



## Spatial Inclusivity: The Unheard Voices of Plus-Size Women in Public Spaces

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### Abstract

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges that plus-size women experience in public spaces, with the goal of shedding light on an issue that demands greater social attention. The researcher interacted with a varied group of plus-size women from different backgrounds to record their lived experiences via in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The study's results revealed three significant issues: challenges related to physical infrastructure, including places to sit and public transportation accessibility; instances of public stigmatization and micro-aggressions; and a lack of representation in public advertising and displays. The findings of the study demonstrate that the challenges often overlooked by professionals in the field of urban design and lawmakers, emphasize the pressing need for the implementation of more inclusive design strategies and the promotion of public awareness campaigns. By taking into these considerations, it is possible to foster a more equitable public environment that accommodates individuals of diverse body shapes.

### Keywords

Spatial inclusivity, Plus-size women, Public spaces, Gender equity, Body positivity, Social inclusion

### INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are important for building community, encouraging social interactions, and promoting inclusivity. However, the design and arrangement of these venues often reflect cultural conventions and biases, therefore excluding some demographic groups unwittingly. Women, particularly those who are plus-size, typically experience specific problems while accessing public settings, which may have a substantial influence on their social involvement and general well-being. These difficulties vary from poor accessibility and lack of infrastructure to social stigma and prejudice, resulting in a cycle of exclusion and marginalization. Addressing these concerns requires a detailed grasp of both the unique obstacles faced by plus-size women and the larger social and cultural conditions in which these challenges occur.

The idea for exploring plus-size women's experiences and challenges in public spaces arises from the pressing need to establish an inclusive urban environment. Despite growing recognition of the need of diversity in public space design, there is a significant gap in literature and practice covering the experiences of plus-size people. The complex connection between body size and accessibility in public spaces has emerged as a critical subject in urban studies, with the goal of understanding how constructed environments may either assist or hinder access for people of various body proportions.

Puhl and Heuer (2009) and Phelan et al. (2015) have paved the way in this research, digging into the myriad challenges encountered by plus-size people, such as restricted infrastructure that does not support varied body proportions and social stigma that promotes negative stereotypes. The present research expands on this basis by investigating how these problems materialize in the daily lives of plus-size women in the Philippines, a setting that has received little attention in the literature.

Furthermore, the function of digital networks in molding the lives of plus-size women is gaining attention and significance. Lee (2022) has emphasized how virtual spaces may serve as havens of belonging and support, providing a new way for plus-size women to interact, share their stories, and find solidarity. This finding is especially pertinent in the Philippines, where social media and digital platforms play an important role in people's lives.

Aside from the social and infrastructure concerns, the interaction between body image, mental health, and public space design is an important field of research. Swami and Barron (2019) explored the influence of body image on mental health, offering a complete grasp of this issue's psychological elements. Jankowski et al. (2020) have broadened the

discussion by investigating how urban design affects public health, providing useful insights into how the built environment may either impede or enhance well-being.

This study intends to shed light on the systemic hurdles that lead to the exclusion of plus-size women by investigating the numerous elements of this problem, from architectural and design issues to the psychological repercussions of traversing public places. Furthermore, it aims to give evidence-based suggestions to urban planners, designers, and legislators in order to build more inclusive public spaces, therefore promoting to the general well-being and social integration of all community members, regardless of body size.

Hence, this study seeks to combine insights from the perspectives and experiences of plus size women in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the barriers and challenges that they face in public spaces, while also contributing to the larger discourse on urban inclusivity and accessibility.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. To explore the perceptions and experiences of plus-size women regarding their inclusivity in public spaces.
2. To identify the challenges and barriers faced by plus-size women in public spaces.
3. To investigate the specific public spaces where plus-size women feel more or less included and the reasons behind these feelings.
4. To propose recommendations for improving the inclusivity of public spaces for plus-size women based on the findings.

## **THEORETICAL LENS**

This study is anchored in the integration of Social Constructivism and Social Inclusion Theory. These theories offer a nuanced framework for understanding the experiences of plus-size women in public spaces. Drawing from Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism, the study explores how societal interactions and cultural norms shape perceptions of body size, influencing the lived experiences of plus-size women in public spaces. This approach acknowledges that societal attitudes and dialogues around body size are not innate but are constructed and perpetuated through social interactions and media representations.

