

# The Ugly Business of Women's Beauty

Tuesday 7 August 2007, by [ESMONDE Jackie](#) (Date first published: September 2005).

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Dove, the company famous for its “99 percent pure” soap, recently launched the “Campaign for Real Beauty”, an ad campaign designed to challenge unrealistic images of women in advertising. One ad features a curvy young woman, and poses the question “oversized or outstanding?”. It invites women to go to the Dove website to cast their vote and join the company in its “search for a wider definition of beauty” and in its efforts to “inspire women to celebrate themselves.”

Unlike most mass media images of beauty that we see, the Dove campaign includes women of colour, women over 40 and women who weigh more than 100 pounds. The campaign has won accolades for its social conscience, including in the feminist pop culture magazine Bitch.

However, there is a contradiction in this “Campaign for Real Beauty”. While the website and the ads are of “real women” who are proud of their “real curves,” the actual goal of the campaign is to convince women to buy “Dove Firming”: a product designed to reduce the appearance of cellulite in two weeks.

Well, guess what Dove – real women have cellulite.

Although the campaign presents more realistic role models for women than is the norm, the central message remains the same. Beauty is not something that comes naturally to women: it requires endless effort, as well as the purchase of various products designed to change or hide women's problem areas. The “real” in real beauty should be in quotes.

Dove aside, we are constantly inundated with mass media images of the so-called ideal that we must hope to achieve to be beautiful. In film, magazines, ads and television, the image of this ideal is invariably that of a white, affluent, stick-figure woman with large breasts and glamour.

## Beauty and Violence

The weight of today's fashion model is 25 percent below that of ordinary women. Few of us will ever achieve such proportions, nor should we if we want to be healthy and happy. Given that the images we now see of today's fashion models were likely digitally altered, the beauty ideal has become so far from possible that it must be computer generated.

The impossibility of attaining these ideals has not stopped women from doing considerable harm to themselves in the attempt. For example, feminists have long drawn a link between unrealistic beauty

ideals and the rise of eating disorders. In a quest for thinness, women starve themselves, vomit, have their stomachs stapled, their jaws wired shut and fat sucked out.

Not only are we told that we are too fat, but we are also told that everything else about our bodies needs improvement. Media images teach us that we need to inject collagen into our lips because they are too thin. We're told to inject botox into our faces to freeze nerve endings and iron out wrinkles. The loss of the ability to show emotion with our faces is a small price to pay for beauty. Our teeth are not white enough, nor is our skin, our eyes are not blue enough, our hair is not shiny or straight enough, nothing we do is ever enough.

Despite gains made since the rise of the women's movement, the pressure on women today to adhere to beauty standards may be even greater than it was 30 years ago. And the standards are not only more difficult to meet, but the targets for this pressure are even younger now that the beauty industry has discovered the profit to be made from the so-called "tweens", young girls just about to enter their teenage years. The greater accessibility and circulation of mass media means that the influence of beauty ideals has broadened both geographically and across classes.

There is considerable and increasing profit to be made from convincing women that their value lies in their appearance. Since there is greater pressure on women than on men to be beautiful, the fashion industry can make women pay more than men for the same consumer goods such as clothing, hair care products and haircuts. Each year in the US, approximately \$40 billion dollars is spent on the diet industry including diet books, diet foods, diet programs and weight-loss gimmicks. According to the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the overall number of cosmetic procedures has increased 228 percent since 1997. One-third of cosmetic surgery patients are between the ages of 35 and 40, 22 percent are between the ages of 26 and 34. Eighteen percent of people getting cosmetic surgery are under the age of 25.

Cosmetic surgery is increasingly affordable for middle-income earners, and as such more women have access to breast implants, nose jobs and other cosmetic modifications. Now that many procedures cost roughly the price of a used car, industry commentators have lauded the "democratization" of beauty. Makeover shows of the past, which improved the appearance of the show's participants with makeup and new haircuts, have been replaced with a new breed of reality shows that transform apparently ugly women into beauties with massive and invasive surgical procedures. Reality shows such as "I Want a Famous Face" have drastically upped the ante. Now we can actually look like the women on the film screens.

