



# MEDIA'S ROLE IN WOMEN'S ASSESSMENT OF SELF IMAGE

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## Abstract

Women are equal or near equal to men in as far as sheer number is concerned, constituting almost 50% of the world population. However, it is common knowledge that this is where all comparisons end. Women's lives, the social pressures they are subjected to and the compulsions to comply with them are in great measure a contrast to that of men. From the earliest humans, women have been associated with sexuality (Salisbury, 2001). Although modern civilization has brought about socio-economic and political changes women's live and the way women are viewed have changed little. Patriarchal society that we live in even today expects women to achieve certain standards of aesthetics, although it is physically, emotionally and financially costly (Travis & Payne, 2001). Society holds certain beauty myths, and women are condemned for not taking care of themselves, "since it implies defying hierarchy of men in society" (Smolak & Moore, 2001). Media, which is a powerful tool influencing public opinion, has only been propagating these myths. As a result women's body image has undergone a significant change over the years. This has created another form of psychosocial control over women. This paper tries to examine the impact of mass media on women's lives in relation to their physical and psychosocial health.

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## Media's Role in Women's Assessment of Self Image

Women's lives, the social pressures they are subjected to and the compulsions to comply with them are in great measure a contrast to that of men. Although they constitute nearly 50% of the world population their social status is lower than that of men. Women, throughout times around the world have been viewed as an object of sexuality (Salisbury, 2001). Her role has been one of a procreator; therefore her life is seen as revolving around child bearing and child rearing. Archeological excavations of societies that existed 4-6 thousand years ago have unearthed one of the earliest portrayals of women – in petroglyphs, hieroglyphs and burial statuettes, representing women essentially with characteristics of fertility and nurturance and men with hunting or warring (Friedman & Schustack, 2004) although this did not necessarily mean a rigid difference in status. With time however, gender difference was formalized by identifying women not only as different but lesser. Plato described women as weaker and inferior. Aristotle very specifically depicted women as incomplete and incompetent. In the Christian Bible too men were described as possessing higher moral authority.

In later years psychologists too subscribed to this view of women's inferiority. Under Darwin's influence the functional school of psychology (late 1800s – early 1900s) declared that behaviour and thought evolve as a result of their functionality for survival. According to functionalists (all males) women's energies was to be expended on pregnancy, childbirth and lactation with no resources remaining for developing other abilities (Lips & Colwill, 1978). The first modern comprehensive theory of personality that addressed the etiology of gender differences was that of Sigmund Freud who explained the sexual dimorphism or gender difference in terms of physical difference in genitals declaring that "anatomy is destiny". His theory further promoted the concept of women being incomplete and inferior to man (Freud, 1979). Males and females look so different and have such different sex organs and hormones that it is assumed they must think, act and feel differently too. Besides, there is an attribution of power to the social roles of males who is seen as protector and provider. These concepts were used to both explain and justify the dominant position of men and submissive position of women in the contemporary society. Thus gender typing that is one of the most basic social categorizing gave way to **gender stereotype**, a preconceived notion of the traits supposedly possessed by males and females (Unger & Crawford, 1993). Gender stereotype that existed for long was only conveniently explained by the theories of psychology.

In the Indian scenario women's position has not been any better, rather worse in many cases. Paradoxically while on one hand women are worshipped as an

embodiment of "Shakti" or power on the other hand no efforts are spared to render her "Nishakti" –a powerless, helpless object. Akin to this inferior status of women in society and her role as a procreator is the emphasis on her sexuality and a need to look desirable. Physical attributes of women have been described at great lengths in our mythology, literature, sculpture, paintings and even in temple arts. Patriarchal society that we live in expects women to achieve certain standards of aesthetics. Society holds certain beauty myths that have been handed down through ages. Following are some of the beauty myths: -

- a Beauty is inherent therefore certain women inherently occupy a privileged position.
- b Beauty is the measure of femininity.
- c One must continuously strive towards achieving beauty.
- d Beauty comes from within therefore it is an indication of goodness or virtue.
- e The most common myth is that there is only one perfect most beautiful woman, "the fairest of fair". This implies that each woman should strive to become the chosen one in order to avoid being considered inherently deficient.

