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Capitalism, Beauty Standards, and the Law: a feminist-foucauldian critique of body regulation

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This study examines the convergence of law, beauty standards, and feminist-Foucauldian theory, emphasising the influence of beauty myths on cultural norms and legal frameworks. Beauty standards, shaped by media, commercial, and legal structures, establish a restrictive and exclusive notion of beauty, frequently favouring lighter complexion, thinner physiques, and straight hair. These norms, devoid of a biological foundation, originate from social constructs that perpetuate patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. The law significantly reinforces these standards by normalizing certain physical traits and marginalising those who differ. Utilising Foucault's notion of "disciplinary power," the examination emphasises how individuals internalise societal norms and consciously modify their bodies to conform to these standards. It also attacks the legal system's inadequacy in addressing body image discrimination, which exacerbates the marginalisation of individuals who diverge from conventional beauty standards. This study underscores the significance of intersectionality, asserting how beauty myths intersect with race, gender, and class, while urging legal frameworks that accommodate diverse body types to strengthen equality and protect against appearance-based discrimination.

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Intruduction

Naomi Wolf (2013), in her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, contends that U.S. law has been constructed to protect the interests of prevailing power structures, creating a legal labyrinth where the beauty myth blocks progress at every turn. This creates significant challenges for women in achieving the expected standards of appearance and success. For instance, St. Cross was terminated from her position due to being labelled as “too old” and “too ugly,”. In contrast, Craft faced dismissal for being considered “too old,” “too ugly,” “unfeminine,” and for not adhering to appropriate dress standards. This indicates that a significant number of women may perceive the legal system as equitable in employment conflicts, contingent upon their adherence to societal norms regarding beauty and femininity. In the current digital landscape, a considerable proportion of social media influencers generate content spanning multiple sectors, including health, food, gaming, travel, lifestyle, and technology. Individuals who concentrate on cosmetics and makeup tutorials are frequently classified as beauty vloggers or beauty influencers (Garg & Bakshi, 2024). Surveys and rankings related to beauty consistently attract significant attention, reinforcing the importance of appearance in media and social discussions.

The beauty industry encounters regulatory deficiencies that do not adequately tackle discrimination related to physical appearance. This has resulted in individuals with darker skin tones facing disparities in treatment within the beauty industry. The allowance of terms such as “whitening” or “brightening” under Indonesian Food and Drug Authority regulations suggests that these distinctions are methodically reinforced within the market. The existing legal framework fails to confront or mitigate beauty biases, thereby enabling the continuation of discrimination against women. The absence of regulatory measures facilitates the continuation of discriminatory practices, ultimately leading to the commodification of women’s bodies for financial gain in the beauty sector. The establishment of these beauty standards within legal frameworks and industry norms highlights a significant societal concern, wherein women are predominantly evaluated based on their physical attributes, perpetuating detrimental stereotypes and biases that are challenging to eradicate.

For instance, the 100 Most Beautiful Faces in 2024 included five Indonesian women—Sandrina Michelle, Beby Tsabina, Lyodra Ginting, Syifa Hadju, and Dita Karang (Dari, 2025; Henry, 2025). It is important to note that these figures exhibit distinct characteristics: none possess dark skin or curly hair, and all display proportional, slender body types. The repeated appearance of these biological traits in leading beauty rankings and influencer circles has led to a broader social agreement that these features define the standard of beauty. This belief is deeply embedded in society, perpetuated by the dissemination of content that showcases “ideal” faces as the standard for beauty (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Maulana, 2025; Merino et al., 2024; Robinson-Moore, 2008; Wolf, 2013). Numerous advertisements feature faces that closely align with the prevailing “beauty standard,” which highlights

specific biological traits that are not universally present among individuals in a society (Bint-e-Khalil & Ali, 2025; Frederick et al., 2015; Kaziga et al., 2021; Liebelt, 2019). What are the implications? Individuals lacking these characteristics are categorised as not beautiful, and some even choose to identify themselves as such (Berry, 2016; Dion et al., 1972; Griffin & Langlois, 2006; Spiegel, 2023; Webster & Driskell, 1983). Additional implications involve individuals attempting to alter their natural traits through corrective actions, yet troublingly, beauty standards are used to curtail rights and freedoms – often arbitrarily – while the law reinforces the myths (Ramati-Ziber et al., 2020; Rhode, 2010; Scutt, 2020; Wolf, 2013).

