



24 January 2014 - Although Mauritania is a poor, drought-prone country in West Africa, affected by the dry winds from the [Sahel](#) and recurring lost harvests, about 20 percent of women in Mauritania are obese, according to the [World Health Organisation](#).

How? The answer used to be, and in some areas still is, the practice of force feeding, also known as gavage. The principle is the same as when geese are forcibly fattened up to produce foie gras – a procedure no more enjoyable for geese than for girls.

Many men in the West African country consider obese women beautiful, seeing their size as a sign of wealth and prestige. For this reason, mothers often started fattening their girls at a very early age, and girls who didn't finish the fattening meals put before them were usually punished. Although the practice is becoming a thing of the past, force-feeding remains a serious threat to girls' health in rural areas.

Methods vary from tying a girl's toes to sticks and if she does not eat, pressure is applied to the sticks sending shockwaves of pain through the girl's feet, or to sending girls to “fattening farms” during their school holidays where they undergo hours of feeding before being told to sleep. Stretch-marks are considered extremely beautiful and when a girl is covered in them she will easily find a husband.

Girls may be fed anywhere up to 20 litres of milk a day, as well as copious amounts of couscous

mixed with generous quantities of butter.

Today, as perceptions of beauty change and obesity-related diseases rise, more women in Mauritania are fighting back against force-feeding and in Nouakchott, the capital, an increasing number of women refuse to fatten up and opt for the gym instead.

But one-third of the country's women's lives remain in danger – this time not by force, but in an increasingly dangerous, although voluntary, manner.

“Chemical gavage”, where girls take drugs including growth hormones, contraceptives and corticoids - steroid hormones - to bulk up, has increasingly replaced the traditional forced feedings.

Some young girls in Mauritania are even taking animal growth hormones and other dangerous drugs to help pile on the pounds and make themselves more marriageable.

Maoulouda Mint Saleck, midwife and activist, stated in an [interview](#) with TV5 Monde conducted in 2012, that the forced feedings indeed increasingly were a thing of the past, but that the “voluntary gavage” posed an increasing health risk for Mauritanian women.

Girls who take corticoids do not realise that the extra weight comes from water retention rather than fat, which is highly dangerous. Other health risks include heart failure, renal failure, diabetes, reproductive health problems, and joint pain.

Additional links:

WHO: http://www.who.int/nmh/countries/mrt_en.pdf

IRIN News report: <http://www.irinnews.org/report/85036/mauritania-force-feeding-on-decline-but-more-dangerous>