

## **Between the Confrontation and the Concession: The Identities of Brazilian Olympic Female Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to analyze the construction of the Brazilian Olympic athletes' identity both in the Olympic scenery as in the Brazilian social context, based on the life stories of the protagonists of these events. The history of the relationship between women and sport in Brazil is marked initially by prohibitions and regulations, maintain the subterfuge of maternal attributes and subsequently by an exaltation of the female body in its sensual aspects. Thus, women's sport has continued to be a field of male mediation. Narratives of Olympic athletes, confronted with the theoretical framework of cultural studies, specifically the work of Stuart Hall on the identity in post-modernity, indicate that, despite the growing inclusion of women in various sports, this has not been a rethinking of the social roles of men and women in sport. Draws attention that this inclusion was not as confrontational as in other countries, keeping relations with the Brazilian feminist movement's history. So many athletes have a speech supporting a separation between athlete's life and life as a woman, holding that, although they are athletes, they not ceased to be a woman. The athletes affirm a sense that they are uncomfortable standing on a male-dominated field.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies; Identity; Olympism; Gender.

### **1. Introduction**

In The Olympic Games in 1896, the first of the contemporary era, women were allowed only on the condition of viewers of the show and banned from competing for biological reasons (Rubio and Simões, 1999, p. 53). Although there were women in the following editions, it was in the 1920s that women's struggle for space in the sport gain strength. That is when a confrontation occurs between the athlete Alice Milliat, president of the French Federation of Female Sport Associations and the president of the IOC, Pierre de Coubertin, who vehemently denies the inclusion of the full program of female athletics in the Antwerp Games in 1920 proposed by Milliat. In response, was organized in later years, the I Women's Games and the creation of the International Female Sport Federation, also by Milliat. In 1922 occurs the second edition of these Games, now under the name "Women's Olympic Games". The impact of this event was so great that opened the door to negotiation to Milliat, now with the International Athletics Federation, to include the full program of female athletics at the Games of Amsterdam (1928), with the counterpart of removing the name "Olympic" of Women's Games. The agreement was accomplished unilaterally, since there were only five events of athletics: 100 meters, 800 meters, 4 x 100 meters relay, discus throw and high jump (Cruz, Silva and Gomes, 2006, p. 17). Therefore, in the 1928 Games, there is a clear demonstration of confrontation, one of the most significant, when the British women's team performed the first athletic boycott in Olympic history by refusing to participate in a reduced program (Cruz, Silva and Gomes, 2006, p. 15).

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Despite these pioneering suggests advances, the first participation of women on the track would be marked by the resumption of discussions on the inadequacy of female sports. This is because, while the German Lina Radke, the Japanese Kinue Hitomi and the Swedish Inga Getzel crossed the finish line, all of them with faster marks than the world record of the 800 meters, the other competitors fell at the track. Few managed to remain standing after the great effort that had been submitted. Because of this, women would only come back to run the 800 meters or longer distances, in 1960. This fact had already occurred in the men's competition at the Olympics in St. Louis in 1904, in which some athletes after running the same event, felt bad, one of them being carried by the arms and other one reanimated with stimulants after fainting. Nevertheless, anyone questioned the permanence of this evidence at the Olympic Games for men (Cruz, Silva and Gomes, 2006). For women, collapsing on the track after a run of 800 meters thoroughly demonstrated that the sport was made for men.

"Women are not made to run this kind of killer distance", bellowed the London Daily Mail. (...) After interviewing doctors and specialists in physiology, the newspaper assured that endurance races like the 800 meters, caused premature aging for women. The limit, the newspaper said (...), was the half track, no more than 200 meters (Cruz, Silva and Gomes, p. 16).

Brazil joined the Olympic for the first time in 1920 in Antwerp and had a delegation of 21 athletes, all men. However, it was on the third Olympic participation of Brazil in Los Angeles in 1932, that a woman participated in the delegation: the swimmer Maria Lenk. However, this does not represent the massification of sports among Brazilian women. A potent evidence of this is the fact that the first Olympic medals for women sports in Brazil were conquered only in 1996, at the Atlanta Games with volleyball, beach volleyball and basketball. In this sense, there is a lack of studies that investigate the process of identity formation of women within the Brazilian Olympic sport seeking to understand the dynamics of inclusion and social representativeness achieved by the athletes. The aim of this study is therefore to analyze aspects of the identities of Brazilian Olympic female athletes and the construction of this social role both in the Olympic scene as in the Brazilian social context.

