



The Truth about

Girl Power

A responsible look at how marketers are limiting the choices of young women

Who could be a better example of girl power than *The Sensational She-Hulk*? Artwork by Mike Mayhew, *She-Hulk* Vol. 1, No. 6, www.marvel.com,TM © 2006 Marvel Characters, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Girl Power!" was the motto often shouted by the English pop singing group Spice Girls. Their message was that girls can be strong, have loyal friendships and have equality with men – along with the option of dressing in platform shoes and wearing skimpy dresses made out of British flags. Although the Spice Girls' version of girl power might or might not be innocuous, US marketers have found a way to use the "girl power" slogan as a propaganda tool that is producing not millions but billions of dollars in revenue by encouraging girls to buy products they don't need. And that is a message that disturbs college professors Sharon Lamb, EdD, and Lyn Mikel Brown, EdD.

Authors of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes* (St. Martin's Press, 2006), Drs. Lamb and Brown contend that marketers are pushing girls into demeaning stereotypes that elevate fashion and sex appeal over academics, sports and even friendships. Lamb and Brown conclude that through the use of television, movies, books, advertising and other media, marketers are trying to hook girls on adopting an attitude that encourages them to buy higher-priced, higher-fashion products at a younger age, products that are robbing them of their childhood. So instead of nine-year-old girls dressing in practical clothes that allow them to play hard at recess, what you see are girls dressed like Britney Spears anxiously awaiting the end of school so they can hit the malls and "shop till they drop!"

In their extensively researched and highly readable book, Drs. Lamb and Brown educate parents about how the marketers are influencing girls and provide practical steps on how to deal with the problem. Because BFS is concerned about helping young people make

responsible choices that will enable them to set and achieve worthy goals, we contacted the publishers and were able to obtain an exclusive interview with Dr. Lamb to learn more about this important subject.

■ **BFS:** What do you hope parents of young girls will come away with after reading your book?

■ **LAMB:** We want them to be able to know how to have conversations with their daughters about the way that marketers work so they can raise daughters who are free to develop their own personalities.

■ **BFS:** When you look at the numbers, in schools girls are superior to boys across the board in just about all aspects of education and have far less behavioral problems. Whatever has been happening in the past 15-20 years seems to be working and girls *are* excelling in our school system. Do these numbers undermine your conclusions?

■ **LAMB:** Not at all. Of the major problems that girls have that are related to marketing, doing well in school is not one of them. However, for *boys*, I would say that the selling of "cool and aloof" as a way to be a man is one of the reasons boys are having problems in school. This attitude disables boys in the classroom in getting what they need because they are not supposed to need anything.

■ **BFS:** Can the influence of religious organizations help girls from being so heavily influenced by marketers?

■ **LAMB:** Perhaps. But I also think that fundamentalists sometimes support, unwittingly of course, what the marketers are doing by promoting modesty and innocence as a part of girlhood. Once girls start buying into a

stereotype of being a sweet, innocent, "pretty in pink" princess, the marketers have them, because by the time these girls are 11, that pretty color pink turns into hot pink and black lace. Parents need to remember that they are players in their children's worlds, and this means not handing them over to any



Sharon Lamb, EdD, and Lyn Mikel Brown, EdD, are the authors of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*.

organization, whether it is religion, schools or the media.

■ **BFS:** Do you consider the *Mean Girls* book and movie an accurate look at the subject?

■ **LAMB:** Our take on the *Mean Girls* scenario is that we think it promotes a stereotype that girls are constantly in competition with one another. In real life, girls tend to have really wonderful friendships with one another. Another issue we have with *Mean Girls* is that it seems to blame the girls rather than the society around them or the media. Instead of helping girls, it's just another form of name-calling – she's the popular girl, she's the fruit cup girl, she's the wannabe, she's the queen bee. Our society is always stereotyping and putting girls into narrow categories, when the truth is they are much more complex than that.

■ **BFS:** What do you think about Dr. Phil's philosophy that you teach

people how to treat you?

■ **LAMB:** That's a "blame the girl" approach. You have to consider that media are also teaching boys how to treat girls, and we think that is a major problem too. Hopefully, we will eventually be able to come out with a book about "packaging boyhood" that will address this problem.

■ **BFS:** What is your opinion of the way today's comic books are portraying girls as role models?

