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Anssi Halmesvirta

Emancipation through Sports. Doctors and the Rise of the Female Body in Finland c. 1900–1920 (ref.)

The cultural history of the body and the history of sports became well-established fields in historical studies during the 1980s. They soon joined hands to explore how the different sexual roles of men and women have been defined to differentiate their physical education and sports, and they demonstrated that medical practice has functioned as a moral discourse, which produced the regulation of the female body.¹ From the middle of the nineteenth century, medical experts assumed the role of ‘public moralists’² in mediating largely gloomy messages of medicine and hygiene to the increasingly body- and sex-oriented reading public. They realized that new evolutionary theories concerning the growth and functioning of the human body bore a great significance for planning and defining the programmes of physical education, gymnastics and sports. Medicine operating at a local level in Finland not only interacted with the state, the law and charities, but also supported sports and gymnastics, which came to be seen as important factors in improving the hygiene and public health of the nation.³ Finnish

healthcare was in the process of modernization and its advisory role was enhanced during the rise of Finnish gymnastics and the sports movement. In the spirit of muscular nationalism, the message was that small nations like Finland had to be saved from the throes of decline and ‘degeneration’ so that they could survive the struggle of life in the age of Imperialism.⁴ Doctors and researchers in medicine were ready to apply the results of their studies in human physiology to physical education and training, and were keen to give instructions and advice on how to develop the human body, build the character and educate the mind of a gymnast or sportsman/woman.

Medical projects aiming to translate the language of medicine in Finland from Swedish into Finnish (‘Finnicization’) and to regenerate the Finnish ‘race’ coincided with the gradual emancipation of the (Finnish-speaking) female body into gymnastics and sports after the 1880s. In pace with demands for educational and occupational opportunities as well as suffrage⁵ – gained in 1906 with the establishment of the Finnish one-chamber Parliament under Russian rule – women began to yearn for their own kind of physical education, to organize in gymnastic clubs⁶ and finally in the 1910s to argue for a respectable place in the Finnish sports movement. For them, the future-oriented function of physical education was to prepare women for participation in the public sphere and sports politics: along with other women’s movements, gymnastics and sports associations took part in educating women to ‘fit citizenry’ (in Finnish: *kansalaiskunto*), without which they thought they did not deserve the right to vote.⁷ The Finnish sports (and gymnastics) movement was to become the most popular mass movement in Finland and its ultimate goal was to democratize Finnish society.⁸ Educated women eager to join the movement did not want to remain onlookers while men prepared themselves to gain ‘power’ and finally independence for the nation.

In what follows, using the methods of intellectual history⁹, I shall analyze the debate – never really a hard-fought controversy – between doctors and influential female organizers of women’s gymnastics and sports over what and how the female body could/should perform in sports. This should throw light on the ways in which medical authority negotiated with women’s new, outward-seeking definitions of the

female body and its functional potential. Both new notions and new meanings attached to old notions were added to women's sports language. The aim is also to show how important the role of doctors really was in estimating the value of gymnastics and sports for women's physical regeneration and consequently Finnish national health in general – especially those doctors who specialized in health care and hygiene and who popularized medical advice to the wider public in health care and sports reviews. In the process, also the role of women was reassessed as more physically active citizens of the Finnish nation than before. This seems to have been motivated not only by the urge to regenerate the Finnish nation or 'race', but also to some extent by the threat to the autonomy of the Grand Duchy of Finland posed by the integration policies of Russian imperial authorities. It was as if the contribution of the 'weaker' sex was also needed in Finland's defence. It can be elicited from the relatively scarce sources on the female sports debate that, although there was some disagreement between women as to what extent sports were suitable for their 'weaker' bodies, active female leaders of the gymnastics movement quite readily accepted and pursued their new 'progressive' role for the sake of Finnish nation. Here, one has to remember that this new role concerned working class women very differently since they organized within their own workers' gymnastics and sports associations, and developed a socialist version of physical education¹⁰ – here I am referring only to the women of educated, bourgeois classes.

The doctors' gloomy message

To begin with, it was doctors as medical experts who were given the say in the Finnish health care and sports reviews (*Suomen Terveystieteiden lehti*, est.1889; *Suomen Urheilulehti*, est 1898; *Kisakenttä* est. 1911) to evaluate the benefits and dangers of physical exercise and sports for men and women alike. The value of gymnastics and sports as a means to mobilize nations was emphasized in order to bring the message home

that they could heal the declining nation and help it to regain its vital forces (*élan vital*).¹¹ The doctors' point of view was largely determined by what they, in light of current medical theories, had discovered about the state of health and the physical abilities of the Finnish nation. In the 1870s, when a draft to the army was called, doctors had – to their great embarrassment – realized how weak and sickly the younger generation of male Finns really was. Signs and symptoms of impaired physical efficiency and fitness, needed to defend the country, in comparison to previous hardy, peasant generations were detected among town-dwellers in particular. This alarming finding made the doctors impatient to reconsider their 'progressive' theories of evolution and instead anticipate a looming 'degeneration'. Yet only rarely did they, after the turn of the century, recommend positive eugenics or other forms of racial hygiene;¹² at just over three million, the Finnish nation was in their view so small that even the weak and infirm Finns should be strengthened by exercise and the sickly, handicapped or mentally retarded regained back to society in order to make some contribution to the national stamina. As one doctor qua moral educator explained, in the era of "armed peace and electricity", it did not suffice to gather wealth and riches; instead everyone had a duty to take care of his/her health and shy away from all forms of modern "vice" (free love, prostitution, alcoholism etc.) – otherwise Finland would decline in the same way as ancient Greece and Rome.¹³ One of the gravest causes of the 'degeneration' of male bodies was that young men frequented prostitutes and disseminated venereal diseases also among women.¹⁴ As for women, their "holy duty" was to breastfeed babies for at least six months in order to combat high infant mortality (over 16 % in 1872–1886)¹⁵ and to avoid exhausting themselves with heavy work or regular gymnastics during this time. However, as soon as the babies could eat normal food, women should resume work or other physical exercise, for example chopping wood or going to gymnastics or sports clubs, because it was the law of nature that if an organ or muscle such as the breast was not exercised, it would start to shrink and become dysfunctional.¹⁶ A modern woman should listen to medical authorities' scientific advice rather than 'old women's idle talk', which exhorted them

