

Pearn Kandola Research

Weight Discrimination at Work (2023)

PEARN | KANDOLA

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Introduction

Background

Obesity is one of the most complex and challenging, as well as controversial, public health issues in modern Western economies, with many people openly holding strong negative opinions about it. These opinions are often based on stereotypical beliefs which lead to people being stigmatised because of their weight. It is fuelled by the fashion industry's view of what "good" looks like.

There are efforts being made to change attitudes. Since 2015 there has been a World Obesity Day which since 2020 has been on the 4th March each year. This year the theme set by the World Health Organisation and their partners was "Changing Perspectives: Let's Talk About Obesity". The aim was to create a conversation to change attitudes and perceptions towards obesity, shift norms and potentially transform health outcomes.

World Obesity Day is part of a wider agenda to change the narrative on obesity on a global scale, to move from a place of blaming and shaming people living with obesity, to considering all the root causes of obesity (such as economic, environmental, psychological, socio-cultural, and genetic factors).

There is evidence that suggests that individuals who have a higher body weight face more negative societal stereotypes and weight stigma, as well as prejudice and discrimination across many areas of contemporary society, ranging from how they are perceived and portrayed in the media, to how they are viewed by healthcare professionals, and how they are treated in the workplace.

A multinational comparative [study](#)¹ examined experiences of weight stigma of nearly 14,000 individuals who were enrolled in WW International (formerly Weight Watchers) across Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the US. The survey assessed each person's history of experiencing weight stigma, interpersonal sources of weight stigma and the onset of the stigmatising experiences and subsequent distress.

The research discovered that more than half (between 55.6% and 61.3%) of all respondents across all countries had experienced weight stigma. Furthermore, the study revealed that

individuals who had a higher Body Mass Index (BMI) were significantly more likely to have a weight-stigmatising experience than those who had a lower BMI. In particular, individuals experienced weight stigma from:

Family members	76.0-87.8%
Classmates during childhood and adolescences	75.0-80.9%
Doctors and healthcare practitioners	62.6-73.5%
Co-workers/colleagues	54.1-61.7%
Friends	48.8-66.2%

This suggests that weight stigma is a common and frequent experience for adults in Western countries. In addition, the wide acceptance of weight stigma, particularly that associated with being overweight or obese, is potentially a major barrier to reducing experiences and impact of weight discrimination, both in society and at work.

One response has been to call for shifting the narrative on overweight and obesity² by using people-first language i.e. referring to 'people living with obesity', rather than 'obese people' or even 'the obese'. This shift in language is now the socially accepted standard for many other chronic disabilities and conditions but has not been widely adopted for obesity.

Research into weight stigma and bias at work often focuses on overweight and obese, while using an average or healthy weight as the benchmark for comparison, with few studies exploring the discrimination of individuals who are clinically underweight.

¹ Puhl, R. M., Lessard, L. M., Pearl, R. L., Himmelstein, M. S., & Foster, G. D. (2021). International comparisons of weight stigma: Addressing a void in the field. *International Journal of Obesity*, 45(9), 1976-1985. www.doi.org/10.1038/s41366-021-00860-z ² Kyle, T. K., & Puhl, R. M. (2014). Putting people first in obesity. *Obesity*, 22(5), 1211-1211. www.doi.org/10.1002/oby.20727

At work, weight discrimination can be experienced at any of the stages of the employee life cycle. According to the [World Obesity Federation](#), people living with obesity will be promoted less often, be paid less, be disciplined more and are more likely to have their contracts terminated. They will also experience bias during career counselling.

According to WOF research³, people living with obesity are significantly less likely to be placed in sales or customer-facing roles. Moreover, people living with obesity can also be paid less than average/healthy weight individuals for the same roles. This disparity is even more pronounced for women with obesity.

This study

In light of the information found in existing studies, and the theme for World Obesity Day, Pearn Kandola conducted a survey to explore experiences of weight discrimination in the modern UK workplace. The aims of the study were to:

1

Explore potential differences in attitudes and beliefs of the existence of weight discrimination in the workplace between different BMI groups (normal/healthy; overweight, obese and underweight)

2

Explore potential gender differences in these beliefs

3

Investigate whether there are group differences in recognising weight discrimination at work

4

Uncover the commonality of experiences of weight discrimination between the different BMI groups, either directly as victims or indirectly as witnesses

5

Identify organisations' actions against weight discrimination and to promote body positivity and inclusivity in the workplace

It is worth noting that the Body Mass Index was used in this survey as a measurement of weight due to its general and repeated use by medical practitioners. However, it can lead to discrepancies when the respondent is of higher weight, but low body fat percentage, as it cannot distinguish between fat and muscle percentage⁴. This is discussed in the 'Attitudes and Perceptions' section.

Analysis of results

The survey contained several closed 'yes'/'no' questions due to the distinct experiences of many areas explored (e.g., "Have you, in your own opinion, ever experienced weight discrimination in the workplace?"). Differences in frequencies between groups were analysed using Chi Square statistical tests and supplemented with odds ratio analyses.

Key Terms

- **Body Mass Index (BMI):** a measure that uses your height and weight to work out if you have a healthy weight ([NHS, 2022](#)).
- **Discrimination:** unfair or prejudicial treatment of individuals on the basis of their characteristics (such as race, sex, disability, etc.)
- **Weight Bias:** negative ideologies associated with obesity.
- **Weight Stigma:** discriminatory acts and ideologies which target individuals due to their weight and/or size. According to the [World Obesity Federation](#), weight stigma is a result of weight bias.

This research

This research is a study identifying people's attitudes, perceptions and experiences of weight discrimination at work. Additionally, it gauges the action taken by organisations and the perceived impact this has by employees and concludes by presenting implications and recommendations for organisations. This report presents our findings from respondents living and working in the UK in 2023.

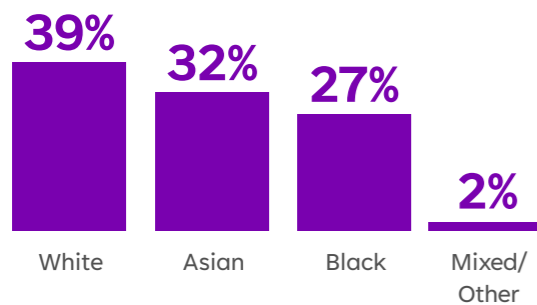
In the next section, we describe how we collected our data. In subsequent sections, we share our key findings, highlighting any differences between groups.

Our approach

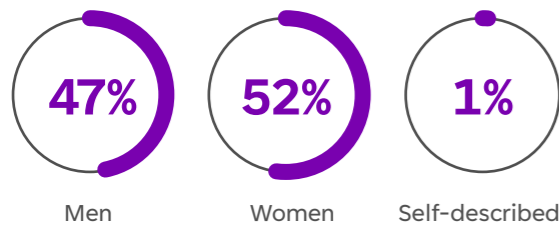
Sample

Using Prolific (an online research recruitment platform) we collected data from 1,427 respondents in the UK via an online survey. The main criteria to be included in the analysis were that respondents had to be currently employed and living in the UK.

Ethnicity



Gender



Due to incomplete data from 8 respondents, the final sample for the detailed analysis consisted of 1,419 respondents.

