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The Racialisation of Body Hair

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

One of my biggest fears when planning and submitting my Laidlaw research application, going through interviews, planning my research, talking to other scholars, and conducting my research was that no one cared. Before I started this research, talking about body hair was something that I, and the people around me, never did. For a long time, I thought I was the only person who felt self-conscious about it. I was genuinely shocked when one of my lecturers and my research supervisor encouraged this research topic and were genuinely interested. I was shocked at every message of support I received, and every conversation I had about my research topic where other women told me they were also passionate about body hair and race and were excited to see my completed research. Because we are taught to keep as quiet as possible about our insecurities, an entire community of women of colour begin to believe that this is something they are going through alone, and that no one else cares. But what I've learnt through the course of this research is that I am not alone, and keeping that insecurity locked away only gives it more power. This experience has been incredibly valuable to me, and I hope that it can be of some value to other women out there.

This research will look at the history of body hair removal, and how it is intertwined with/ integral to dominant whiteness and the construction of submissive, heteronormative, white femininity. Women of colour are forced to exist on the fringes of femininity, and have their femininity questioned and rescinded when they stray from these restrictions. The purpose of this research is to give voice to women of colour and to understand the intersectional relationship between race, gender, and women's body modification practices, which I feel is an underdeveloped area of research.

This report has a four-section literature review which looks at the existing literature on body hair removal, across sociological, psychological, medical and fashion journals. I then discuss the research methodology and then research findings, which is organised thematically based on both the literature review and trends from the research itself.

Literature Review

The Construction of Normative Femininity

In Western societies there is a culturally created model of femininity.

She is beautiful and *She* is loved (by men in particular, which is the most important thing). This ideal woman is thin, *she* has long straight hair, *she* is attractive in a strictly European way (small nose, white skin, etc), and her body is completely hairless.

From before we are even old enough to read and write we are taught that *She* is who we want to be, and *she* is who we must spend our whole lives (and our entire paycheck) working towards becoming. As women, we internalise *Her* and she becomes our Model of Acceptable Femininity, and to be perceived as feminine we must be like *Her*. We must 'Do' gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in order to be considered a woman, and we must

do it according to the rules of normative femininity. Gender, as opposed to sex, is the socially constructed rules and characteristics that define what it means to be masculine or feminine, and so gender becomes something that is performed based on cultural expectations, rather than something that is inherent or natural, though these rules are so dominant that we subconsciously absorb them as both natural and desirable.

She is our internalisation of the male gaze (Fahs, 2011) which means we can't perceive ourselves and our own attractiveness separate to how we are perceived by men, originally theorised by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1988) and based on Freud's theory of Phallocentrism (1905), which is the idea that the male sexual organ is the centre of the social world. As put by Fahs, "Making oneself attractive to men is not just a choice, but a mandate."(2011, pg.467)

Women must 'Do' gender not just to manage their own anxieties and expectations, but also the anxieties and expectations of others, and the women who try to exist outside of the rules of femininity are "controlled, monitored and disciplined" by the vast social networks that uphold and reproduce these gendered expectations (Fahs, 2011, pg.466).

The normative feminine ideal demands that women are submissive and docile not only in personality, but also in physical appearance. Femininity entails passivity, demureness, and placidity, giving femininity a 'child-like' quality (Brownmiller, 1984) (Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2005), and strictly associating masculinity with adulthood (Smelik, 2015). These associations play into the contemporary beauty ideal of the "Cult of Youth" which is prevalent from fashion and beauty to pornography industries.

Because Gender and Femininity has been created by a society that is structurally/intrinsically sexist, racist, homophobic, and capitalistic, these expectations of femininity are then made unachievable to women who are not members of the dominant culture but are also often also unachievable to women who are. Women of colour are significantly further from the model of ideal femininity and so have to work much harder to be considered beautiful in a way that is culturally acceptable. They are also more vulnerable to having their womanhood questioned or rescinded when it does not fall into the physical and biological restrictions of womanhood. These restrictions are established by white supremacist 'fact' rooted in the white, cisgender, female body. Dutee Chand, a runner from India with higher testosterone levels was not only essentially banned from competing as a female, but also had her sexuality questioned as the first openly homosexual Indian athlete (Abraham, 2019). Fellow athlete Caster Semenya, from South Africa, was not as lucky as Dutee, who was later allowed to compete, and was banned from her sport due to her higher testosterone levels.

Body Hair Removal as Social Control

The hairless norm in particular is a "taken for granted" aspect of normative femininity (Smelik, 2015, pg.237). Women are taught that hairlessness is natural, and hairiness is not only unnatural, but something that is shameful and secretive (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004).

Body hair removal has become a form of social control, where women must hide the "tools of transformation" (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004, pg.381) so that their performance of femininity can appear natural and effortless. Women who are hirsute - who have body hair above culturally defined 'normal levels' - described themselves as "abnormal" "unfeminine" and "freakish" (Lipton, Sherr, Elford, Rustin & Clayton, 2006, pg.162).

As women of colour are already further from the sphere of acceptable femininity, this heightens the unacceptability of their body hair, which can be darker and thicker than that of Caucasian women, or at least is perceived to be me more intense (Lipton, Sherr, Elford, Rustin & Clayton, 2006) (Fahs & Delgado, 2011).

In order to be a woman and to gain the social rewards of performing gender, women of colour must remove all 'unwanted and unnatural' hair, a body modification practice that is both time-consuming and costly, and so contributes not only to heterosexist and racist ideas about beauty and femininity, but also to the corporations that contribute to women's insecurity. Maintaining the performance of gender then becomes an industry in which women are made to be insecure, and "To be feminine is to be a consumer." (Freedman, 1986, pg.222)

Normative femininity constructs body hair as unnatural and unfeminine, and places strict rules on acceptability so that women are "**kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring beauties**" (Wolf, 1991, pg.66).

Paradoxy in Sexuality and Sexual Immaturity

One way that the feminine ideal is achieved is through body hair removal practices that require women to be fully hairless like prepubescent girls, but as a sign of sexiness and sexual maturity. All forms of media are guilty of portraying the ideal feminine body as completely hairless, though pornography in particular is a major influence on body hair depilation trends (Ramsey, Sweeney, Fraser, & Oades, 2009).

Schick, Rima, and Calabrese (2011, pg.76) argue that an industry that was "characterized and even defined" by the presence of pubic hair but has now become the opposite, and so genital hair removal has become increasingly normative (Mullinax, Herbenick, Schick, Sanders, & Reece, 2015). This means that women can begin to change their sexual behaviour because of the presence of body hair and the perceived (and not always accurate) fear of rejection from men.

