

# **Is Objectification the Problem?**

Since the beginning of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s, strident complaints have been made regarding men's sexual objectification of women. The foundation of this complaint was, and is, that when men objectify women sexually they see and treat them as sex objects. This line of thinking suggests that reducing women to sexual objects results in their dehumanization, which not only creates, but also perpetuates men's abusive and harassing behavior toward women. Women have been demanding that men view them in a more comprehensive, respectful, and humanized manner. Sadly, despite the call to action by feminists and the recent #MeToo Movement for the end of sexual harassment and sexual abuse, the response from many men has been nothing short of abysmal.

The fact that some men dehumanize and exploit women through sexual objectification is real and this behavior needs to be addressed. However, to fully understand this phenomenon there is still a piece of the puzzle that has not yet been properly explained. Without an effective explanation of what constitutes objectification, the discussion will continue to only scratch the surface and never fully reach a comprehensive explanation nor provide an effective solution to the problem.

## **What is Objectification?**

Objectification is a word that carries a heavy negative connotation. It is associated as a way of speaking, thinking, and acting that is considered morally wrong. Usually, criticisms of sexual objectification center on how women are displayed in advertisements, in films, in the news, and in the general culture. Viewing women as sexual objects is seen as dehumanizing because it treats women as commodities, or like something that can be possessed or dominated. This predominantly male behavior has serious social and psychological ramifications. Typically,

sexual abuse is inflicted for the satisfaction of a person without regard for the other person involved, which disempowers and alienates the victim. When a person insults another person by making inappropriate comments or by making unwanted sexual advances, the affected person naturally feels exploited as an object for the other's gratification. Often, the person affected doesn't have enough control in the situation to stop the abuse. Additionally, the objectified person is sometimes feels forced to 'own' or accept the sexually abusive messages and actions that are used to control or weaken them. This can be especially damaging to their self-esteem and autonomy.

### **Is There Anything Positive About Objectification?**

On the other side of the aisle, some argue that sexual objectification isn't always entirely negative. Writers and researchers have pointed out that in normal intimate relationships certain qualities and physical aspects of a partner can be a 'turn on' for both partners, thus enhancing the intimacy between them. It should be noted that it is not unusual for women to also objectify their sexual partner's body or appearance. For example, author D.H. Lawrence said that for some sexual partners a certain amount of objectification of either the woman or the man adds a genuine erotic quality to the relationship. Extreme erotic objectification, however, is considered fetishism, which can be directed toward a person's body parts and also toward associated physical objects representing a person in an erotic way. That being said, if the objectification can remain in a healthy, unimposing state there actually can be a positive aspect to it.

### **Objectification as a Natural Phenomenon**

As a whole objectification is not inherently abusive. Objectification is a natural phenomenon that is embedded into the normal human experience of subject/object dualism. It is inherent in the normal cognitive interactions a person has with the world. In fact, in the world of

concepts, thoughts and social roles, it is often a necessary and for the most part unavoidable way that humans relate to what we perceive around us. It is through experience and learning that we come to categorize and develop a sense of order in our individual worlds. When we regard another person or thing as an object, it is a way of identifying characteristics of that person (tall, short, smart, pleasant, etc.) or thing and how they can be useful or not to us. We use objectification to focus on how those objects serve our own personal interests and purposes. However, this dualist subject/object relationship has an unfortunate tendency to devalue, isolate, and dehumanize other human beings.

There is the subject (I, me, and mine) and then the object (it, you, they and them). In this dualism, it is the object that we are attracted to or repulsed by. A person identifies objects in the environment that they have learned to like or not through cultural teachings or through personal experience. Then, once a person identifies something that they are attracted to he, or she, has a natural desire to have it. Of course, it is the opposite for something they see as unattractive. The erotic objects are also culturally and personally subjective. This is all part of the typical human process of objectification.

In marketing, objectification is, of course, a very important principle and a lot of time and money are spent on manipulating and enticing people to want to have and own the advertised objects. The phenomenon of want and desire is often used as a way of inviting or seducing the attention and desires of another person. This can even be used as a type of sexual foreplay between consenting individuals. When it is agreed upon foreplay, objectification can be a pleasing interaction for all parties involved. It is this interaction or 'dance' between the subject and object that excites and draws them more intimately together. In this way, when understood and used correctly, erotic objectification can be a normal process used to facilitate attraction.

Therefore, the point I most want to emphasize is that objectification is a natural classification system based on the dualistic subject/object relationship we have with the world around us. The subject is the self and the object is that which is represented in the environment. These poles can be switched where the self, through a reflection like in a mirror, objectifies oneself (I am fat, beautiful, etc.) and is either liked or disliked. Studies have clearly shown that in terms of how women objectify or view their own body type, appearance, and even personality, they commonly introject, or incorporate, outside perceptions. These can include male opinions, advertisements, and many other forms of 'brainwashing'. Such introjection can result in a woman adopting a negative perception of herself leading to low self-esteem or, in the case of excessive positive perceptions, it can lead to arrogance. While introjection is a natural reaction, it can clearly lead to less than desirable outcomes.

