



CANADIANS URGED TO FILE HUMAN RIGHTS COMPLAINTS AGAINST PIMP PRODUCTS

“We’re in a time when young black boys and girls want to be pimps and strippers, because that is what they see” – Spike Lee

Toronto, Ontario, August 29, 2005: The abusive language and violence of pimp rap has spread so thoroughly into the mainstream of popular culture, that it is seriously undermining the safety and rights of girls and women. Toronto activist Valerie Smith is urging people to fight back by filing complaints with Human Rights Commissions against companies selling pimp products. “A pimp”, says Smith, “is the worst exploiter of women on the planet. Pimps routinely beat, rape, torture and kill women, yet this icon of human misery has been elevated to superstar status by the entertainment industry. This is a social disaster in the making.”

Normalizing abuse: From a very young age, children are being socialized by pop culture to believe violence against women is a good thing. Why would they think anything else, when misogynist/pimp rappers are rewarded with multi-million dollar recording contracts, starring roles in movies, product endorsements, and invited to perform their pimp music on MTV award shows. If *adults* treat abusive, violent men in such a fashion, kids have every reason to believe that abusing girls and women is completely acceptable.

Recruiting for the sex trade: In the United States, child advocates are worried by the increasing numbers of middle-class teenage girls turning to prostitution, with some pointing the finger at the influence of pimp rap.¹ Indeed, Spike Lee told a Toronto audience last March, “we’re in a time when young black boys and girls want to be pimps and strippers, because that is what they see”.² This is a tragedy.

Racism bad - sexism good: In Canada, racists are socially vilified and prosecuted by the justice system – as they should be -- while sexists like Eminem, 50 Cent, Jay-Z and Ludacris are welcomed into the country with open arms and perform concerts in front of all-ages crowds. The message this sends is that racism is bad, but sexism is good. In fact, not only good, but extremely profitable. Certain Canadian companies have received this message loud and clear. Bell Mobility, for instance, thought it would be just fine to sell PimpTones -- cellphone ringtones that refer to women as “bitches,” “skanks” and “whores” and feature violence if the phone isn’t picked up.

In the movie, *40-Year-Old-Virgin*, “...all women are called bitches all the time” (*Gross is the new black*, Johanna Schneller, *Globe and Mail*, August 26, 2005)

In defending PimpTones, Bell Canada spokeswoman Nessa Prendergast said the pimp motif is a “huge phenomenon”, in pop culture. “There are mainstream TV shows and products that use that language. It’s a big part of the culture these days,” she said. She’s absolutely right – and that situation is *wrong* and must be changed.

Know your rights: Legislation is different across the country, but in Ontario, the Human Rights Commission (OHRC) considers sexual harassment to be a form of discrimination, with sexual harassment described as including “offensive remarks, gender-related verbal abuse, rough and vulgar humour or language related to gender”, as well as the “display of sexually offensive pictures, graffiti, or other materials”.³ Pimp products pretty much always contain “gender-related verbal

abuse”, so complaints can be filed with the Commission against companies selling products featuring language like “bitch” and “whore”. NB: Complaints involving federally-regulated industries (e.g., telephone companies) must be directed to the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Harassment-free environment is a right in Ontario: The OHRC advises that companies in this province are obligated to provide a harassment-free environment. This means we do not have to silently tolerate pimp language being used by co-workers, displayed on t-shirts, hats, etc., or listen to pimp rap or PimpTones being played in areas where we work or receive services (e.g., transit, restaurants, retail establishments). Management should prohibit this, and if it doesn't, contact the OHRC about filing a complaint against the company.

PimpTones could be prohibited hate messages: Smith recently sent a complaint letter to the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) regarding Bell Mobility's sale of PimpTones, citing a section of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* that prohibits “pre-recorded telephone hate messages”. Unlike traditional telephone hate messages that require people to call a number to hear the message, PimpTones play theirs out loud in places frequented by women, thereby exposing the target group to public denigration. Plus, they disseminate a discriminatory message to people in the area who have done nothing to solicit it.

There is no guarantee these complaints will be accepted by human rights commissions, but it's an avenue worth pursuing. As the OHRC web site says, “silence or doing nothing will not typically make harassment go away”. More information on pimp rap can be found on the Free Radical web site in the Music, Hate Propaganda and News Release sections.

Women excluded from *Criminal Code* Hate Propaganda law: Complaints about pimp products cannot be filed under the hate propaganda law because women are **excluded** from the protection of this law. The situation contravenes our Section 15 *Charter* right to the equal protection of Canadian laws, a fact federal politicians blithely ignored when they changed the law recently to extend protection to those identified by their sexual orientation. Something to remember at election time.

And finally: Some argue that abusive, sexist language has been so mainstreamed by the entertainment industry, that it is no longer offensive or insulting. Here's a little test of that theory for those who believe it -- try calling the women in your office “bitch” and “whore” and see how that works out for you.

ABOUT THE FREE RADICAL: The Free Radical web site is operated by Toronto activist Valerie Smith to provide information on media violence, and strategies for combating it. She is the author of the *Action Agenda: A Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada*, funded and published by Ontario's Office for Victim's of Crime. The report is available for free download from the Free Radical web site.

- 30 -

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¹ *This could be your kid*; Newsweek, August 18, 2003

² *Spike Lee's usual rap, about music and more*, Toronto Star, March 16, 2005

³ *Policy on sexual harassment and inappropriate gender-related comments and conduct*, Ontario Human Rights Commission, September 10, 1996 (available on the OHRC web site)