

## PARTICIPATION OF THE PAN-AMERICAN GYMNASTICS UNION IN THE 2011 WORLD GYMNAESTRADA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the World Gymnaestrada (WG), the largest international Gymnastics for All festival, organized by the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG). The aim was to analyze the participation of the National Federation members of the Pan-American Gymnastics Union (PAGU) in the 14th edition of the WG, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2011. The data collection was made by a semi-structured questionnaire with eight of heads of delegation of the eleven participating American national federation. The results highlight the largest delegations were Brazil, Canada and the USA, respectively, countries which also traditionally participate in this festival. The participants were majority female (74,5%) and the performance were strongly influenced by Artistic and Rhythmic gymnastics disciplines, as well as Dance. PAGU participation has increased in compare with past editions of the WG, ranking it as second in terms of continent with the largest number of participants (6,64%). Although the participation is strongly related to the economic factors, considering all the WG editions held in Europe. We conclude that non-competitive gymnastics still treat secondarily for most PAGU Member Federations, since they are focus on competitive gymnastics disciplines and especially on their national teams.*

**Keywords:** *general gymnastics; gymnastics for all; North America; Central America; South America; gymnastics festival.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The development of sports federation management represents a key aspect in the practice of Gymnastics for All (GfA) in the Americas. Thus, obtaining and analyzing data on the teams that practice GfA and that participated in the 2011 edition of the World

Gymnaestrada (WG) is the first step to be taken to understand, contextualize and support the development of GfA in this continent. This has motivated the authors to conduct this study, whose aim is to analyze the profile of delegations of the PAGU

member federations that participated in the 2011 WG.

### About Gymnastics for All and World Gymnaestrada

GfA is one of the seven disciplines of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) – and the only non-competitive discipline –, whose main principles are: participation, pleasure, joy and promoting the health of its practitioners (Wichmann, 2015). According to FIG definition (2009, p.3):

*Gymnastics for All offers aesthetic experiences in movement for participants and spectators while providing the opportunity to focus on items that are of particular interest in a national and cultural context.*

GfA brings back the roots of gymnastics: fun and leisure (Fiorin-Fuglsang & Paoliello, 2008), as opposed to the disciplinary and methodical character that gymnastics has assumed over time (Soares, 1998). Therefore, it combines the historical and cultural origins of gymnastics with the development of lifelong values through the practice of exercises (Soares, 1994; Vigarelo, 2003). In fact, in the past two decades some Brazilian authors (Perez-Gallardo & Souza, 1995; Paoliello *et al.*, 2014) have proposed concepts and methodologies that emphasized GfA as a major enabler of human development (Maturana & Resepka, 1995; Ayoub, 2011; Paoliello *et al.*, 2014). Thus, in a pedagogical perspective, GfA can be described as

*An expression of body language that combines various interpretations of gymnastics (Natural, Standardized, Artistic, Rhythmic, Aerobics, etc) and blends them with other practices (Dance, Folklore, Games, Theatre, Mimicry, etc.), in a free and creative way, according to the characteristics of the social group, promoting social interaction among participants. (Perez-Gallardo & Souza, 1995, p. 292).*

One of the most appealing features of GfA is to encourage a playful, educational and socially enriching practice that can contribute to health promotion and fitness. It is a practice that allows highlighting cultural and identity aspects of each group, region or country in a free and creative way. These characteristics fundamentally set GfA apart from other gymnastics disciplines under the aegis of FIG, making it so valuable to many practitioners (Russel, 2014).

World Gymnaestrada (WG), which literally means “gymnastics on the road” or “gymnastics road” (FIG, 2009), is held every four years and gathers thousands of gymnasts from several countries from all over the world, with performances that show great technical, aesthetics and material diversity. Since its creation in 1953, this festival has been one of the key contributors to the widespread practice of gymnastics, turning FIG into the first international federation to propose sports practice in competitive and non-competitive settings and to foster the lifelong values developed in each setting (Mechbach & Waneberg, 2011).

