

# **A Phenomenological Exploration Of Gendered Bodies As Lived Realities With Special Reference To Iris Marion Young**

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## **Abstract**

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This paper investigates the construction of the gendered body through a phenomenological framework, with special reference to Iris Marion Young's feminist philosophy. The body is not a neutral, biological entity but a dynamic site where culture, power, and identity intersect. Phenomenology, particularly the insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides the groundwork for understanding the body as lived and intentional, while Young extends this approach by emphasizing the body's embeddedness in social norms, institutions, and practices. The concept of the "social body" illustrates how gendered identities are constructed, regulated, and contested in everyday life.

Young's analysis of the Five Faces of Oppression exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence further demonstrates how systemic forces inscribe themselves onto bodies, shaping both the possibilities and constraints of gendered existence. These mechanisms of oppression highlight the gendered body as a site of vulnerability but also of resistance, where agency and identity are continually negotiated.

This study underscores that gender is neither fixed nor biologically determined; rather, it emerges through embodied practices, gestures, and interactions within broader social contexts. By bringing phenomenology into dialogue with feminist theory, the paper highlights the ongoing relevance of Young's work in addressing issues of justice, inclusivity, and diversity. It argues that critically examining the construction of the gendered body is essential for advancing intersectional approaches that recognize the complexity of lived experience. In doing so, it affirms that understanding embodiment is not only an academic pursuit but also a necessary step toward fostering equity and social transformation.

**Keywords :** Gendered Body, Phenomenology, Embodiment, Iris Marion Young, Social Body, Oppression, Intersectionality

## INTRODUCTION

The human body has long been a central theme in philosophy, anthropology, and feminist thought. Far from being a static biological entity, the body functions as a living site where personal identity, cultural meaning, and political power intersect. In contemporary debates on gender, the concept of the gendered body holds particular significance. To speak of the gendered body is to recognize that gender does not merely arise from biological difference but is actively constructed through social expectations, symbolic norms, and institutional practices. This construction inscribes itself upon the lived body, shaping how individuals move, act, perceive themselves, and are perceived by others.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical method, offers a fruitful avenue for examining this dynamic interplay between embodiment and social construction. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a pivotal figure in phenomenology, rejected Cartesian dualism and argued that the body is not a mere object but the very ground of perception and intentionality. His concept of the lived body (*le corps vécu*) emphasizes that human subjectivity is always embodied—that we do not merely “have” bodies but are bodies in our being-in-the-world. Yet, while Merleau-Ponty’s insights laid the foundation for understanding embodiment, his analysis often overlooked how social categories like gender shape bodily existence.

Feminist phenomenologists, particularly Iris Marion Young, extend this discourse by interrogating how power, culture, and gender norms contour lived bodily experience. Young’s work foregrounds the idea that the body is never neutral but is situated within a social matrix that constrains and enables possibilities of action. Her famous essay *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980) demonstrates how women’s bodily comportment often reflects internalized social restrictions, producing hesitant, inhibited movements. Moreover, Young’s influential framework of the *Five Faces of Oppression* (1990) reveals how systemic forms of domination exploit, marginalize, and regulate gendered bodies.

As this paper unfolds, it will first lay out the phenomenological foundations of embodiment, tracing how the lived body functions as the site of perception, intention, and experience. It will then turn to the ways in which gender norms and expectations are inscribed upon this body, showing how embodiment becomes a cultural construct that mediates identity, power, and social participation. Central to this exploration is the recognition that the gendered body is not merely a passive reflection of biological difference but an active field where meanings are produced, contested, and negotiated.

Building on these insights, the paper will critically engage with Iris Marion Young’s influential contributions to feminist phenomenology, particularly her concept of the social body and her framework of the *Five Faces of Oppression*. These theoretical tools illuminate the structural mechanisms through which institutions and cultural norms both constrain and define embodied existence. At

the same time, they invite us to consider the spaces where resistance, agency, and transformation emerge within and against these structures. By situating the gendered body at the intersection of lived experience and systemic power, this study aims to highlight not only how gender is constructed but also how such constructions may be reimagined in the pursuit of inclusivity, justice, and equality.