to stay in bed and out of sight for as long as possible before and after giving birth.¹⁷

In two articles for *Suomen Terveystieteiden aikakauslehti* (Health Care Review), entitled ‘Women’s Task in Elevating the General Level of Health of the Nation’, one district practitioner and popular health authority sympathetic to gymnastics and sports movements proclaimed that, before the century of ‘progress’ came to an end, it was high time for women to rise up and free their bodies and souls from the shackles of prejudice and ignorance. Too refined or luxurious ways of life tended to spoil especially upper class women who, it was believed, passed their habits of comfort, flabbiness and weakness on to their offspring, thus contributing to the ‘degeneration’ of the nation. Referring to the biblical dictum that God also created the female body as “his temple and holy residence”, the doctor warned women not to leave it unexercised. He combined the current scare of ‘racial suicide’ with warnings of doom familiar to the lay public: if women would not pay heed to family hygiene, God’s vengeance would fall on them. While state bureaucracy already controlled official institutions of health care, hygienic and health care conditions in average homes were still deleterious to health, and, in his view, it was housewives who were to blame. It was their task to ensure that their progeny grew into physically and mentally capable adults who could work for and defend the nation in possible war, not allowing them to become “parasites” of society. Following the example of Spartan women, they should harden themselves and their children with physical exercise and outdoor work.¹⁸ This was the first public diatribe of an expert in health care in Finland aimed at awakening the female sex to understand the value of rational health care and physical exercise for the entire nation.

Since not every town and village in Finland contained a gymnastics club or a sports field yet, housewives were expected to perform some form of physical exercise during and after their household work. And since bourgeois and upper class townswomen did not gain physical strength through everyday agricultural toil, as countryside women did, they had to learn to perform voluntary but regular bodily exercises. In the case of hysteric women or women who suffered from neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion), physical exercise in the form of gardening,

chopping or sawing wood and cooling off with cold water was highly recommended.¹⁹ This piece of advice was not in line, however, with normal medicine at the time in Finland, since it opposed the use of any kind of medication. It was as though physical exercise, gymnastics or ‘light sports’ could become the panacea for every disease which did not require a scalpel.²⁰ The shibboleth of the so-called folk medicine, which was now loudly deemed deleterious to national health, was to be jettisoned and replaced by modern, scientifically corroborated and publicly elucidated prescriptions of rational hygiene. Gymnastics and sports were destined to become the best allies for this grass-root modernization of Finnish national health and the Finnish way of life in general.²¹

As was to become customary, in order to make their message more persuasive, the doctors cited invented life-stories of young women saved by some kind of physical effort or sports. There was ‘Mary Steelstump’, who had been in good health until her fourteenth birthday but had, thanks to natural causes – menstruation and its mentally disturbing effects – soon become “nervous and somnolent”. These symptoms caused her to neglect her schoolwork and brood on suicide. During the Christmas holidays, she took to skiing, but became “listless though occasionally overjoyed” again during the spring. Her only cure was to be sent to the countryside for the summer holidays, where she began swimming, rowing, running barefoot and taking part in agricultural work. The next autumn, she returned to school as “flourishing as a rose”.²² This story was actually composed as an object lesson on how a girl should grow from adolescence to womanhood. In addition, the doctors advised that, between reading schoolbooks, every girl should peruse the Danish gymnast ideologue J.P. Müller’s *My System for Women* (trans. into Finnish in 1912) and the German social hygienist Fr. W. Foerster’s guidebooks on sexual hygiene in particular. In the Finnish context, the message of these books concerning bodily and mental hygiene was directed against the teachings of ‘free love’ associated with revolutionary socialism, which were infiltrating the country from Germany and Russia. In this way, the idea of ‘racial regeneration’ through exercise of the female body was reborn in Finnish hygiene not only as an argument to be scientifically corroborated, but also as persuasion

for women to activate themselves through physical exercise and education, rather than through participating in any antisocial movements.

