

CONSENT, COERCION, AND CONSTRAINT:

Exploring women's freedoms through objects which have shaped their bodies

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THIS EXHIBITION EXPLORES FEMALE FREEDOM, USING ARTEFACTS FROM THE SCIENCE MUSEUM.

Objects of **beauty, female reproduction,** and **women's health** allows exploration of the intricacies of **consent, freedom, coercion, and constraint.** In turn, this enables their relationship to the pressures imposed upon women by society to be observed.

The exhibition highlights **women have not had full agency of their bodies due to social pressures, force, lack of information, ideological agendas, and a lack of alternatives.**

In some cases, objects and practices are forced upon women's bodies to adhere to societal standards of beauty. Women take medication, only to later discover debilitating side effects. Women are offered medication to further the agenda of the provider. Women are given no other option but to accept what is commercialised for use, or face completely losing their freedom. Objects can be packaged up to appear to promote women's freedom, but behind the masquerade is a level of non-consent and the perpetuation of the social subordination of women.

Is a woman truly free despite her apparent consent or choice?

The diverse selection of objects in this exhibition illustrates this control is at play **across the ages and across the globe, overtly and covertly.**

Women's relationship to the objects and themes in the exhibition reflects on the **complex relationship between freedom and choice,** and shows the latter doesn't always equal the former. **It invites visitors to consider the plight of women's survival under social constraints.**

