

Effect of societal norms on ideal body image for women in america, 1950s-early 20...



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The Effect of Societal Norms on Ideal Body Image for Women in America, 1950s-early 2000s

“ What role did societal norms play in creating ideal body standards for women in America?”

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Introduction

When you think of what the ideal women should look like, do the words “ slim”, “ fit”, “ thin”, or “ thick” come to mind? Are these your standards for all women? If a women does not fit that description, is she considered less beautiful to you? According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, body image is a subjective picture of one’s own physical appearance established both by self observation and by noting the reaction of others. Although body image is created in one’s own mind, it is the opinions of people surrounding that person that create one’s perception of their own body.

The ideal body image for women across America is not always the same, but most often the time has a number of similarities. For example, what people expect a white women to look like is completely different from what they expect a black woman in America to look like. This same concept applies to women of many other races including Asian, Latina, and other. Furthermore, these ideal body images for women across the United States of America change over the course of years due to new trends in society, new medical advancements, new influences in the media, etc. What Americans think is ideal for women in the 1950s is very different from Americans think is ideal for a woman to look like in the twenty-first century.

Body image is important in America to both women and men because it is one of the many factors that shape the environment in the United States, in specific social interactions. Body image has gone on to create mental and <https://assignbuster.com/effect-of-societal-norms-on-ideal-body-image-for-women-in-america-1950s-early-2000s/>

physical illnesses amongst hundreds of thousands of women across the country. According to some statistics from the Mirasol Recovery Centers, “ One in every 200 women across America suffer from anorexia.” Also, Mirasol Recovery Centers reported that “ Two out of three women in every 100 American women suffer from bulimia.”(Mirasol) These are just two of the several eating disorders that exist as a result of pressure from the public to look a certain way. Another negative effect of body image in America is the development of mental health issues. Over ten million women suffer from clinical depression yearly and can be found most commonly among women between their mid-twenties and early thirties.(Depression) In other words, pressure by men and other women in America to hold a certain physique have led to many negative effects for women including substance abuse, mental illness, eating disorders, low self-esteem, etc. (Mirror) These kind of issues make it hard for men and women to coexist and hold healthy relationships because people are constantly reminded that they must look a certain way in order to be socially accepted by society.

The Fight for Women’s Rights

One of the biggest social movements in the nineteenth century was the women’s rights movement. The Women’s Rights Movement was intended to give women the same rights that men gained following the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, equality with men before the law, in education and employment. July 13, 1848 marks the beginning of the Women’s Rights Movement.

The Women's Rights Movement began with a tea party including four women on July 13, 1848. A young housewife and mother named Elizabeth Cady Stanton was invited to tea with four of her lady friends. The course of their conversation soon turned to the situation of women. Of course, this was not the first-time women's inferiority to men had been denounced, but this would be one of the greatest attempts to make a change. ("History") At this tea time, Stanton expressed to her friends her strong disapproval for the limitations placed on women in the new American governmental system. ("History") "Hadn't the American Revolution been fought just 70 years earlier to win the patriots freedom from tyranny? But women had not gained freedom even though they'd taken equally tremendous risks through those dangerous years. Surely the new republic would benefit from having its women play more active roles throughout society.", Stanton said. ("History") As Stanton's rant continued, she was able to convince her friends to back her beliefs. As stated before this was not the first talk of women's inferiority in society by a group of women, but this was the first attempt to make a long-lasting change within society.

These women set in motion when they daringly agreed to hold the world's first Women's Rights Convention. After two meetups, together, the small group, made up of Stanton and friends, made a date for their convention, found an appropriate location, and spread the word by placing an announcement in the Seneca County Courier. The announcement in the Seneca County Courier read "A convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman." The gathering would take place at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls on July 19 and 20, 1848. On the first

convention July 19, 1848, two hundred women attended the convention. Elizabeth Cady Stanton read her proposed Declaration of Sentiments at the Women's Rights Convention. Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments was very much similar to the Declaration of Independence and even contained parts of the proclamation in its preamble. The Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances then detailed the injustices of women in the United States and had a call to action for women to organize and petition their rights. On the second convention held on July 20, 1848, men were invited to attend, about 40 actually did including Frederick Douglass. In this convention, the Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances was adopted and signed by sixty-eight women and thirty-two men. Twelve resolutions were also passed at this convention, one in which declared " it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise." This was the only resolution to meet opposition, but was soon backed by Frederick Douglass who sided with Stanton in arguing the importance of female enfranchisement. In a way, the support of men became a source of legitimacy for women in the 1800s. The resolution marked the beginning of the women's suffrage movement.

