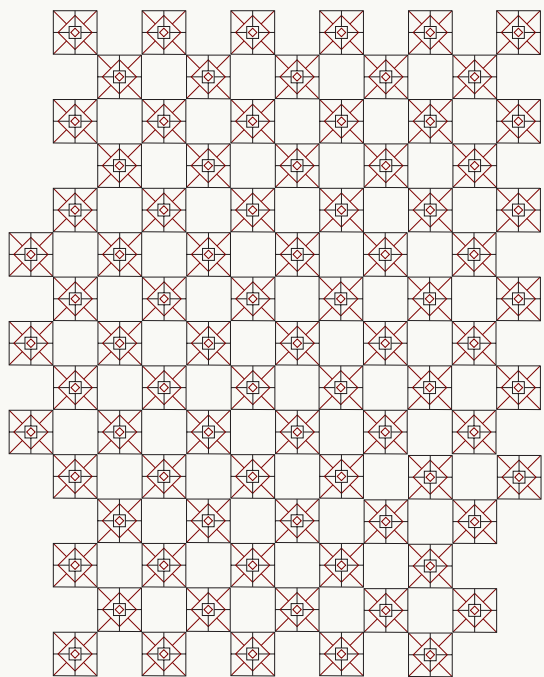


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Scaling Boundaries: Women, Mountaineering, and the Historical Ambivalence of the Female Body

**Premikanje mej: ženske, gornišтво in zgodovinska
ambivalenca ženskega telesa**

Julija Šuligoj

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ABSTRACT

The female body has been idealized, objectified, and burdened with contradictions throughout history. From ancient depictions to contemporary sports culture, it stands at the intersection of social norms and individual power. This paper explores the ambivalence toward the female body through the perspectives of medicine, art, and sports with an emphasis on mountaineering, highlighting how women, despite their achievements, faced and still face persistent scrutiny and bias. It focuses on the historical construction of the body, fashion's role, and how physical activity shaped perceptions of femininity. The analysis shows how enduring stereotypes influence women's participation in public life and sports to this day.

Keywords

female body, gender norms, objectification, sport, mountaineering, body history, feminism, bodily ambivalence

IZVLEČEK

Skozi vso zgodovino je bilo žensko telo idealizirano, objektivirano in obeleženo s protislovji. Od antičnih predstav do današnje športne kulture se žensko telo nahaja na presečišču med družbenimi normami in individualno avtonomijo. Članek raziskuje ambivalentnost odnosa do ženskega telesa z vidika medicine, umetnosti in športa, pri čemer se osredotoča na gornišstvo, kjer so ženske bile, in so še vedno, kljub njihovim številnim dosežkom pogosto soočene z dvomi in predsodki o njihovih zmožnostih. Posebna pozornost je namenjena zgodovinski konstituciji telesa, vlogi mode ter vplivu športne dejavnosti na pojmovanje ženskosti. Analiza razkriva, kako stereotipi o ženskem telesu še danes vplivajo na vključevanje žensk v javno življenje in šport.

Ključne besede

žensko telo, družbene norme spola, objektivizacija, šport, gornišstvo, zgodovina telesa, feminizem, telesna ambivalenca

INTRODUCTION

Given that the body serves as the primary and most immediate aspect of human appearance during initial encounters, individuals have historically evaluated one another based on physical attributes, as they still do today. Scientifically speaking, medical professionals based on the socio-biological approach define the body as a field of existence with its own nature and boundaries, while social scientists, based on the constructivist approach, argue that the body is fully socially and culturally constructed.¹

From a constructivist perspective, evaluations of the female body reveal a mixture of contradictions that are deeply rooted in societal norms. This tension becomes particularly visible through feminist readings of the body, which interpret these contradictions as expressions of the male gaze that defines socially acceptable ideals of the female body. For instance, today we see the coexistence of the body positivity movement with the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Beyond the realm of popular culture, explorations of the female body encompass various domains such as art, literature, medicine, and social norms, revealing complex attitudes toward femininity, sexuality, and women's roles.

Within this broader context, sport stands out as a striking example where the regulation and scrutiny of women's bodies are particularly evident. The 2024 Olympic Games provide a recent illustration, with debates over sex and gender eligibility centering on boxers and their natural testosterone levels.