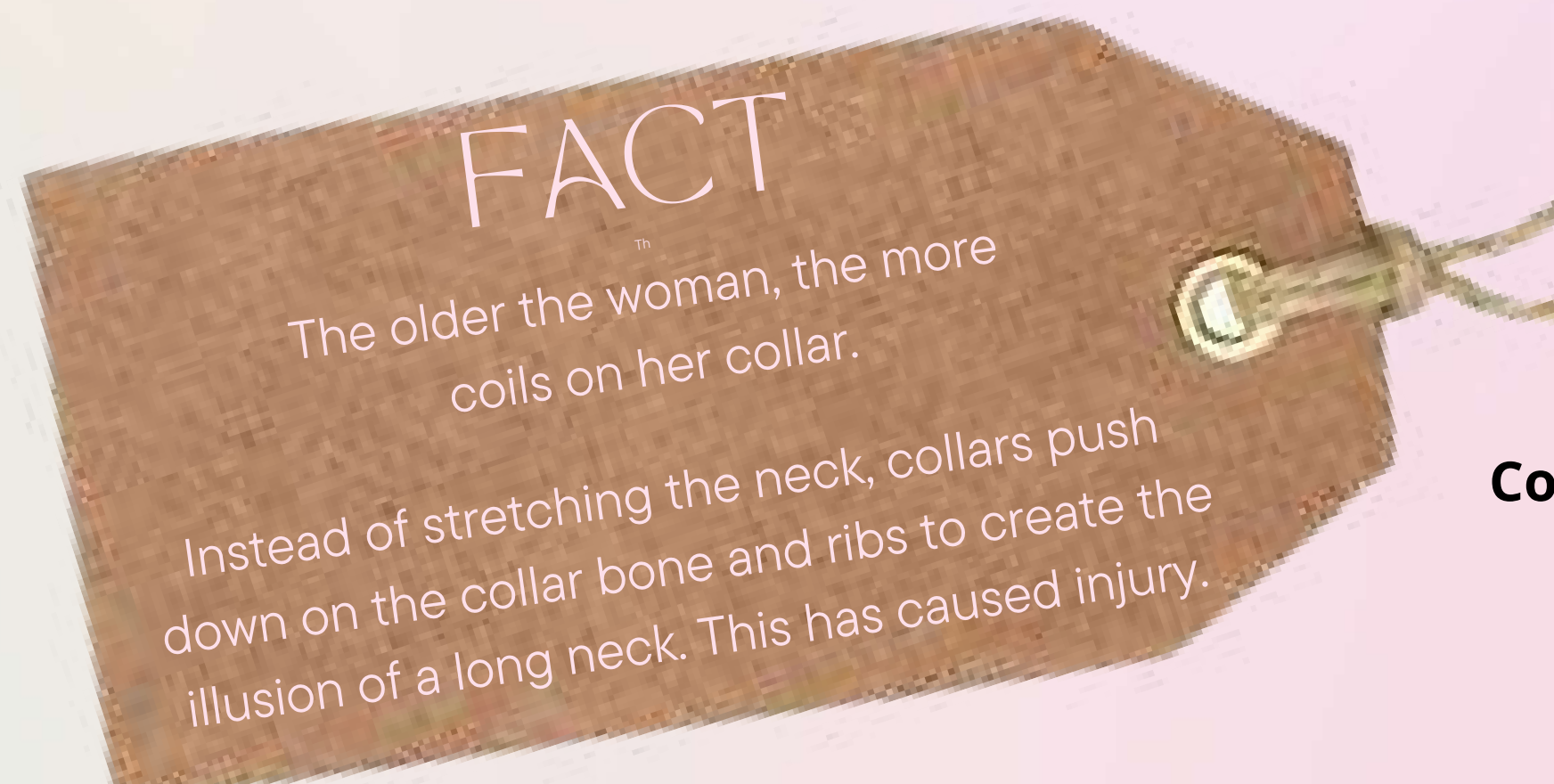
The Head and The Neck



What is beauty? What is ugly? What is the standard of beauty? Who defines this standard? And for whom is this standard defined?

Men are often the primary arbiters of social beauty standards. The male perspective seems to have long been accommodated by social norms, not just for looks. Women's fluctuating hormones are treated as intractable data, and even diseases, in medical research.

This collar was made of brass for Myanmar women, they wear such necklaces is because in Myanmar, it is popular to regard beauty as long neck, and they believe that the longer neck a woman has, the more beautiful she is. Undoubtedly, this is also due to the restriction of women's freedom caused by abnormal aesthetics. Through heavy necklaces, women's necks are abnormally elongated to conform to the so-called social aesthetics, which restricts their freedom to control their bodies.



