities in the portrayal of men and women, and challenged the commercialized nature of the music industry:

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4 Add information about design, data and analysis.
Sophie: You hardly ever see naked men you know, just only women and yeah, I think.. I mean, I don’t get aroused by that, but I can imagine men do. I personally don’t think it’s okay. I mean most just do it for the money or to show ‘look how good I am’. You can prove yourself with something different too. I’m not against dancing or dancing in a music video. But so sexist and all, I don’t like that.

(…)

Linda: Okay, because some people say it’s better to show such videos later. At a later hour?

Sophie: That’s nonsense too, I think… er, because it’s not just for children, but for older people too. It’s never good to see that, even when you’re forty. No, I feel they should make it [these videos] less sexist.

Consolacion (Gunningschool) took another perspective when asked about sexual music videos, and worried that young children especially would be negatively affected, as many of the other girls also did for that matter. So in a classic third-person-effect contention, she says:

Consolacion: … because, you know, little children are watching all of that too, and when they see such stuff, they grow up too fast, and they get to know too much. If you know too much, that is simply not good. When you grow older then it is just too much that you know all that, you know?

(…)

Exceptionally, however, Consolacion also applied this argument to herself, not because of the sexual videos, but because of the Amsterdam red light district that her brother lives in:

Linda: So they’d better not make those videos at all?

Consolacion: Yes, if you want… you know? … If you are a single man, or maybe woman as well nowadays, you can simply go to a whorehouse. You are free to go, that is what these things are for. (…) There are all these windows here, you know, windows and shops. You go in and you see all these dirty things that you don’t want to see. There should be a separate corner for these sex things, and you need a corner where normal…., because if you pass by, when I go to my brother I have to
pass by.. I simply look straight ahead, I don’t look at all these people, that is not good for my childhood.

Linda: I work there, I have to see that every day. But I am not a prostitute.

Consolacion: Of course not.

Linda: If I go out for lunch, I am in the middle of it.

Consolacion: You learn from that don’t you, the world is tough place and you have to get used to that, you have to adjust.

It is clear from the chaotic conversation with Consolacion that she has difficulty coping with the sexual imagery she is confronted with. She articulates what she sees in music videos with the explicit pornography of Amsterdam’s red light district and consciously evades these images, by not watching such videos and ignoring the red light prostitutes, shops and their visitors. At the same time, she is trying to come to terms with it, not by accepting it as normal, but by making it part of the predicaments of life that one just has to ignore (‘the world is a tough place’).

Consolacion’s confrontation with the red light district is uncommon, but her worries about the loss of childhood are not. Many girls similarly expressed their unease with the idea of little children watching sexual music videos, and thought banning them till after midnight was actually a good idea. However, with the exception of Consolacion, they did not perceive themselves as at risk at all. In their eyes, this discussion could not be about them. Indeed sex, let alone the sexual behaviour depicted in or feared from such videos, was not at all part of their world. In addition, the idea of copying behaviour from television seemed silly to them.

Linda: Your mother told you that research showed that children who watch these videos are going to imitate them?

Odecia: When I look at myself and at those people on TV not really. Really never! I mean, I would never dress as vulgar as those chickies on TV. I really thought... when my mother brought it up, ‘what are you talking about’. I wouldn’t think of it, with my tiny brain, to wear such short things. I mean.. I’m not so vulgar. I might be vulgar in other ways, but not that vulgar.
These quotes thus show three themes in the overall reaction of the girls to the societal concern about sexualized music videos: objection (as is clear in the quote from Sophie), accommodation (in the way Consolacion tries to achieve), and denial (as expressed by Odecia when confronted by her mother). When asked whether it was necessary that artists and the music industry themselves should be more responsible and refrain from using these images, another discourse came up among some girls, and that was one of individual choice.

"It’s his or her video, so you can decide yourself what you put in it" [Noa].
"If they want to do that [walk around in bikinis], let them" [Mette].
"It’s their life" [Naoul].
"They should see for themselves what they put in their videos" [Jenna].
"If they think it’s nice to do that, they should" [Maud].
"If they feel it suits their music, then they’re allowed to do that" [Nursen].

