

January 2019

## Beauty or the Beast? University Academics' Perceptions of Women's Physical Appearance and Academic Achievements

Ladan Rahbari

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Rahbari, Ladan (2019). Beauty or the Beast? University Academics' Perceptions of Women's Physical Appearance and Academic Achievements. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(2), 309-323. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss2/21>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## **Beauty or the Beast? Academics' Perceptions of Women's Physical Appearance and Academic Achievements in Iran**

By Ladan Rahbari<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article explores perceptions of Iranian academics of the relationship between women's physical appearance and academic achievements. The research is conducted using interviews with academics working in different universities in the field of social sciences. Results included individual and structural explanations of the relationship between women's physical appearance and academic achievements. Data showed a significant emphasis by the participants on the importance of beauty for women. Gender differences were observed in participants' responses as well as in emotional reactions to the interview questions. Most male participants viewed beauty as the primary resource and an asset for marriage marketing for women. Some female participants denounced beauty as an objective notion and problematized the glorification of masculinity in the workplace. Female participants also discussed an existing backlash against women's growing participation in academia and reflected on the political aspects of body management and feminine beauty in Iran. In conclusion, it is discussed that beauty discourses can be interpreted as a part of the broader social bias towards women's participation in academia.

*Keywords:* Discourses of Beauty, Gender, Harmful Cultural Practices, Higher Education, Qualitative Methods, Sexism

### **Introduction**

Beauty discourses have been and continue to be studied through different biological, psychological and sociological lenses. Biological explanations of aesthetic taste discuss that beauty is not just a social construct and that attractiveness appears to be ingrained in our biology (Little, Jones and DeBruine, 2011). Evolutionary theories explain aesthetic preferences as intrinsic and have even claimed that universally accepted beauty standards (e.g. symmetry) might exist across the centuries and across cultures; standards that signal health, fitness, and fertility in the mate (Robson, 2015) and thus guarantee human survival. The psychological study of aesthetics has also suggested that sensory and neurological responses to objects can be studied, and aesthetic preferences can be predicted (Jacobsen, 2010). In this line, the formalist aesthetic approach believes that the aesthetic experience relies on formal properties of visual stimuli that create intrinsic sensual beauty (Redies, 2015). These theories that claim a psychological, biological and formalist basis for the aesthetic taste have been contested in anthropological studies that reflect the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ladan Rahbari is a feminist anthropologist. She holds a PhD in Sociology and a Master's degree in Anthropology. She is currently affiliated with the Centre for Research on Culture and Gender (UGent, Belgium), and Centre of Expertise on Gender, Diversity and Intersectionality (VUB, Belgium) where she conducts a joint doctoral research project. Rahbari has teaching experience in several programs of social sciences and gender studies in different universities. Her research interests include gender and sexual politics, feminist and postcolonial theory, religion, space, body, and harm.

diversities in the beauty discourses across cultures (Robson, 2015). Anthropology has shown that perceptions of beauty and ugliness are not universal or neutral and change through time. It has also indicated that people from different times and geographies across the globe have called a great variety of different physical characteristics 'desirable' and 'beautiful'. This research is based on the latter approach that believes the socio-historical contexts have in many ways affected and shaped our perceptions of beauty and that our understanding about what is beautiful is contextually negotiated and varies depending on gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other socially constructed factors (Barriga, Shapiro & Jhaveri 2009: 139). Additionally, due to widespread and growing influence of the Western media—and politics—some perceptions of beauty and ugliness have been adopted universally. Though local accounts of beauty are still valid, specific beauty ideals inspired by the media and affected by the global power inequalities have become more universal (Jha 2016; Li et al. 2008). Cosmetic and beauty ideals are thus based on a combination of the regional, colonial and national discourses (Jha 2016), and on an interplay of cultural imperialism and cultural nationalism, which can be sources of social pressure to modify one's physical appearance (Aquino & Steinkamp 2016).

In the past four decades, the Iranian society has experienced great transformations in terms of gender and women's developments (Paidar 2002; Sedghi 2007); these changes have happened mostly in the societal level, while the state has maintained a somewhat static approach to women's rights and development. Although Iran is still far from being a society with gender equality, Iranian women's achievements—especially in the fields of science and higher education—have been prominent (Shavarini 2005; Rahbari 2016). These positive changes and developments have faced patriarchal resistance in different levels and forms. Due to this resistance, women's upward movement to the high-status positions in academia (e.g. to become tenured professors, department/faculty heads and other management positions) has faced institutional and individual challenges. Iranian universities are still characterized by a largely disproportionate gender imbalance in favor of men (Javaheri and Dariapour 2008; Rahbari 2013).