The theories and images of doctors concerning the workings of the female body found their way into the Finnish Journal of Sports (*Suomen Urheilulehti*), in the first issue of which it was declared that the ultimate goal of sports was simply to increase “the physical and mental strength” of the Finnish nation. This idea was collectivist and opposed to individualism, athleticism and professionalism from the very start. Toying with Charles Darwin’s doctrine of evolution, the editor supposed that acquired characteristics were hereditary, and as corollary to this, considered it a “law of nature” that “flabby nations” would be “trampled on” by nations fortified by gymnastics and sports. History was called on to prove that sports greatly aided the rise of civilization, the model nation in this respect being England.²³ Further progress presupposed that also women should leave their “embroidery, piano-playing and novel reading” and take to ‘light’ outdoor sports, so that they would gain beauty and harmony in their bodies and thus add value to the nation in their own way.²⁴ The differences in sex were not so significant that women should be left out of this ‘mass movement of the nation’, since many lighter forms of sports could be performed by women. According to a leading medical specialist, writing for the women’s sports journal *Kisakenttä*, the main difference was that if men would gradually progress to more difficult and demanding movements, for instance in wrestling and athletics, women were made for lighter exercises and would therefore learn to perform the movements of gymnastics and suitable sports “more perfectly and uniformly”. Behind this differentiation lurked the idea that if women performed drastic and powerful jumps or dives, their intestines and reproductive organs (esp. uterus) might be damaged.²⁵ Women had to be careful and abstain from any exercise when tired, since if muscles were overstrained, their contraction would require more nervous energy and might in the long run lead to neurasthenia, a condition that had already been diagnosed among not only upper class ladies but also some athletes in Finland.²⁶ Furthermore, it was quite generally believed that gymnastics and ‘lighter’ sports would also help to reduce the temptation of onania by diverting adolescents’ attention to physical exercise and di-

recting blood away from genitals.²⁷ This concerned schoolgirls in particular, who were more or less forced to perform tiring gymnastics or sports programmes and soon afterwards participate in theoretical lessons. When the freshness and perkiness gained in physical education was spent, learning became increasingly difficult. Tests among schoolchildren showed that all the running and playing during breaks did not actually make them fresher or more energetic but, on the contrary, tired and exhausted. Thus, the highest authority in hygiene in Finland, Professor Max Oker-Blom (1863–1917), who was the first holder of the Chair of Hygiene at Helsinki University in 1914–1917, advised the teachers to allow children a brief period of rest after gymnastics and physical education.²⁸ He also recommended sports and gymnastics to unmarried working women, among whom degenerative nervous disorders were common. In this way, they could compensate for their ‘unnatural’, stressful way of life and not become a burden to their families and the nation.²⁹

Women come forward

The special journal for female gymnasts and sportswomen, *Kisakenttä* (Playground), was edited by Anni Collan (1876–1962), the pioneer of the Finnish female gymnastic movement in its second generation. She worked as the female teacher at Helsinki University Gymnastics Department in 1909–1919 and was nominated to the post of Inspector of Women’s Physical Education in 1919, which she held until 1945. Collan exemplified commitment to the cause of female gymnastics in her own life and articulated it in trying to change the conservative attitudes towards female bodily emancipation in Finnish society. In her diaries, she shows relentless preoccupation with matters of female physical education, ranging from managing courses in play for girls and women, and travelling around Finland lecturing and teaching, to drawing plans of playgrounds and gymnastics equipment for schools.³⁰ She and her other active colleagues working in gymnastics and sports largely accepted the model of physical education suggested by the doctors, but they also enthusiastically defended their own independent standpoints

against the male-dominated sports leadership and its programme for developing the sports movement in Finland. Collan also tried to base her arguments on available physiological knowledge. Referring to current medical theory on degeneration, Collan stated that female organs would be atrophied in the same way as male organs if not used or exercised constantly (in Finnish: *liikunto*). Actually, as she saw it, all life was dependent on physical exercise. In order to avoid premature death or a physically unfit, even shameful condition, women should perform any possible regenerative movement. The proof of regeneration lay in the causal chain: “exercise increases energy and energy invigorates the nervous system, making the brain-cells vibrate” (*väreily*). ‘Energy’ itself was transported to the brain by “fresh blood” – best generated in outdoor gymnastics or sports exercises – making the brain-cells more “receptive to the impulses of the mind’s movement”. Without its influence, the “grooves carved by thoughts” in the brain would fade away and all mental effort would be stupefied, possibly leading to serious nervous ailments. The cure for female neurasthenia was to “unload” nervous stress through light sports and gymnastics (physiotherapy of sorts) which would make “the brain-grooves increase”. In more generalized terms: if women were to take physical education seriously and make it their regular regimen, they should soon gain “greater intellect” and realize what new, active womanhood was awaiting them in the future.³¹ The precondition to female emancipation through physical education for Collan was the ability of women to comprehend the workings of their bodies and to make them more energetic.

The most concrete manifestation of the new notion of female bodily movement was the decision to pinpoint its capabilities with a prominent outward sign. What both medical experts and leaders of women’s gymnastics and sports movements recommended in 1914, instead of demanding competitive sports for women, was that they should strive for a sports badge especially designed for women. One could achieve this badge by performing a series of gymnastic and ‘light’ sports tasks. It was agreed that they should be moderate but exacting enough to arouse sports enthusiasm in women, while saving them from exhaustion and such grave accidents as occurred, for instance, in long distance running (cf. Dorando Pietri’s case in London Olympics).³² The

list of tasks included the following: a gymnastic programme of ten phases (mostly harmonious, bending movements of hands and legs, dancing steps, light jumping or climbing), a high-jump of over 90 cm, a long-jump of 5,5 m using both legs, a javelin (500 g) throw of 14 m, a ball throw at a 5 m distant target (30 cm diameter), a Finnish baseball hitting of 10 m, a 100 m run in 17 seconds and a 1500 m run in 10 minutes, a 5 km walk in 50 minutes, a swim of 200 m plus one deep dive, a 5 km cross-country ski and a 10 km cycle. All this should have been completed within a period of one year and certified by a standing committee. If one performed this once, one would receive a bronze badge. If one performed the programme three times, one earned a silver badge, and if six times, a golden badge.³³ Although some held that the novelty of ‘badge-earning’ sports was only gymnastics removed from indoors to outdoors and concluded that the change

