

## WOMEN IN BOXING: NEGOTIATIONS OF MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES IN THE GYM

*MULHERES NO BOXE: NEGOCIAÇÕES DE MASCULINIDADE(S) E FEMINILIDADE(S) NA ACADEMIA* 

*MUJERES EN EL BOXEO: NEGOCIACIONES DE MASCULINIDADE(S) Y FEMINIDADE(S) EN EL GIMNASIO* 

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**Abstract:** We seek to highlight how traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (and heterosexism) affect the practice of boxing. With this objective and through an ethnographic study carried out in a gym, we reflect on the participation of women in boxing classes, identifying the differences between the practice of men and women. We observed a "naturalization" of what is traditionally considered masculine (virility, aggressiveness, etc.) and feminine (restraint, sensitivity, etc.), but which nevertheless are reconfigured. The results were organized into three categories: on the practice in the space of the gym; on gender separation; and on the crossing of gender boundaries, which is when the woman, due to objectives related to the struggle, tends to be masculinized. The meanings attributed to the practice of boxing are also tensioned, in which the athletes' own sexuality is questioned, demarcating heterosexuality as the norm.

**Keywords:** Women. Boxing. Masculinity. Femininity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In this article we seek to understand the relations between the practice of boxing and the conformations of gender, with reference to Cultural and Feminist Studies which are close to the post-structuralism of Foucault (2002b), in which the very concept of gender encompasses processes of social construction which occur throughout the life of the subjects, in interaction with various circumstances in which they learn to become men and women in a certain way<sup>2</sup>. This learning, which includes social and cultural dimensions, also includes the body.

Although the subjects live in different spaces, the circumstances of each historical and social situation promote different ways of being. Therefore, culture inscribes particularities in the subjects (LOURO, 1999). It not only shapes the social contexts, but also shapes influences in distinct stages of life. Thus, it is possible to observe different ways of living and feeling femininity and masculinity (SCOTT, 1995; MEYER, 2003; GOELLNER, 2007). We intend to highlight how traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (as well as heterosexism) affect the practice of female boxers in a gym in Porto Alegre.

In this direction, we seek to problematize the understanding of a traditionally masculine culture associated with the practice of boxing and the adjacent representations. This dimension allows us to broaden the analyses, to reflect, to question and to problematize the way in which certain roles correspond to women and men, producing themselves as if they were “natural designs<sup>3</sup>”. The social demands established through mechanisms of power (FOUCAULT, 2002a) are also placed in various spaces of daily life, through behaviours required or permitted for each place. What are the processes imbricated in society by which women and men learn in sport to be feminine or masculine in gyms?

In the text by Wacquant (2002), a fundamental work on combat sports, we find discussions concerning the meanings involved in the participation of individuals in a boxing gym located in a peripheral area of the city of Chicago, USA. Despite the relevance of this study and its fruitful and enriching analysis on fighting, there is no in-depth discussion on gender issues, since this was not the intention of the work. Even if the book does not focus on this perspective — gender — the lack of problematization opens an important gap in the theoretical direction of the work.

Reflecting on what was exposed, we consider that the sportive practice by women was denied and historically was progressively liberated (GOELLNER, 2005). Articles such as those of Adelman (2003) analyse the feminine practice in the sports

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1 The text is a segmentation of the first author's dissertation entitled: *Da academia de boxe ao boxe da academia: um estudo etnográfico*. Available at: <https://www.lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/48994>

2 Gender is a concept that refers to all forms of social, cultural and linguistic constructions involved in the processes that operate in the differentiation of men and women. These processes include their bodies, endowed with sex and sexuality, but not biologically determined (LOURO, 1999; MEYER; SOARES, 2003; SCOTT, 1995;), so that we learn to become men and women of/in a given society. To articulate gender and sexuality, we emphasize that we understand sexuality as the different ways of expressing desires and pleasures, which have a social dimension, since the ways used by subjects to express themselves are both socially learned and codified in a particular context. Louro (2004, p. 9), understands that “gender and sexual identities are [...] composed and defined by social relations [...] shaped by the power networks of a society”.

