

Adolescence and the Risk of Stereotypes: *Real Women Have Curves* (2002)

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Summary

The film *Real Women Have Curves* addresses the stereotypes of beauty and behaviour as regards women, especially Latin women, and the reaction of an adolescent who intent on her own decisions. It portrays certain undue types of action regarding the problem of obesity and the difficulties and risks of certain “devaluing” messages. It also deals with the problems of women who have to work in inadequate job surroundings because the textile industry, and many others, use the mechanism of “*tertiarizing*” their work to sidestep union rules, thereby failing to guarantee the protection of women’s health.

Keywords: Obesity in adolescents, Nutrition problems, Aesthetics estereotyp, Job health.

Technical details

Title: *Real Women Have Curves*

Country: USA

Year: 2002

Director: Patricia Cardoso

Music: Heitor Pereira

Script: An adaptation by George and Josefina López of the latter’s play.

Cast: America Ferrera, Lupe Ontiveros, Ingrid Oliu, George López, Brian Sites, Soledad St. Hilaire, Lourdes Pérez, Jorge Cervera Jr., Felipe de Alba, José Gerardo Zamora Jr., Edgar Lujan, Lina Acosta, Celina Balizan and Ramona García Coronado

Color: Color

Runtime: 90 minutes

Genre: Comedy, Drama

Production Companies: HBO Independent Productions, LaVoo Productions and Newmarket Films.

Synopsis: Ana is an 18-year old woman of Hispanic origin who lives with her family in Los Angeles. She is just about to finish her secondary education and she is the first person in her family who dares to dream about

going to University. She does have a real chance of obtaining a grant, but her mother opposes her wishes. She does not believe University is the best choice for Ana because she wants to see her working in her sister’s shop; she wants to see her slimmer and to find a boyfriend soon. To get her to slim down, her mother nags her constantly.

Awards: Special Jury Prize and Dramatic Audience Award at the Sundance Festival (2002). *Premio de la Juventud* at the San Sebastián Film Festival (2002). Prize to Producers of the Independent Spirit Awards (2003).

The making of the film

This beautiful film was made in Los Angeles at the beginning of 2001. It has a very important content for reflecting on education, above all for students and professionals studying nutrition, and indeed any other speciality related to the “aesthetics industry” and the fields of anthropology and psychosocial studies. The film was made with a budget of only 3 million dollars. In the United States it was first shown on cable TV, but the amount of awards it earned finally led it to be shown at movie theatres.

The director, Patricia Cardoso, is a Colombian archaeologist with a degree in anthropology. Because she benefited from a Fulbright Fellowship to follow studies on the cinema at the UCLA Film School, she moved to the U.S. Thanks to her acumen, she forged a solid career for herself, especially as the director of the Latin American program of the Sundance Institute. That is, although this film is her opera prima, she had a sound background and this can be seen in the depth with which she has managed to develop her characters and the seamlessness of the story told.

The topic addressed in the film is based on the play by Josefina López, a Mexican immigrant who moved to the States, in which she described her own experiences as an illegal alien in a sweat-shop in Los Angeles. After seeing the play, George La Voo, who in his youth had been obese, decided to buy up the rights and -together with Josefina- wrote the script of the film.

The two main characters of the film are Ana García and her mother, Carmen García. The role of Ana, the adolescent daughter, is played by America Ferrera, who in common with the character in the film is of Latin extraction and of similar age. This is perhaps why she manages to portray her character so well (Figure 1). The role of Ana's mother is beautifully played by Lupe Ontiveros, who in real life is a graduate in sociology and psychology of the University of Texas and who for many years practised as a social worker helping Latin women. Through her character we can also see the employment problems of a woman who, from a very young age, worked in conditions devoid of the social protection that every worker merits (Figure 2).

