

Body Image in Mauritania

Bigger is Better

Chelsea Seira Thompson

Abstract

In the North African nation of Mauritania, women are expected to maintain large, voluptuous bodies to the point of morbid obesity. This tradition has been kept alive for countless generations, starting centuries ago with nomads who respected those men who could keep their wives plump. In recent history, the pressure to gain weight has led to excessive force-feeding for young girls, who are often urged to ingest up to 16,000 calories per day. In addition to the initial weight gain, women in Mauritania will oftentimes resort to the abuse of pharmaceuticals in order to maintain their figures. This is an intensive process that demands massive amounts of time and energy throughout the lifespan. When women are expected to gain weight and maintain this image of excess, they are tethered to the home and are unable to engage in the community. For this reason, their voices have effectively been silenced in Mauritanian politics. At the beginning of the century, Mauritania saw a lapse in the trend of feminine obesity, which was accompanied by the entrance of more women into the public sphere. However, a recent military coup has set forth a, “return to tradition” and has effectively undone this progress. This shows that body image is a defining factor in a Mauritanian woman’s place in society. The demanding task of putting on weight blocks women from the political sphere as well as from the community as a whole.

Body Image in Mauritania

The ideal woman in Mauritania has two tasks: “to make babies and to be a soft, fleshy bed for her husband to lie on.” According to Haworth’s article, “the stomach flab should cascade, the thighs should overlap, and the neck should have thick ripples of fat.” The ultimate sign of beauty is a collection of, “silvery stretch marks on the arms.”¹ Another article states that, “in Mauritania, a woman’s size indicates the amount of space she occupies in her husband’s heart.”² While men in Mauritania often sport very thin figures, at the same time their wives will boast large, voluptuous bodies. Today’s Mauritanian society puts pressure on all women to maintain this image of excess.

The women of Mauritania have been maintaining their plump image for countless generations. This is thought to have multiple motives. The desirability of female obesity became widespread centuries ago with the nomadic Moors of Arabic and Berber stock, who saw a, “fat wife” as a, “symbol of a man’s wealth.” Her hefty size was seen as, “proof that he had enough riches to feed her generously while others perished in the drought-prone terrain.”³ Because their size makes it difficult for them to move quickly and efficiently, heavier wives also give the impression that their husbands do not need extra help with their work.⁴ Therefore, the size of a man’s wife gives the public an idea of how easily he can provide for her. Since she can offer minimal work and care for herself and her family, the ability to keep and provide for a large wife (and daughters, if applicable) is an honorable status symbol.

Putting on weight at a very young age also affects the girls’ reproductive lifespan. When girls attain a heavier weight, they are more likely to hit puberty more quickly and – ultimately – begin menstruating at an earlier age⁵. This can be highly advantageous because it allows for women to (a) be able to bear children and (b) appear fully developed and, “womanly” when they marry at relatively young ages – usually during adolescence.⁶ Gaining weight early on can spur the onset of puberty and menstruation, which allows the girls to reach their child-bearing years at an earlier age.

¹ Abigail Haworth, "Forced to be Fat," Marie Claire, <http://www.marieclaire.com/world-reports/news/forcefeeding-in-mauritania>.

² Alex Smith, "Girls Being Force-Fed for Marriage as Fattening Farms Revived," *The Observer*, 28 February 2009.

³ Haworth, "Forced to be Fat".

⁴ Aline Tauzin, "Women of Mauritania: Cathodic Images and Presentation of the Self," *Visual Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2007): 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

Therefore, a woman's size not only helps to bolster her husband's social identity, but also alters her reproductive abilities in his favor. The pressure to maintain a heavy wife would eventually result in some of the responsibility shifting from the husband to a girl's parents. As time passed, men became more interested in marrying young girls who had already gained a good amount of weight. Girls that come into the marriage with an already large physique give an idea of their previous lifestyle, and thus deliver a statement about her father who has cared for her up to this point.⁷ Therefore, maintaining a bigger daughter bolsters a father's apparent social status and also impresses potential suitors.

