BEAUTY AND MISOGYNY

Harmful cultural practices in the west

Sheila Jeffreys

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BEAUTY AND MISOGYNY

Should western beauty practices, ranging from lipstick to labiaplasty, be included within the United Nations’ understanding of harmful traditional/cultural practices? By examining the role of common beauty practices in damaging the health of women, creating sexual difference, and enforcing female deference, this book argues that they should.

In the 1970s feminists criticized pervasive beauty regimes such as dieting and depilation, but in the last two decades the brutality of western beauty practices has become much more severe. Today’s practices can require the breaking of skin, spilling of blood and rearrangement or amputation of body parts. Some “new” feminists argue that beauty practices are no longer oppressive now that women can “choose” them. This book seeks to make sense of why beauty practices are not only just as persistent 30 years after the feminist critique developed, but in many ways more extreme. By examining the pervasive use of makeup, the misogyny of fashion and high-heeled shoes, and by looking at the role of pornography in the creation of increasingly popular beauty practices such as breast implants, genital waxing and surgical alteration of the labia, Beauty and Misogyny seeks to explain why harmful beauty practices persist in the west and have become so extreme. It looks at the cosmetic surgery and body piercing/cutting industries as being forms of self-mutilation by proxy, in which the surgeons and piercers serve as proxies to harm women’s bodies. It concludes by considering how a culture of resistance to these practices can be created.

This essential work will appeal to students and teachers of feminist psychology, gender studies, cultural studies, and feminist sociology at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and to anyone with an interest in feminism, women and beauty, and women’s health.

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BEAUTY AND MISOGYNY

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THE “GRIP OF CULTURE ON THE BODY”*

Beauty practices as women’s agency or women’s subordination

In the 1990s a fundamental disagreement emerged between feminist scholars regarding the extent to which western beauty practices represent women’s subordinate status or can be seen as the expression of women’s choice or agency. Ideas emerge in particular time periods because of a concatenation of social forces that make them possible. In the 1960s and 1970s the new social movements of feminism, black power, animal liberation, lesbian and gay politics came into being in response to a mood of hopefulness about the possibility of social change. These social movements were fuelled by a belief in social constructionism and the idea that radical social transformation was possible in the pursuit of social equality. These ideas underpinned the thoroughgoing radical feminist critiques of beauty that emerged from that period.

In the 1980s, however, the ideas of radical feminism, like those of other socially transformative ideologies, were treated to the contempt of right-wing ideologues who called them “political correctness”. A new ideology of market fundamentalism was developed to provide the ideological support for the expansion of a newly deregulated rogue capitalism. This stated that the free market, controlled only by the choices of empowered citizens, would create an ideal social and economic structure without interference from the state. Citizenship, in this new worldview, was not about rights but about responsibilities, and the citizen was empowered by consumer choice (Evans, 1993).

By the 1990s these ideas about the power of choice influenced the thinking of many feminists too. The idea that women were coerced into beauty practices by the fashion/beauty complex (Bartky, 1990), for instance, was challenged by a new breed of liberal feminists who talked about women being empowered by the feminist movement to choose beauty practices that could no longer be seen as oppressive. The new language that penetrated feminist thinking from the pervasive rightwing rhetoric was that of “agency”, “choice” and “empowerment”. Women

became transformed into knowledgeable consumers who could exercise their power of choice in the market. They could pick and choose from practices and products. Feminists who continued to argue that women’s choices were severely constrained and made within a context of women’s relative powerlessness and male dominance were criticized with some acerbity as “victim feminists”; that is, making women into victims by denying their agency (Wolf, 1993).

In this chapter I examine the ideas of the radical feminist critique of beauty and show how these came to be challenged both by the new liberal feminism and by its counterpart in the academy, a variety of postmodern feminism that emphasizes choice and agency in a similar way. I consider the tensions that have developed between the advocates of “choice” and those who emphasize the role of culture and force in exacting women’s conformity to the beauty practices of femininity. I conclude with the ideas of some of those feminist theorists and researchers who have provided persuasive explanations of the constraints that restrict the possibilities of women’s agency around beauty practices in male dominant cultures founded on sexual difference/deference.

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF BEAUTY

Feminist critics of beauty have pointed out that beauty is a cultural practice and one that is damaging to women. For writers such as Andrea Dworkin the most important question was not the extent to which women could express agency and “choose” to wear makeup but what harm beauty practices did to women. Her book Woman Hating is a good example of the powerful critique that radical feminists were making of the notion of beauty in the 1970s (Dworkin, 1974). She analyses the idea of “beauty” as one aspect of the way women are hated in male supremacist culture. Dworkin indicts woman-hating culture for, “the deaths, violations, and violence” done to women and says that feminists, “look for alternatives, ways of destroying culture as we know it, rebuilding it as we can imagine it” (1974, p. 26).

Dworkin sees beauty practices as having extensive harmful effects on women’s bodies and lives. Beauty practices are not only timewasting, expensive and painful to self-esteem, but rather:

Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.

(Dworkin, 1974, p. 112, emphasis in the original)
And, she continues, beauty standards have psychological effects on women too because “the relationship between physical freedom and psychological development, intellectual possibility, and creative potential is an umbilical one”. Dworkin, like other radical feminist critics of beauty, describes the broad range of practices that women must engage in to meet the dictates of beauty:

In our culture, not one part of a woman’s body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement. Hair is dyed, lacquered, straightened, permanented; eyebrows are plucked, penciled, dyed; eyes are lined, mascaraed, shadowed; lashes are curled, or false – from head to toe, every feature of a woman’s face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration.

(Dworkin, 1974, p. 112)

Interestingly this list omits cosmetic surgery, and that would not make sense today. This shows the progress there has been in making cosmetic surgery simply another form of makeup in the 30 years since Dworkin embarked on her analysis (Haiken, 1997). The other oppressive elements of beauty that Dworkin remarks on are that it is “vital to the economy” and “the major substance of male–female role differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman” (Dworkin, 1974, p. 112). Beauty practices are necessary so that the sexes can be told apart, so that the dominant sex class can be differentiated from the subordinate one. Beauty practices create, as well as represent, the “difference” between the sexes.

Sandra Bartky, who also developed her ideas in those heady days of the 1970s when profound critiques of the condition of women included an analysis of beauty, addressed the issue of why women could appear to “choose”. She explains why no exercise of obvious force was required to make women engage in beauty practices. “It is possible”, she says, “to be oppressed in ways that need involve neither physical deprivation, legal inequality, nor economic exploitation; one can be oppressed psychologically” (Bartky, in a collection of previously published pieces, 1990, p. 23). In support of this she utilizes the work of the anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon who wrote of the “psychic alienation” of the colonized. The psychological oppression of women, Bartky says, consists of women being “stereotyped, culturally dominated, and sexually objectified” (1990, p. 23). She explains this cultural domination as a situation in which, “all the items in the general life of our people – our language, our institutions, our art and literature, our popular culture – are sexist; that all, to a greater or lesser degree, manifest male supremacy” (1990, p. 25). The absence of any alternative culture within which women can identify a different way to be
a woman enforces oppressive practices, “The subordination of women, then, because it is so pervasive a feature of my culture, will (if uncontested) appear to be natural – and because it is natural, unalterable” (1990, p. 25).

The bedrock of this cultural domination is the treatment of women as sex objects and the identification of women themselves with this cultural condition. Bartky (1990) defines the practice of sexual objectification thus: “a person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (p. 26). Women incorporate the values of the male sexual objectifiers within themselves. Catharine MacKinnon calls this being “thingified” in the head (MacKinnon, 1989). They learn to treat their own bodies as objects separate from themselves. Bartky explains how this works: the wolf whistle sexually objectifies a woman from without with the result that, “The body which only a moment before I inhabited with such ease now floods my consciousness. I have been made into an object” (Bartky, 1990, p. 27). She explains that it is not sufficient for a man simply to look at the woman secretly, he must make her aware of his looking with the whistle. She must, “be made to know that I am a ‘nice piece of ass’: I must be made to see myself as they see me” (p. 27). The effect of such male policing behaviour is that, “Subject to the evaluating eye of the male connoisseur, women learn to evaluate themselves first and best” (Bartky, 1990, p. 28). Women thus become alienated from their own bodies.

The “fashion–beauty complex”, representing the corporate interests involved in the fashion and beauty industries, has, Bartky argues, taken over from the family and church as “central producers and regulators of ‘femininity’” (1990, p. 39). The fashion–beauty complex promotes itself to women as seeking to, “glorify the female body and to provide opportunities for narcissistic indulgence” but in fact its aim is to “deprecate woman’s body and deal a blow to her narcissism” so that she will buy more products. The result is that a woman feels constantly deficient and that her body requires “either alteration or else heroic measures merely to conserve it” (p. 39).

Dworkin and Bartky produced their critiques of beauty in the 1970s and early 1980s. The most powerful feminist work on beauty to be published since then, Naomi Wolf’s The Beauty Myth (1990) provides an interesting example of how the times had changed. Despite, or perhaps because of, the power of her critique, Wolf felt it necessary to publish within 3 years another book, Fire with Fire (1993), which substantially removed the sting from her analysis and set out to distinguish her from the ranks of radical feminists. Wolf argues that women are required to engage in beauty practices and that this requirement was tightened in the 1980s as a backlash against the threat of the women’s liberation movement and the greater opportunities, particularly in the workforce, that women were now
accessing. As she explains, “The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us” (1990, p. 10). Wolf’s analysis suggests that women are coerced into beauty practices by expectations of women in the workplace. Women might have entered workplaces in great numbers in the 1970s but in order not to threaten men, and in order to meet the requirement that they should be objects for the sexual delight of their male colleagues, they were required to engage in painful, expensive and time-consuming procedures that were not expected of their male counterparts if they wanted to get jobs and keep them. There was a “professional beauty qualification” which accompanied women into the workplace. Interestingly, despite the strength of Wolf’s critique of beauty practices she does not consider them to be harmful in their own right, but only if they are forced on women rather than freely “chosen”. In her last chapter “Beyond the Beauty Myth” she asks “Does all this mean we can’t wear lipstick without feeling guilty?” (1990, p. 270); then answers, “On the contrary”. She explains:

In a world in which women have real choices, the choices we make about our appearance will be taken at last for what they really are: no big deal.

Women will be able thoughtlessly to adorn ourselves with pretty objects when there is no question that we are not objects. Women will be free of the beauty myth when we can choose to use our faces and clothes and bodies as simply one form of expression out of a full range of others.

(Wolf, 1990, p. 274)

Wolf’s analysis does not suggest that there is a problem with the fact that women, and not men, have to do beauty practices at all, only that they are not free to choose to do so. It is this failure to ask the fundamental questions of why beauty practices are connected with women and why any women would want to continue with them after the revolution, that makes The Beauty Myth a liberal feminist book rather than a radical feminist one. Fire with Fire made her liberal feminist credentials clear (Wolf, 1993). In this book she asserts that women can not only choose to wear makeup, but also choose to be powerful. The material forces involved in structuring women’s subordination have fallen away to leave liberation a project of individual willpower, “If we do not manage to . . . reach parity in the twenty-first century, it will be because women on some level have chosen [her italics] not to exert the power that is our birthright” (1993, p. 51).