In the years 2014 and 2015 the author was involved in several discussions and debates in Iranian academic spaces<sup>2</sup> about the gradual increase of the number of women admitted into graduate and postgraduate level programs, especially in the sub-fields of humanities. Within the academic discussions about women's advancements in academia, two arguments were highly prevalent: (i) some argued that highly educated women were relatively 'uglier' than women with lower education. In this argument, the 'beauty' of the female body was presented as a form of social capital, and the lack of it was further used to explain women's pursuit of education because of their failure to achieve other 'feminine' goals; (ii) women were discussed to be generally 'happier' in domestic roles that did not require pursuing higher education. The conclusion of the two arguments was that women's academic achievements were either a substitute for other lacking attributes, or these achievements disadvantaged women by undermining their femininity and happiness. These normative arguments linked women's supposedly newly-emerged urge to make advancements in the society—including academia—as something that distanced them from their 'true' nature, partly defined by their happiness and physical beauty. These arguments indicated that physical beauty is considered an important asset for women in spite of their social achievements.

Beauty practices are an important part of women's lives in Iran. These practices are influenced by the Western beauty discourses (Rahbari, Dierickx, Longman, Coene, 2018). Historically in Iran, the black-eyed and black-haired beauties (of diverse genders) have been

---

<sup>2</sup> At the time, as a doctoral candidate and part-time lecturer in sociology.

praised for centuries in the Persian literature. This imagery is still as much considered desirable as the recent brand of light-haired and fair-skinned beauties with tiny noses. Either way—as in many other societies—there are only very few women who attain the level of beauty that conforms to either of these culturally indicated ideals (Wolf 1990). Conforming to mainstream ideas of beauty and attractiveness is one of the factors affecting gendered image in the workplace. While studies on gendered business image in Iran are scarce, it is well-known that work environments favor perceived masculinity. In higher levels of power hierarchies in work spaces, perceived femininity is looked down upon (Kark, Waismel-manor and Shamir, 2012). Women's perceived attractiveness is considered a feminine attribute and has dual effects. On the one hand, it is considered an asset in the job market and increases chances of employment (Bóo, Rossi, Urzua, 2013). On the other hand, beauty has been reported to be a liability for women in the job market (Desrumaux, De Bosscher, Léoni 2009). In the following, some Iranian academics' perceptions of female appearance and women's achievements are discussed.

### **Beauty in the Workplace: Harmful or Agentic Empowerment?**

Feminist theories have interpreted beauty discourses in diverse ways. In the late eighteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft criticized beauty as a cultural constraint that limited women's choices (Wollstonecraft 1796). Since then, some feminists have criticized fashion and beauty standards and others have considered them agentic and empowering practices. Some feminists have interpreted beauty practices as forms of bondage (Hollows 2000: 139). Radical feminists such as Sheila Jeffreys (2005) have referred to beauty norms as patriarchal mechanisms that mark, stereotype and dominate women, as the subordinate sex class. Some poststructuralist and postmodern feminists have viewed beauty practices as a part of fluid transgressive performativity (they use interpretations of the concept of performativity by Butler 1988), or as acts of empowerment (Van Zeijl 2003, cited in Duits and Van Zoonen 2006). While some feminists have interpreted beauty practices in terms of individual identity making, agency and empowerment (Davis 1994), others have discussed that the representations of women (particularly young women) as autonomous, agentic and empowered subjects (Gill and Schraff 2011: 9) fits into the neoliberal ideology that goes hand in hand with the intentions of the global capitalism and its agents such as the industrial suppliers of cosmetics who encourage the consumption of cosmetics and beauty products. By reducing agency to the individual choice, gendered power structures are no longer questioned, and experiences of disadvantaged individuals who do not have the bodily, financial or social means to 'empower' themselves through such practices become undermined.

Even though beauty practices can be agentic, they do not cease to be a part of the larger gendered norms. Physical beauty is a site of inequality and women of different classes, bodies, ages, ethnicities, colors, etc. are not equally empowered by beauty practices. They are however, similarly, but not equally, criticized and blamed for failing to practice what they are culturally expected to do. Female rape victims have long been blamed and re-victimized (Suarez & Gadalla 2010; Seaman, Werlinger and Wolter 2001) for having provoked sexual deviance by their appearances. On an everyday level, women have been stereotyped and blamed for consumerism (Stearns 2006: 62), while expected to look feminine by performing bodily rituals and beauty practices which make them take part in the consumer culture by purchasing costly products. Women in many cultures are socially expected to maintain certain standards of physical appearance to stay within the labor market, depending on the beauty requirements of the job (Watkins and Johnston 2000; Davis 1994; Kwan and Traunter 2009), but are blamed for not