## **THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BODY : RECONCEPTUALIZING EMBODIMENT**

Phenomenology, a philosophical movement founded by Edmund Husserl and later transformed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, challenges the reduction of the body to a mere biological or mechanical entity. Instead, it conceives the body as the primary medium of perception, intentionality, and existence. Human beings do not inhabit the body as though it were an external container; rather, existence itself is mediated through the lived body. As Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body”—a statement that dismantles the dualistic separation between mind and body and reveals that consciousness is always embodied.<sup>1</sup> A central contribution of phenomenology is its distinction between the objective body (Körper) and the lived body (Leib).<sup>2</sup> The objective body is studied by science, dissected into organs, tissues, and functions that can be observed and measured. Yet this approach misses the fundamental fact that the body is not only an object in the world but also a subject that perceives, acts, and interprets meaning. The lived body, by contrast, is the center of orientation, the anchor of experience, and the agent of intentional acts. Simple gestures such as walking, reaching, or gazing are not reducible to physiological processes; they are intentional, meaning-bearing engagements with the world.<sup>3</sup> This recognition elevates embodiment from being a passive container of the self to being the very condition through which selfhood and world are intertwined.

When this phenomenological lens is turned toward the question of gender, embodiment takes on new significance. **\*\*The body is not a neutral entity; it is always inscribed, regulated, and disciplined through cultural and social codes.\*\***<sup>4</sup> Gender norms shape how individuals carry themselves, how they occupy space, and how they experience their bodily presence. Iris Marion Young, in her influential essay “Throwing Like a Girl”, argues that women’s bodily comportment is constrained by subtle but pervasive cultural expectations, producing a style of movement that reflects limitation and hesitation.<sup>5</sup> This analysis reveals how gender is enacted and lived through the body, making the body both a site of personal experience and a canvas of social inscription. Thus, phenomenology provides a powerful framework for reconceptualizing embodiment. By distinguishing the lived body from the objective body, it uncovers the dynamic interplay between subjectivity and social structure. When extended into feminist thought, it demonstrates how the gendered body is simultaneously biological, experiential, and cultural. It is at once the ground of perception, the bearer of social meaning, and the arena where power relations are negotiated and contested. In this way, the gendered body emerges as a profound philosophical, social, and ethical category,

central to understanding human existence in its fullest complexity.

## **THE GENDERED BODY: LIVED EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCT**

Although embodiment is universal and shared by all human beings, its meanings are never neutral or uniform; rather, they are socially differentiated and historically conditioned. Gender plays a decisive role in structuring how bodies are perceived, disciplined, and valued within particular cultural contexts. From the earliest stages of childhood, boys and girls are encouraged to inhabit their bodies differently. Boys are often socialized into ideals of expansiveness, strength, and risk-taking, while girls are conditioned toward modesty, restraint, and delicacy.<sup>6</sup> These differences are not confined to symbolic imagery or abstract expectations; they manifest tangibly in posture, movement, and comportment, shaping how individuals navigate the physical and social worlds.

The gendered body therefore emerges as a fusion of lived experience and cultural construction. Embodiment is not simply “natural” but mediated by cultural scripts that dictate appropriate gestures, behaviors, and emotional expressions. Here, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity becomes crucial. Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity or internal essence; instead, it is a series of repeated acts, bodily gestures, and discursive practices through which masculinity and femininity are materialized.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the body is not only lived but also performed, becoming a stage upon which norms are enacted and reiterated, thereby producing the illusion of natural difference between the sexes.

This insight resonates with Iris Marion Young’s phenomenological analysis of feminine bodily comportment. Young observes that women often move with hesitation, closed gestures, and a sense of inhibited freedom not due to biological determinism, but because social norms of femininity are inscribed onto bodily style itself.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the body becomes a palimpsest where social meanings are layered onto lived experience, gradually naturalizing cultural expectations. In this way, the gendered body is both deeply personal and profoundly social. It is personal in that it shapes an individual’s immediate sense of self, agency, and capacity for action; it is social in that recognition or the denial of recognition depends upon how bodies conform to, or resist, normative expectations. This duality situates the body at the heart of contemporary debates about freedom, justice, and identity. To understand the gendered body phenomenologically, then, is to recognize it as both a site of self-expression and an arena of social regulation, where lived subjectivity and cultural power continually intersect.

