

Publication: Cosmopolitan

Head: What my body means to *me*

Sell: Three women with three very different experiences open up about how the pandemic encouraged self-reflection on their path to finding body confidence.

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With the blessing of *another* lockdown, we are spending more time inside than ever before. In the era of Zoom quizzes and online video meetings, the image of yourself on the screen becomes another way to obsessively fixate and criticise each one of your features. That being said, there is no surprise that more than half of adults in the UK felt "worse" about their body image during the lockdown period, according to a survey of 8,000 people conducted by the *UK parliament's Women and Equalities Committee*.

However, this self-scrutiny is not an unfamiliar concept. Body image can be defined as how you see yourself when you look in the mirror or when you picture yourself in your mind. This perception may not always be accurate but has a powerful influence on our self-esteem and how we behave accordingly. In a society that promotes unattainable beauty standards, body image issues have become increasingly prevalent, leading to a risk of mental health problems in the long-term. We spoke to three women about their journeys to discovering what their body means to them.

"One of the most common things people said [to me] was: 'What a time to get pregnant... during a pandemic,'" said Bridie Lloyd, 23, from Southampton, who is learning to accept the changes to her body after the birth of her first child. There is no denying the female body goes through an extreme transformation during the childbearing process, enduring both intense physical and emotional changes. It can be difficult to marvel at the miracle of new life when faced with a body almost unrecognisable as your own.

Like many women, Bridie struggled coming to terms with her new physique: "I had great body confidence whilst I was pregnant, I absolutely loved my bump and tried to show it off as much as I could. Then after I had my baby, my body changed... It was nothing like it was before. I found it hard to accept my new 'mum tum'," she said. The media often romanticises the idea of what pregnancy should be like: a glowing mum-to-be, cruising through each trimester without a swollen ankle in sight. Yet, this ideal fails to acknowledge the harsh reality faced by millions of women across the globe.

Research by the *Mental Health Foundation* shows that 54 per cent of pregnant women felt more negative about their body image after pregnancy compared to before. "After I gave birth, I would put off having sex due to feeling disgusted by my stomach. My partner has always made me feel beautiful and constantly told me he found me even more beautiful after seeing me give birth. This really helped me get some of my body confidence back," Bridie recalls.

Pregnancy is considered a time where weight gain is socially acceptable, and with this some people think it gives them an open invitation to comment on a woman's body: "Every single person had something different to say about my pregnancy, it was tiring to hear after a while. One person would say I had a big bump, and another would say it was way too small. People would say pregnancy suited me and others would say I'm too young to have a child. You wouldn't say this to an ordinary woman so why when we are at our most vulnerable?"

"Nevertheless, I'm proud of my body. I love that it carried and birthed my little boy, I'd do it all over again, a million times, for him," said Bridie. Self-love and compassion are key aspects in cultivating a healthy relationship with yourself.

Sabrina Zaragoza, 29, from Birmingham, is a practicing Muslim and, during lockdown, has tried various exercises in self-love to embrace her body. She said: "Body confidence is something I still struggle with. I've always felt chubby, even when I wasn't. I've always had large breasts and feel like that's the first thing anybody notices about me. I remember family members casually joking about the size of bra I must need and that has stuck in my head ever since."

"Due to the pandemic, I now weigh more than I ever have. No matter what I wear, I try to find something that's extremely over-sized and loose because I don't want them to be seen. I've tried placing my hands on my body and sending love and gratitude to each part for the function it performs, but it only has a temporary effect," Sabrina admitted.

Many Muslims interpret the spiritual root of all body image struggles is disapproving of the way God made you. Islam encourages outward beauty, cleanliness and beautiful dress. "Being Muslim improves my body confidence in the sense that I am able to cherish my body much more than I used to before reverting to Islam. I do not feel like I need to be seen as a sex object and gain approval in the eyes of men in order to be confident in myself or my body," she said.

Traditionally, Muslim women wear a hijab to maintain modesty and privacy from males. The Quran instructs women to dress modestly, therefore for many, the hijab symbolises a badge of religious and cultural identity. Sabrina said: "One of the reasons we cover is so that we are not seen as objects but can be appreciated for our minds and our hearts. We have the choice of who we show ourselves to. In my opinion, we are so precious to Allah that he has chosen to honour us with the hijab."

An investigation into body image among British Muslim women, by psychologist Professor Viren Swami, found that participants who wore the hijab had more positive body appreciation, as well as a lower drive for thinness, than women who did not wear one. This is not to suggest that Muslim women who wear the hijab are immune from body image issues, but rather that the use of the hijab may act as a buffer against a negative self-perception. "From the very first time I ever wore a hijab, I noticed how beautiful, precious and safe I felt in it. I am proud to be Muslim. My hijab always reminds me that I belong to Allah. How can I not be confident when I belong to the most loving and the most merciful?" she said.

"To me, body confidence means that you are comfortable in your own skin. It's knowing that you're gorgeous just as you are, no matter what you wear. Though my journey is still far from complete, I admire myself for what I am and who I've become because of it," said Sabrina. With body confidence and self-esteem becoming increasingly widespread issues in the digital age, being able to embrace what you have is the best form of self-care.

Brianna Lynn, 21, from Cardiff, is a full-time OnlyFans creator, whose confidence has grown since posting on the site. OnlyFans is a social media platform that allows users to post content and receive payment from their 'fans' through subscriptions. The rising popularity of the network has helped to bring sex work to the mainstream, from feet pictures to X-rated films, the site has over 70 million users and 1 million creators worldwide.

"Growing up I had no body confidence. I lived in a house full of super skinny, petite women. The most common Eurocentric standard of beauty. Thanks to some random genes mixing I was shorter, thicker and curvier than the rest of the women in my family," Brianna said. "They never intentionally tried to make me feel ashamed for having a different body type but there were always lots of negative comments made about my size,"

“I gained more confidence later in life when I learned that, sexually, I was what a majority of people desired and that many would pay good money to have my body type,” she added.

Sex work is often labelled the oldest profession in history yet is still deeply stigmatised. “We're seen as ‘promiscuous’, ‘easy’, ‘sluts’, and a ‘home-wrecker’ to the jealous wife who found out her husband paid for my content. My personal favourite I've been called is an ‘Internet prostitute’, as if I do anything more than sit and look pretty in front of a camera,” Brianna said, “But there are lots of women who are so quick to judge outside factors that ruined their relationship, as opposed to the actual problem between them and their partner.”

For creators, OnlyFans represents a chance to stand proud of your body and embrace sex positively, “The pandemic has given me more time to focus on myself and love my body. I dress up at home for myself, sometimes putting on makeup and doing my hair just to lay around naked in my room because why not?”

“I don't seek validation from others by posting content online, I have validation in myself and I'm proud of that. It's my body, my choice,” said Brianna.

Our increased lack of real contact has made us even more vulnerable to the messages around us. Recognising how you feel can help you become more comfortable in your body and lessens the tendency to revel in negative thoughts. We are all trying to navigate this new world, from pregnancy and religion to sex work and beyond, learning to accept and appreciate yourself is the most valuable form of self-love in these times of uncertainty. So, cut yourself some slack, *hakuna your tatas*, and *shake what your momma gave you*, it's time to celebrate what your body means to you.