functioning well enough and are not taken seriously or not allowed upward movement if they are perceived 'too feminine' (Bloksgaard 2011). It has also been suggested that physical appearance could create a hierarchy in the continuum of wages in many professional fields (Cereda 2012: 104). In addition, feminine beauty discourses have behavioral aspects (Chambers 2008: 25-26) that dictate how women walk, talk, sit and generally move and behave. Working women who do not comply with such standards might get stigmatized. Based on these reflections, it is possible to discuss that 'beauty' and physical appearance serve the cultural and societal mechanisms that maintain women in lower power status and classify them based on their physical features, and thus can be considered harmful practices. The notion of Harmful Cultural Practices is used in the next section to continue this discussion.

### **Beauty Practices as Harmful Cultural Practices**

Harmful Cultural Practices (HCP), or Harmful Traditional Practices (HTP) is defined by the United Nations OHCHR (1995) as practices that violate women's right to 'health, life, dignity and personal integrity' (OHCHR 1995: 2). Using this notion, the humanitarian discourses consider a wide range of practices 'cultural' and 'harmful', including female genital mutilation, child and forced marriage, unequal marital and inheritance rights, gender-based violence, nutritional taboos, traditional birth practices, honor related violence and polygamy (Longman & Bradley 2015). One problem with the literature on this concept is that it has mainly been used in referring to discriminatory practices against women in the Global South, especially in Africa and Asia; it has also been used referring to the problem of gender inequalities among migrant and minority populations in multicultural societies in the Global North (Longman & Coene 2015). This shows that women in the Global South are regarded as oppressed by static and monolithic traditions or cultures from which they are unable to emancipate from (Mohanty 1988; Narayan 1997). This approach has resulted in lesser attention to practices that are considered 'Western' or 'modern' such as beauty practices and cosmetic surgeries. While feminist scholars have been criticizing beauty practices especially from the 1970s onwards, they have rarely been framed as HCP. Sheila Jeffreys's (2005) attempt to frame beauty practices as HCP is the most prominent contemporary analysis on this subject. Using the definition of HCP, Jeffreys (2005) argued that beauty practices should be considered HCP because they are stereotyping women; are originated in the subordinate position of women in the society; are for the benefit of men [alternatively, other power structures/groups/individuals]; and are justified and maintained by traditions (Jeffreys 2005).

In the next segments, based on observations in the academic spaces in Iran, and interviews with male and female academics, perceptions of the relationship between beauty and women's achievements in academia are explored. In the final section, drawing on Jeffrey's analysis of beauty practices as HCP, the data is engaged with the conceptual presumptions discussed in this section.

### **Research methods**

This research is conducted using qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. Interviews were conducted with twenty male and ten female interviewees. The interviewees were chosen using random and targeted sampling among academics working in three Iranian public universities. The academic affiliations of the participants are not reported up on their request. Interviews were conducted in 2014 in several

locations including work and public spaces selected by the participants. Participants were all highly educated and worked in different disciplines of social sciences. The sample population was selected to fit the research scope, which was to explore how highly educated men and women perceived the relationship between physical appearance and women's achievements in academia.

Most participants were doctoral researchers (16, 6 females and 10 males); others were either part time lecturers (8, 2 females and 6 males), or tenured lecturers (6, 2 females and 4 males). All participants declared that they were active in both research and teaching activities at the time of the interviews. The interview included an introduction consisting of the argument about the relation between women's physical appearance and academic achievements (as discussed in the introduction section), followed by the question about the participants' personal and expert opinion about the argument. All participants were asked to provide sociological or anthropological analysis and explanations to justify their opinion. The interviews were all conducted in Farsi which is the mother-tongue of the researcher, as well as all the participants. Notes were taken during the interviews and were later translated to English by the author and were manually coded. The initial analysis indicated differences in answers given by female and male participants, so the findings were categorized based on participants' reported gender to emphasize on these observed gender differences. It is noteworthy that the fact that the researcher/interviewer was female, and personally or professionally acquainted with most of the participants, might have affected and possibly skewed some responses.

