

The Weight Debate: Should Skinny Models Be Banned?

by Jillian Blume

Americans have a problem with extremes: We either starve or eat ourselves to death. Our media is just as bipolar: most women's magazines show pages of emaciated models and celebrities while TV ads tempt us with the latest triple cheeseburgers and all-you-can-eat buffets. The message: Eat as much as you can stuff in, but still wear a size 0. There is one thing that is perfectly clear: We have no idea what constitutes a healthy body.

And our body image dyslexia seems to be going international.

The latest media hoopla is the "Skinny Model" issue. Models, singers, actresses, ordinary citizens, and dancers have been dying from the complications of starvation for decades. But when four models from Brazil (where women are proud to display their plastic surgery scars) die in two months, retired models, such as Frederique van der Wahl, are suddenly "shocked" by the skinny silhouette of today's models. Kelly Cutrone, owner of People's Revolution, a company that produces fashion shows, doesn't believe that this year's models are any skinnier than previous seasons. "I didn't see any difference in the girls at all. When they bend over, are you going to see their rib cage? Yes, they are thin naturally." Models have been showing off their jutting bones for many years, but there's a big difference between being naturally thin — and skeletal.

Being truly anorexic is a visible condition, especially in a backless designer dress or teeny bikini. Women who are naturally thin—and there are slender women who are healthy—do not have the gray-skin, thinning-hair, bag-of-bones look of a woman who is starving herself to death. "There is really no way to hide when someone is unhealthy on the runway," says designer Derek Lam.

However, banning skinny models (or those under 16 years of age) from the runway is discrimination. It could even be seen as censorship, because fashion shows are considered performance art: They use a stage, costumes, lights and music. Why not also ban modeling agencies from sending anorexic models to designers, or designers from making sample sizes that require starvation, or dance companies from putting so much pressure on their dancers that their throats snap shut like a Pavlovian experiment at the mere smell of food? And while everyone is pointing fingers at everyone else, why not ban fat teachers from schools and fat counselors from summer camp?

It should be common sense and simple decency to call for an ambulance when a woman is about to die of starvation. Instead, models are brainwashed—by their agents, designers, and television shows like "Next Top Model"—into believing that it's noble to die for your art. On Tyra Banks' show, she has "her" girls convinced that it's perfectly normal to model in conditions that cause hypothermia or drag yourself out of your hospital bed to show up at a "judging," even if it means bringing their I.V. stand with them. "As so often in the fashion world," Giorgio Armani says, "things have been taken to extremes." But he goes on to blame the models, "And unfortunately, there are a lot of young women who never accept that they are thin enough—and this is an illness." He fails to mention that if his models don't fit into his microscopic clothes, they're out of work.

While it is commendable that the Council of Fashion Designers of America has issued guidelines to promote good health, the issue of weight and body image is hardly limited by the fashion world. Ballet dancers and their dance companies have suffered from anorexia for many years.

Unfortunately, those with the power in "anorexic fields" like modeling and ballet don't seem to have any idea of what a healthy body looks like, and proof can be found in the size-20 model that strutted down the catwalk at Gaultier's anniversary show last fall. While it's refreshing to see a heavier woman showing off her beauty, she has passed the healthy mark by quite a few pounds. We need to learn how to occupy the middle ground.

Placing restrictions on the age and weight of models will just have us sliding down a slippery slope. Women come in all sizes, and being thin or overweight—within limits—does not necessarily mean being unhealthy. Both heavy and thin women can be physically fit and in good health.

Didier Grumbach, president of France's Chambre Syndicale, believes that the problem of anorexia "won't be solved by regulating the size of girls allowed to walk in shows. The best way to solve the problem is to talk and write about it. It's a false remedy to think that by slapping down a bunch of rules that you're going to solve a serious problem." Attacking the symptoms of body-image illnesses is useless. By focusing on its source, and taking some kind of communal responsibility, we give ourselves hope of finding a body-healthy middle ground.