Beauty standards have evolved beyond a straightforward comparison of one woman's beauty against another's (Khoo, 2019; Muljadi et al., 2024). These have evolved into a tool for discrimination and the perpetuation of patriarchal practices (Forbes et al., 2007; Sultana, 2010; Yin & Abdullah, 2024). Beauty standards are often viewed as a framework that regulates and disciplines bodies through social norms continuously produced by society, reflecting its expectations of what is deemed beautiful and what is not (Coy-Dibley, 2016; Engeln-Maddox, 2006; Li & Li, 2025). In this societal perspective, beauty is often associated with characteristics such as fair skin, a slender physique, a narrow nose, and straight hair (Berry, 2007; Singh & Singh, 2011). These criteria should be understood not as biological facts, but as constructs shaped by historical and cultural contexts that reflect underlying values of power (symbolic power) (Houtsonen & Antikainen, 2008; Pellandini-Simányi, 2014). This illustrates how beauty standards function as a tool of power that operates without the need for violence, instead relying on mechanisms of discipline and normalisation. This leads individuals to willingly participate in self-control, surveillance, and even self-punishment, all under the guise of beauty myths as a form of symbolic power. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1993; 2003), symbolic power operates as an unseen form of power, as it is shrouded in the legitimacy provided by moral and legal symbols. Symbolic violence often derives its effectiveness from misconceptions about the conditions and methods of its implementation. The absence of cultural consumers' associations is undoubtedly intentional in relation to the production of cultural commodities. Consider the myriad economic and symbolic interests associated with the creation of books, paintings, plays, ballets, and films that would be jeopardised if the intrinsic value of cultural items were abruptly disclosed to all customers. I am contemplating mechanisms such as the cyclical exchange of laudatory evaluations among a limited group of producers (both of works and reviews), respected academics who legitimize and consecrate, as well as journalists who validate their own authority while offering praise.

Beauty standards present themselves as an inherent and universal “aesthetic truth,” but they are underpinned by specific ideological interests that sustain social domination, including patriarchy and capitalism (Blaine, 2016; Collins & Rothe, 2017; Eagleton, 1988; Shea, 1997). These standards function as symbolic instruments that place women in a disadvantaged position, as they are directly objectified in visual and sexual terms while simultaneously facing moral pressures to adhere to these normative ideals. Consequently,

they emerge as the most disadvantaged group within this power structure. Within these power dynamics, women are objectified both visually and sexually, a tension amplified when the law shifts from neutrality to a tool that embeds beauty myths into social values and ethics. The law functions as a component of the power structure, concurrently influencing and governing social subjects (Natalis, 2025; Natalis et al., 2023a).

In the realm of beauty, the law serves a multifaceted role (Macioce, 2025; Maurer, 2018). It is essential to address the symbolic violence issue associated with appearance, as the “indifferent attitude” that allows the beauty industry to dictate women’s bodies through commercial standards and beauty myths highlights a notable deficiency in the legal system’s capacity to protect women’s rights adequately (Craig, 2018; Morgan & Björkert, 2006; Son & Kim, 2012; Xu, 2019). This viewpoint not only validates the objectification of women, but also reinforces patriarchal structures that uphold existing social ideologies. Women, often under the media’s scrutiny and defining as beauty standards, become accustomed to external regulation of their bodies, resulting in a passive role in their own self-perception. Foucault (Foucault, 2023) posits that this process leads to the conversion of individuals into what he terms “docile bodies.”

The interplay of power shaping the concept of beauty is not only oppressive but also foundational, as suggested by Susan R. Bordo (2020). The participation of women in this consumption serves to reinforce a male-dominated ideology, thereby allowing symbolic violence to become deeply entrenched. Bordo (2020) points out that “our contemporary aesthetic ideal for women has become the central torment of many women’s lives; at its extreme, the practices of femininity may lead to demoralisation, weakness, and even death”.

The prevailing and evolving beauty standards in society reveal a perspective that symbols of power or authority serve not only as oppressive forces but also as productive ones, where power has the capacity to generate new knowledge, subjects, and truths, influencing their self-perception and leading to feelings of shame and inadequacy when they do not conform to these standards. The law functions not merely as a mechanism of control but also as a producer of truths that reshape the bodily ideal and non-ideal bodies, a process intensified by social media’s expansive surveillance and standardization of beauty, though continually challenged by biological diversity. Consequently, discriminatory behaviours such as body shaming arise, representing a method of enforcing visual standards on individuals who possess varying biological characteristics. The legal system is currently facing challenges in effectively addressing discrimination from appearance-related factors.