## Findings

### *Male Participants*

Some male participants found the argument about the relation between women's beauty practices and academic achievements funny and amusing. They answered the questions with humor and sarcasm. Most participants (14) agreed with the claim that women working in academia, especially doctoral candidates were less attractive than less educated women. Some participants compared their students in bachelor's, master's and doctorate levels to conclude [often humorously] that the higher the level of education, the lower the level of attractiveness. Some male participants (4) declared they never paid any attention to their female students' appearance and thus could not comment about. Other participants (2) believed that the negative correlation between attractiveness and the education level was valid not only in the case of women but also generalizable to men. Participants who believed highly educated women were less attractive offered different explanations. One popular explanation was that unattractive women were less marriageable and thus had a lower chance in finding a husband, and consequently a higher chance in pursuing higher education. One participant explained

*'Beautiful women are more likely to marry at early ages... marriage responsibilities and children keep them away from educational achievements.'*

According to these participants' analysis, marriage acted as an obstacle against higher education. There are studies in the Middle Eastern region that support this claim (e.g. Assaad, Krafft and Selwaness 2017). Iranian policy makers have relied on the reversal of this rationale to decrease women's enrollment in universities with the excuse of serving the family union (Zahedifar 2012), presuming that higher education and having an occupation do not go along with women maintaining their roles within the family.

Another interviewee gave a similar explanation, but mentioned the effects of men's tendency to choose wives among more attractive women:

*'Beautiful students might marry first because they get more marriage proposals... others can focus better on their studies because they are attracting less attention... by getting a good degree they can also increase their chances of marriage.'*

This quotation and other similar comments implied that women's life trajectories were somewhat dependent on men's decision making on whether to marry them or not, and that education was a secondary choice for women. They also implied that choosing a partner was considered an advantage reserved for men. Other participants shared similar views about beauty or education as social resources for women that were used to attract male partners. An interviewee explained

*'[Less attractive women] try to gain access to other resources. So, it is expected that they try to prove themselves in studies.'*

Despite the great diversity in marriage patterns in Iran, marriage remains fundamental to the social identity of many women, regardless of their achievements in other spheres of life. There is pressure on many women to get married (Tremayne 2006) and the choice of partner usually remains in men's hands. This can result in women attempting to attain resources that make them suitable candidates. And since physical appearance is one of the main traits by which men rank women (Grammar, Fink, Moller and Thornhill 2003), women might try to fit the standards of beauty to compete. However, the claim that women turn to achievements in work or studies in case they lack physical beauty is rudimentary at best for its lack of understanding of the complexity of human agency, and because it ignores the recent social transformations by and in favor of Iranian women that enables them to take more control over their private lives, at least in most urban areas in Iran. It also reduces women's choice-making to pursue higher education to merely a marketing choice for marriage.

There was also evidence of a tendency to correlate beauty practices with performing femininity among male participants; meaning that unattractive women were perceived to be more masculine:

*'Physical beauty is an important trait that affects women's lifecourse after puberty... Less attractive women tend to act masculine and imitate men... I have seen this among our female colleagues. I have read that [these] masculine women are more successful in their careers.'*

The idea that women who presented less 'femininity' imitated men derives from a static understanding of gender-based behavior. Women have faced stereotypes based on their 'unconventional' gendered attitudes, as dominant discourses have perpetuated binarism in expressions of gender. It is based on these discourses that adjectives such as 'competitive' and 'aggressive' have been ascribed to masculinity (Moran 1992; Sczesny, Spreemann and Stahlberg 2006). Additionally, in the contexts in which 'masculine' norms of behavior are privileged or rewarded, and 'feminine' norms are devalued or discouraged, it can be expected that women adapt

to the accepted norms (Litwin 2009). However, there have been advancements in gender studies towards deconstruction of what is perceived as 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics and behaviors (Riley and Evans 2017; Fine 2010; Butler 2004). Based on these arguments, one can either legitimately question whether attributes should or could be considered intrinsically masculine or feminine at all, or challenge the binarism in gendered attitudes, behaviors and expressions.

There were other participants who believed that educated people—regardless of their gender—were generally less attractive. One participant mentioned indifference to one's appearance as a virtue earned by educated people:

*'Women and men with higher education tend to care less about their appearances. They don't pay as much attention to their looks as others... It is the consequence of getting more education I suppose; the age and time factors are also influential.'*

Higher education was interpreted as a form of cultural capital in this view; a capital that could substitute the lack of other forms of capital (e.g. attractiveness). A participant also mentioned that being highly educated was usually achieved at a certain age in one's life-course when physical appearances mattered less. He also stated that academics faced serious time shortages that made it impossible for them to seek bodily perfection that was a time-consuming task even if they desired it.

Another participant explained that women and men were similarly affected in their lifecourse if they were perceived more/less beautiful:

*'I think we can say the same thing about men. In a society like ours where beauty is such an asset, good-looking girls and boys are more probable to marry young and settle down. Naturally, that makes it harder for them to pursue their studies.'*

One participant declared that it was *'much better for both men and women if women fulfill domestic tasks'*. A small number of male participants also believed that the increase in women's participation in academia and in higher education in the Iranian society was not necessarily *'for the best'*, not for the women and not for the society at large.

