

# THE COST OF BEING A WOMAN

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BRIGID EVANS TAKES OFF HER MAKE-UP, AND FACES THE BARE TRUTH

We are all far more concerned with our appearance than we'd probably like to admit. It's not vanity. Vanity implies pride. No, we're concerned. Concerned we're too thin or overweight. Concerned our hair is too fizzy, too greasy, or that it never sits right. We're concerned about pimples, blackheads, dry or oily skin. Our clothes aren't flattering. There's always someone who looks better than we do. Some days it feels like everyone looks better than we do.

We all worry, but some of us worry more than others. We don't just spend time fretting about our appearance –we sacrifice significant amounts of money trying to look a certain way. Studies have found that on average Western women are one such group who are highly concerned about our appearance. In fact, we spend 12 hours and 4 minutes per week fretting over how we look. It will take the average woman 27 minutes to get ready, no matter where she is going. That number jumps significantly if she's meeting friends, if she's going on a date, or if it's a Monday. Monday's are hard it turns out. She'll also spend \$160,000 on cosmetics over her lifetime. A further \$800,000 will be spent on clothing and accessories and \$65,000 on her hair. She'll lose 2.5 years of her life washing, styling, cutting, colouring, curling and straightening that \$65,000 head of hair too.

It can be easy to blame women or suggest that this excessive concern, time and money directed against appearance arises out of female vanity. But calling women shallow would itself be a shallow analysis of women's experience. Here philosophy can help us look underneath this glossy exterior.

Our body for the most part is up to us to control. We decide what to buy, what to wear and how we present ourselves to the world. So if I want to spend 2.5 years of my life doing my hair, isn't that entirely my choice? Philosopher Serene Khader argues that this sole focus on autonomy obscures the extent to which our relationships, social structures and norms shape our lives.

It's probably no surprise that there's debate in philosophy about what social norms are, how they arise and what function they serve. Philosophers are always arguing about something after all. One potential definition is that norms are beliefs and expectations which shape what is and is not acceptable behaviour in a group or society. Still not particularly clear what norms are? Philosopher Christina Bicchieri provides a helpful analogy here. She compares norms to grammar. Grammar makes certain language choices more obvious, more appealing and more common. Language choices that fall outside the conventions of grammar sound strange, they don't make sense and some we can't even imagine. *Right it does not sound to write like this.* Sure, I could, but the rules of grammar tell me that I shouldn't. Not unless I was Yoda of course.

This analogy might help to explain why we comply with norms. Bicchieri claims that norms are self-fulfilling expectations –the expectation exists that women shave their legs...so we comply and shave our legs...which reinforces the expectation that we shave our legs. And on and on the cycle goes! This expectation to comply in part arises because we expect that other people will comply. It also arises because we assume that others will expect us to comply too, and that there will be social costs for resisting and reward for complying. So *'speak like this, everyone then would'* if speaking like Yoda was a norm in our society. As individuals we may resist such a norm, but there will be social costs to lone norm-flouters so long as others continue to comply.

Norms direct our imaginative potential. This can mean that certain choices become more obvious while others we might not even think of. This is one of the ways fashion seems to work –when certain styles are 'in' we're more likely to buy that style. You probably wouldn't have imagined getting an undercut or wearing those puffer jackets until the possibility was presented to you.

The media knows this. We see an average of 5,000 advertisements a day. That's a lot of possibilities that are made more obvious to us. These advertisements aren't just presenting possibilities about what to buy though, they communicate expectation for how men, women and children should look and behave. Philosopher Emma Rush points to the concerning rise in advertising material where young girls are dressed up, posed and made up in the same way

as 'sexy adult models' would be. From young ages, normative expectations are being continually communicated that girls and women need to look and behave in certain ways.

Social expectations don't simply open possibilities; they also restrict rational choice. Women are expected to look a certain way, and they are directly rewarded for complying with these expectations. Studies have shown that a woman is more likely to secure a job if she wears make up and high heels. Appearance directly correlates with salary, popularity and likelihood of promotion. If a woman is on trial she's even less likely to be found guilty if she conforms to these expectations for female beauty and etiquette. It makes sense then for women to comply –they're directly rewarded for doing so.

So it costs women time, money and energy to comply, or it costs them significant social reward to thwart these norms and expectations. It seems wrong then to blame women for accepting or rejecting these standards. In some ways we can see that it's perfectly rational to spend all this time on appearance. In other ways it makes sense to want to resist social expectations. Whichever option we choose, compliance or resistance, we incur a personal cost. The question then arises; why is the cost so high?

Margaret Little, another philosopher, may be able to answer this question for us. She points out a historical trend of woman and the 'feminine' being associated with contamination, infection and danger. We see this in dramatic ways; from Eve's corruption of Adam to witch hunts; to more subtle attitudes; school girls skirt lengths being 'distractions' or disgust at women's body hair and menstruation. These ideas of contamination, infection, danger and distraction also see women's appearance positioned in relation to men's gaze. It is through their appearance *to men* that women distract or corrupt.

According to Little, this results in women's norms of appearance being further from 'the natural' than men's; we must pluck, paint, dye, crimp, curl, straighten, wax, tuck, fast and tighten to change our natural appearance. Men merely shave their beards if they feel like it. What Little shows us then is that our beauty norms are harder to meet than men's and that resistance or compliance is more costly for women.

This doesn't mean that we don't have any autonomy. Rather, Khader argues that autonomy and compliance don't exist in a binary opposition. Being an autonomous agent does not mean

that you are 'a law unto yourself', nor does it require the complete rejection of social norms or the refusal to be motivated by anyone or anything other than your own interests and values. Rational and imaginative choices may be restricted by social norms and relationships, but you retain an ability to formulate and scrutinise these choices.

Part of this scrutiny might lead us to consider the value of these additional costs that are placed on women. Perhaps the most fundamental philosophical question is whether gender differences are worth retaining. If it costs women so much time and money to comply with norms –should we do away with these norms? Would we want to live in what Susan Okin terms a 'genderless society'? This might not mean doing away with gender *per se* (which may be hard to imagine), but ending what Okin called the *gendered division of labour* – a society in which women have to work harder, for less reward, than men. Perhaps there is something valuable, after all, in the rituals and efforts we make in living out a gender identity. But it shouldn't have to cost so much.