Wolf’s description of her clear distress at the negative reactions from audiences to the radicalism of her book on beauty may offer a clue as to why she evolved so swiftly into a fully fledged liberal feminist. After
publication she said, “My job involved engaging, on TV and radio programs, with people who represented the industries I was criticizing. Many were, understandably, angry and defensive. Hosts were sometimes confrontational . . . I was acutely uncomfortable” (1993, p. 238). Her experience was a shock because, “I had always thought of myself as warm, friendly, and feminine”, and, “after a vigorous debate, I would come home and cry in my partner’s arms”. Wolf’s experience shows how difficult it is to criticize something so fundamental to male dominant western culture as beauty practices. Her reaction to it helps to explain why she chose to write Fire with Fire so soon thereafter, a book which appears to contradict the strong message of The Beauty Myth. She set out to create an unthreatening form of feminism and castigate radical feminists. Radical feminists who campaign against male violence become “victim feminists” who “identify with powerlessness”, are “judgmental” particularly of “other women’s sexuality and appearance” and “antisexual” (1993, p. 137). She seeks to soothe the masculine breasts that might have been ruffled by The Beauty Myth by proclaiming, “Male sexual attention is the sun in which I bloom. The male body is ground and shelter to me, my lifelong destination” (p. 186). Wolf overcompensated for what she may have seen as the youthful folly of writing a book on beauty which threatened the interests of male dominance. She retreated into a firm public/private distinction which exempts the area of “private” life from political scrutiny and turns it into an arena for the exercise of women’s choices.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

The feminist critique of beauty starts from the understanding that the personal is political. While liberal feminists tend to view the realm of “private” life as an area in which women can exercise the power of choice untrammelled by politics, radical feminists such as Dworkin and MacKinnon seek to break down the public/private distinction which, they argue, is fundamental to male supremacy. This distinction provides men with a private world of male dominance in which they can garner women’s emotional, housework, sexual, reproductive energies while hiding the feudal power relations of this realm behind the shield of the protection of “privacy”. The private world is defended from the point of view of male dominance as one of “love” and individual fulfilment that should not be muddied by political analysis. It is a world in which women simply “choose” to lay out their energies and bodies at men’s disposal, where they remain, despite whatever violence or abuse is handed out to them. The “private” nature of this world has long protected men from punishment because it has been seen as being outside the law that only applies in the
public world. Thus marital rape was not a crime in this worldview, and domestic violence was a personal dispute.

Radical feminist critics argued that, on the contrary, the “personal”; that is, the behaviours of this “private” world, were indeed “political”. Recognizing the “personal as political” allowed women to identify, through consciousness raising groups and the exchange of experiences, that what they took to be their own personal failings, such as hating their plump stomachs or feigning a headache when they wanted to avoid sexual intercourse without their male partner getting angry, were not just individual experiences. They were the common experiences of women, constructed out of the unequal power relations of the so-called “private” world, and very political indeed. The “private” world was recognized as the basis of the power men wielded in the “public” world of work and government. Men’s public power and achievement, their citizenship status (Lister, 1997), depended on the servicing they received from women in the home. Not only did women provide this vital backdrop to men’s dominance but they lacked a class of persons who would do the same for them, thus they were doubly disadvantaged in the public world in comparison with men. The concept that the personal is political enabled feminists to understand the ways in which the workings of male dominance penetrated into their relationships with men. They could recognize how the power dynamics of male dominance made heterosexuality into a political institution (Rich, 1993), constructed male and female sexuality (Jeffreys, 1990; Holland et al., 1998), and the ways in which women felt about their bodies and themselves (Bordo, 1993).

“NEW” FEMINISM

Radical feminism, which identified the workings of male dominance throughout women’s lives, was always opposed by varieties of feminism that sought to privatize and depoliticize sexuality and beauty practices. In the 1980s, for instance, there was a move to insulate sexuality from the radical feminist critique by both “liberal” and socialist feminists (Vance, 1984). In the 1990s there was a surge in publication by mainstream publishers, who had not been so keen to publish radical feminist work, of books that were said to embody a “new”, “power” or “sexy” feminism (Wolf, 1993; Roiphe, 1993). These books had in common the furious repudiation of radical feminism and of the notion that the personal was political. They sought the radical depoliticization of sex and “personal” life. “New” feminism argued that women had achieved huge advances by the late twentieth century towards equal opportunities with men in the public world of work. This “new” feminism was influenced by radical American liberal individualism such as that expressed by a 1986 book
which argued that “gender justice” could be achieved entirely through the facilitation of women’s choices by the removal of barriers so that “individuals have the opportunity to choose” (Kirp et al., 1986, p. 133). In the “new” feminism women’s private lives were now simply the result of “choice” and should be off limits for feminist analysis or action.

A British example of these “new” feminists is Natasha Walter. She explains that she was able to learn from “cultural icons” such as Madonna about women’s independence and sexuality. Madonna’s contribution to creating a new sexualized feminism clothed in the costumes and practices of pornography will be discussed later in this volume. Walter’s “new feminism” is based on a firm reinstatement of a line between the personal and the political. The personal, which should be exempt from political critique, covered “dress and pornography”. The problem with feminism, she says, is that it “has sought to direct our personal lives on every level” (Walter, 1999, p. 4) and this “new feminism must unpick the tight link that feminism in the seventies made between our personal and political lives” (p. 4). Women were now free in their personal lives because, “Most women feel free, freer than their mothers did. Most women can choose what to wear, whom they will spend their lives with, where to work, what to read, when to have children” (1999, p. 10). She agrees with Naomi Wolf (1993) that what women really need is the “power” that will come when they are earning more. When they have “power” then they will apparently still have the desire to, “spend time waxing their legs or painting their nails” (Walter, 1999, p. 86) but feminists will feel “easier” about it. Women will be able to indulge the, “real, often wickedly enjoyable relationship they have with their clothes and their bodies” without being made to feel guilty by puritanical feminism (p. 86). In relation to beauty, Walter takes a similar view to that of the American libertarians above, “Respect for individual choice, however mysterious its origins, is a necessary condition of social justice” (Kirp et al., 1986, p. 15). In other words the context in which “choices” are made is less important than the opportunity to explore them. This eschewing of rational interrogation of the mystery of such “choices” and pleasures to which most men seem immune, and what they might mean for women’s lives, renders beauty practices into an aspect of the natural world beyond political concern.

The American equivalent of this brand of liberal feminism is Karen Lehrman’s The Lipstick Proviso (1997), which argues that makeup is entirely compatible with feminism. Lehrman considers that there has been a return to femininity in the USA so that, “In recent years many women have also returned to practices that were once thought to subsidize male oppression. They’re wearing provocative clothes and heels again, painting their faces and nails, treating their skin and hair to the latest styles and fads” (1997, p. 8). Feminists, she says, need to, “learn to respect women’s
choices – from wearing sensuous Galliano gowns to staying at home to raise their children” (1997, p. 13). She blames women’s oppression on their failure to exercise their personal power. Women must just stop being self-destructive and give up “acting helpless” (p. 41). Beauty, she says, is “a reality, a gift of God, nature, or genius that, to some extent, transcends culture and history” (p. 68). In line with traditional male sexologists and sociobiologists she argues that women and men desire beauty because it is necessary to reproduction. Women want to be chosen, and men are programmed to choose “beautiful” women. Lehrman argues that “beauty”, in the form of sexiness, gives women power they can use to advance themselves. The power derives from “wearing sexual clothing”. Women “ strut” she says, “because sexuality is a form of power, a strength, an asset . . . The difference now is that it’s not women’s only power” (1997, p. 94). Women are not, she says, “victimized by diets, exercise, beautiful models, fashion designers, high heels, makeup, compliments” (p. 23). Rather, they have, “a great deal of control over their lives” (p. 23). The problem for women, it turns out, is that there is intrusion into the sanctity of their personal lives, not just by the government but by something called “society” which “includes feminist theorists” (p. 23).

Nancy Etcoff’s book The Survival of the Prettiest (2000) expresses almost identical sentiments. Beauty is inevitable and universal, a “basic instinct” (Etcoff, 2000, p. 7). Etcoff has a harsh diagnosis for those, like feminist critics of beauty, who fail to respond to “physical beauty”. This lack of response is “one sign of profound depression” (2000, p. 8). Men inevitably respond to “young, nubile girls” because of a “reproductive imperative”. She agrees with Lehrman that women can achieve “power” through beauty practices because “isn’t it possible that women cultivate beauty and use the beauty industry to optimize the power beauty brings?” (Etcoff, p. 4). These liberal feminists do not acknowledge the forces that restrict and can even eliminate women’s ability to choose. They do not consider the limitations of the “pleasure” and “power” that beauty practices offer, or the ways in which they contribute to women’s condition of subordination. Thus they can be seen to protect the status quo of the cultural sexual objectification of women.

THE CULTURAL TURN

The invigoration of liberal feminism is but one aspect of an upheaval in the way oppression could be spoken about that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. A change took place in the academy too. The move towards putting emphasis on women’s capacity to choose and express agency than on the forms of coercion that caused women to engage in beauty practices is an aspect of that postmodern takeover of leftwing thinking that Fredric
Jameson has called “the cultural turn” (Jameson, 1998). Postmodern thinking rejects the notion that there is such a thing as a ruling class which can create dominant ideas. Marxist cultural theorists who reject postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton, explain that this set of ideas emerged to serve a particular stage of the history of capitalism. Eagleton, for instance, argues that postmodernism took root in response to the perceived failure of the left, and the death, among so many of its members, of any idea of revolution or serious social change (Eagleton, 1996). Eagleton invites his readers to imagine that a political movement has suffered a historic defeat:

The governing assumption of such an epoch, one imagines, would be that the system itself was unbreachable . . . there would be an upsurge of interest in the margins and crevices of the system . . . The system could not be breached; but it could at least be momentarily transgressed . . . Fascinated by fault-lines, one might even come to imagine that there is no centre to society after all.  
(Eagleton, 1996, p. 2)

In particular the overtaking of critical thought by postmodernism meant a discarding of the notion of ideology because this notion implies that there are such things as agents or interests responsible for oppression. Australian radical feminist theorist Denise Thompson has argued powerfully the case for retaining the concept of ideology for feminist theory. She answers what she considers to be postmodern mystification thus: “to abandon the concepts of ‘agents and interests’ is to abandon politics. If there are no ‘agents’, there are no perpetrators and beneficiaries of relations of domination, and no one whose human agency is blocked by powerful vested interests” (Thompson, 2001, p. 23). Thompson criticizes the effect this abandonment of the concept of ideology has on feminist theorizing of popular culture. One important understanding of postmodern cultural theorists is that there is little to choose between low and high culture, so that soap operas and sometimes porn movies come to be seen as equal in value to other cultural products. This belief is bound up with the notion that the consumers of this popular culture are knowledgeable and discriminating, imbued with agency and choice, able to select and reject from the smorgasbord of offerings in their own interests. Thompson shows the problem of this tendency in the work of Michele Barrett, a British socialist feminist theorist in whom the socialism has been overtaken by postmodernism. Barrett criticizes feminist theorists for regarding “cultural phenomena such as soap opera, royalty or romantic fiction” as representing a subordinating ideology for women because, as Barrett says, this ignores the “passionate enthusiasm of many women for the products of which they are alleged to be victims” (quoted in Thompson, 2001, p. 24).
Beauty and Misogyny could well fit into precisely those feminist writings which are being criticized because I am arguing here that ideologies of beauty and fashion such as those circulated through popular culture do subordinate women, however passionately those women may adhere to them and cut up their bodies in response. Indeed, as Thompson says, “passionate enthusiasm is the way ideology must operate if it is to operate at all” (2001, p. 24). Thompson suggests that the “only criterion for judging whether something is ideological is whether or not it reinforces relations of ruling” (p. 25). This test of whether or not they reinforce relations of ruling is a useful one to apply to the beauty practices such as makeup, fashion and labiaplasty that are examined in this book.