In this article, I explore how ambivalence both surrounds and is directed at the female body, reflecting complex social and cultural attitudes. Because as:

The fruit of both a social and cultural context, the body is permanently under the yoke of normative representations and discourses. Simultaneously relating

1 Canatan, Kadir. "Preface." In: *Body Sociology*, ed. Kadir Canatan, 15–20. İstanbul: Açılım Publishing, 2011.

to the biological, the social, and the intimate, it is a mediator between an individual and society. It personifies the individual, and is controlled by social norms that govern its appearance and attitude.²

The article begins by discussing feminist perspectives on this subject and providing a historical overview of the treatment of the female body across different periods. It proceeds to link this theme to sport, particularly to mountaineering. Female mountaineers were, and still are, both celebrated for their achievements and scrutinized for their appearance and conformity to traditional notions of femininity.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF THE FEMALE BODY

The analysis of the body has a long history in feminist thought. To frame my discussion, I begin with a brief overview of some of the main authors who have contributed to this field, which provides essential context for understanding the complex social, cultural, and historical constructions of the female body.

Early feminist engagements with the body were shaped by seminal works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), where the female body is conceptualized as a key site of cultural inscription and as a marker of woman's position as the "Other." Arguing that women are not born but made through social and cultural conditioning, Beauvoir reveals that it is not biological difference itself, but its social interpretation, that underpins women's subordination.³

Building on this foundation, later authors developed distinct critical perspectives. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), examines how cultural ideals of beauty and bodily appearance operate as mechanisms of disci-

2 Malivin, Amandine. "The Gendered Body in Europe: Between Constraint and Emancipation." 22 June 2020. Available at: <https://ehne.fr/en/node/12241> (access: May 2025).

3 Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953. (Originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949.)

pline and social regulation. Wolf argues that as women gained social and political power, beauty standards intensified, working to maintain patriarchal control through the internalization of unattainable ideals.⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, particularly in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), advances a poststructuralist account of the body as fluid, material, and discursively constituted. For Grosz, the body is not a passive object shaped by culture but an active, dynamic participant in the production of meaning and subjectivity.⁵ These contributions established the groundwork for feminist analyses of embodiment, providing a framework that continues to inform contemporary scholarship at the intersections of gender studies, cultural theory, and critical philosophy.

Expanding on this theoretical foundation, Rose Weitz situates the female body within historical and social contexts, demonstrating how cultural, legal, and scientific discourses have shaped perceptions of women's bodies over time. Tracing these influences from antiquity to the present, she highlights how sexual double standards, Darwinian notions of dimorphism, and socially sanctioned emotional norms have reinforced gendered hierarchies and prescribed roles. In doing so, Weitz connects historical patterns of subordination to contemporary discussions of embodiment, showing how these enduring frameworks continue to influence social expectations and the regulation of women's behavior and bodies.⁶

Contemporary feminist scholarship additionally emphasizes the interplay between power, culture, and the lived experience of the body. Scholars such as Susan Bordo and Judith Butler have interrogated how social norms, media representations, and performative practices shape both the perception and regulation of female bodies. Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), examines how cultural ideals of thinness and bodily discipline fun-

4 Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: William Morrow, 1991.

5 Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

6 Weitz, Rose, ed. *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Third ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

tion as tools of social control, showing that women's struggles with body image often reflect broader dynamics of power and resistance.⁷ Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), challenges fixed notions of sex and gender, proposing that gender is performative – created and sustained through repeated social acts rather than rooted in biology.⁸ Their work highlights the body as an active site of social and political inscription. Contemporary approaches also incorporate intersectional perspectives, recognizing that race, class, sexuality, and disability intersect with gender to produce diverse experiences of embodiment.

Together, these developments underscore the complex, contested nature of the female body and provide a critical lens for examining ambivalence in domains such as sport, physical culture, and mountaineering.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE (FEMALE) BODY

The feminist rethinking of embodiment builds upon – and often reacts against – long-standing historical understandings of the body. Over the course of history, the human body has been the subject of observation and study, with early scientific understandings recognizing the differences between male and female bodies. Initially, these differences were interpreted through a hierarchical lens, with the female body seen as an inferior version of the male. In antiquity, it was commonly believed that women possessed the same genitalia as men, only inverted.⁹ Galen famously asserted that women have exactly the same organs as men, but in exactly the wrong places.¹⁰ Thomas W. Laqueur described this framework as the

7 Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

8 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

9 Nemesius of Emesa. *On the Nature of Man*. Ed. and trans. William Tefler. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955, 369.

