

Conflicting fitness messages underscore women's fit body stereotypes

March 24 2011, By Jane Hurly

(PhysOrg.com) -- From boot camp to step aerobics, yoga to martial arts, women have been pummeled by the fitness industry and messages in the media to exercise in pursuit of the pervasive fit, feminine ideal: to look young, thin and toned.

A new book, Women and [Exercise](#): *The Body, Health and Consumerism* edited by Pirkko Markula, a socio-cultural scholar at the University of Alberta, sheds light on the complex relationships between women and exercise. It's a timely publication considering Statistics Canada's alarming findings from its recently published Canadian Health Measures Survey, showing that women exercise less than men, and only 14 per cent of Canadians accumulate the minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate to vigorous intensity exercise.

Nevertheless, promoting exercise only as a means to weight loss might not always be healthy, says Markula. "Women are told that they should exercise to look good, feel good and to be healthy," she says, although the women interviewed in the book talked about developing a "fat phobia," where the desire to be thin outweighs all other benefits of exercise.

Markula, a certified Pilates instructor, and whose chapter looks at women's experiences of a Pilates class, says the trend toward "mindfulness" in exercise where activities engage both the mind and the body, such as Pilates and [yoga](#), has taken strong root. While these activities can offer women a holistic, deeply inward-looking activity

where they are engaged and “present” in every movement of the body, they can also easily become used as a means for “looking good and feeling good.”

The fitness industry is also seen in the book’s research as one of the key components of contributing to women’s negative view of exercise and body image. “Within this industry fat is feared, obesity condemned,” says Markula. “In such an environment, many women feel inadequate and flawed instead of empowered with body confidence. Exercise, when promoted as a means for achieving healthy looks, can promote ill health instead of health.”

But, she says, despite this negative potential, not all fitness industry practices are bad. As an instructor, Markula still believes that exercise can be a very good thing and in her practice she emphasizes other exercise goals instead of the “healthy looking body.”

It is important, says Markula, “that exercising women become more aware of the potentially harmful exercise practices. I hope that, as a result, women can become more informed fitness consumers who can expect a greater variety of fitness services to serve diverse needs of diverse groups of [women](#). The fitness industry can, then, evolve into a better informed and healthier practice that can be fun, rewarding and enjoyable.”

Provided by University of Alberta

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