Coiled brass collar with second interlocking coiled ring 1801-1900

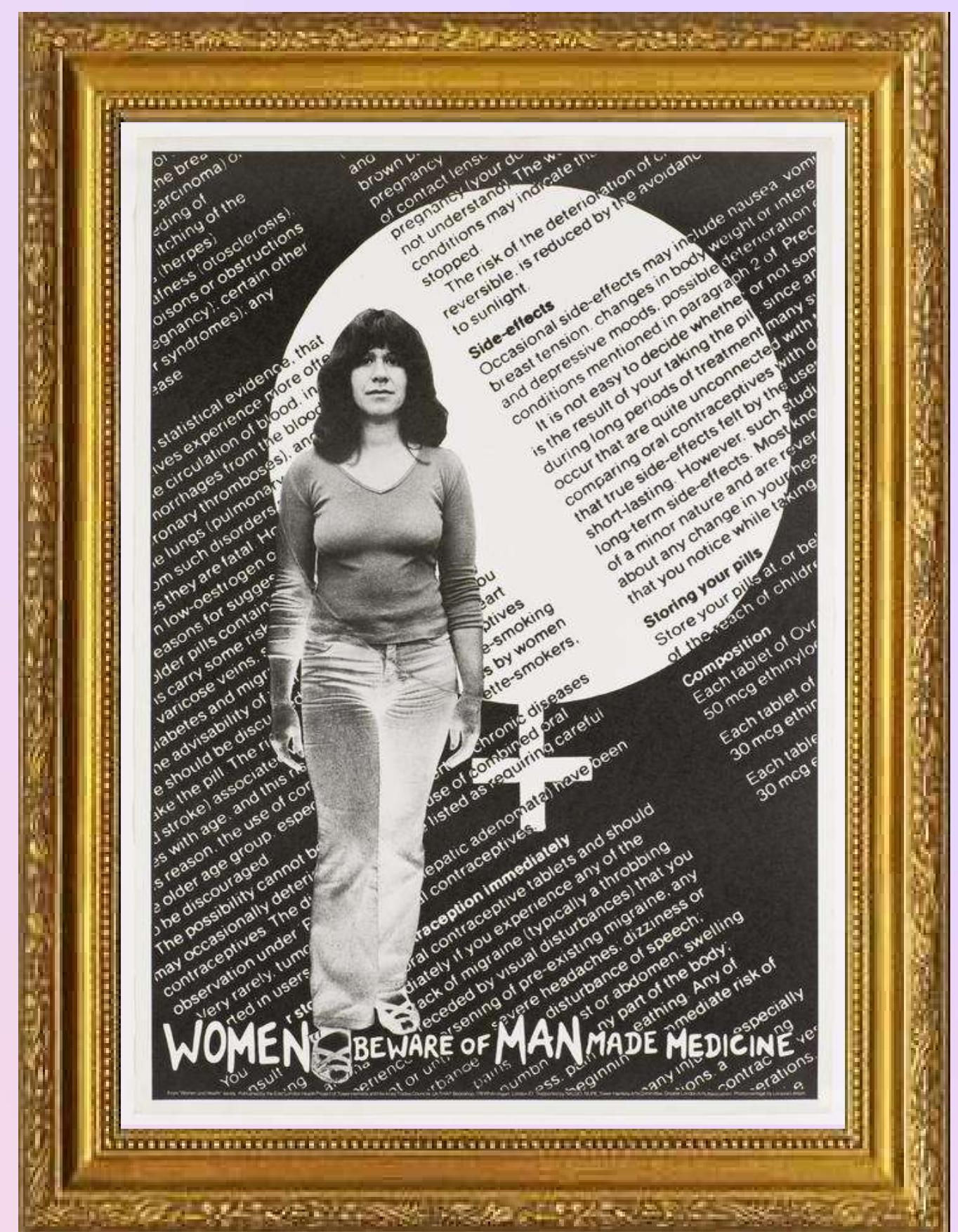
Burma

Min: 12.5cm. Max: 21.5cm.

A75908

The negligent of information of consent.

A woman is surrounded by information on the pill. Side effects can be differ between genders. Worth mentioned it was published at a time of NHS cuts, and the East London Health project was formed to give info to population about health issues. 8 posters made over 2 years.



Poster entitled 'Women Beware of Man Made Medicine' 1970s

Published by the East London Health Project, England
Design by Loraine Leeson

This box contained **anti-hysteria pills**.

John Hooper first developed his 'Female Pills' in 1743 to treat "the irregularities".

In the 19th century, hysteria was considered a diagnosable physical illness that manifested itself in ways such as anxiety or insomnia. It was thought of as a sex-selective disorder, limited only to those with a uterus. Treating hysteria often led to what we now think of as abuse.

The 'Female Pills' were also used for stomach and period problems. It was suggested that pregnant women shouldn't take them, which led to the pills being self-administered as an abortion method. As such, the pills allowed women agency for actions disapproved of by society.

QUESTION

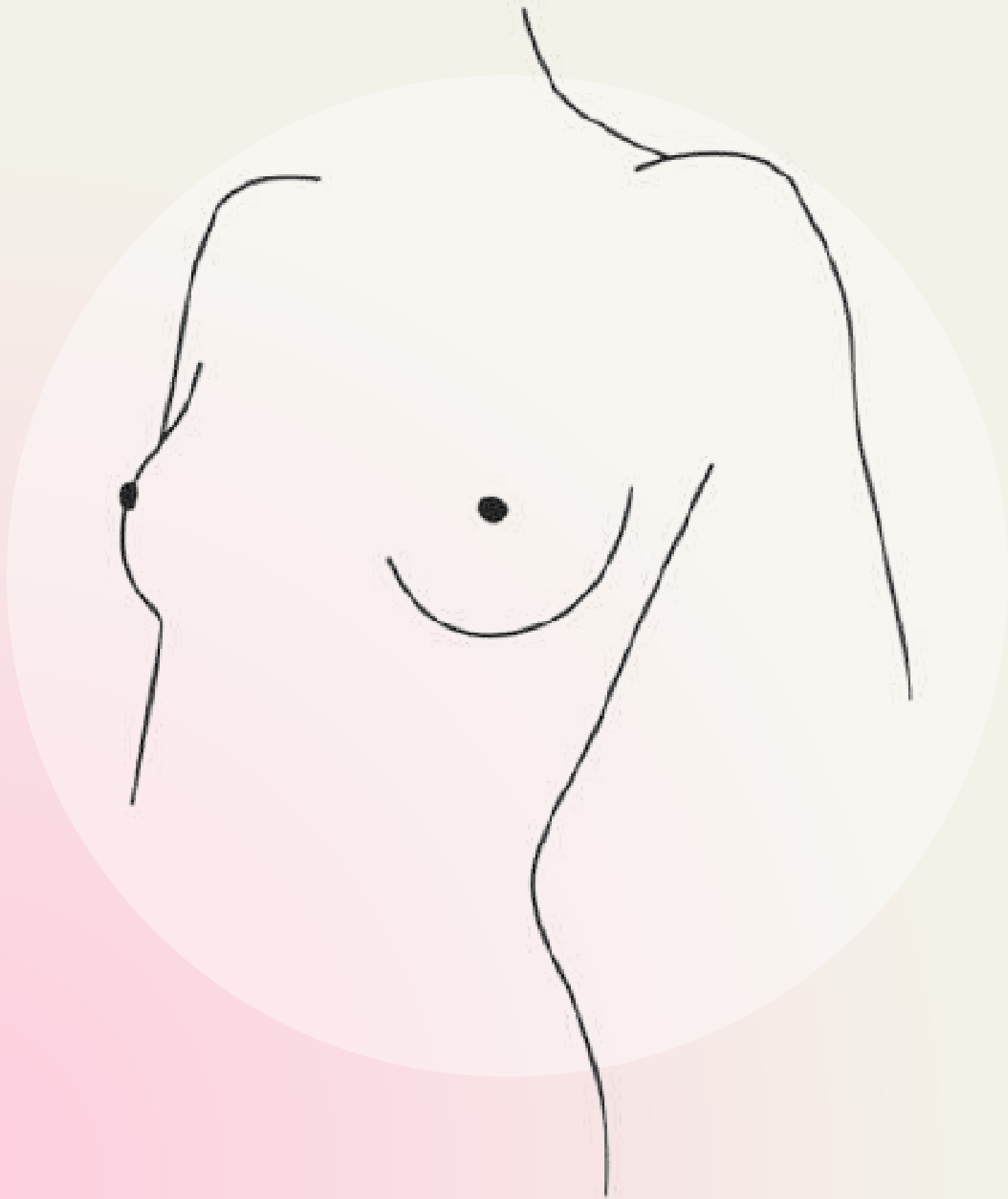
How does this object explore the multiplicity of female agency?



