

Trajectory of the Female Body in Relation to Exercising in Brazil: from eugenics to the culture of fitness

Vera L. F. P. Fernandes

Federal University of Juiz de Fora – Physical Education and Sports College –
Study and Research Group on the History of Physical Education and Sports
(GEPHEFE)

Different periods in history have had distinct views on the female body when it comes to the practice of exercise. From eugenics to the culture of fitness, in Brazil, exercise for women has changed from a medical recommendation, attached to the ideals of purification of the population in the first decades of the 20th century, to a personal search (of the woman) to transform her own body, adjusting it to the beauty standards found in the media, especially from the late 1930's on. This situation is seen in the following decades and has intensified lately.

This study aimed to do a survey of the discourses in which the female body, practicing exercise, was (and still is) inserted, analyzing them regarding the differences and similarities present in the discourses. The time frame analyzed comprises the first decades of the 20th century until today. In order to do that, an exploratory bibliographical survey, including works from authors who study exercise, the female body and/or the relationship between them was carried out.

The findings show us that in the first decades of the 20th century, due to the fact that the majority of our population is of African descent and that people believed that physical activity would cause human strengthening and the consequent improvement of the species, the practice of exercises that strengthened the woman's body would be fundamental since that feature would be passed on to future generations, thus creating the eugenics of the country. However, there was the idea that women could not practice any kind of physical activity. Thus, physicians recommended the exercises that, adapted to the female gender, would strengthen the body of those who would generate strong children to serve our nation. In addition, the intention was to accentuate the female bodily features through the exercises. In this context, great importance

was placed on activities with music, especially singing and dancing, since they bring grace and lightness to the female body.

We have perceived that, behind every discourse of eugenics, there was the concern with femininity (beauty), which caused practices believed to harm their delicate nature to become forbidden, which is the case of fighting and jumping (pole vault, triple jump).

From the late 1930s on, we have noticed that the public health doctors' discourse began to lose strength to advertising, which brought along a direct relationship between the need to fit the standards of female physical appearance and the practice of exercise, especially through magazines directed towards women, which mentioned the importance of exercising and/or embellishment of the body. At that time, there was the discourse of restricting women from practicing some activities considered "inappropriate to their nature," which is the case of several sports and strength training activities perceived as "too manly". That contributed to the growth of dance institutes and gyms which offered activities that were deemed suitable for and exclusive to the female public.

We have also noticed that after World War II (1939-1945), women started to enter areas and professions previously occupied solely by the opposite sex. Simultaneously, women started looking a little more at themselves. Moreover, primarily from the 1970's on, women no longer saw themselves as having to practice exercises created especially for them. They began to exercise in the same places as men and practicing the same activities. Thus, once these previously forbidden areas were conquered, women were more and more present in places and practicing activities (working out) once regarded as solely suitable for men, which is the case of weight training. This practice was greatly intensified from the 1980's on, when women started doing this "new kind of workout," especially weight training, as a way to make their bodies more and more like those in the advertisements.

The literature studied shows that in the last 30 years, behind the discourse of health and quality of life, women have entered into the fitness culture, which is understood as the set of devices which operate around the construction of a representation of the body which brings "health" and "beauty" together as synonymous, as well as "quality of life" and "healthy living". Therefore, they

(women) begin having more and more toned and muscular bodies, not only because of working out, but also due to a whole apparatus which comprises the (contemporary) beauty industry which, besides all kinds of exercise, count on more and more modern cosmetics and plastic surgeries, besides diets which include eating restrictions, supplements and isotonic drinks. All in the name of “health”. All of these resources presented to women through the media seek to convince them to use all available technology to have the so-hoped-for “health”.

In light of what was stated above, we can conclude that the physical exercise in which the female body is included has important and distinct functions (public policies/eugenics, youth) in the time frame studied (the beginning of the 20th century until today), and they also have the intention of creating and maintaining female beauty in common. We have also noticed that we have set out on a path of no return, in which new technologies appear every day with the promise of “correcting” what the previous one did not do, be it through exercise machines or advancements in cosmetic surgery or esthetics. Furthermore, with every novelty, we will have people (women) willing to try them out in their frantic search for the beauty standard found the media and that exercising alone cannot provide them with. In view of all this, we agree that women were and still are “slaves” to the (ideal) body standards, promoted by different discourses, in their search for the standard of beauty in different eras. Additionally, we have noticed that exercises have developed a great deal during this time frame, but, today, it “competes” with esthetical technologies and plastic surgery, which promote the same or better results, and are “faster” and “effortless”: all for a “healthy life”.

With this work, we seek to provide the basis for further studies on a theme which still has much to be explored: the female body, exercise and its different connotations along history.

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