10 Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, 26.

“one-sex model,” where only one sex exists, with the male serving as the paradigm.¹¹

The Greeks (through Aristotle’s theories), associated body temperature with social status, viewing warm bodies as emblematic of strength and health, particularly in men. This perception led to gender discrimination, where women, considered colder and thus weaker, were marginalized and expected to remain covered and excluded from public life. Additionally, the belief that fetal warmth influenced gender outcomes reinforced these biases, positioning female bodies as inherently inferior.¹²

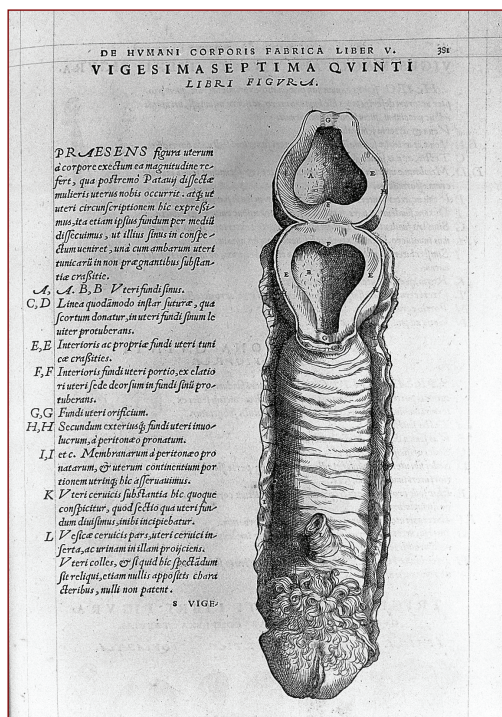


Figure 1: An anatomical depiction of the female reproductive organs by Vesalius, historically interpreted as reflecting residual Galenic ideas of the female body as an “inverted” form within the one-sex model.¹³

It is important to note that such conceptions of bodily difference were not confined to philosophical or medical thought but also had concrete social and legal consequences. Assertions of inferiority reinforced the notion that men could overpower and control women,

11 *Ibid.*

12 Sennett, Richard. *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. İstanbul: Metis Publishing, 2011.

13 “Vesalius ‘De humani corporis fabrica,’ 1543; Illustration of a Uterus.” Wikimedia Commons. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vesalius_%22De_humani...%22,_1543;_illustration_of_a_uterus_Wellcome_L0015865.jpg (access: November 2025).

including within the legal sphere. As Weitz observes, “the law typically has defined women’s bodies as men’s property.”¹⁴ The situation was thus reciprocal: women were regarded as property because their bodies were perceived as inferior, and “women’s legal status as property reflected the belief that women’s bodies were inherently different from men’s in ways that made women both defective and dangerous.”¹⁵

During the Middle Ages, Christian beliefs significantly shaped perceptions of the body. The body temperature theory was rejected. Now, all bodies were “the same body in the eyes of God; they were neither fairer, nor uglier, nor superior, nor inferior.”¹⁶ Attitudes toward the female body in those times were paradoxical: women were celebrated as paragons of virtue (Virgin Mary) yet simultaneously viewed as sources of temptation (Eve). While women’s bodies were idealized in artistic representations, they were objectified in societal contexts.

Advances in medicine and new knowledge of anatomy changed the perception of human bodies. Additionally, the idea of the similarity of the male and female genitalia in ancient Greece and Rome was gradually abandoned, and a view that emphasized differences started to be accepted. This view led to the opinion that the social roles of men and women were also different. “The belief that the advancement of civilization strengthens the difference between men and women is embedded in the idea of role separation.”¹⁷

By the early 19th century, the one-sex view had shifted to what Laqueur termed the “two-sex model,” in which male and female bodies were understood as biologically distinct and incommensurable.¹⁸ Jacques-Louis

14 Weitz, Rose. “A History of Women’s Bodies.” In: *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, ed. Rose Weitz. Third ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 3.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Doğan, Neva. “The Image of the Body in Its Historical Transformation.” *Contemporary Issues of Communication*, 1/1 (2022), 31–45.

17 Gélis, Jacques. “The Body, the Church, and the Sacred.” In: *History of the Body*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, 17–73. İstanbul: YKY, 2008, 120.

18 Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 153.