Women’s sports-badge designed by
female artist Estrid Sandström

was quite easy and smooth for women³⁴, one can imagine that some of the tasks, such as the 10 km cycle and 1500 m run, were not so familiar and easy for every woman to perform without preparation. More so when, in 1919, Collan added to the list a 15 km row and a 2 km run in 10 minutes.³⁵ And at the time, it was usually a shame for a girl to try any ‘manly’ sports. One woman who had already earned the badge remembered being reproached by her mother for hill-jumping with the boys. Girls and young women were expected to stay within the home

bounds and attend to household tasks.³⁶ A change of attitudes was evidently needed, and in one sentimental play written for female gymnastics and sports associations, the reform was acted out: we come across a doctor who, as an expert in hygiene, assumes the role of a saviour rescuing a sports-loving country girl from her home, where all bodily exercise was deemed “a sinful torture of oneself”.³⁷

These obstacles to female sports were made the object of public ridicule and it was advertised that every woman should adopt the ‘badge-system’, since more than 1400 had already done so in 1914–1917. In the year 1920, the number stood at about 5000.³⁸ A further boost to women’s rise to emancipate themselves from domestic prejudice and manly sports came in 1916–1917, when women’s associations drafted plans to establish a separate, nation-wide sports federation. Their efforts were rewarded, as in 1917, the Finnish Parliament voted to pledge 60,000 Finnish Marks to gymnastics and sports, out of which women’s associations received 9000 Marks, a sum which greatly helped them to launch advisory work, sports teaching and especially to train female teachers of gymnastics and sports. Money was also allotted to promote children’s play, the principal aim being that children would gradually take on gymnastics and sports under female teachers’ guidance.³⁹

Encouraged by the growth of the ‘badge-sports’ among women in Finland, Collan wrote the first guide to sports for women in the Nordic countries, entitled *Naisten urheiluoapas* (Women’s Guide to Sports, 1917, 2nd rev. ed. 1920). In it, she leaned towards the radical position that participation in sports depended on the level of development of the *individual* rather than on sex. Even for women who had been evaluated or measured as ‘weak’, a teacher or another expert would always be present during sports performance to oversee that she would not overstress herself. Collan enumerated five main points in her defence of sports for women: (1) (also) women need healthy bodies; (2) health gained in sports results in beauty, since in performing sports, the female body was under the control of the will, making it “more beautiful than the slack recklessness or raw power” of men; (3) a healthy body is more “practical”, i.e. more fit to work than an “undeveloped or slow” body; (4) sports help women to retain their female respectability or

chastity, in the sense that J.J. Rousseau meant when he had said, “the sicker and weaker the body, the more it commands, the healthier and stronger it is, the better it obeys”, and (5) sports call forth sociability, which manifests itself in “friendliness and kindness”, in turn enhancing the coherence of society and the nation.⁴⁰

In addition to gymnastics and lighter sports, one attractive form of physical exercise for women was play. Collan was so fascinated by it that she wanted to launch a playground movement with which to overcome the problem that women from the upper classes did not want women from the lower classes to join them.⁴¹ The real obstacle in her view, however, was the lack of special, separate playing grounds for women where they could play independently from men. From the perspective of national health, this was reprehensible, since overstressed female factory workers, clerks and teachers in particular needed refreshing and “joyful” exercise.⁴² Collan adapted the model for play from the United States (Dayton playgrounds in Ohio), where the playground movement flourished, and exhorted women’s associations to occupy empty plots or wasteland owned by the state or townships and to demand a free lease for them from the authorities. Unused private plots could be rented. The plan for such a playground was rather ambitious for Finnish settings, as it contained all possible types of equipment from carousels, swings, sliders and climbing trees to swimming pools, volleyball nets and separate sports grounds, with all their paraphernalia.⁴³ In this playground, women could perform almost all sports and even compete, for instance, in jumping, running and climbing. So that the play would not become too serious, women should also sing and dance. And again, the final goal was not only to have fun, but also to “educate” girls and women for the “discipline of citizenship” (*kansalaiskuri*).⁴⁴ Collan’s plan was in line with the principle that gymnastics and sports for women should not only train the strongest and best developed for competition, but also strengthen those who were weaker and less developed for sufficient performance in daily work. In this way, it would be possible, for example, to straighten deformations and poor posture in young girls’ bodies. Despite considerable pressure from the female associations, petitions to municipal and state authorities (the Senate) to finance the building of playgrounds were regularly

Joy of Life

rejected. Evidently, Collan's plan was too ambitious and untimely in face of male opposition.

