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Body fatness standards: an international comparison

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The body fatness of men and women varies considerably from one country to another. Diet and physical activity are important factors, but norms of body shape also play a role. Using data from an international social survey in 13 countries and 4 continents, Delphine Robineau and Thibaut de Saint Pol analyse differences in body shape ideals across the world.

Body fatness, expressed in terms of body mass index (BMI – see definition in Box 1), varies considerably from one country to another. Among those which took part in the International Social Survey Programme in 2007 (Box 2), mean body fatness is relatively low in South Korea, in the Philippines and, to a lesser extent in France, while in New Zealand, Russia and Mexico

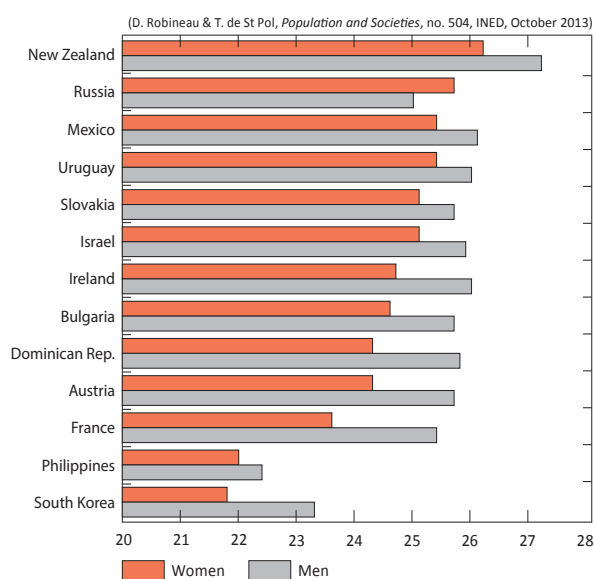
it is quite high (Figure 1). The mean BMI of women in South Korea is 21.8 (for example, 63 kg for a height of 1.70 m), compared with 26.2 in New Zealand (77 kg for 1.70 m) i.e. a difference of 14 kg for a woman measuring 1.70 m.

There are substantial differences between men and women. Apart from Russia, women's mean body fatness is below that of men in all countries for which data are available. The difference is smallest in the Philippines and largest in France. While body fatness is largely influenced by diet and physical activity, representations – norms of body shape in particular – also play an important role.[1] Few data are available to assess differences in body shape ideals between countries. This study aims to fill the knowledge gap by analysing the responses of 20,000 people living in 13 countries on four continents who indicated their body shape ideals for men and women via two sets of pictures (Box 2).

Body shape ideals differ for men and women

The ideal body shape has become more slender in western societies, [2] although body fatness standards vary considerably by sex and country. [3] First we will examine the proportion of persons who chose one of

**Figure 1. Body mass index (BMI):⁽¹⁾
country means by sex**



Source: ISSP 2007 survey, Leisure Time and Sports module.

Interpretation: The mean BMI of women in New Zealand is 26.2.

Coverage: Persons aged 18 and over.

⁽¹⁾: see definition in Box 1.

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Box 1. Body mass index (BMI)

For a person who measures 1.60 m and another who measures 1.90 m, a weight of 65 kg means something quite different. In other words, body weights can only be compared in relation to height. Body weight (in kg) divided by the square of height (in metres), known as the body mass index (BMI), is a good indicator of body fatness and is widely used for comparative purposes.

the two slimmest figures among those shown in the survey questionnaire. Men and women are considered separately (Figure 2). Several groups of countries emerge, depending on their position with respect to the first diagonal or bisecting line, which corresponds to equivalent ideals for both men and women.

In countries above the diagonal, such as Slovakia, Bulgaria and France, slimness is more valued in women than in men. This group mainly comprises European countries, along with Israel and the Philippines. France occupies a singular position: while slimness is not highly valued for men (37%), it is much more so for women (53%). It is the country with the largest relative difference between ideals for men and women, a finding that may be linked to the large gender difference in mean body fatness already mentioned.

Underneath the diagonal we see a group of three countries (Austria, Mexico and Uruguay) with the reverse situation, where proportionally more respondents report a slim ideal for men than for women. Contrary to countries in the first group, respondents here value slimness in men more than in women, and the ideal female body shape is larger.

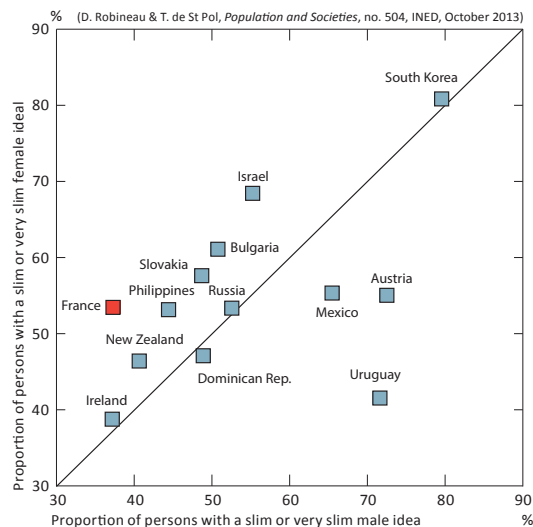
A third set of countries is located on or near the diagonal. These are countries where the ideals for men and women are quite similar. They form two quite different groups, however: on the one hand, countries such as Ireland where a fuller body shape is preferred for both men and women, and on the other, countries such as South Korea where slimness is highly valued for both sexes.

