

# The Beauty Bias



THE INJUSTICE OF APPEARANCE  
— IN LIFE AND LAW —

Deborah L. Rhode

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# **The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law**

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## **The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law** Deborah L. Rhode

"It hurts to be beautiful" has been a cliche for centuries. What has been far less appreciated is how much it hurts not to be beautiful. The Beauty Bias explores our cultural preoccupation with attractiveness, the costs it imposes, and the responses it demands.

Beauty may be only skin deep, but the damages associated with its absence go much deeper. Unattractive individuals are less likely to be hired and promoted, and are assumed less likely to have desirable traits, such as goodness, kindness, and honesty. Three quarters of women consider appearance important to their self image and over a third rank it as the most important factor.

Although appearance can be a significant source of pleasure, its price can also be excessive, not only in time and money, but also in physical and psychological health. Our annual global investment in appearance totals close to \$200 billion. Many individuals experience stigma, discrimination, and related difficulties, such as eating disorders, depression, and risky dieting and cosmetic procedures. Women bear a vastly disproportionate share of these costs, in part because they face standards more exacting than those for men, and pay greater penalties for falling short.

The Beauty Bias explores the social, biological, market, and media forces that have contributed to appearance-related problems, as well as feminism's difficulties in confronting them. The book also reviews why it matters. Appearance-related bias infringes fundamental rights, compromises merit principles, reinforces debilitating stereotypes, and compounds the disadvantages of race, class, and gender. Yet only one state and a half dozen localities explicitly prohibit such discrimination. The Beauty Bias provides the first systematic survey of how appearance laws work in practice, and a compelling argument for extending their reach. The book offers case histories of invidious discrimination and a plausible legal and political strategy for addressing them. Our prejudices run deep, but we can do far more to promote realistic and healthy images of attractiveness, and to reduce the price of their pursuit.

## **The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law for online ebook**

### **Jean says**

Have to skip the last chapter because I was losing interests and found myself disagreeing with her.

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### **Anna says**

The author provided a rousing case against society's beauty bias and I appreciate that she backed it up with citations and a hefty reference list. Regarding her solution, I'm not convinced that adding more anti-appearance discrimination laws to the books will have the impact she hopes for. People being targeted in appearance discrimination shouldn't give in to social norms (for example, getting plastic surgery or buying trends to conform to what Hollywood dictates as hot) because it gives power and credibility to those doing the targeting. While laws and the justice system might have some impact (as is evidenced in the examples she highlights), society also needs to have a swift kick to the shins and just stop being so darn judgmental. Unfortunately, I don't think any law can change that.

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### **Ellen says**

Super interesting but spent too much time proving things I already agreed with and knew.

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### **Liz says**

Didn't really tell me anything that I didn't know before...

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### **Terese says**

*"The kind of attention people once gave to the state of their souls, they now give to the state of their bodies"*

... and the attention given is of the unhealthy sort. This book is erudite and starts out very strongly but loses pace somewhere around the middle and dwindles from there. It's not that it isn't good it's just that it kind of flounders and becomes watered-down in its points and arguments.

The title grabbed a hold of me at the library and the opening caught my interest but at the end of the day it wasn't quite all that I had hoped it to be.

That said it is well worth a read, especially the first half.

(view spoiler)

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### **Jaime says**

This was an interesting read. The author has the credentials and credibility to authoritatively write on the subject and her analysis is often compelling. I was unconvinced by her conclusion but still really glad I read the book.

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### **Mark says**

Deborah Rhode has set out to make a clear case for new laws or regulations that would prohibit discrimination based on appearance, but in doing so, she raises an interesting paradox.

One of her arguments for why such laws would not be a great burden on the legal system or society is that existing municipal and state laws have not produced an avalanche of lawsuits or successful cases. But in stipulating that, she raises the question of whether new laws will have much impact if people are reluctant to bring a case based on appearance or if regulators or the courts are stringently conservative in what standards they will apply.

Despite this pickle, I found this to be a provocative, clearly written book. Dr. Rhode, a Stanford law professor who at one time clerked for Thurgood Marshall, provides a comprehensive overview of the research that shows how we not only sanctify beauty and attractiveness in our advertising and marketing, but how it provides real-world advantages. Good-looking people are employed more easily, promoted more quickly, make more money and are even thought to be nicer and smarter than average looking folks (although beautiful women may suffer in certain professions where beauty can be equated with less intelligence).

She also makes visible a pattern of favoritism that many of us don't think about, precisely because it is so ingrained into every ad, TV show, and social encounter we have.

Well worth the read.

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### **Erin says**

A very interesting book written by a professor of law at Stanford about the ways in which people are discriminated against because of their appearance, in particular shorter men and overweight people of both sexes, but also women who are not classically beautiful or who choose not to conform to heteronormative standards of feminine grooming (styled hair, makeup, fashionable shoes and clothing). The book also addresses instances where successful women who are also beautiful (i.e. Some female athletes) are celebrated more for their beauty than their accomplishments. The book discusses the role of the media and the role women in our culture play in contributing to these kinds of discrimination and judgment. Every claim is backed by dozens of documented examples including legal battles over appearance discrimination. A fascinating read for people of all genders and especially for women interested in thinking more deeply about the importance of 'beauty' in our culture.

