

FEELING GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES SHOULDN'T BE SO HARD



"The 'It' girl of the 21st century has a number of things. She is educated, sassy and stylish. She knows what she wants and is increasingly confident enough to go after it. She is likely to work hard and play hard. She will wait until her thirties before thinking about babies and she will continue to juggle work and family commitments along with her partner. She may or may not get married. In her lifetime she will have a number of roles – daughter, student, professional, wife, mother, sister, taxi driver, confidante, volunteer, chef, stylist, provider, the list goes on." (Durack, 2008)

This description appeared in The West Australian newspaper to mark International Women's Day this year. It is a description of a woman in her twenties to thirties in 2008 – but what could it be like for young women in the future, like those who are in high school now?

International Women's Day has traditionally been a time to celebrate women in all of their diversity. It is a time when we can remember that the image we often see of women, that resembles the description above, is by no means representative of all women. Despite all of our achievements as women throughout the 20th century and beyond, many women are still struggling with challenges that haven't changed. When faced with a description like this, many women immediately look to the bits that they don't do – rather than congratulating themselves for the bits that they do – and do well! Divorce is on the increase, and women are still carrying most of the burden of caring for their kids, and are now starting to care for their parents too. The idea of 'superwoman' is prevalent in the mass media but not realistic. Young women are now more concerned about body image than any other issue. Feminism has become a dirty word.

For young women, there are new and emerging challenges that they are facing. Recent national research conducted by Mission Australia has revealed that the top concern for young people in Australia during 2007 was "body image". Over one-third of all those who responded to the annual survey rated body image as their biggest worry before issues such as family conflict and coping with stress.

A flick through the pages of the latest magazine or hot new website will reveal pages upon pages of judgements on how people look and what we need to do to fit in. The images that are presented are all digitally altered and often are a far cry from where the original picture started and what that person actually looks like.

A new program from The Butterfly Foundation called BodyThink is a response to the increasing concerns of young people about their body image and how this preoccupation about the way we look is dominating the way that we feel about ourselves. The program includes activities that encourage participants to start to recognise images that have been altered and the deliberate construction of totally unreal and unachievable standards by which to measure ourselves.

WOMEN'S Healthworks (WHW) continues to respond in a number of ways to this growing concern. The successful Body Esteem Program for women with eating disorders, was relaunched in December 2007 with the generous support of the WA Health Department and the Butterfly Foundation in partnership with Sportsgirl.

This summer, WHW has also piloted the innovative new "Photovoice" project, which gave women a new way to 'voice' their concerns about the skeletal images that bombard the pages of magazines, newspapers and television and to create new images that recognise women for more than just their waist circumference.

Photovoice has involved 12 mother and daughter teams working with professional photographers and Social Worker. The five week workshop culminated in an exhibition of work at the International Women's Day 2008 festivities on Friday March 7 and Saturday, March 8.

WHW has worked in partnership with Women's Forum Australia (WFA) to bring this project to WA as well as launching the influential 'Faking It' report at the Get Real Forum on March 7. This report has been presented as a glossy magazine and is an easy read to get a sense of what is happening to the images we see in the media and how it is impacting on our sense of self and our health and well being.

At the start of this article I asked what the world might be like in 10 or 20 years time for girls who are now in high school. There is no answer to this question because it depends on what we do now. By working together we can make a difference for each other and for our communities by questioning information that is given to us and standing together to put a different point of view to ensure that we see ourselves for who we are, not what we look like!

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