These beauty myths are so strong that the whole social fabric revolves around these. Women strive hard to achieve them although it is physically, emotionally and financially costly (Travis & Payne, 2001). They are condemned for not taking care of themselves, "since it implies defying hierarchy of men in society" (Smolak & Moore, 2001). Women therefore are subjected to social pressures to comply with the socially constructed standards of beauty. These standards may be culturally determined, just as small feet of women in olden days China and long necks in some African tribes women were considered beautiful in their respective cultures. Inherent to these standards of beauty is a strong emphasis on youthfulness and condescension for ageing. In certain cultures menopause for example is viewed as a disorder (Griffen, 1977), for it is associated with feeling of loss of fertility and /or femininity.

However, women's movement of the 1970s signaled a major shift in women's roles in society and a change in perspective on gender differences. It is interesting to note that these changes also coincided with women now for the first time being admitted to many prestigious colleges, and moving in larger numbers to higher-status careers such as medicine, law and business. This made people less likely to assume women to be inferior. This trend of women's empowerment and enhancement of economic status soon spread to the rest of the world. India too was not far behind. Women moved on from traditionally female jobs like secretaries, nurses,

teachers, bookkeepers to other high paying professions entering every male bastion. They joined the administrative services, technical field, police, military etc. The literacy rate and also women joining portals of higher education gradually but steadily improved throughout the world. The number of women in the different work force steadily expanded, in the last few decades, and the feminist movements have been far reaching, yet there has been little change in gender stereotypes (Fan & Marini, 2000, Spence & Buckner, 2000) gender stereotypes have proved to be remarkably enduring. A study by Helgeson (1994) found physical appearance comes more to mind when thinking of a woman than a man. This has been found true across cultures. A study of an ethnically diverse sample of students from the University of Houston were asked to list the first 10 adjectives that came to mind when they thought of members of a particular group. Each participant was asked to describe eight groups that varied in gender and ethnicity. In three out of the four ethnic groups only women were described as attractive, a clear physical trait. The results are shown in the following table.

Table showing stereotypes toward men and women from different ethnic groups

Gender	African American	Asian American	Anglo American	Mexican American
<b>Women</b>	Speak loudly Dark skin Antagonistic Athletic Pleasant and friendly	Intelligent Speak softly Pleasant and friendly Short <b>Attractive</b>	<b>Attractive</b> Intelligent Egotistical Pleasant and friendly Blond or light hair	Black, brown or dark hair <b>Attractive</b> Pleasant and friendly Lower class Dark skin
<b>Men</b>	Athletic Antagonistic Dark skin Muscular Criminal activities	Intelligent Short Achievement oriented Speak softly Hard working	Intelligent Egotistical Upper class Pleasant and friendly Racist	Lower class Hard working Antagonistic Dark skin No college education

Source: Adapted from Niemann et.al. (1994), (as found in Taylor et.al. 2006, Helgeson 2006)

In the job field too although women match men in education, skills and motivation gender bias continues to follow them. They are believed to be less employable and promotable and to have less ability to make decisions and to cope with stress

(Rudman & Glick, 1999). A male employer may compliment a woman employee on her attractiveness rather than on her competence and offer her an easy job (Munson, et. al., 2000).