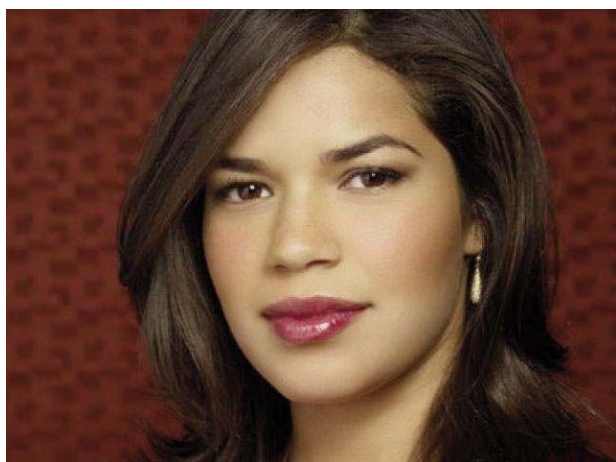


Figure 1: America Ferrera



Figure 2: Lupe Ontiveros

In this generational conflict between mother and daughter, both are in part right, although the opposites, love and egoism, are also involved. These are real women, with their inner and exterior defects, but both merit the respect to make their own decisions without the interference of stereotypes, above all if these latter send them a message of reduced validity as persons, hence opening the possibility of eating disorders, constant and unhealthy diets, unnecessary surgery, and the sensation of never managing to be accepted in their search for a model almost impossible to achieve.

In this film, there seems to be no intention to defend any particular position; rather, we are shown

different imaginary possibilities about how women should or should not behave in order to attain success or happiness. The film invites us to reflect upon the idea that any educational intervention in this aspect should be based on respect, the preservation of self-esteem, and mental health; the more so in a population as vulnerable as that of adolescents.

The film

Ana is a brilliant young student of 18 who lives in California and is typical of millions of girls throughout the world who do not have the physical make up considered to be requisite for women with possibilities of worldly success. From the social point of view, she is a Latin-American immigrant with parents who are poor and lack formal education. Neither does Ana have the typical athletic body, white skin, or blue eyes of a typical Californian girl (Figure 3).

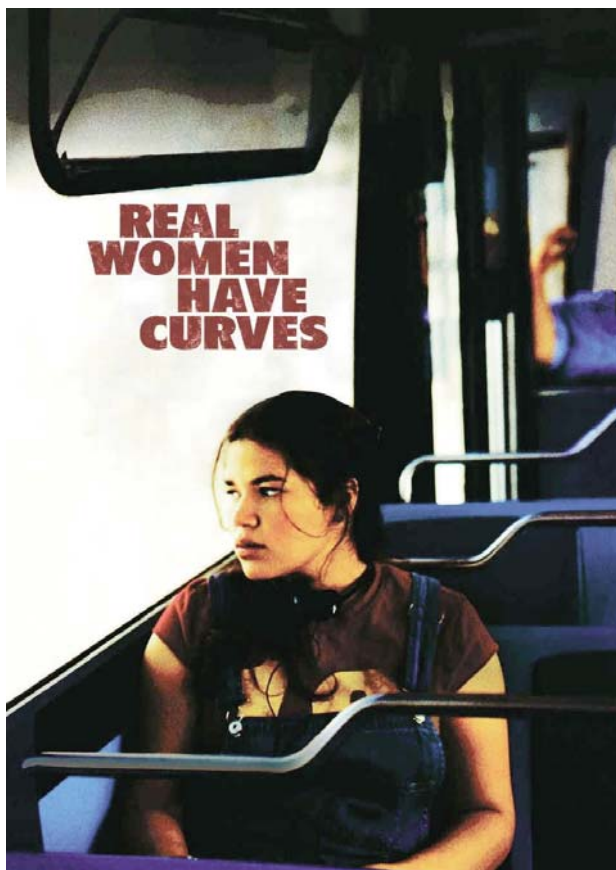


Figure 3: The Latin phenotype of Ana García, the main character

It is therefore somewhat normal that her mother should not be dreaming of some American boy setting his heart on her, although she hopes that her daughter might be worthy of the attentions of some *Chicano* as a woman with a pretty body, who is a

virgin and is industrious at home.

In fact, Ana is no more than an adolescent with a strong character, headstrong and overweight, who has just finished her secondary education and wishes to live her sexuality and make her own decisions.