Girls as young as 5 and as old as 19 often participate in the fattening ritual called *lebloub*. This intensive ritual involves the girls drinking massive amounts of milk and eating rich, fattening foods such as couscous and millet.⁸ Many girls gain weight at home under the supervision of their families, while wealthier parents choose to send their daughters to intensive, "summer camps," usually run by older women. Haworth's article presents a woman who charges an average of about \$155 per girl for a three month course.⁹ In 2001, a government survey found that one in five girls between 15 and 49 had been deliberately overfed using similar rituals - and nearly 70% of those women did not regret it.¹⁰ When girls are considered to be thin, their parents and other adults in society begin to worry about their marital prospects. "How will these poor girls find a husband if they're bony and revolting?" asks Aminetou Mint Elhacen, an older woman who runs an intensive *lebloub* camp.¹¹ It is clear that today in Mauritania, "bigness" is not just desirable – it is a widespread premarital requirement.

Recently, many women have been supplementing *lebloub* with pharmaceuticals such as animal hormones and steroids that tend to cause bloating. These drugs are sold secretly at city markets, and are usually taken by older women who are looking to gain or maintain their current weight. Hawer Sessay, a 5'6" woman who weighed in at 180 pounds, expressed frustration with her own body and claimed to have, "trouble piling on weight." She recalled being teased as a teenager for being smaller

⁷ Claire Cassidy, "The Good Body: When Big is Better," *Medical Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1991): 191.

⁸ Haworth, "Forced to be Fat".

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sharon LaFraniere, "In Mauritania, Seeking to End an Overfed Ideal," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/world/africa/04mauritania.html>.

¹¹ Haworth, "Forced to be Fat".

Body Image in Mauritania

than the ideal, and her husband complained that he “didn’t like sleeping with a bag of bones.” In an effort to gain more weight, Hawer uses an allergy medication that boasts a side effect of increased appetite. She hopes that this will eventually lead to her weight gain. However, if the drug is improperly used, it can lead to symptoms such as low blood pressure, kidney failure, and blurred vision. Hawer claims that she chose this drug because, “the pharmacist told [her] it was the least dangerous.”¹²

In Nouakchott, the nation’s capital, LaFraniere speaks with a pharmacist named Nouredine Francois, who understands the dangers of obesity and does not pressure his wife to gain weight. He refuses to carry dexamethasone tablets – steroids that are known to cause sharp weight gain. Despite his efforts, Francois continues to sell a popular antihistamine to women with side effects of drowsiness and lethargy. “Why don’t you bring me any pills?” his wife asks him, “You give them to other women but you won’t give them to me.”¹³ It is clear that Francois is fearful of the feminine obesity trend, and has likely attempted to educate his wife about the dangers of pharmaceuticals – however, his wife continues to express concern over her weight. Francois states, “She just wants to keep up a good image.”¹⁴ Francois’ wife, Hawer, and many other women display the desperation that can arise when diet alone is not sufficient to achieve the ideal size.

While the idolization of feminine obesity is still widespread, its practice has had its ups and downs over the past several decades. Beginning with the 1970s, the influence of mass media experienced a sharp increase in Mauritania. During this period, the cinema began to show large amounts of Indian films. Young girls began to frequent movie screenings, earning the label, “matinees.” The matinees became infatuated with the seductive actors and began reproducing the dances they saw in the films. Eventually the girls began to emulate the saris from the movies in their own dress, creating a new trend called the *robe veil* made from Indian saris that were bright in color and fine in texture.¹⁵ The act of the matinees embracing traditions seen as *foreign* indicated a wish to separate from past meanings and practices that only grew stronger over the following decades.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ LaFraniere, "In Mauritania, Seeking to End an Overfed Ideal".

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tauzin, "Women of Mauritania."

