

Analysis of the links between feminist thought, political activism, and theological discourse in the struggle for social justice: The way forward

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Abstract

The fight for body positivity is an ongoing struggle against unattainable beauty standards and social pressure. It entails questioning accepted norms, celebrating variety, and advocating for acceptance of all physical characteristics. It is necessary to demolish false beliefs and promote inclusivity, mental health, and self-acceptance in order to cultivate a culture of self-love and empowerment. This article therefore explores the relationships that exist between the pursuit of body positivism and feminist theory, political activity, and theological discourse. In order to oppose restrictive body norms and advance body acceptance and empowerment, it explores the intersections between feminist theories, political activism, and theological concepts. This analysis seeks to offer light on the ways in which these three characteristics contribute to the body positivist movement and its implications for global gender equality by examining historical developments, current problems, and prospective paths for change. This article utilised the secondary, feminist and liberation theologies analysis as methodology. The article has six proposals to individuals, communities, institutions, and society as a transformative strategy.

Keywords

feminist theology; politics; social justice; liberation; body freedom

Introduction

Body positivity questions social norms and expectations about women's bodies, which makes it an important component of feminist discourse.

Women's bodies have historically been policed, condemned, and objectified in covert and overt ways (Griffin et al 2022). This objectification frequently commodifies women's bodies, upholds patriarchal power systems, and place. Political activism motivated by feminist theology and principles is critical in effecting revolutionary social change. In this approach, feminist theology and political activism complement each other in order to combat inequalities and advance social justices as regards an undue focus on looks and adherence to limited beauty standards (Hussen 2021).

The goal of body positivity is to upend these harmful cultural stereotypes and encourage tolerance, respect for all body types, and self-acceptance. It emphasises how vital it is to accept a variety of bodies, question conventional notions of beauty, and acknowledge that one's value should not be derived exclusively from one's outward look (Griffin et al 2022). In feminist theology, body positivity also touches on problems of gender, race, and class as well as other social justice concerns. It recognises that based on overlapping identities, different bodies experience different kinds of marginalisation and discrimination. Women from marginalised communities, women of colour, transgender women, and women with disabilities, for instance, frequently experience extra layers of exclusion and prejudice related to body image (United Nations Women. 2020).

Feminist theology arose in opposition to patriarchal control within religious traditions. It strives to recover women's experiences, voices, and contributions to theological discourse while simultaneously fighting larger systems of gender-based oppression (Resane 2021). Gender oppression, according to feminist theology, connects with other forms of oppression, such as race, class, sexuality, and religion. This interconnectedness informs feminist activism by recognising that women's liberation is inextricably linked to the liberation of all marginalised and oppressed groups. Feminists use an intersectional approach to deconstruct hierarchies, expose systemic inequities, and engage in political activity that extends beyond limited identity-based battles (United Nations Women. 2020).

As it attempts to confront and reform oppressive structures within religious contexts, feminist theology shares goals with feminist and liberation movements. Feminist theologians identify and challenge patriarchal prejudices while prioritising the experiences and agency of

marginalised individuals by critically evaluating standard readings of religious texts and beliefs. Within feminist theology, the goal of liberation links with broader attempts to oppose oppressive power systems and uphold human dignity (Zwissler 2012). Political activism motivated by feminist philosophy and principles is critical in effecting revolutionary social change. As it strives to address and correct social inequities, political participation is organically aligned with the ethical ideals of feminist theology. Individuals and communities are mobilised through political activism to challenge dominant power structures, push for policy changes, and demolish repressive systems. In this approach, feminist theology and political activism complement each other in order to combat inequalities and advance social justice (Kasirzadeh 2022).

With its emphasis on structural oppression and the liberation of the marginalised, liberation theology shares many conceptual connections with feminist theology. Both movements seek to empower marginalised people, to confront oppressive structures, and to advance social justice. Feminist thought and theological frameworks inform one another, since engagement with feminist ideas increases the liberatory potential of theological discourse and activism. Similarly, theological understanding help to deepen and transform feminist activity (Biana 2020). The linkages between feminist theology, political activism, and theological discourse have substantial social justice implications. Feminist theology provides frameworks for analysing repressive religious teachings and practises. It promotes inclusive societies that resist gender-based discrimination by affirming the dignity and agency of all individuals (Judge 2020).

