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RESEARCH

# Does Fatness Politicize Women? Fat Women's Narratives on Whether Fatness is a Feminist Issue

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**Abstract**
Feminist scholars link anti-fatness to sexist body ideals and a relentless drive toward thinness enabled by patriarchal beauty norms (Gordon, 2020; Saguy, 2012). Fat activists, fat liberation writers, and feminist psychologists have long asserted that fatness is a feminist issue, including the highly impactful 2012 *Sex Roles* issue that interrogated the relationship between fatness and feminism (Chrisler, 2012; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012; Simic, 2016). Researchers have argued that fatness connects to cultural ideologies about bodies, power, patriarchy, and sexism. That said, qualitative researchers have not asked fat women to narrate their beliefs about links between fatness and political frameworks, a gap this study sought to fill. This study drew from semi-structured interviews with 20 fat women from a diverse community sample ($M_{age}$ = 40.4, $SD$ = 11.83, 40% queer-identified, 50% women of color, wide range of body weights) collected across the United States to examine their feelings about whether fatness was a feminist issue. We found six themes in fat women's responses: 1) Recognition of gendered double standards; 2) Fatness is how women are judged; 3) Fat women face overt discrimination; 4) Fatness has nothing to do with feminism; 5) Fatness has nothing to do with gender; and 6) Fat women deserve ridicule. Implications for how fatness and feminism were both aligned and misaligned, and how fat women attributed fatness both to systemic anti-fatness and to personal choices and "failures" were explored.

**Keywords** Fatness · Political socialization · Feminism · Body positivity · Gender roles · Attribution

Feminist scholars link anti-fatness to sexist body ideals and a relentless drive toward thinness enabled by patriarchal beauty norms (Gordon, 2020; Saguy, 2012). Some studies have linked these feminist sentiments to an increase in activism against fat stigma (Cooper, 2021), but qualitative research has generally not asked much about how and whether fat women see fatness as a feminist issue. That said, in 2012 *Sex Roles* did a pathbreaking issue that interrogated how, and in what ways, connections between fatness and feminism were generative to explore (Chrisler, 2012; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012); this issue established the central importance of linking fatness and feminism and in seeing fatness from a feminist perspective.

Along these lines, fat activists, fat liberation writers, and feminist scholars have long asserted that fatness is a feminist issue; that is, fatness connects to cultural ideologies about proper bodies, power imbalances, patriarchy, and sexism (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012; Simic, 2016). By framing fatness as a feminist issue, feminist scholars have linked the politics of the body to gender hierarchies. Sociologist Abigail Saguy (2012) wrote of this issue: "Fat is a feminist issue. Far from being controversial, this statement is almost an axiom in the gender literature" (p. 600). That said, we do not know the extent to which people endorse feminist accounts of sizeism, as previous research has ignored this issue while interview research has not directly asked fat women to discuss the topic. Accordingly, how and whether fat women see fatness as a feminist issue remains an open question.

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## The Prevalence of Anti-Fatness

Feminist scholars have shown how the synergy between anti-fatness and traditional gender roles can create a toxic environment for how women, especially fat women, feel about their bodies (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019). Body discontentment is considered so commonplace that it is nearly ubiquitous among women (Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2011), with fat women faring far worse in terms of body image and body satisfaction compared to thinner women (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2006). Further, the fear and hatred of fatness have permeated many spaces of social and cultural life (e.g., media, workplaces, relationships, healthcare, and more) (Fahs, 2025). Fat women face a plethora of negative media stereotypes (Grabe et al., 2008), job and hiring discrimination (Judge & Cable, 2011), mistreatment by healthcare workers (Lee & Pausé, 2016), and are less likely to marry and have children (Fu & Goldman, 1996) compared to thinner women. Fat women are particularly vulnerable to negative messages from those in their close personal circles compared to strangers, suggesting that immediate family members and romantic partners may have an outsize influence on fat women's self-perceptions and body image (Brewis et al., 2011). Fat women are taught to see their bodies as a liability and a problem rather than as a matter of fact or neutral entity (Gordon, 2020).