### **What is the Real Problem?**

When it comes to 'objectification', feminists are not objecting to the process of objectification itself, but rather the sexual harassment and sexual abuse that develop from it. Instead, there are two significant contributing factors to the problem of sexual abuse and harassment. The first is the sexist society, which encourages and allows the dehumanization of those being objectified solely in a sexual way. The relegation of a person to a sex object not only negatively affects the self-perceptions of those affected, but also encourages their being treated in an abusive and condescending manner. The second factor regards the ethics and morality of the harassers and abusers. When a person sees a pleasing object in their environment, they can normally restrain themselves from taking or possessing it. There are a number reasons why people restrain themselves. They might do so because of the fear of negative consequences, it might be an understanding and respect of personal boundaries, or it could be the knowledge that

it is 'wrong'. If a person does take whatever they like and desire, there is a breakdown in the pact each of us as individuals have with the accepted social code of legality, morality and ethics.

Most cultures implicitly follow the well-known general rule of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' In ethics, the 'right' behavior requires self-restraint and self-responsibility regarding one's interaction with the people and objects in their environment. It is a maturity that humans learn through healthy interactions with their families and society as they grow up. Since neurologically based impulse control disorders are rare, the vast majority of abusive actions taken toward others are choices that are rooted in the absence of ethical principles and considerations. Abusive individuals are selfish, immature, and typically lack empathy or respect for other people. They seek their own personal gratification regardless of the impact it might have on another person. If this tendency goes unchecked, it can easily become habitual and by extension harder to suppress. Objectification is merely a tool for a willful abuser to fulfill their desires.

Therefore, it isn't simply the objectification that creates the behavior to which feminists object. In fact, without understanding the subject/object cognitive process, we are only describing the manifestation of objectification (for a deeper analysis about dualism subject/object see my book, *The Buddha's Gift: A Gift of Wellbeing and Wisdom*). When we only describe the action of objectification or harassment, it remains, just that, a description. More than a description, we need an explanation that truly understands the root cause. Without understanding the root cause there can be no remedy, only a continuation of the current frustration and anger. So, I propose that it is now time for the feminist movement and the #MeToo movement to better define and thereby understand and remedy the objectification discussion.

## **The Primary Causes**

Media culture and the men and women who are influenced by the media is a primary cause of the sexual harassment and sexual abuse that is linked to objectification. The sexist media culture obsessively sexualizes women through for-profit advertisements, fashion, pornography, etc. It is the profitable sexual objectification of a woman's body by modern culture that bombards, oversaturates, and entices men to continue to sexually objectify women. In effect, this creates a significant part of the problem. The media creates a norm for what is desirable or not when it comes to the physical female shape. Marketing is often blamed because the thin women with long legs body type most idealized in modern times was certainly not the standard in past generations and cultures. In fact, it is still not the standard of beauty in other non-European and indigenous cultures. Men are influenced by this sexist culture, that fosters immature, unethical attitudes and behaviors which lack empathetic responses. From an early age, men are brought up in a patriarchal society that tells them that it is okay to react with obsessive thinking and oppressive compulsive actions when they see and interact with women.

My proposition is that sexual harassment and abuse is mainly not from the objectification itself, but, more importantly, it is men's lack of emotionally intelligent behavior. A mature response to erotic material is an acceptance of what it is within the larger, more complex web of personal attributes that each person has. Additionally, an emotionally developed person understands that their likes and dislikes have been culturally influenced and have no inherent exceptional meaning. Giving respect and understanding to other people without selfish, egotistical and narcissistic baggage is much easier for an emotionally mature person than an emotionally immature one. An empathetic person can objectify and recognize another person as erotically pleasing, while also realizing that this objectification will never be a sufficient reason

for them to dehumanize and debase a person through harassment or abuse.

Looking at this issue from a men's liberation point of view, as depicted in the significant Berkley Men's Center Manifesto, the significant issue is not objectification. Instead, the most significant issue is how our modern culture uses this subject/object relationship to create a juvenile connection to an erotic object. Men, or any person, who act toward another human being in a flagrant and openly harassing manner are clearly showing immaturity, as well as selfish tendencies. To counter this on an individual level, anti-abuse policies need to do more to promote empathetic and ethical behavior towards women rather than simply discouraging harassing behavior. This would ultimately result in personal relationships that consist of positive, empathetic, and kind behaviors, which would create a happier, more satisfying society for all.

### **What Needs to Happen Now?**

Society has to change. A patriarchal sexist society sends the message that men are more privileged than women. It also proposes that men not only have the right, but the obligation to control and subjugate women through harassing and abusive behavior. Sexual harassment and sexual abuse are surely both decisions made from a position of elitism and entitlement. Such entitlement does not encourage restraint, respect, or compassion for another person. This denigration of women is often reinforced by the groupthink phenomenon where some men conform to and support each other's abusive way of thinking. Women, as well as emotionally mature men, must openly object to such behavior and give opposing feedback to men who act in obnoxious and sexist ways.

When each person in a relationship is seen not as an object to be used or manipulated, but instead viewed with empathy, respect and understanding, each person is better able to see one another as an equal. The natural interplay between subject and object can happen in a mature and

interdependent relationship where the wholeness of the other person is honored and appreciated.

In a relationship where each person's feelings, thoughts, and sensitivities are esteemed, the natural function of objectification will be allowed to manifest within the bounds of an ethical and respectful exchange. Compassion, after all, is the natural opposite of narcissism.

Finally, any extreme objectification process that often leads to dehumanization is not only relevant to the discussion regarding sexism, but also racism and religious extremism. Since prejudice is the result of an exaggeration of the subject/object duality, it is relevant to all ideologies that define another human through the narrow scope of bias and dogmatism. It is the hope that with a clearer understanding of the subject/object relationship and through teaching emotional intelligence, maturity and respect for others, people will want to act ethically and respectfully toward others and shed narcissistic selfishness and brutality.