The “cultural turn” entered the discipline of women’s studies too. Postmodern ideas became dominant over the way in which women’s oppression and sexuality could be thought of and written about in the academy. The takeover of postmodern understandings, in combination with a decline in the strength of feminism and other social movements for radical change, undermined the feminist critique of beauty. The emphasis in the work of some feminist research changed from examining how beauty practices work to oppress and harm women to the question of how women could enjoy these practices and be empowered by them (Davis, 1995; Frost, 1999).

Some feminist researchers have found the ideas of one “postmodern” theorist, Foucault, helpful in addressing the complexities of the construction of women’s “subjectivities” or understandings of themselves. Both Susan Bordo (1993) and Sandra Bartky (1990) use Foucauldian approaches to explain the way in which women are subjected to the regime of beauty to the extent that they engage in self-policing. However, as Bordo herself notes, the problem with the adoption of postmodern ideas in general is that they have led some writers to disregard the materiality of power relations. Bordo identifies the extrapolations and adaptations of Foucault that she considers unhelpful “misrepresentation”, because they make it hard for many feminist thinkers to place women’s actions in a context of power relations. She says of “liberated postmodern subjectivity” that, “This abstract, unsituated, disembodied freedom . . . celebrates itself only through the effacement of the material praxis of people’s lives, the normalizing power of cultural images, and the sadly continuing social realities of dominance and subordination” (Bordo, 1993, p. 129). She suggests that postmodern cultural studies theorists may have been captured by the Zeitgeist of the very television chat shows that can be the object of their analysis. The triviality and superficiality of such cultural forms have been absorbed by the cultural critics and have substantially deradicalized their analysis:

All the elements of what I have here called “postmodern conversation” intoxication with individual choice and creative
jouissance, delight with the piquancy of particularity and mistrust of pattern and seeming coherence, celebration of “difference” along with an absence of critical perspective differentiating and weighting “differences.” . . . All have become recognizable and familiar elements of much of contemporary intellectual discourse. (Bordo, 1993, p. 117)

She criticizes a “celebratory, academic postmodernism” which has made it “highly unfashionable – and ‘totalising’ – to talk about the grip of culture on the body” (Bordo, 1993, p. 117). The “totalisers” are seen as representing “active and creative subjects as ‘cultural dopes,’ ‘passive dupes’ of ideology” and seeing dominant ideology as “seamless and univocal, overlooking both the gaps which are continually allowing for the eruption of ‘difference’ and the polysemous, unstable, open nature of all cultural texts” (Bordo, 1993, p. 117).

The effect of the cultural turn on feminist ideas about beauty is threefold. Women are seen as having choice and agency in relation to beauty practices, or even being empowered by them. Women are represented as having the power to “play” with beauty practices because instead of being oppressive they can now be reinterpreted as fun. Fashion magazines and popular culture are reinterpreted as fascinating resources from which girls and women can be inspired and creative rather than playing a role in the enforcement of dominant ideology.

The work of Kathy Davis is a good example of how a feminist theorist influenced by the cultural turn applies the concern with demonstrating women’s agency to beauty practices (Davis, 1995). She researched women’s reasons for having breast augmentation surgery in the Netherlands, and explains that she is determined not to represent her interviewees as “cultural dopes” who have simply imbibed the negative messages of the beauty culture about the inferiority of women’s bodies. She says that the surgery is “an intervention in identity” which can allow a woman to “open up the possibility to renegotiate her relation to her body and construct a different sense of self” (Davis, 1995, p. 27). Davis says that cosmetic breast surgery “disempowers” the “entrapment of objectification”. It can “provide an avenue toward becoming an embodied subject rather than an objectified body” (1995, p. 113). By the end of her book Davis takes the notion of respecting women’s agency to new extremes by arguing that cosmetic surgery is a means of achieving moral and just outcomes for women, “Cosmetic surgery is about morality. For a woman whose suffering has gone beyond a certain point, cosmetic surgery can become a matter of justice – the only fair thing to do” (1995, p. 163).

Liz Frost is an exponent of this approach in relation to makeup. She describes the activity of “doing looks” as something “which cannot be avoided” (Frost, 1999, p. 134); that is, natural and inevitable. She does not
see the requirement to “do looks” as ideological or in the service of male dominance. She derides feminist theorists for being critical of the practice and thus making women feel guilty and ambivalent. Such negativity, she argues, is in league with patriarchal religion which says that women should not be vain. She sees “doing looks” as a source of pleasure for women as well as empowerment. She uses postmodern concepts to argue that “doing looks” is vitally necessary for women:

For women to feel powerful and in control, to feel a sense of agency and competence (all, I would argue, essential for mental health), doing looks can no longer be viewed as an optional extra but rather as a central identificatory process which can offer meanings such as pleasure, creative expression and satisfaction provided that women can appropriate a discursive space in which to contradict the silencing discourses of vanity, abnormality, superficiality and unsisterliness.

(Frost, 1999, p. 134)

For Frost the feminist critique of beauty practices stands in the way of women’s pleasurable agency in lipstick wearing.

The idea that feminine beauty and fashion practices can be seen as playful fun rather than oppressive owes something to the ideas of Judith Butler on “performativity”. Butler argues in Gender Trouble (1990) that gender is socially constructed through the everyday doing of the rituals that constitute it, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990, p. 33). The idea that gender is socially constructed is not a new one for feminism, indeed it is fundamental to feminist understanding. Much of the excitement associated with her work stems from the way that it has been interpreted by queer theorists and activists as saying that the performance of gender by other than the usual actors, as in drag for instance, is a revolutionary tactic because it demonstrates the fact that gender is socially constructed. Her work has been the inspiration of a whole queer cultural project of playing with and swapping gender by actors who see themselves as doing political work when they wear the appurtenances of one gender on a body usually associated with its opposite. Butler has argued that this interpretation of her work – that gender can be subject to individual choice – is incorrect. In response she wrote Bodies that Matter (1993), arguing that gender performance is in fact the result of constraint and is not open to easy manipulation,

If gender is not an artifice to be taken on or taken off at will and, hence, not an effect of choice, how are we to understand the
constitutive and compelling status of gender norms without falling into the trap of cultural determinism?

(Butler, 1993, p. x)

Though Butler argues that she has been misinterpreted, it is precisely that apparent misinterpretation that has been taken up by queer theorists to argue that drag, gender swapping, transgenderism and even sadomasochism, can be revolutionary ways of playing with gender and thus has made it harder for feminists to theorize beauty practices in a serious way. Ruth Holliday’s work on fashion is an example of this lighthearted queer theory approach. In a piece entitled “Fashioning the Queer Self” she argues that:

postmodern fashion puts quotation marks around the garments it revitalizes, allowing them to be re-read in a space of ironic distance between the wearer and the garment. This opens up a space for “playing” with fashion which is the antithesis of being its victim, and thus the feminist arguments about the regulation of women’s bodies through fashion decline in importance.

(Holliday, 2001, p. 218)

Not everyone might notice the quotation marks, however, when they see the same old gender differences in clothing despite the fact that the players have “revitalized” them through postmodern inspiration.

Angela McRobbie’s work (1997) is an example of another product of the “cultural turn”, the idea that popular culture should not be seen as ideological but as presenting useful resources for women’s creativity and agency. McRobbie is of the postmodern cultural studies school which tries to be relentlessly positive about women’s and girls’ relationships with culture and argues that women are not “cultural dopes” but negotiate the content of fashion and beauty magazines, interpreting what could be seen as patriarchal cultural messages in empowering, creative and diverse ways. Moreover, she argues, young women’s magazines are actually involved in such postmodern practices as “parody” and “pastiche” and “irony” and “the readers get the joke” (McRobbie, 1997). Young girls reading More and 19 are not just internalizing the patriarchal scripts in the magazines but using them creatively.

These young women’s magazines contain ever burgeoning amounts of sexual content, instructions for young women on what to do sexually and how to deal with sexual problems. This sexual content distinguishes these contemporary magazines from those of previous decades. McRobbie calls this “new sexualities in girls’ and women’s magazines” (1997). She writes about how the girls enjoy this sexual content because they have “pleasure-
seeking sexual identities” (1997, p. 200). She advises that feminists are wrong to dismiss these magazines because so many hundreds of thousands of young girls enjoy them, and argues that the magazines themselves have “taken feminism on board” (1997, p. 207) and therefore feminists cannot straightforwardly condemn them. She concludes an article on these “new sexualities” by taking the postmodern line that there is no such thing as truth, and feminists need to accept that “Perhaps it is only by being willing to let go, and relinquish its grasp over the truth, that feminism earns an important place for itself in the magazines” (McRobbie, 1997, p. 208). Feminism, it transpires, can mean anything, as long as we manage to read irony, parody and pastiche into what might otherwise look like ordinary patriarchal ideology.

Unfortunately research by feminist social scientists into what is really happening to young women and girls in heterosexual relations does not support the gung-ho enthusiasm of relentlessly positive, postmodern, cultural studies buffs. The fashionable, post-Marxist, cultural studies of the present may be uninfluenced by the attention to material reality that concerns social scientists, but research on the experience of girls suggests that they are far from “pleasure-seeking” and certainly are not empowered. They are controlled in their relations with boys by the “male in the head” (Holland et al., 1998). Lynn Phillips’ research on young women and heterosex found that they were having to learn to split mind and body to stay in control of their sexual encounters and doing sex as a performance for men’s sexual pleasure rather than meeting any desires of their own (Phillips, 2000).