Further, discrepancies between how fat women and fat men are treated remain stark, with fat women facing far more discrimination and anti-fatness in multiple areas of their lives and to great consequence financially and emotionally (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). Fat women carried more stigma than fat men related to their body size (Brunson et al., 2014), did more care work and emotional labor than men, suffered more dire consequences for being fat compared to fat men, and had far more exposure to violence and abused related to body size compared to men (Farrell, 2011; Gordon, 2020). Fat women have reported far more negative evaluation of their roles as a parent compared to fat men (Gorlick et al., 2021; Lee, 2020) and faced more legal and policy-level discrimination compared to fat men (von Liebenstein, 2022). Compared to fat men, fat women were 16 times more likely to report weight-related employment discrimination (Roehling et al., 2007).

Questions about why these gaps between fat men and fat women exist have yielded a variety of findings. One study suggested that the objectification of women, gender-related aspects of health behavior and knowledge of health and illness, and the importance of self-control in the performance of femininity all contributed to the oppression of fat women (Chrisler, 2012). Further, overlapping negative stereotypes between fat women and feminists—as "unfeminine" or undesirable, challenging traditional gender roles, and serving as a threat to men—may also help to explain gender gaps in attention to fat oppression and experiences (Chrisler, 2012). Fat women experienced more verbal microaggressions compared to fat men (Lindloff et al., 2024), and fat women were more often denied loans, not promoted at work, and prevented from renting an apartment more often than fat men (Puhl et al., 2008). Structural, social, and political inequalities between fat women and fat men suggest that patriarchy plays a major role in how fat women are treated and viewed.

### Do Fat Women Embrace Feminist Beliefs?

Feminist beliefs, sometimes called feminist frames, are multi-dimensional narratives that interpret the world and justify feminist challenges to sexism. Feminist frames debunk the status quo by showing how certain assumptions, norms, and laws can oppress and subjugate women (Gurin, 1985; Duncan, 1999). Feminist frames also serve a diagnostic function as they identify the causes of sexist practices (Liss et al., 2001). By identifying the sources and roots of sexism, feminist activists can label their opponents and devise plans as to what needs to be modified, changed, or ended. Feminist beliefs can also have a collective dimension as women's solidarity and social movements are important tools that can improve the shared fate of women and other oppressed and lower-status groups (Swank & Fahs, 2017).

The acceptance and promotion of feminist beliefs is not a given within any particular population. In this study, we aimed to examine whether feminist critiques of sizeism resonated with fat women, and we wanted to see if fat women identified unfair treatment connected to men's privilege, misogyny, and patriarchy. While these questions seem like a straightforward inquiry, the feminist literatures on sizeism has only tangentially addressed this topic.

Scholars note that feminist activists have been an integral part of the creation of fat activist organizations from the beginning (Ellison, 2020) and played a pivotal role in igniting the earlier iterations of fat activist and fat liberationist work (Cooper, 2021). Studies looking at internet and social media sites found a small but noticeable presence of feminist messages on blogs by fat women (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015) and fat acceptance groups (Darwin & Miller, 2021). Surveys have also shown that having feminist beliefs can lead to greater engagement in fat activism (Acar & Uluğ, 2022; Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022) and can serve as a buffer against internalized fat phobia and negative body image among fat women (Murnen & Smolak, 2009; Nolen et al., 2023). Feminist-identified women also had significantly higher body satisfaction than non-feminist women and women who did not identify as feminists but held feminist beliefs (Borowsky et al., 2016), suggesting that identifying as feminist mattered

more than mere feminist beliefs. Further, "coming out" as fat in more public, feminist ways can help fat women manage fat stigma more effectively (Pausé, 2012).

That said, the public may not see the connections between fatness and feminism. A study on lay theories of fat activism found that people did not tie fatness to fat activism (Oswald et al., 2025). Many people were unsure of what fat activism was, while the rest of the participants mentioned reducing fat stigma, increasing fat acceptance, and normalizing body diversity as goals of fat activism. While these goals can be seen as implicitly feminist goals, the public may not identify these connections explicitly. The study noted that fat women, fat men, and thinner people of all genders mostly agreed that the goals of the feminist and fat acceptance movements were only "somewhat similar" (Oswald et al., 2025). These perception gaps were echoed by other research that found that fat people's attitudes about fat acceptance have improved and have allowed them to feel more accepting of their bodies and find more representation of their bodies, but they still struggled with perceptions that there were ceilings on acceptable size along with some cultural backsliding for fat acceptance (Bombak et al., 2019). These studies point to an uneasy but persistent alliance between feminism and fat activism.