Analysis of results

The survey contained several closed 'yes/no' questions due to the distinct experiences of many areas explored (e.g., "Have you, in your own opinion, ever experienced weight discrimination in the workplace?"). Differences in frequencies between groups were analysed using Chi Square statistical tests and supplemented with odds ratio analyses.

What we measured

The survey was divided into four sections:

Section 1

asked for demographic questions about the respondent (sector of work, race, age, gender, and work environment).

Section 2

asked questions about the respondent's weight and what people considered to be an act of weight discrimination at work. Respondents were given brief descriptions of various scenarios. These descriptions fell under categories of weight discrimination ranging from 'overt' to 'subtle' (no discrimination, subtle, explicit, benevolent, and malevolent).

Section 3

explored the experiences of weight discrimination, either directly as victims or indirectly as witnesses.

Section 4

explored organisations' actions against weight discrimination and to promote body positivity and inclusivity in the workplace.

Attitudes and Perceptions

What is your BMI?

49% of participants were from the normal/healthy weight category; 32% were from the overweight category, 15% were from the obese category and 4% were from the underweight category.

What is your BMI? vs. How do you view yourself?

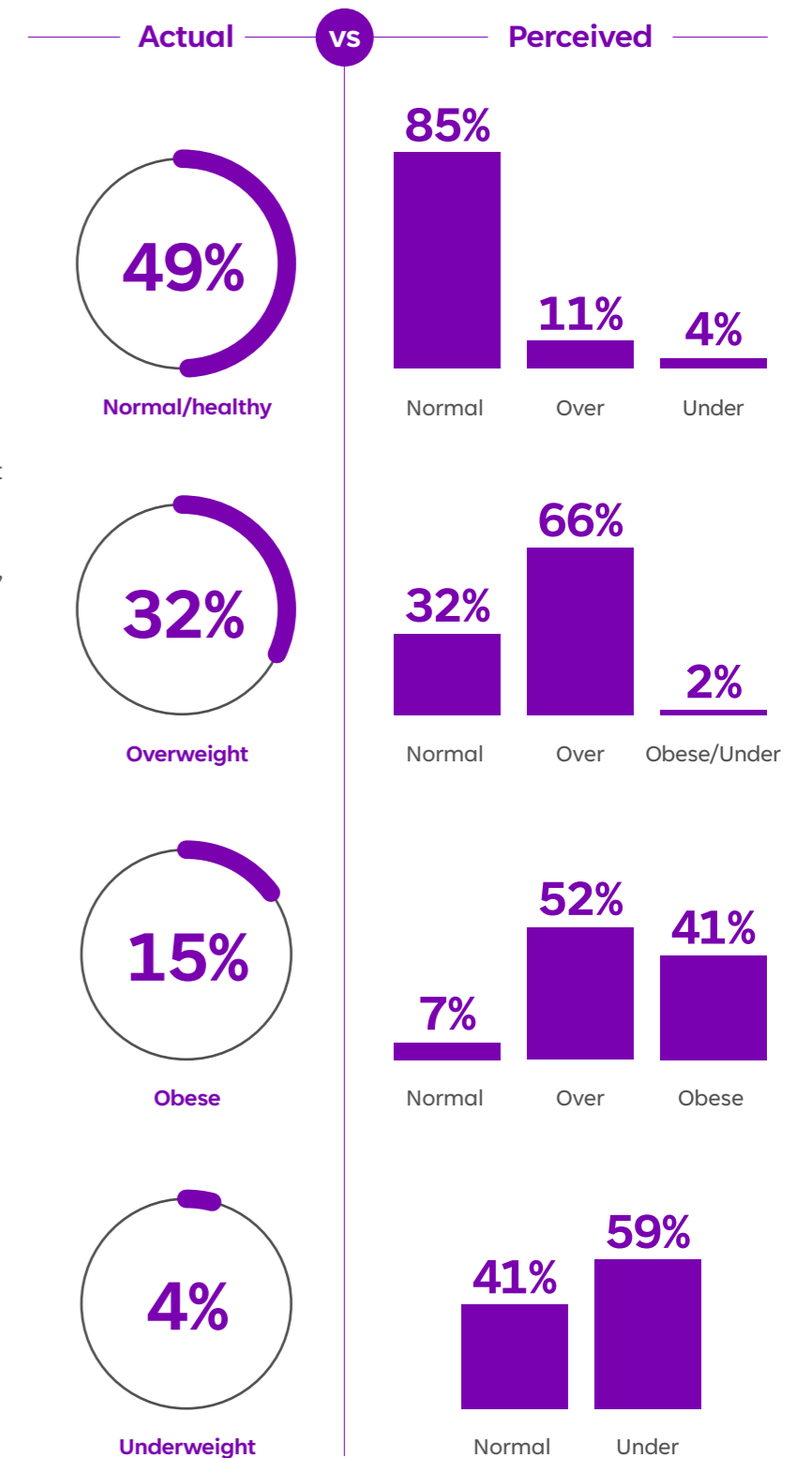
Following the previous question about 'what is your BMI', participants were asked whether they view themselves as normal/healthy, overweight, obese, or underweight.

85% of those who were normal/healthy viewed themselves as being normal/healthy, with 11% viewing themselves to be overweight, and 4% perceiving themselves to be underweight;

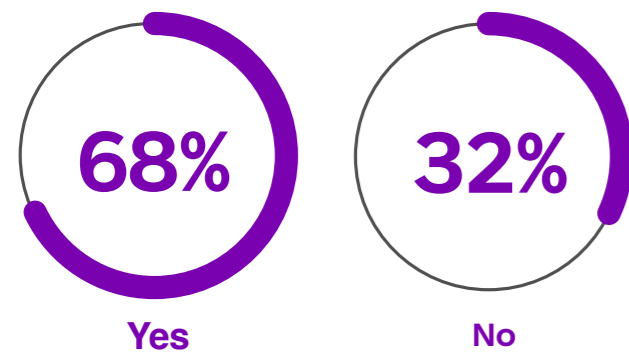
32% of those who were in the overweight group viewed themselves as being normal/healthy, with 66% viewing themselves to be overweight, and 2% perceiving themselves to be obese or underweight;

7% of those who were in the obese group viewed themselves as being normal/healthy weight, with 52% viewing themselves as being overweight and 41% perceiving themselves to be obese;

41% of those who were in the underweight group viewed themselves as being normal/healthy weight, whilst 59% perceived themselves to be underweight.



Do you think weight discrimination exists in the workplace?



Respondents were asked whether or not they thought that weight discrimination exists in the workplace. Overall, 68% of respondents said “Yes” and 32% said “No”.

