

Book review: *Degrees of Difficulty: How women's gymnastics rose to prominence and fell from grace.* By Georgia Cervin

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Degrees of Difficulty: How women's gymnastics rose to prominence and fell from grace. By

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Cervin's *Degrees of Difficulty* provides a much-needed, timely and comprehensive analysis of the history, politics and socio-cultural constructs that have and continue to shape women's gymnastics. Her unique perspective as an academic, historian and former elite gymnast gives the reader a rich and moving account of a sport that was once revolutionary for women but became, and continues to be, shrouded in controversy by limiting women's bodies and voices. As such, the author substantially contributes to a growing body of socio-cultural and historical research on women in sport, particularly women in gymnastics, as well as athlete welfare and sports history. More importantly, she offers a valuable contribution to the growing 'voice' of gymnasts across the globe who have so bravely told their harrowing stories of abuse, harm and systematic silencing in gymnastics.

As a researcher of and lecturer on welfare issues in gymnastics for over a decade, I repeatedly get the same question from my audiences – how does abuse in gymnastics happen to this extent, and for so long? Cervin's book offers a powerful, evidenced-based, yet accessible account of how and why women's gymnastics has become a site of abusive practices and welfare issues. Anyone wishing to understand the tribulations women in gymnastics have and continue to experience, and how best to support them, should read this book.

Cervin begins by examining how women's gymnastics began as a 'feminist pursuit' (p.13), a sport created by women for women. Women's gymnastics was designed to be set distinctly apart from men's gymnastics, allowing women freedom to perform and compete without challenging the dominant gender order of the time. Somewhat at odds with our recent view of gymnastics culture, she tells of an early ethos of empowering women to develop healthy, active and physical bodies through which they exhibited control, agency and developed their athletic identities. Therefore, early forms of women's gymnastics really paved the way for readdressing gender imbalances in sport, legitimizing physicality and competitive sport for women; albeit as Cervin rightly highlights, legitimization was largely restricted to white women embodying traditional femininity.

Yet, from this promising base, Cervin artfully explains how a complex web of Cold War politics, professionalisation of sport and tensions between international sports institutions (e.g., the International Olympic Committee and the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique), transformed the nature of competitive women's gymnastics, driving a demand for more acrobatic and complex skills to be performed. Consequently, women's bodies had to change to meet these demands. Gymnasts became smaller and younger – less womanly and more docile - to meet the demands of acrobatic physicality and training. They were no longer women, but girls as young as thirteen. In addition, gymnasts had to embody elegance, beauty and innocence to counter gender transgressions associated with their athletic prowess. Consequently, female gymnasts became restricted by narrow definitions of femininity and limited power.

Gymnasts' limited power is examined further by Cervin's dedicated and commendable chapter on coaching culture in gymnastics. In this chapter she highlights longstanding patterns of male dominance, privilege and hegemonic masculinity as being at the core of

power-relations between gymnasts and their coaches over time. She refutes claims of ethnic/cultural differences as the root of abusive practices in former Eastern-bloc coaches and instead claims this has historically been used as a tool to explain poor and abusive coaching practices. Likewise, she acknowledges successful female coaches often fail to embody traditional feminine traits which might support female gymnasts (e.g., care, listening, kindness and collaboration).

Importantly, Cervin does not stop at historical analyses. eloquently uncovers a complex web of power imbalances that are inherent to women's gymnastics. She presents these as the root of large-scale controversies (e.g., age falsification), abuse and wellbeing issues, which have been and continue to be the source of global media reporting and public interest. She offers a solution of sorts, to rectify the well-evidenced and harrowing power imbalances women have and continue to experience in gymnastics – 'to be successful and self-sustaining, women's gymnastics needs to look at its feminist roots and *listen to gymnasts*...[doing so will return gymnastics to] a safe and empowering experience for women' (p. 213, added emphasis). She points to the #GymnastAlliance and #MeToo movements as the beginnings of this. Thus, for me, through her carefully constructed and accessible analysis, she presents the reader, and indeed anyone studying, working or interested in women's gymnastics, a simple challenge – listen to female gymnasts – accounts of their past, present and prospective futures. To do so will ensure the future wellbeing of women in gymnastics.

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