

OUR STREETS NOW PRESENTS

Our Words

LITERARY MAGAZINE

UNWORTHY - YOU NEED TO LOSE WEIGHT - UNWORTHY

I love you
but... You
need to lose
weight...

UNWORTHY -



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ISSUE 14



Our Streets Now

Our Streets Now is a campaign demanding the right of women, girls and marginalised genders to be safe in public spaces. How it has started? Two sisters, 15 and 21, spoke about how they experience the world as young women. About feeling afraid walking home at night. About being harassed in their school uniform. About how their lives were restricted by the fear of harassment. Channelling this anger into change, they decided to start a petition. Hundreds of women, girls and marginalised genders went online to share their stories of being insulted, followed and assaulted on the streets of Britain. Soon enough, thousands of voices were joining the Our Streets Now movement, tired of harassment being a 'normal' part of growing up a girl. Our Streets Now became a community determined to challenge the myths and taboos stopping this topic from being discussed and challenged, out in the open.

**#CRIMENOT
COMPLIMENT**

*Join the
movement
now!*



HELLO FROM THE EDITOR

Dear readers,

in this issue, our writers and illustrators explore the **theme of fatphobia, particularly its link to intimate partner violence (IPV).**

First, you will read an article on gender-based fatphobia in abusive relationships, focusing mainly on how rape culture contributes to it. Second, you will find a poem on a woman's experience in an abusive relationship. Third, you will devour a short story about fatphobic practices on romantic dates. Fourth, you will move to an opinion piece, in which our writer shares her experiences when discussing the challenges fat women and marginalised genders face when exercising in public. Lastly, you will encounter an article on body shaming, psychological oppression, and physical aggression in intimate relationships, looking at how oppressive social norms towards fat bodies foster microaggressions and overall violence among intimate partners.

I hope you enjoy your reading!

Renata Guimarães Naso
lead Editor



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trigger warnings

This issue covers some sensitive topics and may be triggering for some readers. Each article will be marked with a specific TW and we advise readers to seek support if needed. Go to:
<https://www.ourstreetsnow.org/support>

MEASURING THE SIZE OF ABUSE

Our writer explores gender-based fatphobia within abusive relationships, looking at how rape culture contributes to it.

Written by
VASILINA RISTANI

Illustration by
DANI ROTA
(@dampstudio)

TW fatphobia, abuse, mental illness, rape and sexual assault, death and suicide.



>> "Violence against fat women is a systemic issue worldwide. Women are the targets of a vast array of abuses at the hands of men and others who align, or wish to align, with dominant societal ideals", as feminist scholar Valeria Panina explains in her intersectional analysis about violence against fat women.(1) Food and obesity researcher Rebecca Puhl has examined the origins and prevalence of weight stigma for decades and confirms its presence across "workplaces, schools, healthcare settings, public accommodations and the mass media, as well as in close interpersonal relationships with friends and families".(2) This article will zoom in to examine fatphobia as a factor in violence between romantic partners.

Gendered fat oppression in relationships is not a private matter only concerning those involved; it's a social issue that exacerbates fat women's objectification and stigmatisation. Melissa Fabrizio, one of the very few scholars who has shed light on this topic, argues that the implications of this stigmatisation become even greater when we consider the reality of rape culture. When fat women are abused or sexually assaulted, there's a common response that they should be thankful for any kind of sexual act or abuse they receive, even if it's not consensual. This dangerous rhetoric implies that rape is a form of sexual validation and that fat women don't deserve it.

Although it's not talked about enough, it comes as no surprise that women are explicitly targeted due to their body size. Female fatness is directly linked to sexual abuse. This issue is clearly reflected in abusive relationships, where intimate partners use fatphobic language and other forms of psychological, physical and sexual abuse to "keep fat women in their place". (3) It's important to understand how fatphobia can lead to asymmetrical power relations between partners when one acts upon removing the other's bodily autonomy as a means of achieving dominance.(4) Power imbalances, control and oppression, are at the root of intimate partner violence (IPV). It's time to integrate discourses on fatphobia, rape culture and IPV into the anti-sexual violence movement before the consequences are irreversible.

Reclaiming the F-word

Determining who is fat enough to be considered fat is solely based on perception and subjective standards formed by toxic forces of consumer culture ingrained in our society. In a desperate attempt to conceptualise fatness, "Your Fat Friend" hit a dead end after realising "there are nearly as many definitions of fat as there are people in the world".(5) "But fat is not a bad word; it is merely a descriptor used to help neutralise the word. Fat is a neutral word that also encompasses a marginalised identity".(6) >>



book information

TITLE Rape Culture 101 Programming Change

AUTHOR Geraldine Cannon Becker and Angel T. Dionne

PUBLISHER Demeter Press

YEAR 2020

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Sociology of Abuse / Gender Studies

>> As an identity, fat is not just a personal or descriptive word, but one that holds enough weight to change the world for everybody. To reclaim this word is to lean into this identity to decrease the stigma and phobia associated with it as a form of revolution. By normalising and accepting fatness, those who aim to weaponise it are left disarmed. There is great empowerment that comes with shifting what was once a shameful insult into a source of pride. As Ashleigh Shackelford expressed this notion in a Teen Vogue article, "the more we call ourselves fat, and the more we realise that it's not bad to be fat, the more we are tearing down walls built by fatphobia".(7) Therefore, by deconstructing the negative associations of fatness we are achieving freedom from systems of discrimination.

A moment on the lips, a lifetime of trauma

Fatphobic language is used within intimate partner relationships to "achieve dominance" through "sizeist comments that signify a gendered power differential between partners".(8)

meet our writer

Vasilina is a Greek journalist who loves to write about feminist issues. She believes that lasting change comes from within, and in order to reshape the public sphere, the media landscape needs to become a safe, more diverse space for all voices to be heard.