We can thus distinguish four types of profile: South Korea (top right), Uruguay (bottom right), Ireland (bottom left) and France (top left).

Four emblematic countries in terms of body shape preferences

Focusing on these four countries, let's look at the way in which ideals are distributed across the four body shapes shown in the questionnaire (Figure 3). In South Korea, there is practically no difference (no more than 1%) between ideals for men and women. The slim male figure is chosen by 69% of respondents, and the

Figure 2. Body fatness ideals by sex and country



Source: ISSP 2007 survey, Leisure Time and Sports module.
Interpretation: In Israel, 55% of the population report an ideal for men that corresponds to the slender or very slender figure in the questionnaire picture (Box 2), and 69% give the same answer for the female ideal.

slim female figure by 70%. The very slim figure (both male and female) is chosen by 11% of individuals, while just 1% opt for the fullest figure. South Korea is a country where pressure to be slim is very strong for both men and women.

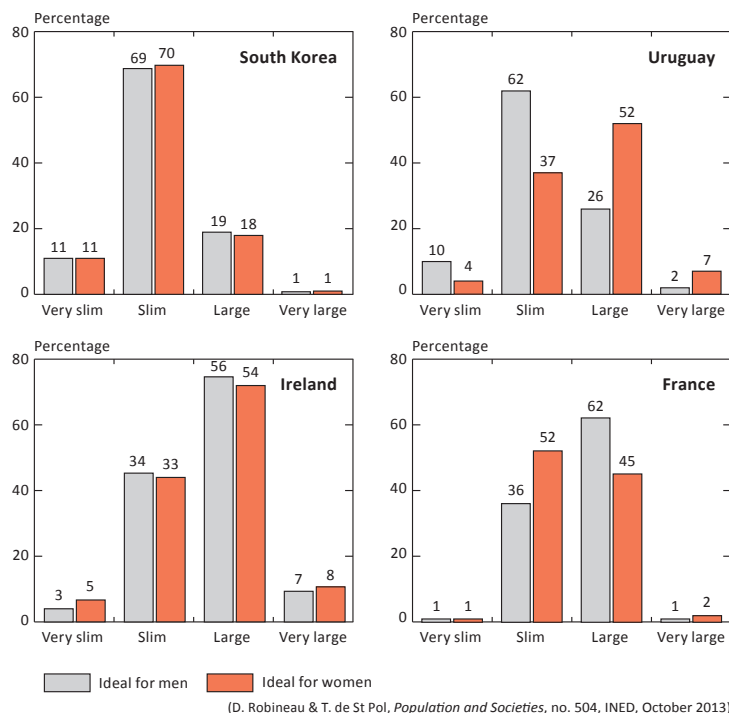
The same similarity between ideals for men and women is observed in Ireland, but this time with preference for the fullest figure, which is chosen by a majority of respondents (56% for the male ideal and 54% for the female ideal). So Ireland is emblematic of countries which value high body fatness in both men and women.

Uruguay and France are also opposites. In Uruguay, a full figure is preferred for women (52%), and slimness for men (62%). A non-negligible share of respondents also report a very slim male ideal (10%) and a very full-figured female ideal (7%). The difference between men and women is considerable (30 points for the slim and very slim ideals). Preferences in France are quite the opposite: 62% opt for the larger-sized male ideal and 52% for the slim female ideal (52%). Very few choose the “very large” or “very slim” extremes for either sex. This preference for male slimness in Uruguay and female slimness in France is found in all the countries of their two respective groups.

When the body we have is not the body we desire

Do reported body shape preferences correspond to individuals' actual body shape? If not, this may be a potential source of dissatisfaction.