Overall, the FIG principles that govern the practice of GfA and, consequently, of the WG are, namely: fun, associated with the pleasure of the physical practice and with the playful aspects of gymnastics; fitness, related to the impact on the gymnast’s physical health; fundamentals, represented by the basic gymnastics skills; friendship, as a means to promote social interaction and interchange of experiences in the context of gymnastics (FIG, 2010). By practicing GfA, people may experience these principles at any point in their lives, regardless of age or background (Mechbach & Waneberg, 2011; Hartmann, 2012).

Additionally, the WG has become an important opportunity for personal and professional development, a strong instrument that fosters voluntary cooperative work and dialogue among national federations that are FIG members (FIG, 2009).

A brief analysis (Table 1) reveals a growing trend in the number of participating countries and gymnasts:

**Table 1**  
**Participation in World Gymnaestrada (1953-2011)**

Year	Number of Countries	Participants
1953	14	5000
1957	17	6000
1961	16	10000
1965	26	15600
1969	28	9600
1975	19	10500
1982	22	14200
1987	26	17300
1991	30	18400
1995	34	19200
1999	37	20800
2003	45	21600
2007	53	22000
2011	55	19000

\* Adapted from FIG (2015).

### **Participation in World Gymnaestrada (1953-2011)**

It can be noted that the number of participants has increased approximately by 400% between 1953 and 2011 editions of the festival (around six decades), and such growth was proportionally similar in the number of FIG member federations, which increased from 14 to 55. Among other aspects, this significant growth can be explained by FIG's greater incentive to the practice of GfA and by improvements in the organization of continental unions and national federations and committees. It seems that GfA is moving in the opposite direction of the neoliberal thinking, which overrates performance inside or outside the sports arena (Ehrenberg, 1991; Lash, 1999; Silva, 1999; Bracht, 2005; Ortega, 2008), as well as competition (Ayoub, 2011).

Therefore, GfA seems to be better understood if we link it to the concept of Sports for All and, as a consequence, of democratization of sports and leisure (Toledo & Silva, 2013).

In alignment with this trend, the participation of PAGU member federations in the WG has significantly increased in the last editions of the festival. The first participation of PAGU member Federations was in the second edition of the WG in Zagreb (1957), when two countries attended (FIG, 2015). Ever since, the continent has been represented in all WG editions, reaching a total of 11 Member Federations in 2011 (Schwartz, 2006), as depicted in the figure below:

### **Participation of PAGU Member Federations in the WG**

Among PAGU member federations, Brazil and Canada had the highest attendance rate, having participated in 13 WG editions (Schwartz, 2006). Gómez (2014) analyzed some aspects related to the development of GfA in the American continent, as Paoliello (2014) did for South America, showing a gradual increase in participation in the WG, especially after the 1999 edition, when it reached 11 federations (of the 23 affiliates of PAGU/FIG) in 2011. For Russel (2014, p.15), "Traditionally these forms of gymnastics were practiced mainly in Europe, but there is now a large following in Asia and increasingly in Africa and the Americas." International experiences have shown to be sources of learning (Hartmann, 2010). Gradually, groups have developed innovative and unique GfA proposals (training programs, projects, festivals), which are aligned with specific national and continental needs aiming at their development (with varying levels in each American gymnastics federations). The Asian Gymnaestrada, a festival promoted by the Asian Gymnastics Union (AGU), is a good example of this sort of expansion beyond the borders of Europe.

Nevertheless, despite this increase in the practice of GfA, the analysis of this

social phenomenon is still taking its first steps from a scientific standpoint, challenging gymnastics researchers to include non-competitive gymnastics modalities in their projects.

