

## **Commitment to DEI Statement | Erin Nolen, MSW**

Steve Hicks School of Social Work | University of Texas at Austin | [enolen@utexas.edu](mailto:enolen@utexas.edu)

When I was a graduate student, a professor told my class that our job as social workers was not to empower people. Instead, our job was to create environments where empowerment was already possible. Working toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) includes contending with complex power dynamics and advocating for systems change so that social conditions give way to empowered living for all individuals. As a feminist scholar and body image researcher, I am committed to understanding how issues of power shape the lived bodily experience. I hold privilege and responsibility to challenge the ways racism, sexism, and fatphobia marginalize individuals based on appearance and size. My commitment to DEI includes contributing to creating academic environments that are body inclusive.

My social location informs my research and advocacy focus on addressing sexual objectification and women's health. I have lived experience of heightened body image concerns, making it a topic of personal and professional interest. However, as a white, cis-gender woman and U.S. citizen, I live in a body that is not culturally stigmatized in ways that other individuals experience. I work to honestly confront the ways in which I have participated in or benefitted from systems of oppression. For example, in addition to experiencing white privilege, I experience body size privilege: people do not make assumptions about my health because of my size; I can find clothing that fits relatively easily in most stores; I am not a "target" for obesity prevention measures; I do not have to worry about my research on body image and eating disorder prevention being taken seriously because of my body size. Therefore, my goal is to contribute to body-inclusive spaces—both in and outside the classroom—from a place of openness and accountability.

Body image research has largely focused on improving outcomes among white, middle-class, cis-gender women. Upon realizing this earlier in my educational career, I made it my mission to make body image research more inclusive. But as I continued to learn more about the writing and advocacy of women of color on fat liberation, feminism, and reproductive freedom, I realized I needed to adjust my stance. I learned that there is already significant work being done to highlight the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals, but it does not always receive news headlines, grant funding, or premier journal publications. My contribution to this space should not be from a place of self-righteousness, but one of humility. I have a responsibility to enter conversations and collaborations with a knowledge and appreciation of the historical and ongoing work on body justice. My job is to credit and amplify voices different from my own and to view myself as just one change agent in an already ongoing legacy.

Several scholars have shaped my understanding of the social construction of the body, including Dr. Sabrina String's research on the concept of obesity and its roots in historical and contemporary racism; Marquisele Mercedes' writing on power dynamics related to poverty, fat politics, and eating disorders; and Dr. Lucretia Ward's research on media, gender ideology, and sexuality among girls of color. In my research, I focus on the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in relation to body image and women's health. (However, I want to acknowledge that queer, trans, and non-binary individuals also experience unique forms of objectification and exhibit a high prevalence of eating disorders.) More specifically, my dissertation research assesses how gendered sexual discourses conveyed in adolescence impact women's body image and sexual well-being as young adults. I am using a quota-based sampling procedure to ensure a racially/ethnically representative sample and to assess the dynamics of oppression as they relate to sexual well-being and body image. I am also exploring how the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* impacts experiences and attitudes related to

## **Commitment to DEI Statement | Erin Nolen, MSW**

Steve Hicks School of Social Work | University of Texas at Austin | [enolen@utexas.edu](mailto:enolen@utexas.edu)

sexuality, objectification, and social norms. My long-term research goals include developing an adolescent sexuality education program which incorporates a critical approach to body image and size representation to reduce stigma around bodies and sexuality.

Creating environments of empowerment also includes sharing knowledge and resources to broader audiences outside academic spaces. I wrote two opinion editorials describing how the popular body positivity movement has been co-opted to largely benefit white, thin women, and that certain body positivity media outlets do not adequately consider the intersecting dynamics of race, class, and body size. As a field, I believe we can better contend with the ways power and marginalization affect how individuals relate to their bodies. Fat liberation activists have argued that putting the onus on women to feel better about their appearance does not address embedded racism and fatphobia. Addressing body image concerns must consider the broader social context which promotes appearance standards that favor white, thin bodies. I will prioritize opportunities for public education on issues of body image from a social justice perspective.

As a teacher, I desire to build a body-inclusive space in the classroom. Since large-group discussion can often center more dominant voices, I use multiple discussion formats, including think-pair-share, peer-based learning, small-group collaboration, and writing exercises to support students in communicating their insights and experiences with one another. I am learning how to ensure that my teaching curriculum includes diverse viewpoints and incorporates an intersectional approach to social work practice. My teaching topics have included helping students understand how racism has shaped many of our social policies today, how the media perpetuates the sexual objectification of women, and how systemic racism impacts food access and health outcomes. For the latter presentation, my colleague and I used historical archives, community data, and maps to tell a visual story of how historical redlining practices led to income segregation, gentrification, and health disparities in Austin, TX. I also have training in making classroom materials more accessible to students who are blind or visually impaired and have supported other faculty in developing universal presentation slides. I look forward to teaching and mentorship opportunities outside of the classroom as well, including participating in university initiatives and programs like the Body Project, which supports students to develop a healthy body image.

Finally, as a faculty colleague, I will prioritize contributing to a departmental culture that is committed to doing the ongoing work of equity and inclusion. Because faculty of color bear a disproportionate burden of labor in and outside the classroom, I will advocate for equitable institutional expectations of service and mentorship. I will share emotional and administrative burdens by helping to manage DEI trainings and service opportunities. For example, because women of color receive, on average, lower course evaluation scores than their peers, I could design a brief training about rectifying this bias for students at orientation. Further, I will hold white students and faculty accountable by helping them to identify how they might be harming others and to work through discomfort and defensiveness in a way that decenters themselves through classroom strategies and mentor groups.

I am committed to continually growing and learning. My research aims to disrupt objectifying discourses about marginalized bodies using a social justice approach. I will support and mentor students to be effective change agents and foster a classroom environment where empowerment is possible. I am committed to practicing humility, curiosity, and self-accountability in my work, situating myself as one change agent in a legacy of scholars and activists working toward embodied justice.