

## **Know Your Assets**

Catherine Hakim, London School of Economics

*Sunday Times Style* magazine, 11 September 2011

Is it degrading to be attractive? The French would suggest that only a lunatic could pose such a question. Is it immoral to enjoy photos of handsome men and women parading glamorously on the red carpet at film festivals? The Italians would not understand such a question. Should highly educated women refuse to wear make-up or get a decent haircut in case people overlook their intelligence? The Chinese would assume you were uncivilised.

Some of the reactions to my book on the power of erotic capital – for men and women alike – hark back to the debates of the 1960s and 1970s over beauty versus brains as women's essential assets in life. Some female gossip journalists seem to be stuck in the mind-set of that era, unable to move on.

However the world has moved on. The 21<sup>st</sup> century offers women opportunities and choices that are a world away from the days when women were required to resign from their jobs on marriage. Modern young women mostly do not care about problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – they live in the present, and look ahead to the future.

Today, we can be beautiful and clever, charming and determined, elegant and business-like. Beauty and brains are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, recent research suggests they are even linked to some extent.

There are now too many examples of women whose success is due to a combination of professional excellence and good looks for the false dichotomy to hold sway. The actress and linguist Natalie Portman, journalist and cookery author Nigella Lawson, businesswoman and TV pundit Karen Brady, and Christine Lagarde, now head of the International Monetary Fund after stellar success as a corporate lawyer – these women are today's role models. They all invest time and effort in looking their best, good make-up, choosing flattering clothes, keeping fit and shapely. They all learn to smile, and the world smiles back at them. Successful women do not reject physical and social attractiveness as a trap, but see it as a tool of the powerful.

The last two decades have seen an explosion of research documenting the substantial economic returns to good looks. Attractive and charming people earn 10% to 20% more than unattractive people, all else equal. This is not due to unfair discrimination, but to the fact that attractive

people are more effective in white-collar and service jobs. They are seen as more competent and treated accordingly, are more persuasive, attract cooperation from everyone, have smoother relationships with colleagues, and sell more. In the entertainment industry especially, good looks are one of the luxuries we seek out and value, so jobs can depend on it.

Beauty is not superficial, trivial, insubstantial, futile. Investing time and effort in looking good is not an indicator of vanity, vacuity, and frivolity – either for men or women. Indeed men currently reap a larger economic advantage from attractiveness than do women – a 17% addition to earnings versus an addition of only 12% for attractive women. So women have a lot of catching up to do.

Hollywood offers one of the most dramatic examples of this. According to Forbes magazine's annual lists, the highest paid male film stars earn substantially more than women do. Currently Leo DiCaprio and Johnny Depp top the list with estimated annual earnings of \$77 and \$50 million. Angelina Jolie and Sarah Jessica Parker top the women's list with estimated earnings of \$30 million each.

I am convinced that this is partly due to patriarchal values that belittle women's contributions and achievements while elevating men into heroes for crossing the street. But feminists also sell women short, by rejecting beauty, charm and elegance as leftovers from another era, or as evidence of women's subservience to men.

The key point is that beauty pays, as economists put it. It pays off in friendships, in social networks, and in the politics of private life. It also pays off in the workplace, especially in recessions when competition for jobs becomes cut-throat. In a survey of 3000 managers, 43% admitted overlooking someone for a promotion or pay rise because of the way they dressed, and 20% had even dismissed someone for this reason. Appropriate styling is important.

In Brazil, where beauty and sex appeal are particularly important, men and women consider it entirely rational to invest in cosmetic surgery and other interventions to improve your looks, if you can afford it. One hairdresser switched his business to a favela because he earned so much more there than in an upmarket location. Brazilians recognise that being attractive can give you an edge that eases your way up the career ladder.

Being intelligent or stupid is never treated as a moral issue, but a question of fact and luck. For some reason, being attractive is often held up as a moral issue, even though it is no different

from being intelligent. Luck is helpful, of course. But everyone can develop and extend what they have to present themselves to best effect. The French insist that skilful presentation and styling allow even the ugly to become attractive – the belle laide or beau laid in the case of a man. Photogenic film stars such as Uma Thurman and Angelina Jolie confess that they felt themselves to be ugly when they were young. Being beautiful is partly about the identity you adopt, and about accepting the potential, and limitations, of your own mixed bag of features. If you are short, you cannot wear large bold prints. If you are tall and slim, you are very likely flat-chested as well. If you have a full bust, clothes never fit well.

At 25, Anna entered a contest and won the top prize of a complete makeover. In her case, the makeover consisted only of a restyle haircut by a top hairdresser, a make-up session and lesson, and a new set of elegant clothes. The 'before' photo displayed an unattractive scowling woman with her hair in an unflattering tight ponytail wearing a shapeless black garment. The 'after' photo revealed a great beauty, with luxuriant dark curls framing her face, dramatic eyes, a huge smile and a flattering red dress. I had expected her to be pleased, as well as astonished, at the transformation. But Anna remained dissatisfied, and even rejected her new look. It is not me, she said, not who I am. Ugliness and beauty can be about a state of mind and an identity as much as a question of fact.

Why let the 'uglies' win?

---

Catherine Hakim is a social scientist in the London School of Economics. Her book, *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*, was published in the U.S. by Basic Books on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2011. Email: [c.hakim@lse.ac.uk](mailto:c.hakim@lse.ac.uk) or Jenny Fry@uk.penguingroup.co.uk.  
For more information, see [www.catherinehakim.org](http://www.catherinehakim.org).