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Who Got Left Behind When “Body Positivity” Went Mainstream?

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My first introduction to body positivity was online through a LiveJournal community called “[Fatshionista](#).” There, we talked about fashion DIY, shared pictures of our favorite outfits, and gave the scoop on the actually trendy pieces popping up in plus-size departments (because lord knows they were hard to find). Beyond that, I was also introduced to radical body politics and intersectional feminism, and found solidarity with other fashion-minded people who existed beyond the “straight-size” world.

As a college student who grew up in image-conscious Los Angeles, this was completely revolutionary for me. I began to realize that I didn’t have to look at my body as a work-in-progress on its way to a thinner version of itself. It’s where I first connected with other writers like [Gabi Gregg](#) and [Lesley Kinzel](#), who would go on to pioneer major changes in the fashion industry and shape body politics.

But as body positivity has made its way into the mainstream, I’ve seen so many of the ideas and values about diversity rewritten and diluted. Here’s what I mean: I love the message behind campaigns like “[Plus is Equal](#),” and give major props to brands like Lane Bryant for their incredible investment in promoting plus-size fashion. But...why then were all the models on the smallest-end of the plus size spectrum? Why not a size 22? Why not a single model who wasn’t an hourglass figure?

I know that being white-passing and straight-passing has helped me leverage my niche notoriety into an actual career, and there are days when I feel guilty about my complicity. This is especially painful because much of the politics, organizing, and business-investment in the plus-size world has happened as a result of the hard work of women of color like [Monif Clarke](#), who launched her eponymous line a decade ago; [Maddy Figueroa-Jones](#) who founded [Plus Model Magazine](#) the same year; blogger [Gabi Gregg](#) who launched the first plus-size blog in the U.S in 2008; and [Gwen DeVoe](#), who founded [Full Figured Fashion Week](#) in 2009. Without their hard work, personal and financial investment, and emotional labor, body positivity wouldn’t be the big-business buzzword that it is today.

It’s undeniable that there are significantly more options for plus-size individuals today than there were even five years ago, but we’re still constantly reminded of how much work there’s yet to do. Even when dressing [Ashley Graham](#) for her [British Vogue cover](#), brands flatly refused to send clothes; if a size-12, white, cisgender, able-bodied, highly celebrated supermodel with multi-million dollar deals is not meeting the litmus test of acceptable aesthetics for capital-F-fashion brands, where do the rest of us living further outside the margins of “normative” beauty standards land?

After all, visibility is *really*, really important. Oftentimes, it takes something as simple as seeing a reflection of yourself in a place of influence to realize that you can do the same. In fashion, that means an image can give you the confidence to wear incredible clothes, empower you to self-express, and realize that you as *you* — your body, the varying unique facets of your identity — are worthy and beautiful.

I gathered eight subjects from various identities, backgrounds, and sizes who the fashion industry has largely ignored, who generously shared their own experiences with clothing and style. This is just the tip of the iceberg, and while they represent incredibly diverse perspectives— from ethnic and religious diversity to varying levels of ability, immigration status, and age — it’s important to remember that each person is sharing their own story and should not be seen as a spokesperson for their respective identity groups.

Fashion is only a small piece of our cultural landscape, especially as we move into an era where marginalized people are more at risk. But I believe that the democratization of fashion can, and should, be a bridge to a more egalitarian and pluralistic society. It’s all the more important now to see the multitude of individuals who exist outside of the mainstream.

Here are some of them.

