

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST OBESE WOMEN IN OBESITY CLINIC'S PATIENTS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Background. The workplace is one of many areas of life where obese people are unfairly treated. According to the literature obese women are particularly susceptible to discrimination in employment. There is a lack of Polish researches of this subject.

Objective. The main objective of this study was to analyze personal, subjective experiences related to weight bias and discrimination against obese people in the workplace of obese Polish women.

Material and Methods. The study was carried out in a hospital clinic for obesity management. A total of 420 women with BMI>30, aged 21 to 72, participated in group interviews focused on the weight bias and discrimination against obese people in the workplace.

Results. In the group of clinically obese women, 5.3% of subjects had experienced employment discrimination and 10.5% had been victims of verbal and social abuse in the workplace. The most common psycho-physical consequences of the weight stigma were emotional problems, lack of motivation and overeating in response to stress.

Conclusions. Weight-based discrimination in the workplace poses a problem in Poland. The weight stigma and occupational discrimination lead to psycho-physical discomfort which exacerbates overeating and obesity.

Key words: *obesity, woman, obese woman, employment, discrimination in the workplace, stigmatization*

STRESZCZENIE

Wprowadzenie. Zjawisko dyskryminacji zawodowej osób otyłych a w szczególności kobiet jest dobrze udokumentowane w licznych badaniach amerykańskich oraz brytyjskich. Niestety brakuje opracowań tego tematu w Polsce.

Cel. Celem badań było analiza subiektywnych doświadczeń dotyczących stygmatyzacji oraz dyskryminacji zawodowej osób otyłych w grupie otyłych polskich kobiet.

Material i metody. Badanie odbyło się w szpitalnym oddziale leczenia otyłości. 420 kobiet z BMI>30 w wieku od 21 do 72 lat wzięło udział w wywiadach grupowych zogniskowanych na temacie stygmatyzacji oraz dyskryminacji osób otyłych w miejscu pracy.

Wyniki. W grupie klinicznej otyłych kobiet 5,3% doświadczyło dyskryminacji zawodowej natomiast 10,5% kobiet było stygmatyzowanych w sposób werbalno-relacyjny w miejscu pracy. Najpowszechniejszymi konsekwencjami psychofizycznymi okazały się problemy emocjonalno-motywacyjne oraz objadanie się jako reakcja na stres.

Wnioski. Wyniki badań sygnalizują, że podobnie jak w krajach gdzie odsetek ludzi otyłych jest najwyższy, również i w Polsce istnieje zjawisko zawodowej dyskryminacji osób otyłych. Stygmatyzacja oraz wynikająca z niej dyskryminacja w miejscu pracy powodują dyskomfort psychofizyczny, który sam w sobie utrzuca otyłość.

Słowa kluczowe: *otyłość, kobiety, otyłe kobiety, zatrudnienie, dyskryminacja w miejscu pracy*

INTRODUCTION

The workplace is one of many areas of life where obese people are unfairly treated [20]. According to Giel et al. [10], obesity is a general barrier to employment, certain professions and professional

success. Moreover overweight workers are at higher risk of encountering stereotypes related to their work competences and for general unequal treatment in the work setting. For instance Puhl and Brownell [22] surveyed 2249 obese women to reveal that 25% of the subjects had experienced discrimination in the

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workplace, whereas 43% had been stigmatized by their employers or superiors. In a study of 3437 obese individuals, *Carr and Friedman* [4] found that 26% employees had been unfairly treated on account of their weight, whereas 31% of the subjects had been discriminated in the workplace due to their weight and low levels of perceived physical attractiveness.

Discrimination against people with BMI>30 is particularly visible during recruitment. Obese candidates are less likely to be employed or promoted than their slimmer colleagues despite the fact that they have identical qualifications [25]. The prevalence of the weight bias was illustrated by an experiment in which obese candidates were offered less attractive jobs and lower wages than leaner candidates [16]. According to *Baum and Ford* [2], both obese men and women earn less during 20 years of their professional careers, and the wage penalty for overweight people was determined between 0.7% and 6.3%. *Crawley* [6] found that obesity lowers wages by approximately 9%.

Obese women are particularly susceptible to discrimination in the workplace [7]. Women are expected to meet much more stringent criteria in terms of their physical appearance than men. Women are also more severely judged for even the slightest deviation from the ideal figure. According to statistical data, 60% women vs. 40% men claim to have experienced weight-based discrimination [9]. The above is directly correlated with weight-related differences in wages between men and women. According to *Fikkan and Rothbloom* [8] and *Judge and Cable* [12], the wage penalty for women begins at surprisingly low body weight levels. Women in the “normal-weight” category earn less and are promoted less frequently than slim and very slim women who are considered to be more attractive. The above studies indicate that BMI is inversely correlated with wages and promotional opportunities. The above correlation was not observed in obese males. Overweight and borderline obese men generated even higher incomes and were more likely to advance their careers than men with normal weight. A reverse correlation was noted for morbidly obese as well as underweight men who earned less than colleagues with a healthy weight [12, 26]. BMI-based differences in the occupational status of men and women are most clearly demonstrated with regard to overweight. Although obesity is generally stigmatized in the workplace regardless of gender, women characterized by different levels of overweight are more likely to be victimized than men [5]. The above studies clearly demonstrate that more stringent criteria of physical attractiveness apply to women. The bar is set very high for women who want to conform to the common stereotype that only slim people can be attractive [18]. This stereotype directly influences women’s employment status. Workplace devaluation on account of higher body weight can also

be regarded as devaluation of the feminine because the female body has a naturally higher fat content than the male body. During pregnancy, females also naturally accumulate more reserve fat to protect the mother and the child against the danger of malnutrition. The obesity stigma and the resulting discrimination lead to social isolation and contribute to devalued social identity of overweight people. Stress and low self-esteem increase the probability of emotional overeating and adopting a sedentary lifestyle [18]. Those behaviors perpetuate obesity and create an additional risk of somatic disease caused by weight gain [21].

The majority of the cited studies into weight-based discrimination in the workplace have been conducted in countries with the highest prevalence of obesity, including the United States and Great Britain. In those countries, the obesity stigma receives significant attention. However the number of overweight people continues to grow steadily around the world. In Poland, half of the adult population is overweight, and every sixth person is obese [28]. Studies of Polish children and adolescents produce alarming results – 16,4 of them are overweight and obese [13]. A study into the prevalence of the weight bias in Poland demonstrated that 20% of 55 women admitted to an obesity management clinic had been victimized on account of their weight, whereas 25% of the subjects had witnessed such events [14]. Also qualitative pilot study over work discrimination of obese people in Poland shows that in a group of 88 obese women there were multiple cases of obesity stigmatization and discrimination in employment [15]. Weight-related discrimination poses a growing problem in Poland, and it should be addressed more frequently by Polish researchers. In view of the growing prevalence of obesity in Poland and the general scarcity of published studies into employment discrimination against Polish women with BMI>30, the objective of this study was to investigate personal, subjective experiences of obese Polish women related to weight bias and discrimination in the workplace.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Surveyed population

The survey was carried out on 420 women aged 21 to 72 (51.8 mean age) with BMI>30 which is indicative of obesity (36.7 mean BMI). All subjects had been admitted to an obesity management clinic which organizes weight loss programs that teach patients to make healthy lifestyle choices with the assistance of an interdisciplinary team of experts, including a dietician, physician, psychologist, physiotherapists and physical education trainers. Considering woman’s superiority in numbers in weight loss programs, only female participants were included into this survey. The survey was carried out from January 2010 until September

2011 and July 2012 until May 2014. All patients gave verbal consent to participate in the study.

