

Mulheres da Rocinha: relações entre corpo, identidade e trabalho¹

Women from Rocinha: relations between body, identity and work

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Resumo: O objetivo deste estudo com mulheres da Rocinha, que praticam musculação de forma regular e assídua em academia local, é analisar como se representam e como agem para se manterem nos espaços sociais e de trabalho, com valorização da aparência e da capacitação do corpo. A hipótese é que as mulheres estão conscientes dos desafios e dificuldades com que se defrontam para empoderar-se. A observação participante de 17 mulheres de 16 a 34 anos, em academia de musculação e a análise de entrevistas semi-estruturadas permitiram-nos constatar que as mulheres negociam com o poder, usando as energias para crescer, desenvolvendo o embelezamento do corpo como estratégia para fortalecer o eu e para firmar-se no emprego. Representam a musculação como recurso para melhorar a qualidade de vida e o bem estar físico e mental.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres. Indústria da beleza. Identidade de gênero. Mercado de trabalho.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study is focused on social representations and practices of women that practice bodybuilding, related to questions such as body appreciation and labor market, in the perspective of physical activity practice, linked with the appearance and beauty demands. The requirements of markets, with the maintenance of physical conditions and appearance, gave rise to new concerns in the contemporaneous civilization scenario. Several studies have been performed in the academic and professional context of Rio de Janeiro, emphasizing the male and female imaginary regarding the body of men and women of several age groups and different social contexts, everyone investing in the role of physical appearance (GOLDENBERG, 2002, 2004).

¹ This article is reformulated from the master's degree dissertation for the Postgraduate Program in Physical Education, Universidade Gama Filho.

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In this context, questions related to health, aesthetics and performance are addressed as a privileged object of study by psychoanalysts, anthropologists, philosophers, psychologists and educators, as well as professionals who directly or indirectly are concerned about the effects of appearance on behaviors and social life. Lovisolo (2006) summarizes this movement as the eagerness for the search for ideals of youth, beauty and health that arouse frisson in the society. Among the themes analyzed, the effects of body image and competence appreciation are emphasized. How do the influences of the body imaginary reach the different social niches, to what extent do they affect, how to they manifest in socially unequal scenarios? How do men and women react to the pressures of the professional market and stimulations caused by media? What are the main pressures exerted by entrepreneurs and suffered by the professionals? How do the professionals answer to job requirements and offers? How effectively do body technologies promote the insertion of building athletes in the target groups?

This study was modeled on this complex of questions, in the context of a bodybuilding gym at Rocinha, a slummy section of Rio, in contact with a group of young women who practice bodybuilding in a regular and assiduous way. This gym was selected for practical reasons, as the first researcher, who worked there as a trainee, lives in Gávea, near Rocinha. The study has limited reach in terms of representation. We cannot extend the results of this analysis beyond similar communities in the city of Rio de Janeiro, given the area configuration, near Barra, São Conrado and Gávea malls.

The initial purpose of the study was to identify and interpret the social representations and practices of these women about how they are positioned and how they act, how they build their bodies, inside and outside the gym, to conquer social space and jobs and maintain them. Along the investigation, other interests become relevant, such as how they conceive the meaning of bodybuilding for quality of life and health.

The initial assumption was that women would be aware of the symbolic and real mechanisms of pressure in the labor market, which correspond to the standards advertised by media, about the need to adapt body shape and performance to such pressures. However, as we analyzed their discourses, we verified that they give the impression of being free to make decisions upon the society, in terms of professions, partners; the idea that they fight for their goals and interests, although such decisions, including the fact of attending the gym, are the only alternatives they have to emerge.

Considering the disagreement between discourses and reality, and above all, the contradiction in several declarations, which show the persuasion power and market determination, we decided to change from content analysis to critical analysis of the discourse, according to Rojo (2005), which says that discourses tend to legitimate and authorize the actions of their users, in such way to impress and touch interlocutors; they have elements of domination and act as ways of social action. The emphasis of the article is on the analysis of declarations provided by our informants, expressing representations that strive to convince us about how they relate with the social environment and labor market.

