



**Women
fight size
discrimination
in the
workplace**

**SIZE DOESN'T
MATTER**

By Samme Chittum

Lisa Tealer no longer cringes when she encounters office furniture that won't accommodate her size—she just asks for an armless chair if she needs one. When ordering lunch at the company cafeteria, she signs her ticket “Lisa, AKA Queen Diva,” a playful gesture that nonetheless makes a statement about how she sees herself.

“It’s just a small thing,” she says, “but it’s my way of creating my own space.” As the diversity manager for a California biotechnology firm, Tealer has used her considerable talents to create a discrimination-free environment that does not penalize plus-size workers like herself. She knows that prejudice aimed at large employees—who are routinely abused, belittled, and held back because of their body size—is a national problem that has only recently been recognized. Last year, researchers at Yale’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity declared that discrimination against plus-size individuals, especially women, is “as common as racial discrimination.”

Women who are classified as obese generally earn 12 percent less than thin women, according to the Rudd Center. They are also less likely to be hired. One 2005 survey of human resource personnel in the United Kingdom reported that an astonishing 93 percent said they would choose a thin applicant over a plus-size one “purely on the basis of their weight.”

Tealer remembers her first bruising encounter with body bias in the workplace, when she was a young intern fresh out of college. “One day the woman I reported to, who was also a woman of color, took me aside and gave me a talk about scientific excellence, and I understood that. Then she got to the part about how hard it is for a large person, especially a woman, to succeed in the scientific arena, and launched into a lecture about how I needed to lose weight. I was totally devastated. I felt like someone had just stabbed me in the chest.”



Frequently, victims of this particular form of discrimination are also members of other marginalized groups, observes Sandra Solovay, a diversity lawyer and author of the book *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination*. “You can’t look at the issue of weight discrimination in a vacuum,” explains Solovay. “At the end of the day, this has a disproportionate effect on African Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups.”

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Like many other women of size, Linda Ramos has had to fight to prove herself by working harder and smarter. “I’m a person who never says die. Whatever I do, I give it my all.” Outside the office, she performs as a belly dancer and helped organize the first Plus-sizeitude Festival, sponsored by the National Association to Advance Plus-size Acceptance (NAAAPA). But her can-do attitude has not paid off in her clerical

job with the County of Los Angeles. Despite strong performance reviews, she has seen thin co-workers who failed the same qualifying exam she passed, get the promotion she wanted. “I’m stuck in a job track where I can’t go anywhere, and it’s really frustrating,” says Ramos. “At some point, it’s hard not to believe that

ISTOCK PHOTO

my size isn't affecting my chances at work."

Self-described plus-size activists such as Marilyn Wann of San Francisco, author of the book *Fat! So?*—a homage to the joys of shedding embarrassment instead of pounds—believes that one day, both overt and covert discrimination on the job will become taboo. "Fifteen years from now, it will be accepted that discriminating based on weight is stupid, and no one will want to be caught dead doing it," Wann says.

For now, however, being perceived as plus-size by your boss or co-workers means being subjected to a plethora of demeaning stereotypes. "We know what all the negative assumptions are about plus-size people," says Tealer. "They're lazy or they're unhappy. They must eat a lot because they have issues. They're sloppy. They're out of control. All these connotations come up."

Such misconceptions are based on pervasive beauty myths, explains Deb Burgard, PhD, a Harvard-trained psychologist and an expert on body image. "Our culture teaches us that if we want a perfect life, we should engage in the practice of perfecting our body." The real solution, she says, is "to stop reading anything based on a person's body size, and stop using it as a proxy for self-confidence, self-discipline, health, or sexiness."

Many businesses cling to the mind-set that women employees' bodies are another form of advertisement, says Esther D. Rothblum, PhD, a professor of women's studies at San Diego State University who studies body image issues. "I can't tell you how many appalling stories I've heard from women who were told not to bother to apply for a particular job because 'our uniforms won't fit you,' or from employees who were asked to stay home the day the company photo was taken."



Instead of working to change attitudes, some employers—taking cues from our thin-centric culture—try to promote health by pushing on-the-job weight-loss programs, says Pat Lyons, a nurse and author of the book *Great Shape*, which advocates fitness at every size. Although promoting healthy eating and exercise is a good thing, an overemphasis on dieting can backfire with some employees. "The plus-size woman who has made peace with herself and is getting on with her life doesn't need that passive-aggressive 'won't you join us?' invitation to lose weight."

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Although diets produce short-term weight loss, they do more harm than good because they fail in the long run, says Linda Bacon, PhD, a nutritionist and leader in the Health At Every Size movement. "Diets don't work," says Bacon. "Not only is the whole industry based on a lie, but it's also teaching self-hatred. The underlying message is that you don't measure up."

