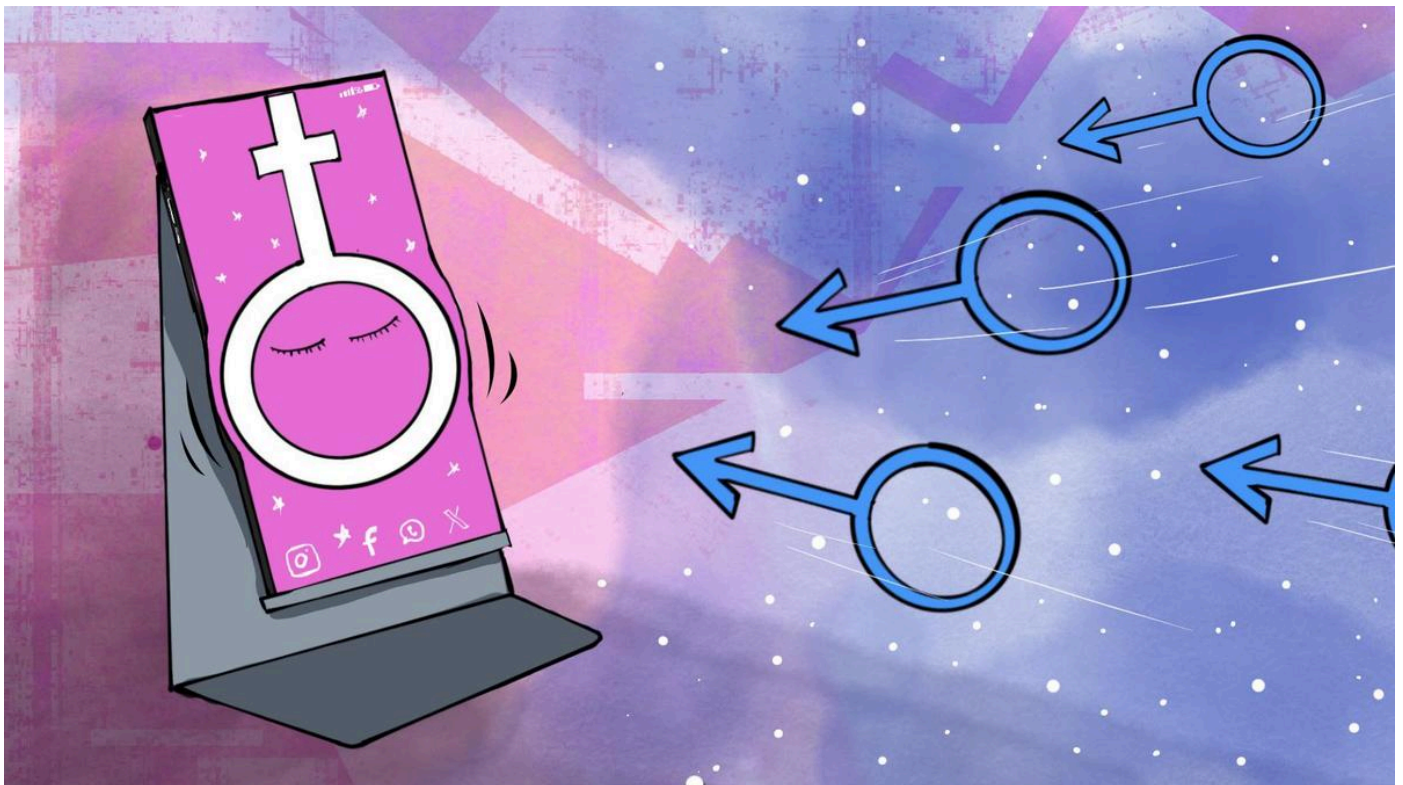


# The tyranny of beauty standards: one story fits all

Addressing this will require accountability from platforms, publications, and institutions which continue to act as the authority on how women's bodies are perceived and judged

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Popular culture has set beauty standards so bizarre that women often feel trapped in an impossible cycle of scrutiny. | Photo Credit: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Across 13 countries and 104 women in an age group spanning five decades, all connected by one experience, shows a survey conducted by me through Google Forms and publicised on social media platforms. The common experience is a feeling of being observed and measured.

Popular culture has set beauty standards so bizarre that women often feel trapped in an impossible cycle of scrutiny. It may not be explicit yet it's constant: a relative's comment, a reaction reel on Instagram, or a fashion trend that quietly reclassifies an

entire body type as undesirable. Women's bodies remain a subject of public debate in a way that men's do not. The findings illuminate insights on the complicated relationship many women have with their bodies as a consequence of the unrealistic beauty standards that exist.

## Unsolicited remarks

Of the women surveyed, 83% have experienced unsolicited remarks on their bodies by family members. "I was shamed for being fat, called derogatory names in school, and bullied by classmates and family... pushing me towards depression, a borderline eating disorder, even suicidal thoughts," one of them says.

Internet slang such as "almond mom" is testament to the shared experiences of women of all sizes facing pressure from loved ones to look a certain way. Another said, "Only fair-skinned girls are given opportunities in school functions to be at the front stage."

Women face unwarranted comments outside the family too: "I work out but people comment on my weight and eating proportions saying I'm too skinny."

With the advent of the Internet, body shaming is propagated, subliminally if not overtly, through media. Media representations have a demonstrable tendency to influence conversation, fashion, belief, culture, and behaviour.

Asked if they felt represented in the media, a participant said: "It is an 'othered' representation of body type; as less desirable... It is shown as a valiant fight to be comfortable in your own body."

"There are more plus-sized actors but they usually fall under the 'desirable' body types... representation feels very 'sanitised' for popular gaze," a respondent said.

Another noted how representation shifts with trends: "A few years ago, curvier women became represented but with Y2K fashion trends, smaller body types have become more 'fashionable' again."

## Trimming the plate

Consider the films *Gone With The Wind* (1939) and *Luckiest Girl Alive* (2022). Though released 91 years apart, both show women curbing their appetite in front of men. Of the

respondents, 52% said they felt hesitant to eat as much as they wanted while dining publicly.

When women build community in virtual spaces to seek comfort in shared experiences, they still risk abuse online. On social media, 98% of participants said they had witnessed mid- to plus-size women being harassed online, while 92% said they had seen women bullied for being petite or “too skinny”. Certain corners of the Internet have long harboured communities that glorify disordered eating, actively encouraging young girls towards anorexia and bulimia.

The romanticisation of specific bone structures such as thigh gaps and collarbones, framed as aspirational, has had documented consequences on the mental health of adolescent girls.

Of the participants, 88% said they felt overwhelmed by beauty standards online: “How is one to do skincare, gym, cook, eat healthy food, get good sleep, with a 9-5, doing chores?” The question points to something larger: how many of these insecurities are manufactured by an economy that profits from women’s self-doubt.

As much as 86% said they found information on weight-management confusing and contradictory, a problem compounded by the fact that fitness research had historically centred male subjects, leaving little accessible science on how the menstrual cycle affected strength and endurance. Many influencers focus solely on aesthetic goals while claiming to champion “health”.

As one participant put it: “The Internet makes you feel all your health ailments are because you are fat.”

## Structural failure

This survey brings forth not just a catalogue of grievances but a portrait of structural failure, in media, medicine and design of online spaces. The women surveyed are not outliers, they represent a majority navigating beauty standards dependent on trend cycles and algorithms which sustain industries that profit from dissatisfaction. Individual resilience in a space such as this may fall short. Addressing this would require accountability from platforms, publications and institutions which continue to act as the authority on how women’s bodies are perceived and judged.

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