

# FEMALE SEXUALITY AND BODY MOVEMENT: AN EXPERIENCE REPORT

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## SEXUALIDADE FEMININA E MOVIMENTAÇÃO CORPORAL: UM RELATO DE EXPERIÊNCIA

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## SEXUALIDAD FEMENINA Y MOVIMIENTO CORPORAL: UN INFORME DE EXPERIENCIA

Patrícia Figueiredo Marques<sup>1</sup>  
Claudia Feio da Maia Lima<sup>2</sup>  
Adriele de Brito Paixão Oliveira<sup>3</sup>  
Elysama Souza Rocha<sup>4</sup>  
Thaís da Silva do Livramento<sup>5</sup>  
Roberta Rabelo Gravina<sup>6</sup>

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**Objective:** to report the development of educational actions, from a feminist perspective, that articulated sexuality and body movement with women in the community of the *Centro de Ciências da Saúde* of the *Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia*, contributing to their self-empowerment. **Method:** descriptive study, with qualitative approach, type experience report, about action research, with active and feminist educational methodology. The participants were 8 women in the seven workshops held in Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, from September to November 2019. For body activities and data collection, educational techniques were used, referenced in the theoretical and methodological framework of feminist pedagogy and in active methodologies. **Results:** there were different reflections on identity and the various ways of being a woman in today's society. **Conclusion:** the educational actions performed strengthened the exchange of knowledge, the bond and trust of the group, in addition to the collective experience of the feminine being.

**Descriptors:** Sexuality. Women. Human Body. Empowerment. Dancing. Health.

*Objetivo:* relatar o desenvolvimento de ações educativas, na perspectiva feminista, que articularam sexualidade e movimentação corporal junto a mulheres da comunidade do Centro de Ciências da Saúde da Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia, contribuindo para o seu autoempoderamento. *Método:* estudo descritivo, com abordagem qualitativa, tipo relato de experiência, sobre pesquisa ação, com metodologia educativa ativa e feminista. *Participaram* oito mulheres nas sete oficinas realizadas em Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, de setembro a novembro de 2019. *Utilizou-se,* para as atividades de corpo e coleta de dados, técnicas educativas, referenciadas no arcabouço teórico e metodológico da pedagogia feminista e em metodologias ativas. *Resultados:* houve diferentes reflexões

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<sup>1</sup> Nurse and Pedagogue. PhD in Nursing. Adjunct Professora at the Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia. Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, Brazil. pfmenf@gmail.com. pfmenf@yahoo.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0242-5024>.

<sup>2</sup> Nurse. PhD in Nursing. Adjunct Professora at the Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia. Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4718-8683>.

<sup>3</sup> Medical Student. Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia. Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4964-7353>.

<sup>4</sup> Health Interdisciplinary Bachelor's Degree Student. Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia. Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8085-5794>.

<sup>5</sup> Health Interdisciplinary Bachelor's Degree Student. Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia. Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0655-3904>.

<sup>6</sup> Graduate in Social Communication and Publicity. Graduated in Dance. Independent Researcher. Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4155-6270>.

*sobre identidade e as várias formas de ser mulher na sociedade atual. Conclusão: as ações educativas realizadas fortaleceram a troca de conhecimentos, o vínculo e a confiança do grupo, além da vivência coletiva do ser feminino.*

*Descritores: Sexualidade. Mulheres. Corpo Humano. Empoderamento. Dança. Saúde.*

*Objetivo: informar sobre el desarrollo de acciones educativas, desde una perspectiva feminista, que articulen la sexualidad y el movimiento corporal con las mujeres de la comunidad del Centro de Ciências da Saúde de la Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia, contribuyendo a su autoempoderamiento. Método: estudio descriptivo, con enfoque cualitativo, tipo informe de experiencia, sobre investigación-acción, con metodología educativa activa y feminista. Ocho mujeres participaron en los siete talleres realizados en Santo Antônio de Jesus, Bahia, de septiembre a noviembre de 2019. Para las actividades corporales y la recolección de datos se utilizaron técnicas educativas, referenciadas en el marco teórico y metodológico de la pedagogía feminista y en metodologías activas. Resultados: hubo diferentes reflexiones sobre la identidad y las diversas formas de ser mujer en la sociedad actual. Conclusión: las acciones educativas realizadas fortalecieron el intercambio de conocimientos, el vínculo y la confianza del grupo, además de la experiencia colectiva del ser femenino.*

*Descritores: Sexualidad. Mujeres. Cuerpo Humano. Empoderamiento. Baile. Salud.*

## Introduction

Throughout history, women have long assumed the position of subalternity, without the right to the place of speech, decision-making, political presence and even without authority in the family sphere. Women's history is marked by patriarchal oppression and gender inequality that dismembered them from society and put them in a place of interest, only for procreation<sup>(1)</sup>.