3 The use of quotation marks is to stress the traditional sense that these words carry.

of volleyball, basketball and horse riding. In addition to her texts, today we identify several others that problematize the articulation of female participation in sports understood as masculine, such as skateboarding (FIGUEIRA, 2009), rugby (ALMEIDA, 2014), bodybuilding (JAEGER, 2014), female soccer (MARTINS, WENETZ, 2020). In fighting, we find boxing (SILVA; CAVICHILLI; CAPRARO, 2015; CARDOSO *et al.*, 2012), women's boxing and movies (FERNANDES; MOURÃO, 2014), insertion/permanence of athletes in the Rio-Grandense Federation (BERTÉ 2016), Olympic wrestling (FERNANDES *et al.*, 2014), boxing and Mixed Martial Arts<sup>4</sup> (FERNANDES *et al.*, (2014), e and the participation of transgender athletes (TURELLI; VAZ, 2011) and MMA and the debate of the sports field itself (SALVINI, 2017). Despite the recent production and considering the gradual inclusion of women in fights (GRESPLAN; GOELLNER, 2014), it is noticeable that their practice has increased, but with certain restrictions, configuring itself with certain nuances that still need to be analyzed and deepened. Thus, we ask: how do gender relations conform in the context of a boxing class at the gym? What difficulties do women encounter to join boxing? What is expected of women who practice boxing?

## 2 ON ETHNOGRAPHY, THE GYM AND THE PRACTICE OF BOXING

The questions asked above led us to choose ethnography as a methodological instrument, because of the anthropological perspective of investigation that that offers a focus on society itself. Today, anthropology is concerned with understanding its own culture, relativizing some concepts rooted in common sense.

Based on microscopic studies, it offers elements for the researcher to enter the field of investigation with a specific theoretical basis and try, based on a particular case, to articulate the results with major debates on a given theme (GEERTZ, 1989). In this case, we address the themes of gender and sports, or, more particularly, we focus on a “so-called” masculine sport practiced by women.

Thus, the ethnographic study allows for an analysis “from the inside”<sup>5</sup> in the search for what is particular, relating it to the field researcher's experience, which allows for greater proximity between the field researcher and the subjects of that context.

Furthermore, ethnography consists of a set of characteristics such as knowing how to see, knowing how to be with others and with oneself and to retranslate what was perceived, reinterpreting to a third party through writing (WINKIN, 1998). According to Geertz's ideas (1989, p. 63), the work of articulating what is experienced in the place implies “a presence of the There in a text elaborated Here”.

In this direction, an ethnography was carried out in a gym in the central zone of Porto Alegre/RS. Thirty field visits were analyzed and registered in field journals<sup>6</sup>

4 Athletes in this sport take elements from various combat sports (for example, boxing, Jiu-Jitsu, and Muay Thai) and use them in the fight.

5 By suggesting an analysis “from the inside”, we support the ideas of Geertz (1989), who suggests that ethnographic work offers conditions to perceive cultural idiosyncrasies related to the group that allow microscopic and deep analysis. Moreover, we support the ideas of Magnani (2002), who argues that ethnography is the result of a deepening of the researcher in the field of research and an analysis that relativizes, dialogues and finds consonances and dissonances with its reality.

6 Between October 2009 and January 2010. The observed classes were held in the evening and were one hour long, with two observations per week.

and ten interviews<sup>7</sup> with people<sup>8</sup> who practiced boxing. The place in question has a recognized trajectory in the city, being, therefore, a reference among gyms. For fifteen years it has offered classes for beginners, intermediate, and advanced students, who practice boxing together at the same time. Among the practitioners there are men and women in mixed groups. In addition, the gym offers boxing classes in three shifts, and we registered a male predominance of eight to 12 people. The female participation did not exceed two to four women per class, throughout the research.

The results were organized into three major categories, based on the concept of deconstruction<sup>9</sup> of gender bipolarity. By deconstructing, we affirm that there is not a “universal”, “true” or “unique” way of being a woman or a man, admitting the possibility of differences.

Before presenting the results, it is important to emphasize that this research respected ethical criteria. Thus, when starting the observations, all interlocutors were made aware of the methodological process. In addition, the gym owner authorized the work to be carried out and all names were changed to respect confidentiality.

### 3 ON THE PRACTICE OF BOXING AND THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Currently, the practice of sports is no longer denied to the female gender. At the end of the 19th century, some physical activities, such as gymnastics, were allowed for women, with the idea that they benefited or “prepared” the body for motherhood (GOELLNER, 2003). According to Goellner (2005), women who formerly performed sports were seen as having deviant behavior. “The sport practice, the care with the appearance, the stripping of the body and the use of aesthetic artifices [...] identified as boosters of the modernization of the woman [...]” were considered “as of vulgar nature that brought her closer to the universe of dishonor and prostitution” (GOELLNER, 2005, p. 145).