**Round pill box of Dr John Hooper's
Female Pills 1900-1950**
United Kingdom

The Breasts and The Waist

The female body has been greatly constrained and suppressed since ancient times. In this part, we will focus on showing how the female body is harmed, such as in the waist and chest. Due to the social aesthetic deformity, women are forced to change their body shape to cater to the social vision they are not willing to accept. For women, such bondage is not only a physical torture, but also a psychological torture, which is undoubtedly the biggest threat to women's freedom. Through these exhibits, we hope that society and the masses can learn from history, respect and protect women.



This Burmese woven and twisted cane **body hoop** was used to bind the waist of Kachin women. With the help of this hoop, women would have a slim waistline.

In the eyes of those who advocated this tool, female beauty was singular and morbid. Women used such tools at the expense of their health to conform to social aesthetic trends.



Body hoop for constricting the waist of Kachin women 1801 - 1900

40cm x 0.9cm x 0.3cm

A34052

QUESTION

Does beauty have to equal pain?
Is it ever worth it for women to pay
so much for "beauty"?

This picture shows a woman having her dress tightened by a tailor in 19th century Europe. European women must constantly tighten up their clothes to follow the trend. To be sure, women have no choice but to conform to a social environment that emphasizes the beauty of a thin waist. This reflects the social restrictions on women, who do not have the freedom to choose their own style and accept the aesthetic imposed on them by the society.

QUESTION

If you were the woman in the image, would you have taken part in this s practice?



