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## An introduction to feminism and cross-cultural body image in the United States

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# An introduction to feminism and cross-cultural body image in the United States

## Abstract

Feminism is a social movement that aims to end the oppression of women and to create opportunities for advancement of women. There are several types of feminism that have their own set of values and beliefs: liberal feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, and womanism. Central to these types of feminism is the call for sexism to cease and for women to have equal opportunity. Embedded within modern feminism is intersectionality, which is described as the effect of multiple oppressions that affect women. Misogyny, the hatred of women, affects the way that women feel about themselves. This is done through a process called internalized misogyny. While the value of women is set by outside forces, it is especially harsh on minority women. The way that minority women feel about their bodies can be described as a type of intersectional and internalized misogyny. In response to the value that society places on women's bodies, women have formed a movement called the "Body Positivity" movement. It is intersectional as it calls for personal worth, and establishing unique beauty- which can be applied to women of all races and cultures. This is implemented through a program called the Be Body Positive model, and through social worker's work with clients. It is important that social workers continue to work on feminist theory and women's issues with the body, as it is a social justice issue concerned with the Code of Ethics.

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FEMINISM AND CROSS CULTURAL BODY IMAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

**AN INTRODUCTION TO FEMINISM AND CROSS-CULTURAL BODY IMAGE  
IN THE UNITED STATES**

By

Laura Darnell

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### **Abstract**

Feminism is a social movement that aims to end the oppression of women and to create opportunities for advancement of women. There are several types of feminism that have their own set of values and beliefs: liberal feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, and womanism. Central to these types of feminism is the call for sexism to cease and for women to have equal opportunity. Embedded within modern feminism is intersectionality, which is described as the effect of multiple oppressions that affect women. Misogyny, the hatred of women, affects the way that women feel about themselves. This is done through a process called internalized misogyny. While the value of women is set by outside forces, it is especially harsh on minority women. The way that minority women feel about their bodies can be described as a type of intersectional and internalized misogyny. In response to the value that society places on women's bodies, women have formed a movement called the "Body Positivity" movement. It is intersectional as it calls for personal worth, and establishing unique beauty- which can be applied to women of all races and cultures. This is implemented through a program called the Be Body Positive model, and through social worker's work with clients. It is important that social workers continue to work on feminist theory and women's issues with the body, as it is a social justice issue concerned with the Code of Ethics.

*Keywords: feminism, intersectionality, theory, history, body-image, body-positivity*

### **Introduction**

Social workers promote social justice for oppressed groups through education and embracing theory and research. An important theory for social workers to embrace is Feminism. Feminism calls for an end of sexism and sexist ideation, and for the creation of equal opportunities for all genders. When taken a step further, intersectional feminism calls for feminists to also empower women from intersecting identities, such as race, religion, ability, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, citizenship, etc. Women in American culture are often exposed to an excessive amount of sexualization and misogyny in the media, and in their interactions with men. This leads to internalized misogyny of women who do not feel that they conform to a standard beauty type. For African American women, sexualization is rampant, and they face an under representation in all types of media. African American women are also at a risk of facing internalized misogyny. This is being combatted through the implication of the Body Positivity movement, an inherently intersectional feminist movement which aims to guide women empowerment and create spaces for all unique beauty.

### **What is Feminism?**

Feminism is a social movement to “end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” (hooks, pg. xii, 2015). Within that definition there are two words that are important to define: sexism and oppression. Oppression is a broad term that is best described when compared with the other side of the coin, privilege. Privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets that are used on a day-to-day basis, that those with privilege remain oblivious to (Macintosh, 1989). Those that are born with privileges are largely unaware of their access and use of their privilege, however, those that are born without these privileges can rarely forget that they do not have these privileges. It is a system that is often uncomfortable for those with privilege to acknowledge

(Macintosh, 1989). However, it is necessary. In order to achieve true equality, those with privilege must identify their privilege and work to lessen it, so that there are lesser gaps between those who are privileged, and those who are oppressed.

The other identification that must be made from bell hooks' definition of feminism is the word "sexism." Sexism is a system of male privilege and female oppression. However, it is important to understand that feminism is not anti-male, in its aim. Like with privilege and oppression, sexism is a system that is socialized and those who are not facing woman-oppression do not often recognize sexism in their surroundings. This system of sexism in a society is called a patriarchy (hooks, 2015). That being said, bell hooks, notes that the loss of power that comes within a sexist system is threatening to men. Men have benefits within a patriarchal system: access to higher pay, more chances to have their voice heard, the ability to command the respect of all. In order to maintain this power over women, men must dominate women; this is done through exploitation, oppression and sometimes violence. Most men do not want the job of being a patriarch, most men do not support violence against women. While that is true, men are afraid of what a world without the patriarchy looks like (hooks, 2015). It is comfortable to live within a system that supports your gender and allows you unearned assets. It is not comfortable to be a member of the same society that oppresses you because of the gender that you belong to.

### **Waves of Feminism**

#### **First Wave Feminism and the Women's Suffrage Movement**

With women's suffrage came the first wave of feminism in America. Women's suffrage is the ability to participate in politics by voting, either in municipalities, primaries, or presidential elections. Full women's suffrage allows for women participation in all elections (McCammon et al, 2001). Wyoming, in 1869, became the first state to grant women's suffrage. By the time the



19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified in 1920, 15 states had granted women full suffrage, two southern states allowed women voting rights in primary elections, and 13 states gave women the right to vote for president (McCammon et. al, 2001).

There are two theories as to why women's suffrage movements were more successful in some American areas than they were others. The two theories rest on political interest from the power-holders (white men), and the changing gender roles of women. During the 19th century, women were responsible for child rearing and domestic work, otherwise known as the private sphere of work. Men were able to work outside of the home and were represented in public spaces such as with politics and business (McCammon et. al, 2001). With this gendered separation of private and public spheres, women's voices were limited and silenced with policies and laws that would affect them and their families.