■ **LAMB:** I think that alternative comics are interesting phenomena and media that can help girls resist the sort of stereotypical busty, oversexed, Laura Croft-type of character we often see in comics and videos that are really male

fantasies. *Emily the Strange*, which is a comic about a depressed girl, is one I found interesting because it didn't conform to traditional stereotypes. I've also heard that there are some great female role models in the comic book world that certainly defy stereotypes, such as *She-Hulk*.

■ **BFS:** Disney has been heavily promoting a singing group called the Cheetah Girls; and unlike many ultra-thin pop singers, these girls as a whole look more like typical girls. Do you believe this signals a positive trend among marketers that could discourage girls from going on strict diets and becoming more susceptible to eating disorders?

■ **LAMB:** Traditionally, among African Americans and Latinos, there has been much greater acceptance of girls with more flesh on their bodies. But as races and cultures integrate into existing society, they are unfortunately sucked into the current stereotypes; in this case, ones that aspire to a thinner ideal.

■ **BFS:** With the growing problem with obesity, many of the so-called "girly" clothes will not look good on many girls. How is this a problem for girls?

■ **LAMB:** Heavier girls will feel terrible about themselves when the only option for a girl to be is cute, small, hot and sexy. During our research we asked



Organized sports, such as gymnastics, are positive ways for girls to establish their own identity. Here are some strong girls from the Olympus School of Gymnastics in Sandy, Utah (left to right): Summer Raymond, Bailey James, Kylie Sharp, Amanda Johanson, and Mary Beth Lofgren.

a curvy girl what sports she played, and she said, “I don’t play sports – I’m too fat.” And where did she get the idea that you can’t play sports if you’re fat? From *marketers* promoting the idea that you have to look good to play sports! That’s so sad.

■ **BFS:** In women’s tennis, the number-two-ranked woman in the world is Maria Sharapova. She’s beautiful, athletic and thin. What is your opinion about the way she is promoted?

■ **LAMB:** I love one television commercial I saw with Maria in that it played her up as someone who happens to be beautiful who loves the game. Having said that, people should want to watch women’s sports because the sports are interesting and because the women are really good athletes, not because people get to see some skin.

■ **BFS:** What do you think about what Howard Stern has to say?

■ **LAMB:** Sometimes he’s horrid, but a lot of what he does is also tongue-in-cheek – it’s adult entertainment. I wouldn’t want any teenager of mine to listen to him regularly, but I don’t believe in censorship. If we were to listen to Stern’s show occasionally, I would talk to my teenager about what’s funny about it and what’s disgusting.

■ **BFS:** In your book you mention that Paris Hilton had been a hockey player in high school. Would you comment?

■ **LAMB:** Often with celebrities, women are made out to be role models for girls by their looks, not by their talent. Lindsay Lohan is a good actress, but people don’t talk about that – it’s about how thin she is, what she’s wearing and whom she’s dating.

■ **BFS:** What do you think about



There are many excellent books available that resist traditional stereotypes that are appropriate for young girls. Here Mary Beth Lofgren reads *Emily the Strange* while her mother Deena studies the good advice contained in *Packaging Girlhood*.

the way girl pop singers have been promoted and how they influence young girls as role models?

■ **LAMB:** Right now I think people are confused about Britney Spears because instead of being a rock-star diva, she’s this gum-smacking mother of two from the South. Avril Lavigne started out as this “skater girl,” but now she’s blond and sweet and pretty. Ashlee Simpson was funky looking at one time and now looks just like her sister Jessica, who really looks like a Barbie doll. These girls have all been packaged by the marketers to fit a specific stereotype.

■ **BFS:** Couldn’t there be an upside to what marketers are doing with their promotions, suggesting with the idea “if you do this, you’ll get this” that life can be precisely planned out? Wouldn’t there be less stress on young girls because they would know exactly what it takes to be happy?

■ **LAMB:** That might be a good thing if it were really true. One of the issues with going that route is that it often doesn’t pay off for women or girls because it represents a lifestyle of dependence, and therefore does not help them develop the skills they need in today’s world. Now if you really want a life of dependency and can find someone you can trust and you have a lot of money to buy all the products in order to be that kind of person, then it might work out. But we know that that life ultimately is not very fulfilling.

■ **BFS:** Do you have any last words you’d like to share with young girls and their parents?

■ **LAMB:** Our goal in writing *Packaging Girlhood* was not to keep girls away from the real world through censorship but to join with them in understanding it and rising above it to expand their opportunities. **BFS**