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The Consequences of America's Beauty Obsession on Women & Girls

BEAUTY AT ANY COST

A YWCA Report on the Consequences of America's Beauty Obsession on Women & Girls

Every woman in the United States participates in a daily beauty pageant, whether she likes it or not. Engulfed by a popular culture saturated with images of idealized, air-brushed and unattainable female physical beauty, women and girls cannot escape feeling judged on the basis of their appearance. As a result, many women feel chronically insecure, overweight and inadequate, as these beauty images apply to an ever-shrinking pool of women. Moreover, the diet, cosmetic and fashion industries are often too willing to exploit these narrow beauty standards so women and girls will become cradle-to-grave consumers of beauty products, cosmetic surgery and diet programs.

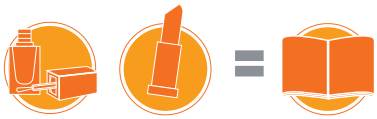
The issue is not new, but the extent to which it is invading the lives of younger girls and women of color, and the lengths to which women will go to achieve an unattainable look, is an increasing problem. The pressure to achieve unrealistic physical beauty is an undercurrent in the lives of virtually all women in the United States, and its steady drumbeat is wreaking havoc on women in ways that far exceed the bounds of their physical selves. From new levels of spending on cosmetic alteration to health risks and to the emergence of a "mean girls" culture, the lifelong burden of an unattainable beauty and body image is taking a terrible toll in all areas of women's lives, from economic well-being to health to interpersonal relationships.

ECONOMIC COSTS

The burden of unattainable beauty has far-reaching implications for women's economic well-being. Not only are women in the United States spending much of their money on cosmetic products – a total of $7 billion spent per year on cosmetics[1] – but they are now taking increasingly drastic measures to alter their appearances through surgical means. Money spent on cosmetic surgery and non-surgical aesthetic procedures is increasing drastically among all women, including younger women and women of color. And the economic implications reach further, even into the workplace, where research shows that women who don't adhere to particular standards of beauty are impacted professionally and financially.

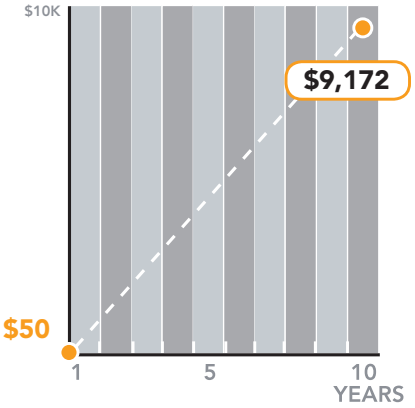
HOW MUCH IS BEAUTY WORTH?

HOW MUCH EDUCATION? One full year of tuition and fees at an in-state public college is equal to almost five years of saving $100 a month normally spent on cosmetics and beauty products.[2]



One year of tuition and fees is $6,185; five years of beauty products savings is $6,423.

HOW MUCH RETIREMENT SAVINGS? If a woman invested the average amount of money she spends on a monthly manicure-pedicure treatment ($50) into her retirement account every year for ten years, she would have almost $10,000 in her account at the end of that time.[3]



COSMETIC SURGICAL PROCEDURES:

- Women are spending huge amounts of money on cosmetic surgical procedures, and the numbers are increasing. Nearly **11.7 million cosmetic surgical and non-surgical procedures** were performed in the United States in 2007 – that represents an **increase of nearly 500%** in the overall number of cosmetic procedures in the past ten years. Women are having most of these procedures – accounting for 91% of cosmetic procedures performed in the United States during 2007. The most frequently-performed non-surgical cosmetic procedure in 2007 was **Botox injections**, and the most popular cosmetic surgical procedure was liposuction.[4]

- Young people are also showing an increased interest in cosmetic surgery. In 2008, young people aged 18-24 had the highest approval rating for cosmetic surgery. According to a survey of young people aged 18 and above, **69% of respondents are in favor of cosmetic surgery,** which is a 7% increase from 2006.[9]