Current society is permanently threatened by the media, who through propaganda and TV series send messages underscoring the importance of female beauty, discrediting other virtues such as intelligence, for example. According to the media, it is logical to believe that if a girl is beautiful she will find a man who will be attracted to her and thus provide for her economic future. This stereotyped image of women in the film is transmitted by the mother, who is a fanatical follower of a TV series with a background that is so repetitive that Ana can guess the outcome even before her mother has finished telling her about what happened. This scene shows us how programs aimed at women are also foster a stereotyped view of women's lives, their problems, and their resources.

Innocence and feminine beauty have always has a certain value and much more so in communities in which women are seen as "reproductive females". Today the prevailing model of beauty is too demanding for these communities. In the film, we see the contrast between the ideas of Ana's mother, which through what she sees on TV and has seen in her community along her life, dreams of which virtues men look for in their would-be wives. This is idea may well depart from men's real ideas about women, and specifically Latin women, where they may value their voluptuousness, wit and affection.

To a certain extent, this latter position is represented by the men in the film: Ana's father (Jorge Cerbvera Jr.) (Figure 4), her grandpa (Felipe de Alba) and even her teacher (George López), all of which value Ana for her other qualities. Breaking her mother's scheme, an American school fellow becomes interested her. Ana refuses to listen to her mother's advice and insists that a man can really consider her beautiful. Decided to embark upon a relationship, she buys a condom at a chemist's with absolutely no embarrassment and after having sex with the boy she shows him her naked body saying "This is me" with a courage few overweight women would show.

The image of the ideal woman is represented in the film by the dresses the business makes for sale in New York to women who are thin and success-



Figure 4: Ana arguing with her parents

ful. They do not make large size and the message in this part of the film is that only thin women can afford dresses of such quality. When Ana gazes at them in admiration, her mother reproaches her, saying that she can't use them and that she must be mad if she could even believe she could fit into them. However, her older sister Estela (Ingrid Oliu) confects a similar dress for her, in her size, to show that she also a perfect the right to dress like that (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Beautiful dresses but only for thin women

Ana represents a typical adolescent - rebellious and also a bit selfish- but the way in which she is treated by her mother is out of line for her to understand that she ought to collaborate with the family business or make an attempt to start a healthy diet. Regarding diet, the method the mother uses is to devalue it constantly, even in front of people, showing that she is more interested in getting an outside improvement that, although leading to a better state of health as regards her daughter's nutritional status, could be very counterproductive if gained at the expense of her mental health. The film does not make an apology of obesity and neither does it deny the importance that an adolescent should have a balanced and health diet, but through the script we see a mistaken way of convincing a young girl to change her eating habits and life style.

The mother fails to use any kind of efficient resources to address the problem, such as cooking Ana decent, healthy, nutritionally correct food, or proposing that she should join a fitness club or consult a professional. Instead, she engages in completely contradictory behaviour: cooking dishes typical of her country of origin, and for Ana's birthday she makes her a huge *torta* but then goes on to admonish Ana and her sister, saying: *The two of you should lose weight. You would look beautiful without all that fat!* (Figure 6). Thus, as is logical, the mother simply manages to encourage rebelliousness in her daughter, as is the case here, while in other cases this kind of behaviour might elicit severe disorders such as bulimia and anorexia. However, the main problem lies in low self-esteem, which could affect adolescents' psychosocial health and their future success, much more so than the problem of being overweight.

The character of the mother played by the actress is excellent and really does act as a lynchpin to



Figure 6: Ana's sister is also obese

the film, since she faithfully represents a well-wrought character acting at both ends of a spectrum: she is able to pronounce the harshest of words to her daughters but at the same time show them love and demonstrate her ability to fight for the family. Ana reflects on her selfish way of looking at her life, typical of an adolescent who believes herself to be too important to collaborate in tasks that the family has been doing for years while she has studied and has only thought about her own future.

Faced with her sisters economic hardships, Ana comments: *You expect me to do this dirty work for nothing?* (Figure 7), in front of the pained look of all the women working there, who were only doing an honest day's work and were perhaps there because they had never wanted to do *dirty work*. With her wilful youth and her education Ana thus devalues the lives of other women who are only toiling honestly under very adverse conditions.

