

# VIOLENCE AGAINST FAT WOMEN: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** Violence against women is a pervasive, worldwide phenomenon. Feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw have argued that gender intersects with other categories such as race and class to produce different experiences of violence and abuse for different women. This paper explores how size intersects with gender in the verbal and emotional abuse of fat women throughout their lives. Beginning in childhood, fat girls are the targets of bullies who use slurs targeting their weight. As they age, fat women may experience verbal abuse in intimate relationships and even in comments from strangers.

On a subtler level, fat women may also be subject to discrimination by legal and medical professionals. Because of this abuse, they experience a loss of self-esteem that could, in extreme cases, lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The vast array of abuses, and their unfortunate results are created by people who subscribe to cultural ideas about beauty and thinness. There is no doubt that fat women are targeted for violence on a daily basis in a unique way because of the intersection of their gender and size. More qualitative research on this type of violence must be carried out so that fat women's experiences are validated and awareness of the existence of fatphobic violence is spread.

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**V**iolence against 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. Radical feminists have argued that this violence exists on a continuum in Western societies. Sexual objectification in the media, sexual harassment in the workplace, and rape are all examples of how women are targets of sexualized violence (Lorber, 2012). In her article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color", Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests that violence against women is not simply a gendered phenomenon; instead, she argues that gender intersects with race, class and other

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social locations in order to produce specific experiences of violence for different women (1991). How sizeism and gender intersect in violence against fat women is an area of research that has not been explored until very recently. Fat women are systemically targeted for verbal and emotional abuse because of their size. Fat children and, in particular, fat girls are targeted by bullies – this has a detrimental effect on their self-esteem. As they grow older, fat women are “kept in their place” by their intimate partners, medical and legal professionals, and even strangers who use fatphobic language.

Childhood bullying involves some children who perceive themselves to be stronger deliberately preying on others in order to hurt them. In her article, “Abundantly Invisible: Fat Oppression as a Framework for Sexual Violence against Women”, Melissa Fabrizio argues that bullying is not an isolated event. Children bully others as a result of having internalized power structures that exist in their families and wider society (Fabrizio, 2014). Those who do not fit the dominant cultural ideal of being white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, and physically fit are specifically targeted by other kids because of their Othered status. As such, fat children are frequently targeted by bullies. Weinstock and Krehbiel in their article, “Fat Youth as Common Targets for Bullying”, suggest that overweight<sup>1</sup> children, in fact, experience “more frequent and longer lasting teasing” (2009) than others. In wider American society, self-discipline and thinness are valued and viewed as inextricable from one another (Weinstock and Krehbiel, 2009). The fat body is perceived as one that is deviant and one that lacks control. Body weight is often viewed as changeable. Therefore, mistreating fat bodies is seen as something that is not only acceptable but necessary, to persuade those who are fat to become thin. Immersed in culture from birth, children quickly internalize and reproduce the practice of fat shaming through bullying.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'overweight' to stay true to the original studies by Weinstock and Krehbiel, and Griffiths Wolke, Page and Horwood. Both studies classified kids according to objective criteria. Conversely, I use the word 'fat' in all other locations in order to reflect that fat and the societal loathing of it are social constructions.

It is evident that despite the fact that all fat children are targeted for bullying as a result of their size, the amount of girls targeted is disproportionate to that of boys. In their study of overweight children, Weinstock and Krehbiel found that 28.6% of girls and 16.1% of boys reported being bullied by family members; 63% of girls and 24.7% of boys reported bullying by their peers, and; 15% of girls and 10% of boys reported bullying by both (2009). Researchers Griffiths, Wolke, Page and Horwood analyzed the differences in bullying between girls and boys. Although they found that overweight boys are more often the targets of physical bullying than overweight girls, this is likely because, as Jon Swain argues in his article “Masculinities in Education”, boys are socialized to “exert bodily power...and [harden] their bodies to prepare...for physical challenges and confrontations” (2005). Moreover, bigger boys were often bullies of other boys themselves if they were considered dominant figures within the group. Among groups of girls, they found that name calling directed at overweight girls was prevalent. Overweight girls, however, were not often bullies but the victims of bullying instead (2005). All bullied children experience negative consequences as a result of being bullied. Symptoms such as “depression, loneliness, general anxiety, and social physique anxiety” (Weinstock and Krehbiel, 2009) are prevalent among both sexes. However, while boys grow up to be men who can proclaim that they are proud of their fat and develop meaningful connections with others based on this identification, girls do not grow up to be women who are allowed to be proud of their fat (Monaghan and Hardy, 2009). Childhood bullying is just a precursor to both the intimate partner abuse and structural institutional discrimination that adult women experience in a fatphobic, patriarchal society.

