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In Jamaica, Shades of an Identity Crisis

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KINGSTON, Jamaica -- Despite youthful good looks, Latoya Reid was bothered by her dark skin. The 17-year-old felt it was a hindrance to attracting boyfriends and finding opportunities for a better life away from the poor Torrington Park section of Kingston.

So Reid recently set her mind on becoming a "brownin'," a term used on this Caribbean island to refer to blacks who have light skin. She took up "bleaching," coating her face with layers of illegally imported skin cream containing steroids or using less expensive homemade concoctions that produce the desired whitening effect.

Regardless of warnings that the practice could damage her skin, rarely a day goes by when Reid does not bleach--and she is pleased with the results. "When I walk on the streets you can hear people say, 'Hey, check out the brownin'.' It is cool. It looks pretty," she said. "When you are lighter, people pay more attention to you. It makes you more important."

Throughout Jamaica's vast underclass, and sometimes in upper classes as well, women and an emerging segment of men are ignoring public health warnings and resorting to skin bleaching in what government officials and doctors describe as unprecedented numbers.

The controversial phenomenon, which has been on the rise for three years, is largely rooted in a belief among Jamaica's poor that a lighter complexion may be a ticket to upward mobility, socially and professionally, as well as to greater sex appeal.

A number of social commentators and other intellectuals here have decried skin bleaching as an affront to black dignity. Observers said it was for that reason during the 1920s in the United States that Marcus Garvey refused to carry advertisements in his publications for skin lighteners, whose origins date to before the turn of the century.

More recently, bleaching became a particularly poignant topic here in weeks leading up to Monday's 161st anniversary of Jamaicans' emancipation from slavery.

"Shouldn't we think of emancipation as that glorious opportunity to open our minds, freeing ourselves not just from physical servitude but also from the deep self-contempt that has for too long enslaved us," attorney Audley Foster wrote in an op-ed piece about skin bleaching in the Weekend Observer newspaper last month.

"All this sounds like an identity crisis of major proportions. The only thing any face needs to be pretty . . . is regular soap and water," columnist Dawn Ritch recently wrote in the Gleaner newspaper.

Bleaching has long been popular in such predominantly black nations as the Bahamas and South Africa, where lighter skin has historically been a symbol of privilege, as it has been in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean since colonial days. It also has been practiced for decades in the United States. Today in many of Kingston's hard-bitten communities, it is not unusual to see women passing time on the streets or doing chores with their faces covered in cream.

"Skin bleaching has just become too popular. There have been days when the creams would go like hot bread," said Kathryn Fischer, a sales clerk at a Kingston beauty shop that has carried the illegal steroid products, occasionally selling up to 60 tubes a day. "One girl would come in here and buy three or four every other day because she used it all over her body."

Doctors, however, have recently reported an alarming increase in patients seeking treatment for skin disorders, some of them irreversible, caused by excessive use of the steroid products or abrasive homemade applications that usually contain toothpaste mixed with a facial cream.

The skin creams typically contain hydroquinone, a chemical used in the rubber industry that was found to lighten skin color. They also usually contain steroids, which are hormones that can suppress certain bodily functions. Both substances seem to work by stopping the formation of pigment, according to J. Fletcher Robinson, a Washington dermatologist.

Numerous dermatologists here said people suffering the ill effects of bleaching--which include severe acne, stretch marks, increased risk of skin cancer and even darkening of the skin--now account for up to 20 percent of their patients. When used in high concentrations or for long periods, steroids can produce adverse side effects by interfering with the growth of skin cells, Robinson said.

Over the last several months, bleaching has sparked an intense public debate about black identity and self-respect in this nation of 2.6 million

people, about 90 percent of whom are black, as well as the influence of American and European models of success and glamour.

"With Jamaica so close to North America, we are bombarded with images of a white culture. People have come to feel that lighter skin is a passport to better relationships and making it in this world," said Kingston dermatologist Clive Anderson. "The use of skin bleaching is spreading rapidly, and unfortunately men are starting to use it as well."

A number of women also have started taking what has been nicknamed the "fowl pill," an anti-infection drug approved only for veterinary use here. It is given to chickens and other fowl to, among other things, enhance their appetites. Although its label reads, "Poison . . . not for human use," women have been using the pill to develop larger breasts and buttocks, which they say Jamaican men prefer, along with whiter skin.

"This is a particularly unique phenomenon," said Grace Allen-Young, director of the Pharmaceutical Services Division of the Ministry of Health. "There seems to be an emerging need to change body features for whatever reason. It has become part of the grass-roots culture."

Alarmed by the surge in medical cases stemming from bleaching, Allen-Young's office last month launched a crackdown on sales of the nine or so brands of steroid creams that are not licensed for use in Jamaica. In one case, investigators seized more than 200 tubes from a Kingston wholesaler.

Efforts are also underway by customs officials to curb the smuggling of the products onto the island. Most are made in Europe, where they are used legally to treat a variety of skin conditions.

Nonetheless, the creams remain widely available--and in demand--in this capital. "I know they can do bad to your skin, but I have nothing to lose in wanting to be a brownin'. I am poor and bored, and being whiter would make me happier," said Sheri Roth, 22, who had just bought a tube of cream that promised "a brighter, cleaner, smoother complexion."

She added, "I want people to think I am more than a ghetto girl. . . . I want to walk into dance halls and feel like a movie star, a white one."

Staff writer Rob Stein in Washington contributed to this report.

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