

Gender, eating habits and body practices in Medellín, Colombia

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The Western ideal of maintaining a thin body is common to wealthier populations in developing countries. However, despite trends of globalization, societies maintain different conceptions of the ideal body image. These ideas have health repercussions, especially among adolescents. In Latin America, the ideal body for women is also shifting towards thinness. It is assumed that one of the reasons adolescent girls desire a body image characterized by extreme thinness is due to their aspirations of conformity to American and European beauty patterns. However, there are differences in the way teenage girls give meaning to this social demand. In order to better examine the phenomenon of the ideal body, there are intracultural and intracommunity differences that need to be explored. In Medellín, Colombia, not only does thinness represent the ideal body, but curves are also valued. With the intention of acquiring this ideal, body practices of numerous girls in Medellín are considered to be extreme. This article focuses on the political and gender influences that pressure teenage adolescents to acquire a body ideal in this Colombian city.

[ideal body, gender, socioeconomic status, eating patterns, Colombia]

Introduction

Despite trends of globalization, societies maintain different conceptions of the ideal body image that have important repercussions for their population, especially among adolescents. Mass media promotes similar ideals almost everywhere in the Western world, but the actual ways in which adolescents attribute meaning to these messages differs within and among societies. Ideal body expectations influence the way teenagers eat as well as their perceptions and practices related to body image. In Colombia, it is assumed that a main reason teenage girls desire a body characterized by extreme thinness is due to their aspirations of conformity to American and European beauty patterns. While this supposition may be partially true, it is also necessary to look more carefully into the political and gender influences behind these assumptions.

Body dissatisfaction is more prevalent in prosperous countries with Western lifestyle ideals (Holmqvist & Frisén 2010), which support body images of thinness for

girls and muscularity for boys, and has also permeated other societies. Several studies have shown that body dissatisfaction and eating disorders have increased in countries like Japan (Pike & Borovoy 2004), Malaysia (Mellor et al. 2009) and China (Chen & Jackson). Similarly, studies in Fiji, where fatness has historically been seen as a positive result of community caring and support, demonstrate that females who were exposed to Western television also showed high levels of body dissatisfaction (Becker 2004). In addition, studies reveal that dissatisfaction with the body is also increasing in societies undergoing a restructured approach toward Western value systems, as in Iran and Tunisia (Jaeger et al. 2002). However, the way symptoms related to eating disorders are presented varies according to the cultural setting. A study found that there is little fat phobia in Hong Kong among anorexic patients and their justification for refusing to eat was epigastric bloating and no appetite or hunger (Lee, Ho & Hsu 1993). In San Andres, Belize, extreme distress over body size is uncommon and the desirable body figure is the iconic 'coca cola' bottle shape. In San Andres Belize there is "an ethnopsychology of self-care and self-protection seems to buffer many girls from body anxiety" (Anderson-Fye 2004: 587). This literature shows that symptoms of eating disorders differ according to the cultural setting.

With regard to studies of body dissatisfaction in Latin America, conclusions indicate that the ideal body for women is shifting towards thinness (Pérez-Gil & Romero 2010), and Latin teenagers have a higher level of body dissatisfaction than Spanish teenagers (Rodríguez & Cruz 2008). A cross-cultural study of six Latin-American cities (Buenos Aires, Argentina, Guatemala City, Guatemala, Havana, Cuba, Lima, Peru, Panama City, Panama, and Santiago, Chile) found the effect of gender on body satisfaction to be significant, and that Latin America girls have a strong predilection for extremely thin bodies, which they believe serves as an indicator of good health (McArthur, Holbert & Pena 2005).

The results of these studies demonstrate how the notion of an ideal body permeates society through mass media systems which promote a reference for normality and attractiveness, as well as via biomedical discourse that underlies the apparently innocuous banner of health making "beauty itself a form of health" (Edmonds 2009: 34). Within this context, excess of weight is seen not only as a physiological disease, but also as being associated with negative psychological states of mind, such as anxiety disorders, low self-esteem, or lack of self-control or will power.

Results from a similar study in 2003 of 475 female college students in Medellín, Colombia showed that the probability of having an eating disorder was 33 percent for adolescent females (Ramírez et al. 2003). In Colombia, the cultural model of the ideal body for women has been established as having large breasts, a thin abdomen, and large firm buttocks and legs. Additionally, according to these standards, a 'beautiful woman' should preferably be blonde, tall, and have light eyes. This model of beauty is entirely detached from the prototype of the Colombian woman, and serves to show that the "idealization of cultural whiteness and European physical features represents discomfort with the demographic realities of the nation" (Casanova 2004: 291) where predominantly women have dark hair and eyes.

