

Israeli law aims to make ultrathin models obsolete

January 9 2013, by Aron Heller



In this Tuesday, Jan. 8, 2013 photo distributed by Adi Barkan modeling agency, models stand in line for a fashion shoot in Ramat Hasharon, Israel. A new Israeli law prohibits the employment of underweight fashion models. 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. (AP Photo/Adi Barkan modeling agency, Heftsy Elgar)

(AP)—When Margaux Stelman began modeling a few months ago, she

always had her sister Aline in mind.

Aline was an ex-model who died three years ago after a long battle with anorexia, a common affliction of models trying to look thinner and thinner—and girls trying to look like them.

Now, thanks to a new Israeli law that prohibits the employment of underweight fashion models, Stelman says she feels protected from the traditional pressures of an industry notorious for encouraging extremes in thinness. The law sets weight minimums with the aim of discouraging anorexia and bulimia, eating disorders that affect mostly young women, who go on extreme diets and are unable to eat normally.

"This disease is something that's very close to me," the 21-year-old university student from Belgium said at a recent photo shoot, the country's first since the law took effect last week. "Doing the exact opposite, showing girls that (they) can be healthy and be a model anyway, it's really something I want to show."

The Israeli law, passed by parliament last year, is the first of its kind. The United States and England have guidelines, but their fashion industry is self-regulated. Other governments have taken steps to prevent "size zero" medical problems but have shied away from legislation.

Israel, like other countries, is obsessed by models. International supermodel Bar Refaeli is considered a national hero. Refaeli, an Israeli who has graced the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition, among others, is not unnaturally thin.



In this Tuesday, Jan. 8, 2013 photo distributed by Adi Barkan modeling agency, models participate in a fashion shoot in Ramat Hasharon, Israel. A new Israeli law prohibits the employment of underweight fashion models. 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. (AP Photo/Adi Barkan modeling agency, Rami Meir)

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 54 kilograms (119 pounds).

Critics say the body mass index is flawed and cannot be applied equally to everyone. For example, many professional athletes fall outside the health boundaries set by the scale, because of their height or muscle mass.

Stelman is 1.7 meters tall (5-foot-7) and says she weighs around 60 kilograms (132 pounds)—but she isn't quite sure.

"I never weigh myself. I don't care. I don't even have a scale," she said. "Weight is just a number. As long as I feel good and healthy—that's all that matters."

One of the main supporters of the new legislation is Adi Barkan, one of Israel's top model agents.

In 30 years of work, he says he has seen young women become skinnier and sicker while struggling to fit the shrinking mold of what the industry considers attractive.

He said Europe's fashion has started shifting back. "They understand that something has to change," said Barkan, noting the rampant use of Photoshop, the popular picture editing computer program, to make models look even skinnier.

The Israeli law requires that any advertisement published for the Israeli market must clearly disclose whether the models' appearance was altered by digital manipulation.

Israeli designer Keren Saban said she prefers models who display her clothes to be "someone who looks like a woman."

"A woman's look is not something you need to be ashamed of, just the contrary," said Saban. "That is what an item should look like when we sell clothes to women."

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