



First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls

Website Summary

September-October 2020 Spotlight: Body Image

MAKE YOUR VOICE
HEARD

**#GENERATION
EQUAL**



YOU SAID – WE LISTENED

In September and October 2020, we invited public feedback on the Spotlight topic of body image. We'd like to give a huge thank you to everyone who shared their experiences and ideas.

A full report has been given to the NACWG and a summary version is shared below.

Please note: these reports summarise the responses received to this open call for submissions. They do not represent the views of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (we are seeking feedback to gain more insight) nor do they represent a majority view or the view of the Scottish population. They represent the views of those organisations or individuals who have chosen, proactively, to respond.

Who did we hear from?

We heard from a range of individuals and groups who held 'Wee Circle' discussions. The diversity questions we ask are optional but show that responses were shared by people of a range of ages and backgrounds.

WE ASKED THREE QUESTIONS:

- Q.1. IN SCOTLAND, WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST EQUALITY ISSUES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN RELATION TO BODY IMAGE?**
- Q.2. IN SCOTLAND, HOW CAN WE CHANGE ATTITUDES TO SUPPORT BODY IMAGE AND IMPROVE GENDER EQUALITY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS?**
- Q.3. WHAT ACTIONS SHOULD THE NACWG RECOMMEND TO IMPROVE GENDER EQUALITY FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN RELATION TO BODY IMAGE?**



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WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The responses spanned eight main areas:

1. Mental health and self-esteem: eating disorders, self harm, confidence, cosmetic surgery
2. Pressure faced by young girls: societal ideals and expectations, school environments
3. Representation in the media: advertising, celebrity, lack of diverse body types
4. The influence of social media: body positivity, empowerment, appearance
5. Hypersexualisation of female bodies: objectification, rape culture, value
6. The necessary privilege inherent to healthier lifestyles: poverty, race, disability, norms
7. The proliferation of industries based around women's bodies: diet culture, cosmetics, fashion
8. Participation in sports: self esteem, periods, resources and funding
9. Redefining 'healthy': BMI, gendered norms and ideals

Overall, feedback made clear that body image is a common and pervasive issue that impacts women and girls across many areas throughout their lives.



MAIN ISSUES



1.

MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-ESTEEM

Respondents highlighted the relationship between physical self-perception and mental health, with some referencing how eating disorders disproportionately affect women and girls. Other responses touched upon self-esteem and confidence; and how this negative evaluation of self, deriving from body image, can lead to damaging physical consequences - including self harm and ill-advised cosmetic interventions.



2. PRESSURE FACED BY YOUNG GIRLS

Feedback referenced the pressure felt by many girls to look (and act) in line with predetermined societal ideals. Responses highlighted how some of the language used around girls, and behaviour within schools, perpetuates the idea that a woman or girl's value is connected to her looks. Some respondents noted how these pressures and ideals, seeded from a young age, can go on to have lifelong impacts on behaviour, aspirations and advancement in life.



3. REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

Several respondents cited the powerful and pervasive influence of media, advertising and celebrity on body image. This includes the overrepresentation of certain body types with the media, leading to damaging perceptions of what is desirable, healthy or 'normal'. As well as this lack of diversity, one response highlighted the volume of suggestive or sexualised images of women in the media - and whether some of this imagery constitutes empowerment or further exploitation.



4.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Although feedback touched upon social media's potential for spreading body positivity, it was noted that women may be at further risk of being sexualised simply by sharing images of themselves. One response suggested that the image-based nature of much social media can reinforce the notion that an individual's worth or character is defined by their appearance.



5. HYPERSEXUALISATION OF FEMALE BODIES

Feedback suggested the volume of sexualised images of women in the media, and on social media, influences the way women's bodies are perceived and commented on by others. This objectifying mindset contributes to an environment that emboldens others to openly discuss appearance - whether it's through inappropriate comments or catcalling.



6. THE NECESSARY PRIVILEGE INHERENT TO HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES

A number of respondents highlighted the intersection of body image, and health, with factors including poverty, race and disability. This may lead to an increased strain on already marginalised groups. Meanwhile it was pointed out that healthy lifestyles (described in terms of physical fitness and diet) are only available to those with the necessary money, time and ability to pursue them, whilst social norming or background can also influence people's understanding of health or willingness to adopt different behaviours.



7.

THE PROLIFERATION OF INDUSTRIES BASED AROUND WOMEN'S BODIES

Feedback included reference to the increasing number of industries and products - plus general 'diet culture' - that target women. These industries and their communications bolster the notion that appearances can be 'improved', with one response highlighting the quantity of products targeted at women to help them change their appearance.



8.

PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

A number of responses cited the effect of negative body image on women and girls' willingness to participate in sports (and how this can further affect confidence and health). Meanwhile, the financial and logistical discrepancies between many men's and women's sports were pointed out.



9.

REDEFINING 'HEALTHY'

Responses highlighted how body image and 'healthiness' tend to be evaluated in line with widespread gendered norms, which often disproportionately impact women. This also extends to BMI, an evaluation of health which can fail to take into account diversity of body type or race - and may therefore lead to misleading and harmful conclusions.



FEEDBACK ON SUGGESTED ACTION FOR CHANGE

Overarching suggested actions from respondents included:

- Education and early years interventions; focusing on the influence of schools, curricula, educators, parents and peers (including boys) to address stereotypes and body image issues
- Campaigning to shift societal norms; suggesting the active role that the government and influencers might play in initiating conversations, shifting attitudes and normalising differences
- Regulating the media (including advertising) to tackle image alteration and regulate weight loss advertisements, whilst also encouraging body diversity and tackling stereotypes
- Introducing new legislation around advertising, body shaming and protected characteristics
- Challenging stereotypes around health and appearance, shifting away from exercise as weight loss towards more positive outcomes such as mental health benefits (and making this accessible to everyone)



THANK YOU

This is a summary of the responses and can't highlight every individual point raised. However full feedback has been shared with the NACWG.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to share their feedback – it is valuable. We'd love as many people as possible to share their ideas on our next Spotlight topics. We have a new one every two months.