The works about fights have pointed in the direction of a predominantly male universe and the practice of women in sports has been tensioned (GOELLNER, 2007; THORPE, MARFELL, 2019). The participation of women is related, in some of these environments, with other objectives, such as aesthetics and physical activity aimed at body care. Unlike men, who most often have fighting as an end (i.e., they are there to learn how to fight), women, in these studies, use a discourse of fighting practice as a means to get fit. Ferreti and Knijnik (2007) and Mariante Neto (2009), who studied speeches of female boxing, capoeira and Muay Thai fighters, summarize them to

7 Eight women and two men were interviewed. The criterion for participation in the interviews was to have practiced boxing for more than a year, in order for the subject to have more knowledge of the researched universe in relation to gender.

8 The subjects' names are fictitious, to preserve research ethics. All interviewees completed the Informed Consent Form.

9 The notion of deconstruction is a procedure used by Derrida, which problematizes the permanent and polarized construction of binary opposition, such as white/black, nature/culture, male/female, etc. These poles oppose and differentiate each other, but are in constant relation. The poles seem to be rigid, determinant, and natural, and the second pole always derives from the first in a power relationship in which there is the logic of domination-submission, which seems to be unchangeable. The deconstruction of the binarisms of opposite poles allows us to problematize the construction of each pole, observing that each one constitutes the opposite pole, “demonstrating that each one actually supposes and contains the other, showing that each pole is not unique, but plural, internally fractured and divided” (LOURO, 2001, p.31).

the idea of “protection”, attributes cited by them to explain their objectives with these modalities.

This could also be observed in the text by Fernandes, Mourão; Goellner and Grespan (2015), and it was corroborated in the universe of this study since the first observations<sup>10</sup>. From the beginning of our presence in the field, we identified – in the third part of the class – that the separation of pairs, a moment that promotes greater physical contact between students (sparring<sup>11</sup>), followed a gender dynamic.

We observed different arguments in relation to the production of meanings about femininities/masculinities. This discursive movement sometimes reinforces (by highlighting that the gym is for “thugs”, women “can get hurt”, can do while the “goal is to lose weight” and “do not get too strong”, “are delicate”, misogynistic and stereotypical expressions that we can often hear), sometimes questions the separation between men and women in performing sports practices (by promoting mixed practice or a high quality training including surpassing men, that they pursue competitive goals, etc. ), which leads us to infer that boxing has implications with gender (re)production, which is implicit in the differences in modality. An empirical example of this discussion is the speech of one of the female students at the gym, who reported that she does not do push-ups at the end of class “so as not to get too strong.”

Such differences, which reflect meanings or cultural attributes of femininity and masculinity<sup>12</sup>, are incorporated/learned by the subjects, and from them they articulate different negotiations, rejections, or acceptances that permeate sports practices.

We could also observe, on the part of women, some difficulty in participating in boxing classes. This was materialized in the interview with Aline, a beginner student, who reported wanting to do the activity for a long time and having faced an initial estrangement because her family did not want her to participate in this practice:

People find it very strange, everyone thinks, because I'm tiny, right? They say I'm too delicate to box, that boxing is aggressive. My father is the most terrified, when I said I was going to box, he got terrified, he almost had a heart attack (laughs). [...] But the real problem was my father, he was horrified, he said 'what do you mean?' 'My little daughter boxing?', 'but it's dangerous', 'you're going to hurt yourself, you're going to hurt your arm, you're going to hurt your hand, they will beat you' (INTERVIEW, 02/04/2010).

Despite wanting to practice boxing, Aline is somehow intimidated by the people around her, like her father, who sees the sport as violent, not fitting for a woman to

10 A basic boxing class begins with “shadowing” exercises in front of a mirror. This activity reproduces the moves used in the sport (jabs, straight punches, dodges, etc.), but without implements (punching bags or punching pads). The intensity of the movement is low, limited to the purpose of warming up the body and improving technique. The “jumping rope” is also used at this point. The second (and longer) part of the class takes place when the fighters are already warmed up. Usually they “put on” gloves and perform two-to-three-minute rounds on punching bags/punching pads. Sometimes they simulate fights (sparring), when they then wear protective helmets. At the end of the class, they perform muscle-strengthening exercises, such as abdominal crunches and push-ups.

11 Sparring is a simulation of a boxing match. This activity is usually performed with protection such as helmets and mouth guards.

