

Plus-Size Representation in Media

Report by: Virgie Tovar

IG: @virgietovar / www.virgietovar.com

For questions, contact: virgie@virgietovar.com

What do we know about plus-size representation in media?



1. Right now there are few plus-size characters in shows or movies.
1. If they are present, they are typically both secondary characters and portrayed in a dehumanizing, *unidimensional* manner, typically as one or more of the following:
 - a. a source of comic relief (especially where the character's body itself is the punchline)
 - b. a crutch meant to make the main character look more appealing
 - c. an unconditional source of relief and support with minimal or no limits
 - d. a villain (Ursula, Stromboli)
 - e. unusually selfish or otherwise lacking in morality (Kate in *This Is Us*)
 - f. unhealthy, dead or presumably going to die if they don't diet (aunt in *Dumplin'*)
 - g. always dissatisfied with their body; if they're not, it's considered humorous
 - h. highly sexualized or inappropriately romantically aggressive (Miss Piggy, Gretchen in *Bob's Burgers*)
 - i. lacking any desirability (completely written out of romances, crushes, etc.)
 - j. idiotic
 - k. slovenly or disheveled
 - l. unfashionable
 - m. incapable of having children or are inept mothers
 - n. secretly a thin person or vice versa (*Drop Dead Diva*, *Shallow Hal*)
 - o. having experienced a head trauma that makes her see the world in a different way (*I Feel Pretty*, *Isn't It Romantic*)
 - p. perpetually eating or thinking about food

- q. plus-size characters are also more likely to be portrayed in private or humiliating moments, e.g., going to the bathroom or having food on their clothes or face. (Mason in *I Feel Pretty*)

What may be the impact of this kind of plus-size representation?

1. Viewers of all sizes rarely - if ever - relate to plus-size people.
2. Viewers of all sizes rarely - if ever - find plus-size people as sources of inspiration or aspiration.
3. Viewers of all sizes develop anxiety about their weight and potentially long-term body dissatisfaction.
4. Plus-size viewers rarely - if ever - are able to imagine a life of dignity at their current size.
5. Plus-size viewers feel it is normal - maybe imperative - to undertake sometimes drastic or dangerous measures in order to have access to dignity, love and friendship.
6. Plus-size viewers see no one who looks like them in respected positions, and may themselves feel that they can't be leaders.
7. Viewers of all sizes see weight-based stigma as normalized and stigma may be potentially exacerbated.

What do we know about weight-based stigma?

1. 68% of US women are a size 14 or above.
2. US children learn and begin to exhibit the understanding of fatphobia by the age of 5.
3. Plus-size women earn between \$9000-19,000 less than her thin counterparts.
4. Plus-size people face discrimination at work and at the doctor's office (Members of the medical field show some of the highest rates of bias).
5. Plus-size women are more likely to be routed into careers that involve physical work.
6. Plus-size women are less likely to be routed into client-facing positions at work.
7. Plus-size women face romantic discrimination, and there is some evidence that they advocate for condom usage less than their thin counterparts.
8. Until recently, clothing was largely unavailable for women above a size "large" or a size "14," despite #1. Even now, most extended sizing has only gone up to include 3 additional sizes.
9. There is a less than 1% chance that a woman who is classified as obese will ever become a normal weight.
10. Dieting - considered the medical standard for appropriate treatment of higher weight people - has an abysmal efficacy rate (the most liberal estimates, put it at less than 10%) and are correlated with anxiety, depression and an increased likelihood of progressing into an eating disorder.
11. Roughly 25% of women and girls who diet will progress into having an eating disorder.

12. Plus-size girls and women are at a potentially higher risk for having an undetected eating disorder because part of the diagnostic criteria for anorexia is an underweight body.

What are some useful reframes for content creators?

1. **A plus-size person is not a failed thin person.** Being plus-size is a legitimate, stand-alone experience and identity.
2. A plus-size person's weight does not prevent them from having meaningful experiences; stigma does.
3. Plus-size people have thriving careers, hold positions of leadership, have successful romantic relationships and marriages, and are parents.
4. We are not born with preconceived notions about higher-weight people. We are socialized into them. There are cultures outside of the West, such as in Mauritania and Niger, that currently revere larger bodies and find slender ones funny and unappealing.
5. A person's weight is primarily genetically - not behaviorally - determined.
6. Encouraging children to participate in fatphobia/weight-based beliefs impacts how they see their own bodies and how they treat their peers. This has lifelong effects.
7. There is significant data that questions whether the health disparities between thin people and plus-size people aren't due to the ongoing experience of weight discrimination that plus-size people face. There is compelling data undertaken by researchers such as Dr. Janet Tomiyama that points to the inefficacy of BMI as an indicator of cardiovascular health. One study posits that up to 30% of those considered healthy by BMI standards are cardiometabolically unhealthy. Regardless of any health disparities noted between thin and plus-size people, however, plus-size people deserve to be portrayed with dignity and full humanity.
8. Every single person deserves to live with dignity and respect, free from discrimination, regardless of their weight or health status.

What are some suggestions for changes in plus-size representation?

1. Not only more plus-size lead characters, but more plus-size roles where (1) weight is not the defining characteristic of their plotline, (2) they are not attempting to become thin people, (3) their weight is seen as a legitimate part of what makes their existence complex and interesting, not caused by a disease that needs curing, (4) they don't ultimately die because of a presumably "weight related" issue. Secondary plus-size characters hold positions of leadership, have positive relationships, and have the main character's respect (not just unconditional support).
2. Plus-size characters are portrayed participating fully in all aspects of life with dignity.
3. Plus-size characters have positive romantic relationships and are considered worthy and full participants of dating, crushes, flirting, romance, marriage and parenting.

Who is the author of this brief?



My name is **Virgie Tovar**. Since 2010 I have lectured and written on weight-based discrimination and how it impacts plus-size individuals and our broader culture. My work in this area began while pursuing a Master's degree, researching the ways that body size and race affect gender development among women. I went on to edit the anthology *Hot & Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love & Fashion* (Seal Press 2012). My single-author titles include *You Have the Right to Remain Fat* (Feminist Press 2018) and *The Self-Love Revolution: Radical Body Positivity for Girls of Color*. I write for Forbes.com and am the host of the podcast "Rebel Eaters Club," where I explore the reclamation of eating joyfully with guests of all sizes. Please contact me for trainings and consultations:

virgie@virgietovar.com