In Colombia, this standard of the beautiful body is markedly stronger among adolescents trying to obtain approval within their society, as “they may find it particularly difficult to challenge dominant cultural representations of femininity while they are still learning about what it means to be a woman” (Grogan 2008: 145). In order to understand how these issues converge in Colombia, and particularly in Medellín, there are several factors to be taken into consideration.

Fieldwork

Considering the aforementioned body image transformation within the contemporary, globalized world, I will draw on ethnographic data collected in 2000 (Piñeres & Ochoa 2000) to explore these emerging body image standards among teenage adolescents in Medellín. The fieldwork I refer to was carried out between 1999 and 2000 at a middle strata high school in Medellín, Colombia. The aim of the research was to explore perceptions regarding physical appearance and beauty among teenagers.

The research involved focus group discussions with fifteen teenagers and interviews with eight adolescent females who also wrote stories that helped them to illustrate their perceptions related to body image and eating patterns. The focus group discussions and interviews were taped and transcribed. Some of the girls were interviewed once or twice, others up to six times. I visited the high school during lunch break hours which enabled me to make observations about the girls’ attitudes and their eating patterns. The observations and transcriptions allowed me to discover some common underlying themes related to body practices, beauty perceptions and eating patterns. What resulted was a diverse depiction of the importance given to body ideal, and the eating patterns and body practices related to this ideal. Some girls recognized the importance of having a beautiful body but they were not too concerned about it, while other girls considered themselves as being obsessed with this issue. I will especially focus on one of the cases, labelled ‘C’, because it portrays the gendered issues converging in the body image pressure that some girls have to face. I will, contrast this case with others that could be named ‘less extreme’ to further explore these issues.

Eleven years have passed since this data was collected, but the body practices in Medellín today are still similar to those of 2000. The testimonies of the girls will help illustrate how gender issues, eating patterns, and body practices are interrelated. It is important, however, to consider that presently this ideal body is not only pursued among middle and upper class teenagers, but also vigorously followed among adolescent girls of lower socioeconomic status. For these girls, the body is “a vehicle of social ascension” (Edmonds 2010: 72). It is important to take into consideration that adolescent women of low socioeconomic status in Medellín, often carry a personal and structural stigma, living in certain *comunas* or neighbourhoods that characterize their ‘social identity’ (Goffman 1986). These girls are supposed to be *bien presentadas* (well-presented / have a fine appearance), thin, educated and preferably white, in order to acquire a job (Uribe 2006). I will therefore, contrast my results with the

condition of lower Socioeconomic Status (SES) girls to explore how the beauty ideal can strongly affect the health of lower SES female girls.

Medellín

Medellin is the second largest city in Colombia and the capital of Antioquia Department. Antioquia has been characterized by being a traditionalistic region and having a strong attachment to land. These traditional values are based on family, property, religion commerce, and a white mixed ethnicity that, in general, tends to be homogeneous (Motta 2007). The emphasis on family, religion and property is reflected in the cultural ethos where male virility and femininity are based on paternity and maternity, so that children were produced to enter the labor force creating wealth and offerings to God and the Church (Motta 2007). However, at present, there is a confluence of two streams: the traditional and the modern, causing a change in the traditions of the society. Since the second half of the twentieth century, traditional Antioquia society has undergone complex processes that have caused the partial dissolution and reorganization of their social and ideological cores (Henaó 2004). In the urban context there are aspects that are modified resulting in a change of traditions. There is a disintegration of the traditional relations of kinship, community, and new forms of family and organization. These changes result in more selective and transient relationships, creating adaptation conflicts for some persons and isolation for others. The higher levels of consumption create transience and impermanence that is not only related to objects but also to time and human relationships (Gonzalez 2002). Another important factor that appears as a determinant of behavioral change in Medellín is the pressures of working patterns and competition. The work environment is now more demanding and this impacts the life styles of the city's inhabitants. There are numerous factors influencing this change such as the technological revolutions of the 1960s through 1990s, the religious crisis and the profound social transition caused by drug trafficking (Gonzalez 2002). The inhabitants of Medellín today are more individualistic, and the family and neighbor relationships more diluted. The traditional roles of women and men have changed. There is a reevaluation of the body and the aesthetic ideal has changed. Phenomena like homosexuality now endure more tolerance (Gonzalez 2002). The informal economy destabilizes family life and forces women to assume other roles. All these factors influence the inhabitants of today's Medellín to look toward other forms of relationships and social recognition, causing the city to undergo a transformation. This transformation has been described as a social hybridation (Henaó 2004).