## **2. Methodological issues**

This research uses the method of History of Life, as Bosi (1994, 2003) and Rubio (2006), from the narratives collected from the protagonists of Brazilian participation in the Olympics. The narrative had been taken as the dimension adopted by Cultural Studies (Hall, 2000; 2006), considered a privileged position in the construction and circulation of meaning, as Guareschi, Medeiros and Bruschi (2003) and Silva (2000). It is also from the conceptual framework of the Cultural Studies that will be analyzed the identity of Brazilian women in Olympic sport.

Stuart Hall (2000, p. 112) defines identity as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" and argues that changes in the twentieth century were substantial for the disruption of the notion of unified subject who had the modern individual. The "crisis of identity" is what comes from this fragmentation in which individuals lose their references that, until then, gave them "stable anchorage in the social world" (Hall 2006, p. 07), going further from a unique identity and approaching of multiple identities based on the differences instead of the unit (Rubio, 2006, p. 35).

The narratives were collected in the form of face interviews recorded on audio-visual media, and later transcribed. It was selected athletes from around the country and from different sports, making a database of approximately seventy athletes. Of these, seven were selected here by the importance they give in their narratives on issues involved in being a woman in the sport. Within this framework, are presented athletes who participated in the Olympics since Munich in 1972, up to Beijing in 2008 in several sports (Athletics, Dressage, Football, Judo, Sailing and Swimming). It was also decided to bring these discourses throughout the text of the article, instead of separating specific part of "results", because we believe they illustrate the discussions from the literature review and the theoretical references from the area. The athletes will not have their names revealed, and when mentioned, they are replaced by letters their not matching with their initials.

## **3. A background of the identities' formation process of the Brazilian female athletes**

Taking into account that the issues of gender and feminism, as well as epistemological and social movement, have become key points in the political, public and private, throughout the twentieth century (Hall 2006; Hobsbawm, 2008), it is necessary to verticalize the discussion of gender relations that are present in the sporting context.

In order to make considerations about the elements that helped the construction of these relations in Brazil, we bring to light some data and reflections found in Goellner and Fraga (2004) and in Regulamento No. 7 (1934). At the end of the nineteenth century, it was still carefully observed the inclusion of women as practitioners of physical exercise, however occur in this period the first measures which take account the benefits of corporal practices in relation to the female body. Such proposals, however, can not be considered emancipatory, since it did not promote a change of the points of views regarding the approximation of the woman and your body and movement (Adelman, 2003).

Goellner and Fraga (2004) comments the ideas of Fernando de Azevedo, intellectual of the beginning of the twentieth century, which in his works “*Da Educação Física*” and “*Antinöus: estudo de cultura atlética e a evolução do esporte no Brasil*”, both from 1920, starts a scientific and theoretical trajectory in relation to physical education and physical activity. At that time, Azevedo proposed the institution of physical education as a science by integrating to the ideals of the nation. His purposes were allegedly based on eugenics and hygienists medical theories, which should turn towards the improvement of weak individuals in order to create a more prepared and capable contingent and thus build the foundation for maintaining a healthy nation, protective and perpetuating the species, confirming the “virtues of the race.” Thus, besides taking care of the maternal body, the exercise would connect this characteristic to the well being of the whole nation, in one proposal of “body-nation.” As Luce Irigaray (1985, p.193) wrote, in this point of view “woman exists only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself”.

