

## **Women and Body Image: A Sociological Study of Women in India**

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### **Abstract**

The narrative of the body holds an important place in the studies on gender and its relation to society. Body image arises with one having a physical body and an awareness of how it is viewed by others or oneself. Studies conducted by various academic researchers, fashion trend analyst and others found that both women and men all over the world seem to be in favour one ideal body type, that is, a slim, tall and perfectly proportionate body. This paper attempts to analyse the notion of beauty and body image ideals among Indian women and present any similarities or differences it may have with the rest of the world. Women are influenced by what they see every day on the TV, Internet and foreign print magazines. The influence is visible by the change in health consciousness and body weight among women who make efforts to change how they look. The huge boom in the beauty industry and slimming clubs are testimony of this change. However, the changes among Indian women are varied and differ from place to place or economic status of the person.

**Keywords: Body Image, Indian Women, Beauty Ideals.**

### **Introduction**

The body is gaining importance in social theory and research. There is an enormous upsurge of interest in the subject of the body in the field of academics as well as in mass culture. Many articles and books written on the body has also emerged in recent years which talks about the features of the body, its history and the present time.

The current interest in the body is thought to be a theoretical development and some have attributed it to the rise in consumer capitalism and medical advances in science and technology, while some have attributed the rise of the body to feminism. Now, a new culture is visible, that of body culture and different disciplines, including sociology has come up with

their theories and findings on the body and how it relates to the individual. The body is revived in order to analyse and understand issues like self-image and embodiment.

Body image is formed with one having a body and it refers to the self-picture that an individual develops in his/her mind. This self-picture is influenced by a person's beliefs, attitudes, experience and ideals followed by society. Accordingly, one may have a positive or negative body image. Body image is a complex construct and is closely linked with the identity of individuals and believed to influence their behaviours. A negative body image may lead to certain behavioural changes like withdrawal from social engagements or loss of self-esteem while a positive body image may give a person confidence and motivation to succeed. How a person begins to have a negative or positive body image is a matter of interest. The size and shape of the body have come to increasingly operate as a marker of personal, internal order or disorder – a symbol for the emotional, moral or spiritual state of the individual.

Women are considered the ones who have the highest rates of body dissatisfaction and body image problems.

“Idealized images of beautiful women are a major factor affecting young women's personal ideas and body image; other influential factors include peers and family and the perceived preference of the opposite sex” (Casanova 2004: 289).

The social importance given to beauty, external appearance in this case, has made women feel dissatisfied about their appearance if they do not meet the current standards.

According to Naomi Wolf, “beauty is a currency system like the gold standard...in assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relation” (1991: 12 cited in Casanova 2004). The quest for unattainable beauty ideals and perfect body shapes is implicated in the high incidence of eating disorders and low body image among young girls and women all over the world.

Women have a close relationship with their bodies since they have been looked at as objects of sexuality and their bodies treated as a medium of culture. With the coming of feminism and critiques against ideal body types, the feminine ideal might have undergone some changes but one thing always remains constant through the decades. “Women have always been encouraged to change their shape and weight to conform to current trends. Through the ages, women have undergone pain to attempt to conform to the current ideal” (Grogan 2008: 41). The pressure that cultural ideals places on women to change their body shape leads to a feeling of body dissatisfaction among women. Body dissatisfaction is a disturbing

phenomenon among women and has to do with the kind of body image that a women has of herself.

By using a variety of different techniques to study how women evaluate their bodies, researchers have concluded that many women in Western culture and the rest of the world are dissatisfied with some aspect of their body weight and shape and are taking behavioural steps to try to change the look of their bodies. Being slim is the most desirable attribute for most women and it “is associated with self-control, elegance, social attractiveness and youth” (Orbach 1993; Bordo 2003). The ideal female shape is – physically impossible, tall, thin and busty Barbie-doll shape. A toned muscle body is also important and the year from modern day culture saw the desired body ideal as being firm-looking body for women as well as men.

