Introduction

As the globe continues to grow to another decade of progress, certain voices always unfortunately still remain unheard and issues, worsen as a result of being unaddressed. It appears to be that no matter where in the world people go to, “men's preferences dictate what a woman should look like”, and pressure from society forces women to conform to the general norms. In the Western world, body-shaming is a daily part of media, however, this isn’t limited to just the wider Western world. In African regions, in fact, a tradition of desirable over obesity has lured several women into harming their own bodies by gaining huge amounts of fat in a short amount of time, through dangerous means.

In historical contexts that, the practice of force-feeding has been implemented in several geographical scopes and historical periods, especially when hunger strikes became prominent, when several individuals were deprived of their liberty and freedom of choice. When prison policies were opposed by political prisoners, and “treatment was incompatible with their human dignity”, hunger strikes were employed and force-feeding emerged as a solution according to government leaders. An example of this is “the British Suffragettes movement”, where the British government resorted to force-feeding against British political activist women that went on a hunger strike demanding for the right to vote.

In the context of the suburb of Western African countries, however, innumerable girls in rural countries are having to tolerate the vile practice of force-feeding in lure of tradition and ‘appropriate’ marriage standards for women. Girls between the ages of five to nineteen are misguided, and sent off from home to fattening farms in order to fatten girls and compel them to obtain rounded-shape figures and overly obese body weight volumes. This practice has a strong link with the act of child marriage, as puberty hits at a much faster rate and young girls appear, more womanly making them desirable for marriage at an early age. When raised in a country that suffers from immense poverty and undergoing a “devastating drought”, getting married to a well-off significant other is of utmost cruciality. In essence, mothers of these children that are sent off to fattening farms believe that getting obese will “increase the chances of a happy union".
It is often said that “the problem is not the problem. It’s our attitude towards the problem”. In this case, it is the attitude that is the problem. Several states in Western Africa, particularly Mauritania has accused the new military of “turning a blind eye to a cult of obesity among young girls being groomed for suitors”. The political authorities of these states fear skepticism of their own traditions, and thus prefer to neglect and ignore the problems that the practice of force-feeding brings with it. When rural child marriages “take place under customary law or are overseen by a marabou [a Muslim preacher]”. Bearing in mind that there is zero involvement of a legislative official, there is nobody that she is of the appropriate age of marriage. The fattening of these girls to achieve “female roundness and corpulence” is usually done when there is a rainy season or during when there is a vacation during school. They are sent away from home without the knowledge or reason of their presence in the farms. Even when the girls suffer, they are lured into believing that being insanely fat and obese will make men like them and bring her happiness.

In essence, this practice of force feeding in Western Africa inevitably brings about consequences that hinder the girls, not only on a physical and mental healthcare perspective, but also causes emotional turmoil that can be a real struggle to deal with. It is of utmost priority, and needs to be addressed at the earliest in order to save several other young girls from the danger of the consequences that come along with force feeding.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Leblouh (Arabic: البلوح)**

This is the “act of force-feeding girls with ages ranging from 5 – 19”, particularly in Western regions of Africa wherein obesity is considered a desirable factor in their tradition.

**Gavage**

The act of force-feeding girls in West Africa is often also referred as gavage, a French word used for describing the deliberate fattening up of geese in order to produce foie gras – also a food item produced from their livers.

**Tuareg**

An ethnic tribal group habituating in the Saharan region, wherein the act of Leblouh is commonly practiced to better the chances of children’s marriage in a traditional society, where “obesity and a large body volume is perceived as a symbol of wealth.”
Fattening Farms

A term designated to a place where older women in West Africa, that compel young girls to ingest gargantuan amounts of food and imposing stringent punishment measures that include the consumption of their own vomit, from the failure to do so.

Zayar

A subtle medium of punishment/torture wherein the fatteners [older women] insert "sticks on each side of a young girl's toe" if they choose to revolt against this action, causing immense pain.

Background Information

The system of force feeding in Western Africa roots from colonial periods in time, and holds a long history. After the ontake of the military junta over the West African country, Mauritania, that spread across several other regions in Africa. Force feeding is, in brief a practice that has still rooted its place in multiple member states where “obesity was traditionally regarded as desirable”.