## **IRIS MARION YOUNG AND THE SOCIAL BODY**

Iris Marion Young significantly expands phenomenological accounts of embodiment by foregrounding the ways in which gender, culture, and power shape bodily possibilities. Drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s insights into the lived body, Young emphasizes that embodied experience cannot be understood apart from the sociocultural frameworks in which it unfolds. Her work challenges

phenomenology to move beyond descriptions of perception and intentionality in isolation, urging instead an analysis of how embodiment is structured by systemic norms of gender and oppression. In her influential essay *Throwing Like a Girl*, Young provides a vivid phenomenological example: the ways in which women often display constrained bodily intentionality.<sup>9</sup> Whereas men may throw a ball with the full extension of the body shoulders, arms, and torso coordinating in expansive motion women's throws frequently appear truncated, hesitant, and self-limiting. Importantly, Young insists this is not the result of biological inferiority or natural weakness. Rather, it reflects the internalization of cultural expectations that discourage women from fully exerting bodily power, training them into comportments of modesty, fragility, and inhibition. Such habitual patterns of movement demonstrate how social meanings become sedimented in bodily style, shaping the horizon of possibilities available to women.

Young's broader concept of the "social body" deepens this analysis. For Young, the body is never an isolated organism or a purely individual phenomenon; it is a nexus of personal experience and cultural inscription.<sup>10</sup> The lived body is always situated within structures of institutions, traditions, and ideologies that establish what is permissible, desirable, or taboo. Bodily practices from walking in public spaces to participating in rituals are inseparable from the cultural codes and power relations that govern them. Thus, to study embodiment phenomenologically without attending to social structures risks reducing the body to an abstract subjectivity and erasing the material dynamics of privilege and oppression that contour lived experience. Her work therefore reframes phenomenology through a feminist lens, insisting that the gendered body must be recognized not only as a medium of subjectivity but also as a site of political contestation.<sup>11</sup> By emphasizing how bodily comportments reproduce or resist systemic oppression, Young bridges phenomenology with feminist social theory, demonstrating that embodiment is never politically neutral. Her contributions invite philosophy to see the body as a terrain of struggle, where freedom, justice, and identity are contested and renegotiated.

### **THE FIVE FACES OF OPPRESSION AND THE GENDERED BODY**

Iris Marion Young's framework of the *Five Faces of Oppression* provides a vital lens for analyzing how systemic inequalities inscribe themselves on the gendered body. These "faces" are not abstract categories but lived realities that shape embodiment, perception, and social recognition.

**Exploitation:** Women's labor, both domestic and professional, has long been appropriated and undervalued. In households, unpaid care work sustains families and economies yet receives no recognition as "productive labor." In workplaces, women continue to experience wage gaps, occupational segregation, and the "double burden" of balancing paid employment with domestic responsibility. The female body thus becomes a site of extraction where time, care, and energy are consumed disproportionately.<sup>10</sup>

**Marginalization:** Certain gendered bodies particularly those at the intersection of caste, race, class, or disability are excluded from full participation in social, economic, and political life. This exclusion often results in invisibility, dependency, and heightened vulnerability. Women from marginalized groups face compounded barriers: their voices are muted, their access to resources restricted, and their bodily presence rendered suspect or subordinate in public spaces.<sup>11</sup>

**Powerlessness:** Gendered bodies frequently experience systemic restrictions on autonomy, agency, and authority. Women's decision-making powers are curtailed in families, institutions, and politics, reinforcing cycles of dependency. Powerlessness manifests in reproductive control, limited access to education, and denial of bodily autonomy. It is embodied in daily practices that diminish women's capacity to act as full subjects of freedom.<sup>12</sup>

**Cultural Imperialism:** Cultural narratives reinforce narrow ideals of femininity and masculinity, silencing diverse forms of gendered embodiment. Women are expected to conform to roles of modesty, sacrifice, or nurturing, while non-conforming identities queer, trans, or non-binary are marginalized. The imposition of such norms not only disciplines individual bodies but also colonizes the collective imagination, creating hierarchies of embodiment where some expressions are legitimized while others are stigmatized.<sup>13</sup>