Quantitative surveys suggest that being fat was an inconsistent predictor of identifying as a feminist, as body weight was rarely a significant predictor of feminist identification among women. Three studies found that BMI showed a positive, weak, and insignificant correlation to an awareness of widespread sexism (Levin et al., 2016), having a feminist identity (Ojerholm & Rothblum, 1999) or retaining feminist beliefs (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018; Fingeret & Gleaves, 2004). Conversely, one study found the inverse relationship of women with lower BMIs embracing feminist identities more often than women with higher BMIs (Borowsky et al., 2016). This again reinforced the idea that fatness and feminism remain an uneven and inconsistent partnership.

Looking at the successes of fat activism, many positive impacts have resulted from women's participation in fat activist, fat acceptance, and fat liberation spaces. Women involved in the fat acceptance movement reported many benefits, including more self-acceptance, freedom from dieting, and more time and energy to pursue other interests not related to body modification; still, they struggled with continuing to strive for thinness and felt conflict about this (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012). Further, the integration of fat activist goals and priorities into psychotherapy has been more widespread (Fahs, 2023; Matacin & Simone, 2019), suggesting some movement of fat activism into more mainstream spaces. Fat activists have also been more often quoted in mainstream media articles and have a greater public voice than ever before (Fahs & Swank, 2025).

## Research Questions

Research has suggested that anti-fat stigma has strongly gendered components, disproportionately impacts on women, and comes from a patriarchal exertion of power over women's bodies. Consequently, we wanted to examine whether fat women themselves perceived these aspects of sexist control of their bodies. Additionally, researchers have examined the connections between fatness and feminism, particularly in the 2012 special issue of *Sex Roles.* In this study we drew from this previous work and asked three primary research questions: In what ways do fat women conceptualize fatness as a feminist issue? How do fat women discuss the relationship between fatness and feminism? What issues link fatness and feminism for these participants, and, conversely, why might fatness and feminism not be connected for these participants?

## Method

### Recruitment and Participants

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult fat women ($M_{age}$ = 40.4, $SD$=11.83) recruited in Spring 2021 from across the United States. Every woman self-identified as being fat or "overweight" and study participants were recruited through the "gig" listings of the local online section of Craigslist from numerous cities (e.g., New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Denver, Honolulu, and Phoenix). Locating participants through Craigslist has some limitations, but it allows researchers greater access to people from different ages, races, and sexual identities than community snowball samples (Head et al., 2016) or convenience samples of undergraduates (Alto et al., 2018). Craigslist also attracts women from more diverse age, sexual identity, and social class backgrounds compared to Facebook and Google AdWords (Antoun et al., 2016; Head et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2015).

The recruitment advertisement asked for women over 18 who "identify as fat or overweight" to participate in a Zoom interview study about their "feelings about being fat and the social aspects of fatness." We used the terms "fat or overweight" in the ad because some women identify as fat but not overweight, and some identify as overweight but not fat so we wanted to capture both and appeal to people's diverse language and identifiers. Interviewing on Zoom allowed for access to a diverse group of participants across multiple geographic areas while also honoring people's need for safety during the second year of COVID-19 (Oliffe et al., 2021). While the benefits of face-to-face interviewing are well documented, Zoom interviews can lead to frank and authentic conversations in settings that are familiar and safe

to the participants (Gray et al., 2020). Identifying information was removed from the transcripts and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

The group of women we recruited was highly diverse: 50% ($n$=10) white and 50% ($n$=10) women of color (five African-American, three Asian/Pacific Islander, one Mexican-American, one Native American); 60% ($n$=12) heterosexual, 25% ($n$=5) bisexual, and 15% ($n$=3) lesbian women; and a diverse array of sizes within the category of "fat," including 15% ($n$=3) women under 200 pounds, 50% ($n$=10) women between 200–250 pounds, 20% ($n$=4) women between 250–300 pounds, and 15% ($n$=3) women over 300 pounds. The distribution of U.S. regions also led to a diverse sample, as participants resided in both "blue" and "red" states, and lived in urban, suburban, small town, and rural settings. The average age of the sample was 40.40 years-old and all participants identified as cisgender. They were paid $25.00 for participating in the study. All participants consented to have their interviews recorded and fully transcribed. All participants were assigned a pseudonym (Table 1).

## Procedure

All interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Questions were asked on a variety of topics about their bodies, relationships, political beliefs, and feelings about fatness. In all, 17 questions were asked, including clarification questions as needed. The study and the specific interview protocol were both approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants were interviewed by the first author.