However, gender began to evolve with the turn of the century. Women were more represented in the public sphere in educational domains, working outside of the home, and began to develop professional identities. As women increasingly began to leave their homes to join the public sphere the notion of what it meant to be a woman began to change. No longer was it accepted as fact that women belonged in the home only. Instead it appeared that there was several acceptable ways to be a woman, and the rise of this new type of woman offered a gendered opportunity (McCammon et. al, 2001).

As states and districts increasingly allowed for white women to vote in their elections, it set a type of example for other states that had not yet begun to allow for women suffrage. Elections that women had taken part in had ideal results and had proven women's competence (McCammon et. al, 2001). However, not all groups were accepting of women's increasing presence in the public sphere, as well as their rights to suffrage. Liberal ideation flourished in

communities that had less Irish and Italian inhabitants (McCammon et. al, 2001). During the time of women's suffrage, both Irish and Italian people were seen as less than other white immigrants from different countries, an example being English immigrants. Italian American and Irish American women faced two different types of oppression: cultural and gender oppression.

### **Second Wave Feminism**

When a person is experiencing two or more types of oppression it is called intersectional oppression. Intersectional feminism, an important part of third wave feminism, was not a focus of second wave feminists. Just like the suffragettes, many of the second wave feminist theorists were white women. Some black feminist theorists began to develop the term "intersectionality," in their work as they came to the realization that the current feminist movement was as inclusive to their needs as was necessary (Crenshaw, 1989). Second wave feminism, while flawed, was crucial to the upward mobility of all women in society. Betty Friedan authored a famous book called *The Feminine Mystique*, which has been credited with launching the second wave feminism movement. *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, names women's traditional roles as housewives and mothers as "the problem with no name" (Friedan, Pg. 20, 1963.) The "problem with no name" refers to the emptiness women felt internally with their intrinsic roles as women; these roles were not inclusive of careers and personal economic stability.

The goal of second wave feminism was to challenge the notion that women should not work outside of the home. Just like the suffragettes began to leave the "private sphere," in exchange for a voice inside of the "public sphere," second wave feminists wanted to expand their roles in the public domain. During the time of second wave feminism, what it meant to be part of the public or private sphere was noticeably different for varying demographics. Women started to get hired by General Motors in 1964; however, they only hired white women, and African

American women were not hireable by General Motors (Crenshaw, 1989). In a court case that was brought against General Motors, for sex discrimination based hiring practice, the African American women found themselves being denied pursuit of the lawsuit. General Motor's claim was that they did not practice sex discrimination, as they were still hiring white women. There was no space for women's upward movement, career wise, for women who were also facing racial oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). There was no word for this practice until Kimberle Crenshaw coined the word, previously mentioned as intersectionality. Intersectional oppression is a powerful phrase and is powerfully and metaphorically described as a bird cage, by another famous feminist theorist, Marilyn Frye (1983):

“Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance

to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon (p.2).”

This quote is used repeatedly in gender and sexuality classes in college campuses in the United States. This is probably because it gives a symbol to a larger issue of multiple oppressions or what it feels like to be a person who is experiencing intersectional oppression. It can be argued that the bird is representative to a woman experiencing some sort of outward oppression, which would be something that the bird is trying to escape. The viewer of the cage, when expecting a single wire “cannot see the other wires,” so as a result, cannot see how the bird is not able to get out of their cage of oppression. A woman, living inside of her own metaphorical cage may have a cage made of many wires that make up the multiple things that she is oppressed by: race, religion, ability, sexual orientation, gender expression, health, body-type, socioeconomic status, etc. These are things that are part of the woman’s identity, and are not flexible or malleable, rather they are things that the woman lives with daily.

### **Third Wave Feminism**

Intersectionality is a central piece to what comprises third wave feminism, or the type of feminism that is currently being practiced. The contribution of the motives of the new generation of young feminists, and the development of intersectional theory from African American feminists has helped to comprise aspects of the new third wave feminism (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Arguably, one of the largest difference between third wave feminism and second wave feminism is that there was a larger focus on expanding the scope of who would be effected by feminist ideology. The younger generation of feminists had the groundwork laid out for them from their second wave feminist “mothers,” but the newer generation had also been able to

decide what they did found to be non-inclusive for all women from the second wave (Mann & Huffman, 2005).

The focus of third wave Feminists includes intersectionality, media, the rejection of gender binaries, and the embrace of sex positivity. Young feminists are able to spread their ideologies through platforms that other waves did not have access to (Mann & Huffman, 2005): the internet has provided an explosion of access points for feminists through social media, online journals, blogs, etc. It is important to note the presence of feminism online, as it is an important tool to combatting misogyny and patriarchal ideals.

As what it means to be a feminist evolves in our culture, it begins to become a product of the culture that we live in. Second wave feminists balk in horror at the behavior of young women in today's world (Glazer, 2006). Examples include a culture that encourages and promotes mainstream pornography, Girls Gone Wild videos, and clothing that is promiscuous in nature (Glazer, 2006). When compared to the stereotypical feminist image of a second wave feminist, the differences can be very striking. Second wave feminists tended to reject sexualizing their bodies and instead were known to burn their bras and quit shaving their legs. However, the argument for proudly showing off their female bodies is valid. Modern feminists argue that showing off their bodies in revealing clothing is the equivalent to the bra-burning feminists of the 1960's (Glazer, 2006). The increasingly important role femininity and sex has taken up in third wave feminism has been coined "raunch culture," by the young women who take pride in showing off feminine figures (Glazer, 2006).

There is a large focus on young women, of all shapes and sizes, to make themselves more desirable or more attractive. It is not a secret that in Western culture, white bodies and thinner body types are seen as more "beautiful" or more "ideal" (Thompson & Stice, 2001). What space

does this leave for young women who are not part of the narrow margin of what the “ideal” and “desirable” young woman looks like? Young feminists want to explore different definitions of beauty and want to empower each other, instead of repress features that are non-Eurocentric. An intersectional feminist, part of what defines modern feminism, looks at ways that minority women are oppressed.