Gender “[...] is a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes and (2) gender is a primary way of giving meaning to power relations”<sup>(2,86)</sup>. As men understood women as a possible danger to their authority and to their exercise of privileges, they sought to further distance her from power functions outside the family space, such as the right to vote or literacy. This gender relationship begins a process of change with feminist struggles and, thus, female identity begins to be socially (re)constructed, providing visibility and strengthening of the female role in the social, political and economic spheres<sup>(3)</sup>.

However, despite the great achievements of rights that sought equity between women and men, the approach to issues such as self-esteem and female empowerment, aspects influencing power relations present in different cultural contexts, still remains inevitable<sup>(4)</sup>. Thus, the feminist expression defended by the sentence “the personal is political”, arising in the 1960s,

was built in meetings of groups of American women activists. They sought to exchange experiences and debate issues, such as the social relations of power in which they lived, and it was an example of collective action developed by women, in the search for changes not only sociopolitical but personal, that strengthened them intimately<sup>(5)</sup>.

Thus, recognizing the importance of sorority and the process of female empowerment in the course of history and in current times, the workshop project, which deals with meetings with female students of the health courses of the *Centro de Ciências da Saúde* of the *Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia* (CCS/UFRB), for the development of body practices, including sexuality articulated with dance, it was based on the theoretical and methodological feminist framework of actions aimed at health education. Dance was used as a manifestation of female sexuality and body self-knowledge, because it allows reflections on self-esteem, autonomy, body image and exercise of sexuality with freedom. These are aspects considered relevant in the emancipation process, based on the concept of sexuality based on human rights, which include the right to control and free decision on issues related to sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health without coercion, discrimination or violence of any

kind. Equality of relationship between men and women, with full respect for the integrity of the person, mutual respect, consent and division of responsibilities on sexuality behaviors were equally important aspects<sup>(6)</sup>.

Given the above and considering the importance of addressing female sexuality from different perspectives, contributing to its self-empowerment and the continuity of the movement for women in society, the objective of this production was to report the development of educational actions, from a feminist perspective, which articulated sexuality and body movement, together with women from the CCS/UFRB community, contributing to their self-empowerment.

## Method

This is a descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, of the type of experience report, about an action research for the elaboration of a proposal, with active and feminist educational methodology, which supports female self-empowerment. The organizers of the activities presented were two professors nurses and three students from the health area (medicine, psychology and nutrition).

The workshop project was carried out between September and November 2019. Eight women attended each meeting, totaling eight workshops, lasting 2 hours each. They were carried out at CCS/UFRB, located in the municipality of Santo Antônio de Jesus (BA), located in the *Região do Recôncavo Sul*.

Inclusion criteria were: declared female participants, linked to the internal community of CCS/UFRB (professors, students, administrative and outsourced techniques), aged 18 years or older. Exclusion criteria included: cognitive, mental or mobility changes.

The strategies used for body activities and data collection were educational techniques referenced in the theoretical and methodological framework of feminist pedagogy, articulated with principles of active methodologies. The actions were developed by the awareness groups<sup>(5)</sup>, reflection and action, which use awareness

workshops as one of the actions whose role, in dismantling unequal gender relations, was and continues to be fundamental.

In this process, a differentiated relationship was established with the participants, in which a trajectory of knowledge construction and promotion of learning was observed. Moreover, it sensitized and trained responsible social actresses, ethically conscious and capable of critically judging their attitudes and responsibilities towards vulnerable groups, family and society<sup>(7-8)</sup>.

The topics covered included: body meaning, perception of the diversity of postures towards female sexuality, influence of life history on the various behaviors of sexuality, association of body movement by belly dance (sexuality and body), body movement as self-knowledge and elaboration of the concept of sexuality.

