OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

The Continuum of Control: Legal, Religious, Medical, and Aesthetic Regulation of the Female Body Across History

Anastasiia Sharkova
sharkovaai@mail.ru

ABSTRACT

This review explores the autonomous right of women specifically with respect to their bodies, and the historical and current regulation of this right from prehistory to the present day. Instead of separating into distinct parts the legal, religious, medical, and beauty domains of female bodily regulation, this article points out that they represent four different manifestations of a basic logic: seeing the female body as an object that can be externally defined and controlled. Relying on Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualization of "the Other, " Glick and Fiske's theory of ambivalent sexism, Haidt and Joseph's moral foundations, and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this article puts together evidence from ancient archaeological, early medieval legal, Roman religious, 19th century medical, post-colonial global cosmetic, and contemporary digital sources. The results of the investigation reveal that the ways through which female bodies were controlled never relied on a single medium but on a combination of interrelated systems, the particular form of this control changing with economical/political circumstances and the function being always the same. This article also outlines the main moments of organized resistance against such control - from suffragists to #MeToo and the Latin American Green Wave - claiming that despite setbacks in some moments, resistance has been constant in time rather than being only occasional.

In conclusion, the review argues that women’s bodily autonomy has been repeatedly questioned and constrained by patriarchal legal, religious, medical, economic, and cultural institutions, and that any expansion of autonomy has resulted from sustained collective resistance rather than from rights granted voluntarily by those in power.

METHODOLOGY

This is a narrative review rather than a systematic one. My intention has been to follow one theme through different disciplines and across different centuries, rather than quantifying a single effect, so it was quite appropriate for the article to provide only an informal summary since a meta-analytic study would not yield valid results here. The peer-reviewed scientific literature was explored using Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PubMed, which collectively offer access to history, law, anthropology, psychology,

and medicine. The historical primary source texts, such as Clarke (1873), Power (1874), Mauriceau (1668/1672), and Ellis (1905), were consulted through their digitised versions. Because many of the issues mentioned below are not outdated ones (i.e. Texas abortion laws, #MeToo, the Latin American abortion law reforms), official Websites of governmental (national and international) and non-governmental organisations were additionally consulted; among them were the United Nations Fund for Population, the UK Parliament, the Department of Health and Human Services of the USA, and the Center for Reproductive Rights. News outlets were employed purely to describe recent occurrences and public statements which are not captured by any other source at all.

I paired a word related to women or the female body with a word that referred to control or resistance, e.g., "patriarchy" and "earliest civilization", "coverture", "purity" and "women", "menstruation" and "religion", "female genital mutilation', "hysteria" and "19th-century medicine", "obstetric violence", "women" and "clinical experiments", "beauty standards" and "history", "waist-to-hip ratio', "ambi-sexism","self-objectification" and "social networking", and "right to terminate pregnancy" and "Latin America". The lists of references of the main books (Lerner, 1986; Wolf, 1990; Saini, 2023) that provide the background of the paper were then cross-checked and used to get more references.

A work was only considered appropriate if it satisfied the following three criteria. First of all, it had to present a specific example of how the female body was controlled or regulated OR that of resistance against such regulation. In short, it was expected that the paper would go beyond mere mention of the gender gap and would provide a concrete instance of how that particular mechanism worked.The second condition was that the work was either: a) the main source of information of the historical period being discussed or b) an academic publication which used evidence as its starting point (archaeology, law, clinical medicine, statistics, or ethnography). Third, it had to be available in English either in its original version or translated version. Pieces of opinion that were not based on evidence, as well as articles that merely repeated a result which was already available in its original source, were not taken into account. Where a news article covered an original publication, I preferred citing the publication itself instead. Finally, I ended up using 59 references: 22 books (including works on historical development such as monographs along with writings of prominent historical figures), 15 published journal articles on the matter reviewed and accepted by a panel of experts, 2 federal laws and 1 U.S. Supreme Court decision (making legal documents 3 in total), 9 governmental (national or international), intergovernmental, and non-governmental organisation reports and materials, as well as 10 news and reference works.

In this study, I have used the method of qualitative thematic synthesis to analyze the selected papers. All documents were classifications were made based on one of four main kinds of control legal, religious, medical, aesthetic or one of three further categories: bodily modification practices, the internalisation of control in the present day, and organised resistance. The texts in each of these categories were sorted chronological. In this way, I could compare the changes
factors in control form and changes in economic factors, political. To this set of evidence the researcher applied four theoretical frameworks in a particular order, de Beauvoir's concept of the
Other; Glick and Fiske's ambivalent sexism model; Haidt and Joseph's moral foundations theory; Butler's

theory of gender performances. In other words, the domains of power do not just reflect differences but also have some underlying themes that have been highlighted by the four theoretical frameworks. The similarities are what this paper really discusses in detail. As it is one reviewer only, search was not conducted and pre-registrarion was missing and selection was only verified by the same reviewer. Hence the examples are only illustrative but not at all comprehensive.

RESULTS

Origins: Why the Female Body Became an Object of Control

It wasn't always the case. As Ian Hodder, the archaeologist who carried out decades of excavations at the 9,000-year-old settlement of Çatalhöyük in southern Anatolia, points out (Hodder, as cited in Stanford News, 2015), the settlement was one in which gender played almost no part in people's way of life: men and women ate the same foods, spent about the same amount of time indoors and outdoors, and carried out similar kinds of work.

In hunter-gatherer groups such as the Hadza, Agta, and Mbuti—some of the most egalitarian societies in human history—men and women have about the same social status, power, and autonomy and there is no established hierarchy or male dominance (Migliano, 2023).

This gender-neutral situation did not continue. For a long time the accepted theory was that agriculture was the turning point since it caused an imbalance by demanding physical strength, and as livestock became property, the elite—those people who had accumulated more property than others—wanted to make sure that their wealth would pass on to their legitimate children and therefore began to restrict women's sexual freedom. Hodder expressly states that this idea is incorrect: "the old idea that as soon as you start farming you acquire property and therefore come to have women as property is clearly wrong" (Hodder, as cited in Saini, 2023). The timelines do not agree: women have always been involved in agricultural work (this is shown by the depictions of women reaping corn and acting as shepherds in ancient Greek and Roman literature) and animal and plant domestication took place long before the historical record shows clear evidence of gender-based oppression (Saini, 2023).

The earliest clear evidence of a distinction between men and women does not appear until the formation of the first states in Mesopotamia, around 5,000 years ago. Administrative tablets from the Sumerian city of Uruk illustrate rulers carefully keeping records of the population and resources. The political scientist and anthropologist James Scott of Yale University enunciates the fundamental principle that "person power is the key to general power" (Scott, 2017, p. 4); the elite in these societies needed people who could produce a surplus of resources and, if necessary, sacrifice their lives in war. This pressure was transmitted to families, since young women were expected to have as many children as possible, particularly sons who would go on to take part in warfare. Anyone who deviated from the established male/female category was subjected to social condemnation (Saini, 2023).

The historian Gerda Lerner records that it was during this period that written records indicate women were slowly withdrawn from the public spheres of work and leadership and were instead relegated to the domestic sphere, where their main focus became motherhood and housework (Lerner, 1986). In her book The Creation of Patriarchy, Lerner states that this change did not result from nature but was instead the product of historical social and economic developments; control over women's sexuality and their reproductive abilities became the fundamental basis of patriarchal societies since it enabled men to control inheritance and the social order. This occurred at the same time as the practice of patrilocal marriage (in which a daughter leaves her family home to join her husband's family), which put women at a disadvantage and made them susceptible to exploitation within the household. Gradually, marriage became a strict legal institution in which a woman was regarded as the property of her husband, on a level comparable to that of children and slaves. As Lerner explains, religion justified this system by portraying it as being divinely ordained rather than as something created by society — a point which is examined in detail in the following section.

The framework that Simone de Beauvoir presents in The Second Sex applies this origin story to all that comes after (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011). She states that a woman is not born with a pre-formed essence; instead, she is shaped by functional development and external instructions, not by her anatomy. The main idea that de Beauvoir advances is that of the Other (l'Autre): men are seen as the subject and as the absolute, being the "first sex", while women are defined only in relation to men, as a deviation from the norm and not as an independent being. This idea has origins that go back a long way: Aristotle, in the Politics, referred to women as an "incomplete man" and claimed that "man is by nature superior and woman inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled" (Aristotle, trans. 1885/2013, 1254b). When a category is regarded as the Other rather than as a subject in her own right, then all the subsequent mechanisms of control that are examined below — legal, religious, medical and aesthetic — become different expressions of the same basic principle: the regulation of a body which is treated as an object to be described rather than as a source of self-determination.