That discourse of choice was only occasionally used for viewing behaviour, for instance when Esther said ‘If people want to watch it, they should watch it.’ Our analysis shows, instead, that for most girls watching sexualized music videos is surrounded with an awkward and sometimes anxious awareness of their controversial status and possible effects. While the girls did express worries about younger children, they did not perceive themselves as possible victims (apart from Consolacion). In fact, from many of their responses it became clear that they had found satisfactory and specific tactics to manage these images, sometimes with a little help from their mother. Thus, Caruna and Odecia reported their mother interfering, but Nazli and Nursen themselves turned their screens to teletext when they didn’t like the videos; Maud said she usually dances while listening to the videos and thus doesn’t see what is going on; Chemae and Thirza made a sharp distinction between stylish beautiful apparel in videos, and over the top nudity; and Laila and Romeysa made similar distinctions between nice and dirty videos:

Linda: So what do you think of artists making such videos?
Laila: Oh, they are dirty, very much [laughing]
Linda: But do you still like them then?
Laila: Some of them, some of them, depends who they are
Linda: What do you think is a great band?
Laila: The Pussycat Dolls and Shakira
Linda: And how about their videos? What kind do they make?
Laila: The last one is a bit dirty, the newest…
Linda: Why?
Laila: They sit on a chair, only wearing a top and underpants [laughing]. And then they start like, whory dancing [laughing]
Linda: And that makes you laugh
Laila: Yes [laughing]
Linda: But do you still like them when they do that?
Laila: Mwah, but they are not dirty or something
Linda: It is not too dirty?
Laila: No.

In sum, when we asked girls to reflect on sexualized music videos they mostly expressed critical and concerned opinions and mentioned particular tactics to accommodate these images to their own lives and standards. Nothing in these conversations points to a process of internalisation of self-sexualization that is feared in the psychological approaches and the government reports. On the contrary, both their reflections on and their reception of these videos suggest an active construction of critical distance between themselves and these videos.

The question, of course, with such self-reported data, is how they comply with everyday activities and behaviour. The importance of mothers’ interventions, speaking from the interviews already suggests that the everyday context of reception affects the meaning and impact of sexualization for girls. To get a richer understanding of this everyday context we reconstructed mini-biographies of three girls whose engagement with sexualisation, or lack thereof, differ considerably.
Nazli: afraid of boys

Nazli (Gunningschool) is a Dutch-Turkish girl. She identified strongly with her Turkish background and considered herself a Muslim. Nazli lived with her parents and her two little brothers in a small apartment in a disadvantaged neighborhood. She also had an older sister, who at 25 was married and had a 4 year-old daughter. Nazli’s father worked as a butcher whilst Nazli’s mother stayed at home. Nazli had a hard time paying attention in primary school, and her secondary school was of the lowest level. Nazli, like most girls at the Gunningschool, avoided contact with the boys in class. On several occasions, she told Linda she was afraid of boys. On other occasions, she claimed boys did not interest her. Nonetheless, Nazli paid much attention to her appearance, used mascara and eyeliner, and often wore new clothes that ‘touched upon’ the latest fashions. To Nazli it was particularly important to look well-groomed. She made sure her hair was in good shape, her nails were dirt-free and cut, and her clothes were clean and faultless. She struggled with the dilemma of looking good and not attracting boys’ attention. In this excerpt from the in-depth interview, Nazli’s dilemma becomes apparent.

Nazli: Look Betty, for instance, wears a short skirt up to here.
Linda: Halfway up your upper leg?
Nazli: Yes, upper leg, and my mother doesn’t approve of that. My mother says: ‘Yes, boys will look at you and all’. That’s true. Boys do look at Bette that way.
Linda: Would you like to wear that, those clothes?
Nazli: I’m afraid to.
Linda: You’re afraid to?
Nazli: When I was little – know nothing about it – I was afraid to walk outside like that, blouse like that. Then I was really afraid.
(…)
Linda: (..) How do you feel about girls who wear such short sweaters so you can see their belly buttons?
Nazli: Well, I don’t think that’s right at all. I feel they’re doing that for boys. That’s what I think. Some wear really short skirts. Without pantyhose, without nothing, without trousers. And I feel they’re doing that for boys. That’s what I think.