### **Intersectional Feminism**

The application of intersectional feminism falls under the conflict perspective of social work. Conflict perspective acknowledges oppression and inequality in social structures, whether the settings are economic, political, cultural, or other places of undistributed power. In conflict perspective, power is unequally divided and some social groups, or one social group, is dominant over the minority social group, or groups (Hutchison, 2011). The root of the struggle, or conflict, gives one group a sense of privilege. The privileged group is the group that is the majority in most cases. However, the privileged group would not have privileges, if it was not at the expense of the oppressed group. In other words, “social order is based on the manipulation and control of nondominant groups by dominant groups,” (Hutchison, 2011).

Intersectional feminism operates under the understanding that the conflict between power groups exists. Simone de Beauvoir, a classic feminist theorist, wrote about the idea of the “other.” “Othering” when compared to the “self” says that the “self,” or more privileged group, is dominant while the “other,” or the more oppressed group is submissive (de Beauvoir, 1953). Simone de Beauvoir had intentions for this idea to be applied to women versus men; however, it can be applied in cases of race, religion, sexual orientation, age, transgenderism, ability, and etc. In the case of the research for this paper, it can be easily applied to body image in terms of race. The ideal body image in Western culture is thin and white, therefore, the “self” in this scenario

would be thin and white women. The “other” would be African American women of a fuller figure. The “self” of a thin white woman is privileged in a sense that she sees other woman like her represented as beautiful in the media, and the African American woman with a fuller shape rarely sees herself represented in mainstream media.

When discussing intersectional feminism, it is helpful to come back to the above passage by Marilyn Frye where she discusses the birdcage. Instead of holding a woman in a standard birdcage, an intersectional feminist examines how it would feel to live life inside of a birdcage with many more wires, and hardly any light getting in. The new wires would represent things that pertain to racial oppression, religious oppression, sexual orientation oppression, or any other type of oppression, on top of the oppression of women. In other words, oppression does not exist on its own. Women do not exist in a world where their identities exist on their own, their identities cross over and form the human being that is facing biases and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). The world of a thin white woman, with an “ideal” body type, is far different than the world of a African American lesbian woman who does not conform to an “ideal” body type. However, both of these women experience a type of gender oppression.

### **Types of Feminism: Liberal, Radical, Cultural, and Womanist Feminism**

#### **Liberal Feminism and Radical Feminism**

Liberal feminism can classically be thought of what is “mainstream” feminism. The first liberal feminists were considered the suffragettes. The liberal feminist goal was to bring women into mainstream, or public sphere, as discussed briefly before (Echols, 1989). The objectives of liberal feminism were to embrace both arguments of “sameness” and “difference,” an example of this occurring during the women’s suffrage movement. Suffragettes, the first liberal feminists, argued that they were deserving of equal rights to men because they were on the same level as

men both intellectually and morally. However, they would also argue the “difference aspect,” or how equality of the sexes would benefit society as women possessed different attributes that men simply did not, and they would be able to counterbalance men’s “aggressiveness, belligerence, and competitiveness,” with their “pacific, nurturant and moral,” traits (Echols, 1989). The separation of “difference” from “sameness” is one of the many aspects that sets liberal feminism apart from radical feminism. Radical feminism, as well as other feminists believe that the elimination of gender roles, the same roles that label women as “pacific, nurturant, and moral,” is the only way to reveal true gender-based liberation.

Liberal feminists identify the primary cause of oppression and inequality of women as “denial of access and opportunities due to sex-role stereotyping or structural barriers or both” (Hyde, 2013). This is slightly different to what radical feminists would identify women oppression as a concept of “sex caste,” or “women (being) subordinated because of male supremacy and cultural patriarchy” (Hyde, 2013). Hyde identifies the strategies that radical feminists use to combat oppression as modeling their movements after black power movements, consciousness raising, forming collectivist orientations to power, and politicizing their approaches to services for women like rape crisis lines, or health clinics (Hyde, 2013). Radical feminists are the feminists who are most stereotyped from the second wave feminist movement, they were the ones who put the fire in the bellies of many young feminists during their time. However, liberal feminists were more present in decision making and policy development. Hyde identifies the strategies liberal feminists used as integrating women with men, and using legal remedies to “secure and extend women’s rights (for example, employment and education equity legislation)” (Hyde, 2013)



A major critique of liberal feminism is that it is not quite radical enough in what it aims to do. Liberal feminism has had many successes, including women's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment. Arguably, liberal feminism is the most mainstream type of feminism, and is the type of feminism that average people label themselves as. The language that surrounds liberal feminism discussion has not been able to provide words or terminology that are singular or descriptive about the oppression of women, and their attempts to liberate themselves (Dietz, 1987).

This is one of the many issues that radical feminism took with liberal feminism. Radical feminists felt as though liberal feminism did not do enough, radical feminists had a tough stance on gender equality and what that looks like and means. One of the ways that radical feminism can be described is by comparing it to its counterpart: cultural feminism. Radical feminism embraces an ideology that eliminates the "sex-class" system (cultural feminism later would evolve from the idea of the sex-class system, but in a different way.). Radical feminists aim to render themselves as female person rather than a gendered construct. This can be compared, counter culturally, to the cultural feminist theory principle that aims for the valuation of males and females to be the same (Echols, 1989). Cultural feminists embrace "femaleness," where as radical feminists aim to eliminate gender roles that make up what it means to be a woman.

### **Cultural Feminism and Womanism**

A cultural feminist identifies woman oppression and inequality as stemming from a "societal denial and repression of women's inherent, and superior, ability to nurture" (Hyde, 2013). A cultural feminist notices that women and men are inherently very different; however, they believe in the value of woman-traits and believe that they should be given access to the same opportunities. Cultural feminists combat woman oppression through means of the creation

and sustainability of separate woman-centered spaces that “promote female biology as the basis of women’s power” (Hyde, 2013). Examples of this in the entrepreneurial sphere are things like women’s gyms or health clubs and women’s bookstores.

