What is a Body?

A body is a vessel where our soul resides and allows us to experience life in all its dimensions and establish a livelihood.

Every human being comes with equal worth; our bodies come in different sizes, shapes, colors and abilities. These bodies also have differences in needs and interests. These differences manifest the amazing power of life and are good reasons to celebrate unity in diversity.

Unfortunately, in most societies these differences in women’s bodies have been used as a yardstick for determining beauty, status, privilege and the overall wellbeing and value of women. The difference of bodies are judged and measured against a male-defined ‘standard.’ If a woman’s body differs from this standard, it can prompt feelings of shame and inadequacy and result in some women feeling compelled to take risky actions to reach the ‘standards.’ Sadly, how we feel about our bodies is largely defined by society, as they dictate which bodies are more acceptable and celebrated. However, our bodies belong to us and nature has given us the responsibility to take care of them; we can choose to respect and celebrate ourselves, including our differences.
What is Body Politics?

The encyclopedia defines body politics as: *the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body.*

The definitions and interpretations of bodies are determined in our societies. These interpretations are usually associated with groups and categories, for example, gender. The rules on how a woman should appear, behave, move and function are defined by a society’s expectations of gender. The expectations of a woman to always look beautiful, usually for men’s pleasure, is typical with the social norm that a woman’s main value revolves around her reproductive roles.

This enforces expectations for women and leaves little opportunity for us to define the needs, pleasure, purpose and politics of our own bodies. If women fail to conform with societal expectations, they face repercussions. Gender intersects with several other aspects like sexual orientation, race, social status, age, ability, furthering the control of our bodies. This is the war and oppression on women’s bodies. The social norms that impact us as individuals are also found in our structures and systems. Societies and governments are mostly patriarchal and therefore they make policies and laws that express power over woman’s bodies and autonomy. For example, the Ugandan Anti-Pornography Act (2014) that, among other prohibitions, forbids women from wearing short clothing is an example of the structural oppression of women’s bodies. Laws like this directly or implicitly accentuate the patriarchal standards expected of women.

> “The corridors of power are structured to accommodate the associated characteristics of male, heterosexual bodies of dominant racial and ethnic groups.”
> Waylen et al., 2013

Contextualising the Reality of Body Politics

The different layers of our society provide means to reinforce the politics around women’s bodies; from the individual, relationships, community and society. As individuals, we battle with ideas of perfection because of society dictating what beauty is. For example, skin lightening or extreme dieting and unsafe weight loss programs sometimes lead to dangerous eating disorders and serious health implications. Our bodies face scrutiny from people that we interact with closely and have some sort of relationships with—family, friends, acquaintances. Oftentimes, family members put pressure on women to serve as caregivers to cook, clean and look after everyone else.
The communities in which we live and work like schools, churches, mosques and the cultures established tend to impose patriarchal beliefs on our bodies such as what we can wear, bearing children and sexual submissiveness. Often, schools, workplaces and communities tend to enforce patriarchal norms about our bodies. Societies hold so many traditions and practices that promote conformity to ensure that a woman’s body fits the cultural or societal standards of beauty and what is acceptable.

Image 1. The Ecological Spheres of Body Politics

**Why Should We Care About Body Politics?**

As women, we are often not recognized for who we are as autonomous beings but rather what we can do for others, especially men. Instead of looking at who we are as women and what we can do as individuals, we are looked at for our reproductive role, as mothers, caregivers, and objects to provide pleasure for men.

**Beauty and Body Politics**

Globally, there are many body enhancing products to slim, fatten, lighten, and shape a woman to fit society’s description of a ‘beautiful’ woman because we are seen as a thing to admire and use not for our intellectual ability or aliveness but for the benefit of others. Media have contributed heavily to the objectification of women. The millions of magazines sold globally, social media channels, and pornography, among other media, create and reinforce rigid beauty norms.