Not too distant<sup>3</sup> is the “Regulamento No. 7” (Statute nº7), or the “French Method”, which proposes a special physical education for women which should not go beyond the alleged biological determinations imposed on them. It considered human beings equals in relation to the sexual characteristics until seven years, but “at the time of puberty, while the boy instinctively seeks occasions to produce intense muscular effort, the woman becomes, instead, calmer and more reserved. His physical education should be mainly hygienic” (Regulamento nº 7..., 1934, p. 16). It continues to restrict women to certain practices by arguing that “menstruation during adolescence and later pregnancy and lactation, become causes of exhaustion, with added muscle fatigue” (Regulamento nº 7..., 1934, p. 16 ) and that “women are not made to fight, but to procreate” (Regulamento nº 7..., 1934, p. 16). Recommended for women the following practices:

The jogging, rhythmic exercises and suspension with short jumps, jump on the rope, the discus throw, javelin and shot put (less than men), racquet games (péla and tennis), transporting light weights balanced on the head and both arms fencing, which ultimately require only a moderate work and putting into action, especially, the muscles of the pelvis, will be, in principle, the exercises proper to the woman. Any exercise that is accompanied by bumps, shocks and blows, it is dangerous to the uterine organ. The hygiene condemns their practice by women (Regulamento nº 7..., 1934, 16).

It should be noted the fact that these discourses did not justify the body practices of women cited only in these periods. The evocation of the naturalized woman body recurs in works about the called “female physical education” at later times, as seen in the article “*A importância da aptidão física para a mulher*” [The importance of physical fitness for women] in a 1976 edition of the Journal of Physical Education of the Army signed by Captain Paulo Roberto Laranjeiras Caldas and the 2nd Sergeant Israel Gomes Filho, both belonging to the faculty of the School of Physical Education of the Army. At that time, the officers points out to several guidelines on the work to be done with women, one of which directs that “the brutal exercises should be abolished, because the woman was not formed to fight, but to procreate” (Caldas and Gomes Filho , 1976, p. 10).

Coming from a family of athletes - declaring even that his mother was one of the best competitors in the Maria Lenk selective for the 1936 Games - T. I. began his practice in riding through his father and colleagues and with fifteen years have competed in dressage under the tutelage of a strict German coach. After being several times regional and national champion, with eighteen years old she moved to Germany to live with the first Olympic medalist in history, a woman (the event of dressage is mixed, predominantly male). In 1972, aged 23, she was the youngest athlete of dressage of the Olympics, competing with a rider of 75 years.

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, Castellani Filho (2006, p. 75-76) shows that Fernando de Azevedo made clear his choice of the French method in an article entitled “O papel do professor de Educação Física moderno” from 1920.

In the following excerpt, T. I. reports as her pioneering in a sport originated from military activities - and, not surprisingly, influenced by conceptions centered on the exaltation of masculinity - has resulted in tensions among her fellow knights:

*Normally, those who won were the militaries. And men. I had to ride really well to win the men and the militaries. I was the first woman to teach dressage at Hípica Paulista. In the Hípica arena I was hit by other horsemen, because they thought a woman teacher was a absurd. And there was much prejudice to ride with a female teacher because of the relationship between horse and manhood. So how does a woman can teach a man?*

It is quite probable that these thoughts have come to be, by the acceptance that obtained at the time, the landmark for the dissemination of the female body practices and public policies in the following decades. As shown in Castellani Filho (2006, p. 60), these institutions, authors, and eventually legislators emphasized the dominant thinking in relation to the social representation of women by suggesting the preparation of their bodies for motherhood. There was also a legal reinforcement of restrictions on sports for women with a ban on certain sports, as a decree of 1941, when creating the National Council of Sports, and a resolution of 1965 of the National Council of Sports itself, which specified such sports (Castellani Filho, 2006, p. 61-63).

P. D. started practicing judo encouraged by her father who believed that sport not only good for improving the health of children, like to their social integration. Before contacting the practice, she did ballet under the encouragement of his mother, but felt the dance monotonous. At the beginning she believed that Judo was a sport oriented for boys, but after some time became interested more seriously. When she had been already invited to the Brazilian Junior National Team, she watched Rogério Sampaio's fights on television at the Olympic Games in 1992, and from that moment, became interested in the mega event that she had never seen before. After obtaining excellent results in the Pan American Games in 1999 she got injured and did not attend the Olympic Games in 2000, delaying her debut for 2004. Despite not having lived under the spell of the legal prohibition, the athlete verticalizes the discussion to comment on the effects of such public policy:

*In Judo I think we live an even more problematic issue. As we had the law that everybody knows, until 1979, which did not allow the practice in many sports. Judo could not be practiced at a competitive level, indeed, at all, but still had women who practiced "illegally". But there were few girls who did. If you count all of Brazil, could not be above thirty, I think not, I think I'm being very optimistic about this.*

