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DOES POLE DANCING STRENGTHEN OR HINDER WOMEN'S RIGHTS? ANALYSING THE CHANGING DISCOURSE ON POLE DANCING AS A RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY

Abstract: This paper critically reviews contemporary academic and public understandings of the changing discourse on pole dancing following its shift from a sex industry related activity to sports. Through an ethnographic approach, combined with a desk review of scarce academic literature related to pole dancing, I analyse whether pole dancing as a recreational activity strengthens or undermines women's rights. My conclusions indicate that either pole dancing fitness classes should be observed only through the lenses of pornographic culture, as an activity inevitably perpetuating misogyny and sexism, nor would forcefully "whitewashing" them from any notion of sensuality automatically make pole dance empowering. From an anthropological and human rights perspective, this research stresses how posing our own assumptions or even prejudices on others is not only intellectually limited but can also be "objectively" dangerous and discriminating. Simple minded advocacy for women's emancipation and attacks on "unacceptable" practices, like pole dancing, mostly presents a hegemony over ideas on gender, sexuality, liberation and empowerment. While imposing those static definitions of subordination and inequality on pole dancing and its participants, critics often end up in embracing them rather than deconstructing them.

Key words: Pole dancing, recreational activity, human rights, women's rights, culture.

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** This paper was originally written as an MA thesis in Human Rights at the University of Sussex, revised and updated in 2021.

Introduction

In this paper, I explore pole dancing as a contemporary form of recreational activity in relation to women's rights. While analysing the changing discourse on pole dancing, I examine whether this form of a recreational activity strengthens or undermines women's rights.

As Cowan (2001) points out, rights process is complex and contradictory, rights are enabling and constraining and they produce social relations and subjectivities. Anthropologists are invited to contribute to the theoretical and empirical interdisciplinary debate between culture and rights, seeing culture as a process and human rights as a cultural process. Rights could be seen as a form of culture (Merry 2003), could be explored in opposition to culture (Merry 2003; Zechenter 1997; Coomaraswamy 2002), as a right to culture, especially in the context of multicultural politics (Eriksen 1997; Turner 1993). Finally, culture can be used as an analytical tool when exploring rights (Cowan, Dembour and Wilson 2001).

I use human rights as an analytical tool to investigate the changing discourse on contemporary pole dancing, which I define as a form of a subculture. Since the mid-2000s (Holland and Attwood 2009), when pole dancing went from underground, stripping practice to a main stream dance and fitness recreational activity, gaining more and more popularity among women, but also men, the subject has been raising arguments and debates, both in public and the academia. Not many scholars have explored this topic, and when they have, they have analysed pole dancing mainly from the perspective of pornographic culture and post-feminism (Gill 2007). In their work, pole dancing is seen mainly as a part of an on-going process of "the sexualisation of Western culture"¹ (Attwood 2009), an offshoot of the "pornographication of the mainstream" (McNair 1996) by which porn symbols are entering the mainstream culture and are being sold to women by the consumer society (Nally 2009; Negra 2009). The prevailing group of authors define pole dancing as a form of sexualised culture and a new form of subordination, concluding that it abuses and perpetuates gender stereotypes (Nally 2009; Negra 2009) and strengthens patriarchy (Gill 2007). Assuming that pole dancing belongs to the misogynous, patriarchal and pornographic world, they have however failed to notice that pole dancing, since it has been practised as a recreational activity, has been thoroughly changed and has become least related to the old discourse of stripping for men. This has been emphasised by very few academics who conducted their own ethnographies among actors engaged in pole dancing as a recreational activity (see Allen 2011; Holland and Attwood 2009; Holland 2010; Whitehead and Kurz 2009).

1 Although "East" and "West" distinctions are analytically deficient and obsolete in anthropology, they still appear frequently in other literature.

So far, however, none of these authors have explicitly set the topic of pole dancing into a human rights framework, despite the human rights language (and notions like women's choice, identity, sexuality, relationship with men and other women, empowerment, body, discrimination, subordination, patriarchy or misogyny) being used not only throughout academic papers, but also throughout public debates related to pole dancing.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to analyse the changing discourse on pole dancing following this shift from a sex industry related activity to sports and to examine the "culture" of pole dancing through the human rights framework. Through an ethnographic approach and literature research related to pole dancing, I examine the discourse and positions of various actors and academics, trying to discover whether this activity strengthens or hinders women's rights.

Through the paper, I examine the following questions, taking into account different sides and identities in the debate on contemporary pole dancing through the human rights perspective:

Are women equal if they can freely choose to engage in whatever activity they wish, including pole dancing, or are they not equal (among themselves and with men) because they engage in a practice which, as some critiques assume, reflects patriarchy and misogyny and perpetuate unequal gender positions? Should their choice be respected as "free" and "rational", or should it be considered "irrational", driven by the imperative of "sexiness" and framed by the dominance of pornographic culture and commodity (Gill 2007; McNair 2002)? Do women gain dignity and self-respect, as they claim, through strength, coordination, flexibility and devotion equal to gymnastics, which pole dance practice require? Or, on the contrary, are they being discriminated, by the public and certain academics because the practice they are engaged in has been, in its original form, attached to sex industry and stripping? Are women empowered by such a practice, as they say they are, because they gain physical and mental strength as in any other sport? Does pole dancing reduce women to male sexual desires (Levy 2006; Murphy 2003, quoted in Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 227) or subordinate them (Dentith 2004), even if they practice it by their deliberate and free choice? Does pole dancing deconstruct patriarchy, because women practise it for themselves, and not for men? Or, does it reaffirm patriarchy, because women have internalised the male gaze which reflects a liberal, misogynous culture (Dentith 2004; Gill 2007), in which women must feel and look feminine and sexy? Are women sovereign over their own bodies or are their bodies being subordinated and "normalised", examined by the society and themselves according to the dominant cultural norms of being fit, sexy and slim?

I have conducted my ethnographic research among key actors and pole dancing clubs, associations and societies both in the UK and internationally. The analysis of the public discourse on pole dancing is focused on two

campaigns: the initiative to ban pole dance from UK universities, launched in 2012, and the campaign conducted by the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF) in order to establish pole dancing as a legitimate sport and potentially as a future Olympic discipline. I have also analysed how different discourses on pole dancing reflected on the activity itself, as how changes in pole dancing have modified the discourse. Conclusions are drawn from interviews and from my personal experience and reflection, as collecting ethnographic data for this paper has been a part of a two-year long research and personal participation in this activity.

In the paper, terms “pole dancing” as a recreational activity and “pole fitness” are used interchangeably.

Literature review

During the last two decades, following the shift of pole dancing from a stripping practice to a fitness activity, several authors reflected on pole dancing as a recreational activity (Allen 2011; Attwood 2009; Bahri 2012; Dentith 2004; Holland 2010; Jensen 2015; Just and Muhr 2019; Murphy 2016; Owen 2021; Simpson 2021; Whitehead and Kurz 2009).