Weight-based microaggressions, often rooted in this internalised dominance, reflect the desire for power and control. Microaggressions are often seemingly unintentional and can be hard to spot. A good example is a backhanded compliment or a piece of unsolicited advice. Sometimes those who experience frequent microaggressions can end up questioning their experience of reality. Since these derogatory messages are so subtle, the perpetrator can easily dismiss the offence when confronted about it.

Even in non-physically abusive relationships, some men make belittling remarks about their partner's weight, telling them to regulate their diet and flaunting their preference for thinner bodies. Although it's not often socially acknowledged, such comments are forms of psychological and verbal abuse, contributing to the significant decline of another individual's emotional well-being.(9) Women who have dealt with fatphobia in intimate relationships report that the damage of this abuse is so significant that the symptoms are consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (10) This can include hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, anxiety, dissociation, difficulty with social and romantic relationships, intrusive thoughts, suicidal ideation and physical pain.(11) Healing from the trauma of abuse can be challenging when faced with external weight stigma and internalised fatphobia.

Fat women can find it difficult to leave abusive relationships due to the psychological barriers of internalised fatphobia. In response to fatphobic abuse, some try to shrink themselves into fitting in, covering up and constantly adjusting their manners in public, making jokes at their own bodies' expense, or simply staying quiet to draw as little attention as possible. >>

>> This mentality is distinctly demonstrated in Shawna Felkins' book, *The Weight I Carry: Intersections of Fatphobia, Gender, and Capitalism*, in which she describes her own journey of a fat girl growing into a fat woman, struggling with eating disorders, fatphobia, and stigma in Western culture. Felkins puts into words what it feels like being conditioned to be sorry for living in your own body: "I spent much of the first twenty three years of my life hating myself, hating my body and apologising for its size to my lovers and the million big and little things that remind us that we are too much... or that just maybe the world isn't big enough".(12) But why do fat women stay in abusive relationships? Having a child together, financial dependence, the intimacy of trauma, and shaken self-esteem can cause women to feel grateful for their partner's "love", even when some fear for their lives.

Generally, relationships can be a vulnerable situation for everyone, but, as the academic Melissa Fabrizio argues, "it is likely for the vulnerability to increase when an individual is living in oppression".(13) The intersection of sizeism and sexism results in an intimately harmful and toxic environment. Due to the demonisation of fat bodies, society does not provide fat women with a support system to break the cycle of abuse. Often, they are advised to stay in abusive relationships because they are considered unable to find another or better companion. As attested by Felkins, "I couldn't help but internalise these narratives, this framework, that my body, my fatness means that I am inherently a bad person and a bad person deserves punishment".(14) This punishment narrative is a clear indicator of the foundations of abuse as a systemic exercise of power.

Even when women muster the courage to get away from their berating partners, they often encounter fatphobic bias and abuse at the hands of healthcare professionals and law enforcement officials. "Fat women who report sexual assault to the police are frequently re-victimised by police officers.(15) Their allegations are not taken seriously, with some officers refusing to even take reports, commenting that these women are "too ugly" to be raped".(16)

On today's episode of rape MythBusters

One of the most harmful manifestations of fatphobia is the belief that fat women are "unrapeable". Feminist academic Tracy Royce points out that "anti-fat bias and myths about rape amplify each other".(17) In most cases, rape myths shift blame onto the survivors instead of the actual sex offenders. This can be seen in the expression of disbelief in survivors' claims regarding the assault and the invalidation of their experience. Ultimately, this perpetuates the stereotype that only certain women can be raped, as if it's some kind of compliment. The implication here is that the behaviour of conventionally attractive women, such as dressing or acting provocatively, leads to rape - and shields fat women from the rape hazard. In this way, anti-fat bias fuels the widely popularised victim-blaming myth.

The justification of the victim-blaming tactic is usually communicated in three different strategic and manipulative ways: "victim masochism, victim precipitation and victim fabrication".(18) First, the victim masochism narrative tells the story of the woman who actually found pleasure in the act of rape, doing the victim a favour, especially in the context where the abuser was an intimate partner. Similarly, in the victim precipitation strategy, the woman is guilty of causing this act upon herself as she probably "asked for it". >>

>> Lastly, the victim fabrication expression of victim-blaming acceptance paints the picture of a woman who lies about being raped because of some ulterior motive. That could include anything from harming her partner's image and vengeance to gaining attention, sympathy and financial profit. Therefore, the acceptance of victim-blaming plays a crucial role in the way survivors of sexual assault are perceived and treated by society.(19)

What might this mean for a woman or a female-presenting person who also happens to have a larger body? The acceptance of victim-blaming tactics leaves fat women vulnerable to abusive partners thinking that they are "green lights". "Can't say no: Not to chocolate cake not to getting raped", states Beck Cooper in her powerful slam poem "Rape Prevention Potluck".(20) In this poem, Cooper unpacks the false idea that fat women are so desperate for affirmation that they will accept any form of sexual contact. The widespread nature of this belief is shown in the case of Quantisia Sharpton, one of the several women who accused R&B singer Usher of not disclosing his herpes diagnosis before having intercourse.(21) As soon as Sharpton appeared in public, the Internet attempted to build a 'defence' of Usher, constructed on nothing but fat-shaming. Internet users insisted on his innocence based on the premise that he would never have sexual relations with a fat woman. In this way, fat women experience sexual violence in a way that is particular to their intersecting gender and size identities. The anti-sexual violence movement needs to include fat women who have endured IPV. A world in which fatphobia suggests that fat women are undesirable and then uses this to defend the sexual assault of fat women is a dangerous place for all.