Collan, though she spearheaded the promotion of physical exercise for women in the 1910s and adapted the US model to Finnish circumstances, was not after all very revolutionary in her demands for women's emancipation. She did not pursue any such drastic changes in the male-dominated Finnish social system as some of the so-called 'new women'. Gymnastics was for Collan a more regulated form of physical education than sports, and the ideal, in her view, was demonstration gymnastics performed in front of large audiences to produce a feeling of harmony, mirroring the unity of women in collective movement. For instance, in the women's section of *Suomen Urheilulehti*, she explained to her students at the University Gymnastics Department that it was important to obey leaders in social life and sports. On the one hand, it kept society and voluntary associations (Collan also founded the Finnish girl-scout movement) orderly and unified, and on the other hand, it pacified the mind and eased nervous tension as the performer "let her will relax from continuous strain, abandoning it in order to be led by another person". Such a rigid regimen, which did not make much difference between men's and women's exercises – the same bodily movements suited them both⁴⁵ – was typical of the Swedish (Lingian) system, adopted and revised for the Finnish type of "slower moving" women. Collan also referred to English gentlemen who had learned strict discipline during their education into games ethics in public schools. However, it was only after the Civil War (1918)

that Collan pursued her campaign for sports in elementary schools, and gymnastics retained its role as the prevalent form of bodily exercise for girls and women in the 1910s.⁴⁶ It was all about making the female will control the body through “commands, orders and absolute obedience”; otherwise, the formations that gymnasts should perform in public would collapse. Analogically, the entire Finnish nation would fall if its citizens did not conform to the national ideal of self-controlled, healthy life. And, more to the point, gymnastics, complemented by ‘light’ sports, was the road from adolescent “unruly behaviour” to the “self-conscious social freedom” of adulthood. Thus, physical education served the purpose of developing women’s “capability of self-determination”, which enabled them finally to reach the level which men had already achieved: the ability both to obey and command. Reminding her readers of the importance of “detachment”, she formulated a rule: all work and physical exercise was to be performed as though one were an approving outside observer of one’s own action.⁴⁷ Collan’s preferred example of the ‘perfected’ form of socially respectable exercise for such self-conscious women was (gymnastic) dance, refined from the “animal condition of intoxication” of the ecstatic dancers seen in the dancing-halls and clubs of the capital, to a controlled “burst of joy in life”, preferably outdoors. This kind of dancing was intended to keep ‘bad’ habits and ‘dangerous’ sensuality, a menace to selfhood from hidden impulses, at bay. It was men who evidently stood in the way of this reform of dance, since their sexual impulses and other needs, such as soliciting women and smoking during dance, dominated the scene.⁴⁸ Dancing in groups according to rules and performing gymnastic movements or sports presupposed lighter dress for female bodies so that they could move more freely. This was liberation from uncomfortably tight shirts to light trousers, and corsets to loose garments.⁴⁹ In the same vein, Collan advised girls to play games which could enliven the shy and melancholic Finnish female type: in play with gay teammates, she could “gather power and skill and accumulate courage and self-confidence”.⁵⁰ Borrowing lessons from German sources such as Karl Groos’s *Die Spiele der Menschen*, she published a handbook of Finnish play containing over 200 task examples, some of which demanded considerable physical strength to perform.⁵¹ She also visited the Uni-

versity of Gent in Belgium and criticized the Catholic severity of its disciplined sports, proposing singing play and playful sports instead.⁵²

In 1909–1910, Collan clearly opened a new perspective for female physical education, adding to gymnastics such forms of movement as dancing, playing and some lighter sports that gave women opportunities to express themselves more freely through their bodies. It was thought that play would purify female minds and prepare young women for love and marriage, hopefully acting as an antidote to men's double standard morality, exemplified by cheating and visiting prostitutes.⁵³ Regarding the modernization of working relations, Collan wanted to combine physical education and play with lessons in sociology, since work in factories and offices demanded new skills from women in co-operating with others which did not exist in the traditional way of life.⁵⁴ This meant that women should become more open-minded towards the wider society in order to adapt to its change from agricultural to industrial and professional society. *A skiing lady.*

Upon reading Henrik Ibsen's radical novels, Collan took her notion of emancipating the female body one step further. She discovered that a woman could expect and seek more from life than fulfilling a duty in work or sacrificing herself to husband and children. Even gymnastics for women seemed no longer to suffice and Collan started to envisage the idea of "exposing or risking one's life", i.e. making in-roads into the masculine sphere (e.g. politics and sports).⁵⁵ This sudden reorientation towards

new womanhood seemed even more important in face of the resumed Russification measures launched from St. Petersburg in the early 1910s. Women too had to assume a more active (activist) role in defending the Finnish nation. One scandalous example of this defence was seen at the Stockholm Olympics in 1912, when the Finnish athletes and gymnasts, men and women together, highlighted their national identity and protested against imperial legislation by boldly carrying the forbidden Finnish flag in the opening ceremony.

Considering the success of Finnish athletes and gymnasts in international sports and the ensuing expansion of the badge-sports movement, Collan revised her system of physical education in favour of sports. She was bending to the view that “without competition there is no progress” also for women. Having compared the purposes of male and female sports, she reached the conclusion that female sports aimed at “the ability to perform” (*osaaminen*), whereas male sports aimed at achieving “the best performance” (*paras osaaminen*). A purely ‘performance’ focus helped to maintain female fitness and health, whereas a ‘best performance’ focus was necessary to win competitions. For women, the advantage of sports in comparison to gymnastics was that it brought female bodies more often into the open air, with cycling and rowing in summer, and skiing and skating in winter.⁵⁶ However, in her view, the ideal form of sports for women was javelin, because, as a physical effort, it carried with it also a metaphoric meaning by connecting hand and mind in a goal-oriented act. At first, the female thrower thinks, “I cannot do this”, then she says to herself, “I want to try”, and finally she realizes “I can now throw longer than before”.⁵⁷ The message does not pass from brains to hand but conversely from hand to brains, making the female body – rather paradoxically – the ‘commander’ of the mind.

