

Submission by Authentic Equity Alliance [MRS0062]

While it is true that over the last 10/15 years males, particularly young males, have and continue to experience social pressure in relation to idealised body images, it has long been, and continues to be, the case that it is predominantly women and girls who experience social pressure to conform to an idealised body image; with negative consequences, including when they (mostly) fall short of the ideal.

AEA has a focus on females, accordingly that is the focus of this submission.

The idealised female body image hinges around sex and apparent readiness to engage in sexual activity. The ideal is slim yet voluptuously curvy and perfectly proportioned; sexually adventurous; consenting and accessible. It is all about how she looks, how she is perceived, and how well she matches the fantasy. It is not about *who she is*, nor what *she can do and achieve*.

An idealised female bodily image is relentlessly promoted by the fashion and beauty industries via magazines, advertising and social media, and by **practically** every other sector with a product **or service** to sell. As the adage goes: sex sells. And sex is bought in multiple ways, principally by males. The biggest seller of sex is the porn industry, and porn is consumed on a gargantuan scale - largely because of Porn Hub: a free online platform, which also acts as a portal to the vilest forms of sexual abuse and exploitation of females of all ages.

An idealised body image is predominantly about she in the male gaze; she as a source of male pleasure; she whose value lies in her physicality and in her utility to males. But it is also about the *internalised* male gaze, trained inward in ferocious self-criticism and self-castigation.

The consequences for females - encouraged to criticise their bodies and aspire to a (mostly) impossible physical ideal - has long been known. It is the driver behind waves of the social contagions of self-body-hatred we have seen over decades: bulimia, anorexia, self-harming, body dysmorphia and, in more recent times, gender dysphoria; which, now, predominantly affects young girls seeking escape from their female bodies, many who would otherwise grow up to be lesbian¹. It is the driver behind the cosmetic **surgery** industry, worth £multi-billions in the UK alone². It is the driver behind reported high rates of sexism fuelling poor mental health in women³, widespread sexism in schools⁴, low self-esteem in girls⁵, and rocketing rates of sexual assault and rape in schools, including primary schools.⁶ The sexualised breast - in which the primary function of breasts (mammary glands) is seen as **purely** sexual, rather than for the provision of human milk to human babies - impacts negatively on breastfeeding rates.⁷ Domestic violence/abuse and sexual assault/rape are at epidemic proportions. The trafficking of females (and it is predominantly females) for sexual exploitation and forced marriage is taking place on a massive scale⁸.

The solutions to all this cannot be piecemeal. Solutions need to address the very heart of the matter: which is that, in 2020, females as a class are still disadvantaged, discriminated against and exploited.

1. As a starting point, we need clear statistics that reveal female realities

Currently, DV/A police statistics record every incident that takes place in a home as domestic violence, this includes incidents between in-laws, siblings, adult offspring to a parent and vice versa. CSEW statistics cap the number of incidents, which obscures the true number of events that women endure before eventually fleeing their abusers.* Taken together, the reality of female lives with violent/abusive partners is effectively masked.

The trafficking of girls and women into prostitution and forced marriage, is obscured by the term 'human' trafficking, which necessitates recourse to international sources for female/male breakdowns.

Outside of trafficking, 'sex-work' is a misnomer when the majority of women are forced into prostitution by poverty and the need to provide for dependents.

Recommended Action: Government to change parameters for the gathering of statistics.

2. Young females

Girls and young women need to be taught women's history. They need to be made aware of all the extraordinary women who have made ground-breaking contributions across a whole swathe of human endeavour. They need role-models who demonstrate what it is *to be* and *to achieve*, rather than to be seen and consumed. We need to reach girls who achieve high grades in STEM at GCSE Level but overwhelmingly drop-out at A Level, influenced by lack of self-confidence, stereotypes, educational environment and social factors, including peers, parents, the presence of role models and the media⁹. **Girls and young women need to be instilled with self-confidence and their self-esteem nurtured.**

Recommended action: Government to fund women's groups to give talks in schools

3. **Advertising and media.** The never-ending flow of pernicious images needs to be curbed.

Recommendation action: Government must produce new standards and guidelines.

Though now the majority in UK population, females as a class are not only still disadvantaged and discriminated against but they also still bear the majority of the unpaid burden of housework and caring for dependents.

And, of course, 30 years after the 1970 Equal Pay Act, the Pay Gap still exists.^{10 11}

Ann Sinnott
Director, AEA

** I have since been informed that the cap has been dispensed with; if so, that is good news.*

1 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0202330>

2 <https://www.cosmeticsurgerysolicitors.co.uk/news/cosmetic-surgery-billion-industry>

3 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2019/sep/high-levels-sexism-could-be-fuelling-poor-mental-health-among-women>

- 4 <https://neu.org.uk/advice/its-just-everywhere-sexism-schools>
- 5 <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2019>
- 6 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719902/Sexual_violence_and_sexual_harassment_between_children_in_schools_and_colleges.pdf
- 7 *Breastfeeding Older Children*, Ann Sinnott, Ch 7: 'The Breastfeeding Dyad', 2010
- 8 *Global Trafficking in Women and Children*, Report from International Police Executive Symposium, 2019
- 9 <https://matrixni.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Women-in-STEM-Report-final-20-may.pdf>
- 10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mandatory-gender-pay-gap-reporting-summary-of-reported-data-for-201819>
- 11 <https://ig.ft.com/gender-pay-gap-UK-2019/>

September 2020