In the contemporaneous Brazilian scenario, particularly in the labor market, the position of women is increasingly more important and expressive, with predominance of simple functions, for factory floor, and subordinate functions in the service sector. However, the increase in the percentage of women's participation in higher positions is slow and little encouraging. Similarly, higher positions in sports are predominantly occupied by male managers. There are many references in literature denouncing the differences found in opportunities to women, if compared to men, such as different salaries for the same type of job. Based on these data and analyses of Algerian, French and Western realities, Bourdieu (2005) elaborated the theory of male symbolic domination, which explains the male domination power, maintained and reproduced by the State and at times unconsciously stimulated by men and women. At first, we thought of testing the author's ideas about male domination in the niche of women's activities at a bodybuilding gym. We expected to find evidence, in the discourse of bodybuilding athletes, of their efforts to maintain their bodies according to today's beauty standards, as manifestations of male requirements.

However, we had many other challenges in the analysis. The first one was to deal with the different body models (FRAGA, 2001), according to different motivations, not all of them corresponding to the supposed men's preference, which would be curvy women (GOLDENBERG, 2004). This is the case of very thin bodies associated with those of top models. We could think that women would be taking their own ways, not considering men's preference; however, they were following the preferences of the clothing market, which deviates from the men's preference, if we consider that the industry is controlled by men. We kept the expectation, as we understand domination is manifested in a mandatory manner, although at times more implicit.

The question of male symbolic domination, according to Bourdieu, appeared in all interviews, references to standards, exemplified through media models. We also have favorable evidences of the proposals elaborated by Badinter (2005), regarding discussions on man-woman relations, when the informants try to give the impression that they establish their own models, decide and fight for what they want and for the values they believe. However, we attenuated their supposed decision and fight autonomy, once the references the informants relate are hegemonic and implacable. We understand they have relative autonomy, resulting from their capability to reflect and assume themselves critically, according to the sense granted by Giddens (2002) to the reflective character of contemporaneous communities, as well as the one's role with his/her particularities. We would say that, although they take it carefully, the field of consideration is limited, as they are not able to see, beyond the immediate appearances, who in fact is controlling the game they are inserted in.

2 METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The methodology utilized in the study combines participant observation with semi-structured interviews. The main researcher acted as a trainee in the bodybuilding room of the gym, to be closer to the athletes. The semi-structured interview script was developed in a direct interaction with the informants themselves. After several tests of validation with judges from the academic world and the community itself, the 17 informants were interviewed, usually after the bodybuilding activities. The age of the informants ranged from 16 to 34 years old. All of them live in Rocinha and the absolute majority work or intend to work with sales of women's products, at Barra, Gávea and São Conrado malls. The initial intention was to utilize the content analysis to interpret the discourses of the sample, but after the first scan on the discourses, we verified that it was necessary to add a category of analysis in which the discourses could be submitted to the criticism screen of the production conditions in the answers and mechanisms utilized by the informants to impress the interviewer and make her believe they were autonomous and had free discourses. For this reason, we opted for the Critical Discourse Analysis, according to Van Dijk, incorporated by Rojo (2005).

2.1 THE WOMEN OF THE SAMPLE

Rocinha is one of the largest sections in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It was considered a slum area until 1993, when it was granted the section status. Surrounded by the sections of Gávea, São Conrado and Leblon, in the south part of the city, Rocinha presents high population density. It has all basic urban instruments, as well as television channel, radio, club, transportation and banks. In this area, the shops are sophisticated, with all kinds of goods, especially products from the north and northeast regions of the country. We could say that “it has everything you can find in the world”. Several gyms are available to the population, in different areas of the section. The gym selected for this study is located in a 3-floor building and offers activities of regular exercises and bodybuilding practice. It is at Largo dos Boiadeiros, near the expressway, in the central area of shops, where there is a street fair with typical drinks, foods and craft products of the north-northeast regions.