No place at the table

"Fat people are denied a place at the table, both literally and figuratively" - as stated in a memorial to victims of fatphobia and size prejudice.(22) Fatphobia is so deeply rooted in our society that it has marginalised fat women and exposed them to mental, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their own intimate partners. In some extreme cases, it can result in death if abusers use weight as an excuse to continue their battering. In other instances, abusive partners take advantage of this fatphobic society by gaslighting women into staying in the relationship and convincing them that they are not worthy of love. On account of this dehumanisation, women suffer from self-esteem loss and other mental health implications. In moments of pain and despair when the fatphobic abuse became too much to bear, some women have taken their own lives.(23) Despite this, most survivors have not yet found justice in a court of law: their continuous trauma is far from over.

As Panina argues, "there is no doubt that fat women experience violence on a daily basis in a unique way because of the intersection of their gender and size".(24) Nonetheless, fatphobic misogyny does not simply affect fat women; "the fear associated with fatness affects all women. Whether or not social norms label women as fat, they live in a 'fat-fearing, fat-hating culture and are likely to be told they are fat".(25) The diktat of thinness is just one of the many absurd and unrealistic norms imposed on women, who are stigmatised all the more if they are fat, who are more affected by disorders and who are more abused.(26) Fatphobia is consequently a feminist issue. Women are constantly taught that to be feminine is not to take up any space, especially not more than a man, and are expected to reduce almost to the point of disappearing. Looking for the source of fear associated with fatness, Fabrizio found that "the real reason that women are so afraid of weight gain extends far beyond body image. It's a removal of power and privilege".(27) ●

THE PURPLE NECKLACE

Written by HARRIET CLARK

Illustration by
ADRIENNE SHELFORD
(@adrienneshelford)

TW rape, physical violence.



You gave me a necklace of purple stones,
You gave it just to me.
It wrapped around my neck so tight,
Imprinting on my skin.
The chain punctured my airways with every tug,
Making it harder to breathe.
The purple gems shone in the naked light,
Flashing glints of red and yellow, when brave enough to look.
I kept it hidden, I kept you a secret.
I hid it from even myself, perhaps hoping it wasn't true.
You blessed me with your presence,
Gave a gift so rare you thought I would cherish it.
Yet your ignorant mind was wrong.
You are not special, not important, not unique.
There is no rarity in your action or behaviour,
These are not the first battered rocks I carry on my body.

I am not the first woman
And you are not the first man.

JUST A DARE

Her whole life Megha has dealt with the constant comments, stares and abuse that strangers, peers, and even some family members have hurled at her, thinking it was their place to judge her body. Now, well into her twenties, Megha battles with her insecurities when she goes on a date. What happens when her worst fear comes true? Was she just a dare after all?

Written by ASHA ASKOOLAM

Illustration by
[LUCILE ESCALLIER \(@studio.notagraphe\)](#)

TW depression, anxiety, fatphobia, bullying, body dysmorphia, and mentions of racism.

She had heard of it happening before. She'd even read a book on it. A fat woman goes on a date with a man, only to find out that it had been a dare between him and his friends. It was honestly so cliché that Megha thought it only happened in books or tv shows, or from a friend of a friend, at a distance where she could push it away, forget about it and convince herself that something like that would never happen to her. Megha met Hassan at a birthday party for one of her work friends. The night was in full swing by the time she arrived. There was a golden glow over the back garden as the sunset in the distance, and the sky was a burning backdrop of reds, oranges, pinks and dark purples. It was summertime, and the warm haze of the heat that day still crackled in the air, wafting through a gentle breeze. There was already a group of people, some she knew, some she didn't, mingling with food and drink.

"Megha!" a voice called. Deepika ran over to her from where she had been sitting on the lawn. "You made it! Oh, I'm so glad you're here."

"Of course, I came!" Megha smiled, hugging Deepika close. "I wouldn't have missed your birthday. Happy birthday!"

"Aw, thank you, honey," she replied, giving Megha a kiss on the cheek, "you look beautiful." >>

>> Megha flushed, looking down at herself. As a child, she had felt beautiful in her own skin. She had loved how her skin burned brown, a bronze gleam against dark eyes like the clouds at dusk when the night sky crept up on the golden sunlight. Megha liked the way she smiled, the colour of her eyes, the bounce of her curly hair and, most of all, the curves of her body. In her family, most women were bigger than the beauty standard of the West. In fact, this was celebrated in her family. It wasn't until she went to primary and then secondary school that she was introduced to Western beauty standards that made her feel ugly, disgusting and unloved. And it took her many years to unlearn the comments, shouts and whispers that she heard about her.

"She's so fat; how do her parents let her leave the house like that?"

"Look at the rolls on her body; isn't she ashamed?"

"Bet she ate all the pizza at lunchtime."

She was still learning. Megha looked up at her friend, at everyone at the party. All of them were either very slim or very fit; no one looked like her there, which made every fibre in her body scream at her to leave.

"C'mon, there's lots of food," Deepika smiled, wrapping her arm around Megha, taking the flowers and present from her hands. "Thank you so much for this. You've honestly made work so much more bearable."

The evening passed by with the clinks of drinks and the sound of laughter bubbling around them.

Hassan arrived an hour after the party began, and Megha thought he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He had curly, dark brown hair down to his shoulders and green eyes against tawny-brown skin that made his smile twinkle like the stars in the night sky above him. The moment his eyes met hers, she knew that she would be going home with a slight crush on him.

"Hi," he said as he walked up to her at the drink's table. "What's your poison?"

Megha looked up at him, shocked that he would even consider talking to her. Her whole life, people that looked like him - fit, able-bodied and beloved by everyone - did not date people that looked like her. She was seen as a hindrance to the healthcare system, clothes never fit properly or made her look frumpy, and there were constant comments on her weight and what she ate, to the point where she believed that no one would be able to look at her and find her more than a cluster of mass. "Hmm," Megha replied, trying to push away the thoughts screaming at her. *He won't like you. You're too big, too dark, and too ugly. "I like cocktails. Anything sweet."*

He grinned at that. "Me too! I can't stand the stronger stuff. I'm Hassan. I know Deepika from school. We met when we were about ten years old."