The Women's Suffrage Movement was the struggle of women to vote and participate in government. The suffrage movement began in the United States and eventually moved to Europe, specifically Great Britain. Stanton was introduced to Susan B. Anthony, a woman who was active in the movement at the time. This facilitated the formation of a close friendship between the two based on their goal of women's suffrage. They formed the

Woman's National Loyal League in 1863 to support the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery and to campaign for full citizenship for blacks and women. Anthony and Stanton founded the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and campaigned for a constitutional amendment for universal suffrage in America, and for other women's rights, such as changes in divorce laws and an end to employment and pay discrimination. On August 18, 1920, the Tennessee legislature narrowly approved the 19th Amendment. On August 31, the Tennessee House of Representatives voted to rescind their previous vote, but the U. S. Secretary of State had already proclaimed the amendment ratified on August 26. Women's right to vote was achieved through the national and local efforts of both the NAWSA and the NWP. The labor shortage caused by World War I that allowed women to move into roles traditionally held by men also made it increasingly difficult for opponents to argue that women were unworthy of the vote on the grounds of physical and mental inferiority. With the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in sight, Chapman Catt formed the League of Women Voters during NAWSA's last meeting on February 14, 1920, to help newly enfranchised women exercise their right to vote.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott had hoped for " a series of conventions embracing every part of the country." Their wishes were definitely granted following the first Woman's Rights Convention. Women's Rights Conventions were held regularly from 1850 until the start of the Civil War. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and women like Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Sojourner Truth traveled the country lecturing and organizing for the

next forty years. Eventually, winning the right to vote emerged as the central issue, since the vote would provide the means to achieve the other reforms.

Even in 2018, women's rights are still considered inferior to men. The National Organization for Women, an organization who have the same concept as Stanton, work to this day to create an egalitarian society. The National Organization for Women is the largest organization of feminist grassroots activists in the United States. NOW has hundreds of chapters and hundreds of thousands of members and activists in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. NOW's purpose is to take action through intersectional grassroots activism to promote feminist ideals, lead societal change, eliminate discrimination, and achieve and protect the equal rights of all women and girls in all aspects of social, political, and economic life. The National Organization for Women also known as NOW's mission statement reads: " The purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men..." The NOW organization is working to resolve the issues stated in Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments and Grievance, such as equal wages compared to men. Women still are not receiving equal pay for equal work, let alone equal pay for equal value of work. This disparity not only affects women's spending power, it penalizes their retirement security by creating gaps in Social Security and pensions. Members of the National Organization work to ensure of a future of equal pay for women by attending marches and peaceful protests to raise awareness. The NOW organization encourages women and

older teenagers to sign up to the organization to help spread awareness and support for women across the United States and eventually the world.

American Society in the 1950s

In the 1940s, the United States was faced with a great number of challenges from economic instability to world wars. In fact, both the Great Depression and the World Wars brought about a number of societal shifts that had to be restored in the 1950s. For example, the Great Depression largely damaged the United States' economy, which meant that the unemployment rate skyrocketed leaving thousands of Americans homeless. This led to extreme gender inequality in the workplace as most employers only wanted to employ men. During the world wars, women were allowed to work factory jobs to take the place of men and maintain their family incomes. However, when the war was over, thousands of women were forced back into their homes to take care of their families. Thus, America in the 1950s was focused on getting things back to normal before World War 1, World War 2, and the Great Depression.

Gender inequality

Gender Inequality in the workplace is something many women face in their career path. Gender equality in the workplace is beneficial for companies, countries, and families, therefore the government and/or business owners should work to make the workforce more egalitarian.

Gender equality in the workplace can help to boost a company's profits.