This breeds body shaming. Because society has a limited idea of how all women should look or how much we should weigh, women who do not have these characteristics are deemed not ‘beautiful enough.’ This not only affects the esteem of women and how we view ourselves, but we also miss out on many opportunities in building our career, like fashion, politics, journalism and many more.
Women, Reproductive Roles and Body Politics

Policing of women's bodies not only affects and demeans our autonomy, but also limits our life's choices and opportunities. 26% of Ugandan school going girls drop out because of lack of sanitary products, and even more still drop out of school or fail to perform to their maximum abilities because of menstruation shaming, taboos and myths.1 Girls stop going to school because they are made to feel dirty and shameful for a natural process that happens to their bodies.2

At a later age, women are shamed if they choose not to or are unable to have children because our bodies are viewed as vessels for reproduction. However, even for women who choose to have children especially in the formal employment sector, we can face scrutiny, lose advancement opportunities or even lose jobs because we choose to be mothers. This double standard hurts women.

Women’s Sexuality and Body Politics

From a young age, women's bodies are expected to be flawless and as a result, many women live in shame about their bodies when we fail to meet the myth of flawlessness. As a result, young women are disempowered and know much less about their bodies which influences many decisions they take later.

Conceptualization of the woman's body as existing for the man's pleasure is very dangerous and leads into development of a society that believes that women are only good enough if they please men and that their primary purpose is the pleasure of men. This leads to sexual violence, abuse and a repression of women's sexuality. It is typical that a woman's pleasure is often sacrificed for the man's pleasure. A woman's sexual appeal is measured by how much men find her attractive and women are considered good enough if they can perform sexual acts that please men at the expense of their own pleasure, comfort and consent.

Reclaiming Our Bodily Integrity

Women deserve an authentic free and happy life. We deserve this. It is challenging and difficult within the patriarchal society that we live in and structural change is necessary. However, as individuals and collectively, we can start to reclaim our bodies. Here are some ideas of how we can foster the power within ourselves, join in solidarity with other women and set expectations for male allies, our communities and societies to ensure as women, we can live in our bodies with dignity and safety.
Table 1. Creating a Reality Where Women and their Bodies are Respected

<table>
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<th>Who?</th>
<th>What They Can Do</th>
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| **Women, individually and collectively** | - Understand that we have the power within us and exist as autonomous beings.  
- Connect, accept and appreciate our bodies.  
- Be mindful of the language about ourselves and other women; avoid shaming and criticism of our own and other women's bodies, refuse to reinforce the patriarchal beliefs held about women's bodies.  
- Sisterhood & Solidarity: learn and unlearn beliefs we hold about our and other women's bodies.  
- Collective and Self-care: affirm and support fellow sisters.  
- Work together to change the patriarchal norms and rules. |
| **Men, individually and collectively** | - Educate yourselves and unlearn the patriarchal beliefs about women's bodies.  
- Avoid objectifying and treating women like they are objects or using degrading phrases or language.  
- Respect every women's bodies: refuse to make jokes about, critique, assess or otherwise comment on women's bodies.  
- Ensure safety and pleasure in your sexual relationship. Tell and show your partner that her pleasure is just as important as your own.  
- Hold each other accountable for respecting women as autonomous beings.  
- Speak out, individually and collectively when women's bodies are being controlled. |
| **Communities** | - Reject practices that harm, control or critique women's bodies.  
- Encourage respect, autonomy and freedom for women in your community.  
- Ask women how the community can prioritize their safety.  
- Encourage and celebrate the diversity of women's bodies in age, size, color, shape and ability.  
- Reject body shaming of women.  
- Promote non-violence in your community.  
- Create a conducive environment where women can grow and be authentic to themselves and their bodies. |
| **Societies** | - Establish gender sensitive laws that protect women's rights and freedoms.  
- Reject policies and laws that police women's bodies and take control and decisions of our bodies out of our hands.  
- Refuse to accept violence against women as normal and expected.  
- Reject media portrayals of women that objectify, degrade or diminish women's dignity and our bodies. |
This brief was written by Lucky Kobugabe with support from Natsnet Ghebrebrhan, Leah Goldmann and Lori Michau.

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**Endnotes**