The other issue dealt with in the film is that of employment-related illnesses, above all those typical of women¹, seamstresses², and of women involved in similar activities such as the "*maquila*" (textiles) workers³. Since an early age, Ana worked in the clothes industry under deplorable conditions, with no comfortable seat, inadequate lighting and poor ventilation. All this for a textile industry that has recently been damaging both the end-users -by insisting on ever decreasing sizes to cut fabric costs- and the workers themselves, with stressful deadlines⁴. Who then is to look after the health of these workers? Since that fateful day almost a hundred years ago, when more than 100 women textile workers were burnt alive in a factory in New York, to the



Figure 7: Ana working in her sister's sewing shop

present it does not seem that things have changed very much...

There is one scene that is fundamental in the film and that summarises the whole argument. In that scene, the heat in the shop has become insupportable and is even worse, if possible, in the ironing section. It was not possible to use fans because these might have soiled the fabric being sewn. Ana has had enough and begins to take off her clothes despite the recriminations of her mother, who reproaches her for revealing her obesity in public. The other women recognise that Ana is right; that only they are present and that it is not logical that women should be ashamed of their bodies in front of other women. They see that it is normal that the passage of time and the years lived under stressful work conditions should take their toll on their bodies in the form of wrinkles, scars, and diverse imperfections, but that there is no sense either in hiding this on a permanent basis or carrying it around as a burden. One by one, the women take off clothes and show their cellulite and their "spare tyres" almost with pride, as though they were saying "Here I am and yet I dare look at myself and show what I see" (Figure 8).



Figure 8: The women show their bodies unashamedly

Ana manages to awaken in all of them an awareness of what they are and, above all, that they should see this themselves. It is perhaps on the basis of seeing what they are instead of hiding themselves that the aim of transforming themselves can be begun. It is possible that many of these women had never even taken a moment to look at their naked bodies: this is bad and especially so for the detection of illnesses: women should always be free to look at and touch their own bodies and be aware of the changes taking place.

Ana wants to take her mother's blouse off and discovers that she has a large scar on her body. She asks her mother where it came from (*Mama, what's that scar?*) and her mother, in a magnificent piece of acting by Lupe Ontiveros, replies -very tenderly-: *This one? This one is you*. She does not say these words in a recriminatory tone, as on other occasions; rather, we feel that she is proud to have given birth to Ana. Ana realises that, bar the joke, her mother had suffered during her birth and that it was true that it must have been awful to have to have worked for so many years under dreadful job conditions. She is now aware of the sacrifice that others have made for her.

The film ends showing Ana studying in New York, walking along the street: a bit overweight but looking pretty and confident in herself (Figure 9). Ana must now start her own struggle to improve many different aspects of her life. Feeling sure of herself, and feeling herself to be accepted, she can endeavour to lead a balanced, healthy life and not the kind of existence that so many women and young girls fall into if they do not match the social demands as regards external appearance: the search for magic offers and solutions that only temporarily improve the outside but that do not offer a healthier way of life. This is unfortunately the case of many offers made by health professionals, who even use messages similar to those imbibed by Ana's mother: encouraging a situation in which a patient-client will feel increasingly disappointed with herself and return again and again for the "magic fix".

The film touches upon many medical issues: nutrition and obesity, education for health, the mental health of adolescents, sexual relations, and employment-related risk prevention and illnesses. The film also tackles family affairs, generational and cultural conflicts people's deep beliefs and self-evaluation and self-esteem.



Figure 9: Ana in New York

The current state of nutritional problems

The advent of obesity as an issue for observation and debate in the field of epidemiology and public health, together with the growing interest worldwide in this important health problem, are all relatively recent. Obesity can be considered an emerging problem and the available information indicates that we are witnessing a true epidemic of obesity throughout the populations of industrialised countries. According to the WHO, worldwide there are more than one billion adults who are overweight, of which approximately 300 million are obese⁵. The increase in obesity has been so considerable that in 2000 in the USA it was estimated that 64% of people over 20 were obese or overweight, which is equivalent to 120 million people affected by this severe problem. In that year, about 15% of children were overweight⁶. However, this situation is seen not only in advanced countries; it is also related to a sedentary life-style and meals rich in empty calories –junk food- whose consumption is increasingly frequent, above all in children and adolescents.