12 Working with gender as a social and relational category allows us to understand how both femininity and masculinity are relational and interdependent constructions (MEYER, 2003). Thus, it is usually assumed that aggressiveness, virility, strength and courage would be adjectives directly associated with masculinity; delicacy, intuition, sensitivity and fear would be linked to femininity. In this sense, we can affirm that the same discourses that allow men to be narrated as aggressive and restless, position women as passive and sedentary, and, simultaneously, contribute for the process to be understood as natural. Connell (1995) understands that the construction of masculinity is a process in which certain “appropriate” behaviors are expected for men. Thus, “boys are pressured to act and feel this way and to distance themselves from the behavior of women, girls, and femininity understood as the opposite” (CONNELL, 1995, p. 190).

develop characteristics that, possibly, will lead to physical damage, understanding a logic of femininity as the “fragile sex”.

Thus, the father’s estrangement about his daughter’s participation in boxing classes bears little resemblance to the “male world” that regulates the symbolic universe of boxing. Wacquant (2002) shows how men are stimulated to practice fighting and it is perceived that “boxing is a man thing”, in the sense of the internalization of a criterion of masculinity, far from the hegemonic vision of femininity. Therefore, if in the work cited individuals are stimulated to participate in the gym, including showing their “war marks” (WACQUANT, 2002, p. 67) as signs of bravery and honor, at the research site women are perceived as strangers in a world hostile to them. The insertion of women mainly occurs through other modalities in the gym, such as gymnastics and dance. Rarely do women enter straight to the boxing classes. When they enter, coming from another modality, there is no hostility from the men, however, they understand that they are there for aesthetic reasons, not to fight or develop the “eye of the tiger”<sup>13</sup>.

The difficulties of participation were also reported by professional athletes who talk about suspicious comments, or even prohibitive, by the possibility of getting hurt, although they admit that if there is persistence on the part of the fighters, they will be accompanied and supported by family and friends (SILVA; CAVICHIOLLI; CAPRARO, 2015; CARDOSO *et al.*, 2012). Similar results about the possibility of getting hurt were problematized by Cardoso and collaborators (2012) and Cardoso, Sampaio, Mara and Silva (2015).

#### 4 SEPARATION BY GENDER

In order to deepen gender analysis, we criticize, at this point, essentialist notions of man/woman and masculinity/femininity, or even the idea of a single representation of the feminine, as highlighted by Fernandes, Mourão; Goellner and Grespan (2015) and Berté (2016). Gender, as a relational category, allows us to argue that the same discourses that enable women to be seen as devoid of aggressiveness, strength, a desire for competition, or a certain “adrenaline rush,” at the same time view men as “naturally” endowed with these characteristics. Their bodily ability is not questioned; as for women, they are expected to come as close as possible to these requirements, considered “part of practice/fighting”.

We understand that masculinity and femininity operate in different and opposing poles. Different discourses reinforce the separation between men and women in the observed classes, which has drawn the attention of Raquel (student) when referring to the gym studied (which offers other activities and provides the separation of pairs). In her opinion, this fact distinguishes the referred gym from the traditional training places, considering that the others are, according to the women when referring to men, “gyms full of thugs”<sup>14</sup> (INTERVIEW, 03/15/2010).

In this direction, it is possible to analyze how women boxers are inserted in gender learning processes in the gym space and what meanings attributed to gender

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<sup>13</sup> This term will be developed later.

<sup>14</sup> The “thugs” would be the representatives of the concept of “standard masculinity”, individuals who show little or no appreciation for the participation of women in the fights.

are negotiated. We resume the power relation (FOUCAULT, 2002a) confirming that it has a relational nature, not existing *a priori*, therefore, a dominant/teacher or colleague/man relation, but the establishment of a binomial that classifies the relation in dominated/student or colleague/woman, and that these meanings are negotiated during the practice.

Such relations may or may not be “suspended”, as Tunelli and Vaz (2011) report, based on a negotiation that is daily remade. It is understood that the woman fighter can both reinforce the separation and tension it through resistance/power mechanisms used in relation to discourses that are legitimized or not on a daily basis.

