**Dying to Be Thin and Beautiful: Feminism and Advertising, an Interview With Jean Kilbourne**

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[Omega Institute](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/omega-institute-for-holistic-studies)Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, Rhinebeck, NY. eOmega.org

*In this interview pioneering media literacy activist* [*Jean Kilbourne*](https://www.eomega.org/article/pioneering-media-literacy-activist-jean-kilbourne-is-juno-resident?content=LNK&source=PWeb.HUFF.art) *discusses the saturation of sexualized advertising in our media-driven culture and the harm it causes young women.*

**Omega**: Today, [50 percent of 3- to 6-year-old girls worry about their weight and 30 percent of women want a body shape that is actually 20 percent underweight](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2792687/). Have things changed in your 40 years of observing women in ads?

**Jean**: The pressure on girls and women to look impossibly perfect is worse than ever—and on girls younger than ever—because of Photoshop, increased cosmetic surgery, and the fact that celebrities have to be perfect-looking all the time—if they’re not, they’re shamed.

There’s one standard of beauty for women: the very thin, increasingly young woman. People say, “There have always been statues or paintings of idealized female beauty.” Yes, being attractive has always been more important for women than men—more than it should be. But one painting of an exceptional figure is not the same as [3,000 ads a day](http://sjinsights.net/2014/09/29/new-research-sheds-light-on-daily-ad-exposures/)—and television shows, video games, and pornography—all saying, “This is what a beautiful woman is, which is a woman’s value, and this is a product you can purchase to become beautiful.”

When women feel compelled to achieve an impossible standard of beauty, they waste a lot of time, psychic energy, and money. Imagine what teenage girls could do with that extra time, if they didn’t get made-up and figure out their wardrobe before school every morning—to say nothing of the time shopping and browsing? What if they were encouraged to spend those hours in another way? It could be quite impressive what they could accomplish.

Instead, teenage girls are told they can do [STEM programs](http://www.ed.gov/stem) or be in sports, but still need to look incredibly perfect and very thin. So, it’s not like they’re let off the hook. It’s good to have the expanded opportunities, but it’s not like that takes the place of searching for that ideal beauty.

**Omega**: Women in ads are generally portrayed as passive, vulnerable, or submissive, so boys from a young age see women objectified sexually. What are your current perspectives about the connection between advertising and violence/safety?

**Jean**: I’ve never said that ads directly cause violence, but they create a climate in which women are seen as objects and when that’s done to people violence becomes more likely. It’s the same with racism or homophobia that’s dehumanizing. That’s why soldiers are taught to dehumanize the enemy, because otherwise it’s hard to kill them. Being abusive to a thing—as opposed to a person—is not a big deal.

[The White House has a campaign](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/01/fact-sheet-its-us-campaign-launches-new-psa-marks-one-year-launch) against violence and sexual assault on college campuses with a couple of very good commercials in which famous actors and athletes speak out against violence and sexual assault. We need more of that—any public message—to change the norms. Because the norm is still that if a young woman is drunk or dressed a certain way, sexual violence is her fault and women tend to take on all that blame and shame.

Pornography is a whole other issue. The fact is most kids in America learn about sex through pornography, because they’re naturally curious and we don’t teach them [sexual education in school](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/component/content/article/450-effective-sex-education), or if we do, we teach lies. Most pornography is violent, misogynistic, and totally unrealistic.

**Omega**: Brand campaigns like [Pantene’s “Not Sorry,”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p73-30lE-XE) and [Verizon’s “Inspire Her Mind,”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP3cyRRAfX0) are a new marketing trend being called “soft feminism” or “pink-washing” while “feminist” is still an edgy label. What is next for feminism?

**Jean**: When I started speaking, I was so alone. It wasn’t all right for women to speak in public let alone about feminism and sexism. People thought my ideas were radical—even feminists thought advertising was unimportant. Now, [so many organizations](http://www.jeankilbourne.com/resources-for-change/) and films and such are raising feminist issues and seeing the connection with advertising and the mass media.

We need an environment that makes it easier for women to advance and for men to be with their children. We have an environment that makes it maximally difficult—we’re a nation with very unfriendly policies towards women and families. The [childcare and family leave that we lack](http://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/paid-family-leave-obama-work) is appalling, especially if you look at other developed nations.

So much of a woman having a career depends on having money to afford support. It’s a different universe for someone like [Sheryl Sandberg](http://www.ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_why_we_have_too_few_women_leaders?language=en) or the professional women she’s addressing, who can mostly afford help. The truth is most women who work can’t lean in if they can’t lean back and have somebody catch them. It’s a very individualistic, American approach: pull yourself up by your bootstraps. You can make it if you try hard enough.

And we need to deal with violence against women as a society. My point has always been that advertising creates a climate in which violence becomes more likely—which is now a mainstream idea—so I’m hopeful for my daughter and this younger generation.

There’s much more tolerance and more of an acceptance in general of gender fluidity—even in the face of the remaining homophobia—that’s happened so quickly. Twenty years ago if somebody said gay marriage was going to be legal, nobody would have believed it, so that gives me hope as well.