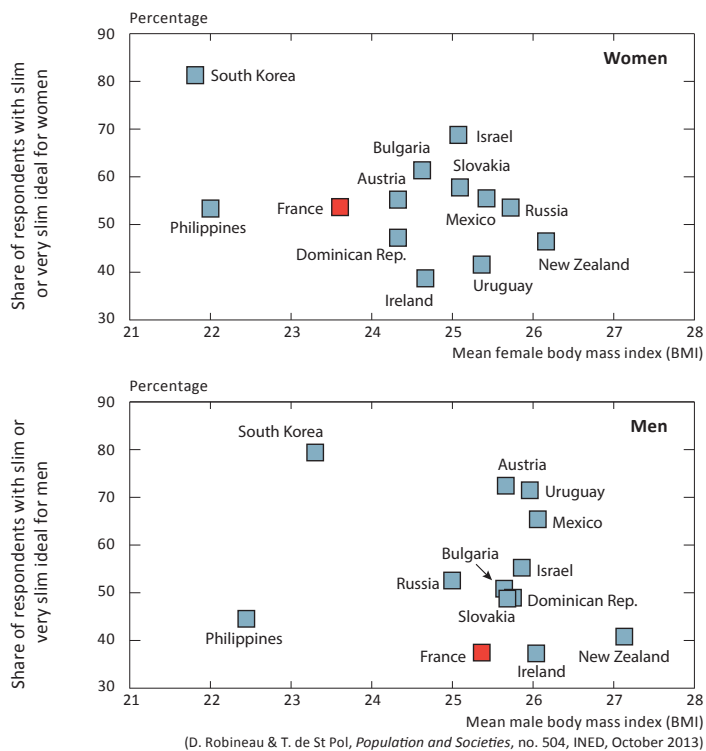
Figure 3. Ideals for men and women in South Korea, Uruguay, Ireland and France.



Source: ISSP 2007 survey, Leisure Time and Sports module.

Interpretation: In South Korea, among the pictures shown to respondents (Box 2), 11% of respondents chose the very slim ideal for men, 69% the slim ideal, 19% the large ideal and 1% the very large ideal.

Figure 4. Actual and ideal body shape



Source: ISSP 2007 survey, Leisure Time and Sports module.

Interpretation: In South Korea, the mean female BMI is 21.8 and 81% of the population have a slim or very slim body shape ideal.

For men and women alike, two countries stand out (Figure 4). The first is South Korea, where actual and desired body shape are relatively congruent: the vast majority express a slim or very slim ideal (81% for women and 80% for men), and the mean BMI is very low for both sexes (21.8 and 23.3, respectively). The Philippines, on the other hand, has a somewhat paradoxical situation: while the mean BMI is very low for both sexes (22.0 for women and 22.4 for men), the slim or very slim ideal is much less predominant (53% and 44%, respectively).

The other countries have very contrasting situations by sex. For women, there is a group of countries (Ireland, Uruguay, New Zealand, Dominican Republic) where actual and ideal body shape match quite well: the slim or very slim ideal is a minority choice and women’s mean BMI is quite high (between 24.0 and 26.5). By contrast, most other countries (Israel, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Mexico, Austria) have a similarly high female mean BMI, but a majority preference for a slim or very slim body shape, probably associated with pressure on women to achieve a slender silhouette.

The countries that stand out for men are Austria, Uruguay and Mexico, where mean male BMI is quite high (around 26), but where the slim male ideal is chosen by a large majority, reflecting pressure on men to remain slim. In the other countries, notably France, Ireland and New Zealand, the actual and ideal male body shapes are quite similar, with a high mean BMI and a majority preference for the larger-sized male figure in the survey.

So in many countries, the difference between actual and ideal body shape is quite large. In a social context where individuals are seen as responsible for their body size, and as culpable if overweight, [1] having the “wrong” body size may affect behaviour, leading to excessive dieting or even eating disorders. France, where the female body shape ideal is slim, is the country – behind South Korea – where the largest proportion of women wish to lose weight: this is the case for six in ten French women.

Box 2. The Leisure Time and Sports module of the ISSP survey

Question on body shape ideals:

Which of the following pictures come closest to your conception of an ideal shape of a man and a woman?

MAN

(Please tick the box below the picture of your choice of the ideal man)









WOMAN

(Please tick the box below the picture of your choice of the ideal woman)









The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) takes place each year in around thirty countries across the world using a common, jointly designed questionnaire. Each annual survey corresponds to a specific theme, and the themes rotate on a ten-yearly basis. In 2007, a Leisure Time and Sports questionnaire was administered in 34 countries on all continents on a sample of 49,700 individuals aged 18 and above. The questionnaire module included optional questions on body shape that were asked in 13 countries, with a total of 19,450 observations.

A highly original approach was used: respondents were asked to give their male and female body shape ideals using two sets of pictures, one for men and one for women, showing four different body shapes ranging from very large to very slim (figure 5). These pictures are generic and applicable to all countries. They are designed to show differences in body fatness for an identical height. However, respondents had a choice of just four figures, and the largest one does not correspond to the most extreme obesity.

References

- [1] Thibaut de Saint Pol, 2010, *Le Corps désirable. Hommes et femmes face à leur poids*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- [2] Peter Stearns, 1997, *Fat History. Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West*, New York, New York University Press.
- [3] Thibaut de Saint Pol (2009), "Norms and attitudes to body fatness: a European comparison", *Population & Societies*, 455.

Abstract

The value placed on slimness varies between countries, and may be greater for one or other sex. Four groups of countries emerge: a set of mainly European countries, including France, where slimness is more highly valued for women than for men; countries such as Uruguay where the preference is for slim men and larger women; countries such as Ireland where slimness is not highly valued for either sex; and last, South Korea, where pressure to be slim is very strong for both men and women. While actual and ideal body shape are quite similar in South Korea, the situations are very contrasting by sex in most countries.