Nazli listened to her mother, who warned her about boys looking at her. She saw her mother proven right, because her classmate Betty wore short skirts and was looked at, according to Nazli.⁵

When Nazli moved on to secondary school, she decided to wear a headscarf. Nazli took great care of her scarves, colour-coordinating them with her outfit every night before bed. She practiced with the headscarf during the summer holiday, though not in Turkey where she spent most of the summer. She had consulted her older sister about whether she should start wearing the scarf. He sister had advised against it, because if she could not maintain it, it would be really bad. Nazli added that some girls at her new school wore a headscarf in the first weeks, and had then taken it off, which she considered ‘mean’, saying ‘Allah does not like that’. Nazli started to attend a small secondary school. Even though they were plenty of Muslim girls, only three or four at the entire school wore a scarf. Her classmates responded negatively to Nazli’s scarf, telling her she was prettier without it. They had asked her why she wore it, to which she replied ‘because it’s my choice’. Nazli’s parents were pleased with her taking up the headscarf, and she said they were happy that she did not wait. When asked about what it was like, she said ‘I felt a little bit big and all, I felt like a woman’.

Odecia: going steady

Odecia (Kantlijn) could not be a more different girl than Nazli. Odecia identified as Dutch and was not religious. Her mother was French and her biological father Surinamese. Her descent was a complex question to her:

⁵ Although Linda never observed this in class.
Odecia: I was actually just born in the Netherlands, but my real dad, he was born in Suriname and my granddad, from my real father, he was born in Afghanistan. Er... no sorry, in er... Hin... er India, so I’m sort of half Surinamese-Hindoestaans. My mother, she was born in France. She moved to the Netherlands when she was twelve, so I’m like half Surinamese-Hindoestaans, a quarter French and a quarter Dutch.

Odecia lived with her mother, her adoptive father, her older brother and stepbrother in a gentrified and white area of Amsterdam. Odecia knew quite well what kinds of clothes she liked and disliked, and considered herself to be a typical girl in her style, that is wearing skirts, jeans, sweaters and zipped cardigans, all according to the latest fashion. At the time of our observations that also meant showing some belly and some button, and Odecia had very definite ideas as to how far this could go: ‘Such clothes make me feel good, like a real girl, but it shouldn’t show too much, for instance when your shirt is up to your breasts, and your pants are down here’. Odecia also suspected that her style could change in the following year when she would go to secondary school, ‘because fashion could be different then, or I could have other friends’. Thus, for Odecia herself, her slightly sexualized style reflected a desire to follow the latest trend and to fit in with her friends, rather than an internalization of sexualization. This is not to deny that the style, in a cultural sense, is representative for processes of sexualization. Yet, for Odecia personally it meant something else, and through her negotiation of the amount of belly and bottom she wanted to show, she actively tried to limit instead of internalize that sexualized connotation.

Although none of the girls engaged in sexual acts at the time of research, several girls at the Kantlijn had boyfriends. The girls often ‘asked’ boys out, sometimes together with a friend. Usually, they only went out with a boy for a short time, and the girls often switched boys. Only Odecia and Lars ‘went out’ for a long time. Odecia told Linda they had been on and off since the 6th form. In the interview, Linda asked her what going out means:

Odecia: Well it is... I mean I really feel so comfortable and special with Lars. He really makes me, he can like... make me feel special, you know? And then... I just really like that. He’s just
really nice and pretty and handsome and very funny and I feel really good and all around him you know.

Odecia shows a deep affection for her boyfriend Lars. In explaining going out, she started with love. When pressed about what that meant in terms of behaviour, she explained the physical part:

Linda: Okay, and then what are things that you like do together?
Odecia: Kissing of course, and holding hands…
Linda: Kissing-kissing…?
Odecia: Not kissing-kissing, because Lars and I are very affectionate of course, but we’re also like… Yeah, I don’t really want to kiss every five seconds. We’re still just like a normal couple, like we kiss often but… Well now often, very often, and we hold each other’s hand and I often sit on his lap.
Linda: And does kissing mean French kissing or just like…
Odecia: Well we have done that a couple of times, but I really have something like: ‘Okay, I still have my whole life ahead of me to do that, so maybe now I can just go and enjoy my youth’. You know? So I really had something like let’s just do a long, long kiss instead of with tongue.