Concurrently, the study employs Social Inclusion Theory, as elaborated by Le Grand (1997), to examine how these constructed perceptions impact the inclusion or exclusion of plus-size women in urban social, cultural, and economic fabrics. This theory aids in understanding the systemic barriers and facilitators to spatial inclusivity, examining not just physical accessibility but also the social dynamics that govern public spaces. Together, these theoretical lenses provide a comprehensive view, dissecting the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader societal structures, crucial for devising inclusive urban planning and policy strategies.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Ringrose and Regehr's (2017) study of gender and diversity in London's public places is a substantial addition to the literature. Therefore, they provide a more all-encompassing framework for understanding the realities that women face in urban environments. Their research highlights the necessity for public spaces that welcome all women and meet their unique needs. Additionally, they stress the significance of visibility and representation in the process of producing a sense of belonging.

Additionally, Yang (2023) makes a significant contribution to the discussion by concentrating only on the plus-size travel movement. She examines the many ways in which this rapidly expanding group subverts the established standards of travel and works to foster inclusiveness. This study focused on the resiliency and agency of plus-size travellers by showcasing how they navigate and manage space in a society that often excludes them from the mainstream narrative. This is in line with the goals of the current research since it sheds light on the ways in which plus-size women actively interact with public places and modify them to better fit their requirements.

In addition, Moorti and Ross (2005) set the basis for this study by conducting a study of the complexities that are associated with plus-size bodies and gender. More specifically, they looked at the ways in which societal mores and expectations influence the lives of women of a larger size. Their study highlights the interconnections of gender and body size and shows that women of plus size suffer unique hurdles in public settings as a consequence of widespread prejudices and biases against them as a result of the prevalent prejudices and biases against them as a result of their body size. It is necessary, while researching the experiences of plus-size women in public settings, to take into consideration the gender-specific problems that this implies, since the fact that this reveals the need for doing so proves the need of doing so.

Within the context of the Body Positive Movement, the dissertation paper that Merton (2022) wrote investigated the function of activism and agency. This adds a crucial new dimension to our understanding of the challenges faced by plus-size women as well as makes a contribution to the overall development of the discipline. The purpose of this study was to analyze the ways in which plus-size women navigate societal norms and expectations pertaining to body size, as well as the ways in which they use the Body Positive Movement as a platform for empowerment and advocacy. This will allow for a more in-depth assessment of the challenges that are faced by plus-size women when they are in public settings, and it will also enable the results from the research conducted by Merton (2022) to be included into the inquiry. Not only will the social and physical barriers be taken into consideration in this research, but also the manner in which these women actively engage in resistance and advocacy. In addition, Merton's (2022) emphasis on the Body Positive Movement contributes an essential aspect to the discussion by fostering a greater awareness of the socioeconomic and cultural factors that impact the lives of plus-size women.

In relation to this, Johansson's (2021) research explains how the intersectionality of race, gender, and body size makes the experiences of black people who are overweight more complicated. His observations are really helpful in gaining an appreciation of the intricacy of the challenges that plus-size women experience when they are out in public spaces. This demonstrates the need of adopting an intersectional perspective that takes into consideration not just one's physical size, but also one's race and other social categories. This will ensure that the experiences of all plus-size women are examined and addressed.

Another study by Sadeghi et al.'s (2023) that revolves on the understanding and improving the necessary circumstances for women to participate in urban public areas in a secure and healthy manner. This study recognizes the distinct requirements and preferences of women within the context of urban settings, highlighting the need of adopting a gender-responsive perspective in the fields of urban planning and the design of public spaces.

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 7192, also known as *An Act Promoting the Integration of Women as Full and Equal Partners of Men in Development and Development for Nation Building and other Purposes*, this legislation symbolizes a crucial step forward in the Philippines toward gender equality, advocating for the inclusion of all women as full and equal partners of men in development and nation-building. The act provides a legal framework for the inclusion of women in development processes, which can be a powerful point of leverage for advocating policy changes that specifically address the needs of plus-size women in public spaces.