An examination of legal discourse through a feminist-Foucauldian lens, which integrates critiques of patriarchal power dynamics with insights into the mechanisms of power as they manifest through normalisation, surveillance, and legal language, is essential. This approach reconceives not as a neutral tool for justice, but as a strategic domain where power manifests in ways that may not be readily apparent. Bodies are now governed less by prohibitions than incentives, surveillance, and normative expectations of physical aesthetics. In Indonesia, legal frameworks have yet to address the nuances of power associated with aesthetic discrimination and symbolic violence linked to physical

appearance. By insisting on formal objectivity, the law overlooks the body as a political site of power struggles. In the digital era, the growing emphasis on visibility intensifies idealised standards of women's appearance, systematically reinforced across society.

Based on this viewpoint, it is crucial to reassess the function of law in the creation of beauty myths, which subsequently serve as mechanisms for social control. By framing beauty standards within the context of power and law as interconnected elements that systematically uphold these standards, a new avenue for examining the relationships between the body, authority, and justice in intricate and evolving societies, such as modern Indonesia can be created.

1. The Body in the Grip of Power: Foucault and Feminism on Disciplinary Aesthetics

MacKinnon's (1989) highlights how men exercise power not only over resources and institutions, but also over cultural values, knowledge, and morality. By defining masculinity and femininity, men reinforce dominance and marginalize women, shaping the very parameters of gender roles.

The continuation of male dominance construction creates a framework that systematically advantages men, placing women in a lesser role. The roles and identities of women frequently become constrained by the desires and expectations imposed by men, which complicates efforts to escape the cycle of patriarchal dominance. MacKinnon argues that unless women recognize the power structure imposed by men and reclaim autonomy, they will remain confined within them, making it important to redefine the limits set by the dominant gender.

Foucault's concepts regarding power clarifies its subtle and internalised functions, indicating that control operates not only through law but also through social norms and practices continually reproduced. In the context of beauty standards, power manifests less by imposing explicit regulations than by naturalising criteria of attractiveness – particularly youth and beauty – as inherent ideals. These norms, internalised by women as aspirations rather than impositions, transform subjective preferences into binding social expectations. Beauty myths thus function as powerful frameworks that shape women's behaviours and self-perceptions, compelling conformity while undermining autonomy and self-expression. The beauty industry reinforces these disciplinary mechanisms by presenting aesthetic ideals as natural and desirable, thereby regulating women's bodies in ways that are difficult to resist. As Foucault's analysis suggests, such standards are not neutral tastes but socially constructed norms embedded within patriarchy, sustaining male dominance by defining women's value and identity through conformity to imposed ideals.

Foucault (2023), in *Discipline and Punish*, highlights that the process of disciplining the body can be accomplished through targeted techniques aimed at converting it into a productive and compliant entity. The female body is consistently subjected to dominant cultural myths of beauty, transforming it into an object of regulation and control. This objectification is further complicated by aesthetic practices – such as skin care, plastic surgery, and extreme dieting – that operate in tandem with broader imperatives of

productivity, all directed toward the attainment of prescribed aesthetic standards. Such ideals constitute what Foucault (2023) characterizes as disciplinary regime, wherein deviation from established norms results in categorization, such as “not beautiful” or “not ideal,” and similar designations. Within this framework, disciplinary power is internalised, as women themselves become agents of surveillance, continuously monitoring, assessing, and adjusting their conduct to align with externally imposed standards. This mechanism functions as a “truth regime” that dictates the criteria by which individuals, especially women, are evaluated and constrained to corporeal aesthetics. Consequently, the female body is positioned within an ongoing project of self-optimization—ostensibly progressive in form, yet fundamentally underpinned by normative and moralised dimensions.

Beauty standards function not through a direct external pressure, but by becoming so deeply internalised that women perceive them as self-generated. These mechanisms operate without relying on explicit prohibitions. Women are not compelled to attain beauty, yet societal influences create a framework that fosters a desire for it. This desire is not solely internal but shaped by media, the beauty industry, societal norms, and regulatory frameworks that emphasise specific aesthetic ideals. Women often face double victimization – for instance, their physical appearance is used to justify sexual violence. Morality and legality should not be judged through aesthetic standards, yet women’s bodies remain under external control from family, society, institution (Figuerola et al., 2023; Natalis et al., 2023b).

A deeper interpretation of the female body is essential and has evolved into a multifaceted domain of symbolic contention. Sandra Lee Bartky (2020), in Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power, outlines the distinct disciplinary practices imposed on women compared to men, highlighting a more intense form for exerting control and power through aesthetic standards. Women are often expected to maintain an attractive appearance, as suggested by seemingly neutral phrases like “self-love,” “self-care,” and “be the best version of yourself.” These slogans emerge as a product of either reclamation or fabrication by neoliberal capitalism, serving to obscure the reality that women’s bodies have been commodified within this framework. Currently, a well-maintained and aesthetically pleasing body has transitioned from being merely an aspiration to a fundamental requirement for women seeking social, professional, and legal acceptance. The use of this distorted aesthetic ideals to evaluate women’s professionalism in the workplace reflects a deeply discriminatory approach. Appearance has increasingly become a benchmark for assessing trustworthiness and competence, with significant implications in the legal context (see: Women as Double Victims of Sexual Harassment). These patterns demonstrate how aesthetic values have been absorbed into a meritocratic system that obscures gender inequality. Over time, aesthetics has shifted into moral and ethical markers within social interactions, extending far beyond superficial appearance.

