

Low body confidence thwarts girls' and women's work and education aspirations, says new report

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New report by Centre for Appearance Research and AnyBody reveals low body confidence is thwarting girls' and women's confidence and aspirations in education and the workplace.

'Costing the Invisible' report is an urgent call to challenge the economic and psychological costs of low body confidence.

A new report, commissioned by the Government Equalities Office, has found that [girls](#)' and women's academic confidence and performance, as well as their potential to contribute socially and economically to society, is being undermined by low body confidence.

Society's current emphasis on looks and beauty is fuelling widespread [body image concerns](#) and preoccupation with [appearance](#) among girls and women.

The report, 'Costing the Invisible: A Review of the Evidence Examining the Links Between Body Image, Aspirations, Education and Workplace Confidence', was written by the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England and renowned psychotherapist and writer Susie Orbach, and reviewed 25 [empirical studies](#) with a total sample of over 49,000 girls and women aged 10-60 across five continents.

Studies across the UK, USA, Finland, Germany, Italy, France, China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Russia, Brazil and Argentina indicate:

- Adolescent girls are not engaging in classroom debate and are missing school due to concerns about the way they look. For example, 20% of girls don't give an opinion in class and 16% don't go to school when they feel bad about their looks.
- Irrespective of their actual weight, girls in Finland, USA and China who think they are overweight achieve lower academic grades.
- When young adult women at university are primed by others to focus on their appearance, their performance on academic tests is undermined, indicating that body image concerns can prevent women from achieving their full potential academically.
- A significant minority of adult women do not turn up to work or job interviews due to body image concerns.

The report documents that society places great emphasis on women's appearance and, as a consequence, a large proportion of girls and women come to place high importance on their looks and experience dissatisfaction with their bodies. Orbach's clinical experience also indicates that current unrealistic standards of beauty and the resultant disruption of secure attachments to the body and within the family are contributing to girls' and women's body image distress.

The impact of body image concerns on physical and psychological health is well documented. What is new in this report is the growing evidence on the academic, social and occupational consequences of this concern.

The report concludes that body image concerns are holding many girls and women back from realising their full potential and aspirations in education and the workplace. It says: "there is an urgent need for

interventions to reverse the trend of poor body image and poor body confidence. The silent self-attacks are thwarting girls' ambitions at exactly the time when society is apparently opening up to them."

Jo Swinson MP, Minister for Women and Equalities: "This report shines a welcome light on what happens to girls' aspirations and confidence when they are constantly distracted by how they appear to others. There is a lot of focus on the anxiety poor body image causes to young people, but much less attention on how its effects can spill out across all areas of life. This report forces us to consider how much creativity, energy and ambition would be unlocked if we could relieve girls from the unwavering, critical scrutiny of a society obsessed with a narrow and unrealistic ideal of beauty."

Dr Emma Halliwell, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Centre for Appearance Research, report author: "The striking thing emerging from this report is the breadth of the impact that body image has; this is an issue that impacts upon all aspects of girl's and women's lives. Yet, this isn't simply a problem of women not liking how they look or women thinking about their appearance. This report provides evidence that when society teaches girls that their appearance is intrinsically linked to their value as a person and that their looks matter, society undermines girls and women's potential to thrive. We need to challenge the ubiquitous messages that female appearance is of central importance and begin to focus on all of the other ways in which girls and women can excel. By ignoring this issue, we all become complicit in reinforcing these damaging messages. By actively challenging this overemphasis on appearance we can improve the lives of both women and men."

Dr Susie Orbach, Psychoanalyst and Writer, report author: "what emerges from this report is devastating. Young girls and women's appearance concerns are hampering their economic and intellectual capacities. Yes they succeed. Yes they are doing well in school but they

could be doing better. Their efforts are undermined by an ever vigilant inner eye that diminishes their contribution because of their view of how they look. This has nothing to do with how they do look but entirely to do with how girls and women are seeing themselves as less than adequate and in need of perfecting as though the beauty culture is the way to a sustainable life. The assault on appearance must stop before it robs more girls and women and increasingly boys and men from expressing themselves as ably as they might. The imperative to look good as the rich industries which feed the beauty culture suggest is not a solution but a prescription for dissatisfaction. Costing The Invisible is an urgent call to challenge the economic and psychological costs of body dissatisfaction."

Dr Phillippa Diedrichs, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Appearance Research, report author: "This report clearly shows that body image concerns have serious consequences for girls' and women's quality of life. We need to move beyond simple awareness raising and twee body confidence slogans if we want to make a real difference on this issue. Robust research shows that we already have some effective tools to do this, including delivering evidence-based body image programs in schools that have been shown to work. Showcasing greater appearance diversity in advertising has also repeatedly been shown in research to be not only effective in promoting positive [body image](#) but in also as appealing to consumers. It is time for serious action from schools, industry and governments to reverse the damaging trends showcased in this [report](#)."

More information: Link to 'Costing the Invisible' report here: eprints.uwe.ac.uk/24438/

Provided by University of Bristol

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