



# NATIONAL CENTER ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

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January 31, 2018

Mr. Richard Plepler  
Chief Executive Officer  
Home Box Office, Inc  
1100 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10036

Dear Messrs. Plepler, Bloys, and Ms. Konstan:

We are writing to express our concern regarding Home Box Office, Inc.'s frequent production of original programs that incorporate graphic sex scenes and eroticized rape scenes. Despite hosting graphic content, parental controls on HBO are clunky and ineffective, decreasing the odds of parents using them, and increasing the odds that children can get around the safety settings. Therefore, we are writing to inform you that HBO will remain on the annual Dirty Dozen List, which names 12 leading mainstream contributors to sexual exploitation and abuse in America.

At the National Center on Sexual Exploitation—a non-partisan nonprofit in Washington DC dedicated to addressing the full spectrum of sexual exploitation—we identify that HBO's media often uses its influence on the public conscience to send harmful messages that normalize male sexual entitlement and minimize the damaging experiences of sexual assault or commercial sexual exploitation. We recognize that HBO has parental control options to help families filter content based on their judgement. Unfortunately, a simple loophole in these parental controls has been allowed to exist for many users.

We request that you resolve problems with the parental controls and that you dialogue with us concerning the draft "Industry Standard for Freedom from Sexual Exploitation in Entertainment" as seen on page 4.

## **Problems with HBO Parental Controls:**

HBO does not provide different profiles for users unless the designated TV provider does. This means whenever one wishes to watch content that is not from the kid's section, they must lock and unlock the profile. This inconvenience likely deters many from setting up parental controls and may result in user-error where parents forget to turn the controls back on.

Further, if an HBO account does have separate profiles, any tech-savvy kid can easily switch between profiles to access more mature content because there is no pin-code lock on these profiles.

## **How Media Influences Cultural Perceptions of Sexual Exploitation**

HBO has an opportunity to shape the public discourse regarding sexual harassment by refusing to foster the deeply-rooted culture of sexual abuse and exploitation that afflicts our country and measures to correct this corrosive influence. Because people learn by consuming media, and “because media can influence public opinion and help formulate the national culture and social consensus,”<sup>1</sup> the entertainment sector has long been recognized a significant social influencer.

### **Positive Examples of Responsible Depictions of Sexual Exploitation**

Films like *The Butler* (2013), *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Les Misérables* (2012), and the *Color Purple* (1985) manage to responsibly convey the gravity of slave-holder rape, prison rape, prostitution, and sexually abusive relationships respectively.

In each of these films, sexual exploitation is a significant part of the story’s plotline. However, the films—through narration, and scene cues which inform viewers of the impending danger—all refrain from visuals or audios that portray the actual act of sexual exploitation taking place.

This intentional restraint is important because research makes it clear that media portrayals of sexual violence against women, sexual access to women through nudity, the commodification of women as objects to be bought for sex,<sup>2</sup> and the sexualization of children<sup>3</sup> can have damaging effects.

### **Examples of Irresponsible Depictions of Sexual Exploitation**

While this is far from a comprehensive analysis of irresponsible depictions of sexual exploitation, there are three key ways HBO and other entertainment influencers often incorrectly address these issues:

#### 1. Reinforcing rape myths and romanticizing sexually abuse relationships

Rape myths are beliefs which are culturally available permission-giving beliefs that justify sexual violence, or which blame victims for their victimization and/or minimize their perceived injury.<sup>4</sup> A few examples of rape myths include: women secretly enjoyed being raped; rape is a crime of passion; men cannot be raped; and when women say “no,” they really mean “yes.”

HBO productions have often promoted rape myths, such as in *Game of Thrones* when the female character Daenerys fell in love with her rapist or, even more pronounced, when director Alex Graves said a rape scene between Jamie and Cersei began as rape but became “consensual by the end.”<sup>5</sup> These depictions of rape minimize injury and send a message to viewers that some women will enjoy rape.

<sup>1</sup> Chan Goo Lee, Jiyeon Sung, Jin Ki Kim, et al., “Corporate Social Responsibility of the Media: Instrument Development and Validation,” *Information Development* 32, no. 3 (2016): 554-565.

<sup>2</sup> National Center on Sexual Exploitation, “Prostitution: ‘The Zone’ of Raw Male Physical and Sexual Violence,” (2017). [http://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE\\_Prostitution-Violence-Booklet\\_2017\\_FINAL.pdf](http://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE_Prostitution-Violence-Booklet_2017_FINAL.pdf) (accessed January 9, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> American Psychological Association, “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls,” 2010, <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx> (accessed June 22, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Monto and Norma Hotaling, “Predictors of Rape Myth Acceptance among Male Clients of Female Street Prostitutes,” *Violence against Women* 7, no. 3 (March 2011): 275-293.

<sup>5</sup> Denise Martin. “Breaking Down Jaime and Cersei’s Controversial Scene With Last Night’s Game of Thrones Director.” *Vulture*, 21 Apr. 2014, [www.vulture.com/2014/04/game-of-thrones-director-on-the-rape-sex-scene.html](http://www.vulture.com/2014/04/game-of-thrones-director-on-the-rape-sex-scene.html).

## 2. Normalizing or eroticizing sexual violence

Many shows on HBO, like *The Deuce* and *Game of Thrones*, have portrayed sexual violence alongside statements that the shows seek to expose or address these themes in a thoughtful manner.

Unfortunately, by creating gratuitous sexual violence scenes that include nudity and drawn-out scenes HBO often produces content that puts the viewer in the position of a voyeur of sexual assault.