In the bodybuilding division of the gym, there is a higher concentration in the division for lower limb strengthening, where 17 women were attending the gym during the trainee program hours of the researcher, and who constituted the sample. The inclusion criterion was attending bodybuilding classes regularly and assiduously. Most informants had professional activities involving direct contact with people, such as clerk, cashier, receptionists and waitresses. The education level of the sample ranged from complete intermediate education (most of them) to some cases of incomplete fundamental education.

The systematic observation of the informants' everyday life shows that the consumer goods of the women's universe from the selected gym are the same as those of women from other gyms of medium-class sections in the southern region of the city. Products that predominate include tennis of famous brands, sport clothes following the fashion trends, jewelry and beauty products for face, lips and hair.

2.2 ANALYSIS OF THE INFORMANTS' IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In the last century, women, led by charismatic pioneers, conquered the right to vote, work in areas previously reserved for men, decide if and when to be pregnant, teach at universities, practice sports. Conquering these rights and having a profession resulted in a movement that enabled social and economic independence. A significant part of the women left the confinement of their private and home life to be actively exposed to the

public sphere. However, according to Bourdieu (2005), such movement did not break the links with the subtlest mechanisms of symbolic domination. Based on a macro analysis, Badinter (2005) does not agree with that. For him, the simplifying idea of male domination does not allow to progress in the discussions on opportunities for men and women to reach their goals.

The identity of some of the women in the sample seems to have acquired a new outline, with more autonomy, or at least with more freedom of choice, more space for personal positions, in the sense Giddens (2002) attributed to individuals:

[...] modernity should be understood at an institutional level, but the changes introduced by modern institutions are directly associated with individual life, and therefore, with individual "I". One of the distinctive characteristics of modernity is in fact the increasing interconnection between the two ends of extension and intentionality: globalizing influences on one side and personal dispositions on the other side (GIDDENS, 2002, p. 9).

The speech fragments we included in this study illustrate social representations regarding roles, conquests and attitudes of the women that constitute our sample, as well as language actions of these informants. We critically interpreted the informants' speeches using as a reference the analysis proposed by Rojo (2005), following the postulations of Badinter (2005) and Giddens (2002).

According to several declarations, the contribution of the body appearance is decisive to finding a job: "[...] nowadays, the appearance is essential, not for other things, but to get a job"; and "[...] if I go to an interview like in my job, they give preference to thin people".

The interviewees' speeches transcribed above suggest personal choices, but we should not forget that the choices are necessary to find a job. Rago (2003) points out the subtle aspect of domination that is hidden in speeches that at first are signs of autonomy and the internalization of male desires in women's choices. The construction of the female behavior is more adequately interpreted as a result of two factors: pressure and adequate answer to pressure.

The representation of the body appearance contribution to wellness, as if the focus would fulfill internal personal pressures, despite the regret for incorporating the external view, is illustrated in the second quotation of the two interviewees listed as follows: "[...]

having a nice body is feeling good with my body”; and “[...] feeling good with my body, looking at myself and saying ‘I’m fine’, being able to go to the beach, wearing bikini”.

The contribution of body appearance to status and power gains relevance in the informants’ discourse. Beauty attributes linked with women’s image, are values that each of them should adhere to, although they say this is a matter of option. There are many requirements, such as diets, physical exercises, aesthetic treatments and some times more aggressive procedures, such as surgeries. Body as the element of the individual “I” construction, in the sense of Giddens (2002, p. 37), is related to the history of women, with aesthetic and market pressures. For the author, “[...] body is the individual “I” incarnate” (GIDDENS, 2002, p. 57).

Women that opt for this embellishment process make it because they need it and are obliged to do it, although they say that are submitted to the sacrifices associated with new body technologies, for the benefits or advantages resulting from them. In the investigated group, when asked if a woman with a beautiful body will get or can have advantages, the interviewees answered:

[...] she will get advantages and if she’s smart, she will also get a job and be involved with people of higher level;
and
[...] she will get advantages, these girls that have been in *Big Brother*, if they hadn’t had that body (Sabrina) in good shape, those buttocks, they wouldn’t have been selected. She’s there for her body.
Lastly:
[...]she will get advantages, for example: If I suddenly go to an interview like in my job, they give preference to thin people, they refuse fat women. I know people that have suffered with that, they lost their jobs for being fat.

