

Israeli law eyes super-thin models as bad examples

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An Israeli walks past an advertising displayed on a main street in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Monday, March 19, 2012. A new Israeli law, passed late Monday, is trying to fight the spread of eating disorders by banning underweight models from local advertising. (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

(AP) -- Told she was too fat to be a model, Danielle Segal shed a quarter of her weight and was hospitalized twice for malnutrition. Now that a new Israeli law prohibits the employment of underweight models, the 19-year-old must gain some of it back if she wants to work again.

Not that she was ever overweight. At 1.7 meters (5-feet-7), she weighed 53 kilograms (116 pounds) to begin with. Feeling pressure to become ever thinner, she dropped another 13 kilograms (29 pounds). The unnaturally skeletal girl weighed 40 kilograms (88 pounds) by then, or about as much as a robust pre-teen, and her health suffered.

The legislation passed Monday aims to put a stop to the extremes, and by extension ease the pressure on youngsters to emulate the skin-and-bones models, often resulting in dangerous eating disorders.

The new law poses a groundbreaking challenge to a fashion industry widely castigated for promoting anorexia and bulimia. Its sponsors say it could become an example for other countries grappling with the spread of the life-threatening disorders.

It's especially important in Israel, which, like other countries, is obsessed by models, whose every utterance and dalliance is fodder for large pictures and racy stories in the nation's newspapers. Supermodel Bar Refaeli is considered a national hero by many. She is not unnaturally thin.

The new law requires models to produce a medical report no older than three months at every shoot for the Israeli market, stating that they are not malnourished by World Health Organization standards.

The U.N. agency relies on the body mass index, calculated by factors of weight and height. WHO says a body mass index below 18.5 indicates malnutrition. According to that standard, a woman 1.72 meters tall (5-feet-8) should weigh no less than 119 pounds (54 kilograms).

Also, any advertisement published for the Israeli market must have a clearly written notice disclosing if its models were made to look thinner by digital manipulation. The law does not apply to foreign publications sold in Israel.

In Israel, about 2 percent of girls between 14 and 18 have severe eating disorders, a rate similar to other developed countries, experts said.

The law's supporters hope it will encourage the use of healthy models in

local advertising and heighten awareness of digital tricks that transform already skinny women into seeming waifs.

"We want to break the illusion that the model we see is real," said Liad Gil-Har, assistant to law sponsor Dr. Rachel Adato, who compared the battle against eating disorders to the struggle against smoking.

The law won support from a surprising quarter: one of Israel's top model agents, Adi Barkan, who said in 30 years of work, he has seen young women become skinnier and sicker while struggling to fit the shrinking mold of what the industry considers attractive.

"They look like dead girls," Barkan said.

Aspiring model Segal says she's thrilled with the new law and wishes it had been passed years ago. "I wouldn't have grown up thinking that this (being underweight) is a model of beauty. I wouldn't have reached the point I reached," she said.

Segal said an agent told her three years ago that she had a beautiful face - but not a "model's body." Trying to attain that ideal through drastic diets, she ended up in the hospital twice and stopped menstruating.

Segal said she met Barkan during her modeling work, and he convinced her that she could succeed as a model without being unnaturally thin. Segal, who now weighs around 50 kilograms (110 pounds) and would have to gain 3.5 kilograms (almost eight pounds) to qualify for work.

Barkan estimated about half the 300 professional models in Israel would have to gain weight to work again.

Top Israeli model Adi Neuman said she wouldn't pass under the new rules, because her BMI is 18.3. Neuman said she eats well and

exercises. "Make girls go to a doctor. Get a system to follow girls who are found to be puking," a symptom of bulimia, she said.

Critics say the legislation should have focused on health, not weight, arguing that many models are naturally thin.

"The health of the model ... should be evaluated. Our weight can change hour to hour," said David Herzog, a professor of psychiatry and a leading U.S. expert on eating disorders.

Pressure on the fashion industry has intensified in recent years, sparked by the deaths of models in Brazil and Uruguay from medical complications linked to eating disorders.

Uruguayan model Luisel Ramos, 22, collapsed and died soon after stepping off the runway in August 2006, reportedly of anorexia-linked heart failure.

Other governments have taken steps to prevent "size zero" medical problems but have shied away from legislation.

The Madrid fashion show bans women whose BMI is below 18. Milan's fashion week bans models with a BMI below 18.5.

The U.K. and U.S. have guidelines, but their fashion industry is self-regulated.

Unrealistic body images in the media are believed to shape eating habits, especially among young people, though there is debate about how influential they are. Other factors include psychological health, trauma like sexual assault, or a tendency within one's family to emphasize physical appearance as a sign of success.

It's not certain that the law will have a measurable impact, because Israeli teens take their cues from both international media and local publications, said Sigal Gooldin, an eating disorder specialist at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Social worker Uri Pinus, who treats seven teens with eating disorders at a Jerusalem hospital, said the law was unlikely to affect his patients.

"But our expectation is that this law will impact the wider public," Pinus said. "(It) will reduce pressure on the girls to lose weight."

Segal said putting weight back on would be a challenge. But, she said, "in the end it's a very low price to pay when I think about other girls who won't grow up sick in the future."

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