**Media creators must be careful that their portrayal of sensitive subjects does not exploit or encourage the same harmful consequences they are trying to “expose.”** For example, Norman Lear created the famed show *All in the Family* with a lead character Archie Bunker as a humorous satire on racial prejudice. It was supposed by Lear and others that the show would produce a cathartic rejection of bigotry. However, research revealed that most viewers did not consider the show a satire on bigotry, and saw nothing wrong with Archie’s use of racial and ethnic slurs.<sup>6</sup>

So, good intentions notwithstanding, the show actually encouraged bigots to excuse and rationalize their own prejudices. HBO’s portrayal of sexual violence in an eroticized fashion, including nudity and lengthy scenes, is likely producing a similar unintentional effect.

## 3. Depiction of commercial sexual exploitation

HBO has employed prostitution as the context for scene after scene of nudity, sex, and exploitation. From parades of naked women on display for sexual sale, to the setting of casual dialogues, political intrigues, and orgies, brothels, pornography studios, and the naked women in them are the wallpaper of *Game of Thrones*, *The Deuce* and *Westworld*.

When prostitution is normalized, it becomes more difficult for law enforcement to convict the sex traffickers, pimps, and sex buyers who are abusing women, men, and children. The Denver Police Department confirmed that when jury pools review cases of 17 or 25 year olds who have been exploited in prostitution or sex trafficking, the juries assume these victims are wholly autonomous and wealthy based on what they see in TV shows and movies.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, that narrative commonly promoted in entertainment is far from reality. Even in “VIP” prostitution rings, prostitution is rarely an empowering or lucrative venture. Prostitution survivor Rebecca Bender has said, “Most women involved in high-paid, high-clientele absolutely have a trafficker . . . .”<sup>8</sup>

Considering the real impact of media’s portrayal of prostitution on both prostitution and sex trafficking legal prosecutions, and the inherent sexual violence in prostitution, it’s clear that the entertainment industry has a significant impact on our culture’s perception of sexual exploitation.

<sup>6</sup> Vidmar, Neil, and Milton Rokeach. “Archie Bunker’s Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure.” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 24, no. 1, Jan. 1974, pp. 36–47., doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00353.x.

<sup>7</sup> Demand Abolition, “Law Enforcement: Starz’s ‘The Girlfriend Experience’ Doesn’t Reflect the Reality We See.” *YouTube*, Apr. 2016; [www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLiOhapMbl19UziUc9IgY6AwXdQwzBj4GG&v=Vv2U3XVjZkw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLiOhapMbl19UziUc9IgY6AwXdQwzBj4GG&v=Vv2U3XVjZkw)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Further, HBO contributes to a culture of toxic sexual pressure in the media industry by producing content that requires actors to do nude scenes.

Given the highly competitive nature of the media industry, and the fact that many young actors have minimal economic security, the choice to "turn down" a job can end an actors career before it even began. Therefore, by producing such a high volume of content requiring nudity, HBO adds to the industry pressure for young actors to accept parts requiring nudity, until they have enough industry capital to negotiate their own contracts. In the age of #MeToo, and heightened awareness about the imbalance of power Hollywood producers can exercise over actors, it is a thin and porous line between script-required nudity and the "requirement" to grant "sexual favors" on the producer's casting couch. No person should be required to remove their clothes in order to get a job.

For the reasons outlined above, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation invites you to adopt a new industry standard:

**Industry Standard for Freedom from Sexual Exploitation in Entertainment:**

Whereas cultural values of equity and sexual consent are often shaped by the creative storytelling community, film studios must hold themselves to a high standard in order to depict issues regarding gender inequality and sexual exploitation in a socially responsible manner. The momentum generated by #MeToo and Time's Up Now movements, must extend beyond addressing sexual harassment and assault perpetrated against those within the industry. The entertainment industry must recognize its collective role in creating media that inculcate the very attitudes and behaviors that foster sexual harassment, assault, and sexual exploitation. It must take firm steps to intentionally protect and promote the welfare of not only its members, but society at-large by portraying sex and its surrounding visual narratives in ethical and responsible ways. It can take a positive step in this direction by adopting and implementing "The Standard for Freedom from Sexual Exploitation in Entertainment."

Accordingly, we commit to the following:

- Refraining from gratuitous portrayals of sexual harassment, coercion, or violence against women, men, or children by not displaying prolonged or eroticized scenes with such content;
- Combating the normalization of behaviors associated with sexual entitlement, harassment, and violence by minimizing nudity, particularly female nudity which is more common than male nudity;<sup>9</sup>
- Thoughtfully eschewing the glamorization or normalization of the sexual commodification of another person, such as through the irresponsible portrayals of the sexually exploitive institutions of prostitution, strip clubs, and pornography;
- Never producing any promotional materials or developing content that sexualizes children (persons aged-17 or below) or adult actors portraying children.

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<sup>9</sup>Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Peiper, "Inequality in 900 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, and Disability from 2007-2016," (USC Annenberg: Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, 2017).

HBO has an opportunity to become a leading entertainment production company in the realm of advocating for freedom from sexual exploitation. We ask you to do this as a matter of conscience, and to benefit the HBO brand as one of supreme corporate responsibility. We welcome a meeting or conference call on these topics, and you can contact us at 202-393-7245 or [public@ncose.com](mailto:public@ncose.com).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'P. Trueman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Patrick A. Trueman, Esq.  
President and CEO

CC: Mr. Casey Bloys, President, HBO Programming  
Ms. Eve Konstan, EVP & General Counsel