Legal Control Over the Body

The idea of legal control over a woman's body can be traced back to Roman law. In ancient Rome there was the concept of patria potestas, which was known as 'the power of the father', according to which a daughter was considered the absolute property of the head of the household. Acts of violence against a woman were in law seen not as crimes against her person but as damage to the property of her father or her husband; rape was originally regarded as a crime against the property of the father of the victim (Hooda & Ameta, 2026).

A clear example from history is that of Artemisia Gentileschi. When she was seventeen years old she was raped by Agostino Tassi, a colleague of her father's. Instead of acting because of his daughter's suffering, her father brought legal action in order to claim monetary compensation on the ground that Tassi had "deflowered" her, since this had ruined her prospects for a good marriage and had reduced her value as a

family asset. In order to show the harm that had been done, the court had Artemisia subjected to humiliating public gynecological examinations.

In European law the principle of coverture was established according to which a woman, on getting married, was legally absorbed into her husband's person: the two became a single unit and her body, health and labour came fully under his control. If she escaped, the law regarded her as a runaway servant or as stolen property. The law also allowed a husband to use physical force as a means of 'moderate correction' of his wife and stated that marrying someone meant giving irrevocable consent to sexual relations. The reasoning was straightforward: by controlling a wife's virginity and keeping her at home, a man could be sure that their first child was his. This kind of reasoning still exists today in a non-legal, social form: in certain parts of some countries there is a demand for capsules of artificial blood to simulate bleeding on the wedding night; in 2017 Rajabi Khurshed from Tajikistan committed suicide after her husband refused to believe the results of two independent gynaecological examinations which confirmed her virginity.

Women could not own property, sign contracts, or choose where to live on their own in most of history. For instance, let's consider the USA. The first states to pass Married Women's Property Acts—laws which gave married women the legal right to own, manage, and sell their own property and earnings independently of their husbands—were Mississippi in 1839 and New York in 1848. Wyoming was the first state to grant women the right to vote in all elections in 1890, although the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibited denying the right to vote on the basis of sex, was not ratified until 1920 (Wyoming State Historical Society, 2019).

Until 1922 there was a rule which automatically took away citizenship from a woman born in the United States when she married a person who was not a citizen (Cable Act, 1922). In 1948 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that women could not work as bartenders in the big cities unless the bar was owned by their father or husband (Goesaert v. Cleary, 1948); it wasn't until 1973 that women could serve on juries in all fifty states; and until 1974 women could be refused credit cards without their husband's permission.

In cases where legal protection is on the books, it is found to be incomplete. Women are excluded from some of the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Equal Rights Amendment was never finally ratified; and the Equal Pay Act, which should ensure equal pay for equal work, is weakened by a large number of loopholes. An example given in Rachel Osterman's article in the Yale Journal of Law and Feminism illustrates that even ten years after Title VII was passed, the courts treated the inclusion of women in the ban on sex discrimination as a joke; one federal court stated outright that "Congress in all probability did not intend for its proscription of sexual discrimination to have significant and sweeping implications" (Osterman, 2009, p. 409).

A good example today is Texas law S.B.8 and the amicus brief submitted by Texas Right to Life, which was signed by Jonathan Mitchell: "Women can 'control their reproductive lives' without access to abortion, since they can achieve this by abstaining from sexual intercourse" (Mitchell & Mortara, as cited

in HuffPost, 2021). The source material makes it clear that the aim is not simply to ban abortion but to gain control over the woman herself. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg gave her testimony at the Supreme Court confirmation hearing in 1993, she said: "The decision as to whether or not to have a child is central to a woman's life, to her well-being and dignity; it is a decision which she must make on her own. If the Government takes that decision away from her, she is being treated as less than a fully adult human being who is responsible for his or her own choices" (Ginsburg, as cited in National Women's Law Center, 2020). Twenty-five years later, Senator Kamala Harris asked Judge Kavanaugh during his confirmation hearing if he could think of any laws that give the government the power to make decisions about a man's body, and he was unable to name even one (Harris, as cited in CNN, 2018).

This kind of asymmetry is precisely what the ambivalent sexism theory (Glick and Fiske) forecasts (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The theory separates out hostile sexism, which is hostility directed at women who challenge the existing gender hierarchy, from benevolent sexism, which involves paternalistic care for women who adhere to traditional roles; together these views hold that "good women" should be protected from harm and that it is men's duty to protect them. The Texas brief is a classic example of benevolent sexism acting as a mask: an argument based on the idea of protecting a woman from harm is being used to restrict a woman's autonomy rather than to expand it, just as the theory predicts in the case of restrictive dress codes which are said to keep a woman "pure" (Madonna) rather than sexualised (Whore) — the same Madonna–Whore dichotomy that reappears, in different clothing, throughout the legal record above.

Religion as a System Legitimizing Control

In her book When God Was a Woman, Merlin Stone describes the transition from early civilizations which worshipped female deities linked with fertility, nature, and life to religions that were controlled by men (Stone, 1976). According to her, as patriarchal societies grew in extent, women's spiritual traditions were step by step replaced and authority shifted from priestesses and goddesses to male priests and male gods, thus strengthening men's control over religion.

In her biographical reflection, Simone de Beauvoir explains that theologically God is seen as being transcendent and genderless, but historically God was referred to in masculine terms as Father and was given masculine qualities such as strength and protection. All of the three major Abrahamic religions have established a strict male hierarchy in that no female prophet or messenger ever existed; supreme authority, the making of law, and prophetic missions remained the exclusive concern of men for centuries, thus confirming women's position as subordinate beings—the same way in which women are regarded as the Other rather than as subjects, a viewpoint which de Beauvoir identifies as the fundamental logic of the legal record mentioned above.

A comparative study carried out by Hooda and Ameta ("Patriarchy in the Name of God") examines the specific ways in which control is exercised in Muslim and Hindu societies. In Muslim communities, women are made to wear the burqa or hijab as a means of regulating their visibility and sexuality; triple talaq is permitted, enabling a husband to divorce his wife immediately by saying the word "talaq" three

times in a row; nikah halala requires a divorced woman to have sexual relations with another man before being allowed to go back to her first husband; polygamy is allowed for a man but a woman can have only one husband (Hooda & Ameta, 2026). In Afghanistan under Taliban rule this situation reaches an extreme: women are prohibited from speaking, husbands are legally allowed to beat their wives, education is forbidden, cases have been recorded in which one eye has been deliberately damaged, and women are not allowed to leave the house without a male escort. The Taliban defend these measures on the grounds that they conform to Islamic law and safeguard the dignity of women, viewing international human rights standards as foreign -- once again, the argument of protection is used as the justification for the restrictions, representing the most extreme manifestation of the benevolent-sexism pattern today.

In Hinduism, it is held that menstruating women are 'impure' and therefore excluded from temples and religious ceremonies; there is also the historical practice of sati (a widow setting herself on fire on her husband's funeral pyre); furthermore, there is a marital custom according to which a woman moves into and lives with her husband's family, this being a symbol of a shift in loyalty (Hooda & Ameta,). The Saptapadi ritual involves the wife making a vow to devote herself to her husband "in body, mind, and soul", a phrase which the article claims is at times taken literally as meaning a physical sacrifice, and this has been linked to cases of marital rape that continue to go unrecognised in practice.

The way in which the concept of purity is applied in these practices corresponds directly to moral foundations theory (Haidt and Joseph), which identifies purity—the category that distinguishes clean from unclean—as one of five basic moral foundations and causes disgust whenever sacred norms are breached (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). A review carried out by Gray and his colleagues demonstrates that purity as a concept is highly heterogeneous in that it brings together a variety of unrelated things (such as not eating rotten meat, not sleeping with a sibling, and not selling one's soul), and is essentially defined by what it is not, that is, by the absence of harm to someone else (Gray et al., 2022). It is precisely this lack of clarity which makes purity so useful in this context: menstrual exclusion, veiling, and the norms concerning premarital virginity all make use of the emotional weight of "purity" without having to specify any actual harm that is being prevented, and it is this very feature that enables the concept to be applied selectively to women's bodies and almost never to men's (Gray et al., 2022; Bareket & Fiske, 2019; Morgenroth et al., 2024).

The fact that the female body was used as a resource by both the state and religion can be seen in the case of the Vestal Virgins in ancient Rome; these were six priestesses from noble families who were selected when they were children and were required to maintain their chastity for thirty years in order that Rome might prosper, and if the sacred fire was ever extinguished they were charged with having broken their vow of chastity and were then buried alive (Beard, 1980).

Information concerning "the female body as a sacred resource" gives a wider anthropological background: the more spiritually significant the female body is, the more complex the rituals associated with it become. In the case of the Arapesh of Papua New Guinea (according to Margaret Mead), fetal development was seen as a shared spiritual undertaking of both parents as a result of frequent intercourse,

and this demanded that all members of the household behave carefully (Mead, 1935). For the Aztecs, childbirth was viewed as a battle; women who died giving birth were regarded as warriors who had fallen in battle, and the goddess Cihuacoatl was their patron; a boy's umbilical cord was buried on enemy soil in order to gain combat strength, while a girl's cord was buried near the household hearth in order to aid her future role as a homemaker. Among the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia, conception was traditionally accounted for by a spirit-child entering the woman's body from the Dreaming rather than by biological paternity, which in turn resulted in kinship being based on totems and spiritual connections rather than on strict biological fatherhood, and as a result women had stronger matrilineal rights.
On the other hand, in societies where paternity is conceived in a strictly biological way, there arises a whole cultural system designed to ensure that a man can be certain about his children: rules requiring virginity at marriage, restrictions on women's mobility, the practice of veiling, and severe punishments for adultery. The Indian situation provides a clear example: caste endogamy together with strict rules concerning female purity establish a clear lineage of descent, and the body of an upper-caste woman is in particular regarded as a "vessel of purity" which must be protected; in this case, religion does not simply reflect social control but actually plays a part in setting it out.

The puberty rites show the way in which women themselves perpetuate patriarchal expectations, just as Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity explains: gender is not an inherent essence but rather a regulatory and repeated action which produces the illusion of reality (Butler, 1990). The Chisungu is a rite of passage for girls among the Bemba people (in Zambia), which was described in great detail by the anthropologist Audrey Richards in the 1930s (Richards, 1956/2021); it consists of a series of ceremonies lasting a month and involving mbusa symbols, each of which contains a moral lesson concerning marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and respect for the elderly. The ritual is carried out by senior women themselves (the banacimbusa), but its aim is to reinforce the social duties associated with marriage: the girl is taught to be a good wife, how to manage her husband, how to deal with other wives, and how to honour her in-laws. Richards stresses that it is at the same time a celebration of women's reproductive power and a means of directing that power into socially accepted roles, so that patriarchal expectations are passed on from one generation of women to the next—women who have themselves taken part in the rite being responsible for reproducing gender, according to Butler, in each new generation of initiates, and the everyday situations at home (a woman being taught to yield to the elders and to make herself smaller in order to bring comfort to those around her) operate by the same mechanism (Butler, 1990).

Finally, an important counterargument against "goddess feminism": the idea that everyone once worshiped goddesses, and that this was a Good Thing for women. There is an inverse ratio between the worship of goddesses and the granting of rights to actual women. When the goddesses are pictured as bloodthirsty, this reinforces the myth that uncontrollable female power is a danger to order and civilization, which must be tamed. The religious texts and rituals clearly express male fear of female power, and so the male authors of those texts make even greater efforts to control real women. When the goddesses are pictured as an ideal feminine figure, real women are penalized for failing to meet that impossible standard. Either way, putting women on a spiritual pedestal effectively removes them from the earthly realms of power, such as politics, law, and economics. Goddess worship acts as a psychological

safety valve: precisely the benevolent-sexism mechanism identified above, operating at civilizational scale. It allows men to express reverence for the feminine or channel their fear of female power in a controlled, ritualistic environment, without requiring them to give up actual power to the women.

Practices of the Physical Body Modification: A Cultural Anthropological Summary

Modifying the female body at an early age in the name of cultural identity, purity, or even protection is a feature common to many cultures.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is the non-medical removal of female genitalia or its damage. It happens to a girl who hasn't reached the medical age of majority. FGM, the UN says, is most notably done when a girl is either still a child or when she is a young woman about to leave the house (adolescence). According to UNFPA, a woman or girl who underwent FGM, a non-medical practice, is considered for marriageability only if she is a virgin, pure, and modest. The consequences that girls and women suffering from female genital mutilation could expect in the future are both physical and mental health complications, and they could also involve the risk of death for a mother and an infant during childbirth. The UN estimates that around 200 million girls and women have been affected by FGM in the world (United Nations Population Fund, 2020).

The practice of breast ironing is prevalent in the West African states such as Cameroon and the neighboring countries like Nigeria, Togo, Guinea, and Chad. Breast ironing generally consists of flattening or pounding a developing young girl's breasts using hot objects such as stones, spatulas, grinding tools, etc. Normally relatives like mothers and older sisters are the ones carrying out this procedure. In the process of breast ironing, physical damages such as injuries and infections, as well as lasting health problems in the breasts can result for the girl (Inter Press Service, 2011).

The Leblouh of Mauritania is a customary practice of fattening in which the girl is fed so that she becomes fat and thus, she becomes a desirable candidate for marriage (World Atlas, 2019). The fat girl represents wealth, beauty, and marriageability in their culture. The girl is sent to a fattening house, where a group of women, older ones, prepare food made mostly from millet, butter, and the milk of camels. The effects of Leblouh are connected with serious digestive problems as well as prolonged metabolic complications.

Neck elongation is a practice among the Kayan tribes (also found in Thailand) of the Shan states where, since a girls' early childhood, around the age of five, brass rings are placed on the upper parts of their body. These are continued to be added as the girls grow, thus, pushing down the collar bones and upper parts of the rib-cage and eventually forming a longer neck.

For many in the local community, the practice is considered to be part of the cultural and aesthetic expression and in some cases tourism as well. African societies have had practices in their widowhood rituals which involve the widow getting rid of her sexual life or, through an initiation rite, getting her

sexuality back, marrying her a male relative, or even, driving her out of the house practices that the scholars have shown can be associated with health risks, HIV among them.

We can observe in the examples mentioned, the purity-based reasoning explained here is still evident: in regulating the female anatomy, one is primarily expressing purity, marriageable state, or group affiliation while using mostly an indistinct moral lexicon, rarely used to the same extent regarding the males.

The Medicalization of the Body

In the 19th century, the profession of medicine as a science was dominated by men from the very beginning so that women in general were excluded from it or at least the practice was deliberately made to appear to be so. The male scientific community further made the assertion that the female body was naturally imperfect and even at times, unpredictable. A classic example is the diagnosis of hysteria which means simply "the womb" base on a Greek word "hystera". The word "hysteria" was also the term used not only by physicians but by the society in general, to condemn women, women who, for instance, showed independence or were too open about their sexuality or simply angry or a virgin, had a bright mind or even a rebellious nature to her husband. Women lost the right to have a physical body of their own from the moment they set foot in a doctor's room they were treated as patients and prescribed a course according to their 'female-ness.' Harvard professor Professor Edward Clarke, for instance, believed that a woman's mind was being drained as a result of overthinking "which would cause blood to be pulled away from the womb and thus, cause the ovaries to get damaged," and so, doctors used to force hospitalization, total rest at times, and forbid any form of exercise (Clarke, 1873). Menstrual cycle, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), pregnancy, menopause, etc. were viewed as a state of female disease rather than normal parts of bodily functioning.

That is the clinical representation of the Other by de Beauvoir: the female body is completely objectified, described, and by men, as merely an exception to the medical norm defined by human bodies. Therefore, the female body is seen as a deviation and not as a self-defined body.

