

But there are many women out there, myself included, who would be keen to point out that we never actually went anywhere. Being big, according to the media, seems to be like platform shoes; coming in and out of fashion according to some higher power's dictation. But really, fat is like the colour black, it's *always* in style.

Only praise...

Let me make one thing clear from the start; this isn't an attack on slim women. If you really wanted my opinion, I would tell you that all women are beautiful. Some women are incapable of losing weight for whatever reason, just as some are incapable of gaining weight. We are what we are – powerful, beautiful, wonderful women. But for the here and now, I'm focussing on the larger lady.

I'll start with the basics. What does BBW even mean, anyway? You might balk that I feel compelled to explain, but as a regular of the BBW chatroom in *Swinging Heaven*, let me tell you, we're asked that question at least once a day! BBW is an acronym which stands for Big Beautiful Woman. I know what you're thinking. It sounds very arrogant doesn't it? It sounds like we KNOW we're the best thing since sliced bread, and that because we wear a larger dress-size, we must naturally be prettier than our skinny counterparts.

But that's not so. The word 'fat' has been bandied about for so long as a negative word. Not everything about being larger is negative, so we ladies have to use a more positive term to describe ourselves – hence BBW. In my opinion, there are two types of BBW in the world as a whole (which obviously includes the SH members I have had contact with) – those who use the term BBW, and those who are the term BBW.

I've spoken to a few SH BBW friends about this, and many have told me that they are now comfortable and happy with how they look – but it wasn't always like that for them. So, why not apply a positive term to themselves while they learn to accept how fabulous the truly are? The other type of BBW is best described by an SH friend of

mine, who is a BBW in the truest sense: 'a certain type of woman; big, pretty, sassy, confident and self assured. A woman with a big personality who is able to carry her weight through life like a lantern and who is strong and assertive.'

There's a lot of ambiguity over what dress-size you have to be to qualify as a BBW – or indeed an SSBBW (Super Sized BBW). I'm not even sure myself, if I'm honest with you, and it's extremely hard to reach a consensus on it. The way I see it, if you shop in plus-sized stores, you're a BBW.

Historic beauty

The term BBW might be *relatively* new, but the adoration of curvy women is not. Go to any fine-art gallery and look at some Titian or Raphael paintings from the 1300s. OK, the women in them aren't exactly of epic proportions, but the point is they're far from skinny. And larger women have been portrayed through the ages, harking back to plumper ladies in paintings and sculptures, to modern day BBW icons like Jo Brand, Dawn French and the latest addition, Gossip lead singer Beth Ditto.

I desperately wanted to add Sophie Dahl to this list, as her arrival on the fashion scene was a pivotal moment in my own size-

acceptance, but she succumbed to the evils of the modelling world and is now a skinny Minnie; likewise Fern Britton, who appears to be shrinking before my very eyes on TV (however, I still think she's fabulous!).

All a matter of taste

This article came about after I spotted a request from an SH member on the forum – they wanted to know about the allure of BBWs. My initial answer was this: BBWs are alluring to certain people because that is their personal taste. But this answer won't do, and won't leave my reader satisfied. With that in mind, I went to the SH site and asked a few BBWs and gents who like them for some opinions.

There are men out there who are obsessed exclusively with BBWs – it could be described as a fetish. They're known as 'chubby chasers' or 'BBW admirers'. For them, having sex with BBWs is a fantasy fulfilment, much as some men visit a dominatrix. To try and unravel the thought processes behind that would probably require me to write a complex psychological textbook – there could be all sorts of Freudian elements to it. And many of my chatroom friends don't go for this type of man. Having said that, there's nothing wrong with idolising BBWs, or with allowing a BBW admirer to idolise you.

But instead I wanted to ask our most popular ladies why they thought they had such a long line of men hoping to meet them; and ask some male BBW regulars why they kept coming back to the chatroom and going to BBW meets, munches and socials.