Moreau, one of the pioneers of early psychiatry, fervently argued against the earlier conception of women in relation to men. He declared: "*Not only are the sexes different, but they are different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect. To the physician or the naturalist, the relation of woman to man is a series of oppositions and contrasts.*"¹⁹

In the Victorian era, two ideal and totally opposed types were established. The ideal for men was to have a muscular and hairy body and a deep voice. The ideal for women was the opposite, as their bodies were seen through the lens of sexual modesty and fragility, and thus they should have a high voice, and a small and sleek body without hair.²⁰ Of course, these criteria included only white, able-bodied, heterosexual individuals.

The Victorian era also gave rise to the idea of separate spheres, where women were associated with the private, domestic realm, while men occupied the public sphere.²¹ Women were thus intended to be passive. This divide extended to medical thinking as well. Any deviation from the perfect body type would be explained by a dysfunction of reproductive organs. Women's health problems, particularly those related to the reproductive system, were often seen as linked to their emotional or moral state, leading to diagnoses such as hysteria. A common treatment for women with hysteria or nervous conditions was enforced rest, which further reinforced the belief that women's bodies were inherently weak and required constant management.²²

19 Moreau, Jacques-Louis. *Histoire naturelle de la femme*. Vol. 1. Paris: L. Duprat, 1803.

20 As Weitz observes, it was similar in American society: "*women's bodies as ill or fragile [...] white middle-class women were unable to sustain the responsibilities of political power or the burden of education or employment.*" Weitz, "A History of Women's Bodies," 6.

21 Similar concerns about the physical and social constraints imposed on women can be found in other contexts: "*To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles [...] artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action.*" Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. London: J. Johnson, 1792, 29.

22 Cohut, Maria. "The Controversy of 'Female Hysteria'." 13 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/the-controversy-of-female-hysteria> (access: May 2025).

"Society thus did everything it could to control the body and make it conform to gender norms. Identity was simultaneously visible on the body, as well as based on it."²³ That is why in late 19th-century Europe, the ideal body weight or shape became a concern primarily for the middle class, perpetuating the notion of the bourgeois "tyranny of thinness" over women.²⁴

The 20th century witnessed significant progress in women's rights, as feminist movements and socio-political upheavals transformed perceptions of the female body. Feminist rhetoric, drawing on liberal ideas and the civil rights movement, argued that women's bodies were fundamentally similar to men's, and therefore that equality should be extended within existing social structures.²⁵

This emphasis on similarity was later challenged by approaches that celebrated women's distinct qualities.

In contrast, a more recent strand of feminist thought, known as 'cultural feminism', has re-emphasized the idea of inherent differences between men and women. Unlike those who made this argument in the past, however, cultural feminists argue that women's bodies (as well as their minds and moral values) are superior to men's. From this perspective, women's ability to create human life makes women (especially mothers) innately more pacifistic, loving, moral, creative, and life-affirming than men.²⁶

These rhetorical shifts, while contributing to significant social change, also generated new challenges and ambivalences. On the one hand, women gained greater freedom in dress and public presence; on the other, societal pressures surrounding thinness, beauty standards, and sexualization persisted. For instance, advances in reproductive rights and medical access empowered women to control their bodies, while debates over

23 Malivin, "The Gendered Body in Europe."

24 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 185.

25 Weitz, "A History of Women's Bodies," 8–10.

26 *Ibid.*, 8.

contraception and abortion highlighted ongoing tensions between autonomy and social norms.

The political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, along with their prescribed gender roles, were fundamentally shaped by these “facts” about their bodies. These beliefs served as “*the epistemic foundations for prescriptive claims about the social order.*”²⁷

HOW CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN’S BODIES HAVE SHAPED THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

The changing attitudes toward the female body are particularly visible in the realm of sports, a context in which norms surrounding gender, physicality, and performance are both produced and contested. A recent example of debates over women’s bodies in sports occurred at the 2024 Paris Olympics, where controversies over gender eligibility in boxing arose. The Algerian boxer Imane Khelif was at the center of the debate after her opponent withdrew just 46 seconds into their match, following Khelif’s earlier disqualification at the 2023 World Championships over alleged elevated testosterone levels, which she denied.²⁸ However, these debates are far from new.

