

# Gender and body image – looking at women and men through the life course

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Throughout our lives we are governed by how we look and act according to society. One of the main leaders throughout history has been which sex a person belongs to. This governs our every aspect in life from a baby, through to adulthood. Opinion changes constantly to whether children should live a certain way and especially act certain ways at different ages and stages throughout life. We are socially constructed from the start of our lives, if a baby wears blue or pink determines society's view of how to treat the child and most importantly whether it is male or female.

We are judged in our abilities and skills just by from which sex we belong to. It is one of the most influential factors in life, being male or female. I will be looking at the perceived differences between males and female body image and actions throughout the life cycle, from birth through to old age. One of the first things we notice about a person is which sex they belong to. Today due to changes in society's impressions and opinions on sex and sex orientation, it is generally possible to immediately determine the sex of a person that gives out first impressions and places stereotypes.

Every culture distinguishes between male and females and this accompanied by beliefs and psychological and physical behaviours belonging to each sex. It is not a recent act to distinguish differences between the sexes. In pre-industrial Britain children were sent off to work at an early age between 6-7. They were kept apart and designated a job. At this age physicality's of gender differences would not be differentiated because of no puberty growth in the children causing no differences in physical ability and strength yet

girls would be sent to become servants while boys would be trained to be apprentices.

In the sixteenth century boys were increasingly sent to boarding school, while girls were mainly kept at home, any small amount of girls who were sent to boarding school were trained for domesticity. Their father or their masters controlled any girls in a family, like an ownership. The males possessed them. Any money that was made was not their own to keep but passed on to their masters or their family for their parents personal use or placed back into the family for food and supplies. Both boys and girls were used for their bodies yet in completely different ways.

In the early nineteenth century working class children would be used in working class factories for cheap labour. Boys would follow the men with physical work while girls were sold for prostitution. Girls were not seen to have many uses apart from their bodies or domesticity uses. This treatment of girls continued through the years in society. Towards the First World War girls were not sold for such explicit reasons but used in different ways (Humphries 1977). Families became dependent on the wages of their siblings. With men called to war the children would work to help the families upkeep.

Girls would be expected to help their mothers with domestic tasks and to take the role of second mother for their younger siblings. While boys and young men were used for their physical abilities. By the twentieth century psychologists identified that childhood was a vital part of a person's identity.

Freud dedicated his life to the study of people and the affect of childhood on their adult lives. Children could be scared for life because of their childhoods. This could explain judgements of people on sex opinions later in lives because of their upbringings, which had forced the stereo types into society.

Post war brought the decline of infant mortality and the decline in birth rate. Children where not therefore depended upon for their help with the families income. Adults began to see children as pleasurable company. Children soon became the main focus of life. The division of home from the workplace resulted in an isolation of women and children. The home in middle-class households represented a haven from the competition of the market place and from the public world. Men would stay in the workplace and women and children were kept 'confined' and 'protected' in the home.

This soon broadens from the middle-class household to the working class home. This image of the western family soon became the model norm of the western societies, which influenced many people throughout their lives. Female and male children are segregated and classed as different, which has continued up to the present day. From birth they are given different clothes and toys and are subjected to socialisation. Children were even segregated at school, boys may have been sent to a different school than girls and be taught different curricula.

Children now share schooling and have moved closer together in the curricula but in many other ways they are treated differently. Although today boys and girls may study the same curriculum, some subjects are still

labelled as being male or female subjects. Increasing anxieties about sexual threat in contemporary society, because of sexual abuse cases, has become increasingly popular; causing boys and girls to be treated differently. Girls are surveyed and controlled more than boys of the same age. Girls and boys are sheltered differently.

Girls are protected from the real dangers of society but also the ones, which are possibly fictional, or of an adult's exaggeration. Girls in particular are sheltered from the real adult world. The sexualisation of adults' contact with children means girls are seldom allowed to walk alone, or spend much time on their own. This treatment causes girls today to be segregated from society from the start of their lives. This influences the way they live their life and attitudes they have towards their influencing adult guides.

When children are allowed out 'to play', boys seem to be allowed out later than girls or more trust and leniency. Although childhood is seen as psychologically influencing on a person's life adolescence is both psychologically and physically changing. Adolescence is a time for psychological adjustments to the physical changes in the child's body. For young girls and women it is normally related with developments of secondary sexual qualities such as breasts, and body hair. When we become adolescence's we gain legal responsibilities. At the age of 16 a young woman can give consent to sexual intercourse with a man.

Before this age a young woman will in the eyes of the law be seen as irresponsible and unable to give responsible consent. Also at the age of 16 a

young man and woman may get married however although legally responsible to have a sexual relationship and possibly bare children, the young adults must have parental permission. Their responsibilities are too high to be married from their own choice at this age. The legal view on heterosexual relationships seems a reasonably understandable law, compared to the opinions on homosexual relationships.

