



Boobs and Booties: How Hypersexualised Images of Women Impact Society

By Rasna Warah



I do not normally agree with self-appointed media censor Ezekial Mutua, who gained notoriety recently for banning the film *Rafiki* because of its homosexual content, but I think we should not dismiss his claims that some Kenyan music videos are so crude and offensive that they should not be viewed by the public, especially the youth.

Mutua says that videos showing explicit sexual acts promote immorality in society. It is clear that the CEO of the Kenya Film Classification Board is approaching immorality from a purely sexual – dare I say Christian? – perspective. As Christine Mungai argued in a [recent article](#), Kenyan society is immoral at so many levels that confining immorality to sexuality obscures the many ills that bedevil the country. “If we steady our gaze on the nihilism and purposelessness that our young people have been forced – by the older generation – to inhabit, then their lewd chants and booty-shaking becomes less an indictment on their morals and more on our own,” she wrote.

However, if we shift the debate from morality to women’s rights, Mutua’s concerns could be valid. His views might be based on his warped sense of what is moral and immoral in society, but by calling for the ban, he inadvertently became a champion for women’s rights. Let me explain why.

I have stopped watching music videos of Kenyan, Congolese and black American hip hop and rap

artists because I find them offensive to women. As a woman who has spent a lifetime fighting the notion that women should be judged by the size of their breasts or buttocks, I find the hypersexualisation of women and girls in many of these videos to be an assault on womanhood. The skimpy outfits, the suggestive gyrating of the extraordinarily large buttocks, the focus on women's surgically enhanced breasts are all meant to show that women are first and foremost sex objects.

In the majority of these music videos, the men are fully clothed; I have yet to see a man dangling his penis in front of the camera, yet women are expected not just to dangle but to wiggle their nude or semi-nude private parts. These videos are a slap in the face of all those women who fought for women's rights and who continue to advocate against pornography, which they view as a form of women's oppression.

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Many people believe that the anti-pornography movement denies men and women the right to freedom of expression and has prudish and out-dated views on sex and sexuality. What they don't recognise is that most anti-pornography activists, such as the inimitable Andrea Dworkin, identify themselves as feminists. They are not against women and men having sex; they are against the debasement of the sexual act and the degradation of women in most porn films.

A former porn star who has started a campaign against the porn industry recently told the BBC's Stephen Sackur that the sex shown in porn movies promotes unhealthy sexual relations between men and women. Some studies have also shown that men and boys who watch a lot of pornography become desensitised to violent sexual acts committed against women; they see women as purely sexual commodities whose main function is to please men.

The branding of women's bodies

Unfortunately, the commodification and hypersexualisation of women and girls has gained a new impetus in this today's money-worshipping world. Memories of slavery and female subjugation have been erased by advertisers, the music industry and the media in general, who use women's bodies - especially black women's bodies - to sell everything from cars to watches.

The sexualisation and sexual exploitation of black bodies is nothing new. Myths about black/African men and women's extraordinary sexual prowess was one reason for the enforcement of strict segregation laws in the United States, South Africa and Kenya. White men feared that white women would not be able resist black/African men, or that black/African men were unable to control their sexual urges (unlike white men who were considered to be more cerebral) and so would be tempted to rape white women. (Yet, black/African slave women were routinely raped by their white owners.) There was even a belief that black women's bodies were made differently from white women's bodies and that they could endure more pain. It is therefore sad to see black male musicians perpetuate similar myths in their videos.

The sexualisation of women is not confined to music videos. In Kenya, some female news anchors and TV hosts act as if they are on a catwalk, with each competing with the other to show off their cleavages and legs. This sexing-up and dumbing down of presenters had turned the 9 o'clock news into an indecent show. Radio has not been spared either. Morning shows on some FM stations in Kenya would even make porn queens blush.

As Oyunga Pala noted in [an article](#) titled “*Slay Queens, Socialites and Sponsors: Sexual Violence in Kenyan Society*”, this commodification of women can result in sexual or other forms of violence, including murder. It also reinforces the notion that the only thing women have to sell in today’s market is their bodies. “The message young people hear and see is that eroticism is an investment in itself. To raise one’s sexual potency is a privilege and a currency that can be translated into real material benefits,” he wrote.

The idea that women’s bodies can be used to make money for the women themselves has gained more currency in this age of “social influencers”, who, thanks to the Internet and social media, particularly Instagram and YouTube, compete with each other to gain the most followers. Young women are now “brands” who market themselves. The more hits, likes, shares or followers you get, the more money you make from the platform and the company whose products you display. Social influencing is now considered a respectable career choice, thanks to women like Kim Kardashian whose empire is built entirely on this concept.

An article titled “How to Monetise Yourself Starting Now” published in a recent edition of the *Saturday Nation* shows you how one can become a rich social influencer. Among the author’s recommendations to become a successful social influencer are: “Be the talk of the town”, which includes being “photographed with the right people”; “Break the Internet”, which includes posting a daring or provocative photo of yourself on social media; and “Bring on the drama”, which means “never being too far from the rumour mill” and being “witnessed by the biggest gossip in town”.