According to an article written by " Chad Brooks titled " Gender Inequality

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can boost profits”, “ A more diverse set of employees gives organizations a more diverse set of skills, which can help the office function better, said Sara Ellison, an MIT economist.” This shows that a more gender equal company brings more diversity to the table, which in turn helps the office run smoother. If a company is less diverse, then it is less likely to hold more than one viewpoint or perspective. This lack of diversity can be unappealing to customers, resulting in a decline of profit. An equally diverse company can help to boost profits. Yilmaz Arguden, who wrote the article “ Why Boards need more women”, also said: “ Experts believe that companies with women directors deal more effectively with risk. Not only do they better address the concerns of customers, employees, shareholders, and the local community, but also, they tend to focus on long term priorities.” Including women on to the board helps expand perspectives at the top, which helps to increase the company’s profits. An increase in the company’s profit is good for the employees and the administrative board and shows a sign of good management.

Gender equality in the workplace helps to build better countries. As stated by Michael Kimmel in a TED talk video titled “ Why gender equality is good for everyone-men included”, the highest scoring countries on the happiness scale “ are those countries that are the most gender equal.” This shows that the less a country discriminates, the more fortunate and positive it is. If an entire country and its citizens are satisfied with their way of living, then the country is less likely to deal with conflict. This concept is similar to the Golden Age in Central Asia, where the Mongols entered a period of peace and prosperity for over two thousand years. The Mongols had more time to

focus on the arts and literature because they were politically and internally stable. Everyone was satisfied with their way of life and role in society, decreasing any chance of a civil war or violent rebellions. During these thousands of years of peace, they were able to develop new innovations that would help their empire succeed, such as the construction of new temples and monasteries. Michael Kimmel's correlation between gender equality and a country's happiness level according to the happiness scale shows that something as small as gender inequality in the workplace affects the overall satisfaction of a country and the citizens of that area.

Gender equality in the workplace benefits the family life, as well. According to an article, "Women can increase household spending on children's nutrition, health, and education with more income and financial independence." This proves that gender equality benefits employees outside of the office, as well. The more money a woman earns, the better she can provide for her family and loved ones. If more women are able to get higher paying jobs, then more families are able to provide more health care for their families, which in turn affects the overall health and life expectancy rate of a country. According to an article titled "How gender equality can boost economic growth", "When companies invest in women, it pays off. By encouraging more women to apply to its pre-hire-engineering and construction skills training programs, Odebrecht, a global corporation, was able to recruit more workers, engage with local communities, and provide women with a foothold in the construction industry." This shows that simply hiring women can help a company to gain a bond with the community around them. More of a bond with the community helps a company or

business to understand the families and environment in which it stays. If the business and people have a relationship, then the families will be more influenced to join the workforce. This can help to increase the employment rate and help families earn more health benefits.

However, some may argue that is more expensive to run or revert to a gender equal company because that means more staff to pay. According to Research done by Catalyst and other studies, “ the more gender equal companies are, the better it is for workers, the happier their labor force is. This means less turnovers and job loss for a company.” The truth is the more employees a business has, who are actually satisfied with their job, the more money the company will make in total because they no longer have the risks of people quitting. Studies show that it is actually more expensive for the company to prohibit people from working because of their gender. Overall, the company is hindering themselves from earning more money by discriminating against a certain group of people.

Gender equality can help to further prevent a patriarchal society in the workplace. If gender discrimination continues in the workplace, then more men will be hired to work higher positions in the government and the workforce. This will show later in the future when the government is patriarchal and filled with a cabinet of men. The more egalitarian the workforce and the government is, the better run a country will be.

The Emergence of the Media in America

News outlets, magazines, social networks, and other forms of media are used by more than millions of people around the world to spread important <https://assignbuster.com/effect-of-societal-norms-on-ideal-body-image-for-women-in-america-1950s-early-2000s/>