### **The Body of Women in India**

The body of women has always been considered as a site for culture and for ‘others’ in India. The body is a medium of culture, in the sense in which women take care of it and maintain it, eat, dress, and adorn themselves, communicate with others. An Indian woman was represented as a home maker, a wife, a mother and a perfect daughter in law belonging to a rigid joint family system; a common way of living in many Indian households. “The traditional image of womanhood emphasized the women as the complementary of men in the context of the family that was central to social continuity” (Jain and Mahan 1996: 44).

Under the strict dominant patriarchal rule, women had little say or rights to their bodies that were treated like an object for the benefits of the male interests. The body of women was morphed in accordance to the accepted social ideals of the time and not with their individual will. Every change in the body shape was for the sole aim of attracting male attention and generating male approval. In contrast to the rest of the world where women have the freedom to change their body shape according to their individual beliefs and choices, women in India were dictated on what type of body shape they should have by others which usually meant the husband, father and other male members of the family. This visible hold on women is explained by Jain and Mahan (1996) because of certain ‘images’ attributed to women.

The image of the Indian women has always been depicted as a devoted wife, loyal, benevolent and in humble service to the dominant husband. The Indian women body was useful for procreation and a good woman was one who bore many sons to the family. Ideas of feminine beauty were already long in place from ancient India and the evidence of this is inherent from the preserved sculptures and paintings on female bodies.

In India, the earliest images of women are a set of Mauryan period figurines (Dhavalikar 1999: 178, cited in Bracey). The figures were however, not simply representation of female form but symbols of fertility or mother goddess figure. The figures produced in the Mauryan period were linked to symbols of fertility and the images produced display women with large breasts, wide hips and tapering legs. However, what were considered as symbols of the feminine, these figures came to be used as representations of female body.

The artists in the ancient formal schools of art (such as presumed to have existed at Sanghol, Mathura, Sanchi, Ajanta etc) were recorded to follow certain rules of proportions. Based on these rules, the artists produced the sculptures that are located at historical sites. “The female figures assume a particular posture called the tribangha or 'pose of the three bends', bent at the hips, waist, and breasts (sometimes with the head cocked), to provide an S like shape” (Bracey n.d)

The proportions depicted in the sculptures are of interest because of they are repeated again in the second and third century and also because they are formalised and unrealistic. The images are in short “an idealisation of the female form. A form that is instantly recognisable to its viewer as being an image (rather merely a symbol) of femininity while at the same time being utterly unattainable by any real woman” (Bracey, n.d).

### **The Indian Female Body Today**

In the case of India, there are very few studies and findings on the body as compared to other parts of the world and this makes the task of analysing the problems faced by women more hard. Unlike its Western counterparts, the studies on body image issues in India are very limited and inadequate. Even feminists in India have withdrawn from addressing issues related to the female body and the reason for this abstinence is explained by Meenakshi Thapan as, “it may also be the case that Indian feminists do not view discourse on the body as problematic or deserving their particular attention in the face of more striking issues such as poverty, women’s rights, violence against women, and so on” (1995: 34).

The lack of material does not mean that body image problems are absent among women in India or that the issue should take a back seat. Findings from medical case studies of eating disorders suggest that the problem exists and more extensive research is needed to analyse the issue in detail. Of note, Shroff and Thompson (2003) conducted a study among adolescent and adult females on the role played by media and interpersonal influences on body image and eating disorder and found that internalization of thin ideal and ‘teasing’ by peers or others were mainly responsible for driving young adults to stay thin or try to be thin.

The body image problem is attributed to body dissatisfaction and this was aggravated by experiences of teasing on one's weight that the young participants faced. These findings replicate and extend previous work with U.S., Australian, and Swedish samples, suggesting that there are similar potential risk factors, cross-culturally, that may explain the development of eating and shape-related problems.(Shroff & Thompson, 2004).

Another study carried out to find out the consciousness of adolescent girls about their body image show that girls who were already perceived as too thin continued to wish to be thinner and the level of body dissatisfaction was higher among girls of urban areas as compared to rural areas (Dixit et al. 2011). The reason for this could be that girls in urban areas maybe exposed more to foreign images and ideals of thinness.

