

When Health Warning Becomes Body Shaming

Bombarded by the media's portrayal of feminine beauty as dangerously thin, many people internalize these unrealistic standards and feel guilty for their inability to meet them. This leads to the development of negative health outcomes such as low self-esteem, body image disorders, and eating disorders. In particular, the experience of fat women serves as the paradigm of this reality. The fat body has become a common subject of societal scrutiny, often viewed as a warning of "who" not to become.

The alarming rise of obesity and concerns about the health outcomes of obese individuals, seemingly justifies how society fat-shames people who are overweight or obese. Does making these people feel self-conscious about their appearances necessarily help them make healthier decisions regarding their lifestyles? The scientific community took on this same stance. Specifically, Claudio Nigg--assistant professor of public health sciences and epidemiology at the University of Hawaii--and his colleagues, after analyzing instances of obesity among children in Hawaii, contended that intervention was necessary for preventing and ending obesity. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that fatphobia, along with the obsession with thinness, has preceded the American society's concern for adverse health effects for nearly a century.

The dominant class, as Linda Bacon maintained in her work *Health at Every Size*, uses fatphobia as a political agenda to marginalize those who are low income, ethnic minorities, or fit into both of these groups. Dr. Sabrina Strings, in her research, found that while Protestantism taught people to avoid overindulging in all pleasures, colonists and race scientists persisted in their shared notion that black people were unable to restrain from sexual excess and gluttony. Accordingly, a grass-roots belief arose, postulating that fatness was a characteristic of immorality, inferiority, and ethnic minority. In the perspective of the privileged class, which often consists of thin people, the increasing body fat of the poor and the minorities account for their laziness and, thus, unworthiness.

For women, whose bodies are often viewed as men's objects of sexual attentions and pleasures, fatphobia becomes more prevalent. Because thinness epitomizes the ideal female body, as depicted frequently in the popular media, deviation from such image usually results in fat women being deemed to be underserving of love and respect. Especially for those whose identities are at the intersection of gender, race, and socioeconomic background, fatphobia simply intensifies.

Frustrated that the oppression of the fat body was not approved by mainstream feminism, fat activism and fat acceptance movements emerged in the 1970s and 1990s, respectively. Fat activists like Louise Turcotte and Michèle Charland weaved their voices into topics presented at feminist events, seeking to gain legitimacy for their movements. Still, valid health concerns linger. For instance, a fashion and lifestyle blogger Maui Bigelow, in 2019, decided to have a weight loss surgery procedure as her health deteriorated at almost 380 pounds. Ultimately, one dilemma remains: how should the society promote healthy lifestyles while also encouraging greater awareness of other social challenges and oppressions that people must face?

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Information gathered from "Fat Shaming" in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender*; Kris Rothstein's "Big Fat Lies" in *Herizons*, vol. 34, no.3, Fall 2020, pp.36-37; Shawna Felkins's "The Weight I Carry: Intersection of

Fatphobia, Gender, and Capitalism” in *Frontiers*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2019, pp.180-185; Heather Ashbach’s “Where does fat phobia come from?,” University of California (<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/fat-phobia>); *Psychology of Women and Gender* by Miriam Liss, Kate Richmond, and Mindy J. Erchull; and Leanne Italie’s “When ‘fat acceptance’ movement leaders decide to lose weight” in *Global News* (<https://globalnews.ca/news/5667229/fat-acceptance-weight-loss-backlash/>).