

# ***One System, Several Cultures: A Comparative Study of Swedish Gymnastics for Women***

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## **Abstract**

In many countries at the end of the nineteenth century, there were discussions about the applicability of the various gymnastics systems, especially in relation to their relevance for schoolgirls. In this connection, Swedish gymnastics was often the system that prevailed, in preference to other national systems. The success of the system belongs in many ways to the efforts pioneers of Swedish female gymnastics, who travelled to other countries with qualifications from the GCI in Stockholm and a vision about contributing to “the modern-woman project”. From about the 1880s they made concerted efforts to create a new profession for young women: school-mistresses and female gymnastics teachers. The purpose of the article to get a differentiated understanding of the contribution of Swedish gymnastics and female gymnastics teachers to “the modern-woman project” at the end of the nineteenth century. Through two oases the article analyses how Swedish gymnastics was introduced in England and Denmark in different ways for middle-class, working-class and rural girls. This comparison gives the opportunity to judge whether successes were due to the system itself or to the professional women’s efforts, or a combination of the two.

## **Introduction**

because in all the kingdoms and countries of gymnastics, the Swedish – with its physiological basis, with its systems and dogmas, with its formula and tables, and its completely stiff and static appearance – is the most doctrinaire of the doctrinaire, the worst of all bad schools.<sup>1</sup>

This was the sharp comment of the Danish doctor Sigfred Levy in July 1899 on the introduction of Swedish gymnastics in the Danish municipal schools. With the publication of the *Haandbogen* of 1899 girls again had compulsory physical education.<sup>2</sup> His complaint was that the physical education regulations were based on the idea that a ‘girl is but a *weaker* and *frailer* boy in skirts’. Levy would have preferred that girls’ physical education was based on the ‘national work’ of Danish gymnastics instructor Paul Petersen (1845-1906), which had been developed since the 1870s taking into account so-called ‘female characteristics’.<sup>3</sup>

A few days before Levy’s article was published, the Swedish gymnastics teacher Madame Bergman-Österberg (1849-1915) argued at the Women’s International Congress in London that ‘of all gymnastics systems’, the Swedish one was the best on account of its scientific basis, and because it always made allowances for the physical possibilities of the individual.<sup>4</sup> Bergman-Österberg was one of the first, and certainly the best known, female

Swedish teacher, who went abroad to propagate Swedish gymnastics after her training at *Kungliga Gymnastika Centralinstitut* (GCI) in Stockholm. In her lecture in 1899, she spoke against the background of many years' success with the introduction of Swedish gymnastics in the London municipal schools and the establishment of training for female teachers at her college.

In many countries at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a discussion about the applicability of the various gymnastics systems, especially in relation to their relevance for schoolgirls. In this context, Swedish gymnastics was often the system that won, in preference to other national systems. The first generation of pioneers was to be found among doctors and progressive school leaders and teachers.<sup>5</sup> But it was not until the 1880s that a serious beginning was made to create a new profession for young women: school-mistresses and female gymnastics teachers. Here, the efforts of the Swedish female gymnastics directors were of a pioneering nature, as they travelled to other countries with qualifications from the GCI in Stockholm and a vision about contributing to the 'modern-woman project'.<sup>6</sup>

This article focuses on the education of middle-class women in particular, and the incorporation of social and health norms for all girls, in the second half of the nineteenth century. If one is to understand why Swedish gymnastics achieved the great importance it did, we need to study the implementation of Swedish gymnastics in different parts of the world. In an on-going project, I am making a comparative analysis, because I hope to get a differentiated understanding of the contribution of Swedish gymnastics and woman gymnastics-teachers to 'the modern-woman project' at the end of the nineteenth century. I have analysed how Swedish gymnastics was introduced in the USA, England and Denmark in different ways for middle-class, working-class and country girls. In this article I do not include the USA.

I will present two cases – written on the basis of a few pioneers' contributions: two Swedish female gymnastics teachers, Martina Bergman-Österberg and Sally Högström. Both of them travelled abroad to promote Swedish gymnastics. While Bergman-Österberg introduced the system in England for working-class girls and middle- and upper-class young women, Sally Högström did the same for country girls in Denmark. The analyses, in the words of the quotation at the beginning of the article, will help to understand how this 'doctrinaire system' could be used with different cultures and classes. This comparison gives me the opportunity to judge whether this success was due to the system itself or with the professional women's efforts, or a combination of the two. The focus in the paper thus will be on two main problems:

1. Why did Swedish gymnastics, an apparently sex-neutral gymnastics system succeed at a time when femininity was being taken very seriously? and
2. What constituted the educational and cultural project of the professional women?