Wood Engraving 1800-1899

24cm x 17.8cm

European

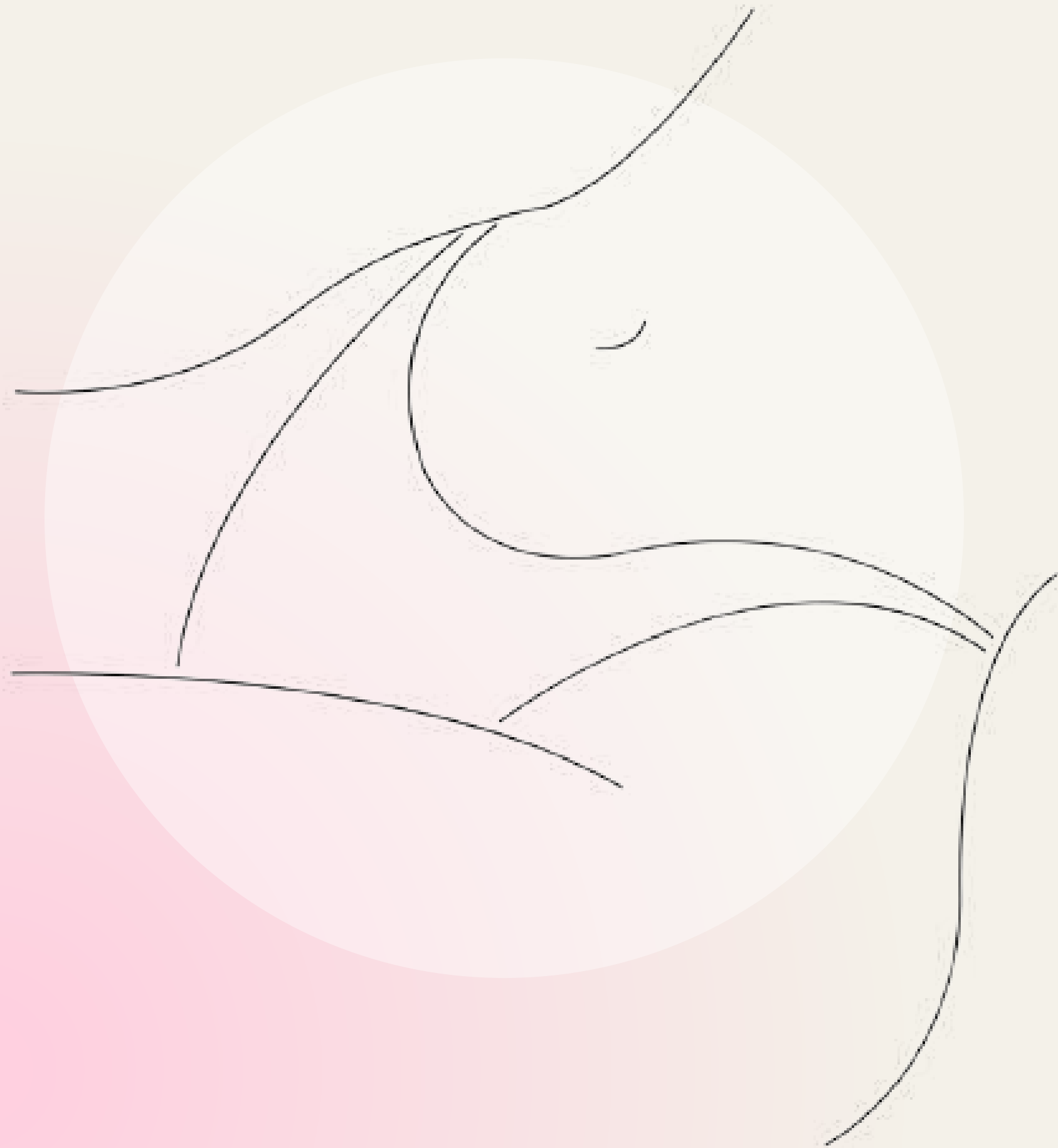
Loan from: Welcome Collection.

Welcome Library No. 35324i

The Reproductive System

Reproductive health is more than biological factors: it has also social and cultural context. It implies the ability to enjoy sexual relations without fear of infection, pregnancy, coercion or violence; the ability to control one's fertility without unpleasant or dangerous side effects; the ability to bear and raise healthy children.

This section explores how women have been caught into multiple power struggles like these between patient and health provider, man and woman, and women and the state. Objects in this section range from 19th century to mid-20th century. We've come a long way since then but there's still more to be done.



This **cervical cap** was a form of contraception developed by Dr Marie Stopes, intended to sit over the cervix to block sperm entering the uterus.

Its trademark name is “Racial”, which refers to Stopes’ belief in **eugenics**. She intended to create a “superior” race by promoting access to contraception for “undesirables”.

Stopes opened her first birth control clinic in London in 1921. The organization expanded and became one of Britain’s leading clinics for abortions. They have since renamed in order to distance from their founder’s belief in eugenics.



Carton for 'Racial' cervical cap, 1945-1960

"Racial" by Dr Marie Stopes' Society for Constructive Birth Control (CBC)
London

'Enovid' become the **first contraceptive pill available in the UK.**

The pill helped the development of sexual revolution as this method of contraception was fully controlled by women. Some social conservatives blamed the pill for the revolution. However, it is known that unmarried women were having sex prior to the development of the pill.

First versions of contraceptive pills had very high dosage of hormones. This caused heart problems in some women. Modern versions contain far lower levels of hormones, yet side effects are still common.

