

Research Statement | Erin Nolen, MSW

Steve Hicks School of Social Work | University of Texas at Austin | enolen@utexas.edu

I use feminist and social-ecological perspectives to understand how women and girls are socialized to view their bodies from an outsider's perspective, which in turn leads to body shame and disrupted health. Sexual objectification disproportionately impacts women of color, individuals who live in larger bodies, and individuals with lower socioeconomic status (SES), but research has focused predominantly on white, middle-class women. There is a critical need for research and interventions focused on diverse populations that consider culturally relevant risk and protective factors. My research goals are to 1) identify sociocultural factors that influence body image with attention to women, race/ethnicity, and SES; and 2) examine positive body image in relation to health and psychological well-being. My long-term goal is to promote a social justice approach to body image and eating disorder prevention by intervening through media, policy, and sexuality education.

My research agenda is inspired by my lived experience of negative body image and my professional experiences in practice and research. I served as Assistant Director of Research for an anti-hunger nonprofit which focused on maximizing access to nutrition programs through policy and community organizing. I managed program evaluations, conducted community assessments, and used data to inform outreach strategies. I gained experience in grant writing and reporting, contributed to research briefs and congressional testimonies, and helped design a rural meal delivery program which was authorized nationally for emergency use during the pandemic. My early practice experiences included state-level policy work on human trafficking and food insecurity issues and case management for women who faced unplanned pregnancies. Many clients lacked access to contraception and faced other issues related to restricted bodily autonomy and reproductive justice. The intersecting issues of material hardship, low-quality sexuality education, and sexual objectification disproportionately impacted vulnerable women and individuals in the LGBTQI+ communities. These experiences shaped my professional commitment to address the broader sociocultural factors (e.g., policy, discrimination and objectification, resource access) that influence bodily agency and health outcomes.

In addition to my professional experience, two review studies have informed my long-term goal of affecting body image from a systems perspective. The first is a scoping review (a first-authored publication in *Health & Social Work*) that assessed the role of positive body image—or the appreciation of aspects and functions of the body beyond appearance and weight—in the health behaviors of women and adolescent girls. Positive body image can protect against unsafe sexual behaviors and substance use, and promote positive behaviors, such as seeking out routine medical care and cancer screenings. This review underscores the importance of positive body attitudes in impacting health behaviors beyond disordered eating. The second is a scoping review on SES and women's body attitudes. Body dissatisfaction impacts women across all SES groups, and some studies suggest that body dissatisfaction is especially pronounced among adolescents with lower SES. This directly challenges the stereotype that body image and disordered eating are a white, affluent phenomenon. Teaching body image resilience should happen in adolescence and from an intersectional perspective which considers structural oppression that disproportionately affects girls of color.

Given that most youth receive formal school-based sex education, incorporating a social justice approach to body image into this curriculum could have a significant impact on body image and health outcomes for teens. Previous research has shown that negative body image is associated with risky sexual behavior, but there has been less attention to how communication of sexual values impacts body attitudes. My dissertation examines how sexual socialization discourses prevalent in school-based sex education (e.g., messages which reinforce a sexual

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double standard) influence body image and sexual well-being in a racially/ethnically diverse sample of young adult women. I am also conducting an exploratory analysis of women's embodiment and objectification experiences following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, including an assessment of social norms around safe sex responsibilities. I will use these findings to inform sexual health interventions and policy grounded in women's experiences. From a social justice perspective, it is crucial to reduce stigma related to the body and sexuality in interventions intended to address body shame.

My two latest research projects were qualitative and mixed methods studies on body image from a feminist perspective. The first is a study on women's body attitudes and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have documented the rise in disordered eating and negative body image during the pandemic, but there has been less attention to pregnant people's experiences. This paper suggests that pregnant women have felt left behind by the healthcare system during the pandemic and have complex body image experiences: heightened appearance and weight monitoring, appreciation that social distancing has enabled a relaxation of appearance standards and less external feedback on their bodies (e.g., staring, touching), and vigilance with health and safety strategies. The paper underscores the need to consider the impact of social factors and healthcare systems on the quality of body image/embodiment. This is a first-authored brief report publication in *Body Image: An International Journal of Research* (IF 5.61). The second study is a mixed methods analysis of women's responses to peer's negative body talk. This research shows that holding feminist attitudes can protect women from engaging in self-objectifying body talk. Supporting people to develop a feminist identity, or a critical stance toward cultural objectification, may help prevent individuals from talking negatively about their own bodies with their peers and instead engage in more compassionate dialogue that resists buying into cultural appearance ideals. How we talk about our bodies with one another holds a mirror to cultural values, and shifting dialogue is one way to enact large-scale change. This is a first-author paper in the revise and resubmit stage at *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (IF 4.29).

I have been recognized for my commitment to body image research and my potential as an independent researcher. I was competitively selected to participate in the Doctoral Student Policy Forum hosted by the Society for Social Work and Research and advocacy training by lobbying experts. I was awarded the University of Texas at Austin's Graduate Continuing Fellowship, which is a competitive and prestigious award granted by the University. As an affiliate researcher at the Center for Body Image Research and Policy, I am connected to researchers and advocates with whom I have established collaborations to support my goal of promoting positive body image and embodiment for marginalized groups, including the development of a sexuality education intervention which incorporates an intersectional approach to body image. My experiences advocating for women's embodied well-being have invoked a calling in both my personal and professional endeavors. It is my privilege and responsibility to advocate for the improvement of social conditions so that all people can experience bodily freedom and agency.