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# For Indian Women, The Pressure To Look Perfect Is A Problem Born At Home

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Beauty standards permeate most aspects of life: Instagram posts photoshopped to extremes, foundation ranges limited to 40 shades of pale, offensive Tube adverts dictating how our bodies should look... The list goes on and on. You'd hope, then, that the place you call home, surrounded by your family and friends, would be safe from the pressure forced on us by these industries. You *need* it to be.

But for many Asian girls in the UK, the urge to look 'perfect' is actually a problem born in that exact environment: home. Industry pressure certainly adds fuel to the fire, but I and other Asian women know all too well that this fire burns eternally in most Asian households. These ideals don't stem from the smoke-and-mirrors perfection of Bollywood. They stem from the outdated view that there is only one version of beauty.

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I'll give you an example. I have a sebaceous cyst on my jaw and while it's a bit of an eyesore and doesn't do much for my self-esteem, it's completely benign and causes me no problems. Until my appointment to have it removed, I simply live with it. So when a hair and makeup artist asked how I'd like my hair for my sister's wedding, I asked for it down. While I was clearly feeling myself, my *kaki* (aunt) had other thoughts.

"That really doesn't look nice," she said in Gujarati, with a safety pin in her mouth as she sized me up, considering where to stab me next. With one hand pointing to her jawline and a scowl on her face, it becomes clear that the outfit is fine. The hair and makeup is, too. It's the cyst that's the big issue here.

I brush it off but I feel shitty about myself that day. And I'm not alone. Talking to friends and family proves that being put down for your appearance is the norm in Indian families. Your entire appearance is always fair game, no matter the occasion. Sugar coating? These Indian *masis* (relatives) haven't heard of it. Eyebrows need to be thick but shapely. Skin needs to be clear and glowing, not to mention *fair*. Hair must be long, luscious, thick and undyed. No bob cuts under any circumstances. Nose piercings? Okay. But not on the *wrong* side. It must be on the Indian side.

In 2019, movements such as skin positivity give hope to those who have been criticised for their appearance. However, [Varkha Chulani](#), a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, notes little progress in eradicating 'classic' Indian standards of beauty. Upsettingly, this trend among Indian families has remained unchanged for years. "With the advent of social media, there is more emphasis on beauty being laced with certain requisites," she says. "For example, fairness, flawless skin, and features that stand out."

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These "requisites" mean self-esteem is a somewhat alien concept among Indians. So is it a generational issue? After all, your younger cousins often aren't the people obnoxiously pointing out your flaws at family gatherings. It is almost always older relatives, who sadly don't seem to understand the impact of their words. One friend explains that she feels as though every older

Asian relative comments on two things. "Weight and whether you have bad skin," she tells me. "This then makes you feel so self-conscious."

"My uncle once asked my sister if she could fit in a chair," another friend tells me, referring to weight. "I also heard him suggest to his daughter that she should stop eating," – because *who will marry us if we're fat?* Eye roll.

It goes both ways, though. Being "too skinny" is also up for critique. My sister was relentlessly called a "chicken" as a teenager. She confesses: "When your whole worldview and frame of mind is shaped by Indians and all they do is berate you, you internalise that and take it with you when you leave the 'Indian' world. You end up changing your actions. You go on holiday and sit in the shade while your white friends tan. You wax your arms when nobody else in your school does. These things exclude you. You become alienated from the Indian community because all they do is criticise but you are also alienated from the non-Asian community, because you act differently in regard to how you look."

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Chulani points out that socially constructed views come from the communities we engage with. "They derive from the inner circle who give their personal definitions," she says. Ultimately, impressionable young women internalise these definitions. "An unthinking mind agrees to the 'standards' decided by his or her group and then follows the pattern."

While *jadi* (a Gujarati term which essentially translates into "fatty") is sometimes used as an endearment, it sticks with you, and never for an endearing reason. "You've put on a lot of weight now!" one uncle might comment, after you've reluctantly made your way downstairs to say hello. Yes, uncle. I have put on weight. That's because you last saw me when I was 14, when my metabolism worked at the speed of light. (And because your family keep feeding me samosas. No hate, they're delicious.) But mostly, I've put on weight because that happens in life. Okay?

We've established that there is an awful lot of scrutiny, but this is barely scratching the surface of the scathing comments an Indian girl may face. An open, healthy discussion about beauty and feeling comfortable in my own skin never formed part of my growing up. My white friends could talk to their parents about their skin problems, for example, but as a 13-year-old, my family told me "*fine natee lagtu*" ("this doesn't look nice") followed by the ground-breaking advice: "Just go to the doctor."

So why, in 2019, are critical remarks still part and parcel of growing up as an Asian-Indian? Of course, some blame can be attributed to the beauty industry. Our good friends at Fair & Lovely (a skin-lightening cosmetic product) have played a role in perpetuating the light skin ideal. My cousins in Kenya used this cream too, as living in a hot country was deemed detrimental to their appearance. The media's discussion of the Indian film actress Bipasha Basu as being 'too dark' for Bollywood, dubbing her an 'unconventional' heroine, is another example of the industry's enemy lines. I remember being criticised for being as 'dark' as Basu – the underlying message being that dark skin, my natural complexion, was not and never will be beautiful.

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We call out the industry for perpetuating these outdated ideals, but why don't we confront our relatives? Perhaps our elders are just thicker-skinned and expect us to be, too. But the pressure among Indian friends and family to constantly look perfect goes deeper. [Studies](#) suggest that being victimised by peers could potentially lead to low self-esteem, with [research](#) linking this to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

"Issues with low self-esteem often stem from childhood and are then exacerbated as we get older," adds Dr Elena Touroni, a consultant psychologist and cofounder of [The Chelsea Psychology Clinic](#) in London. "Negative comments are formative and if said regularly can have a cumulative effect on an individual. Often, these criticisms are made in a family environment where they may be the norm. Perhaps to those making them, it is completely innocent. But for those who receive them, they are negative messages about themselves which they then internalise as the truth."

Dr Touroni continues: "Constant criticism can contribute to low self-esteem, which leads to that person having a negative view of themselves. When this happens you may be very vulnerable to experiencing depression and generally having a negative self-perception, as well as anxiety. Anxiety is linked to vulnerability, comparing yourself to other people and not thinking you're good enough."

To combat these feelings, both Dr Touroni and Chulani advise turning your attention inwards. "Where did these feelings of defectiveness and inadequacy start?" asks Dr Touroni, while Chulani adds: "Developing one's own views and not internalising those of others is important in avoiding conforming to socially defined norms of beauty."

So to Indian-Asians everywhere – young, old, mother, father, siblings – please break the pattern. Refrain from placing your family and friends under such scrutiny. Stop equating self-

worth with fair skin, immaculately shaped eyebrows and washboard stomachs, and start changing the conversation around these ideals.

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