### **A New Era of Education, Hygiene and Swedish Gymnastics**

Where, broadly speaking, the private space, the home, had been the site for girls' education until the middle of the nineteenth century, the school now came to the fore as a new arena for socialisation and control. Girls' education, it was thought, should help to ensure among other things that girls received a decent training that could give them a basis for choosing between marriage and independence. The male monopoly on knowledge was to be broken and space was to be made for 'superfluous women', those without private means, those unprovided for, those who were ignorant, unmarried and who belonged to the middle-class.<sup>7</sup> The need for education thus paved the way for a new group of professional educationalists: female teachers. This educative project contained an interesting and perhaps for the time a general ambivalence. These essentially middle-class virtues were primarily promoted to the uneducated, while those who had a middle-class education could seek further challenges.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of the century, there was a change in the way the world was perceived: the idealistic and firmly structured image of humanity was replaced by a more materialistic, biological image, and religious explanations were replaced by scientific ones. With regard to the individual's self-perception, this resulted in ambiguity:

On the one hand, the social links that had previously inhibited the individual's mobility and free development were broken, on the other hand, new links were forged, because the individual was regarded as a product of the laws of nature.<sup>9</sup>

For women, the cleavage between these contrasts was particularly pronounced and could be seen in various emancipation strategies, here defined as promoting inner and outer emancipation. Common for the two strategies was that they were both based on education and the acquisition of civil rights. Inner emancipation refers to a view of the role of housewife and mother as the central role for women, where the importance of education should be seen as qualifying women within the setting of the home. In this context, knowledge and understanding about health and hygiene had great importance. Outer emancipation, on the other hand, is based on a struggle for equal rights with men – outside the home, too.

Physical education was introduced as a compulsory school subject, for both boys and girls, in Sweden in 1842, but it was not until 1861 that women could take an examination as teachers, and only when a course for women was established at GCI in 1864, could women take an examination as physical education teachers.<sup>10</sup> The reason for the growth of the interest in physical education for girls had many similarities with the situation in other countries, and was in particular linked to a recognition of girls' weak state of health and general hygienic problems. For example, anaemia was registered three times as frequently in girls as in boys.<sup>11</sup> The need to improve for health was emphasised, and the Swedish system offered something else that was in

keeping with the quest of the time for scientific and rational explanations.<sup>12</sup> The collective, forming exercises of the system were to be adapted to the individual body and the result could be measured in its harmonious development, and not, as in sport, by the result. But the body in Swedish gymnastics was a uni-sex body, a male body, which, in Levy's words, just regarded girls as weaker and frailer men. Thus, the system was based on a 'single-sex' perception of body and gender. This corresponded to contemporay perceptions of both men and women, and the scientific construction of the particularly *feminine*.<sup>13</sup> Earlier pioneers, among them the Danish gymnastics instructor Paul Petersen, had developed more movement-oriented gymnastics, which he found suited both contemporay ideas of femininity and the demands for physical activity. This and other forms of gymnastics which had developed nationally were for a time displaced by what Levy called the 'doctrinaire' Swedish system, although they were more enjoyable. What constituted the particular potential of the Swedish system in connection with *the modern-woman project*?

### **Case 1: Martina Bergman-Österberg and English Working Class and Middle Class Girls**

Martina Bergman was born in 1849. She studied gymnastics in Switzerland, Germany, France and England before she was enrolled in GCI in 1879 at the mature age of thirty. At the GCI, she acquired a theoretical knowledge of Swedish gymnastics through anatomy, physiology and hygiene, movements and general teaching theory. She passed her examination in 1881. After this, she went to London in continuation of the work of the Physical education teacher Concordia Löfving.<sup>14</sup> Here began a completely new chapter in her life and in the development of physical education for girls. In 1886, she married Professor Edvin Per Vilhelm Österberg, and afterwards was best known by the name Madame Bergman-Österberg.<sup>15</sup>

In an interview in the *Woman's Herald* on 20 June 1891, she spoke about her views of women's emancipation. She considered it natural that women should have the right to vote, and believed it was crucially important that they had equal access with men to the professions, just as she pointed out that financial independence was of the greatest importance if general emancipation was to be attained. But this could only be achieved, if women had a healthy physique, as the basis for effective efforts in other fields. She thus fought for outer emancipation with the development of women's physical health as a crucial precondition.