- Cosmetic surgery is increasing among the ranks of minority U.S. women, too. In 2007, **almost one-quarter of cosmetic plastic surgery procedures were performed on women of color,** comprised of African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans; this represents an increase of 13% from the year before.[10]

APPEARANCE-BASED WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION:

- An expectation of physical beauty even impacts women economically through their workplaces. **"Lookism," or the prejudice based on physical appearance and attractiveness,** is an increasing equal-opportunity problem. Despite the fact that work productivity has not been scientifically linked with physical attractiveness, one study found that employers believe that good looks contribute to the success of their companies.[11]

- One analysis found that **workers with "below average" looks tended to earn about 9% less money** than workers who were "above average" in appearance, and that those who were "above average" in appearance tended to make about 5% more money than those who were "average looking."[12]

- Discrimination against overweight people in the workplace is a widespread practice. According to one researcher who has examined 30 studies about weight-based discrimination, **"weight-based discrimination consistently affects every aspect of employment, from hiring to firing, promotions, pay allocation, career counseling and discipline."**[13]

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IN 2007 the top five surgical cosmetic procedures for women in the United States (by numbers of procedures performed) were: ***breast augmentation***, ***lipoplasty, eyelid surgery, abdominoplasty*** (tummy tuck) and ***breast reduction***. Together, expenditures for these procedures totaled $5.3 billion.[5]

TOP 5 SURGICAL COSMETIC PROCEDURES FOR WOMEN[6]

The top five surgical cosmetic procedures for women in 2007, next to average costs for each procedure, and total spent per year.

	$ spent per procedure	*$ spent per year*
Breast Aug. (silicone gel & saline)	*$3,889*	***$1.5 B***[7]
Lipoplasty	*$2,942*	***$1.3 B***[8]
Eyelid Surgery	*$2,840*	***$684 M***
Abdominoplasty (tummy tuck)	*$5,350*	***$992 M***
Breast Red.	*$5,417*	***$829 M***

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

The health implications that impact women on the never-ending treadmill of unrealistic beauty attainment are substantial. Through chronic and unhealthy dieting, using smoking as a weight-loss aide, taking unnecessary risks during cosmetic surgical procedures, and absorbing unsafe chemicals through cosmetics, women are placing themselves in precarious health situations to maintain some semblance of their idealized physical selves. Women and girls are at risk for lifelong health problems – and the problems start at an early age.

OVER 1/2 of teenage girls use unhealthy weight control behaviors such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives.[16]

UNHEALTHY DIETING & DIET-RELATED BEHAVIORS:

- According to a study of women between the ages of 25-45 in the United States, **67% of women** (excluding those with actual eating disorders) **are trying to lose weight; 53% of dieters** are already at a healthy weight and **are still trying to lose weight.**[14]
- **39% of women have concerns about what they eat** or weigh interfere with their happiness.[15]
- According to a study, **13% of women smoke to lose weight.**[17]
- According to the American Lung Association, **"Women have been extensively targeted in tobacco marketing** dominated by themes of an association between social desirability, independence, weight control and smoking messages conveyed through advertisements featuring slim, attractive, and athletic models."[18]
- Also according to the American Lung Association, "Teenage girls often start to smoke to avoid weight gain and to identify themselves as independent and glamorous, which reflect images projected by tobacco ads. Social images can convince teens that being slightly overweight is worse than smoking. **Cigarette advertising portrays cigarettes as causing slimness and implies that cigarette smoking suppresses appetite."**[19]
- The American Lung Association also states that **"Smoking is directly responsible for 90 % of all lung cancer deaths in the United States each year.** In 1987, lung cancer surpassed breast cancer as the leading cause of cancer deaths among women in the U.S. Current female smokers aged 35 or older are 12 times more likely than nonsmoking females to die prematurely from lung cancer. Women who smoke double their risk for developing coronary heart disease."[20]
- In the United States, **nearly 10 million women suffer from an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia.** More than 80% of women are reported to be dissatisfied with their appearance.[21]
- 40% of newly-diagnosed cases of eating disorders are in **girls 15-19 years old,** but symptoms can occur as young as kindergarten.[22]
- As minority women become acculturated into the dominant culture of white women – and **"dominant standards of beauty are internalized"** – they may become more vulnerable to eating disorders. Anecdotal evidence shows that rates of eating disorders are on the rise for minority women, though more research is needed because of the "historically biased view that eating disorders only affect white women."[23]
- People with eating disorders tend to **suffer from low self-esteem.**[24]