The real appeal

Firstly, here's my opinion on the subject. We're real women. I'm tired of the media and their obsession with Photoshop and airbrushing. If I see another programme where they take a woman and butcher her with a scalpel in the name of looking like a model in a magazine, I will scream. I cannot begin to tell you how much I love Gok Wan for his series *How to Look Good Naked*. His love of real women is an inspiration, and he makes women who lack confidence look and feel completely fabulous – and all without a hint of surgery.

There is no such thing as the perfect figure, and I believe the BBW community embraces that ideology. Beauty honestly comes in all shapes and sizes and these women are beautiful, both because and in spite of having a few extra curves and a touch of cellulite here and there. It doesn't affect their fabulousness – and it certainly doesn't affect their sense of fun or their popularity. In my opinion, there's nothing quite like curves. That 'skeleton look' has always left me a bit cold.



Sex-appeal – all in the mind

The BBWs I know are, on the whole, confident, sassy, sexy – and boy do they know how to have a good time! And it seems that confidence is key here. One member reckoned that 'sexy is a frame of mind, not a body-size', and she is right, too. These ladies are down-to-earth and, as one SH member put it, 'have nothing to prove'. Another said they 'weren't afraid to mess up their hair' (and I immediately thought of Beth Ditto's devil-may-care attitude when working up a sweat on stage, and I love her all the more for it too), meaning that, although they take pride in their appearance, they aren't going to cry and sulk over getting a bit dishevelled.

Confidence and an ability to laugh at yourself is incredibly appealing – and so are curves, poured into just the right amount of sexy clothes. Put them both together and you have one hell of an allure!

The women I spoke to were, however, keen to point out one very important thing (with which I wholeheartedly agreed): they are very fussy. It's a common misconception that just because a lass has some extra curves she'll be grateful for anyone who shows an interest in her. Not so. Don't mistake the friendliness of these ladies for desperation either, I can personally vouch for the popularity of my BBW friends – they certainly don't need a sympathy shag!

BBWs and swinging

I asked my gang of gorgeous girls about being a BBW on the swinging scene. Many of them frequent clubs and parties and nobody reported back with any horror stories or bad comments. Chameleons was mentioned more than once, so if you're a newbie BBW swinger, I suggest you head there. It sounds as if you'll be made very welcome indeed!

I have always viewed the swingers I know as very open and accepting of

everyone, so you have nothing to worry about (and again, it's all down to confidence!). None of these ladies has ever been made to feel unwelcome or like the odd one out at clubs or parties (in fact, it sounds like many of them are the life and soul – not to mention the centre of attention).

Most of the BBW chatroom members go on regular meets, so there is no denying their popularity. A lot of us think this is down to people coming into the chatroom, because it is always a busy area – and this allows for more conversation, and realising how great the women in there are – which in turn leads to meets. Many of the men in the chatroom do not have a size preference, but come in and find us welcoming, fun and non-cliquey, so stay and get to know us, and, well, you know the rest!

Many of the BBW ladies I know are bi, and often swing with fellow bi BBWs. This might be to make them feel more comfortable (you can be as confident as you like, but being naked and size 20 and standing next to a naked size 8 girl can still give you the collywobblers!), or simply because they prefer their ladies to be big and curvy. And as for the munches the BBW room holds, I have it on good authority they are the best around!

Welcome all-comers

Still not convinced about BBWs? Don't take my word for it – come and get to know us! We host our chatroom on Server 1, and despite having a large group of regulars, we welcome everyone like an old friend. We're all close, whether we've met each other or not, and we also plan frequent munches to which regular chatters are warmly invited.

So, Mika, you irritatingly catchy young pop star, you're right. Big girls are beautiful. But then, all sexy, confident, fun women of every size are too!

With thanks to many of the regulars of the BBW Room for their invaluable input. This article is dedicated to the memory of Debb, one of the most fabulous of all the BBW ladies I've ever known, who passed away recently and is sorely missed. Keep heaven curvy and fabulous 'til we all join you for one hell of a party, love!

