

GIRLS, YOUR VALUE IS NOT THE WAY YOU LOOK,



IT'S YOUR SENSE OF PURPOSE'

Ahead of International Day of the Girl, author and broadcaster Emma Dabiri writes a letter to the future generation of women

AS A TEENAGER AND YOUNG WOMAN, I was obsessed with my appearance. When I think back to experiences that should have been fun they were so often coloured by a self-loathing that stopped me relaxing. Insecurities made me defensive and on edge in ways that meant I struggled to feel happy.

So when I read that a recent Girlguiding survey has found happiness levels in young girls have dropped to an all-time low because of factors like concerns over their appearance, my heart sank: girls' wellness hasn't improved, it seems. In fact, lacking in self-esteem seems to be getting worse.

The annual study – which surveyed 2,614 girls between the ages of seven and 21 – also found this happiness plunge is driven by concerns over online dangers and sexual harassment. Fewer than 20% of girls surveyed described themselves as very happy, while nine in 10 said they felt generally worried and anxious. Other studies prove that feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem have grown considerably since the rise of social media.

It doesn't surprise me. It's tough being a girl. Everything is so contradictory for young women who are told it's boring and shallow to focus too much on their looks, but are then 'punished' or excluded in various ways if they are not deemed conventionally 'pretty enough'. How do we tackle notions that women either 'let themselves go' or are 'too hung up' on their appearance? Where's the middle ground?

When I was growing up, I never saw anyone with similar features to mine celebrated as beautiful. Thankfully this has changed in the years since as we've seen a representation revolution. The scope of what constitutes 'beautiful' now is wider. But while social media has given us a space to welcome diversity, it's created unrealistic levels of beauty standards – on speed! It's exacerbated competition and comparison, enabled our preoccupation with our appearances to go into overdrive, intensified body image disorders (a recent study found social media a 'significant risk' to young people's view of themselves) and made us obsessed with using our face or body to win likes and feel a rush of endorphins.

And unlike when I was a teenager, we

aren't only looking into our mirrors today. We're armed with mirrors and cameras and bombarded with photographs everywhere we turn. And the cameras are miniature production companies and broadcast devices. We're not taking photographs for private family albums. Our images are for public consumption, pixels with the potential to catapult us to celebrity status.

Now more than ever our bodies are under constant surveillance. Every moment documented. Persistently under the scrutiny of our own watch, we analyse every angle of our face and contour of our body. We see our faces reflected back at us across a multitude of platforms. Knowing how I felt as a teen I can't imagine navigating this while coming of age.

Which is why, as we mark International Day of the Girl this month, it's you, girls, women of tomorrow, who I want to address: I want you to remember that we are taught that we are each other's competition. Often even in friendships. Ignore it. Real friends don't care if your body changes, or your nose doesn't look like Bella Hadid's. Female friendship should be a source of strength and solidarity. Invest time and effort in your friendships and don't settle for anything that makes you feel like less.

There is great pleasure to be taken in the processes and rituals of adornment and beautification, and I'm not saying that taking an interest in our appearance is automatically frivolous. But I can't emphasise enough how important it is to cultivate aspects of yourself that have little to do with how you look. Hone your sense of purpose, be curious; the world is rich and full of

wonder if you are open to it. You have many talents, find out what they are.

The overemphasis on appearance is overtly gendered, too. This isn't to say that guys are immune to these pressures, but they are perceived as having other important qualities and contributions to make than just their looks. Remember: so do you.

Beauty tutorials on YouTube and TikTok can be wonderfully creative – but if they start to make you feel you constantly have to change yourself, try to mute them or change your algorithm.

I wrote *Disobedient Bodies* to try and think through my own relationship with beauty and how I navigated the combined effects of the patriarchy and racism. Both had left me feeling so deeply insecure about the way I looked and I knew this wasn't a unique experience to me. In fact, I found it hard to think of any woman I knew – irrespective of what she actually looked like – who was totally confident and happy with her looks. And I wanted to understand where our deep-seated sense of self-loathing comes from.

It was important I could come up with proposals beyond the trite 'just love yourself the way you are' in a world that makes that virtually impossible. I knew I had to go deep. So I delved into the history of where this obsession with a woman's appearance comes from, and I explored attitudes about beauty that are very different from our current model.

When our ideas about beauty are informed by oppressive systems, organised according to individualism, competition and envy, no wonder it is distorted. So how do we change things? By prioritising community, solidarity and sorority. I propose a long overdue beauty revolution. If we're being told we must be one thing, let's find joy in being disobedient. You can change the way you feel when you understand that your primary value is not the way we look, but your sense of purpose and your relationship with the world around you.

'Disobedient Bodies: Claim Your Unruly Beauty' by Emma Dabiri is published by Profile Books and The Wellcome Collection on 5 October, £7.99 (paperback)

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PRIORITISE
COMMUNITY,
SOLIDARITY AND
SORORITY

Grazia asked influential women to nominate a girl they're most inspired by. Here are the leaders of tomorrow, according to the powerhouses of today...