A common aspect of modern feminism is the aspect of intersectional feminism. This is often displayed in the feminist theory aspect of Womanism. Alice Walker defined a womanist as follows:

“A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counter-balance of laughter) and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: ‘Mamma, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?’ Ans.: ‘Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.’ Traditionally capable, as in: ‘Mamma, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘It wouldn't be the first time’” (Walker, 1983).

The discussion that Walker is having with her Mama is representative of the acknowledgement and empowerment of women of color in the feminist movement. Whereas some veins of feminism attempt to incorporate the aspect of intersectionality, or acknowledgement of intersectional oppressions in a woman’s life, womanism centralizes the issue of race. The flowers, arguably, that “Mama” is speaking of in the passage can extend to represent multiple aspects of an identity: race, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, gender expression

or identity, ability or disability, etc. A womanist values the strength and culture of women, all women, and the movement is centered on love and appreciation of differences (Walker, 1984).

To recapitulate, intersectional oppression is the “double-discrimination,” that women experience when they have two oppressive aspects of an identity. A African American woman experiences discrimination that is similar to a African American man’s discrimination, and also the oppression of being a woman (Crenshaw, 1989). “They experience double-discrimination- the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women- not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). When examining women inside of intersectional oppression, it is often found that a woman’s lived experiences is not singular with every other woman. It is important to identify and explore intersectional oppression. One way that this can be done is through comparing one woman’s experience with another woman’s experience.

### **What is Misogyny?**

A women’s experience with her world involves a level of misogyny. Misogyny is defined as hatred for women (Holland, 2006). Holland (2006) argues that this level of hatred, has been a staple in every society in the world since the beginning of time. Greek and Roman societies, much of what the Western world believes they come from, ran rapid with the mistreatment and violence towards women. Formation of religion in Western society has reinforced misogynistic ideals, as Holland states: “It took no training in philosophy to decipher misogyny behind the word ‘cunt.’ But the exaltation of the Virgin Mary as Mother of God proved that misogyny can push a woman upwards as well as downwards. In either direction, the destination is the same: women dehumanized” (Holland, 2006, p. 6). This is an example of how there is a double-

standard placed on women that they cannot benefit from. Whether they are viewed as objects, or whether they are viewed as “godly,” they are not placed on the same playing field that men place each other. This has helped to contribute to the dehumanization of women.

Holland also argues that misogyny exists in both the public and private sphere. The public sphere is one of the many things that feminists hoped to gain a voice in, especially in the first and second wave. However, the personal sphere, the sphere in which women live their lives in, is where a lot of disparity between race and sex occur:

“The hatred of women affects us in ways that no other hatred does because it strikes at our innermost selves. It is located where the private and public sphere intersect. The history of that hatred may dwell on its public consequences, but at the same time it allows us to speculate on why, at the personal level, man’s complex relationship to women has permitted misogyny to thrive. Ultimately, such speculation should allow us to see how equality between the sexes will eventually be able to banish misogyny and put an end to the world’s oldest prejudice” (Holland, 2006, p. 11).

This argument is interesting for many reasons. It suggests that men, rather than women, have some responsibility to address misogyny. It also addresses the natural intersection of the lives of women in the public and private sphere, both where they live with misogyny.

Misogyny takes many forms. It is “biological, sexual, psychological, social, economic, and political” (Holland, Pg. 271, 2006). According to reports from the World Health Organization, the global estimates of women who have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence is about 1 in every 3 women (World Health Organization, 2016). The World Health Organization also reports that 38% of murders of women, globally, are committed by an intimate partner. In the United States, women hold only

26 positions as CEO at S&P 500 companies, or only 5.2% of CEO positions (Catalyst, 2017). Women also made up 20.2% of board seats at the same *Fortune* 500 companies, and Minority women made up only 3.8% of the *Fortune* 500 board seats in 2016 (Deloitte and Alliance for Board Diversity, 2017). The Center for American Women and Politics reports that women make up only 105 seats in congress, which is only 19.6% of the 535 seats. Of those women, 38 of them are Women of Color, or, 36.2% of women in congress are Women of Color. This means that the entirety of congress is only 7.1% Women of Color (Center for American Women and Politics, 2017).

### **Intersectional Misogyny**

#### **A Woman's Worth**

In the Fall of 2016, prior to the November election, news broke out that Donald Trump, the Republican candidate for president was being accused of sexual assault (Carmon, 2016). MSNBC was among many news outlets covering the several allegations that came to surface against Donald Trump. Trump was caught on tape telling Access Hollywood host, Billy Bush, that being a star means “you can do anything,” and that you can “grab them by the pussy” (Carmon, 2016). With this audio leak, it was thought that this would be enough to lose Trump the election. However, he still won the election on November, 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The President of the United States of America was someone who openly admitted that he thought “grabbing women by the pussy,” was okay. The way that society valued women was out in the open. There was a consensus that this man's politics were more important than the respect and worth for women as a whole, much of which is deeply rooted in Western culture.

Western culture values women as sex-objects, as disposable. Women are promoted as inadequate unless they are able to conform to a narrow set of Western beauty standards, which

are often painful, expensive, labor-intensive, unattainable, and unhealthy. The media also does an extensive and solid job of depicting women as sexual objects, existing solely for the consumption of men (Rondino-Colocino, 2012). As capitalism develops in American society, there has been a strict focus of women's worth being tied to their ability to sell a product with their bodies. Advertisements, something that is consumed by everyone, are becoming increasingly pornographic (Jeffreys, 2005). The negative impact of viewing women sexually, outside of sexual contexts is harmful to the development of women. It helps the sex industry as it normalizes their business and helps to contribute to the international trafficking of women (Jeffreys, 2005).

It can be hypothesized that due to the intersections that many women face that the sexualization that African American women face is different from the sexualization that white women face. White women are halted as the "ideal" or the "self," as was discussed by Simone de Beauvoir. African American women are seen as the "other" (de Beauvoir, 1959). The sexualization of African American women is wide and perverse- stemming from the worth that popular culture places on them. Hip-hop culture has been a large factor to the objectification of African American women. African American men are oftentimes seen as the "pimp" or "player" of women who swarm him, and exist for no other purpose than for his visual pleasure (Avery, 2017). The women featured in hip-hop videos are interchangeable, and disposable- any African American woman's body can take another African American woman's place (Avery, 2017).

### **The Male Gaze**

It has been explained that popular culture, especially in films and other visual entertainment, that women exist for the purpose of the "male-gaze:"

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire... The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze and flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then had to be integrated into cohesion with narrative (Mulvey, 1989, p. 808-809).”

In a sense, Laura Mulvey argues that women’s representation in the media is narrow and exists for the pleasure and viewing of men. Women in film rarely exists solely as their complex identity of being a woman. Men, who value women for their sexuality, sometimes only for their sexuality, enjoy viewing women in their roles as the erotic. It is argued that women exist for the male desire for women as “pin-ups,” and for the “strip-tease” (Mulvey, 1989). When a woman is not subjected to the erotic-centered aspect of the male-gaze, she is still present for her appearance, but as a motivator for action or as a storyline developer. It is never as a contextual human being with importance or centrism to the story. Since women have little value to storylines in popular culture’s film and cinema industry, it is essential that the women portraying the “love interest” or the “vixen,” maintain a level of beauty and appealing nature to those who are watching.

The “male-gaze” is an important aspect of what it means to be a woman experiencing objectification in the United States. Sexual objectification is the phrase that explains the

phenomena as “being treated as a body (or a collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (Frederickson & Roberts, 1999, p. 174). Frederickson and Roberts proposed that objectification theory creates a framework to better explain the multiple oppressions that women face by owning a body that is female. It is argued that while the “male-gaze” and other less threatening “gazes” in society contribute to the objectification of women, but the most harmful of “gazes” that a woman is subjected to comes from the “visual media that spotlight bodies and body parts and seamlessly align viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze” (Frederickson & Roberts, p. 176, 1999 and Mulvey, 1975). One of the many ways that this is shown in the media is through photographs with images of the female body as fragmented. To give an example by comparison, men in photographs tend to have a greater emphasis on their faces, which usually show their face, neck, and hair in great detail. Women, in photographs do not tend to have their face as the focus on magazine covers, and in other media forms, but rather their bodies. In fact, women are sometimes left without their heads at all in images (Frederickson & Roberts, 1999).

Another term that has been used to talk about the sexualization of women and girls' bodies in society is the term sexual objectification. Like Frederickson and Roberts point out that fragmented bodies are a fixture in the sexualization of women in the media, another feminist theorist, Sandra Bartky (1990), says this: “a person is sexually objectified when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (p.26). Combined with the fact that the sexualization of female bodies in American culture is permeated deep into its roots, and happens at such a fast rate, it is easy to see how young women and girls fall into a trap of self-objectification and begin to internalize their own misogyny.



### **Internalized Misogyny and Desire**

A term that was used to explain feelings of internalized misogyny by Catherine Mackinnon is the phrase “thingified” in the head, or “learning to treat their own bodies as separate from themselves” (Jeffreys, 2005, p. 8). Jeffreys explains this by using Bartky’s example of the wolf-whistle from a passerby onto a young woman or girl: “The body which only a moment before I inhabited with such ease now floods my consciousness. I have been made into an object” (Bartky, 1990, p. 27 as cited in Jeffreys, 2005). The whistle signifies that the whistler, or objectifier, not only had to look at the woman’s body, but also make it known that he had been looking at her body (Jeffreys, 2005). She must, “be made to know that I am a ‘nice piece of ass’: I must be made to see myself as they see me” (Bartky, 2005, p. 27). As this perpetuates, young women begin to take into account a man’s evaluation of their selves first.

There are six types of internalized oppression that women face. They are powerlessness, objectification, loss of self, invalidation, derogation, and competition between women (Bearman & Amrhein, 2013). Powerlessness, as a means of internalized oppression, means that women believe that there are more limits to achieving their goals and that they are less competent than how much they actually are. Objectification occurs when women view themselves as bodies from an outsiders’ perspective, rather than the human being that they are (Bearman & Amrhein, 2013). The loss of self is when a woman shifts who she is to be more accommodating, and in the process has internal feelings of distress. A woman’s own invalidation is when a woman pushes her feelings or emotions back, or views them as unimportant, especially, if a male perspective tells her that she should. Derogation is the negative words that are used to tear women down, or words that police gender stereotypes for women (Bearman & Amrhein, 2013). For example, the word “bitch,” or the phrase young men use when speaking about past romantic relationships “she

was crazy.” The last form of internalized oppression is competition between women, and this is when women view each other as threats to a limited resource, especially when it comes to the attention of young men.

When young women learn to internalize all of these things, it is not surprising that women view themselves as sex objects, and have low self-worth when they feel as though they are not “conventionally beautiful.” Women will do many things to appear desirable. That is not to say that wanting to look attractive or finding yourself feeling the need to adhere to certain beauty standards is un-feminist or sexist (Valenti, 2007). Having the want or need to appear desirable is a natural and understandable thing. When it becomes suffocating and anti-feminist is when one takes a step back and begins to examine who is setting the standard to what it means to be ‘sexy’ or ‘beautiful.’ It is not young women and girls who decide what it takes to be ‘desirable’ (Valenti, 2007). The driving force that sets the standards for beauty is the desire of men: “We’re all trapped by the limiting version of sexuality that’s put out there- a sexuality that caters almost exclusively to men (Valenti, Pg. 45, 2007).”

### **The Portrayal of Women in the Media**

Women’s modern role in society is in a constant state of change. Throughout history women have struggled to become part of the public-sphere, but as we have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the media explosion, women are experiencing a type of sexualization that was unheard of several years ago. Sex is ubiquitous and omnipresent throughout pop culture in the United States, but specifically it is centered on women and girls. Sexuality is mainly female in our culture, and it is mainly women who define what it means to be “sexy” in the United States (Valenti, 2007). It is described as the pop-porn culture by Valenti (2007):

“And it’s not just sexy- it’s straight up sex. Pop culture is becoming increasingly ‘pornified.’ As pornography becomes more culturally acceptable, and the more we’re inundated with sexual messages- most of which are targeted at younger women- the more hardcore these messages become. Yes, I know, sex sells and always has. But do you think that twenty years ago little girls would be taking *Playboy* pencil cases to school, or that teen girls would be vying to take their tops off for little more than a moment of ‘fame’?”  
(p. 44)

Establishing what qualifies as sexy between cultural lines, changes depending on what women is asked. The Jezebel image is an image that entraps African American women. The image of the Jezebel is described as being “seductive, manipulative, and unable to control her sexual drives” (Townsend et al., 2010). This image is controlled by the media in a sense that African American Women are portrayed in hip-hop culture as promiscuous and sexualized. While it is argued that African American women are portrayed as desirable in hip-hop videos, there is a real counter argument that this is problematic as it is controlled by a White patriarchal perspective. An ideal beauty for African American women in the United states is a woman who has a “light skin tone, long and straight or loosely curled hair, and a curvy body shape” (Oney et al. 2011).

An important part of intersectional feminism is making the exploration of racial oppression central. Third wave feminism, or modern feminists, take this approach to be inclusive of all women in the battle for social justice. Misogynistic attitudes surrounding bodies are especially problematic for African American women. African American women face a culture saturated with their sexualization, but not anything that highlights their accomplishments, their personalities, their intelligence, or anything with a deeper meaning. Womanism, and other

African American feminist movements have focused on issues that have been particularly encompassing of what it means to be an African American *and* a woman in the United States.

### **African American Women and Body Image**

With keeping in mind that in North America eating disorders are more prevalent than in other more Eastern countries (Qian et. al, 2013), and also keeping in mind that there are women residing in the United States who come from other cultures and ethnicities that value larger figures, it seems as though there are a lot of things to consider. The “thin-ideal,” supports negative body image feelings for some women. However, a social worker must consider that what it means to be attractive must be adjusted to the lens of a woman’s own race and ethnicity. This lens recognizes and appreciates that African American women tend to internalize and value the beauty standards that stem from African American culture, rather than the beauty standards that come from Western and White culture. It is not unusual that women who belong to different ethnic groups or cultures would identify with the beauty standards of said culture or ethnicity (Crocker & Major, 1989). African American women have shifted their ideal of attractiveness to suit their cultures to protect their self-esteem and body image. African American girls and women have shown a personal bias towards bodies that are described as “thick” or possessing or owning attributes that are “curvaceous with large hips, a rounded backside, and ample thighs” (Hesse-Biber et al, 2004, p. 55) This preference has helped to contribute to the erasure of the narrow and Eurocentric White standards of beauty. In one study by Lamb and Plocha (2015) it was found that African American girls wanted to attain a body that was perceived as “thick” (fuller figured), and that the participants in the study felt that they could sense progress in society and popular culture when a “thick” body was accepted as a norm. They argued that this was the case because their white peers would be jealous of fuller-figured women, but then this idea was

challenged when the same white peers would attempt to lose weight to conform to the thin-ideal. (Lamb & Plocha, 2015).

It is an interesting and important factor to address that African American girls are not as notably influenced by the media when it comes to feelings about their bodies. Black girls are less likely to obsess or pass judgements on themselves when it comes to their weight. It is argued that the reason for this is because “African-American girls talked about their bodies as fixed entities- and often in terms of being biologically- or God-given (Lamb & Plocha, 2015).” The media that African American girls are exposed to is similar to the media that white girls are exposed to, but the media over represents white actors, and not enough actors for People of Color. The statistic of this is that People of Color represent 28.3% of roles on television, however, they make up 37.9% of the population (Smith et. al, 2016). However, it has been proven that for both white girls and African American girls that idealization of “TV images is positively correlated with the desire to be thin, and body dissatisfaction” (Lamb & Plocha, 2015).

### **Sociocultural Theory**

Negative feelings about body image, according to sociocultural theory, are tied to three factors (Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004). The first being that Western Culture values thin women more than women who have a larger figure. The second factor being that due to cultural objectification of women, young women start to view themselves as objects. The last factor that corresponds with the negative body image of young women is that there are specific reinforcements that coincide with conforming to Western standards of beauty, and consequences to not conforming to Western standards of beauty (Morrison, Kalin, & Morrison, 2004).

If this is to be applied to women, on a day to day basis, it could be argued that this minimalizes Women of Color, larger-figured women, non-binary persons, and transgender

women as un-ideal. As it was established, Women of Color in the United States tend to value fuller figures more than they would value a thinner figure, like people who are White in the same culture. When that is taken into account in juxtaposition with sociocultural theory, it can be said that Women of Color with fuller bodies are valued less, since Western culture values thin women. The second factor, which states women objectify themselves, because of the oversaturation of sexualization of women can be applied to transgender women, who are often sexualized in excess (Bettcher, 2007). The third aspect to sociocultural theory says that there is rewards to conforming to Western beauty standards, and that there is consequences to not conforming. The result of this is that women who face intersectional oppression, or are part of a minority group, face more consequences for not achieving tradition “beauty.” Those that can conform, will always face reinforcement.

#### **In Response to the Thin-Ideal**

It is problematic that women face specific oppression that coincides with their ability to achieve traditional beauty. It appears that misogyny surrounds women on all ends. Since there has been a rise in social media use amongst women and girls, it is easy to be subjected to images that support traditional beauty standards (Rao, 2015). There has been a lot of backlash from the feminist movement, that aims to challenge beauty standards. It has been argued that if there is a large presence of women who meet traditional beauty standards on social media, then why can it not also be true of women who do not meet traditional beauty standards (Rao, 2015)?

It is inherently feminist to collaborate behind the so-called “body positivity” movement. Like Alice Walker (1989) suggests when discussing womanism, it is so important to love women, all women, whether it is sexual or non-sexual. Can it not be said that loving and embracing all bodies is an aspect of loving the entirety of women? There is something that is so

raw and visceral about the embracing of a woman's own individual body. There is something to viewing the female body as deserving of respect and personal kindness. As bell hooks suggests "The one person who will never leave us, whom we will never lose, is our self. Learning to love our female selves is where our search for love must begin" (hooks, 2016, p. 104). Body Positivity embraces self-love and the journey that many women must take to reach body acceptance. The relationship that the woman has with her body is her "personal" story, and it has been established that a woman's personal experience is political (Hanisch, 1969).

### **"The Body Positivity Movement"**

A hot topic of discussion in the current feminist movement is the movement towards accepting all body types, sometimes it is referred to as the "Body Positivity Movement." The movement has a large social media presence. In recent years, several websites have popped up dedicated to "nurturing bodily acceptance and challenging the normalization of thin, toned bodies" (Sastre, 2014, p. 929). These websites aim to capture the essence of body-positivity through challenging the "thin-ideal" as a beauty standard. They offer a "safe space for people to share stories, and more importantly images, of their bodies" (Sastre, 2014, p. 929). They claim to respond to a need for visual representation of alternative body types, like larger body types, non-binary persons, women in hijabs, etc. One of the websites that Sastre's research explores is called "Stop Hating Your Body" ([stophatingyourbody.tumblr.com](http://stophatingyourbody.tumblr.com)).

"Stop Hating Your Body" embraces body positivity intersectionally. Blog posts include resources for people with disabilities as it pertains to protecting the Affordable Care Act. One of the things that the post includes is how to be a part of citizen lobbying. Another post, titled "Dark skin model of the week," highlights a woman of color and the many accomplishments she has achieved as a model, and in other professional fields. "Stop Hating Your Body" allows for user

submissions, which many people do. The submissions typically highlight some sort of struggle that the person went through on their journey towards body-acceptance. “These struggles are consistently framed around the catharsis engendered by a newfound positive relationship with one’s body, allying the body positive movement not merely with bodily acceptance, but with acceptance explicitly obtained through a process or journey” (Sastre, 2014, p. 938). When a participant goes to submit an image and caption, one of the “rules” for submission goes as such:

“More than anything we try to talk about our minds, and then our bodies, this is about self-esteem, this is about confidence and loving yourself. This is about what we believe and why we believe it, what incited our negative body image and what steps are we taking to change it. I want to spread awareness of what it is that causes us to think so negatively about ourselves and what different ways there are to recover from that pattern of thought.” (Stop Hating Your Body, 2014).

### **Implementing Body Positivity- A Response Grounded in Feminism**

#### **“The Body Positive” Model**

One way to implement body positivity with clients is through a program called The Body Positive. This program was started in 1996 by social workers, Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott. It was created to provide a “lively healing community that offers freedom from suffocating societal messages that keep people in a perpetual struggle with their bodies” (The Body Positive, 2017). The mission statement of the program is “The Body Positive teaches people how to reconnect to their innate body wisdom so they can have more balanced, joyful self-care, and a relationship with their whole selves that is guided by love, forgiveness, and humor” (The Body Positive, 2017).



The way that this model works is by following five core competencies which then have their own subgroups of goals and benefits. The five core competencies go as follows: “reclaim health, practice intuitive self-care, cultivate self-love, declare your own authentic beauty, and build community” (The Body Positive, 2017). Reclaiming your health includes goals that help the client to uncover their relationships, not only with their body-image, but with their relationships to food and exercise. This competency also calls for developing a “weight-neutral, health centered approach to self-care” (The Body Positive, 2017). The next core competency, practice intuitive self-care, focuses on what self-care looks like and how to find the “tools and resources to help you eat, exercise, and live intuitively” (The Body Positive, 2017). Cultivating self-love, the third core competency, has a goal to help the client use compassion, humor, and forgiveness with the self, and leave behind any need for self-criticism. Declaring your own authentic beauty is the fourth core competency, which focuses on viewing the body as unique and calls for a self-image of confidence. This core competency can broadly implement intersectionality, as it focuses on the empowerment of unique and different bodies.

The Body Positivity model appears to be inclusive to all women, in a sense that it asks women to retreat inside of themselves and focus on their own authenticity and original beauty. Since American culture relies on a misogynistic approach to displaying beauty, this step appears to offer women the chance to look outside of that- which means that they are now given the chance to embrace intersectional ideology. Every skin color, every race, every body type, every type of ability, every woman- regardless of gender identity or expression, sexuality, or socioeconomic status can possess a deep and meaningful beauty.

The last component of the Body Positivity model is to build community. The two goals of building community within a body positive space are to “connect to others through a shared

positive approach to beauty health and identity” and to “role model love and respect for your own body” (The Body Positive, 2017). This is specifically an important part of feminist theory, and one of the key aspects to maintaining a body-positive self-image. A community that loves women, as they are, in all forms, is culturally feminist and inherently womanist.

### **Body Positivity and Social Work Practice**

#### **The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics and Bodies**

The Body Positivity model is aligned with the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics. It was formed by social workers to promote social justice and empowerment, which are two very important values in the Code of Ethics. The Body Positivity movement is fueled by social justice, as it calls for body-acceptance amongst women, which has been established as a primary women’s issue. The model also promotes social justice as it says that all body types can be considered beautiful, whether those bodies are Black or white, or thinner versus fuller. The Body Positivity is also empowering, as it coaches women to make choices about their bodies in terms of finding their own healthy balance, and asking women to find their own authentic beauty. These are things that have to be done alone, so if a worker guides the practice, it gives women the tools to empower themselves.

When working with clients, it is important to work from a stance that upholds the Code of Ethics. One of the ethical principles that social workers uphold on a regular basis is the principle of social justice. The Code states “Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people” (National Association of Social Workers, 2008, p. 1). Not only does that statement encompass social justice at its roots, it is discussing the importance of empowering clients to make improvements to their own situations. When clients begin to feel a

sense of empowerment, they utilize their own resourcefulness. Clients are able use their own sense of self and determination to improve their lives (Howe, 2009). Empowering clients is an important aspect to social justice, as when people rise out of oppression they are more able to adjust their situation, and for the generations that follow them. Empowerment is an important method that helps to break cycles of poverty and discrimination.

Ethical standard commitment to clients (1.01) and ethical standard self-determination (1.02) are essential standards for workers to keep to improve ongoing issues of low self-esteem and low internal feelings about body image. Ethical standard, Commitment to clients, states “Social workers’ primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of the clients. In general, clients’ interests are primary” (National Association of Social Workers, pg. 1, 2008). Client-centered practice is an attitude that is taken on by staff and interns when working with clients that is non-directive. A non-directive attitude embraces the clients’ autonomy and believes in the clients’ right to self-determination, while also protecting the clients’ sense of self (Kemp, 2005). A client-centered perspective is congruent with the Code of Ethics in that it puts the client first, and that the client is the worker’s number one priority. What a client-centered perspective in practice may with women and girls, in relation to body image, would be engaging with the client about their negative feelings toward the body. While engaging with the client, the worker may listen to things that the client has done to improve their self-image, and would have overall respect for the clients’ beliefs.

The last Code of Ethic’s principle that applies to the mission of workers to combat the objectification of women is principle 6.04, Social and Political Action. This is part of the section titled Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society. Sexism is a system that entangles the objectification of women, and subsequently, the idealization of some bodies, and

the abhorrence of others. It is a social worker's duty to do what they can to end the sexual objectification of women. Part C says: "Social Workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity in the United States and globally" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017) which can be done through the embracement of intersectionality of women, and through applications of programs like The Body Positive. Part D of 6.04 says

"Social Workers should act to prevent and elimination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, or mental or physical ability" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

This is, in essence, what is asked of intersectional feminism. The word exploitation is descriptive of what occurs when women are subjected to rampant sexualization. Discrimination occurs when there is idealization placed on thin White bodies, but other bodies are not given the same value. Social Workers have a responsibility to question what an "ideal" body looks like, in the face of the public. Social workers must embrace intersectional feminism when they are working with their clients.

### **Conclusion**

Feminism is the ideation that women deserve to be given the same opportunities and choices, and be free of oppression and exploitation. Feminist theorists have worked hard throughout the past 100 years to define what being a feminist means, and to work towards a common goal for women. Feminism is an important part of the history that compiles what it means to be a citizen in the United States of America. The history of feminism in the United States has been a path

carved by suffragettes, and the radical second wave. The work of women in the past has brought us to the modern Third wave of feminism. Third wave feminism and modern feminism made intersectionality a priority in their goals. It was made an understanding that women cannot advance without the inclusion of all women. Modern feminism also has put a spotlight on the importance of body-positivity and sex-positivity for all women.

Misogyny, or hatred of women, is one of the things that caused the formation of feminist movements. Misogyny is especially present in the media, which has been a determinant of women's worth in society. Women are regularly viewed as sex objects, or undesirable if they do not fit a conventional standard of beauty. In film, it has been said that women are only valuable if they provocative to the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1989). Combined with the objectification of women permeated in American society, young girls and women fall into a trap of their own self-objectification. This means that some women have internalized their own misogyny.

Internalized misogyny is problematic, for women view themselves through the eyes of males. The large consumption of pornography in the United States has also contributed to a "pop-porn" culture that tells women how to be "sexy" or "appealing." However, ideal bodies are typically thin, white, and without any disabilities. This is where the application of intersectionality becomes important, once again. The system that oppresses women, oppresses minority women again, as it tells them that their bodies are unappealing to male viewers, the male opinion that many young women value. It is fortunate that Black and Latina culture values bodies outside of the thin ideal. They value women of fuller-figures and do not tend to internalize images of thin White models the way that White women and girls do.

In response to the oppressive idealization of thin White bodies, and objectification of women, there has been a movement called the Body Positivity movement. The Body Positivity movement

encompasses feminist theory by supporting and empowering women's bodies. A large part of what makes the Body Positivity movement feminist is that it focuses on intersectional oppression of women, and expends a lot of energy in making sure that women who face intersectional oppression are included in the largely online movement. Body Positivity is implemented in real life in several ways. One way is the "The Body Positive" model which focuses on five components health, self-care, self-love, owning your unique beauty, and building community.

It is important that a social worker compiles all of this information when working with women and girl clients. Understanding feminist theory and ideology helps a worker to understand the journey that women have taken to gain a presence in the public sphere. Valuing and understanding the history of feminism helps a social worker to see the progress that women have made in gaining opportunities and equal rights, but also helps a worker to gauge how much further feminists need to go. Since social workers are committed to social justice, it makes sense that social workers understand women's issues, so that they can help to reduce any oppression that women face. In this case, it is the idealization of thin and White bodies, and to end objectification of women.

It is also important that workers embrace feminism and educate themselves on women's issues because it is part of the Social Worker's Code of Ethics. Social workers are called to act on social justice issues. The sexualization, objectification, and misogynistic attitudes that women face are indeed a social justice issue. Another important thing that the Code of Ethics guides social workers to do is to educate their clients and to give them their right to self-determination. Social workers can educate their clients on feminism, and perhaps this can help empower their clients to own their unique body, like the Body Positive Model tells them to do.

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