A genetic argument against the myth that 'the man is the standard' would point out that, from a genetic standpoint, the Y chromosome is way younger than the X chromosome. Initially, life on earth was in a basic XX configuration only. Then through a mutation, the Y chromosome appeared and was still mutating. Over the past million years, he has lost 18 times of his length due to inability to exchange gene segments. Additionally, mitochondria are practically the only ones that have been inherited from one generation to the next almost without any changes. This phenomenon lets the researchers identify the common ancestor of all currently living humans mitochondrial Eve through the maternal line. Mitochondrial Eve lived about 200,000 years ago in Africa (Cann et al., 1987). However, Mitochondrial Eve was just one of several women of that time as other women had offspring too; however their lines ceased, for instance if all of a family's children are boys, a boy gets mitochondria from his mother but cannot pass it on further, only a daughter is able to sustain the line. That is to say, the female is, as far as genetics is concerned, the foundation, upon which the male comes out as a branch which is in the same

way contradictory to man being the 'original' one from the perspective of the biological and cultural stories like "the son is the line continuation"

If we look at this kind of male-centeredness in medical science, we find that it leads directly to current-day situations of inequality. Since 1993, the federal legislation in the US has mandated a minimum number of studies on female biology and that women must be part of such studies (National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act, 1993). In contrast, worldwide pharmacology research used very often male only participants and female patients were considered only if they were "just by the way" or "by eye" for the most part. And now, more than 30 years later, that gender gap remains, as a very serious underinvestment occurs in research relating only to women (issues like endometriosis, PCOS, and severe conditions like rheumatoid arthritis). A small part of less than 2.5% of the total medical research funds is allocated to the development of treatments and prevention for women's reproductive health, even though women and girls compose over half of the world's population.

There have been and still are many problems that primarily women experience or that they are exposed and thus under-researched are conditions. For example, even though breast cancer primarily affects women, it is not sufficiently researched. Erectile dysfunctions concern less number of men but on the other hand, that condition receives significantly more attention and money for research compared with conditions that affect women. One of the other notable cases is a car dummy. For years the standard male model of the dummy has been used, resulting in a female driver being at 47% more risk of getting seriously injured or 17% more risk of being killed in a collision than a male driver (UK Parliament Petitions Committee, 2019). The "female" dummy that was released as a response to this was merely a smaller version of the male dummy that the manufacturers created without regard to distribution of fat and muscle. A joint report from the World Economic Forum and McKinsey reveals that women, on average, spend a quarter of their lives dealing with pain, pharmacies, and doctors, despite the fact that on average they live 5-years longer than men (World Economic Forum & McKinsey Health Institute, 2024).

There is another aspect of medicalization relating to control over childbirth. In the past, births were looked after by midwives, that is, members of the female community, but this kind of control has gradually been taken over by qualified physicians, mostly men, as a result of which childbirth has changed from a natural and personal experience into a medical procedure carried out in an assembly-line fashion. In order that the doctor might carry out the examination more easily, pregnant women were made to lie on their backs, even though physiologically this is the most uncomfortable, painful and traumatic position since it works against gravity; for many millennia women gave birth while standing up. The practice of lying down was established in France at the beginning of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was due to the convenience it gave male obstetricians. The French physician François Mauriceau, who considered pregnancy to be a disease, stated in 1668: "It is best and safest to deliver a woman in bed so as to avoid the inconvenience and trouble of having to move her afterwards" (Mauriceau, 1668/1672). This is in accordance with a hypothesis advanced by sociology professor Lauren Dantes, namely that King Louis XIV, who enjoyed watching births and was annoyed by the poor visibility provided by the birthing stool, encouraged the practice of lying down (Lauren Dantes, 1987re).

Whatever the origin of this practice, it led to the emergence of what is known as obstetric violence: at the most vulnerable moment, a woman lost all control over her own body and was turned into a clinical object. The practices involved the use of obstetric forceps, carrying out procedures without consent or without anaesthesia, and restraining the woman's hands and feet, all of which were aimed at bringing the woman's body into line with hospital procedures. This issue still exists today, since when women complain of actual physical pain in hospitals their complaints are more frequently dismissed as psychosomatic or described as a "feature" of the menstrual cycle. The most striking current example is the Kristeller manoeuvre, which has been banned in many countries but is still carried out: a doctor presses against the top of the labouring woman's uterus with the elbows, the forearm, or their full body weight in order to force the baby out, a procedure which can result in a uterine rupture, damage to internal organs, broken ribs in the mother, and serious spinal injury and hypoxia in the child (Malvasi et al., 2019). This is in addition to the routine performance of an episiotomy without the labouring woman's consent, the restriction of her freedom of movement during labour, and the rudeness shown by the staff. Furthermore, in some hospitals they carry out what is called the "husband stitch", an extra stitch being added when closing up after childbirth, allegedly in order to enhance the partner's sexual pleasure, a practice which brings no medical benefit and which is intended solely to satisfy the man.

The Body, Beauty, and Capitalism: The Historical Evolution of Standards

The beauty standard involves more than just an concern with aesthetics and instead acts as a mirror showing the structure of a particular society, particularly the way that society treats its women.
In prehistoric times the ideal was a large and fully developed body, as can be seen in the Venus of Willendorf (which is about 30,000 years old) with its rounded belly, prominent breasts and genitalia (EBSCO Research Starters, 2023). This was because, in a world where food was an unstable resource, a full figure stood as a symbol of abundance, health and success in survival.

In Ancient Egypt a change took place as agrarian societies emerged and a more reliable food supply was achieved: the women shown were portrayed as slender and graceful, having narrow hips and small breasts. The images of Nefertiti (since her name means 'the beautiful one has come') show either an idealised version featuring a long and graceful neck or, in other cases, unusually elongated features with sunken cheeks, these being more indicative of artistic convention and idealisation than of realism.

In Ancient Greece and Rome the statues such as the Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory of Samothrace show a body which is neither round and large as in the case of the prehistoric Venuses nor long and angular like the Egyptian ideal, but rather strong and in good physical condition with a slight amount of muscle. The Greek standard of beauty was linked to a way of life: living in the shade and enjoying a disciplined luxury without excess; the ideal body was one free from the signs of hard work, and so was attainable only by the wealthy.

In the Middle Ages the naked female form was generally excluded from art due to the Church's position as the main patron, apart from Eve and, to a lesser degree, witches; the way in which Eve is depicted is that of a pear shape, with small and prominent breasts, a lengthened torso, a bulging stomach and rounded hips; this outline can still be seen in clothed women of the High Middle Ages through the characteristic S-shaped curve of the figure.

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods the fear of the naked female body disappeared: artists, from Michelangelo to Rembrandt, portrayed women with full figures and a great deal of flesh rather than women who were thin. Yet at the same time, from the 1500s onwards there was a tendency for the waist to become smaller, and an obsession with the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) developed, although modern sources incorrectly claim that this ratio is "universally attractive across all cultures and eras", a notion which one source attributes to a single male evolutionary psychologist and which has been challenged by other researchers. A study by Bovet, which included both ancient images and twentieth-century Playboy models, showed that the WHR had stayed essentially unchanged in the ancient world before beginning to decline from the year 1500 until the 1960s when the decline stopped or reversed slightly (Bovet & Raymond, 2015).

In the nineteenth century a pseudoscientific terminology was developed for the purpose of controlling the female body. As Havelock Ellis, a prominent medical figure at that time, put it: "For example, the women of several Central African peoples, when seen from behind, can hardly be told apart from men; even Arab women… display no trace of the globular fullness characteristic of the well-developed European woman… In the highest European races it is immediately noticeable to the eye as a sexual distinction… It is at once proof of a high degree of evolution and a sign of the promise of capable maternity" (Ellis, 1905). The source material makes it clear that this view was wrong in every respect (it was racist, based on cherry-picked data and lacking any sources), although it was in perfect accord with the trends of the period, a result of the use of the corset.

The racial aspect of beauty standards includes a colonial element. As Naomi Wolf states in The Beauty Myth, there is no valid historical or biological basis for the "beauty myth", and anthropologists have found no evidence to show that current beauty ideals come about as a result of the evolutionary process of mate selection (Wolf, 1990). Amira Adawe, who founded The Beautywell Project, points out that Eurocentric beauty standards have now become global because of Western colonialism (Teen Vogue, 2020): "what we are now seeing [in beauty trends] in America within three years will reach Africa and Asia". Beginning around the fifteenth century, the colonizers introduced to Africa, Asia and Latin America the idea that whiteness is desirable, that fair skin means better economic prospects, more employment opportunities and better education; the same ideology was at work during slavery in the United States, where people with lighter skin worked in the house and those with darker skin worked in the fields, and the lighter-skinned people were regarded as more beautiful. Even after slavery was abolished, the standard stayed in place: "the colonizers have left, but they have left a legacy: the legacy of whiteness".