MEET THE NEXT-GEN POWER PLAYERS

ANGELA RAYNER:
OLIVIA HANCOCK, 17, ASPIRING SPORTS JOURNALIST

Angela Rayner is Deputy Leader of the Labour party. She nominates Olivia Hancock, who resolved to be a strong female voice for girls in football back in 2017 after being told that she couldn't play football at primary school because of her gender. At the age of 13, she made a speech to UEFA and her continued advocacy led to the FA's Let Girls Play campaign to get all schools to give girls equal access to football – for which she is an ambassador. 'Olivia is a trailblazer for girls in football and a passionate advocate for giving access to others right across the world,' says Rayner.



BERNARDINE EVARISTO:
AMINATA KANNEH-MASON, 18, ASPIRING VIOLINIST

Bernardine Evaristo is author of Booker Prize-winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*. She nominates Aminata Kanneh-Mason, a keen musician who has already toured around the world, achieving grade eight distinction on the violin when she was just 11, and grade eight on the piano aged 12. At the BBC Proms 2021, she performed *Carnival Of The Animals* (Saint-Saëns) and *Revel* (Kidane) with the Kanneh-Masons at The Royal Albert Hall. As a concert soloist, she has played Mozart's *Violin Concerto* and amassed several television and radio appearances including ITV's *The Royal Variety Performance*. Evaristo describes her as 'amazing', sure to become a star in the classical music arena.



ANGELINE MURIMIRWA:
TINOTENDA*, 17, ASPIRING NEUROSURGEON

Angeline Murimirwa is CEO of Camfed, a pan-African non-profit supporting girls to go to school. She nominates Tinotenda, a student from Zimbabwe who, after losing her father, attended school without food or a bag, scribbling her notes on old bits of paper. When Camfed stepped in (with fees, notebooks and support from mentors) everything changed. Now, Tinotenda is head girl, a Junior MP for her district and an aspiring neurosurgeon. 'She has a burning desire to open doors for all the disadvantaged children in her community,' Murimirwa says.



LAURA BATES:
ELLIE SPRAY, 16, ASPIRING POLITICIAN

Laura Bates is founder of women's empowerment initiative Everyday Sexism. She nominates Ellie Spray, a local youth councillor who is passionate about ending sexual harassment, period poverty and homophobia. Aged 11, she flew to Japan for a youth summer camp focused on building global peace, and she's been working relentlessly ever since. She helped create a short film about street harassment that has been shown in schools and youth clubs and has worked with Plan UK to create better educational resources for schools around periods and puberty. 'Ellie is one of the bravest and most determined young campaigners I have ever met,' says Bates. 'She has made a real impact in her community. She makes me feel very hopeful for the future.'



CARMEN GONZALEZ:
IVYEN WAMBUI MWANGI, 19, ASPIRING CHEF

Carmen Gonzalez is CEO of Wonder Foundation, a global charity that works to empower girls through access to education and vocational training. She nominates Kenyan-born Ivyen Wambui Mwangi, a keen culinary artist who received a scholarship from Kibondeni College of Catering and Hospitality Management in order to pursue further education. This year, she represented Kenya in the WorldSkills competition and earned a silver medal in culinary arts. Ivyen aspires to become a renowned chef. 'Ivyen's determination and resilience is a testament to her belief in a brighter future. She is a shining example of the indomitable spirit of girls around the world,' says Gonzalez.

DR ANNE-MARIE IMAFIDON MBE:
AISHA KUKOYI, 18, ASPIRING ENGINEER

Dr Imafidon is founder of Stemettes, a social enterprise promoting women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) careers. She nominates Aisha Kukoyi, from Essex, who is on course to become one of the UK's leading engineers, currently an A-level student hoping to study product design engineering at university. Already knowledgeable in python (a programming language), she is one of Stemettes' engineering trainees. Imafidon describes her as 'a powerful voice who speaks sense, she's been attending our courses for years and her approach to problem solving excites me.'



DR MYA-ROSE CRAIG:
LAILA PRICE, 15, ASPIRING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

Dr Craig is an environmental activist and author of award-winning memoir *Birdgirl*. She nominates British-Bangladeshi Laila Price, a frequent volunteer at Dr Craig's Black2Nature camps, which inspire Visible Minority Ethnic (VME) people to engage with nature – an initiative Craig started after realising people from VME backgrounds rarely have access to the countryside. 'Laila is a fantastic volunteer, always able to inspire other VME children and teenagers,' says Craig. 'It is rare to find a teenager who is so prepared to work with their peers. I believe she could go on to do great things.'

MARIA BALSHAW CBE: CHLOE CHIDUME, 13, ASPIRING ARTIST

Maria Balshaw is director of the Tate art museums and galleries. She nominates Chloe Chidume, who was named Britain's Best Young Artist in the CBBC TV competition of the same name. Her winning painting, titled *Homage*, depicted a tender tribute to the notion of home, which for her is both the UK and Africa. It was then displayed at Tate Modern, making her the youngest artist ever to have shown their work at Tate. 'What an exciting achievement for someone of only 13 years of age,' says Balshaw. 'Chloe has an irrepressible talent which I have no doubt will continue to flourish. I can't wait to see what she does next.'



*CAMFED'S CHILD PROTECTION RULES RESTRICT THE SHARING OF LAST NAMES FOR UNDER-18S. PHOTOS: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX