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Force feeding burdens obese Mauritanian girls with diabetes, heart disease

Heavier girls are deemed more beautiful and likelier to find a good husband in the West African country

By Zoe Tabary

Thomson Reuters Foundation (08.04.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2qitg9g> - When Souadou Isselmou was made to eat buckets of porridge as a child in southern Mauritania, she hated it so much she would hide food under her armpits and throw it in the toilet.

"I tried to stick it in my abaya (loose-fitting robe)," she said, fiddling with her beaded bracelets. "Sometimes I got caught, but I still managed to get rid of some food."

When she was seven, her parents started feeding her two buckets of porridge and couscous per day "so men would want to marry me".

"I married my cousin at the age of 13, and had my first child a year later," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at a friend's home in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital.

Isselmou's case is far from uncommon. Heavier girls are deemed more beautiful and likelier to find a good husband in the West African country, say activists.

The practice of force feeding is known as gavage – a French term used to describe fattening up geese to produce foie gras, a delicacy produced from their enlarged livers.

It can leave young girls with diabetes, hypertension or heart disease for life, said Youma Mohamed, a rights activist.

Girls of around eight can weigh 140 kg (300lb) after force feeding, putting a huge strain on their hearts and jeopardising their health. Young women can tip the scales at 200 kg.

Now in her forties, Isselmou has type 2 diabetes, which is associated with obesity and lack of exercise.

Her parents used to give her zrik - a drink made of milk, water and sugar - so she would digest food faster, she recalled.

"My mother would cook an entire sheep in oil and butter, and I had to eat it all within a week," she said, adding that she felt so heavy that she could barely walk after four months of the diet.

"I didn't fit into any of my clothes."

Desirable

The tradition is closely linked to child marriage because it accelerates puberty and makes younger girls appear more womanly, according to rights group Equality Now.

"Mauritanian men often see large girls and women as more desirable," said Aminetou Mint Moctar, head of Association des Femmes Chefs de Famille, a local women's rights charity.

"They take it as a sign of wealth and that a girl will make a good wife," she said in emailed comments.

While drought has left many families short of food to fatten girls, some are turning to "chemical gavage", with girls buying drugs such as corticoids – steroid hormones – to get bigger and increase their chances of marriage, activists said.

"These are pills meant for animals, which can be even more dangerous than eating too much food," said Mint Moctar, whose organisation has called for force feeding to be criminalised.

"But you will see gavage in the rainy season, when meat and milk are plentiful."

Although gavage still exists in rural areas, it is now less widespread in cities as working women need to be mobile so "they aren't as interested in putting on weight", said Mohamed.

"Having a job and earning an income allows them to stand up to their families and make their own decisions," she said.

Although Isselmou says her parents had her best interests at heart, she never force fed her two daughters.

"It's their bodies, not mine," she said.

'My husband beats me when he is at the peak of his love for me': The place where domestic violence is a sign of love

'A woman takes pride in being beaten by her husband'

By Nebghouha Mint Zeidane

The Independent (01.03.2017) - <http://ind.pn/2mtc2Wk> - Salimata was always told she should be proud to come from a family of wife beaters.

"You're the daughter of a woman whose husband broke her hands. Your grandmother's legs were fractured by her husband. You must be loved," Salimata said, citing her mother's words.

The 19-year-old woman from Mauritania's Soninké ethnic group, married to a man who also beats her, said she taught herself to believe what her mother told her.

"I felt like an animal that had to be disciplined," she said. "As time passed, I came to believe that my husband beats me only when he is at the peak of his love for me."

Mauritania, a poor, mainly Muslim nation, has deep social and racial divides, each group with its unique marriage norms.

While divorce is widely accepted among the majority Moors, it is almost impossible among the Mauritians of African descent such as the Soninké and Fulani.

And while domestic violence is frowned upon among the Moors, of Arab and Berber descent, it's seen as an act of love and an accepted practice for Soninkés, said social researcher Sidi Boyada, an advisor at the ministry of social affairs.

Tradition

Aichetou Samba is a 60-year-old Fulani grandmother who lives in a modest house in a Nouakchott neighbourhood.

"In the past, our girls used to get married at eight years of age, and they usually married their cousins," she said, coddling one of her grandchildren.

Mauritanian law stipulates "sanity" and "marriageable age" as preconditions for getting married, leaving the door open for early marriage by giving parents the right to decide.

Wearing a colourful scarf that shows her Fulani heritage, Samba smiled and said: "A Fulani woman always takes pride in being beaten by her husband," and often shares her experiences with other women to show off his love for her.

"This is one of our traditions," she said. "We see wife-beating as a common and normal practice, which sometimes includes pouring cold water on the wife's body."

"My legs were broken"

Sociology professor Ousmane Wagué at the University of Nouakchott, also a Fulani, said Mauritanian women of African descent accept being beaten to avoid divorce, convincing themselves their husbands' violence is a sign of love. "As the popular song goes: My legs were broken and I stayed home," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Mariem Jallo, a 25-year-old Fulani woman, is an exception. She has been divorced for five years.

"My husband used to constantly beat me. He passionately loved me but this didn't stop him from hitting me for very trivial reasons," she said.

Jallo, who is fond of soap operas, said her husband came home one day while she was watching television and hit her. Minutes later, he tried to make it up to her, saying he couldn't bear to see her preoccupied with something other than him.

Her husband tried to block the divorce and her family blamed her for the failed marriage, she said.

Alyoun Idi, a 27-year-old Fulani man, said he had beaten his wife many times because she disobeys him, adding that this never affected their relationship.

"I love my wife so much and I can't live without her, but we inherited this from our ancestors, which is part of our traditions," Alyoun said. "It's also a great resolution for many family disputes."

Criminalised

Domestic violence against women was criminalised in 2001, and under Mauritanian law, wife-beating is a crime punishable with up to five years in prison.

Ahmed Bezeid ould Almamy, a lawyer who works with women's rights groups, said he receives an average of five complaints every month of women reporting abuse by their husbands.

But prosecutions are rare as women often drop charges for fear of sending their husbands to jail or getting divorced, he said.

However, lengthening queues outside the offices of women's rights organisations suggest a waning tolerance for violence against women, campaigners say.

The Household Women's Association recorded more than 2,000 complaints in the first half of 2016, compared to 1,700 complaints in 2014, according to Aminetou mint Al Mokhtar, head of the association.

Ministry of Justice official Haimouda Ramdhane said the Mauritanian legal system provides women victims with free services, including lawyers, medical and psychological support.

"New legislation is underway blocking the way for the withdrawal of complaints against violent husbands to protect the public interest and punish anyone who is also involved in covering up for crimes against women," Ramdhane told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, without giving a timeframe.

Despite efforts to pursue and prosecute violent husbands, some Mauritanian women continue to endure battering.

"When apathy afflicts our relationship, he won't care anymore for what I do even if I burnt down the house," said Salimata. "It's at that moment that I will miss being beaten."

Further reading:

[Mauritania proposes legislation that would criminalize insulting one's wife](#)