**Table 1** Participant Demographics

| Participant | Age | Race/Ethnicity | Sexual Identity | Weight |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Audre | 29 | African American | Bisexual | 230 lb |
| Bei | 32 | Korean American | Heterosexual | 180 lb |
| Vaiana | 28 | Filipina American | Bisexual | 217 lb |
| Jayden | 57 | White | Lesbian | 220 lb |
| Carrie | 36 | White | Heterosexual | 190 lb |
| Marge | 66 | White | Heterosexual | 245 lb |
| Hannah | 27 | White | Bisexual | 220 lb |
| Esther | 59 | White | Heterosexual | 319 lb |
| Tahi | 29 | Pacific Islander | Heterosexual | 265 lb |
| Georgia | 53 | African American | Heterosexual | 275 lb |
| Octavia | 32 | White | Bisexual | 200 lb |
| Kellyann | 37 | White | Heterosexual | 190 lb |
| Laila | 30 | African American | Heterosexual | 200 lb |
| Winnie | 49 | Native American and White | Heterosexual | 260 lb |
| Yvette | 31 | African American | Heterosexual | 325 lb |
| Sharon | 40 | White | Heterosexual | 323 lb |
| Isabella | 36 | Mexican American | Heterosexual | 236 lb |
| Patty | 44 | White | Heterosexual | 290 lb |
| Nia | 36 | African American | Bisexual | 312 lb |

Responses to two primary questions guided our analysis: "Do you consider yourself a feminist?" and "Do you think fatness is a feminist issue?" These questions were scripted but served to open other conversations and dialogue about related topics. Follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes were free-flowing and conversational. Note that we did not ask women to define feminism but allowed their own affiliations (or not) with feminism to guide their responses. Rapport was easy to establish, and women generally seemed eager to talk about their feelings about feminism and whether fatness was a feminist issue.

## Positionality

Both authors identify as white, fat, middle-class, cisgender, and as feminists. The lead author is a professor of women and gender studies, and the second author is a professor of social and cultural analysis. Both study social movements, bodies, and identities, particularly as connected to structural inequalities.

## Thematic Analysis

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of reflexive thematic analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This inductive and data-driven type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women's responses to the questions about fatness and feminism (e.g., recognition of gendered double standards, fat women deserve ridicule, etc.). The lead author created the initial themes and discussed a broad coding scheme before both authors independently did their coding. After we finished this initial review, the authors met again and looked for similarities between our early codes. We reread the transcripts to see if each of us coded the same passages in the same way (similar to the recommendations of Campbell et al., 2013). We then finalized the themes by reviewing lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of describing their feelings about fatness and feminism.

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion that the generation of themes does not follow a purely linear sequence because inductive techniques generally follow a more recursive process where they move back-and-forth throughout the phases. These patterns were then turned into broader themes that linked data excerpts from individual interviews into a broader discussion of how the whole dataset operated. Finally, we combined our inductive analysis back to the concepts of previous research that informed our interview guide and literature review. Data analysis was guided by a reflexive, critical realist perspective (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2021; Ussher, 2010). This approach highlights and situates informants' perspectives and subjectivities within larger power structures. In

the case of the present study, we focused on how fat women felt about whether fatness was a feminist issue.

### Data Trustworthiness

Referencing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, trustworthiness was established through four methods. First, credibility was established through precise transcription of participants' statements. Transferability was supported by providing full descriptions of the participants' demographic backgrounds and body weights. Dependability was established through a rigorous thematic analysis process and attention to refining themes. Finally, confirmability was established through an extensive researcher conversations to reduce biases and establish consistency between researchers.

## Results

Notably, the sample had quite diverse reactions to both questions we asked them. When asking about participants' feminist identities, the sample skewed in a feminist direction. In terms of raw numbers, 13 women said they identified as feminist, three said that they would maybe call themselves feminists on some issues, and four said that they would not identify as feminists. Nevertheless, calling oneself feminist did not lead to an automatic identification of fatness as a feminist issue. The sample had an even split about whether fatness was a feminist issue, with eight saying definitively yes to whether fatness was a feminist issue, four saying it might be a feminist issue, and eight saying that fatness was decidedly not a feminist issue.

When analyzing the longer discussions of this topic, we identified six general themes of how fat women talked about the relationship between fatness and feminism. The first three themes pointed to connections between fatness and feminism: 1) Recognition of gendered double standards; 2) Fatness is how women are judged; 3) Fat women face overt discrimination. The last three themes seemed to reject the link between fatness and feminism: 4) Fatness has nothing to do with feminism; 5) Fatness has nothing to do with gender; and 6) Fat women deserve ridicule (Table 2).