Political activism based on feminist ideology elevates marginalised voices, affects legislative reforms, and fosters a more equal society. They work together to mobilise transformative action for social justice (Sweetman 2013). Fighting for social justice is tough because it necessitates an examination of complicated power relations at work within political activism and religious institutions. Furthermore, while feminist theology, political activism, and theological discourse have all garnered significant attention, there is a paucity of comprehensive scholarship that investigates the deep links between these fields. Existing scholarship focuses on one component while ignoring the broader linkages and their implications for body positivity. Therefore, in the pursuit of bodily positivism, this analysis

explores the connections between feminist theology, political activism, and theological discourse.

Methodology

This article utilized secondary, feminist and liberation theologies analysis as methodology.

Secondary data analysis

Secondary data analysis is defined as the utilization of pre-existing data by researchers who were not engaged in the initial data collection. Data can be examined to confirm or expand on previously noted findings or to respond to fresh research concerns that were not covered in the data's initial published analyses (Greenhoot & Dowsett 2012).

There are a variety of factors that could influence a researcher's decision to do secondary analyses on an existing data set as opposed to creating a brand-new study to gather fresh data. The most straightforward explanation is that the data have already been gathered, allowing the researcher to focus their time and energy on other phases of the scientific method. The other advantage is that many shared data sets, especially those for public access, feature very large samples, measurements of numerous characteristics, and longitudinal designs that allow researchers to answer issues that they might not have had the time or resources to explore otherwise (Greenhoot & Dowsett 2012).

Secondary data analysis has some limitations although it has many benefits, because the researcher may find that not all researchers or research questions are appropriate for it. Since the data have already been gathered, the researcher had no say in who was sampled, what was measured, or how it was measured. Therefore, the researcher must determine whether this strategy offers a strong match to an investigator's study questions (Greenhoot & Dowsett 2012).

To guarantee a broad and informed approach, I used secondary sources in this article. These sources include critical perspectives and scholarly studies that help to deepen one's understanding of the subject. I was able to obtain a wide range of facts, theories, and perspectives from experts in the

subject, which served to deepen the analysis and present a well-rounded perspective. Furthermore, secondary sources provided me with a historical context, empirical evidence, and theoretical frameworks that enriched this article and supported the claims made in light of the complex and interconnected nature of these disciplines.

Feminist analysis

This article also adopted a feminist analysis as a methodology. The goal of feminist analysis is to reform society and the church (Hirschmann 2017). It suggests accepting the patriarchal nature of society as well as a desire to change it. It supports the creation of fresh approaches to ministry that reflect how women live out their religion and their daily experiences in society (2017). It is amongst the postcolonial theories that provide black people with insights into realities that are not fully reflected in Western feminist discourses (Mshweshwe 2020).

This theory emphasizes the societal norms that consent to the utilization of violence and aggressiveness by men and the gender norms that define how women and men should act in their relations (Thobejane & Luthada 2019). In contrast to violence against women, feminists admit that women can have violent behaviours in their relationships with men. However, they do not consider this issue a severe societal challenge and therefore it does not deserve similar levels of attention as the issue of violence against women (2019).

Liberation theology analysis

Liberation theology, which promotes the liberation of the downtrodden in all forms, sprang from the fight for social justice in Latin American contexts. Its concentration is on underprivileged groups, encompassing not only racial and economic minorities but also gender based (Mackin 2015). Liberation theology acknowledges that dehumanisation and discrimination, particularly negative body image, frequently affect these communities. This theology highlights the ways in which repressive systems reinforce body negative and calls for dramatic transformation

by highlighting the interdependence of social, political, and spiritual emancipation (West 2010).

