Perfection: An impossible standard imposed upon every aspect of beauty in today’s society.

Good evening chairperson, ladies and gentlemen.

The want, or rather need, for perfection has become part of our everyday life. From a happy family and successful career, through to high intelligence and community involvement, it encompasses every aspect of our lives. Nowhere is it more sought after, however, than in beauty. Whether referring to having clear skin, a flawless appearance or reaching a desired weight, striving for perfection is more prominent than ever.

Due to this, there have been dangerous trends in the number of adolescents suffering from eating disorders, and a range of other associated mental illnesses. A study conducted in 2013 by the National Institute of Health Research, found that two thirds of girls aged 13 are afraid of gaining weight, and the number of hospitalised eating disorder cases has tripled within 4 years. Further research showed that out of a population of women aged 13-17, who were at a healthy weight, only 22% were happy with their bodies. 68% of these women surveyed felt the need to be slimmer.

This is not only due to a significant increase in social media, and how it impacts and influences the younger generations, but also because of changing ideal beauty standards around the world. As Western beauty standards become the ideal, many women and men alike go to extreme measures to ensure that they are considered ‘perfect’. A study called the ‘perceptions of perfection’ tasked 18 designers from around the world to take an image of a lady, and change it to fit their countries’ ideal beauty. The results were alarming; all countries photo-shopped the image to make her appear slimmer, more toned and more appealing to men. It highlighted the common thread between nationalities; that weight is directly proportional to fitting the mould of the perfect body.

After using survey results to the expected weight of each, newly perfect woman, a number of countries had their ideal lady falling with a BMI of 18 or below; this is medically classified as underweight, and borders on the criteria for anorexia nervosa. Considering that the perfect woman in several countries is significantly underweight, to the point of having an expected eating disorder, it is unsurprising that the prevalence of these mental illnesses is increasing.
Children as young as 8 and 9 are being brought up with the image of their culture’s perfect body, and when this is a dangerously underweight and unhealthy body image, these kids grow up with a distorted perception of normality. These changing beauty ideals, and their ability to be mass marketed to the public is a toxic combination, and one leading to an ever-increasing number of victims.

However, it is not only the body affected by this perception of perfection, but also the mind. Reports by the National Eating Disorders Collaboration show that up to 97% of those with eating disorders also have co-morbid mental health issues, the most common being depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse. The combined effects of these illnesses often take years of intensive recovery, and many victims describe that they never fully returned to their old selves.

Unfortunately, mental health issues still have a stigma attached, one which deters many from seeking the help that they desperately need. With the presence of cyber-bullying, and with the ever-growing trend of online body-shaming, this stigma which controls hundreds of thousands of lives around the world, is being further built upon and publicised through the mass media.

Whilst, for many, it may seem that perfection is a far-fetched wish, for some the doors to perfection come directly from the internal struggle with an eating disorder and other associated mental illnesses. In order to save the up-and-coming generations from a society where underweight beauty standards are considered the norm, change must be made to ensure that this dangerous trend does not continue.

What happened to the saying “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?” Why should we be told what is beautiful and what is not? How boring would the world be if everyone looked the same? The media’s fascination with “perfection” encourages the mass reaction of body shaming ……. Now that’s a shame!!