**Table 2** Thematic Descriptions

| Theme | Description Used for Coding | Prototypical Example | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Recognition of gendered double standards | Participants explicitly described fatness as a feminist issue because women experience greater stigma, harsher appearance standards, and more severe social consequences than men for the same body size. | Fat men are funny. Fat women are just seen as gross. (Audre) | 4 participants (21.1%) |
| 2. Fatness is how women are judged | Participants described fatness as a central way women are evaluated, valued, and judged, arguing that women's worth continues to be tied to meeting cultural appearance standards. | Women are constantly judged by how they look, and fatness is just another way people decide what we're worth. (Carrie) | 3 participants (15.8%) |
| 3. Fat women face overt discrimination | Participants emphasized that fat women experience tangible discrimination in employment, healthcare, media representation, and other social institutions, viewing these inequities as evidence that fatness is a feminist issue. | Women can't be equal if they're still discriminated against for being fat. (Octavia) | 4 participants (21.1%) |
| 4. Fatness has nothing to do with feminism | Participants rejected feminist interpretations of fatness, instead framing body size as a matter of personal responsibility, individual lifestyle, or health rather than gender inequality. | It's about personal responsibility, not feminism. (Laila) | 3 participants (15.8%) |
| 5. Fatness has nothing to do with gender | Participants acknowledged that fat people experience stigma but argued that discrimination affects people of all genders equally and therefore should not be considered a women's or feminist issue. | It affects everyone, not just women. (Sharon) | 2 participants (10.5%) |
| 6. Fat women deserve ridicule | Participants justified ridicule or discrimination toward fat women by portraying teasing as deserved, motivational, or a consequence of personal choices, while some criticized feminism itself for exacerbating social conflict. | If you don't want people to tease you, lose weight. (Nia) | 3 participants (15.8%) |

### Theme 1: Recognition of Gendered Double Standards Toward Fatness

Two women, all of whom identified unequivocally as feminist, said that fatness is a feminist issue because fat women face intensely gendered double standards. Audre (29, African-American, Bisexual, 230 pounds) noticed that fat women faced different scrutiny than fat men:

> I definitely feel it's harder for women in a lot of areas of life and I wish there was more equality. When you're a fat guy, it's just like, 'He's the fat funny dude,' but if you're a fat girl, you're gross. That's just not cool for me….Men completely, like, rule out being with women if she's of a certain weight, and I think that's messed up.

Similarly, Bei (32, Korean-American, Heterosexual, 180 pounds) argued that women were more likely to be denigrated for their body weight: "People are treated differently according to their gender or sex because there's a man or woman, same ethnicity, same weight, the woman is going to be considered fat and that's not equality." This recognition that fat men with the same body types face less discrimination drove women toward seeing fatness as a feminist issue.

Two women also had more expansive critiques of the gendered double standards of fatness. Vaiana (28, Filipina-American, Bisexual, 217 pounds) felt angry that fat women faced more scrutiny than fat men:

> Fatness is a feminist issue because, unfortunately, fatness affects us a lot harder as women and it affects all of us regardless of our race, our economic standing, our disabilities, things like that. Fatness is harder for women so it's definitely a feminist issue.

Jayden (57, White, Lesbian, 220 pounds) felt that the gendered double standards impacted women both in comparison to men and it fueled women to compete with each other:

> Fatness intersects with women's issues and becomes a problem for society. It needs to be rectified. Men hate women for being fat, but how do you get fat? And women are against other women too, so that's a real problem. You have people who hate women, so it becomes a feminist issue. Where is your allegiance? What is your hatred of women just for being fat about?

This sense of outrage drove some women to clearly identify fat biases as a feminist issue because fat stigma undercut female solidarity and male privilege created double standards in the perception of fat men and women.