Liberation theologians work to free people from repressive regimes and stress the value of spiritual embodiment. They contend that oppressive systems have an effect on marginalised people's spiritual and emotional health in addition to their physical health (Kwok 2003). Liberation theologians understand that body positivism requires recognising how race, class, and other social markers contribute to body-based discrimination, and they do this by addressing the intersectionality of oppression (Griffin et al 2022).

Intersectionality as a feminist concept and political activism

In 1989, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality,” which refers to the interconnectedness of many social identities and experiences as well as how these intersections influence how privilege and oppression are experienced by an individual. Fundamentally, intersectionality recognises that rather than experiencing social phenomena and prejudice solely as a result of one aspect of their identity, such as their race or gender, people experience them as a result of the complex interconnections between a variety of parts of their identities.

Although they are not the only ones, these criteria also include race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, and religion. The concept of intersectionality challenges traditional studies of social inequality that usually examine individual aspects of identity in isolation while neglecting to account for the numerous and overlapping systems of power that influence a person's experiences. Instead, it emphasises the ways in which various oppressions and advantages overlap, link, and compound one another to produce particular experiences for people who identify as several marginalised identities (Hill 2015).

Intersectionality is a theoretical paradigm that acknowledges the dynamic interaction between various social identities and experiences of privilege and oppression. By examining how various forms of prejudice link to one another and interact, it challenges accepted theories of social inequality. By identifying and understanding these intersections, intersectionality helps to advance a more complex understanding of social injustice and serves

as a basis for creating more inclusive and effective social justice measures (Cho et al 2013).

The emphasis on inclusive advocacy is one of the main contributions of intersectionality to feminist theory. Intersectionality urges feminists and activists to raise the voices of marginalised groups who have historically been excluded from mainstream feminist movements by recognising the multiplicity of experiences. This inclusive strategy makes sure that all people's worries and difficulties are considered (Zimmerman 2017).

Body positivism and feminist perspectives

Feminist views on body image and body autonomy emphasise how societal expectations and norms impact women's experiences and perceptions of their bodies. These beliefs criticise the objectification and sexualization of women's bodies and advocate for women's freedom to make decisions about their own bodies. As a result, in the objectification theory, women are frequently considered as objects to be gazed at and assessed based on their physical appearance. This results in a poor body image and has a negative impact on women's self-esteem and overall well-being. Beyond their outward looks, feminists believe, women should be respected for their accomplishments and distinctive talents.

Political activity and the pursuit of policy reform have been greatly influenced by intersectionality. Activists can now develop more potent plans for social change because they are better equipped to comprehend the intricate ways that various forms of prejudice interact. For instance, intersectional studies have helped shape new legislation on topics like violence against women, job discrimination, and reproductive rights (United Nations Women. 2020).

According to Naomi Wolf's beauty myth theory (1995), women's obsession with physical attractiveness and perfection is a social construct meant to distract them and limit their influence in other areas. Feminists contend that a woman's knowledge, abilities, and skills should define and judge her rather than her appearance. According to intersectional feminism, women's experiences with race, class, sexual orientation, and disability all intersect and influence how they perceive their bodies and their sense of

autonomy. Certain groups of women may suffer distinct experiences with body image and bodily autonomy as a result of several types of oppression that compound and further marginalise them. Feminists emphasise how crucial it is to take these intersectional aspects into account when having conversations about body image.

Feminists value bodily autonomy, or the ability of individuals to make decisions about their own bodies without interference or compulsion from others. This includes the freedom to pick one's own attire, hairdo, and makeup, to engage in consenting sexual activities, and to make reproductive health decisions. Women, according to feminists, should have complete sovereignty over their bodies and should not be subjected to cultural pressures or expectations. In addition, body positivity is a feminist movement that aims to upend conventional notions of beauty and encourage respect for all body shapes as well as self-acceptance. It promotes honouring the intrinsic value and beauty in every person, regardless of size, shape, or appearance, and embracing various bodies. The goal of body positivity is to combat the false ideals and depressing messages that are frequently spread by the media and society at large (Griffin et al 2022).