Phillips found that sexually violent experiences were common among the college age women she interviewed in the late 1990s. Indeed, 27 of the 30 women “described at least one encounter that fit legal definitions of rape, battering, or harassment” (2000, p. 7). But, despite the fact that many were taking women’s studies courses and despite the work of feminists for 20 years challenging rape and trying to make it more possible for women to recognize and challenge violence against them, “only two women ever used such terms to describe a personal experience” (Phillips, 2000, p. 7). One reason, she suggests, is that young women today have been raised to believe in their own power and agency, precisely that which dominant cultural studies theory attributes to them, and this makes recognition of rape difficult:

Whereas feminist scholars may speak of male domination and women’s victimization as rather obvious phenomena, younger women, raised to believe in their own independence, invulnerability, and sexual entitlement, may not so readily embrace such concepts, even as they are raped, harassed, and battered by men. (Phillips, 2000, pp. 10–11)
Liz Frost, the writer we saw earlier declaring that “doing looks” was a positive “central identificatory process” for women, has, in other work, provided good evidence for why women “do looks” that relates clearly to oppression. In a book on the relationship of young girls to their bodies, she argues that young women in the west might be said to be suffering from “body hatred” (Frost, 2001, p. 2). She points out that though it might be expected that women who were losing their ability to represent the ideal of feminine beauty through age would be most vulnerable to body hatred, it is in fact the young who suffer most. She says that women’s bodies are “inferiorised – stigmatized . . . within an overarching patriarchal ideology. For example, biologically and physiologically, women’s bodies are seen as both disgusting in their natural state and inferior to men’s” (2001, p. 141). Body hatred is manifested in self-harm and that harm is becoming more and more serious both in young women and in young lesbians and gay men. One of Frost’s interviewees, when asked “Are there any young women who are happy with their looks?” responded, “Well if there is I don’t know them!” (2001, p. 154). Bullying, in the young women’s accounts, played a large part in creating the agonized relationships they had with their bodies. The constant humiliation of girls about their appearance from their school peers seems to be one element in the creation of body hatred. One interviewee explains that this leads to girls scrupulously trying to improve their appearance with beauty practices such as makeup. The “doing looks” that Frost celebrates can be seen, though she does not make this connection, as a way to ameliorate the shame and despair that a male dominant culture creates in women. The culture that young women in the west grow up in is not as diverse and open to playfulness as some cultural studies and queer theorists suggest.

**SEXUAL DIFFERENCE/DEFERENCE**

Western culture is founded on the notion of sexual difference: the idea that there is an essential difference between men and women, expressed in the behaviours of masculinity and femininity and their attendant practices. It is so dominant and all pervasive, allowing little place for alternatives, that the idea that women can positively “choose” the practices which express this difference makes little sense. Western culture, like all other male dominant cultures, requires that the “difference” be publicly demonstrated. For this reason the difference is regarded as truth. This is a most tenaciously enduring myth and difficult to challenge. The practice of different, masculine and feminine behaviours by men and women is based on the idea that there is such a thing as “sexual difference”. French feminist theorists such as Monique Wittig (1996) and Colette Guillaumin (1996) argue forcefully that this difference is political and the very basis of
male domination. Sexual difference is generally explained by biology as if there were two clear biologically distinct sexes that display biologically created differences of behaviour and appearance. Feminist theorists from various disciplines have pointed out with overwhelming force over the last 30 years that “sex roles”, now more usually called “gender”, are culturally constructed and this social constructionist analysis has more recently been extended to the idea of biological sex itself (Delphy, 1993). The phenomenon of intersexuality, where secondary sexual characteristics, hormones and/or genetic structure can incorporate elements of both supposedly distinct biological sexes, has lent force to the idea that the notion of two sexes is a political one. The idea of two sexes results from the need of a male dominant culture to be able to identify members of the ruling class of men and the subordinate class of women by slotting babies into one of these two status categories at birth. The genders of male dominance and female subordination are then foisted upon those occupying the appropriate status category.

The “difference” between men and women is created in and by culture but is regarded as natural and biological. The huge difficulty that so many women and men have in seeing femininity and masculinity as socially constructed rather than natural, attests to the strength and force of culture. The French feminist theorist Colette Guillaumin explains the difficulty with this cultural idea that women are “different” (Guillaumin, 1996). If women are “different” then there must be something they are different from. That something turns out to be “men” who are not themselves “different” from anything, they just are. It is only women who are understood to be different, “Men do not differ from anything . . . We are different – it is a fundamental characteristic . . . We succeed in the grammatical and logical feat of being different all by ourselves. Our nature is difference” (Guillaumin, 1996, p. 95). Women are, of course, understood to be “different” from men in many ways, “delicate, pretty, intuitive, unreasonable, maternal, non-muscular, lacking an organizing character”, as Guillaumin puts it (1996, p. 95). But most importantly women are understood to be different from men in being both potentially “beautiful” and in being interested in beauty and enthusiastic to put in huge amounts of time, money, pain and emotional distress to be “beautiful”. This is assumed in western culture to be “natural” to women and a most persuasive sign of women’s difference from men.

The idea of biological sexual difference is the major obstacle to the recognition that men and women actually stand in relation to one another in positions of dominance and subordination. As another French feminist, Monique Wittig, puts it, “The ideology of sexual difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women” (Wittig, 1996, p. 24). The sex difference is created by a system of domination since in any system of
domination, “The masters explain and justify the established divisions as a result of natural differences” (p. 24). Wittig argues that the concepts “man” and “woman” are political categories and would be abolished in a class struggle between women and men if women were successful. But women do not engage in this class struggle. They do not recognize they are dominated because the “oppositions (differences) appear as given, already there, before all thought” (1996, p. 25). Wittig quotes Marx and Engels on the way in which the ruling class of “every epoch” is “at the same time its ruling intellectual force” and the ideas of any time are the ideas of this class’s dominance (1996, p. 26). It is the dominance of the political class of “men”, according to Wittig, that teaches women that “there are before all thinking, all society, ‘sexes’ (two categories of individuals born) with a constitutive difference”, which is both metaphysical and “natural” and adopted into Marxist thought in the form of the division of labour according to sex. This idea “conceals the political fact of the subjugation of one sex by the other” (Wittig, 1996, p. 26).

The category of sex into which humans are placed is the basis of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1993) and it “founds society as heterosexual” (Wittig, 1996, p. 27):

The category of sex is the one that rules as “natural” the relation that is at the base of (heterosexual) society and through which half of the population, women, are “heterosexualised” (the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals) and submitted to a heterosexual economy.

(1996, p. 27)

The purpose of this compulsory heterosexuality is to enable men to “appropriate for themselves the reproduction and production of women, and also their physical persons by means of a contract called the marriage contract” (p. 27).

Wittig’s analysis of the requirements of the “category of sex” for women is helpful for understanding beauty practices. She explains that women are made into sex itself:

The category of sex is the product of heterosexual society that turns half of the population into sexual beings. Wherever they are, whatever they do (including working in the public sector), they are seen (and made) sexually available to men, and they, breasts, buttocks, costume, must be visible. They must wear their yellow star, their constant smile, day and night.

(Wittig, 1996, p. 28)
Wittig suggests that we see this forced availability of all women, married or not, as “a period of forced sexual service, a sexual service that we may compare to the military one, and which can vary between a day, a year, or twenty-five years or more”. It is beauty practices that mark out women as fulfilling the requirements of their sexual “corvée”; that is, the work that the peasants must perform for their feudal landlords without payment. The beauty practices give pleasure to men, enable their sexual excitement, in the office, the street, at the movies, in the bedroom. Men do not inhabit the category of sex as women do. Men are much more than sex, “the category of sex . . . sticks to women, for only they cannot be perceived outside of it. Only they are sex, the sex, and [it is as] sex [that] they [are] made in their minds, bodies, acts, gestures” (Wittig, 1996, p. 28).

This idea that women are sex is well described in the work of the male scientists of sex, the sexologists of the twentieth century who have played such an important part in giving the “category of sex” for women an authoritative base in science and medicine. The important sexologist Iwan Bloch, quotes in his 1909 The Sexual Life of Our Time, an author who, he says, has “well characterized woman’s extended sexual sphere”:

Women are in fact pure sex from knees to neck. We men have concentrated our apparatus in a single place, we have extracted it, separated it from the rest of the body, because pret a partir [ready to go]. They [women] are a sexual surface or target; we have only a sexual arrow.

(quoted in Jeffreys, 1985, p. 138)

The creation of sexual difference through beauty practices is essential to affording to men the sexual satisfaction that they gain as they go about the tasks of their day from recognizing “woman” and feeling their penises engorge. This may sound like an exaggeration of the way men think and behave but some are prepared to express it this clearly. J.C. Flugel in his Psychology of Clothes (1930/1950) puts quite baldly the reason why women are required to dress differently from men:

the great majority of us doubtless will . . . admit frankly that . . . we cannot bear to face the prospect of abolishing the present system of constant titillation – a system which ensures that we shall be warned even from a distance as to the sex of an approaching fellow-being, so that we need lose no opportunity of experiencing at any rate the incipient stages of the sexual response.

There seems to be no escape from the view that the fundamental purpose of adopting a distinctive dress for the two sexes is to stimulate the sexual instinct.

(p. 201)
Emmanuel Reynaud, author of *Holy Virility*, offers an explanation of the difference in dress that supports the idea that it serves men’s sexual satisfaction, “She must show her legs and make her vagina accessible, whereas a man does not have to reveal his calves or offer easy access to his penis” (Reynaud, 1983, p. 402).

Beauty practices show that women are obedient, willing to do their service, and to put effort into that service. They show, I suggest, that women are not simply “different” but, most importantly, “deferential”. The difference that women must embody is deference. The way in which the sexual difference/deference is required to be expressed can vary considerably between male dominant societies, but there is no evidence that any societies exist in which the sexual difference/deference is irrelevant or in which the social order of male dominance is founded in anything but this difference. Indeed how could male dominance have any existence without a clear difference marking who is in the dominant class and who is not? In western societies it is expressed in the requirement that women create “beauty” through clothing which should show large areas of their bodies for male excitement, through skirts (although this is not such a pervasive rule as it was 20 years ago), through figure-hugging clothing, through makeup, hairstyles, depilation, prominent display of secondary sexual characteristics or creation of them by surgery and through “feminine” body language. Women are required to practise femininity in order to create sexual difference/deference. But the difference is one of power, and femininity is the behaviour required of the subordinate class of women in order to show their deference to the ruling class of men.

**FEMININITY AS THE BEHAVIOUR OF SUBORDINATION**

The beauty practices that women engage in, and which men find so exciting, are those of political subordinates. The sadomasochistic romance of male dominance, where sex is constructed from male dominance and female subordination (Jeffreys, 1990), requires that someone should play the girl. The feminist theorist of sexuality and sexual violence, Catharine MacKinnon, argues that the “genders” of male dominance, masculinity and femininity need to be constantly recreated to service the sexuality of male dominance; that is, eroticized power difference (MacKinnon, 1989). This understanding is helpful in explaining the existence and persistence of femininity. The sexuality of male dominance requires “fems” and women are trained and pressured into femininity to facilitate men’s sexual excitement.

