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Obesity and Poverty: The Apparent Paradox. A Study of Women in the Rocinha Favela, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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Objectives: Investigate obesity in the context of poverty, to understand this paradox through a broad approach that embraces sociocultural and symbolic information.

Methodology: Qualitative study. Subjects were twelve women aged 34 to 60 years, who used a health clinic in a Rio de Janeiro favela (slum, poor neighborhood). Women who were selected for the study were diagnosed as obese by body mass index parameters and had characteristics of social vulnerability. They were interviewed on five basic aspects: information about their regular diet, daily physical activities, their life histories, their body perception, and their living and working conditions.

Results: The authors found that the lives of these women were a struggle for survival amidst poverty and grueling work. The majority of them had migrated from the northeast of the country and had less than three years of education. The women worked a double shift, as they had to do their household chores, take care of their children, and work at their informal jobs. Their accounts rarely mentioned moments of rest or pleasure. Their diet was monotonous and had little variation: coffee, rice, beans, and occasionally pork. Eating fruits or vegetables was only mentioned a few times, and beef and fish were not mentioned as part of their diet. The authors also found that the women's food choices were influenced by what they had eaten in their home region, showing that cultural factors play a part. The women did not perceive themselves as obese until they were so diagnosed by a physician. For these women, obesity had little relationship with esthetic attributes; it was related rather to the ease and agility with which they could carry out their tasks. They identified a slender figure with food deprivation.

Conclusions: Material, cultural and symbolic aspects of life as well as various concepts about food and the body were shown to be fundamental elements in an analysis of the multiple facets of obesity in Brazil.