The hairless body as the pinnacle of sexiness in pornography, and in turn many people's personal lives, exists in direct opposition to biological sexual maturity, and to sexuality in men, where it is often associated with sexual power and virility (Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005). Body hair has also historically been associated with wanton sexuality (Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005), "The thicker the hair the more wanton the woman" (Cooper, 1971, pg77).

This association of body hair as a sign of sexuality can contribute to the uncomfortable and racist hyper-sexualization and fetishization of women of colour (Gassam Asare, 2021), where their ethnicity and naturally occurring body hair is treated as a fetish for men on the fringes of mainstream pornography. This exoticization of women of colour contributes to the idea that they are outside normal femininity and are 'Othered'.

This hairless norm in media (both pornographic and mainstream) is again intertwined with the norm of weak femininity. Hope (1982) found that clinicians described women as less than fully adult, and that hair removal advertising emphasised the baby-like quality of smooth, hairless skin in its adverts targeted towards adult women. Whilst Hope's argument is based solely on Caucasian women's experiences, her argument that not only are "Caucasian American women supposed to manifest nonadult personality characteristics, they are also expected to get rid of certain bodily signs of adulthood." (pg.99) still stands true for women of all ethnicities.

Since women of colour are further from the ideal of the sexy feminine woman of mainstream and pornographic culture, and are viewed as inherently less feminine, they are more policed (both personally and socially) into intimate body hair removal.

Heteronormativity, Differentiation from Men, and the Masculinization of WoC

Body hair, though a sign of sexual maturity in both men and women, has become strictly associated with men and masculinity. Hope (1982) argues that the practice of body hair removal between 1915 and 1945 was prompted by a re-invention of idealised white womanhood during/after the World Wars and by the need for a symbolic marker of gender difference when more physical ones, such as the corsets, began to be lost (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004). To uphold the more powerful and dominant position of men, a lack of body hair began to be equated with femininity, and so in turn women's more submissive and passive position in society.

Men and women began to be differentiated further through either the lack, or presence of body hair, though contradictory to biology, and has now become so socially normative that many research finds between 99%-99.7% of adult women (Herzig, 2015) (Toerien, Wilkinson & Choi, 2005) remove their body hair. Body hair has become one of the biggest beauty industries in the world, and is upheld by capitalistic, misogynistic, racist, and heteronormative ideals that women in their natural state are deficient and so must "pretend to be bald from the forehead down with a skin as smooth as an egg shell" (Smelik, 2015, pg.246).

These racist beauty ideals are rooted in the white supremacist notion that non-whites are sub-human, and non-white women in particular are less of a woman than their white counterparts, rendering them “socially unacceptable aberrations” (Aditeba, 2020,). Because women of colour are treated as inherently further from acceptable femininity, their body hair then becomes particularly unacceptable, and they are more vulnerable to the accusations of masculinity. Though body hair removal as a form of gender differentiation is significant for women of all races (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004), women of colour face a greater social threat (through the removal of their femininity, as an example) by not doing so. To be an acceptable women based on the racist, misogynistic, and heteronormative beauty standards they must emulate whiteness as closely as possible, in this case through body hair removal practice, or be perceived as masculine, less sexually attractive, social and intelligent (Basow & Braman, 1998).

Women who reject the traditional rules of femininity, which are built on compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), the theory that heterosexual attraction, and so the social, emotional, and cultural practices that come with this, are assumed and imposed upon women. Body hair removal is one aspect of compulsory heterosexuality that if not performed, women will have the ‘lesbian’ label attached to them and so become an outlier and are out at greater risk of social punishments and fear of direct and anticipated homophobia (Fahs, 2011). This can be particularly harsh for women of colour (Symanksi & Sung, 2010), and as put by Fahs (2011, pg.451) women who stray from these body hair removal norms are labelled as the, “Dreaded Other – in particular hairy, manly, angry and lesbian”.

Dirtiness, Darkness and Disgust

Body hair on women has somehow become conflated with dirtiness. It has become associated with (especially for women) making you closer to an animal, or as put by Tom Loxley commenting on Julia Roberts’s armpit hair “One small step to Planet of the Apes” (Maxim via Toerien, 2003, pg.334). The hairless norm is so prominent in the media that even celebrity women (such as Julia Roberts, Miley Cyrus etc) who are considered some of the most beautiful women in the world, face social and media sanctions for embracing their natural body hair.

However, these women often still receive praise for their radical act of not shaving, whereas the average woman, and women of colour in particular will face social punishments and be negatively evaluated as ‘dirty’ and ‘gross’ for departing from these social norms (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). "To be hairy ... is to risk a range of negative connotations, which serve as sanctions against non-conformity to the hairlessness norm. This norm may, therefore, be understood as a form of social control."(Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003, pg.341)

Because shaving, waxing, etc is an act of removal, body hair has become a symbol of waste, and so given an even greater association with dirtiness and uncleanliness (Smelik, 2015). One of the most common reasons women say they remove their body hair is because it's “more hygienic” (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004), though ironically men who don’t remove their body hair are not universally considered unhygienic. Rather than being inherently dirty, body hair has been classified as such, and to quote Douglas (1966, pg.xvii) “There is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit”

Body hair has become socially and culturally associated with uncleanliness, disgust, and waste (Smelik, 2015). This feeling of disgust when someone sees body hair, the same feeling you get when you see maggots on food (Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004), is largely due to the transmission of disgust sensitivity throughout childhood, that is parents and other figures of authority teaching children, especially girls, that their natural body hair is disgusting and something to be ashamed of.

Hirsute women in particular are made to be ashamed of their body hair, and have a habit of covering their face, staying in partial darkness, and avoiding physical contact with people so they can’t see their body hair (Ferrante, 1988), and feel uncomfortable/anxious in social situations (Lipton, Sherr, Elford, Rustin & Clayton, 2006)(Ekback, 2017)

This association of body hair as dirty and disgusting is also racialized and adds a layer of shame for women of colour. Kubie (1937) argues there is a universal assumption that hairiness is dirtier than smoothness, and that pigmentation is considered dirty, and whilst this research is from 1937, these same assumptions still prevail.

According to Kubie's assumption, women with more pigmented skin are dirtier, and so their natural body hair is considered dirtier and so more shameful. This intersection of gender norms and skin colour (which can be, but is not always, synonymous with being a racialized minority) means women of colour face harsher social expectations, and punishments around body hair removal.