Feminist theorists have shown that what is understood as “feminine” behaviour is not simply socially constructed, but *politically* constructed, as
the behaviour of a subordinate social group. Nancy Henley’s work on body politics is a classic example of this approach (Henley, 1977). She shows clearly that the ways in which human beings are trained and expected to use their bodies derive from their place in a power hierarchy. The powerful express their privilege in certain ways that are forbidden to subordinates. Henley shows that it is not only men who act out the behaviours of power but human beings involved in other forms of hierarchy besides gender, such as employers and employees. The powerful take up more space. Not only do employers have larger offices but men will have more space in their homes and the world which is theirs alone. They take up more space with their bodies. Thus men may stretch out on a bus seat or on the sofa. Women are expected to keep their legs and arms tucked into their bodies and fit into the space that is left over. Similarly interviewees may not sprawl when in the subordinate position of applying for a job, but the interviewers may do so. Men, Henley shows, approach women more closely than they would approach other men because women are permitted less personal space around their bodies.

Touch is another area in which the powerful are privileged. The powerful may make physical contact while the subordinates may not. Thus employers may touch office juniors but the reverse behaviour would be presumptuous. Men may, and do, touch women but if women touch men it can be interpreted as a sexual comeon and is a dangerous behaviour. Eye contact is also a way of expressing power. Men may stare at women and women are not supposed to stare in return but to decorously cast down their eyes. But men may not stare at other men without inviting an aggressive, “who are you staring at” response. These behaviours are learnt both through direct instruction, such as mothers telling their daughters to keep their knees together, and through social interaction. But it is likely that by adulthood they are seen by those who practise them as “natural”. The learning process is forgotten. The behaviours of space, touch and eye contact that are required of subordinates are then understood as the “natural” behaviours of femininity. It is on the base formed by these behaviours that beauty practices are grafted, and that high heels can seem natural on women but ridiculous on men.

The feminist psychologist Dee Graham has contributed significantly to our understanding of femininity as the behaviour of subordinates with her concept of “societal Stockholm syndrome” (Graham, 1994). In Loving to Survive she makes an analogy between femininity and the behaviour of hostages in situations of captivity and threat that has been named Stockholm syndrome. She explains that the idea of Stockholm syndrome comes from a hostage situation in Stockholm in which it became clear that hostages, instead of reacting with rebellion to their oppressors, were likely to bond with them. This bonding, in which hostages can come to identify the interests of their kidnappers as their own, comes from the very real
threat to their survival that the kidnappers pose. Graham extends this concept to cover the behaviour of women, femininity, that is a reaction to living in a society of male violence in which they are in danger. Femininity represents societal Stockholm syndrome, “If one (inescapable) group threatens another group with violence but also – as a group – shows the victimized group some kindness, an attachment between the groups will develop. This is what we refer to as Societal (or Cultural) Stockholm Syndrome” (Graham, 1994, p. 57).

Graham states unequivocally that, “masculinity and femininity are code words for male domination and female subordination” (1994, p. 192). She says that women, like hostages, are afraid, and “use any available information to alter our behavior in ways that make interactions with men go smoothly” (p. 160). One of the things they do is change their bodies in order to win men over. She lists the harmful beauty practices that are considered in this book, such as makeup, cosmetic surgery, shaving and waxing body hair, high-heeled shoes and restrictive clothes, as examples. She says that these practices reflect:

(1) the extent to which women seek to make ourselves acceptable to men, (2) the extent to which women seek to connect to men, and thus (3) the extent to which women feel the need for men’s affection and approval and (4) the extent to which women feel unworthy of men’s affection and approval just as we are (unchanged).

(Graham, 1994, p. 162)

Graham also argues that, “femininity is a blueprint for how to get along with one’s enemy by trying to win over the enemy” (1994, p. 187). The term “femininity”, “refers to personality traits associated with subordinates and to personality traits of individuals who have taken on behaviors pleasing to dominants” (p. 187) and “those behaviors which male culture classifies as ‘feminine’ are behaviors that one would expect to characterize any oppressed group” (p. 189). These behaviours of the less powerful are necessarily indirect attempts to influence the powerful, “such as use of intelligence, caniness, intuition, interpersonal skill, charm, sexuality, deception, and avoidance” (p. 187); that is, those behaviours, except perhaps for intelligence, likely to be identified as essentially feminine.

Graham offers an explanation for why many women believe that their “femininity” is biological and inherent and why, “we believe that we would choose to wear makeup, curl our hair, and wear high heels even if men didn’t find women who dressed this way more attractive” (1994, p. 197). Women believe this, she says, because “to believe differently” would require the acknowledgement that our behaviour is controlled by “external variables”; that is, men’s use of force and its threat. Recognizing
this would mean that women would have to “acknowledge our terror” (p. 197). She says that “It is scary for women to contemplate no longer being feminine” (p. 199) and concludes that examining what it is that is scary about giving up femininity may lead to the decision to give it up altogether.

Feminist social constructionists such as Henley and Graham understand the task of feminism to be the destruction and elimination of what have been called “sex roles” or “sexual difference” and are now more usually called “gender”. When masculinity and femininity are understood to be the behaviours of dominance and subordination it does not make much sense to expect any aspects of these behaviours to survive the destruction of male dominance. Christine Delphy explains that the concept of androgyny as a way forward for dealing with gender difference – that is, both men and women could combine the behaviours now rigidly ascribed to either one or the other – is not realizable (Delphy, 1993). The behaviours of domination and subordination would not survive in an egalitarian future in order to be combined in any form. There may be aspects of ascribed behaviours that are not associated with power difference that may be more equally shared, such as nurturing behaviour, but all the behaviours of deference and privilege would become unimaginable.

I have sought to show the power of the cultural expectation that women should demonstrate femininity by engaging in beauty practices. The forces which exact this behaviour include a lack of any possibility of glimpsing alternatives, the belief that femininity and its practices are natural and inevitable, childhood training, bullying in school, the requirements of the workplace, the need to ameliorate the body hatred inculcated by male dominant culture, and the fear of male retaliation. As Karen Callaghan explains in her introduction to the collection, Ideals of Feminine Beauty (1994), social control in the contemporary west is not usually imposed on individuals by brute force but achieved through, “symbolic manipulation” which can include such things as advertising and women’s magazines and “creates the guise of free will and choice” (Callaghan, 1994, p. x). The fact that some women say that they take pleasure in the practices is not inconsistent with their role in the subordination of women. This should perhaps be seen as the ability of some women to make a virtue out of necessity. In the next chapter I argue that western beauty practices need to be included in United Nations definitions of harmful cultural practices. This concept is a useful antidote to the debate on agency versus subordination that I have covered here because it is founded on an understanding of the power of cultural enforcement of practices that harm women and children. For practices that are identified as harmful, “choice” is no defence.
2

HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AND WESTERN CULTURE

I argue here that beauty practices in western culture should be understood as harmful cultural practices. Western beauty practices such as makeup and breast implant surgery involve different degrees of harm to women. Cosmetic surgery that removes body parts is more obviously similar to female genital mutilation than makeup wearing is, for instance. This chapter argues, however, that a continuum of western beauty practices from lipstick at one end to invasive cosmetic surgery at the other, fit the criteria set out for harmful cultural practices in United Nations understandings, although they may differ in the extremity of their effects. The concept of harmful cultural/traditional practices originates from UN concerns to identify and eliminate forms of harm to women and children that do not easily fit into a human rights framework (UN, 1995). It is gaining increasing recognition in the international human rights community but only inasmuch as it refers to practices such as female genital mutilation in non-western cultures. There is, however, no recognition of quite similar practices, such as the cutting of genitals to fit people into gender stereotyped categories in the west, as harmful. Indeed it is likely that the idea that the west has a “culture” that produces “practices” at all may seem foreign. Harmful practices in the west will most usually be justified as emanating from consumer “choice”, from “science” and “medicine” or “fashion”; that is, the law of the market. Culture may be seen as something reactionary that exists in the non-west. The west has science and the market instead. In this chapter I argue that the culture of western male dominance does produce practices, including beauty practices, that are harmful to women.

In the last decade a particularly brutal western beauty practice, labiaplasty, has grown in popularity with cosmetic surgeons. An Internet search under the term “labiaplasty” turned up 2,200 websites, most of which were for US cosmetic surgeons offering the procedure. A labiaplasty surgeon describes the surgery as “a surgical procedure that will reduce and/or reshape the labia minora” (LabiaplastySurgeon.com, 2002). The websites list the practice routinely among the other surgeries offered which cut up the female body to conform to male desires. In western countries too,
the practice of “gender reassignment” surgery, in which men and women are castrated, and breasts, penises, wombs are removed or constructed, is carried out by, often, the very same surgeons. But these practices are not understood to be clearly harmful and evidence of a reactionary culture. Transsexual surgical castration, for instance, is represented by the medical profession that profits from it as being treatment for a disabling medical condition of “gender dysphoria”, rather than a cultural requirement that those who do not fit into one sex class category should be surgically transferred to another (Rottnak, 1999).

The concept of harmful cultural practices is helpful for analysing such practices in the west as well as in the non-west. Harmful cultural or traditional practices in UN terms are identified as: being harmful to the health of women and girls; arising from the material power differences between the sexes; being for the benefit of men; creating stereotyped masculinity and femininity which damage the opportunities of women and girls; being justified by tradition. This definition is well suited to beauty practices in the west such as cosmetic surgery. The concept enables the culture of male domination in which women live to be brought into focus and subjected to criticism instead of being regarded as natural, inevitable or even progressive.

HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES

The UN concept of harmful cultural/traditional practices is aimed at identifying practices that are culturally condoned, as forms of violence and discrimination against women. The concept is enshrined in the very important and only “women’s” convention – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW; UN, 1979). Article 2(f) of CEDAW states that parties to the Convention will “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women”. CEDAW also enjoins States Parties to take measures to:

modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

(UN, 1979, art. 5(a))

The definition of customary practices here is sufficiently wide to include beauty practices very well. Beauty practices are the main instrument by
which the “difference” between the sexes is created and maintained. They create the stereotyped role for women of being sex and beauty objects, having to spend inordinate amounts of time and money on makeup, hairstyles, depilation, creams and potions, fashion, botox and cosmetic surgery. Men engage in most of the beauty practices described in this book only for the sexual satisfactions they gain from masochistic crossdressing. They are not required to wear makeup for work, or dress in high heels to please the dominant sex class. Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 3, men’s crossdressing causes considerable problems for women rather than stimulating sexual excitement. Unless we accept that women are biologically programmed to engage in beauty practices, then they need to be understood as cultural practices that are required of women. All practices required of one sex class rather than the other should be examined for their political role in maintaining male dominance.

The concept of harmful cultural/traditional practices was refined in several UN documents in the 1990s. An expanded definition of harmful traditional practices is offered in a 1995 UN Fact Sheet:

female genital mutilation (FGM); forced feeding of women; early marriage; the various taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility; nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices; son preference and its implications for the status of the girl child; female infanticide; early pregnancy; and dowry price.

(UN, 1995, pp. 3–4)

Some of the practices described in the Fact Sheet have analogies in the west. Forced feeding, for instance, which prepares girls for marriage in cultures in which plumpness is considered by men to be attractive, bears some resemblance to western beauty practices. It is instructive to compare it with what is apparently its opposite, starvation, which is more likely to be engaged in by western girls and women in order to approach the cultural standard of attractiveness. In western culture women are likely to restrict eating for weeks or months in order to fit into their wedding dress rather than to increase their consumption. The Fact Sheet usefully explains how such practices originate and this can illuminate the origins of beauty practices too.

