

## “ELEGANT FEMALE SILHOUETTES AND HARMONIOUS MALE FORMS”: INITIAL HISTORICAL APPROACHES ABOUT WOMEN AND PHYSICAL CULTURE IN MONTEVIDEO

“ELEGANTES SILHUETAS FEMININAS E HARMONIOSAS FORMAS VARONIS”: PRIMEIRAS APROXIMAÇÕES HISTÓRICAS SOBRE MULHERES E CULTURA FÍSICA EM MONTEVIDÉU [↗](#)

“ELEGANTES SILUETAS FEMENINAS Y LAS VARONILES FORMAS ARMONIOSAS”: PRIMEROS ACERCAMIENTOS HISTÓRICOS SOBRE MUJERES Y CULTURA FÍSICA EN MONTEVIDEO [↗](#)

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 **Alberto Noel Mallada Messeguer\*** <albertomallada2016@gmail.com>

 **Evelise Amgarten Quitzau\*** <equitzau@cup.edu.uy>

\*Centro Universitario Regional Norte. Sede Paysandu. Universidad de la Republica del Uruguay. Montevideo, Uruguay.

**Abstract:** In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Uruguay was undergoing important social changes. The country was apparently open to modernizing reforms, in a process of increasing urbanization, secularization and nationalization, especially in the Montevideo area. In this context, a series of policies and interventions focusing on the bodies of the population took place and saw physical exercise as an important element to strengthen those bodies and maintain health. This article is an initial approach to relations between women and physical culture in Uruguay, examining which practices were prescribed and/or forbidden to them in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through an analysis of regular and sports magazines published in the Montevideo area, we found the establishment of an ideal of woman – white, healthy, young and heterosexual – based especially on practices such as tennis and swimming.

**Keywords:** History. Sports. Women. Uruguay.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The academic field of History of Physical Education and Sport in Uruguay is one of ongoing construction. As from the 2000s, systematically dedicated research is conducted on this matter, with some Master's and Doctoral theses (DOGLIOTTI, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; PÉREZ, 2016; RODRÍGUEZ, 2012; RUGGIANO, 2016; SCARLATO, 2015) aiming to understand and explain the development of Physical Education and Sport in the Uruguayan context, specifically under what could be called an 'official' perspective based on several urbanism handbooks of common circulation during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This leaves a wide range of subjects and issues raised on Physical Education and Sport yet to be addressed from a historical perspective. Among them, there is gender in the sphere of Physical Education, seen by David Kirk (1999, p. 66) as "a specialized form of discourse around the production of meaning based on physical practices such as sport, recreation and exercise." Thus, the use of the concept of 'physical culture' provides an understanding of institutionalized physical practices that goes beyond their biological conception, as a field to observe different aspects around the cultural and social relationships (re)producing discourse on the body. These include gender relationships or, more specifically, the grounds on which different discourses have banned or prescribed women's participation in those practices.

Analyzing the epistemological issues around gender as a specific category when looking into history of sport, Silvana Goellner claims that

As an analytical tool, the term 'gender' made it possible to deconstruct a naturalized representation of the definition of men and women as masculine and feminine based on body differences... Above all, it enabled identifying that bodies, gesturalities, and the representations of health, beauty, performance and sexuality, are all historical constructions, which became related to men and/or women in different times and cultures and still produce representations of masculinities and femininities. (GOELLNER, 2007, p. 183)

Gender has been used in historical studies on sport in Latin American countries as a key to understanding how physical culture has contributed to the construction of different forms of masculinities and femininities. In Argentina, Pablo Scharagrodsky, for instance, demonstrated how a certain physical culture contributed to building certain hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity, emphatically based on a supposed superiority of the male body (SCHARAGRODSKY, 2006a; 2006b; 2014). In Brazil, Goellner (2000; 2003; 2007), demonstrated how physical exercise helped building the ideal of a healthy, white, heterosexual woman whose main life purposes are beauty, maternity and femininity.

In these contexts, an ideal of femininity constructed by certain discourses, especially around medical knowledge, has determined which practices would and would not suit women. And what about Uruguay? Which practices and prescriptions regarding physical culture and women could be observed in the first decades of the last century, in the midst of modernization and town planning, and cultural and social change?

This work is a first approach to the relationships between women and physical culture in Uruguay, looking into the practices they were either prescribed or banned from in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Magazines published in Montevideo during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were used for that. The search for records of that

relationship between physical culture and women for this first foray had to be set in such a vague and broad period due to an information void on this matter.