An opinion poll

The ideas and attitudes of Finnish women concerning the limits of their bodily performance in sports can best be illustrated by analyzing the results of a survey conducted by *Kisakenttä*, the first journal dedicated to women’s gymnastics and sports, in 1911. It aimed to feel

out how women viewed the widespread ‘sports madness’ prevalent in Finnish society before the Stockholm Olympics. It put to women the questions, ‘what is your opinion concerning sports and competition, do you think women should take part in them, and which sports do you think would be suitable for them?’ In three consecutive issues, altogether 28 answers were published, mostly from gymnastics teachers from the biggest towns in Finland. Most of the answers were strictly against any form of competitive sports for women, some were ambivalent as to the value of sports for women in general, and some were tentatively supportive of lighter sports such as those promoted by the sports-badge system.

As for the first part of the question, women’s opinions were divided for and against. In the first letter received by the editor (Collan), the writer, Elli Björkstén (1870–1947),⁵⁸ vented her objections to competitive sports, saying that she found trophies and medals “repulsive”. She understood that the well-meaning purpose of medical science in promoting sports was to awaken and heal a “flabby and physically degenerated” generation through physical exercise and she realized that competition had so far been the best way to go about it. However, she had serious qualms about the healthiness of hard training and she looked forward to hearing that scientific congresses dealing with the topics of physical education could corroborate the argument that it was harmful. From the vantage point of morality, competition was also harmful since – in contrast with the Hellenes who had competed only for glory – it aroused egoistic ambitions which hampered the development of a pure and altruistic mind. Competitive sports also spoiled the spectators, since rather than seeing “harmonious and beautiful bodies” on the field, they saw musclemen with their overreached performances. Sports had degraded into circus-like popular entertainment. Women, she felt, should have nothing to do with this. And, happily for the critic, in Finland, women’s competitions had thus far been so “worthless” that they did not really count – they were organized by men, and women had found them to be against their “nature”. It was for Björkstén, who advocated rhythmic gymnastics, a recognized fact that women were “too fragile and weak” to bear the risks which the systematic training indispensable for competition brought with it. What was fit-

ting for women was “general and simple but respectable” gymnastics that would not harm their bodies. In principle, women too should be “strong and healthy”, but the physical education of the times – still in its infancy according to Björkstén – had not yet been able to envisage a new and “more sensible” ideal of womanhood, suited to sports. If women were captivated by the “spirit of competition”, they would not be able to harness it, which may lead to most harmful consequences – what these consequences would be, she did not want to say, but she insinuated that there would be possible damage to sexual morality. Of all sports, only lawn tennis and other ball games were acceptable. Remarkable in this answer was that no mention was made of any concrete, medically proven harmful effects of sports on the female body, only a vague reference to ‘general weakness’.⁵⁹ It was evidently taken for granted that everybody knew what these effects were.

A more positive and authoritative response came from Elin Kallio (1859–1927)⁶⁰, the founder of the women’s gymnastics movement in Finland and the organizer of the first gymnastics jubilee in Finland in 1887. Her letter was originally a lecture given in 1904, when she attended a gymnastics show in Viborg, in Karelia County. It was chosen by Collan to be reprinted in *Kisakenttä* because she regarded it as a persuasive statement from a pioneer. Kallio had been delighted that women had also joined the sports movement, since Finnish women had been accustomed to demanding physical excursion outside home bounds both in their work and in walking and skiing long distances. And lately, inspired by the British skater Jackson Haynes, who had visited Helsinki in the 1870s, many women belonged to skating clubs, as well as rowing and skiing clubs, and had taken part in the competitions they organized. To the amazement of elderly ladies, some women had also won many trophies. Kallio realized that opinion over the issue was sharply divided: sporting enthusiasts emphasized that sports were the mother of all progress, whereas medical authorities sounded grave warnings on the “overstrain and exhaustion” of physical exercise and competitions. Kallio herself was hesitant to take a definite scientific stance, although she endorsed the view that competitions might “have an unhealthy effect” on the female body. The problem awaiting solution was the old

Jewish one: “is it better to let a few die than to allow the entire race to be exterminated?” – a telling comment on what women should expect if they followed men in the throes of serious sports.⁶¹

The solution lay in the national character of the Finnish woman. Kallio conceded the fact that the majority of Finnish women were “slow and comfort-loving” and that they were not very “enterprising”. From this, it followed that all sports had to be adapted to this handicap and the sports movement had to be directed into “healthy” pursuits. When it came to women’s competitions, they should be the responsibility of female rather than male gymnastics teachers. On this point, Kallio agreed with Collan. Although no accidents had yet happened to women under male teachers’ lead, it was difficult for them to weigh the physical strength of women – Kallio had seen many examples of mistakes in their behaviour. Moreover, if sports would become fashionable and performed on the principle of equality between men and women, only female control could restrict the rise of ambitions in women and prevent their “overexertion”. In any case, Kallio surmised, women were usually “too lazy” to train themselves to the extent needed for competition. Importantly for female physical integrity, women did not, in Kallio’s opinion, like to be inspected by male doctors, albeit it necessary during practice and before performances to ensure that “weak and sickly” women would be disqualified. And during menstruation, competing should be strictly forbidden. In order to be able to comprehend and supervise female sports, the female gymnastic teachers should have carefully studied its medical aspects, and they should try to enlist as members in sports clubs themselves, since it was useless to preach lessons from the outside. If all these preconditions were fulfilled, Kallio did not find any further objections to female competitive sports.⁶² Her opinion was not representative among the female teachers who answered the poll. The majority of them opposed sports and criticized Kallio for being so open to ‘manly’ sports.

