



Employment Discrimination against Obese Women in Poland: A Focus Study Involving Patients of an Obesity Management Clinic

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Dear Editor-in-Chief

According to WHO, more people die from obesity than malnutrition in the contemporary world (1). Obesity is one of the leading causes of hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer (2). Also excessive body weight significantly lowers self-esteem and quality of life in the sense of social belonging. Recent research has demonstrated that in the United States, where obesity poses a significant problem, weight-based discrimination has risen by 66% in the past decade, and is now as prevalent as racial discrimination (3). Overweight people are discriminated and victimized in many different settings. They face contempt, verbal or physical abuse and social repression, becoming subject to isolation, neglect, ridicule and gossip (4). The workplace is one of many areas of life where overweight people are unfairly treated (5). Especially obese women are expected to meet very stringent criteria in terms of their physical appearance (6). 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 experiences of obese Polish women in the workplace. The survey was carried out on 88

women aged 25 to 65 with BMI>30 which is indicative of obesity. 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. 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 surveyed women were asked to share their personal experiences regarding weight bias in employment settings.

In the group of 88 surveyed women, 4.5% had experienced discrimination, mostly problems with finding employment or smaller chances of promotion due to high body weight. Nearly 10% of the subjects had experienced verbal and social stigmatization (ridicule, teasing, and social isolation in the workplace). The perpetrators of discrimination were superiors and co-workers, both men and women. The victims of employment stigmatization and discrimination were relatively young (31-42 yr) 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 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. All of the surveyed subjects had experienced significant mood disturbances as the result of employment discrimination, which in itself perpetuates obesity.

The results of group interviews with female patients of an obesity management clinic indicate that weight-based discrimination in the workplace poses a problem also in Poland. Further work is needed to investigate the problem on a larger population sample. 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.

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