"The perception that plus-size employees are a liability has become more acute in recent years," says Tealer. "The unfortunate thing about the war on obesity is that it's turned into a war on plus-size people. It has given license to treat people badly who happen to be plus-size. It's just not right to terrorize people in the process of trying to make them thin."

Every plus-size woman has her own story to tell about being rejected or demeaned. One of the most familiar

is the job applicant who is given a warm reception over the phone, only to get a freezing-cold shoulder when she shows up for the interview. “This happened to me,” says Lyons. “After I sent in my résumé, I talked to someone on the phone about the job, and they were so excited about my qualifications, and yada, yada, yada. Then, when I came in and sat down with the interviewer, she would barely speak to me. It was clear to me that she had made up her mind based on my size. I wrote it off and went on. But for a lot of people, it’s devastating.”

In Lyon’s case, the judgment was implied. But often it’s blatant and brutal. Deborah Iyall is a poet and painter who teaches art in a Navajo school in northeastern Arizona. A member of the Cowlitz tribe, Iyall is an extrovert who is comfortable in her fulsome body. She was just eight years old when she climbed onstage for the first time—in this case, the family washing machine—and belted out a song. As the lead singer for the popular 1980’s rock band Romeo Void, Iyall wrote songs with edgy lyrics and indulged a “kooky” fashion sense that was “about being sexual but not a sex object.” Even Iyall, however, was not immune from attack by plus-size-phobic bullies.

“I did have one traumatic experience that I’ll never forget,” Iyall says. “Our band was performing at Hofstra

University on Long Island, and it was 10-cent-beer night. And there was a food court outside where the band was playing. After the first couple of songs, some drunken frat boys in the audience started throwing donuts at me. I just flipped out and ran off the stage. My road manager tried to talk me into going back on, but I wouldn’t do it, because I knew they were still out there.”

Iyall encountered the same mentality in a different form when dealing with Columbia Records, the band’s distributor. Marketing personnel at Columbia began pressuring her to check into a spa and lose weight, a demand she found ridiculous. “What is the point of spending all that money to lose 20 pounds? I felt like the record industry was trying to get between me and my fans.”

Her experiences illustrate the abusive, intensely personal response to their appearance that women confront. Although both genders must deal with appearance-based discrimination at work, the pressure on women to be thin is much greater. Yale’s 2007 Rudd Center survey that identified the extent of weight-based bias in the United States also found that women get negative feedback when they are just 13 pounds over what is considered their “highest healthy weight,”



Tips for a Size-Diverse Workplace

Conduct a cultural audit. Ask yourself: Is the organization ready to hear the size-diversity message? Who will be your supporters? Who will be your challengers?

Generate a strategy that yields a win-win perspective. Create activities and initiatives that deliver your message and support the company, too.

Create a size-friendly space for yourself. Start small by surrounding your office or cubicle with size affirmations.

Volunteer for health-related activities. Bring some size diversity to the committee; share ideas so that plus-size employees can participate.

When resistance shows up, remain calm. Don’t automatically go on the defensive. Listen, pause, and then respond.

There’s no rule that you have to act right away. Delivery of the message is just as important as the content.

Organize a size-positive posse. Start a group, meet for lunch, and share ideas. You might make some friends and allies in the process.

Contribute to the company newsletter. Offer to write a size-diversity article.

Lisa Tealer



versus men, who don't experience problems until they are 68 pounds over their high healthy weight mark.

In general, women job seekers are more vulnerable to being judged by their weight, says Rothblum. In one study she conducted, two groups of college students were given résumés and asked to evaluate the applicant. On one résumé the applicant's weight was listed as 180 pounds, versus 120 on the other résumé. The same applicant, when identified as heavier, was consistently rated as less qualified, said Rothblum. "The interesting thing is that 180 pounds is not necessarily that much for a woman of average height. So the bias is kicking in at a much lower weight if the employee is a woman."

Many forty-something women who pick up an extra 20 to 30 pounds—which is quite common—are encountering this covert bias for the first time, especially if they work in image-conscious industries. Elizabeth Cohen of Port Crane, New York, is a journalist and award-winning author with an A-list résumé. Yet on a recent job interview, she sensed that it was her appearance that was being scrutinized, not her work. "I felt in my heart that the minute I met the interviewers, the die was cast because I didn't look the way they wanted me to look. I became aware of weight issues for the first time in a new, disturbing way."