The ethical aspects were respected, through the submission of the project to the Research Ethics Committee of UFRB, approved by Opinion n. 3.640.322, and compliance with all the requirements established in Resolution n. 466/2012<sup>(9)</sup>. The participants signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). For the research conducted, through workshops, some agreements were defined: the restriction in the use of the cell phone, the confidentiality of all events in the experience process and the non-judgment. In the presentation of the speeches, the participants were identified in this text with flower names.

## Results and Discussion

The workshops sought to contribute to the process of self-empowerment of the participants, understanding it not as an individual resource, but as a way to enhance their knowledge about the topics addressed. Discussions, conversation wheels, dynamics and dance functioned as important work methodologies, as they contributed to self-perception, autonomy, emancipation and empowerment, through body movement and contemplation of sexuality, which allowed participatory reflection in the exercise of their sexuality and health promotion. Therefore,

the workshops were characterized as a moment of collective construction and exchanges of lived experiences. Gradually, the interaction between participants and those responsible for the activities was generating greater self-confidence and growth in verbal expression.

The group consisted of eight women, aged between 18 and 30 years, all declared heterosexuals and black (50%), brown (37.5%) and white (12.5%) It is noteworthy that, in the first meeting, respecting the feminist principles, the proposal was presented, the demands of the group were heard, the social diagnosis was outlined and a bond movement began between the participants. The workshops began with stretching, awareness and body awareness exercises.

In a reflection on identity and the various ways of being a woman in today's society, the first workshop discussed the multiple identities. In the dynamics used, the participants formed a small circle and, as one of the facilitators pronounced an expression of identity – adult/adolescent/white/black/woman and others –, they would take a step forward, if there was identification with the word, or a step back, if not. This dynamic allowed a brief reflection on identity and the various ways of being a woman in today's society, according to the social markers of difference.

It is undeniable that the degree of demand in relation to women becomes increasingly great in the set of androcentric discourses of society. That is, if, before, the perfect woman was the one who took good care of the house and family, today she needs to be a professional reference, without neglecting the previous issues, besides having a model body<sup>(10)</sup>.

The female body is linked, in an objectified way by advertising media, with distorted values that emphasize aesthetic models molded in European standards, as the only socially accepted and valued forms<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus, because the female body reflects habits, manners and psychosocial construction, the second workshop worked on the meaning of the body for each participant. A dynamic was performed, using modeling mass, to answer the following questions: "What is the

meaning of body for you?" and "What challenge do I determine to feel even better with my body?". At the end, the participants demonstrated their expressions in the form of art and explained them, according to the following statements:

*I made this body with several colors, because each color represents something different. The points are yellow full of energy and the pink part represents my femininity. And to feel even better with my body, it is to love more. (Amaryllis).*

*The singularity marks my body, but I highlighted my big breasts and large shoulders because I have issues with them. So, to feel even better with my body, I need to love myself and take care more of myself. (Bromeliad).*

*My shoulders, arms and breast annoy me very much. So, to feel better, I challenge myself not to use bra. (Camellia).*

*I did not make the arms and legs because they make me feel bad, and my hair represents me a lot. My personal challenge is to accept my body parts I do not like. (Chrysanthemum).*

This dynamic allowed the reflection on the female body and also on how much capitalist patterns interfere in its acceptance, overvaluing defined patterns of beauty. Therefore, many women end up vulnerable to the aesthetic market, in an attempt to achieve a perfect and standardized appearance. After the dialogue with the group, the participants understood how marked and dominated the female body by the political-social construction. They also saw how important it is to unlink these pre-established models and standards, understanding the importance of self-discovery and experimentation, to promote appropriation, emancipation and self-empowerment.

Female sexuality, for centuries, was understood as something nonexistent, because women were seen only as a reproductive being. Currently, this theme is gaining space in society and has been presenting itself as something that should be exposed and dialogued. However, it is noted that these issues are still surrounded by many taboos, which make dialogue a growing obstacle<sup>(11)</sup>.

This phenomenon, consequently, restricts women in relation to the exploration and valorization of their desires<sup>(12)</sup>. Therefore, to promote a reflection about sexuality and its social contexts, a conversation was promoted in the third workshop about how the life history of each participant interfered in sexual behavior. For this purpose, the "bottle dynamics" was used.

