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To cite this article: Sarah Riley (2023): Trivialized and Taboo—Why Studying Women's Body Hair Is Central to Feminism, *Women's Reproductive Health*, DOI: [10.1080/23293691.2023.2171662](https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2023.2171662)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2023.2171662>



Published online: 07 Feb 2023.



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BOOK REVIEW

Trivialized and Taboo—Why Studying Women’s Body Hair Is Central to Feminism

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As the author of this interesting book observes, body hair has a surprising amount of power to unsettle and unnerve (p. 251). In *Unshaved*, Breanne Fahs explores this power. She starts considering the “extraordinary compliance” (p. 2) of women in removing hair, charting this rise historically across various countries including China, England, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Turkey, New Zealand, and Uganda, but with a focus on the United States, to show how a hairless norm has replaced hairiness. Her case is that, when asked, many women account for hair removal as a personal choice and feel that it is normal, natural, and hygienic. Yet as her historical analysis demonstrates, normative hair removal is a relatively new cultural practice, heavily marketed and socially policed, and one associated with health problems. Key parts of this history orient to the early 20th century, including a rise in fashion photography, bathrooms becoming more private, Gillette campaigns for women’s hairlessness, sleeveless dress fashions, and developments in nylon hosiery that made leg hair more obvious, to the present day that adds contemporary porn and new forms of dilapidation to the sociohistoric mix. Fahs then offers an in-depth investigation of what this contemporary context means for women, particularly for women who stay, as she says, *unshaved*.

The book spans multiple investigations, starting with a discussion of several years of working with students who were asked to both imagine and experience going against the hair-removal grain (in practice, exploring when women stop hair removal and when men start it, with more nuanced considerations for gender nonbinary or sexual-minority students). This discussion allows Fahs to especially explore the differences between how women imagine the removal (as a personal choice) and how they experience it (as highly socially policed along heteronormative, gendered, and racialized axes). She then describes research projects that extended this work to explicitly explore body hair rebellions by considering the media attention that the student courses elicited, before exploring more alternative spaces, including artistic responses to body hair, feminist cultural products like zines, activist responses to body hair including a social media campaign in China, and interviews with women and nonbinary people from diverse backgrounds who have not removed hair for a long time. Combined, this work allowed Fahs to explore connections among art, activism, social justice, political change, and personal narratives and to consider how power, emotions, identities, and social relations flow through the bodily practices of hair removal. As she concludes, “body hair rebellions represent hyper realised versions of the personal is political” (p. 253).

Fahs is a therapist, feminist activist, and academic whose work has a disciplinary reach across feminist, social science, and humanities. This background and expertise give her a special vantage point from which to examine women’s issues, and she has applied this lens to a range of stigmatized topics for some time. Body hair, menstruation, fatness, and anal sex are some of the topics that have received her attention, in the spirit of shining a light into these shadowy spaces because they offer important routes for understanding women’s lives. She is especially interested in those topics at the intersection of the taboo and the trivial, an intersection she positions as a site for developing feminist consciousness and directions for resistance and one crystalized in the topic of hair removal. As she says, “Body hair

has been viewed, historically and currently, as a way to delineate rights and privileges based on distinctions between sexes, races, and species, and it has defined all sorts of social statuses” (p. 14). Body hair is also a highly personal topic for her, in the range of issues that she’s written about, “none of these topics has incited more emotional aggression from right-wing reactionaries than my work on women’s body hair” (p. 24).

Positioning body hair as a topic through which we can think through gender, embodiment, power, and feminist consciousness requires a theoretical framework that can deal with complexity and nuance. And Fahs does not disappoint. Objectification theory is brought in early to consider how women and girls become objects rather than subjects in their own right, creating forms of intense self-scrutiny that “results in women’s self-loathing, depression, internalised shame, poor body image, beliefs in their natural bodies as disgusting or inadequate, and compliance with socially constructed body norms” (p. 17). These feelings and outcomes are linked to internalizing cultural messages that relate to body hair, and she draws on feminist psychoanalytic theory to show why these feelings are so powerful for body hair through consideration of how women’s bodies are symbolically linked to pollution, dirt, and the abject. This allows the reader to understand how women’s internalization of cultural expectations (from objectification) connect with symbolism around women’s bodies as dirty or polluted, creating powerful emotions such as shame for women whose bodies are deemed problematic. These ideas also explain why body hair elicits powerful emotions in others who would wish to police them because hairy bodies represent disturbances in the order of existing social systems.