Several authors analysed pole dancing from the perspective of pornographic culture (Dines 2010; Levy 2006) where pole dancing as recreational activity is seen as a symbol of “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair 1996) through which porn iconography is entering popular culture. According to most authors, pole dancing as a recreational activity appeared in the era of post-feminism (Gill 2007; Negra 2009) and “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair 1996) and is “inevitably” related to sex industry. Regardless of becoming a recreational activity, according to these authors, pole dancing still transmits porn and its values (mostly perceived as wrong) into our everyday lives and culture. Deeply rooted into the discourse of “raunch culture” (Levy 2006), post-feminism (Gill 2007; Negra 2009), or “porn culture” (Dines 2010), these analyses use the same feminist/women rights’ language and terms such as: sexism, hyper-femininity, self-objectification, sexiness or porn culture. Participating in this type of classes, even when it is practised as a recreational activity, is often seen as strengthening patriarchy (Gill 2007) thus abusing and perpetuating gender stereotypes (Nally 2009; Negra 2009).

Moreover, most of these authors claim that pole dancing as a recreational activity has been deeply affected by certain aspects of post-feminism. As Gill (2007) explains, post-feminism, as a mixture of different standpoints closely related to neoliberalism, is often in confrontation with feminism.

[F]emininity in post-feminism is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring

and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a make-over paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a market sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and commodification of difference. (Gill 2007, 149).

Negra (2009) goes further by saying that post-feminism is “caricaturing, distorting (and often wilfully) misunderstanding the political and social goals of feminism” (Ibid.,2), using sexist images to illustrate women and explain their characteristics, stressing female power and desire, while constantly framing and posing limits on them (Ibid.,6).

Indeed, most authors agree (Levy 2006; Gill 2007; Negra 2009), post-feminism is “responsible” for making porn culture become an integral part of mainstream pop culture (Dines 2010, 25). “[P]orn has seeped into our everyday world and it is fast becoming such a normal part of our lives that it barely warrants a mention” (Dines 2010, 10).

Notions of sexiness and hyper-femininity, highlighted by post feminism and set as new values (Gill 2007; Levy 2006; Negra 2009) were, therefore, simply taken over by pole dancing classes. “Women’s consumption of pole dancing classes is a form of ‘feminized’ gendered leisure that fits into a broader discussion of post-modern feminist practices where women are seeking empowerment through the purchase of ‘sexy’ goods and services in what has been termed the ‘sexualisation of culture’, or even more blatantly, ‘striptease culture’” (Roach 2007, quoted in Bahti 2012, 1).

When Gill (2007) examines post-feminist culture (which has been widely promoted by media), she defines her own analyses as being deeply rooted in social-constructivism and postmodernism, and therefore, free from any presupposed or static definitions. However, when she defines pole fitness solely as a form of sexualised culture and a product of post-feminism, she seems to do exactly the opposite, using static notions and falling into the trap of essentialism and construction. Why would women engage freely and deliberately in such a degrading practice? According to Gill and similar authors (Dentith 2004; Whitehead and Kurz 2009), due to the normalisation and promotion of sexualised culture and pornography through mainstream, women have lost their critical sense towards images and gender roles promoted through porn, therefore lacking lucidity to recognize their own subordination and degradation implied in pole dancing and to resist it.

It my view, it is not only intellectually narrow to reduce the analysis of pole dancing fitness classes to the discourse of “raunch culture” (Levy 2006), post-feminism (Gill 2007; Negra 2009), or “porn culture” (Dines 2010), thus essentializing the practice, but it is also disdainful to reduce actors engaged in this activity merely to passive recipients of these values and life styles.

Few academics (see Allan 2011; Holland and Attwood 2009; Holland 2010, Jensen 2015; Just and Muhr 2019; Kim and Kwon 2019; Simpson 2021;

Whitehead and Kurz 2009) took interest in actors engaged in pole dancing as a recreational activity and conducted their own ethnographies or other types of primary research. Holland and Attwood (2009), for example, do acknowledge previous understandings of pole dancing as a recreational activity in the light of a wider process named “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair 1996) or “raunch culture” (Levy 2006), but they move further in their research through participating and observing pole dancing classes. Pole dancing fitness includes a lot of muscular endurance, stamina, coordination and confidence, as they found out, and while dancing and learning acrobatic moves women have a lot of fun and enjoyment in a female only environment. According to Holland and Attwood (2009), pole dancing classes as a recreational activity are far away from sex work or from performing for men in exchange for money. All women who participated in their research had only positive comments on pole dancing, stressing the strength, coordination, stamina, body confidence and having fun as the main qualities of these classes, which influenced their lives in a positive way. Furthermore, these women were using words like “power” and “empowerment” to illustrate their experience with pole dancing (how contributing to “sexiness” is a form of self-objectification that women have wrongly incorporated, these authors agree with Storr (2003, quoted in Atwood and Holland 2009, 181) who points out that there is no reason to necessarily discard feelings of being sexy and powerful.

Moreover, Holland and Attwood (2009, 181) oppose to the assumption of pole dancing as being something necessarily degrading for women: “While it is important to remain critical of the way new sexualized practices for women are developing, it is equally important not to dismiss them out of hand if we are genuinely interested in working out what an active and empowered female sexuality might look and feel and really be like”. Even though my work is not related to female sexuality as such, from an anthropological and human rights perspective, I strongly agree that it is important to investigate a practice and engage with participants before trying to criticise, dismiss or ban any practice, custom or recreational activity in the name of “subordination” or “disempowerment” or any other assumptions we may have.

Although I agree with the social-constructivist notion that women and men are constantly informed and normalised by hegemonic pictures of gender, sexuality and beauty and that it is important to notice the social, cultural and media influence those pictures have on people and their choices, I would suggest more caution when analysing pole dancing. In my view, by exploring pole dancing only through the lenses of pornographic culture, popular media pictures and representations, most academics fail to notice how different actors engage in this practice and how they define it. Assuming that pole dancing belongs to the misogynous, patriarchal, sexist (Murphy 2016) and pornographic world, they fail to notice that the discourse around pole dancing, since it has been practised as a recreational activity, has been thoroughly

changed and is least related to the old discourse of stripping for men. While constantly linking the practice with porn and sex industry, academics are giving static and narrow definitions of a much fluid, dynamic and complex practice which is in a constant process of change. Already established as a sport, it is a complex mixture of dance, yoga, contortion, gymnastics and fitness and will be possibly present at the Olympics in the near future.²

The personal experience of women practicing pole dancing is taken seriously by Holland (2010), who gives them voice in her in-depth ethnographic analysis, coupled with an extensive observation and participation, an approach I share in my work. This approach makes it impossible to generalise and perceive women practicing pole dancing as a unified and homogenous group of passive recipients being under the influence of “pornographic culture” (Dines 2010; Gill 2007; Levy 2006; Negra 2009).

Therefore, in order to find out whether pole dancing strengthens or undermines women's rights, apart from analysing the limited academic literature on the subject, I have conducted an extensive ethnographic research, the methodology of which will be described in the next chapter.

Methodology

My ethnographic research was conducted among key actors and pole dancing clubs, associations and societies both in the UK and internationally, over a period of approximately two years, during which I participated in 7 pole dancing schools, 4 master classes, 2 seminars, and 3 public pole dancing events. The survey, conducted mostly in a form of interviews or mailed questionnaires, was designed to collect data from pole dancing actors and participants regarding different debates surrounding pole dancing.