What was Madame Bergman-Österberg confronted with when she arrived in London? At that time, London was a centre of England's second industrial revolution and its consequences, with poverty and pollution widespread. Like most other places in the industrialised world, experiments had been made in England with physical activity for girls, too, since the middle of the century. Several social reformers had pointed out the need of reforms since the 1850s, and many considered that Swedish gymnastics had certain advantages, especially for the poor.<sup>16</sup> The English historian Sheila

Fletcher points out that the period from 1870 was in general a time of renaissance in girls' education. In those years a number of middle-class institutions were founded, without which Madame Österberg's crusade would not have had a base.<sup>17</sup> However, it was not the middle-class girls who were the starting point for Martina Bergman. On the contrary, she started with working-class girls in the municipal schools. Bergman-Österberg taught from morning to evening and began training female teachers, one from each school. When she came to London in 1881, eighteen female teachers had been examined in gymnastics. When she left the London School Board in 1887, Swedish gymnastics had been introduced into 300 municipal schools and 700 female teachers had been trained and issued with a certificate.<sup>18</sup>

In the lecture mentioned above given in 1899, *Physical Training as a Profession*, Madame Österberg expounded her ideas about the importance of physical education and its social role on the one hand, and the need for professional teachers on the other. Physical education and training, she said, should begin in childhood and continue throughout life. The importance was not in the actual exercises, but in the combination of exercises and hygiene. Not all children, however, had the same need for systematic training, as it was not absolutely necessary for healthy children with lots of outdoor activity. She recommended, that all children should have physical exercise, as school undermined the laws of nature that a child should move. In this way, unfortunate sedentary habits arose which systematic exercises could prevent but not cure. On the same occasion, she criticised the excesses of games, because the exercises were both too hard and too long, thereby contributing to the weakness of the body.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of Swedish gymnastics was health, and competition was ruled out. Teachers must understand, she said, that human beings were morally, mentally and physically a unit and not a trinity, and that weakness in the body was reflected in the soul. The private schools with their middle-class and upper-class girls also did Swedish gymnastics, but there gymnastics had a much less central role in the total programme, and was more a supplement to various games. Gymnastics was therefore introduced and implemented with different intentions for working-class girls and middle-class girls. Gymnastics helped to 'ennoble' the participants in the class to which they belonged.

Like her predecessor, Löfving, Madame Österberg, made use of displays for particularly influential people. For instance, in 1883 she held a display with 100 poor London girls for clergymen and the Prince and Princess of Wales, and Jennifer Hargreaves emphasises that through this, the class division was symbolised and consolidated.<sup>20</sup>

Physical education for girls was deemed necessary because it was part of motherhood training. To improve the upbringing of the poor, it was a crucial precondition to producing qualified female teachers and thus developing a proper profession for women.<sup>21</sup> The arguments in favour of women teaching girls was linked to the idea that women better understood the strengths and weaknesses of their own sex. Madame Österberg led in the creation a platform for women in education and a new profession for women.<sup>22</sup>

Proper female teacher training in gymnastics first started in England in 1885, when Madame Österberg founded the *Hampstead Physical Training College*. As she later recounted, she worked constantly at improving the physical development of middle- and upper-class women. However not all women were potential candidates for Madame Österberg's educational project. She pointed out that she had been mistakenly given the reputation that she could make a woman out of every girl. 'I cannot do that', she said.<sup>23</sup> She wanted women with the best female characteristics, as only the best would be good enough for her profession. She wanted women with brains as well as character. 'Send me girls with heart to understand woman's physical difficulties; send them with brain to understand me and my plans; and send them, above all, with the will and enthusiasm to serve and help woman whenever and however she needs helping'.<sup>24</sup> If emancipation was to succeed, the fighters at the front had to be physically healthy women which working-class women were not. According to Madame Österberg:

the physique of this class was so lowered and impaired by neglect and by bad conditions of housing, food and clothing, that unless the conditions could be changed, no radical improvement could be effected.<sup>25</sup>

Studying letters in the Dartford archive, I was able to discern how the pupils' background and qualifications were thoroughly investigated before they were admitted. The training was primarily aimed at middle- and upper-class girls aged between eighteen and thirty, although most were around eighteen years old. The course lasted two years, and for some of the youngest girls, it could last three years. Several did the course for the sake of their health. Before they enrolled, the women had to undergo a medical examination and, of course, the use of corsets was forbidden.<sup>26</sup>

The daily rhythm at the school, along with fixed rules, did not give the pupils many opportunities for independent activity. Letters and accounts from pupils at Dartford show how many found the beginning particularly difficult. A few talk cried themselves to sleep, because the exercises hurt, they were tired all the time and Madame Österberg was very strict. If the pupils did not behave properly, she could say, for instance, 'It shows what sort of Home you come from'.<sup>27</sup> But life at college was made up of more than stressful experiences. One pupil, Anna Pagan, also relates how they made life-long friendships at the College, which meant that it was hard to say goodbye, because they had been through so many activities with each other. And of course they gained experience and qualifications. Anna Pagan praised Madame Österberg for her 'glorious gym lesson'. Madame Österberg was a dominating woman with strong views. She lectured, for instance, on the dullness and self-centeredness of the English people, which she warned against, as the result could be that 'You KILL the Swedish with your dullness'.<sup>28</sup> Attitudes were worked on in both activities and the social sphere. Professionalism, social life and useful knowledge went hand in hand.