## Media's Portrayal of Women

Stereotypes by definition are "beliefs about the typical characteristics of group members" (Taylor et.al, 2006), which develop as a part of different forms of social learning. The mass media represents a very potential source of social learning and plays a crucial role in building and breaking several stereotypes. Gender stereotype is no exception. With the communication boom, mass media has a much wider reach today than ever before. Media reflecting the prevailing social norms continues to portray gender stereotypes – one of women's inferior status and the compulsive emphasis on her physical attributes. "One has to only pick up any newspaper to realize that one is living in a patriarchy", said Virginia Woolf. This description aptly fits the entire mass media not just the print, even today. Television, movies, popular music, and other mass media convey messages about the nature of masculinity and femininity (Martin, 2004). Following a set pattern the order of importance in news coverage is – events and issues, politics, economy, law religion, issues like women's health, position, work experiences, deprivation and tyranny they are subjected to prompt far less coverage (Joseph & Sharma, 1994). Formal news business is not just the powerful talking to the less powerful but essentially "men talking to men"; women's pages are a deliberate exception (Molotch, 1990, King & Scott, 1977). Women's coverage in the Indian press is mostly restricted to fashion, cookery and beauty care following the patterns set by the Western media (Bathla, 1998).

Systematic research has shown that the most common commercials depict a male expert instructing a female consumer about a product, for example the Harpick ad shows a male star demonstrating the benefits of a toilet cleaner to a visibly gratified women customer or a male dentist instructing a mother on the benefits of a particular brand of toothpaste on her child's oral health. In a study of T.V. ads that was conducted in 1970s and replicated since, in 5 continents, found 70% of men were shown as experts, whereas 86% of women were product users (McArther & Resko, 1975). Commercials also depict women as anxious housewife piecing together delicious and nutritious meals, working tirelessly towards keeping the family healthy, clean and happy. Young women appear to be obsessed with grooming, looking fair (fair & lovely ad), wearing the right clothes or perfume competing for a man's attention either for marriage or employment. In print ads and T.V. commercials

women are often depicted as sex objects (Schultz, 2004). Scantily clad women pose provocatively in ads selling, electronic gadgets, beer, soft drinks, and clothes to cars. Mallika Sherawat advertising for Pepsi and the anorexic model posing for a brand of jeans are pointers here. Sexy ads are growing daring every year. Although many people enjoy looking at these ads it is not clear whether sex sells: research evidence suggests a very low rate of recall for information that accompany sexy illustrations (Schultz, 2004), yet advertisers continue to make them relying on their eroticism and shock value.

Dane Archer and his colleagues analyzed thousands of photographs from newspapers and magazines in the U.S. to discover that photos of men tended to emphasize their faces but that of women focused on their bodies. The same tendencies, termed as *face-ism* by Archer were found in 11 different countries from Hong Kong to Kenya (Taylor, 2006). Subsequent research corroborated these findings. Ads in magazines like Glamour, Vogue, Esquire were 4 times more likely to show female anatomy than men's (Plous & Neptune, 1997). On T. V. talk shows camera tends to take a close-up of male guests' faces but entire body shots of female guests (Taylor, 2006). This way media only reinforces stereotype of men as superior, powerful and as thinkers and women as subservient, inferior, incapable of thinking and as sex objects. What is of concern is that such media behaviour will have a long lasting effect on generations to come, and women will continue to be discriminated and suffer in silence. Experimental studies have shown strong evidence about the potential impact of media on viewer's beliefs about gender (Taylor, 2006).

Media has also been responsible for creating new gender stereotypes. Over the years women portrayed in the media have become progressively thinner. The natural curvaceous physique is no more fashionable. Comparisons of women models and movie stars from 1960s to 1990s show much leaner standards (Piran, 2001). Irrespective of the body type or racial differences in height and weight women all over are striving hard to match up to the thin image that is currently made out to be desirable, often with disastrous results. Health psychologists have expressed concern and criticized the media and the products they popularize for perpetuating false images of feminine beauty" (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Barbie doll has particularly come in for immense criticism since it has affected the body image among women all over the world across ages. In order to achieve the same body proportions researchers have calculated that a young healthy woman would have to increase her bust by 5 inches, her neck length by more than 3 inches and her height by more than two feet while decreasing her waist by 6 inches, a clearly unattainable standards (Brownell & Napolitano, 1995 as in Taylor, 2003).