2 Written in 2013 after a thorough ethnographic and desk research and submitted as MA thesis at University of Sussex and awarded with distinction, but left unpublished, this paper has been updated in the light of (scarce) new academic papers related to pole dance. However, as four new sports have received green light for inclusion at the 2024 Paris Games, pole dance being, temporarily, left out, all old and some new debates on pole dance related to rights are likely to emerge soon. Among the new developments which may have an impact on the debate, I agree with an article published on the *Holygrip.ca* pole dance blog, stipulating the potential influence of the ongoing #METOO campaign on the issue.

“In the wake of the #metoo movement, the final outcome of the Olympic committee to officially add Pole Dancing as a titled sport in their international events is currently circumstantial. Taking an art form that's at the epicenter of sexuality and rendering it equal to Figure Skating is a beautiful thought, especially with all the upcoming rising talent and push from athletic individuals globally. Perhaps this is precisely what is needed to regain power and accountability in the corporate world, is place a pole on the world stage and let the music play”. <https://holygrip.ca/blogs/news/is-pole-dancing-an-olympic-sport>

The sample for my survey consists of 63 members of the pole dancing community of all proficiency levels, in four countries, mostly from the UK, but also from one EU, one non-EU state and the USA. Among interviewed persons, 4 of them are men, 4 are judges and 3 are internationally recognised athletes, winners of major pole dancing competitions. The age scope goes from 17 to 45, the majority being in their twenties and early thirties. Two thirds had no dance or gymnastic background. However, others have been practicing yoga, jazz or classical dance classes, athletics or other sports. Just a little below 10% are pole dance professionals, other being practicing pole dance only as a hobby.

In terms of my anthropological field work, as I define “field” as a non-static, fluid, dialectical, holistic “place”, my research field include also internet forums, different feminists blogs, newspaper articles and web pages presenting different pole dancing schools and teachers. However, I am fully aware of the limitations of this stratified random sample and have taken into account the possibility that other media may put forward particular arguments and perspectives while researching the issue. In line with ethical guidelines for research practice, respondents are anonymous. Instead of their real names, I use pseudonyms, written in italics. The ethnography will be presented in the next two chapters of the paper. While analysing the changing discourse on pole dancing as a recreational activity, I shall confront different academic, public and actors discourse in order to answer the set of questions related to women’s rights, listed in the introduction.

Conclusions are drawn from my findings as well as from my personal experience and reflection.

Pole fitness – a platform to explore the dialectical process between culture and women’s rights concerns

Pole dancing classes have grown in popularity over the past 10 years as a fitness option for women, together with aerobics and yoga, practiced at gyms or dance studios, especially in North America, Australia and the UK (Holland 2010). However, as Bahri (2012, 1) puts it, “pole dancing lessons are undeniably distinct from these other forms of workouts because of the pole’s symbolic association with exotic dance, an occupation which is often constructed as exploitative (or risqué at best) through media and popular discourse”.

Ever since pole dancing went from an underground, stripping activity into main stream as a fitness activity, it has been raising debates and arguments. As Allen (2011) points out, although pole dancing has become a form of fitness and it is now linked to sports and health, “the typical image of a pole dancer in popular culture appears to remain that of a semi-naked young woman,

swinging, gyrating and rubbing her body against the dance pole in order to sexually arouse a (typically male) audience" (Ibid., 6).

Holland (2009, 43) reminds us that popular discourse on pole dancing continues "with its links to the sex industry and a lasting (though incorrect) image of it being only about titillation and sexiness rather than strength, confidence and coordination".

Even though contemporary pole dancing as a fitness activity is very similar to Indian gymnastics, practiced on the wooden pole, or to the Chinese pole, performed in circus, the most frequent association of pole dancing is with stripping and porn industry, thus making it so controversial.

"Pole dancing offers women a safe space in which they can engage with issues of sexual display, body image and body management in ways which make them feel powerful" Holland and Atwood point out (2009, 180). Pole dancing classes are far away from sex work or performance for men, while embracing femininity through these classes includes not only sexiness but also strength, exhilaration and grace. Even if some of these characteristics may be "traditional indicators of femininity", Holland and Attwood (2009) notice how they "are reworked into experience of sexual agency and power" (Ibid., 177). And "women experience the exercise of pole dancing as liberating because it allows them to feel the pleasures of their bodies in motion and unrestricted by the limitations of constructed feminine space" (Battersby 1999; Jeffreys 2006; Young 2006, quoted in Weissmann 2011, 686).

Although "recreational pole dancing does not represent the pornographic in the most technical sense", according to Whitehead and Kurz (2009, 240), concerns that arose in the feminist debate around pornography such as gender stereotypes, patriarchal power structures, objectification, sexual expression, women's freedom and choice are strikingly similar to those related to pole fitness. Debates often concern the position of women practicing pole dancing as a recreational activity in the wider culture, society, media, sex industry or University context, sharing women's rights language and concerns³ such as dignity, liberation, equality, femininity, discrimination, subordination, empowerment, choice, bodily integrity, sexuality, sexual exploitation, sexual objectification, sex work, gender stereotypes, patriarchy and misogyny. Debates on pole dancing as a recreational activity involve struggles over meaning and representation among different actors, their identity positions and subcultures, confronting their different notions of femininity, subordination, liberation, emancipation, power or dignity.

Therefore, in my view, pole dancing as a recreational activity illustrates, from an anthropological and human rights perspective, the dialectical process

3 For more on women's rights and concerns, see the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, CEDAW (United Nations General Assembly 1981) and Optional Protocol to CEDAW (United Nations General Assembly 2000)

between culture and rights (Cowan, Dembour and Wilson 2001) and becomes an interesting platform to explore traditional women's rights questions.

While gathering and analysing different academic critiques on pole fitness, I have come across two campaigns related to pole dancing which reflect the same women's rights issues and feminists' concerns. The first one, the National Union of Students' (NUS) women's campaign to ban pole societies from UK campuses, analysed in the next section, examines women's rights concerns such as sexual objectification, sex industry, gender stereotypes, femininity, women's subordination, inequality, women's choice and women's body. Through the analysis of the second campaign, which aims to establish pole dancing as an Olympic sport, I shall look at three more concepts related to women's rights: dignity, empowerment and sexual liberation in relation to pole dancing.

Analysing the public discourse

NUS women's campaign to ban pole societies from UK universities (Ethnography; first part)

"Pole dancing is a symptom; the disease needs its method of transmission controlled." (Jender, comment on *Feminist Philosophers* 2009).

In 2009, a group of university scholars, in a letter to their university's Vice Chancellor, expressed their concern about the presence of pole fitness classes at their university's sport centre. Protesting against these classes because "a university campus is not an appropriate place for a 'fitness'⁴ activity which is an offshoot of the sex industry and a manifestation of the mainstreaming of raunch culture which objectifies women" (Seagull, comment on *Feminist Philosophers* 2009), they claimed their "right to a working environment which enshrined respect for women" (Seagull, comment on *Feminist Philosophers* 2009).

Their arguments were drawn from a – in my view – highly disputable book of a feminist journalist, Ariel Levy (2006) called "Female Chauvinist Pigs"⁵. Its title describes women who "objectify themselves and objectify other women"

4 "Pole fitness" in inverted commas illustrates their standpoint that pole dance could not possibly have a fitness form.

5 Although I believe that the title of the book was chosen to sell the book better, this linguistic tagging could be qualified as discriminating. However, this has rarely been highlighted, as the book is presented in the light of the fight for the "appropriate" women's rights, feminism and female identity.

