

The beauty myth:  
how images of beauty  
are used against  
women



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## Book Review

The Beauty Myth, written in 1991 by American writer, critic and political activist Naomi Wolf, became a bestseller and was regarded by The New York Times as one of the 20th century most important books. One of the pioneers of the liberal feminism movement, Naomi Wolf described in the book her viewing of the women's role in modern society and how females are oppressed with beauty impositions in the modern society. She expressed her ideas in six following sections: work, culture, religion, sex, hunger, and violence.

Naomi Wolf exposes beauty myth as an organized political construct that is originated by the man-dominated society in order to counteract the feminist movement. Naomi Wolf claims that all the beauty standards that are vigorously promoted by the modern mass media and different fashion and body care industries are aimed to manipulate women's consciousness by making them feel less-worth and by transferring their attention from the serious issues to the obsession with their physical appearance.

It must be said that the book was written more than twenty years ago. Although lots of points implied in the book are relevant to the current situation, many things have changed since 1991. Regarding this, the author may sometimes sound quite radical or uncompromising and some issues she exposes may seem to be inaccurate or a bit exaggerated.

Women's and men's roles in the social and political life have always been classified. Since very childhood, girls and boys get general notions about behavior, clothing style and even occupation choice that are appropriate for <https://assignbuster.com/the-beauty-myth-how-images-of-beauty-are-used-against-women/>

their gender. During the socialization period children also get ideas about the gender-based roles. They use their parents and surrounding as role models of the behavior they are expected to perform. The traditions and other social influences are a significant factor that directs which occupations and lifestyle may be chosen by representatives of each gender. For example, since the childhood boys are encouraged to study technology and take up different active sports when girls are cheered to perform more passive activities like piano playing or studying literature.

For a long time women have been referred to as the weak gender. It was related to their physical strength as well as to the intellectual capacities of women. That is why they had limited access to formal education and politics. Females were supposed to give birth to children and perform different house holding activities, while men were intended to do physically tough work. Such qualities as passivity and domesticity were regarded as the most significant and honorable ones in any woman in the past. Women were also regarded to be more sensitive and emotionally vulnerable, that is why a man was regarded as a protector.

The change of the general concept of a society led to the gender roles shifting. During the last decades Western women exercise the same rights as men, specifically, they have a right to vote and to participate in politics. Women also get a possibility to try themselves in such fields as medicine, law, education and economics that were totally or partly inaccessible for them before. However, men are still viewed more powerful and strong and therefore more suitable to perform a role of a leader. Under scrutiny it appears that the vast majority of politicians and top managers are  
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represented by males. It is mostly caused by the remnants of gender prejudices and stereotypes that were common for a men-dominated society. Due to having more physical strength, man is believed to be an inborn leader, while woman is supposed to obey to him. It can be observed on different levels of society, for example, in a family unit or in a governmental structure.

In a modern Western society, family and house holding duties and responsibilities are usually shared by both partners and are not assigned only to a woman. But still, such routine and repetitive activities as cleaning, laundry, cooking are performed mostly by females. Women now take part in important decision making process and family problems are usually solved in a way of finding a consensus and taking into consideration both partners' points of view. Men participate more in the process of children breeding, though women take the largest part of responsibilities related to child care.

Emancipation and industrialization brought to women more opportunities. Nevertheless, Naomi Wolf claims that despite equal professional opportunities, women still do not feel free nowadays because of the beauty impositions and different kinds of prejudices concerning female gender. Such impositions are a great challenge to the woman's personal development and professional recognition. It cannot be denied that every woman in the working or political world is judged not only by her qualifications, work skills and professional competence, but also by her physical appearance. Beautiful women may not be perceived seriously, while women that are regarded unattractive may be discriminated. Besides, pretty women are more likely to be sexually harassed in their workplace, and are often seen not as victims  
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but as provocateurs. In spite of the fact that today women are protected by law against any kind of discrimination that is based on a gender factor or physical appearance, different gender-based constructs may become serious obstacles for females.

According to Naomi Wolf, after the female liberation movement had demolished traditional notions about the family unit and especially women's role in the society, new requirements that demanded high standards of physical appearance were imposed on women. Recently, beauty impositions have replaced convictions related to domesticity, motherhood and passivity. And the image of an ideal housewife was replaced by the image of a skinny beauty queen. Beauty myth incorporates inevitably into everyday life as endlessly produced "beautiful" images of how really beautiful women should look may be seen in advertisements, films and magazines.

The author believes that such vigorous beauty propaganda is a reaction of man-dominated society on the feminist movement as it threatened to destabilize the institutions on which the patriarchal society was based. She says that all these impositions are used as an effective device of women's consciousness manipulation by making females obsessed with their physical appearance and preventing them from taking part in the social and political life of the country. She regards a beauty myth as a "newly invented" gender-based form of oppression and refers it to the unrealistic and unnatural beauty standards that are imposed on women nowadays. Naomi Wolf states that Western women became obsessed with their physical appearance, age and clothes under the pressure of the mass media, which dictates to women since their childhood how they should look. It is hard to <https://assignbuster.com/the-beauty-myth-how-images-of-beauty-are-used-against-women/>

disagree with the point that the abundance of such images may affect badly women's self-esteem and distorts the women's perception of themselves. Many women are prone to comparing themselves with the images of top models they see on the screen or in the magazines. As a result, females may feel depressed and less worth as they believe they are unbeautiful or different because their bodies and skin are not so perfect. She also claims that beauty myth purposes to divide women and break links between generations by making them compete with each other.