In spite of Madame Österberg's critical comments about the possibilities of excess in games, she regarded the combination of English games and Swedish gymnastics as the perfect training system for young people.<sup>29</sup> Thus she understood how to develop gymnastics in a dialogue with the English cultural context where games had such a great importance. The fact, that so much could be achieved in such a short period was primarily due to several circumstances:

1. The socially created necessity for the healthy and hygienic upbringing of 'the uneducated' classes.
2. The system was cheap (no equipment), easy to learn (a form of drill) and the female teachers could command many pupils at the same time.
3. The system contained a ritual strength that lay at the heart of the collective exercises – and the ritual and discipling power was made visible in displays.
4. Education for middle-class girls was put on the right track.
5. The scientific character of the system gave it great authority.

Thus, Swedish gymnastics seemed to offer solutions to the topical problems of the time, and the 'scientific character' suited the social-Darwinist project for national fitness. Jennifer Hargreaves points out that Swedish gymnastics was perhaps better than other systems in apparently solving so many contemporary problems.<sup>30</sup> Madame Österberg and her training also created a profession for girls of the upper classes, who, with the time-tabled day, established norms, rules and professional knowledge, received a solid ballast to pass on middle-class virtues and knowledge about health and hygiene. This ensured, in Richard Holt's words, that they could go out and improve 'the racial quality of the elite'.<sup>31</sup>

### **Case 2: Sally Högström, Swedish Gymnastics and Peasant Girls**

In Denmark, gymnastics suffered for most of the nineteenth century from the lack of qualified teachers, and it was not until 1898 that Denmark got advanced training in gymnastics with the establishment of the One-Year Gymnastics Course under the State Teachers Course. Here women, too, were trained for the profession of physical education teachers in the framework of the public sector.<sup>32</sup> There have been many previous attempts by A.G. Drachmann, Paul Petersen, Natalie Zahle and others in the private sector, with both the teaching of girls and women and the training of the female teachers.<sup>33</sup>

Before Sally Högström came to Vallekilde Folk High School, gymnastics for girls had been established in various institutes and private schools, and there was a broad agreement about its importance. But it was not the institutes, the municipal schools or the clubs that gave Swedish

gymnastics its real breakthrough in Denmark; it was the Danish folk high school.

In 1884, Swedish gymnastics had been successfully introduced at Vallekilde Folk High School for men.<sup>34</sup> The principal Ernst Trier was very enthusiastic, and he wanted to introduce gymnastics for girls too. Ernst Trier wrote to Sweden and asked a female teacher, Lilly Engström, to recruit him a woman teacher of Swedish gymnastics who:

on the one hand is versed in Ling's gymnastics and the lovely, splendid regard he had for physical exercises, and on the other hand has such a sense for Danish life and its growth, that she would be able to be comfortable with and be happy to live in a Danish folk high school that is led according to Grundtvig's ideas. She will not be able to do anything here unless she is simple in the way she presents herself, if she does not have a sense for our folk high school work, if she cannot fight according to the circumstances and fall in with what happens here in the school, and is the main matter around which all of us who work here must unite.<sup>35</sup>

Since, according to Sally Högström's book *Minnen från Danmark* (Memories from Denmark), Lilly Engström did not know any other female teachers, she was sent to *Vallekilde Folk High School* in 1884. At that time she did not have 'the slightest idea what a folk high school was or who Grundtvig was'. She thought, 'I will be told about that when I come there', and she wrote that the most important thing for her was to go abroad. Where Martina Bergman started a job that in many ways was unpredictable in introducing Swedish gymnastics to the London municipal schools, the job that Sally Högström was thrown into was of quite a different and clearer nature.

Sally Högström was born in Stockholm in 1863 and passed her examination in the GCI in 1883. She was thus only twenty years old when she came to Denmark, and vividly describes in *Minnen från Danmark* her meeting with the folk high school and life in the school, which, in the space of a very short time, she helped to change. In the long term, her short stay had decisive and wide-ranging significance for the development of Danish women's gymnastics, especially in the rural districts. This can be seen by the fact that at the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912, the Danish King Christian X awarded her the Danish gold medal for her contribution to gymnastics in Denmark.

