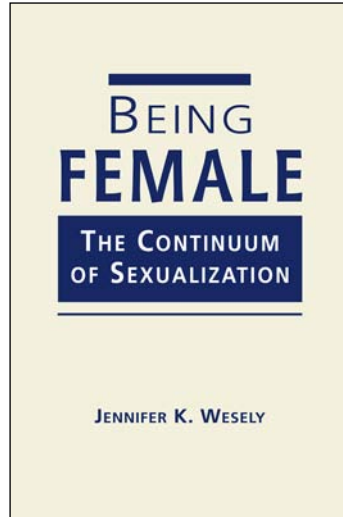


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**Being Female:
The Continuum
of Sexualization**

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Contents

1	The Continuum of Sexualization	1
2	Gender Socialization in Today's Culture	7
3	The Processes of Sexualization	33
4	Personal and Social Consequences	55
5	Tracing Pathways to Victimization	83
6	How Can We Stop Failing Girls and Women?	109
7	A Challenge to Our Society	135
	<i>Appendix: Methods for Qualitative Interviews</i>	147
	<i>Bibliography</i>	151
	<i>Index</i>	163
	<i>About the Book</i>	171

The Continuum of Sexualization

I always wanted to be a boy. I was a tomboy. When I was younger I wanted to be a boy. I think it was because I wanted to be my brother, 'cause my parents favored him. But being a girl, I just learned . . . you don't learn it unless someone teaches you, and that's how the world works, you don't just know things. Everything is taught to you. And I just learned, I don't know how old I was, but I learned that people only paid attention to me because I was cute, or because I was sexy . . . when I go to the store, flirt a little bit, or wear a low-cut shirt, and you know they're looking. Or, the tight jeans or something . . . I don't know where I learned that along the way. —*Rita, age 21*

Rita tells me this during a late afternoon conversation that takes place in an empty conference room on a college campus. At the time, I am a PhD candidate completing research for my doctoral dissertation. Rita is putting herself through college. As we talk, Rita's demeanor is one of nonchalance. She is casual when it comes to what she has learned about being a girl in the world. She is tough. I am to think that this does not faze her; that she has taken what she has learned and turned it on its head, made the most of it, capitalized on it. Rita works as an exotic dancer.

A few weeks later, I meet up with her at the club on a Tuesday. As it is a weeknight, it's slow, and Rita goes into a stage performance directed toward one of the few customers, a man sitting alone right in front of the stage. Her smile is very different from

2 *Being Female*

how it appeared earlier. It is empty, a void. She arches her back and takes her legs, with spiked heels, and wraps them around the customer's neck. With her legs like this, she gyrates her hips in simulated sex rhythm. As I watch her perform in this contorted position, I remember part of our conversation from the campus conference room, when she was telling me about how she started dancing in the first place:

My mom had no money. She had none. She never worked, she was kind of a trophy wife. I hate to say that but she raised children and stayed at home and was really beautiful, and young, and that was kind of her lifestyle. Never went to college. And then everything split up and she had nowhere else to turn and she's already borrowed money from relatives. And my account, I was 18, and she could say, well, I'm her mother, I'm just taking it out for her. In her mind, "I'm just going to borrow it and pay it back." That's fine if she's going to pay it back but . . . where's she going to get it from? Nowhere. She has no money. This month she called me, "I need money."

The whole reason I got into this was because I had no money left and I had nothing else to do, and some sorority sister of mine thought it would be kinky and fun to go into a strip club and just try it for the fun of it. We sat there for two hours, the manager was like, "ooh, cute sorority girls, we could sell these girls for a pretty penny."

The first time I went on stage they had someone ask me for a lap dance. Practically in tears I was so scared. You just don't know. And I'd never even had sex before, and I'm up here faking noises on stage, and trying to be all sexy, like I have any idea what's going on. It took a long time for me to practice and watch, and that's the only way you learn that.

When she describes her struggle to start working at the strip club, and as she also mentions her real-life lack of sexual experience, I am deeply disturbed by the fact that Rita's personal sexual growth and adjustment are eclipsed and cheapened by strip club parody. But that is not the first time she has learned to act sexualized. Just as effectively as in the club, she was schooled in this everyday art early on. What she describes learning is that when it comes to being female, it is the sexualized performance that matters.

The Continuum of Sexualization Concept

Two major research projects thus far in my career have involved in-depth interviews with separate groups of women, those who worked as exotic dancers and those who experienced homelessness (see the Appendix for more information). As I listened to the stories of Rita and many others for more than a decade, I was haunted by certain consistencies across their narratives. As this started to take shape and solidify for me, I felt a growing urgency to identify and articulate these consistencies. They became known to me as the “continuum of sexualization.” Though I initially developed this concept based on patterns that persisted among women in my own research, it has far greater reach. Beyond the original conceptualization, I argue that it is applicable to the complicated array of lived experiences among the broader population of girls and women. It is true that the populations of which my study participants were members inhabited the “margins” of society, typically appearing invisible to and being stigmatized by the mainstream. But margins are created in relationship to a center against which they are compared, a relationship that suggests that the experiences of some can inform a deeper understanding about the lives of all. There are many researchers and writers, including Stephen Hinshaw (2009), Ariel Levy (2005), and Deborah Tolman (2002), who document experiences that fit along the continuum of sexualization among girls in more “mainstream” populations. Their studies are just a few of the many that I include throughout this book to demonstrate the relevance of the continuum of sexualization to the lives of girls and women.

