



## How Virgie Tovar Is Leading a Fat Revolution

She was researching fatness and wound up “onboarded” into fat activism. That set Virgie on her professional path, and radically changed the trajectory of her personal life. She breaks down the difference between “fat liberation” and “body positivity,” explores the parallels between her Mexican grandparents’ pursuit of the American Dream and her pursuit of thinness, and encourages us to imagine a world without diet culture.

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Alicia Menendez:

In advance of this conversation with Virgie Tovar, I read her book, *You Have the Right to Remain Fat*. Well, actually I devoured it. Virgie’s thinking about bodies, and food, and the politics of bodies and food made me take a hard look at my own assumptions and biases. Uncomfortable, but necessary. Virgie has an online course, Babecamp, and a podcast, Rebel Eaters Club. Both are part of her mission to help anyone who wants to break up with diet culture.

Virgie, thank you for waking up early to do this.

Virgie Tovar: Oh, my pleasure.

Menendez: Virgie, tell me about being four years old and the first thing you would do when you’d come home.

Tovar: I was a little fat kid. I was a chubby kid in a chubby family. And my favorite thing to do every day when I got home from running errands with my grandma was jiggle, like I would push open the front door, and I would run to the bathroom, and I would take off all my clothes, and then I would run out to the kitchen, where my grandmother pretty much lived, and I would spread out my arms and legs and I would jiggle, and she would just laugh, and laugh, and I just... It really sort of is this vivid memory, because I had forgotten about that beautiful jiggling feeling in adulthood. But I had this recollection a few years ago that like, “Oh my goodness, I used to love that sensation of fat moving.” Like I loved how my arm fat moved, and my tummy fat moved, and my thigh fat moved, and it felt like magic.

I remember thinking it felt like the water in the bathtub, or like the water at the pool. It was like so pleasurable to feel that sensation of my body moving. And it’s such a high contrast to how we’re taught to think of that sensation in adulthood, you know?

Menendez: I do. I mean, and I have a four-year-old daughter, and she loves to do multiple outfit changes a day, and she is super into her body, and it breaks me knowing that at some point that could change.

Tovar: Yeah.

Menendez: When did it change for you?

Tovar: It changed for me around the same time that it changes for most children in the United States, which is the age of five. So, most children learn about something called fat phobia when they're about five years old, and fat phobia is essentially a form of bigotry. It's an idea that says that an entire group of people who comprise about 70% of the U.S. population are inferior because they're higher weight, and that inferiority extends to like intellectual inferiority, and we're romantically inferior, we're intellectually inferior, we're incapable of completing tasks. There's a lot of evidence that shows that people have really negative attitudes about higher weight people, and I started learning about that and becoming a target of fat phobia at the age of five.

Menendez: Where are kids learning that at five?

Tovar: It seems to coincide pretty strongly with introduction to formal education. Five is also the age when children typically go to kindergarten. They're in an environment where there's children of all ages. I think for some people, they're learning it at home from their parents. I've talked to a lot of people whose parents put them on a diet at a very young age, often at the recommendation of their pediatrician, and I think obviously we live in a culture where the message that being big is a bad thing is omnipresent, right? And it's subtle in some ways, right? You think about who's always the hero, who's always the villain, who's the person who falls in love and who's the friend who's always pining? Who's the person you're supposed to relate to in a movie and who's the person you're supposed to sort of make fun of, or not relate to, or feel embarrassed for in media?

There's this phrase that I often use in my work, and I'm not the only one, but it's diet culture or weight loss culture. And we really use the word culture because it's inescapable. It's like everywhere, right? You see it on the street, you see it on your screen, you see it in your intimate life. It's kind of unavoidable.

Menendez: Last night, I was reading the book, I was eating pita chips, and I looked at the bag, and it's a bag I buy all the time, and it said, "Reduced guilt."

Tovar: Right.

Menendez: And I was like, "Wait, but I don't have any guilt about this, why?"

Tovar: Yes.

Menendez: Why are you trying? Now I feel guilty, like it's reduced from what I guess it would have been, but I did not realize the extent to which the word diet had gone out of vogue and had been replaced by some more subtle but equally nefarious constructs.

Tovar: Absolutely. I think diet culture, like any toxic system, is really good at adapting. The point of diet culture, and again, any toxic system or culture, is to maintain itself by any means necessary. Especially as body positivity has become really trendy, you're gonna see more and more that word diet is gonna be going away. And in fact, diets are gonna be saying, "We're not a diet." I mean, I literally got an ad the other day that was for a diet app and it was like, "This isn't a diet. This is something else. It's not a diet." And you know, it's like... I mean, literally I'm like, "Girl, you're a diet. There's a definition of a diet, that's you. I don't know what you're talking about."

Menendez: You brought up body positivity and that may be a term that more of our listeners are familiar with than fat discrimination, or fat culture, so how do you define the difference between these movements?

Tovar: At this point, I kind of use them interchangeably. I'm super aware that people are much more aware of body positivity than fat activism or fat liberation, but I think a lot of people don't know that body positivity pretty much came from fat liberation, came out of fat activism. I think body positivity has moved beyond it in some ways, like I think it's gone beyond the issue of weight. It's generally about body diversity in all of its different manifestations, but definitely in terms of the zeitgeist that allowed for body positivity to become top of mind socially, it was because of the energy that came from fat activism.

I think some important history lesson is like fat activism started in 1960, and it was always about trying to get rights for fat people. It's totally legal to discriminate on the basis of weight in 49 states. It might be 48 now. But San Francisco, and the state of Michigan, and a few other cities are the only places where if someone fires you, or makes fun of you, or harasses you on the basis of weight, that you actually have any legal recourse. Because weight stigma is really intense, it leads to a lot of really staggering things.

So, plus-size women make at least \$9,000 less annually than straight-size women. A lot of medical care is really bigoted, so if you're a higher weight person, you are likely going to get inferior medical care, because doctors consider plus-size patients to be less compliant. And you're less likely to get a raise. You're less likely to be considered seriously as a candidate for a job if you're plus size. Again, 68% of U.S. women are plus size.

But in terms of the differences, so, fat activism and fat liberation really came out of and really is still about making sure that fat people have the same rights as everyone else. And making sure that fat people don't feel ashamed of being fat, right? So, it's kind of an overtly political movement with very overt political aims that are stated, and it's largely about societal change. Body positivity is actually much more about self love, which is sort of the individual experience of liberation on some level.

So, where fat activism was like, "How do we create equal rights for everyone, regardless of size?" Body positivity's question is really, "How do I learn to love myself?" I often use the metaphor of like the three-story house. When you think about a political movement, there's three stories, right? There's the first story, which is the change that happens within you, the second story, the change that happens within your immediate community and your circle, and the change that happens sort of structurally, right? Like the change that happens on a societal level. And I really think of fat activism as largely residing on that third floor and body positivity is largely residing on that first floor.

Menendez: 2010, you're in grad school. Fat study is an emerging discipline. Had not realized how new this all was. You started interviewing other women about how their body size had impacted the trajectory of their lives. What did you learn?

Tovar: I came into the research really wondering if being fat for women who had been bigger and fat in... and I use the word fat really lovingly. I know a lot of people have been taught that word is impolite, and it has been used really rudely to hurt people, but I use that word because that feels comfortable for me. So, I really wanted to know for people, especially women, who had been fat since childhood, how had it affected how they understood and how they performed gender? That question kind of came out of my own experience of growing up as the biggest girl at school and in the spaces I navigated as a child, and I felt sort of this sense of gender confusion.

Gender is kind of a social thing, right? So, like I might have an idea of who I am or what my gender is in and of myself, but like if society isn't affirming that, then that creates sort of a

sense of tension, a sense of confusion. It might be painful. So, for me, like I'm being told that I'm a girl by my mother, I'm being treated by a girl, everybody knows I'm a girl, but for example, when we go shopping, there's nothing in the girls section that fits me. And when I look at cartoons, there's no girls who are my size in those cartoons.

For example, at birthday parties, when everybody's getting the package of the princess outfit, where you get the heels, and the crown, and some little fake nails or whatever, and the shoes would never fit me, and it would be like this really intense sense of like, "Oh my God, I don't even belong in this experience." And then I think like at school, I saw boys treating my thin friends one way and they were treating me differently, and it was much more aggressive, much harder, much more physical, much more in line with how I saw them treating each other. And so, it created this real sense that I had to really assert and perform femininity much harder in adulthood to be seen as an actual woman.

And I found that when I talked to people, they had similar experiences.

Menendez: And what did that awaken in you?