According to Allen Guttman, culture – not biology – accounts for most, if not all, of the gender differences observed throughout sports history. For instance, Greek culture exhibited striking ambivalence toward women’s involvement in athletics: while Athenian women were largely excluded from political and military activities and confined to domestic roles, Spartan women excelled in athletic competitions and were required to undergo rigorous training. This example supports Guttman’s thesis that sports represent a key to understanding gender and the position of women in society. In Sparta, women enjoyed greater freedom and more rights

27 Moreau, *Histoire naturelle de la femme*, vol. 1, 15.

28 Khelif, Imane. “I Am a Woman”: Imane Khelif Hits Back in Gender Row after Claiming Gold.” *The Guardian*, 10 August 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/article/2024/aug/10/i-am-a-woman-imane-khelif-hits-back-in-gender-row-after-claiming-gold> (access: September 2025).

compared to their Athenian counterparts. Their participation in sports both reflected and reinforced this freedom, confirming the reciprocal relationship: they were freer because of their involvement in athletics, and they could participate in sports because they were freer.²⁹

As the examples from antiquity illustrate, the female body was not well understood, but it was consistently controlled and shaped by religious and cultural beliefs that varied across time and space. That practice continued into the Middle Ages. Although formal opportunities for women to participate in organized sport were limited, they were by no means entirely excluded from physical activity. Women engaged in informal games, dances, and physical labor, and in certain aristocratic contexts they participated in hunting, riding, and other pursuits. In addition, some women practiced swimming, archery, and even ball games, often in private or semi-private settings. However, such activities were closely regulated by social norms, religious authorities, and local laws, which sought to restrict women's mobility, enforce modesty, and prevent behaviors deemed unbecoming or dangerous.³⁰

The Victorian era, as previously noted, emphasized even stricter gender norms and bodily regulation, which also shaped women's involvement in sport. In the 19th century, women's bodies were objectified and regulated by social standards, emphasizing thinness, fragility, and paleness, all of which also affected their participation in sports. In contrast, the idealized male sporting body was portrayed as strong, aggressive, and muscular, serving as a symbol of masculinity against which women, characterized as relatively powerless and inferior, were and still are measured.³¹ Muscularity on the female body was not considered a beauty ideal, but rather the opposite. Concerns also emerged that rigorous physical activities like mountaineering could have potentially detrimental effects on women's supposedly delicate constitutions and mental well-being, with a belief that such

29 Guttman, Allen. *Women's Sports: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

30 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 185.

31 Hargreaves, Jennifer. *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*. London: Routledge, 1994, 145–146.

extreme physical activity could damage women's "weaker" bodies and their "fragile" minds.³²

In the 20th century, during the interwar years, although sportswomen became more athletically inclined, influential ideological assumptions persisted regarding the detrimental effects of exercise on the female body. The expansion of women's sports and the growing visibility of the female body's form and sexuality – particularly during the second half of the 20th century – became increasingly tied to the commercialization of female athleticism and sexuality. As Jennifer Hargreaves aptly notes: "*image-making is the cult of modern capitalism; it reflects the obsession about the body which affects modes of everyday life and personal responses.*"³³ Despite the empowerment associated with strength, muscularity, and athletic skill for men, these attributes were often devalued or denigrated for women. Even by the end of the 20th century, sportswomen felt pressured to present popular images of femininity to avoid being labelled as having "unwomanly" physique. Sport thus continued to challenge traditional notions of femininity, while traditional notions of femininity also challenged women's access to sports.³⁴

Although these contradictions persisted, Bordo highlights a shift in perceptions toward the athletic and muscular image of femininity, solid and bulky-looking, which started to become increasingly more desirable around the late 20th century and has continued into the 21st century.³⁵ The body studies scholar argues that this shift can be attributed to the preference for tautness and containment over thinness, as any form of excess, sagginess, or wrinkling detracts from its line and firm appearance. As already mentioned, historically, muscularity has been linked with masculinity; however, by the end of the 20th century, it became more glamorized and sexualized. Representations of the female athletic body, muscular yet feminine (e.g.

32 Libbon, Stephanie E. "Pathologizing the Female Body: Phallogentrism in Western Science." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8/4 (2007), 79–92.

33 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 158.

34 *Ibid.*, 164.

35 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 185.

Jane Fonda with her workout programs), symbolized empowerment and offered an escape from traditional notions of femininity and domesticity.³⁶

As these examples illustrate, the evolving social attitudes toward the female body have consistently been mirrored in the realm of sports, where cultural norms and anxieties around femininity are both reflected and reinforced. This ongoing negotiation of femininity and the athletic body also extended beyond performance to appearance, laying the groundwork for how cultural expectations around gender and clothing would shape women's participation in physically demanding activities, as explored in the next chapter on the example of mountaineering.