Giddens (2002) elaborates a theory about the reflective project of the individual “I” as a form of control or domain and for the construction of a personal identity. Reflectivity is essential for this process. For the author:

[...] the reflectivity of modernity is good to organize and habitually change the aspects of social life that relate or analyze [...] each of us not only has, but also lives a reflectively organized biography in terms of flow of social and psychological information about possible ways of life (GIDDENS, 2002, p. 20).

The reflectivity of individual “I” involves the body processes associated with everything that happens, everything that is felt and desired. This reflectivity is supported by two distinct ways of self-construction: way of (supposedly) personal choices, based on own expectations, and the way of pressures, based on the power of other people’s expectation, configuring a case of domination, presented by Rago (2003), when postulating that many women keep thinking from a male view and end up internalizing the men’s desire.

Giddens (2002, p. 58) considers body “[...] as the focus of power that, instead of trying to mark it externally, just like in premodern times, submits it to the internal discipline of self-control”. Regulating and controlling one’s own body is a way to construct one’s own identity. Such self-identity is also mediated by the exhibition to others, to which we referred as body work and search for beauty, to “[...] feel good and find a job”.

Wolf (1992) emphasizes the myth of beauty is a political act to disarticulate women’s conquests. However, we understand that women, building on gaps, can use their aesthetic attributes of beauty and seduction as one of the ways to share power with men and defend their place.

In this sense, we see the contribution of body appearance as advantages. Beautiful women have advantages over less aesthetically favored women. That is a type of hidden power, controlled by other powers. Indeed, our interviewees from Rocinha say that they use body beauty as a way to achieve their goals.

[...] when I was very fat, I looked for a job and I couldn’t get any. After I lost 60 kg, I could get a job.

and

[...] I guess today appearance is everything you need, especially to find a job;

and:

You never see an ad with a fat woman of disheveled hair or a woman without make-up, or a sweaty woman, you will always see very beautiful woman, with beauty resources.

The interviewees, when showing they are aware of the appreciation to beautiful women and that they accept to be part of this model, make us conclude that this is a choice for a price, which can generate profitable results in some situations.

The informants’ speech emphasizes the body appearance contribution as an instrument of identity. The utilization of beauty and the promotion of vanity as seduction

tools are socially accepted attributes for woman. When keeping searching for a body according to today's standards, they demonstrate familiarity with the standards for a beautiful body in the society. The interviewees' aesthetic body-related standard was:

A person with well built buttocks, well built legs, without belly;

[...] a body in shape, not necessarily too worked out. The person shouldn't have much belly or the body with flaws;

[...] for example, you wear pants without belly pouring out. Something plain, you can wear a low-necked blouse, that's for me a beautiful body;

[...] a slim, well-defined body with no fat.

The speeches selected illustrate how women value beauty and use it to gain power. The pressure in the search for beauty is common to all of them, with increasingly demanding and aggressive requirements, as the technological resources, accesses and possibilities to achieve such longed-for ideal have been built up, from the most natural and less invasive ones to surgical interventions. Women inserted in the labor market and controlling their own money decide how and how much should be spent with personal care. They see obliged to imitate models, consume images, seeking to make personal and "creative" use of the proposed models. The resources indicated as desired or used by the interviewees were basically the use of silicone, liposuction and massages:

[...] I'm make two things: I'd have silicone in my breast and a plastic surgery in my nose;

[...] I'm have a liposuction in my waist, because I guess I have some belly;

[...] I have a prosthesis, I've already taken lymphatic drainage sessions and had a bioplastic procedure.