A survey was conducted among sixty-six psychiatrists in Bangalore to answer the question of whether eating disorder is a significant clinical issue in urban India and the results they found was among them, the total number of eating disorder cases they had seen in a year seen was 74. Of these, 32 were diagnosed as anorexia nervosa (AN), 12 as bulimia nervosa (BN), and 30 as eating disorders not otherwise specified (EDNOS). Sixteen (23.5%) respondents were of the opinion that EDs were increasing in Bangalore, 18 (26.5%) felt the rates were stable and 28 (42%) were not sure. The study concluded that two-thirds of psychiatrists reported seeing at least one case of ED indicating that EDs are common in urban India (Chandra, Abbas and Palmer 2012).

In a comparative study conducted on weight-related body image concerns among 18-24-year-old women in Canada and India, it was found that among the Indian women, concerns about the weight of the upper torso (i.e., face, neck, shoulders, and chest) emerged as a distinct body image construct (Gupta et al.,2001).

Kapadia (2009) in her research on body image in Indian women and the influence of media found that most Indian women were dissatisfied with their body size and this was attributed to several factors. The women were aware of the impact that media had on their body images and they usually compared themselves to friends, family members and movie actresses.

Radhika Batra (2007) conducted an interesting study on the body dissatisfaction experienced by young Indian women who are regular readers of foreign print magazines like Cosmopolitan, Elle, and Marie Claire etc. and see the numerous advertisements on beauty products. The advertisements shown in such print media and targeted at women are said to influence the way how women perceive their body image and beauty. Not all women derive the same responses from advertisements and there are degrees to how much visual imagery affects them. A significant finding from the study was inspite of the strong influences of

American mass media, some Indian women still retained a deep connection with Indian culture and were proud of the way they look (Batra 2007: 73).

In another study carried out among young females above the ages of 12 in Chennai, it was found that around 30 % of the total 915 participants felt pressure from advertisements. They acknowledged that after looking at advertisements, they wanted to look more beautiful, attractive and change their body shape. Women were also found to be overestimating their present body size and idealize a thinner image (Rekha and Maran 2012). Thus, we see that the culture of thinness affects the body image of young women in India too and lead to body shame and dissatisfaction.

### **Slimming Clubs, Gyms and Diet Books: Proof of Weight Obsession**

The urban scene in India is one where we see a number of beauty salons, spas, beauty clinics and clubs growing rapidly to meet the needs of those women who wish to be more beautiful and acceptable in society by changing the way they look.

The increasing obsession with appearance can be proved by the rising statistics of beauty clinics and clubs today.

In the region of Delhi NCR alone, a keyword search for names and contact numbers of slimming clubs/centres at popular information sites like [www.asklaila.com](http://www.asklaila.com) and [www.sulekha.com](http://www.sulekha.com) turn up hundreds of results showing that there are multiple clubs and gyms which are available to cater to the needs of modern women.

Clinics like VLCC for example, offer packages that promises to reduce weight in sixty days or three months. Some salons even have special bridal packages which begins three to six months before the wedding date to make the bride beautiful with perfect skin and body for the big day.

Clinics like the Kaya Skin Clinic have services for youthful skin that include – ‘Wrinkle Reduction with Botox’, ‘Youth Renewal with Thermage’, ‘Age Control Peel’ etc. A visible change is also seen among the female Bollywood stars, almost all of them endorse a fit, slim and tone body and some actors like Shilpa Shetty, Bipasha Basu and Lara Dutta have produced their own fitness and exercise DVDs. Like in the west, books that offer fat free diet recipes and on how to lose weight or how to get a flat tummy are highly popularised and advertised in magazines, newspapers and television.

A notable one has been ‘Don’t Lose Your Mind Lose Your Weight’ by Indian Rujuta Diwekar who claims to be the dietician responsible for Kareena Kapoor’s new slim body. The obsession for a thin body is projected through the increasing popularity of weight loss pills, exercises, diet plans and birth of many gyms and clinics that cater to this need. India is

witnessing a massive growth in weight reducing programs, slimming gels, creams and pills. More and more young women are trying to be thin and look beautiful. We see clinics, beauty salons and even hotels and resorts offering diet plans, beauty makeovers and fat-free meals to attract customers and fuel their need to attain the perfect body shape and weight. The popularisation of offers such as these generates a negative body image notion among women who are exposed to them. A preference or celebration of perfect bodies leads to a dissatisfaction of natural bodies which look ugly in comparison to artificial made up bodies.

