

Connecticut NOW Newsletter, October-November 1974

The situation: a consciousness-raising group. Topic under discussion: their bodies, and their feelings about them. A common thread runs through all the women's comments - each one thinks she is too fat. The session ends in a self-deprecating sort of debate between two members, each describing herself as "huge," over which needs to lose the most weight. Both weigh less than 100 pounds. Two other members of the group remain silent during this exchange, wondering what their "sisters" must think of them: these two women are fat.

Being fat and female in our society means that your chances of being accepted into a college or university are less than those of a fat man and only half a slim woman's chances, given equal qualifications; most job opportunities, including traditionally women's careers - teaching, secretarial, clerical, nursing - are not available to you because of arbitrary weight restrictions; if you can get insurance coverage at all, you will probably find yourself listed under Medical Disability, regardless of the state of your health, and have to pay exorbitant premiums; you may not even be able to find clothing in your size, and if you do it will be overpriced, of poor quality, and possibly dowdy, too; birth control may be impossible to obtain, and if you become pregnant you may not be able to get prenatal care; should you be raped, no policeman will take your attempt to report it seriously.

These are all feminist issues. Fat women are victimized by society's valuation of women in sexist terms: since according to the predominant aesthetic a fat woman is supposed to not be attractive to men, she is not considered a "real" woman. Far from recognizing the basis of fat women's oppression as sexist, however, and speaking to the issues involved - issues of importance to all feminists - the Women's Movement has unconsciously reinforced and perpetuated society's stereotypes against us. Fat feminists are in a sense stepsisters in our own movement by its adoption of the ultra-slim body style approved by Madison Ave. and with it the dieting-as-a-way-of-life style necessary for most women to maintain this unrealistic ideal. For women, and this includes a sizable number, not able or willing to starve and otherwise torture their bodies into the desired configuration, this amounts to a betrayal of some basic feminist principles.

The ambivalence with which most feminists approach the subject of weight is, in fact, an indicator of its importance as a feminist issue. Women's bodies contain more fat biologically than do men's, and proportionately more women than men are termed "overweight"; women are also twice as likely as men to become fat, due to metabolic and other changes during pregnancy. Despite this, a double standard still prevails by which a certain amount of paunch is socially acceptable on a man but even smaller-than-average women feel they must lose weight. In

view of this, it is self-contradictory for the Movement to not support women's right to be fat without being pressured or harassed into the self-destructive "reducing" schemes which take thousands of women's lives every year. Fear of fat, programmed into all women from childhood by our anti-fat, anti-woman culture, is used to manipulate us and separate us from each other. It is time for feminists to recognize this manipulation as sexist and, to begin to examine their own attitudes toward fat, both in relation to themselves and to their sisters who are fat.

It is time for fat women to come together with the Movement to voice our concerns, and to make the Movement recognize fat as a legitimate women's issue and support our struggle for an end to weightism. We must expose the dangerous reducing fallacy (less than 2% of dieters lose weight permanently) that makes us see our weight as a personal failure rather than a political issue and allow our bodies to be abused for the profits of the powerful diet and reducing industry. We must debunk the myth that one is fat by choice or gluttony (most fat people are normal eaters) to create a positive image for ourselves based on an acceptance of the fact that it is as natural for some women (and men) to be fat as it is for others to be thin.

Stripped of the benefits of male chivalry, the condition of fat women reflects the true position of women in our society. We must not be silent any longer; for as long as fat women are oppressed, no woman can be liberated!

--Karen Jones

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