Louro (1997) analyzes that is from this idea of biological determinism that arise the need, by Anglo-Saxon feminists, to use the term "gender" as opposed to "sex." If we can say that there are sexual differences between men and women, the social construction that is derived from these elements belongs to the field of gender. Thus, the aim is to bring to the political field which is insisted to be kept in the field of biology and the naturalization of inequality, since it is in the context of social relationships that are built the concepts of femininity and masculinity. This concept creates a major transformation in feminist studies and is now used, not without disputes and tensions, by Brazilian feminists in the late 80's (Louro, 1997, p. 23).

Throughout the subsequent period what was seen was the transformation of language over the body and motor skills, since the woman provoked the displacement of a social status and a role in time and space. However, this shift did not occur in a revolutionary way in the overthrow of conceptualization about the factors impeding or restrictive for women sports. In the words of Goellner (2005, p. 145):

*In the structuring phase of women's sports in the country, progressive and moralist ideas challenged and seduced women, both for display and for the hiding of their bodies, sometimes forging new ways to care for themselves, sometimes reinforcing the idea that the public exhibition of his body was associated with pagan universe of impurities and obscenities. On the one hand, there was criticism of laziness, lack of exercise, excess clothing, confinement at home, on the other, amplified the restrictions to the effective inclusion of women in different public spaces which, in a way, fenced some possible daring.*

It should be noted that at the 1970s, the discourse of "sensuality" of the female body joined - not replaced - to the health maintenance for maternity.

The inevitable female participation in various sports was followed by a concern to maintain an ideal of feminine sensuality (Goellner, 2005)<sup>4</sup>, by the spectacularization of their bodies in gyms, stadiums and gymnasiums. The exercised body of the women, especially of the athletes, becomes an object of social desire. And this seems to be the paradigm of women's sports that still persists nowadays. It is reported by a football player when preparing for the championship, "Paulistana" in 2001, whose life story told to us is summarized below.

C. J. started to play football with the neighborhood boys. Her father wanted her brother as a player but was the daughter who demonstrated more skills for the sport. Her mother, who disliked the idea of having a daughter practicing football, imposed a series of housekeeping duties that she should do before heading out to the street. However, with the help of her brother, she always ended in time to play. And it was soon changed his life: when she was thirteen years old her mother died and she left home to join the Olympic team in Atlanta. In just over ten years of his career, she stood out with the teams that participated in the South American championships and the Pan American and Olympic Games in 2000 and 2004 respectively. We emphasize, therefore, how clearly is her view over her body exhibition in the sports spectacle:

*All teams wore uniforms that were a parameter to all. They were extremely short shorts, there was no way to practice the sport, and I am defender, I usually give a lot of sliding tackles. The first slide tackle I gave I could become naked. A tiny shirt, all to take men to the stadium; for the men look at the women and not the football itself.*

#### **4. The identities: from perception of discrimination to the maintenance of "femininity"**

In an article of relevance for this study, Adelman (2003), presents the position of Festle which states that women athletes always had to face at least two types of social prejudice/stereotypes. The first refers to "physical differences" between women and men who made them less competitive for the sport. There's where the differences eventually become restrictive subterfuges, if not prohibitive, of sports practice, transforming the inherent and built peculiarities of the women into inequalities. The second relates to the fact that the sport "masculinizes" the athletes, questioning her sexuality. Festle (1996 cited in Adelman, 2003) argues that professional athletes do not see alternative unless adopting a defensive posture. This questioning of women's sports is brought up again by C. J.:

*Homosexuality does not exist only in women's football, but why just talk about it in women's football? Because the image is that. You don't need to be a "tomboy" to play football, but unfortunately the image that is passed is that way.*

Bringing the analysis of Louro (1997, p. 23), therefore being related, sexual identity and gender identity cannot be confused. While the first one reefer to the fact that the subjects join their sexuality in different ways – with persons of the same sex, of the opposite sex, both sex or without partners – the gender identity concerns in how the subjects consider themselves, social and historically, being masculine or feminine.