The breakdown of responses was:

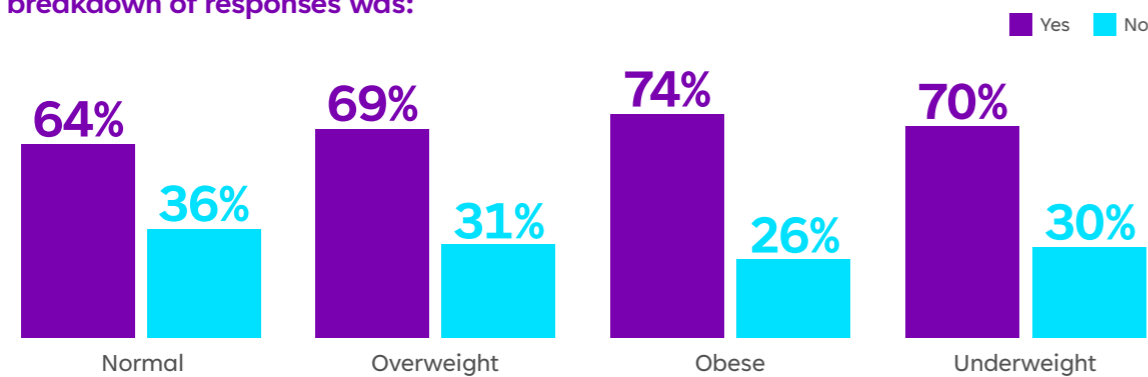
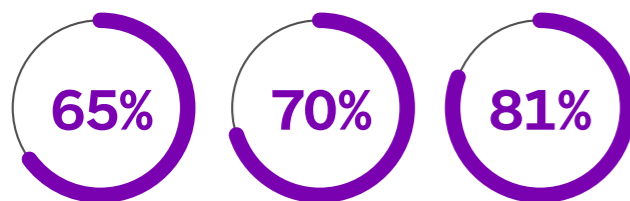


Figure 1: “Do you think weight discrimination exists in the workplace?” - percentage of ‘Yes’ responses per BMI group.

A Chi-Square (χ^2) test revealed a non-significant difference in the responses of individuals from different BMI groups ($X^2 = (6, N=1419) = 8.863, p = .181$), suggesting that although the perceptions of weight discrimination existing in the workplace can vary depending on whether someone is normal/healthy or living with

overweight/obesity/underweight, these differences were not statistically significant.

Odds ratios of the data revealed respondents living with obesity were **1.6 times** more likely to believe weight discrimination exists in the workplace than normal/healthy respondents.

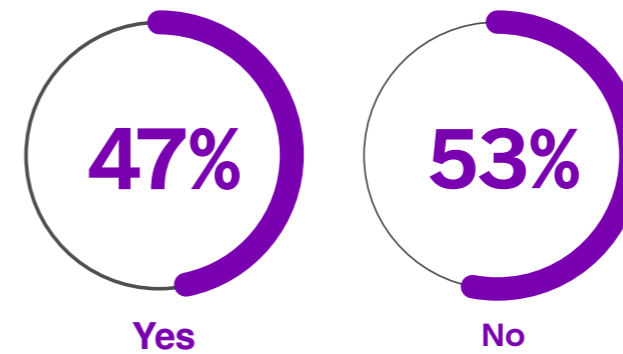


The data also revealed that **65%** of men, **70%** of women, and **81%** of those who self-described believed that weight discrimination exists in the workplace.

A Chi-Square (χ^2) test revealed a non-significant difference in the responses of people from different genders ($X^2 = (4, N=1419) = 6.485, p = .166$), suggesting that although the perceptions of weight discrimination existing in the workplace can vary depending on gender, these differences are not statistically significant.

Odds ratios of the data revealed women were **1.2 times** more likely, and self-described individuals were **1.85 times** more likely to believe weight discrimination exists in the workplace than men.

Do you consider weight discrimination to be a problem in the workplace?



Respondents were asked whether or not they thought that weight discrimination is a problem in the workplace. Overall, 47% of respondents said “Yes”, and 53% said “No”.

The breakdown of responses was:

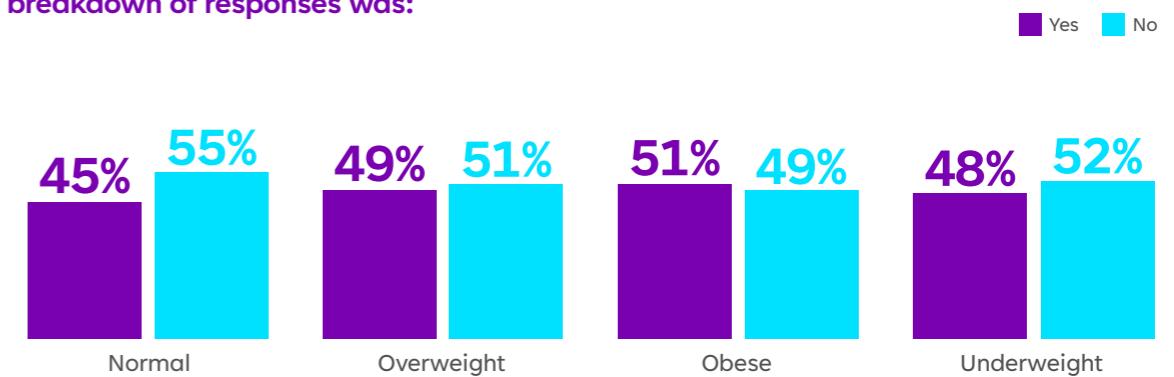


Figure 1: “Do you think weight discrimination exists in the workplace?” - percentage of ‘Yes’ responses per BMI group.

A Chi-Square (χ^2) test revealed a non-significant difference in the responses of individuals from different BMI groups ($X^2 = (6, N=1419) = 15.744, p = .015$). This suggests that, although believing that weight discrimination being a problem in the workplace can vary depending on whether someone is normal/healthy or living with

overweight/obesity/underweight, these differences were not statistically significant.

Odds ratios of the data revealed respondents living with obesity were **1.3 times** more likely to believe weight discrimination is a problem in the workplace than normal/healthy respondents.



The data also revealed that **43%** of men, **51%** of women and **48%** of those who self-described believed that weight discrimination is a problem in the workplace.

A Chi-Square (χ^2) test revealed a significant difference in the responses of people from different genders ($X^2 = (4, N=1419) = 40.718, p < .001$), suggesting that the belief that weight discrimination is a problem in the workplace varies depending on gender.

Odds ratios of the data revealed that women and self-described individuals were both **1.3 times** more likely to believe weight discrimination exists in the workplace than men.

When you're at work, how comfortable do you feel discussing weight?

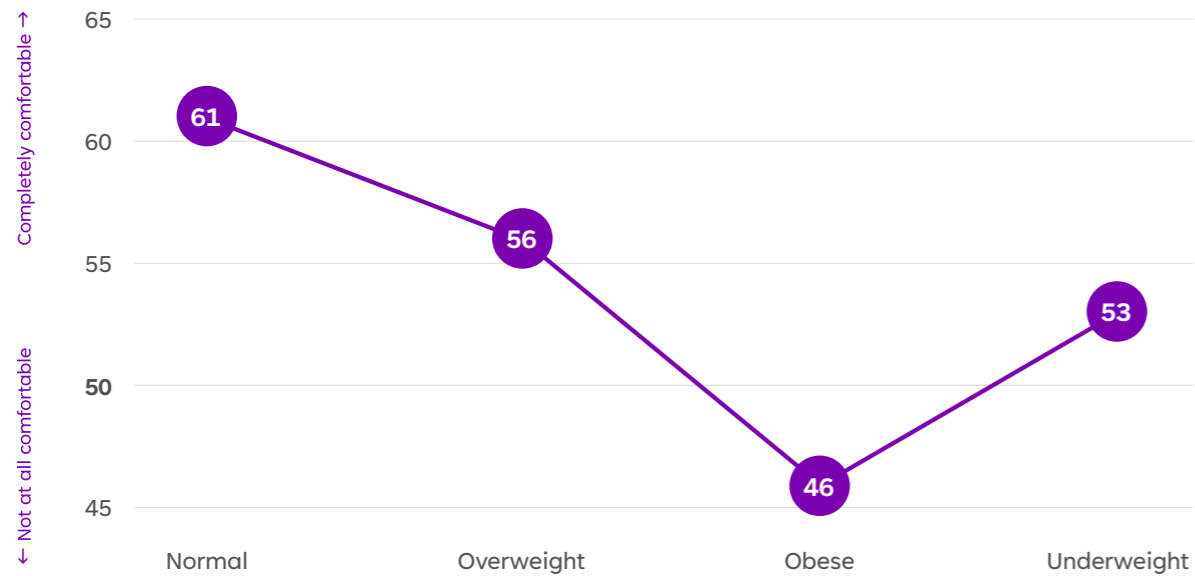


Figure 3: "At work, how comfortable do you feel discussing weight?" Mean scores per BMI group (1 = not at all, 100 = completely)