To highlight this analytical movement, we emphasize the possibility of watching the performance/interference of gender not only during the research practice, but also in the very production of knowledge. This was registered by Tunelli and Vaz (2011), when observing a change in behavior of a female karate fighter who, when she started to research, also provoked a displacement of her position and legitimacy in the group. By changing from being a female fighter to a female researcher, she provoked some new reactions of discomfort on the part of those investigated, or “an escalation of aggressiveness and chauvinism — also an expression of defense and territory demarcation — corresponding [...] to the researcher, once almost ‘suspended’ her condition of fighter” (TUNELLI; VAZ, 2011, p. 897). Challenged by sexist behaviors and the *sensei*'s<sup>15</sup> unlimited authority over her, the situation was only overcome when the woman repositioned herself as a fighter. Her retreat to the condition of fighter had the effect of suspending challenges by her peers.

Salvini (2017) researched professional women with the aim of analyzing the strategies of the MMA subfield in relation to the sports field from the position that women fighters occupy in this structure. The author states that “[...] both the MMA subfield is dominated against the sports field and women are dominated within the MMA subfield, which results in a double domination of female MMA fighters” (SALVINI, 2017, p. 245). While not recognizing a certain openness nor the future possibility of subversion and resistance.

Although our study shows the possibility that this sports space has been “opening” to women, some observations reinforce the separation of this practice because of gender. The mere presence of women in classes is not enough to show an acceptance by the gym goers (BERTÉ, 2016). According to some records, they show resistance when the subject in question is addressed. An example of this is a conversation recorded by us between a female boxing student of the gym and a new female student of weight training of the same place. They were talking about boxing classes:

The researcher reports: I arrive to teach at 9 pm. That day I was not going to teach, but Ricardo called me to replace him. I meet Renata at the reception and tell her that I will be the one to teach today. She is talking to a new weight training student about boxing. The following dialogue ensues between them:

Renata: Come box one day, it's great. It burns a lot of calories.

Ana: But you don't get hurt?

<sup>15</sup> This term refers to the teacher or master in Eastern fighting.

Renata: No, the boys fight each other (laughs)

Ala: I can't get a black eye (laughs)

Renata: Don't worry, I've been doing it for two years and I've never been hurt.

Ana: I'll try it one day.

I interrupt their conversation and ask: "Why don't you do it today? She answers: "Not today, I'll just watch.

At the end of the class, Ana was asked what she thought of the class and she answered: 'It is hard, but very aggressive, I will continue weight training' (Field journal, 11/28/2009).

As can be seen from the relational aspect of the gender concept, women also use different arguments that reinforce aggressiveness in men and delicacy in women. At other times, we can map a negotiation or conflict in this reinforcement when these attributions come into dispute or negotiation.

## 5 CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The crossing of gender and sexuality boundaries happens when there is tension between what is understood as corresponding to the feminine/masculine. This transgression occurs when men or women approach an activity considered to be of the other gender. For example, when a woman chooses to practice boxing or a man decides to practice ballet.

What we call crossing allows us a movement of analysis on the conflict of gender boundaries, tensions that can be mapped, for example, when a woman performs a sport practice still considered masculine. Raquel (student), when asked about how she got into boxing and why she didn't start attending boxing classes before, answered:

I thought I would be much more lost, that it was a really more masculine sport, I don't know if it's because I always heard from my father: 'So, how are you going to do boxing? You know, so much so that I had a bag for about ten, eleven years and I never started a class, I made my ex-boyfriend start fighting, then he taught me (laughs) some things, but I didn't go to class myself (laughs). Of course, it is not that I made him fight, but I encouraged him to fight so he could teach me. And there was no boxing in my town, but when I got here, I wanted to do it, but I didn't have the courage. I saw fights and movies and thought it was a violent, aggressive sport, that only men did it (INTERVIEW, 05/15/2010).

According to the report, the student had difficulty entering the boxing classes, to the point of encouraging her boyfriend to fight so that he could teach her how to give some blows. Even without knowing a gym, her vision was that of a violent and masculine sport, built by the movies (FERNANDES; MOURÃO, 2014) and by the vision of her family. This set of representations was reflected in insecurity in starting to attend a boxing gym. On the other hand, her boyfriend seems to have more autonomy in going to the gym, since men are expected to have characteristics that match the representation of this sport, which is referred to as "aggressive" because "only men did it".

This can be observed in the analyzed context: the discussion of what is “man’s thing” and what is “woman’s thing” takes prominence and is effectively applied to the practice of boxing. About this, Almeida (1996) understands that masculinity is a discursive phenomenon, implied in a field of dispute and negotiation of conducts, rules and social behaviors experienced by the subjects. The author highlights that the organizing principle is the hegemonic masculinity, as an “ideal cultural model which, not being attainable — in practice and in a consistent and unchanged way — by any man, exerts a controlling effect on all men and women” (ALMEIDA, 1996, p.163).

