



BODY IMAGE: A GLOBAL HEALTH CONCERNS AMONG GIRLS AND WOMEN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on body image as a global health concern on the body dissatisfaction among girls and women in developing countries. Dissatisfaction with one's appearance and shape is a common feeling in the society that can foster unhealthy attitudes, as well as disordered eating and exercising behaviour. This may also result in purchasing unhealthy products that are harmful to their health. Issues related to the body image across the life span, its causes, sources of information and health threats were discussed. The dynamics of body dissatisfaction among girls and women and health impacts were of great concerns. Towards the prevention of body image as a global health concerns, it was therefore, recommended that there should be health education programme on prevention of eating disorders and fitness exercises on girls and women. The messages girls and women usually receive from peers, media as well as role model of teachers and adults in the society, should be examined on body image issues. The ecological context in which girls and women develop and function need to be changed.

Keywords: body image, dissatisfaction, health threats, media, objectification, social-learning

1. Introduction

Body image is a complex construct that has not been consistent. It may be concerned with the general appearance of the body shape of human considering somatotyping such as endomorphs, mesomorphs and ectomorphs (National Eating Disorders

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Association (NEDA), 2005). Basically, body image refers to how physically attractive we perceive the body and how we feel about it (Striegel-Moore, 2003). For instance, considering adolescence period, physical changes in puberty affect adolescents differently. More importantly, body image dissatisfaction may result in dangerous weight-loss techniques, sometimes culminating in eating disorder such as obesity and bulimia nervosa. Overall concerns on body image appearance satisfaction may not differ by gender but on body shape focusing commonly on thinness among females.

The body shape can be assessed in perpetual, evaluative or affective terms. For instance, overweight men are more likely to think of themselves as normal weight while underweight women are more likely to consider their weight to be normal (McCreary, 2002 and Hendriks, (2004). Affective differences appear to be even larger with women reporting more body dysphasia. It is of health concerns on how girls and women feel about their body shape and weight, how they construct an image of their bodies that is inferior to that of the cultural ideal and how the body dissatisfaction associated with this discrepancy can be prevented.

Body image dissatisfaction is a serious psycho-social health threats, not only for the discomfort it causes, but also of its risk factor relationship to eating disorders, obesity and cosmetics surgery particularly on physical exercises and impacts on reducing sedentary lifestyle (Kinnally and Van-Vonderen, 2014). For example, concerns for being overweight can lead to calories-restrictive dieting, resulting in binge-eating and lowered metabolism, which may result in obesity and even dangerous to girls whose bones are still growing. Body image dissatisfaction may restrict the activities such as swimming, gymnastics, athletics and dance that individual women will engage in, and contribute to the incidence of obesity (Field, 2011). Although, women generally view a more negative body image, many men are dissatisfied with their bodies but for different reasons. Often they want to lose or gain weight or to gain muscle and bulk. Women compare their appearance to others more frequently than men and worry more that others will think negatively about their look. Yet appearance matters just as much to men, who are just as likely as women to engage in effort to improve their bodies.

2. Concept of body image

The body image is concerned with a person's perception of aesthetics or sexual attractiveness of the body. The components of body image include how human beings view themselves, what they believe about their appearance including memories, assumptions, and generalizations and how they feel about their bodies including height, shapes weight and how man senses and control his body as he moves (NEDA, 2005). Human society at all time has placed great value on beauty of the human body, but a person's perception of his/her own body may not correspond to society's standard. A person's body image is thought to be in parts, a product of their personal experiences, personality and various socio-cultural forces. It could be described as a representation of how an individual thinks and feel about their physical attributes. A person's sense of his/her own physical appearance in relation to some cultural ideals

can shape their body image. Exposure to mass media, peers and family background depicting the thin-ideal body may be linked to body image concerns on many negative psychological and physical effects for girls and women (Derenne and Beresin, 2006).