Harmful traditional practices are, in the UN definition, damaging to the health of women and girls. The damaging health consequences of practices such as female genital mutilation are well documented (Dorkenoo, 1994). The damage that results from harmful practices in the west may not be so immediately clear or severe. However, there is considerable evidence of the damaging health consequences of cosmetic surgery practices such
as breast implant surgery (Haiken, 1997) that are common in the west. The psychologically harmful consequences of beauty practices are largely undocumented because such practices have not been considered problematic, but they are likely to be considerable, playing a part in the construction of a subordinate femininity for women.

The concentration on the health consequences of such practices arises from the tendency in the west to want harm to be subject to easy measurement. Harm to women’s status as equal citizens is less easy to measure but is a likely result of all cultural practices based on women’s subordination. Ruth Lister’s work on women’s citizenship, for instance, argues that the role of housewife with its accompanying requirements that women do various forms of unpaid labour severely damages women’s status as citizens while supporting men’s citizenship (Lister, 1997). The extra labour that women expend on beauty practices and the effects of these practices on the ways in which they are able to occupy public space, to feel about themselves, and to intervene in public life, could usefully be included in this analysis. Nirmal Puwar’s work on the experience of women members of parliament in the UK shows that the practice of femininity in appearance is vital for them when trying to survive in that exceedingly masculine culture (Puwar, 2004). A woman MP she interviews explains that the women are being scrutinized and remarked on as sexual objects and “the women’s sexuality is with them all the time” (Puwar, 2004, p. 76). The MPs are, Puwar argues, “under pressure to reproduce gender differences, through reified forms of bodily styles of dress, hence the emphasis on an acceptable form of feminine appearance” (p. 176). One impact is that they suffer constant remarks, but there are likely to be further effects, unexamined here, of having to be so clearly and conspicuously women, wearing the uncomfortable stigmata of their subordinate condition while seeking to be effective in government.

The Fact Sheet says that harmful cultural practices are, “consequences of the value placed on women and the girl child by society. They persist in an environment where women and the girl child have unequal access to education, wealth, health and employment” (UN, 1995, p. 5). In western cultures the value placed on women and girl children is clearly different from that placed on male humans. Unequal access to education may not be such a problem but unequal access to wealth and employment persists. The weekly average total individual income for women in the UK in 2000/1, for example, was £133, compared with £271 for men (Carvel, 2002). The lower value of women and girls is demonstrated in domestic violence and all the other practices of violence against women and girls, in the existence of pornography and other forms of the sex industry. Western beauty practices, I suggest, arise from this lower value. Makeup and high-heeled shoes, labiaplasty and breast implants are the result of the value placed on women and girls in the west, where women’s bodies are changed and
decorated to show that women are members of a subordinate class that exists for men’s delight.

Other criteria the Fact Sheet gives for recognizing harmful cultural/ traditional practices are that they “reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations” and they are for the “benefit of men” (UN, 1995, p. 3). Beauty practices do reflect longstanding values and beliefs about women, although the precise practices to which women are subjected change over time. The requirement that women alter and adorn their bodies for the sake of “beauty” does not change, for example, though corsets as an instrument for shaping the female anatomy to emphasize the breasts may give way to breast implants (Summers, 2001). The idea of “beauty” as something that women should embody for men’s sexual excitement, either naturally or by artifice, is deeply ingrained in western culture.

Beauty practices can reasonably be understood to be for the benefit of men. Though women in the west sometimes say that they choose to engage in beauty practices for their own sake, or for other women and not for men, men benefit in several ways. They gain the advantage of having their superior sex class status marked out, and the satisfaction of being reminded of their superior status every time they look at a woman. They also gain the advantage of being sexually stimulated by “beautiful” women. These advantages can be summed up in the understanding that women are expected to both “complement” and “compliment” men. Women complement men by being the “opposite” and subordinate sex. Women compliment men by being prepared to make an effort to adorn themselves for men’s sexual excitement. Thus men can feel both defined in manhood and flattered by women’s exertions and, if the women are wearing high heels for instance, pain endured for their delight. Those women who refuse beauty practices are offering neither complement nor compliment and their resistance can be deeply resented by members of the dominant sex class.

Harmful cultural practices “persist” the Fact Sheet tells us, “because they are not questioned and take on an aura of morality in the eyes of those practicing them” (UN, 1995, p. 3). Beauty practices in the west are certainly seldom questioned. They are understood to be natural and inevitable, justified cross-historically and cross-culturally as something inherent in women’s biology (Marwick, 1988). The rejection of the practices creates anger and mockery, such as references to feminists as bra-burners, as ugly, hairy legged, can’t get a man. Western beauty practices possess the morality of nature. Women who fail to practise them can be seen as “loose”, disreputable, unnatural and threatening to the social fabric.

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, explains that attempts by states to modernize their economies often leave abuses of women’s rights in the form of harmful traditional practices intact (Coomaraswamy, 1997). In the west there has
been considerable development of what is, in western understandings, a “modern” economy, technology and democracy, and yet beauty practices that are arguably of considerable harm to women and girls thrive and form the basis of very significant industries. Instead of the modern economy leading to any decrease in harmful practices it exploits them, as in cosmetics and fashion, to make very considerable profits. In this way the modern economy greatly increases the difficulty of eliminating harmful practices. The global beauty industry was estimated by The Economist in May 2003 to be worth US$160 billion (The Economist, 2003).

In 2002 Coomaraswamy produced a new and lengthy report on harmful cultural practices. To a large extent the report continues the western bias of earlier documents, however western beauty practices do get a whole paragraph dedicated to them here. The report says that “In many societies, the desire for beauty has often affected women in diverse ways” (Coomaraswamy, 2002, p. 31). It specifically addresses beauty practices in the west in the form of the requirement of slenderness, “In the ‘Western’ world in the twenty-first century the beauty myth that a thin female physique is the only accepted shape is imposed on women by the media via magazines, advertising and television”, and by sexist advertising. What the report calls this “culture of impractical ideals” results, it says, in “many practices that cause a great deal of abuse to the female body” and singles out for mention “cosmetic surgery of every part of the female body” which “has led to health problems and complications for many women”. This passing mention, however cursory, may be an indication that the need to include some western practices among those which Coomaraswamy describes as violating “women’s human rights to bodily integrity and to expression, as well as undermining essential values of equality and dignity” is being recognized (2002, p. 3).

She includes only non-western practices, however, in the category she identifies as most serious. This is the category of “cultural practices that involve ‘severe pain and suffering’ for the woman or the girl child, those that do not respect the physical integrity of the female body” and “must receive maximum international scrutiny and agitation” (Coomaraswamy, 2002, p. 8). It includes “female genital mutilation, honour killings, Sati or any other form of cultural practice that brutalizes the female body” (p. 8).

There are some non-western practices described in the report that might usefully be compared to very similar practices fast becoming ordinary components of beauty in the west. For instance we are told that “Tutsi women in Rwanda and Burundi undergo the practice of elongation of the labia, the aim being to allow the women to experience greater sexual pleasure” (Coomaraswamy, 2002, p. 12). This has something in common with the practice of labiaplasty in the west. In labiaplasty cosmetic surgeons cut off parts of the labia minora to “beautify” women’s genitals. This is not a practice that can be explained or justified in terms of
tradition, because it is of recent origin, but in degree of mutilation, pain and potential complications it does resemble female genital mutilation and forms a startling contrast to the Tutsi custom. In the west, in the advertising literature of labiaplasty surgeons, long labia are said to inhibit sexual pleasure and to be an embarrassment. Coomaraswamy uses the language of human dignity to describe the harm of traditional practices. These practices are said to violate women’s dignity (Coomaraswamy, 1997). The concept of women’s “dignity” is an important one and the idea of human “dignity” is fundamental to human rights theory and practice. It is a useful measure against which to size up western beauty practices such as labiaplasty. Though there are analogues in the west to many of the non-western practices described in the report (Wynter et al., 2002), they are likely to be omitted in UN literature. This is, I suggest, because of a western bias that identifies the harmful cultural practices in the west as reflecting women’s choice rather than being enforced by threat of punishment, or by religious edict.

WESTERN CULTURE PROVIDES “CHOICE”? 

Harmful cultural practices are seen as existing in cultures in which women do not have choice. The idea that “chosen” harmful traditional practices can be distinguished from forced ones does not fit well with United Nations understanding of what constitutes such a practice. The notion of harmful cultural practices is based on the idea that culture can enforce and that women and girls are not free agents able to pick and choose. In the 1990s in the west, however, the ideology of western liberalism, and the economic systems of laissez-faire individualist capitalism defended by it, were potent forces in the deracination of political critiques that recognize inequality and oppression as constructing limits to choice and opportunity (see Jeffreys, 1997b). This ideology is so pervasive that it has even affected Radhika Coomaraswamy’s discussion of harmful practices outside the west in her 2002 report. The report includes dress codes that enforce all enveloping clothing such as the burkha on women as harmful cultural practices. They are harmful because, “they restrict women’s movement and their right to expression” and because they are harmful to health, “Such dresses may cause asthma, high blood pressure, hearing or sight problems, skin rashes, hair loss and a general decline in mental condition” (Coomaraswamy, 2002, p. 28). Recently another health concern has arisen. Doctors writing in the Lancet of the increasing incidence of rickets, in which bones are weakened by a lack of vitamin D, explain that, in the Middle East, there are “lots of mums there with the adult form of rickets and children with rickets as well” as a result of women being required to cover their bodies and getting no natural sunlight on their skin (Lichtarowicz, 2003).
Nonetheless, Coomaraswamy comments, such dress codes are a problem only if they are, “forced on women and if punishment is meted out for not wearing very cumbersome attire” because in that case “their rights of choice and expression are clearly denied” (2002, p. 29). The notion of choice she employs does not make allowance for the types of pressure towards wearing restrictive clothing that are discussed elsewhere in this chapter, such as harassment in public places that can only be alleviated in this way. Covering can reduce this kind of friction but is not therefore a sign of freedom so much as an accommodation to oppression. Coomaraswamy’s introduction of the notion of “choice” is worrying because it waters down one of the most useful aspects of the notion of harmful cultural practices, the irrelevance of such western notions where cultural expectations and practices act as enforcers.

