

It was a wakeup call that would overhaul their view of the modelling industry even within the Black their own Black community. **Rukundo Tsubira** (Uganda) and **Cynthia Chisom Umezulik** (Nigeria) – both university graduates – are undoubtedly very gorgeous African beauties. But not everyone agrees that their looks constitute that. This came to bear recently when their beauty was called into question by a judging panel at a top modelling competition in London. Both girls, unsurprisingly, failed to take the coveted crown, but the scars

created on the night have forced of both to openly share their experience with *NAW* readers. In their own words, here is their view of “ideal beauty” as seen in the modelling world. Who has the right to define other people’s beauty? Let us hear it from the girls:

What is *ideal beauty*? Models speak out

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Cynthia Chisom Umezulike

“Race and skin pigmentation is a factor in modelling.”

Looking in from the outside, I must fit the ideal quintessential dream of the fashion world: designers, stylists, makeup artists and high fashion photographers especially as the general misconception created by the industry screams ‘the skinnier and taller the better’. I’m 5ft 10.5ins tall with doey-eyes, rounded, structured facial features and strangely skinny. However, my experiences beg to differ. I am also a lawyer called to the Nigerian bar at the age of 21.

Growing up in West Africa, where every young girl is a bosom bride and is expected to look succulent, endowed, dark-skinned and above all well fed, I didn’t fit this description in any way. Nicknamed ‘stock-fish’ (dried fish) by my classmates, I was constantly taunted for being bony. I had a flat chest and with no curves. So, I understood at a young age that I was different. I have penned an inspirational book titled “Parallel Sapphires, Rules to Inspire”



which talks about a young woman's journey into adulthood, how they can build their self esteem and accept the true value of who they are.

When I was discovered by a modelling agent in Nigeria, he described my features as 'stunning', 'amazing' and 'unique'. In the same manner, when I started modelling, I got a warm reception from some designers, but for the majority of the black African community I was a bone of contention due to the colour of my skin and body size. There were times when I was asked, "Are you African or mixed raced? Why is your skin tone different? Why are you so skinny? Are you anorexic?". The most bizarre comment was, "a typical African woman has meat on her bones, where are your curves?". I was constantly questioned and criticised. It was too much criticism and hate coming from a conglomerate of people who scream racism and discrimination on every single comment about skin tone, race and shape made by other races. As a model, I'm paid to wear clothes, not speak. It was hard to have a voice to avoid being labelled and tainted as unprofessional.

Given this backdrop that shapes my story, I have come to a place where I believe that beauty has no colour, no shape and no specific construed form. We all come in different shades, figures and features and what's acceptable to A is different from what B deems the ideal colour of beauty. Beauty is in the form we define it. It is the way every woman can accept and pride herself, both in her intellectual capability and physical attributes no matter how flawed others think of her beauty. In my opinion that is beautiful. Self-esteem, self-value and confidence in one's ability is also reminiscent of the beauty inherent in a woman rather than shades, features and forms.

Participating last year in a major modelling competition was truly a moment of reckoning for me as an African woman. The day of the final show turned into every contestant's biggest nightmare as the judges, predominately black, tore into us. The crowd booed and my colleague Rukundo Tusubira, who is stunning and striking, was referred to as a "man". Others were called "too fat" and I was asked why my skin tone was in a fairer shade than the rest of the cast. An implication that I had done

something to change my skin colour.

My experiences make me ponder if people from our race are at liberty to make demeaning comments about others within the same race without repercussion. Is it all right to condone negativity (conscious racism) and scream unjust, unfair and lack of equality when it comes from another race?

Race and pigmentation of our skin will always play a key factor in the fashion and modelling world, where the slogan "Black Don't Sell" is engraved in the most pseudo way among high end designers. At the same time, most fashion stylists, critics, experts, industry gurus and esteemed designers, by credentials and years of idolised experiences, think they have earned the right to offer a prestigious definition of what beauty is and in what size of clothes they fit in. Each individual has their own right to define what their beauty should be viewed as and is, if at all we feel the need to emphatically outline the features of our beauty. Every woman should stand proud and declare, "I'm beautiful and this is the shape, size, features and form of my beauty". She must blatantly refuse to allow her beauty to be subjected to further evaluation, contention or debate. The sole message here should be: "I accept me as beautiful, I hold sole rights to define my beauty and others will accept and acknowledge my beauty". I am intellectual, high fashion and stunning, that is the beauty I identify with, the beauty I know.