### *Female Participants*

The female participants found the arguments about women's appearance disturbing, judgmental and sexist. Some female participants (6) found the assumption of an existing relation between women's beauty and the level of education either stigmatizing or simply baseless. Other female participants (3) believed that the claim of an existing relation between the two might be true for several reasons such as marriageability of more attractive women at early ages (similar to some male participants). Some participants also discussed that women in academia were inclined to behave in 'masculine manners' by rejecting beauty practices and this would help them gain educational achievements, because (i) they would be taken more seriously, and (ii) they would not be wasting time on beauty practices. Some participants used examples of successful female sociologists in Iran who seemed indifferent to their physical appearances; these examples included women with 'deep voices' who were perceived as 'arrogant' but were more successful in their academic careers, while others were considered too feminine to be fit for 'getting the job done'

(similar ideas discussed in e.g. Storey, Anthony, Wahid 2017; and earlier studies such as Prather 1971).

One participant believed that the idea that uneducated people were less attractive was applicable to men, but not women; because due to the existing social pressures on women, they felt the urge to conform to the beauty ideals no matter their social status. Stigmatization of working women in academia was largely believed to be a result of the perceived displacement from social positions traditionally allocated to women:

*'Calling [educated] women ugly carries the same logic as calling women with [sexually disgracing words] ... not only men; some sexist women do the same thing. It is not an uncommon thing to hear a woman call another ugly. In women, it is called 'jealousy' but when men use it they will try to convince you that it is a scientific fact.'*

According to this participant, enforcing feminine beauty standards was a backlash against the increase in women's participation in academia. The pursuit of supposedly masculine achievements transformed 'beauties' to ugly 'beasts' who wanted to take control over spheres that were traditionally not considered appropriate for them. Another participant made a similar comment by pointing out the increase in women's participation in higher education, and the backlash from men who opposed women's advancements:

*'Let them call us ugly. They are just angry we are getting all the best positions slowly and things are not as they were before.'*

Another participant opposed the supposed relation between beauty and women's achievements by explaining that beauty was a dynamic and subjective notion that changed not only in different periods of history, but also in every individual lifecourse. She also objected that such remarks could be backed scientifically, asking *'Do we even have a general agreement on what beauty means?'*

Another participant blamed the officially enforced standards of clothing, and the university dress code as a reason for perceptions on women working at universities and other educational institutions. Besides the hijab, universities in Iran encourage the usage of Chador [a full-body-covering cape] and enforce the usage of a loose (at least) knee-long manteaux that should be worn over loose trousers, both preferably in dark colors. There are detailed codes for shoes, socks, make-up, wearing ornaments on the visible parts of the body (hands and face and other body parts such as nails; e.g. wearing colored nail polish is not allowed). The interviewee believed that the strict dress codes left no place for bodily expression and 'beauty':

*'The dress code has a role to play... this official uniform is making us look ugly... it is affecting the way people perceive our appearance.'*

As this participant suggested, the political regulations enforced on women's appearance affected their social and self-image. Other studies have suggested that in Iran, due to the strict regulations of dress code, many women might try to 'beautify' the only visible parts of their body by going under facial plastic surgeries (e.g. Sadrnabavi and Fooladian 2014; Lenehan 2011).

Another participant argued that discussions about women's appearance in the work space were sexist and discriminating, and it was better to avoid starting any such debates in academic spaces:

*'Workplaces are already very stressful for women. The last thing we need is another source of stress... ideas of beauty and ugliness exist of course, that is a reality and every man and woman is judged by them; [but] to pursue them is both impossible and time-consuming.'*

Two other female participants believed that there might be a negative correlation between women's beauty and their choices to pursue higher education. They pointed out that general ideas about the importance of physical beauty, and perfection for women could in different ways affect women's choices in their lifetime.

### **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore male and female academics' perceptions of beauty and women's achievements in academia. The results included participant's explanations on women's appearance and its relation to their achievements in higher education. A general observation was the gender differences in emotional responses and attitudes towards the interview topic and questions. While some male participants approached the topic with humor, female participants expressed anger and annoyance, and found the discussions about women's beauty stigmatizing and sexist. Another general finding was that most male participants and some female participants had very static ideas on notions of 'femininity/masculinity' and 'beauty/ugliness'. Only a few participants pointed out the relativity of the concepts, and for most of the sample population, such notions were considered fixed and largely agreed up on.