**Violence:** The most explicit form of oppression is violence, enacted both interpersonally and structurally. Gendered bodies are subject to harassment, assault, domestic abuse, and femicide. Beyond these acts, institutional frameworks, laws, customs, and traditions also perpetuate systemic violence by normalizing vulnerability and restricting women's movements. Violence functions not only to harm but also to discipline, reminding women of their precarious bodily autonomy.<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, these five dimensions reveal that the gendered body is never neutral. It is constituted, disciplined, and constrained by broader structures of domination. Young's framework insists that embodiment must be read simultaneously as a phenomenological reality and a political terrain, where oppression and resistance continuously unfold.

## **INTERSECTIONALITY, JUSTICE, AND THE GENDERED BODY**

The construction of the gendered body cannot be understood in isolation from the multiple axes of identity and power that intersect in lived experience. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality demonstrates that systems of oppression do not act independently but are interlocking, producing unique configurations of privilege and subjugation.<sup>15</sup> A Dalit woman in rural India, for instance, does not simply experience "gender discrimination" in a generic sense. Her body is inscribed simultaneously by caste hierarchies, economic marginalization, and patriarchal norms. This interweaving of oppressions creates a distinct form of embodiment, different from that of an upper-caste, middle-class woman in an urban setting.<sup>16</sup> Such an intersectional approach enriches phenomenology by

anchoring the lived body within concrete social contexts. The phenomenological emphasis on perception, intentionality, and lived experience must therefore be expanded to account for how social hierarchies structure bodily possibilities. By situating embodied subjectivity within caste, class, race, and sexuality, intersectionality prevents the abstraction of the body into a universal category, reminding us that every body is historically and socially marked.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, intersectionality does not only reveal oppression; it also highlights spaces for resistance and transformation. Recognizing how oppression operates across interwoven dimensions allows individuals and communities to resist imposed meanings and reclaim embodied agency. Movements of Dalit feminism, queer activism, and trans rights in India exemplify how marginalized groups resist erasure, transforming embodied identities into sites of political power and cultural redefinition.<sup>18</sup>

In contemporary contexts, debates around gender fluidity, trans identities, and non-binary embodiment further challenge rigid binaries of “male” and “female.” Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience rather than abstract categorization, offers a powerful vocabulary for interpreting these shifts. The fluidity of embodiment, the contestation of normative gender roles, and the recognition of diverse bodily identities all demand an expansion of both phenomenological and political frameworks.<sup>19</sup> Justice, in this light, extends beyond formal legal and institutional reforms. While legislative measures against gender-based discrimination remain essential, they are insufficient without a parallel transformation of cultural narratives and lived practices. True justice requires a re-imagining of embodiment one that affirms multiplicity, inclusivity, and dignity.<sup>20</sup> Intersectionality thus becomes not only an analytic tool but also a normative framework for envisioning a more just social order, where every body, in its difference, is recognized and respected.

## **EMBODIED RESISTANCE AND AGENCY: NEGOTIATING GENDERED NORMS**

While the gendered body is frequently shaped, constrained, and regulated by systemic structures of oppression, it is simultaneously a dynamic site of resistance, negotiation, and agency. Phenomenology provides a crucial framework for understanding this duality, emphasizing that individuals inhabit their bodies not as passive recipients of societal norms, but as active agents capable of producing meaning, asserting autonomy, and negotiating the social codes imposed upon them. The lived experiences of women and marginalized groups reveal that even in highly restrictive contexts, bodies are mobilized in ways that challenge, resist, and subvert dominant cultural and institutional expectations.

Embodied resistance manifests in diverse and context-specific ways. In rural India, for example, women may contest gendered labor hierarchies by asserting authority in agricultural or domestic work, demonstrating physical skill, endurance, and practical knowledge that challenge assumptions of passivity or fragility. In urban

contexts, resistance may take forms such as reclaiming public spaces, practicing non-normative dress, engaging in feminist protests, or participating in grassroots political organizing. These actions illustrate that the body is not merely vulnerable to domination; it is a strategic site for contestation, where norms can be questioned, cultural scripts can be rewritten, and identities can be actively negotiated. Resistance thus occurs at multiple scales, from subtle acts of self-expression and embodied decision-making to overt social and political activism, each contributing to the reconfiguration of gendered expectations.

