

The Impact of Beauty Standards on Women

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Introduction

This paper argues that beauty standards operate as subtle mechanisms of social control that can reinforce gender inequality and contribute to forms of symbolic gender-based violence. Beauty standards have become more demanding and influential in recent years. They exert significant social and psychological influence on women. This topic is studied within a human rights framework because it looks at how social expectations can affect equality, dignity, and fair treatment. This issue is important because it challenges how equality and dignity are understood, particularly in relation to gender-based violence. Symbolic harm, psychological harm, and physical harm are already recognised in the human rights framework, and beauty standards can produce all three — making this a significant issue to address. However, even though gender-based violence is widely discussed, the role of beauty standards in this issue is still not addressed in human rights frameworks. This paper explores how beauty standards can also be understood as part of human rights violations and gender-based discrimination.

The paper will discuss the challenges women face when trying to meet these beauty standards and examine the causes behind these expectations. In the literature review, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) will be discussed as an important framework related to women's rights and equality. Another concept explored in this paper is the “beauty is good” bias, which explains how attractiveness often influences how people are treated in society.

Overall, this paper aims to show the mental and social pressure many women experience while trying to meet unrealistic beauty standards. It also examines how women may experience both psychological and physical harm when attempting, or sometimes being forced, to meet these expectations.

Background and Significance

This study is located under human rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is one of the main international instruments working towards women's equality. CEDAW focuses on eliminating discrimination against women in all areas of life.

The Convention is the only human rights treaty that clearly affirms women's reproductive rights and also recognises culture and tradition as influential forces that shape gender roles and family relations (Text of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women n.d.).

Based on Article 1 and Article 3 of CEDAW, “extensive discrimination against women continues to exist”, and such discrimination “violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity”. According to Article 1, discrimination includes “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex...in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”.

The Convention also requires States to take “all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men” (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, New York, 18 December 1979 | OHCHR n.d.).

Although CEDAW addresses discrimination broadly, discussions around beauty standards and their impact on women are still limited within this framework.

Research further suggests that body dissatisfaction is highly prevalent among women; one large-scale

study of nearly 6,000 women in the United States found that approximately 91% reported a discrepancy between their current and preferred body, indicating widespread dissatisfaction shaped by cultural beauty ideals (Runfola et al., 2013).

Literature Review

Academic discussions surrounding beauty standards generally fall into two major schools of thought: sociological and feminist perspectives that interpret beauty norms as mechanisms of patriarchal control, and evolutionary psychology perspectives that suggest some ideas of beauty may come from natural human preferences. The sociological and feminist school of thought views beauty standards as mechanisms of social control.

Cultural enforcement of beauty norms

Beauty can be defined differently depending on the culture and society. Perceptions of beauty vary across different societies. For example, in Indonesia, beauty is often associated with fair skin and a slim body. As a result, women who do not meet these standards are sometimes viewed as less attractive (Muljadi & Angjaya, 2024).

In contrast, some cultures value completely different body types. For example, practices such as leblouh or gavage, which involve force-feeding young girls to increase body size, have been reported in Mauritania. In this context, larger bodies are considered a sign of beauty and status (Palermo & Peterman, 2013).

Further research also suggests that beauty can shape public perception in different societies. Xu explains how in China phrases such as "beautiful female PhD" or "beautiful female teacher" attract public attention, showing how appearance can influence how women are viewed in professional spaces (Xu, 2019).

These examples indicate that ideas of beauty are shaped by culture, social expectations, and historical norms. However, women often feel pressure to meet these standards even when they may be harmful.

Psychological mechanisms of beauty standards

Scholars have also argued that beauty standards are influenced by wider social systems. For example, Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth* that modern beauty standards often create unrealistic expectations for women and encourage them to focus heavily on their appearance (Wolf, 1991).

Beauty standards can also influence how people judge others. According to Frederick et al., people often assume that attractive individuals have better personalities and more successful lives. This research demonstrates what is known as the "beautiful is good" bias (Frederick et al., 2015).

Psychologists have further explored how appearance affects women's experiences. According to Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, objectification theory suggests that women are often evaluated based on their physical appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This can lead women to constantly monitor their bodies, which may increase body dissatisfaction and anxiety.

Harmful consequences of beauty standards

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some women experience pressure to become extremely thin. One example of this is anorexia nervosa. As Bulik explains, "Anorexia nervosa is a debilitating psychiatric disorder with profound biological, psychological, and social consequences" (Bulik, 2005).

Studies have shown that exposure to idealised images, particularly through social media, is associated with increased body dissatisfaction among women and adolescent girls (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). This supports earlier theoretical work on objectification, which explains how women may internalise an observer's perspective of their own bodies. Further research has found that self-objectification is linked to anxiety, body shame, and reduced psychological well-being (Moradi & Huang, 2008).

In contrast, evolutionary psychology suggests that some ideas of beauty may come from natural human instincts, not just society. Scholars such as David Buss say that features such as clear skin and a balanced face are often seen as attractive because they can show that a person is healthy (Buss, 1989). Some studies also show that people in different countries find similar features attractive, which suggests that these ideas may not come only from culture.

This indicates that beauty standards may not be entirely created by society, but may also be influenced by human biology. However, culture still plays a big role in shaping and changing what people find beautiful.

At the same time, some researchers suggest that beauty practices, such as makeup, can also be a way for women to express themselves and feel more confident (Antoniadou et al., n.d.; Lee & Oh, 2018).

Overall, beauty standards cannot be explained in just one way. While evolutionary psychology suggests that some ideas of beauty may be natural, School A scholars argue that these ideas are shaped and strengthened by society, media, and cultural expectations. This means that even if some preferences come from biology, they can still create pressure and inequality for women. As a result, beauty standards may act as a form of social control rather than just personal preference.