Megha shook his outstretched hand, "I'm Megha. I know her from work. She was the first friend I made. The office can be quite cold at times, and she was really welcoming. It also helped that she was wearing bright yellow tights, and I thought: ah, she's my kind of person."

Hassan laughed. "That sounds like Deepika." >>

>> Megha spent most of the night talking and getting to know Hassan. He seemed kind, took an interest in her life and loved to read books on social causes. The end of the night came to a close, with Hassan leaning down to kiss her cheek and ask for her number. Looking back, Megha wished she had never gone to that birthday party. She had no idea that it would end in her feeling humiliated and heartbroken. Hassan asked her out the following week. They were going to a new exhibition in London and then for dinner.

"You look amazing," he said as soon as he saw her, picking her up from her house. Megha giggled, feeling giddy like a teenager. She had chosen to wear a dress with tights that showed off her body. It was the one dress that she had that made her feel sexy.

"Thank you," she replied, getting into his car and closing the door. "So do you."

The exhibition passed with bright splashes of colour, intricate designs and whispered words. Both of them were engrossed with the abstract art all around them.

At some point, Hassan's hand had found hers, and he held her close throughout the evening, despite the looks that they received. Megha could hear what they were thinking and the words they would say, just by seeing the hatred in people's eyes. *Why is he with her? He should be with someone that suits him. She looks like she could crush him.* It was nothing she hadn't experienced before, and yet it made her feel small, insignificant and broken like she was an insect or dirt found on the bottom of someone's shoe. In the end, she couldn't wait to leave the exhibition and go to dinner.

But even at dinner, it felt like she could feel the stares of everyone. They were like daggers that pierced her skin. She wondered if they felt good about themselves. What did they gain from making someone feel disgusting in their own body? Megha had been told her whole life by strangers, bullies, doctors and peers that because she was overweight, she would end up with health problems and should start to 'eat better for her health'. It bored her to no end to hear people comment on her body when they had no right and had no idea why she had put on weight and why it was hard for her to lose weight. >>

meet our writer

Asha is a writer with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing and a Master's degree in Creative Writing. She has a background in content writing, having written for her campus' paper *Smoke Magazine* and edited the English Society's blog. She enjoys discovering new worlds and magical places for people to escape to. "Everyone has a story, and as long as you're willing to listen, you'll find the one meant for you".

book information

TITLE Holding Up the Universe

AUTHOR Jennifer Niven

PUBLISHER Penguin

YEAR 2016

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Fiction

>> "Are you okay?" Hassan asked once they had ordered their drinks.

Megha was staring down at the menu, glancing over the meals wondering what she should get. She decided it was best to settle on something small so that she would feel less judged.

"Oh, I'm fine," she replied, feeling that itchy, uncomfortable feeling under the skin. She felt hot all over, and tears were pricking the back of her eyes. "Just nervous," she lied.

Hassan didn't seem to think anything of it and started chatting away about the exhibition until he excused himself to use the bathroom. >>



>> Megha sat there, staring at the menu, until she saw his phone buzzing on the table. She hadn't meant to look, but she saw her name in one of the messages. Looking around her to ensure that no one was watching, she picked the phone up and looked at the messages.

Yo Hassan, how's the date going with the fat chick? I guess we owe you £50...that's if you fuck her, one message read.

The other stated I can't imagine kissing her. The thought of it makes me feel sick.

Megha dropped the phone like it was burning hot. Her heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest, and she felt sick. Quickly, she took a picture of the text messages. She wanted proof of this when she told Deepika. Without sparing a second glance at Hassan's approaching figure, she grabbed her coat and phone. Tears began rolling down her cheeks, and the room felt like it was spinning. She wanted to cry, scream and punch something. Instead, she left the restaurant in a hurry, despite Hassan calling her back.

He didn't come after her, and she didn't expect him to. Instead, she called her best friend, Layla, to pick her up. She spent the night in her friend's arms, crying, huddled under blankets, watching shitty tv shows, attempting to dull the ache in her chest.

"It's going to be okay," Layla said softly, threading her fingers through Megha's hair. "It's all going to be okay. He's a dickhead for what he did."

"It was something I had always feared would happen," Megha sniffed, resting her head on Layla's lap.

"I always worried that I would go on a date with someone, and they would turn out to be playing some kind of sick game."

"It's absolutely evil," Layla said, her voice holding so much anger as she spoke. "How can these men call themselves human?"

"Because they don't see me as one," Megha sighed, her voice defeated, "they just see me...as something vile, something that is so outside of the norm that they feel as though they can other me because I am not worthy of respect, dignity and care."

Layla leaned down and kissed Megha's forehead. "You don't need to be fixed. You didn't do anything wrong. Will you tell Deepika what happened?"

Megha shrugged. "Maybe. There's not much else I can do. I just hope he doesn't do this to anyone else."

Megha thought Deepika would be sympathetic. She believed that she would listen to her. Instead, Deepika had just laughed it off. "Oh, Megha," she giggled, shaking her head, "it was just a joke I'm sure. Don't overthink it."

Megha's heart dropped. The office room suddenly felt so small, and she wanted to throw up. Deepika's fake smile and laugh made her skin crawl. Had her friendship been a complete lie? Looking back on their friendly relationship, Megha could see the moments when Deepika had made inappropriate jokes or comments about her weight or the kinds of food she ate and how she always complained about her own weight to belittle Megha.

"A joke? He humiliated me," Megha replied. She felt exasperated. It felt like she was talking to a brick wall that wouldn't budge. >>

>> "He set this up as a dare with his friends! They bet him 50 pounds to see if he could sleep with me, look!"