Conclusion

One way to conclude is to point out that medical authorities, female gymnasts and sportswomen generally agreed on what women could and should physically perform. They all saw the female body as more fragile and weaker than the male body and this was reflected in the way they thought women should express themselves during sports or gymnastic performance. Their ideas mirrored the subtle and contained style of female performing artists of the 1900–1910s, from the theatre or dancing-halls. In comparison to male actors, who might burst into violent passion at any moment, they thought that women should perform in a composed way, as representing the beautiful and morally pure sex of the Finnish ‘race’. The same contrast applied to sexual politics: as women were becoming and were encouraged to become more active partners in sexual intercourse – not only trying to pacify men’s dominating role – through sports, they could be politicized and challenge men in the public sphere. Women no longer complained to doctors of their fear of sexual energy, and they were encouraged to enjoy both sexual satisfaction and the pleasure of sports. Sports could become an escape route from the day-to-day routines of the household or office; moreover, many sportswomen were not married and did not comply with the old roles, and hence were freer to take up sports. However, one can detect some uncertainty and ambiguity in women’s statements concerning sports; they had begun to use their own rhetoric, make their own choices and occupy their own spaces in seeking and finding alternative physical interaction and relations with their ‘sisters’ or ‘comrades’, as they usually called each other.

As J.A. Mangan has suggested, women interested in sports were not victims living in a fantasy world, but rather performers and protagonists. This held true also for Finnish women promoting sports, who obtained a platform in Finnish publicity and made their own voices heard. Nevertheless, their ‘weakness’ and aesthetic sense demanded slower, more harmonious and more collective movements than men performed. They would also be more beautiful, producing joy and happiness in the performers’ and spectators’ minds. The approach in

creating sportswomen was holistic; dualism of body and mind was overcome by making them work in co-operation: *mens sana in corpore sano*, as the motto engraved on the Finnish women's sports badge read. Women were deemed ready to enter most of the sports, starting with lawn tennis, swimming, rowing, sailing, skiing and skating, and all the other so-called lighter sports mentioned in the badge-list. Hard sports, overexertion and athletic performance were deemed still to be too much for their bodies and nervous systems – and exhaustion of the female body would lead to an incapacity to fulfil the female biological duty of producing healthy and fit children for Finland, a country whose independence from the Russian Empire was imagined by many a female activist after the end of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the emancipation of sportswomen had to conform to the ideals of Finnish nationalism; sportswomen should not become sisters to that rare breed of 'new women' which, since the 1902–1903 feminist debate, threatened men's cultural hegemony. Rather, women involved in physical education aimed to work with men to strengthen the entire nation and its *élan vital*. Neither did the sportswoman belong to that class of female artist whom anthropologists and psychologists of the time classified as a degenerate or decadent, neurotic or hysteric being. Sportswomen despised and pitied such creatures who had betrayed the plan of nature to make women beautiful and supple.

Thus the dictum by J.F. Stephen, "Nations grow like men, by exercise", could be rephrased to read "Nations grow like men and women, by exercise", irrespective of the fact that male sports were also seen as preparation for the battles of war.

Notes

1. Cf. Turner, *Regulating Bodies. Essays in Medical Sociology*, I; Porter, "History of the Body Reconsidered", 236; Mangan & Park, "Introduction", *passim*.
2. Coined by Stefan Collini in his *Public Moralists. Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1950*.
3. Cf. Jordanova, "Social Construction of Medical Knowledge", 352.
4. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918*. For Finnish ideas of degeneration, see Anssi Halmesvirta, *Ideology and Argument. Studies in British, Finnish and Hungarian*

Thought, part II.

5. In Finland, women's emancipation was, from the 1840s, preached by the Ladies' Associations, which were charity organizations of the upper classes. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* was introduced to the Finnish public in 1869 by Mrs Adelaide Ehrnrooth, who was the first female journalist in the country. Later, from the 1880s, the women's movement organized itself on the model of other mass movements but did not especially attract Finnish women and remained politically dispersed and internally quarrelsome. The main goals of reform were equality of men and women (in 1887 they gained the right to choose their employer and govern their own property), abolition of prostitution and double standards, and general chastity and temperance. See Ramsay, "Rouvasväen yhdistykset – naisasialiikkeen orastava alku", 313; "Naisasialiike – itsevarmuuden pitkä taival", 252-259.
6. In 1900, there were 108 gymnastics and sports associations with 3300 members. In Denmark, their number was c. 10,000 and in Germany 600,000. In 1907, their numbers stood at 301/10,600. Out of these, 14 were women's associations. The Association of Women's Gymnastic Clubs was established in 1897.
7. Cf. Ollila, "Naisliike, nationalismi ja kansanvalistus", 63-65.
8. The rise of Finnish sports is well told in *Suomi uskoi urheiluaan*.
9. Halmesvirta, *Ideology and Argument*, "Introduction".
10. This issue has been studied by Laine, "Käsi kädessä siskot veikot? Naiset ja työväen urheiluliike", 186-209.
11. Halmesvirta, "Sports as Medicine: Public Health, Hygiene and the Rise of the Sports Movement in Finland, 1880–1920", 171-179.
12. Aro, "Muutamia mietteitä urheilusta", 574-575; Pihkala, *Nykyiset ja urheiluväen velvollisuudet*, 4.
13. Relander, "Vuoden vaihteessa". 1.
14. Relander, "Siveellisyyskysymyksestä sananen", 1-2.
15. Relander, "Vuotta nuorempain lasten kuolevaisuus Suomessa", 9-11.
16. Relander, "Työn siunaus", 34.
17. Relander's remark in *THL* 11 (1895), 174.
18. Relander, "Naisen tehtävästä kansan yleisen terveystilan kohottamiseksi", 81-87.
19. Relander, "Hysteriia eli luulotauti sekä keinoja taudin voittamiseksi", 24-26.
20. See Halmesvirta, "Sports as Medicine: Public Health, Hygiene and the Rise of the Sports Movement in Finland, 1880–1920", 173-176.
21. For a theoretical and methodological overview, see Stark, "Empowering Practises: Perspectives on Modernization in Finland", 4-16.
22. Reijo Waara, "Tytöstä naiseksi kehittyessä", 4-6; "Hoida sydäntäsi, keuhkojasi", 115.
23. *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1898), 2; Hällberg, "Sananen urheilusta arvosteltuna lääkärin-urheilijan kannalta", 144.
24. Ivar Wilskman in *Suomen Urheilulehti* 1 (1898), 177.
25. 'C.S.', "Mikä erotus tulee olla tyttöjen ja poikien voimisteluliikkeiden välillä", 100.
26. Oker-Blom, "Ruumiinharjoitukset ja henkinen työ", 231.
27. Halmesvirta, "Sukupuolihygienia ja nuorisopolitiikka", 73.
28. Oker-Blom, "Ruumiinharjoitukset ja henkinen työ", 234.