Sex propaganda and using women sexuality as an effective marketing technique are other issues described in the book. Images of pretty slim-figured girls are widely used in the advertising industry and mass media in order to strike attention of the audience. It also motivates women to buy things via making them feel unbeautiful and outmoded and therefore forcing them to buy cosmetic products and fashion items that would improve their look. Women are also persuaded by the advertisements that beauty is a key to good life and success. Females, especially the ones that suffer from lack of confidence and low self-esteem, are prone to succumb to such type of message and believe they may change their whole life just by changing their appearance.

We can observe how the revaluation of the women's role in the society caused the transformation of the advertisement concepts. When a woman dedicated herself to the house holding activities and was mostly regarded as a housewife, industries were oriented on the producing and promoting different items for house management. Right after women got equal rights with men and various possibilities to approve themselves in different <https://assignbuster.com/the-beauty-myth-how-images-of-beauty-are-used-against-women/>

professional domains, companies and advertisements started promoting different beauty products and services. Thanks to beauty myth propaganda, numerous cosmetic companies, fashion industries, surgery clinics, and other beauty services and companies are making million-dollar business.

Naomi Wolf rejects the gender-based belief about the male polygamy and female monogamy by using Darwin's and other scientists' investigations. She mentions some matriarchal Goddess religions where women were leaders, held all the political and economic power and used to have more than one partner. The convictions about the female monogamy originated from the fact that female are more prone than men to building a strong emotional bond with oone partner. The author also rejects the idea of modern society system that is based on the sexual selection. Still, it is difficult to object the fact that physical appearance and age counts more for women than for man. In the modern society men are mostly judged by their financial status and professional achievements, while women are evaluated by their beauty. That is why couples where a girl is much younger than a man are quite common for our society.

In the chapter about hunger Naomi Wolf describes the adverse effects that the beauty obsession may have on women's health. Apart from psychological disorders, it may also cause physical problems. Needless to say, in an ill-inspired attempt to have a perfect look, many women resort to such radical actions as surgery and diets that are harmful to their health and result in eating disorders, fear of gaining weight, and anorexic and bulimic conditions.

"Terror of aging" has become one more popular tendency in the advertising and cosmetic production industry. Consequently, many women have started <https://assignbuster.com/the-beauty-myth-how-images-of-beauty-are-used-against-women/>

being afraid of aging as they are convinced that becoming elder they are less attractive. Under pressure of propaganda of eternal youth women come to different methods like surgery, cosmetic products in order to prevent natural process of aging.

It must be said that young generation is the most vulnerable category of population as their consciousness is not stable yet, that is why young girls are prone to exurb all the information they get from mass media. It is well-known that teenage girls usually suffer from low self-esteem and lack of confidence during the period of transition from a little girl to a woman. At this age their bodies are transforming and they need time to get used to it. Young girls often challenge themselves with different diets in order to lose weight and become as slim as girls from the TV advertisements. It often results in anorexic and bulimic conditions, which may have serious consequences for any girl's health in general and for her future fertility abilities in particular.

In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf is trying to prove that today's beauty standards are just culturally imposed physical standards that have neither historical nor biological background. Wolf's rejection of the idea of universal and changeless beauty concept is quite reasonable. There are numerous evidences that beauty standards have changed throughout the centuries so that the notions about beauty and ugliness differ due to various nations or tribes. The author reasonably compares beauty to the currency system. It fluctuates similarly to changing patterns of the gold standard, which depends on different political and economical factors.



The author compares modern beauty impositions with medieval German device of torture called Iron Maiden to demonstrate how all these beauty concepts and impositions are used nowadays to immobilize women. She claims that modern women are forced out to keep to the unique requirements of how to look and what to wear regardless their physical peculiarities and personal preferences. However, it must be said that nowadays the new concept of natural beauty is promoted that persuade women to love them as they are. Besides, there exist different styles of outfits and looks which are oriented on different types of women. Modern women have more freedom in choosing which clothes or hairstyle to wear regarding their physical appearance peculiarities and their tastes.

To conclude, gender-based roles became more flexible during the last decades. Consequently, women got more opportunities to participate actively in the social and political life of society. However, Naomi Wolf believes that all that feminism brought to women is now challenged by the new concept of beauty myth. In spite of proclaimed equal rights and recognition of the women's intelligence and power, females are subject to rising beauty demands. According to the author, the beauty myth was generated by the men-dominated society in order to weaken females physically and mentally and to reduce their participation in the political and economical world. Although the beauty myth existed in the society before, the one that is promoted in modern time is much more powerful and frustrating. The idea that all these beauty impositions have created some kind of pressure on women in modern society is sound, however, it is debatable whether it is a well-organized and intentional political construct

aimed to immobilize women or not. Wolf's anger is directed against companies and industries that are promoting feminine insecurity, which is fair and understandable given the fact that beauty obsession may have some adverse effects for both mental and psychological health.