



# Mirrors are harder to break than glass ceilings

Glossies, billboards and even the BBC all tell women to look hot or lose out, so which is better: surgery or the CV?

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If I were Maria Miller, craving a little political capital, a story that neatly combines BBC-bashing and female voter-pleasing I wouldn't waste departmental stationery on John Inverdale. Go for the biggie.

"Dear D-G, By what sub-clause in the BBC Charter is your flagship show *The Apprentice* permitted to pimp cosmetic surgery? This is an industry that not only preys upon women's insecurities but, as in the PIP breast implant scandal, also endangers their lives for the biggest buck (and for the NHS to clear up). This mentality was endorsed by Lord Sugar as he awarded his £250,000 prize to a recently qualified doctor, Leah Totton.

"The ethics of her enterprise worried him, he said, but the margins were lovely. So are you happy to endorse Dr Leah's clinics, where £250 shots of cow collagen, like all 'injectables', only make women look puffy or peculiar and in any case need redoing every six months (ker-ching!)? Or have you just cut a corporate rate for your older female presenters, whose faces are looking 'tired'?"

You can trace the past decade through *The Apprentice*. Once,

beneath the daft challenges, it purported to have a business message. Sir Alan, as was, banged on about inspiring a generation of entrepreneurs: "It's the only reason I'm bladdy doing it."

The contestants were blowhards and tools, but they were a varied bunch, including in series two the marvellous Ruth Badger, a solidly built, hyper-keen Wolverhampton lesbian. Another outré female contestant even wore a beret.

But gradually the field has narrowed until this year the only women that *The Apprentice* recruited looked — with their hair extensions, fake boobs, false nails and thick masks of slap — like lap dancers dressed to make a good impression in court. The two

## Keeping women on past crumpet point is like a humanitarian act

women finalists thought it appropriate to mention on their business CVs their voluminous hair and hot bods.

Does it matter? It's only telly, you might think; don't get your XL-size feminist knickers in a twist. But having spent the past month talking to teenage girls about their appearance (for a report in next Saturday's *Times Magazine*), I think it does matter. Rather a lot.

Being a mother of sons, I'd hitherto not understood the pressure, misery and anxiety felt by girls trying to

achieve a look that is not just pretty or idealised — we all grew up with that — but a photoshopped female form that does not exist within nature.

The road to such "beauty" starts at the tanning salon and leads to the surgeon's knife.

Oh, but girls are succeeding, flooding into universities and dominating professions. So they are. But while sucking up this message from every TV station and magazine: none of your other achievements — your hit single, Wimbledon title, medical training — matters unless you also look "hot".

Women will never smash the glass ceiling until they also break the mirror; the one that is held up to them by the likes of Inverdale: "Are you a looker?" Or the mirror they hold themselves, for hour after wasteful hour, dwelling upon newly minted things to hate: their "nasolabial folds"; their smoker's lips; their droopy knees. Before squandering the deposit for a flat or their potential pension pot on putting them right.

In his crass way Inverdale had a point. Marion Bartoli, neither "leggy" — well, she has legs — nor blonde, could never rely upon the vast modelling and sponsorship fees paid to her more babelicious peers. She could only hope for the more meagre sums awarded for winning grand slams.

Hey, girls, suck up this nutritious fact: looking good in a tennis skirt is more lucrative than being a tennis champ.

And John Humphrys was right too — in part — about Mishal Husain, the

new Radio 4 *Today* programme presenter. Of course her break into TV was connected to her beauty. Clearly her journalistic skills are first-rate, but unlike, say, Humphrys, she — along with Emily Maitlis, Stephanie Flanders and Fiona Bruce — also has to pass this additional hurdle thrown in her way by male TV bosses: "Well, would I?"

Which has made it difficult for the likes of Mariella Frostrup, Selina Scott or Miriam O'Reilly to complain when

## Because of surgery, to be ugly today isn't bad luck but negligence

they are cast aside for younger, firmer models — "Hey, you lived by the sexiness sword so you will be fired by it." So whenever the BBC keeps long-experienced women on beyond their crumpet point, it behaves like it has performed a humanitarian act.

Women will only stop being accused of getting jobs through their looks when TV has the courage to employ an ugly one. Where is the female Mark Mardell (the BBC North American editor) or Brian Taylor (its Scottish political editor), journalists so brilliant and valued that no one cares if they are frankly obese. Producers don't frown and slip them a copy of *The Fast Diet*, they buy them a larger size of linen trouser and say their reports have weight.

Men are allowed to be, by

conventional measures, aesthetically challenged, like Andrew Marr. Or have odd verbal tics, like Robert Peston. They are allowed to be as old as God, stropy, eccentric, fierce, argumentative, odd and wrinkly as a scrotum. The few non-regulation women who slip through — Mary Beard, Clare Balding, Lena Dunham — encounter hatred for shoving their crazy hair or chubby tums into the public space.

Far more shocking than Inverdale was the torrent of real fury that Bartoli provoked on Twitter, mainly from young men. How dare this thing, with her muscles and heft, sweat and grunt on centre court: this wasn't the type of girl that pleased them at all.

Mostly women look at that single, hard-edged template they are offered, look back at themselves in the mirror, then either despair or change. And since the means to carve yourself into acceptability exists, why not do so? To be ugly these days is not bad luck, merely negligence.

"Who done yer face?" said Lord Sugar in *The Apprentice* final. That, he believed, would be the question of the future. Not the designer of your dress, but the surgeon who did your "work". He could be right: the number of cosmetic treatments increases by 6 per cent every year.

Yet the Government has ignored an NHS report calling for tighter regulation and for all advertising to be banned. And so the rookie Dr Leahs can still tell women they are "no lookers" from every glossy magazine, every billboard and even on the BBC.