

Thin police

Is it possible to legislate an aesthetic? This is the question that countries are beginning to ask as they wage an ongoing battle to promote healthy body weight and discourage eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia.

In April 2008, France introduced a law that would make it a crime to “incite” people to thinness through websites, magazines and advertisements, a move that could effectively ban fashion magazines from using the stick-thin women who have long modelled the latest looks. In 2006, Spain announced that models must have a minimum body mass index of 18, or they would not be allowed on the runway.

The moves were, in part, a reaction to the deaths of 2 fashion models in 2006: Brazilian, Ana Carolina Reston, who died at the age of 21 at a weight of only 40 kg, and Uruguayan Luisel Ramos, 22, who walked off a runway and dropped dead from massive heart failure, the result of starvation.

Needless to say, even one young woman starving herself in the name of beauty is indicative of a societal problem. But is a law the best way to change women’s attitudes toward food?

Skepticism of the French legislation and its impact has been expressed around the world, and not just by the designers, editors and style-makers who trade in images of the super thin. Some believe these are moves in a game wherein governments pay lip service to resolving issues. In this case, politicians are appealing to voters with a law that they have no hope of actually enforcing. Others have cried censorship, and said that the fantasy world of fashion can not have its content dictated by elected officials.

But more than that, the legislation smacks to many of a witch hunt, blaming fashion magazines for eating disorders just as gangster rap and video games are named as the cause of violence and misogyny.

And, unfortunately, addressing the root cause of eating disorders just isn’t that simple.



Stuart Kimmond

The girls and young women who populate so-called “pro-ana” websites, where starvation techniques are exchanged along with “thinspiration” photos of Mary Kate Olsen and other tiny celebrities, are suffering from a complex disease that will not be cured by banning Kate Moss from the pages of *Vogue*.

Yes, having healthy role models are an important element for teaching young women about positive body image, but there is a more practical and effective way to change their mindset. Parents, educators and physicians must all take a proactive role in discussing weight with young girls, in teaching them about the media images and the food that they consume and in providing the treatment they need at the earliest possible intervention.

That is not to say the fashion world is entirely without blame or responsibility. Just as Hollywood films have cut down on the cigarette puffing of screen stars so as not to glamorize smoking, the purveyors of popular culture must recognize their role in encouraging a certain body type and strive to offer healthier examples.

The Spanish decision to enforce a minimum body mass index for models is also a practical way to ensure the health of women who work in the industry, although it would perhaps be more appropriate as a requirement

enforced by modelling agencies rather than government departments.

Do we really want the government deciding the threshold of what looks healthy, or telling us whose picture is harmful to others? Unhealthy weight is a problem on both ends of the spectrum, but people can not be legislated out of being too thin, just as they can not be legislated out of being too fat.

The average Canadian body mass index is 27, and while 38.9% of Canadians are considered to be a normal weight (18.5 to 24.9 body mass index score), 59.1% of Canadians are considered to be overweight or obese. But imagine if the French legislation were applied to that demographic and the country outlawed images of overweight men and women, making it illegal to “incite” people to fatness, by showing obese people in the pages of magazines or on the internet.

That too could potentially have an effect, but can you imagine the outrage?

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