

Why OBJECT to Beauty Pageants?

In 2009 [beauty pageants](#) are unbelievably making a come-back in British universities - emerging in campuses ranging from Leeds to London and Scotland. OBJECT fully supports the student union *Miss-ogynist* campaign ([miss-ogynist.org](#)) to challenge this and is working with NUS officers across the UK to support revived [student activism](#) on this issue. It is an exciting time to be part of the growing student feminist movement mobilising against sexism. Email anna@object.org.uk for more info and to get involved.

Here are some of the reasons why we think it is important to OBJECT...

What about women's right to take part in a beauty pageant?

We have nothing against women who choose to take part in beauty pageants. However, we would say that the issue is not as simple as one of individual choice.

The mainstreaming of beauty pageants has an impact on all women. The idea that it is okay to judge women on the basis of their appearance and that there is one objective beauty that women can be measured against, influences the way that all of us feel about ourselves as women and the way that men view and treat women.

Beauty pageants therefore become an issue for all women, not just those involved in the contest

Aren't beauty pageants empowering?

We live in a society in which as women we are forever being told that being empowered is all about looking good and being attractive to men whether it be through beauty pageants or cosmetic surgery, or a new lipstick or becoming a lap dancer. But is that real empowerment?

When the positions of power in society are vastly dominated by men, does winning a beauty pageant or looking hot really make a difference to the power relations? Rather than being empowering, beauty pageants are in fact disempowering because they deny the full humanity of women and they reinforce the idea that women's purpose is to look attractive or 'be hot'.

Aren't beauty pageants harmless fun?

Beauty pageants treat women as if we were objects that can be compared and judged. This dehumanises women and leads to the idea that it is acceptable to view women as a sum of body parts, not real people.

The first part of any oppression is to dehumanise the group that is oppressed. The more it becomes acceptable to view women as a sum of body parts, the easier it becomes to disrespect, to mistreat and even act out violence towards women as a group.

When we live in a society in which gender inequality is massive and violence against women is endemic, it becomes clear that any practice which promotes the objectification of women inevitably has an impact on the sexist attitudes which underpin mistreatment and that it is therefore clearly not harmless.

Aren't beauty pageants about celebrating beauty?

There's nothing wrong with celebrating beauty per se. But when it is always women who are judged on the basis of our appearance, and when the idea of beauty is based on sexist, racist, homophobic and able-bodied notions of what constitutes beauty, which excludes the vast majority of women; and when we are constantly bombarded with images and messages of what we are supposed to look like in order to be accepted as beautiful, which leads to the majority of us feeling terrible about ourselves – a contest is not a celebration of beauty, it is a manifestation of sexism.

Do we still need feminism? Aren't we post-feminism?

We live in a society in which 80% of MPs are male, 91% of High Court judges are male, 92% of Vice Chancellors of universities are male and 75% of people living in poverty are female. A society in which 1 in 4 women will be raped in her lifetime and in the UK 2 women die each week from domestic violence. Sexism is clearly alive and kicking (read this [document](#) (pdf) for statistics about women's inequality).

In fact in some ways, the revival of beauty pageants in universities, the pornification of culture, and the growing sexualisation of young girls are all signs of a mounting backlash against the gains women have made in society.

It is interesting to note that the revival of the sexist 1970s style beauty pageants in universities, which is very much a part of a general pornification of culture, is taking place at a time when women and men are actually becoming more equal in education and a time when girls are even outdoing boys at school. It is as if to remind us that as women, no matter how intelligent you are, your worth is still dependent on how you look. This is not liberation, it is a backlash.

To sum up:

The reintroduction of beauty pageants into universities is another example of how sexist practices are becoming seen as a normal and mainstream part of our lives rather than as sexist and outdated.

Beauty pageants reinforce the idea that women are only of value according to their attractiveness and they reduce women to objects to be judged and compared on the basis of our appearance.

This erodes our human rights to be treated as equals and is therefore an issue for all women, not just those involved in the contest.

As women we have fought long and hard for the right to be treated and respected as thinking individuals, not as objects who exist in order to 'look good'.

We want so much more for all women and OBJECT is happy to support the student campaign to challenge the reintroduction of beauty pageants in universities.