

Weight Discrimination

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"Like me, it may take them years to realize that the body is not only a sexual statement, but a social one as well, an ongoing story with multiple plots that women individually and collectively must speak." (Foster, 1994).

Obese women are discriminated against more so in the work force than are thinner women. However, what I have learned through the course of the last several months is that women are discriminated against not only as women, but also as individuals, according to individuals of color, heights, attractiveness, age, weights and sexuality. We, as women, all have our own set of demons or discriminations that have been left for us to fight from generations preceding us. Regardless of how many ways women are discriminated against, obesity is the worst, this is because it is the most accepted form of discrimination and the least questioned. Thomas Wadden calls prejudice against the obese the last socially acceptable prejudice (Increasing Sensitivity Towards, 1998). This is why I have chosen obesity as the main focus of this paper.

It is important to examine what has happened in the work force since the 1970's to understand what is happening in the work force today. In the 1970's the work force for women changed. It has been reported and taught in classes that women make 70 cents to a man's dollar, however, according to author Susan Faludi, this is not true. She says women only make 64 cents to the man's dollar. The 70 cents, according to Faludi, comes from a census that was conducting by measuring weekly wages instead of yearly wages. Faludi also believes that women are still facing the same wage gap that was faced by women in 1955 (Faludi 1991). Not only are women still facing wage discrimination, but they are also lacking representation in job sectors. According to Janet Kodras and Irene Padavic, employment for women has increased in the service sector, but has not increased for women in the professional or manufacturing sectors. Kodras and Padavic site service sector jobs as the reason as to why women did not enter manufacturing, "One was the huge

increase in service sector jobs that drew women away from manufacturing or absorbed new labor market entrants who might otherwise have gone to the manufacturing sector," (Kodras and Padavic, 1993). Women's employment in the medical and law fields only rose 5% and in regards to blue collared jobs, they only rose 3% (Faludi, 1991). Women in executive positions took on an opposite effect and women started losing their jobs. Faludi notes three female media executives who were all fired from major networks; newscaster Marcia Brandwynne, CBS broadcaster Jennifer Siebens and ABC vice president Marlene Sanders. Siebens told women at a conference entitled "Breakthrough Women", "Anybody who has a fantasy of becoming a serious on-air reporter with major network or more critically with a local station, forget it" (Faludi, 1991, 370).

What is causing women to slip further and further behind men in the work force? Faludi is blaming the emphasis put on physical attractiveness and she is not alone in her stance. Research, like Faludi's has shown that physical attractiveness has an impact on and directly effects job recommendation (Cash, Gillen, and Burns, 1977), evaluations of resumes (Dipboye, Fromkin and Wilback, 1975), recommended starting salaries (L. Jackson, 1983), promotional decisions (Morrow 1990) and income (Haskins, 1990). Ultimately, different physical appearances lead to different finalities in income (Loh, 1993). In Loh's research, the Economic Effects of Physical Appearance, the relative height of a woman is found to be in direct connection with her salary also. A woman, according to Loh, will receive a 4.2% increase in pay for hourly wages for every 10% increase in height over the average height.

Loh does conclude, in detail, that men are discriminated against when they are heavier, however, he does not know if it is the employer or the customer that the discrimination stems from. However, what Loh does not do is recognize, in detail, as he does with the male counterpart, the problem women face in the work force due to weight. He merely concludes that "the effects of height and weight on women's wage growth are more tenuous" (Loh, 1993, 431).