### Notes on the 14th World Gymnaestrada

The 2011 edition of the WG was held in Lausanne, Switzerland, with the main theme “*Meet the magic!*”. It involved five years of planning and around 4,000 volunteers (FIG, 2011). The official program included an opening ceremony, small and large group performances, an educational forum, conferences, national evenings, FIG Gala performances and the closing ceremony. In parallel to these events, there were group performances throughout the city, as well as shows and parties (FIG, 2011). In the 2011 edition, following WG’s tradition (Mechbach & Waneberg, 2011), participants were

accommodated in 70 schools in Lausanne and in other 14 cities in the region.

The festival was attended by 19,087 gymnasts from a wide range of age groups, representing 54 Member Federations (FIG, 2011) with the following regional distribution:

### Number of National Federations that participated in the 14th WG by continent

It can be noted that the participation of European federations (27 countries, accounting for 50% of all) was numerically the same as the sum of all other countries from the other four continents (27). This dominance is explained by the long-standing tradition of gymnastics in Europe, especially in Central European and Nordic countries (Langlade & Langlade, 1986; Neumann, 1987; Soares, 1998; Hobsbawn & Ranger, 1983). It should also be stressed that no WG edition has ever been conducted outside Europe, which reinforces this hegemony.

Year	1957	1961	1965	1969	1975	1982	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
Country/ Edition	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	13 <sup>th</sup>	14 <sup>th</sup>
Argentina				x	x								x
Brazil	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Canada	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chile					x						x	x	x
Cuba										x			
Ecuador											x		
United States									x	x	x	x	x
Guatemala												x	x
Honduras											x	x	x
Mexico										x	x	x	x
Trinidad and Tobago										x	x	x	x
Uruguay													x
Venezuela											x	x	x

Figure 1. Participation of PAGU Member Federations in the World Gymnaestrada. Adapted from FIG (2011).

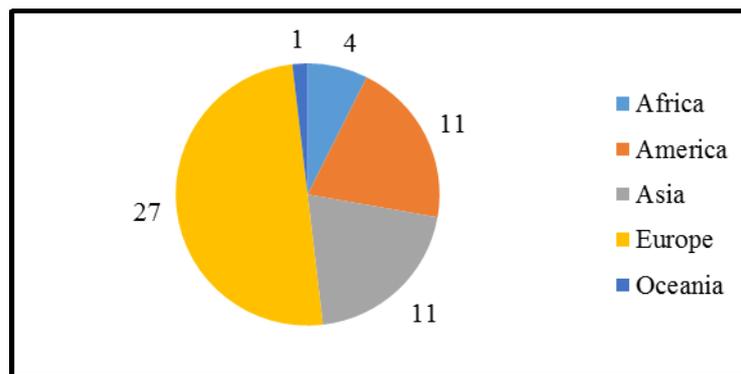


Figure 2. Number of National Federations that participated in the 14th WG by continent

## METHODS

The increase in participation of PAGU member countries in the WG (Figure 1), the lack of systematic analyses of this topic and the importance of fostering the development of GfA in the American continent has motivated the authors to conduct this research study.

The survey was conducted during the 14th WG, between July 10-16, 2011, as part of a project that involved 12 Brazilian investigators from the Gymnastics Research Group from the Faculty of Physical Education of University of Campinas (UNICAMP) in Brazil (GPG, 2015).

It included an exploratory data collection (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2011) from a face-to-face survey conducted with four subject during the 2011 WG, and other 4 surveys were sent by e-mail, since it was not possible to have a face-to-face interview during the event. Out of the 11 heads of delegation invited to take the survey, eight have replied (72.7%). The survey was taken by heads of delegation of the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, United States and Venezuela. The survey was translated into the three official languages of the countries that participated in the survey (English, Spanish and Portuguese), in order to minimize communication issues.

Six categories were previously defined for data analysis: 1 - "Composition of delegations from the Americas"; 2 -

"Disciplines that are most influential in the routines performed at the WG"; 3 - "Types of participants"; 4 - "Group selection system to represent the national delegation"; 5 - "Investment and Funding strategies"; 6 - "Distribution of GfA Programs". These categories have been chosen because they allow the identification of several aspects, from group composition and their routines to how gymnastics federations operate and groups participate in international events such as the WG. It is important to highlight that this information complements the research scope that is already addressed by the GPG, in the sense that it provides input to public policies that promote GfA in Brazil. This paper presents the results of the first two categories, since they provide data that comprises general aspects of the participant groups. This information characterizes the population that was investigated and allows for reflections on the development of GfA in the American continent. Such information is also interesting to the federations that are currently responsible for GfA management, thus contributing to expand the participation of American federations in the WG.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, which is presented graphically (in tables and charts), with the corresponding reflections and proposals described in a written text.

This research study presents the following limitations: failing to collect data

from 100% of the population studied (11 national PAGU member federations that participated in the 2011 WG); lack of detailed information in the answers of some surveys; some heads of delegation took a long time to respond to the survey.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### 1 – COMPOSITION OF DELEGATIONS

The delegations of the eight PAGU National Federations that participated in this research totaled 1,875 people, with 1,263 gymnasts (9.82% of the total number of WG participants) and 612 people among team supporters<sup>1</sup>, managers and team leaders (Figure 3).

#### WG participants from PAGU Member Federations that participated in the survey

The substantial participation of Brazil, Canada and also the United States reinforces the trend that had already been observed in previous editions, thus confirming that these federations have the highest participation rate in the WG and the longest tradition in GfA among PAGU member countries.

Brazil was the national federation with the largest delegation. Several factors played a role in such a high number of participants, namely:

- regular attendance in previous WG editions; local events that promote GfA, such as the International Forum of General Gymnastics (FIGG) that has been conducted since 2001 and that is considered the largest GfA-centric scientific event in the Americas and one of the largest in the world;

- a significant number of scientific papers and educational books (Paoliello, 2008; Santos & Santos, 1999; Ayoub, 2011;

Pinto, 2013; Toledo & Silva, 2013), such as academic dissertations;

- a growing number of initiatives that encourage the practice of non-competitive gymnastics in various educational settings, like a national program sponsored by the Ministry of Sports called “*Segundo Tempo*” (Barbosa-Rinaldi & Teixeira, 2011). This public program offers sports and physical activities to children after or before their regular school hours<sup>2</sup>.

#### Composition of PAGU Member Federations that participated in the survey in the 14<sup>th</sup> WG

Gymnasts account for approximately 70% of the total number of participants, while 10% are team leaders and 20% are team supporters (footnote 1). Unlike other international sports events, particularly high performance competitions, participants are from a wide range of age groups ranging from children to elderly gymnasts, as usually observed in gymnastics festivals (Neumann, 1987), providing supporters the opportunity of getting involved in the day-to-day routine of the delegation, as a delegate does.

The number of female participants is considerably higher than the number of male participants in all delegation roles (gymnasts, team leaders and supporters). This could be related to the high predominance of GfA participants that are former gymnasts of competitive disciplines, mainly Artistic Gymnastics and Rhythmic Gymnastics, which traditionally have more female practitioners.

Interestingly, these data indicate a new trend that has been observed for quite some time in the practice of gymnastics, which historically was a sport mainly practiced by men (Knijnik, 2010). The authors highlight that this sport is usually seen as intimidating by society (media, family members and friends), which hinders or prevents children from choosing disciplines that are not

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term “team supporters” is generically used to include both chaperones, who supervise underage gymnasts, and supporters, i.e., people with no other role apart from providing assistance as required by their manager (not a gymnast, coach, manager or chaperone).

<sup>2</sup> For more information:  
<http://portal.esporte.gov.br/snee/segundotempo/>  
 (website in Portuguese).

strictly related to the expected gender behavior. This is rather evident in Latin American countries, where there still seems to be prejudice against the participation of male gymnasts, as that commonly encountered towards dance.

The predominance of female participants walks hand-in-hand with what is observed in National Federations of long tradition in GfA, such as Finland (Laine, 2006) and Japan (Soares *et al.*, 2015), suggesting that it is not a unique feature of American National Federations.

The presence of supporters, including managers of the participant organizations, chaperones and spouses who, in addition to attending the festival, also take the opportunity to enjoy the so-called “Sports Tourism” (Wichmann, 2015).

The number of teams in each delegation is directly related to the size of the delegation. For example, Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela have just one team each, which indicates that GfA is not a predominant discipline in those countries. On the other hand, gymnastics in Mexico is clearly expanding, as shown by their growing number of participants since the 2003 WG edition.

We would like to highlight that there was a predominance of group performances in all delegations surveyed and absence of large group performances. Conversely, countries that do not have a long tradition in the practice of gymnastics tend to concentrate their participation in group performances. Interestingly, countries like Brazil and Canada – the largest delegations from the Americas – do not have any teams

enrolled in large group performance, which may suggest another problem: the difficulties in bringing together smaller groups because of the large geographical distances between them, as well as the high costs involved to attend a WG conducted in Europe.

Another interesting point was raised in the survey by Argentina. Although many gymnastics team leaders are willing to develop GfA in Argentina and despite the existence of several teams, their participation in the WG is small and irregular. In 1969, a group of team leaders participated in the WG, but only in 2011 the country was represented again in the WG – this time with two teams (one university team and another dance team), with a delegation composed of 30 members. It can be noted that progress was slim in over four decades.

The composition of gymnastics teams varies greatly. The United States delegation was composed of teams from private clubs, municipal associations and sport organizations like Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and Sokol (Banjak, 1993), while in other National Federations, school and university teams are more predominant.

Another relevant aspect is that the Canadian delegation includes a medical team, which shows an important institutional concern with the health monitoring of their delegation members. No other PAGU Member Federation has informed to have an official Medical team as part of their delegation.

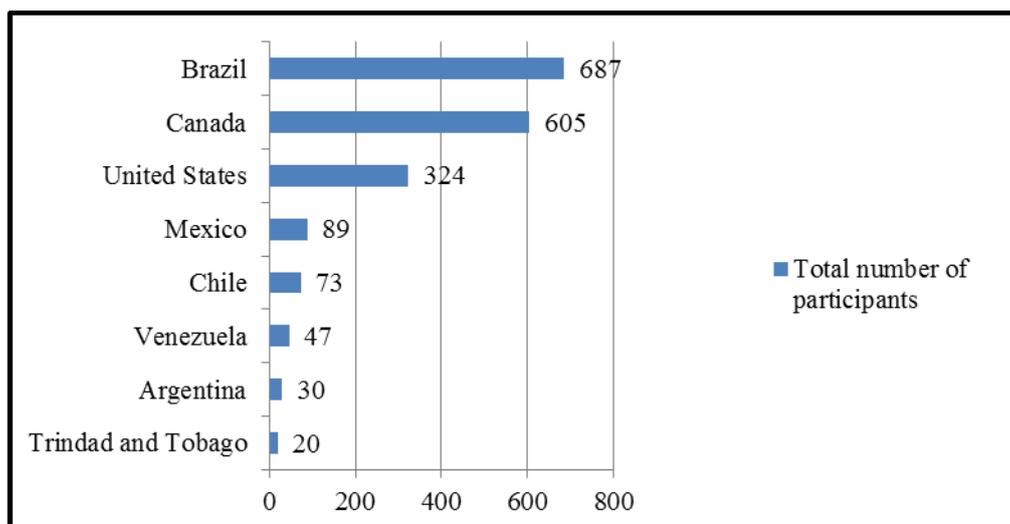


Figure 3. WG participants from PAGU Member Federations that participated in the survey

Table 2.