Table 1. General characteristics of surveyed group (n=420)

Education n (%)	Elementary	5 (1.2)
	Vocational	35 (8.3)
	Secondary	120 (28.6)
	Higher	250 (59.5)
Marital status n (%)	Married	272 (64.7)
	Divorced	45 (10.7)
	Widow	25 (5.9)
	Single	78 (18.5)
Inhabitancy n (%)	Big city	144 (34.3)
	Average city	123 (29.3)
	Small city	78 (18.6)
	Village	75 (17.8)

Table 2. Description of obese women who experienced employment discrimination

Number of obese women who experienced discrimination	22
Mean BMI	35.5
Mean age	32.65
Education	5 - university degree 7 - secondary school diploma 10 - university students

Survey procedure

The surveyed subjects participated in group interviews focusing on stigmatization and discrimination against obese people in the workplace. Interviews were held in focus groups of approximately 10 participants and lasted 1.5 hours. The women participated in the study after a 10-day stay in an obesity clinic during which they got to meet other group members by participating in therapy sessions. We assume that the interview was carried out in an atmosphere of psychological comfort and mutual trust that was conducive to obtaining reliable results. The interview was conducted by a moderator the same for all the sessions. She was employed as a counseling psychologist at the clinic. At the beginning of the program, the moderator provided the participants with basic information about the sessions and requested their consent to take notes during the interview. Obviously the subjects were introduced with the concept of obesity stigmatization as weight-related attitudes and beliefs that were manifested by stereotypes, rejection and prejudice towards individuals because they were overweight [22]. There were also given common examples of obesity discrimination in employment as a consequence of obesity stigma in society where heavyweight employees were judged negatively by co-workers, supervisors and employers [17, 24]. The surveyed women were asked to be possibly objective while interpreting and then classifying their personal experiences as acts of obesity stigmatization and

discrimination. Simultaneously they were encouraged to free expression of their beliefs and feelings accompanying above painful situations. Then the moderator initiated a discussion on the topics listed in the interview scenario:

- What was the nature of stigmatization and discrimination in the workplace?
- What was the perpetrator's age and sex?
- What was the victim's relationship with the perpetrator?
- What was the effect of stigmatization and discrimination on the victim's psychological and physical well-being?

Table 3. Description of perpetrators discriminating against obese women

Perpetrator's sex	6 woman 16 men
Professional relationship between the perpetrator and the victim	employer or staff member responsible for recruitment / potential employee

During focused interviews, it was the moderator's task to ensure that the discussion did not go off topic. The moderator also made sure that every respondent had an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. The surveyed women were asked to share their personal experiences regarding weight bias in employment settings. The aim of the person conducting the interviews was to elicit the information related to the nature of stigmatization and discrimination in the workplace as well as related to the effect of stigmatization and discrimination on the victim's psychological and physical well-being. Also the victim's relationship with the perpetrator and the perpetrator's age and sex were taken into consideration. At the end of the session, the moderator summed up the discussion to make sure that all participants agreed with the conclusions. Immediately after each meeting, the moderator attended a debriefing session without the participants' involvement to express and write down his observations. After the completion of all sessions, the moderator's notes and transcripts were collected and analysed.

RESULTS

The surveyed victims of weight-based discrimination were divided into two groups according to their answers:

Group 1 – women who experienced problems with finding employment or becoming promoted due to weight-based discrimination and unfair treatment in the workplace;

Group 2 – women who experienced verbal and social discrimination in the workplace, including ridicule, teasing or isolation.

Table 4. Consequences of employment discrimination against obese women

Emotional consequences	22 women – negative emotions, including humiliation, sadness, anger at self and others, sense of injustice
Professional consequences	18 women – loss of motivation to find work 4 woman – increased motivation to find work to improve self-esteem and get respect from others
Non-constructive ways of coping with stress caused by employment discrimination	14 women – overeating 4 woman – crash dieting which resulted in overeating 4 woman – smoking

Group 1 results

In group 1 there were 22 (10.5%) obese women (mean BMI= 35.5; mean age= 32.6) who experienced employment discrimination. 5 of them had a university degree, 7 - secondary school diploma and 10 were university students. 22 women experienced emotional consequences of employment discrimination including humiliation, sadness, anger at self and others, sense of injustice. 18 women lost their motivation to find work and 4 women increased their motivation to find work in order to improve self-esteem and get respect from others. Besides there were non-constructive ways of coping with stress caused by employment discrimination observed in group 1: 14 women were overeating, 4 women were crash dieting which resulted in overeating and 4 women were smoking. There were women and men among perpetrators discriminating against obese women from group 1 and they were mostly victim's employers or staff members responsible for recruitment.