Homosexual relationships between men are not legal unless both parties are 18, however same sex relationships between two women are legal at any age. It is evident from these figures that young men and women have a different statues in law reflecting different assumptions about masculinity and femininity. Young people become legally responsible for their actions from their age of 10. This makes youth today so much longer than it was many years ago. This extended period in the youth phase causes extensive protection from the parents.

One explanation for this could be the increasing choice by children to stay in education for a longer period of time. The number of young people choosing to go into higher education increases because of more opportunities, larger choices in courses and the range of training schemes increases. It is apparent that young people especially women seem to be spending longer being trained and educated, and then having greater uncertain futures because finding full-time work is increasing remote. This is especially apparent for young people because they are most affected by unemployment.

Young women have come through time from not being educated to spending more time in education than young men. Government reports have stated that young women do considerably better in school than young men due to a stronger ambition to be successful and ability to concentrate their efforts into studying. It is generally stated that adolescence is a period of stressful experience. However an anthropologist Margaret Mead challenged this. She studied adolescent women in eastern Samoa (1943) and found no evidence of role confusion, conflict or revolt.

Suggesting that adolescence was not world-wide and biologically determined but ethnically variable, and that the stresses of this time could be socially determined, and because of confusing status to which, young people find themselves consigned by particular communal forms. It is a wide-ranging protest from adults to complain of adolescent deviant behaviour however this suggests that it is the western societal norms which push adolescents to be seen as irresponsible and problematic to society. Adolescence is a particular distressing time for young women.

Trying to conform to societies views of how to behave and to trying to keep their reputation with friends and partners at the same time makes life very traumatic. The behaviour of teenage women is partly the result of being treated differently from boys through their life. As was stated earlier women are seen as more in need of care and protection. Parents 'police' their daughters more strictly than their sons. This then is linked to the ideological definition of 'appropriate behaviour of women'. Sue Lees (1986) has shown

how boys control young women in the public eye through threat of labelling them sexually promiscuous.

It is expected of young men to copulate but for a young woman to continue with the same behaviour would result in such labels as 'slag' or 'slut' and 'scrubber' or an 'easy lay'. This labelling is less to do with the actual sexual action rather than to the extent to which young women's behaviour deviates from the normal ideas of femininity. For example a female should not be seen using foul language or rough behaviour as they could be classed as a 'tom boy'. Sexuality is classed in very different ways. Both sexes are concerned with reputation; the basis on which it rests is very distinct.

For boys sexual reputation is enhanced by varied experience boasting to their friends for all the girls they have 'made', for a girl reputation is to be guarded. It is to be under threat not merely if she is known to have sex with anyone other than with her steady boyfriend but also if she goes out with several different boys, or dresses in a certain way. To remain a 'nice' girl a young woman must suppress any sexual desire, and instead conform to the dream image of romantic love and complete monogamy.

This double standard serves to constrain the public and private lives of young women to ensure conformity based on a model of sexuality, which ultimately takes its form from the ideology of the nuclear family. Feminist sociologists' arguments showed that past ideas that suggestions of femininity and masculinity classed as natural were actually of a social origin. Young people apparently learn roles. Mc Robbie and Garber stated that



young women didn't 'rebel in the same way which young men did but instead used the ideal romantic fantasy as a form of escapism.

Sue Lees (1986), Christine Griffin (1985) and Clair Wallace (1987) have looked into the theory of the role that romantic love fantasies have in young women's lives. They are apparently not deceived by characters lives portrayed in women's literature, but actually have realistic ideas of married life. It was also believed that young women have tactics of resistance for example 'tom boys' or pregnancy, which are not in the 'nice' girl stereotype. They state that an important aspect in young girls lives is their status and independence inside and out of the family that could be achieved by them acquiring a job by themselves.

Sharpe (1995) study contrast to an earlier study found that young women interviewed no longer saw marriage and parenthood as their only goal in life. These studies show a change in young women's views and opinions; however, it causes views of people to think young girls are rebelling against the norms of society because family life is not their first objective in life. The media is one of the most influential aspects to people's lives. It is used to inform, sell, advise, and help the readers and many other uses. Young women are important customers of media resources.

There are magazines, which particularly target young women and influence their lives. The magazines give advise on romance, hygiene and behaviour according to societies rules at the time. 80% of magazines are articles about fashion and appearance pushing young women into a proposed look. They

steer young women to see romance as standard and as an ultimate goal in life to have a 'normal' steady monogamous relationship leading to marriage and all as typecasts with a male companion. According to these magazines the main interest of their teenage years is in getting a man'.

The young women become immersed into the ideology of romance and of 'falling in love'. Adulthood is associated with taking up full status in society, having sexual relationships, getting married, having children, having a full time stable job, and living in an independent household. When we become an adult we associate it with citizenship status -the right to vote, to take loans, or to enter legal contract we are given responsibility and trusted. This legal responsibility is associated with the turning of age to 18. There are many physical body aspects, which are also associated with adulthood. Such as first menstruation, and first sex.