Composition of PAGU Member Federations that participated in the survey in the 14<sup>th</sup> WG

Category/ Country	Argentina	Brazil	Canada	Chile	Mexico	Trinidad and Tobago	Venezuela	United States	Total
<b>Groups number</b>	2	23	22	1	3	1	1	*	53
<b>Gymnasts number</b>	28	499	374	54	52	16	39	201	1263
<b>Male</b>	7	72	11	10	15	5	0	*	120
<b>Female</b>	21	427	363	44	37	11	39	*	942
<b>Coaches number</b>	2	57	29	1	9	2	2	28	130
<b>Male</b>	0	*	1	0	3	1	2	*	7
<b>Female</b>	2	*	28	1	6	1	0	*	38
<b>Team supporters number</b>	0	102	27	13	28	2	6	95	273
<b>Male</b>	0	*	1	2	11	2	3	*	19
<b>Female</b>	0	*	26	11	17	0	3	*	57

Note: \* No information.

Table 3.

Gymnastic disciplines and other practices on the performances

Disciplines/Country	Argentina	Brazil	Canada	Chile	Mexico	Trinidad and Tobago	Venezuela	United States	Total
Gymnastics for All	X	X			X	X	X	X	6
Artistic Gymnastics	X	X	X	X	X			X	6
Rhythmic Gymnastics	X	X	X					X	4
Acrobatic		X						X	2
Aerobic		X							1
Trampoline		X							1
Dance	X	X			X	X	X		5

## 2 – GYMNASTICS DISCIPLINES THAT ARE MOST INFLUENTIAL IN THE ROUTINES PERFORMED AT THE WG

As stated in the WG regulations (FIG, 2009), routines can be inspired by the core elements of several gymnastics disciplines, as well as by elements of Dance and many other sports and cultural forms of expression. In fact, the routines performed at the WG show great variety and “freedom” as permitted by the WG regulations. The table below shows these influences clearly:

### Gymnastic disciplines and other practices on the performances

Table 3 clearly shows the wide range of disciplines that influence teams in each performance - Brazil is the country with more diversity. Overall, Artistic and Rhythmic Gymnastics and Dance are the most influential disciplines in our sample, probably because these are consolidated practices in most countries.

Chile had only one participating team and reported only one influential discipline (AG). Although it had the highest number

of teams (22), Canada listed only two gymnastics disciplines as influential to their teams (AG and RG). The authors do not claim to say that these data represent the actual scenario of gymnastics diversity in these countries, since several factors affect the participation of groups in the WG, such as economic status, public and federal policies, interest in festivals like this, among others.

Among the gymnastics disciplines inquired in the survey, GfA and AG were mentioned by 75% of delegation leaders, followed by RG in 50% of the answers. Other disciplines like Acrobatic Gymnastics (AcroG), Aerobic (AeroG) and Trampoline were mentioned by 25%, 12.5% and 12.5% of respondents, respectively. The fact that GfA was mentioned as the main influential discipline shows consistency with the WG proposal. The influence of the basic AG movements, ranked as influential in the same percentage as GfA, shows that many teams still use core AG elements to develop their routines. It is worth noting that AG was the first discipline to be included in the Olympic Games (FIG, 2015) and it is the most popular gymnastics discipline in many American countries today. In the specific

case of Brazil, AG has grown significantly in the past two decades, and it is the most popular and media-covered gymnastics discipline.

Along the same lines, RG was the second gymnastics discipline to be added to the Olympic Games in 1984 with individual competition and in 1996 with group competition (Laffranchi, 2001). Similarly, these discipline regulations establish the use of gymnastics elements (jumps/leaps, rotations, balances) and hand-held apparatus, characteristics also found in GfA. RG uses low-cost apparatus that can be easily adapted and stored, differently from AG. Consequently, its practice is more affordable (Toledo, Tsukamoto & Gouveia, 2009). Some children's games of the American culture use similar apparatus, like balls, which are still often used in many countries, as well as "hula hoops" (Brazil) and ropes (Brazil, USA), making the RG practice easier in several settings.