Critical Black and feminist scholarship is also central to the book and drawn on to highlight the role of racism and gendered racism within historical and contemporary forms of sense making around hair. In contrast, affect theory is introduced later in the book, to provide a framework for shifting attention away from individuals and toward the flows of affect among ideas, relationships, and bodies. Here, Fahs orients to the idea of people being in a process of becoming and importance of understanding emotions “we do not merely think about our bodies but we feel our bodies and feel through our bodies” (p. 174). This also further strengthens her argument that focusing on emotions is important, not only because they highlight taboo topics where power is working, but because one way in which power operates is to dismiss or ignore these emotions.

Finally, Fahs also links to critical scholarship on neoliberalism and postfeminism. In relation to neoliberalism, she highlights how bodily practices are framed as forms of personal choice, which absents notions of how difficult it is to opt out of cultural norms. While her engagement with postfeminism highlights how feminist and anti-feminist ideas become entangled, for example, that body hair might be understood through both the feminist language of choice and anti-feminist language of equating hairiness with man-hating feminist stereotypes.

The reach and depth of the content and theoretical orientations of this book, written in an accessible way, provides important understanding of the social context in which people—especially women—make personal choices. It also offers an important exploration of the power relations operating within these “choices.” In exploring how power and resistance operate through body hair, showcasing those women who on their bodies or in their art offer forms of resistance, *Unshaved* offers an important read. In particular, she invites the reader to look differently at body hair if we do have negative emotional responses to it and to think through the role of the language of “personal choice” and flows of emotion that circulates around body hair as forms of control. *Unshaved* also offers an example of how feminist scholarship can be part of developing new, more liberatory imaginaries. As Fahs says, “once women make sense of their own freedom and imagine it in relation to their bodies, the whole system of justification,

self-objectification, patriarchal control of bodies, internalized body shame, careful compliance with sexist and misogynistic body norms, control of bodies in relation to labor and work, and the ceding of control over reproductive freedom (and much more) begins to topple. This whole book is an exercise in that very premise” (p. 255).

Despite a clear commitment to pay attention to international scholarship and activism, *Unshaved* remains U.S.-centric, especially in which voices are elevated and the historical analysis. And I would have liked greater engagement with postfeminist scholarship, which I think offers important insights into how discourses of personal choice, freedom, and pleasure are woven into forms of governance, including the pleasures in meeting cultural embodied norms. The links between postfeminism and healthism might have added further insight into how notions of health are embedded into these forms of governance because the postfeminist imperative to work on the body to meet cultural ideals of femininity intersects with healthism’s obligations to work on one’s body for health. The links, therefore, among neoliberalism, postfeminism, and healthism could be further drawn out. These are, however, only minor criticisms; overall the book is energizing, rich, and nuanced in its analysis.

Although *Unshaved* is not explicitly about women’s reproductive health, the book is relevant for readers of this journal in multiple ways. The nuanced explanation of how gender operates and “how the imprint of culture is felt in the individual’s experiences of the body” (p. 33) is central of much work on women’s health if we agree with the broad social constructionist notion that our ideas are structured by our sociohistoric context. *Unshaved* provides an accessible way to think about power and how power gets inside our heads to shape women’s experiences of their bodies, but it is also optimistic, envisaging through in-depth scholarship a better world for women. Fahs’ multiple theoretical framework also offers directions for scholars looking for nuanced ways to draw together the multiple and sometimes contradictory elements that inform contemporary women’s discursive milieu about bodies and thus their own—and others—sense making about their bodies. And she offers methodological directions also, highlighting the importance of studying what is trivialized or taboo and why topics that are not taken seriously might offer the richest veins for analysis of gendered power. Her methods are also multiple. In chapter 6, where she presents her interview study, she explains the practice and importance of recruiting diversity when doing gender-related research, while other chapters offer methodological examples of analysis of art and media, offering examples of questions to be posed and methods for addressing them. Finally, she offers a rallying cry to feminist researchers, “The system isn’t secure or inevitable. We don’t have to experience the world in the way we’ve been told to. We can make something new, something better” (p. 254).

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/23293691.2023.2171662>