In another study, The Economic Reality of the Beauty Myth, Susan Averett and Sanders Korenman recognize that there is "little doubt that Americans (especially women) experience great

social and psychological pressure with respect to body size" (Averett and Korenman, 1995, 305). Averett and Korenman also put into perspective what Loh does not. They conclude that heavy women make 12% less in earnings than their thinner peer and a heavier male makes 5% less in earnings than his thinner peer (Averett and Korneman, 1995). Averett and Korenman also conclude, like other (Register and Williams, 1990 and Sargent and Blanchflower, 1994) that heavier women are more likely than other women to speak up about gender-based discrimination in the labor market. Averett, Korneman, Register, Williams, Sargent and Blanchflower do not suggest a reasons as to why heavier women will speak up about gender-discrimination. However, I believe it is because women who have been heavy throughout life must fight discrimination everyday. Therefore, they are not used to standing up for themselves and fighting when they feel they have been wronged. Gender-discrimination is not any different.

Why is physical attractiveness so important in the work force? Why not ask the fashion industry, the cosmetic industry, the fitness center industry, and the plastic surgery industry. According to the head of Componix, a Los Angeles apparel maker, "Older women want to look sexy now on the job. They want men to look at them like they're women. Notice my legs first, not my appraisals" (Faludi, 1991, 183). Could it be that because men are looking at women's legs first and not their appraisals that sexual harassment is actually at an all time high in the work force by both private and federal employees? (Faludi, 1991). I need not mention President Clinton and Miss Monica Lewinsky. Lewinsky happens to be under attack every day by the press, the American public and the United States Governments for not only having a relationship with the president, but also for being overweight.

Designer Donna Karan is also into the new world of short, tight fashion for women telling the New York Times that, "It's okay to show off your derriere. I questioned it at first. But women are in better shape," (Faludi, 1991, 183).

Like Faludi, Susie Orbach has not skirted the subject of women's physical appearance as a determinate in the work force. She, however, unlike Faludi, offers a reason as to why some women feel the need, whether consciously or not, to be heavy in the work force.

...just as many women first become fat in an attempt to avoid being made into sexual objects at the beginning of their adults lives, so many women remain fat as a way of neutralizing their sexual identity in the eyes of others who are important to them as their life progresses. In this way they can hope to be taken seriously in their working lives outside the home. It is unusual for women to be accepted for their competence in this sphere. When they lose weight, that is, begin to look like a perfect female, they find themselves being treated frivolously by their male colleagues. (Orbach, 1994, 13)

Orbach is not saying here that women are purposely getting fat because they enjoy it. She is saying that women use weight as a defense against sexual harassment at work. Women want to be able to go to work and do their job. They do not want to go to work and be interrupted with sexual comments and remarks.

You can see that there is not an abundance of research on the aforementioned topic of women and weight in the work force. However, the mere recognition that there is a problem is a start. I interviewed a series of heavier women about their experiences in the work force and their answers were amazing. One woman who used to work at the Twelve Corners Day Care was asked how she could take care of infants when she couldn't get off the floor (Twelve Corners Day Care Interview, 9/1998). Loren Oechsle was fired from a shoe store because her weight intimidated her male boss (Oechsle Interview, 9/1998). Kara Holdren was made to lift all of the heavy boxes off of the delivery trucks at the retail store she worked in while the delivery men carried in the boxes for the thinner women. She also founds that if there was a thinner clerk on the floor working along side of her, the customers would automatically ask the thinner clerk for help (Holdren Interview, 9/1998). When Jill Place was taking classes at Monroe Community College her professor asked her to drop out of his gym class because she wasn't "right for it," meaning she was too fat in his

opinion. She instead stayed in the gym class and passed it. She says that "staying in the gym class and passing it gave me confidence." However, Jill also said that she would never take a gym class again for fear of feeling the same humiliation (Place Interview, 9/1998).

In an article appearing in Network News, author Pat Lyons tells a story about a woman who was told by her doctor she was too fat to receive a PAP smear and to return when she lost weight. Ten years later the woman still had not had her PAP smear (Lyons, 1998). Kristin Eddy wrote an article for The Atlanta Constitution, wherein she told the story of another woman, only this woman was "flat-out" told that her job application was denied because of her body weight (Eddy, 1997).