Leblouh and Male Approval

Older women in Western Africa force their daughters to ingest insanely enormous quantities of food, the practice being known as *leblouh*, in order for them to achieve “plumper, more mature figures”, hoping for an early marriage. The elderly family members urge young girls to eat and drink more than their bodies can intake. Once they are obese upto the "right size", they will hit puberty at a much faster, and not to mention abnormal means. Even though 10 centuries have passed since the rooting of this practice, men are still considered the one that decide their preference, and women blindly follow.

At this rate, a six year old in a fattening farm will “consume four-and-a-half pounds of millet, two cups of butter, and five gallons of camel’s milk per day. An eight-year-old could weigh 300 pounds after going through gavage”. In the case that the girls attempt to run away, have withdrawal symptoms or refuse to ingest excessive food, they are tortured and physically punished through the practice of *zayar*.

Ideologies

The ideology behind these nomads [of an Arabic Muslim origin, that consist of 3.1 million, making up two-thirds of Mauritania’s overall population]. The consencus in colonial times was “the richer the man, the less his wife would do”, and thus his wife would be obese as a result of laziness and no work. In ancient times, stretch marks around the waist, *tebath*, were considered as jewels. Even till this date, in
some rural villages, “fat around the waist, lekhwassar”, is considered pride and girls who have the most fat around their waist “gain the stature of mbelha”. These girls are given special treatment, and are taught to behave with a royal attitude; “sit in the lotus position, speak softly, use utensils and to emulate the exemplary lives of the Prophet Muhammad's wives”. This practice has spread far “beyond Mauritania, into Northern Mali and rural Niger”.

### Negative Consequences

#### Health Issues

The act of force-feeding inevitably brings about consequences of health that hinder the normal growth rate of the young girls that are force-fed by elderly women in fattening farms. The risks of this practice are not only long-term, but quite intense as well. These include, but are not limited to: “heart disease, diabetes, several cancers, osteoarthritis, respiratory problems, sleep apnea, high blood pressure, renal failure, reproductive health issues, and a range of negative psychosocial effects, plus an overall shorter life expectancy”. Obesity on such a large scale also increases problems associated with pregnancy for women. Recent studies have also demonstrated that “growth hormones and steroids”, also known as chemical gavage that have replaced the traditional fattening method also consists of dangers.

#### Freedom

Statistics have suggested that more than one third of women in Mauritania, and other regions in Africa who were victims of force-feeding as a child have said that it makes it is “immensely difficult to move around and leave the house” because of being obese. This also brings about several limitations and provides only a narrow leeway for force-fed victims to participate in societal respectable events, such as sports, workforce, community leadership, dances and other recreational activities. As the world progresses, it may even lead to marginalization and social exclusion once beauty perceptions aren’t relied on traditional practices.

### Child Marriage

Despite there being a higher legal age of being lawfully wedded, 34% of girls still get married before reaching adulthood; ie before the age of 18. In the instance that underage marriage is practiced, regardless of it being legal or not in a few countries, the practice of force feeding still prevails as a method to make little girls appear as sexually mature, gain a good suitor boy for them and secure a good future for them.

Although modern-day media, evolution and statistics that describe the harmful impacts of the act of force-feeding, “one-third of Mauritanian women still believe that the practice makes a woman more
beautiful, and one-quarter of them believe that it will increase their social status in the community”. In such cases, the “pressure to conform is stronger than the fear of poor health and reduced mobility later in life”.

**Government**

This form of child abuse that endures several torturous practices deserves to be addressed immediately and action needs to be taken immediately, yet those elderly women in fattening farms that encourage it and other mothers that do nothing about it “escape punishment because the law permits it”. Despite signing and ratifying several treaties and child protection conventions, leaders of not only Mauritania but other member states as well, fear from revolting against tradition and thus, don’t criminalize it. It is also perpetuated by the practice of child marriage [blind to the law], and body shaming thin women- in contrast to the Western World.

Despite the fact that the negative consequences are acknowledged by elderly women and they have experienced the health issues that are associated with the practice of force feeding, they still continue the practice of extreme weight gain, in the aspiration of being sexually desirable by older and wealthier men in society - thus attaining a higher social stature. Government legislation in the early 2000s published several reports that indicated the death of this practice, but after the ontake of the military, particularly in Mauritania, “force-feeding remains prevalent and unpunished”.

**Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

**WUNRN [Women’s UN Report Network]**

“WUNRN addresses human rights, oppression, and empowerment of women and girls all over the globe”. This network is a framework for thorough and informative global resources on women and young girls’ problems. WUNRN provides, “research, documentation, programs, reports” in order to progress in advocacy and activism and encourage women empowerment on a lexical global field. WUNRN has compiled resources of those force-fed and have carried out multiple projects in order to address this issue and raise general awareness about it.