In the case of the student, the sport seems ready, conceptualized: it is violent and masculine, a restricted, closed environment directed to aggression and virility, which are “man’s things”. The strangeness is not related to the sport, but to the fact that a woman wants to practice boxing, because what is expected of her does not match this sporting space.

In relation to the gym environment, we highlight the fact that it already promotes this participation in some way. As observed by Mariante Neto, Myskiw and Stigger Neto (2012), boxing, according to the analysis of Wacquant, on the one hand, already has some characteristics in common: the sport would be related to a social ascension or status. As the only practice in the space and being the practitioners aspiring to professional boxing, the space is characterized as predominantly male and the body is understood as a tool demanding from the group certain type of characteristics. On the other hand, the boxing practiced in gyms would be a leisure type sport, a means in tune with physical fitness. Therefore, boxing practiced in gyms changes a logic presented in other studies.

Although boxing is part of a set of activities practiced by men and women, the students’ discourses about the body involve different meanings, such as health, aesthetics, and body shape. By its nature, it also admits a heterogeneity of senses and meanings to the practice. These observations of Silva, Cavichioli and Capraro (2015) pointed out a great convergence with the boxing that is practiced in the gyms of Curitiba, highlighting that “this shows that the insertion of women reveals a movement of resignification and adaptation of boxing to these new practitioners subjects” (SILVA; CAVICHIOLLI; CAPRARO, 2015, p. 133).

Although there is an increase in participation, the implications of boxing practice are different for women, as Nunes (2004) highlights. For MMA female fighters, body marks represent prestige in the researched gyms. Such body marks, and even signs such as muscular hypertrophy or some injury, result of disputes (even a reason for exhibitionism, in the case of men), seem not to be well seen in the case of women, from whom it is expected a standard of behavior marked by care or, as Goellner (2003) states, by a fear of masculinization.

These meanings cross and configure a broad conceptualization of femininity. Fernandes, Mourão, Goellner and Grespan (2015) aimed to analyze the femininities of professional female fighters (in this case, boxing and mixed martial arts) of great representation in the country<sup>16</sup>. The authors observed a diversity of meanings,

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16 In this case, the speeches are from two athletes who represented Olympic boxing at the London Games. Olympic boxing differs from professional boxing in that it does not aim for knockouts. The goal is to score points by giving blows

because, while for a female athlete, femininity is associated with the fact of being a woman and “being feminine is having your vanity, feeling and finding yourself like a woman, regardless of anything” (FERNANDES, et al., 2015, p. 373), for another “the sport, whatever it is, can compromise the expression of normalized femininity, being the responsibility of the athlete herself to take care that this does not happen” (FERNANDES, et al., 2015, p. 373).

In this way, we can highlight how there are social and cultural mechanisms that collaborate to a maintenance of a matrix of gender intelligibility (BUTLER, 2017). Thus, through normative discourses, it establishes as natural, normal, fixed, unquestionable the linear articulation between biological body, gender and sexual desire. This discursive movement, which places the sexuality of female boxers under suspicion, strains the matrix of gender intelligibility (BUTLER, 2017), as it stresses the blurring of female/masculine boundaries. Ratifying these ideas, Louro (2004) confirms the premise that to a certain sex — in the sense of biological characteristics — corresponds a certain gender, and this, in turn, would indicate a desire. Thus, a person with a woman’s body would be feminine and would want to have sex with men. This sequence allows a continuity between sex-gender-sexuality, which operates by reaffirming and repeating the norm, based on the binary male/female logic and that the body is identified as male or female.

In this direction, it is expected that men and women are defined in a single way and that desires and ways of living sexuality have an internal coherence sustained by a compulsory heterosexuality. Assuming that sexuality also organizes the social, we can affirm that it also affects the practice of boxing. Thus, it is possible to verify how, from these practices, several strategies are used to strengthen a certain form of sexuality, represented as “normal”: heterosexual masculinities and femininities.

The gym constitutes a space in which women still suffer discrimination that hinders their insertion in this environment, reducing their participation in classes. Considering the articulation between gender and sexuality, we have Renata’s account: “My mother says that I will never find a husband because I box. In this example, we can observe how the practice of a sport understood as traditionally for men can interfere in the personal life of a woman who will have, according to the statement, difficulties to “find a husband”. Here we can observe how the suspicion falls on sexuality. Similar results were observed in other studies, such as that of Cardoso *et al.* (2012, p. 261) who, when researching the practice of boxing by female athletes, heard from one of them that “they often have their sexuality questioned, since, due to their involvement with a sport that requires strength and blows, they are labeled as ‘lesbians’”.