Even the well respected US feminist political philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, uses the “choice” argument to distinguish western beauty practices, dieting in particular, from those outside the west. Nussbaum argues that practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) should not be seen as “morally on a par with practices of dieting and body shaping in American culture” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 121). She argues that the differences between FGM and dieting are so considerable as to invalidate such an argument. The distinctions that she makes relate to the issue of choice, which she considers to prevail in the west in relation to dieting, and to the degree of damage to health involved in the practices. FGM is, she says, “carried out by force, whereas dieting in response to culturally constructed images of beauty is a matter of choice, however seductive the persuasion” (2000, p. 122). FGM, she argues, is irreversible whereas dieting is not. She says that FGM is performed in dangerous and unsanitary conditions, unlike dieting, and considers that the health problems linked to FGM, which can include death, are so much more severe that a comparison is inappropriate. Nussbaum also says that because FGM is usually carried out on children consent is not an issue. She details the distinctions in female literacy rates between the USA and some African countries as a basis for arguing that African women do not have access to choice and consent in the way that US women do. She says that FGM means, “the irreversible loss of the capability for a type of sexual functioning” which is, presumably, a greater loss than that connected with dieting. She argues, finally, that FGM is “unambiguously linked to customs of male domination” by which she implies that dieting is not. She has other broader arguments for seeing FGM as a more significant abuse of women’s rights than beauty practices. She says that feminists in the USA have disproportionately criticized western beauty practices while giving less attention to FGM, and that it is the duty of feminists to be concerned for the fate of their sisters outside western culture rather than being concerned only with themselves.
It would be hard to disagree with Nussbaum that western feminists should be concerned with the human rights of their sisters in other countries. I would argue, however, that western feminist criticisms of harmful cultural practices in other cultures need to be founded on a profound critique of such practices within their own. Nussbaum’s arguments as to why dieting should not be compared with FGM are not convincing. Western dieting inflicts lasting damage to health, particularly when it is taken to extremes in eating disorders that can cause death. A 2001 study reported in the *Lancet*, for instance, found that five (2 per cent) of the patients with eating disorders that were interviewed at the start of the research were dead at the time of a 5-year follow up (Ben-Tovim et al., 2001, p. 1254). Similarly, cosmetic surgery practices can lead to serious health problems, as Elizabeth Haiken documents in the case of breast implants (1997). Labiaplasty, like FGM, can lead to difficulties in sexual functioning. Nussbaum’s argument about the degree to which women in the west can “choose” could be seen as revealing a western bias, according to which women in the west are so advantaged that they can “choose” and thus whatever cultural practices they are required to engage in are not as severe as those in some African cultures. It is an underlying problem with liberal feminist thought that relations of power in western cultures are reframed as simply “pressures” which women have the education to withstand (Jefferys, 1997b).

Some liberal individualist feminists can find evidence of women’s “choice” even in the most unlikely situations. One of these is the practice of hymen repair surgery in the west. Hymen repair surgery is carried out to create an artificial virginity for women from cultures in which bleeding is required on the wedding night to avoid the shame that will descend on a bride and her family for lost “honour”. The penalty for lost honour can be an “honour killing” in which the woman is killed by male family members. Immigrants to the west from such cultures can obtain hymen repair from the same surgeons who provide labiaplasty to women influenced by pornography to consider their labia ugly. In her article on the practice of hymen repair surgery in the Netherlands in the twenty-first century, Sawitri Saharso argues that girls who have hymen repair surgery are, “moral agents who can choose” (Saharso, 2003, p. 20). Feminists should, she says, respect “other women’s choices, even if we do not agree with them. This in turn means that making hymen repair available is a deed of multiculturalism and good feminism” (p. 21). The girls are “morally competent actors who do have a choice and are able to state their preferences” (2003, p. 21). Hymen repair is currently available free from the public health service in the Netherlands and Saharso considers this to be a “policy measure that is culturally sensitive in that it acknowledges culturally informed suffering” (p. 21).

The concept of “choice” that Saharso puts forward is one that is so impoverished it is hard to work out why anyone would want to call it
choice at all. For instance she quotes as a basis for her argument about girls “choosing” hymen repair surgery, a Dutch writer who argues that they can be said to be making a choice because they do have other options like leaving their community:

She suggests that leaving the community does not necessarily mean becoming a prostitute, as there exist in the Netherlands shelters for runaway girls and women. So it is only if the girls want to remain within the family and community, and presuming the girl’s family is indeed as mercilous as she presupposes, that the operation is the only solution available.

(quoted in Saharso, 2003, p. 19)

Girls from immigrant communities are likely to need the support of families and communities more than those from the dominant culture. Thus the casual assumption that girls would be able to make a reasonable choice between outcast status in which they may have to hide for a lifetime from a family seeking vengeance for the shame brought upon it, and having surgery which would enable them to remain, is a rather surprising one. These “choices” are not equal in their implications and Saharso’s suggestion that they should be considered so demonstrates the strange logic that can result from the fetishizing of choice in western liberal theory.

MAKEUP AND THE VEIL: SAME DIFFERENCE?

Rather than being two sides of the same coin of women’s oppression, the veil and makeup are most usually seen as opposites. Makeup can even be seen as the liberated alternative to wearing the veil. Whereas there is apparently a difference, that is, respectable women in Islamic culture are expected to cover their heads and bodies so that men are not sexually tempted, while in the west women are expected to dress and makeup in such a way that men are sexually tempted and to create a feast for men’s eyes, there can be seen to be a connection. These expectations reflect the traditional dualism with regard to women’s function under male dominance. Women traditionally, even in the west, have been expected to fit into the categories of virgin/whore. Virgins were off limits until they married and were owned sexually by individual men, whereas whores existed to service men in general.

Unfortunately even feminist scholars are sometimes unable to think themselves out of this dualism to imagine an autonomous way of life for women that does not fall into one of these categories. Lama Abu-Odeh, for instance, in writing about the re-adoption of the veil in some Muslim countries, says that her assumptions as an Arab feminist are that “Arab
women should be able to express themselves sexually, so that they can love, play, tease, flirt and excite . . . In them, I see acts of subversion and liberation” (Abu-Odeh, 1995, p. 527). But what she considered joyful the women who adopted the veil saw as “evil”. In choosing the role for women of sexually exciting men over covering up, Abu-Odeh is stuck within the duality that is offered to women under male dominance, sex object or veiled one, prostitute or nun. There is a third possibility: women can invent themselves anew outside the stereotypes of western and non-western patriarchal culture. Women can have access to the privilege possessed by men of not having to be concerned for appearance and being able to go out in public barefaced and bareheaded.

Both the veil and makeup are often seen as voluntary behaviours by women, taken up by choice and to express agency. But in both cases there is considerable evidence of the pressures arising from male dominance that cause the behaviours. For instance, the historian of commerce Kathy Peiss suggests that the beauty products industry took off in the USA in the 1920s/1930s because this was a time when women were entering the public world of offices and other workplaces (Peiss, 1998). She sees women as having made themselves up as a sign of their new freedom. But there is another explanation. Feminist commentators on the readoption of the veil by women in Muslim countries in the late twentieth century have suggested that women feel safer and freer to engage in occupations and movement in the public world through covering up (Abu-Odeh, 1995). It could be that the wearing of makeup signifies that women have no automatic right to venture out in public in the west on equal grounds with men. Makeup, like the veil, ensures that they are masked and not having the effrontery to show themselves as the real and equal citizens that they should be in theory. Makeup and the veil may both reveal women’s lack of entitlement.

In some cases the adoption of the veil is clearly the result of force and the threat of violence. In Iran covering up is compulsory and enforced by the state. As Haleh Afshar explains “The open defiance of hejab and appearance in public without it is punishable by 74 lashes” (Afshar, 1997, p. 319). There is no suggestion that women can “choose” to wear the veil since the enforcement process is so clear and so brutal, “Women who are considered inadequately covered are attacked by these men (members of the ‘Party of God’ the Hezbollahis) with knives, or guns and are lucky to survive the experience” (Afshar, 1997, p. 320). Makeup is not enforced with such brutality in western cultures.

However, as Homai Hoodfar points out, the veil may be worn for different reasons in different countries and even within the same country (Hoodfar, 1997). In some situations no obvious force is applied. Lama Abu-Odeh describes the readoption of the veil. She says that in the 1970s women “walked the streets of Arab cities wearing western attire: skirts and dresses below the knee, high heels, and sleeves that covered the upper arm
in the summer. Their hair was usually exposed and they wore make-up” (1995, p. 524). In the 1980s and 1990s many, even some of the same women, adopted the veil, defined here as a headcovering or headscarf. Abu-Odeh tells us that, “their bodies seemed to be a battlefield” between the values of the west, the “‘capitalist’ construction in which female bodies are ‘sexualized, objectified, thingified’ and the traditional in which women’s bodies were ‘chattelized,’ ‘propertized,’ and terrorized as trustees of family (sexual) honor” (p. 524). The women adopting the veil were those who needed to use public transport either for work or study. They were less likely to be sexually harassed by men. On occasions when they were harassed they would feel more comfortable objecting to this if veiled, because they could not be blamed for having incited this abusive male behaviour. It was easier for the veiled women and girls to feel outraged and for others to feel outraged on their behalf if they were seen as innocent victims who did not deserve such treatment. The adoption of the veil can thus be seen as a way to alleviate the harms suffered by women as a result of male dominance. Such a “choice”, though, arises from oppression rather than indicating agency.

Hoodfar explains the readoption of the veil in Egypt where there is no threat of brutal punishment. Women who are, as Hoodfar puts it, “reveiling” tend to be lower-middle class, university educated and white-collar workers in public and government sector jobs. The reasons that Hoodfar gives for “reveiling” do not suggest that women had reasonable alternatives to making this decision. One woman Hoodfar interviewed expressed resistance to the idea of wearing the veil before she married but on the eve of her marriage encountered considerable pressure from her future husband’s family against going out to work as a teacher, which she had trained to do and was looking forward to. Her in-laws argued that if she went out to work, “people would talk, and her reputation might be questioned” (Hoodfar, 1997, p. 323). Moreover she would suffer sexual harassment, “in overcrowded buses men who have lost their traditional respect for women might molest her and of course this would hurt her pride and dignity as well as that of her husband and brothers” (p. 323). To resolve these pressures she decided to become a muhaggaba (veiled one). This pleased the husband’s family.

The reasons that Hoodfar gives clearly relate to women’s attempts to accommodate themselves to male dominance. The veil, she says, demonstrates women’s loyalty to the rules of male dominance, it “communicates loudly and clearly to society at large and to husbands in particular that the wearer is bound by the Islamic idea of her sex role” (Hoodfar, 1997, p. 323). Veiled women can work because they are demonstrating that they still respect “traditional values and behaviour”. Women who wear the veil “lessen their husband’s insecurity” and show their husbands that “as wives, they are not in competition, but rather in harmony and cooperation
with them” (p. 324). In exchange for all these signs of obedience the veil “puts women in a position to expect and demand that their husbands honour them and recognize their Islamic rights”. Thus husbands may let their wives keep the money they earn and keep their side of the bargain by “providing for the family to the best of their ability” (p. 324). None of the reasons given here suggest that the activity is chosen because it gives the woman any satisfaction that is separate from being able to alleviate the forces of male dominance. In order to have the right that men possess of working in the public world, women have to cover up and fulfil other stereotypes and expectations of women’s subordinate role.