(Levy 2006, 4), identifying them as the worst enemies of feminism, equality and liberty. Consequently, the uncritical takeover of this essentialising (Grillo 2003) discourse framed the participants of pole fitness as “raunchy” (Levy 2006), “porn-washed”⁶ individuals who contributed to their own oppression while perpetuating misogyny and patriarchy which, in the end, would affect all womankind. In this respect, their choice to participate in whatsoever activity they wish is not recognised as a free choice, but as one driven from the “raunch” (Levy 2006) and porn culture and contributing to the oppression of other women.

However, the reply of the university's management closed the debate: it said that pole dancing as a fitness activity was no longer associated to its “sleazy roots” and praised its benefits for students' health, supporting its stand on the matter with various documents from sports and fitness organisations (Seagull, comment on *Feminist Philosophers* 2009).

Another initiative to ban pole fitness classes from UK university campuses emerged three years later. Called the NUS women's campaign, it gathered more people, involving many outside the academic circles. It mobilised a wide range of opponents to pole dancing, amongst whom, on the same side of the debate, feminists and conservatives, who formed this odd couple before – whenever fighting pornography was on the agenda⁷.

As McNair (1996, 79) points out, conservatives argue that pornography annihilates patriarchy, a nuclear family and traditional moral values, whilst feminists claim that pornography strengthens patriarchy, objectification, subordination and repression of women. Despite their different starting points, they both end up on the same side of the debate in regards to pole fitness.

Writhing semi-naked as they perform their raunchy routines, these young women look like professional pole-dancers. In fact, they are students at a leading Scots university, where undergraduates as young as 17 are taking part in the “sport” (Ellis-Peterson and Grant 2013).

“Semi-naked” (Ellis-Peterson and Grant 2013) in this comment is pejorative, disregarding the technical reason for having body parts exposed during pole dancing. Exposed ribs, elbows, stomach, thighs, armpits and naked skin are necessary to grip and hold the pole to avoid sliding and prevent injuries.

Nowadays, conservatives willingly embrace the language of women's rights in order to dismiss pole dancing as a recreational activity at universities, as illustrated in the voice of Mike Judge (2013, quoted in Ellis-Peterson and Grant 2013), the representative of the UK evangelical group:

6 I use “porn-washed” for individuals who are assumed to be brainwashed by pornography.

7 For example, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin fought with Minneapolis Ordinance against the production, distribution and use of pornography (see in McNair 1996, 56)

This is not what parents would expect their daughters to be doing at university. Those who fought for the right of women to go to university would be appalled by this club. The pornification of our culture is forcing young women to do things many of them later regret. It's yet more evidence of our hyper-sexualised society (Judge 2013, quoted in Ellis-Peterson and Grant 2013).

Regardless of the “false consciousness” argument, which says that women have been pushed by the media and popular culture to contribute to their own oppression, being simplistic and patronizing (McNair 1996, 84), most feminist critics and moral conservatives uncritically adopted this view.

This conservative's moral panic is coupled with the assumption that pole dancing as a recreational activity is unquestionably linked with pornography, thus saturating culture and influencing students. Although pornography is not easy to define (McNair 1996), most feminist critics consider that contemporary pole fitness emerges in times when strippers and porn stars become popular, regarded a symbol of porn entering lives of everyday women (Levy 2006; Dines 2010).

Most critics agree with Negra, who claims that “exercise routines [are] emphasizing the emulation of performance codes of pornography” (Negra 2009, 122). In this context, as they claim, pole dancing as fitness cannot be divorced from its striping and porn origins. For McManus⁸ (2013), “fitness” is just a discourse used to mask pornography, and for Whitehead and Kurz (2009 239), “the invocation of the fun/fitness discourse serves as a rhetorical device utilized to head off potential criticism by positioning those who would question recreational pole dancing as somewhat misinformed and as someone who would deny women the right to have ‘fun’”.

Even though the NUS Women's Campaign acknowledged possible fitness benefits from pole dancing, it stressed that “associations between pole dancing and the sex industry raise the question of whether it is appropriate for SUs to support these clubs” (NUS 2012). Furthermore, the campaign expressed the concern about the possibility of lap dance clubs recruiting students who practice pole fitness at university. One of my informants commented:

Just because I know how to pole dance does not mean I will end up earning extra money as a stripper... I doubt this was their concern; if it was, they were poorly informed... in strip clubs, strippers usually do not perform tricks; they might be doing a few spins around the pole and that's it....The assumption that I am doing such a hard fitness and gymnastics work to become a sex worker is hilarious (*Catherine* 2013).

8 I am citing here his unpublished lecture, titled ‘Pole Fitness and Porn “empowerment”: Aestheticizing the New Misogyny’, delivered at School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts, University of Brighton, on 14th March 2013.

The potential link of pole dancing as a recreational activity with sex work is often easily deconstructed. However, what remains problematic for most critics is its symbolic link with sex industry and the objectification of women. Some feminists critics go as far as suggesting that pole fitness might be promoting connections between being a woman and the sex trade (JJ, comment on *Feminist Philosophers* 2009). For Nowatzki and Morry (2009), pole dance classes present a form of “sexual objectification” where sexiness and physical appeal becomes dominant criteria of attractiveness. While participating freely in this porn culture and self-objectification and enjoying sexual attention, women may feel desirable, but as Nowatzki and Morry (2009, 96) claim: “at a cost of being objectified and treated as subordinate”.

Pole dancing is attached to stripping sub culture, stress Whitehead and Kurz (2009), where men come to see naked women's bodies (Murphy 2003, quoted in Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 227); therefore, according to these authors, “pole dancing per se, positions female body (at least ideologically) as a sexual commodity to be viewed and consumed, most traditionally by men”.

From pole dancing participants' own perspective, this old discourse is changing rapidly and that they are actively contributing to this process of change. The president of the Newcastle Pole Society (Rostron 2013, quoted in Day 2013) explains: “We see the activity as a sport, and most importantly, do not perform for the sexual gratification of our audiences. People who come to see our shows are not expecting to get a complimentary lap dance; more often than not, they come to support family or friends who are performing, and to appreciate the skills required to perform moves”.

Furthermore, my informants reject the idea of sexual objectification saying they practice pole fitness for themselves, in a friendly and supportive and often, but not only, female environment. Even those who perform in public during music festivals or circus events, stress that pole dancing is a mixture of dance, acrobatics, sports and art.

“I definitely do not feel as a sexual object when I perform. People admire my strength, coordination, fluidity and effort I put in my artistic performance, not simply my physical appearance” (*Maggie* 2013). Critics often dismiss not only the sports and fitness dimension of pole dancing as masks for pornography, but also its artistic pretensions: “when pornography or acts considered pornographic do make the ‘leap’ from subculture to mainstream, it is achieved via art” (Whitehead and Kurz 2009 241).

Furthermore, the fact that men are practicing pole dancing as well, together with women and in the same way, challenges the claims that, through pole fitness, women are objectified by men. However, “[t]he point about men being able to join ignores the fact that men cannot be objectified in the same way that women can” the campaigners retort. “Objectification is all about power and we live in a society where power is held by men” (NUS 2012). This essentialist,

static and generalising argument ignores the whole complexity of power, culture and gender relationships while simplifying the idea of objectification.