Respondents were asked how comfortable they felt discussing weight in a work environment. Overall, the mean score of all the respondents was **57/100**. While no group are particularly comfortable discussing weight in the workplace, our findings suggest that normal/healthy respondents were the most comfortable, with people living with obesity being the least comfortable.

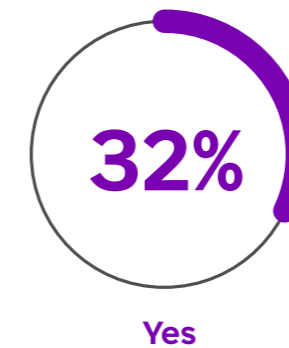
A one-way between subjects ANOVA of the data revealed a statistically significant difference between the comfort ratings of at least two of the BMI groups ($F(100, 1317) = [1.506], p = .001$).

Figure 3 shows the mean scores for how comfortable respondents felt discussing weight at work per BMI group.

BMI	Mean* (1-100)
Normal/Healthy	61
Overweight	56
Obese	46
Underweight	53

(1 = not at all, 100 = completely)

In the workplace, have you ever witnessed someone discriminating against someone else because of their weight?



Respondents were asked if they have witnessed someone discriminating against someone else on the basis of their weight. Overall, 32% of respondents said "Yes", they had witnessed someone discriminating against someone else because of their weight in the workplace.

The breakdown of responses was:

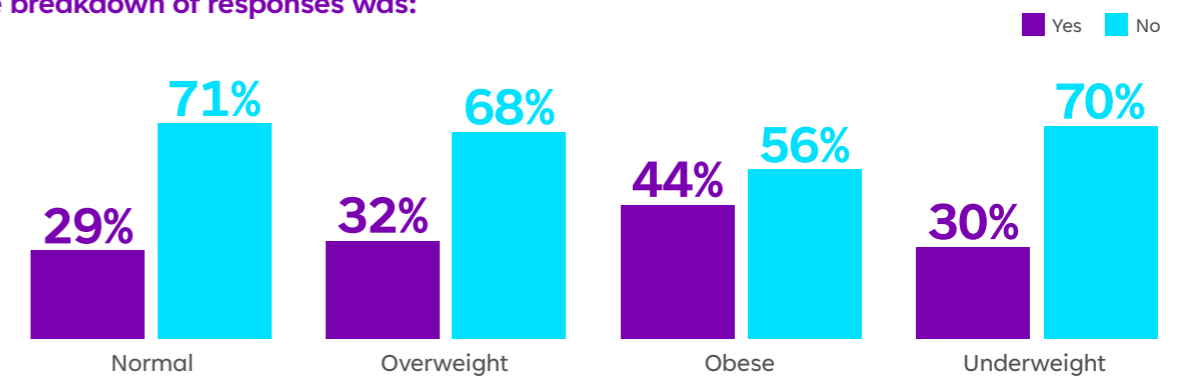


Figure 4: "In the workplace, have you ever witnessed someone discriminating against someone else because of their weight?" Percentage of 'Yes' responses by BMI group.

A Chi-Square (χ^2) test revealed a significant difference in the responses of individuals from different BMI groups ($\chi^2 = (3, N=1419) = 19.225, p < .001$), suggesting that experiences of witnessing weight discrimination in the workplace vary depending on whether someone is normal/healthy or living with overweight/obesity/underweight.

Odds ratios of the data revealed respondents living with obesity were **2 times** more likely to have witnessed weight discrimination in the workplace than normal/healthy respondents, and **1.9 times** more likely to witness weight discrimination than respondents living with underweight.

Group differences may relate to personal experiences of weight discrimination at work. Respondents living with overweight/obesity/underweight reported experiencing significantly more weight discrimination at work than normal/healthy respondents. The groups' relative familiarity with these discriminatory encounters may therefore influence their abilities to recognise weight discrimination in the workplace.

Figure 4 shows the percentages, per group, of those who have witnessed weight discrimination at work.

How did you respond after witnessing this event?

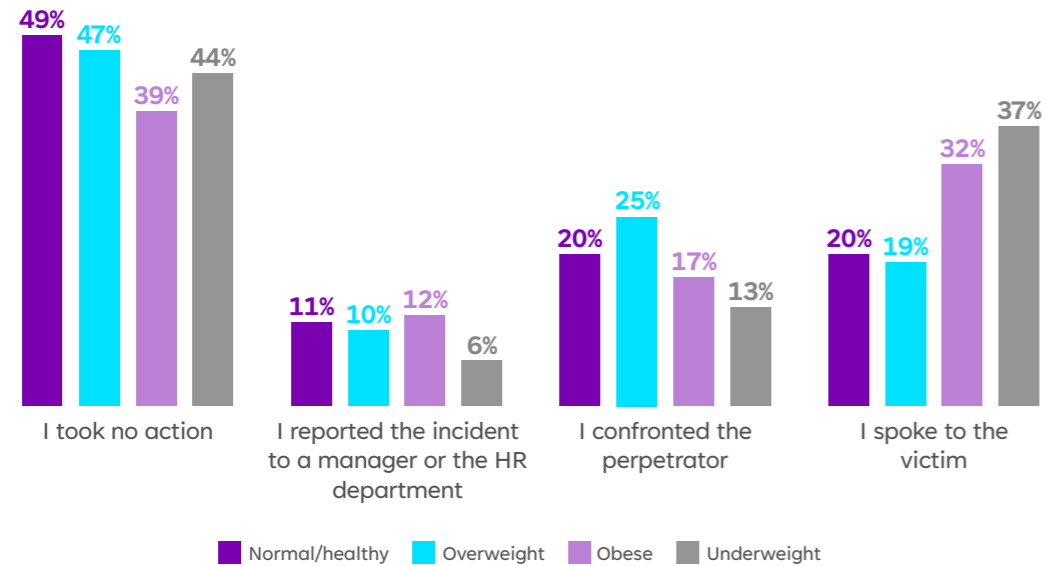


Figure 5: "How did you respond after witnessing this event?" Percentage of 'Yes' responses by BMI group.

Overall, of respondents who said they had witnessed weight discrimination in the workplace, 46% took no action, 21% confronted the perpetrator, 22% spoke to the victim, and 11% reported the incident to a manager or HR department.