Beginning in the 21st century, Mauritania's government set out to change the trend of feminine obesity. Television commercials and official pronouncements urged young women to maintain a slimmer figure, warning them about the health risks that come with obesity. In 2003, the women's ministry introduced a "slim-down campaign" that made its marks in the media. One television skit depicted a husband, "carting his fat wife around in a wheelbarrow," and others displayed women completely immobilized and unable to properly entertain their guests.¹⁶ The message was clear: in addition to the inconveniences that it places on everyday life, obesity leads to countless health concerns such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, depression, and more. These very public messages about the risks of obesity proved to be effective for several years, as women of varying ages began to exercise and play sports together. A new love for sports and a slimmer figure made a new impression on younger girls, who began to approach *lebloub* with negative thoughts. "I don't want to be fat," one girl in Haworth's article stated. "I don't think it's beautiful. Now I see why some girls at school came back fat after vacation, but they were much prettier before... I love sports. I'm scared I won't be able to run fast when I'm fat."¹⁷

Government efforts to control the problem of feminine obesity were encouraging during the early 2000s. The 2003 campaign that strove to raise awareness of obesity was widely successful in the capital and other heavily populated areas, where younger women began to slim down. During these years, Mauritania also received heavy influence from the rest of the globe, enjoying Western influence in fashion and television, along with Nigerian pop music. Women in more populated cities began to invest less time in their weight and more in the political and cultural boundaries that surrounded them. However, progress was halted in 2007 when suspected al Qaeda gunmen murdered four French tourists near Nouakchott. The event caused tourism to plummet, along with foreign investment. The following year, a military coup removed the democratic government and put in place a junta which advocated a, "return to tradition."¹⁸ Since the coup, the trend of feminine obesity has quietly settled back into place. Seyid Ould Seuid, a Mauritanian journalist, believes that, "the practice is re-emerging because men still find mounds

¹⁶ LaFraniere, "In Mauritania, Seeking to End an Overfed Ideal".

¹⁷ Haworth, "Forced to be Fat".

¹⁸ Ibid.

Body Image in Mauritania

of female flesh comforting and erotic.” He states that the attraction is something that is, “ingrained from birth.”¹⁹

Activists such as Aminetou Mint Ely, head of the Association of Women Heads of Households, express their concern for the new political situation. “We have gone backwards,” she states. “We had a Ministry of Women’s affairs... we had female diplomats and governors.”²⁰ Now that the military junta has taken power and effectively reinstated the feminine ideal of largeness, young women once again feel pressure to invest a large amount of energy into gaining and maintaining large amounts of weight. Campaigners such as Mint Ely worry that the junta’s, “return to tradition” has rolled back several decades of progress and effectively silenced Mauritanian women in the political sphere.

The trend of feminine obesity in Mauritania has played a vital role in the nation’s social structure. It widens the gap between men and women, both at home and in public, and makes it difficult for women to participate in politics and in society as a whole. As recent history has shown, the trend has risen and fallen since the beginning of the century – however, it has begun to return as the national norm. The control of the military junta and its, “return to tradition” presents a challenge to the nation’s recent change in the popular notion of body image.

Chelsea Thompson was an undergraduate student at the University of Utah majoring in history, with an emphasis in Asia and the Middle East. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in May of 2014.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Smith, "Girls Being Force-Fed for Marriage as Fattening Farms Revived."

Bibliography

Cassidy, Claire. "The Good Body: When Big Is Better." *Medical Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1991): 181 – 213.

Haworth, Abigail. "Forced to Be Fat." Marie Claire,
<http://www.marieclaire.com/world-reports/news/forcefeeding-in-mauritania>.

LaFraniere, Sharon. "In Mauritania, Seeking to End an Overfed Ideal."
New York Times,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/04/world/africa/04mauritania.html>.

Smith, Alex. "Girls Being Force-Fed for Marriage as Fattening Farms Revived." *The Observer*, 28 February 2009.

Tauzin, Aline. "Women of Mauritania: Cathodic Images and Presentation of the Self." *Visual Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2007): 3 – 18.