There were several explanations on the relationship between beauty and educational achievements. Most male participants viewed beauty as a primary social resource of status for women to be used in marriage marketing; and thought of education as a secondary resource that was used in the lack of the primary capital. Women's beauty practices and education were deduced as a struggle for sexual attraction. Among the male participants, the most popular explanation for women's tendency not to pursue higher education was their marriageability in younger ages. Some male participants also addressed time and age as other factors affecting highly educated people's choices of bodily practices regardless of their gender.

The female participants' responses offered more diversity. Some participants referred to the glorification of 'masculinity' in the workplace and how feminine appearance did not work in their favor. Others referred to existing sexism and considered it a part of the backlash by a patriarchal order that feared a take-over of academia by women. It was concluded by some female participants that beauty was an excuse and a means to undermine women's achievements in a culture that expected them to give up personal achievements for mainstream traditional roles; thus, ugliness was considered a stigma for women entering the supposedly masculine and male dominated arenas such as higher education. One participant questioned the logic of comments made on women's beauty by using a post-modernist approach, and by questioning the validity of the concept of 'beauty' as a homogeneously agreed up on notion. There were also other women who viewed beauty practices as time-consuming sources of stress for working women. A

participant also mentioned the political aspect of body management in Iran, and lack of freedom in expressing oneself through clothing and fashion choices.

Approaching the data using the notion of Harmful Cultural Practices, different forms of harm – mostly social and cultural – were mentioned in beauty practices. A broad understanding of harm considers not only physical, but also psychological, and social types of it. This is one criticism toward the literature of the concept of HCP; as it has been oriented more often towards physical aspects of harm, and less towards other forms. Additionally, it is not always the beauty practices – the products and processes – that directly inflict harm, but the broader historically created discourses around femininity and feminine beauty. The beauty discourses, as discussed by one of the participants, could produce stress for women, and as mentioned by others, stereotype women's behavior and performance. Beauty ideals can have negative effects on women's wellbeing and social life (Wolf 1991; Saltzberg and Chrisler 1995; Engeln-Maddox 2006; Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac 2005) and have social and political consequences. The body is the central location for the expression and reproduction of power relationships (Dellinger and Williams 1977: 152). If the idea that beauty is considered the primary source of value for women—an unstable and transient source, is widely accepted and internalized, it can divert women from other trajectories that lead to education, economic stability, independence, and other objectives that could lead to more power in society.

Pursuing beauty is sometimes explained on the individual level and as a personal choice, and it could indeed be an agentic and creative practice. There are studies in Iran (and elsewhere) showing that beauty practices are conducted for creative, performative and playful self-expressions and are sometimes signs of political and social resistance (Jafari and Maclaran 2014). However, global beauty trends do speak of women's attempt to fulfill the socially created expectations that are partly transnational and homogeneous, rather than individually set goals (Jha 2016). Similar to other social issues, beauty practices are complex, and serve different functions. The structural and patriarchal manipulations of notions/discourses could co-exist alongside reclaimed, agentic and even emancipatory forms of the same notions; and one's presence does not contradict or deny the existence of the other. But considering beauty discourses as harmful does not mean that that beauty practices should necessarily be categorized as HCP. It is rather to question the underlying logic of the concept of HCP that associates harm to specific 'cultures' that are assumed to have negative effects on women's health, life, dignity and personal integrity in the Global South, but does not pay attention to widespread beauty practices, cosmetic surgeries, dieting, and other body modifications that are globally practiced.

Another important finding of this research was that even though women are a minority in decision-making and powerful positions in Iranian academia (and other positions of power), and are haunted by limited binarist perceptions of femininity, participants who took part in this study demonstrated critical perspectives on the contemporary position and the future of women in academia and higher education. They used the statistics of female participation in tertiary education and women's academic achievements to discuss that things were changing for the Iranian women in higher education (for data see Mehran 2009; Shavarini 2005). They used exemplary success stories in their own workplaces to show how despite the interventions of traditionalism and the patriarchal resistance, women paved the ways to approach high status positions for themselves, and for the future generations.

To conclude, this study's findings indicated that while sexism and stigmatization of women based on their appearance was present in academic workplaces, such ideas were also contested and challenged. This study's choice of methods does not allow for generalization of the findings,

including perceptions of Iranian academics on women's physical appearance and academic achievements and the observed gendered differences, but it does signal the necessity of more critical research on sexism in Iranian academia, and on the limitations of HCP as a globally useful concept.

