

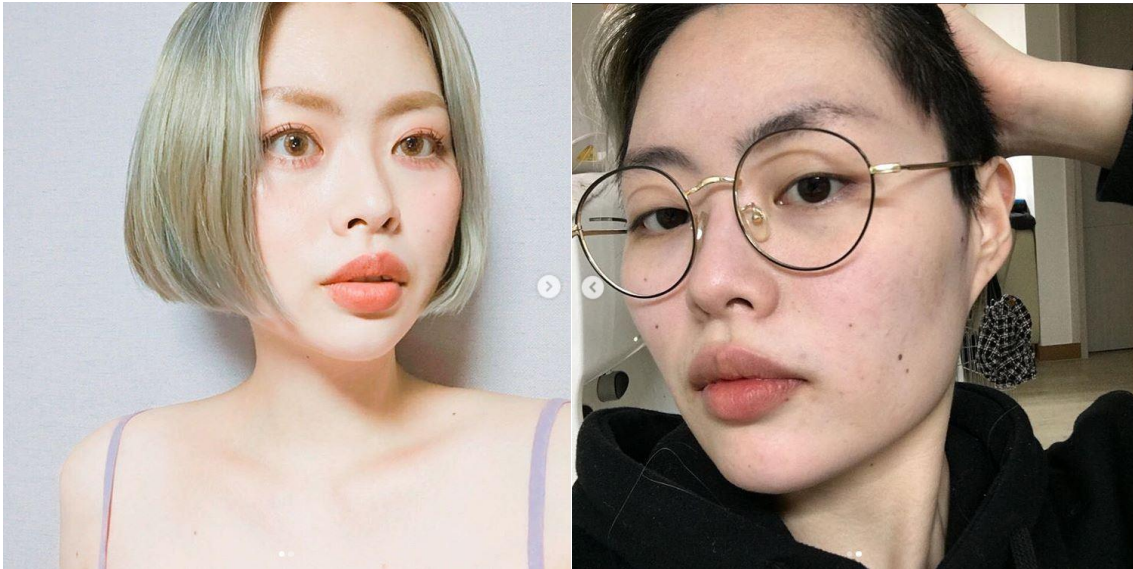
# 탈코르셋

by Silvia Bombardini



Feminisms across time and space have drawn our attention to the unpaid labour that women and girls perform in all cultures: be it reproductive, affective, or housework. Yet for beauty – and all the more so, skincare – to be framed in these terms can still sound excessive. This is because we’re socialised to think of makeup as playful, of embalming sheet masks as a token of self-love. When we indulge, it’s as if we were opting to take time off our duties to treat ourselves instead: but radiant skin, rather than a mirror of inner joy, is an obligation for many females still. In their book *Aesthetic Labour*, published in 2017, Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff argue that, in societies such as we live in today, dominated by new forms of visibility, “neoliberalism makes us all ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’”. To be beautiful is a finite investment, volatile cultural capital, a window of opportunity. In some contexts, it can be a moral responsibility. Take South Korea, for instance. Lim Hyeon-ju, a morning news anchor, made waves in April last year for being the first woman unironically wearing glasses on air on Korean television. In a piece for Quartz about her gesture – a statement

and a test – Isabella Steger gives another example: in the country, not wearing a full face of makeup to work can sometimes be seen as unprofessional, she notes, in the same way that some viewers perceived Ms Lim’s choice. And although it should be conceded that more men in South Korea wear makeup today than perhaps anywhere else in the world – a K-Pop side effect – these aesthetic expectations in the workplace naturally apply to women only.