On the other hand, disciplines like Acrobatic Gymnastics and Aerobic Gymnastics are not included as disciplines in the Olympic Games and do not have a long-standing tradition in most countries. The authors believe the low rate of answers that mention these disciplines (Table 3) is an interesting paradox, since they share significant artistic elements that cause higher visual impact, an important feature in events such as the WG. In addition to these factors, it is easy to start practicing these modalities, which can involve various numbers of participants and do not require specific apparatus, thus being more economical, which is a positive aspect for many developing countries.

Although it is an Olympic discipline since 2000, Trampoline was mentioned only by a few respondents of the questionnaire, which can be explained by the low tradition of this discipline in the majority of PAGU Member Federations surveyed. Trampoline is not a widespread practice in those countries, due to the high cost of apparatus, difficulties to find skilled professionals to coach gymnasts and, also because their

practitioners usually see it as a leisure practice rather than a competitive discipline.

Last but not the least, Dance was extensively mentioned by the survey respondents, in 62.5% of the surveys. Although it is not a gymnastics discipline, it can greatly contribute to the choreographic and artistic elements of a routine (Santos & Santos, 2001; Sborquia & Neira 2008; Scarabelim & Toledo, 2015) and it is crucial to most gymnastics sports. It is worth saying that some groups also add local/regional cultural elements to their routines, such as typical local dances. It was also observed that some groups define themselves as dance groups and their participation in this festival is allowed by the WG regulations (FIG, 2009).

Finally, we know that other disciplines are also listed in the WG program, such as *TeamGym*, Aesthetic Group Gymnastics, Male RG, but since those disciplines were not included in the survey, they were not analyzed.

We can also identify that PAGU member federations use less large-sized apparatus (parallel bars, flying rings, for example) in the performances. This could be related to the fact that PAGU member federations lack the gymnastics tradition and the availability of large-sized apparatus when compared to countries in Central Europe (Germany, Switzerland, among others).

## CONCLUSIONS

It was observed that the attendance of PAGU member federations in the WG has increased over the years. This increase was accompanied by a growth in the number of National Federations and participants in those delegations.

Brazil and Canada were the leaders in terms of number of participants in the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the WG, which may be directly related to their regular and traditional participation in the WG, as well as how the practice of GfA has spread in these countries (as indicated by research studies, scientific and performance events,

institutional initiatives, and so on). The United States and Mexico have also increased their participation in the WG over the years.

Considering the gender, participants were predominantly female (74.5%), possibly because of historical and cultural aspects related to the gymnastics practice that region. Such predominance is also observed in the most of European National Federations and in the WG itself, as indicated by Laine (2006), for example, in Nordic countries, which reinforces the idea of a global trend.

Disciplines like AG and RG, as well as Dance, were among the top aesthetic and movement references used in the creation of performances.

The authors believe that the number of national federations as well as the number of gymnasts is not significant, especially if we consider the potential number of participants in this continent, given the number of federations enrolled in FIG and the population density of the region. The low participation rate seems to be related to insufficient financial incentives to non-competitive gymnastics, lack of GfA development policies driven by national federations, by the public and/or private sector (Paoliello *et al.*, 2014).

Last, but not the least, the participation of PAGU has contributed to the increase of diversity of cultures and experiences in the American continent, in the sense advocated by Wichmann (2013:64). We believe that the opportunities for cultural sharing and interchange through a well-structured dialogue and collective initiatives (of groups and funding organizations that foster the development of gymnastics) can be beneficial to bring those groups together and it is crucial for the development of GfA in our continent.

Despite the limitations of this research study, the data presented can help GfA managers in the Americas to expand the participation of groups in the WG and, above all, to streamline access and support the widespread practice of GfA in their countries. National federations should

definitely ask for team leaders and managers for their input in order to better understand the barriers to the growth and maintenance of GfA.

We hope that this research study can motivate and inspire other investigators to further study GfA, as well as the contribution of non-competitive sports to contemporary society.

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