**Acknowledgements:** This article is part of a research project made possible by the financial support of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

## References

- Aquino, Y.S., Steinkamp, N. (2016). Borrowed Beauty? Understanding Identity in Asian Facial Cosmetic Surgery, *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 19(3):431-441.
- Assaad, R., Krafft, C. and Selwaness, I. (2017). The Impact of Early Marriage on Women's Employment in the Middle East and North Africa, GLO Discussion Paper Series, Global Labor Organization (GLO), <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/157645>
- Maestripieri, D., Henry, A., Nickels, N. (2017). Explaining Financial and Prosocial Biases in Favor of Attractive People: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Economics, Social psychology, and Evolutionary Psychology, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 40: 1-16.
- Barriga, C. A., Shapiro, M. A., Jhaveri, R. (2009). Media Context, Female Body Size and Perceived Realism, *Sex Roles*, 60:128–141.
- Bloksgaard, L. (2011). Masculinities, Femininities at work – The Horizontal Gender Segregation in the Danish Labour Market, *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 1(2): 5-21.
- Bóo, F. L., Rossi, M. A., & Urzúa, S. S. (2013). The labor market return to an attractive face: Evidence from a field experiment. *Economics Letters*, 118(1), 170-172.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Cereda, A. (2012). Professional Beauty: Narratives about Women in the Italian Medical Institution. In Gabrielle Simpson (Ed.) *Exploring the Critical Issues of Beauty* (pp.101-111), Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary, <http://www.interdisciplinarypress.net/product/exploring-the-critical-issues-of-beauty/>
- Chambers, C. (2008). *Sex, Culture and Justice: The limits of choice*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press.
- Davis, K. (1994). *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of the Cosmetic Surgery*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Dellinger, K., Williams, C. L. (1997). Makeup at Work: Negotiating Appearance Rules in the Workplace. *Gender and Society*, 11(2): 151-177.
- Desrumaux, P., De Bosscher, S., Léoni, V. (2009). Effects of Facial Attractiveness, Gender, and Competence of Applicants on Job Recruitment, *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 68:33-42.
- Duits, L. & Van Zoonen, L. (2006). Disciplining Girls' Bodies in the European Multicultural Society, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(2): 103–117.
- Engeln-Maddox, R. (2006). Buying a Beauty Standard or Dreaming of a New Life? Expectations Associated with Media Ideals, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30(3), 258-266.
- Fine, C. (2010). *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference*, London: Norton and Company.
- Gill, R., Scharff, C. (2011). *New Femininities: Post-feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grammar, K., Fink, B., Moller, A. and Thornhill, R. (2003). Darwinian Aesthetics: Sexual Selection and the Biology of Beauty, *Biological Review*, V. 78, pp. 385-407.
- Hollows, J. (2000). *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Jacobsen, T. (2010). Beauty and the brain: culture, history and individual differences in aesthetic appreciation. *Journal of anatomy*, 216(2), 184-191.
- Jafari, A., Maclaran, P. (2014). Escaping into the World of Make-up Routines in Iran, *The Sociological Review* 62: 359–382.
- Javaheri, F. and Dariapour, Z. (2008). Female University Lecturer's Career Problems, *Iranian Journal of Research on Women*, V. 6(2), pp. 79-106.

- Jeffreys, S. (2005). *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Jha, R. M. (2016). *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism and the National Body*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kark, R., Waismel-Manor, R., Shamir, B. (2012). Does Valuing Androgyny and Femininity Lead to a Female Advantage? The Relationship Between Gender-Role, Transformational Leadership and Identification, *The Leadership Quarterly* 23(3): 620-640.
- Kwan, S.; Traunter, M. N. (2009). Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender, and Questions of Agency, *Sociology Compass*, 3(1): 49-71.
- Lenehan, S. (2011). Nose Aesthetics: Rhinoplasty and Identity in Tehran, *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 6, 1, 47-62.
- Li, E. P.H., Jeong Min, H., Belk Russell W., Kimura, J., Bahl, S. (2008). Skin Lightening and Beauty in Four Asian Cultures, in Angela Y. Lee and Dilip Soman, Duluth, MN (Eds.) *Advances in Consumer Research*, Volume 35, Pages: 444-449, Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth: Association for Consumer Research, <http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13415/volumes/v35/NA-35>
- Little, A. C., Jones, B. C., & DeBruine, L. M. (2011). Facial attractiveness: evolutionary based research. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B: Biological Sciences*, 366(1571), 1638-1659.
- Litwin, H. A. (2009). *Shadow and Light: A Study of Patterns of Relationship among Women in the Workplace*, A Synopsis of Dissertation Research Conducted by Anne H. Litwin, [http://www.annelitwin.com/awards/ShadowandLight\\_DissSynopsis.pdf](http://www.annelitwin.com/awards/ShadowandLight_DissSynopsis.pdf)
- Longman, C.; Bradley, T. (2015). Interrogating the Concept of 'Harmful Cultural Practices'. In Longman, C. & Bradley, T. (Eds.) *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices*. Farnham (England) and Burlington (United States): Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Longman, C. & Coene, G. (2015). *Harmful Cultural Practices and Minority Women*. In Longman, C. and Bradley, T. (Eds.). *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: Gender, Culture and Coercion*. Farnham (England) and Burlington (United States): Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Mehran, G. (2009). "Doing and Undoing Gender": Female Higher Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran, *International Review of Education*, 55(5), 541.
- Mohanty, C.T. (1988). Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist review*, 30, 65-88.
- Moran, B. (1992). Gender Differences in Leadership, *Library Trends*, V. 40, No. 3, Winter, pp. 475-491.
- Narayan, U. (1997). *Dislocating Cultures. Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- OHCHR, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (1995). Fact Sheet No.23, Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children.
- Paidar, P. (2002). Democratization and the Politics of Gender, in M. Molyneux and S. Razavi (Eds.), pp. 239-276, *Gender Justice, Development and Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prather, J. (1971). Why Can't Women Be More Like Men, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 15(2): 172-182.
- Puhl, R. M., Heuer, C. A. (2009). The stigma of Obesity: A Review and Update, Obesity, Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University.