The graph below presents the percentage of each response to witnessing a weight discrimination incident at work, per BMI group.

Figure 5 shows how the different BMI groups responded overall to witnessing weight discrimination in the workplace. Respondents living with being overweight were most likely to confront the perpetrator, but also least

likely to speak to the victim when compared to respondents living with obesity and respondents living with underweight.

All groups were more likely to take no action after witnessing weight discrimination at work than to take action, with nearly 50% of normal/healthy respondents opting to take no action.

What was the outcome of the action?

Those who said they had taken action when they witnessed weight discrimination in the workplace were then asked what the outcome of this action was. Overall, 40% stated that the action led to appropriate outcomes and the situation was dealt with; 35% said that the issue was not resolved, 24.6% said that the complaint was ignored, or no action was taken, and 0.4% said that the action worsened the situation.

This suggests that taking action very rarely leads to a worse outcome. In the vast majority of cases, taking action either improved the situation or had a neutral (visible) outcome.

Was there a particular reason for not taking action?

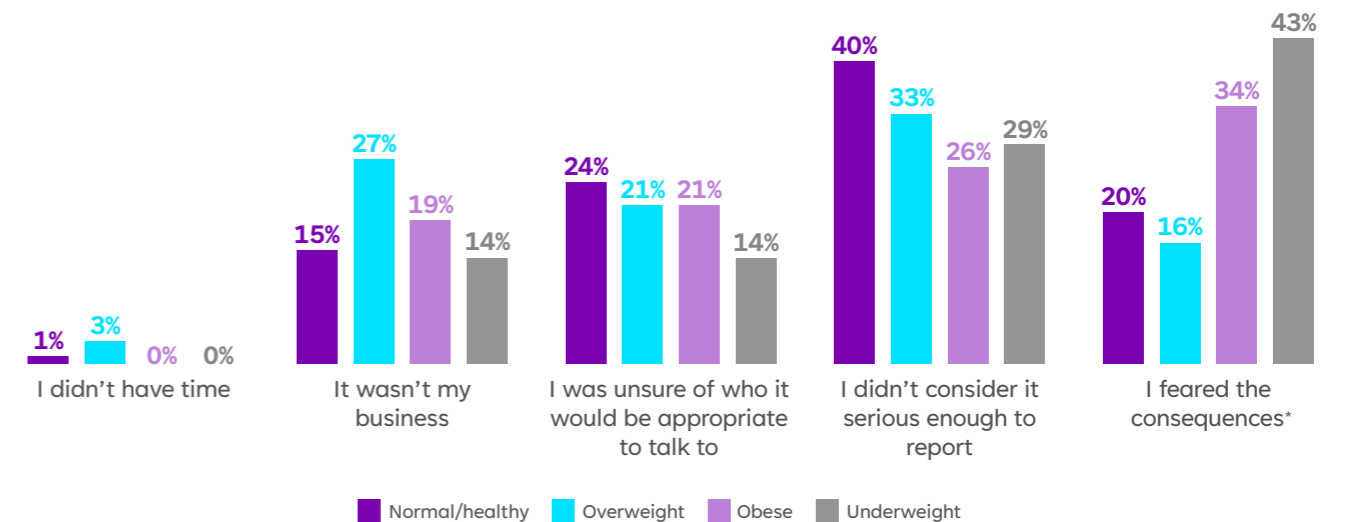


Figure 6: "Was there a particular reason for not taking action?" Percentage of 'Yes' responses by BMI group.

Of the respondents who took no action, the most common response was "I didn't consider it serious enough to report" (35%), followed by "I feared the consequences" (22%) and "I was unsure of who to talk to" (22%), "It wasn't my business" (19%) and "I didn't have time" (2%).

As highlighted in the table, responses varied by BMI group:

- **Overweight respondents** were more likely to respond with "it wasn't my business" than any other group of respondents,
- **Normal/healthy weight respondents** were more likely than any other group of respondents to say that they were unsure who to talk to,
- **Normal/healthy weight respondents** were more likely to state that they didn't consider the

discriminatory event that they witnessed serious enough to report than any other group,

- **Underweight respondents** were more likely to say that they feared the consequences than normal/healthy weight respondents and respondents living with overweight/obesity,

The graph above highlights the reasons why respondents did not take action when they witnessed racism in the workplace, per BMI group.

* (i.e., being penalised by the person carrying out the discriminatory behaviour)

Outcome where action was taken	Total
The action led to appropriate outcomes and the situation was dealt with.	40%
The issue was not resolved.	35%
The complaint was ignored, or no action was taken.	24.6%
The action worsened the situation.	0.4%

Recognising Weight Discrimination

The ability to challenge weight discrimination in the workplace will be influenced by peoples' ability to recognise such incidents when they occur.

Are the following scenarios discriminatory?

Respondents were presented with a range of scenarios which described, or did not describe, incidents of weight discrimination. We were interested in how effective UK employees were at recognising different forms of weight discrimination in the workplace.

Using definitions and frameworks of other forms of discrimination and micro-incivilities (racism, sexism, etc) we applied these to develop our own definitions of forms of weight discrimination. The table below lists the forms of weight discrimination that were categorised in the scenarios, alongside their definitions.



Definitions of the forms of weight discrimination

Subtle, malevolent discrimination:

this is what we can consider to be 'casual weight discrimination'. Subtle malevolent forms of discrimination refer to covert acts of discrimination that are commonplace and ambiguous. An example of these is "fatphobic" microincivilities, which often reinforce systematic weight discrimination, bias, and stereotypes (Essed, 1991; Sue et al., 2007; Kandola, 2018). These can be intentional or unintentional.

Subtle, benevolent discrimination:

acting in a prejudicial manner towards people living with obesity/underweight/overweight and framing these behaviours as positive or even beneficial to the minority group individuals (Romani, Holck, & Risberg, 2019).

Explicit, malevolent discrimination:

this refers to behaviours which are exclusionary, verbally and/or physically antagonistic, avoidant or even exterminatory (Blank et al., 2004). This includes calling people who are outside of the "normal/healthy" weight category fatphobic slurs, "fat or skinny shaming", excluding people on account of their weight, and bullying or harassing individuals because of their weight.

The following table shows the percentage of respondents that correctly identified each type of discrimination, classified by BMI group. These scenarios have been classified as exhibiting a form of weight discrimination and so have been separated from the scenarios which have no form of discrimination present.

Scenario	Normal/Healthy	Over weight	Obese	Under weight
Subtle, benevolent Acting in a prejudiced manner and framing these behaviours as positive or beneficial to the recipient (Romani et al., 2019)	64.4%	69.0%	72.2%	67%
Subtle, malevolent "Everyday racism". Subtle acts of racism that are commonplace and ambiguous (e.g. micro-incivilities; Kandola, 2018). These can be intentional or unintentional.	46.0%	46.8%	48.5%	52.8%
Explicit, malevolent "Old-fashioned" racism. Behaviours that are exclusionary, verbally and/or physically antagonistic and avoidant (Blank et al., 2014).	79.8%	85.4%	88.2%	84.0%

Overall, the table demonstrates that incidents of 'explicit, malevolent' (84.4%) discrimination were more easily recognised than 'subtle, malevolent' (48.6%) or 'subtle, benevolent' (68.3%) forms. This highlights the need for organisations to promote education on subtle forms of discrimination and the occurrence of microincivilities in the workplace. The graph below, Figure 7, demonstrates the percentage of participants identifying discrimination.