Tovar: It was really kind of the first time that I was sitting down for an hour, two hours with fat women, and chopping it up. Really, fat women are encouraged not to hang out with each other, because there's an idea because of fat phobia that you should avoid being around fat people. And that if you're a fat person, being with another fat person makes you look "worse." This is just like so bigoted, but this is how our society thinks. And so, I had not had a lot of fat friends, and the ability to sort of have these beautiful, intimate, highly relatable conversations with other fat women, and particularly women of color, really was special.

While I was doing the research, I was learning about the field. I was learning about fat studies. I was reading other people's writing on the topic. And it kind of... It put me into a position where I was going down a rabbit hole, like I started learning about the history of diet culture. I started learning about the history of weight discrimination. And in the midst of it, I was meeting people who were like, "I heard through the grapevine that you were doing this research." It was such a tiny world that word spread really fast, like people would just hear through the grapevine that somebody was doing something, and they would reach out to them and be like, "Hey, do you..." They would onboard you into the activism. It was really incredible.

Word started spreading that I was doing research on fat people and fatness, and I started getting invited into these circles, this underworld that I didn't know existed. And that was fat activism. And essentially, my research landed me at a conference in Oakland, California, while I was in grad school, and it was a fat conference. I literally remember arriving. I was walking into the hotel, in the breezeway of the hotel, and I could just hear laughter, and I could hear splashing, and I could smell chlorine, and then I kind of like walked out of the hallway and then I was like greeted by this extraordinary tableau of like fat people swimming, and laughing, and hanging out, and in bathing suits, and bikinis, and rad sunglasses, and I had never seen anything like this in my entire life.

And it just completely blew my mind, like I'd never seen fat people in a group like this. I had never seen fat people having fun without any sense of shame or self-consciousness. It was like completely intoxicating to me.

Menendez: Especially because it overlays with a sentiment you express in *You Have the Right to Remain Fat* that resonated very deeply with me, which was this idea that your life would

begin once you lost weight, that you'd wear those cute swimsuits after you lost weight, that you'd date after you lost weight. What did it require to stop putting your life on hold?

Tovar: For me, it required seeing someone else who was living the amazing life that I wanted to live. I mean, and at a bigger size. Really, the moment that crystallized that I was committing my life to this work was when, at that same conference, I'm in the midst of this amazing moment where I'm seeing something I've never seen before at this pool, and then a fat woman comes out of stage left and she's got this amazing red hair, and she is big, she's got like a big stomach, and big arms, and big breasts, and big thighs, and she is wearing a red and white vintage polka dot bathing suit with cat eye sunglasses. She's not walking. She's like strutting. She's like sauntering out.

And then there's a boy behind her who is carrying a parasol over her head, so that she won't get a sunburn, and it was like that exact snapshot is... I was like, "Oh, I can be my ridiculous, turned up, all the way to 500, fire..." The femininity that I always craved, I can have that as a fat person, which had never been proposed to me before. No one ever says, "You can stay at whatever size you are and have this electric life that's kind of on your terms."

Menendez: I just love that image so much. And I love the guy with the parasol.

Tovar: Yes.

Menendez: It's so evocative. You're raised by your grandparents, both Mexican immigrants, and you tell a story that a lot of us are familiar with, which is the idea of their bootstrapping their way into the American dream, and you draw a parallel with your bootstrapping your way to thinness. Where do you see those two stories overlapping?

Tovar: The rule with bootstrapping is you take responsibility for your own life and that means that you take responsibility for both your success and your failure. 100% of your success and failure is based on you as an individual. No matter what you come up against, no matter how unfair anybody has treated you, no matter what obstacles are in your way, if you are strong enough, and good enough, you will have anything that you want. And that's sort of the myth of bootstrapping.

And dieting is the same thing, right? It's based on the idea that you can have everything that you want. You can have the romantic relationship of your dreams, the job of your dreams, the wardrobe of your dreams, people can treat you really well. All you gotta do is control how you eat. And for women, it's like all you have to do is not eat. Right? That's kind of like the lie that's the promise. When you dive into the history of diet culture, it is so linked to white supremacy. It is so linked to racism. It is so linked to colonialism. Literally the BMI, the body mass index, was invented by the grandfather of eugenics, like some Belgian mathematician in the 1800s was like, "Hey, I'm gonna weigh a bunch of white dudes and decide who is the ideal human," and then the culture just like, "Cool, we're gonna adopt that as a way to tell whether people of all races, genders, and sizes are healthy."