Sharon Jacobson does not believe that she has been discriminated against because of her body, but because of her body image. Jacobson says that the jobs she has been offered may have been because of her weight, but that the weight has never held her back from the jobs she has taken. Like Jacobson, I too have interviewed for job that I have been qualified for, but have been offered another due to my weight or people's image of it.

Jacobson remembers one interview very vividly. According to Jacobson the man she was interviewing with, who was also the head of the department, would not stop staring at her breasts because they were so large. Tiring of the ordeal she began to stare at his penis. When offended he asked her what she was staring at and she replied, "Obviously not as much as you are." When Jacobson was working in Canada she caught two colleagues staring at her breasts and she said, "Yup, they're still there." Jacobson has since had a breast reduction done. She has not had to face any other job interviews and does not know if the reduction has helped her body image. According to Jacobson she does not feel that people are comfortable with her body weight, even though she is. "I am a vegetarian and normally if I go out to eat and if there is not a vegetarian meal that appeals to me I go with the basic salad, baked potato thing, that is how I save, and I always get the comment, oh are you on a diet? Are you trying to lose weight?" Another person made a comment, "Oh if you came to work here I guess we'll have to get you a new chair." It is the subtle things and the assumptions that bother Jacobson the most.

I am very open and honest and very proud of who I am. I do not feel like my weight is a disability. I don't feel like it is something that is deviant. This is my body, it is mine and I like it just the way it is. And if you have a problem then deal with it because it is your issue and not mine. Does it keep me from getting jobs? It may. If you're not going to hire me because you have a problem with my body size, I don't want to work for your school anyway (Jacobson Interview, 9/1998).

According to the book *Shadows on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, "The pain of a fat woman is no secret" (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983, ix). In this collection of stories, women speak out about the pain they feel when they are discriminated against for being fat and their quest to conquer it. However, their fight is not one to lose weight as many would think, but is the fight to gain acceptance and happiness for who they truly are, fat women, for no one person on this Earth is the same.

Judith Stein writes about her karate class and how it has evolved to include many heavy women. However, it was not easy for Stein when she first began. She found it hard to do some of the stretching techniques the "right way." It took consciousness raising on her part to let the instructor know that there is not one way to do anything, but many ways and that people should do what is comfortable for them. The instructor agreed and taught the exercises as they should be done, but now encourages the women to do them at the best of their ability (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983).

Sharon Bas Hannah writes about the discrimination heavier women feel in the art of dance. She writes, "Today, most Western dance teachers will say fat people cannot dance well or move gracefully. These cultural and aesthetic prejudices are fostered by a system of dance that does seem to work best for thin people, and they are the ones in control" (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983, 102). Bas Hannah is quick to point out that history has shown us that thin women are not the only women to be successful in dance. Virginia Zucci danced for the Russian ballet and was

famous for her pirouettes. She also weighed 200 pounds. Isadora Duncan, also overweight by today's standards, radicalized modern dance (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983).

Marjory Nelson makes the correlation between fat women and old women saying both are "distortions of nature" and "diseased." Nelson also feels that it is important that women have control over every aspect of their body, "I begin to understand in a new way how control over our bodies is the bottom line of the women's movement, how this control must extend beyond reproductive rights into every aspect of our lives and health" (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983, 232).

Elana Dykewomon says that a fat woman is one "who weighs over 200 pounds, at an 'average' height, or is a woman who endures one or more of these things: access problems in public places, job discrimination, random & frequent attempts at humiliation from strangers (or family & friends), having to go to special stores or catalogues to find clothes that might fit," (Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983, 144).

The demands that physical appearance put on women, especially in the work force is cruel and demeaning. They demand the superficial and the impossible. There is no reason that when it has been proven that when a man and a woman receive the same training they do the same quality work, this is not true of fat people and thin people also (Lauer and Lauer, 1997). Who was it that gave people the right to discriminate against other people, based on anything? When people are in a position of power and are threatened by another's weight, does that give them the right to cut that person's pay and even fire them, in order for the other person, the one of power to feel more comfortable and less threatened?

