

**Sassatelli, Roberta, & Ghigi, Rossella (2024).
Body and gender. Cambridge: Polity Press, 257
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What happens to female bodies - especially those of Palestinian women - under conditions of war and colonial siege? In the testimonial piece by Mariam Mohammed El Khatib, a writer, poet, and activist from Gaza, published on *mondoweiss.net* on May 19, 2025, the body is not approached as a theoretical abstraction, but as a torn and resistant space - a living flesh inscribed by conflict. "In war, the body loses its rights, especially the female body," Khateeb writes. This sentence encapsulates a truth that demands the attention of the sociology of the body in its most urgent political form.

Her account of menstruating without privacy - amid torn tents and mattresses shared by dozens of cramped bodies - constitutes an act of radical testimony. The menstrual cycle, often rendered invisible in Western contexts, becomes in Palestine an extreme experience of vulnerability. Yet it is precisely within this space of violence and deprivation that the female body emerges as a site of resistance. Khateeb writes: "To menstruate, to carry life, to nourish, to soothe - in the midst of destruction - means to insist on life." This is a powerful reversal of the passive imaginary historically imposed on women in wartime.

This experience poses a direct challenge to sociological theory: can any reflection on the body, on emotions, or on embodied subjectivation remain neutral in the face of such structural violence? How can we articulate a theory of the body that acknowledges the systemic vulnerability of Palestinian women not as an exception, but as a paradigmatic intersection of gender, race, colonialism, and war?

The bodies of Palestinian women are not merely regulated by disciplinary devices -they are actively exposed to annihilation. There is no privacy, no care, no reflective subjectivation. Bare survival disrupted bodily rhythms, the impossibility of mourning in spaces devoid of intimacy - all of these reveal the deeper operation of colonial violence, which acts not only upon bodies but

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within them. In her description of a mother hunched over a pot, watchful and trembling, Khateeb offers a concrete image of care as resistance: a body that becomes shelter and survival infrastructure, defying the war apparatus through the stubbornness of everyday life. Hunger withheld, exhaustion, and wakefulness become political acts.

In this sense, the paradigm of embodiment takes on a radical charge - not merely as the internalization of norms, but as a material insistence against erasure. If, as Giddens suggests, the body is a project, it is also a living archive of memory and resistance. The story inscribed in the flesh of Palestinian women - those who persist without a tent, without shelter - is a story the sociology of the body can no longer afford to ignore.

This urgent question finds fertile ground in *Body and Gender*, the volume by Roberta Sassatelli and Rossella Ghigi, which restores to the body its political and social centrality. By foregrounding the body as a material, symbolic, and political space, the text offers powerful theoretical tools for critically reading those embodied experiences located at the margins—within zones of war, occupation, and care under siege.

Bodies are never neutral biological givens. They take shape over the course of our lives and relationships, molded by both individual choices and the implicit or explicit demands of institutions. Although they may appear natural and prior to will, sociological inquiry reveals them to be sites saturated with conflicting truths.

Starting from this premise, *Body and Gender* offers a dense and nuanced exploration of the social construction of the body through its concrete, historically situated, and culturally defined processes. It stands as one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated efforts to systematize the sociology of the body in light of contemporary transformations shaped and revealed by gender dynamics. The text weaves together classical theory (Elias, Marx, Weber, Simmel) with more recent perspectives (Butler, Guillaumin, Hochschild), constructing a complex and layered understanding of corporeality as a social, symbolic, normative, and affective construct.

At the heart of the book is the concept of embodiment, defined as a social process that is scalar, circular, active, incessant, and contested - five key dimensions that illuminate the social density of the body. Scalar, in that bodies are shaped by social relations at multiple levels. Circular, as social differences are internalized and later enacted. Active, because subjects can reproduce, modify, or resist normative expectations. Incessant, since the body never ceases to communicate. Contested, as it is traversed by relations of power.

Gender emerges as the analytical lens through which the deeper nature of embodiment is revealed. It is not a mere variable, but the very filigree through which hierarchies, roles, and powers are structured. The book's seven chapters trace the body in its formation, regulation, expression, and social representation, following a coherent and accessible path.

From the very outset, the book focuses on the sexualization of the body - understood as the process through which individuals are sorted into sexual categories to which asymmetrical roles and values are assigned. The sexed body, far from being a mere biological datum, emerges as the result of historically stratified relations, and gender operates as the filter through which these relations are inscribed into subjectivity.