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, CLOTHING, AND MOUNTAINEERING

Another important dimension of the shifting attitudes toward the female body can be found in the realm of clothing, as the norms of Western society were also reflected in the way clothes were deemed socially appropriate. Men wore pants, women skirts. Furthermore, clothes represented another type of oppression for women. *"In the 19th century, with the influence of Christianity, it was forbidden for women to show their thighs, even their ankles."*³⁷

However, restrictions on women's appearance extended beyond the expectation to cover the body. The corset, for example, was a central element of women's clothing during the Victorian era, with the majority of middle-class women and many working-class women wearing it regularly. It played a crucial role in achieving the desired feminine figure, tightening the waist while keeping other parts of the body full. This ideal shape was intertwined with broader societal expectations of femininity, which emphasized self-discipline, control of one's appetite, and associated a small waist with wealth and social status. *"It is this link to self-regulation that led people*

36 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 146, 161.

37 Doğan, "The Image of the Body," 37

to see the corset as the ultimate symbol, and indeed instrument, of female oppression."³⁸



Figure 2: This photograph of a woman in a corset depicts the idealized Victorian beauty, emphasizing a cinched waist and elegant posture, while also reflecting the constraints of this idealized body, as beauty was often achieved through uncomfortable clothing.³⁹

The criteria for appropriate clothing were, of course, also reflected in sport. Mountaineering presents a particularly interesting site for examining

38 Aspinall, Hannah. "The Fetishization and Objectification of the Female Body in Victorian Culture." *brightONLINE: Student Literary Journal*, University of Brighton. 10 August 2012. Available at: <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/brightonline/issue-number-two/the-fetishization-and-objectification-of-the-female-body-in-victorian-culture> (access: May 2025).

39 "Art: Portrait of Woman Wearing Corset." Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. [c. 1899]. Available at: <https://www.learner.org/series/art-through-time-a-global-view/the-body/portrait-of-woman-wearing-corset/> (access: November 2025).

the intersection of gender, sport, and clothing, as it brings the female body into confrontation with a domain traditionally associated with masculine strength. In mountaineering that meant wearing corsets and skirts to the unwelcoming mountain environment. Nineteenth-century photographs depict pioneers such as Marie Paradis and Lucy Walker ascending Europe's highest mountains in skirts, despite the sheer impracticality. Mountaineering in such attire was arduous: corsets restricted breathing, the heavy skirts got in the way, weighing even more if they became wet and then froze.⁴⁰ Women improvised by making some adaptations, such as, for example, not lacing the corsets tight. For the skirts they had various options: "*They could jimmy-rig small hoops within the fabric of a skirt and hoist the skirt to the length needed to climb a mountain, bravely stash the skirt behind a rock to be retrieved upon completion of the climb, or mountaineer in a potentially dangerous floor-length dress.*"⁴¹ Such improvised strategies expose the tension between the symbolic maintenance of femininity and the lived realities of physical endurance.

Over time, clothing was adapted to meet the challenges of climbing while adhering to evolving notions of femininity. In the early 20th century, women mountaineers modified their attire for functionality over modesty. Climbing clubs provided opportunities for more practical clothing choices like shorts and tight pants, enabling more effective climbing.⁴² In general, bodies became freer during the 20th century. After the First World War, the corset was rejected, women cut their hair, skirts became shorter, and heels grew longer starting in the 1930s.⁴³

40 Brown, Rebecca. *Women on High: Pioneers of Mountaineering*. Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2002, 21.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Gunn, Natalie. "Women and Gender in Mountaineering and Climbing." Undergraduate Honors Thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 2023, 21–23.

