

**Scottish Women's Convention response to:
Westminster Women and Equalities Select Committee:
Call for Evidence: Body Image
June 2020**

Premise:

The Women and Equalities Select Committee has called an inquiry to consider the role of media, social media and advertising, and will consider whether there is enough research and data to support the Government in creating policy surrounding body image and social media.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

What is the impact for those with multiple protected characteristics including race, disability, sex and sexuality?

The impact of negative portrayals of body image is a pervasive problem within a wider societal narrative of inequality. Attempts to rectify this situation through solutions by both Government and business are necessary to ensure those most at risk are sufficiently protected from the harms associated with such portrayals.

Such images cannot, however, be looked upon in a vacuum. They must be seen as a direct consequence of wider issues within society that risk causing harm to women, particularly those with intersectional characteristics. Robust procedures and safeguards should be given to companies and individuals to promote images that are truly representative. Failure to do so sends a message that certain body types are more desirable than others.

What contributes to poor body image?

Throughout their daily lives, women encounter an array of negative imagery through targeted advertising. The current Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown has exacerbated these issues exponentially. Where adverts may portray those with protected characteristics, this can often be done in a stereotypical or problematic way, leading to the danger of reinforcing certain perceptions. This can include risks in areas including but not limited to:

- Perceptions of women and men based on gendered divisions of labour and domestic responsibilities.
- Stereotypical portrayals of women which may lead to a further reinforcement of such perceptions.
- Digital retouching of images to lighten skin colour or reduce weight.
- Cultural appropriation of different communities' ideals in an offensive manner.
- LGBTQ+ individuals struggling with sexual or gender identity, particularly for those where advice and peer groups may be hard to access.

What are the long-term effects of poor body image on people?

Much of the misrepresentative, unrealistic or edited content circulated online has a strong influence and may normalise a perception of an "ideal" and unobtainable body. Younger women and girls may be particularly susceptible during key stages of adolescence where being inundated with such portrayals can have a negative and long-lasting effect. Other issues include:

- Normalising to young girls that the primary factor through which their worth is measured is by comparing them to an unobtainable standard.
- A severe risk to both mental and physical health and wellbeing.

- The normalisation to young men and boys of what a “standard” feminine body type is.
- Sending a message to women that it is through purely physical means that they are judged, which may act as an impediment to women’s economic and career development.
- Attempts by women to control their body image through ways such as surgery and excessive dieting.

What is the impact of media consumption on people’s body image, does it impact their mental health?

Women can suffer from severe mental health issues brought about by the societal preoccupation with idealised body images, intensified by ongoing media exposure and the rise of digitalisation. Businesses use social media to advertise and promote products in order to make a profit rather than considering the long-term impacts on their audience. Young women are often influenced by unobtainable body images which in turn can have a negative impact on their mental health.

Many women consulted have noted the strong rise in such issues, particularly with more and more of life being lived through online platforms. The potential harms of this may inadvertently contribute to a minimisation of women’s life choices and affect their self-esteem and mental wellbeing. This may be further compounded through the use of online forums and other ways of connecting with individuals, where a woman’s image is often discussed as an idealised standard.

MEDIA

What is the effect of the following on people’s body image when using social media?

Adverts

Whilst advertising may not be the sole cause of enforcing negative stereotypes around body image, it can also be a powerful contributing factor. The glorification of an idealised form can severely affect the ways in which women view themselves. It may also act as a prerequisite to objectification, and in some cases violence where it portrays images of women as victims or in gender-specific roles.

Whilst many companies have rightly begun to understand their responsibility in the way in which they use advertisements, this is not the same for all. By using air brushing and other digital means, many transform images to present an even more unobtainable appearance. This carries potential risks of severe health problems including eating disorders and other health issues. In addition, some advertisements may carry unnecessary emphasis on products as a way of improving a woman’s own image. Not only does this commit to further sexual objectification and gendered standards of a woman’s body but insists on reinforcing perceptions of what is considered a “normal” sexual identity.

User-generated content (posts from friends)

One of the main risks from such content in a more personal capacity is that many individuals may be unaware of what they are posting or the false images portrayed in these posts. This can be particularly troubling when such content carries DIY fixes and hacks which are untested and potentially dangerous. There is also the added issue that such content is missed by regulators due to low traffic in comparison to media advertisements and posts from celebrities.

User-generated content (posts from celebrities)

Visual social media has led to an extension of celebrity culture through the creation of 'Influencers.' These people will typically hold a large target audience due to their representation of an 'aspirational' lifestyle and physical appearance. The continuing rise of product advertising by use of celebrity/influencer endorsements has led to many young women being exposed to such portrayals. This can be an issue for younger girls who may follow numerous individuals, further exacerbating this. There are other risks associated with posts from well-known figures. Professional retouching is often used to alter images, reinforcing that only certain body types are normal.

Low regulation and weak sanctions can allow celebrities and well-known figures to market and promote certain products which may pose a risk when not thoroughly researched. Furthermore, these are often expensive and see young women spending a high proportion of money on items that are 'fix it' schemes which falsely promise to provide solutions.

Content promoting eating disorders and diet culture

Many of the posts generated online around body image may strike a precarious balance between healthy and excessive dieting whilst being unregulated. This has a disproportionately negative impact on young women who it is often targeted towards.

Content promoting cosmetic surgery/interventions

Given the potential dangers that cosmetic surgery or interventions carry, any content which is associated with such features may pose severe risks if unregulated. As mentioned previously, this can pose problems where such procedures are advertised without clearly laying out the potential harms or where false outcomes are presented as realistic. Many women consulted have noted the increase in this form of content over the past few years. This can be a worry where such deceptive content is marketed as a cheaper substitution whilst not being recognised for the harms it may pose to physical health. In addition, this promotional material seeks to standardize an image to women that their own physical attributes need fixing in some way.

What are the responsibilities of companies and the media in ensuring diversity in the images we see?

Whilst many companies have begun to understand their responsibility in the ways in which they use images, this is not the same for all. Organisations should be reminded of their role around equal opportunities. This should not just be in recruitment but also in how the image of the company is portrayed. Positive body images can ensure that promotional material reflects the company's commitment to equality and diversity.

REGULATION

What strategy should the government take in promoting healthy body image for young people?

The UK Government has a chance to implement robust guidance and procedures regarding the promotion of diversifying the portrayals of healthy body images both on and offline. Strategies that should be given as appropriate would include:

- Providing refreshed guidance that is continually updated regarding the potential risks and harms of negative associations with body image for companies.
- Promotion of effective use of advertisements and content as best practice.
- Working with social media companies to promote sustainable content as well as further regulations and sanctions.
- Ensuring a coordinated national strategy regarding education around social media with a specific emphasis on body image.
- The establishment of a separate Women and Equalities Minister to support enhancement of equality and protected characteristics.
- Ensuring strategies take account of the unique approaches and regulation that is needed in media in its online and offline forms.

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Select Committee's call for evidence regarding body image and its portrayal within the media. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to the effect of this on equality at both a reserved and devolved level.

For further information, please contact
The Scottish Women's Convention
Email – info@scottishwomensconvention.org
Telephone – 0141 339 4797
www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Scottish Women's Convention is a charitable company limited by guarantee. Registered in Scotland No. SC0327308. Registered office 2nd Floor, The Albany Centre, 44 Ashley Street Glasgow G3 6DS.

The Scottish Women's Convention is a Charity registered in Scotland No. SC039852.