Western education today is obsessed by being thin and such body image ideals may be the reasons for girls to restrict their food intake. However, it has been extremely difficult for people to live up to the standards of society on what they believe the ideal body image should be. It appears that a large proportion of students are dissatisfied with their body image (Kinnally and van-Vonderen, 2014). There are many factors that result in a person's negative body image as either a distorted perception of the shape or feelings of discomfort, shame, anxiety about the body, family dynamics, mental illness, biological predispositions, diseases and environmental causes for obesity, malnutrition and socio-cultural expectation (Centre for disease control and prevention, 2009). For example, people who are either underweight or overweight can have poor body weight and those who are normal or overweight on the basal metabolic index scale (BMI) have higher risks of poor body weight (Preston, 2004). They may later alter their bodies in some ways by dieting or undergoing cosmetic surgery (Grogan, 2008). However, positive body image is described as a true perception of the body appearance as really you are, understand that everybody is different and celebrate your uniqueness including flaws which are identified as to do with the value as a person.

In adulthood, body image is linked to self-esteem among women. However, self-esteem is strongly related to overall physical appearance, not just weight. Women who express dissatisfaction with their bodies and those who worry about how they shape up, when compared their self-esteem with few other problems such as psychological, social, or sexual functioning were still low (Kinnally and van-Vonderen, 2014). Body image had a greater effect on men between the age of 30 and 50, even though they usually do not directly express their concerns (Murnen and Smolak, 2012).

3. Objectification theory of body image

The theory of objectification states that male and female bodies have different meanings and women bodies in particular are supposed to be available for men sexual pleasure (Mayo Clinic, (2008). Objectification theory provides a framework for gender effects on the experiences of being female shaped girls and women construction of their bodies. For example, men's bodies are seen as and functional agents while women's bodies are objects to be viewed and enjoyed by men. Thus, women's success in work relationships, their safety and survival are related to understanding and cooperation of the role as primary to women in the socio-cultural setting. Objectification might also be marked by self-silencing. Women who viewed themselves as objects rather than actors are likely to be unaware of other psychological state and so put their own interests and needs behind those others. This is self-silencing and eating problems that are positively correlated. School girls who are unsure of how they feel about sexual harassment or medial images of women have poorer body esteem (Murnen and Smolak, 2012).

The most visible, and often the wealthiest women are thin models and actresses. Women make less money than men in virtually every profession and less visible at the highest level of politics and sports participation. The pervasiveness of the image and the social pressure to accept it lead to internalize this objectification and to treat them as something to be looked at or evaluated. This internalization of the gaze of others leads to habitual self-monitoring to ensure that one is meeting the ideal body image (Associated Press (2010). Such self-monitoring probably includes social comparison which leads to body shame and appearance esteem and eating problems.

4. Body image across the life span of girls and women

Experience has shown that people express their concerns on negative attitudes about fat people (obese) with elementary children ascribing various negative characteristics such as laziness, and unhappiness to male and female obese peers (Brennan , Christopher and Jody, 2010). Elementary in-school aged girls may be expected to be thin. Thus, the pressure to meet the cultural ideals begins earlier for girls than for boys. The pre-adolescent girls reported that they are dissatisfied with their weight and want to avoid becoming obese (Birch, 2003) However, girls are more concerned about this than boys in all western countries and Sub-Sahara African (Mayo Clinic, 2008). Studies have shown that body esteem decreases in girls throughout early elementary school, but found increasing in body esteem from age 5 to 9 (Kater, 2005 and Brennan and Christopher and Jody, 2010). Thus, findings revealed average body dissatisfaction at age 5 to 7 predicted that restrain at age 9, Girls' body esteem drops in middle schools and is concurrently related to the onset of puberty, which moves girls away from the cultural prescribed body ideal of thinness and lower for girl than boys. For example about 60% of adolescent girls are dissatisfied with their weight and shape (Field, 2011). Some forms of eating disorders may occur in more than half of adolescent girls such as vomiting after eating, but most women exhibiting body dissatisfaction do not suffer from eating disorders. Furthermore, women's body dissatisfaction does not seem to disappear with development (Triggerman and Lynch, 2010).