Women I interviewed claim they do not feel “objectified” and “subordinated”, neither when practising nor even when performing a pole dance in public (which does not involve strip clubs), as the context, aesthetics, type and purpose of the performance and their identity positions are completely different than those related to strip clubs and sex work. As the purpose of the performance is not to sexually arouse male audience, it becomes a form of a dance and gymnastics entertainment for the public.

Despite that, the campaign did not acknowledge the possibility that pole fitness could be something else than pole dancing in sex industry, which, according to campaigners, necessarily objectifies women⁹: “It is impossible to divorce the activity from the origins. Pole dancing was created to exploit women’s bodies for financial gain and still does. Simply having difference circumstances and in different clothes doesn’t make pole fitness a different thing from pole dancing” (NUS 2012).

This static and narrow argument does not leave space for a potential change and it closes the debate on pole dancing as a recreational activity. From the women’s rights perspective, if we were to think that certain practices or positions of women were “impossible to divorce from their origins” or immutable, there would never be any advancements or change in the position of women.

When it comes to male gaze and male desire, feminists are often concerned with the construction of a good-looking female body that is responsive to male desire. Gill (2007) claims that women have internalized the male gaze, and were therefore trying to achieve the looks society tells them men would find attractive.

To be feminine requires not only the accoutrements of hyper sexuality – high heels, tight clothes, and so on – but also a body that adheres to an extremely strict set of standards [...] Women have so internalized the male gaze that they have now become their own worst critics (Dines 2010, 110).

Moreover, this self-objectification therefore leads to body perfectionism and misogyny, according to Negra (2009), who claims that words like empowerment, self-esteem and health are just a rhetoric used in promoting pole dancing and cardio strip fitness classes which masks “body perfectionism” (Ibid., 121), with over-exercising and starving, and reproduces regressive and misogynist norms and values. Whitehead and Kurz (2009) stress how women may use pole dancing to control their body size and shape and to perpetuate the “societal expectations of desirable femininity” (Ibid., 240).

9 The debates whether women in sex industry and pornography are necessarily objectified and therefore subordinate or exploited or not, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

NUS Women's campaign (NUS 2012) uses the same arguments and says that pole dancing as fitness

[...] promotes an impossible and narrow (youthful, busty, thin, white, able-bodied, scantily clad) image of acceptable female sexuality, which is impossible for women to attain. These ideals damage the health and self-image of girls and young women, and can lead to eating disorders, anxiety and depression.

However, participants challenge this perception of pole dancing promoting a stereotypical female beauty ideal. Haley (2013, quoted in Slavin 2013), a student who practises pole dancing and sees herself as an advocate for women's rights and equality, says:

I was completely sceptical. At that point, I was uncomfortable with my body, and was afraid that I was going to be the "fat girl" in a room of smokin' hot blonde skinny girls. I was pleasantly surprised when I went into the class and found all kinds of different women. It was the most judgment free environment I have ever encountered (Haley 2013, quoted in Slavin 2013).

All women participants I have interviewed agree that achieving a positive body image is more a result than a goal, because to be good at pole dancing involves too much hard work to be motivated only by the simple attractiveness promoted by popular culture. In addition to that, according to women interviewed by Atwood and Holland (2009), the popular body image of a skinny, blond and young stripper (as frequently and wrongly assumed by most pole fitness critics) has never been promoted and women of all age and body shape participated in classes.

Critics also assume that pole dancing classes promote only a certain type of narrow, liberal, static and heterosexual type of femininity and prescribed female sexuality according to which women are supposed to be fit, sexy and slim (Gill 2007; Negra 2009), therefore perpetuating gender stereotypes and leaving no space for diversity in gender expression. Women practicing pole fitness are presumed as necessarily "hyper-feminine" (Nowatzki and Morry 2009, 97). According to Bahti (2012, 2), pole fitness classes offer a "feminizing" practice and reify a certain type of heterosexual femininity.

It is true that some women claim pole dancing does make them feel more feminine and sexy; some pole dancing schools, such as S factor, are based on this approach, and are using words such as: "language of the women's body", "fluid and feminine movements", "exploring of women's soulfully sexy Erotic Creature", "empowering women to embrace their femininity and sexuality". In a video published on the S factor's website in 2013, three generations within one family (daughter, mother and grandmother) explain how good they feel about themselves and their body and how much they appreciate strong female friendships forged in the class. Although S Factor might nurture some form of femininity and feminine sexual expression, it is not necessary the liberal,

heterosexual version embedded in skinny and young women critics often point out.

Regarding the expression of female sexuality, a member of the Newcastle University Pole Dancing Society explains

There's nothing wrong with women expressing their sexuality. We live in a world where we are constantly told what is sexy and how to be sexy, air brushed glamour models plastered across magazine covers and club fliers. Pole Fitness encourages you to throw out this prescribed version of what a sexy woman is and make up your own. There are no set styles, it's a form of dancing that is so open for interpretation. (Rostron 2013, quoted in Day 2013)

Some of my informants go a step further, viewing pole dancing rather as a challenge to the traditional femininity. One of them says:

I do not consider myself that feminine ... I have big arms and shoulders and it is all from pole dancing. If you have those skinny, feminine, chicken arms, you cannot pull yourself on the pole. To be honest, my strength is often intimidating for guys (*Jenna* 2013).

Women in sports often challenge traditional notions of femininity by virtue of their strength and body shape and this happens in pole dancing as well. Women who practise pole dancing on regular basis or compete are proper athletes and are usually much more muscular than average women. Therefore, it is impossible to reduce pole dancing to a practice that nurtures only a certain type of heterosexual femininity necessarily responsive to male desire. Pole dancing can strengthen traditional gender stereotypes or, on the contrary, challenge them, depending on the context, pole dancing schools, participants and their identity positions.

Women's free choice to engage in pole dancing as a recreational activity is also challenged by critics. Under the influence of pornographic and "raunch" (Levy 2006) culture and the pressure to look sexy and slim (Gill 2007; Negra 2009), choices women make are not real choices (Negra 2009) but ones shaped by the static notions of gender and sexuality and sold to women in a consumer society through fitness discourse (Gill 2007).

NUS Women's Campaign (NUS 2012) specifies it is:

[...] not condemning the individual choices that students make. This is not a debate on personal choice, but about asking what is appropriate within our students' unions. Students' Unions are values-led organisations, who should seek to support social change. (NUS Women's Campaign 2012).

Participants, on the other hand, often stress the role of a university, precisely as a values-led setting, in fighting the stigma attached to pole fitness by allowing them to practice in a safe and supportive environment.

As a society, we also compete professionally in the sport and some of us have competed in the UK Professional Pole Championships. The university has been really supportive of us... (Rostron 2013, quoted in Grant and Peterson 2013)

NUS Women's Campaign (NUS 2012), appealed on the student's unions as on "a unique environment with the politics of equality and liberation at [...] heart [...] committed to political freedom, and [...] diversity of opinions", to ban pole fitness to prevent, as they claimed, objectification of women, their subordination and gender inequality.

However, in the name of the same values, diversity, equality and tolerance, according to Glasgow University's Student Representative Council vice-president, Craig Agnus (2013, quoted in Day 2013), their pole dancing society welcomes all range of students, male and female.