**Mauritania**

The principal country in Western Africa where force-feeding started over multiple generations. According to UNRIC’s statistics, “20 percent of women in Mauritania are obese” despite being struck with overly cascading poverty. “Chemical gavage has replaced forced feedings” in modern-day Mauritania.
As modern day “beauty perceptions change and obesity-related diseases rise”, women in Mauritania are revolting against traditional practices and the figures of women that refuse to undergo the fattening and rather opt for healthier life choices have exponentially grown over the past years. Yet, young girls and women in rural areas are in jeopardy and remain as prone to this danger. More worryingly, not by compulsion but rather voluntary - as a result of brainwashing by elderly women. Surprisingly, Mauritania as a delegation has signed and ratified both “international and African treaties protecting the rights of the child”.

Morocco

A neighboring country to Mauritania, where “high body volume used to be a sign of wealth”. In the southern regions of Morocco, the practice of fattening still continues and girls still remain in the sphere of the danger of diseases that come along with this practice. In other parts of Morocco, though, this practice is regarded as orthodox and beauty commercials portray girls with slim waists wearing jeans. When these are viewed by girls who practice fattening, some say they wish they were more like them, whereas some curse them of disregarding tradition and laugh hysterically at their courage to do so.

Sudan

Force-feeding of women is also practiced in Sudan for the same purposes, however it is also being implemented on several different contexts on minority groups that oppose the authority. Recently, Sudanese protestors claim that “they were force-fed sewage water and shot with live ammunition by security forces during a crackdown”. An extremist case was when a man was forced by opposition party soldiers to drink sewage water despite his fast for Ramadan. Due to their unstable political position, any action taken as an attempt to resolve the issue is rendered quite useless.

China

In China, the re-education camps [official name: Vocational Education and Training Centers] have been accused of force-feeding Uyghur Muslims on the pretext of educating them. Not only that, but Liaoning Province Women's Prison has a history of practicing force feeding on women that go on hunger strikes, as a result of being imprisoned due to their religious beliefs and practices. “Many have lost their lives or become disabled or mentally disordered as a result of such abuse”.

South Korea

In November 2019, a university professor was imprisoned for a period of 12 years for compelling a student to ingest human faeces and urine during a two year period of physical and psychological
assault". In prisons or when people revolt through hunger strikes, this is still practiced and several people are abused and die, as a result of this horrid force feeding of human waste.

**United Kingdom**

The action of force feeding in Western Countries first began during the suffrage movement, where British women went on a hunger strike, and were “met with a brutal regime of force feeding which left many chronic injuries”. It was this time period where women revolted against the right to vote.

**OHCHR**

The office of the high commissioner human rights works on spreading awareness about the act of force-feeding girls in the Western region of Africa. This organization carries out several campaigns and projects in order to aid the victims that are tortured through force feeding. They have a universal human rights instrument list in order to aid those whose rights have been violated.

**Timeline of Events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11th Century</td>
<td>The practice of force feeding roots back to this century, particularly in Mauritania and originally derives from the Arabic nomads, who believed that an overly obese woman is a sign of wealth and the tradition of sending young girls to fattening farms began.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12th Century</td>
<td>This practice spread across multiple countries in Africa, particularly in the Western region as elderly women began the practice of <em>leblouh</em> and the number of fattening farms continued to grow.</td>
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<td>September 1914</td>
<td>In this time period, the UK witnessed the British Suffrage Movement, wherein several women revolted for women’s rights to vote. It was more commonly known as the “Cat and Mouse Act, whereby debilitated prisoners would be released, allowed to recover, and then re-arrested”. These women went on hunger strikes to allow women to vote, and were then force fed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 1917</td>
<td>There was a case whereby “a female prisoner in the US to be subjected to force feeding”, because she was an activist in advocating for the new constitution of birth</td>
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control for women. She revolted through hunger strikes, and “refused to drink water for 185 hours”, after which she was force fed.

**December 10, 1948**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created and ratified by several member states.

**May 1985**

The special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhumane or disregarding treatment or punishment was created.

**October 1996**

A select Serbian prisoners have claimed to have been forced to “eat paper and soap” in the Northern Bosnia in 1996.