Methodology

Definitions

This section will outline key terms used throughout the research that are problematic or contested.

Comment on the term BAME

The term BAME has recently received criticism in the media as lumping minorities together as a homogenous group and furthering the idea of "white and other" (Fakim & Macaulay, 2021). By using the term BAME it makes it easier for corporations and institutions to ignore the enormous diversity of experiences and the differences in discrimination and disparities, faced by all ethnic minorities.

I completely agree with all of these criticisms and recognise that it's a fundamentally flawed term that groups people as **'**White' and 'Not-White', thus othering non-white people.

However, because of institutional racism, there is still some level of shared experiences that comes from being a member of the non-dominant race, and so I have used the term BAME throughout my research. The experiences of every ethnic minority group, and every individual within these groups will be vastly different, but having your experiences racialized is shared by all ethnic minorities. In my survey (which looks at the experiences of BAME women only) I chose not to ask for participants to choose their ethnicity, but rather a Yes/No "Do you identify as White?". In my interviews I asked participants to describe their own ethnicity.

Race vs Racism

I am also not using Race as a classification; however, I will still be using the term Racism. This is because Race does not exist biologically and is a restrictive classification again rooted in scientific white supremacy and the othering of non-white people (Saini, 2019). However, because of the history of racism, race still has "social, political and economic meanings" (Onwuachi-Willig, 2016), and so this means the social construction of race is still hugely significant.

Instrument Design

Ethics

All interview and survey participants had to complete a consent form before participating that detailed the purpose of the study, the length of the interview/survey, the structure of the interview, how their data would be anonymized, how personal information/data from interviewees would be stored, their ability to opt out at any point, how their data would be stored and used, and how it will be processed. I was granted ethical approval from the Department of Education, University of York Ethics Committee. Survey participants were given the option to view the interview consent form before submitting their emails, and the survey software did not store any personal information such as email or IP address. Any responses not completed within the 2 weeks were deleted and not kept as survey data.

Before I started recording each interview I would talk through the consent form with the participants to remind them how their data would be stored and give them the chance to ask me any questions before and after the recording. After downloading the recording, I would immediately delete the video, and I was the only person who had access to the audio recording, which I used to make transcripts. The transcripts were made on a google document which I then shared with the interview participant, so they had the chance to rescind any parts of their transcript, which they had a week to do.

Survey Questions

The key themes of the survey were Personal Attitudes and History, when did you first become aware and start removing body hair, why and how, and the costs associated. The second section looked at attitudes and relationships with body hair in school, how their peers may have affected them, who the comments came from and whether comments felt racialised. Initially I had mostly long answer questions that also asked why and the how, but Vanita recommended shortening the questions to be multiple choice or short answer, and using the survey to produce quantitative data, and the interviews to produce qualitative data, so that there was less overlap between the two methods. This triangulation, alongside the literature review meant that I had more comprehensive and reliable data, and I was able to find many similarities between existing theory and my own results. I also added a long-answer open question at the end of the survey that invited participants to share something about their experience of body hair, which was useful for people who weren't comfortable with an interview and produced some really fascinating and useful short answers.

Caveats

As with any survey the results are unreliable to a certain extent as it was answered anonymously.

One criticism of the questioning used in the survey is the non-inclusive language used in the question “Do you identify as a woman?”, as it is not inclusive to non-binary people and those who were assigned female at birth or have presented female throughout their secondary school experience but no longer identify as such. There was also an oversight on my part as all of the “Other (Please Write Below) answers for the question “What method did you use the first time you removed your body hair?” were hair removal cream or bleach cream, which I forgot to include.

As the survey did not ask for respondents’ specific ethnic identities, but instead “Do you identify as white?”, there is no way of knowing the ethnic demographics and the differences in answers for different ethnicities. This means I was not able to analyse data based on the responses of certain ethnicities.

Survey Recruitment

The total number of Survey Respondents was 96, though 29 responses were ignored during analysis as the respondents said they Did Identify as White, and 1 was ignored as the respondents said they do not Identify as a Woman, which means in the Research Findings section of this report the results given is based on the 66 respondent who identifies both as BAME and a woman.

The survey was open/accepting responses for 2 weeks and was shared through University BAME society group chats and Instagram accounts, my own social media and Laidlaw Scholars website and group chats, the Department survey request email, and the Reddit thread r/RazorFree and r/Feminism.

Interviewee Selection

As the survey was promoted through university channels and my own social media/the social media of my friends and peers, many of the respondents that gave their email are people I know personally/am friends with. In order to avoid bias I selected the first five emails submitted that were not by anyone I am/was close friends with, as this may affect the interview relationship and responses and present a possible conflict of interest. I did not get responses from the initial 5 I emailed s then emailed the next 10 emails until I had done 5 interviews. I did not base my interviewee decision on survey responses, though the interviews themselves were based somewhat on these responses, as I wanted to avoid introducing my own bias by selecting people who had responses that fit my own hypothesis.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were mainly based on the survey questions, and to elaborate on the quantitative data by giving the backgrounds and motivations of my interview participants. The interviews were only semi-structured, and I had five main, planned questions. I also had additional questions I would ask based on the content and length of the response. I found that those five questions generally covered the overall themes I wanted participants to touch on, though I encouraged them going “off topic” or answering questions I had not

asked. The themes I wanted to cover, similar to the survey, were personal attitudes and history, the impact of family, race and culture, school and comments from peers, body hair removal practices and changes to that practice. Three of my participants self-identified as mixed-race so I also asked them how that in particular impacted them.

In my first interview, the interviewee Donna made some really insightful comments on pain that I had not considered, and so from then on I asked every participant about their relationship with pain and ended up making a separate section of this research Self-Care or Self-Harm?, so thank you Donna! I also asked about how body hair affected romantic or sexual relationships based on interviewee responses. The five questions I asked were.

1. Could you tell me about when you first became aware of your body hair?
2. Can you tell me about how school/ your friends or peers affected your relationship with your body hair?
3. Can you tell me about when you first started removing your body hair?
4. Do you feel that your relationship with your body hair was influenced by your ethnicity or your heritage?
5. Has your relationship with your body hair changed as you've gotten older?