Body positivism and political activism

Political activism and body positivity are two prominent social movements that attempt to question and overcome societal norms and injustices connected to politics and body image. The term “political activism” describes the deliberate and planned actions taken by people or organisations to encourage changes in the political, social, or economic systems (Neil 2002). In order to address political issues and promote diverse causes, it entails actions like protesting, lobbying, campaigning, and raising awareness. A wide range of issues, including social justice, environmental preservation, and economic equality, can be the focus of political activity (Reif 2000).

In contrast, the goal of the body positivity movement is to question conventional notions of beauty and encourage acceptance and love for people of various shapes, sizes, and looks. It encourages people to accept and appreciate their bodies and aims to refute the assumption that there is a single ideal body type. Advocates of body positivity contend that regardless

of looks or cultural standards, everyone has the right to feel confident and at ease in their own skin (Griffin et al 2022).

Body positivity and political activism share the same objectives of opposing and overthrowing repressive structures. Both of them seek to subvert social mores that support prejudice, inequality, and unfavourable body images. Advocates of body positivity as a social and political position want to subvert the prevailing ideas of beauty that marginalise and exclude people on the basis of their look, size, or shape of body (Griffin et al 2022).

By supporting laws and policies that uphold and advance diversity, inclusivity, and body acceptance, political action may be extremely effective in promoting body positivity. Activists may advocate for inclusive healthcare and education systems, control media portrayal and advertising tactics, or combat appearance-based discrimination (OECD 2012). Additionally, by encouraging people to believe in their own value and empowerment, the body positivity movement can also support political activism. People are more inclined to take up advocacy and activism, confront oppressive structures, and fight for social justice when they feel good about their bodies (Griffin et al 2022).

Body positivism and theological discourse

The convergence of theological discourse and body positivism provides a chance to critically evaluate and criticise negative cultural views towards bodies in religious and spiritual contexts, as well as promote a more inclusive, compassionate, and welcoming understanding of the body (Heinrich et al 2021). There are therefore several ways that theological discourse can interact with body positivity when the two ideas above intersect.

Different religious and spiritual viewpoints on the body can be explored in theological debate. This may involve looking at religious writings, doctrines, and customs that shed light on how other religions see the human body and its importance. A more positive and comprehensive understanding of the body may be promoted by such investigation, which may contradict negative body myths in religious contexts (Abdulla 2018).

Body positivism opposes negative practises such as body shaming, objectification, and prejudice. Theological discourse can address these

concerns from a religious standpoint while advocating for social justice and compassion for all bodies. It has the potential to draw attention to religious teachings that emphasise the intrinsic worth and holiness of all people, regardless of their outward appearance (Lipowska et al 2019).

Theological discourse can investigate the relationship between body positivism and other social justice initiatives. It can, for example, investigate how body shaming links with other types of oppression such as racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia. This study can emphasise the significance of tackling multiple forms of discrimination and striving for greater inclusivity and equality for all (Ndzwayiba 2017).

Some theological viewpoints emphasise the divine's embodiment or the body as a sacred vehicle. In such instances, theological discourse can investigate how body positivism corresponds to the recognition of the divine within each human body. This investigation may result in the acceptance of various body shapes as well as the rejection of body-based hierarchies or judgement (Cross 2017).

Feminist and liberation theologies pathways to body positivism

Feminist and liberation theologies provide distinctive viewpoints that might advance body positivity, question repressive social standards, and encourage personal empowerment. These theologies are diverse in their backgrounds and areas of emphasis, but they are all concerned with achieving social justice, equality, and the liberation of oppressed people. Body positivism can be attained through feminist and liberation theologies' critiques and examinations of the patriarchal systems that uphold body negativity (Grey 1999).

Despite coming from distinct backgrounds, feminist and liberation theologies interact when they criticise systems of oppression, such as those that support objectification and body shaming. By opposing social conventions that determine women's value according to their adherence to particular physical standards, they promote acceptance of a range of body shapes, sizes, and looks. These theologies challenge the idea that a person's

value is primarily derived from their looks by supporting body positivity, which celebrates the intrinsic worth of every person (Colker 1989).