When confronted with body bias, some women have chosen to fight back. That's what Wann did when she embarked on a personal quest for plus-size acceptance. As a twenty-something graduate of Stanford University, Wann was working as a freelance writer and "living my groovy life." Until the evening she received a double punch of rejection. The first blow came during dinner with an old college friend. "There was some chemistry there. And things were going well until he said, 'You know I like you, but I'm embarrassed to introduce you to my friends because you're plus-size.' Naturally, I was hurt and shocked. I just wanted to kind of go numb and forget about it.

"That same evening I came home and opened a letter from Blue Cross of California that said they



wouldn't insure me because I was 'morbidly obese.'" The combined effect, she said, "was like a door slamming shut in my face."

Wann woke up the next day powered by what she calls "a high-octane rage that fueled what turned out to be a really fun, creative outburst." The result was a rebellious 'zine that quickly found an audience of women who were tired of being put down. "Now I realize the day I started *Fat! So?* was the day I came out. I'm definitely borrowing queer community language, because I think most plus-size people live in a kind of closet. They say, 'This is not my body. My body is what I'm going to be when I lose weight.'"

While many cringe when they hear the term *plus-size*, Wann, Lyons, and other activists believe it is time to take back the *f* word. "A lot of people don't like the term *overweight* because it assumes weight is in itself a problem," says Lyons. "Using the term *plus-size* has been very freeing for many women." Regardless of how

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they choose to define themselves, women who have been stigmatized because of their weight are finding support from each other and advocacy organizations such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and the Council on Weight and Size Discrimination that lobby for size

acceptance and encourage the media to question demeaning images of plus-size people.

There are hopeful signs that attitudes may be changing. The corporate world is starting to embrace a social agenda that honors people of all body types through diversity programs. Tealer and other diversity managers are leaders in a movement to promote an inclusive workplace. Businesses are learning that diversity is not just a program but also "a strategic tool for success" that maximizes human potential, she says.

Companies have been put on notice that trampling

on the rights of plus-size workers can have consequences. When Jennifer Portnick, a qualified plus-size aerobics teacher, applied to Jazzercise to become a certified instructor and was turned down because she did not fit the corporate image, she filed a complaint with the San Francisco Human Rights Commission and won. Jazzercise settled with Portnick and agreed to drop its "fit appearance" standard.

A few progressive cities, including San Francisco, Washington, DC, and Santa Cruz, California, have adopted laws that ban weight and height discrimination, notes Solovay, who along with Wann and Bacon testified at a recent public hearing in Boston before state lawmakers there who are considering passing a similar law.

Human resource departments can also make a difference by "helping people live in the bodies they have," says Bacon. "The reality is that many plus-size people have excellent health if you look at objective measurements, such as cholesterol, blood pressure, and exercise habits."

Individuals who want to make a difference can act on their own, says Tealer, who has outlined a series of action-oriented steps for promoting size acceptance (see sidebar). She suggests that employees get involved by educating themselves, volunteering to work on company-sponsored health-related activities, and creating their own "no diet/no body-hatred zone" in the work area.

Lyons has a simple suggestion. "If we want to help people, the first thing is to stop judging them, and stop making comments about their weight. That includes the standard, 'Oh, you must have lost a few pounds.' Stop watching my weight. My weight is my business." **DW**

Samme Chittum writes about health, women's issues, and the environment for the New York Times, Women's Feature Service, Village Voice and Ladies Home Journal.

Get Connected!

You are not alone. Make connections with other women and find the products and resources you need to make a difference in your own life and the lives of others.

Council on Size and Weight Discrimination

www.cswd.org

Works to change people's attitudes about weight by acting as a consumer advocate for larger people in the areas of medical treatment, job discrimination, and media images.

The Workplace Bullying Institute

www.workplacebullyinglaw.org

The premier U.S. research and education organization dedicated to the eradication of workplace bullying.

The International Size Acceptance Association

www.size-acceptance.org

Promotes size acceptance and fights size discrimination through advocacy and lawful action.

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance

www.naafa.org

A leader in the fight to promote size acceptance. Find everything from newsletters to convention dates. Learn how to write a complaint letter.

Now Foundation and the Love Your Body Project

www.nowfoundation.org

Find out how to fight unrealistic beauty standards.

Largesse, the Network for Size Esteem

www.largesse.net

Learn about International No Diet Day.



Largely Positive

www.largelypositive.com

An upbeat resource with personal-care products and columnist Carol Johnson.

National Organization for Lesbians of Size

www.nolose.org

A volunteer-run organization dedicated to ending the oppression of fat people and creating a vibrant, fat, queer culture.

Body Positive

www.bodypositive.com

Check out the *Size Matters Too* online radio show and books that will get you thinking in a positive way.

SizeWise

www.sizewise.com

Everything from products to politics.

The Plus Size Yellow Pages

www.plusizeyellowpages.com

Clothing, DVDs, and personal-care products.