43 Malivin, "The Gendered Body in Europe."

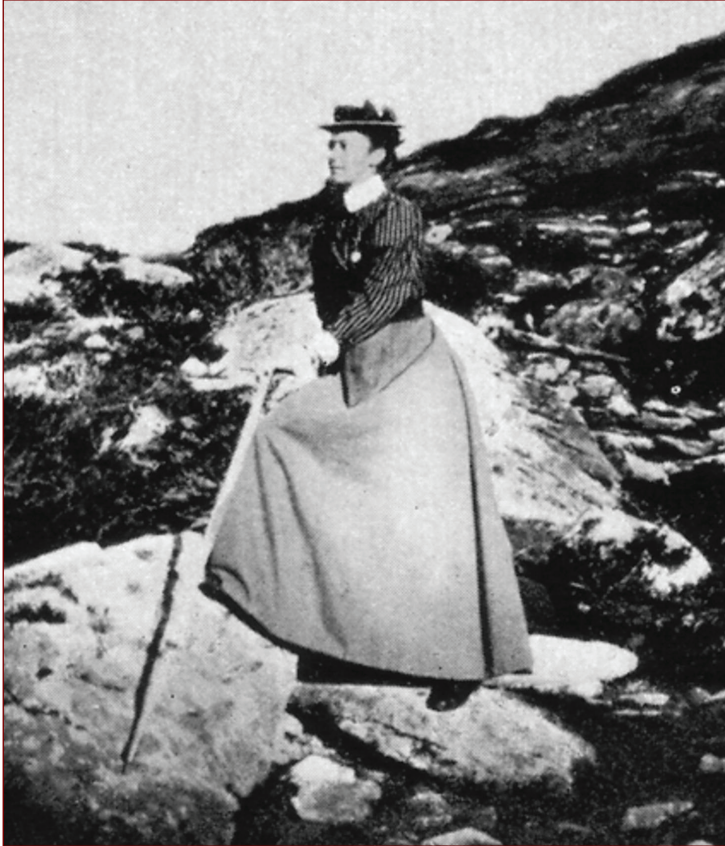


Figure 3: In the 19th century, women wore skirts to the mountains. The photograph shows Margaret Jackson, an English mountain climber.⁴⁴

BETWEEN ADMIRATION AND RESTRICTION: AMBIVALENT VIEWS OF WOMEN IN MOUNTAINEERING

The belief that women's bodies were fragile and had to be taken special care of was clearly seen in mountaineering. However, we can also see an ambivalence in the perception of women in the mountaineering commu-

⁴⁴ "Margaret Jackson." [c. 1880]. Wikimedia Commons. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Margaret_Jackson,_alpinist.jpg (access: September 2025).

nity. A text from 1907 reads: "A man hates a 'mannish' woman; but when a slight girl equals him at his favorite sport and yet retains her womanliness, he readily admits her claim to a place 'on the rope', and admires her greatly in consequence."⁴⁵

We can observe more of this attitude in the obituaries published in contemporary journals, although only the best performing females deserved those, of course. When written by men, they reveal gender-biases: "they describe these women as so excellent that they surpass not only all other women but also most men. At this point of exceptionality, one could say that they no longer truly fall into the category of women."⁴⁶ They are described as persons with, on the one hand, incredible physical and mental skills, which were perceived as male qualities, and, on the other, with a fragile female constitution. Gertrude Bell, a British archaeologist, writer, and political officer known for her expertise in Middle Eastern culture and diplomacy in the early 20th century, and also a mountaineer, is described with this ambivalent attitude. Her exceptionality is based on the contrast between her slender morphology and her physical and mental qualities, all described as masculine:

Her strength, incredible in that slim frame, her endurance, above all her courage, were so great that even to this day her guide [...] speaks with an admiration of her that amounts to veneration. He told the writer, some years ago, that of all the amateurs, men or women, that he had travelled with, he had seen but very few to surpass her in technical skill and none to equal her in coolness, bravery, and judgment.⁴⁷

Male admiration hinged on a delicate balance: a woman who appeared overly masculine was dismissed, yet a woman who remained modest

45 "A Ladies' Week at Wastdale." *Journal of the Fell and Rock-Climbing Club of the English Lake District*, 1/1 (1907), 190–191.

46 Moraldo, Delphine. "Women and Excellence in Mountaineering from the Nineteenth Century to the Present." *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 37/9 (2020), 732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2020.1819250> (access: May 2025).

47 Strutt, Edward L. "In Memoriam Gertrude Bell (1868–1926)." *Alpine Journal*, 39 (1927), 297–299.

and seemingly fragile while accomplishing remarkable feats in mountaineering was seen as extraordinary and worthy of genuine admiration.⁴⁸

Throughout the 20th century, more and more climbers offered encouragement, but sometimes that was in a patronizing way. Nicholas Jaeger, for example, states that *"the history of mountaineering presents us with some remarkable women,"* but quickly adds that *"mountaineering may not be particularly adapted to the psyche of most women [...] none of them could ever pretend to play the leading roles."*⁴⁹ Such remarks reveal how admiration could coexist with exclusion: women were praised as anomalies, yet simultaneously denied full legitimacy within the mountaineering community.