The use of external resources can mean returning to submission, now subtler and more perverse. The women from Rocinha say what they want and what they can get by following the standards for a beautiful body, but they will make every effort to achieve their goals:

[...] I don't eat sweet foods, pasta, I don't drink soft drinks;

[...] I run, practice *capoeira*, I work out, practice a lot of physical activity
 [...] I take care of my hair, go to the beauty salon, have it cut, washed, dyed, strengthened; and:

[...] I really take care of my body. I make many things. I'm on a diet, I practice body building. I use creams every day.

[...] I'm on a diet, I take care of my skin, I work out every day. I avoid alcoholic drinks.

These speeches also reflect the choices that determine lifestyles. In the construction of individual "I", the possibility of choosing the lifestyle plays an important role. For Giddens (2002, p. 79), "[...] a lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated group of practices that a person adopts". The decision of taking care of the body in order to find a job can be considered as one of women's conquests in modernity, but it can also be considered a dependence on external factors that command their options.

Besides aesthetics, women highlight the role of body qualification to be successful in the labor market. Aesthetics is not enough to remain in the labor market; competence is essential. Besides embellishment, being competent is required. The speeches selected illustrate the presence of two types of pressure in the reality of labor market, with explanation of the difficulties related to finding a good job and resources required to keep it:

[...] you need to have a good sense in general, there's no point in having a beautiful body and being always in a bad humor. I guess you need to have a nice body, good behavior, be friendly, show good performance. I guess everything together is a whole, one does not work without the other;

[...] you can't get every thing because you have a beautiful body. What's the point in having a beautiful body if you don't know anything about the things?

In this relatively tough analysis we made of our informants' speeches, we identified some discursive mechanisms to legitimate the interpretations they give to how they deal with pressures and the impression of being free to choose that they try to convey. The reviews now available about employability in Brazil support our analysis, as, besides the difficulties indicated by the interviewees relating beauty and competence, other questions emerge in the national scenario. According to the *Departamento Intersindical de Estatística e Estudos Socioeconômicos* (DIEESE, 2006), low salaries, informal hiring and extended work hours are reported as indicators of problems in the women's insertion in the

labor market in the city of São Paulo, which in general can be considered as a reference at a national level.

An increase in women's insertion in the market can be attributed to their participation as family head, participation in the family income or her desire for professional satisfaction. The percentage of women's participation in the market has increased in a consistent and progressive manner, which is a point of no-return. In the 1990s, 50.2% of women participated in the labor market in the Great São Paulo. According to DIEESE (2006), it is not only due to the importance of the fight for women's emancipation, but also for the increasing specific weight of women in the market. Besides, there is the possibility of having new labor configurations more adapted to women's abilities and characteristics. However, it should be noted that, despite the increased participation of women, their presence is still fragile, as a significant part of the female population still works under precarious conditions, with high concentration in service sector.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this study, we illustrated a process of professional identity self-construction, in which beauty and appearance articulate with competences for labor market qualification. We identified how women from Rocinha are placed in and act to keep their social and labor spaces positions, appreciating appearance and body competences. We verified how they interact with their immediate social and professional world and how they use their power to grow and consolidate in their jobs.

We can conclude the women are focused on improving their personal and professional image. However, we cannot deny that other view keeps influencing values and indicators that direct such improvement. The women are alert to female characteristics of personal and aesthetic care, as if they were absolutely owners of their fates. But, when applying for jobs in the service sector, they admit these characteristics are rigorously required and controlled by their employers.

The study also indicates that beauty/appearance alone is not the only required characteristics. Aesthetics enables the opportunity and is a factor appreciated at first, and will keep appreciated to maintain the job, but another indicator is now considered. To retain their jobs and grow in their career, body competences - for ex. physical resistance to

spend all day on their feet, go up and down stairs and search for products in stock - and mainly professional skills to deal with the client with attention, courtesy and influence power for product purchase, are decisive.

Therefore, for the woman who wants to be in evidence, beauty and appearance are important allies, but not enough. Besides her power of seduction and enchantment, the woman is encouraged to invest in studies and improve her professional performance.