COSMETIC SURGERY RISKS:

- According to Barry L. Friedberg, M.D., an expert in cosmetic surgery anesthesia, "General anesthetic (GA), the predominant choice of anesthesia for cosmetic surgery, includes many unnecessary, avoidable and potentially fatal risks to patients choosing to have surgery that has no medical reason or indication…including blood clots to the lungs, airway mishaps leading to lack of oxygen to the patient's brain, postoperative nausea and vomiting (PONV), and postoperative cognitive disorder (POCD). **All of these risks can and should be avoided by having patients and doctors choose a different anesthetic technique."**[25]

- According to a recent article in The New York Times, **"Unlicensed cosmetic procedure practitioners,** who include doctors trained in other countries, nurses, medical aides and even beauticians, **attract patients with low fees,** a willingness to use illegal permanent wrinkle fillers, a congenial atmosphere or the **convenience** of not needing to make an appointment weeks in advance."[26]

- Within the past several years, the number of non-surgical cosmetic procedures, often performed in "retail or spa-like settings," has increased dramatically. However, these spa-like centers may have limited or no full-time medical staff, and they may be ill-equipped to handle more than routine beauty services, as opposed to physician offices where medical professionals oversee treatments and maintain medical records. **Recent cases of patients receiving some cosmetic procedures in homes or beauty salons without proper licensure or training are causing public health concerns.**[27]

- **Breast augmentation complications**, in rare instances, may include scar tissue, infection, sagging of implants, rupture or deflation of implants, and implants settling toward the middle of the chest.[28] **Tummy tuck complications** can include infection and bleeding under the skin flap, blood clots leading to pulmonary embolus, a potentially life-threatening blood clot in the lungs.[29] **Liposuction complications** may include infection and skin discoloration.[30]

UNSAFE COSMETICS:

- In the United States, **cosmetics are not subject to testing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA),** and the FDA is not required to give "premarket approval" before cosmetics are offered to consumers. Cosmetics companies are not required to register information on cosmetics ingredients, or cosmetics-related injuries, to the FDA. Individual cosmetics companies are responsible for substantiating the safety of their ingredients.[31]

- **Several ingredients found in U.S. cosmetics products** – including hair sprays, nail polishes, and perfumes – **contain phthalates,** which have been shown to cause damage to the liver and reproductive system in animal studies; this chemical can be inhaled or absorbed through the skin. In 2003, the European Union acted to ban the use of phthalates in cosmetics in Europe, but the United States currently has no such ban on U.S. cosmetics products.[32]

- The 2003 European Union's Cosmetics Directive states that substances classified as "carcinogenic, mutagenic or toxic for reproduction" should be prohibited from use in cosmetics products.[33] The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which regulates cosmetics products in the United States, does not specifically prohibit such substances from cosmetics products in the U.S.[34]

INTERPERSONAL & PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The beauty and body image obsession is cyclical, contributing to widespread cultural messages and norms that are negative and harmful for women and girls, which in turn create interpersonal dynamics that are damaging for women and between women. Media portrayals of women – through advertising and characters who are thin, airbrushed and perfect – contribute to norms that reinforce this unattainable image of beauty. According to Maggie Vlazny, a mental health professional, "Self-esteem is a core identity issue, essential to personal validation and our ability to experience joy. Once achieved, it comes from the inside out. But it is assaulted or stunted from the outside in. A woman with low self-esteem does not feel good about herself because she has absorbed negative messages about women from the culture and/or relationships."[35] Consequently, women find themselves in a cultural stew that promotes sexualization of women and competition among themselves.