[...] Like-minded people can meet up on a regular basis to do something which they enjoy, and that doesn't have any malicious intent towards anybody [...]. The trick is not to impose your ideological beliefs on other people who just happen to feel differently. Above all, it's about tolerance and understanding (Agnus 2013, quoted in Day 2013).

Because of numerous negative comments on the NUS Women's Campaign (NUS 2012), the campaign has been put on hold and the briefing, named "Pole Fitness Societies", analysed in this chapter, temporarily withdrawn.

Pole dancing as a recreational activity is practiced at Universities across the UK, mostly focusing on tricks and gymnastic elements and often divorced from its "sexy" aspect. Male students are welcome to practise and they often do, as well as teachers and parents. Students often organise performances for friends and family and often raise money for charity (Sussex Pol Soc 2013). As Effees (comment on *Feminist Philosopher* 2009) stresses,

There is also a growing emphasis on "pole fitness" which minimises the dance aspect and does resemble gymnastic performances, [...] showing off impressive rather than dance moves. I know, for example, that Kent University insists that only tricks, and not dance, can be taught in their pole fitness courses (Effees, comment on *Feminist Philosopher* 2009).

One of my informants explains: "In our pole society all people are welcome, we teach tricks only... I really do not understand what is so sexual about it" (Laura 2013), while Haley (2013 quoted in Slavin 2013) stresses: "It isn't sexualized unless you make it that way".

By divorcing the practice from its strip or sex work origins, by adding gymnastic and acrobatic elements and by practicing pole dancing in a fitness setting, participants are constantly challenging and reframing the old discourse on pole dancing being a practice that "necessarily" objectifies women, nurtures stereotypical gender images and makes them unequal and subordinate.

However, albeit all positive comments on pole fitness participants in this activity may have (see also ethnographies done by Allan 2011; Atwood and Holland 2009; Holland 2010; Kim and Kwon 2019; Whitehead and Kurz 2009), objecting to subordination, male gaze, patriarchy, objectification of women, hyper-sexualisation or misogyny as being related to contemporary pole fitness, their arguments are constantly being dismissed by most academics (Gill 2007; Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Levy 2006; Murphy 2016; Negra 2009) under the assumption that turning such a “degrading” practice (once related to porn industry and sex work) into an “empowering” practice is just not possible. By simply embracing old static and popular definitions of pole dancing, these critics strengthen rather than deconstruct traditional power structures they are supposed to be fighting against.

In order to become a fitness activity that is appropriate for the university campuses and fitness gymnasiums, this practice has to be re-shaped and normalised, utterly detached from its “sexiness”¹⁰. In this respect, in the following chapter, I shall analyse tone of the first efforts to establish pole dancing as a legitimate sport with the perspective of becoming a future Olympic discipline. While doing so, I shall look at three more concepts related to women’s rights – those of dignity, empowerment and sexual liberation in pole dancing.

Pole dancing as sports – normalisation and purification of pole dancing (Ethnography– second part)

Most critics consider entering of pole dancing into the mainstream as part of a larger process named “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair 1996), through which porn values and symbolic images are entering everyday culture. On the other hand, in the process of pole dancing entering the mainstream as a recreational activity, popular culture and its participants have re-shaped, “normalised” and purified pole dancing to fit into the discourse of sports and fitness.

In this respect, this chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the changing discourse on pole dancing through the campaign to establish pole dancing as a legitimate sport potentially a new discipline contested at the Olympic Games in the future. Through the analysis, I shall investigate how women’s rights concerns, such as empowerment, dignity and sexual liberation, relate to this process.

When pole dancing first emerged as fitness, it was still practised behind closed doors, in a female-only environment, where women could free themselves to explore sensual and erotic movements. However, with the overall spreading of

10 By “sexiness”, I mean dance moves that are traditionally perceived as erotic and sensual, such as “body waves”, “hair flips”. Likewise, by “sexiness”, I mean sensuality and erotic type of dance expression.

pole dancing as a recreational activity practised in gymnasiums and university campuses, together with the emergence of public competitions, the sensual and erotic aspect started to fade out. The aesthetics and discourse related to pole dancing have gradually changed. Although, as Ashe (comment on *Feminist Philosopher* 2009) points out, “all forms of dance can be made legitimately athletic, or borderline obscene — it all depends on the creative decisions made and the way the surrounding culture interprets it”, the International Pole Sports Federation, does not seem to wish to take any “interpretation risks”. Therefore, it has produced a precise document containing rules and regulations that should strike the final blow to the old discourse relating pole fitness to its seedy origins – to stripping and exotic dance.

“We’re trying to be stricter here and become respected as a sport”, says Florenza Pizanis (2013, quoted in Gulyas 2013), the head of the International Pole Sports Federation’s technical committee.

In line with this goal and in order to join the family of other Olympic sports which would give pole dancing its ultimate recognition and more dignity and respect to its participants, new regulations of the IPSF specify the following: firstly, pole dancing is renamed as “pole sports” and performers and competitors are “athletes” (IPSF 2013 2); secondly, it sets the acceptable venues for competitions, which are: sports centres, gymnasiums, dance auditoriums, leisure facilities, conference centres, concert arenas or theatres (IPSF 2013, 3); it strictly prohibits night clubs as possible places to welcome pole sports events; thirdly, it defines a dress code: “Costumes must be appropriate for competitive athletic sports” (IPSF 2013, 6), which means that:

The cut of the bottoms must not be higher than the fold of the crotch in front and must fully cover the buttocks (rear) in back (see 13.3/13.5 for specifics). The top must fully cover the breast area for women and show no added or unnecessary cleavage (see 13.3) [...] Costumes should not be intentionally removed, must fit correctly (13.2/13.4) and not used in an erotic manner (IPSF 2013, p. 6).

High heels, in which pole dancers have traditionally danced in, even in other competitions, are prohibited (IPSF 2013, 13.7). Moreover, it is

[...] expressly forbidden to perform semi-nude, improperly dressed or in an overtly erotic manner (i.e.: stroking the body suggestively, fondling the breast, chest and groin area, performing a gluteal dance and shaking the chest or gluteus in a suggestive manner. Please be advised body rolls are not included in the above).

Judges’ dress code is illustrated in the section 16.10: “Judges must wear black suits (either trousers or medium length skirt), blue tie, white shirt and heels no higher than 5” (IPSF 2013, 9).

Indeed, in order to distinguish pole sports and its aesthetics from low culture such as stripping or porn, pole sports had to be “normalised” in accordance

with an acceptable (some could argue – even elitist) forms of culture. As Gulyas (2013) points out: “Regulation is the latest advance in pole dancing’s evolution from strip-club staple toward serious sport”. IPSF is putting big efforts for pole dancing to be recognised as an official sport on one hand, and to be present at the Olympic Games in the future on the other hand therefore it takes the “reformation project very seriously” (Gulyas 2013).

In 2015, IPSF supporters and other pole dancing practitioners fighting to differentiate themselves from clubs and strippers, launched an Instagram campaign posting only athletic photos on their social media profiles named “#Notastripper”. On the other hand, this initiative enraged some pole practitioners who claimed the campaign was rather offensive and discriminatory towards sex workers, who should be the ones praised for inventing pole dancing.

