

The truth on perviving: women are better than men at controlling their lust

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Fred Nile's call to ban topless bathing may have been overwhelmingly rejected by the state's politicians, but plenty of women I know think he has a point. Not that any of these women would advocate making toplessness a crime, only that they acknowledge a naked chest can be mightily distracting. Oh, and they're talking pecs, not breasts.

Nile wants the law to state that "exposure of women's breasts on beaches will be prohibited" but the ladies I talked to would be happy with a simple health warning: "Exposure to finely toned, lightly oiled male torsos may cause dizziness, confusion and excessive sweating."

These symptoms were in evidence when pictures of the US president-elect, Barack Obama, strolling topless on a Hawaiian beach were beamed around the world last week. Women from across the political spectrum were, for a moment, united in their glassy-eyed appreciation of the soon to be Babe-in-Chief. (Representative comment on one female-targeted website that published the pics: "Those swimming trunks leave too much to the imagination. Buy that man a Speedo!")

The tiresome myth that women are not as visually aroused as men is used to justify everything from sexual assault to double standards about public toplessness, and it's time to kill it dead.

If the oceans of female drool spilt over Obama (and Daniel Craig and Jude Law and Roger Federer et al) isn't enough to convince you, consider the fact that women continue to have sex with men despite not being legally or economically or in any other way compelled to do so.

Sometimes women even have sex with men for no other reason than - shock horror - physical attraction.

The should-be-obvious truth is that straight women love men's bodies. That it sometimes seems otherwise is only because pervy men are more acceptable in our culture than pervy women.

Think of that classic teen rite of passage - getting busted with a porn mag stashed under the bed. Now imagine the pictures are of naked men and the bed belongs to a teenage girl. Guffaws and mumbles about healthy curiosity are replaced by disgust and dismay.

Girls get the message early on that it is not acceptable for them to want to boff a bloke just because he's buff. They learn that yearning for male bodies can be expressed only if those bodies belong to smart, funny boys who are kind to puppies and old people.

Girls learn to say they love Zac Efron for his beautiful singing voice rather than his immensely grab-able arse. They learn to think about boys in terms other than physical.

Meanwhile, boys are not taught, as girls are, that their bodies could have a disruptive effect on people around them, that they should wear looser clothing so as not to distract their classmates. They're not told that how they look could incite nasty rumours or prevent them advancing at work or cause them to get raped. They aren't told that the sight of their flesh may cause grown women to turn into mindless brutes.

But the fact is male bodies can have the same effect on women as female bodies can have on men. That far fewer men than women are harassed or attacked by people claiming sexual provocation is not because women aren't visually aroused, but because women have learnt that their biological responses to beauty are not an excuse to commit acts of violence or discrimination.

Just as teenage girls learn to express their desire in culturally acceptable terms, most women learn to not impose their desire on the unwitting (or not) person who triggered it. They know, for example, that no matter how gorgeous a passing man is, it's not OK to scream out an invitation for sex from across the street (although a polite, situation-appropriate compliment is almost always appreciated).

Women's learnt ability to deal with inappropriate lust brings us back to those topless sunbathers. In supporting Nile's proposal, the Labor MP Paul Gibson revealed his deep discomfort with both women's bodies and the language used to describe bits of them when he asked, "Do you want somebody with big knockers next to you when you're [at the beach] with the kids?"

Plenty of beach-loving mums can relate: there you are, rubbing sunscreen into your toddler's back when a delicious slab of man meat lays his towel down right beside you. What to do?

How about this - remember that the person lying there is a human being whose hotness does not negate their right to bake unmolested. If the kids ask awkward questions like, oh, "What are those?" You say, "Nipples, we've all got them. Cool, huh?" Then you stop being a creepy perve and concentrate on the sandcastles and surf.

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