"Fifty pounds is still a lot," Deepika sighed, rolling her eyes at the picture of the text messages on Megha's phone, "I'm growing tired of this. This is on you. Lose weight, and this shit won't happen."

Megha had never wanted to punch someone more than she had at that moment. Instead, despite the anger coursing over her body and bubbling under her skin, she laughed humorlessly, "wow, that's rich. How about learning to stay in your own lane and stop commenting on people's bodies? If I'm only worth 50, then honey, you'd be worth five. That mouth of yours is dirtier than the mud on my shoes."

A while later, when Megha had left the company she was working for, deciding that the people she was around were far too toxic for her liking, she saw Hassan again. It was a cold winter's evening, and she was on her way home from work, passing by some restaurants nearby her company building when she looked into the window of a Thai place. And there he was, sitting with another South Asian and plus-size woman who was also nervously looking over the menu.

Gritting her teeth, Megha walked into the restaurant. Holding her head high, she walked over to their table, painting a fake smile on her face.

"Hassan!" she greeted him, loving how the colour drained from his face. "Fancy seeing you here. How have you been?"

"Megha, I'm busy with Parvati here--"

Megha rolled her eyes, a bitter smile on her lips, "busy? Oh, so you're going to do the same thing you did to me? What, did your friends bet you again, see if you could seal the deal this time with another woman?"

The woman looked up at Megha with a confused and heartbroken expression on her face. "What do you mean?" her voice shook, and Megha could see the tears pooling in her eyes.

Megha's smile softened, and she placed a hand on her shoulder, "honey, I'm sorry, but he's only on this date because his friends bet him to date a fat woman, take her out, kiss her and then sleep with her. He tried to do the same to me."

Parvati looked at Hassan as tears escaped her eyes, "Is that true?"

"No, that's not true--"

Megha laughed humorlessly, fishing out her phone and showing Parvati the pictures of his messages to his friends from that awful night.

"I'm not making this up," she said softly to Parvati, "he's scum and will only hurt you."

Hassan looked like he was about to burst, full of rage that his plan, his game, had been foiled once again. Parvati got up from the table, grabbed her things and rushed out of the restaurant.

"Let's see what the internet thinks about this," Megha smirked, posting the pictures to her Instagram. Before Hassan could snap back, she walked out of the restaurant and wrapped an arm around Parvati's shaking figure. Though the cycle of fatphobia would continue, she could at least save this woman from going through it alone. ●

Intersections between exercise and fatphobia

A look at the challenges fat women and marginalised genders face when exercising through the lens of the author's personal experience.

Written by
ALICE NUTTALL

Illustration by
[SANNE DE VRIES](#) (@sanne.de.vries)

TW fatphobia, public sexual harassment, rape culture, victim-blaming.

While I'm a firm believer that there are as many fat experiences as there are fat people, there's one experience that seems to be, if not universal, at least very common: school physical education (PE) sucked. My school career spanned from the nineties to the early 2000s in the UK. From primary to secondary education, sports options were limited and followed a set pattern: rounders in the summer, hockey in the winter, with the yearly hells of the Bleep Test and the cross-country run slotted in between. There was no adaptation for different body types or ability levels. So, like many other fat children, I internalised a view of myself as "the slow, unfit one" - despite my weekly long-distance swimming sessions outside of school hours.

My mental image of myself as "bad at sport" was so all-pervading that I didn't even consider my participation in sponsored swims or the love I later discovered for karate to be 'sport' or 'fitness' - because I enjoyed them. It wasn't until I hit my late twenties and fell in love with lifting and - much to my surprise - running, that I realised that I wasn't "bad at sport", but instead that the sports I'd done at school had been taught in a way that didn't work for my fat body.

School is a microcosm of wider society, particularly when it comes to the Catch-22s that fat people face. We're simultaneously told: "you're fat - you should exercise more", and "who do you think you're kidding, trying to exercise?". >>

>> Samantha Puc notes, "When fat people dare to work out in public, we're ridiculed at best and violently harassed at worst. There's a bizarre dichotomy between fatphobia that manifests in people telling us to shed pounds and go to the gym, and fatphobia that manifests in those same people being disgusted by our presence in those spaces."⁽¹⁾ Nowhere is this dichotomy more apparent than in the backlash that occurs whenever athletic retailers introduce exercise clothing for fat bodies.

In 2019, *Nike* introduced⁽²⁾ a plus-sized mannequin at their flagship store, leading to *The Telegraph* publishing an article condemning the idea of fat women buying workout clothes.⁽³⁾ The writer of this article, Tanya Gold, argues that introducing "obese" mannequins transforms obesity into a healthy ideal. Gold's article is a textbook example of the "ridicule and violent harassment" Puc describes, full of no-holds-barred fatphobia.

meet our writer

Alice is a freelance writer based in Oxfordshire. A member of the *Our Streets Now* team, Alice spends her free time running, lifting, playing Dungeons and Dragons, and annoying her two long-suffering cats.

Gold makes gross generalisations about body sizes, with statements such as, "the new Nike mannequin is not size 12, which is healthy, or even 16 – a hefty weight, yes, but not one to kill a woman", an ignorant argument which completely ignores the fact that human bodies are diverse in shape and size. Would a writer ever make similar sweeping statements about heights or shoe sizes? She also describes the model as "immense, gargantuan, vast" and snarks, "she is not readying herself for a run in her shiny Nike gear. She cannot run. She is, more likely, pre-diabetic and on her way to a hip replacement". While Gold claims, "I would never want a woman to hate herself for what she finds in the looking-glass", her article echoes the abuse fat women and others have heard throughout our lives: you are disgusting, you should exercise, but the world doesn't want to see you exercise because you are disgusting. The question of where and how fat people are supposed to exercise without offending the eyes of fatphobic onlookers is never answered because the reality is that these onlookers would rather we didn't exist at all.