The Safe Spaces Act (RA 11313), also known as the "Bawal Bastos" Law, was enacted to combat gender-based sexual harassment in public places, online, at work, and in educational institutions. It is comprehensive law that handles numerous types of gender-based harassment, assuring the protection of women and other vulnerable groups. RA 11313 is particularly important in the context of this research since it clearly focuses on public places and attempts to promote safer and more respectful conditions for women. While the legislation mainly addresses sexual harassment, it also adds to a wider discussion about the safety and inclusion of public spaces for women (Gonzales, 2022).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research approach is used in this study to dive into the issues and experiences of plus-size women in public areas in Davao City, Philippines. Semi-structured interview guidelines were conducted via Zoom in gathering the data.

This study's participants are plus-size women from Davao City who were chosen via purposive sampling to guarantee a diverse range of experiences. Social media platforms were utilized to reach out to prospective participants. Posts requesting participation are written with sensitivity and inclusion in mind, to ensure understanding on the objective of the research and participant qualifications, which include self-identification as a plus-size woman and a willingness to share personal experiences. Prior to any data collecting operations, ethical permission for the study was secured, and informed consent was thoroughly obtained from all participants, ensuring their rights and privacy are protected.

Semi-structured interviews are used for gathering data on participants' experiences, challenges, and personal strategies for going through public spaces. To examine the qualitative data, thematic analysis is used, starting with an in-depth reading of the transcripts to familiarize researchers with the responses provided by the respondents. To uncover patterns and themes within the data, initial codes are created, which are subsequently organized into larger themes that reflect the study's key conclusions. The procedure includes member verification, which allows participants to examine and offer input on early findings to guarantee correctness and reliability.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study of plus-size women's lived experiences in public spaces has produced remarkable insights into the numerous issues they encounter on a daily basis. This research methodically unraveled the complexity of their interactions with public places, infrastructure, and social norms through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of plus-size women. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three major themes that encapsulated the substance of their experiences: physical infrastructural impediments, public stigmatization and micro aggressions, and a lack of representation in public marketing materials and displays.

These themes serve as the foundations for understanding the complex ways in which public spaces and cultural attitudes affect plus-size women. They emphasize the critical need of a paradigm change in urban design, policymaking, and public awareness in order to build a more inclusive and equitable society. The parts that follow go further into each issue, offering the participants' experiences, comments, and the ramifications of these results on the larger society environment.

### Thematic Analysis

#### *Physical Infrastructure Impediments*

The participants shared numerous instances where public infrastructure failed to accommodate their needs. One respondent, Sarah, a 32-year-old teacher, recounted her experience at a coffee shop:

*"Ang mga lingkuranan kay gamay ra kayo. Nauwlaw ko kay kinahanglan nako iadjust ang akong self para makalingkod, ug makafeel jud ko nga tanan nagtan-aw nako."  
(The chairs were so small and closely spaced. I was embarrassed because I had to squeeze myself in, and I could feel everyone's eyes on me.)*

The participants' narratives, notably Sarah's encounter at a coffee shop highlight a widespread problem in public infrastructure: a lack of accommodations for people of different body shapes. Sarah's description of the tiny and tightly placed seats that made her feel ashamed and inspected is a moving illustration of how public places may accidentally marginalize people.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) note that public accommodations should be accessible and usable regardless of a person's body size, posture, or mobility, suggesting that features such as counters and service windows should be designed to be reachable by all (CDC, 2023). This aligns with the narrative provided by Sarah, who found the seating in a coffee shop to be uncomfortably small and closely spaced, indicating a failure to consider diverse body sizes in design.

Another sentiment was echoed by Emily, a 28-year-old nurse, who shared her struggles with public transit:

*“Ang mga bangko sa bus kay dli jud ingon ana kadagko, ma feel jud nako nga gina judge ko sa mga kauban nakong pasahero ug dli ko ma igo sa bangko.”*  
(The bus seats are never wide enough, and I can feel the judgment from others when I can't fit properly.)

In the context of size inclusivity, fat people, especially women, face notable discrimination. Fat women are reported to experience discrimination in the hiring process and are underrepresented in high-level positions (Burns, 2021).

To combat these biases, organizations are encouraged to include body size in non-discrimination policies, provide training on weight-stigma, and create spaces that are physically accessible to people of all sizes, which could also extend to public transportation design. The design of transit is an important part of urban planning since it should meet the demands of all people, regardless of body size. Emily's discomfort with the tight bus seats demonstrates that present public transportation arrangements are restrictive and fail to respect the comfort of plus-size persons. This design flaw compounds the difficulties that this group faces, limiting their mobility and access to public spaces.