On this day, the “United Nations War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague approved the use of force-feeding” of a Serbain politician as it was for a medical necessity. They decided it was not “torture, inhuman or degrading treatment if there is a medical necessity to do so… and if the manner in which the detainee is force-fed is not inhuman or degrading.”

**December 6, 2006**

After the military junta gained its control back on Mauritania, the practice of force feeding had a surprising comeback and elderly women were encouraged to continue this practice.

**2008**

In Israel, the government allowed and in fact passed a law permitting the practice of “force-feeding of prisoners in response to a hunger strike by a Palestinian detainee who had been held for months in administrative detention”.

**April 2015**

Modern-day media and young males changed the perceptions of beauty in Western Africa, and caused a huge change in numbers of girls that attended fattening farms.

**November 2019**

A severe case occurred in South Korea of force feeding, whereby a teacher was accused of force feeding human waste to a student.

**Relevant UN Treaties and Events**

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948 *(A/RES/217(III) A)*
- Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Disregarding Treatment or Punishment (1985/33)
• African Union, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), adopted in 2003
• Model legislation on domestic violence (E/CN.4/1996/53/Add.2)
• Honour crimes predominantly on women that “deem to have defiled the honour of the family” (E/CN.4/1999/68, para. 18).

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

It can be difficult to point out previous attempts to solve particularly this very issue of force feeding of girls in Western Africa. However, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the special rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhumane or disregarding treatment or punishment was created, and the model legislation on domestic violence was created. In addition to that, several government laws, constitutions and political parties have been tweaked and twisted so as to address this issue and begin taking action. However, because of the fear of being accused of disregarding old traditions, several politicians end up turning a blind eye to this issue.

Other attempts to solve this issue are primarily based on general awareness and continuously convincing elderly women at fattening farms of the negative consequences of this practice and all the health-related issues that it can bring with it- both physical and mental. These have been carried out in the form of projects and campaigns by several agencies- such as the ONHCR and WUNRN who go to rural areas and address this. Undoubtedly, there has been effort taken, but there needs to be more solutions to this than simply general awareness and creating laws in a government legislation.

Possible Solutions

As aforementioned, the problem in reality is not the problem. It’s our attitude towards the problem. There are a plethora of steps that can be taken in order to resolve this problem, and implement action against it. First and foremost, the practice of gavage and child marriage should be formally criminalized all across the globe. Those that run fattening farms and permit child marriage should be penetrated across prisons and punished for the horrendous crimes that they not only do, but encourage others to do so. These, however, must come with stringent means and reliable means of enforcement and implementation.

“Most importantly, the root of the problem must be treated, not simply the symptoms”. The sole solution that appears to tackle the issue at hand in an effective manner, is to condemn the harmful beliefs and traditional practitionering behind them. This can be done, of course through education and
raising general awareness about the health risks and future consequences associated with force-feeding, especially those that voluntarily do it. Women empowerment and feminism is said to be a key tool in encouraging women to “make their own decisions about their bodies” and be self-reliant. When they will stop depending on men’s approval and desires for how their physical form should look like, “perhaps leblouh will at last become obsolete”.

A different on-take for solving the problem and providing as much assistance as possible, would be to ensure access to appropriate health care for those that survived. From an optimistic point of view, a creative, yet effective solution would be to transform the fattening farms into rehabilitation farms, wherein trainers, nutritionists, psychotherapists and professional counsellors are employed in order to treat those victimized and subjected to this practice. These rehabilitation farms would consist of one-to-one care for each girl and women that was undergoing force-feeding or any woman that previously underwent force feeding. A daily exercise routine alongside a healthy meal plan and mental mindfulness would be the main focus of these farms; the ultimate goal in the end is of course to reduce, if not eradicate all the health-related concerns that arise from force feeding of girls in Western Africa, and get rid of the leblouh practice.

Although seemingly insignificant, raising general awareness is key and, often is almost sufficient to address the urgency of the issue. A new solution to this problem would be to reach out information of the negative side to this practicing through means with which young girls gain information of force feeding. For instance, gatekeepers such as media, posters, school campaigns and social platforms is a great way to start and spread the word. In addition to that, older women, especially mothers of young girls that continue the reign of force feeding need to be educated so that they don’t pose a threat and act against it. When girls are sent to “summer camps”, during the rainy season and school holidays, let’s make it a camp where they practice physical and mental health rather than exactly the site of violation for it. Let’s make the reality of a summer camp closer to their dream, and not a nightmare.
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