

The beauty industry: Out of control?

TODAY THE beauty industry, which refers to toiletries, cosmetics, dieting products and plastic surgery, is worth billions of pounds. The negative effects that its methods and advertising have, particularly on women, in the quest for profit can be traced back over hundreds of years.

Becci Heagney

Living in a society which encourages valuing women for their bodies rather than any other contribution they can make constantly induces low self esteem. We are made to feel that in order to succeed we need to conform to a narrow ideal of what a woman should look like. This can often lead to women taking costly, unnatural and unhealthy measures in an attempt to achieve this ideal.

Advertising for beauty products plays on this anxiety that women feel. It is clear that the women's movement has not been able to fundamentally change this aspect of the beauty industry.

The late Victorian press complained that women fighting for the right to be educated were 'spoiling their complexions'. And more recently, adverts in the 1980s asked

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women: 'is your face paying the price of success?'

But over the years advertising has altered depending on the position and experience of women at the time. For example, during the 1970s, cosmetics, fragrance, and hair-care products all suffered flat or declining sales which is widely believed to have been an effect of the 'second-wave' feminist movement.

What cost?

THE INDUSTRY had then to sink to new lows to carry on selling unnecessary products to women by making them seem 'necessary'. They are now often endorsed by medical professionals to imply they will improve women's health and to keep

their profits rolling in.

But at what cost? There are countless examples of women's skin being burned with acid face peels and cosmetic surgery causing severe infections or death. Dieting pills have undoubtedly contributed to a rise in eating disorders and the health problems that go along with them.

The 'ideal' woman

THROUGH THE media we are bombarded with daily images of celebrities who are able to afford to fit into this narrow ideal of what a woman should look like. The pressure on ordinary women to look a certain way in order to be appreciated is therefore constant.

For working class women who cannot afford expensive surgery in Britain, it often means that they are driven to undergo dangerous surgery in unlicensed clinics or to take out loans to pay the cost.

This drive towards 'perfection' has started to affect the confidence of not just women, but younger girls too.

Recent statistics show that girls as young as six years old are concerned about their weight. Rather than magazines for teenage girls explaining how to lead a healthy lifestyle, there is page after page of quick fix diets, how to style hair and how to wear make-up.

This is not to say that it is wrong to take care over your appearance but the idea that the only way to succeed as a woman is through the way that you look is very damaging.

Quick fix solutions

ONE ARM of the beauty industry that perhaps is the most damaging is the wide range of diets and related products now available. The vast majority of people on slimming schemes and diet pills regain any weight lost.

These quick-fix approaches only link losing weight to 'looking good' rather than any health benefits. This leads to an attitude to dieting that is dangerous for many women, as highlighted by the multiple deaths of underweight models in recent years.

Profit is put above the safety of workers and consumers in the beauty industry. The US Food and Drug Administration estimates that 89% of ingredients used in beauty products have not passed safety laws.

The chemicals used can cause



There are countless examples of beauty treatments going wrong.

health risks for the women using body creams, hair dyes and cosmetics. But they also pose a risk for people (again mainly women) who work in the industry.

Some women working in beauty salons, for example, have suffered with long term health problems from high levels of exposure to these products, especially nail varnishes. The testing of these ingredients would add extra cost so the companies simply decide not to do it.

The beauty industry as a whole serves to reinforce the objectifica-

tion of women along with the idea that problems can be solved through the use of certain products.

The problems that women face such as sexism, unequal pay, attacks on abortion rights and being the hardest hit by cuts in public services cannot be solved with the use of an expensive anti-ageing cream.

Smoke screen

THE BEAUTY industry also reinforces the false idea that women can change their lives just by changing themselves. Inequality and the problems that ordinary women face are a product of the capitalist system and can therefore not be fully solved without a fundamental change in society.

The rights that women have won have not been fought for on an individual basis. They have been achieved through making links with other women and the labour movement as a whole.

The future struggles that women face in defending our public services can only be won by uniting workers, both male and female, and organising against these attacks. The beauty industry is used as a smoke screen to disguise this.

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Untested chemicals are a big danger for women working in the industry.

Diminished responsibility

I SAW this report the other day: "Former cab driver kissed his 100-year-old mother on the cheek and said "sorry" after stabbing her to death". The man, aged 62 and suffering from depression and the onset of the degenerative Parkinson's disease was jailed for six years after pleading guilty to manslaughter by reason of diminished responsibility.

The article mentioned he'd been his mother's main carer. In view of her age I suspect he'd looked after her for her quite a long time. I wonder how much support he received. In my experience (I've cared for my mum for six years) being the main carer means doing 99% of the caring.

There's very little help available. I was offered three hours 'respite' a week, with the option of paying for

extra hours. I get paid £53 a week. We got approval for a bathroom conversion but in the end family members paid as it takes six months for applications to go through.

Yet I still count myself lucky as my mum is funny, tough, has all her wits about her and a brilliant sense of humour. We also share the same views and interests.

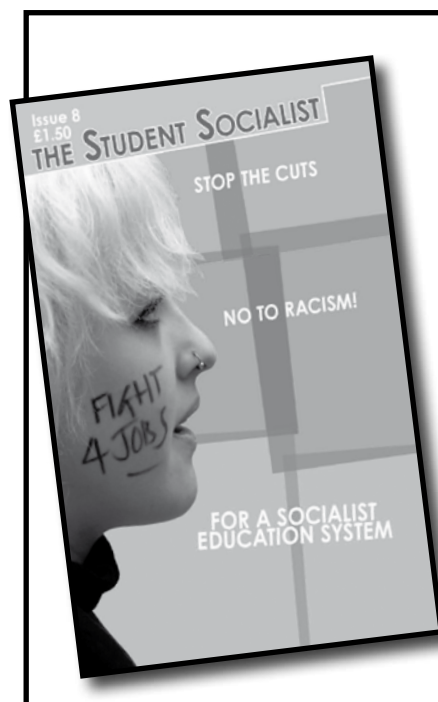
Imagine what it's like looking after someone who is difficult, disturbed and irrational or who has constant physical needs? We've been told there's "extra help" in the "last six to eight weeks" but in the absence of a crystal ball we don't know when that might be. Hundreds of thousands of people - many of them children or elderly themselves - are 'main' carers.

How must this man have felt

knowing that he was becoming ill and incapable himself? I read somewhere that the NHS budget would double if people like us stopped providing care. There's a lot of talk about giving carers more recognition. This includes the occasional award from the media. Perhaps they'll have a Big Society medal? It makes my blood boil, especially where children are involved.

Carers are not saints but the frantic act of that sick man was a sign of despair. Perhaps he won't find prison too bad. He was already in a kind of prison - trapped in his mum's dependency on him and a system that offers no respite or support. And as the cuts loom large, the question arises - whose responsibility is diminished?

A Socialist Party member



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