### **Public Stigmatization and Micro-aggressions**

The women who were interviewed described their feeling that they were excluded because of their weight. An accountant named Jessica, who is 35 years old, relayed an experience she had when she was in a shopping mall. She said:

*“Ginatan-aw ko nila nga mura bag dili nako deserve magpalit diri sa department store labi na mga underwears akong paliton or sinina. Panagsa gani kadungog kog story ba unya ginakataw-an ra ko.”*  
(People give you this look in a department store especially when I tried to buy underwear or even shirts, like you I don't belong here. I even heard them making fun of me and laughing at me.)

The thematic analysis of public stigmatization and micro-aggressions, particularly regarding individuals who are overweight, reveals a pressing public health concern. The stigmatization of obesity is acknowledged as pervasive and damaging, significantly undermining core public health values. Weight stigma manifests in various sectors, including policy, healthcare, media, workplaces, and education, necessitating a multi-faceted approach to address and mitigate its impact (Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

The widespread prevalence of public stigmatization and the frequent occurrence of microaggressions highlights the need of social reform. The prevalent prejudices and attitudes toward persons of a plus size may be challenged and altered via the implementation of public awareness projects and educational campaigns, which can play an important part in the process. A determined effort on the part of all members of society is required in order to successfully create a culture of inclusion and respect.

### **Lack of Representation in Public Marketing and Displays**

All of the respondents were in complete agreement that there is a severe deficiency in the amount of plus-size women that are shown in public advertisements and displays. The graphic designer Lisa, who is 40 years old, said:

*“Panagsa ra jud ta kakita ug mga plus-size sa billboards or mga mannequins. Dagko lagi ta pero murag wa may makita nato oi. Di man ta ma recognize.”*  
(You hardly ever see plus-size women in billboards or store mannequins." It's almost as if nobody can see us.)

Peck and Loken (2004) delve into an important question - *under what conditions are larger-sized female models in advertisements viewed positively?* This question is crucial in today's society where body positivity and inclusivity are increasingly emphasized. The study's findings could have significant implications for advertisers and marketers in terms of how they choose models for their campaigns. The research also explores the moderating effects of instructional frame, gender, and need for cognition on the perception of larger-sized female models. This suggests that the impact of using larger-sized models in advertisements may depend on various factors, including the way the advertisement is framed, the gender of the viewer, and the viewer's level of cognitive engagement with the advertisement.

The lack of visibility adds to a sense of being excluded and marginalized, which is a contributing factor. Business establishments may help normalize plus-size bodies and establish a more inclusive public environment by integrating persons of plus size in advertising campaigns and ensuring varied body types are represented in retail displays. Both of these actions can be used to promote diversity in the public spaces.

The lived experiences of plus-size women in public spaces indicate a complicated situation that demands urgent attention and action. These women's experiences highlight the need for quick attention and action. It is very necessary, in order to create a society that is more inclusive, to address the concerns of public stigmatization, lack of representation, and physical infrastructure. This research is meant to serve as a call to action for urban planners, governments, marketers, and the general public in general to realize these difficulties and work together towards a more inclusive future.

The lived experiences of plus-size women in public spaces indicate a complicated situation that demands urgent attention and action. The experiences of these women emphasize the need of paying close attention and acting promptly. In order to build a more accepting society, it is crucial to address issues of public stigma, inadequate representation, and inadequate physical infrastructure. Urban planners, governments, marketers, and the general public are all targeted by this study so that they might be spurred into action to address these issues and create a more welcoming future.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study conducted a thorough analysis of the lived experiences and challenges faced by plus-size women in public spaces. Comprehensive interviews conducted with varied groups of plus-size women. Through these interviews, three primary themes emerged, which encompass the various challenges faced by these individuals. These themes include the challenges that are presented by physical infrastructure, the societal stigmatization and micro-aggressions encountered, and the absence of representation in public marketing materials and displays.