Interview Bias, Reliability, and Validity

The responses given in interviews may have been affected by a level of interviewer bias that could work both for and against the collection of valid and reliable data. One the one hand, as a young bame woman who is not an academic, the women interviewed may have felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with me as there was less of a social and epistemic hierarchy, and they recognise that we are peers and are discussing a shared aspect of our identity. On the other hand, my age, gender and ethnicity could have worked against me, as some of the participants may have taken me less seriously or felt less comfortable sharing personal and sensitive information because of my age, and/or may have withheld information because they know me socially, and I am not a more distant and academic university researcher.

This is also my first research project, and my very first-time doing interviews so the level of academic integrity and professionalism will have been lower than that of an experienced researcher. I also had no concrete rules on the questions I asked and the level of response I gave to each person as it was specific to individual responses.

It is also important to recognize that this research, from the topic itself, to the methods, report and conclusion are all deeply imbued with my own personal values and opinions. Whilst I tried to avoid influencing interview participants and was as objective as possible with my questions and responses, I am coming to this research with the opinion that the culture of body hair removal is harmful and racist, and so all of my research will reflect this. Because of the nature of my research, my participants also held the same general opinions of body hair as me, as you are unlikely to fill out a survey and do an interview on the Racialisation of body hair if you do not think that relationship is racialized. I also do not see the existence of values as a flaw, rather an integral part of the research, and this is less about creating quantifiable data, and more about providing a space/voice for women of colour to share their experiences.

Interview Participants

Participants names have been changed for anonymity and ethnicity is self-described.

Donna - 19, British Indian
Christine - 20, Indian
Paige - 20, Mixed White and Black Caribbean
Maeve - 26, Mixed Indian and English
Martha - 20, Half Indian

Research Findings

One of the most valuable parts of this research for me had been the stories and anecdotes shared with me by the survey and interview participants. In the research findings section survey data and interview data has been combined and is presented by themes, starting with an overview the participants thoughts on their own inadequacy in the face of Eurocentric beauty ideals, and how this translates to body hair, and then going on to discuss the impact of secondary schools/peers as a form of social control, the impact of body hair on femininity, sexuality, and how these are intertwined with the male gaze, body hair and hygiene, and finally the relationship between pain and body hair.

Inadequacy and Eurocentrism

Hairlessness is a powerful, yet "taken for granted" aspect of normative femininity (Smelik, 2015, pg.237) that teaches girls their natural state is inadequate. A significant theme in the interviews was the way that body hair removal was treated as something that is both natural and normal from very early childhood, and how the construction of femininity being exclusively white, and older female role models being completely hairless, led these women to believe that their body hair was abnormal. They also commented on how their status as a woman of colour meant that beauty, often manifested through hairlessness, felt significantly further than for their white peers, and how the more they emulated whiteness, the more beautiful they felt.

One interview participant, Paige, describes the need to remove her body hair in primary school,

"It was just something unsaid, but it was subconscious, I knew I got this body hair, and it was wrong, and as time went on, that I was supposed to remove it." (Paige)

Girls in primary school are subconsciously aware that their body hair is something shameful that needs to be removed. But there is no actual biological or subconscious need to remove body hair, it was put on our body for a reason, and yet we are taught to uncritically accept it as unnatural**.** Martha also discussed the unquestioned power of the hairless norm on children, and how this can be transmitted through family,

"When I was younger I just wanted to get rid of it all and be completely smooth and hairless everywhere … I didn't see my parents or my aunt or anything with hair, so I felt like I was the only one dealing with this … it felt as though everyone's saying this isn't natural this is ugly and this is something you should be looking to get rid of, so my self-worth and my self-esteem is definitely tied to whether or not I was hairless, because I definitely felt like I had to be completely hairless to be beautiful." (Martha)

Young girls also see few, if any, older female relatives, or role models who have body hair or keep body hair, and this teaches young girls that to go out into the world as a woman you must be hairless, and anything less than that makes you deficient. Christine comments that,

"For a very long time I wanted to get rid of body hair because that's what everyone older than me was doing, it's what was expected of me, and it's what I had to do to be perfect."(Christine)

As discussed above, the construction of the ideal female body is exclusively white, and so women of colour are again further from this ideal, and so their body hair pushes them further again from the sphere of acceptable femininity. One survey respondent commented,

"There is never a time you're not critically aware of your body hair as a brown woman" (Anonymous Survey Participant)

Paige also commented on the inability to be perceived as beautiful as a woman of colour,

"We have to go the extra mile to feel attractive, and there's loads of little subconscious things. I guess it's white supremacy really. That just the closer you are to whiteness and being smooth and petite the more feminine you are and in society that's the ideal." (Paige)

Martha also echoed this and commented on how exhausting having to assimilate to Eurocentric beauty standards is, and the different relationship she had with her body hair as opposed to her white peers.

"I think I always felt a little bit jealous because I'm having to put in all this work to fit this Eurocentric beauty standard … partly jealousy, partly tiredness." (Martha)

Donna also commented on the power of the dominant beauty standard on making women of colour feel inadequate, and how she tried to conform more to white beauty standards by regularly waxing from as young as 12/13,

"When I look back on it now my emotions have changed because I think like, I was just trying to conform to white beauty standards ... because I was making myself look as close to them as I possibly could, and in secondary school, I was in a very white dominated school and that's all I knew in terms of standards of beauty, so this was one thing that could help me fit in slightly more." (Donna)

To be beautiful you must assimilate with the beauty standards of the dominant culture, and as described by Donna, this is particularly acute in non-diverse/white-dominant areas when you stand out more as a person of colour. Christine, who lives in a white-dominated Northern city, spoke in particular about how living in a non-diverse area makes body hair rebellions, and rebelling from the dominant beauty standard, more difficult and dangerous,

"I don't want to engage with a very western idea of beauty because that's not what I represent, and I'm fine with that … Do I want to go out to be subjected to a whole load of abuse? No. And that's the problem, I'm trying to make my life a little bit simpler and being a bame woman in [Northern City], it's already difficult to go out and feel safe ... I'm conscious of the fact that I stick out and I don't want to give anyone a reason to say anything." (Christine)

For women of colour in a white-dominated country, departures from the beauty norm can lead to much harshers social sanctions than for white women. However, because of the global dominance of whiteness through historical and present-day colonialism, these same white supremacist beauty norms also infiltrate non-white cultures and impact women of colour living in majority ethnic countries and cultural contexts.

As discussed above, their darker and thicker hair can be more obvious, and they also have the added difficulty of the way that their gender performance can intersect with their ethnicity. The gendered violence women who choose not to remove their body hair can face, from passing comments from strangers, partners, friends, and family, to verbal abuse and physical violence.

