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One System, Several Cultures: A Comparative Look at Swedish Gymnastics for Women

Physical education for girls was introduced in most of the Western world in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the first generation of pioneers was to be found among doctors and progressive school leaders and teachers. But it was not until the 1880s that a serious beginning was made to create a new profession of young women: school-mistresses. Here the efforts of the Swedish female gymnastics directors were of a pioneering nature, as they travelled to other countries with a good training from the “Gymnastiska Central Institutet” in Stockholm and a vision about contributing to the project of making the modern woman. In many countries at that time, there was a discussion about the applicability of the various gymnastics systems, especially in relation to implementing them in girls’ schools. In this connection, Swedish gymnastics was often the system that won, in preference to more nationally developed systems.

This paper looks at the education of middle-class women and, in particular, the incorporation of social and health norms for all girls, in the second half of the nineteenth century. A comparative study of the implementation of Swedish gymnastics in different parts of the world may help to explain why the system was so important and aid our understanding of the its contribution to ‘the modern-woman project’ at the end of the nineteenth century. To do this, I have analysed how Swedish gymnastics was introduced in the USA, England and Denmark in different ways to the middle class, the working class and country girls, on the basis of the efforts of three women in particular: the two Swedish gymnastics directors, Martine Bergman-Österberg and Sally Högström, who worked in England and Denmark respectively, and the American, Senda Berenson, Smith College, Massachusetts.

The paper focuses on two main problems: Why did Swedish gymnastics, an apparently sex-neutral gymnastics system, have success at a time when femininity was being taken very seriously? And what did the training and educational projects of these women comprise?