@absolutelyfemi, before and after

Of course, South Korea is hardly the first patriarchal nation, indeed, a place that isn’t remains to be found. Naomi Wolf wrote in the early 90s of how in the world at large beauty was being “*extremely widely institutionalized as a condition for women’s hiring and promotion*”. She saw this as a direct consequence of female emancipation, and aesthetic expectations at work as devised to hinder women’s success. “*The closer women come to power, the more physical self-consciousness and sacrifice are asked of them*” writes Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, “*The triumphs of ‘beauty’ ideologies in the eighties came about as a result of real fear ... that the force of an unmediated current of female energy on a female wavelength would break down the delicate imbalance of the system*”. This being a worldwide scenario, still it is true that beauty standards in South Korea are notorious for being exceptionally strict compared to most countries. Seoul is often referred to as a plastic surgery capital, with the highest per capita ratio of procedures on the planet, and the women who get them among the youngest – double eyelid surgery, or blepharoplasty, is frequently cited as a common graduation present. Hand in hand with cosmetic surgery, goes South-Korean beauty. Taken to be the best in the world, mentions of its go-to ingredients can make the uninitiated among us gasp in oh-s and ew-s. Snail mucin, salmon roe, starfish, donkey milk, cheese, placenta, bee venom, volcanic ash: recipes or potions that keep the local industry, as beauty editor Katie Thomas told the BBC, “*typically about 10-12 years ahead of the rest of the*

*world*". Beauty is also immensely profitable for South Korea, estimated in 2017 to be worth over \$13bn. But a saturation point may have been reached, and there are signs enough to suggest that beauty culture as we know it could well collapse.

In the wake of the worldwide #metoo campaign, a feminist awakening is underway in South Korea. For the fifth time in October, women have taken to the streets to protest against spycam porn – videos filmed secretly and frequently in public changing rooms and toilets, then shared online via dedicated websites. At the same time, after a flurry of criticisms, Seoul Metro has pledged to reduce, and ban by 2022, the high number of plastic surgery ads that coat the capital's subway stations, reminding women on their commute of how much better they could look. Then there's the 'escape the corset' movement. Rooted on social media, often on the very same platforms where makeup tutorials are teaching girls how to contour, its defining visuals consist of mid-buzz cut selfies and pulpy, gooey piles of emptied-out foundation, eyeshadow grinded to dust, and lipsticks carved, their stubs repurposed as markers to spell out slogans and resolutions. Loosening the corset of society's pressure, the movement's members seek to unbound: they 'skip care', beauty regimes and doctrines. In the aether of the cloud, the #탈코르셋 hashtag chronicles their grassroots bonfires of the vanities, the crushing of cosmetics and masks, and videos like Lina Bae's 'I am not pretty' – the message: but it is fine – already count over 6 million views. Note that this is not the same as saying that everyone's pretty however we look. This is a movement that aims to undermine the importance we've come to grant to looking good. So it is true: with the best of surgery, the best of makeup and discipline, beauty in South Korea is a goal that can be achieved by anyone who would pursue it with enough dedication. But why should they? Beauty is a waste of time. In an article about the movement, The Guardian clarifies its complaints: women in South Korea, it reads, "*must wake up two hours before work to ensure perfect makeup*" and "*perform skincare regimes that involve 10 steps or more at each end of the day*". It is, indeed, unpaid – what's more, expensive – labour.



'I am not pretty' – Lina Bae removes fake eyelashes

*"This industry absorbs a lot of money from women. And it just gives them back the mirage of beauty" tells me @korean\_womyn\_, who vlogs against Korean society's strict beauty standards on a popular YouTube channel, "why should a woman be recognized as a beautiful person? Women and men are all born bald. The only differences are the shape of the genitals and the shape of the breasts. Nothing is feminine yet. Men live as they are born. Women make every effort to live up to their femininity". Like many other women in the country, she decided to stop doing that – and her family and friends, though initially startled, are coming to terms with her transformation. Now, she says, "they treat me like a human not a doll". Forgoing cosmetics, @korean\_womyn\_ has traded beauty for respect. "Being beautiful does not give you any power or human rights" she explains, "we are crying out for the right to not be beautiful".*

If the South-Korean beauty industry is indeed a decade ahead of the rest of us, can we take it to mean that the 'escape the corset' movement heralds the end of beauty for the world at large? This is, alas, unlikely. Though heavy makeup does seem to be in decline, the therapeutic effects of skincare, at least, are still argued for by many. Still, marketing campaigns are changing their strategies to appeal to younger, woke-r females. Words like 'anti-aging' have been banished as old-fashioned, and recently launched cosmetic lines like Beautiful Rights donate to women's charities, like Planned Parenthood, a good percentage of their sales. This is in response to their audience concerns, the sign of a new consciousness that's taking hold: if not quite yet the end of beauty as such, a new era of cheap, quick, flaw-positive and unisex skincare may be on the horizon.