

[« Return to article](#)[Print this](#)

# The Straits Times

[www.straitstimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com)

Published on Jun 08, 2014

## Worked up over make-up

Time women spend on dolling up can be used for more important things

By Fiona Chan

I can remember the first time I felt bad for not wearing enough make-up.

I had just gotten into the car of a particularly tactless boyfriend, who glanced at me and said: "Wah, you're very pale. Why don't you wear blush like other girls?"

I was in my mid-20s then, still young enough - or so I thought - to rely on the natural flush of youth.

But that comment planted the first seeds of self-conscious inferiority in my mind (not to mention the seeds of that relationship's end).

Before that, I had never given much thought to make-up, which I saw as mostly a special-occasion chore, along with pointy stilettos and stick-on bras.

As I scrutinised my too-pale cheeks in the mirror, however, other flaws began to swim into my newly critical view: my square jaw, my freckles, my tiny eyes that disappeared into creases the moment I smiled.

Why stop with blush? Slowly, an array of artificial enhancements started making their way into my bathroom shelves, if not always my morning routine. Sleep, after all, still trumped vanity.

But that changed when I moved to Tokyo last year. Everywhere I looked, I saw Japanese women who were always perfectly turned out, running down to check their mailboxes with flawless skin or taking out the trash with eyelashes longer than my eyebrows.

After a while, those painted faces started looking normal and my own bare face decidedly below average. Given the surreptitious disapproving stares I received when I popped to the supermarket around the corner or the convenience store across the street, you'd think I'd neglected to dress my whole body instead of just my face.

Maybe I was being paranoid, but I decided to make the best of it and embrace Japan's miracle-promising beauty products, some of which I had previously mistaken for miniature torture devices. I stocked up on daily acid lotion, eyelid tape to create double eyelids, and nose straighteners clearly modelled on Hannibal's mask.

At one point, my beauty routine took a full 20 minutes: BB cream, foundation, powder, concealer, bronzer, blush, eyeshadow, eyeliner and two mascaras (one for volume, one for length) - not to mention the serum, moisturiser and sunscreen that went underneath all that.

Then, a few weeks ago, I met a Japanese woman who had recently returned to Japan after living in Venezuela. A 20-something with smooth olive skin, she told me she was having problems in the office because her boss had insisted she wear make-up daily for her desk-bound job.

A British friend teaching in a Japanese primary school also related an anecdote about one of his students' mothers, who once had the audacity to pick the child up from school with a bare face. As punishment, the other mothers had gossiped about her, Mean Girls-style, for days.

Suddenly, what had seemed like superficial fun and games took on a more sinister slant. As I talked to

more Japanese friends, I uncovered more unsettling stories: the housewives who woke up earlier and slept later than their husbands to ensure they were never seen without make-up, and Japanese females' preference for paler foundations than their true skin colour to emphasise "femininity".

As it turned out, the pressure I felt to put on make-up wasn't just in my head after all; it was a truly ingrained way of life, an anachronistic custom in otherwise highly modernised Japan.

The country's notorious gender gap is more than skin-deep (pun intended). A survey last year found that one in three Japanese women aim to be a housewife, and when a woman quits her job to get married - a routine occurrence in Japan - it's a cause for celebration.

Even in meritocratic Singapore, signs of gender divisions persist: In the latest United Nations' Gender Inequality Index, Singapore slipped to 18th place from 13th the previous year.

Women still drop out of Singapore's workforce at an alarming rate, and there is an obvious need for many more female politicians, board directors and industry leaders in Singapore. Despite the gender gap, Singapore is already ahead of other countries, where it sometimes seems that many women are still trapped in a neanderthalic nightmare.

The fact that women in India have to relieve themselves in open fields with the ever-present fear of gang-rape and death; the abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls in Nigeria in April in an antiquated rant against female education; Elliott Rodgers' misogynism-fuelled shooting rampage in the United States - all these show there is still a long way to go to fight the gender fight.

Against this backdrop, make-up may seem like a frivolous way to make this point.

But sometimes, I wonder if women who buy into gender-based differences are not at least partly responsible for the entrenchment of masculine and feminine stereotypes. In a way, it is the daily fights we lose against sexism that make the larger obstacles possible. The make-up, the tight skirts, the high heels, the unthinking reliance on men to carry heavy bags and fix malfunctioning laptops - if we start by changing these, could we end up changing the world?

A feminist ex-classmate of mine once declared that every minute spent applying make-up could be better put to doing something useful.

I thought that was a bit sweeping - most of us would probably spend that extra time watching TV at night or sleeping later in the morning.

But maybe she has a point. Time is a zero-sum game, and if you spend some of it on make-up, that leaves less time for more important stuff such as contributing to education, women's safety and equal opportunities.

For me, I've cut down to a bare-bones, if not quite bare-faced, routine. The time I've freed up has gone to more sleep, as I predicted, but I've donated the money I saved on powder puffs and pointy pumps to building toilets in Indian villages.

From feeling bad about not wearing make-up, I now sometimes feel bad about wearing it at all.

Make-up is just the beginning of the gender conversation - one that hopefully goes beyond the painted surface.

fiochan@sph.com.sg