But this order can be challenged, transformed, and even subverted. To maintain it, several investments must be made, “continued and repeated”, just as one should not spare “efforts to defend it [...], because said sequence is not natural, nor safe” (LOURO, 2004, p. 81). Somehow here we highlight dissonant bodily practices or even abject bodies because they escape from what is expected for gestures or traditional sports practices.<sup>17</sup>

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over the belt line.

17 For further definitions of dissonant practices or dissonant or abject bodies, see (BUTLER, 2017; CAMARGO, 2016).

In order to visualize how this logic operates, we initially cite an example about female strength and its relationship with body shape.<sup>18</sup> Although today society is not surprised by the feminine strength and the insertion of women in sports, the increase in the number of these participants does not necessarily mean that they escape from the stereotype of “masculinized woman” and, even more, of “woman who has sexual desire for women”.

As we have already mentioned, in the gym studied the space is divided according to gender (here the space reinforces the traditional sense: women in specific gym and locker room spaces). In our observations, we did not find any female boxer, that is, a woman with combat objectives, who sought professionalization or even amateur boxing, but with competitive purposes<sup>19</sup>. We also did not find any men who set themselves to these ends. Even so, we noticed that women and men do not share the same goals in the practice of boxing.

How is boxing reappropriated for/by women? The explanation given to explain the benefits of fighting is directed to “body care”, not to “the fight”. The use of this sport takes on, in this case, another meaning. Confirming Ricardo’s interview, Vítor (student) tells what he thinks about the participation of women in the classroom: “I think they do it more for the physical preparation, right? For physical fitness itself, to get in shape. Not to aim a fight or even to defend themselves; I think fighting doesn’t even cross their minds” (INTERVIEW, 06/20/2010).

In this speech, it is observed that the objective of the woman in the class is to take care of her body, and that it is not up to her to fight. This discourse is also present in Ricardo’s statement, who, about his female students fighting, says

Most of them are here for the physical activity, I’ve had some that wanted to fight, but I try to discourage them from fighting, I think they kind of make a little mistake because in the training, they train well [...] they hit hard, I have to take care that they hit hard, they know how to hit, I think, on the other hand, to enter the ring, competitively, is already another mentality, the woman would get hurt and then give up (INTERVIEW, 05/06/2010).

In this speech, we can see how the teacher himself does not encourage professional fighting because, for that, they need to have “another mentality” or they can “get hurt” because they are the ones who “make a little mistake” and thus give up. Here we see the matrix of intelligibility (BUTLER, 2017) operating in the sense of reiterating that women, although they hit hard and want to compete, are mistaken in having other goals that go beyond day-to-day training and fitness care.

It is based on this differentiation between competitive fighting and fitness that women are allowed a place in boxing classes. According to several statements, they would be there to do a physical activity. The expectation is around an aesthetic concern and they would probably face resistance from classmates and teachers if they showed any aggressiveness or desire to fight and compete in the sport.

This understanding fits into what Adelman (2003) called the “aesthetics of limitation,” and confirms the idea that boxing remains a practice that can “compromise”

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<sup>18</sup> Here, we refer to the example on page seven, in which one of the interlocutors reports that she doesn’t do push-ups in order “not to get too strong”.

<sup>19</sup> On athletes, see more in (BERTÉ, 2016).

women's femininity, as the pursuit of a femininity can be applied to both behavior and the female body, being negotiated by acceptance and restrictions of various elements/aspects. For example, women can perform sports and be strong although always feminine. Here a restriction or limitation operates, in which sports participation can become a form of resistance if it strains those expected meanings for female behavior/body.

Characterizing this resistance, or “what is expected of a woman in boxing classes,” we have Rodrigo's statement on the subject:

I think the participation of women in boxing is indicated, I just think, and here goes a little bit of machismo, I don't like women who become, let's say, 'a beast' in boxing, or women who have the 'eye of the tiger'; women don't have to have the eye of the tiger. The eye of the tiger is an innate aggressiveness of certain people, you know. Something that shows that they were or were not made specifically for boxing. In my way of seeing, a woman with the eye of the tiger, and I think it's a bit sexist, I don't think it's very nice (INTERVIEW, 05/10/2010).