The 1900s show how rapidly the standard responds to economic and political demands. In the 1920s there was an androgynous silhouette, women bound their breasts, and flappers obtained the vote and entered the workforce; Margaret Gorman (measurements 30-25-32), who won the Miss America pageant in 1921, was praised by the president of the American Federation of Labor as "the type of womanhood America needs: strong, red-blooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood", even though the pageant itself assessed appearances only. In the Second World War women went to work in factories and fashion at once changed to reflect a strong, androgynous figure in a work jumpsuit, while, as the source material points out, women's nature had not changed at that time, it being only the market demand that had shifted. In the 1950s, with men coming back from the war, women were sent back to the kitchen: Christian Dior's New Look revived the use of rigid corsets and heavy, layered skirts, which made it impossible to walk or work; the pin-up ideal also appeared (Betty Grable, Marilyn Monroe): an hourglass figure once again, but without the obvious artificiality of hoops. In the 1960s Audrey Hepburn and then Twiggy brought back androgynous thinness; but in contrast to the 1920s the body had to actually have that shape, without the need for corsets, because feminism demanded freedom of movement, an "invisible psychological corset" replacing the physical one (Denis Bruna, 2015). This is then followed by the 1980s emphasis on athleticism, the 1990s "rail-thin" look, body positivity in the 2010s, and once again extreme thinness in the 2020s together with the Ozempic era.

The role that this cycle plays in the economy can be seen by referring to Thorstein Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899); a rich man showed off his status by buying items which had no practical use, and in this case his wife became such an item. A woman who was dressed in a corset was physically incapable of working since she had difficulty breathing and would faint; and that was exactly the object of it, for a wife who was physically impaired acted as a sign of the husband's wealth to the outside world. Fashion has, for centuries, been used as a legal way of limiting physical freedom; it is difficult to ask for the right to vote or to organize protests when one cannot take a deep breath. The trend towards thinner body types has historically occurred at times of economic difficulty, political turmoil, and when women's rights came into conflict with a conservative majority, as was the case in the 1920s, the 1960s, the 1990s, and once again in the 2020s.

The various theories advanced to explain why women are so concerned with their appearance—such as the idea of 'catching a man' (with the father acting as a judge, beauty serving as a form of currency on the historical marriage market since women had practically no opportunity to build careers), the notion that 'outer beauty reflects inner beauty' (for instance, the work titled The Examination of Men's Wits (1575), which has been reprinted at least 80 times, connecting a woman's skin tone to her fertility and submissiveness), the argument that 'other women do it' (since the mothers themselves bound their daughters' feet and tightened their corsets), and the claim that 'it is for herself alone' (Christine de Pizan stated in 1405: 'not all women [who are pretty] do this in order to seduce men. Some people, both men and women, are just naturally inclined to enjoy elegance' (The Book of the City of Ladies))—all demonstrate that the motivation cannot be reduced to a single explanation, but economic pressure is present in all of them: one study found that a 65-pound weight gain for white women resulted in a 9%

decrease in wages (Cawley, 2004), and attractive waitresses receive bigger tips than unattractive ones, an effect that is stronger for women than for men.

The dynamic was taken over and put to financial use by advertising. A clear example of this is the advertising for Ivory soap, which frightened women by saying "if your body smells natural, your husband will go to another woman"; natural bodily functions were declared to be impure and therefore needed to be masked with chemicals. By the end of the century, advertising had changed to the formula 'sex sells'; in marketing the female body lost its human appearance and became a collection of parts (lips, breasts, hips, legs) which boosted sales.

The capitalist monetization of insecurity is shown by means of specific examples. In the early 1900s, the cosmetics entrepreneur Helena Rubinstein was the first to divide skin into 'dry', 'normal' and 'oily' types in order to promote her cream, Valaze, and thus caused women to believe that normal skin functions (such as wrinkle formation and oil production) needed to be corrected. When Eugène Schueller, the founder of L'Oréal, launched the company's shampoo in 1938, he openly stated his marketing strategy: if 43 million people in France washed their hair once a week, sales would increase twentyfold; he described his method as being to "tell people that they are disgusting, that they don't smell good and that they are not attractive". Wolf connects the increasing standards of beauty in the 1960s and 1970s to a reaction against feminism: the number of articles in women's magazines relating to diet increased by 70 per cent between 1968 and 1972; in 1975 Xerox cancelled a job offer on the grounds of a woman's weight; and courts throughout the 1960s and 1970s repeatedly supported employers' right to enforce appearance-based rules on female employees (Wolf, 1990).

In response to the increasing feminist pressure, the industry rebranded the pursuit of beauty as a matter of personal empowerment. The slogan which L'Oréal adopted, "Because I'm worth it" (1973, written by a man), represents a change from 'being beautiful for other people' to 'being beautiful for oneself'; we've moved from a culture that tells you that your body is being looked at to one in which you are the one who most consistently examines your own body. Although Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign (2004), which was lauded for employing real women rather than models, was linked to a cream that reduces cellulite, it still played on people's insecurities by promising to get rid of something that is naturally part of the body and practically impossible to remove. A further example is Edward Bernays's 1929 advertising campaign for a tobacco company: he employed women to march through New York, publicly smoking, and described cigarettes as "torches of freedom"; the campaign therefore marketed a physical action involving the female body as if it were an expression of feminism.

The Internalization of Control in the Present Day

The philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the idea of the panopticon, which is a decircular prison in which the prisoners are seated in transparent cells while a guard is concealed in the middle behind dark glass; since the prisoners never know if they are being watched at any given time, they begin to act in a perfectly proper manner all the time and thus become their own guards (Foucault, 1977). When this

concept is applied to the female body, it results in a division of the mind: a woman at the same time acts out her life and watches herself as she is acting; the internal question in the background as to 'how do I look from the outside at the moment?' thus becomes a constant presence. This is what de Beauvoir calls the Other that has been internalised: the external gaze which previously belonged visibly to fathers, husbands, doctors, and priests no longer needs to have an external owner (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

Historically the film and media industries have directly influenced this external perspective by having women played either in a highly sexualised way or by being dependent on a male character, camera angles, casting choices and costumes all being decided by male directors; Betty Boop is a typical example of an animated female character who was created with a male audience in mind.

Social media has taken this process to an even greater degree of detail. In the past, women used to compare themselves with unattainable figures in magazines, at least realising that a group of retouchers, stylists and makeup artists had been behind the image. Nowadays a woman does not compare herself to a model but to a digitally altered version of herself (one that has been filtered, with no pores or bruises and with contoured cheekbones), and when she then looks in the mirror she is shocked. This condition is known as algorithmic dysmorphia. Research shows that even when a person realises that someone's appearance has been changed, the brain still takes in the image and unconsciously compares it to their own (Rajanala et al., 2018).

The fact is reinforced at a psychological level by the idea of internalized objectification, which is a condition in which a woman, having become so used to being the focus of another person's gaze, starts to see her own body as an external tool that needs constant adjustment and repair.
This mechanism is established in childhood as a result of gender socialization: boys are praised for their actions and achievements ("How strong you are!, What a great fort you've built!"), while girls are praised for conforming to a standard of beauty ("You're so sweet, so neat, so pretty") — Butler's concept of performativity thus beginning at the earliest possible age, so that by adulthood the act of performing no longer seems like an act (Butler, 1990).

At the same time, the 'tradwife' trend and the 'feminine energy' retreat are being observed, with these movements idealising complete dedication to domestic life and family service. This represents a subconscious withdrawal into an imaginary past, arising as a response to the exhaustion caused by chronic stress and economic instability; women are presented with a 'safe' compromise—giving up control to a man and retreating into domesticity in return for relief from anxiety—this being the same benevolent sexism referred to above, but now promoted to women as a lifestyle choice rather than something imposed by law. However, in today's world this agreement provides no protection; women who had given up their careers for the sake of family are often left on their own when they divorce and have to face the courts, and in the USA the debt for unpaid child support has reached $10 billion (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2006). Even in households that are considered progressive and in which a man takes part in domestic duties, the woman still bears the invisible mental workload—the role of an unpaid manager, remembering the children's vaccinations,

shopping lists and relatives' birthdays—while the man in such a situation tends to carry out only isolated tasks and does not have to deal with the mental effort of planning (Daminger, 2019).