Fashion and beauty

In order to understand the social and cultural context to which this analysis refers, it is important to consider that Medellín is regarded as the fashion capital of Colombia.

Accordingly, the modelling industry is also of great importance within the city. Models in Medellín represent a strong influence among young girls who want to emulate them. This can be seen as girls are entering modelling schools at the age of three in an effort to initiate an early path to success that will instil ideals of the modelling industry (Uribe 2006). Similarly, another point of reference for adolescent girls in terms of the beauty prototype is that of ‘beauty queens’. Socio-political issues converge from the creation of this ideal body image in Medellín, as in the rest of Colombia. The models and the ‘beauty queen’ image are “one of the few roles that mass media promotes as available to women” (Browner & Lewin 1982: 72). These issues can be seen in the following testimonies:

F: I want to be thin, like the beauty queens. I don’t feel good or bad about my body right now, but I would like to feel better and for that I have to lose about 10 Kgs. For doing so, I follow diets. The other week I was following a diet only consisting of fruits, but someone told me that it was dangerous and then I stopped that diet. Now I don’t eat sugar.

J5: I follow the beauty queens’ diets. All the models are super thin. Compared to them, one looks like a cabbage. Nowadays, all men look at women’s body, they look at other things too, but the body is the most important thing.

J7: ...Men do not like fat girls, they are used to see Natalia Paris [famous Colombian model], and they wish they could be like her... Media show you spectacular bodies and you want to have a body like that.

As Bourdieu suggests, experiencing the body with discomfort “varies very strongly according to sex and position in the social space” (Bourdieu 2001: 65). For young adolescent girls in Medellín, the social pressure of acquiring an ideal body is strong. Consequently, body practices of numerous girls in Medellín are considered extreme, as respondents explain:

F: I have starved myself, I once followed a fruit diet with some friends, and we only ate fruits for a whole week. I also followed another diet that consisted of a beverage of celery and pineapple in the mornings, and I didn’t eat breakfast lunch or dinner.

E: Last year the only thing I cared about was my body and now I have gastritis. I get dizzy, so that is why I started taking care of myself. When you get drawn into that [the desire for losing weight] you are not the same and you get scared. That situation lasted for a year. I ate very little, only lettuce and water, while everybody was having lunch, I only ate lettuce. Later, I started to have horrible pains, I felt like crying, that was at the end of the year. Then I stopped. My friends and my mother found out when I stopped the diet. Now I eat too much, but I don’t want to eat so much. Now I have an obsession for food.

F: I think this happens among people of my age but you can also see ten or eleven year old girls thinking about dieting.

There is, however, something special about the concept of ideal body and beauty in Medellín; thinness is highly valued, but a woman is also supposed to have curves which “resemble the role of Eve, the temptress” (Browner & Lewin 1982: 72).

F: I wish the body was not so important, but I think that nothing can be done to change this situation. My male friends always look at the body of a woman, that she has nice boobs or bottom.

What type of girl do boys look at?

N: In playing ‘truth or dare’ with a group of boys and girls you realize that boys care a lot about how a girl looks, ...that she is thin with ‘attributes’ [bottom and breasts] and that she has a pretty face. Only later, when they have gotten to know her, they also care about her personality.

Dieting: “The less I eat, the better I feel”

Just as teenage girls in Medellín make great efforts to reach the ideal standard imposed by their society, one of the most recurrent practices for losing weight is dieting. In this sense, it is important to explore the meaning of the concept of ‘diet’ in Medellín. In addition to their aesthetic significance, diets are valued for their relation to religious tradition that associates fasting with sacrifice and virtue (Uribe 2006). In Medellín there is a cultural model that links morality with the ability to control one’s weight (Nichter & Vuckovic 1994: 127), but this “mortification of the body leads not to personal freedom from its needs, but to mental enslavement” (Turner 1984: 185).

Susan Bordo elaborates that these practices of “denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse” (Bordo 1993: 130). Below, C explains how restraining food gives her a feeling of control:

C: When I stop eating, I feel more secure because I feel I have control over myself. I used to think that eating sweets or chocolates was a symbol of weakness, so now I diet.

C: Having control over yourself is the ability of not being weak, to eat is a weakness. When I overeat I get very angry and I feel weak... I am very demanding with myself but I like it. I tried to be less demanding with myself but I didn’t feel as well).