What did Sally Högström find when she came to Vallekilde? The form of school to which Sally Högström came was the Danish folk high school, which had developed from its beginnings in Rødning in 1844. It was inspired by the ideas on popular enlightenment and education of the poet and clergyman N. F. S. Grundtvig.<sup>36</sup> The schools were founded on private initiative and the purpose was to use an 'educational-cultural break' of three to five months to give farmers' children a chance to be *enlightened*, which could help

to qualify them as members of a class of self-aware democratic citizens. The young people lived at the schools, which were a great success.<sup>37</sup> The aim of the stay was not primarily the acquisition of precise knowledge, but to a greater degree, the development of personality through dialogue between pupils and teachers and through immersion in literature and history, all without an exam of any kind. Almost no books were used in the folk high schools, and the pupils read little. Enlightenment was by means of the living word in inspirational lectures and dialogue. The farming community wanted to be educated and learn about culture but *on their own terms*. Women usually attended the high school for only three months in summer, the young men for five (more rarely six) winter months. The young people were adolescents, on the verge of adulthood (16-20 years old). Some teachers found that this stage was particularly suitable to 'start on academic pursuits'. According to Grundtvig, this was wrong, as he found this age group was better suited to 'the inner life'. The perception of the body and human beings on which many high schools were based was often characterised by a Christian morality, which in many ways clashed with the urge of the young people for fun and exercise.<sup>38</sup> Gymnastics had been on the programme of the schools from 1844, but it was not until 1872 that girls began to do gymnastics in *Testrup Folk High School*. This was inspired by the Danish Dr Drachmann's development gymnastics.<sup>39</sup>

Sally Högström's stay was influential as can be illustrated with quotations from her book. She relates that on her arrival at the school, she had to pass 'through the "dung heap", which was not so pleasant'. She was well received by Trier as well as all the 'peeping girls' faces' in the windows, and she was lodged in a small room in the house of one of the school's teacher families, with a straw mattress on the bed. At the summer school in 1884, there were 188 pupils: 99 farmers' daughters, 55 small holders' daughters, 24 from tradesmen's families and ten who were daughters of civil servants or teachers.<sup>40</sup> Pupils and servants addressed her with the informal 'you' and never, as she had been used to, as 'Miss'. Meals were eaten with the pupils and servants.

Porridge and soup were eaten by six people from the same bowl or pile. I sat at Trier's table and at the first dinner he said to me: 'You as a stranger have to have your own plate'. I thought: If I now take my own plate, I probably will not fit in with the situation here. So I answered: 'No, thank you, and ate from the bowl with the rest'.<sup>41</sup>

At the end of the summer course, there was an outbreak of scarlet fever among the pupils and Trier was worried, but Sally Högström explained that this was not so strange when everyone 'ate from the same dish'. Trier understood the problem and promised that if she would return the following summer, he would make sure that everyone had her own plate.

Sally Högström not only tried to improve the general hygienic situation, but she also worked with the girls' personal hygiene and their physical development. In her preliminary inspection of the girls' backs, she noted that they 'were quite grimy'. There were no gym clothes either and 'most had no idea about gymnastics, it was like cutting stone, and a whole lot of them were afraid that it was something unfeminine! So it was a struggle against generally held prejudice'.<sup>42</sup> The room for gymnastics was also inadequate. When one reads Högström's account, it is easy to understand the girls' enthusiasm for gymnastics, because after they had done the course, they 'got longer waists' and the 'distance from the chin to the waist was longer'. Several of the girls had to alter their clothes because their figures had changed and, for instance, their bust measurement had increased. Thus there was a girl who at the beginning of the course who had been measured as '13 inches down the chest and 16 inches down the back', while the measurements were reversed by the end of the course. Another girl had been forbidden to do gymnastics by her doctor, but was allowed to participate after pleading over a long period with Högström, she also showed continued improvement.<sup>43</sup> These stories are important, if we are to understand the relation between discipline and emancipation. In this interpretation the terms cannot be separated. When Sally Högström returned in 1885, Ernst Trier on her recommendation had bought plates for each pupil, there were gym clothes, and the lovely gymnastics hall had been finished.