Such an analysis could be pertinent when are observed the discourse of Brazilian athletes who, while claiming their competitiveness and the need to be present in the sport, confirm the social desirability in not forget their "feminine side", their femininity. Conciliate the exercise of the sport with that of "being a woman" does not seem to be compatible for the athletes.

S. L. liked to practice several sports as a child, wished to be a ballerina, but it was athletics that attracted most interest to her. When she competed in the city of Presidente Prudente, the by Regional Games, she was selected by a coach to take a test. From there the family moved away to live in this city.

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<sup>4</sup> The author refers to a report in *Veja* magazine, signed by Maurício Cardoso, entitled *Flowers of the Field*, about women's football team of the Olympic Games in Atlanta (1996), to illustrate that, on the edge of XXI century, the eroticization of women's bodies is part of the sporting spectacle. Follows the passage cited by Goellner (2005): "As in the men's football, the competence of the players is essential to transform the sport into a business venture. But in the game of women, unlike men, this is not enough. The clubs are demanding that, besides knowing how to hit a ball, the players are beautiful" (Cardoso, 1996, p. 72).

After winning several championships in the tests of sprinting, she faced the challenge of heptatlon, which earned her participation in world championships and Olympic Games in 2008. S. L. leads into the track some care with their appearance, being possible to say that for the athlete, such measures are the peculiar characteristics of women's sports. When asked about being a woman in the sport, reveals:

*It is a little complicated, because you always want to get on the track vain, beautiful, with the makeup. At least in my sport, when the second proof comes I'm all smeared. We cannot makeup because we are sweat and spend almost six hours on the track.*

Born "on the edge of the 'Guarapiranga' dam ", K. A. learned to sail with her father when she was seven years old. At fifteen, she did not think about love relationships, as the construction and management of the boats were her main activities. Since the beginning of sports, she always wished to participate in the Olympics, even when there were no female events in sailing. However, she realized that the financial conditions are crucial to success in this sport, making her engaging in other activities. She returned to the waters only after much effort seeking partners and sponsors. Even saying that, in addition to financial difficulties, your sport is extremely sexist she was able to cope with these barriers and participate in the Olympic Games in 2004, performing her childhood dream. The excerpt of the interview, which is brought below illustrates the treatment that she gives to the issue of emerging identities of inclusion of women in the middle of high performance sport:

*In the water you are a man like in all sports. At the time of the activity is as equals, but have this part out of the water. In the land you have your cares. My sponsor is Nivea. Sunscreen, you have a care, you use it. So at no time you lose your femininity. At no time.*

From this perspective, despite the growing protagonism of women in Brazilian sport, certain questions have arisen halfway between the practice of women's sports in the Olympic level and its potential as a possible institution for the emancipation of women. In this sense, it is observed that the mere gradual participation of women in these mega-events did not change certain social gender in sport. It is worth taking a break in the discussion about gender relations and sport and turn to the history of feminism in Brazil. Pinto (2003) reveals that one of the unique characteristics of Brazilian feminism is the presence of what she calls "women's movement", that is, the demand of women for better living conditions, but without questioning the male bias that guides society in which they lived. Thus, the presence of women in sports arenas followed this peculiarity of Brazilian feminism: many of the athletes do not question the unequal guidelines in relation to gender to their federations and confederations and are not based on organizations of women athletes. However, this does not stop them from attending events and sports unthinkable for them a few decades ago. This fact is revealed in the actions leading to the institutional development of women's sports as told by some athletes. These include the judoka Y. D. and the swimmer G. R. Y. D. "was born on the mat," since her father is a professor of Judo. At age six she began training more seriously and with eleven she moved with her family to Japan, where she lived for eight years, but without letting dedicating herself to the sport. Wishing to participate in the Olympics, which began to wonder at the time of high school, she returned to her homeland to live in the house of a friend of her father and was hired by São Caetano, the club which in 2006 she joined the Brazilian Team and participated in the 2007 Pan American Games and the 2008 Olympics. In the following excerpt, Y. D. problematizes the discourse of lack of funds to take the women's team for the world championship that was approaching the time when she was interviewed (early 2009) and brings up impediments that are not in the order of the material conditions:

*They give this excuse that is money. I think they do not want to lead us. We were champions in the Pan-American by teams and in the championship of Moscow. So it's not for lack of experience, they could rely a little more on women. (...) Or the question of wages, the male is much higher than the female. While women earn an average of one thousand, two thousand reais the masculine team earns from five to ten thousand. It has a very large difference.*

G. R. began her practice in swimming to help in treating asthma, bronchitis and sinusitis. Her father who was a professional football player, let just she practice another sports unless she continues swimming. However, it was seeing Gustavo Borges and Fernando Scherer in the Olympics on TV that she was enchanted by the sport. With twelve years old she began to participate in competitions, being victorious in many of them. After only two years of competition she joined the relay team that won the bronze medal at the Pan American Games in Winnipeg.

After this done, the family moved to live in Europe, where she climbed the steps to attend the 2004 Olympic Games. G. R. finishes the issue of institutionalized prejudice, though veiled, in relation to women's sports in Brazil quite clear:

*Living in a society being a woman is already complicated. On sport is more complicated. First the financial side, we see various competitions where the prizes are always higher for men than for women. The boys are always the priority in terms of planning, training. This is very frustrating.*

The speeches of some of these athletes who are still in competitive activity already show an overview about the consequences of the inclusion of women in the Olympics without proper contestation of "androcentrism" of sports institutions. Now they circulate without flagrant restrictions in the same spaces as men but there are still certain provisions, including financing, that valorize the male sport in detriment of the women's.

### **5. Final considerations - In search of fragmentation**

Throughout the construction period of the theoretical reference, of the history review related to the Brazilian woman and her corporeality and the analysis of collected interviews, it can be noted a range of factors that provide support to understand the peculiarities of the course of female participation in Brazil Games Olympic and the phenomena that guided the formation of identities of these athletes. At first, when we look at some of the ideas that motivated the inclusions and prohibitions, one might suppose that the conquest of space was rowdy and permeated by disputes in the face of sports administration agencies in order to reconfigure such conceptions. However, both the historical analysis of literature, as the discourses present in the life histories of some of the Brazilian Olympic athletes suggest that the processes of inclusion and support for women's sports are given on a non-organized way by the athletes, avoiding confrontation. In Brazil are not found movements such as Women's Olympic Games and the Alice Milliat's International Female Sport Federation or the boycott of British female athletics team at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. This position of the Brazilian athletes, however, is not an isolated fact, and can be linked to the own conformation of feminism in the country.

We have, among the Brazilian Olympic female athletes whose participate in this work, many histories of life marked by moments of individual overcoming and by the need to prove worthy of support to the institutions that regulate the sport, and this not challenging the male bias given to the sport. However, despite the non-organized actions, that does not mean that the perception that women's sports are less fomented is not noticed. Some athletes have clarified the favorable bias that the leaders give to men, identifying even the prejudice of gender. If the athletes did not cause a contestatory movement, they took their place in the public space through individual actions. This characteristic of the Brazilian women's sports, which, in a sense, follows what might be called the Brazilian feminism, shows how diffuse were the achievements of women in relation to their presence in sport's world.

Analyzing the processes of identity formation of the athletes it is possible to assume that women athletes lose their "stable anchorage in the social world" when they transgress the social institutions by practicing elite sports. The "crisis of identity" arises when they are forced to deal with tensions of training and participate in professional competitions and meet the social roles traditionally linked to women. However, the fragmentation of identities is not an impediment to the participation of these athletes and sports, much less is questioned or problematized for them. Sometimes the plurality of identity is reinforced in the athletes' own speech. Thus, if we consider that the Brazilian Olympic women have multiple identities is not possible credit this multiplicity to a mere chance or to individual differences between them: there are reasons that have historical and political support for the construction of these identities.

It is possible to consider that even after the relative achievement of a public space for women, one of the most significant, the reference that they are stepping on a field essentially male-dominated is constantly brought up. Many say, about the relationship between gender and the activity which is practiced, that, *although* they are athletes, they *did not stop* being women. We cannot disregard that, on the other hand, there are athletes who are beginning to realize how gender issues cross the sports field, maybe indicating for a possible movement of protest against inequality both the financial incentive to women's sports and the social roles played by men and women.

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