The foods that are avoided are the foods with high content in fat, fast foods, sweets and starches.

F: I do not like eating fat, fried meats. Hot dogs and hamburgers on the street are disgusting.

A: The skinny girls at school go to the gym and diet. They do not eat sweets, fats, or starch. Some of them follow unsupervised diets. They also drink plenty of water.

Some of the diets that girls follow are explained in detail by them:

J: I never eat dinner, I only eat a fruit at night.

D: I followed the diet of an actress that consisted of eating once per day and another diet that consisted of eating only tuna and pineapple. Now I hate pineapple and tuna.

N: I once followed a 1000 calorie diet that was not prescribed.

J: I followed the 'onion diet'. My mother was following that diet and then I tried it too, but it tastes really bad).

C also gives a lot of detail about her eating practices:

C: I always wanted to be thin. Boys looked at me more when I was thin. However I didn't feel thin. When I was a little girl I was very thin, I could spend all day playing without eating. I always was underweight. During the last two months I have lost 5 or 6 Kgs. I don't care if my health is affected because I don't eat enough. I know I should eat things that are nutritious, like fruits so I don't get sick. Even more, I used to eat 628 calories per day, I learned the caloric value of the things I eat, and then I calculated. The less I eat the better I feel. When I eat a lot I feel... I don't know... I feel I have lost control of my life.

C: At breakfast I have orange juice prepared with a single orange, at 2 p.m. I have a bit of chicken, juice and a cracker and for dinner I eat corn flakes. I know that is not a lot but at the beginning it didn't matter. Then I started getting headaches, my eyes were always irritated, but it was because I didn't eat well, since then I started to eat fruits.

One of the main reasons girls diet is for achieving a body that is socially acceptable:

D: I want to have a beautiful body, to be thinner because clothes fit you better and boys look at you. I used to be 7 Kgs. heavier, and my friends called me 'little donut', now I am thinner and I feel much better.

C: I used to go to the gym but the instructor used to tell me that I was fat so I didn't go back. Also, I need someone to go with, because when I am alone I don't feel well. I feel very insecure.

The importance of having an ideal body is so entrenched that even mothers are concerned about their girls achieving ideal beauty. Additionally, nuclear and extended families pressure teenage girls about the importance of 'taking care of themselves'. For example:

C: Some things people say make me feel bad, not so much other people, but my own mother. She tells me I am not well organized, she tells me I speak very strange, that I have cellulites, that I am flaccid, that I don't have enough boobs, that I am selfish and rude.

F: My brothers tell me I'm too fat, but they do not see their own big bellies. I tell them, "Look at yourselves," but they say it is different because they're men. I think that is machismo, but I do agree that it is worse to see a fat woman than a fat man. I think it is the fashion and the culture that men have now, they like women with a good body, nice boobs and bottoms. Men don't take care of themselves, well; some of them do but not

all of them. The thing is that women don't care so much about the looks of men but men care about the looks of women.

Exercise

Exercise is another issue that plays a role in acquiring or maintaining a beautiful figure. As one of the girls explains in the conversation below:

Did someone tell you that you are fat?

E: A friend of mine, I told her, Tell me the truth, am I fat? She said, No, you are not fat but it would be better if you were thinner.

Have you gained weight?

E: Yes, I gained weight; I was 54 Kgs. last year

Did you feel good when you were 54?

E: No, I felt fat I went to that machine that tells you the blood pressure and weight and it said that my recommended weight should be 53 to 60-something Kgs. So, I am going to be 53 Kgs.

Would you feel good when being 53 Kgs.?

E: I would, but not all flaccid, then I have to do exercise. Some friends of mine spend two or three hours in the gym, I don't know how they have time to do other things.

Male eyes

Another important point to consider is that in a patriarchal society like Colombia, a girl's appearance is of great importance, as women are defined by their attractiveness to men. Males often pay for their girlfriends' plastic surgery in order to adapt them to the stereotypes of beauty, and the common gender expectations in Medellín entail being "pretty as a doll" for women and "strong as a champion" for men (López & Vélez 2001). As a result, girls "face relatively little social sanction, and may even acquire prestige from having operations" (Edmonds 2009: 27) and this Colombian city is sometimes referred to as 'Silicon City' because of the number of local women resorting to implants and plastic surgery as a form of accommodating to this ideal of the beautiful body. Beauty is therefore something that is acquired through sacrifice, either by fasting, recurring exercise, or medical procedures. In order to achieve these ideals, girls diet and acquire a slim figure, and often resort to plastic surgery. It is not uncommon for parents to offer breast enlargement surgery to their teenage daughters on their fifteenth birthday (Ramírez 2004). Regarding plastic surgeries C explains:

C: I think everybody is concerned about weight right now. When I am 18 I will get liposuction and silicones. I don't think it is risky. If a lot of women have done it and they are still alive, why not me? I think that everything is very superficial now, it doesn't matter what you are inside, with the TV... especially about women, only the aesthetic part is

important, no other values. Women are very good when we have to do things, we have a very high sense of compromise and we are very sensitive, but we care so much about looking good for the men. Yes, you want to be admired.

It is important, however, to take into consideration that some teenagers prefer to be healthy than being obsessed with their figures. They explain that other girls have extreme behaviours regarding their figure that affects their health. For these girls, being healthy is the principal issue:

A: I don't know why some girls consider their bodies so important. Maybe they are more materialistic. Don't get me wrong, I think the material part is important but it is not the only thing that matters. Here, at school, we have some of those materialistic girls; they are not friends of mine. They are together all the time, in two groups, one of five and another group of four. They are the ones that say what is right or wrong to do. One of them is fourteen and she didn't eat anything, she is going to have surgery soon, because she is very sick, i don't know what is wrong with her.

A: If I got sick and the doctor would tell me that I have to eat more, then I would think first about my health, I would try not to eat in excess and eat balanced.

“No hay mujeres feas, sino pobres”¹: Lower socioeconomic status girls

As stated previously, the body acquires a special meaning for adolescent girls in Medellín. This issue is particularly notorious among women of low socioeconomic status. It can be stated that the body, in a sense, is the means that enables a girl to find a partner who will eventually support her. When considering this matter, it is important to understand that mortality rates in Colombia are greater for men than women, especially between the ages of 10 to 55. This is a result of violence and certain diseases that affect more males than females, as well as a decrease in young adult males between the ages of 15 and 35, a result of international migration (Sandi 2007). These issues result in a higher proportion of women to men and make it more difficult for girls to obtain a partner. From this perspective, having a beautiful body becomes a means to find a partner, and women “find themselves in competition with one another for economic support from men” (Browner & Lewin 1982: 71). The ideal body is culturally understood as a means for having a ‘better life’, considering girls of low socioeconomic status usually carry the stigma of living in the *comunas*.

The gap between rich and poor is enormous in Medellín and drug trafficking is often one of the few options for obtaining money. This applies especially to marginalized sectors of the population, usually young males who cannot find an alternative to earn a living and support themselves and or their families. Drug trafficking creates a sense of affluence and power acquired by fast and easy money which has permeated Medellín society in a profound way. It can be argued that in Colombia, and especially Medellín, there is a narco-aesthetic (Rincón 2009). This narco-aesthetic is connected to other values, and its expression can be seen in Colombian literature, art, music, televi-

sion, language, architecture and tastes, which all are part of this new ‘narco values’ (Rincón 2009).

This aesthetic has repercussions in body image. As in other places in Latin America (Edmonds 2007), Medellín experienced a boom in plastic surgery during the 1990s, a phenomenon that extends to the present. According to this narco-aesthetic, women’s bodies are supposed to be ostentatious, and become objectified. For the narcos, money, guns, silicone women, loud music, flashy clothing, luxury houses and cars are all part of their cultural models (Rincón 2009). This aesthetic, common among deprived communities, has penetrated the rest of the city and in particular the mentality of young women from lower socioeconomic status. These young women believe that obtaining the ideal body and being ‘beautiful dolls’ is their only option in a competitive environment, for securing a partner that will provide economic stability.

This situation is especially problematic among girls who frequent illegal clinics or *clínicas de garage*. There have been dangerous health concerns related to plastic surgery such as women getting implants with non-approved substances. It is also important to consider that *traquetos* (drug dealers) and *sicarios* (hired assassins) are the main sources financing plastic surgery in the city. As a result – and ironically – biomedicine, so concerned about the well-being of teenagers, advertises plastic surgeries for teenagers as treatment for problems of ‘low self esteem’. These procedures are even advertised as combos and *paquetes* (packages) to target international audiences under the name ‘medical tourism’. The bodies consonant with the narco-aesthetic can be seen in novelas such as *Las muñecas de la mafia* (Mafia’s dolls), *El capo* (The drug dealer), and *El cartel de los sapos* (The cartel of the toads), all of which were enthusiastically welcomed for their depiction and exaltation of the narco-way of life.