FACT
In 2019, The Guardian reported almost 9 in 10 women receiving contraception use a type of "pill".



Bottle of 'Enovid' contraceptive pills, United Kingdom

1960-1965

G D Searle and Company

Made: USA. Distributed: UK

In 1999, Edinburgh University conducted trials to develop an oral male contraceptive. The trials were discontinued as the contraceptive drastically reduced sperm count. Testosterone implants used to offset this side effect turned out to be ineffective. However, there were other trials that seemed to be more successful. They also were discontinued after some of the participants reported side effects such as mood disorders – common among women using hormonal contraception.

Notably, the first trials happened around 40 years later than work on female contraceptive pill. Some argue that the reason for that is low societal need for male contraceptive pill.



Four pills and two implants for the prototype male contraceptive pill 1999

Manufactured by Organon, Netherlands.

Used by Edinburgh University during successful trials in 1999.

The National Abortion Campaign (NAC) was formed in 1975 and the group defended the Abortion Act 1967 against several proposed amendment bills during the 1970s and 1980s.

These badges were left behind by the NAC during the protests and show the organisation's struggle for women's rights.



One of five National Abortion Campaign badges 1970-1981

Metal
British

Social conventions assumed most of the consequences for unwanted pregnancies fall on women. It suggested women should be "sure" and "ready" before they make love, stating the importance of consent. Imposes the responsibility of birth control on women.

QUESTION

How does this poster make you feel?



Poster 'No: Still the most effective form of birth control' 1970-1987

Produced by The Health Education Council, England

Thalidomide was prescribed to **pregnant women** for morning sickness in early pregnancy from 1958 to 1962. Unbeknownst to women and doctors, taking just one pill could **damage unborn children**. Affected babies developed disabilities including limb difference, sight loss, and facial paralysis.

The drug was used for other purposes, so some women were **unaware** they were pregnant when using it, because the test for pregnancy was three missed periods.

It took **three years** to link thalidomide and the birth impairments.

It was widely used in Europe and Japan as an anti-emesis drug. Soon after its introduction, data showed that pregnant women using the drug had increased rates of miscarriage and malformation causes birth defects. Causing the drug to be withdrawn from the market.

Later in 1999, the information document contains literature, surveys and consent



Information document about avoiding foetal exposure for Thalidomide prescribed to treat blood cancer 1999
National Health Service
New Jersey

FACT
In March 2021, **452** people are living with Thalidomide impairments in the UK.
12,000 families were impacted in the UK, and **147,000** worldwide.



24 x 25mg Thalidomide Tablets 1958
The Distillers Company Limited
UK

The Legs and The Feet?

When people talk about freedom, what exactly is freedom? There are many different interpretations of freedom, the most direct one being "to go wherever you want, with your legs and feet". In this seemingly most common form of freedom, the feet and legs are the parts of the human body most directly associated with it, and they take a person wherever he/she wants to go, freely moving forward and backward.

In this section, the exhibits will discuss the choices women make about their feet and legs. This choice may appear to be an active one, a sacrifice made for the sake of 'beauty'. It may appear to be a passive choice, an alternative healing for permanent injuries caused by external factors. Does their choice mean freedom or not?



This white high heel is from the period 1975-1985 and was made for a woman's prosthetic leg. The information confirms that the reason for the woman's amputation came from a drug called thalidomide, a sedative used in pregnant women and also used as a sleeping pill, which was banned in the 1960s because it was found to cause foetal malformations.

This woman had her leg taken away by side effects after taking thalidomide and was fitted with a prosthetic leg, a white high heel made for the very prosthetic leg that was caused by taking an unsafe drug.



One of a pair of white high heeled shoes for use with artificial/prosthetic

1870-1910

leather and metal

At this time, ancient China was immersed in the worship of small feet. The whole society believed that small feet were beautiful for women. This deformed aesthetic resulted in all women being forced to cover their feet with cloth and wear shoes only about 9 to 10 centimeters to inhibit the natural growth of their feet, starting from childhood. This will undoubtedly do great harm to women's health, but also constrain women's freedom of body. They didn't have any freedom to choose, because it was determined by the social aesthetics of the time, and they had to obey.



Pair of shoes for women with bound feet 1870-1910

Card, cotton, silk, wood

Chinese

A104208

END OF EXHIBITION

SEE YOU NEXT TIME