

WOMEN ATHLETES OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of fighters in MMA stands out as a challenge to the norms prevailing in combat sports. The study analyses the re-signification of female bodies in MMA. The sample consisted of 3 sites. We selected posts with the theme of women athletes from November/2012 to July/2018. Data were subjected to content analysis. Results suggest that within the octagon athletes unleash potentials, they become symbols of resistance and empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Mixed Martial Arts; Empowerment; Body

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a rich and multifaceted phenomenon that can boost either many discussions about body and the different ways of experiencing and feeling it. Therefore, we can conceive sport as a rich field of investigation by stimulating looks and meanings about masculinities and femininities (GREENSPAN, 2015; GOELLNER, 2003, 2005). Sport discourses are entangled in power relations that construct and convey representations of being a man and a woman, seeking intrinsic biological features, to hierarchize, to allow, to limit and to prohibit women's presence in sport.



By entering Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) women blur the boundaries of what would be socially appropriate to them and threaten the representation of a normalized femininity. Dana White (president of the UFC - Ultimate Fighting Championship) has seen this insertion as an opportunity of financial profit by joining beauty and technical abilities in the spectacle. Body is a biopolitical reality (FOUCAULT, 1979) and it is fetishized in the society of spectacle (DEBORD, 2003).

Sport is a breeding ground both for the reproduction of masculinities and femininities and to the production of new configurations of generalization. Power relations established in this context grow with the construction of sport spectacle, bodies undergo control strategies intensified by discourses, but they also resist, create foundations and blur the boundaries of regulatory norms.

Based on these discussions, we asked the following question: Does the inclusion of women athletes in MMA allow a re-signification of women's bodies in sports? The study aims to analyse the re-signification of female bodies within a hegemonic masculine sport, here represented by MMA. Hence, we used the concepts of power (FOUCAULT, 1979, 1980) and spectacle (DEBORD, 2003) as key elements for the discussion.

METHODOLOGY

Framing the methodological path allowed us to operate the investigative steps essential to the study. We defined MMA-exclusive sites and posts as the investigative field. Female MMA was the first expression browsed on Google. The following inclusion criteria were considered: sites / pages in Portuguese; sites of institutions promoting only MMA fights; sites containing identified posts; posts with the central theme: body of female athletes.

Three sites were considered from these criteria: A Dama de Ferro, MMA Space and UFC Brasil¹. Data collection ran from November 2012 to July 2018². We used the software QSRNvivo 12 Pro as a support tool for data organization and codification, and a content analysis was performed (BARDIN, 1977). Posts totalled 66 units, being 43 on A Dama de Ferro, 14 in MMA Space and 9 in UFC Brasil.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Data enabled us to gather information and establish discussions about the re-significances of female athletes' bodies in MMA. It is worth mentioning that of the three sites analysed only one presented an exclusive content about female MMA. The other sites presented this theme as one among many and features fewer reports when compared to male MMA.

Sport has been for a long time a territory of disputes about what a female and a male body could and should do. Data allowed us to analyse the re-signification of the female athletic bodies between power relations and sports spectacularization. The fact, is that for many years the relation of women and sport was centred on the triad: beautiful - maternal - feminine (GOELLNER, 2003). The quest for motherhood did not cease to exist, but it ceased to occupy a central place in the lives of female athletes. Today, motherhood and sports walk together side by side:

I think being a mother definitely gives me an advantage [...] I wanted to do something with my life that he could be proud of, something that would show him the importance of having something that you are passionate about. (A Dama de Ferro, Cat Zingano, fighter, 04/30/2013).



¹ It is necessary to inform that I have contacted the maintainers of the three sites and obtained the return only of the MMA Space. The information contained in the others was taken from what is presented on the site. Data were collected until July 2018, with the exception of the MMA Space whose site is temporarily deactivated.

² At MMA Space, data collection was done until December 2017, considering that it was deactivated in early 2018.



If you have an even older dream, bet on it. I have a son and I will be 30 years old in two months, but I am happy to have followed my passion [MMA]. (MMA Space, Bryan Anne Russilo, fighter, 09/29/2015).