In 2016, the International Pole Sports Federation submitted an application to the International Olympic Committee to be recognised as an official sport and participate in the Olympics. A year later, the IPSF became recognised as an international sporting body while pole was temporarily accepted as a sport. This was the first step achieved among the many standards that the federation needs to fulfil in order to qualify to become an Olympic sport.

[...] (IPSF 2016) emphasized that pole dancing is about “athleticism and technical merit”, in line with “other Olympic standard sports such as gymnastics, diving and ice skating” and even though it may be closely associated with strip clubs, a performance does not have to contain an erotic element. (BBC)

The firm decision to work on the “normalisation” of pole dancing may seem legitimate because the controversy and stigma related to pole fitness are still present. However, one may argue that insisting so strongly on distancing pole sports from any of its sensual elements translates an internal societal gaze based on discriminative prejudices. Similarly, persons participating in it as a recreational activity constantly dissociate themselves from “unacceptable” strippers, lap dancers and women sex workers who practise pole dancing in exchange for money, possibly leading, as Bahti (2012) points out, to their further discrimination.

The debate within the pole dancing community on whether pole sports should be separated from its origins, remains a lively one. Not all women participating in pole dancing agree that pole dancing as a recreational activity should be “whitewashed” from all its sensual elements. In this process of mainstreaming of pole fitness, as some participants stress, pole dancing might be losing its “empowerment” and “sexually liberating” potential. Thus, one of my informants stresses:

Of course it was liberating, as we were able to express our sensuality and erotic, we were given the opportunity to explore our bodies in motion, and to flow with the music. I am afraid fitness aspect has sacrificed all of that (Anna 2013).

Others see this transformation as a “purification” (Claire 2013) of pole dancing, “limiting its art expression” (Mary 2012).

One of my informants says she understands that “gym is not an appropriate setting for a sensual movement, so we focus only on tricks” (Fiona 2013). However, she adds: “But, you know, what is, in my view, far more disturbing, is that I do not allow myself to perform any sensual movements, even when I am at home” (Fiona 2013).

The other explains:

I am of a shy nature, easily embarrassed; however, after just a month of practicing pole dancing, I allowed myself to be sensual without fearing what people would think of me; on the other hand, I was so proud of myself as I have managed to learn such difficult athletic moves. It is so empowering. I doubt other sports give that opportunity to embrace your sexuality while gaining strength (Sam 2013).

Whitehead and Kurz (2009, 228) have rightfully noticed that words such as personal empowerment, but also sexual liberation, are often attached to pole dancing fitness classes.

However, Walter (2010, 7) points out to the “strange distortion” of what the word empowerment [...] often attached to this culture, [...] meant to feminists. When we talked about empowerment in the past, it was not a young woman in a thong gyrating around a pole that would spring to mind, but the attempts by women to gain real political and economic equality (Walter 2010, 7).

Most critics deny the possibility for women engaged in pole dancing as a recreational activity to be empowered through this practice, although, according to and Whitehead and Kurz (2009, 233) their informants were framing recreational pole dancing as empowering while, on the contrary, professional pole dancing in strip clubs in exchange for money was framed as disempowering.

According to most academics, the notion of empowerment is utterly wrongly associated to pole dancing; this empowerment felt by women engaged in pole dancing is false. Influenced by the “raunch” (Levy 2006) and “porn culture” promoted by the media (Negra 2009), these women, seen as a kind of uncritical recipients of post-feminism and pornographic culture are, in their view, only conforming to what is expected from them: to be sexy and fit and wanted by men (Dines 2010; Gill 2007;). Therefore, although they believe to perform agency and make their own choices, they actually perpetuate the patriarchal and misogynous culture and contribute to their own oppression and the oppression of other women (Levy 2006;). As for the notion of “sexual liberation”, they say, nothing can be sexually liberating in a commodification process where porn values have been sold to women through the “technology of

sexiness” (Gill 2007), where women internalize the male gaze and unconsciously accept to be objectified and to objectify themselves (Gill 2007).

In opposition to these scholars, I do not see women engaged in pole dancing as a recreational activity as passive “victims” of the “pornographicated mainstream” (McNair 1996) and of distorted and abused post-feminist notions (Negra 2009). In my view, they are active agents in defining, changing, balancing and constructing meanings and representations around pole dancing.

Holland (2010) points out that pole dancing classes offered a safe and supportive environment where women could engage and play with issues such as body display and erotica in a way that made them feel powerful. They were also, it may be added, given the opportunity to play with their different identities and transgress acceptable social boundaries; therefore, the following question may be asked: can a woman be empowered by practising something that is controversial and not entirely socially acceptable? Can the process of transgressing social and identity boundaries in itself be an important source of empowerment?

In my view, and according to some of my informants, it can: “Although being a housewife, twice a week I can pretend I am a stripper, or a glamorous dancer; when I dance, I can be whoever I want to be” (*Celina* 2013). Others said: “Fighting the stigma was an important source of empowerment” (*Rumi* 2013). “When I started practicing pole fitness, I didn’t tell anyone about it, as I knew people would have wrong assumptions. However, the strength and self-confidence I acquired day by day made me want to show what I could do” (*Naomi* 2013). According to my informants, their empowerment came from within. By allowing themselves to engage with the practice that was not socially acceptable, they gained enough self-confidence and self-esteem to accept themselves fully and eventually “step out of the closet”.

However, those in favour of total eradication of all sensuality from pole dancing, gathered around the IPSF, see the empowerment of women through pole dancing from a different angle, as an empowerment which may be achieved as through any other sports. As expressed by one of my informants, a successful competitor, “the physical strength, dexterity and self-confidence achieved through practising are both empowering and liberating, allowing us to express ourselves fully through a highly demanding athletic performance” (*Jude* 2012). “I became so strong but so graceful. Like a ‘Supergirl’. I love it”, explained *Audrey* (2012). As seen in these examples, empowerment and liberation of women are frequently in the heart of the pole dancing discourse (Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 228). Despite being related to the same activity, these terms usually denote different, even opposite contents.

The overall academic and public criticism of pole dancing as a problematic or pornographic recreational activity has only helped its transformation. Through a dialectical and fluid cultural on-going process, its participants,

critics and public eye are constantly and actively negotiating the meaning, representations and the position of women within the practice.

In my view, the process of “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair 1996) is followed by a more fluid and complex cultural response, becoming a part of a larger and dialectical cultural process in which general public and “appropriate” culture¹¹ is re-shaping “porn” values and images. Therefore, sports and fitness are not just a rhetoric that masks pornography, as claimed by some scholars.¹² In my view, sports and fitness became a frame in which pole dancing as a recreational activity is constantly transformed through the process of “normalisation” and “cleansing” from its previous seedy roots. In addition, I do not see those who participate in pole dancing as passive recipients of “porn” and post-feminist values (Gill 2007; Negra 2009); instead, I see them as active agents in defining, changing, balancing and constructing the meaning and representation around pole dancing as a recreational activity.

In my view, establishing pole dancing as an officially recognised sport will not prevent women from choosing a pole dancing school which has not banned sensual moves or nurtures more of a dance than gymnastics approach if they feel like it. However, it may have an enormous impact on lifting the stigma and attenuate prejudices over this activity.