The breakdown of responses was:

The percentage of respondents that correctly identified the presence of discrimination.

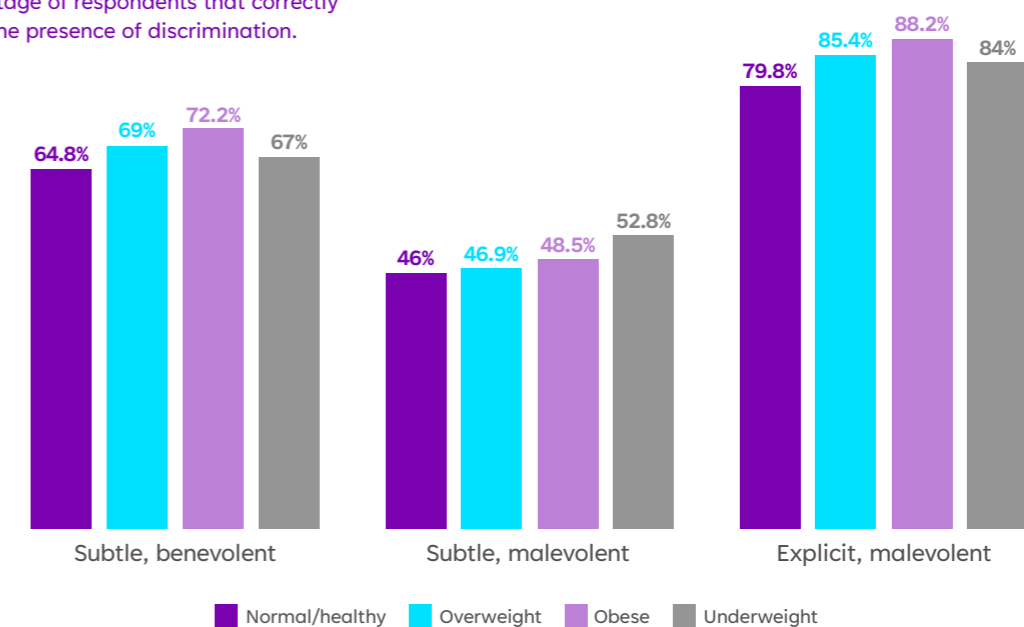


Figure 7: The percentage of respondents that correctly identified the presence of discrimination across each type of scenario.

Experiences of Weight Discrimination



Participants were asked: “Have you, in your own opinion, ever experienced weight discrimination in the workplace?” Overall, 16.8% of the respondents in 2023 reported having experienced weight discrimination in the workplace.

Yes

The breakdown of responses was:

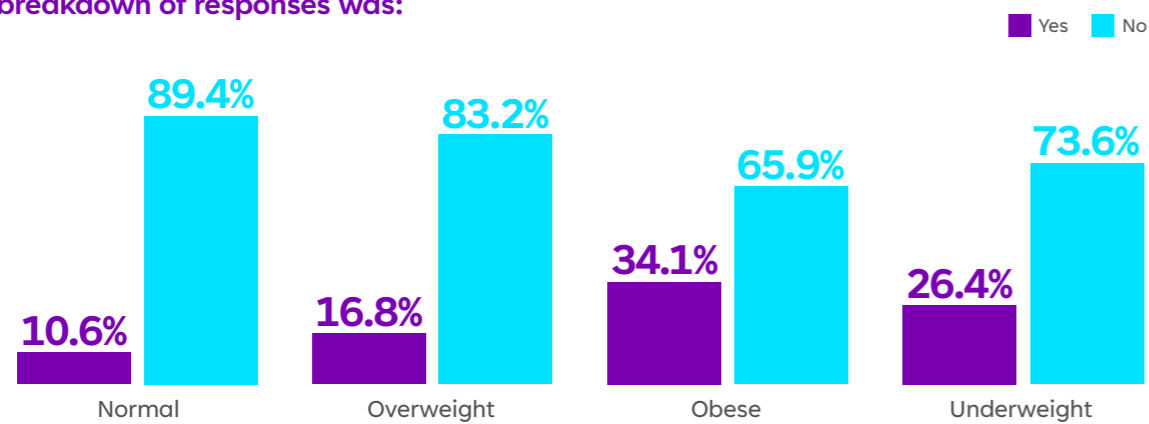


Figure 8: A graph to show the respondents who said to have experienced weight discrimination in the workplace.

Responses differed significantly between BMI groups $X^2 = (3, N=1419) = 95.037, p < .001$, demonstrating that experiences of weight discrimination in the workplace vary depending on whether someone is of normal/healthy BMI or living with overweight/obesity/underweight.

Participants living with obesity recorded experiencing the highest level of discrimination in the workplace (34.1%), followed by participants in the underweight BMI level (26.4%). Figure 8 illustrates the results by group.

Overall, 18.9% of female respondents had experienced weight discrimination, alongside 19.0% of respondents who identified as non-binary or transgender and 14.5% of male respondents.

Have you experienced any of the following situations?

Participants were asked whether they had experienced any of a range of situations in the workplace. Below is a table demonstrating the percentage of participants in the four BMI groups that had experienced each of the scenarios.

Scenario	Normal/Healthy	Over weight	Obese	Under weight
A I have been intentionally excluded from work or social events because of my weight	1.3%	2.6%	9.1%	1.9%
B I have been verbally or physically abused from work or social events because of my weight by other colleagues	4.3%	7.3%	11.8%	13.2%
C I have been falsely accused or criticized by colleagues because of my weight	2.6%	4.6%	4.5%	7.5%
D Colleagues have made assumptions about my ability, character or behaviour based on stereotypes of my weight	12%	12.4%	31.4%	20.8%
E I have sometimes felt that because of my weight, I am not always actively included by my colleagues	2.2%	7.5%	18.2%	3.8%
F I sometimes feel that because of my weight, colleagues treat me differently	4.5%	6.8%	23.6%	7.5%
G I have been asked intrusive questions about my weight by my colleagues	7.2%	7.7%	14.5%	26.4%
H I have experienced an over-fascination about my weight from colleagues (e.g.: how much I weigh, what exercises I do/don't do, my eating habits)	14.3%	8.4%	17.3%	28.3%
I I have experienced colleagues policing my outfit choices because of my weight (e.g.: suggesting that I dress for my size)	2.6%	5.5%	10.5%	3.8%
J None of the above	75.3%	71.1%	51.8%	56.6%

Overall, the data demonstrates that individuals from all four BMI categories have experienced some sort of weight discrimination in the workplace:

- **Participants in the 'obese' BMI category** were most likely to report having experienced a discriminatory scenario. Across five of the nine options, respondents in this BMI category reported experiencing discriminatory scenarios more than any other weight category.
- **Respondents living with obesity** were most likely to report experiences of colleagues treating them differently due to their weight (23.6%), not feeling actively included due to their weight (18.2%), and colleagues making assumptions about their ability, character or behaviour based on stereotypes about their weight (31.4%) compared to other BMI groups.
- **Of the remaining four options, the 'underweight' BMI category** contained the largest number of participants that had experienced the scenario. Participants in the 'underweight' category reported the highest percentage of experiencing intrusive questions about their weight, alongside over-fascination from colleagues toward their weight, exercise and eating habits.
- **Respondents in the normal/healthy and overweight BMI categories** recorded similar experiences of weight discrimination, with the highest percentage of experiences lying in the over-fascination and stereotypical assumptions scenarios.