Another line of criticism focuses on mysticism and esotericism as a form of consoling illusion of control — this being the same kind of trade as goddess worship that was looked at earlier: symbolic power is offered in return for real power. The promotion of "feminine energy", astrology, divination and the associated industry is not a means of unlocking female power but rather a method of diverting women's attention away from actual areas of power (such as career, science and politics). According to sociologist Erving Goffman, beauty routines are a ritualization of subordination: the small daily rituals inculcate obedience, and their effect is most powerful exactly when a woman doesn't just go through the rituals but actually loves them (Goffman, 1979) — this is precisely what Lorde had warned about in the mildest form, namely that the erotic and the pleasurable are redirected into the maintenance of appearances rather than into power. The concept of femininity itself is very vague and is defined in different ways depending on the source, which means that the pursuit of it is in principle unattainable, just as had been seen earlier with the concept of purity. Simone de Beauvoir puts forward the paradox of having to define oneself through one's gender: "if I want to define myself, I must first say 'I am a woman'… it does not occur to a man to write a book about the particular situation of men" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

It is Audre Lorde's idea of the erotic, as set out in "Uses of the Erotic", that gives this entire section its most compelling character. For Lorde the erotic is a source of power that exists in every woman, "firmly rooted in a deeply female and spiritual plane", and patriarchal society has distorted it, causing it to become either pornographic or suppressed; according to her, the suppression of the erotic was a necessary condition for keeping women "docile and loyal" (Lorde, 1984, pp. 1–3). When this view is considered in light of the material just mentioned, Lorde's statement ceases to be abstract: the panopticon, algorithmic dysmorphia, the mental load, and the beauty-as-empowerment marketing referred to in the previous section are all, in her terms, mechanisms which either commercialise or switch off the erotic -- understood in a broad sense as a woman's own source of vital power, not just as sexuality -- so that the energy which could be directed towards self-determination is instead used for self-maintenance.

When one talks of a woman being self-determined that would mean one who is the author of her actions and decisions, one who is not dominated or dictated by anything and everything from without, that the woman is a self-sufficient entity. But what a woman could potentially channel that energy to be self-determined, in the case of these instruments, what is channelled instead, it could be, is a woman's energy towards self-maintenance only.

Counterarguments: Resistance Across History

Obviously, looking beautiful and feminine is not solely a form of surrender. Christine de Pizan already said in 1405, "[not all women who look pretty] do this mainly to attract the opposite sex. Some people... are merely inclined by nature to love elegance, being attractive or richly dressed, to cleanliness, and the finer things in life."

In the book The Ugly-Girl Papers written by Susan D.Power in 1874, the author states as the very beginning, "the first requisite in a woman toward pleasing others is that she should be pleased with herself," which is really talking about self-love in some way even though it is being put into a context that is basically the idea of serving others.

Women from a Milan prison in the early twentieth century had to deal with having no makeup but came up with a red pigment made by dye with the red threads of their uniforms and white paint obtained by scraping lime from walls that kind of creativity came from their desire just to look beautiful even though they would never get to see a male audience as men.

There have been female revolts documented at various time periods. The witch trials of Late Medieval and Early Modern periods that saw the persecution of "witches" were basically the suppression of women who had knowledge and did not conform to the social norms; these allegations were mainly by males who, in many ways, were in control. These women were literally put on fire or cut off one of their heads or so in the event of a hanging. However, when they are accused of being "witches", women have also been able to resist the dominant male tradition through these private, "weapons of the the weak." For example

Women's storytelling and artwork often contained jokes made on the men and revealed how men were getting around of the male-dominated traditions by showing different forms of women's work.
In addition, the function of women's religious practices at local/small level was also the way that women were able to express their resistance historically through the private rituals that men interpreted as witchcraft or through chanting, singing and calling the voices of the angry goddesses.
Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre forged an unconventional relationship around 1929, the so-called existential pact. They cohabited for nearly 50 years without marriage, never lived together in the same apartment, rented hotel rooms separately, didn't raise kids together, and even after becoming lovers, they continued to allow romantic relationships with other people. De Beauvoir made clear the difference between being a spouse to a great philosopher and a separate self. However, societal norms were still trying to force her into what they considered a fitting role of a woman, i.e., merely a companion to Sartre: the Soviet newspapers during their 1965 visit to USSR labeled her as "an only companion" of the French thinker and there was a photo of the Lithuanian tour where physically removing an image of de Beauvoir to make the published image have only Sartre's and her shadow on the sand.

De Beauvoir was also very concerned about legacy management when she accepted Sylvie Le Bon, the child from the relationship of Sylvie's parents, as her own daughter, thus granting her the family surname and authorizing to manage the intellectual heritage, an important personal and conscious decision of how to spread herself to posterity other than the traditional family patterns.
Beyond these forms of direct resistance which are not large-scale movements, political groups fighting for women's empowerment provide the most compelling challenge against the narrative of women as passive

subjects. So they should not only be viewed as an example within a single sentence, but as separate entities, their own terms and conditions.

Suffragism, which mainly took place in the USA-UK and other countries about the 1840-1920 period, was actually a campaign to gain women the rights that have been lost or excluded legally. These have been such as "female not allowed to vote," "a woman being deprived of her own property," "and even the legal inability." The methods suffragists employed were different such as the presentation to a committee of demands made at Seneca Falls, the use of Parliament lobbying by Women's Suffrage Societies, hunger strikes and imprisonment of the Pankhursts and their radicals (Pankhurst, 1914) and they were successful in a way that is unevenly and gradually, the earlier references about 19th Amendment and the state-by-state Married Women's Property Acts reveal this trend. At the same time, within the movement, there were also exclusions that were brought to light especially the fact that Black suffragists such as Ida B. Wells were ignored in the mainstream American movement which means even if they succeeded, we can not see the whole victory as a purely positive thing.

Feminism in its second phase roughly from 1960s to 1980s, targeted the issues of domesticity, medical and legality power, rather just a vote: it was the reason for Roe v. Wade (1973), the emergence of divorce that was not fault-driven and the fact that previously male-only occupations and universities were now open to women. Besides those, there was also a number of literature on the issue such as Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique (Friedan, 1963), one of the early sources of the idea that the mental load and the beauty standard talked about are actually political issues. Moreover, it is actually one and the same period, the one mentioned before, that triggered the backlash against the beautification standards. One example of this reaction from the 70s to 72 was that diet-related magazines increased their contents by 70%. Also, the employers still had the legal basis of the dismissal on such a basis as a female employee's appearance at a particular time.

The #MeToo movement, initiated by activist Tarana Burke as early as 2006 and taking off world-wide mainly in 2017, achieved what legal history failed to do: it made the private, often absorbed by individuals, trauma of sexual assault and harassment visible collectively and, in many situations, even legally enforced, resulting into workplace law changes, revised statues of limitations in several U.S. states, and the charging of high-profile, previously untouchable individuals.

Opponents of the movement, some feminists and scholars among them, have highlighted concerns over proper judicial procedures and the way the movement's impact varies across socioeconomic status and industries, which by the way is in line with the overall opinion that this article expresses, namely that resistance movement in one wave does not fully close the gap in ownership its object targets.

The Green Wave (Marea Verde), i.e., the abortion rights movement in Latin America after which it acquired the image and name from Argentina approximately in 2018 and the country legalization of abortion in 2020, is the most direct parallel nowadays movement.

Also, its triumph in countries where religion is an official doctrine casts the light on that section on religion: in this case, institutional faith did not succeed but rather faltered at blocking that which it had kept up since time immemorial.

Closer reading, however, of these four movements discloses that the "continuum of control" mentioned throughout this article is always accompanied by another continuum of resistance and in effect the two are interconnected; the resistance movements each addressed directly a distinct, named form of repression from the above list of cases, and the victories they secured were partial, contested in nature, and depended on historical contexts rather than being a complete resolution and indeed that is exactly the storyline upon which this paper's closing section circles back again.