From the vast repertory of publications circulating in Uruguay in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> two main sets of magazines were selected. The first set consists of publications specialized in sport: **Rush: revista del deporte Uruguayo** [Rush: Uruguayan Sport Magazine] published weekly since 1934, illustrated with a great number of photographs; **Deportes: Revista nacional ilustrada** [Sport: National Illustrated magazine], published since 1930; and two others called **Sportsman**, the 1908 **Sportsman: Revista semanal ilustrada** [Sportsman: Weekly Illustrated Magazine] and 1916 **Sportsman: Semanario sportivo ilustrado** [Sportsman: Weekly Illustrated Sport Magazine]. The second set includes magazines of a more mundane nature, specifically the **Anales Mundanos** [Mundane Annals], a magazine edited in Uruguay between 1915 and 1953, initially characterized as an “album magazine of the Uruguayan society” which, in its chief editor César Álvarez Aguiar’s words (1915, p. 7), “[was] meant to [...] captivate the mind and spirit of those who can appreciate the virtue, intelligence, class and beauty of Uruguayan ladies, whose physical and moral images embellish Anales Mundanos’s pages”

## 2 MODELLING BODIES, BUILDING FEMININITIES

During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Gerardo Caetano’s words (2015, p. 22), Uruguay was a country which “seemed open to receiving and interpreting the impact of modern politics whose typical phenomena developed easily in that new, rather improvised country.” The process of modernization of the Uruguayan state, according to this author, occurred in six main areas: economic, social, rural, physical, moral, and political. According to Gianfranco Ruggiano (2016, p. 30), these transformations were favored by three factors: town planning, broader secularization, and nationalization.

The changes triggered by town planning and social reform impacted one way or another on every aspect of people’s lives, as they were the object of the new policies. In this sense, among the actions and policies derived from the process of modernization were those with a direct impact on the body, from the medical to the educational area. According to José Pedro Barrán (1995, p. 33), the then popular Social Hygiene Movement was part of “a behavior-moralizing scheme” aimed mainly at making the younger and more popular members of the society avoid “excess,” especially the carnal one. For this movement’s activists, control over one’s own body and especially its drives and desires was the key to health. The body then becomes the target of medicine’s and the government’s actions, and one of the ways sought to prevent discomfort and release these drives was physical exercise.

These structural changes came along with great social movements such as feminism. Looking into the feminist movement in the River Plate area, Amanda Gómez (2015) claims that, in South America’s Southern Cone, feminism mainly developed in capital cities from the contributions of women who had migrated to Latin America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Barrán (1995) states that, whereas feminist activism grew stronger in

<sup>1</sup> Many of these issues are available at Portal Anáforas, a website containing a collection of publications from Uruguay since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, created by the Information and Communication School (FIC/UdelaR). See: <http://anaforas.fic.edu.uy/jspui/proyecto>.

its fight for causes such as the place of women in the work market or abortion rights, the medical class, traditionally consisting of patriarchal members, aimed to determine femininity and masculinity – and hence what was prescribed to women and men – grounded mainly on the bodies' biological bases.

According to Barrán (1995, p. 97, emphasis in the original):

Breastfeeding used to be preached in the 1900s as a means to secure children's health, along with the dawn of feminist uprisings and the decay, due to different causes, of patriarchalism. Besides an obsession for the health of the 'race,' a typical value of the time, men's fear of women's 'liberation' from their traditional role and an urge to bind them back to it are observed.

These tensions, expressed and reflected on the bodies, impacted on their education as well. Ruggiano (2016) observes, from looking into town planning handbooks published in Uruguay in the 1900s, that what occurred was that

[...] the education of children's and women's bodies, among others, is always conveyed in terms of inequality and subordination to adult, urban, ruling men's bodies; generally speaking, it is an education of the body which allows us to identify and classify all forms of otherness that differ from what is perceived as oneself. (RUGGIANO, 2016, p. 113).