Selected responses of employment discrimination victims (Group 1) were:

"I was looking for work at university, and I called about a job in a pub. I was invited to an interview, but when the manager saw me, he said that they had already found someone and cut me short. A few days later, my slim friend from the dorm went to the same pub because the ad was still up there, and she got the job."

"I work for a pharmaceutical company. I was hoping to be promoted to project manager. I lost my promotion to a slim friend who was identically qualified but had two years less professional experience than me."

"I was trying to get a job as a driving instructor. I had had several years of experience and the required qualifications. The employer who was the owner of the driving school checked my qualifications, then he looked me over and said that they preferred male instructors. He said that they employed women only if they were 'hot babes who attracted customers'. He also joked that 'the suspension won't last long with your weight'."

"I was hoping to get a summer job as a waitress in a cafe. During the interview, the manager told me that they had strict policies regarding the physical appearance of their staff, and that they couldn't employ me because they didn't have uniforms for my size."

Table 5. Description of women who experienced verbal and social discrimination in work setting

Number of obese women who experienced verbal and social stigmatization	44
Mean BMI	37.04
Mean age	43.50
Education	20 women -university degree, 12 women -secondary school diploma 2 women - elementary education

Group 2 results

In group 1 there were 44 (5.3%) obese women (mean BMI=37.1; mean age=43.5) who experienced verbal and social stigmatization. 20 of them had a university degree, 12 - secondary school diploma and 2 had elementary education. 44 women experienced emotional consequences of employment discrimination including humiliation, sadness, anger at self and others, sense of injustice. 44 women lost their motivation to perform the job. Besides there were non-constructive ways of coping with stress caused by verbal and social stigmatization observed in group 2: 38 women were overeating and 6 women were smoking. There were women as well as men among perpetrators of verbal and social discrimination against obese women from group 2 and they were victim's co-workers or superiors.

Selected responses from victims of verbal and social discrimination in the workplace (Group 2) were:

"I had been working in a fashion store in a shopping mall for several years. I returned to work from maternity leave 20 kg heavier, and ever since then, the manager has been hinting that I am not suited for the job because sales attendants should look good."

"My colleague teases me about my weight."

"Up to a certain point, I always thought that I had good relations with other people in the office. One day, a colleague told me that all employees had been going on regular outings to the spa for several months. I was never invited. My colleague tried to explain that they had never invited me because I would probably feel uncomfortable in a spa."

"I work in a grocery store. The manager is rough on most employees, but he puts additional pressure on me, even though I work as well as the others. One day he said: 'don't just sit there doing nothing, move a little for exercise. You would lose weight, and that would only do you good'."

Table 6. Description of perpetrators of verbal and social discrimination against obese women

Perpetrator's sex	28 women 25 men
Professional relationship between the perpetrator and the victim	12 cases: superior/subordinate 32 cases: co-workers

"Whenever I go on a new diet, my female colleagues from work tease me by saying that it won't work as usual."

"I am too embarrassed to eat with other people at work. On several occasions, a female colleague remarked in front of the others that I shouldn't eat too much."

"I work in a law firm. I once overheard my colleagues talk about me. One of them said that I would have more clients if I lost weight."

Table 7. Consequences of verbal and social discrimination against obese women

Emotional consequences	44 women – negative emotions, including humiliation, sadness, anger at self and others, sense of injustice
Professional consequences	44 women – loss of motivation to perform the job
Non-constructive ways of coping with stress caused by employment discrimination	38 women - overeating 6 women – smoking

DISCUSSION

In this study, the problem of employment discrimination against obese women in Poland has been discussed from the victims' point of view. In most research published around the world, the weight bias has been discussed in various areas of life based on analyses of the attitudes and behaviors displayed by people with normal body weight [19].