Table 1: Summary of Findings by Category

Category	Key findings
Origins	1. Early societies (Çatalhöyük; the Hadza, Agta, and Mbuti) show little gender hierarchy. 2. Control over women's sexuality and reproduction appears with the first states in Mesopotamia (c. 5,000 years ago), not with farming: elites needed workers and soldiers. 3. Patriarchy is a historical creation; seeing woman as the “Other” is the logic behind all later forms of control.
Legal	1. From Roman patria potestas to coverture, a woman was legally the property of her father or husband; violence against her was treated as damage to property. 2. Rights came late and only in part: property (1839, 1848), the vote (Wyoming 1890; nationally 1920), citizenship (Cable Act, 1922), work (Goesaert v. Cleary, 1948), credit (1974). 3. Modern restrictions are presented as “protection” (Texas S.B. 8), which ambivalent sexism theory describes as benevolent sexism.
Religious	1. Goddess cults gave way to male-led religions; in the Abrahamic religions, authority and prophecy belonged only to men. 2. “Purity” is a vague concept, so it can be applied selectively to women's bodies (menstrual exclusion, veiling, virginity norms). 3. Women themselves pass patriarchal norms to the next generation (the Chisungu rite, performativity); goddess worship gives real women no rights and works as a “safety valve.”

Bodily modification	1. Girls' bodies are changed at an early age for purity, marriageability, or group identity: FGM, breast ironing, force-feeding (Leblouh), neck rings. 2. These practices are often carried out by female relatives and cause long-term physical and mental harm. 3. All of them rely on a vague moral language of purity that is rarely applied to men.
Medical	1. Nineteenth-century medicine treated the female body as a deviation from the male norm ("hysteria," Clarke's theory): the Other in clinical form. 2. Women were excluded from research, and the gap remains: less than 2.5% of research funding goes to women's reproductive health, and crash-test dummies are based on men. 3. Childbirth moved from midwives to male doctors, which led to the lying-down position and to obstetric violence (the Kristeller manoeuvre, episiotomy without consent).
Aesthetic	1. The ideal body changes with economic and political needs: full when food was scarce, androgynous when women were needed in factories, corseted when they were sent back home. 2. Eurocentric standards spread through colonialism; the corset worked as conspicuous consumption, since a wife unable to work showed her husband's wealth. 3. The beauty industry profits from insecurity and, under feminist pressure, rebranded beauty as empowerment.
Internalised	1. The outside gaze has become internal: women watch themselves (the panopticon, the internalised Other), and filters take this further ("algorithmic dysmorphia"). 2. It starts in childhood through gendered praise; the "tradwife" trend is benevolent sexism sold as free choice and gives no real protection (child-support debt, mental load). 3. Beauty rituals train obedience, and women's vital energy (Lorde's "erotic") goes into self-maintenance instead of self-determination.

Resistance	1. Caring about beauty is not always surrender; it can also be pleasure and self-expression. 2. Individual resistance has always existed: the "weapons of the weak" during the witch trials, de Beauvoir's life outside traditional marriage and family. 3. Organised movements (suffragism, second-wave feminism, #MeToo, the Green Wave) each targeted a specific mechanism and won real but partial gains; control and resistance form parallel continuums.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This review has various limitations. The first is that being narrative and not systematic, this review didn't follow a protocol like PRISMA and the authors choice affected partly the sources selected; consequently a certain number of relevant articles may be missing and at the same time selection bias is a possibility.

The second limitation is that only sources in English or an English translation were considered, so it was impossible to include non-English language scholarship, including works written by researchers of the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America about their societies. Another shortcoming is that the materials are not geographically evenly distributed: the law and medical topics were mainly based on the U.S. and Western Europe; other areas only show up through individual case studies. Because the review period was so long, many periods were only mentioned briefly, while some assertions were based on secondary or popular sources rather than primary materials.

Last but not least the review considers "women" as one unit and does not make an in depth analysis of how class, race, disability or gender identity factors change how much people get to control their body. The parts dealing with suffrage and colonial beauty standards indicate that all these issues make a difference to beauty standards in the way this review understands them.

Research in the future could tackle the mentioned shortcomings in various ways. First, the use of a systematic review by following a detailed strategy for sources and the choice of studies would be a better way to document and justify the data used. Secondly, by analyzing non-Western legal and medical traditions using authentic texts, the validity of the four-domain model in the Euroamerican framework would be tested. The proposed connection between economic or political change on one hand and changes on the other hand in beauty standards could be tested for example by comparing the ideals body-size presented in media with the corresponding developments and statistics of that time. Besides this, an investigation of the Internet as a medium including the effect of digital platforms, especially filters and algorithms that might have an influence girls'self-esteem and if the use of the Internet by young females could be limited through regulations would bring in useful insights. As finally, an intersectional research would uncover how the various aspects of women's life (e.g., class, race, generational change) influence different forms of power and resistance as well.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that society has repeatedly questioned women's rights and autonomy by defining the female body as an object to be regulated rather than as the basis of individual self-determination. This process developed historically with the rise of early states, when control over women's sexuality and reproduction became connected to inheritance, labor, family structure, and military power. Patriarchy therefore appears in the work not as a biological or inevitable system, but as a historical and social arrangement that treated women as the "Other": beings defined in relation to men rather than recognized as independent subjects.

Women's bodies were controlled by law through a combination of systems. From a legal point of view, female human beings were considered as the property of fathers or husbands, with reference to the system of *patria potestas* and *coverture*, where a married woman loses her legal personhood. Everything, including the sexual behavior, labor, movements, property rights, citizenship, political activities, employment, credit access, and reproductive freedom of females was decided by the dominant male members at home, the courts, employers, and even at the level of the state. These kinds of male hegemony were sanctified by religious teachings that portrayed the role of men, girls' virginity, veiling, menstruation-based restrictions, marital submission, and the female sex to be connected with the concepts of purity, morality, or heavenly order. The use of a purificatory ideology was a very efficient method because it converted social limitations of women into their moral duties thus the control of their bodies was not to be backed with evidence of real harm.

Medical institutions questioned women's autonomy by presenting the female body as biologically defective, unstable, or inferior to the male body. Diagnoses such as hysteria interpreted women's anger, independence, sexuality, and intelligence as symptoms of illness. Medical research excluded women or treated the male body as the universal standard, while childbirth was increasingly transferred from women-led midwifery to male-dominated obstetrics. Non-consensual procedures such as forced positioning, intrusive and unnecessary interventions, body restraints, episiotomies, and fundal pressure have turned women into mere patients, whose pain and experience are no longer considered.

Beyond that, economic and beauty systems have reduced women's autonomy as well. Political and economic needs have constantly dictated beauty standards: sometimes women with fuller figured, sometimes with thinner ones, androgynous, athletic, or very controlled. Corsets limited women's movements. On the other hand, colonialism gave birth to a new beauty culture rooted in euro-central whiteness and image ideals. Then the advertising and beauty industries turned ordinary features into imperfections needing remedies and turned anxiety into profit. Today women internalize control under capitalism: women regulate their appearance, compare with digitally doctored images, dedicate energy to self-maintenance and beauty. So, external control has turned out, in many cases, to be a self-policing tool.

These systems were overlapping rather than separate. In fact, different institutions law, religion, medicine, and economics have, more than once, stood behind the very same ideology: that women's physical existence can be characterized, disciplined, safeguarded, redesigned, made sexy, medicalized, or even commercialized not just by women themselves, but also by institutions and others. Control could look like punishment, yet at the same time, it could wear the face of protection, nurturing, ethics, aesthetics, traditions, and, in a way, also women's empowerment, etc. It is ambivalent sexism that accounts, to a large extent, for this two-sided control: while hostile control seeks to suppress female resistance through penalties, at least to the extent women challenge gender hierarchy, benevolent control seeks to restrain the women's independent streak through rewarding the female submission to stereotypical behavior.

The study further reveals that female control has never been a unilateral affair. Women were active players through such tactics as their private ways of resisting, local customs, oral storytelling, expressing through arts, family set-ups deviating from the mainstream, and political campaigns. They stood up for women's rights at various fronts: in politics women did not have any vote right as per the suffragists; domestic medicine/medical, legal control, etc. to be rejected according to the second-wave feminists; the #MeToo movement revealed all the public the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault whereas the Green Wave challenged religious and legal restrictions on reproductive rights through the use of peaceful methods of resistance to these restrictions. It should also be noted that these campaigns have been able to make a number of changes to women's lives among them a wider franchise, entry to various professional and educational fields, a better work-environment, and victories on abortion. So, these are all partial but major results.