This kind of backlash fails to answer the question of what fat women are supposed to wear when we exercise. Perhaps baggy jogging bottoms and oversized T-shirts, which are much less suitable for serious running and workouts than form-fitting, non-chafing fabrics? No, the underlying message behind such backlash is that fat people don't exercise; therefore, retailers should not produce clothes for us. This somehow misses the point that companies like *Nike* would not invest money in producing goods for a market that didn't exist. Athletics companies are not concern-trolling friends, trying to encourage us fat people to do the exercise that many people believe we've never considered; they're corporations responding to consumer demand. >>

>> Companies sell athletic clothes for fat women because plenty of athletic fat women want to buy them. If there was no market for athletic wear for fat people, no corporation would waste money producing it.

Additionally, Gold's central argument - a repeat of the common belief that fatness is inherently, and of itself, unhealthy - is based on phoney science and assumptions, debunked brilliantly by researchers such as fat activist Aubrey Gordon and her co-host Michael Hobbes on their podcast *Maintenance Phase* (for a deep dive into the science of the relationship between fatness and health, try the episode 'Is Being Fat Bad For You?').(4) For example, where Gold argues against fat-positive criticism of campaigns that blame cancer on fatness, Gordon and Hobbes go into the science behind the correlation between fatness and cancer diagnoses, discovering that the reality is not as simple as "being fat gives you cancer". >>



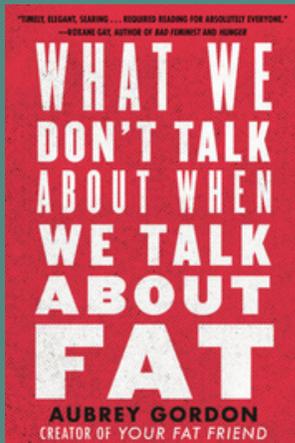
"fat people often avoid attending routine screenings such as cervical smears or prostate checks due to fatphobia from medical professionals. Consequently, they are less likely to receive a diagnosis of cancer in its early stages when it is eminently more treatable."

>> Instead, fat people often avoid attending routine screenings such as cervical smears or prostate checks due to fatphobia from medical professionals. Consequently, they are less likely to receive a diagnosis of cancer in its early stages when it is eminently more treatable. Fatness itself – as in, having a larger amount of adipose tissue on one’s body than average – does not automatically make a person unhealthy. It is entirely possible to be both fit and fat, and indeed, to be a fat elite athlete – just ask Olympic weightlifter Holley Mangold.(5)

Sadly, snarky articles in major newspapers are not the only issues fat women and other fat people face when we want to exercise – if they were, we could ignore them relatively easily. Fat women and people of marginalised genders who exercise in public are also exposed to public sexual harassment (PSH) based on their intersecting gender and body-size identities. *Our Streets Now* (OSN) emphasises(6) how fat women and girls often experience extreme and sometimes violent PSH, while Aubrey Gordon (writing as *Your Fat Friend*) discusses(7) the fact that fat women not only experience high levels of sexualised harassment but are expected to be grateful for the attention.

As Gordon writes in her post, "Any sexual attention fat women receive is treated as a windfall worthy of congratulations, an erroneous impossibility, or an out-and-out lie. Fat women are expected to be grateful for any expressions that could be mistaken for want, including assault and harassment". This attitude is apparent at all levels of society, including legal systems. In a 2018 court case in Canada, a judge commented that a 17-year-old girl who had been sexually assaulted by a 49-year-old man was probably "flattered" by his attention because of her weight.(8) A fat woman may feel unable to exercise in a public space because she may face sexual harassment, and if she does, the people she trusts enough to tell may actually congratulate her on the experience instead of sympathising with her.

Non-sexual harassment is also an issue for fat women and fat people of other genders who exercise in public. While running, I’ve been barked at, laughed at and, one time, passers-by even hummed a bouncy, Nellie-the-Elephant-style soundtrack at me. Exercising while fat makes you hypervisible. This is at odds with the survival technique of invisibility, learned by many of us in school as a form of protection in a fat-hating world. >>



book information

TITLE What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat
AUTHOR Aubrey Gordon
PUBLISHER Penguin Random House
YEAR 2021
LANGUAGE English
GENRE Non-fiction

"Exercising while fat makes you hypervisible. This is at odds with the survival technique of invisibility, learned by many of us in school as a form of protection in a fat-hating world."

>> At school, I, like many other fat girls, hid at the back of the playing fields during games and kept my head down during cross-country runs, trying to minimise my visibility and avoid non-sexual fatphobic harassment from fellow students and even staff. While my experiences of this kind of harassment as an adult didn't put me off exercising altogether, they set me back. My routine was disrupted for a few days after each experience of PSH as an adult, and they're always at the back of my mind whenever I go out for a run today. When I run now, I will often wear a hoodie - even on hot days - to ensure that my stomach and arms are covered; I put on loud music and never take my earbuds out because I would rather not hear negative comments in the first place than go through the time, effort and emotional turmoil of processing them and letting them go. How many fat women with similar experiences have been put off for good? According to lived experiences gathered by inclusive fitness organisation *Fitness Professionals Against Weight Stigma*, fat people are regularly shamed or singled out for exercising. These experiences take a toll on their mental health.(9)

While I would love to reach a point where I can fully claim space as a fat runner and shrug off any comments without breaking stride, a lifetime of comments on my body has taken its toll. Without the shield provided by my hoodie and my earbuds, I would simply stay home.