Indeed, Lars and Odecia were often seen sitting together or holding hands. At the end of the school day, Lars always kissed Odecia goodbye with a peck on the cheek. Nothing in Odecia’s answer or in her behaviour warrants the societal worries about sexualization.

Priscilla: falling through the net

Although Odecia and Priscilla went to the same school and lived in the same neighbourhood, they too were girls that were worlds apart. Priscilla lived alone with her mother, who had never married and was unemployed. Priscilla had never known her biological father. One morning she said that her mother had finally told her ‘what she was’: a quarter Moroccan, a quarter Surinamese and a quarter Portuguese. Priscilla had problems at home and she and her mother were supervised by Dutch Child Services. She stopped coming to school in the last months of the 8th form. Both her teacher and
other school staff, worried deeply about her and expressed concern – one even remarked to Linda that he would not be surprised to find her working one day as a prostitute in the red light district. Priscilla had no real friends at school, and she was unpopular with boys and girls alike, yet everybody still conversed and hung out with her.

Priscilla had one of the most matured bodies in class, with already somewhat developed breasts and curves. She often wore revealing clothes, like loose tops without a bra, crop tops that showed her belly, or low-cut trousers that revealed a string and most of her buttocks. Her trousers were frequently coming down, and her classmates repeatedly pointed out to her that she needed to pull up her pants, to which she would respond ‘so what?’ She often teased the boys, and sometimes got into fights with them. Her classmates gossiped heavily about Priscilla’s behaviour. They would call her vulgar, weird, and crazy. One day, she stuck a knitting needle through her pierced belly button, disgusting everybody in class. Priscilla laughed this off.

In April, Priscilla got caught up in a fight at the local fun fair. One of the other girls had seen it happen and talked about in class as, by now, Priscilla was hardly ever there. Two weeks later, she was back and Linda tried to find out what had happened. She had been with an older Moroccan boy, and some girls were trying to pick a fight. She had to engage them, because otherwise it would have been a ‘disgrace’. They had fought and Priscilla had gotten a concussion. The police had been involved. This was one of the last times Priscilla had been to school. Her classmates continued to gossip about her. They told Linda she had once said she was pregnant, and they speculated about sexual acts she had supposedly undertaken.

As stated, the teacher worried about her. Priscilla disappeared off the radar the year after. The teacher had been involved in trying to get her accepted at a secondary school, as her mother would not help much. When Linda met up with the teacher when her project was finished in 2008, he said he considered Priscilla his biggest failure, because he had not been able to save her. He said he had heard she had gone to Portugal, but was not sure.
Discussion

The three biographies show, to begin with, how girls’ everyday lives are as much the product of their family (mothers in particular) and socio-cultural environment as of their own behaviour and attitudes. Factors that strongly emerge from these three mini-biographies are class (middle-class for Odecia, lower class for Priscilla) and religion (Nazli). It is also striking, that the only girl among our 31 participants of whom it would be possible to say that she is a victim of sexualization (Priscilla), also had a range of other problems, and was monitored by Child Services. Research about victims of online predators, based on actual cases and not on perceived risks, has also shown that - by and large – they were in difficult positions already, due to social or family problems (Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2004). Priscilla’s case underlines such findings and point at the accumulation of different problems on one person, whereas Nazli’s and Odecia’s stories tell of resistance and negotiation of sexualization. The three biographies thus speak, each in their own way, against the occurrence of a simple process of internalization of sexualisation, because of the complex articulation of social and family background, everyday life and personal reactions to sexualised images and culture.

Furthermore, our interview data show that these girls, both from middle and lower class, and from religious (Islam) and non-religious backgrounds are well aware of the sexualization in the world around them, but they deny, accommodate or resist this, sometimes in the discourse of mainstream critique about sexualization, other times in a discourse of individual choice. Some respondents even explicitly used the terminology of feminism (‘sexism’) to condemn these images as wrong. In the interviews, nobody spoke or acted as if they had internalized these sexual images.⁶ The assumption of such a process of internalization is not at all warranted by how the girls in our research talked about sexualization.