Sally Högström's contribution in Denmark was that she paved the way for others.<sup>44</sup> She opened their eyes to the potential of Swedish gymnastics in the *modern-woman project*. Gymnastics, health and hygiene went hand in hand and in the Danish folk high school milieu became part of the social life and enlightenment which had such great importance for the youth of the farming communities. Swedish gymnastics acquired a symbolic significance in the Danish folk high school world, because, in the 1880s it became part of the peasants' general fight for parliamentarism<sup>45</sup> as well as women's struggle for inner and bodily emancipation. But just like so many others who have been surprised at the success of Swedish gymnastics in Denmark since then, Sally Högström also reflected why it aroused such an interest among *the Danish people* which had not been possible in its own the country of Sweden.<sup>46</sup>

### **One System – Two Women – Several Cultures**

The narratives about the efforts of the two women to spread Swedish gymnastics help us to understand many small, but often important details in the contribution of Swedish gymnastics to *the modern-woman project*. The two women went abroad at almost the same time, with the same system, the same training, but to very different cultural and social milieus. Both stories contribute to a differentiated understanding of the success of Swedish gymnastics in the relationships between system, context and its socialisation agents, the professional women. Bergman and Högström both went abroad with what was a new profession for women in their baggage, the female

gymnastics teacher, and they came from an old milieu (GCI), which, because it had defended the Swedish system in relation to others, had developed a strong self-awareness. Their starting point gave them a solid base, and in addition was the fact that they were *selected* to bring home success.

### **The Role of the System in the Educative Project**

Swedish gymnastics, with its 'one-sex' starting point, made its breakthrough at a time when medical arguments helped to depict women as subordinate and infirm, and put biological determinism on the agenda. The 'one-sex' system with its rational schooling required uniformity and discipline in the teaching. The practice of middle-class virtues such as self-control were necessary for those who did not have them. For the uneducated, the Swedish exercises were linked to a unifying ritual by means of the teacher's commands, and this, coupled with the scientific justification, helped to give the authorities faith in the potential of the system both for the individual and society. The effect of the exercises could be quickly seen in the shape of the body, with straight backs and lifted heads, just as with the girls in the London schools and at Vallekilde Folk High School. The system helped to give the body a *hallmark*, which previous systems could not document as effectively. This physical *hallmark* which Swedish gymnastics gave the London children, has been interpreted by Jennifer Hargreaves as a contribution to qualify the pupils only within their own class, but not to overstep class boundaries. On the other hand, narratives about the introduction of Swedish gymnastics into the Danish folk high schools documents that gymnastics had a *symbolic* significance in the peasants' struggle for democracy, political influence and women's emancipation, by virtue of the gymnasts' new *physical and collective identity*. Here, the symbolic power of the system helped to overstep established boundaries.<sup>47</sup>

The girls who were already educated were to have other challenges that laid the ground for the development of independence. Madame Österberg understood that she should involve the games of the English physical culture in the physical education of middle- and upper-class girls. In this way, she contributed to a physical upbringing that ensured a balance between the *predictable* physical and disciplining exercises and the more *unpredictable* and challenging games. The Danish folk high school never invited any discussion about games or sport, as this more individual body culture did not fit in with the folk high school idea about a culture of popular enlightenment and democracy. Here Högström's 'pure' Swedish gymnastics suited better.<sup>48</sup>

If one is to explain the success of Swedish gymnastics, it is crucial to look at the system in relation to the very different social and cultural contexts of which it was a part. Where school gymnastics in many ways was 'drill' for inferior members of society, Swedish gymnastics, in the social space offered by college and folk high school, was completely different. Here the exercises, irrespective of whether they were regarded as fun or boring, were included into the cultural and social activities of the regulated daily life. Here the

connection between the identity-creating gymnastics and culture was given a significance that stretched far beyond the short or long stays at college and folk high school. In Denmark, Swedish gymnastics, to Högström's surprise, could be spread to the voluntary clubs all over the rural parishes.

### **Professional women and the Possibilities of the New Profession**

In spite of the 'single-sex' construction of the system, the Swedish women worked on the basis of an idea of the biological difference between the two sexes and their different social roles. The historian Jens Ljunggren points out that they wanted 'to create an autonomous space outside both traditional gymnastics and the growing, mainly male, competitive sport'. He concludes that women's gymnastics can probably be analysed as a variation of feminist separatism.<sup>49</sup> Madame Bergman Österberg's arguments that girls should be taught by female teachers and not, as had often previously been the case, by men, was connected precisely to the idea of two sexes, with women's biological physical rhythms as the starting point to understand the specifically *feminine*. The correct communication of the one-sex physical system should be done by way of the experiences of and differences in the biological body.