It's tough living in a world that discourages bodies like mine from exercising, mocks us for trying, and then condemns us if we give up. I'm often surprised that I found my love of running in the first place. But, as I noted earlier, companies like *Nike* wouldn't make athletic clothing for fat women if there weren't enough of us out here to warrant the financial risk. I despised running in school but fell in love with it after finding out about fat-friendly running podcasts (e.g., Jill Angie's *Not Your Average Runner*, and taking the graduated approach championed in *Couch to 5K* and the *Zombies Run* app) rather than the one-size-fits-all format that we followed in school. Instagram led me to fat fitness influencers, such as weightlifter Meg Boggs and yoga expert Jessamyn Stanley, whose books and accounts have helped me build a routine that treats my body type as a source of strength rather than a hurdle I have to overcome. I've found true joy in movement and exercise through fat-positive yoga classes, where I can see bodies like mine achieving complex and challenging poses and know that it's my level of experience, not my body, that is the difference between them and me. While the world of fitness and exercise is still far from welcoming to fat people, the rise of fat influencers is slowly normalising the sight of diverse body types exercising, while organisations such as *Fitness Professionals Against Weight Stigma* are producing guides which help trainers and fitness organisations to be more inclusive of larger bodies, instead of alienating fat exercisers. Hopefully, one day soon, the idea that someone can be fit and fat will be so mundane that an outraged article on the subject won't make it beyond someone's personal Facebook posts, let alone into *The Telegraph*. ●

THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE IN A FATPHOBIC SOCIETY

This article will examine body shaming and the psychological oppression within an intimate relationship between an overweight woman and a non-overweight partner and how fatphobia plays out within their power dynamic.

When you see the word 'phobia', do you immediately think of something truly horrifying, with every right to be feared? If so, you may be confused as to why the term 'fatphobia' is rampant in today's society. Fatphobia is the fear and hatred of fat bodies. Fat people are shamed and bullied for their oversized weight, which doesn't fit in with what is classed as a 'normal' body (i.e. slender with minimal fat). It's important to recognise that disgust toward fat bodies due to social norms can intersect with physical abuse, especially in intimate partner relationships.(1)

Written by KATHERINE AMALIJA

Illustration by
[HAVVANUR SONMEZ \(@aykimkio\)](#)

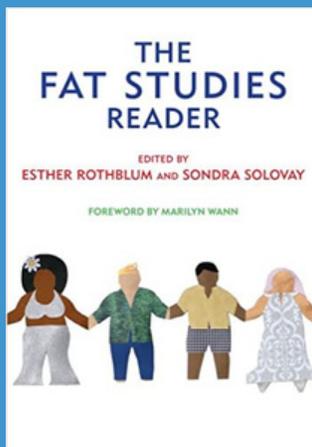
TW sexual, physical and emotional abuse; fat shaming.

IPV, also known as Intimate Partner Violence, includes emotional, physical and sexual abuse, as well as controlling behaviours. In the book *The Fat Studies Reader*, there's a chapter by Royce called 'The Shape of Abuse', where she states that "[one] area of special concern for fat women has gone relatively unexplored in the social science literature: the intersection of fat oppression and violence against women".(2) This link may not be fully realised by people who see these two issues separately, as they might not think that being derogatory towards fat women is an 'abusive' action or that it could escalate into physical abuse. Royce argues "not only that violence affects fat women in ways specific to their size, but also that fat women are sometimes targeted for violence precisely because of their size".(3) Royce makes an important observation here; fat women are singled out to be on the receiving end of this abuse and, when a partner is involved in that, it can become something that devastates and escalates over a period of time. >>

>> Fatphobia and IPV can cause extreme and detrimental effects on the fat women being abused, such as mental suffering (e.g., making them highly critical of themselves). They may even form a reliant attachment to their abuser as they feel they have nowhere else to go and worry they may be harmed further if they try to leave. Asymmetrical power is a significant factor within this dynamic. Referring back to Royce once more, she comments on how "fat women in relationships with abusers are subject to their partners' fatphobic insults and verbal attacks on their desirability".(4) Women in these abusive relationships are punished by their partners, whether verbally or physically, which can gradually demolish their self-esteem and cause them to believe that they deserve this abuse as they are not desirable. As time goes on, they can start to feel they should be grateful that they are even in a relationship to begin with, and since their self-esteem has taken a hit, they can find it harder to leave. They often feel they will not be loved by someone else or that they or their family could be harmed further if they try to leave. It is as if they are not able to break free, having had their confidence shattered and making them feel like they can't stand on their own two feet without that person.

Being bullied for their weight in their adolescence can make fat women believe that they deserve what is happening to them currently, so when violence becomes a factor, they do not question if it's wrong as they have known different types of abuse (e.g., school bullying, parental abuse) throughout their lives. As Fabrizio writes, "For children, the effects are long lasting and very harmful. This shapes the confidence and vulnerability of fat individuals and can lead to the construction of abusers based on the cultural enablement of fat oppression".(5) It's clear that women who are subjected to this abuse will carry those memories with them forever. The self-doubt and fear they experience will play some part in how they view the world and others around them, especially if it has been going on from an early age. The author says, "It's easy for an abuser of a fat woman to consistently shame her for her body because society not only tolerates these attacks, but celebrates them".(6)

It has also been noted that fat women who have seen a doctor about a medical issue can be told that it is likely due to their weight, and losing some will result in better health. An online article written by the self-styled fat doctor Offman states that "doctors fall into the same trap as everyone else when they oversimplify the causes of obesity by blaming patients for eating too much and not exercising enough".(7) >>



book information

TITLE The Fat Studies Reader

AUTHOR Esther Rothblum and Sondra Soloway

PUBLISHER New York University Press

YEAR 2009

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Culture

>> Not only is this dismissive of their feelings, but it's highly dangerous on a medical level as something could be missed due to a doctor chalking up their issue because of their size. If this narrative is being reinforced by a medical professional, then the abuse that they are exposed to at home becomes normal. Hence, it is less likely that they will question their partners' motives, and more likely they will feel the aggressions towards them are justified. If they do not know any other type of care and compassion, they believe that they, solely, are the issue.