In Indonesian society, beauty myths operate not mainly through direct repression, but – seen from a Foucauldian lens – through different mechanisms of power. Beauty myths work through micro-level, distributed mechanisms, indicating that they operate without the need for a dominant actor to execute them. Instead, they are maintained by institution and social

practices that embed them into daily life. Within this system, women's bodies become the main site of control and exploitation, central to feminist critique. Women's bodies are not fully their own but are shaped and "colonised" by outside interests. The constant rise and shift of beauty myths create lasting instability in how women relate to their bodies, showing how deeply these power dynamics are internalised (Jay, 2024; Jeong-a, 2025; McLaren, 2012; Paudel, 2023).

Myths or standards of beauty function as mechanisms of performativity for women's bodies. Women face expectations not only regarding their appearance but also concerning their behaviour. They are often expected to conform to a feminine demeanour, which may not authentically reflect their true selves. Women's actions and behaviours can be understood as shaped by long history of power dynamics that continue to sustain themselves, often without women realizing it. This hidden influence is masked by beauty discipline; which women carry out voluntarily. Today, external authorities are no longer needed to control women's bodies, because women themselves feel pressured to match ideal images, leaving their bodies open to constant judgment and objectification. Social media functions as a mechanism of influence, inundated with idealised representations that lead women to perpetually assess their bodies against the "ideal" propagated by the media. In this context, women engage in ongoing surveillance and adjustment of their bodies, motivated by the perception that their physical appearance does not conform to the societal ideals promoted by the public. At this juncture, women's bodies once more shift from biological entities to semiotic products that are perpetually assessed and scrutinized (Brooke-Rose, 1986; Haraway, 1989). This pattern represents a significant form of power without overt repression, drawing on the imagination and aspirations that appear to originate from women themselves.

In this context, a heightened awareness of the underlying logic of power started to emerge through diverse forms of resistance. Body positivity, digital feminism, and critiques of the beauty industry have emerged to reassess the significance of women's bodies (Darwin & Miller, 2021; Riley et al., 2022; Sastre, 2014; Streeter, 2019). Over the past ten years, beauty brands have increasingly showcased a wider range of colours and body diversity. This shift is evident in numerous prominent fashion houses that have included models representing various body types. However, this trend has faced criticism, with some arguing that it serves primarily as a strategy to evade allegations of body-shaming discrimination. According to Foucault (1981), the presence of power inherently invites resistance, which can manifest even in newly established domains shaped by that power, such as social media. Women, as figures of influence, have the capacity to craft alternative narratives that serve as forms of resistance, questioning the acceptance of biological realities of their bodies in contrast to the constructed myths of beauty. It is essential to recognise that numerous structural limitations persist in these efforts to counteract power.

It is crucial to highlight that aesthetics is not a neutral concept but rather a politically charged domain that holds significance for women in their pursuit of equality. The law cannot be neutrality while simultaneously upholding and reinforcing norms that dictate

discriminatory treatment based on physical appearance. From both feminist and Foucauldian viewpoint, the women's bodies function as sites of power, shaped through complex dynamics. The regulation, shaping, and discipline of women's bodies align with pre-established narratives that serve specific interests. At the same time, these dynamics also creates substantial opportunities for resistance against the subtle oppression and limitations enforced by beauty myths.

2. Law as Disciplinary Discourse and the Production of Beauty Myths

The relationship between law and the female body can be identified through the lens of power dynamics and how the law shapes specific subjectivities about women, often reinforcing discriminatory norms. Foucault's (1978; 1979; 1981) framework suggests that law operates not just through explicit prohibitions, but through more subtle mechanisms that influence truth, knowledge, and power. In this sense, the law acts as a cultural tool that actively constructs and regulates concepts of beauty, morality, and propriety tied to womenbody. It does more than the rules; it defines social expectatins of femininity and what is considered acceptable. The law helps spread beauty myths that empasise modesty, restraint, and passivity, as well as it reinforces these ideals through legal and institutional reinforcement.