### Theme 2: Fatness is How Women are Judged

Three women mentioned specifically that fatness is a feminist issue because women are always judged according to their body weight; all responses used the actual word *judged.* Carrie (36, White, Heterosexual, 190 pounds), who identified as feminist, felt that women were evaluated by their bodies and this made it a feminist issue: "[Fatness is] another characteristic on the rubric by which women are judged." Marge (66, White, Heterosexual, 245 pounds), who adamantly said she was not a feminist, said that she nevertheless saw fatness as a feminist issue because of women being judged: "I'm just an old biker bitch. I'm not feminine at all. I wear a little make-up, that's it, but I think fatness is judged by others so it's a feminist issue." Hannah (27, White, Bisexual, 220 pounds), who identified herself as a feminist, linked fatness to feminism because of how women's bodies were judged: "Notions of acceptance and positive feelings towards fatness are more linked towards that sort of feminist mindset of 'love your body, love yourself' types of beliefs, because bigger women are treated badly and judged for their bodies." These statements suggested that constant worries and harsh judgements over women's fatness made fatness a feminist issue.

### Theme 3: Fat Women Face Overt Discrimination

The most common theme, mentioned by four women, was that fat women faced overt discrimination and that fatness was therefore a feminist issue. Esther (59, White, Heterosexual, 319 pounds), who was tepid about identifying as a feminist, first denied that fatness was a feminist issue but then conceded that job discrimination was a problem: "The only way fatness is a feminist issue is if you take into account the discrimination side of job hiring, like if somebody's gonna hire the normal sized person over the fat person." Tahi (29, Pacific Islander, Heterosexual, 265 pounds), who identified as an intersectional feminist, said that fat women faced greater discrimination in many areas: "It impacts women's mental health, their portrayal in the media, the representation they see, and the limitations they have. We already have limitations on us and I feel fatness introduces limitations and discrimination against us." Similarly, Georgia (53, African-American, Heterosexual, 275 pounds), who identified as a feminist, felt alarmed at how fat women faced discrimination and how their value was often minimized by people in our society:

> There is little to no acknowledgment that fat women have a place in society that is integral to the whole makeup of society. We have a lot to offer and to not be given the attention and the applause for that

> contribution, and only focusing on, 'Well, she fat!', you know, you have now suffered a loss because that person has been ignored tossed aside. That fat person might save your child! She may be a medical doctor! She may have a gift but their talents have been turned away because they're fat.

Octavia (32, White, Bisexual, 200 pounds), too, a self-identified feminist, said that fatness was a feminist issue because fat women face enormous barriers to full equality through discrimination:

> Fat phobia exists across all genders in our society but it's women who largely get the brunt of it. Fatness, especially as it manifests in certain ways, whether it's after childbirth or as you get older, uniquely impacts women. A society that is truly good and free for women will truly be good and free of fat phobia.

This sense of barriers and limitations driving the treatment of fat women figured centrally to the belief that fatness was a feminist concern.

### Theme 4: Fatness has Nothing to do With Feminism

Three women adamantly insisted that fatness had nothing to do with feminism and was an unrelated phenomenon. Kellyann (37, White, Heterosexual, 190 pounds), who did not identify as a feminist, said in an irritated tone, "I don't like this whole #MeToo movement. It's getting too ridiculous. And fatness has nothing to do with feminism. I think it's merely a woman-first movement." Similarly, Laila (30, African-American, Heterosexual, 200 pounds), who said that she identified as a feminist "a little bit," situated fatness as an issue of personal responsibility and said that it was unrelated to feminism: "I just think fatness is a normal issue that is just something you have to control on your own." In a related way, Winnie (49, Native American and White, Heterosexual, 260 pounds), who did not identify as a feminist because she felt feminism was too extreme, framed fatness as a non-political issue, saying, "It's just more like either a weight issue, on your own, or about your level of comfort, not about feminism." These disconnections between fatness and feminism, and the insistence that fatness was not a feminist issue, reflected a belief in the divorce between gender and body size.

### Theme 5: Fatness has Nothing to do With Gender

Three women also said that fatness had nothing to do with gender, seeing it as unrelated to sexism or gender. Yvette (31, African-American, Heterosexual, 325 pounds), who identified as a feminist, said that fatness was unrelated to her identity as a woman: "I don't see how it can be a feminist issue. It's not as separate as becoming or being a woman, or it's not a factor of what makes me female." Similarly, Sharon (40, White, Heterosexual, 323 pounds), who identified as a feminist, said that fatness was not about women or gender:

> It's not a feminist issue. I mean, there's issues that we've talked about that women seem to have more stigma than men do, but I don't think it's necessarily just a woman's problem. Fatness isn't related to women or men only, but to everyone.

These responses situated fatness as worthy of inquiry but not as a gendered phenomenon because fat oppression was not solely directed toward women.