OBJECTIFICATION & SEXUALIZATION OF WOMEN:

- One study found that teenaged girls who watched **TV commercials** depicting underweight models lost self-confidence and became more dissatisfied with their own bodies. Girls who spent the most time and effort on their appearance suffered the greatest loss in confidence.[36]

- One study found that only 30 minutes of TV programming and advertising can **change the way a young woman perceives the shape of her body,** indicating that body image can be influenced by observing "ideal body shapes."[37]

- Young women of this generation "have learned from a very young age that the power of their gender was tied to what they looked like – **and how 'sexy' they were** – than to character or achievement."[38]

- Sexualization of women – **the sole focus on one's physical and sexual attractiveness** – and increasingly of young girls and teens, occurs in virtually every form of American media. Women are much more likely than men to be shown with unrealistic standards of physical beauty, and the consequences are great, including negative effects on mental health, cognitive functioning and their beliefs about ideal standards of beauty.[39]

- Research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: **eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression** or depressed mood.[40]

- Girls are encouraging the negative effects of sexualization and **unrealistic physical appearance** by policing each other to ensure conformance with standards of thinness and sexiness, creating a kind of competition among themselves.[41]

- The association between **self-objectification** and **anxiety about appearance** and feelings of shame has been found in adolescent girls (12–13-year-olds) as well as in adult women. And cognitively, self-objectification has been repeatedly shown to detract from the ability to concentrate and focus one's attention, thus leading to impaired performance on mental activities.[42]

- Young boys also pick up on sexualization and appearance-based objectification of girls early by learning to **sexually harass and objectify girls.**[43]

- Objectification of women plays into a general culture of tolerance of unhealthy sexual behaviors for young girls. One survey found a surprising level of **acceptance for forced or coerced sex** among both boys and girls.[44]

A MEAN CULTURE BETWEEN WOMEN:

- **Interpersonal problems between women start young.** The use of aggressive bullying between girls has been on the rise since the early 1990s, based on issues such as physical attributes and social status.[45]

- Mean girls, or those who display "relational aggression" – or **"the use of relationships to hurt another" through verbal violence** – often don't grow out of the behavior, and they become adult women who exhibit the same behavior.[46]

- The amount of relational aggression among women is related to their roles in the culture. "A major cultural difference in men and women's roles is the emphasis placed on physical appearance. **Women want to be attractive and men want to have attractive partners,** which may result in rivalries within both genders."[47]

- In a research study about the unhealthy culture of competition between women, nearly **80% of women interviewed said that they competed with women over physical appearance.** This competition over unrealistic beauty extends to women competing with younger women, women competing with "their younger selves" and seeking cosmetic procedures to attain younger and more beautiful images of themselves.[48] These women are "driven by an unhealthy belief that winning the looks competition will somehow gain them the husband, the career, or the self they desire."[49]

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Calculation: $100 starting amount, $100 contribution per month, in savings account with 2 percent interest compounded annually for five years. See online calculator at: http://www.finance.cch.com/sohoapplets/CompoundSavings.asp]

[3] Calculation: $50 starting amount (an average manicure-pedicure treatment cost), $50 contribution per month, invested into a retirement account with 8 percent interest compounded annually for ten years equals $9,172. See online calculator at: http://www.finance.cch.com/sohoapplets/CompoundSavings.asp