Intersectionality further enriches this understanding by highlighting how intersecting identities such as caste, class, disability, or sexuality shape both the constraints placed upon bodies and the strategies for resistance. Women whose identities occupy multiple marginalized positions often face compounded oppression; yet these same intersections frequently inspire innovative and adaptive forms of embodied agency. Dalit women, for instance, have historically mobilized cultural practices, storytelling, and performative acts to challenge social exclusion, assert visibility, and transform the meanings inscribed upon their bodies. Such resistance is not always dramatic or performative; it frequently emerges in everyday practices, such as the organization of household labor, public mobility, caregiving, and community engagement, cumulatively producing subtle yet powerful forms of social transformation.

Recognizing embodied agency reframes the gendered body as simultaneously constrained and generative. While social norms shape the contours of possibility, they do not wholly determine lived experience. Individuals continuously negotiate the boundaries of these norms, creating spaces of autonomy, resilience, and dignity even within oppressive frameworks. By centering these forms of resistance, feminist phenomenology highlights the transformative potential of embodiment, demonstrating how the body can serve as a locus of creativity, empowerment, and political assertion.

Consequently, the study of gendered embodiment is incomplete without attention to the ways individuals resist, renegotiate, and reimagine their bodily possibilities. Embodied agency illuminates the dynamic interplay between oppression, identity, and social change, offering critical insights into pathways toward empowerment, inclusivity, and social justice. In understanding how bodies are both shaped by and respond to social structures, we gain a deeper appreciation for the role of lived experience in generating transformative social action and cultivating a more equitable and humane society.

## **CONCLUSION**

The exploration of the gendered body reveals embodiment as a profoundly complex and multidimensional phenomenon, situated at the intersection of biology, lived experience, cultural inscription, and systemic power. The body is neither a neutral canvas nor a mere biological entity; it is the site where social norms, expectations, and power relations converge, producing meanings that shape

both individual identity and collective life. Phenomenology provides a critical framework for this exploration, emphasizing the lived body as the foundation of subjectivity and intentionality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the lived body illuminates how perception, action, and consciousness are inseparable from our embodied existence, while Iris Marion Young's feminist phenomenology extends this understanding by revealing the social and political dimensions of embodiment. Her work demonstrates that the body is profoundly gendered, socially situated, and shaped by historical, cultural, and structural forces.

Young's framework of the social body, alongside her Five Faces of Oppression exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence highlights that gendered embodiment is simultaneously a site of constraint and a locus of resistance. These forms of oppression are not abstract theoretical categories; they are tangible realities inscribed upon bodies, producing both vulnerability and resilience. Yet, the body is never merely passive. Individuals negotiate, challenge, and redefine the norms imposed upon them, transforming their lived experience into acts of embodied agency. This duality of constraint and empowerment is central to understanding the dynamic interplay between oppression and resistance, revealing the body as a site where social structures are both reproduced and contested.

In contemporary society, where gender-based violence persists, intersectional inequalities are entrenched, and debates around gender identity and fluidity are increasingly visible, examining the gendered body acquires urgent social and ethical significance. The study of embodiment underscores that justice is not only realized through legal frameworks or institutional reforms; it is also enacted in the quotidian ways people inhabit, move through, and relate to the world with their bodies. Understanding how bodies are constructed, experienced, and negotiated illuminates the conditions necessary for inclusion, dignity, and social transformation.

Ultimately, engaging with gendered embodiment is both an intellectual and moral imperative. By centering the experiences of those historically marginalized, we gain critical insight into the mechanisms of oppression and the possibilities for liberation. The body, as the locus of both subjugation and agency, becomes a site through which social justice can be envisioned and enacted. To study the gendered body is, therefore, to affirm the profound ethical responsibility of acknowledging lived realities and creating a more equitable, humane, and inclusive society one in which embodiment is recognized not only as a personal experience but as a political and social reality that shapes and is shaped by collective human life.

## Endnotes

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  5. *Ibid.* 31–33.
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  7. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 140–43.
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  10. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 122–25.
  11. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 71–74, for a complementary perspective on how the body becomes a site of political subjugation.
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