

The Ultimate "Confidence Trick"?

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Injustice and inequality are almost always easier to recognise, and therefore understand, in their most extreme forms. This is true whether the inequality we speak of is based on gender (e.g. sexual abuse/rape) or social stratification (e.g. the caste system) or financial status (e.g. homelessness or destitution). That's why, for example, it is much easier to build a campaign to combat problems such as dowry demands or wife beating, than it is to deal with the more subtle aspects of gender discrimination.

Sometimes negative gender attitudes can be hard to identify, let alone contest. Indeed, the social pressure is often such that all of us - women *and* men - may end up accepting such things as "normal". And as a wise man once said, the greatest success of any system of oppression is when those who are oppressed begin to collaborate in their own subjugation. So it is when women internalise negative social values and begin to help perpetuate them that patriarchy *really* wins!

While most societies have come a long way from the *mandhatar-amoler* attitudes that viewed women's education as unimportant (and more recently, in Bangladesh for example, that boys are best suited to study the sciences, and girls should be relegated to the humanities stream), the long held priorities asserting that being intelligent is more important for boys and being beautiful is more important for girls still linger in some form, not too far below the surface. Such prejudices are not by any means limited to developing countries in general or Bangladesh in particular. After all, it is not an accident that in so many parts of the western world there remains a significant wage gap between women and men for work that is similar or the same! But the form taken by such prejudices can vary considerably between societies, and in cases where they are "packaged" right (and it should be noted that the advertising industry is particularly helpful in playing an advisory role here), women can in fact end up perpetuating such attitudes as frequently and with as much enthusiasm - as many of their male counterparts.

So in South Asia, just as the need for girls to be fair-skinned is widely accepted when the senior females of the family go out in search of a *bou* (bride), in some Western societies - and increasingly, next door in Bollywood - the need for women to be considered "sexy" has been taken to a fairly unhealthy level. Among other things, the latter preoccupation has led to an increasing sexualisation of young girls, with provocative marketing measures in recent years including clothing items for children that range from T-shirts using words like "bitch" and "future porn star" to underwear that features explicit messages.

One supermarket chain even brought out a "pole-dancing kit" aimed at preteen girls. In case you're wondering what that's about, it's the smaller sized version of the poles seen in strip clubs, usually featuring scantily clad women wrapped around them. It's hard to understand quite what a sick mind would come up with this as a product for children! And the store's defence that it was aimed at parents who want to "help their children get more exercise" really does beggar belief...

But then, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. I was fairly disturbed to read about the so-called health craze that has led to the popularity of pole-dancing classes for adults in a number of countries in the last five years. But what really upset me was the justification provided by those running the classes, that many highly successful women professionals felt that taking these classes had "given them more confidence" by making them feel like "real women"!

That seems a little hard to believe. If the financial success, high levels of education and professional recognition already achieved by these women had not been sufficient to raise their confidence levels beyond a point where they needed to writhe around strippers' poles to feel better about themselves, surely that says something really sad and frightening about the society they live in? I find it hard not to be outraged by the fact that someone can be so utterly brainwashed by certain social stereotypes that in order to feel like a "real woman", she should feel compelled to play out a typical male fantasy related to strip clubs.

After I had spent some time seething about all this, I finally found someone who not only shared my views on the pole-dancing craze, but managed to articulate them far more effectively than I ever could. According to the American comedian Wanda Sykes: "All these women are taking stripper classes in hopes that