Therefore, we can think of sport as a historical apparatus of a regulation network that both organizes practices and polices bodies and their behaviour (FOUCAULT, 1979, 1980). It is also a space of transgression and disruption of rules that are imposed on women. More than prepared for motherhood or spectacularized by their bodily contours, female athletes' bodies are sensed and represented in the singular discourses produced by themselves, thus impairing preconceived truths.

[...]Fighting is not a male thing, it's a human thing. To say that it is not for women is something anti-feminist. [...]”, and adds: “I am the biggest attraction of the sport and I am a woman”. (A Dama de Ferro, Ronda Rousey, Fighter, 03/30/2015).

“Fight is human”, this speech delivered by Rousey crosses power relations and brings forth a new connection of the female athlete with her body. Physical exertion, fights, and technical skills demonstrated by women in the *cage* / octagon implode the representation of the fragile sex, making them also protagonists in a hegemonically masculinized territory. Athletes' voices break the frontiers of normalized femininity and lend themselves to a counter-hegemonic discourse to signify that they are capable. Power clings to new mechanisms, retreats, shifts, but follows its investment (FOUCAULT, 1979), but it also creates resistance. The experiences built in the context of MMA are represented in the attention and recognition that they come to have of themselves.

I think going out in famous magazines is a great feat for the fighters. If you're on the cover of Maxim or ESPN, you're sure to get more famous and powerful. This is fantastic (A Dama de Ferro, Julianna Pena, fighter, 11/27/2013).

I would love for most people to admire me because of my fights (A Dama de Ferro, Felice Herrig, fighter, 08/21/2013).

My body is everything. It's my machine, that's what I need to sharpen to work (UFC Brasil, Michelle Waterson, fighter, 06/26/2017).

The spectacular MMA spotlights illuminate both athletes' body contours and also their fighter techniques and skills. In the society of the spectacle everything is commodified (DEBORD, 2003). Although the insertion of women has been viewed as a potential financial gain, the context of MMA has proved to be a fertile ground for the construction of new experiences, for a corporeal re-signification. Foucault (2013) has already stated that one does not live in a neutral and white space, but in places coloured by different levels of power communication. Sport is also a territory of struggle and resistance. MMA athletes have in their hands the possibility of rewriting not only their stories, but those of all others who encourage and dare to transgress what would be considered appropriate to their bodies. And so they express and unleash a series of potentialities, becoming symbols of resistance and empowerment.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

To think about the re-signification of women's bodies within MMA is to understand that it goes beyond their insertion in a hegemonically masculine sport, it produces and strengthens the subjectivities that give voices to women amid power relations. Debates show that it is possible to understand that the power in sport around the spectacularization gave athletes' achievements visibility. The speeches reflect moments of discovery of their potentialities, ruptures, transgressions and constructions of new meanings about their bodies. These discoveries within the spectacularization of MMA construct power and empower female bodies with courage, strength and resistance.



MULHERES ATLETAS DE ARTES MARCIAIS MISTAS E EMPODERAMENTO FEMININO

RESUMO

Incluir lutadoras no MMA é um desafio às regras do esporte de combate. Foi analisada a re-significação dos corpos femininos. A amostra foi formada por posts com o tema: corpos das mulheres atletas, coletados desde novembro/2012 a julho/2018. Os dados submetidos à análise de conteúdo mostraram que atletas são símbolos de resistência e empoderamento.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Artes Marciais Mistas; Empoderamento; Corpo.*

ATLETAS MUJERES DE ARTES MARCIALES MIXTAS Y EMPODERAMIENTO FEMENINO

RESUMEN

Incluir luchadoras en MMA es un desafío a las normas en deportes de combate. La re-significación de cuerpos femeninos fue analizada. Muestra formada por posts con tema: cuerpos de las mujeres atletas, colectados de noviembre/2012 a julio/2018. Los datos sometidos a análisis de contenido mostraron que las atletas son símbolos de resistencia y empoderamiento.

PALABRAS CLAVES: *Artes Marciales Mixtas; empoderamiento; cuerpo.*

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