The participants presented convincing experiences of the discomfort and shame they encounter due to insufficient public infrastructure, specifically shown by limited seating arrangements in coffee shops and public transit systems. The existence of these tangible barriers not only impedes people's capacity to navigate unrestrictedly but also intensifies their self-consciousness. The narratives shared by the women also provide insights into a pervasive culture of stigmatization and micro-aggressions, so highlighting the societal biases and prejudices they encounter in their daily existence. Moreover, by openly acknowledging the lack of plus-size women's representation in public advertisements and displays, a substantial concern is raised, as it contributes to their sense of being disregarded and marginalized.

The findings of this study highlight the critical importance of conducting a thorough re-evaluation of urban planning, policy development, and societal perspectives. To address the challenges pertaining to physical infrastructure in a comprehensive manner, it is critical to adopt inclusive design methodologies that consider the diverse needs of the general public. Consequently, this has the potential to mitigate the psychological anguish associated with perceived scrutiny while also improving the mobility and comfort of individuals who identify as plus-size in public environments.

It is imperative to address the problem of public stigmatization and cultivate an atmosphere characterized by sensitivity and respect. Public awareness campaigns and educational endeavors play a pivotal role in challenging entrenched prejudices and fostering an inclusive social milieu. Furthermore, it is imperative to underscore the significance of augmenting the visibility and inclusivity of plus-size women in public presentations and marketing. This substantial metric is of the utmost importance in diminishing the social disapproval linked to a wide range of body types and cultivating a climate that promotes acceptance and recognition.

To address the second research objective, it is advisable to develop a comprehensive approach that incorporates inclusive design standards, awareness campaigns, and systematic methodologies to bolster the advocacy for plus-size women's inclusion and support. The importance of modifying public spaces to improve accessibility is highlighted in the study. The recommendation is to incorporate broader and more durable seating alternatives in public spaces and transportation systems, in addition to modifying the spatial configuration to ensure adequate mobility. The principal aim of this intervention is to alleviate physical distress and potentially diminish sentiments of humiliation encountered by individuals who self-identify as plus-size.

This research provides compelling evidence that advocates for urban planning, legislation, marketing, and society as a whole should recognize the challenges that plus-size women encounter. This assertion emphasizes the significance of cooperative efforts in creating a public domain distinguished by impartiality and all-inclusivity. By actively participating in this endeavor, individuals can actively contribute to the formation of a societal framework that values and embraces a wide range of distinctions, maintains principles of regard and deference for each individual, and cultivates an atmosphere marked by inclusiveness and acceptance of others.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study's research findings reveal numerous obstacles that plus-size women encounter when utilizing public spaces. The aforementioned concerns possess extensive implications for urban planning, societal attitudes, and the portrayal of varied physiques in media. A cultural context characterized by inadequate public infrastructure, widespread social stigma, and limited media representation collectively contribute to the marginalization of individuals who identify as plus-size. This, in turn, negatively impacts their overall well-being and sense of belonging.

To effectively tackle these challenges, urban planners must embrace a more all-encompassing approach that places inclusivity at the forefront and guarantees that transit systems and public spaces are designed to accommodate individuals of diverse statures. By means of awareness campaigns and educational initiatives, it is possible for society to cultivate a culture characterized by empathy and acceptance via the active confrontation of prevailing stereotypes. In addition, it is imperative for the media and advertising industries to strive for the representation of body diversity in an inclusive manner, therefore promoting the normalization of those who are plus-size within the realm of public discourse.

By putting these ideas into action, we may move toward a more equal and supportive society that promotes a feeling of inclusion and well-being for people of all sizes.

This study also suggests the establishment of focused awareness initiatives that celebrate body diversity and encourage acceptance and respect for plus-size persons in order to raise public awareness and challenge cultural prejudices. Furthermore, educational programs aimed at addressing and removing prejudices, building empathy, and supporting inclusive behaviors are suggested for adoption in schools and workplaces.

Lastly, this study recommends for regulatory reforms that safeguard plus-size persons' rights and encourage inclusive practices in both urban design and media portrayal to give a comprehensive approach to inclusion and support. The formation of community support networks is also emphasized as an important step, offering safe venues for plus-size women to discuss their experiences, access resources, and create a feeling of community. Furthermore, the research recommends cooperation among legislators, urban designers, and fashion businesses to guarantee that plus-size people's demands are acknowledged and satisfied in public areas and product offers.

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