Rukundo Tusubira

"Narrow definition of beauty omits 'blackness'."

I was born in Uganda and raised in London. I'm 5ft 10ins tall with a statuesque and a unique look and graduated from university last year with a degree in Education, Culture and Society. Modelling has been a journey and my experience in a 2011 show finale once again awakened me to what different people's notion of beauty and femininity is. The particular incident I refer to unfolded as the finalists walked the runway and posed in front of judges, who consisted of three industry experts. I made it to the top five. When it was time to respond to questions from the judges, I answered my industry questions correctly. During feedback, one of the judges, a black female, implied that for her my look was too masculine and she wondered how I would make myself look more feminine if I was in a 'room with a lot of lady-like women'. Another judge, a black male, came to my defence by saying I have an androgynous look which makes me stand out but it is up to me to show it in an attractive and positive way. During the pre-judging that took place before the actual show, I was advised that because I have a 'strong' look it's either going to be loved or hated and I shouldn't take it personally. Instead I should embrace it and go more extreme, following in the footsteps of Grace Jones. I must say that I wasn't shocked at the turn of events during the final. Disappointed but not shocked. Black on black discrimination, internalised 'racism' and 'colourism' are subjects I researched during my university degree. So I was aware of the views some black people have about each other, especially surrounding black aesthetics. As a platform for promoting models and a catalyst for change in the industry, it's



Photos by Ernest Simons.
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Ideal Beauty

disappointing to think that narrow views of beauty are being perpetuated.

Over time, I have been described as a Modern Day Grace Jones, a title that was put on me rather than one I chose for myself. Nevertheless, a huge contrast exists – my look has been criticised for being too “strong, unfeminine and in some cases ugly”. It has been said that “the place from which you are looking determines what you see” so if someone is looking at me through the eyes of a westernised ideal beauty, then of course they will view me in a negative way. To them I represent everything beauty is not. I have come to learn that people like to put others in boxes in order to feel comfortable and safe. If someone does not easily fit into one of these categories they are made to feel ‘less than’ and attacked.

I believe there is an ‘ideal’ beauty standard for women that’s being perpetuated throughout western society, predominately by the mass media. This standard of beauty favours young caucasian,