So, I think about , with my grandparents as immigrants, fully embraced the American dream, who fully taught me to revere white people, and whiteness, and to recognize my place as subservient to white people, and subservient in some ways to real Americans, right? Because that's how my parents sort of... my grandparents thought of Americans, right? As like these Yankee, blue-eyed, blonde people. And sort of like the bootstrapping

they were doing economically, by like buying a home, and teaching their kids how to be a certain way, and all this stuff, even the part about teaching me how to be the best, like I had to be a straight-A student, I had to have perfect attendance, it was all about... That shit is about inferiority. It's about teaching your kid that you don't get to be just regular. You don't get to be average. You don't get to be mediocre. That's a privilege that only white people get, because they already just have this standing in society.

And so, they were bootstrapping and teaching me bootstrapping, and of course, like when it came to weight, I was like, "Right. Part of being a real American is hating your body, being obsessed with food," and I think certainly as I was making my way up the ranks and becoming a high-performing student, and going to a good college, I was more and more and more among wealthy white people, almost all of whom were really obsessed with how they ate, because at this point, like being slender is associated with being wealthy.

I see our stories of bootstrapping as completely one and the same. You know, I was doing it with my weight. They were doing it with economics. But it was all about becoming a real American. Like in my opinion, dieting, like when people of color do dieting, it's so much about saying, "I recognize that something's wrong with my body and I will strive to become the white ideal."

Menendez: Your podcast, Rebel Eaters Club, what does it mean to be a rebel eater? Why use that framework?

Tovar: The podcast really came from the observation that we live in a culture that is deeply anxious about eating and about food. 38 million Americans go on a diet every year. They might not call it that, but they do. And so, that's a pretty sizable percentage of the population. And I think beyond people who identify as going on a diet, many more people are of course influenced by the example of your pita chips, the guilt thing. These kinds of messages really create anxiety in people. The podcast sort of became a world in which I could experiment with the possibility of what would the world look like if we didn't have these categories, look good and bad food, like junk food, like what if we lived in a world where all food was good food and the purpose of eating was to feel good, was to have fun, was to connect?

And so, for me, a rebel eater is someone who is interested in embracing that world with me and creating that world with me.

Menendez: Does that require a complete abandonment of the constructs that we have? Is there anything worth preserving about the way that we've come to understand food?

Tovar: Yeah. I mean, that's such a big question. I will say, for example, for people who have a food allergy, for people who have celiac, those kinds of things become really important to someone who needs to make sure that they are managing their illness, right? So, in that way, that kind of information is really important, right? Like what we've learned from dietetics or nutrition. Those things are life saving for people who have those kinds of illnesses they need to manage maybe their whole lives. So, there's value there.

I think what's hard is like most people don't fall into that category, and when that information becomes saturated, and becomes obsessively shared in a culture, it ends up creating stress, and anxiety, potentially eating disorders as I mentioned earlier. I'm actually gonna quote a colleague who I interviewed in season two of Rebel Eaters Club, who is a PhD and is a dietician. She said this beautiful thing, which was like, "We need to remember

that science should only exist in service to the human interest, the human spirit, justice and love, and science that doesn't exist for that doesn't need to be done." Science that doesn't serve human rights and justice doesn't need to be undertaken.

I think that's such a powerful sentiment, which is like are we gathering this information? Are we obsessing about calories, and nutrition, and all this stuff because we really care about that group of people who need this information to survive? Or are we doing this because we know that it helps us perform class, we know that it helps us stay thin and that gives us certain privileges over other people? And I would say in our culture right now, we're largely about doing the latter. In the pie chart of overall health, individual behavior only comprises 30%. So, 70% of our overall health is socially determined. It's determined by things that we have no control over.

You know, you take that number, 30 versus 70%, I would say why aren't we doubling down, why aren't we doing twice as much to change the needle on societal access to clean water, ending prisons, things that we know affect people on a societal level, and why aren't we twice as excited about moving the needle if we know it's more than twice the number of our individual control? I would encourage any listener to sort of really say like, "If I had the chance to move the 70% number or the 30% number, what do I want to spend my life doing?" I would say move that 70% number.

Menendez: Right. That pivot from the individual to the systematic is such a big one in almost every conversation that I've been having these days, and you realize how much we come back to individual solutions on absolutely everything.

Tovar: Yes. Absolutely.

Menendez: Virgie, thank you so much. I don't know if you remember this, but I reached out to you like a year ago when we were only doing things in person, and so I've had you on this like sad running list of like, "Well, if I'm ever in the Bay Area, I guess I'll get to talk to Virgie."

Tovar: Yes! Oh, I'm so glad we got to talk.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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