

With obesity on rise, Paris takes a hard look at size bias (Update)

December 15 2017, by Thomas Adamson

France, the country that gave the world butter croissants and foie gras, often has been a place where being overweight was seen as something of a sin. But its capital is taking a hard look at the contradictions with a campaign to counter sizeism, an often disregarded kind of discrimination.

Paris anti-discrimination chief Helene Bidard promoted the idea after being on the receiving end of weight-related insults and noticing how bias against people who are overweight or perceived to be went unnoticed, never mind unpunished in the image-conscious city known for luxury fashion brands.

"We see fat people as ugly and even stupid, lacking hygiene and in bad health," Bidard said. "Talking about sizeism is already acting."

As part of its annual week devoted to raising awareness about discrimination, Paris on Friday unveiled its "Sizeism, stop! Taking action together" campaign with a plus-size fashion show and panels featuring bloggers from the "body positive" movement. Leaflets with legal advice and helpline numbers are set to be distributed at sports centers, night clubs, swimming pools and bistros.

The effort, which is aimed at countering both casual and institutionalized discrimination, comes amid rising obesity rates in France. The National Institute of Health and Medical Research reported that nearly 16 percent of the adult population was obese last year, compared to 6 percent in

1980. But thinness ideals persist.

French blogger Daria Marx said that while a 2011 French law prohibits job discrimination based on physical appearance—resumes and job applications often require candidates to include their photos—fat people are much less likely to be successful. Doctors also can deny in vitro fertilization to women who are deemed overweight.

To challenge the images of small-sized beauty propagated by fashion houses such Paris-based Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Dior, organizers of Friday's event put on a big-is-beautiful runway show with clothes specially made by designers such as Ewa Minge.

French luxury giants recently woke up to the potential dangers of encouraging excessive thinness. Since Oct 1, French fashion conglomerates LVMH and Kering stopped hiring excessively thin models and now require models to provide medical certificates to prove they are healthy before they can work. The companies said they hoped to set a new global standard for the fashion industry.

The move garnered praise at Paris Fashion Week, including during the show for the collection by Stella McCartney, whose house is owned by Kering.

"The community in fashion needs to look after these young women ... whether that be their emotional health, their mental health or their physical health," McCartney told The Associated Press.

The French law initially included a minimum body mass index requirement, but it was removed after lawmakers deemed the doctor's certificate an adequate safeguard.

Though discrimination against fat people is a real documented problem

in France—a book about growing up fat in France entitled "You're Not Born Fat" became an unexpected sensation—some remain skeptical.

"There is no problem of sizeism in Paris," image consultant Emery Dolige said. "Does eating well make you fat? No. On the contrary. Our American friends often demonstrate that."

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