### Theme 6: Fat Women Deserve Ridicule

As a final theme, three women explicitly said that fatness was not a feminist issue because feminists overstated the role of sexism or that fat women *deserved* ridicule for their large body sizes. Isabella (36, Mexican-American, Heterosexual, 236 pounds), who identified as "somewhat" feminist but with major caveats, said that fatness was not a feminist issue because fat people should be resigned to a lifetime of mockery: "Let's be real, right? If you're a fat person, you're being made fun of by someone who is not fat. It's just one of those circles of life kind of things that is supposed to happen." In a related way, Patty (44, White, Heterosexual, 290 pounds), who did not identify as a feminist and who was a strong conservative activist, said that "extreme" feminists had ruined fat women's lives by inviting problems: "When it gets to be when they're angry and violent all the time, too vocal, that's when it's wrong. When it's not in moderation, of course people will be cruel." Nia (36, African-American, Bisexual, 312 pounds), who did not identify as a feminist, similarly blamed fat women for their own discrimination: "If people don't want to be teased about it, they should lose weight. People will tease you if you're fat. Maybe it'll motivate us to get skinny. That's not about feminism." These responses again show the opposite end of the spectrum, where fatness is not only *not* a feminist issue, but is seen at times as deserving of ridicule and teasing. In this case, seeing fatness as a site of inequality was perceived as taking away the shame as motivation for women to lose weight.

## Discussion

Feminist social scientists have created a large literature on how "fatness is a feminist issue." A long line of experiments, surveys, and interviews have shown how sexist body norms

restricted the lives of women and undermined women's the mental and physical well-being. Some quantitative studies have also demonstrated how feminist beliefs can mitigate the sexist effects of fat stigma, but the literature has been mostly silent on how fat women themselves conceptualize the gendered and feminist aspects of their lived lives. This study addressed this gap by asking fat women if they considered themselves feminists and what they thought of the claim that fatness was a feminist issue.

These results in many ways showcase the slippages between identity and recognition of inequality, as more women self-identified as feminist compared to the recognition of fatness as a feminist issue. We found evidence both for those who were non-feminist identified who *did* see fatness as a feminist issue, and, more commonly, those who identified as a feminist but who *did not* see fatness as a feminist issue. The qualitative narratives point to some possible reasons for these notable gaps, and for fat women's different interpretations of fat identity and its connections to political/social movements and identities. While our findings focused on how (and whether) fat women saw fatness as a feminist issue, their feminist identification was also an important part of this analysis, as it showed more allegiances and openness to feminism than to fatness as a feminist issue.

As expected, we found that some fat women could clearly identify distinct reasons that fatness was a feminist issue, particularly for those fat women who identified as feminist. In particular, gendered double standards seemed to ignite interest in seeing fatness as a feminist issue, particularly as fat women grappled with double standards in how attributions were made about fat women, and how fat women were designated as "fat." There was also a clear sense that fatness pitted women against each other in competition and that fat men fared far better than fat women, claims supported by existing research on gender discrepancies in fat stigma (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Rice, 2007). Further, some fat women could clearly see that fat women were judged differently than fat men, and that their bodies were subjected to various kind of intense scrutiny. These frameworks pointed toward a feeling of fat women's bodies being negatively evaluated or harshly judged against men's bodies.

Many fat women also identified discrimination—overt and covert—as a reason to label fatness as a feminist issue. They saw discrimination against fat women in job hiring, media representations, the willingness to dismiss or ignore fat women's accomplishments, and in broad claims about fat phobia and the fears of fatness. These were the most systemic critiques in our sample, and they signaled some sense that fat activist work on framing fatness and anti-fatness as key elements that shape modern life have impacted some fat women's perceptions of their own identities (Acar & Uluğ, 2022; Striley & Hutchens, 2020). These findings suggest that fat women have in part developed political consciousness, and perhaps have become politically socialized, through their fat identities, though more research on these issues is needed to determine the extent and the causes of how fat women arrived at linking their bodies to their feminist politics.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, some fat women did *not* see fatness as a feminist issue. While some of the results seemed predictable, particularly fat women stating plainly that they did not see how the two were linked, we were more surprised by the lack of recognition of the gendering of fatness. It seemed that some fat women could see that fatness was treated poorly, but they saw it as a singular oppression and could not imagine how women were particularly disadvantaged by the glorification of thinness. This suggests that some fat women may not have developed a consciousness around gender equality, or that they do not interact much with other fat women, or that they see fat men as suffering equally. We see this as another area of future research in terms of how fat people recognize anti-fat biases and who they see as targeted by anti-fatness (e.g., gender, race, sexual identities, ability, etc.).