Karpin's (1992) analysis of the legal construction of the women body aligns with a Foucauldian understanding, highlighting how law, in collaboration with scientific and cultural discourses, continually reconstructs women through the imposiyion of bodily norms. The regulation of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy reveals how legal frameworks often position women's bodies as objects of control, thereby maintaining power imbalances. For example, Laws on reproductive technologies and the criminalisation of pregnant women's behaviours regulate women's bodies while shaping societal definitions of womanhood. These measures reinforce power structures that subordinate women to reproductive roles and legitimise attached moral values. Thus, law operates not only as a means of physical regulation but also as a tool of ideological construction, embedding control under the guise of moral and social protection.

Heather Widdows (2018) argues that the constriction of acceptable beauty standards has emerged as a prevailing ethical ideal. This shift complicates the process of questioning or dismissing beauty standards, which then become entrenched in societal norms and legal practices. Widdows suggests that "beauty failure" is seen as a comprehensive failure of the self, with beauty becoming not just a personal choice or a minor shortcoming but a core inadequacy of the self. As the beauty ideal gains increasing significance, it fosters a heightened commitment to beauty as a crucial value framework, integrating these ideals into the self-monitoring process. Consequently, beauty standards, much like the legal regulation of women's bodies, are intricately correlated, reinforcing control over the female body and embedding societal expectations into women's self-perception and behaviour.

While beauty standards are increasingly global, this does not negate the ongoing relevance of local beauty ideals. These normative positions intersect, overlap, and operate

concurrently, with local cultural contexts still playing an important role. Considering that beauty standards are not solely internalised through the mechanisms described by Widdows; state influences also help to reinforce them. Practices that enhance beauty are often legally protected, while deviations like tongue splitting or other body modifications may be criminalised (Walker, 2025). This shows that beauty is shaped not only by culture but also by law, which reflects and reinforces cultural values about appearance. As a result, the law strengthens society's focus on women's looks and deepens the control over their bodies in both legal and cultural contexts.

The legal frameworks reinforce beauty myths, as demonstrated by various policies and regulations, such as Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia Number 71 of 2018 regarding Dress Code for State and Official Events. This regulation clearly specifies the categories of clothing required for different states and official events. The established dress codes serve to illustrate the level of formality associated with the event while simultaneously indicating the identity and social standing of the attendees. The clothing requirements encompass Complete Civilian Attire, official attire, ceremonial dress, and national costumes. The dress codes function beyond mere politeness; they are indicative of an individual's status and position within the context of the event. For men, Complete Civilian Attire comprises a dark suit, a white long-sleeve shirt, a tie, and black shoes. For women, Complete Civilian Attire similarly includes a dark suit and black shoes, with the choice of either skirt or trousers. The clothing standards that are specific to gender illustrate the influence of social and cultural norms, which tend to enforce a more formal and structured dress code for women in contrast to men.

Regulations on body image operate at both individual and structural levels. Women who deviate from norms regarding attire, body shape, skin colour, or behaviour risk social exclusion and possible criminalisation. Appearance also serves as an unwritten standard in job recruitment and public spaces, where women outside conventional standards are judged as inappropriate or disruptive. Such scrutiny, framed as legally valid, raises the question: What type of truth does the law promote about women's bodies?" The supposed neutrality of law must be questioned, as it often reinforces gender inequality. The presence of beauty myths in Indonesia nowadays can be understood as a consequence of social interactions that legal frameworks have reinforced. The law embodies patriarchy values, legitimizing and formalizing them as tools of control. Viewing law through a Foucauldian feminist lens necessitates an understanding that it transcends normative texts; it represents a shift in perspective regarding the power structures that influence its formation. The law should be perceived as a battleground that encompasses the ideological development of conflict, power dynamics, normative agreements, and individual autonomy, rather than simply focusing on the safeguarding of rights. The intersection of law and cultural aspects of society gains importance when societal myths of beauty are employed to regulate, discipline, and control women through legal norms that are justified by notions of morality and propriety.

The regulation encourages the adoption of national attire, which is indicative of Indonesia's cultural diversity, alongside ceremonial and official uniforms designated for

state events. This regulation highlights how clothing standards in formal settings can perpetuate gender stereotypes, with women expected to wear more structured and formal attire than men. This regulation also governs physical appearance while also implicitly conveying societal values associated with roles, status, and individual identity in state and official events.