4.1 Dynamic of body dissatisfaction among girls and women

Females do not seem to start with any sort of temperament, genetics hormonal or neurological predisposition to judge their bodies as too fat. Instead, they receive constant and consistent messages from many sources of teaching them. Women have long been bombarded by the media with idealized image of female bodies that bear little resemblance to the way most women look. Increasingly, more advertisements and men magazines are featuring idealized male bodies. Using social learning theory explanation, socio-cultural influences clearly contribute to the development and maintenance of body image (Birch, 2003). However, it was revealed that there was inconsistent relationship between masculinity, femininity and body image (Nattiv (2007). Thus, gender is clearly a factor in the body image and eating problems.

Adolescent girls and women in their thirties and forties are more likely than other age groups, to be dissatisfied with their bodies and to attempt to conceal them, by wearing non-revealing clothing. Women, over age fifty, remain negative as young adults in evaluating their own appearance but they report less concern about what others think of their bodies and compare themselves to others less frequently (Birch, 2003)

4.2 Sources of information about body image among girls and women

Girls and women seem to receive messages about their ideal body image from wider range of sources such as peers, family, schools and media than boys do (Thompson and Stice, 2001 and Mayo Clinic, 2008). Peer influence can be indirect in that they may model body image concerns and weight behaviours. It can be direct to make comments and tease girls about that body image through conversations with their friends. Such conversations may mediate the relationship between socio-cultural influence and body dissatisfaction. Peers may be teasing about modelling weight, shape concern and contribute to the onset of eating disorders symptoms as related to body dissatisfaction about weight and shape (thinness) (American Psychiatric Association, (2010). Thus, peer concerns with teasing about weight and thinness during middle school contribute to the onset of eating disorders symptoms a three-year period.

Family influences on the body image and eating disorder have followed two general paths: the effects of family structure and functioning and the body image eating pattern message set by family members, particularly the parents. Findings in the study revealed correlation between parent's comments about a daughter's weight and shape and the girl's body dissatisfaction in children in the elementary school (Mayo Clinic, 2008 and American College Health Association, 2010). Similarly, Triggeman and Lynch (2010) found that there were relationships between mother's concerns about their own weight and shape and their daughter's body dissatisfaction even when the daughters were adults These findings about parental influence underscore the importance of involving parents in prevention efforts.

Adolescent girls watch televisions more than 21 hours per week, read journals, fashion magazines, catalogues and dailies on body image and satisfaction. They always search for features of the ideal body image for males and females. It is not unrelated that cheer exposure to thin women on television magazines and pictorials are enough to create body image threats (Hofschire and Greenberg, 2002). Personal characteristics are typically found to mediate this relationship with identification with peers, celebrities, social comparison and interest in the journals, magazines, textbooks and internets to gain information about body shape and appearance (Pope, 2005).

Some girls and young women compare themselves with models considering physical attractiveness on thinness of an ideal female body shape in the fashion industry. This size can be physiological detrimental to the wellbeing of many young women on their self-image and give rise to excessive exercises. Girls and women are shown in media, internet and even handset communications for promoting commercials advertisements on consumer's products with perceived side-effects. Media

influence awareness of the presented thin-ideal internalization, using young girls and women by clothing and accessory by featuring beautiful and thin models in extravagant and appealing circumstances. Skinning actresses and models appear everywhere in the media today, especially on televisions, magazines, print-media and on billboards.

The ideal body image of the media importantly considering socio-cultural issues is a body that is extremely thin and preferably white colour (Hofschire and Greenberg, 2002). Mostly in Western world, thinnest is associated with happiness, success, youthfulness and socially acceptable while people who are slightly overweight are seen as having qualities like laziness, inadequate willpower, and being out of control (Brennan, Christopher, & Jody. (2010). The process of one comparing themselves to these images in the media can result in healthy behaviours like dieting, adequate physical exercise and also results in unhealthy behaviours such as obsessive exercising, bulimia and anorexia nervosa (Triggerman and Lynch, 2010). The digital manipulation of body image had contributed to increase and common procedures of plastic surgery such as breast augmentation and rhinoplasty in more than 70% from 1992 to 2004 (Hendriks, 2004).

