

Chapter 5

Force Feeding in Africa: Juvenile Justice in Africa and Western Criminal Justice Systems Abstract

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ABSTRACT

Around the world, beauty standards are associated with women's attractiveness to men. In America, it is a cultural standard for women to be super thin to enhance their beauty. However, in Mauritania, young girls are force-fed to become voluptuous young women in preparation for the prospects of marriage (Thompson, 2014). Leblouh is noteworthy of several threats to children who are forced to commit to this tradition. For example, not only is the child eating until she is sick, but the child must also prep for an underage marriage by becoming obese (Melograno, 2022). Thus, the chapter will cover the behaviors, traditions, and risks of Leblouh in Mauritania and compare these concepts to the American idea of body image and eating habits. In addition, the chapter will identify the Mauritanian's government involvement and prevention in Leblouh practices, as well as the non-governmental groups that have actively combatted Leblouh and how this practice effects the juvenile justice system.

INTRODUCTION

Leblouh in Mauritania

Around the world, beauty standards are associated with women's attractiveness to men. In America, the cultural standard is for women to be exceedingly thin to

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enhance their beauty. However, in Mauritania, adults force-feed their girls to become voluptuous young women, ready to prime the girl for marriage (Thompson, 2014). *Leblouh*, also known as gavage, is a French word meaning “force feeding” (Ouldzeidoune et al., 2013). Gavage was initially meant to fatten geese for livestock. Although the fattening process of livestock is meant as a preparation for human consumption, the practice of *Leblouh* on girls and women is enforced to mold them for early marriage. Therefore, girls and women are treated more like property for marriage than a person. This form of treatment is a women's rights issue that the Mauritania government is actively trying to prevent due to the underlining health issues *Leblouh* enforces.

The practice of force-feeding girls in Mauritania is known as *Leblouh* and is a cultural practice in Mauritania dating back to the nomadic era, where obesity signified wealth. This practice is a norm for Arab families in the region (Ouldzeidoune et al., 2013) to feed their daughters up to 1,600 calories daily to gain considerable amount of weight to catch a man's attention for marriage (Thompson, 2014). Therefore, *Leblouh* has a significant reference to the two main goals of the Mauritanian Arab culture for women: to produce children and to be a comfortable body for husbands (Ouldzeidoune et al., 2013). Harworth (2021) states that the perfect body, according to the men in Mauritania, would be women who have achieved bellies that overlap past their thighs, and the girl's neck should have multiple layers of fat. While Thompson (2014) describes the golden body image as stretch marks scarred down the girl's arms.

Leblouh could begin as early as six years old (Ouldzeidoune et al., 2013). It is customary for families to start force-feeding their daughters early to help provide an image of early body maturity and development (Ouldzeidoune et al., 2013). If the girl provides the illusion that she is more mature for her age through her body form, then she is perceived as ready for marriage. Although it is illegal to marry a girl under the age of eighteen years of age, many law enforcement undermines this law (Melograno, 2022).

***Leblouh* as Child Abuse**

The *leblouh* practice tends to host two known forms of abuse to children—these two forms of abuse are physical and psychological abuse (*Physical Abuse*, 2023). Physical abuse is defined as a person who purposefully inflicts harm on another (Dag, 2021). In other words, physical abuse is when an elder maliciously harms a child after a child expresses an undesirable behavior. Psychological abuse, also known as emotional abuse, is characterized as abuse that targets another person's

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