The study conducted by Franz von Benda-Beckmann and Keebet von [Benda-Beckmann \(2013\)](#) examines the dynamics of dress code enforcement, particularly regarding Muslim attire at events like the Quran reading competition in a rural district, revealing the complexities of acceptance and resistance surrounding this issue regarding Muslim attire. The implementation of dress code has posed particular challenges, yet many individuals ultimately accept and embrace them. In rural areas, regulations requiring Muslim attire for specific events are often enacted with little resistance, as some regard the practice as a symbol faith and tradition. Nonetheless, dissenting voices remain. Some argue that women who willingly adopt Muslim dress should not be subjected to coercion. Dt. Majo Basa, former head of the customary council in Candung Kota Lawas, criticised such enforcement, stating that women should be encouraged—rather than compelled—to wear Muslim attire, since not all are ready to embody the ideals of a “good Muslim woman.”

Perceptions of appropriate clothing in rural communities have shifted over time. While Muslim attire is widely accepted for many occasions, concerns persist that it may overshadow traditional ceremonies as well. Village regulations still mandate traditional attire – such as “baju kuruang” (traditional clothing) – for weddings, funerals, and the inauguration of adat (customary) officials, with the aim of protecting cultural identity. Men are not subject to formal dress codes, though informal norms shape their choices, such as wearing loose trousers and tucked-in shirts. Enforcement remains inconsistent, leading many men to view the rules as symbolic. Women, however, fear these regulations may open space for police exploitation and harassment. The director of the research centre at IAIN Imam Bonjol, Padang, criticised county rules limiting women’s mobility as restrictive measures that enforce conformity rather than supporting the organic growth of local values ([Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2013](#)).

This regulation reflects a broader movement that reinforces traditional roles for women, often justified through references to Islam and adat (customary law). Discussions surrounding inheritance, lineage, dress codes, and moral regulations highlight tensions between gender relations in adat and Islamic law and the standards of constitutional and international human rights. Both systems face significant challenges in aligning with anti-discrimination principles. Bahar critiques adat for its discriminatory practices toward men, even calling for a “liberal men’s movement,” but also acknowledges its negative impact on women, particularly when *ninik mamak* (maternal uncles) exploit inheritance without consulting female relatives. His support for a broader reading of Islamic inheritance law—commonly viewed as gender-biased—appears inconsistent with his call for gender equality. Nonetheless, he suggests that *ijtihad* (interpretive reasoning) could be used by Islamic scholars to promote greater equity ([Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2013](#)).

Supplementary regulations further examine the aesthetic aspects of the body. Governor Regulation No. 14 of 2017 for West Nusa Tenggara serves as the second amendment to Governor Regulation No. 25 of 2014, which addresses the Work Discipline of Civil Servants within the Government of West Nusa Tenggara. This regulation outlines disciplinary procedures for civil servants in West Nusa Tenggara, covering attendance, working hours, uniforms, and penalties for rule violations. Article 11A, paragraphs 3 and 4, stipulates that the *Imtaq* uniform, designated as white for Muslims, must be worn on Fridays, reflecting the province's vision of promoting faith, culture, competitiveness, and prosperity. The regulation prohibits denim or similar fabrics, restricts women from wearing trousers, and allows non-Muslims to modify their attire as needed.

Known as the “land of a thousand mosques,” West Nusa Tenggara embeds Islamic values deeply into its social and political life. Within this legal framework, the female body becomes a symbolic construct—projecting conformity to norms, modesty as a means of disciplining desire, and aesthetics as an instrument of control. These regulations not only regulate appearance but also cultivate a culture of shame and self-surveillance, particularly for women. Women's bodies are consistently positioned as sites of fascination and anxiety requiring oversight, while men are framed as neutral. Thus, rather than eliminating inequality, the law reinforces gendered hierarchies, keeping women under continual scrutiny and regulation.

The Ministry of Health Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1176/Menkes/Per/VIII/2010 regarding Cosmetic Notification aims to protect consumers from potentially hazardous cosmetics that fail to comply with the defined quality standards. Nonetheless, while its main objective is to guarantee the safety and effectiveness of cosmetic products, this regulation unintentionally upholds specific prevailing beauty standards within society. Although it adopts a neutral position regarding women's bodily autonomy, particularly in the beauty industry, it functions mainly within the private sector and, inadvertently, reinforces, and legitimises the beauty myths developed throughout society.

This regulation reinforces beauty standards by endorsing cosmetic products that assert their ability to change an individual's appearance. Products like skin-whitening, anti-ageing, and slimming cosmetics delineate beauty with a limited perspective: fair skin, youthful characteristics, and a slim physique. Although these products satisfy technical standards regarding safety and efficacy, they simultaneously endorse a limited and exclusive ideology of beauty, recognising only a singular type of appearance within society.