This initial analysis opens the way to a broader reflection on the political dimension of corporeality, addressed in the second chapter. The body, in fact, “is intimately tied to power: much of what constitutes everyday inequality is played out on bodies” (p. 51). This claim guides the examination of the ways disciplinary devices, biopolitical regimes, and social norms shape gestures, desires, and behaviors. The Foucauldian legacy is here enriched by feminist contributions, which demonstrate that gender functions as a structural and productive matrix of inequality, rather than a mere variable of difference.

The third chapter expands the reflection by incorporating embodied subjectivity: the body is not only a regulated object, but also an acting subject, capable of internalizing and simultaneously negotiating norms. Drawing on Giddens, Goffman, Bourdieu, and Hochschild, the authors examine everyday practices that give shape to emotions, postures, expressions, and gendered identities.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the fourth chapter enters the realm of appearances. The body as a visible surface becomes the site of an aesthetic politics that imposes upon individuals - unequally - a relentless labor of self-presentation. Aesthetic pressure is particularly intense for female bodies, where identity formation is inextricably tied to the obligation to be beautiful and the imperative to conform to normalized cultural standards.

The fifth chapter explores sexuality as a normative field: heterosexuality, far from being one orientation among others, emerges as a compulsory matrix that structures relationships and hierarchizes identities. Trans and homosexual subjectivities are thus interpreted as points of friction that destabilize the coherence of the dominant heterosexual order.

The multiplicity of bodies and their unequal visibility is addressed in the sixth chapter through the lens of intersectionality. Age, race, class, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability are not treated as additional variables, but as structural axes that, when interwoven with gender, define the boundaries and possibilities of embodied experience. This approach allows us to grasp the co-production of inequalities, which are manifested both in access to resources and in the very construction of embodied subjectivity.

Intersectionality, as an analytical framework, makes it possible to examine how bodies are differently positioned and interpreted depending on the entanglement of multiple forms of oppression and privilege. The intersectional body is not merely a crossroads of distinct axes, but the product of their inseparable interaction: to be a woman, Black, poor, or disabled entails

specific embodied experiences that cannot be understood in isolation. The authors effectively demonstrate how these configurations generate both material and symbolic effects, shaping visibility, legitimacy, and the very possibility of occupying social space.

This trajectory culminates in the seventh chapter, devoted to visual representations. Images, far from being simple reflections of reality, construct gender ideals and normalize hierarchically ordered bodies. From artistic nudes to advertising, cinema, and social media, the male gaze emerges with force - but so too does the potential to subvert it. Representation becomes a terrain of symbolic struggle in which the meaning of embodiment itself is contested and negotiated.

The volume stands out for its conceptual rigor and clarity of exposition. Among its strengths is the ability to combine theoretical depth with accessibility, thanks to a lucid writing style that makes complex approaches intelligible even to non-specialist readers. Its progressive thematic structure allows for an in-depth understanding of corporeal and symbolic transformations without fragmenting the analysis. The constant interplay between embodied micro-experiences and institutional frameworks, between everyday practices and power dispositifs, makes this book an invaluable resource for grasping the political nature of the body in contemporary society.

Particularly noteworthy is the adoption of an intersectional perspective that, rather than treating social variables additively, explores their structurally situated co-implication. This approach makes it possible to grasp the composite nature of inequality in its co-constitutive and embodied dimensions. Equally significant is the attention devoted to the visual dimension of corporeality: the male gaze, normalizing representations, but also the subversive potential of images.

The book also opens promising avenues for further theoretical and analytical development. Among these, the nexus between corporeality and technology emerges as especially fertile terrain: a systematic exploration of digitalization processes and their implications for embodied practices could further enrich the conceptual framework proposed. Likewise, a more elaborated theorization of the disabled body - not merely as an intersectional node, but as an embodied experience with its own epistemological and ontological weight - would make a valuable contribution to expanding the inclusivity of the analysis. Finally, the volume's firm anchoring in the Euro-Western context suggests the potential of a decolonial extension, capable of displacing and pluralizing the categories through which the sociology of the body is conventionally articulated.

In sum, *Body and Gender* highlights how gender constitutes the first axis of corporeal differentiation, and how such difference is socially transformed into inequality. A sociology of the body attentive to gender reveals the invisible web that connects our most intimate emotions with the most public of images.

Within this framework, the body is not only a site of subjectivation and embodiment, but also a vulnerable frontier and a radical space of resistance. The experience narrated by El Khatib reveals how structural violence does not strike "the body" in abstract terms, but acts selectively, along the lines of gender, race, class, and colonialism. To see, to recognize, and to illuminate these vulnerable and resisting bodies is today an urgent theoretical and political task: without them, any sociology of the body risks remaining blind to reality.