At that moment, they all sat on the floor, around a plastic bottle that was in the center and would be rotated by the teacher conducting the activity, to point out who would answer the question. The subjects addressed were: perceived transformations in the body in adolescence; menarche, coitarche and with whom; curiosities, doubts and fears regarding sexuality. With this, information was acquired to expand the sex education of each participant.

The themes discussed triggered, at first, much shyness on the part of the participants, a reflection of a female sexuality still surrounded by prejudices, even if highlighted in today's society, inhibiting sorority and hindering the exploration, valorization and fulfillment of female desires.

Among the participants, six reported difficulty in accessing sexual education, related to family creation and religion. In general, they turned to their friends as counselors, hardly ever to family members. Moreover, none of them stated that they had sought the health professional, due to the inhibition and lack of openness to talk about female sexuality.

As a result, it is essential to reflect, promote and reinforce new measures in the performance of health professionals, considering that few undergraduate courses present, in their curricula, transversal themes related to gender, sexuality and sexual diversity. Therefore, it is necessary to rethink the potentialities of health education, to expand discussions of sexuality in different areas, adding new methodologies and references for an articulated formation based on emancipatory, humanized and integral attitudes<sup>(13)</sup>.

In the empowerment process, the association with body movement through dance, which is largely that of the Womb (Belle Dance), allows thinking about one's own sexuality and influence on social constructions. Moreover, Belly Dancing brings beneficial effects to women's health in the medium and long term<sup>(14-15)</sup>.

This dance modality is used to contribute to the development of reflexive practices related to consciousness, sensitization and emancipation, because the body is not one, fixed or stable, but multiple and open to transformation and new connections with the world<sup>(16)</sup>. During the

fourth, fifth and sixth meetings, the Belle Dance theme was explored. There was talk of history, its bodily movements and ways of developing it; also the importance of look, hair, hands and hips. Illustrative videos with explanations were displayed. Then, the accessories used in the Belly Dance were made available for the participants' use in performing the movements.

At first, they showed shyness to the development of some movements and the use of accessories. At the end of each meeting, however, they were already more uninhibited, self-confident and open to dialogues related to the body and female sexuality. The Belly Dance strengthened the exchange of knowledge, the bond and the trust of the group, allowing the experience of the feminine being collectively. These workshops have become a space for valuing oneself and, therefore, self-empowerment, through the body and continuous reflections on being a woman and engaging in the fight against social oppression.

The practice of Belly Dance develops a feeling of relaxation, well-being and transformation of emotions, enabling women more femininity, beauty, softness and self-confidence<sup>(17)</sup>. In the workshops, women began to experience the collective feminine, sharing problems and intimacies, exchanging knowledge and recognizing the strength of the group and its sorority.

To think of Belly Dance is to refer to the sensuality and eroticization of the female body, to correspond to the desires and satisfactions of the masculine, especially in the West, reported in the stories mostly written by men. From this a stereotype of biased understanding arises<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus, throughout the project, in a contrary and rescue movement, the Belly Dance was worked as a mechanism for discovering the individuality, flexibility and well-being of the woman with her own body and not only for male pleasure.

The seventh workshop had the participation of a dance professional, who conducted the activity, articulating the participants' personal experiences to an object of emotional value and body movement. The facilitator requested the formation of a circle, so that they would

remember the object they took, without revealing it. What significance did it possess? Why was it taken? The choice of objects surprised, because many of them took belongings that portrayed their process of self-empowerment and the exercise of personal sexuality.

Then, the participants were distributed in pairs and used movements to describe the chosen object, thus forming their own choreography. Despite the initial shyness of some, they all expressed satisfaction and comfort with the created environment and their performance. In the end, they shared their feelings before the experience, with the rescue of their object.

The expression of the body as language is the first form of communication of the human being, and dance is personified through the production and reproduction of the different contexts and cultures of different social groups<sup>(18)</sup>. Dance is not an exclusionary object and can be practiced by any individual. Therefore, it is a mediation tool, which allows the manifestation of malleable and singularly experiences.