The hairless norm is also intertwined with capitalism, as by teaching women of colour their hair is unacceptable, they develop an insecurity that turns them into consumers. As Maeve puts it

"Of course they're going to make us feel shit about it so they can make more money. I have to keep reminding myself they are out to get your money, make you experience pain, be racially excluded, for their gain. You just have to be like fuck you and enjoy having hairy legs." (Maeve)

Secondary Schools, Shaving, and Social Control

This ideal hairless feminine body is incredibly impactful on girls from before they even have fully developed critical thinking skills, which is partially why it can be so harmful. Of the 66 survey participants, 42% became aware of their body hair when they were 10 years old or younger. These powerful messages from the media – that to be beautiful, and acceptable as a woman, is to be hairless – become so internalised that we then begin to act as enforcers of these social norms and criticise those who do not conform. 47% said it was their friends/peers that first made them aware of their body hair, and 28% saying it was their family. The first question I asked my interview participants was about how they first became aware of their body hair, with other people acting as a catalyst for realisation being a key theme. Also significant was how young all the interviewees were when they had their first realisation of their body hair. Many of the quotes, in particular Donna and Martha also mention how peers in primary school make comments without a recognition of the

effects they have, and whilst children lack the critical thinking to understand the effects comments have, ironically these same comments still have a life-long effect.

Could you tell me about when you first became aware of your body hair?

Donna

*"It was the **end of primary school**, at that age when it's not really seen as offensive to make fun of each other because you're too young to know the difference. I was at a birthday that was like laser tag and I must have been wearing a vest and waving my arms about, and some of the girls were laughing and were like "nice top". I'd been wearing this top the whole time and then I just noticed I had underarm hair for the first time, and immediately felt self-conscious."*

Christine

*"I was in year 8, so I would have been **12 or 13**, but I don't think I ever noticed it through myself first. Weirdly enough I kind of became aware of it through a friend of mine who was Iranian and was very conscious she had very thick hair, so she would talk about it a lot, and that's what made me aware of my own body hair."*

Maeve

*"I remember being quite small, maybe **7 or 8 years old** … I used to swim all the time, so it was very apparent very early on. I think I was first aware of arm hair, it's always the white girls being like "Oh I'm so hairy", and I look at my arms. It was definitely my mum, 100% [that made me first aware]."*

Martha

*"**Year 4 so I think 8 or 9**. I think that's when I first started getting peach fuzz on my face and arms and legs… towards the end of year 4 "Oh Martha's got a moustache" and I think that was when I first started being like ok I want to get this off, because it wasn't something that I noticed, it was pointed out. Then I became aware of it and I wanted to get rid of it."*

Paige

*"It was probably comparison to other girl my age who had sideburns and a moustache as well, and I realised I had the same thing, or girls who didn't have that, and I think because I have older sisters as well who have been through the same issues with their body hair, it was just something unsaid...I think that was like **primary school**."*

These above anecdotes illustrate the moment of realisation about body hair that immediately and indefinitely affects the way you perceive your body hair and yourself and learn for the first time that body hair is wrong and something to be ashamed of. From that point their relationship with their body hair is shaped by these emotions, which are again created by these restrictive feminine that profit off women's insecurities, from as young as 7 or 8 In Maeve's case.

Fahs (2011) theorised that teenage girls treat body modification practises as a rite of passage and a normal aspect of femininity, and that they enforce these rules on each other. One survey participant noted that,

"I have a very specific memory of asking a friend to come and get a razor with me because I didn't know what to get. This would have been in secondary school so year 7 +" (Anonymous Survey Participant)

This treatment of body hair removal as a rite of passage into adolescence is also reflected in a story told by Martha, who describes how "going into year 6 all the girls were talking about shaving their body hair for the year 6 leavers prom"**.** In Year 6 all of these girls would have been 10 or 11, barely old enough to have enough body hair to shave, and yet still recognised that to be beautiful for a big event (such as the Year 6 leavers prom), they must be hairless. So many girls start removing body hair at such a young age that it "didn't even have the chance to grow to its fullest point", as Paige describes, "I knew if people see it you're going to get made fun of and made to feel uncomfortable and seen as less attractive to boys."

And another participant recognised how other teenagers subconsciously reinforce social norms, even through positive comments.

“My BAME peers would always compliment my lack of arm hair, I was genuinely confused by this as I didn’t see arm hair has bad at all” (Anonymous Survey Participant)

Interestingly, 2 survey respondents said that it was their schools/teachers that first made them aware of their body hair, which speaks to how education informally acts as a transmitter of social norms both from students and teachers.

Shaving (55%), followed by waxing (20%) and then hair removal cream (17%) were the most common methods of hair removal, and 49% of respondents were under the age of 13 when they first removed their body hair. Before most girls have even reached sexual maturity they are practicing body modifications to appeal to the male gaze and are shamed by their male and female peers for not doing so. 64% of respondents said classmates made comments on their body hair in school, and 75% said these comments influenced their relationship with their body hair and body image, with 72% saying these comments also influenced their decision to remove their body hair. There was no significant trend in whether more comments came from male or female classmates, with most saying they weren’t sure (29%).

Interestingly, Donna and Martha had opposite experiences in regards to the relationship between the diversity of their schools and the comments about their body hair. Donna recalls, **“**In sixth form, where it was really diverse, it almost made it worse because everyone was much more comfortable talking about race because there weren't as many white people there, but then it meant I got more race-specific comments.” Martha describes the opposite experience, and says she received significantly less comments, “I think at secondary school it was a lot better, because there were a lot more people of colour at my secondary school”.

Race was also significant, with 42% saying the comments felt racist, defined in the question as *“negative or derogatory because of the colour/texture/thickness of your body hair”,* and this trend continued in the comments at the end of the survey and in the interviews. One respondent said that growing up in a predominantly white area with a white mother meant they had a more “difficult relationship with [their] body hair growing up as [they] had a different experience to their friends/peers”. Fahs and Delgado (2011) also found participants stated race as salient in their narratives. Racist comments around body hair (as with many other micro-aggressions) can be hard to judge as racist, though whether a comment is perceived as racist is more important than whether the intention was racist.