Intimate partner abuse is a form of gendered violence against women. As Tracy Royce suggests in her article, “The Shape of Abuse”, battering is reflective of the subordinate position that women hold in society. Royce writes that at the same time, “institutionalized sexism perpetuates men’s violent power and control over women” (2009). Historically, partner abuse has been considered a family matter. It has been dismissed by courts and women have been blamed for bringing violence onto themselves (Sheehy, 2014). Nowadays, there is more acknowledgement of

intimate partner abuse under the law; for example, the Battered Woman Defence is a legitimate defence used by counsel to protect women who kill their abusive husbands from incarceration (Sheehy, 2014). Much like how violence against women exists on a spectrum in society, the types of abuse that individual abusers use to control their partners also exist on a continuum (Royce, 2009).

Verbal abuse is one specific type of abuse that keeps women from leaving their partners by destroying their self-esteem. Royce suggests that abusive partners often employ societal prejudices, including fatphobia, when they verbally abuse their partners. Fat women are routinely told that if they leave, they will not be able to find another partner because they are not attractive enough (Royce, 2009). Royce observed that even in relationships that are not considered conventionally abusive, some men comment on their partners' weight, control their food consumption and flaunt their interest in thinner women (2009). Whether women are classified as fat or not by societal standards, they live in a "fat-fearing, fat-hating culture... [and are] likely to be told [they are] fat" (as cited in Royce, 2009) by their partners. Such an observation is consistent with what Elizabeth Sheehy found in her book *Defending Battered Women on Trial*, in which she analyzed the cases of battered women who killed their abusive spouses. Abusers' dissatisfaction with their female partners' weights was a typical theme that she found across almost all of the cases that she analyzed. In one case, Kim Kondejewski's husband repeatedly told her that she was too fat. When she had lost twenty-five pounds, he told her that she was "still fat" and when she joined a gym, he made her quit, telling her that she "had no right" (as cited in Sheehy, 2014) to join it. Royce writes that language is a means of "achieving dominance" and "sizeist comments signify a gendered power differential between partners" (2009). She goes as far as to suggest that the symptoms that women who endure fat shaming as a form of emotional and verbal abuse have are consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (2009). Women quickly lose their self-esteem, face psychological barriers to leaving abusive relationships, and are "prevent[ed from both] literally and metaphorically taking up 'too much' space" (Royce, 2009).

Verbal abuse is not only found in relationships. Women who leave their abusive partners often face healthcare professionals and law enforcement officials who subscribe to societal fatphobia. Royce notes that fat women who report sexual assault to the police are often re-victimized by police officers. Their allegations are not taken seriously, with some officers refusing to even take reports, commenting that these women are “insufficiently attractive to rape” (as cited in Royce, 2009). Similarly, the health concerns of fat women are often not taken seriously by medical professionals (Kinzel, 2014). Lesley Kinzel created the hashtag #DiagnosisFat on Twitter so that fat people could share their experiences of medicalization. Countless posts under this hashtag demonstrate that very often, health professionals misdiagnose those who are fat, producing “life-threatening consequences [because of] assumptions about a patient’s health and needs based exclusively on a visual appraisal and personal assumptions” (Kinzel, 2014). Just one such example is that of a fat individual who was advised to lose weight after having been diagnosed with asthma (Keely, 2014).

Strangers, too, often feel that they are entitled to comment on the bodies of fat women, thereby reinforcing their marginalized position in society. On the website for the magazine *Everyday Feminism*, a comic based on a real story submitted by a user is posted. This graphic depicts a self-identified obese woman who is followed and harassed by a stranger on the street. He shouts things such as “our insurance is higher ‘cause of fatsos like you... you need to hurry up and die!” (as cited in “The Unbelievably Cruel,” 2015). The final image in the comic is of the woman alone, with the caption “some days, fat is all I am... even in my own head” (as cited in “The Unbelievably Cruel,” 2015). As can be seen here, it is evident that verbal abuse has an effect on fat women’s self-esteem. Royce also refers to Lenskyj’s study of the sexual harassment of female players on university sports teams. In this study, Lenskyj found that women are criticized publicly by their coaches if they gain weight. Royce listed several shocking ways in which they do this: “public weigh-ins, insults, posted “fat lists” or “weekly ‘Fat Pig’ awards” (as cited in Royce, 2009). Society encourages people to call out women who are fat in the name of health or a lack of sexual appeal, while ignoring actual negative health effects such as PTSD

and a loss of self-esteem that result from verbal harassment. Although it is not societally acknowledged, such comments toward fat women are forms of abuse that have a direct effect on their emotional well-being.

Fat women are the targets of various forms of violence specifically because of their size. Fat girls are targeted by bullies who use name-calling to make fun of them. In intimate relationships, women, whether they are fat by societal standards or not, are subjected to verbal abuse from their male partners. These men use the knowledge that fatphobia exists in society to their advantage, convincing women that they will not find another partner if they leave. As a result of dehumanization, these women experience a loss of self-esteem amidst other mental health consequences. Even if women leave abusive relationships, they encounter fatphobia in the words of medical professionals and legal officials. Fat women are harassed by strangers on the street who shout insults, as well as by their own coaches on sports teams. Ultimately, 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. It is imperative that more research on this type of violence be carried out so that awareness of its existence can be spread and so that the experiences of these women are validated and they themselves are re-humanized.

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