29. Oker-Blom, *Heikeobermoisuus ja kasvatus*, 53-54, 68-70.
30. E.g. Collan's diary from the year 1913. Collan's Collection, box no. 9.
31. Collan, "Elämä ja liikunto", 65-66; "Voimistelu kasvatuskeinona", 94-95.
32. Oker-Blom, "Urheilumerkkijärjestelmästä sananen", 113-114.
33. (A. Collan), "Urheilumerkki", 114-115.
34. 'K.K.', "Suomen Naisten Voimisteluliitto". *Kisakenttä* no. 4 (1915), 71.
35. Collan's notes from the year 1919. Collan's Collection, box 9.
36. Anon., "Naisten urheiluvastuksia", 212.
37. 'O.K.', "Maijan huolet", 154
38. Collan, *Naisten urheiluopas*, 24; Collan's notes from the year 1920. Collan's Collection, box 9.
39. Collan, "60.000 markkaa voimistelun, urheilun ja leikin hyväksi", 157-159; 'A.C.', "Voimistelunopettajan tehtävä maaseudulla", 218.
40. Collan, *Naisten urheiluopas*, 26.
41. This did not, in the 1910s context, mean children's play but young women's own alternative 'play' including e.g. joyful running, dancing and singing or, in sports-like fashion, basket-ball 'play'. Competitions in 'play' were also organized, but they aroused confusion and resentment among people who had been accustomed to competitive sports. See for details: Laine, "Voimistelu, leikki urheilu. Naisliikunnan ohjelmanrakennusta 1910-luvulla", 156-164.
42. Collan's remark in *Suomen Urheilulehti* (1906), 392-393.
43. Anni Collan, *Ruumillinen kasvatus Pohjois-Amerikan Yhdysvalloissa*, passim. In the foreword of this report on a study trip to the United States in 1914, she expressed the hope "that the circumstances described in this book would be exemplary to us in the work being done in the field of physical education in order to promote the progress of humankind" (p. v).
44. Collan, "Leikkikenttätöiminnan järjestely", 172-184.
45. 'C.S.', "Mikä erotus tulee olla tyttöjen ja poikien voimisteluliikkeiden välillä", 98.
46. Collan, *Urheilun järjestely kansakouluissa*, passim.
47. 'A.C.', (Women's Section), 135-136.
48. Collan's remark in *Suomen Urheilulehti* (1909), 326; "Kansallispukuja ja kansantansseja", 626.
49. 'A.C.', "Voimistelupuku", 353.
50. "Tyttö", "Leikin merkitys", 497.
51. Anni Collan, *Suomen kansan leikekiri*. WSOY: Porvoo, 1904.
52. Anni Collan's report, 614-616.
53. Collan, *Kansan laululeikekiri*, 30-34.
54. Collan's lecture at Varala (women's summer school), 21st of July, 1916. Collan's speeches, lectures and occasional writings, 1905-1918. Collan's Collection, box 9.
55. 'A.C.', "Tovereille". *Suomen Urheilulehti* (1910), 27-28.
56. Collan, "Vastakohtia urheilusta ja voimistelusta", 167.
57. Ibid., 171-172.
58. For a short biography, see Laine, "Björkstén, Elli, 1870-1947. Finnish Educator and Gymnastics Theorist", 139-140.
59. Elli Björkstén's letter to *Kisakenttä* no. 1 (1911), 6-9.

60. For a short biography, see Laine, “Kallio, Elin (1859–1927). Finnish Teacher and Founder of Gymnastics Movement”. 617-618.
61. Elin Kallio’s lecture in *Kisakenttä* no. 2 (1911), q. p. 21.
62. Ibid, 21-22.
63. Mangan, “Prospects for the New Millennium: Women, Emancipation and the Body”, 238-239.
64. On the new woman in Finland, see Rojala, “Modernia minuutta rakentamassa”, 155-164.

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