Considering results obtained in the research, in the group of 420 surveyed women, 5.3% had experienced discrimination, mostly problems with finding employment or smaller chances of promotion due to high body weight. The results of the study corroborate published findings which indicate that obese people have lower opportunities of employment and promotion [23, 25]. However in the research verbal and social stigmatization occurred more common than problems with finding employment or smaller chances of promotion due to high body weight. Nearly 11% of the subjects had experienced ridicule, teasing, social isolation in the workplace. The perpetrators of discrimination were superiors and co-workers, both men and women. *Puhl* and *Brownell* [22] demonstrated that obese employees face aggression and social exclusion in the workplace. Their findings

confirm the observations made in this study that obese people face discrimination not only from employers but also from work colleagues, both male and female. That is the effect of deeply rooted negative stereotype of overweight person in society [3] and impact of automatic bias on real hiring discrimination against obese [1].

Results obtained also show that the victims of employment stigmatization and discrimination were relatively young (mean age - 38.1) who embarked on their professional careers in the 21st century or towards the end of the 20th century. The age structure of the surveyed group could indicate according to the subject's literature that the importance of body image and physical beauty has risen in recent years, leading to less tolerant attitudes towards people with BMI>30 in comparison with several decades ago [27].

Findings also reveal that perceived weight discrimination increase the health risks of obesity associated with functional disability and self-rated health. Weight-based stigma shapes weight perceptions, which mediate the relationship between perceived discrimination and health [26]. Therefore successful obesity management requires an in-depth analysis of the psychological and emotional consequences of the weight bias. All of the surveyed subjects had experienced significant mood disturbances as the result of employment discrimination, which in itself perpetuates obesity. According to *Carr* et al. [5] or *Puhl* et al. [19], emotional discomfort of people with BMI>30 leads to social isolation and decreases their physical activity levels. Stress also contributes to overeating which delivers mood-boosting benefits. The women interviewed in this study admitted to overeating or going on restrictive weight-loss diets that produced the yo-yo effect. In the long-term, unhealthy eating habits lead to weight gain and emotional problems. From the therapeutic point of view, the effectiveness of programs promoting healthy lifestyle choices is highly correlated with self-efficacy which is determined by the patient's self-esteem and general well-being. The psychological and social consequences of the weight bias in the workplace prevent obese people from acquiring healthy eating habits and becoming more physically active. For this reason, the victims of persistent discrimination should receive psychological counseling to speed up the recovery process and to develop self-control in their eating habits.

Results of group interviews with female patients of an obesity management clinic indicate that weight-based discrimination in the workplace poses a problem. Above findings are especially important because of the fact that the percentage of overweight Poles continues to increase every year. Therefore weight-based stigmatization and discrimination in the

workplace are likely to intensify in the future. The fact that the study was performed in an obesity clinic could have influenced the results, which probably cannot be reliably generalized to the entire population of obese women in Poland. The programs offered by obesity clinics are usually attended by people who have a history of unsuccessful weight loss attempts. Those persons are also highly determined to change their eating habits and lose weight. Perhaps, it was the accumulation of negative social experiences which motivated those persons to participate in a specialist weight loss program supervised by members of an interdisciplinary team. This aspect should be analyzed in future studies of discrimination against obese employees in Poland. It should be noted that the study is a part of wider survey project also covering obese males work discrimination experiences and inter-gender comparisons in this area which are planned to be published in the future. Further work and new researches could also analyze employers attitudes towards obese people and could propose effective methods for minimizing potential employers' bias towards obese people. Another avenue for future research would be to carry out psychological and legal analyses demonstrating how obese people can pursue their rights to equal treatment in the workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Weight-based discrimination in the workplace poses a problem in Poland.
2. In the group of clinically obese women, 5.3% of subjects had experienced employment discrimination and 10.5% had been victims of verbal and social abuse in the workplace.
3. Emotional problems, lack of motivation and overeating in response to stress were the most common psycho-physical consequences of the body mass stigma.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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