Fatphobia can happen to anyone, no matter the colour of someone's skin or where they come from. To better understand the intersections between race, fatphobia and IPV, I would recommend looking at *Fearing the Black Body - The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* written by Sabrina Strings.(8) The dominant societal norm states that 'fat is bad', so fat women will accept what is happening to them; this includes the violence they face at home with their partner, who constantly berates and scolds them for how they look. They do not see the abuse just in their homes but on their screens and outside too. >>



>> The constant barrage of advertisements tells women that they can be happier if they were thinner, showing thin women in bikinis in summer, basically telling them that their size is not accepted, making them feel left out and alone.(9) For example, there was an advertisement for La-Mar Reducing Soap that promises women they can “wash away fat and years of age” with this product. Fast forward to today, and there may not be advertisements in papers anymore, but there are videos on TikTok and posts on Instagram for “Skinny Teas” and “Fat loss pills” showing ‘dramatic’ transformations of women who have taken these products, with some viewers not realising that they probably never took those products in the first place, they are being duped.

Goodman wrote in her book *The Invisible Woman*: “If some women continue to put their lives on hold until they have lost weight, it is because they are bullied into doing so by the endless cultural propaganda, often reinforced by family and friends, which tells them they can’t truly enjoy life, can’t have self-confidence or high self-esteem, unless and until they are thin”.(10) Culture greatly impacts our lives due to how we consume it in this day and age through social media. If they see adverts with thin women who are having the time of their lives, they feel like they cannot participate in the fun because they don’t look like *them*. Instead, they shun themselves, and internal fatphobia manifests as hatred and shame for their bodies.

The focus on women’s experiences of fatphobia and how it affects them is warranted, as fat women are scrutinised a lot more for the way they look, how they act, their weight, and so on. This is because of the societal pressures they have been receiving throughout history.

meet our writer

Katherine is a 28-year-old content writer who has a passionate interest in mental health and storytelling and hopes to one day publish a book of her own.

By looking at advertisements, we can see a clear divide in how fat women, in particular, are addressed compared to men. With appearance being a significant factor in ads for products (look up sexist weight advertisements online, and a myriad will appear throughout media history), there’s no equal footing regarding weight with some of them. These advertisements promote violence against women by men alongside it in a ‘jokey’ manner. For example, the sexist humour about women’s size that they are subjected to, and the jokes about rape, are well known. So when a fat woman grows up experiencing sexism and fatphobia, they can feel like they are even further on the outside of society and internal misogyny bubbles up. As previously stated, advertisements have shown the way that fat is viewed, not for men, but for women. (11) >>

>> This focus on fat can influence people so much that it can come out in the form of microaggressions. For instance, Angela Meadows has written an online piece about these aggressions, stating that they can be seen in television shows with fat jokes, a friend asking if she “looks fat in this”, people scrutinising what fat people eat in restaurants, and so on.(12) These microaggressions can influence an IPV relationship as an abusive partner will watch what she eats, comment on how much it is, chastise her for the way she looks, taunting her and calling her fat. This can then turn into full-on aggression with physical violence. Something that may seem ‘small’ as a microaggression can escalate in a relationship where violence is the main factor.

Panina speaks of how "violence against women is a systematic issue worldwide. Women are the targets of a vast array of abuses at the hands of men and others who align (or wish to align) with dominant societal ideals".(13) It's rife throughout the world, and those targeted have to deal with the violence, abuse, and the aftermath, which can affect their mental health. This is especially true with prolonged and targeted abuse from a consistent person in their life. So when a fat woman is in a relationship with someone who aligns with these thoughts, they're not only the target because of their gender, but their body size is also factored in. It seems like no matter what they do, they cannot escape these targeted attacks when they are just simply existing, and in a society that still does not fully 'accept' a fat woman, this makes them vulnerable to partners who know how to use their manipulation on them. (14)

"Weight-based abuse cannot be ignored in today's society. We must collectively do more to recognise and fight against the suffering that fat women experience. It's encouraging to see powerful voices out there. Women worldwide are fighting to be seen and changing the status quo of what we perceive to be the 'norm'. They are not giving up and are letting people know that even a muffled voice can still have power."

Weight-based abuse cannot be ignored in today's society. We must collectively do more to recognise and fight against the suffering that fat women experience. It's encouraging to see powerful voices out there. Women worldwide are fighting to be seen and changing the status quo of what we perceive to be the 'norm'. They are not giving up and are letting people know that even a muffled voice can still have power. By going to protests, standing up for themselves, and not accepting what used to be, they are taking their power back. As a society, we must educate ourselves and others, deconstructing our oppressive beliefs. ●

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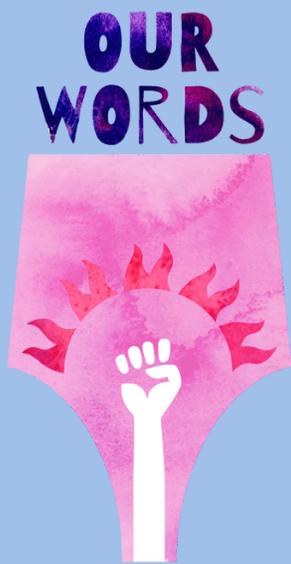
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about us

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Our Words is part of Our Streets Now (OSN). Within *Our Words*, we have a Literary Magazine, a Book Club and events. We feature various writing pieces on topics covered by inspiring books in the *Literary Magazine*. The Book Club is an opportunity for the OSN community to engage with one another, creating spaces of dialogue. At events, we promote interviews, lectures, and poetry gatherings. *Our Words*' primary aim is collective learning. We appreciate our members' experiences, knowledge, and interest.



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