The regulation grants distribution permits for cosmetics based only on product safety and composition, ignoring factors such as cultural relevance and market impact. In this cosmetic industry, however, marketing strategies and symbolic value often outweigh physical benefits. Cosmetics, particularly for skin and facial care, shape self-image and reflect dominant beauty ideals. By validating products that claim to improve appearance, the regulation inadvertently supports narrow standards of beauty defined by whiteness, youthfulness, and slenderness.

This reinforces social and gender inequalities, privileging those who fit these ideals while marginalizing people with darker skin, older appearance, or fuller bodies. Although the regulation protects consumers from unsafe products, it also sustains beauty myths promoted by cosmetic corporations. In doing so, it perpetuates restrictive and discriminatory standards that influence both how women see themselves and how society judges them.

3. Invisible Bodies: Intersectionality and Resistance to Gender-Neutral Laws

Beauty engagement has historically been perceived as a mechanism of gendered subordination. In *Woman Hating*, [Andrea Dworkin \(2025\)](#) articulates that engagement with beauty is a behaviour acquired through experience—serving as a strategy for navigating a patriarchal society. She articulates, “we acknowledged that our social behaviour was a learnt response that served to ensure survival in a sexist world: we adorned ourselves, smiled, revealed legs and buttocks, bore children, maintained households, as our adaptations to the dynamics of power politics”. Nonetheless, employing gender subordination as a framework to elucidate beauty engagement appears to be diminishing in its persuasiveness compared to the period when Dworkin articulated her views. With the advancement of gender equality, as women experience a decrease in financial, social, and economic dependence on men, their interaction with beauty ideals becomes more liberated—rather than dismissive. This shift indicates a diminishing asymmetry and inequality that exploitation arguments depended upon, as an increasing number of men participate in body work and encounter body image anxiety themselves.

Unfortunately, despite the significant achievements of women’s emancipation and gender equality, these advancements have not been accompanied by a strong rejection of the normalisation of the women body. As Naomi Wolf ([Wolf, 2013](#)) explains in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, women have made considerable progress, there is a continued emphasis on the physical attractiveness of the female body, driven by obsessive media images and messages centred on sexuality and beauty. This has allowed industries that exploit and commercialise women’s bodies—such as pornography, weight-loss products, and cosmetic surgery—to thrive. Ironically, the more legal and material barriers women have overcome, the greater the pressure on them has become in the form of increasingly stringent, harsh, and cruel beauty standards. Over the past decade, women have breached power structures, eating disorders have risen exponentially, and cosmetic surgery has become the fastest-growing specialty. Today, women enjoy greater wealth, power, and legal recognition than ever before. Yet, in terms of body image, many feels worse than previous generations, showing that pressures around beauty remain strong and now extent to men as well. Beauty practices today are shaped by visual and virtual culture, consumerism, global standards, and technology. They are no longer just tools of female subordination but part of broader cultural and economic transformation ([Widdows, 2021](#)). Attempt to reject beauty practice as resistance have largely failed. Feminist critique often divides women instead of challenging increasing beauty standards, often eliciting emotions of guilt and shame. Women who conform are judged by feminist perspectives,

while those who resist may feel marginalized or accused of acting “for men.” This cycle fosters blame and deepen insecurity rather than building unity. As [Virginia Blum \(2003\)](#) notes, critiques of body practices risk reproducing the same shame they seek to dismantle. Victim-blaming further fuels the problem. Failed cosmetic surgeries, such as PiP breast implant scandal, often lead to public ridicule. Society mocks “botched” procedures, fat-shames, condemns body hair, and blames individuals for failing to meet restrictive beauty norms. Such focus on personal choices distracts from systemic issues and reinforces judgement and insecurity ([Widdows, 2021](#)). These dynamics reveal that the body is no longer neutral. It has become a site where political, cultural, and economic forces intersect, shaped by laws and norms that define who is considered acceptable in the public sphere. Beauty myths, especially those tied to women’s bodies, present themselves as natural but are in fact socially constructed and reinforced by institutions, including law. Far from being neutral, the law often excludes and disadvantages those with “non-ideal” bodies. Addressing these hidden injustices requires an intersectional approach that recognises how beauty standards and legal frameworks jointly sustain inequality.

Intersectionality, as articulated by [Kimberle Crenshaw \(1991; 2023\)](#), underscores that experiences of injustice cannot be simplified to a singular dimension or issue, such as gender or race alone. Instead, these are interconnected and have a compounding effect on vulnerability. In examining beauty myths and women’s bodies, the concept of intersectionality offers insights into the presence of additional biological realities that face diverse forms of discrimination, that is not solely based on gender, but is also interconnected with other identities that challenge dominant beauty standards. Bodies that do not conform to established beauty standards are often overlooked in mainstream aesthetic discussions and are inadequately represented within legal systems, as well as being unaccountable primarily to the beauty industry.