The discourse of the women from Rocinha also indicates that the new practices resulting from the new identities achieved according to the sense of Giddens (2002) attenuate the male domination, but do not eliminate it. They improve their physical and psychological power, become more self-confident, are more secure and qualified to accept job offers, in an industry dominated by men.

Women that practice body building in the interviewed group use the resources available for self-construction. They practice embellishment, improve their appearance and body resistance as strategies of individual “I” strengthening. They represent appearance as a job facilitator and the capability as the element to remain at the places they have conquered.

A critical analysis of their speeches allows to conclude that the informants² incorporated the media discourse of autonomy, but their ideas seem to indicate a new obscurantism, as they represent themselves as free from a more obscure, difficult and painful past for women, to the detriment of a present that would be full of conquests, freedom and happiness. However, they are literally obliged to follow the body norms required by the market - that took them to the gym. Then, we can say they illustrate the symbolic domination of Bourdieu (2005) when they say they are free to make their choices upon society regarding their professions and partners. They say they fight for their goals and interests, as if they did not have any challenges, even with the differences in terms of labor market access and permanence, the triple (professional, wife and mother) role, the lower salaries if compared to men, and a number of analyses that the contemporaneous feminist movement keeps denouncing.

The informants’ discourse builds the representation, and according to that, the practice of body building is presented as a way for women to be in the market, negotiate with their employers, using beauty to grow professionally and be consolidated, strengthening the individual “I”. However, they do not deliberately and spontaneously opt

² We would like to thank our specialists for their contributions.

for these activities. Instead, the beauty and appearance attributes linked with the female image are values each woman should adhere to; otherwise they might not assume positions of prestige in the labor market. Indeed, the concern about beauty can be interpreted as allurements, with retrocession to the condition of women's submission, as the women say they know what they want and what they can get, but they do it explicitly to follow the standards of a beautiful body. They basically manifest submission to norms and expectations, with reference to media models (*Big Brother*, *Sabrina*, etc.) or the concern about parts of the body (breasts, buttocks, belly, legs) or the ways to achieve the desired body (liposculpture, liposuction, silicone, etc.). Such reference identifies a way to relate with the body in an aggressive manner, as it reproduces and internalizes in women the male domination, via media, which subjugates and vulgarizes the female body.

Besides the aesthetic reasons, women say they practice body building also for wellness and health. We can say they believe in a project of empowerment, for life and work, for family and professional life. This project combines the ideas of Bourdieu about symbolic domination and the ideas of Badinter about the search for promising directions in the reorganization of one's universe.

Women from Rocinha: relations between body, identity and work

Abstract: The aim of this study with women from Rocinha, aged 16 to 34, who practice bodybuilding in a regular and assiduous way, is to analyze the way they represent themselves and the way they act in order to maintain their social and work places, through empowerment strategies. After participant observation, the content of 17 semi-structured interviews was analyzed. One realizes that women negotiate with the world, using their energies to grow and stay firm in their labor, taking care of the beauty of their bodies, as a strategy of body strengthening. They also consider bodybuilding as a key factor for improving the quality of life and for wellness.

Keywords: Women. Beauty culture. Gender identity. Labor market.

Mujeres de Rocinha: relaciones entre cuerpo, identidad y trabajo

Resumen: Este estudio con mujeres de Rocinha practicantes de musculación de forma regular y asidua, con edades entre 16 y 34 años, analizamos su papel en el mundo social, las expectativas en relación a sus cuerpos como marca de lugar en el mundo y las formas de continuar valorizadas en el trabajo. Después de la observación participante, procedemos con el análisis de 17 entrevistas semi-estructuradas. Constatamos que las mujeres usan la apariencia física y las energías para crecer y firmarse en el trabajo, desarrollando la belleza del cuerpo, como estrategias para fortalecer el ego. Ellas consideran también los ventajas del ejercicio para la salud y el bien estar.

Palabras-clave: Mujeres. Industria de la belleza. Identidad de género. Mercado de trabajo.

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Submitted on November 6, 2007

Approved on June 17, 2008