Actions Taken by Organisations

Respondents were asked whether their organisation had taken any action to promote inclusive culture and/or a positive attitude towards people of a plus size in their respective workplace. Overall, 19.6% of all respondents said that their organisation had taken action to promote weight equality in the workplace.

Respondents whose organisation had taken actions were asked to identify the type of action taken. Below are the most common actions taken by organisations to promote inclusive culture and positive attitudes towards people of underweight and overweight BMI group, and people living with obesity.

- **Championing equality in the workplace (increasing equality and/or awareness):** The majority of actions reported by respondents (12.1%) was championing equality in the workplace. This consists of general actions and attempts to increase awareness of weight discrimination and promote equality.
- **Education:** 7.9% of respondents listed actions related to 'education'. The 'education' action consisted of workshops and training, seminars and talks, and training and development programmes. This increases awareness of weight discrimination in the workplace and promotes inclusive behaviour.
- **Culture and communication:** 9.4% of respondents reported that their organisation took action under the title of increasing culture and communication. This involves developing inclusive culture and improving communication in attempt to increase equality in the workplace. This was listed in the form of supporting organisations that champion body positivity, hosting events, starting networks and/or support groups for individuals in the workplace.
- **Changing internal policies and practice:** 8.2% of respondents reported their organisation changing internal policies and practices to increase equality and inclusion within the workplace. This broader aspect of organisational action involves ensuring there are sufficient opportunities to report exclusion, offering equal opportunities, and developing better employment and recruitment practices.

Summary: Action taken by organisations

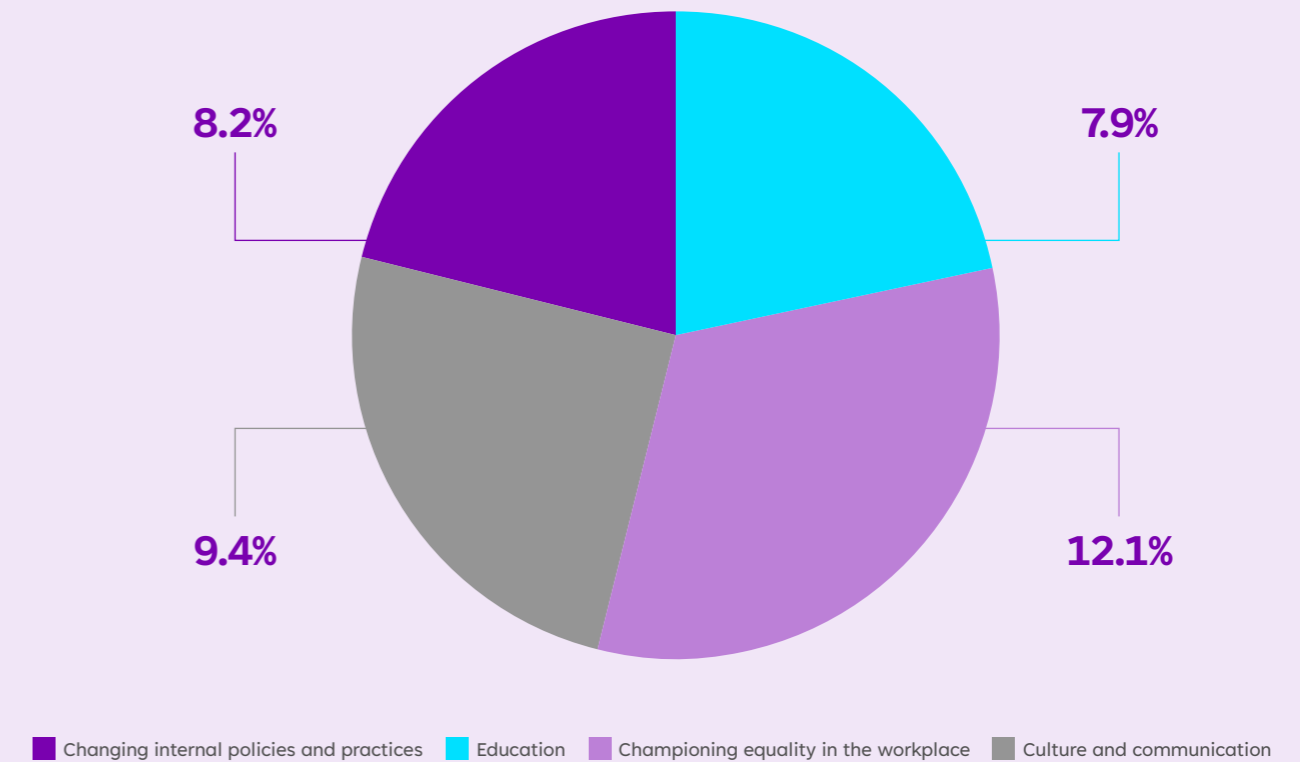


Figure 9: Percentage dispersion of actions taken by organisations against weight discrimination.

The most common action taken by organisations related to education, culture and communication, support for organisations that champion body positivity and raise awareness, and the changing and development of internal policies and practices. This chart demonstrates the dispersion of organisational action by % responses.

Implications of the research

There are a number of implications of this research that provide clear and compelling directions for action. The results demonstrate the existence of weight discrimination in the workplace and that, although respondents across all BMI categories acknowledged this, many still do not consider weight discrimination to be a problem.

There is still much work to be done to increase employees' comfort around speaking about weight in the workplace, in order to increase communication and promote awareness and equality.

Overall, the findings reveal that individual experiences and perceptions of weight discrimination in the workplace vary depending on their Body Mass Index category. Those respondents living with obesity were most likely to have experienced weight discrimination, followed by those in the underweight category.

The implications for U.K. organisations are discussed below.

Attitudes and perceptions

Does weight discrimination exist in the workplace?

- Overall, 68% of respondents believed that weight discrimination currently exists in the workplace.
- A higher number of women (70%) and those who self-described (81%) their gender believed that weight discrimination exists in the workplace than men (65%).

- **Implication:** Weight discrimination exists in the workplace and is most likely to be perceived by respondents living with obesity (74%) followed by respondents with an underweight BMI (70%). Women and those respondents who self-described were more likely to perceive weight discrimination to exist than male respondents.

Is weight discrimination a problem in the workplace?

- There was a significant difference between the percentage of respondents who believed discrimination to exist, and those who believed the discrimination to be a problem.
- Only 47% of participants believed weight discrimination to be a problem in their workplace. This was consistent across all four BMI groups.
- A higher percentage of women believed weight discrimination to be a problem in the workplace

(51%) than those respondents who identified as male (43%) or self-described (48%).

- **Implication:** This suggests that a proportion of respondents are either unaware of the impact or not concerned by the impact of weight discrimination. Women demonstrated the largest awareness for the issues caused by weight discrimination in the workplace, demonstrating there are gender differences on how weight discrimination is perceived in the workplace.