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### **Stephen Cranney says**

Decent review of the lookism literature in the first couple of chapters--brought up some studies I hadn't heard about. Later chapters provide history of legal cases against lookism; her reasoning wasn't particularly unique and closely tracked a lot of other books on the subject.

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### **Peter says**

Chronicle of Higher Ed article

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### **Cali says**

Although this book brings to light some pressing issues of today's culture, I found that it was very repetitive and used far too many statistics. It read more like an article than a seven chapter book. It likely could have been more effective if it had been about half the amount of pages and if the introduction (chapter 1) didn't exist at all. Some good insight, some interesting facts, but not executed in the best way possible.

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### **Sehar Moughal says**

Every man and woman must read this book to understand the damage done by appearance bias/discrimination. Every page that I read, I kept yelling (in my head): YES, YES, YES. I kept saying to myself: "This is me, my past, present and future" - my "dowdy" appearance. While reading this book, I asked a friend her views on the discrimination against "fat", "ugly" and "unkempt" people. Her views were exactly what most people think: "Fat" people are lazy, have no self-control and a disgrace to the big corporate companies. "Ugly" people want a law against appearance bias because they are jealous of all the "perfect" and "pretty" people around them. "Unkempt" people make excuses because they know that they can never get as good looking as others. I was shocked, to say the least.

Deborah talks about how the appearance based discrimination is hurting us at an individual level and as a society. She advocates for legal policies to protect individuals (esp. employees) from such horrendous and baseless biases. I agree with her: Why do women need to doll up (wear makeup, heels and have an hour glass figure) while the men can get away with just trimming their nails? Why are "fat" people dismissed on the basis of being 'lazy' and unsuitable when they have the knowledge, skills and experience to perform at a job?

I completely agree with her when she says that our society is putting too much emphasis on beauty; wasting hours on perfecting the "natural" look. As a consequence, we are punishing creativity, initiative to learn and to discover the world around us...

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## Kary says

Rough summary: People don't get hired (or get fired) because they're fat or ugly. But it's an under-reported problem because in order to fight back (via law suit), they have to admit they're fat or ugly.

I had higher hopes for this book - kept expecting the author would offer some insights about how these issues might be addressed. This was depressing. Read for a class.

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## Molly says

This book started with a lot of interesting ideas (Feminism! The intersection between race, poverty, gender, and appearance standards! Legality of discrimination based on height and weight!), went over the potential results (positive and negative) of banning appearance discrimination, and ended with an entire chapter on why we should be banning soda in schools and preaching the evils of big food in the streets. To me, it was all a little old-hat, but I can see how it might be an interesting overview for someone who had never encountered these issues before. The extensive endnotes provide lots of opportunity for further reading.

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## David Dinaburg says

*"Beauty may be only skin deep, but the costs associated with its pursuit go much deeper."* That's the essence of this work, and on that note it's hard not to agree. Whether it is pointless-to-harmful diets and supplements or optional surgeries that complicate rather than heal, the discussion is detailed, interesting, and well insulated from argument. Which can make things a little tedious.

*"When it comes to cosmetic surgery, the key issue is not whether it is hypocritical for feminists to have face-lifts. It is rather whether such practices are sufficiently safe and well-regulated, and whether a nation that leaves millions without basic health care is well served when the fastest growing medical specialty is cosmetic surgery."*

It would be difficult to take a counter stance to such a reasonable hypothetical. But it waters down a direct question, "Is this hypocritical?" to pose another, "Shouldn't we focus on other, more important, health care?" The stance that regulating appearance discrimination should take a backseat to other, "more important", regulations is often vilified throughout the book. This encapsulates my main critique: stop pulling your punches. Appearance bias is messed up, and it's damaging society, and it falls more heavily on women and non-whites. The data are there, the arguments are there, but they're softened, their edges rounded down so no one gets mad. Some of the things discussed, they are so patently unfair that someone should get mad. I appreciate being able to draw my own conclusions, but an endless stream of hypotheticals might be enough for a journal article, but not a complete book.

The most interesting parts of the book cover the historical absurdities surrounding the issues of appearance in culture. These are so fascinating, especially surrounded by the context of grounded, reasonable arguments against their modern equivalents, that the whole book moves at a brisk pace.

*"During America's first two centuries, the conventional wisdom was that '[w]hen a woman wears cosmetics, it is...prima facie evidence that her character is frail.' In some states, a man could have his marriage*

*annulled if he had been seduced into marriage by his wife's use of a paints or powders during courtship."*

*"Mercury, one of the most popular treatments for removing freckles, removed the outer layer of skin as well, and sulfuric acid and turmeric made some women bald. Ceruse, a cosmetic whitener, was composed of deadly combinations of lead oxide, hydroxide, and carbonate."*

*"In 1867, three thousand women burned alive and twenty thousand suffered severe injuries from flammable petticoats."*

*"80 percent of the ten thousand ingredients used in cosmetics and personal care have never been assessed by the FDA."*

It offers a lot of information, and for that, it is worth a read. It advocates for inoffensive regulations that truly make sense for much of society. I think it errs a bit too hard on the side of caution, and I don't think the title, which comes across like an inflammatory tear-down of social interactions (which is what I was looking for when I picked it up), is doing it any favors. The legal arguments aren't technical enough for attorneys, but lack in substance to stand on their own merits. I liked the book enough to allow myself to be a bit disappointed by it.

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