Survey participants were also invited to anonymously share something about their experiences, and two in particular stood out as examples of the way that shame and pressure are used as tools of social control in schools. One wrote,

“When I was in 6th grade, a boy made fun of the hair on my upper lip. I went home and shaved it off with my older brother’s razor. Later, my mom noticed the hair was gone and asked me what happened. I lied and said I waxed it off with duct tape? I was too ashamed to admit I used my brother’s razor.” (Anonymous Survey Participant)

Another survey respondent said,

“I felt pressured into removing my facial hair and then when I did, I was still made fun of because people realised I had removed it and so it felt like I couldn’t win.” (Anonymous Survey Participant)

Christine describes the experience of a friend in secondary school, which shows how comments from peers can cause life-long discomfort and changes to everyday behaviour.

“Some of the boys in her history class made her feel uncomfortable, and she started wearing skins/full sleeve shirts underneath her school shirt because she didn't want people to see it and started shaving her arms and still does 6 years on.” (Christine)

This idea, that if you don’t remove body hair you will be shamed, and when you do you will still be shamed, falls into the theme of the Illusion of Choice around women’s body hair practices. If body hair removal is

actually the ‘choice’ it is made out to be, then can women choose not to do it? This lack of choice can be particularly prominent when in school as other students act as communities of social control where non-conformance to social norms leads to isolation and bullying.

Femininity, Sexuality, and the Male Gaze

The male gaze (Mulvey, 1988) is described, both directly and indirectly, as a particularly powerful tool of controlling body modification practices and my interview participants' relationship with romance and their own sexuality. They commented on the assumption that men want a hairless woman, and how this creates an unquestioned culture of body hair removal for young women. Heteronormativity and the male-female binary is another powerful tool of the male gaze that controls women's sexuality, even women who are not attracted to men, like Paige.

Though most survey respondents did not find a significant difference between the comments made from boys vs girls in secondary school, many of my interview participants commented on how their body hair affected their relationship with their sexuality. Christine recalls a comment made by a friend of hers.

“I’ve known people who were like “I was getting off with someone, but I decided not to take them home because I haven’t shaved” (Christine)

Whilst her friend actually had no idea what the man's attitude on women's body hair was, the societal message that tells women that having no pubic hair is normal and any departure from that is unsexy and unacceptable, was so strong that she left him at the club. Similarly, Maeve describes the culture of normative body hair removal amongst young women at university that treated intimate body hair removal as an expectation of any woman having sex,

“When we started having casual sex and stuff at uni, and that all the girls would shave so much that they would be in so much pain.” (Maeve)

Donna also mentions the perceived distaste of body hair from men, and again how the hairless norm is so normative that some men genuinely do not know that women also grow body hair. Donna comments,

“if you were a boy … you might think “eww that's gross, that's unhygienic, that's ugly”, but that’s because it's fear of the unknown. Guys haven't seen that many hairy girls so they just don’t think girls have hair.” (Donna)

Interestingly, my interview participants presented opposite views on the extent to which they believed men care about their body hair. Martha describes how her relationship with her own body hair changed in her teens when she had her first boyfriend and realised “boys don’t actually care about you being completely hairless all over,”.

Ironically, Maeve disagreed with this exact statement, saying **“People would be all “boys don't care”, but some boys do care they do bully you about it. Some boys were nasty to me and my friends.”** As with any opinion stated by my interview participants, both are rooted in these women's personal experiences, and so one opinion is not truer than the other.

Maeve also comments on the relationship between hairless bodies and the ideation of childlikeness, and how this realisation is what encouraged her to stop shaving,

“Why do I want to look like a kid? Having body hair is a part of maturing and growing into a woman, why would I want to look like that?” (Maeve)

The male-female binary is incredibly powerful in relationships with sexuality, and the treatment of body hair as an inherently masculine quality, and hairlessness as inherently feminine. This binary is built on heteronormativity, and Paige, who identifies as a Lesbian, describes how when she began to question her

sexuality, she began to examine her relationship with her body hair, and to recognize how this was intertwined with the male gaze.

“I think the male gaze even to this day is there even though now I'm a lesbian, that validation is so hard to grow out of. As time went on and I started to discover my sexuality, the less I was attracted to men, the more I felt like I could do whatever I wanted with my body hair and let it grow.” (Paige)

Despite not being attracted to men, Paige describes how she still struggles to untangle herself from the validation of men. The male gaze (rooted not only in misogyny but also racism, capitalism, and heteronormativity) is so dominant in our culture that it is near-impossible to try and perceive yourself outside of these restrictions. Margret Atwood (1993) perfectly describes how the male gaze turns women into their own voyeur, and how we then begin to police our bodies, and other women's bodies into body hair removal.

“Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.” (Atwood, 1993, pg.456)

The male gaze is so powerful in controlling the way we behave as women, that it becomes so internalised that we are unable to perceive our own bodies and our own beauty independent of it. Even as a lesbian the male gaze still has power over the way Paige views herself. Donna also agrees that the way that her body hair is connected to potential romantic or sexual relationships is **“completely about the male gaze”**, and that women endure painful and time-consuming body hair removal practices essentially **“so boys don't have to realize that girls have body hair,”** and that other girls don’t care as much about each other’s body hair. Something else Donna said is also very reminiscent of the above Atwood (1993, pg.456) quote on how women **“are a woman with a man inside watching a woman”,** and that the male gaze becomes internalized to the point that we are our own voyeurs.

“Women only did it to appease men, and if you love the feeling of smooth legs that's great as long as you really do, and you don't love the feeling of smooth legs because men prefer the feeling of smooth legs.” (Donna)

One survey participant, who identified as White and so whose answers were left out of the statistics, comment demonstrates how women with body hair are masculinized and treated as closer to animals,

“Boys told me I had more arm hair than them or said that my back was like a monkey.” (Anonymous Survey Participant)

Heterosexual (white) femininity is hairless, and anyone who does not conform to this is treated as less than a woman. Women of colour exist in a particularly difficult intersection of this norm, where their race means they are further from femininity from the outset, and so face more accusations of masculinity.

Multiple survey participants also describe how comments around their body hair were associated with masculinity. Maeve recalls how a classmate described her as having **“their dad's legs”**, and Donna also remembers being told **“oh you have a beard, you have a better beard than most brown boys”**. Martha was also told in year 6 when wearing a short sleeve top **“Oh you’ve got hairier arms than your brother”**. Paige also describes how having body hair made her feel more masculine, and that in order to protect herself from hurtful comments she would join in to protect herself.

“I remember my moustache in particular made me feel very masculine, it was never seen as feminine at all to have any kind of facial hair and boys would make comments and jokes. As I went through high school I would join in on the jokes like “I've got a moustache, I'm a boy haha” as a way to protect myself from feeling hurt by that.”