For most of us, our interactions with these images of ideal female beauty are deeply personal and individualized. As feminists, we do not engage with beauty images uncritically. But few of us are untouched. Not only must we wrestle with our low self-esteem because of our bad body image, but we also struggle with feelings of guilt that we actually care what people think about our appearance.

But the impact of these images is not only personal. The dictates of the beauty industry are connected to the social oppression of women. That old feminist slogan still rings true. The personal is political. It is time to call the beauty industry and the practices it advocates for what it is - a form of gendered violence and oppression.

## **Beauty and Oppression**

Struggles with body image are tied to struggles over gender and what meaning is assigned to being male or female. Like race and class, concepts of gender are extremely powerful social forces. Although much has been done to complicate the male/female gender distinction, characteristics of

“men” and “women” in popular culture have remained steadfastly narrow and predetermined. In other words, men are from Mars, women are from Venus, and our characteristics are determined by biology rather than by culture.

Limiting the meaning of gender to opposing categories of “male” and “female” has important material consequences. It implies that gender is a fixed thing rather than a dynamic social relation that is the site of ambiguity, creativity, repression and contestation.

However, ideal “feminine” attributes shift and change over time, and it is not a coincidence that the very characteristics that are supposedly “feminine” are marshalled to justify and reproduce women’s inequality. For example, cultural stereotypes of women as nurturing and controlled by emotion rather than rationality have been relied upon to justify preventing women from owning property, having the vote, from attaining positions of power in the workplace and making them disproportionately responsible for housework and childrearing. Thus, cultural ideals of womanhood should be approached with suspicion.

The women’s movement of the 60s and 70s posed a major challenge to the laws, stereotypes and misogyny that kept many women in the home. The 1980s witnessed a major backlash against feminism that successfully turned the term “feminism” into a dirty word for many young women. Beauty ideals have been used in this backlash with great effect, portraying feminists as unattractive. The stereotype of the hairy, lipstick-hating feminist is a stern warning about the social costs and rejection that accompany challenging gender oppression.

## **Women as Objects**

However, while feminists are apparently doomed to a life of poor hygiene and loneliness, the roles depicted for women who meet the social ideal are not so rosy either. Virtually any mainstream magazine or television commercial shows women’s bodies being used to sell products such as cosmetics and clothing. But they are also used to sell products that bear no connection to women’s bodies, such as cars, food and electronics. The images of women that are used to sell, well, virtually anything, are sexualized, commodified and objectified. Most importantly, they are silent.

There is a clear link between the pressure on women to appear a certain way and the pressure on women to act a certain way. The qualities that are considered beautiful in women act as symbols for desirable female behaviour. Cultural ideals of beauty are about prescribing behaviour, not appearance.

Media images are not themselves oppressive, nor is sexualization. However, the context is everything. In contexts where prescribed gender roles are attached to material realities that undermine women, the flood of media images that link women to these roles serves only to reinforce, never challenge, them.

Few ads show women engaged in action unless they are cleaning their homes. Some ads make use of only parts of women’s bodies – notably not their brains. Women’s mouths are either slightly open and suggestive, or simply covered. Mouths, apparently, are not for speaking. Women’s bodies are for sex or for cleaning.

Even women who are shown in actions that demonstrate physical power and strength are undermined by overt reference to their sexuality and appearance. For example, a recent outdoor sports magazine, *Outside*, featured a story on women rock climbers. The cover photo was of a naked woman standing in front of a rock wall.

Shortly after the second Iraq war began, Glamour, one of the top selling women's beauty magazines in the US and Canada, published an article on makeovers for female US soldiers in combat. The spread included such handy tips as how to keep the desert sand out of your lipstick, and how to keep the sweat from ruining your makeup (waterproof mascara is apparently a must). I suppose every woman wants to look her best while torturing Iraqi prisoners – after all, you never know when someone is going to snap a picture. The message could not be clearer. Even as soldiers, one of the most powerfully violent masculine images possible, women are reduced to objects of beauty and desire.