information and opinions, interact with people across the globe, share one's talents, and as a source of entertainment. As body standards for women continue to change in America, the media has continued to be one of the many causes of this constantly changing expectations for women. Social media was not always as prevalent in the lives of Americans as it is now. The internet was developed in between the late 1960s and the early 1970s by officials at the Pentagon in an attempt to survive a nuclear attack, but was originally just a scientific experiment.(Beginnings) During this time, it was not called the internet, this " experiment" was referred to as the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency Network(Arpanet). The initial plans for this was not to link people together nor was it created to improve communication skills across the globe. Social media, in specifics, was not launched until 1997 when the world's first social media site, Six Degrees, was released to the public. The website, Social Degrees, allowed people to make personalized and unique user profiles along with connect with friends and/or family through the site, as most current social media sites allow users to do. Six Degrees was around from 1997 until 2001.(History) Soon after Six Degrees came other social media sites called ICQ and America Online. In the early 2000s, the Internet became more accessible to people with over 100 million people using it. As the Internet became more widespread, the original profile social media website, Myspace, emerged. Myspace paved the way for larger sites like Facebook and Twitter that have the same general concepts and ideas as Myspace.(History) With newer and more improved technological advancements, social media grew to gain over a billion users, and with large groups of people come conversations and opinions.

The first ever television was developed in 1927. However, it wasn't until the 1950s that the original box-shaped, black and white television became popular in American households. Thus, the television became the main influence for Americans. Shows, movies, and commercials aired in TVs influenced popular hair trends, fashion, and body shapes.

The Evolution of Ideal Body Image for White Women

White women in America have been key in idealizing what beautiful is. Other than their body size, their skin type has been used as the determinant for what is normal dating all the way back to the nineteenth century. This idea was a result of racist beliefs. Racism in America revolved around the idea that the white race was superior to other races, most notably that of African descent. In addition to this ideal, white men were considered to be the “breadwinners” or “superior beings” in America because of their skin color and gender, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth century gave them a lot of power to accomplish things at an easier rate than people of another gender or race would be able to. Because men were expected to “bring home the bacon along with protect the family” during this time in America, white women were expected to bear and nurture the children, clean the house, and cook for the family.

Since one of the main roles for the women in the family was to bear children, it was expected that the women look attractive most, if not all, of the time, in order to find a decent husband or male spouse. In the early 1950s, magazines like Playboy emerged that showed what “sexy” women looked like. (How) On the cover of the first issue of Playboy magazine in 1953,

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Marilyn Monroe was on the cover. She appeared to have medium sized breasts, a small waist, a small but round rear, and was ultimately described as “ round” and having an “ hourglass figure”. This is what America deemed beautiful at the time, which is equivalent to their standards for all white women. In order for women to meet these expectations, corsets and pinups were popular in the 1950s for women to obtain and maintain this ideal body shape.

In the 1960s and 70s, the ideal body shape for white women began to shift to a more thin and skinny body type. This was a result of many events in America at the time, including the Women’s Rights Movement and the introduction of the 16 year old model, Twiggy, to magazines in America. (HOW) As part of the Women’s Rights Movement, feminists and women all over began to embrace their natural bodies more due to beliefs that women should enjoy the same privileges and rights as men in society. Although women began to rid themselves of wearing corsets and other garments, there became more of an emphasis on natural body shapes. The British model, Twiggy, was an incredibly thin, sixteen year old model who was introduced to American magazines in the 1970s. She became very popular for her “ slim” shape and was often described as having very small breasts, a slim waist, and a tiny rear. This soon became the ideal body shape for women, which caused a rapid increase in eating disorders amongst women in the 1970s. Women were now more than ever depriving themselves of food, in order to fit this “ perfect” body that America wanted them to have. (HOW) In the 1980s, jogging and other exercises became more popular, which led to a shift in ideal body types from “ thin” and “ skinny” to more “

lean” and “ fit”. Thin bodies continued to be shown off by magazines and newspapers. However, a new emphasis on healthy women began to emerge in the media.(HOW)

Feminists View on Body Image(1970s and 1990s)

The second wave feminist movement in the 1970s fought for women to enter the workforce, which led to a shift in the overall image of women as housewives to working women. This change allowed the ideal body image of women to change, but still pushed for “ thin and skinny” women in western culture, especially. In the 1970s, black women began to embrace their natural curves and aimed for the “ hourglass figure” by taking weight gain supplements. However, the ideal body image of being “ lean” still occurred. In the 1980s, jogging and fitness became very popular, so ideal body image for women slightly changed to tall and skinny with a larger bust. In the 1990s, the ideal body image for women shrunk in size and petite, waif sized women were embraced, causing low fat diets to be set in stone.

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