Ugly, Stinky, and Shameful

Whilst white women are celebrated for their body hair, women of colour often face harsher social sanctions for being hairy, as colonialism and racism means that their body hair is more associated with a lack of hygiene and unattractiveness. Both the survey and interview participants commented on the link between body hair, hygiene, and shame, and how these standards of cleanliness are higher for women of colour, who cannot afford to be seen as anything less than perfect, and yet still cannot achieve the Eurocentric ideal.

As Donna puts it,

“If I have a monobrow I’m ugly but if a white woman has one then she's a leader in the body hair movement.” (Donna)

One survey respondent commented that,

“In secondary school I was led to believe that letting my pubic and underarm hair grow out [was] disgusting and unhygienic” (Anonymous Survey Respondent)

Some of the survey participants also echoed this same sentiment. Donna details the double standards for women of colour around hygiene and body hair.

“When you're a person of colour you have to think so much harder - I have to show that I'm a really clean person, and that I never smell of anything except flowers, and so if I was hairy they would probably think I'm dirty and don't clean myself. We already have higher standards to live up to than a white woman, so I don't have that privilege to not remove my body hair a lot of the time. (Donna)

Women of colour often do not have the privilege to embrace their body hair as the standards of cleanliness to which they are held are so much higher so they can avoid being labelled the stinky, dirty person of colour. Donna also describes how different areas of the body are considered dirtier than others, **“when it comes to underarm hair there is more stigma because they think it's unhygienic.”**

Martha describes a similar situation when not having removed her body hair,

“I would try and hide away so no one could see my face and wear long sleeve tops and stuff, and it affected how I presented myself because if I had removed my hair I would pull my hair back so people could see my face and wear shorts.” (Martha)

Donna also described presenting herself differently in the world when she had removed her body hair, as opposed to between waxes when she had to let her hair grow,

“I’d think oh I hope I don't see as many people today, and then when I have removed hair I want loads of people to see me because I've put so much effort into looking like this and I want them to know” (Donna)

Christine also describes how the association with body hair and dirtiness meant as a teenager she would spend longer in the bathroom shaving before any social events to be seen as “presentable”,

“If I’ve got hair on my arms or my legs or whatever then I'm not presentable, and it's the whole expectation that you have to look clean, which is difficult, and it goes back to having thick and dark hair compared to a white person who has blonde or finer hair.” (Christine)

The darker hair that women of colour often have, which all of my interview participants referenced, means they are often viewed as inherently dirtier and more unhygienic, as opposed to white women with pale body hair, which Maeve describes

“My older aunties, they're so soft, and being soft and smooth is really desired in Indian culture. I think it's a colonial thing that hair is dirty, animal-like, all those horrible things that white people put into the brains of Indian people and people of colour generally.” (Maeve)

One survey respondent commented that as a brown woman,

“You are taught from such a young age that [your body hair is] shameful and embarrassing”. (Anonymous Survey Respondent)

Self-Care or Self-Harm?

“I remember feeling really proud that I’d waxed it and not shaved it, because it's almost like *wearing pain as a little badge of honour*. Like “look everyone I didn't shave it, I waxed it because I’m such a strong tough woman and beauty is pain and all this.” (Donna)

Donna describes how at the age of **11** she had her arms and underarms fully waxed during a family holiday to Egypt as she knew she would be wearing short sleeves and shorts in the heat. This quote, and much of what Donna and the other interview participants have said, really illustrates how the social controls around shaving are so powerful, that from as young as 11, children will endure incredible amounts of pain and discomfort in an effort to fit into normative beauty standards. It was this quote, alongside much of my interview with Donna that brought the association between body hair removal and pain to my attention and inspired me to ask all of my interview participants, and the comments were insightful and illustrate the strange association with pain and self-care, and how harmful this is to young girls.

Donna also describes an even earlier body hair removal memory, that resulted in an injury when she was a child,

“I think I was in primary school … quite young, and I got my dad’s razor and tried to shave my arm, and then I cut my thumb really badly, it was like a huge gash.” (Donna)

In this anecdote Donna was young enough to not know how to shave properly and injure herself in the process, but old enough to recognise that her own body hair was unacceptable, and to recognise that having it, but also removing it, was shameful. She told her parents that “[her] dad's razor slipped and [she] picked it up and cut [her finger]”. Girls are taught to suffer in silence and keep their body hair shame as quiet as possible, and that the endurance of pain is normal. The normalisation of laser treatment is a great example of this, though Maeve, said

“I didn't find [laser hair removal] that painful though, I'd been waxing for so many years I didn't feel pain at all.” (Maeve)

This pain is not only normative but treated as a form of initiation into womanhood. Christine describes a conversation with her younger cousin, 12 and 14 at the time.

“I remember her talking to me and saying, “as soon as my hair starts growing my mum's booking appointments to get it all waxed.” And I remember thinking like “12? I'm 14 and I’ve never got waxed” … Even now she still does, maybe every three weeks or so she has an appointment to get her full body waxed.” (Christine)

After her cousin got her period, one of the most obvious physical markers of puberty and sexual maturity in adolescent girls, she was also not only allowed, but encouraged by her mother, to start having her body hair fully removed. Maeve, also describes these same mother-daughter hair removal rituals, and the pain they both endured,

“I have memories of when I was a kid in her bedroom, even before I had hair, and she would bleach every part of her…all over her face…all over her arms…some parts of her chest and back. I would sometimes do her back for her. When I started to get [body hair], we would do it together - oh it's actually so bad - she

would bleach everywhere on me and it was so painful, and so horrible, all my arms, everything and I must have been so young." (Maeve)

In some ways this pain was treated as a gift from her mother to initiate her into womanhood. Christine also describes how in her family the body hair removal, and the pain that comes with it, is treated as an act of self-care and pampering.

"When they are going out or treating themselves it includes shaving or waxing… if I was having a really stressful time at school, I'd be thinking to myself Ok I'll have a self-care day, and rather than that just doing a face mask or washing my hair, I would shave my legs and my arms, and I will feel clean… I treated it as a way to feel better about myself." (Christine)

Maeve also describes how hair removal is treated as an act of sisterhood and becomes normative through family relationships.

"I remember like all my cousins … we'd all get the waxing strips out. It's always a joke that any sort of woman of colour, especially Indian women, will have wax strips. My cousin would have the wax strips out and be waxing her arms if it was a Sunday night ready for the next week." (Maeve)

Because body hair has become so synonymous with beauty, body hair removal is treated as an act of self-care, rather than an act of self-harm, as described by Maeve.