Although law is expected to remain neutral, Indonesian legal documents often include aesthetic descriptors, such as “polite,” “neat,” and “appropriate.” This reveals that law is not value-free but reflects dominant cultural ideals, particularly those tied to beauty myths. By focusing mainly on product safety, regulations from the Food and Drug Authority overlook the social consequences of cosmetic advertising, which frequently promotes narrow ideals of whiteness, youthfulness, and slenderness. As a result, bodies that do not conform to these standards are subject to discrimination, yet such practices remain legally unaddressed.

The Consumer Protection Law No. 8 of 1999 similarly fails to challenge visual and symbolics narratives that sustain beauty myths, leaving marginalized bodies vulnerable. Women from religious or ethnic minority groups who express their cultural identity risk being labelled “untidy” or “unfeminine,” while professional settings often stigmatise those outside dominant beauty norms as “unprofessional” or “inappropriate.” Existing regulations therefore marginalise women lived realities by treating aesthetic discrimination as insignificant, especially in the workplace, where clear protections remain absent.

Further examination is needed regarding the role of law in protecting consumer rights and addressing discrimination grounded in aesthetic values, particularly in how it mediates

power relations surrounding beauty myths. Law cannot be regarded as a neutral construct; rather, it operates as part of a broader discourse that shapes social reality. If beauty myths function as mechanisms of discipline and control over women's bodies, then law must adopt a critical rather than permissive stance, interrogating the norms reproduced through social interaction and dominant value systems.

To achieve this, law should recognise diversity as an inherent right rather than an exception. Explicit protections against discrimination—including those based on aesthetic values—are needed across education, employment, and public services. Such measures must protect “invisible bodies,” or those excluded from prevailing standards, regardless of skin colour, body type, or gender identity. Legal protections should also address cultural and symbolic dimensions, ensuring that advertising and visual media embrace diversity rather than reinforce exclusion.

Those who do not conform to aesthetic ideals should not be dismissed as “inappropriate,” “unworthy,” as such labels reflect systemic disregard. Ensuring dignity and fairness for marginalised individuals is a legal and moral imperative. Without confronting the power struggles embedded in beauty myths, law risks reinforcing hegemonic systems under the guise of neutrality. Thus, the pressing question is how law can move beyond maintaining norms to act as a transformative instrument of justice through collective efforts that secure equality for all.

Conclusion

Upon analysing the intersection of law, beauty standards, and the feminist-Foucauldian perspective, it is evident that beauty standards extend beyond superficial aesthetics and are intricately woven into the fabric of societal power structures. The standards disseminated through various channels, including media, advertising, and legal frameworks, perpetuate ideals that marginalise numerous individuals, particularly women, by defining “beauty” through a limited range of attributes, such as light skin, slim physiques, and straight hair. The legal system significantly contributes to the affirmation and reinforcement of beauty myths by normalising them through established laws, regulations, and social practices. Government policies and corporate regulations frequently endorse physical attributes considered “acceptable,” thereby further marginalising individuals who do not conform to these standards.

In this context, law serves as a non-neutral instrument of power that actively shapes societal norms and practices. Laws and regulations regarding appearance—whether in workplace environments, advertising, or the oversight of beauty products—systematically promote a uniform standard of beauty. Women are compelled to regulate their bodies to conform to these established norms. Foucault's concept of “disciplinary power” elucidates the mechanisms through which power operates, highlighting that it is not solely enforced through overt violence, but also through the normalisation of behaviour and the subsequent internalisation of these norms by individuals. Women are not simply compelled to adhere

to beauty standards; they actively participate in practices to modify their bodies, internalising the notion that their value is linked to their appearance.

By failing to challenge discriminatory norms, the legal system inadvertently contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. It overlooks beauty standards that privilege lighter skin or specific body types, and current regulations focus narrowly on product safety while ignoring deeper issues of body image discrimination. This neglect sustains the symbolic violence of beauty myths and marginalises those who do not conform.

Beauty standards function as a form of symbolic power that influences race, class, and gender. As Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality shows, discrimination linked to beauty cannot be understood solely through gender, but must be analysed within broader social categories. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential to addressing the complex realities faced by marginalised groups.

Ultimately, the law should be reconceptualised as a tool of justice that recognises the variety of bodies and identities. Legal frameworks should expand definitions of beauty, prohibit appearance-based discrimination, and protect all individuals regardless of size, shape, colour, or gender expression. Beyond protecting rights, the law must also confront and dismantle the symbolic power sustaining beauty myths. Only then can it serve as a transformative force for building a more inclusive and equitable society where beauty is recognised in its full diversity.

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