February 1, 2018

Mr. Richard Plepler, CEO
Mr. Casey Bloys, President, HBO Programming
Ms. Eve Konstan, EVP & General Counsel
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, incessant use of graphic sexual violence and gratuitous nudity in its television programming.

Given the positive momentum generated by #MeToo movement, the entertainment industry faces new opportunities. HBO should recognize its responsibility to combat the attitudes and behaviors that foster sexual harassment, assault, and other forms of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, and take firm steps to intentionally protect and promote the welfare of society by portraying sex and its surrounding visual narratives in ethical and responsible ways by adopting and implementing “The Standard for Freedom from Sexual Exploitation in Entertainment,” enclosed at the end of this letter.

Unfortunately, to date HBO has consistently produced content which normalizes rape myths, sexual violence, and commercial sexual exploitation through with sexually exploitive depictions of sex and sexual violence. For this reason, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation plans to place HBO on its 2018 Dirty Dozen List, where HBO shares space with bad corporate actors such as the sex trafficking and prostitution website Backpage.com.

To be removed from the list, we ask that HBO adopt “The Standard for Freedom from Sexual Exploitation in Entertainment” which are outlined at the end of this letter, and discontinue The Deuce—which is based on and gratuitously portrays the commercial sexual exploitation of women, and which stars James Franco who has been accused by many women of sexual abuses.

The Influence of Media on Culture and 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.
Media—whether in the form of the written word, movies, television, or the visual arts, etc.—is a powerful driver of social norms.

Cognitive script theory asserts that media provides a heuristic learning model that outlines: 1) what should or should not be happening in a given scenario, 2) how others will respond to certain actions, and 3) what the total outcome will be of a given scenario.¹

Researchers further explain:

Heuristic processing describes the way in which information is processed quickly and without much deliberation and can be contrasted with systemic processing, which is about deliberation, weighing of facts, and conscious analysis. Media, in other words, create an easily accessible memory structure for real-world decision-making that circumvents critical analysis (emphasis added).²

In other words, the “fantasy” world of entertainment media is not constrained to the realm of whimsy or imagination, but has real world implications and impact. Because people learn by consuming media, and “because media can influence public opinion and help formulate the national culture and social consensus,”³ the entertainment sector has long been recognized a significant social influencer.

This is especially true with respect to sexual objectification of women. Social scientists report that, “As a visual narrative medium, film is particularly apt at conveying images and storylines that depict sexual objectification and perpetuate social oppression and restriction by focusing on women’s bodies.”⁴ Or, as one film critic put it, “the exploitation of female nudity is an axiom of modern cinema.”⁵

While the sexual objectification of women in cinema is indeed self-evident, findings from the Media, Diversity and Social Change Initiative add weight to this accepted truth. The Initiative found that within the top 100 films of 2016, 25.9% of females versus 5.7% of males were shown in sexually revealing attire, 25.6% of females versus 9.2% of males were shown partially or fully naked, and females aged 13-20 were just as likely as those 21-39 to be shown in sexy attire or nude.⁶

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² Ibid.
Moreover, both movies and television programming routinely exploit plot lines demeaning women, and normalizing violence against them. For instance, Hollywood films about college have been shown to portray women in ways that reinforce rape myths and which advance anti-intellectual backlash against women’s advances in higher education and society (e.g. recycled plot lines depicting female characters as focused on romantic or sexual pursuits rather than academics; discounting personal traits and intellectual abilities of women and prioritizing their bodies for gazing, pleasure, or violence).\(^7\)

Additionally, R-rated films with scenes that objectify or degrade women have been shown to alter the way men perceived acquaintance rape, resulting in men believing that the victim received pleasure and “got what she wanted.”\(^8\)

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

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

In each of these films, sexual exploitation is a significant part of the story’s plotline, yet the screenplay and directed videography avoid exploiting the scene in a way that is salacious, dehumanizing, or disrespectful to real victims of sexual violence or domestic abuse who often struggle to stop re-living the horrors of those experiences.

The films do this through the use of narration, and scene cues which inform viewers of the impending danger, yet they 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,\(^9\) and the sexualization of children\(^10\) 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

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\(^7\) Yakaboski and Donahoo, ibid.


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.\textsuperscript{11} A few examples of rape myths include: women secretly enjoyed being raped; rape is a crime of passion; only “bad” women get raped; men cannot be raped; and when women say “no,” they really mean “yes.”

HBO productions have often promoted rape myths, such as in \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{12} These depictions of rape minimize injury and send a message to viewers that some women will enjoy rape.

2. Normalizing or eroticizing sexual violence

Many shows on HBO, like \textit{The Deuce, Game of Thrones}, and \textit{Westworld}, 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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{13}

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.

For example, \textit{Westworld} creators stated that they were examining the “basest parts of human nature” and insist that sexual violence is something they all ‘take seriously.’\textsuperscript{14} While we do not know of an episode that explicitly showed a rape, which makes it marginally better than \textit{Game of Thrones}, the show still routinely depicts graphic sex, uses women (especially prostituted women) as objects of sexual violence, and regularly displays female (and male) nudity. Instead

\textsuperscript{11} Martin Monto and Norma Hotaling, “Predictors of Rape Myth Acceptance among Male Clients of Female Street Prostitutes,” \textit{Violence against Women} 7, no. 3 (March 2011): 275-293.


of “commenting,” *Westworld* therefore engages in, and fuels, the use of abused female bodies as props in exchange for higher ratings.

Sexual violence is not a topic for HBO to exploit for mere shock value or titillation. Sexual violence is a real social harm, with real (not fictional) victims, who bear the scars of their abuse for their entire lives.

3. Depiction of commercial sexual exploitation

The entertainment industry’s portrayals of prostitution and pornography as erotic or empowering ventures, and of prostitutes as objects on whom savage violence can be depicted without fear upsetting the general public, offers a disturbing example of how the entertainment industry can produce negative consequences in the court systems and society at-large.

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*. Beyond the routine buying and selling of women (some of whom look like mere teenagers), the prostituted women in *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* are subjected to sadistic violence, torture, and murder.

As with other women, sexual violence perpetrated against prostituted women is justified by a set of specific myths such as prostitutes are unrapeable, no harm is done to prostitutes when they are assaulted or harassed, prostitutes deserve to be raped, and all prostitutes are the same.\(^{15}\) Such myths, are expertly communicated in *Game of Thrones*, *The Deuce*, and *Westworld*, and give assent to the notions that “male sexual needs are imperative, and that prostitution should exist as an institution to meet men’s sexual needs.”\(^{16}\)

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.\(^{17}\)

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 . . .”\(^{18}\)

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.


\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Demand Abolition, “Law Enforcement: Starz’s ‘The Girlfriend Experience’ Doesn’t Reflect the Reality We See.” *YouTube*, Apr. 2016; www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLiOhapMbl.19UziUc9lq6AwXdQwzBj4GG&v=Vv2U3XiJZkw

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
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;*¹⁹
- *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.*

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.

Sincerely,

Patrick A. Trueman  
President & CEO

Dawn Hawkins  
Senior Vice President & Executive Director