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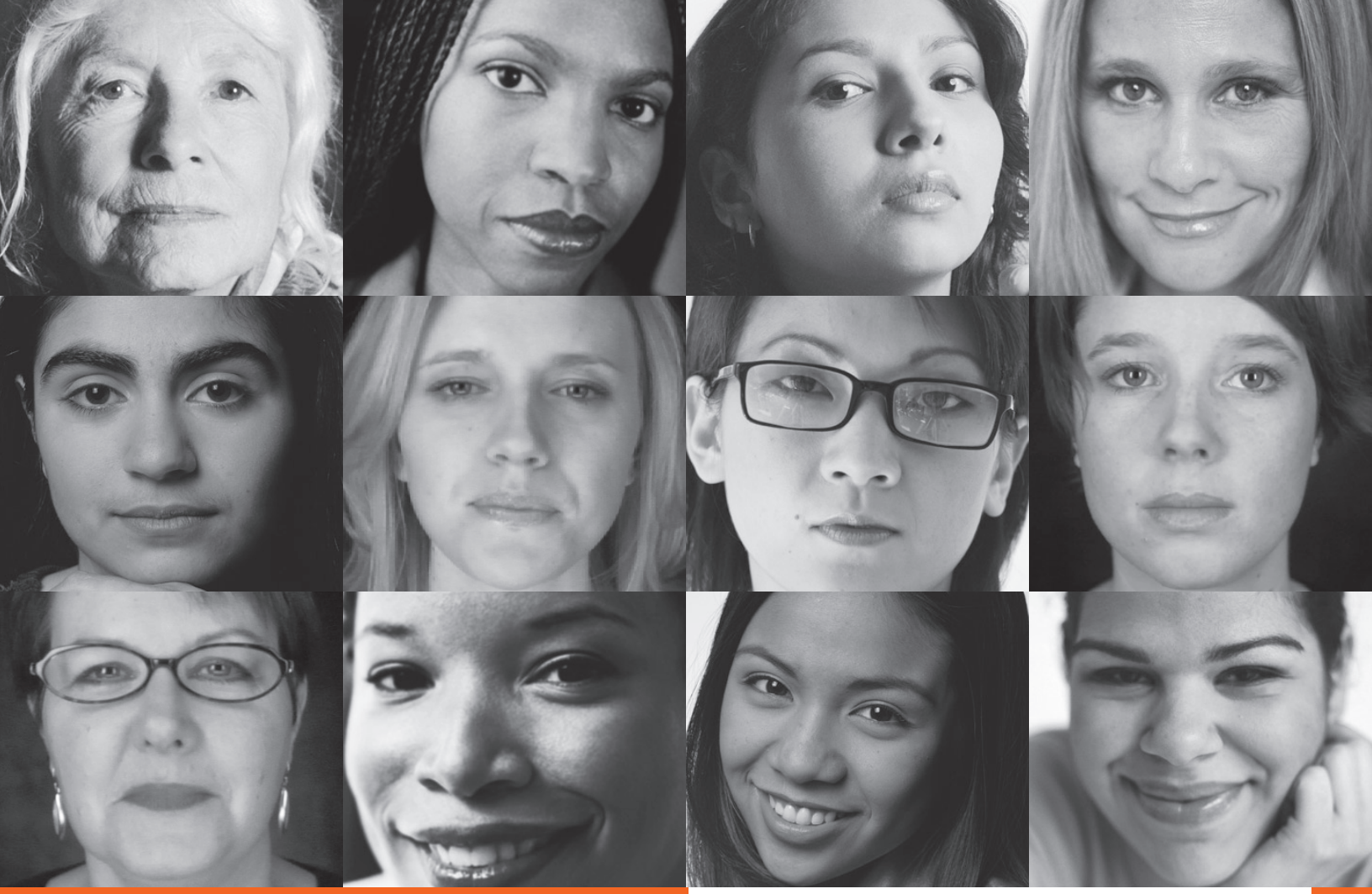

YWCA USA
1015 18th Street, NW, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20036
202-467-0801

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