Media play their roles in promoting these cosmetic treatments through advertisements in magazines and on billboards by using beautiful women in a state of happiness. Before the need to be thin, young and rich, there is also a weight prejudice in the society that is brought up in media social setting with friends and parents. Media influence awareness of the thin-ideal internalization. Thin-ideal internalization appears to be a particular powerful factor in the development of body dissatisfaction. People assign positive personality traits and overall life outcomes to those they perceive as attractive both mentally and physically (Grogan, 2008).

The high standard for women to follow and develop an attitude from women that thinness and average size of clothing wear is extremely desirable, and has changed drastically within the past decades. It is therefore, important to reiterate that girls who are exposed to multiple sources of message emphasizing a thin-ideal seem to be likely developing body image dissatisfaction and eating problems. It was also emphasized that media modeling, peer concerns about thinness and peer teasing about weight predicted the onset of clinically significant eating problems during adolescence.

Gender is clearly a factor in the body image and eating problems. Girls and women are most likely to be dissatisfied with their weight and shape, engage in weight reduction and even when basal metabolic index (BMI) is considered. Furthermore, girls of average weight have been found to be almost as likely to be on a diet as their overweight peers (Centre for disease control and prevention, 2009). Gender differences related to the body image are increasingly prevalent between men and women. Throughout all stages of life, women have more body dissatisfaction than men. Although, dissatisfaction is more common in women, men are becoming more negatively affected than women (Mayo Clinic, 2008). Historically, for a much longer period of time, the advertisements on media have moderately targeted females, which may be explained why they are becoming less sensitized to the health concerns of perceived side-effects (Kinnally and Van-Vondereren, 2014). Studies have shown that

females tend to think more about their body shape and endorse thinner figures than men even into old age (Muth and Cash, 2007). However, many women engage in fat-talk, a behaviour that has been associated with overweight dissatisfaction.

4.3 Health impacts on body image among girls and women

People live in an era where obsessing over the bodies and the outlooks has become a daily consideration. In mainstream media, the most beautiful girls and women are thin-ideal image with long hairs and cosmetic eyelashes, faces, perfect skin and pleasing to the eyes for acceptability to society. However, the projected body image that media place on girls and women is a big controversy today. The media are responsible for creating ideals on beauty and body image (Triggerman & Lynch, 2001). Girls and women are suffering from negative body image which result in an increase in dissatisfaction with oneself and can cause various threats ranging from body dimorphic disorders, psychological effects to body health-related issues, eating disorders, obesity and anxiety which media do not take into consideration. The issue of body image and its effects on individual is complex as many multitudes factors are involved (Kater, 2005). Media continues to depict models and celebrity throughout advertisement in various brands such as heavy cosmetics, hair dressing, make-ups, and significant others. Women actresses, and singers and models therefore, continue to compare themselves to figures in the media, regardless of the health threats on physical, socio-cultural and psychological concerns.

Girls and women with poor body image may experience frequent feelings of depression and anxiety with large body mass, body dissatisfaction and bulimic behaviours (Nattiv, 2007). The female body is for the pleasure of males and men enforce their active dominance over women as they wish. (Harrison, 2002). However, there is a continuum of sexual terrorism ranging from sexual harassment to domestic violence and rape. These serve to remind what could happen to them at any time quite independently of her behaviours. Girls may likely to be frightened by sexual harassment than women as a result of societal functions and with poor body esteem. Dating, violence, child sexual abuse and rape have been associated with postural problems and they are important factors in understanding why body image is so heavily gendered (Grogan, 2008).