- Rahbari, L. (2013). Iranian Women's Role in Science and Education, International Conference on Social Science Research (ICSSR), Penang: Malaysia, e-ISBN 978-967-11768-1-8.
- Rahbari, L. (2016). Women in Higher Education and Academia in Iran. *Sociology and Anthropology*, 4:1003-1010.
- Rahbari, L., Dierickx, S., Longman, C., & Coene, G. (2018). 'Kill Me but Make Me Beautiful': Harm and Agency in Female Beauty Practices in Contemporary Iran. *Iran and the Caucasus*, 22(01), 50-60.
- Riley, S., & Evans, A. 2017. Gender. In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Social Psychology* (pp. 409-431). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Redies, C. (2015). Combining universal beauty and cultural context in a unifying model of visual aesthetic experience. *Frontiers in human neuroscience*, 9, 218.
- Robson, D. (2015). The Myth of Universal Beauty, Retrieved 7 July 2018, from: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150622-the-myth-of-universal-beauty>
- Rothblum, E. D. (1992). *The Stigma of Women's Weight: Social and Economic Realities, Feminism and Psychology*, London: Sage.
- Sadrnabavi, F., Fooladian, A. (2014). An Investigation on the Reasons of the Iranian Women's Tendency to Cosmetic Surgery: a Mashad Case Study, *Indian Journal of Fundamental and Applied Life Sciences*, 4, 4, 408-411.
- Saltzberg, E. and Chrisler, J. C. (1995). Beauty Is the Beast: Psychological Effects of the Pursuit of the Perfect Female Body, in *Women: A Feminist Perspective* edited by Jo Freeman (pp. 306-315), Fifth Edition, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Sczesny, S., Spreemann, S., & Stahlberg, D. (2006). Masculine = Competent? Physical Appearance and Sex as Sources of Gender-Stereotypic Attributions. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 65(1): 15-23.
- Seaman D. J., Werlinger M. E., Wolter K. A. (2001). Perceptions of Male and Female Rape Victimization as Moderated by Perceived Attractiveness, *Journal of Undergraduate Research*, IV: 89-96.
- Sedghi, H. (2007). *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The Feminization of Iranian Higher Education, *International Review of Education*, 51(4): 329-347.
- Stearns, P. N. (2006). *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Storey, V. A., Anthony, A. K., & Wahid, P. (2017). Gender-Based Leadership Barriers: Advancement of Female Faculty to Leadership Positions in Higher Education. In V. Wang (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Strategic Leadership and Management* (pp. 244-258). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Suarez, E. & Gadalla, T. M. (2010). Stop Blaming the Victim: A Meta-Analysis on Rape Myths, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(11): 2010-2035.
- Tremayne, S. (2006). Modernity and Early Marriage in Iran: A View from Within, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 2(1): 65-94.
- Watkins, L. M. & Johnston, L. (2000). Screening Job Applicants: The Impact of Physical Attractiveness and Application Quality. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 8(2), 76-84.
- Wolf, N. (1990). *The Beauty Myth*. London: Chatto and Windus.

- Wollstonecraft, M. 1796. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London: Johnson.
- Yamamiya, Y., Cash, T. F., Melnyk, S. E., Posavac, H. D., & Posavac, S. S. (2005). Women's Exposure to Thin-and-beautiful Media Images: body image effects of media-ideal internalization and impact-reduction interventions. *Body Image*, 2(1), 74-80.
- Zahedifar, E. (2012). *Women in Higher Education in Iran: Student perceptions of career prosperity in the labour market*. MS thesis, University of Oslo.