It is due to the conscious efforts of these feminists and others that fat can be seen as an issue facing Americans, especially in the work force. Fat, not as an issue of having to diet, but fat as an issue of acceptance and stopping discrimination. We must not only have acceptance with ourselves that may be fat, but also accept the concept that being fat is okay. I have stated before not two

people on the Earth are the same, we were never meant to be. To stop weight discrimination in the work force, we must stop weight discrimination in everything we do and say.

Wadden along with Lynn McAfee and Knoll Pharmaceutical Company are trying to find a way to end workplace discrimination against the obese. They have designed a program to battle the myths about being overweight and increase sensitivity. The program also includes research that states obese people do have problems being hired and promoted in jobs, (Increasing Sensitivity Towards, 1998). A diverse and national team of health providers and educators have put together a group called CONNECTIONS. Its main focus is at ending weight discrimination in the medical fields. They have sponsored Sovereignty in hopes that people will join their fight by participating in even the smallest of ways.

S - Stop making comments about weight - yours or other people's - especially in front of children

O - Observe how prejudice against fat seeps into discussions of weight and health

V - Volunteer your thoughts and feelings on the need for body acceptance and start dialogue

E - Educate yourself on healthy alternatives to dieting/weight-loss focused medical care and info

R - Remember that prejudice has been learned. It can be unlearned. Have patience.

E - Encourage and sponsor speakouts, workshops, professional training and conferences

I - "It's not OK to tell 'fat jokes' or ridicule fat people." Use this phrase as needed.

G - Give yourself credit for taking on these issues. It will benefit people of all sizes, including you

N - News travels quickly through newsletters. Write about this topic. Review relevant books.

T - Take time to nurture your body. Dance, play, rest, relax, eat & enjoy life just as you are.

Y - YES! WE want to hear from you - contact us for speakers, tell us about your activities...

(Lyons, 1998, 5)

Our society is saturated with thin ads. In its November issue Glamour magazine tried to justify why models are size six and smaller. They called their answer "complicated" and blamed it on the sample-size, which only includes two sizes, a size six and a size eight. Models must also conform to the clothing and not the other way around. According to Harold Mindel, director of Click Models, "You can pin a sample on a model to make it look smaller but you can't let out the seams to make it larger" (Glamour, November 1998, 244).

Glamour also blamed it on the fact that plus size models are between the sizes of ten and fourteen. Glamour claims that even though plus size clothing begins at a size 16, no woman wants to see themselves reflected in the fashion world and the same is true for thinner women (Glamour, November 1998, 244).

In actuality Glamour had no honest justification as to why models are a size six. What we do know, however, is that advertising is full of overly thin models. It is because of these models that our society thinks that every person should be thin. Thin equals healthy, successful, smart, and a slew of other adjectives that are just not true. History, however, claims this as not always having been the way. Fat used to be the symbol of richness and health. If you were fat it meant that you had enough to eat. Today, because so many people have enough to eat, control over that eating and thinness is the new status quo.

All women must face different issues, different demons in their lives. Whether it be their height, the size of their body, the color of their skin or the attractiveness of their face. A woman is not only judged in the work force for being a woman, but is also judged for the type of woman she is. It is frightening that as we move into the next millennium women are faced with the same issues that they were faced with fifty years ago. Why must society, filled with people each with a

differing quality, make others the lesser? It is because we, no matter who we are, cannot accept ourselves as the lesser and we will forever find one group to discriminate against, to make the deviant, so that we can go on living society's normal life. It is said that 20% of Americans die from obesity. This has led to many things, but most importantly it has led to more discrimination. We are in a time where 80% of fourth graders are dieting and fifth graders can be heard saying that their thighs are too fat (Lyons, 1998). When will the discrimination stop for fat people? When will fat people be given the chance to move freely up and down the job ladder and when will they be hired for a job based on their merit as an employee and not based on what the scale says?

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