## Methods Women Adopt:

Media portrayals of thin image messages have given rise to a misperception that being thin equals being healthy. Pursuing the elusive perfect physique numerous women chronically follow certain unhealthy weight loss practices. They fast or go on a strict diet, continually use laxatives or diet pills, engage in cigarette smoking or over exercise their bodies, all of which pose high health risks. In the past decade preoccupations with weight control among adolescents have reached epidemic proportions (Taylor, 2003). Many women also resort to surgical alteration of appearance or cosmetic surgeries. According to American society of plastic surgeons the number of cosmetic surgeries doubled from 1997 to 1999 (Smolak & Moore, 2001). The most common surgeries include liposuction, breast and or buttock implants, no scientific study is yet available on its medical effects though. In India exact figures are not available may be either because most of the procedures are done outside India or records are not revealed in order to maintain confidentiality of the clients. But the body standards prevailing in the glamour world in the country leaves no doubt that these procedures are commonplace. Most of them strive for a Euro-American standard of height and weight, which makes unnatural interventions necessary.

## Physical Consequences:

The obsession with weight watch coupled with high rate of obesity has created a vicious circle of intermittent weight gain and weight loss. These cycles of weight loss and weight gain may have adverse health consequences. It results in lowered metabolic rate, which can lead to general propensity to gain weight. There may also be a change in fat distribution and have long-term effect on blood pressure, a risk factor for cardiovascular diseases. The low percentage of fat distribution may lead to amenorrhea (cessation of menstruation) and fertility problems (Taylor, 2003).

Obsessive concern with weight loss can give rise to excessive dieting. People who are dieting become irritable, lack concentration, experience fatigue, headaches, stomachaches, which may interfere with their performance. Dieting may eventually lead to eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the incidence of eating disorders in the adolescent female population of Western countries (Taylor, 2003). A study at NIMHANS has found an increasing trend in India too, although it may not have yet reached the epidemic proportion of the West.

## Psychological Consequences:

"Thin is in" kind of messages that media constantly propagates has had a negative effect on the body image of women. Body image is a feeling and beliefs about, perceptions of and attitudes towards the attractiveness of one's body that is a complex concept with several dimensions- perceptual, cognitive, affective and attitudinal (Smolak & Moore, 2001). Perceptual distortion of body image is central to Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Body Dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction is found more between African American and Asian American, which is an indication of another form of social oppression where Caucasian body standards are considered a norm and found to be desirable. This gives rise to immense emotional load, low self-esteem and depression. Women's sex role orientation has been linked to differential psychophysical outcomes in measure of sympathetic adrenal medullary hormones (WHO, 1993). Women are particularly vulnerable to stress and depression, sex discrimination and social pressures to conform are major contributors. It is interesting to note that eating disorders are found to occur in cultures where gender stereotypes are limiting and which promote a body image standard that is impossible for most women (WHO, 1993).

Standards of beauty are socially constructed; they evolve and change over time in response to social, economic and political changes. The anthropological and socio-cultural research suggests that preference of certain body shape for women is not random, but linked to economic factors. While women have economic independence, a thin standard is preferred, when denied access to economic power, marriage is favoured, and a curvaceous standard is preferred (Travis & Payne, 2001). Perhaps this explains the growing trend of thin body image of women and increasing eating disorders in developed and developing countries among women, who pursue higher education, achieve economic independence and climb the social ladder. Whether for marriage or otherwise women constantly face pressure to conform to the standards of beauty set by society. Thus it appears that women are in an inescapable double bind. While they suffer economic deprivation social institution like marriage controls them, wherein exist various forms of suppression. With economic, social and political gain they suffer another form of social control- expectation of extreme thinness and maintaining a look of desirability. Age-old gender stereotype of women as inferior and as object of sexuality persists; media that is clearly patriarchal keeps it alive in its promulgation.

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