

# Seeing Through the Mirror

*Liz Lance, Fulbright Scholar in Journalism*



*Miss Nepal contestants line up in front of the judges at the International Club in Sanepa.*

*Last September, I trudged up the red-carpeted steps inside the International Club in Sanepa, heavy messenger bag and camera bag slung over one shoulder. My pants were flecked with mud, my hair haphazardly pulled back into a ponytail, sweat dripped down my face. It was the end of the monsoon, hot and humid, and this six-foot-tall bideshi was in search of the 15 or so young women competing for the Miss Nepal title.*

I returned to Nepal to document the effects of mass media on beauty and body image in young women in Nepal. Since my first stay in Nepal in 1998, I had seen significant changes in Nepal's media landscape and also in how young women dressed and presented themselves in public. Modesty seemed to be out, and tight jeans and cleavage-baring shirts were in. With my own history of rebelling against my American Southern upbringing that valued dainty women who drewled their way into the arms of eligible young men, I began my research with a strong agenda. I was going to spend time with beauty contestants and models and expose them for the insecure attention-seekers they must be, all the while blaming the media and advertising industries for promoting unrealistic standards of beauty to women. Oh, yes, I had an agenda.

As I walked through a set of French doors into the tired, dark room where the contestants were rehearsing, I carried assumptions and judgment about the kind of women who would subject themselves to being judged on their appearance. They must be silly, uneducated girls, I reasoned, more interested in showing off their bodies than using their minds, not critical enough to question the ideals served up to them by the media. I was afraid of being outed as a feminist in a room full of beauty queen wannabes. And suddenly I was a cliché – a 30-year-old woman intimidated in the presence of thinner, prettier, better-dressed women ten years or more her junior. The next day I wore mascara.

But then I started to spend time with these and other young women. These women may spend a lot of

time putting on their makeup and threading their eyebrows, but they are not silly or uneducated. As I formed closer relationships with these women and they opened themselves up to my questions about beauty and how they view their bodies, I naturally reflected on my own answers to those same questions. And I realized what a hypocrite I had been to walk into that room of Miss Nepal contestants loaded with my agenda six months earlier.

I like to think of myself as an educated woman, a critical media consumer, someone who is confident in herself and comfortable with her own body. But I would be lying if I said I didn't fantasize about what it would be like to be thin, to wear a bikini, to turn the heads of people as I walked down the street. Every woman in this world who has been exposed to any media has a conflicted relationship with her own body image. And I can't condemn these young women for their conflicted body image any more than I can condemn myself. If an educated young woman wants to participate in a beauty contest, she's smarter than I've ever thought of giving her credit for, because her participation is going to open professional doors for her, and there shouldn't be anything wrong with that. There isn't anything wrong with that.

I still demonize the media and advertising industries for propagating outrageous standards of beauty, here in Nepal and across the world. And I still think the idea of a beauty contest with male judges crowning one woman the most beautiful of all is patriarchal and archaic. But I no longer judge these women I meet and talk to about beauty. Instead, I hope for them to find confidence, success and happiness without worrying about measuring up to societal standards, the same as I hope for myself. Because the whole point of the feminist movement is to let women make their own decisions and take control of their bodies without judgment, even if they choose to wear Fair and Lovely skin lightening cream.

*--Liz Lance holds a bachelor's degree in Languages and Cultures of Asia from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and has completed graduate work at Tribhuvan University's Bishwa Bhasha Campus and the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies. After completing her Fulbright research in June, Liz begins her MA studies at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in August 2009.*



*Singer Indira Joshi fixes her hair on the set of a video shoot in Kathmandu.*



*American Fulbrighter Liz Lance in Dhaka, Bangladesh, for the international photography festival Chobi Mela (as taken by a friend).*



*A billboard near Bhat Bhateni Super Store, a popular supermarket in Kathmandu.*