Another woman interviewed by Hoodfar adopted the veil directly to avoid sexual harassment when she worked late after studying and had to use the bus to get home, “So often people treated me badly that I would go home at night and cry”. She decided on the veil so that “people would know that I am a good woman and that my circumstances have forced me to work late at night” (1997, p. 325). Seeking a strategy to avoid being attacked in the street by men is not an exercise of free choice but an accommodation to oppression. The ordinary men who would harass her in Egypt can be seen as the civilian equivalent of the Hezbollahis who lash women in Iran. Abu-Odeh explains the kinds of sexual harassment to which women have traditionally been exposed in Arab cities if not veiled:

Unfailingly subject to attention on the streets and on buses by virtue of being women, they are stared at, whistled at, rubbed against, and pinched. Comments by men such as, “What nice breasts you have,” or “How beautiful you are,” are frequent . . . They are always conscious of being looked at.

(Abu-Odeh, 1995, p. 526)

But Abu-Odeh reminds feminists who think that women should refuse the veil that this would be “socially suicidal” (1995, p. 529). Muslim women were in no position to speak out against the veil because they would be seen as defending the west. She adds the influence of Islamic preachers as another reason for revealing: “A woman who decides to wear the veil is usually subjected to a certain ideological indoctrination (by a fundamentalist preacher), in which she is told that every Muslim woman needs to cover her body so as not to seduce men, and that in doing this she obeys the word of Allah” (p. 532). This can be seen quite clearly as religious indoctrination but it might be reasonable to ask whether it is necessarily more powerful in influencing girls to cover themselves in the veil than the magazines and fashion and beauty culture of the west are in getting girls to cover themselves in makeup.
HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AND WESTERN CULTURE

WESTERN CULTURAL IMPERIALISM – EXPORTING HARMFUL PRACTICES TO THE NON-WEST

Women in an Afghanistan supposedly newly liberated from the rule of the Taliban, are trapped within the patriarchal duality of virgin/whore through being presented with only two choices for their appearance, covering up with the burkha or with makeup. Western beauty practices are seen as so obviously natural, inevitable and good for women that they have been held out as the holy grail to the women of Afghanistan. After years of terrible oppression in which they were only allowed outside in the all-enveloping burkha, could travel only in the company of men, were stripped of education and employment and could be beaten in the street by the male guardians of Islamic righteousness without redress, the ability to engage in western beauty practices, particularly for face and hair, does not seem an urgent need. Yet this is how it is being promoted.

The American beauty industry rushed in 2002 in the aftermath of war to infiltrate Afghanistan under the guise of urgently needed beauty “aid”. This was represented in the western media as a positive help rather than as American cultural imperialism and capitalist enterprise. Women were offered the role of being covered in makeup and sexually objectified, rather than covered by the burkha to prevent them being seen as sex objects by men. The New York Times perspective on this is that despite two decades of war, “Afghan women have held on to their desire to look beautiful”, but there is a “woeful shortage of beauticians. Also, they have no one to teach them and nowhere to lay their hands on a decent comb, let alone the panoply of gels, rinses, powders, liners and colors that spill from the shelves of the average American drugstore” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 1). In response to this market opportunity, and the opportunity to show their companies dealing with an aid emergency, a “Who’s Who” of the American beauty industry was soon “racing to the rescue” led by the editor of Vogue. The result of this generosity was that a school to teach practitioners of beauty was to open in the compound of the Afghan Ministry of Women’s Affairs, as if beauty practices were indeed a crucial human rights issue for women, on a par with education, safety and work.

The manufacturers of American beauty products volunteered manuals and wares to help the venture. The Vogue editor, Anna Wintour, said that the beauty industry is “incredibly philanthropic” and the beauty school would “not only help women in Afghanistan to look and feel better but also to give them employment”. Apparently the situation in the 20 beauty salons that did reopen after the removal of Taliban control constituted a health crisis because conditions were so unsanitary and dangerous. As one Afghan émigré who took a look at the situation reported:
They’re using rusty scissors, they’ll have one cheap comb for the whole salon and they don’t sanitize it, there’s no running water or Barbisol, and there’s a real lice problem. They’ll use wooden sticks and rubber bands to do perms. And there’s no cotton, so perm solution would just drip down a client’s face.

(Halbfinger, 2002, p. 1)

Perming hair could be considered a harmful cultural practice in its own right considering that the chemicals involved are toxic whether they run down the face or not (Erickson, 2002), but in the interests of capitalism it has been transformed into a human rights demand. Simply translating existing beauty education manuals was not sufficient in Afghanistan because so many women were illiterate, so a videotaped course of instruction in makeup was being prepared.

Though the cosmetics corporations vying with one another to make donations to the beauty school at a Vogue luncheon said they were not in competition for sales, one executive did say, “that the beauty school could not be judged a success if it did not create a demand for American cosmetics before too long” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 1). It is not just in Afghanistan that US cosmetics corporations have seen a marketing opportunity. They swiftly entered the Soviet Union after the fall of the communist regime, to offer their service to formerly deprived women, and they are reaching out to China too. As the business historian Kathy Peiss puts it, even in “Amazon rain forests, women sell Avon, Mary Kay, and other beauty products” (Peiss, 2001, p. 20). But Peiss, like many of those involved in selling western beauty ideals in Afghanistan, conceals the oppressiveness of this colonizing activity by emphasizing that it provides employment for women who sorely need it. As she says, “as was the case a hundred years ago in the United States, these ‘microbusinesses’ have given some women a foothold in the developing market economy” (Peiss, 2001, p. 20).

COVERING WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL RELIGION

Although the sexual objectification required of women in the west may seem very distinct from the covering up required by Islamic regimes, it is instructive to consider the identical cultural basis from which both western and Islamic cultures have developed. Covering the heads of women is a cultural practice of middle eastern tribes that found its way, via the monotheistic religions which originated in that region, to other parts of the world. The covering of heads and bodies was imposed on some Christian women in the west until quite recently. In my childhood in Malta in the 1950s, where my father was posted with the army, I remember the notices
on buses that instructed women to “wear a Marylike dress”. Women entering churches in many parts of Europe are still required to cover their heads. The Christian religion, like Islam, and the other patriarchal monotheistic religion, Judaism, has its roots in earlier patriarchal cultures that existed in the middle east. In these earlier cultures respectable women were required to be covered as in the Babylonian code of Hammurabi. Gerda Lerner explains in The Creation of Patriarchy, that the code, which predated the three religions, required women who were not prostitutes to cover themselves so that they could indicate that they were the property of individual men (Lerner, 1987). The prostituted women, usually slaves, were uncovered to indicate that they were the property of men in general.

In early Christianity a similar code was enforced. Thus in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament he sets out the covering rule. He explains that the “head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God”. This is to be demonstrated through head covering thus:

Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.

(Corinthians, 1957, 11: 3–15, p. 181)

Woman’s headcovering would show that she was man’s possession. Other harmful practices of early Christianity accompanied the dress code. Women were not to speak in church, though they were allowed to ask their husbands about anything they did not understand when they got home, and they were enjoined to “submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Ephesians, 1957, 5: 22, p. 200).

One branch of the Christian religion today goes rather further than simply covering women. Women are actually excluded from the whole of Mount Athos in Greece, which is covered in Greek Orthodox monasteries, so that the monks may be protected from having to see them. In 2004 this ancient Christian practice received influential endorsement from a visit, reported in the media, of Prince Charles to a monastery on the mountain (Smith, 2004). The mountain has excluded women since the eleventh century and with the status of an independent theocratic republic is able to impose legal penalties on those who challenge the ban. Charles has visited
several times since the death of his ex-wife, Diana, and is said to gain great solace from this refuge, a place where readings in the refectory “are frequently based on . . . the evil caused by womankind with the fall of Eve” (Smith, 2004, p. 3). The continued existence of this zone of exclusion despite attempts in the European Union to revoke the ban is a salutary reminder of the womanhating values that underlie patriarchal Christianity.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICE?

I have suggested in this chapter that both western cultures influenced by Christianity and cultures influenced by Islam enforce harmful cultural practices on women. Only a determination to ignore the political origins, functions and consequences of western beauty practices would enable a belief that western culture is clearly superior in the freedoms it allows to women in relation to appearance. Whereas all three patriarchal religious cultures originating in the ancient middle east started off by enforcing the covering of women, this has changed in the west towards the apparently very different prescription that women perform their sexual corvée in public places. In some areas of the middle east and Asia where the covering requirement has been challenged or is dying out there has been a renewed enforcement of the rule. The end result is an apparently greater and greater divergence between the appearance rules for women east and west. Both sets of appearance rules, however, require that women should be “different/deferent”, and both require women to service men’s sexual needs, either by providing sexual excitement or by hiding women’s bodies lest the men should be so excited. In both cases women are required to fulfil men’s needs in public places and do not have the freedoms that men possess.

The concept of harmful cultural practices in relation to appearance should, therefore, not be restricted to non-western cultures. All the western beauty practices considered in this book, from makeup to labiaplasty, fit the criteria for identifying harmful cultural practices. I argue that they create stereotyped roles for the sexes, they originate in the subordination of women and are for the benefit of men and they are justified by tradition. It is certainly possible to argue, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6 on makeup, that even practices that appear to have the least effect on the health of women and girls, such as lipstick wearing, can be damaging. Although western beauty practices are seldom enforced by actual physical violence, they are all culturally enforced. The failure to wear makeup and depilate legs and underarms may not be “socially suicidal” in western cultures but it will, as I suggest in the makeup chapter, affect women’s ability to get and keep employment and the degree of social influence that they may wield. The British women MPs I mentioned were required to wear feminine
clothing and show their legs if they were to have any legitimacy in the legislature and they are unlikely to have survived if they allowed underarm hair to peek from their blouses or leg hair to show through their tights.

However I am aware that the degree of damage inflicted by such practices as cosmetic surgery and lipstick wearing is not the same. The implication of recognizing western beauty practices as harmful cultural practices is that governments will, as required by the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, need to alter the social attitudes which underlie them. In the case of some cosmetic surgery practices the consequences are sufficiently severe and regulation so easily achieved by legal penalties on medical practitioners that they could be ended through legislative means. Lipstick wearing and depilation, however, should not be exempt from being considered as harmful and requiring remedies, although legal ones may not be appropriate. They mark women as subordinate and clearly demonstrate the stereotyped roles of the sexes even if not so severe in their impact on women’s health. The role of governments committed to the ending of such practices, or even simply alleviating the impact of the cultural requirement that they should be performed, should therefore be to combat the creation of sexual difference, of ideas and attitudes, business practices, that inscribe this notion at the very foundation of western culture.

In later chapters I examine the practices of makeup, high heels and cosmetic surgery in some detail to show how they are enforced and what their consequences are for women’s health and access to the ordinary prerogatives that men in western societies are likely to take for granted: to appear in public space barefaced, to run, to have leisure time free of the need for body maintenance. Readers will be able to make up their minds about the appropriateness of including these practices within the United Nations understandings. In the next chapter I enlarge on the meanings of feminine beauty practices in western culture through transvestism/transsexualism. The performance of beauty practices by men shows that this behaviour is not biologically connected with women. But it does more than that. As I seek to demonstrate here, male practitioners take sexual pleasure from these practices because they demonstrate subordinate status. This supports an understanding of beauty practices as behaviours of deference by a subordinate group.