In this speech, we can see how the interviewee himself recognizes his difficulty in accepting that women do boxing for competitive purposes, in accepting that they become professionals and have the “eye of the tiger”. The term “eye of the tiger” is commonly used in fighting environments and served, in the case of this research, to represent the opposite of what is expected of women, including those who practice boxing. The “eye of the tiger” represents aggressiveness, masculinity, a desire to knock out the opponent, characteristics of those who possess it and who would be endowed with a “natural” desire for fights, that is, a woman who keeps her boxing practice within the boundary of traditional femininity.

## 6 CONCLUSION

After the reflections presented, it is up to us to understand that this relationship between boxing and gender is tensioned, insofar as this relationship is configured in a tortuous way, not very linear and full of concepts and patterns that distance the practice of women's fights. We also call attention to the little, but fruitful academic production on the subject.

Upon entering the gym, we noticed that the participation of women was based on tacit agreements, specific to that context, which placed women in a different place than men. This statement materialized in the performance during the classes. We noticed that female practitioners found it difficult to get into the boxing classes. We recognize the existence of a social barrier, materialized in speeches and attitudes represented by the discomfort of these women in relation to fighting. Thus, boxing reaffirms itself in the daily life of this gym and materializes in the observations made as a “man's sport”.

What is expected of these women? We can say that in this gym they are expected not to stop being feminine (in the sense of the “hegemonic feminine”). This statement allows a reflexive deepening, for we can think about their characteristic attributes. To stop being feminine would be to assume a posture of aggressiveness

and combat typical of men. The “eye of the tiger”, as one of our interlocutors stated, would not correspond to the way a woman should behave in training, and even “in society”. A softer tone is expected from them, and that for them boxing is only a means — and not an end — to achieve good shape. Issues such as self-defense or combat are far removed from what is defined as the “good way” for a woman to behave.

It is possible to state that women transgress a gender norm by crossing the boundary established in the boxing universe and, simultaneously, keep some gender attributes and sexuality in operation. In addition to facing resistance to enter the boxing practice, female boxers still need to prove that they have not ceased to be feminine or heterosexual.

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**Resumo:** Buscamos destacar o quanto as noções tradicionais de masculinidade e feminilidade (e heterossexismo) afetam a prática do boxe. Com esse objetivo e por meio de um estudo etnográfico realizado em uma academia, refletimos sobre a participação de mulheres nas aulas de boxe, identificando as diferenças entre a prática de homens e de mulheres. Observamos uma “naturalização” do que tradicionalmente se considera masculino (virilidade, agressividade etc.) e feminino (comedimento, sensibilidade etc.), mas que não por isso deixam de ser reconfigurados. Os resultados foram organizados em três categorias: sobre a prática no espaço da academia; sobre a separação de gênero; e sobre o atravessamento de fronteiras de gênero, que é quando a mulher, por objetivos relacionados à luta, tende a ser masculinizada. Também são tensionados os sentidos atribuídos à prática do boxe, no qual a própria sexualidade das atletas é questionada, demarcando a heterossexualidade como norma.

**Palavras-chaves:** Mulheres. Boxe. Masculinidade. Feminilidade..

**Resumen:** Buscamos destacar hasta qué punto las nociones tradicionales de masculinidad y feminidad (y heterossexismo) afectan la práctica del boxeo. Con ese objetivo y a través de un estudio etnográfico realizado en un gimnasio, reflexionamos sobre la participación de mujeres en las clases de boxeo, identificando las diferencias entre la práctica de hombres y de mujeres. Observamos una “naturalización” de lo que tradicionalmente se considera masculino (virilidad, agresividad, etc.) y femenino (comedimiento, sensibilidad, etc.), sin que por ello dejen de ser reconfigurados. Los resultados fueron organizados en tres categorías: sobre la práctica en el espacio del gimnasio; sobre la separación de género y sobre el cruce de fronteras de género, que es cuando la mujer, por objetivos relacionados a la lucha, tiende a ser masculinizada. También son tensionados los sentidos atribuidos a la práctica del boxeo, en el cual la propia sexualidad de las atletas es cuestionada, enmarcando a la heterossexualidad como norma.

**Palabras clave:** Mujeres. Boxeo. Masculinidad. Feminidad.

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**Flávio Py Mariante Neto:** Fieldwork; interpretation of field data; conceptualization of boxing; establishment of criteria; data analysis and article writing.

**Ileana Wenez:** Conceptualization of the theoretical debate on gender; interpretation of field data; establishment of criteria; data analysis and article writing.

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