Added to this problem is that of the appreciation of extreme thinness as an archetype of beauty. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, women were valued in terms of their good nutritional status and their beauty was exalted in terms of their abundance of forms and curves (Figure 10). This can be seen in the portraits of the times. And it was directly related to health since skinniness, svelteness and a languid physiognomy were synonymous with illness, because tuberculosis was the most feared disease of the times. Thanks to the appearance of effective treatments for tuberculosis, the disease became less common and thinness was uncoupled from illness, and a new model of beauty was born.

This new model is used by the fashion creators and designers who set the pace in social habits that foster the creation of fashion parades and the appearance of increasingly thinner models as paragons of elegance, beauty and status (Figure 11). A stylized body takes first place in cultural evolution and regarding what is personal it is considered to be the most important attribute. This, together with patterns of social behaviour tending to cause obesity, leads to extremes that encourage the onset of different pathologies, all in an attempt to reach standards set by society that are well nigh impossible to attain. Adolescence is perhaps the most vulnerable stage of life owing to adolescents' vulnerability and their desire



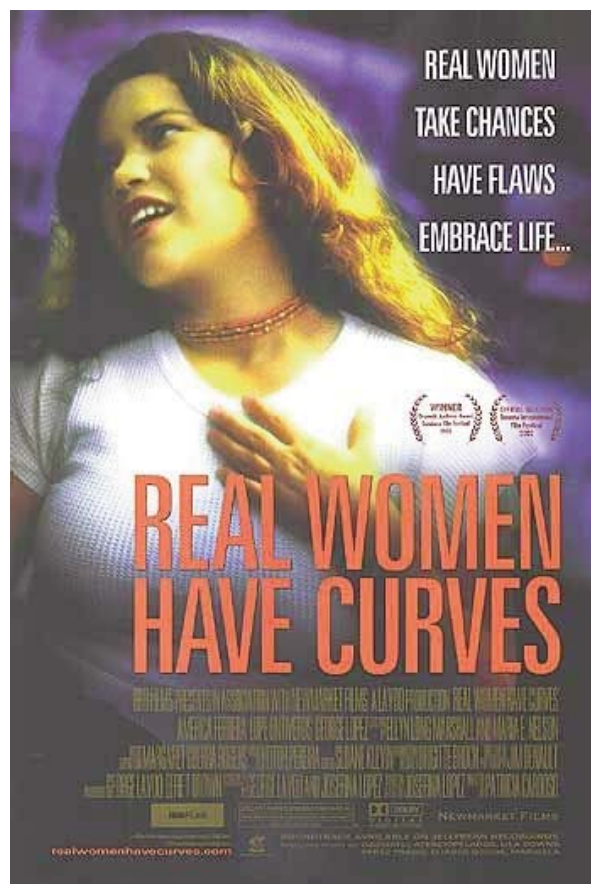
Figure 10: The traditional model of female beauty: Note this in the *Las Tres gracias* (1638) of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

to be accepted by their peers, and it is one in which very serious conditions may appear, such as bulimia, anorexia or behavioural disturbances, leading to the risk of life-threatening circumstances.

Additionally, in an attitude contradictory to today's western market, the offer of low-cost food products of little nutritional value has increased. It is thus usual to see youth making a bee-line towards fast foods based mainly on carbohydrates; they cost less but they predispose individuals to obesity. It would be useful to promote nutritional education based on nutritionally correct premises such as the quality and quantity of food that is sufficient: how much meat should be eaten; how much fruit and fresh vegetables. Nevertheless, when choosing the right food costs rise, leading people of low socioeconomic level to select carbohydrate-based foods, which in inordinate amounts lead to obesity. This concept is supported by the paradigm of the presence of obesity in situations of dire poverty, and the problem must be addressed at the level of national health and education policies because, paradoxically, poor populations have the associated problem of obesity as well as being undernourished.



Photo 11: The new canon of beauty and extremely thin fashion models



American poster with the main protagonist. Design by KO Creative

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