In the eighth and last meeting, the participants talked about their experiences with the dynamics of the “Personal Garden”, held since the second meeting. In this dynamic, they wrote positive words of “power”, such as happy, resistance, power, feeling, resilience, potency, pleasure, strong, love, deconstruction and coziness, capable of representing their body, and cast them into a bottle. This positive reflection on the body aimed to make them aware of the power of each one and the importance for filling “emotional voids”, new possibilities of being and being in the world and the (re)construction of being a woman.

Each one arranged their “Personal Garden” particularly and cultivated the inserted words, always oriented to write, with their body movements (hands, arms, legs...), at least three times before they were “planted”.

*It was interesting to think about the words that empowered me. Words freed and helped express. I managed to feel free with the bodily movement. (Dahlia).*

*I liked the bottle and the meetings. I managed to see things I had never realized. See I can be whatever I want to be and every woman can be whatever she wants. We*

*all have a world inside o fus. That is why drew a galaxy on the bottle. (Lily).*

Reflections were made about the experiences provided by the workshops and the approach to the theme empowerment, since awareness would be the primary point in this process. The participants also constructed the concept of sexuality of the group, with the dynamics of the collective text. Each completed the sentence and passed on to the next, with the writing on paper with ink not visible. At the end, the responsible facilitator read each response and organized the concept together with the group: “Sexuality is self-knowledge, pleasure, movement to be free, feeling pleasure through the self-knowledge that empowers them and provides freedom”.

One of the definitions of sexuality is the search for full satisfaction, in continuous development, which involves biological, psychological and social issues<sup>(19)</sup>. Sexuality influences emotions and actions, relationships, physical and mental health, in short, life in society. Thus, it is essential that this theme be addressed in order to provide knowledge related to all issues involved in female sexuality. It was noticeable the growth of the participants in terms of speech power and self-confidence, by disinhibition, participation and safety when expressing their opinions.

It is important to emphasize that empowerment is expressed in the search for social power, which becomes evident when people gain control of their own life, projects, choices and the ability to act and socialize<sup>(20)</sup>. Thus, at the end of the meetings, it was remarkable the perception of the participants’ awareness about the female struggle for their space, even in a patriarchal society; the importance of sorority; the power of transformation and self-knowledge of their potentialities, since empowerment is a process of internal and constant transformation.

The limitation placed here is related to the physical space, not as appropriate to the development of activity, as that developed and described in this article. The study highlights the strengthening of the group of participants on the importance of recognizing part of a body that expresses different subjectivities and needs to be

valued, besides contributing to interaction and cooperation between participants, generating a valuable contribution to self-empowerment.

## Conclusion

The experience with the group of women showed how much capitalism and androcentrism still act on the female body and the expression of their sexuality, imprisoning and inhibiting them in strengthening the sorority and awareness of female mobilization. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the constructions of gender inequality and the need for women to break with pre-established paradigms, based on awareness, union and reflection of their fighting power and importance of dominance over their bodies.

The meetings represented a space of many deconstructions and reflections, self-knowledge and appreciation of the female body. In the consolidation of bonds and exchange of experiences for body movement and dance, especially Belle Dance, the importance of union among women in the fight against women's oppression and in the engagement for social rights was evidenced. Such experience was relevant in the process of strengthening critical awareness of female mobilization, supported by collective exchange and the path of self-empowerment. Thus, the educational actions performed strengthened the exchange of knowledge, the bond and trust of the group, in addition to the collective experience of the feminine being.

Women have little or no access to the exercise of power, whether in the public environment, in the occupation of positions, or in the exercise of their sexuality free of coercion. It is necessary to rethink and strengthen the social transformation that education and health can produce, in order to enhance more research and studies related to female sexuality based on emancipatory reflections, in the search for the improvement of quality of life.

## Collaborations

1 – conception, desing, analysis and interpretation of data: Patrícia Figueiredo

Marques, Claudia Feio da Maia Lima, Adriele de Brito Paixão Oliveira, Elysama Souza Rocha, Thaís da Silva do Livramento and Roberta Rabelo Gravina;

2 – writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intelectual content: Patrícia Figueiredo Marques, Claudia Feio da Maia Lima, Adriele de Brito Paixão Oliveira, Elysama Souza Rocha and Thaís da Silva do Livramento;

3 – final approval of the version to be published: Patrícia Figueiredo Marques and Claudia Feio da Maia Lima.

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