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All these attention-seeking behaviours are then supposed to translate into money in the bank. Some Kenyan politicians have also bought into the notion that scandals will earn them notoriety, as illustrated by the sex videos posted by politicians or their sexual partners. The current president of the United States, Donald Trump, has not lost his job for his “pussy-grabbing” and making pejorative remarks about women, the disabled and minorities. That is how crude politics in today’s world has become.

Modern-day Hottentot Venuses

Dede Hunt, an African-American woman, recently put out a video that decried the “Baartmanisation” of black women in music videos and on the Internet. She wondered why African-American rappers constantly referred to black women as “whores” and “bitches” and why they used titillating images of black women’s breasts and buttocks in their videos. Is this what slavery had done to a people, she wondered, where former slaves humiliate their own, all in the name of record sales?

Hunt was referring to [Saartjie Baartman](#), also known as the Hottentot Venus, who was a South African woman whose naked body was put on display for four years in London, where she was caged, mocked and leered at by Europeans. Baartman’s unusually large buttocks became the object of much scientific curiosity, amusement and voyeuristic stares. She was even taken to Paris, where an anatomist further examined her body at the Museum of Natural History. Her miserable life was cut short in 1815 when she died of an illness at the age of 25.

However, even death did not spare her the humiliation she had suffered while alive. Her skeleton, genitals and brain were preserved and exhibited at the museum in Paris for the next 150 years; the

exhibit was only removed from public view in 1974.

Many would argue that dancing provocatively for a music video or posting nude pictures of yourself on social media is a woman's right - a type of freedom brought on by the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s. These women see themselves as modern, successful professionals who turned their natural physical assets into money-making enterprises.

But I would argue that while the sexual revolution (brought on partly by the invention of the contraceptive pill) did benefit women in many ways - for instance, by removing the stigma associated with "losing one's virginity" before marriage - it also did them harm. Men viewed the sexual revolution as a licence to have sex irresponsibly - if a woman got pregnant as a result of a sexual liaison, it was both her fault and her responsibility. It also gained men access to more sexual partners, which they didn't have before; in a sense, it allowed them to have sex for "free" because neither did they have to pay for it, nor did they have to marry the woman. This resulted in a significant rise in sexually transmitted diseases among both men and women.

Unlike Baartman, who was forced to strip and entertain people against her will, modern-day exhibitionists are willingly degrading themselves in front of cameras. They are not the victims of pimps or slave owners; they are the products of a modern world where misogyny has become the norm, and where the backlash against women's liberation has seen a rise in the hypersexualisation and infantilisation of women.

The undeclared war against women

The advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s - with its push towards open market economies and societies where money is worshipped more than gods and goddesses - unleashed regressive, conservative forces that cancelled all the gains achieved by the women's movement. It was the beginning of an era that elevated pornographers like Hugh Hefner, who, instead of being vilified for objectifying women in his *Playboy* magazine, got his own reality TV show where naked women young enough to be his granddaughters frolicked with the aging sex maniac in full view of cameras. Meanwhile, conservative religious forces decided what women could or could not do, including use contraception or have an abortion.

The beauty industry, on its part, popularised the "baby doll" look that infantilised women, who were never expected to age gracefully. In her book *Backlash*, Susan Faludi chronicles the demise of the feminist movement and how the beauty industry helped fuel what she calls "the undeclared war against women".

In the late 1980s, when Reaganomics and Thatcherism were at their peak, the beauty industry, alarmed by the decline in the use of its products by women who no longer cared for make-up and skin-hugging and revealing clothes, embarked on campaigns to lure women back into the sexist fold. The backlash was not so much a conspiracy against women as it was a calculated business decision to improve sales of cosmetics, plastic surgeries, skin-lightening creams, and other potentially harmful products, whose sales were plummeting.

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In societies where women are valued mainly for their bodies, women will go to extraordinary lengths

to make their bodies attractive to the men who decide what is attractive and what is not. This has spawned entire industries where women will self-mutilate, through, for example, skin-bleaching creams, tummy tucks and vaginal tightening procedures, in order to achieve a standard of beauty prescribed by the male-dominated culture. This, says Faludi, has had a devastating impact on women's health and self-esteem. Women and young girls with low self-esteem become easy prey for predators. The impact on their physical health can be deadly: anti-wrinkle creams expose users to cancer-causing agents; silicone breast implants leave painful deformities; liposuction causes infections; and harmful eating disorders among girls and young women escalate.

"Feminist" in this post-feminist world has also become a dirty word, and women who led the women's movement are now relegated to the pages of history. Some, like Donald Trump and his ilk, have even suggested that such women become feminists either because they are ugly (and so have a grudge against beautiful women) or because they are lesbians (and so do not like men). Meanwhile the rape of women and girls has reached epidemic proportions around the world, with "date rape" being cited as the most common form of sexual violence among college students in the United States.

In other countries, such as India, the Bollywood movie industry has stopped producing serious films on women's issues; instead films are rated for their sex appeal. "Item numbers" - song-and-dance routines focused on titillating male audiences - are now de rigueur in Bollywood blockbusters. Meanwhile, incidences of rape have increased in cities such as New Delhi, which has been dubbed the rape capital of India.

The backlash against women has entered a critical stage. Women must fight back and remain vigilant.

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