"I'll get the mirror with the light on and I'm just like literally carving my skin to get this ingrown hair out, and some of them are so deep I got these huge scabs on my face. Given how the definition of self-harm has been broadened, if we weren't expected to do this in society I would call this an act of self-harm. The way I constantly pick at my ingrown hairs and my face and on my legs literally cutting skin to get the hair out. If we lived in a parallel universe where hair was fine I wouldn't be sitting here carving hairs out of my skin." (Maeve)

Not only are many methods of body hair removal painful, such as waxing and body hair removal cream, but they can also painfully affect your bodies afterwards. Ingrown hairs and folliculitis, both of which can be a consequence of body hair removal, inflamed and pus-filled rashes/cysts that can require medical attention and be incredibly painful. As described by Maeve, trying to 'treat' them yourself can also cause you more pain, and could be seen as an act of self-harm. This normalisation, even celebration of pain, is also explored in another story from Donna.

"I remember my friends got their eyebrows threaded before me - I was obviously very jealous - and they were like "don't do it, it felt like somebody was taking a cheese grater to my face", and even since hearing that it still didn't put me off. And like normally if there is a cheese grater to your face you'd be like no, but I was like "no that's fine I'll take it I just wanna get my eyebrows done." Cheese grater to your face it sounds like something out of a horror film." (Donna)

As put by Donna, so much of the language used by my interview participants does sound like something out of a horror film. These women, and so many others, have and continue to subject themselves to unnecessary pain in the name of beauty, for unachievable, restrictive, and harmful beauty standards. As women, particularly women of colour, we are constantly striving towards being perceived as beautiful, but in a system that will never allow us to 'win'.

Reflections and Transgressions

Whilst the pain and trauma that all of these women shared is something they, and many women of colour unfortunately have in common, something else wonderful they all shared was incredibly positive and hopeful stories of how they are learning to love their body hair. Unlearning the internalised hairless norm and learning to love and accept their bodies as they come naturally is something multiple participants mentioned, and how (whilst dominated by white women) the online body hair acceptance movement has been valuable in helping

to unlearn this self-hate. They also spoke about how it is a continuous, and sometimes rocky journey, and how mental attitudes are not always reflected in actual hair removal practices - that sometimes removing it is the easiest answer. Unlearning is a process, and as described by Maeve, has become conflated through the online movement with being political and radical.

Donna

*"People can do what they want, but I personally want to unlearn all of that, go back to the beginning and think **right now I want to remove the hair on my face, why?**. It's a long process and sometimes I'm like I don't have time for this. I'm not doing it because I want to get accepted by other people. I'm doing it because I want to do it. Even seeing white women embracing body hair - to an extent - did change my attitudes … It helped plant the seed in my mind of "maybe I'm normal", but **I need to see women of colour in order to properly appreciate myself.**"*

Christine

*"My whole thing with body hair is that I've never been fussed by it, I've never seen it as an issue … **your body produces it for a reason, why should I get rid of it?** I'm at the point where if someone dislikes me because I have hair on my body then that's fine, there's no reason for them to be in my life. **I feel sad for my 13-year-old self** who felt like she had to do those things because now I don't care. If I'm talking to a guy and he doesn't like the fact that I've got hair on my arms, he can leave. I don't need that. So yeah I would say now I'm not fazed by it. It's there and it's going to stay and I'm not getting rid of it."*

Maeve

*"I don't have a great relationship with my body hair and that's definitely a big impact for my mum, but also I understand that her way of thinking has come from society and patriarchal bullshit … It's only when we start to try and break the cycle can we start to heal. I've internalised that as well, but it takes time to unlearn it, and **learn that legs with hair on them are still beautiful**, but I don't see that yet. I think that now that I don't remove my body hair as much, it's annoying that **having body hair is an act of political activism** … sometimes I want to have body hair and not make it a big deal, when I go out with body hair I embody this **Fuck you society and Fuck my insecurities.**"*

Martha

*"It started being about my own preferences and **I started being completely happy going out with unshaven legs,** and I'm a lot less self-conscious about it. I think it's definitely helped you have more hair positivity movement going on nowadays."*

Paige

*"If I had a black mum who kept her armpit or leg hair long that definitely would have changed everything for me. Being online and seeing the **LGBT community**, there just being a lot less judgement from gay women about body hair. The more I realised it was all **programming from society**, the more it made me want to re-evaluate and realize what my actual opinion was on body hair. And I realised **I actually enjoy having body hair, and it makes me feel a lot more attractive and like myself.**"*

Conclusions

Female body hair is natural. It is not shameful, or masculine, or dirty, or unsexy (or too sexy). From birth, women are taught all of these things by a society that is built on racism, homophobia and misogyny, and an industry that profits off women's shame and insecurity. We are taught that we are inadequate from the time we are born, and these messages become so ingrained that we uncritically accept them, and then go on to enforce them on every woman around us. Eurocentric Femininity is constructed to be unattainable and keep women (especially women of colour) as self-hating and starving consumers, who will keep on buying their overpriced hair removal products in a constant, unwinnable effort to be beautiful.

The journey to body hair acceptance is long and fraught. It took me years not to love, but to stop hating the hair that grew on my body. I, along with so many other women, was taught that my body hair was disgusting, and it made me ugly, and I punished myself mentally and physically for growing it. I still have to stop myself from thinking and speaking negatively about my own, and other women's body hair, and sometimes I still find myself disgusted by my hairy arms or sideburns or moustache. But I have to remind myself that these are taught, not inherent, emotions. I have been taught to feel disgusted at my hairy body by a society that tells me that as a woman of colour I am not beautiful, and I am not whole. I had to start viewing my body hair as a part of my Punjabi heritage, rather than a deficiency, as I had been told my entire life by every form of media, my peers and friends, and my family. Even though for years I have looked into the history of body hair, and how it's intertwined with racism and the male gaze, I still have a very long way to go. Loving the way the hair on my body grows is hard work every single day.

I have been so thankful for the women whose stories I've read and listened to this summer, and I hope that we all, as women of colour, can find hope and self-love in this community. We have cried a collective river of tears, tears of pain, tears of sadness, of anger, anguish, and disgust. But by existing as hairy women we are doing something incredibly powerful. I know that seeing a woman with hair like mine as a child would have changed my life, and I hope we can all be that role model that makes a little girl realise she is beautiful and whole exactly the way she is. Hopefully we can all be better for our daughters and stop giving power to the little voice inside that wants us to believe we are not enough.

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