Furthermore, a poor body image has been related to the onset of eating disorders and poor development of interpersonal skills, negative self-esteem, unhealthy exercise regime, harmful substance abuse, and unhealthy dieting behaviour resulting in obesity (Derenne and Beresin (2006). Depressions among female adolescents have been associated with suicide, eating and disruptive behaviour disorders, with negative impact upon people sense of self and the degree of confidence in social situations throughout the entire life (Preston, 2004). Hence, poor body image can result in poor development of social skills and social relations in girls and women with lifelong negative impacts. However, the projected body image that media place on women is a big controversy today. Media are responsible for creating ideas about beauty and body image. Women are suffering from perceived side-effects resulting in an increase in

dissatisfaction with oneself resulting in low self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, anxiety body dysmorphic and negative health-related issues that media do not take into considerations (Hendriks, 2004).

4.4 Protective factors against the body image problems among girls and women

It appears that the factors that give girl a non-appearance-related source of self-esteem or turn girls away from focusing on the thin-ideal may be protective. For example, participating in team sports through parental influence (basketball, handball) by high school girls has been associated with body image in comparison with girls who are uncertain about whether or not they like the body image (Nattiv, 2007). Harrison (2012), found out those girls who are attracted average size female television characters rate thinness and good looks are less important than girls who do not find these average size women attractive. Thus, protective factors might be incorporated into prevention and intervention programmes and as a way to test the nature and extent of the relationships.

4.5 Prevention of body image problems among girls and women

The problems on body image concerns are in the ecological context in which girls and women develop and function. Perhaps, it is the environment that needs to change the ecology. Thus, the messages that girls and women receive from peers, teachers, as well as teachers' modeling of the unacceptability of harmful behaviours and comments help prevent girl's body image and eating problems. In addition, therapists may consider helping clients to initiate changes at schools or workplace, and take initiative to work towards systemic change themselves towards treat eating disorders. It will be challenging to design programmes evaluation on changing body image thin-ideal to be tailored to the community and identifying appropriate control group (Field, 2011). Studies will have to go along enough to actually demonstrate that the onset of dangerously poor body self-esteem need to be prevented. There is need for a long term social change to decrease the rate of body image problems among girls and women. Media messages on tolerance of sexual harassment and the expectation that girls should discuss dieting over lunch need to be changed (Hendriks, 2004 and Murnen and Smolak, 2012).

5. Conclusion

It is of great health concerns on how girls and women feel about their body shape and weight, construction of body image that is inferior to that of the cultural ideal and how their body's dissatisfaction associated with this discrepancy. Body dissatisfaction is a serious psycho-social health problem not only because of the discomfort it causes, but relationship to eating disorders particularly on obesity, and physical exercises to reducing sedentary lifestyles. Exposure to mass media, peers and family background depicting the thin-ideal body may be linked to body image disturbance for girls and women. Women's success in work and relationship with their safety and survival, are

related to understanding and cooperation on roles of women in their culture and gender effects on live experiences.

Using social learning theory explanation, socio-cultural influences clearly contribute to the development and maintenance of body image. Girls and women seem to receive messages about thin ideal body image from wider range of sources such as peers, family, schools and media than boys do. The problems for body image concerns are in the ecological context in which girls and women develop and function, needs to change the ecology. Thus, the messages that girls and women receive from peers, family as well as teachers' modelling the unacceptability of harmful behaviours and comments to prevent girl's body image and eating problems need to be of great health concerns.

5.1 Recommendations

Toward the reduction of body image health threat, it was therefore recommended that:

1. There should be health education programme in the schools and colleges on prevention of eating disorders typically on body image components for girls and women.
2. The message that girls and women receive from peers, media, teachers, as well as teachers' modeling of harmful behaviours to positive attitude and comments should be vetted via social media on body image issues.
3. The ecological context in which girls and women develop and function needs to be of significant health issues within the community setting.
4. There should be a challenging design programmes on evaluation to be directed to the community and government should identify appropriate control group on body image among girls and women.
5. There is the need for a long term social change in the society for decreasing the rate of body image problems among girls and women.
6. Media messages on tolerance of sexual harassment and the expectation that girls should discuss on dieting during lunch need to be of great health concerns.

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