Madame Bergman-Österberg and Sally Högström's view of women's social role was, for both, linked to women's emancipation, although this was understood as an inner emancipation on the basis of women's role in the home. The hygienic and physical upbringing was crucial for women's future lives as mothers and housewives.<sup>50</sup> Yet, Madame Bergman-Österberg went further in her ideals, because, she emphasised the fact that emancipation would only succeed when men and women had equal rights and opportunities in all areas, such as an outer emancipation. Richard Holt argues that female sport served just as much to reinforce woman in her domestic role as to liberate her from it, because female sport had found a balance between emancipation and social respectability.<sup>51</sup> It was precisely this balance that the Swedish female teachers understood; they never overstepped what was respectable, but they dared to challenge contemporary norms of femininity, especially through the clothing and allowing women to display themselves in public when doing gymnastics. It was not a case of a *revolution*, but on the other hand an *incipient evolution*, with several variations.

The success cannot be explained so simply, but the contributions of the women in part depended on some general preconditions necessary to create it. The Swedish women who went abroad were professional in the best sense of the term. They were better at their subject than others at that time, they had arguments that suited<sup>45</sup> the need of the time for health and hygiene, they could demonstrate obvious results, which they made use of at displays etc. for prominent and influential people. They understood how to adapt themselves and the system to the needs of different cultures and groups. They did many things differently in the completely different milieus and cultures which they met, and their success could be briefly described with the phrase, *they made a difference*. Physical education for girls and women was different after they had been there.

## NOTES:

1. Sigfred Levy, A Den danske Pige-gymnastik (Danish girls' PE), *Politiken*, 16 July 1899.
2. PE had already been introduced in the Danish municipal schools in 1814 for both boys and girls, but in 1828 the subject was restricted to include only boys. After this, girls' physical education did not come on the agenda again until the beginning of the 1830s with the establishment of the Experimental school for the teaching of the female youth in physical and health exercises. It was not until the Act on Schools in 1904 that Physical education again became compulsory for girls – although *Haandbogen* 1899, which was the teaching manual for many years, also contained a teaching content for girls, see Else Trangbæk, *Mellem leg og disciplin, Gymnastikken i Danmark i 1800 tallet* (Duo, 1987).
3. See Else Trangbæk, 'Den danske kvindegymnastiks fader – Paul Petersen, in *Mellem kald og videnskab, Ledelse og uddannelse i idrætten, Idrættshistorisk årbog 1989* (Duo, 1989), pp. 46-66.
4. Madame Bergman Österberg, 'Physical Training as a Profession', *Women's International Congress*, London, 3 July 1899, p. iv.
5. A pioneer is someone who goes in front and paves the way, getting rid of obstacles and trenches. Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Englishwoman*, 1, 1, pp. 76-7.
6. It is a case of both a civilisation and modernisation project, that wanted to give women upbringing, education, culture and health.
7. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was noted all over Europe, in spite of national and local variations, that there were about two per cent more women than men. W.R. Greg, 1862, quoted in Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London, 1985); Brigitte Possing, *Renhed, disciplin og stræbsomhed: Om Natalie Zahles pigeskole, Pigernes skole*.
8. Brigitte Possing, *Renhed, disciplin og stræbsomhed*, p. 34.
9. Sven Møller Kristensen, *Digteren og samfundet II* (Copenhagen, 1974), p. 64.
10. GCI's historia 1813-1913, quoted in Olle Halldén: *Vandringsbogen. En femtiårig brevvaxling mellan kvinnor* (Stockholm, 1996), p. 26.
11. *Festskrift ved GCI – GIH's 175-årsjublieum* (Stockholm, 1988), p 28-9.
12. Swedish or Ling gymnastics was developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the gymnastics instructor and poet Per Hendrick Ling (1776-1839).
13. Bente Rosenbeck, *Kroppens politik, Om Køn, kultur og videnskab*, Museum Tusulanums (Forlag, 1992), in particular about the construction of femininity.
14. In 1879, Swedish Concordia Löfving was employed as Inspector of Physical Education in girls' schools under the London School Board. She taught and examined London female teachers in Swedish gymnastics, anatomy and physiology.
15. Jonathan May, *Madame Bergman-Österberg. Pioneer of Physical Education and Games for Girls and Women* (London, 1969), pp. 4-12, 24-25.

