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oral sessions with C. Hamard

The economics of thinness

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Mireille GuIliano is a slim and successful woman. She offers a glass of water before quipping “You know how much I love water.” She is correct; drinking plenty of water is a key rule in “French Women Don’t Get Fat”, her bestselling book on how to lose weight and stay slim “the French way”. In the book she describes her discomfort when as a teenager she gained weight while spending a summer in America.

Successive waves of feminism have told smart women they should have emancipated themselves from vanity—as they have from domestic servitude and an existence defined by procreation. But as a woman greatly affected by a comment about her weight Gullioano is not rare. These experiences are deeply personal but also universal, at least in the rich world. They reflect the pressure on women to look like an “ideal”.

And the fiction that clever and ambitious women, who can measure their worth in the labour market on the basis of their intelligence or education, need pay no attention to their figure, is difficult to maintain upon examination of the evidence on how their weight interacts with their wages or income. The relationship differs in poor countries where rich people are generally heavier than poor ones.

Wealthy people are thinner than poor ones in countries such as America, Britain, Germany and rich Asian countries, such as South Korea. That poor people are more likely to be overweight has often been explained by arguments that obesity, in the rich world, is a feature of poverty. Poor people may struggle to afford healthy foods. They may reach for processed or fast foods because they lack the time to prepare meals at home or have less time to exercise because low-wage jobs often involve working long shifts and can be less flexible than those performed by the “laptop class”. Or because low income is often a function of limited education, perhaps, so goes the thinking, that lack of education extends to a lack of knowledge about how to maintain a healthy weight.

The problem with all of these explanations is that the correlation between income and weight at the population level in advanced countries is driven almost entirely by women. Rich women are much thinner than poor women but rich men are about as fat as poor men.

That should give pause to anyone who thinks that poverty can explain why people are overweight or obese, or that being rich helps people to maintain a lower weight. You must then explain why those dynamics seem only to affect women. That there is a gender gap in the relationship between income and weight, which cannot easily be explained by other differences between men and women, indicates another explanation: perhaps being thin helps women become rich. Myriad studies find that overweight or obese women are paid less than their thinner peers while there is little difference in wages between obese men and men in the medically defined “normal” range. The penalty for an obese woman is significant, costing her about 10% of her income. Discrimination against fat women has not diminished as their numbers have risen. (523 words)