Such inequality is also shown by our sources of the same period. The magazine *Anales Mundanos* (1916) accounts for this situation in an article in its issue 9 called 'The Wife's Duties presented as a letter by Diderot, unknown until then, apparently taken from the Parisian paper 'Le Temps.' In the form of a letter from a father to a daughter who leaves home right after marriage, it highlights the wife's duties towards her husband, telling her to "make home so delightful for your husband, that he will have to regret to leave, if you are sweet, pleasing and joyful. Outside business is his, inside is yours" (DIDEROT, 1916, p. 16). In his remarks, she is given the possibility of some socialization though, provided her husband approves, implying that, in this relationship, sense and reason are exclusively his domain. By publishing this letter by such an important French writer and philosopher, *Anales Mundanos* reproduces a series of features which help build the hegemonic masculine and feminine roles in Uruguayan society, prescribing an ideal of woman who behaves submissively and under the ruling of her husband and established social mandates. This is how this woman of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century got limited in the different areas of her social life. These limitations are not only visible in the journal's texts, but also in their pictures, displaying the postures, clothing and activities allowed to and prescribed for women.

So far, the woman of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and her possibilities and limitations in the different areas of her life have been observed and reflected on. One of those areas, of major interest for this work, is physical culture. The works of Paola Dogliotti (2013) are taken here, which analyze education of the body in the training of Physical Education teachers and sport centers<sup>2</sup> from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, outlining certain tensions regarding the place given to women in sport centers. There, women were directly in charge of child care, given the spatial organization of the centers: there was an area for men and another one for women, which included the one spared for children under six of age. Such a design, therefore, reproduces the strong discourse of the time: the woman, in her role of mother, was seen by Hygiene Medicine as an important agent

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2 [Literally "Sports square", state, popular sport centers open to all public.]

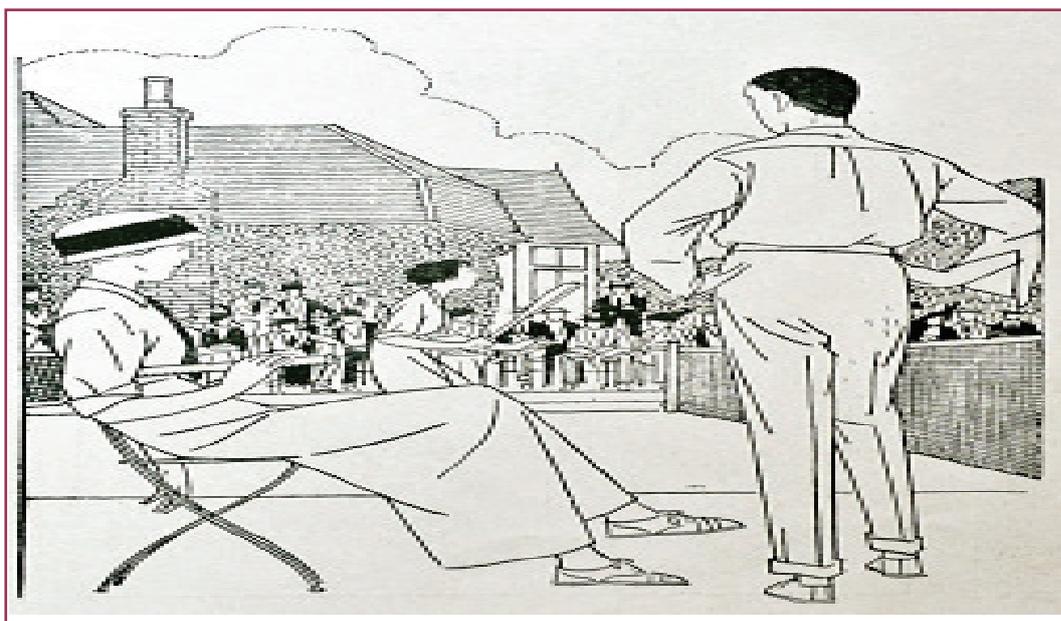
in health care, since her direct responsibility for children helped reduce child mortality by taking responsible, scientific care (LAVRIN, 2005, p. 140). Sport centers reproduced and reinforced the symbiosis that should exist between mother and children, contributing to limit her access to other areas of physical culture.

Despite these limitations, several sources include women in some sport practices such as tennis, as mentioned in several issues of *Anales Mundanos*, which include pictures and texts highlighting its benefits for women. In its article “El Tennis,” included in issue 6 of 1915, that sport is said to be possibly a “passing craze,” having become suddenly and curiously popular but doomed to eventually fall from grace soon after, due to the “unsporting history” of the Uruguayan society. For its author, tennis was an exception, as everybody – children, youngsters and adult men and women from all social classes – could practice it. But not all would play it anywhere: whereas the high classes played tennis in the aristocratic Pocitos or Mrs Williams’s courts, the rest of the population attended popular sports centers.