Buying into beauty ideals has serious consequences. It ensures that women's value is determined by their appearance rather than on what women do, how they think, or even how they treat other people. Women of colour are automatically devalued, since cultural ideals of beauty exclude them from the start. Beauty ideals reward women who look good, say little and pose no challenge to male power and domination.

Striving for unattainable beauty ensures that women lack self confidence and a belief in their own value. There is something important at stake here. If you don't have confidence in yourself, how can you fight for gender equality and a better world? How can you believe that your political arguments or beliefs have value, when your value lies in how you appear?

The problem is not that women are neurotic, irrational and shallowly focused on their appearance. We live in a deeply sexist culture in which women are disempowered in their personal, work and political relationships. Images of beauty are a cultural expression of that disempowerment, and play a role in its continuation by prescribing gender roles that devalue women.

## Real Beauty

Marxists have not paid much attention to the body and body image despite the fact that these issues are tied to systems of oppression and social control in our patriarchal and capitalist society. Given the wide-ranging impact that beauty ideals in popular culture have on women, we ignore such issues at our peril.

I do acknowledge that men are also, increasingly, targeted by the beauty industry. Men are viewed as a new and untapped market for cosmetic surgery, fashion, hair products and cosmetics. I anticipate that the mass marketing of beauty ideals for men will only intensify in the coming years. This has a different impact on men because they are not oppressed as a group in the same ways as women. However, like images directed at women, the images directed at men also reinforce strict gender roles in which men are social actors with power and women are dominated.

The fight for gender equality must, of course, focus on improving the conditions of women's work, accessible daycare and fighting violence against women, amongst other issues. These are key issues that require serious attention, analysis and activism. But beyond the material issues that prevent women from engaging as equal participants in society, we must not ignore the ideologies that justify that inequality. The ideology of beauty is one extremely powerful tool in the arsenal of gender oppression.

Therein lies the key problem with ad campaigns such as Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty". While the campaign attempts to broaden the definition of beauty, it does not pose any challenge to strict gender roles that place value on women's appearance above all else. It does nothing to break apart existing categories of gender that depend on strict divisions between what is male and what is female.

So, with the greatest respect to Dove, my campaign for real beauty is a campaign for gender equality and social justice.

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## **Letters**

### **Dove beauty and critical feminism**

**Nicole Dzuba**

**NEW SOCIALIST MAGAZINE Issue 54, November 2005 to January 2006**

My recent experience as an exhibit attendant in a Winnipeg mall for “The Dove Real Beauty Photography Exhibit” offered an important lesson about the significance of articulate feminist analysis such as that provided by Jackie Esmonde in the last issue of New Socialist [see article above]. The mass media portrayal of the beauty ideal is unquestionably very real to the crowds of mostly women who showed up in the thousands to visit the Dove exhibit. They were visibly and self-admittedly moved, inspired, grateful and overtly supportive and excited about Dove’s campaign. They openly praised Dove’s efforts with statements like “it’s about time” or “I have been following the campaign and love what Dove is doing.” A large number of women talked about the importance of the campaign in securing a better future for their daughters and it was not uncommon to see the eyes of women swell with tears of hope as they enjoyed the exhibit.

A general critique of the ideology of beauty or a healthy suspicion about the campaign’s real motivations of profit were apparently absent from everyone’s mind as they were allowed a few moments to entertain the possibility that they were being witness to the beginning of a new era. Though these responses should not be surprising in a time and place without any significant women’s movement, the experience was disheartening. Critical feminist analysis such as that offered in the last issue of New Socialist will be crucial to maintaining clarity in a time when ‘the word in the mall’ offers little.

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**P.S.**

\* From NEW SOCIALIST MAGAZINE Issue 53, September to October 2005.