

Beauty at Any Cost
Discussion Guide

Introduction

Beauty at Any Cost documents the harm caused to women and girls by Americans' obsession with unattainable, airbrushed and artificial female physical beauty. The issue is not new, but the extent to which it is invading the lives of young girls and women of color, and the lengths to which women will go to achieve an unattainable look, is an increasing problem. The pressure to achieve unrealistic physical beauty is an undercurrent in the lives of virtually all women in the United States, and its steady drumbeat is wreaking havoc on women in ways that far exceed the bounds of their physical selves. From new levels of spending on cosmetic alteration to health risks and to the emergence of a "mean girls" culture, the lifelong burden of an unattainable beauty and body image is taking a terrible toll in all areas of women's lives, from economic well-being to health to interpersonal relationships.

Guidelines for Discussion

Discussing issues related to definitions of beauty, self-esteem, weight, and physical appearance can be a deeply personal and emotional experience. Consequently, it is important to keep the following tips in mind:

- Make all participants aware of the time frame and purpose of the discussion.
- Establish guidelines for the discussion (i.e. respect others' feelings and experiences, listen without interrupting, etc).
- Encourage participation from everyone in the group.
- If the discussion takes place directly right after reading the report, take a break to give participants time to gather their thoughts.

Discussion Questions – Thoughts and Feelings

- What women do you think are beautiful? Why?
- Do you think you are beautiful? Why?
- What messages did your family communicate to you about female beauty? About your beauty?
- How do you talk about other women's beauty to other women? To men?
- Do you ever feel pressure to change your looks/body to be more "beautiful"?
- Do you feel manipulated by the beauty and cosmetic industries to buy their products?
- How have you been personally affected by America's obsession with idealized female beauty?

Discussion Questions – About the Report

- Were there any statistics in the report that surprised you?
- What was the most important message you took away from the report?
- Did you learn any new information about the cosmetic industry from the report?
- What do you think of the dramatic increases in cosmetic surgeries and procedures?

Beauty at Any Cost Discussion Guide - Continued

Discussion Questions – About the Issues

- Do Americans have an unhealthy obsession with female beauty?
- Do you think employers intentionally discriminate based on a woman's physical appearance?
- Have you ever experienced any form of discrimination based on your physical appearance?
- Have you ever experienced low self-esteem or felt insecure because of your physical appearance?
- What role do the cosmetic industry, media, dieting, and fashion industries play in fostering low self-esteem in women? What motivates them to do this?
- What role do women's magazines play in promoting idealized female beauty?
- What role do pornography and men's magazines play in promoting idealized female beauty?
- Do you think the FDA should more rigorously regulate cosmetics?
- When does the pursuit of female beauty cross the line into unhealthy behavior?
- Do you think it is possible to change the way that Americans define female beauty? If yes, how would you make this happen?

Conclusion

As discussion time nears an end, ask the group to name the five most important points from the discussion. Ask if any of the participants have changed how they see beauty in themselves and others. Ask if anyone has decided to challenge the beauty images presented by the cosmetic and fashion industries, and by the media?

SUGGESTED READINGS:

- *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, by Mary Pipher
- *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty*, by Nancy Etcoff
- *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, by Naomi Wolf
- *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, by Joan Jacobs Brumberg
- *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It*, by M. Gigi Durham
- *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the mass media*, by Susan J. Douglas
- *More Than Skin Deep: What to Look for in Cosmetics, What to Avoid*, by Judith Snyderman, Washingtonian Magazine, July 2008. <http://www.washingtonian.com/articles/shopping/8751.html>