This sport had several advantages such as “nicely bringing the sexes together, distanced until now with a tough attitude, and thus fostering a more intense and reasonable social activity” (EL TENNIS, 1915, p. 11). This togetherness holds a notorious difference with respect to Dogliotti’s analysis (2013) of men’s and women’s separate areas at sport centers. At least in the environment of that Montevideo elite portrayed by *Anales Mundanos*, tennis made a great impact, promoting not only their physical development but also bringing men and women together. (See Picture 1)

Another advantage of this sport refers to the hygiene, interest and appeal which other sports lack, considering that its moves, if well performed, “highlight the elegant female silhouettes and harmonious male forms” (EL TENNIS, 1915, p. 11). Women were therefore encouraged to practice tennis, since it helped build the image sought at the time, of an ‘elegant’ and ‘feminine’ look.

Picture 1 – “El tennis”



ANALES MUNDANOS, 1915, no. 6, p. 11. Portal Anáforas archive.

Picture 2 – Sports



ANALES MUNDANOS, 1915, no. 3, p. 26. Portal Anáforas archive.

As shown by Pictures 1 and 2, the clothing worn by women was certainly not chosen because of its comfort to play tennis, as this 'uniform' would clearly limit their movements, as opposed to Picture 3, showing well-known US tennis player Hellen Wills, which illustrated an article on international tennis published by *Deportes* in 1930.

Picture 3 – International tennis today



DEPORTES, 1930, no. 5, p. 3. Portal Anáforas archive.

The garment worn by this famous tennis player who appeared in *Deportes* as well as the one worn by the women playing tennis in the pictures from *Anales Mundanos* are worth noticing. Carmen Lucia Soares (2011) claims that from the 1920s onwards women's fashion contributed to transform aesthetic and moral values, besides becoming a sign of class. In her words,

*Sports* are also adjoined in outfits and, if a sport's outfit is designed and sold, if it creates a specific market for both sexes, it also creates distinction between such sexes. Hence, for women, fashion in general — including sports fashion — has always been more emphatic in the ‘elegance’ item (SOARES, 2011, p. 88, emphasis in original).

In the case of tennis in Uruguay, the priority of elegance over comfort when it comes to sports clothing is evident. It is interesting to observe, however, that whereas Anales Mundanos portrays women playing tennis in long dresses, the specialized journal *Deportes* shows US sportswoman Wills in a shorter, apparently more comfortable garment, surely allowing for freer, more efficient movements during the game.

The texts on tennis bring up aspects defining what would be feminine, which are also taken by authors from other countries. Goellner (2000) analyses pictures of women's bodies from the Brazilian Journal *Educação Physica* [Physical Education], published between 1932 and 1945, and draws three specific points: beauty, maternity and femininity. On beauty, he sees it as a result conquered by individual effort and through hard, constant work under the recommendations and advice given by said journal. On maternity, Goellner claims the journal implies its social function, a goal, a natural event: the body must be healthy and strong as it must serve society, and must accept certain constraints aiming to protect its feminine features and preserve its fertility.

A similar image of the woman is found in Uruguayan sources, also pouring with discourses on beauty, femininity and maternity, clearly linked to upbringing, housework and care, sharply illustrated in this article from the sports journal *Rush* of 1934, called ‘Fútbol coreográfico femenino’ [Female Choreographic Football], including information and pictures about a female football game in Madrid, Spain, featuring it as “a foreign curiosity.” Here, two aspects become paramount: the term “choreographic” and a description of the game including the expression “agile, pretty legs championship.” (Picture 4). These two points illustrate the importance of beauty – her “pretty legs” – and femininity – calling the sport “a choreography” – implying that women's practices should be feminine, subtle and beautiful. While it highlights the appropriate, desirable attributes of a woman, the description of the match gives away the author's value judgment and certain extent of objectification of these women “become footballers”:

As we were told, let's agree the game was tight and hard-fought at all times which, when it comes to showgirls, should come as no surprise. ‘A totally revolutionary game strategy was shown in the match, we are warned. It seems anything goes for the beauties of Eslava and Cervantes, now become footballers... and for the spectators, who would at times fancy a bite. (FÚTBOL COREOGRÁFICO FEMENINO, 1934, p. 2)

**Picture 4** – Female Choreographic Football: [caption: A moment from the tight game where the girl cracks flaunted their class and gorgeous shape]



RUSH, 1934, no. 41, p. 2. Portal Anáforas archive.

