

## The Hidden Dangers of Male Modeling

By Edward Siddons  
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When most people think of exploitation in modeling, they think of young women and girls walking the catwalk with alarmingly protruding hips and angular shoulders, or they remember the tales of celebrity photographers manipulating young women into sex acts. Muscle-bound male models with perfect cheekbones and fat paychecks? They do not seem like obvious victims. But as I found during my short career as a male model, men and boys are increasingly at risk in the odd, unregulated workplace that is the fashion world. Being a man does not make you safe: Male models are often subject to sexual harassment but rarely report it. And, like their female counterparts, they are under intense pressure to have just the right kind of body. Recent menswear trends have polarized male catwalk modeling, encouraging either extreme muscularity or waifish androgyny. Want to look like that? It will likely make you sick.

And there's another factor that makes male models more vulnerable today: Emerging East Asian economies have created a demand for designer clothes and consequently for models. Growing numbers of young models, both men and women, are heading to Asia, far from their families and support networks, and working in poorly regulated conditions that leave them at risk of being overworked and underpaid. It turns out that being really, really, really good-looking—as Ben Stiller's male model character Derek Zoolander describes himself—will not guarantee you wealth, health or security.



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Sam Thomas, founder of the U.K.-based charity Men Get Eating Disorders Too, is highly critical of recent shifts in the fashion industry. "There has certainly been a trend in which some male models are getting younger and definitely skinnier," says Thomas. The industry seems "particularly divided right now," he says, with hypermuscular looks becoming increasingly popular at the same time as demand has surged for waifish male models.

Sara Ziff, founder of the Model Alliance, a New York City nonprofit labor organization advocating for greater protection of models, says male models face a uniquely difficult situation. "I definitely think that men have just as many labor-related concerns as women, if not more," says Ziff, a longtime model. "The industry urgently needs reform. It's an industry that has escaped any real regulation for decades."

At the age of 20, I fell for that world. It seemed to me like easy money and a shortcut to joining a glamorous elite. But after a year of dabbling in the industry, I realized it was making me miserable. Sure, I had become part of a rarefied world cordoned off from the public—and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't enjoyed that—but to remain part of that elite

I was expected to work unpaid to gain a degree of celebrity that never came. I had to cope with relentless pressure to keep my weight down, and my agency bookers expected me to attend castings for up to 17 hours a day in the run-up to fashion week. And there was this: The money turned out to be lousy. While a male model might earn a few thousand dollars for a major show and maybe in the tens of thousands for an international campaign, many magazine shoots are unpaid, and small shows often pay only a few hundred. I felt exploited, as did many of my peers, and yet all of us felt we couldn't speak out because getting a reputation as being "difficult" or "demanding" could kill your fledgling career. So we kept posing and we kept quiet.

France, Spain, Italy and Israel have all passed legislation within the past decade requiring all models working in those countries to possess a medical certificate that declares them fit to work. The French law stipulates that models' health must be "assessed in particular in terms of body mass index" but with a nod to more holistic methods of assessment, including body shape and well-being. An agency booker who fails to adhere to the law risks a fine of 75,000 euros (about \$83,623) and up to six months in prison. The law also requires agencies to signal when modeling photos have been retouched to alter body shape. Fines of up to 10,000 euros (about \$11,150) and one year in prison can await individuals "provoking people to excessive thinness by encouraging prolonged dietary restrictions that could expose them to a danger of death or directly impair their health."

The fashion industry is so sprawling and decentralized that many industry insiders believe that the only way it can protect its young is if it decides to take on that responsibility itself. Many powerful figures in the industry say they are already acting

responsibly. Storm Models, a leading agency, says it abides by minimum BMI rules. "Ultimately, we're just a supply chain," says Cat Trathen, head of the men's division at Storm. "We only provide what our clients are asking for." She says that any potential problems lie with the editors and brands booking the models she represents. And she was adamant that she and her team already do their utmost to safeguard the models signed to their agency: "We do not have and we have never had one model—male or female—on this board who is underweight." Trathen says it's not in the economic interests of an agency to promote models who are too thin: "A model who's underweight is going to be ill. Ultimately, they're a commodity, and you have to look after them. If someone is ill or too thin, they're not going to work because they're not going to look their best or have the energy to model."

One prominent casting director, Noah Shelley of AM Casting, says he bears some responsibility for the pressure to be skinny. "If we were to sit down and round table and say there's blame to be had, then I would definitely deserve some," says Shelley. "Nonetheless, I don't feel on a daily basis that I'm responsible for unhealthy body ideals, but I'm not naïve enough to suggest that couldn't be happening without my intention, and I have to take responsibility for that."

Yet Sebastien Meunier, creative director of the Paris-based cult fashion house Ann Demeulemeester, denies that designers are doing anything wrong. "We are not doing anything shocking: We're making clothes that are perfectly decent and acceptable," he tells *Newsweek*. "At the end of the day, [models] are adults. There's no problem here."

Steele, of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, believes the industry is unlikely to self-regulate in a meaningful way. "Everyone says they're not the ones at fault, that they're just following orders," she

says. "I suspect there's a lot of blame to be shared. The casting directors and designers and members of the audience want to see thin, white, young models. They're all at fault."