16. Sheila Fletcher, *Women First: The Female Tradition in English Physical Education 1880-1980* (London, 1984). There is a splendid description of early gymnastics and Physical education for girls in England. pp. 9-55.
17. Sheila Fletcher, *Women First*, p. 20.
18. The number of trained female teachers in 1887 is somewhere between 700 and 1,312 according to different sources such as Fletcher, *Women First* and Jennfier Hargreaves, *Sporting Females* (London, 1994). The reason for the different figures is perhaps that not all the teachers had certificates.
19. About strength-saving theories, see for instance Jens Ljunggren, *Kroppens Bilding, Linggymnastikens manlighetsprojekt 1790-1914* (Stockholm, 1999) p. 221.
20. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 71.
21. Madame Bergman-Österberg, *Physical Training as a Profession*, Reprint of Women's International Congress, London, 3 July 1899, pp. i-vii.
22. Richard Holt, *Sport and the British, A Modern History* (Oxford, 1989) p. 119.
23. Madame Bergman Österberg, *The Training of Teachers in Methods of Physical Education*, undated material in Dartford College Archive C 6/8.
24. Madame Bergman Österberg, *Physical Training as a Profession*, p. vii.
25. Quoted in Sheila Fletcher, *Women First*, p. 23.
26. Unpublished letter, 'The most Curious School in the World – where girls are taught to play. Dartford College Archive, letter C8/3-1654 – dated 24 April 1894.
27. Anna Pagan, *A Description of life at College 1892-94*, unpublished material Dartford College Archive: File 1647 Box C8/1,
28. Sally Högström, 'Pedagogisk gymnastik i Danmark', *Tidsskrift i Gymnastik*, 2, 8, 1899, p. 524.
29. Madame Bergman Österberg, 'Gymnastics and Games for Girls', in *Teachers Encyclopaedia*, p. 214.
30. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 69.
31. Holt, *Sport and the British*,. P. 119.
32. Else Trangbæk, 'Gymnastik bliver skolefag – ca 1800-1880'; Per Jergensen, 'Alkke more, men opdrage – ca 1898-1940', in Ivar Berg-Sørensen and Per Jørgensen (ed) *Een time Dagligen. Skoleidræt gennem 200 År*. Odense 1998, pp. 25-60; 85-150.
33. In 1859, A.G. Drachmann founded the Institute for Medical Gymnastics and in 1865 the Institute for Medical and Orthopaedic and Development Gymnastics. In 1861, Nycander established the *Institute for Swedish Illness Gymnastics*, in 1878, Paul Petersen founded the *Institute for Danish Women's Gymnastics*. All had women's gymnastics as the central element.
34. Else Trangbæk, 'Danish Gymnastics'; Ove Korsgaard, *Kampen om kroppen, Dansk*

*idræts historie gennem 200 år* (Copenhagen, 1982).

35. Sally Högström, *Minnen från Danmark*. In *Särtryck ur Föreningen G.C.I's Årsskrift*, 1932.
36. N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), clergyman and writer.
37. In 1867, 17 schools were started and in 1868 another 15. Between 1844 and 1901, a total of 134 folk high schools were started, of which 60 closed down. In the period from 1867 to 1901, about 150,000 young men and women went through these schools for periods of 3-5 months. Of these young people, 95 per cent came from the rural districts, and it has been calculated that in 1872-73, they constituted about 13 per cent of a year's class of rural youth (age 20). In Skrubbeltrang, F., 'Agricultural Development and Rural Reform in Denmark', in: *Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations* (FAO), Rome, April 1953, p. 174.
38. Hans Lund, *Askov Højskole 1865-1915* (Copenhagen, 1965), pp. 55-56.
39. Else Trangbæk, *Mellem leg og disciplin*, p. 77.
40. Pia Gars Jensen, *Kvindegymnastikken i Danmark – specielt med henblik på den svenske gymnastiks opkomst, udbredelse og udvikling 1884-1925*, unpublished thesis, Institute of History, University of Copenhagen, June 1985, p. 52.
41. Högström, *Minnen från Danmark*, p. 3.
42. Högström, *Minnen från Danmark*, p. 4.
43. Högström, *Minnen från Danmark*, pp. 5-7.
44. During Sally Högström's first stay in Denmark in 1884, she inspired several women to take the two-year female gymnastics teacher training course at the GCI in Stockholm. These women, in particular Ingeborg Appel from Askov Folk High School, were of great importance for spreading women's gymnastics in Denmark especially to the women from the rural districts.
45. See Ove Korsgaard, *Kampen om kroppen*, Dansk idræts historie gennem 200 år (Copenhagen, 1982); Trangbæk, 'Danish Gymnastics'. Denmark first had a parliamentary system 1901. In 1915 women won the right to vote.
46. Högström, 'Pedagogisk gymnastik i Danmark', p. 524.
47. Trangbæk, 'Danish Gymnastics'.
48. Sally Högström herself points out several times that she introduced A pure Swedish gymnastics. In addition she belonged to the wing that, through her later work at GCI, only slowly accepted changes to the system. See for example, Ljunggren, *Linggymnastikens manlightsprojekt*, p. 236.
49. Jens Ljunggren, *Kroppens Bildung, Linggymnastikens*, p. 237.
50. Hargreaves, *Sporting females*, p. 77.
51. Holt, *Sport and the British*, p. 118.