Goellner (2000), on the Brazilian context, claims that all three aspects – beauty, femininity, maternity – help build the image of a young, white, healthy, heterosexual, middle-class woman for whom physical and sport activities, apart from contributing to her health, represent a social exercise to position her in male-controlled spaces. In this spirit, and supported by some scientific arguments of the time, several articles from *Educação Physica* prescribed swimming as the best sport for women, as its technique does not demand too much burnout or an overdeveloped muscle structure. Along with swimming, dance is highly recommended, then considered the activity which best enhances all three attributes of women’s femininity.

These practices prescribed and recommended for Brazilian women did not differ from the ones in Uruguay. The journal *Deportes*, in its article ‘Interesante clase de natación’ [Interesting Swimming Class] plays its role through pictures and texts on this practice in Britain. What stands out, though, is that it promotes this discipline not on medical or hygienic grounds, but as an attraction to male audiences, referring to swimmers as “having a showgirl’s anatomy, and we know what that means to our River Plate audiences...” and stating that “any of these swimmers would make our major arenas put up the “sold out” sign just by showing herself in her swimsuit” (INTERESANTE CLASE DE NATACIÓN, 1930, p. 10). Were women’s femininity and, to a more extreme extent, their bodies’ objectification the only points of women in sport? Could sport develop their physical strength outside the ruling femininity model?

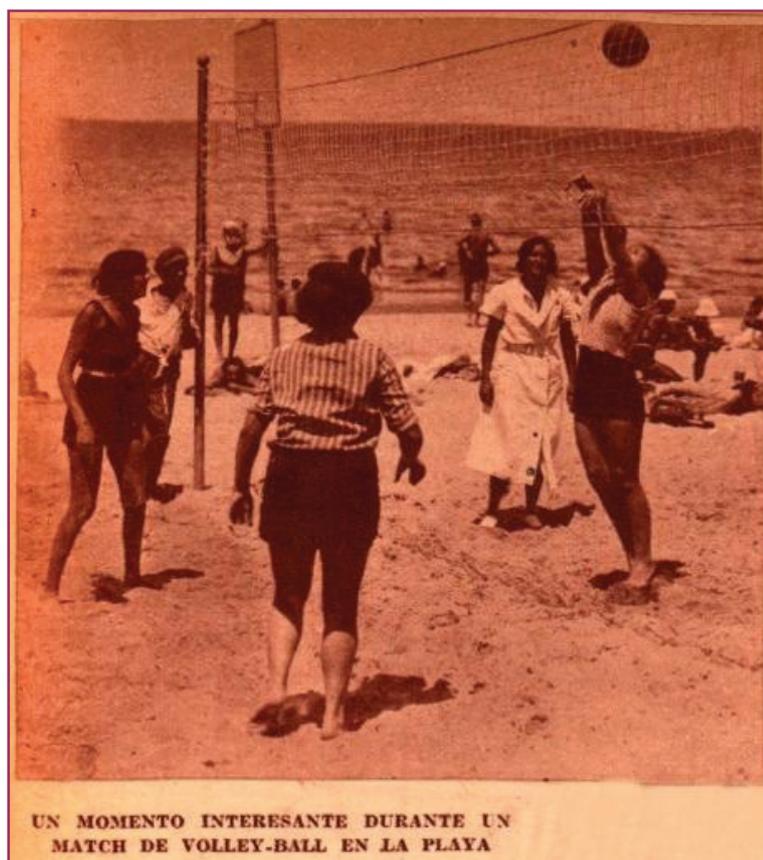
In the 1930s, a “modern woman” model arises, accounted for in *Anales Mundanos’s* article ‘La mujer en el deporte’ [Women in Sport], for instance. Though features like grace and elegance are used to describe this woman who “succeeds with charming simplicity” (LA MUJER EN EL DEPORTE, 1937, p. 38), there is a certain emphasis put on a desire for change in these women keen to “beat distances” or “show the arrogance of the new century Amazon.” In this case, they are no longer shown in their elegant tennis outfits or revealing swimsuits emphasizing their “feminine lines.” Instead, they are portrayed in dominant postures, in control of horses, cars or yachtes.