On the continuum, then, one end represents sexualization that occurs as part of girls’ day-to-day gender socialization and identity development (Figure 1.1). It is the type of socialization that teaches lessons like the ones Rita described becoming aware of early on. In this book, I will show that this end of the continuum has serious, damaging effects on girls as they grow up to be women in society. The other end of the continuum represents sexual abuses and violence against women and girls, which are severe manifestations of sexual-

Figure 1.1 The Continuum of Sexualization

Socialization/typical ←————→ Sexual abuse/severe

ization. In between these two ends lies everything else that sexualizes girls in contemporary society.

In Rita's case, her studied indifference belies her deeper conflicts. Though the stage performance is superficial, the task of always presenting a readily available sexualized appearance and behavior takes its toll. Even as she admits to "faking it," it seems that to do so drains her, that her identity and self-concept are put on the line in the very effort to appear effortless:

And it's hard not to get . . . you're acting so intimate—this is hard to explain—you're acting so intimate and physical and you're putting all this energy, to not get something in return is really tough. It's really tough. You put a lot into it. . . . You want to be like, why do I feel I have to do this, I'm the one who got suckered into this, I'm the one who's losing here, I'm losing a piece of me every time I do this. . . . Sometimes I can't bear to look in a guy's eyes while I'm dancing because I'm putting so much of myself into it, I'm afraid they are going to see right through me. And know that I'm faking it. And sometimes I get afraid of that, they're going to see right through me, they're going to know that I'm lying, that this is a big game.

Outline of the Book

The purpose of this book, then, is to examine the "continuum of sexualization." Throughout the years, this concept has shadowed the details of lived experiences that girls and women I've interviewed have described, refusing to go away. In this book, I aim to emphasize particular ways that it is systematically ingrained in girls growing up in the contemporary era, perpetuating limiting identity meanings, at best, and severe damage and destruction, at worst. Book chapters are arranged in a way that I hope most organically allows the continuum of sexualization concept to develop in the minds of readers.

Chapter 2 focuses on gender socialization in today's culture. Such everyday socialization of girls is what constitutes one end of the continuum. This discussion of gender socialization will systematically unfold through the examination of points related to embodiment, "pornified sexualization," and media. Chapter 3, about the processes of sexualization, both fortifies and complicates the main

assertions from Chapter 2. It is in Chapter 3 that the continuum of sexualization is presented most comprehensively, clarifying the array of experiences that can exist along the continuum. Not only is there the sexualization that occurs as part of girls' day-to-day gender socialization and identity development, but there is the other end that represents sexual abuses and violence against women and girls. The length of the continuum illustrates the range of experiences that fall between these two ends. It is important to note that Chapter 3 undergirds the framing of the continuum of sexualization as a tool to identify ways in which girls are sexualized (starting at a young age), how this fundamentally incorporates into identity and life for women and girls, and its ultimate effects. It also addresses context, since the continuum of sexualization is located within larger structures of relative privilege or disadvantage. The chapter advances the idea that individuals have a range of experiences in their lives, so for any one girl or woman, sexualization varies as to intensity, duration, and frequency. To fortify these points, I draw extensively on two case study populations—one with a population of women who worked as exotic dancers and one with a population of women who were homeless—and show how contextual factors can exacerbate risks along the continuum. This is a rich addition to a discussion of context, since it is my study of these two populations over the years that crystallized the naming and conceptualization of the continuum of sexualization.

Chapter 4 progresses into the myriad effects the continuum of sexualization can have on women and girls. It traces the extensive personal and social consequences of the continuum. In Chapter 5, the foci of the previous chapters come together in an investigation of pathways that have led to the victimization of girls and women. It is in Chapter 5 that I return to details of the case study populations of exotic dancers and homeless women, looking at how context shaped the effects of their experiences along the continuum of sexualization. In particular, I examine their dreams and goals, decisions, further victimization, and even perpetration as they became adults. Chapter 6 poses some answers to the basic question of how society can stop failing girls and women in the ways the book has detailed. I identify key areas where we do not succeed at protecting girls from risks in society and relate these areas to strategies to counteract such shortcomings. Chapter 7 concludes the book with a challenge to society. In this final chapter, I argue for changes that need to occur

6 *Being Female*

at the structural level, with a call to question ideology and social attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality and to bring in programs and services that can affect individual lives. This chapter aims to mobilize readers by relating advocacy for girls to larger social responsibility.