Level of comfort discussing weight-related topics

- Levels of comfort around discussing weight-related topics and incidents of weight discrimination varied across the four BMI groups.
- Overall, no groups were particularly comfortable discussing the topic, with the mean rating of respondents at 57/100.
- Respondents living with obesity were the least comfortable (46/100); however, answers across the BMI groups were similar.

- **Implication:** This could act as a barrier to opening up discussions around the issue at work and challenging weight discrimination in the workplace.

Self-perception

- It is interesting to note that people's self-perception does not always match up with their actual BMI. 7% of people who consider themselves to be in the normal/healthy category had a BMI which showed them to be in the obese category.

- **Implication:** Estimations about one's own weight therefore are not necessarily based on facts but on our perceptions, and this may impact our perceptions of both the occurrence and prevalence of weight discrimination.

Witnessing weight discrimination

Observed workplace weight discrimination

- 32% of respondents said to have witnessed weight discrimination in the workplace. Respondents living with obesity had most frequently reported witnessing discrimination (44%), followed by respondents in the overweight BMI category (32%) and underweight category (30%).

- **Implication:** The results demonstrate a lack of awareness of the existence of weight discrimination.

Taking action

Overall, of respondents who said they had witnessed weight discrimination in the workplace, 46% took no action, 21% confronted the perpetrator, 22% spoke to the victim, and 11% reported the incident to a manager or HR department.

Response to action

- Respondents living with being overweight were most likely to confront the perpetrator, but also least likely to speak to the victim when compared to respondents living with obesity and respondents in the underweight BMI category.
- All groups were more likely to not take any action after witnessing weight discrimination at work than to take action, with nearly 50% of normal/healthy respondents opting to not take action.

- **Implication:** Employees should be supported in taking action and recognising the most appropriate steps for action.

Outcome of action

- Those who said they had taken action when they witnessed weight discrimination in the workplace were then asked what the outcome of this action was.
- From the results, 40% stated that the action led to appropriate outcomes and the situation was dealt with, meaning 60% of actions remained unresolved or ignored.

- **Implication:** This leaves a clear future direction for organisations to ensure that any action or complaint is sufficiently acknowledged and resolved.

Reason for not taking action

- Of the respondents who took no action, the most common response was "I didn't consider it serious enough to report" (35%), followed by "I feared the consequences" (22%), and "I was unsure of who to talk to" (22%), "It wasn't my business" (19%) and "I didn't have time" (2%).

- **Implication:** This provides avenues for improvement in organisations to ensure employees are aware of the appropriate action to take when witnessing weight discrimination in the workplace.

Experiences of weight discrimination at work

- Overall, 16.8% of the respondents in 2023 reported having experienced weight discrimination in the workplace. Participants in the obese category most frequently reported experiencing discrimination (34.1%).

- **Implication:** This demonstrates weight discrimination in the workplace is of concern, especially for those living with obesity.

Recognising weight discrimination

- Respondents' accuracy at recognising discriminatory behaviours varied across the scenarios.
- Overall, respondents were significantly better at identifying explicit, malevolent discrimination than identifying subtle or benevolent forms.

• **Implication:** This highlights the need for educating employees and increasing awareness of all forms of discrimination and micro-incivilities.

Organisational action

- Only 19.6% of participants reported that their organisation was taking action to combat weight discrimination in the workplace. The most frequently cited action taken by organisation was a general attempt to champion equality and awareness. This was followed by 'Education', which consisted of workshops and training; seminars and talks; learning, training and development.
- Organisations also took other actions such as improving culture and communication in the workplace (9.4%), consisting of hosting events, starting support networks and groups, and supporting organisations which champion body positivity.
- Finally, respondents reported actions such as 'Changing internal policies and practices', which consists of organisations changing their policies and procedures to make them more inclusive or increasing opportunities to report discrimination at work to someone possibly more senior.

• **Implication:** This is a particularly striking finding, as it highlights that only 1 in 5 organisations may be taking any action to combat weight discrimination in the workplace. Organisations may be unaware of the need to take action or simply not consider weight discrimination to be a necessary issue to address.

Review of processes

- Weight discrimination is clearly a significant issue for some people in organisations. As our research shows, discrimination can take place at any stage of the employee life-cycle.
- This is further complicated by the fact that these biases can often be expressed openly and shared by others. As a consequence, they are less likely to be challenged. It is important to recognise that this means organisations will be missing out on the talent that is available to them.

• **Implication:** It is important that those involved in making key decisions about people are made aware of the ways in which biases towards weight can impact decisions that are made.

Creating an inclusive culture

- A lot of attention is now being given to the creation of inclusive cultures within organisations. As our understanding increases, we can see ways in which we could become even more inclusive.
- There is ultimately a responsibility on all of us to be able to take on the perspective of others and empathise with their position.
- A key part of this is to be able to discuss the experiences of individuals, particularly those who are living with obesity, and to be able to have conversations which are respectful and seek to explore and understand weight discrimination.

• **Implication:** The research highlights not only the ways in which we can exclude people, based on perceptions of their weight, but also highlights actions that we can take to make our workplaces more inclusive for everyone.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are based on the findings and the implications of this research, alongside our wider expertise in understanding race and gender discrimination.

While weight is currently not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, we encourage organisations to be aware of, and act on any signs of discrimination. We believe that organisations aspire to create working environments in which all employees can be their best self and bring themselves to work, so understanding where and how weight discrimination may inhibit this is a priority.

In particular we make the following recommendations:

<p>Recommendation 1</p> <p>Organisations aspire to create work environments in which all employees can be their best self and bring themselves to work, so understanding where and how weight discrimination may inhibit this is a priority. Organisations should recognise and acknowledge the presence of weight discrimination in the workplace and seek to understand the subtle but long-lasting impact it has on employees.</p>	<p>Recommendation 2</p> <p>In addition, it is just as important for individuals – employees, managers and leaders – to understand the existing biases and negative stereotypes that they may hold and that may be leading to unconscious discriminatory behaviour across the employee life cycle. Employees should be encouraged to examine attitudes and be alert to micro-incivilities associated with weight discrimination.</p>
<p>Recommendation 3</p> <p>A significant issue identified by the research are the gender implications associated with weight discrimination. Any organisation genuinely committed to tackling gender discrimination should consider weight discrimination within their discussions and plans for addressing gender discrimination.</p>	<p>Recommendation 4</p> <p>Organisations should consider ways to promote education and awareness of weight discrimination, and encourage inclusive language and behaviours, therefore further increasing equality in the workplace.</p>
<p>Recommendation 5</p> <p>Organisations should revisit equal opportunities and anti-harassment policies, and the associated training, to make sure that the workforce understands that weight discrimination and 'fat-shaming' is unacceptable.</p>	<p>Recommendation 6</p> <p>Organisations should consider making reasonable adjustments for employees living with obesity and eating disorders. These could be in a physical or occupational manner, for example accessible doors, toilets, chairs, desks, parking spaces and flexible working requests.</p>
<p>Recommendation 7</p> <p>Finally, organisations should make sure that employees and staff members are aware of the actions they can take in the event of discrimination occurring, and that any action taken is followed up on to completion.</p>	

Further contact

For further information on this research, or any of our other research projects focused on bias and inclusion in the workplace, please contact the author, **Norma Molla**, via email at info@pearnkandola.com.

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