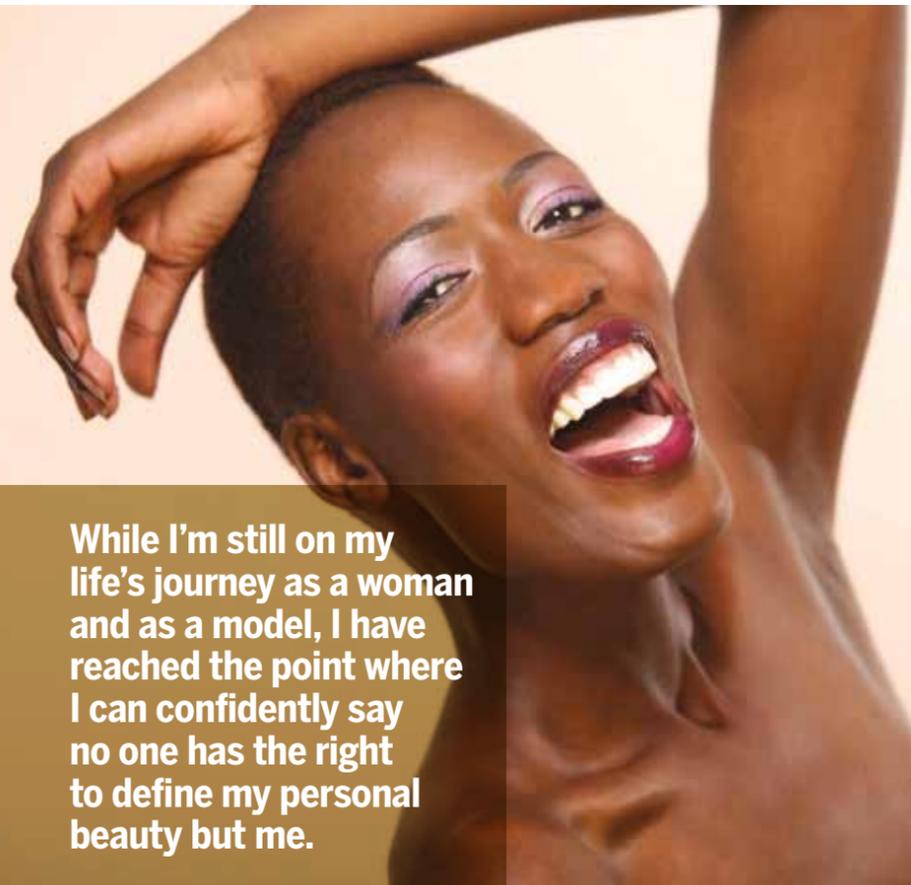
slim females with long straight hair. We are constantly bombarded with images through television, films, magazines and advertising that promote this one standard of beauty. Eventually the images can seep into one’s subconscious, influencing your views. Research has proven that women, irrespective of race, who try to adhere to this beauty standard, can suffer damaging effects which include low self-esteem, depression, anorexia and bulimia. While most women can suffer negative effects due to a ‘narrow definition’ of beauty, it’s particularly detrimental to women of colour as it completely omits ‘BLACKNESS’. It does not include features usually associated with Black, African and Caribbean women – afro hair, dark skin and more voluptuous figures. Unfortunately beauty for women is usually connected to sense of self, so if a woman feels ugly, she probably feels worthless as well and this can manifest in various ways such as unhealthy relationships, self-harming, promiscuity, teenage

pregnancy and substance abuse. Does the way people view or define my beauty affect me? When I was younger it did and badly. I grew up feeling ugly and worthless. Consequently during my teenage years I went through some traumatic experiences. However, and with time, the negative comments about my appearance now encourage me to make a difference and have heavily influenced my career choices. I’m concerned about the younger generation; I don’t want girls to go through what I did. Throughout history black aesthetics have been ridiculed. During slavery variations in skin tone and facial features for black people could mean the difference between freedom and enslavement, consequently a standard of beauty for black women was established that devalued blackness. Sadly a lot of importance is still placed on having good hair and complexion, which equates to having straight long hair and a light skin tone. I think this is because beauty can be seen as a form of social capital for women, meaning

it can be used for economic gain and social mobility, therefore having those desirable features is seen as an advantage. Consequently a beauty formula is created that grants ‘good hair’ or a light skin complexion the authority to counteract less desirable features like a broader nose, Afro hair, and dark skin. These racialised beauty features are constantly negotiated by black women in order to be classed as beautiful and placed highly on the beauty hierarchy.

What we don’t realise is the dangers that we create by doing this, self-hatred being one of them. Besides the psychological effects I discussed earlier, women are damaging themselves physically by using harmful chemicals to bleach their skin in order to obtain a lighter complexion and destroying their natural hair by using harmful chemicals to make it straight. As a result, I have taken it upon myself to do something about this situation, however small, to make a difference. I’m in the process of starting my own beauty campaign to promote diverse features and unique looks, and urging women to celebrate them even if they think they are unattractive because it doesn’t conform to society’s ideal. I’m also starting a business based around my campaign that uses photo shoots and personal development to empower women to celebrating their uniqueness.

While I’m still on my life’s journey as a woman and as a model, I have reached the point where I can confidently say no one has the right to define my personal beauty but me. It took me a while to get here but now that I know better, I live by that fact. I think every individual has to define what black and African beauty means to them because we come in so many beautiful variations. It’s unrealistic to try and create one definition that goes for beauty in general. I know people will always have their preference but the damage is caused when value is put on those preferences. I think people need to really examine their opinions on beauty and work out where those conclusions come from. My message to young women who have similar experiences is to know who you are, define yourself and stand in that truth with no apology. You are valuable and worthy just because you are here. ■



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