

This is a test of your reading and writing abilities. Please read the following article and:

- 1.) demonstrate your understanding of the gist of this article by summarizing it in a few sentences,
- 2.) demonstrate your ability to critically engage the issue under discussion by writing your response to the points made in the article.

Your writing should be presented in the form of a well-structured and well-argued essay, and you are strongly urged to provide refreshing ideas about this easily polarized issue.

Is this empowering?

BBC news 2007-12-19

Once women burned their bras, today they send photos of their breasts to lad mags and call it liberating. Is this really a new form of feminism or just the old objectification, asks Sarah Montague, of BBC Radio 4's Today.

Twenty years ago when I was in my teens, Page Three girls seemed old fashioned. Surely it was just a matter of time before they disappeared altogether. Not only has Page Three survived, it has been joined by almost every other page of a newspaper, including the front.

These days I find myself in petrol station queues trying to explain to my five-year-old daughter why these women haven't got any clothes on. I don't know what message she takes from it. Perhaps she'll think the only exploitation going on is of men's sexual responses. After all, women like glamour model Jordan have made a fortune from this sort of stuff. She's become a role model for thousands of young women who no longer see the sex industry as a last refuge if they're desperate but as something to aspire to. And it doesn't seem to be just down to the money it can pay.

A few months ago, a woman from Nuts TV told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that the reason thousands of young women chose to upload pictures of their breasts for free so that men could rate them on the Nuts website was because it was "empowering" to do so. It reflects a change in society over the past ten years. I wouldn't blame the Spice Girls. I'm sure they just successfully tapped into something that was already there.

As a result of the success of feminism, women can now do exactly as men do. Not only are they doing the same jobs, they're drinking the same amount of alcohol and even treating sex in the same way. But 40 years after the Equal Pay Act, a female director in retail or business earns about £57,000 while a man in the same job earns £70,000, according to the Institute of Directors.

Ten years of girl power has coincided with the rise in what the journalist Ariel Levy has called "raunch culture" - a phrase describing how the sex industry has now become mainstream. Perhaps no surprise that young women look at the images around them and conclude that, to be successful, they have to be sexy. They also

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often say that if they feel sexy, they feel confident. The evidence is everywhere. At a competition for page three girls in Portsmouth, one entrant (wearing little more than a g-string) says we're "doing it for ourselves". She calls it a "confidence boost for us girls". "If we get the cheers, we like ourselves even more," she says. And that word "confidence" crops up again with young women in professional jobs I spoke to in west London. "If you're wearing smart and sort of sexy clothes, you feel more confident and empowered," says one.

But what is our image-obsessed society doing to teenagers? Girls struggling with their self-image are more prone to eating disorders and self-harming. And the boys? If the whole point of feminism is that you can wear what you like and people won't judge you, then someone needs to tell at least one bunch of teenagers in east London, who appear to assume women want to be treated as sex objects. "The first thing that comes to mind is she's a 'ho'," one says. "The first thing, with girls like that, I see them as like easy targets - you can get their numbers, do whatever."

That doesn't matter if that is what the woman wants, but what if it's not? More women now report that they've been raped than ever before and convictions have not kept pace. The first Reclaim the Night march was 30 years ago when organisers said there was a one in three chance of a conviction for rape. Now it's one in 20 and that's why marches have started again. "I was raped by my best friend. I know for a fact if I had said to any other of my male friends that that happened, they would have said, 'well you must have been asking for it in some way' and that's really scary," says one victim.

But for Katherine Townsend, columnist and author of *Sleeping Around*, the rebranding of women's liberation was inevitable. "Every 10 or 15 years feminism needs to mutate and change and I think that's what groups like the Spice Girls did. It repackaged it in a very attractive way to young girls, but I don't think they can claim to speak for everyone." And she believes it can be empowering to be considered sexy. "I'm not saying all women should go out and sleep around. For me it was a journey." But Natasha Walter, author of *New Feminism*, says that while she felt "optimistic about where women were going" during the Spice Girls' era 10 years ago, she is now concerned about how feminism is being defined.

"I think obviously it can be empowering and liberating to throw off the shackles of modesty and go out there and be sexy. "But I think we have to remember what empowerment and liberation meant - what is it in its wider sense? Let's not settle for the narrower sense."

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