As Vijayarasa explains, in relation to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women General Recommendation No. 35, “After a twenty-five-year lapse in time, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) returned to the issue of gender-based violence, issuing General Recommendation No. 35 on 14 July 2017” (Vijayarasa, 2020).

This raises an important question about how gender-based violence has been addressed within international human rights discussions. Although gender-based violence is now recognised as a serious global issue, the connection between beauty standards and gender-based violence is still not discussed very often.

Even within major international frameworks such as CEDAW, beauty standards are not explicitly mentioned. However, many harmful pressures and practices that women face are closely linked to social expectations about appearance. This shows that the issue of beauty standards may not be getting enough attention in discussions of discrimination and gender-based violence.

As Palermo explains, “Gender-based violence (GBV) is widespread globally and has many negative health effects, but it is still greatly underreported” (Palermo et al., 2014). This suggests that certain forms of harm experienced by women may not be fully discussed or recognised in academic and policy debates.

Research Question

This research explores how beauty standards can influence the way women are treated and perceived in society. In many societies, women are encouraged to follow certain beauty practices in order to appear “beautiful” or socially acceptable.

This leads to the main research question:

To what extent do contemporary beauty standards function as mechanisms of symbolic control that reinforce gender inequality and contribute to forms of discrimination against women?

Many women are encouraged to use cosmetics, products, and other methods to meet socially accepted beauty ideals. However, this raises further questions about why these expectations exist and what social factors influence them.

As discussed by Havlin, beauty standards are also connected to larger social systems. She asks questions such as: “How is beauty being redefined, especially in light of race, disability, class, gender,

sexuality, and economics? How are dominant beauty regimes shaped by racism, sexism, able-bodiedness, homophobia, colonialism, and capitalism?” (Havlin & Báez, 2018).

These questions show that beauty standards are not only about appearance, but also about broader systems of power, culture, and social expectations.

Argument

Based on this debate, this paper argues that beauty standards can act as a form of social control in a human rights context. Beauty standards often act as a form of social control that shapes how women see their bodies and how they are treated in society. Building on sociological theories of symbolic violence developed by Pierre Bourdieu, beauty standards can be understood as subtle mechanisms through which social hierarchies are reproduced. In many societies, expectations surrounding femininity are closely tied to physical appearance, which creates pressure for women to change their bodies in order to be accepted in society. Scholars have argued that beauty norms are embedded within wider patriarchal structures that influence how women are seen and valued in society (Bordo, 1993). As a result, appearance may become an important factor in social approval, professional opportunities, and relationships.

Cultural practices in different societies show how beauty ideals can influence behaviour and social expectations. In Mauritania, for example, the traditional practice of *leblouh* involves force-feeding young girls to increase body size, reflecting a belief that larger bodies represent beauty and status (Palermo & Peterman, 2013). Reports describe how some women feel pressured to maintain this body type due to fear of losing social acceptance or marriage prospects.

Media also play a major role in shaping beauty expectations. In the Indonesian film, *Imperfect: Career, Love & Scales*, the main character Rara experiences pressure to change her appearance in order to get opportunities at work despite her qualifications (Valencia & Junaidi, 2021).

This research also demonstrates the psychological consequences associated with unrealistic beauty standards. Exposure to idealised body types through social media has been linked to body dissatisfaction and harmful behaviours among young women and adolescents (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). In more serious cases, these pressures may lead to eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, a psychiatric disorder with serious biological, psychological, and social consequences (Bulik, 2005).

Supporters of the agency view make a reasonable case. Makeup and beauty practices can genuinely improve women's self-confidence and sense of identity. Lee and Oh (2018) found that makeup enhances self-confidence and interpersonal relationships, and Mafra et al. (2022) showed that women wearing makeup are often perceived as more attractive, competent, and socially prestigious. From this perspective, beauty practices are not oppression but creative self-expression. These findings show that beauty practices are not always experienced as pressure, but this does not mean women are free from social influence.

However, Gill (2007) argues that contemporary media often shows beauty practices as empowerment while still reinforcing traditional gender expectations. The choice to wear makeup may feel personal, but the pressure shaping that choice — and the social rewards for making it — are not. When 90% of women aged 18–29 report using makeup (Tran et al., 2020), the question is whether this reflects free expression or an expectation so widespread it may be difficult for many women to avoid or resist.

Conclusion

Beauty standards play an important role in shaping how women see themselves and how they are treated in society. While beauty practices may sometimes be forms of creativity or self-expression, they can also create strong pressure for women to meet certain expectations about appearance.

Many women experience mental and emotional stress while trying to keep up with changing beauty

standards. In some cases, these pressures can lead to harmful behaviours such as extreme dieting or eating disorders like anorexia. In other situations, beauty standards may be enforced by others, such as in practices like leblouh in Mauritania.

Researchers such as Naomi Wolf and Susan Bordo have also argued that beauty standards are closely connected to cultural expectations and gender roles. Understanding these pressures is important when examining how appearance can influence women's opportunities, confidence, and social treatment.

While this study relies primarily on existing scholarly literature rather than empirical data, examining beauty standards through a human rights lens highlights how cultural expectations surrounding women's bodies may contribute to broader patterns of discrimination and symbolic forms of gender-based violence.

Overall, examining beauty standards contributes to the understanding of how social expectations can affect women's lives and contribute to wider discussions about discrimination, inequality, and gender-based violence. Future research could explore how beauty standards can be more clearly addressed in laws and policies that aim to protect women's rights.

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