### **Indian Beauty Redefined**

At the present, what is known as the Indian beauty is a tone, slim, fair and tall women who can relate with the Western notions of beauty and blend easily among them. The entry of Indian origin models and heroines in the Western fashion and entertainment industry is responsible in part for the huge change in body shapes. Here, it should be noted that the phenomenon for attaining a slim slender body is somewhat restricted among urban women who are heavily exposed to foreign media and lifestyle as compared to rural women who are not. Due to its vast diversity in culture and traditions, the Western Ideal of Thinness seems to have affected those parts of the country that are more advanced and westernised while backward and rural areas continue to stay the same. The choice to not eat entails a power of surplus production which only the privileged or well off class enjoy.

Thus, we see that it is in urban metropolitan cities that many slimming clubs and gyms have sprung up and the clientele consist mostly of the rich and affluent. The quest for slenderness seems to be stronger among young independent urban women.

We hear reports about weight control and dieting among young girls but the problem does not take the nature of an epidemic outbreak like in the West. However, the problem of body dissatisfaction is not absent among women in India and as research indicates, women are influenced by media and other everyday experiences in forming self-perception of their bodies.

### **Conclusion**

The body is an important subject today and further research on its issues will reveal more solutions to tackle the body image problem. The paper set out to address the nature and solution to body image problems and has come up in small measure a better understanding of its causes and reaches among women. A grim picture is painted with the multitude of problems that still affects women today regarding their body but hopes to address this wrong is not lost. Recent developments show that the media and other agencies are presenting positive measures to decrease body dissatisfaction problems among women.

Beauty company, Dove started the “Campaign for Real Beauty” in 2004 after a global study report on ‘The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report’ revealed that about only 2% of women around the world described themselves as beautiful and that the definition of beauty was limited and impossible to achieve. The campaign aimed at widening the definition of beauty coming up with new ads featuring women of varied sizes, bodies that are not considered as beautiful according to stereotype, and asking women how they felt about the new images shown.

Feminist scholars on the body of women suggests that a positive way to reduce low body image would be by promoting a new aesthetic of female body and women themselves celebrating their natural bodies.

Feminine beauty ideals should incorporate diversity and definitions of beauty should not be confined to one dominant ideal of society.

The case of body image among women in India shows that their experiences and beauty ideals are similar and different at the same time with women in other parts of the world. They are similar in the sense that women in India also has aspirations to have a slim, slender and toned bodies like Western women and participate in beauty rituals. But there are differences in the way women in India experience their embodiment and follow the current ideals. This is explained by Thapan (2004) who states that the ‘new Indian woman’ is,

an ambivalent entity shaped by the social and public domain which simultaneously portrays her as glamorous, independent, conscious of her embodiment and of the many forms of adornment and self-presentation available to her, and yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values. The overarching trope, therefore, remains that of middle-class ‘respectability’ within which a woman is ‘free’ to pursue her career and look after the interests of her family and her body repair and maintenance.

(Thapan 2004: 416- 417)

Thus, a woman in India have different experiences of body image as compared to other women. The adoption of western ideals depends on the social class, status and education of women in India. Beauty ideals of the West are usually adopted and followed by urban middle class women who has the resources to pursue such goals. Some scholars are even of the opinion that imitating the Western ideals is a way for the higher castes to remain distinct from lower castes. “As lower castes sanskritize, so higher castes westernize to maintain their distinction from others lower down the hierarchy” (Russell 1997: 13).

### **Limitations**

Studies on body image are usually developed and assessed as a trait-like construct. The daily experiences of body image, situational and emotional contexts that individuals face needs to be studied too. The literature review on body image studies show that it has dealt mostly with body image issues among young adult women and has excluded aged and minor girls. Future research on body image will be more enriched with more studies on these two age groups.

Data on eating disorders and body image opinions have been collected from urban middle class women and we have no detailed research on the issues of body image among rural women. Also, the literature on the subject of bodies in India has no sufficient data on the statistics of women who undergo body modifications like cosmetic surgery to enhance their looks.

The study is incomplete and further research is suggested to give an overall understanding of the body of women in India.

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