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⁶ We could not do a separate interview with Priscilla who had left school by then.
That does not mean that sexualization is not a problem for girls, on the contrary; it constitutes a cultural environment which they do not like very much, but which they have learnt to deal with nevertheless. The media literacy programs that are set up and supported as part of government response, thus seem to miss the point for girls like Nazli - who is already explicitly resisting sexualization by taking up her headscarf - or Odecia, who is already aware of sexualized images but does not acknowledge them for her own life and what she does with her boyfriend. Priscilla would probably want to see a whole range of other issues than sexualized culture solved first.

The policy language of girls and young women being ‘vulnerable to’ or ‘at risk of’ today’s sexualized culture, denies their agency and strength. As Furedi (2007) argues in his analysis of fear culture, the notion of vulnerability ‘assigns to the individual a passive and dependent role’ and suggests that people ‘lack the emotional and psychological resources necessary to deal with change, to make choices, or to deal with adversity’ (p. 7). Even our 11 and 12 year old girls were neither passive, nor dependent in the face of sexualization, and accounted of different tactics and resources to resist or accommodate the adversities of sexualization. As we argued elsewhere too (authors, 2007), the response of Muslim girls to sexualization, in this study represented by Nazli, may be problematically articulated with Islam, but nevertheless present a strong collective counterforce against sexualization. In the psychological approaches to sexualization that inform government policies there is no mention of such religious counter forces, let alone a balanced assessment of its meanings, feminist potential and cultural relevance. This denial of actual and potential resistance to sexualization, both through individual and collective practices of young women and girls, implicitly prescribes an identity for girls and young women as individual ‘victims’ that need to be protected and rescued. Without denying that protective legislation and measures are often necessary to ensure women’s rights and integrity, victim discourse has also been abused in history to curtail girls’ and women’s freedom. Shayla Thiel-Stern (2008), for instance, compares the current concerns about alleged self-sexualization of girls on their social network pages, with the societal worries about girls going to dance halls in the late 19th and early 20th century. In
both cases, Thiel-Stern argues, government committees, political activists, social groups and other actors framed women’s legitimate appropriation of public space in terms of possible sexual and moral transgressions that need control and regulation. Social media and dance halls have thus created gendered moral panics, she concludes, that exaggerate risk and restrain women’s opportunities and freedoms. Similar arguments have been brought forward by feminist scholars analysing recurring moral outrage about sexualized persona and performances of Madonna (e.g. Schwichtenberg, 1993).

Feminist scholars have discussed all of these issues - about victim-feminism, about the mono-cultural bias of feminism, about the pleasures and/or dangers of sexuality, about the situated appropriation of media texts - at length, at least from the mid-eighties of the previous century. If one thing became clear from these discussions, it was that academic research always is embedded in particular versions of feminist (or anti-feminist) ideologies. Such a recognition is absent from the current wave of governmental reviews and policies which present themselves, mostly in alliance with psychological effect research, as objective assessments of risks and threats for girls. The specific politics of the sexualization debate thus disappears from sight and the psychologically underwritten ‘truth’ status of the research, prevents a thorough political discussion. As we argued, the current wave of sexualization concerns fits the neo-liberal project of individual responsibility versus state or corporate accountability strikingly well. More importantly, however, from our particular political and feminist perspective, the most problematic element of the sexualization thesis is one that was already identified by feminists of the previous century: ‘To have made pornography both the main cause of women’s oppression and its main form of expression is to have wiped out almost the whole of the feminist agenda’ (Wilson, 1992, p. 28). Evidence of how the sexualization concerns, again, produce a blind spot to many other feminist concerns, is the media reception of the Dutch emancipation policy (Meer Kansen, 2008); the joint Dutch press headlined the sexualization paragraph and ignored other issues in the proposed policy concerning work, the participation of women and girls from ethnic minorities, and domestic violence.
To go back to Priscilla, her particular accumulation of problems remains unresolved by anti-sexualization policies.

In sum, the current sexualisation reviews and policy documents are a mixed blessing: on the one hand, it is a relief that there is now general recognition of the pervasiveness of a sexualized culture that is built on the portrayal of heterosexual femininity and female bodies. On the other hand, the complete denial of the way women and girls from very different backgrounds have managed in the past and present to resist and negotiate this culture, in favour of an opposite reconstruction girls and young women as potential victims, is offensive and forsweares decades of feminist research and politics.

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