

MAURITANIA: Force feeding burdens obese 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.

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