

Fashion's Invisible Majority
By Sally Smith

It's no secret that plus-women are the fashion world's invisible majority – though it seems that some consider it breaking news. A few weeks ago, the *L.A. Times* ran a story detailing how, despite the fact that the average American woman is a size 14, the typical department store offers 900 brands for smaller women and only 20 brands for women larger than a size 12. Or, as the *Times* writer put it, "It often seems that it's easier to find and buy stylish clothes for Chihuahuas than for roughly half of the country's female population." Yawn. Tell us something that we didn't know.

Several years ago, when *BBW Magazine* was in print and I was its editor-in-chief, I received a steady stream of complaints from readers for rarely featuring models larger than a size 14 in the fashion layouts. As a super-size woman, I totally agreed, but my hands were tied. After all, the vast majority of models in the plus-size divisions of agencies like Ford and Wilhelmina were size 10. But the real conspiracy was in the realm of fashion designers, who as a whole refused to provide samples of the next season's fashions larger than a size 14. The reason? Whether out of revulsion or fear, they didn't want their clothing shown on larger models. They wanted to keep us invisible.

In the meantime, over at the *Daily Beast*, Meghan McCain (yes, John's daughter) recently took on Laura Ingraham for cattily dissing McCain for fluctuating between – gasp – a size 8 and a size 10 on the campaign trail. And there's Jessica Simpson, Oprah, and myriad other celebs whose sizes and wardrobe choices become fodder for fashion's chattering classes. Against this backdrop, and without a drop of irony, the *L.A. Times* article lauded "America's Next Top Model" for selecting Whitney Thompson as the only "plus-size winner" of the reality show. At a size 10-12, Thompson is still smaller than the average American woman. If she's representative of plus-size women, where do the rest of us fit in?

What should we do about the department stores that tuck their plus sizes away in a hidden corner, the unenlightened designers who turn their backs on us, and the ersatz plus-size clothing catalogs that refuse to use plus-size models in their catalogs? One of the best ways to create change in the marketplace is to vote with our dollars. If we don't patronize those stores and catalogs, perhaps they'll get the message that they need to acknowledge their customers. If we send them email, write letters, and lodge complaints with their customer service departments, maybe they'll rethink they ways in which they contribute to the invisibility of plus-size women.

Thankfully, some clothing designers have made it their mission to give us visibility. For a quarter of a century, MiB has proudly featured plus- and super-size models within the pages of their catalogs – a radical position in the fashion industry. Those models' faces – and curves – reflect the beauty and diversity of our sisterhood. When we see women like Lisa and Tesia and Debbie and Dana, we see ourselves. We see how MiB's gorgeous fashions look on their bodies, and can easily imagine how the clothing will look on our bodies. As an MiB customer, I appreciate the company's commitment to designing for and celebrating women all sizes of large. And, I'm proud to support a company that, for so long, has given a face, a figure, and fabulous fashions to our community. I know I'm not alone in feeling this way, but I'd love to hear your thoughts about MiB's "radical" commitment to using plus-size models. Drop me a note, (sally@makingitbig.com) and I'll share what you tell me in a future article.