Following this order of ideas, it can be stated that in Medellín’s patriarchal society, women – especially the ones of low socioeconomic status – are in a “permanent state of bodily insecurity, or more precisely of symbolic dependence” (Bourdieu 2001: 66). As a result of Colombia’s phallogocentric culture, there is a perpetuation and encouragement of this bodily dynamic (Bourdieu 2001: 34).

While exploring the ideal of beauty, it is important to consider that it gets perpetuated as a regulating function (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). From this perspective, eating patterns mirror what happens in the larger society (Bordo 1994). Firstly, the borders between what is considered normal and abnormal are not clear, and sometimes confused with each other as the case of beauty and health. In Medellín, “medical systems frequently reproduce inequalities and hierarchies in a society by naturalizing and normalizing inequalities through facts and images about the body” (Larme 1998: 1005). It has become a common and accepted practice that women undergo plastic surgery, and in some cases it is to be expected; but the same behaviour in men would be considered strange. In this context, “cosmetic surgery is a practice that becomes normalized as a tool for managing reproduction and sexuality” and therefore, “it is chosen not just as a beauty practice, but also a health one” (Edmonds & Van der Geest 2009: 13).

In Colombia, mass media and health education often send out conflicting messages about the perfect body and what is considered healthy, or proper eating habits. An arti-

cle on a Colombian website explains the rise of health problems associated with the malpractice of plastic surgery. However, problems caused by plastic surgery or other practices of the body, continue to happen. As a result of social demands, teenagers in Medellín embody the contradiction in the importance of having a healthy body, but at the same time, investing in bodily practices that endanger their health in order to acquire a well-shaped body.

Conclusions

The idealized body is a social construction for which “women are both the products and the producers of social meanings” (Frost 2005: 66). Human behaviour does not occur in a vacuum, and conflicts with the body are present almost everywhere, but they crystallize issues of each society (Bordo 1992). At the beginning of this article, it was stated that the Western ideal of a thin body is common to wealthier populations in developing countries, as in the case of ideals of beauty, body, and health in Medellín. This study supports the findings of other authors such as (McArthur, Holbert & Pena 2005, Rodríguez & Cruz 2008), showing the enjoyment of thinness in Latin America. It also acknowledges that violence, marginality, and poverty are risk factors for an extreme preoccupation with the body, especially among SES adolescent girls (Uribe 2006). It also supports the findings of many other studies that explore the link between the desire of thinness and the influence of the mass media. However, the influence of American and European beauty ideals on non-Western societies varies according to cultural settings (Lee, Ho & Hsu 1993, Anderson-Fye 2004). In Medellín’s case, not only does thinness represent the ideal body, but curves are also valued. Teenagers’ efforts to conform to an idealized body and their encounter with this struggle are shaped both individually and collectively (Turner 1984). The type of body that is valued in Medellín was defined by one of the girls as an “impossible body” that requires dieting and constant exercise, and also forces women to get surgical enhancements.

It is often assumed that there is “homogeneity of health problems within developing countries” (Oths 1998: 1029). In Medellín, girls resort to diets, exercise and medical treatments that can be deleterious to their health. However, eating patterns and body practices of female teenagers in Medellín, although problematic, can be seen as a strategy or ‘tactic’ (Edmonds 2010) that allows conformity to the cultural model of beauty in order to attain a ‘better life.’ In Medellín, the ideal body and the means to attain it is related to socioeconomic, political and gender issues. It is evident that women in Western society experience social pressure to conform to the cultural models of beauty, however, there are differences in the way teenage girls in Medellín respond to this social demand. All of the girls in the study show concern about their body image. However, they share varying degrees of concern, some of them seek a balance between health and beauty, while others describe dieting and taking care of their bodies as a central point in their life; even if they recognize their practices as extreme, they continue these behaviours because they feel this is the only way of dealing with the social and family pressure. There are also, other intracommunity dif-

ferences in Medellín, for women of lower socioeconomic status, the body is a means, an “imaginary vehicle of ascent for those blocked from more moral routes of social mobility” (Edmonds 2010: 20). It can be stated that in Medellín, women of lower socioeconomic status have to face a double burden: in addition to being a woman, they belong to the *comunas*. Achieving a beautiful body is a desire but in some instances it becomes a necessity.

Notes

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- 1 Popular Colombian saying, meaning: “There are no ugly women, only women who cannot afford beautification.”

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