In general, women's rights and autonomy have been in question on societal level mainly through the handing over of the legal, religious, medical, economic, and cultural powers that decided women's physical existence to patriarchal institutions repeatedly.

The means of control have changed over the years: from ownership laws and purity rules of a religious character, to the medicalization of bodies, beauty expectations, working place standards, monitoring through the internet, and the banning of reproduction yet the underlying role of control has remained the same: making women's bodies an external definition and guiding them to male-imagined social, economic, and reproductive ends. Women’s autonomy has expanded through continuous collective resistance, but it has never been granted permanently or equally. According to the evidence reviewed, bodily autonomy remains a contested historical achievement rather than a completed condition.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. (2013). Politics (B. Jowett, Trans.). Digireads.com Publishing. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.)

Bareket, O., & Fiske, S. T. (2019). A systematic review of the ambivalent sexism literature: Hostile sexism protects men's power; benevolent sexism guards traditional gender roles. Psychological Bulletin. Advance online publication.

Beard, M. (1980). The sexual status of Vestal Virgins. Journal of Roman Studies, 70, 12–27. https://doi.org/10.2307/299553

Biography.com. (n.d.). Tarana Burke. https://www.biography.com/activists/a77899467/tarana-burke

Bovet, J., & Raymond, M. (2015). Preferred women's waist-to-hip ratio variation over the last 2,500 years. PLoS ONE, 10(4), Article e0123284. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0123284

Bruna, D. (Ed.). (2015). Fashioning the body: An intimate history of the silhouette. Yale University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge.

Cable Act, Pub. L. No. 67-346, 42 Stat. 1021 (1922).

Cann, R. L., Stoneking, M., & Wilson, A. C. (1987). Mitochondrial DNA and human evolution. Nature, 325(6099), 31–36. https://doi.org/10.1038/325031a0

Cawley, J. (2004). The impact of obesity on wages. Journal of Human Resources, 39(2), 451–474. https://doi.org/10.2307/3559022

Center for Reproductive Rights. (October 9, 2025). What is Latin America's Green Wave? https://reproductiverights.org/resources/what-is-latin-americas-green-wave/

Clarke, E. H. (1873). Sex in education; or, a fair chance for the girls. James R. Osgood.

CNN. (2018, September 5). Kamala Harris pushes Kavanaugh on abortion rights. https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2018/09/05/politics/kamala-harris-kavanaugh-hearing

Daminger, A. (2019). The cognitive dimension of household labor. American Sociological Review, 84(4), 609–633. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007

de Beauvoir, S. (2011). The second sex (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)

DeFino, J. (2020). How white supremacy and capitalism influence beauty standards. Teen Vogue. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/standard-issues-white-supremacy-capitalism-influence-beauty

de Pizan, C. (1982). The book of the city of ladies (E. J. Richards, Trans.). Persea Books. (Original work published 1405)

Dundes, L. (1987). The evolution of maternal birthing position. American Journal of Public Health, 77(5), 636–641. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.77.5.636

Ellis, H. (1905). Studies in the psychology of sex: Vol. 4. Sexual selection in man. F. A. Davis.

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1975)

Friedan, B. (1963). The feminine mystique. W. W. Norton.

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 70(3), 491–512. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491

Goesaert v. Cleary, 335 U.S. 464 (1948).

Goffman, E. (1979). Gender advertisements. Harvard University Press.

Gray, K., DiMaggio, N., Schein, C., & Kachanoff, F. (2022). The problem of purity in moral psychology. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 27(3), 272–308. https://doi.org/10.1177/10888683221124741

Haidt, J., & Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. Daædalus, 133(4), 55–66.

HuffPost. (2021, September 20). Texas anti-abortion attorney's brief argues women can avoid pregnancy by not having sex. https://news.yahoo.com/women-avoid-pregnancy-sexual-abstinence-004439729.html

Hooda, S. K., & Ameta, N. (2026). Patriarchy in the name of God: How religion controls women. International Journal of Human Rights Law Review, 5(2), 219–229. https://ijhrlr.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Patriarchy-in-the-Name-of-God-How-Religion-Controls-Women.pdf

Inter Press Service. (2011, October 1). Cameroon: Protect your daughters, iron their breasts. https://www.ipsnews.net/2011/10/cameroon-protect-your-daughters-iron-their-breasts/

Lerner, G. (1986). The creation of patriarchy. Oxford University Press.

Lorde, A. (1984). Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. In Sister outsider: Essays and speeches (pp. 53–59). Crossing Press.

Malvasi, A., Zaami, S., Tinelli, A., Trojano, G., Montanari Vergallo, G., & Marinelli, E. (2019). Kristeller maneuvers or fundal pressure and maternal/neonatal morbidity: Obstetric and judicial literature review. Journal of Maternal-Fetal & Neonatal Medicine, 32(15), 2598–2607. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767058.2018.1441278

Mauriceau, F. (1672). The diseases of women with child, and in child-bed (H. Chamberlen, Trans.). John Darby. (Original work published 1668)

Mead, M. (1935). Sex and temperament in three primitive societies. William Morrow.

Mercadal, T. (2023). Venus of Willendorf. EBSCO Research Starters. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/anthropology/venus-willendorf

Migliano, A. (2023). Were our ancestors more gender equal than us? World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/stories/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/were-our-ancestors-more-gender-equal-than-us/

Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., Arnold, M. F., & Faber, N. S. (2024). The moralization of women's bodies. European Journal of Social Psychology. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3121

National Conference of State Legislatures. (n.d.). Map Monday: Married women granted right to control their property. https://www.ncsl.org/resources/map-monday-married-women-granted-right-to-control-their-property

National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act of 1993, Pub. L. No. 103-43, 107 Stat. 122.

National Women's History Museum. (n.d.). Ida B. Wells. https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ida-b-wells

National Women's Law Center. (2020). Justice Ginsburg on abortion and privacy rights. https://nwlc.org/

Ohlheiser, A. (2017, October 19). The woman behind 'Me Too' knew the power of the phrase when she created it — 10 years ago. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/

Osterman, R. (2009). Origins of a myth: Why courts, scholars, and the public think Title VII's ban on sex discrimination was an accident. Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, 20(2), 409–440.

Pankhurst, E. (1914). My own story. Eveleigh Nash.

Power, S. D. (1874). The ugly-girl papers; or, Hints for the toilet. Harper & Brothers.

Rajanala, S., Maymone, M. B. C., & Vashi, N. A. (2018). Selfies—Living in the era of filtered photographs. JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery, 20(6), 443–444. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamafacial.2018.0486

Richards, A. I. (2021). Chisungu: A girl's initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Zambia. Routledge. (Original work published 1956)

Saini, A. (2023). The patriarchs: How men came to rule. Beacon Press.

Scott, J. C. (2017). Against the grain: A deep history of the earliest states. Yale University Press.

Stanford News. (2015). Stanford scholar digs deep into human history at Neolithic site. https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2015/08/hodder-neolithic-dig-080715

Stone, M. (1976). When God was a woman. Dial Press.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement. (2006). Assessing child support arrears in nine large states and the nation (Report to Congress). Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/assessing-child-support-arrears-nine-large-states-nation

UK Parliament Petitions Committee. (2019). Make it law for all UK car manufacturers to use female test dummies [Petition record]. https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/586148

United Nations Population Fund. (2020). Female genital mutilation. https://www.unfpa.org/female-genital-mutilation

Veblen, T. (1899). The theory of the leisure class. Macmillan.

Wolf, N. (1990). The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women. Chatto & Windus.

World Atlas. (2019). The tradition of Leblouh in Africa: Force-feeding girls for marriage. https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-tradition-leblouh-in-africa-force-feeding-girls-for-marriage.html

World Economic Forum & McKinsey Health Institute. (2024). Closing the women's health gap: A $1 trillion opportunity to improve lives and economies. World Economic Forum.

Wyoming State Historical Society. (2019). Women's suffrage and women's rights. WyoHistory.org. https://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/topics/womens-suffrage-and-womens-rights