This today is more associated with the teenage years because of younger people having sex earlier and young girls developing into women earlier so the legal opinion of an adult may not be the same as a physical adult. The transition of adolescence to adulthood can be more meaningful for women than young men generally because young women marry earlier, have sex earlier and many other things earlier than men. It is often said that young girls mature earlier than young boys. It is a stressful time for women when the beginning of sexual activity occurs. It is a time of pride and manhood for males while traumatic and cautious for women.

Not to be seen on the one side as 'frigid' or a promiscuous 'slag' on the other (Cowie and Lees 1985; Halson 1991). Marriage, childbirth and parenthood are also parts of adulthood that are given different meanings from men than women. This seems to be because although attitudes are changing in society today women in the main have the foremost responsibilities and usually end up interrupting their careers to care for children. Today it is increasingly popular for single parent families which again is mostly women taking the responsibilities, the majority of about 90% of single parent families are headed by women.

Baring children is also seen as hindering a women's working career and leisure life. The process of pregnancy changes a women's body, and although both men and women's bodies change in the life course this can be seen as the biggest change a women can experience. Increased hormones and the gradual growth of the baby stretches and changes the women's normal body shape. This change, during pregnancy and after can affect a woman greatly because of opinions of what a woman should look like. It is looked upon badly if the bulge during pregnancy is on show when in the public eye.

It is a nature event that is seen as part of a women's' meaning on earth. However, it cannot be looked upon, only in disgrace. Is it a disgusting view to see a woman pregnant? Or is it disgusting to see a woman out of shape, from societies view of what a woman should look like, as I suspect it could be. Women's careers are perceived as more intimately tied to their biology and reproductive cycles than are men's. Men's bodies are defined by their

performance and action in the labour market and public life. Their reproductive functions and their bodies are seldom referred to and are seen as unproblematic.

Women's body shape and reproductive functions are constantly studied and are sometimes referred to as determining their lives (Ussher 1989). In the media it is women's bodies that are used to sell their products. A car advert will usually at some point show a young stereotype of a woman draped over their product in order to sell it. It is unusual to see a man or even a larger woman used in the same way. Women's lives are constantly referred to by their menstruation. They are frequently seen as 'victims' of 'ragging hormones' either because of 'pre-menstrual tension' or because of menopause.

Each case supposedly causes women to 'suffer' from temporary indisposition that can sometimes become 'insanity'! This then could be the reason why it is used for reasons of moodiness, road accidents and even cases of murder. On account of these biological 'problems' women's lives are intervened with medical attention and even seen as a kind of disease. Women can be recommended hormone replacements therapy and hysterectomies as a solution to menopausal problems and are given special diets or hormone treatment for pre-menstrual tension.

Unlike male bodies women's are somewhat controlled by medical science from the moment of first problems with menstruation or with the need for birth control through to menopausal problems. Some women

may never need medical assistance, but most do at some point in their lives.

" Imagine what might have happened in a world with different cultural and moral attitudes towards gender and responsibilities for family planning and children. It is not beyond imagination that we would have ended up with a male contraceptive pill, a medical treatment for male menopause and a classification system of multiple sexes (Oudshoor 1994).

One of the most traumatic times in a person's life is the process of ageing.

No person wants to lose his or her looks, shape or mind. For men it is losing their hair or gaining that 'beer belly'. For women physical attractiveness is the most important feature and losing this is a major source of anxiety. Women spend thousands of pounds on creams, potions, dieting, exercise and even plastic surgery. Men today are also increasingly purchasing these types of items but it is generally women that advertising is focused on (Arber and Ginn 1991). It has been questioned what is personal purpose in life?

One of the proposed reasons is to reproduce, to keep the population. Men are seen to do this throughout their lives, so women who have therefore passed the menopause could be seen as having no use anymore for their reproductive functions and therefore are uninterested in sex. Doctors are more likely to recommend hysterectomies to women than men. In medical textbooks women's ovaries are described as 'shrivelled' or 'senile' metaphors, which, imply they are 'useless', or 'past it'. Women are classified by their biological position in and throughout their lives. 'Pre-menstrual' in their youth, 'pre-menopausal' in their thirties, 'menopausal' in their forties

and 'post-menopausal' in their fifties, its as though their reproductive organs control women's lives. Women who have children find themselves defined in terms of their roles as mothers and carers. On the other hand childless women are seen as frustrated mothers and somehow incomplete. It is as if a woman's ultimate goal is to bare children. A childless woman is classed as having psychological inadequacies or a lack of feminine qualities.

Today many more women are pursuing careers rather than starting a family, this is seen as selfish whereas men are not exposed to such punishments. It is seen as acceptable for a man to never be a part of a family. Women's lives are seen as shaped by their biological bodies and the changes these bodies undergo. Men's lives by contrast are seen as shaped by their achievements. Throughout our lives we are governed by our sex and opinions made by society which label us according to our sex. These labels are started through opinions made from birth, which stay with us until death.