CONCLUSION

The female body has long been idealized, objectified, and fetishized as *"social rules and guidelines on how the female body should look, and how it should be dressed, objectified the body and encoded femininity within these rules. This made the portrayal of the female body a space for expression, oppression and sexual commodification."*⁵⁰ This societal ambivalence toward the female body throughout history is particularly evident in the exploration of women's roles in mountaineering and sports. Accounts of these experiences reveal a complex interplay of admiration and scrutiny, reflecting deep-rooted cultural attitudes toward women's bodies and capabilities. Although women have made significant strides in these fields, they have often been subjected to biases that shape perceptions of their achievements. Understanding this historical context is essential for recognizing how stereotypes have persisted and evolved over time.

The history of shifting attitudes toward the female body should therefore not be understood as one of linear progress. Rather, it demonstrates that

48 Moraldo, "Women and Excellence," 732.

49 Jaeger, Nicolas. *Carnets de solitude*. Paris: Denoël, 1979, 95.

50 Aspinall, "Fetishization and Objectification."

transformation often carries both liberation and constraint: as new freedoms emerge, so too do new forms of regulation and expectation. Despite this overall pattern, the second half of the 20th century brought significant changes through feminist movements and social transformations. New challenges and forms of ambivalence remain, but these developments represent important advances in the social and symbolic recognition of women's bodies. Examining these narratives allows us to both appreciate the contributions of women in mountaineering and sports, and recognize the enduring impact of societal norms on their experiences.

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POVZETEK

Članek obravnava zgodovinsko in sodobno ambivalentnost v odnosu do ženskega telesa, ki je hkrati prostor občudovanja in družbenega nadzora. Orisu feminističnih pogledov in zgodovinskega razvoja obravnave ženskega telesa sledi navezava na šport in v teh okvirih na gornišтво.

Kritične obravnave ženskega telesa izhajajo iz del feminističnih avtoric, kot so Simone de Beauvoir, Naomi Wolf, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler in drugih, ki so pokazale, da je žensko telo ujeta v mreže družbenih norm, oblasti, medijskih reprezentacij in kulturnih pričakovanj. Sodobni feministični pristopi opozarjajo tudi na presečišča spola z raso in razredom.

Zgodovinski pregled pokaže, da so bila pojmovanja ženskega telesa vedno prežeta z oblastjo in dominacijo. Od antičnega »modela enega spola«, ki je žensko opredelilo kot nepopolno različico moškega, do srednjeveških krščanskih predstav ter kasnejšega »modela dveh spolov« za razumevanje bioloških razlik, povsod so bila ženska telesa prikazana kot šibkejša, bolj omejena in neprimerna za javno življenje.

Na področju športa so ta prepričanja močno zaznamovala dostop žensk do telesnih aktivnosti. Primeri iz antike, srednjega veka, viktorijanske dobe in 20. stoletja kažejo, da je bilo vključevanje žensk zamejeno zaradi medicinskih predsodkov, moralnih norm in strahov pred izgubo »ženskosti«. Te napetosti so prisotne tudi v sodobnosti, kot je razvidno iz razprave o regulaciji spola v boksu na Olimpijskih igrah leta 2024.

V dejavnosti gornišťva se posebej dobro razkrije, kako se žensko telo sooča s področjem, ki je zgodovinsko dojeta kot moško, kar omogoči natančen vpogled v preplet spola, športa in oblačil. Kljub nespodbudnim družbenim normam so nekatere ženske dosegale izjemne dosežke, a so njihove zmožnosti pogosto opisovali z ambivalentnimi podtoni. Občudovanje teh planink je bilo pogojeno z občutljivim ravnotežjem med močjo oziroma oblastjo in ženskostjo.

Članek sklene, da se odnos do ženskega telesa skozi zgodovino ni linearno izboljševal, temveč je napredku pogosto sledila nova oblika nadzora. Razumevanje teh zgodovinskih vzorcev omogoča kritičen pogled na sodobne prakse in večje priznanje prispevkov žensk v športu in gorništvu.

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