

## 'Body liberation' or a Death Sentence?

'Big is beautiful', but sistas may be paying a high price for fighting body size 'fascism'. RAPPER SIR Mix-a-Lot's '90s hit Baby Got Back became an anthem to celebrate the larger figure of the average black woman. Referring to the standard images of skinny European models featured in women's magazines, Mix-a-Lot was clear where he stood. 'So Cosmo (magazine) says you're fat, well I ain't down with that!...give me a sister, I can't resist her.' Mix-a-Lot spoke for how many black men feel when it comes to definitions of female beauty, and more importantly his comments reflected how many black women feel about themselves.

According to research, black and Asian women generally have a more positive body image than white women. In research among American high school pupils, 80 percent of the black girls were happy with their body size compared to only 43 percent of white girls.

### SELF-ESTEEM

Black women with high self-esteem and a strong sense of racial identity actually rated themselves as more attractive than pictures of supposedly 'beautiful' white fashion models. Other studies indicate that this may be because Western black women are more flexible in their concepts of beauty than their white counterparts.

In much of the Caribbean, for example, females generally want to be bigger than would be deemed 'the right weight' in European countries. Size 10 is seen as too thin, while being a size 14 or above is seen as much more attractive. In recent years bigger black women have become more confident about their size and asserting this new-found confidence.

From London, to Johannesburg, to Atlanta, there are a growing number of beauty competitions that celebrate the bigger black woman. But while many applaud the new assertiveness of black women to celebrate the beauty

of their more voluptuous shape, there is concern from those working in health care about a growing obesity problem.

### OBESE

In the US, the National Center for Health Statistics reports that more than one-half (54.3 percent) of Americans are obese, with black women the most overweight segment of the US population. In Britain health chiefs have warned that Britain faces a 'obesity time bomb' that will kill thousands of the next generation unless major steps are taken. Like in America, black British women are more likely to be overweight.

With the biggest fat problem in the Western world, obesity-related ailments cost America \$117 billion a year to treat, and contribute to 300,000 deaths annually. Two out of three adult Americans are overweight, the government says, and they're gaining nearly 2 pounds every year. A quarter of them get virtually no exercise.

For African-Americans, the problem of expanding waistlines is grimmer still; 60 percent of black men and 77 percent of black women are too heavy, doubling their already elevated risk of diabetes and other diseases.

To compound the problem a recent Pennsylvania Medical Center study claimed that black women have 'a biological disadvantage' that makes it more difficult to lose the extra weight. Researchers have found that even at rest, overweight black women burn almost 100 fewer calories daily than their white counterparts.

However, not everyone buys this theory. Dr. Otelio Randall, director of the General Clinical Research Center at Howard University in Washington, disputes the claim that black women are biologically disadvantaged when compared to white women. He says some people are just simply more active than others.

'There are some people who are very active, or hyperkinetic, and they constantly burn calories, even if they are not playing tennis,' Dr. Randall says. 'People who sit watching television and who do nothing will burn very few calories, whereas the hyperkinetic people are sitting but are constantly moving and burning energy. Some people just burn a lot of calories and it has nothing to do with being black or white.'

Although obesity contributes to heart disease, certain forms of cancer, hypertension, high blood pressure and diabetes, black women (like many in other ethnic groups) are continuing to pack on the pounds, says obesity specialist Soundrea Hickman, of the Association for Improving and Maintaining Black Health.

'In 1998, the average clothes size for black women was 18; today it is a size 20,' Hickman says.

'I think the mistake that is happening is this 'full-figured woman' tag. It means a woman is no longer considered obese, she's just full-figured. It's a death sentence for the black woman. 'I'd like

to choke the person who came up with that title because it's killing us, and I'm sick and tired of going to funerals of black women in their 50s."

## CONFIDENCE

Tackling the problem, say experts, is not so much about trying to improve self-esteem, (overweight black women tend to have more confidence than white women of a similar weight), it's about trying to make women realise that there is a link between weight and health.

Added to a cultural aesthetic which sees larger built women as being more attractive than skinny ones, it's easy to understand why many women are reluctant to lose weight.

In many parts of Africa, obesity, especially in the buttocks, is associated with abundance, erotic desirability, and fertility. Fat has been seen as evidence of well-being and that perspective is still held by many black people across the diaspora. In Britain, just like America and the Caribbean, being large is simply not seen as a real problem for many black women.

Arts administrator Beverley Marks, from west London, was, in her words, "a well built black woman" until 12 months ago. Beverly said: "I've always been a big girl, and to tell you the truth I never had any concerns about the way I looked. I remember at school all the white girls were on diets and worried about how they looked, but I can honestly say I was very happy being what others would see as fat."

## BETTER

"It was only when I got ill for a few months and lost weight as a result of the illness, that I realised that I felt better carrying less. I started to go to the gym and I suddenly understood how exercise can make you feel mentally and physically so much better. "If I hadn't got that virus and got ill I would still be the same big Beverley, and would have been happy because I wouldn't have known how much better I could have been. I think the problem of weight and black women is that there are many like me who are perfectly happy being big. I'm not saying everyone is happy being over weight but I don't think that many black women see it as a real problem," she adds.

## CAMPAIGN

The Government has launched a major campaign to try and get the nation taking at least five half-hour sessions of exercise a week. With more children skipping exercise and outdoor pursuits to play inside with computer games, health chiefs are concerned that we are creating health problems for the future unless we act now. If health programmes aimed at tackling growing obesity in black women are to be successful, they will need to take on board the unique cultural factors which contribute to obesity, and work within that framework.

For black health writer Zondra Hughes, it's all about trying to strike a balance. "For the most part big beautiful black women are self-confident, content with their lives and are not on a destructive mission to transform themselves into living Barbie dolls." But unfortunately as she adds, "too many black women are caring themselves to death." Source: The Voice