The changes referred to by said article are reflected not only by the three pictures illustrating it – a woman riding a horse, another one driving a car, and a third one sailing a boat – but also in its text, reading “there is a deep-rooted feeling in all humans, and mainly in women, which is a drive for change, for breaking the given monotony and conquering new lands of innovative freshness for their own eyes and souls” (LA MUJER EN EL DEPORTE, 1937, p. 38).

Along with this new realm where women were allowed, it is interesting to point out the article ‘El deportivo femenino Capurro es un club de verdad’ [Capurro Female Sporting is a Real Club] included in a 1934 issue of *Rush*, introducing the activities held at said summer resort by the Capurro Club, the first all-women club since YWCA. The article applauds such initiatives as they promote enriching activities while most beaches had no spaces spared for sports and recreation. Texts and pictures in the article show several sports such as volleyball, tennis, basketball, hockey, athletics, and swimming. Together with the implementation of these practices, a set of habits is encouraged, which entice “women to rebel against stillness and take over the beaches to do sport” (EL DEPORTIVO FEMENINO CAPURRO ES UN CLUB DE VERDAD, 1934, p. 12). (See Picture 5).

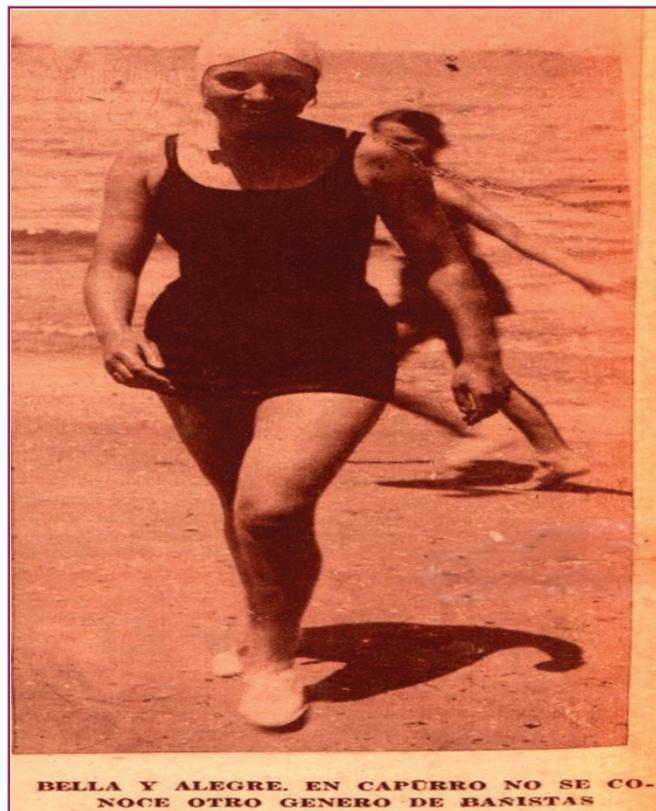
An aspect worth pointing out here is the position of man, given by the text and pictures, and implied by the excellent idea of placing basketball hoops on beaches, as it allows gentlemen to “lie for a sleep” below, adding to the female sport practice the element of “the others’ look,” thus introducing the question: does this hinder women’s physical practices?

**Picture 5** – El deportivo femenino Capurro es un club de verdad. [caption: An interesting moment during a beach volley game]



Source: RUSH, 1934, no. 30, p. 12. Portal Anáforas archive.

**Picture 6** – El deportivo femenino Capurro es un club de verdad. [caption: Pretty and joyful, no other kind of swimmer is known at Capurro]



Source: RUSH, 1934, no. 30, p. 13). Acervo: Portal Anáforas

At a first glance, these male looks do not condition women's sport practices at Capurro beach. Picture 5 shows a group of women playing beach volleyball; yet if examined more closely, by the net pole and the basketball hoop those male looks appear.

On land or at sea, these "pretty and joyful" ladies are empowered with vindication, unbound by men's watch. The sport activities performed have helped them develop not only physically but also on a social level, as clearly shown by the article, making Capurro beach a place worth being reproduced elsewhere, as promoted by Rush in said two-page article: "the project is vast and surely worthy of the honors of our mentioning on many occasions" (EL DEPORTIVO FEMENINO CAPURRO ES UN CLUB DE VERDAD, 1934, p. 13). (See Picture 6).