Most notably, mapping onto previous research that found shame has often been tested as a "motivator" for weight loss, three women refuted fatness as a feminist issue and claimed that fat women deserved ridicule (Cullin & White, 2025; Pearl & Puhl, 2014; Täuber et al., 2018). These responses delved more into the belief that fat women are responsible for their own body size and should expect poor treatment from others when living in a fat body. It was hard to determine whether to interpret these claims as a form of self-loathing and internalization of anti-fatness, or as a form of anti-feminism directed in these instances toward the body. It may also be a product of the widespread belief that shame and stigma may motivate weight loss (Cullin & White, 2025; Täuber et al., 2018). In any case, hearing fat women say that fat women should expect, and even that they deserved, maltreatment only further reinforced the sense that anti-fatness burrows into the self-perceptions of fat women in deep ways.

These results also collectively point to the importance of nuancing discussions of feminist beliefs and feminist identities. This study dealt with feminist identity more than feminist beliefs, but these do not always align. Research has shown that feminist identities and feminist belief systems sometimes aligned, but sometimes do not (Nolen et al., 2023). This implies that fatness can sometimes activate or correspond with a political consciousness about systemic oppression, but also that many fat women do not identify fatness as linked to feminism and do not see how their bodies are a part of a political and social system that disadvantages

fat women. If fatness and feminism are linked, this could have deep implications for those thinking about social movement organizing and for fat activists.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study's results. To begin, this is a diverse sample, but it is not representative of the population of U.S. fat women. Further, relying on Craigslist for identifying participants, and interviewing fat women during the COVID-19 pandemic could have influenced the results (Monaghan, 2025). It is possible that asking about fatness and feminism in different ways (e.g., reversing the order of the questions, asking about other kinds of political beliefs first, etc.) could have changed the results. Further, women may have answered differently than if they had not been answering questions about fatness for the previous hour, so a separate study about political beliefs could be warranted. Future studies could better examine women's attitudes about different aspects of feminism (e.g., body positivity, sexual harassment, abortion politics, feeling about workplace discrimination, etc.) which would better nuance discussions of feminist belief systems. Quantitative studies could also add different insights about this phenomenon, as standardized scales could determine the precise distribution of feminist attitudes among women or men.

### Practice Implications

These results also point to some practical implications for therapists, activists, and the public at large. Looking at the range of how people construct links between fatness and feminism suggests that fat people can and do challenge the tenets of anti-fatness, particularly if fatness is moved away from an individual experience or struggle and more toward a political and politicized framework. Seeing fatness as connected to gender may help women engage in less self-blame and self-loathing, just as it may help generate more clear links between personal and political experiences of the body.

Conversely, understanding how anti-fatness informs women's beliefs about fatness—namely that fat people may deserve ridicule, or that fatness has nothing to do with gender or politics—can help practitioners better explore, and perhaps challenge, these kinds of internalized beliefs. Fat activists and therapists, too, can benefit from better understanding the particular ways that fat women welcome or reject feminist sentiments, particularly if they take seriously the call to "meet people where they're at." There are also implications for the public at large, particularly as anti-fatness continues to appear on the public stage in patriarchal and misogynistic ways (e.g., U.S. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth asserting the need for soldiers to be thin, or Trump calling women reporters "piggy"). These are times in which the embrace of feminist sentiments may help women to combat anti-fatness and sexism in more robust and organized ways.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, these findings point to the complex interplay between bodies, political beliefs, feminism, and social movement work, and how researchers and organizers should continue to challenge their assumptions about how people connect these aspects of their lives. We were encouraged that many women had seriously reflected on the feminist sides of fat oppression and that the understanding of fatness and feminism was so complicated and messy, as there is certainly room for political diversity in the fat community. That said, we felt more discouraged by the lack of consistent framing of fatness as a feminist issue, even among feminist-identified fat women. If fat women themselves do not identify fatness as a feminist issue, it will be harder to push the broader population (particularly thin allies) to better consider the integral role of anti-fatness in shaping beliefs about women and their bodies (and vice versa). Perhaps this study raises more questions than it answers, but it may operate as a springboard for asking questions about commonly held feminist assumptions while also continuing to push for critiques of anti-fatness from both within and outside the fat community.

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### Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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