Feminist and liberation theologies advocate for a comprehensive understanding of the body, recognising that persons' physical, emotional, and spiritual components are inextricably linked. These theologies counter conventional narratives that objectify and exaggerate physical appearance, encouraging people to embrace their bodies as spaces of self-expression and empowerment (Lewis 2010). These theologies offer as means to reclaiming agency over one's own body and rejecting society's oppressive standards through theological reinterpretation, community participation, and social activism.

Recommendations

A multidimensional strategy including individuals, communities, institutions, and society at large is necessary for transformative change in challenging body standards. This article therefore proposes the following to implement this change.

Education and public awareness

Encouragement of education and awareness programmes that challenge established societal conventions around body standards. This should include training critical media literacy skills to equip individuals to question and oppose damaging ideas about body image perpetuated by the media and popular culture. Education should also include lectures about the negative impacts of body positivism and the need to appreciate body variety.

Body positivism promotion

Promote body positivity in all aspects of life, including media, advertising, fashion, and entertainment, to encourage and celebrate body variety. This should include showcasing people of various body shapes, ages, races, and abilities in ads, films, TV shows, and fashion campaigns. It would help to fight the restrictive and oppressive idealised body norms by showing genuine and diverse bodies.

Promotion of legislation on body positivism

Propose laws to protect people from body shaming and discrimination. This involves advocating for legislation prohibiting weight discrimination in employment, healthcare, education, and other areas. Legislative actions can also aid in the development of inclusive and varied media and commercial representation.

Shift in culture

Encourage societal shifts that question body objectification and sexualization. This can be accomplished by initiatives that encourage a positive body image, self-acceptance, and self-love. Promoting open dialogue on body image and mental health in schools, businesses, and communities can help to de-stigmatize and dismantle harmful stereotypes.

Acceptance of intersectionality

This should involve understanding the connections between various forms of privilege and oppression, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, and body norms. Adopting an intersectional perspective guarantees that initiatives to question body norms are inclusive and consider the needs and experiences of all people, especially those who are members of marginalised communities.

Encourage positive body movements

Encouragement and magnifying groups, organisations, and initiatives that are body-positive and aim to question conventional body norms. This can entail taking part in demonstrations, raising awareness via social media, and making donations to groups that support diversity and body acceptance.

Confrontation of internalised body negativity

This shall involve urging people to overcome the internalised body-shaming they've experienced and cultivate a more positive relationship with their own bodies. This can be achieved by engaging in self-reflection, cultivating self-compassion, and contacting support organisations or mental health specialists for assistance.

Conclusion

This article concludes that in the fight against body positivity, there are clear and significant connections between feminist theory, political action, and religious discourse. The repressive societal standards that support body positivism have been challenged and dismantled in large part because of feminism. Recognising that body positivism is a product of the patriarchal and capitalist structures that support gender inequality, feminists have battled for equality and inclusivity through political activism.

Since theological discourse offers a moral and spiritual foundation for analysing repressive structures, it has also played a significant role in the fight against body positivism. Traditional theological doctrines that support body positivity have been criticised by feminist theologians, who have drawn attention to how these beliefs are fundamentally discriminatory and abusive to women and other marginalised groups. They have worked to advance a more empowered and inclusive view of spirituality and the body through their scholarship.

The ways that body positivism interacts with various types of oppression, including those based on sexual orientation, racism, and class, have been critically stained in feminist theory. Recognising that diverse bodies experience privilege and oppression to differing degrees, intersectional feminism seeks to address the intersecting power structures that fuel this inequity. Feminists have been able to counter the ubiquitous effect of body positivism with more inclusive and comprehensive solutions by comprehending the intersections between identity and oppression.

The fight against body positivity is a component of the larger feminist movement, which aims to topple repressive structures and establish a more equal and just society. Feminists are questioning not just the objectification and commodification of bodies but also the fundamental underpinnings of capitalist and patriarchal systems. This is a fight for systemic, cultural, and political change as well as personal growth.

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