Experiences of Weight-Based Oppression in Qatar

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Introduction
Weight-based oppression is a widespread phenomenon in Western countries. External sources of weight-based oppression include exposure to stigmatizing or exclusionary social, cultural, economic, political and built environments, weight bias and discrimination, and weight-based bullying and violence. Internal sources of weight-based oppression are the internalized negative attitudes, values and beliefs people hold about body weight.

Weight-based oppression is associated with a range of psychological, physiological and behavioral harms such as depression, anxiety, disordered eating, hypertension, allostatic load, cortisol reactivity and oxidative stress.

Research on weight-based oppression is largely absent from the Arab region.

Objectives
- To examine the internalized attitudes, values and beliefs related to body weight
- To examine the experiences of external weight-based oppression, including teasing, bullying, stigmatization, and discrimination in a diverse sample of people in Qatar

Methods
In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to provide a rich understanding of the views and experiences of participants recruited from staff, faculty and students at Qatar University using convenience and snowball sampling. The study was approved by the QU-IRB, approval number 1070-EA/19.

Results
Participants (25 females, 4 males), were mostly Arabic, and aged between 18-53 years. Internal and external weight-based oppression were experienced by all participants and regarded as so common as to be normative. There were four major themes relating to internalised feelings about participants’ bodies, and the timing, source and impact of exposure to external oppression.

Internalised feelings
- Embarrassment
- Shame

Timing
- Mostly during childhood
- Heightened vulnerability

Major themes
- Low self-esteem
- Suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders

Impact
- Dissatisfaction
- Generational change
- Depression
- Isolation
- Sadness

Source
- Family
- Friends
- Teachers
- Social media
- Culture

Conclusion
Weight-based oppression in the Middle East is an important and unrecognized public health issue. Programs should be developed to reduce exposure to weight-based oppression in all sectors. Reducing teasing, bullying and negative experiences related to body weight in childhood should be a priority.

References