Along the lines of said article from Rush, Maria Paula Bontempo (2016) analyzes some points made in Argentinian magazine 'Para Ti' [For You] of 1922, more specifically in its article 'La cultura física en la mujer' [Physical Culture in Women] by Dr. César Sánchez Azicorbe, recognizing and promoting physical culture and sport for women. In her words, Dr. Azicorbe "joins the ranks of those doubting women's weakness and, in turn, adds certain moral values as grounds for their 'emancipation'" (BONTEMPO, 2016, p. 335). Such values, aimed at reinforcing women's place in society, are also drawn from an analysis of the Uruguayan magazine Deportes, and its 1930 article 'Una de las más bellas atletas del orbe' [One of the Most Beautiful Athletes in the World], featuring Italian Marina Zanetti – depicted by the journal as one of the

best discus throwers of her time and a relentless activist for women’s development in sports – highlighting the importance of sports for women. She is critical of Italian physical culture which, when it comes to women, limits them to a couple of gym sessions a week and “no organized sports, championships or school tournaments” (UNA DE LAS MÁS BELLAS ATLETAS DEL ORBE, 1930, p. 1). Zanetti advocates the presence of women in sports and their right to actively participate in the sports world, and her words reaching the Uruguayan press mean a great deal of support to women’s strive and participation in sport on a competitive level. In this sense, she encourages them to fight against the inequalities clearly faced when compared with men’s possibilities to perform any given physical practice.

### 3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This work is a first historical approach to questions about women and physical culture in Uruguay, more specifically in Montevideo. Covering a broad period, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1930s, it is an attempt to identify which physical practices were available to women in this country in said period. The analysis of common and more specialized publications unveiled a series of discourses which, in general, sought to build and reinforce an ideal woman very close to the one also observed in other countries such as Argentina and Brazil: a healthy, young, white, heterosexual woman ruled by hegemonic discourses highlighting her attributes of beauty, femininity and elegance, which must be developed by means of the physical practices allowed and prescribed for her.

This ideal, present throughout most of the sources analyzed, must be attained through certain practices such as tennis and swimming. Uruguay also holds local records of women sailing, horseback riding, driving, practicing athletics, minigolf, volleyball, gymnastics and hockey, as well as records of female participation in football, cross country and athletics from other countries. Meanwhile though, during those attempts of building an ideal of woman, some new discourses appear, from the 1930s mainly, linking women to modernity and a wish for change, implying possible transformation towards this ideal woman and widening the scope of female physical culture in Uruguay.

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**Resumo:** O Uruguai do início do século XX passava por grandes transformações sociais, mostrando-se como um país bastante aberto para reformas modernizadoras, em um processo de crescente urbanização, secularização e nacionalização, especialmente na área de Montevidéu. Nesse cenário, uma série de políticas e intervenções tinham sua centralidade nos corpos da população e consideravam os exercícios físicos como um elemento importante para seu fortalecimento e para a manutenção de sua saúde. O objetivo deste artigo é fazer uma primeira aproximação ao tema das relações entre mulheres e cultura física no Uruguai, indagando sobre quais práticas lhes eram prescritas e/ou proibidas no início do século XX. A partir da análise de revistas mundanas e esportivas publicadas na área de Montevidéu, pode-se perceber a construção de um ideal de mulher branca, saudável, jovem, heterossexual a partir de práticas principalmente como o tênis e a natação.

**Palavras chave:** Palavras-chave: História. Esportes. Mulheres. Uruguai.

**Resumen:** El Uruguay del inicio del siglo XX pasaba por una gran transformación social y se mostraba como un país bastante abierto para reformas modernizadoras, en un proceso de creciente urbanización, secularización y nacionalización, especialmente en el área de Montevideo. En este escenario, una serie de políticas e intervenciones tenía enfoque en los cuerpos de la población y consideraba los ejercicios físicos como un elemento importante para su fortalecimiento y para la mantención de su salud. Nuestro objetivo es hacer un primer acercamiento al tema de las relaciones entre mujeres y cultura física en Uruguay, indagando sobre cuales prácticas les eran prescriptas y/o prohibidas a comienzos del siglo XX. Partiendo del análisis de revistas mundanas y deportivas publicadas en el área de Montevideo, se puede percibir la construcción de un ideal de mujer blanca, sana, joven y heterossexual a partir de prácticas como el tenis y la natación, principalmente

**Palabras clave:** Historia. Deportes. Mujeres. Uruguay. Cultura física.