Conclusion

Most authors agree that pole dancing as a recreational activity emerged as a consequence of the “pornographication of the mainstream” (McNair 1996) and the overall “sexualisation of ‘Western’ culture” (Attwood 2009) that took place during the last two decades. This tendency opened the door for “porn culture” (Dines 2010; Negra 2009) and “raunch culture” (Levy 2006) to take over the popular culture and invade everyday life. This way pole dancing, traditionally associated with striptease in the 1980s, came to light again in the mid-2000s. However, since that time, pole dancing as a recreational activity has established itself as a legitimate activity and distanced itself in many ways from “porn culture” it was derived from. Practised in a safe and acceptable social environment like fitness clubs, gyms or university campuses, it has reshaped itself thoroughly into a physically demanding discipline mixing various elements taken from as different horizons as contemporary dance, gymnastics, yoga, acrobatics and contortionism. Recognised as a new dance and fitness practice, it has been increasingly gaining popularity among young women, but also some men, therefore drawing the attention of some academics but also some conservative or feminist communities.

11 By “appropriate culture” I mean leisure activities, fitness and sports discourse, for example.

12 Notably, by Phil McManus, in a lecture which I have already cited in footnote 9.

Their interest has been mostly driven from their different feminists or conservative perspectives. The analysis of discourses around pole dancing since it has been established as a recreational activity has highlighted the fact that, whether pole dancing has been criticised or praised, throughout the scarce academic resources as well as in public campaigns, the language used has always been the one associated with women's rights concerns.

Therefore, arguments and debates around pole dancing include notions of femininity, emancipation, empowerment, equality, choice, gender and sexuality, notions of subordination, inequality, gender stereotypes, disempowerment, objectification or male gaze.

According to most critics, pole dancing, even as a recreational activity, is inherently degrading to women, because of pole dancing's historical, popular and symbolic relationship with sex industry and patriarchal institutions that objectify and subordinate women. It is based on stereotypical gender positions and is still perpetuates traditional, patriarchal power structures. Therefore, it remains problematic in any other context. This standpoint has been defended mostly by some feminists and women's rights activists. These critics claim that pole fitness subordinates women and that it cannot be otherwise. In the eyes of these critics, women engaged in pole dancing are passive objects of pornographic culture; trapped in their own subordination and unable to understand how oppressed they have been and how oppressive they have become.

Pole dancing would be then imagined as a highly controversial activity which hinders women's rights.

However, these critics do not engage with participants to explore why they engage in this "controversial" and degrading activity of their own free will, as if they lacked the capacities to grasp the full picture of their subordination and not capable to express it. Therefore, they needed the "help" of pole dance critics (some feminists or conservatives), who would protect them from themselves.

My research, as well as ethnographies performed by a couple of scholars who have left the hegemonic discourse¹³ of their peers to engage with participants of this "controversial" activity, has shown the following: for pole dancing participants, this form of fitness seems legitimate and empowering. They do not feel objectified or subordinated; they are under no pressure to look and feel "sexy" and have "desirable bodies". On the contrary, they feel strong, confident and healthy; some of them do feel feminine and sexy and they find these feelings legitimate. Moreover, as women practise pole dancing for themselves and not for men, and not in exchange for money, they seem to be challenging traditional gender positions and the discourse of sexual objectification. Women practicing pole dancing as a recreational activity are using this practice traditionally bound to patriarchal power structures and are

13 Just and Moore 2019, Kim and Kwon. 2019.

constantly transforming it, for themselves, into something quite different, while enjoying the process and having fun.

The gap between these two visions of pole dancing as a recreational activity is striking.

In my view, from an anthropological and human rights perspective, it is important to stress how posing our own assumptions or even prejudices on others is not only intellectually limited but can also be “objectively” dangerous and discriminating. Simple minded advocacy for women’s emancipation and attacks on “unacceptable” practices, like pole dancing, mostly presents a hegemony over ideas on gender, sexuality, liberation and empowerment. While imposing those static definitions of subordination and inequality on pole dancing and its participants, critics often end up in embracing them rather than deconstructing them.

Before patronising others on what their empowerment and liberation should look like and before trying to “save” other women from themselves, “culture” or men, in the name of women’s rights, sexual objectification, subordination or inequality, the question needs to be asked if these women really need “saving”.

According to the results of my research, they do not. Engaged by their own free and deliberate choice in a fitness practice bringing them physical strength, good movement coordination, stamina, grace, enjoyment and fun in a supportive, friendly environment, they conquer and fully transform the space once “polluted”, or “abused” by porn, sex work and degrading practices. In this sense, it may be said that fighting the stigma and prejudice on pole dancing based on the assumption that it still is a problematic or pornographic recreational activity has only helped its transformation.

The case of pole dancing as a fitness activity illustrates how this cultural process, as any other cultural process, is a complex, fluid and dialectical one, in which its participants and critics are active agents in the reshaping and in the transformation process, actively negotiating the meaning, representations and the position of women within the practice.

Therefore, translated into language of human rights, pole dancing as a recreational activity, as it is practised in most fitness clubs at this moment, according to my findings, do strengthen women’s rights rather than hinder them.

However, we should always remain sensitive to any practice women are engaged in, analysing and respecting their own relationship and definition of the practice, but also fully aware of all the possible social changes. Their implications might involve more complexity and bring more diversity of definitions out of what ought to be a liberating, empowering, feminine, strengthening or hindering practice, even if it differs from what rights defenders or any other group once implied.

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Primljeno: 10.10.2021.

Odobreno: 30.10. 2021.

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Da li ples na šipki osnažuje ili opstruira prava žena? Analiza promene diskursa o plesu na šipki kao rekreativnoj aktivnosti

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad se kritički osvrće na savremena akademska i javna tumačenja promene diskursa o plesu na šipci i analizira transformaciju ove aktivnosti od prakse usko vezane za seksualnu industriju ka sportu. Kroz etnografski pristup, u kombinaciji sa pregledom malobrojne akademske literature koja postoji u vezi sa temom, istražujem da li ples na šipci kao rekreativna aktivnost jača ili podriva ženska prava. U ovom radu, zaključujem da je pogrešno časove fitnesa na šipci posmatrati isključivo kroz perspektivu pornografske kulture, kao aktivnost koja nužno perpetuira mizoginiju i seksizam, kao što ni nasilno „prečišćavanje“ plesa oko šipke od bilo koje naznake senzualnosti ne služi nužno osnaživanju žena. Naprotov, iz antropološke perspektive i perspektive ljudskih prava, zaključujem kako projekcija dominantnih i statičnih pretpostavki i definicija o osnaživanju žena i rodu ili čak predrasuda o njima na osobe koje se bave plesom oko šipke nije samo intelektualno ograničeno već može biti i „objektivno“ opasno i diskriminatorno. Uskogrudo zalaganje za emancipaciju žena i napadi na „neprihvatljive“ prakse, poput plesa na šipci uglavnom predstavljaju hegemoniju nad idejama o rodu, seksualnosti, oslobođenju i osnaživanju. Namećući statične definicije o podređenosti i nejednakosti kao nužno utkane u ples oko šipke i posledično, na osobe koje se njime bave, kritičari ove aktivnosti često, umesto da dekonstruišu ove esencijalističke definicije, zapravo ih perpetuiraju.

Ključne reči: Ples na šipki, rekreativna aktivnost, ljudska prava, prava žena, kultura.