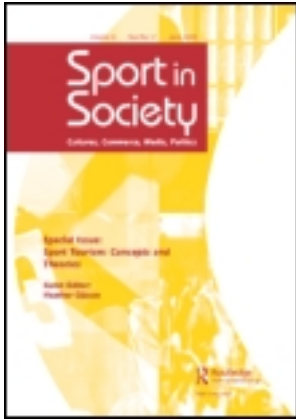


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### Women in sport - gender relations and future perspectives

Gertrud Pfister<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

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## Women in sport – gender relations and future perspectives<sup>1</sup>

Gertrud Pfister\*

*Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark*

Starting off from deliberations on the ‘nature’ and significance of gender differences and gender relations, I first of all present in this contribution my theoretical framework: a constructivist approach to gender. If gender is understood as a social construction, gender differences are not ‘natural’ but acquired and enacted, and also vary according to the particular social and gender order. Currently observable in many respects is a tendency towards ‘gender bending’ and gender play. This raises the question as to whether this dismantling and/or de-dramatization of gender differences in, as well as outside, sport is a sign pointing towards a new gender order. Or has gender enactment become more subtle? Have gender scripts shifted to other areas, for example to media sports with their focus on (hetero)sexuality? Which course will gender relations take in future, in as well as outside sport? In discussing the issues raised above, I will analyse the present situation and consider future developments with regard to sports participation, media sports and leadership in sport.

### Introduction

The gender of sport in the past was clearly and conspicuously masculine. From the very beginning women in sport were the ‘other sex’; they were outsiders, new- or latecomers who, if they were allowed to at all, could take part in ‘suitable’ forms of exercise and sport. For many years it was commonly believed – and it may still be firmly anchored in popular wisdom today – that certain types of sport and exercise were suitable for women while others were unsuitable, and that the same applied to men. It has always been taken for granted, for example, that men play American football and that women are keen gymnasts and dancers. From the early days of sport in the nineteenth century this assumption, based on the theory of the polarity of gender attributes, seemed to be confirmed not only by everyday convictions and practices but also by scientific knowledge. In 1953, for example, the renowned philosopher Buytendijk commented on the subject of women’s football: ‘Football as a game is essentially a demonstration of masculinity as we understand it from our traditional view of things and as produced in part by our physical constitution (through hormonal irritation). No one has ever been successful in getting women to play football.’<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1950s female athletes have gained access to more and more sports which were formerly men’s domains. But has this changed the situation of women and/or the images and practices of sport? Bodies and physical differences are at the very centre of sport since sport is a system which systematically reveals differences and establishes a ranking based on the individual’s performance. Sport, or at least as far as the great majority of sports is concerned, is also a system which, in its competitive and elite forms, is based on a universally valid gender segregation that is scarcely to be found any longer in other areas of western societies. Thus, as a rule, separate competitions are held for men and women,

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\*Email: GPfister@ifi.ku.dk

and it is strictly ensured that men do not take part in women's events and vice versa. Frequently, too, different standards and regulations are in operation for the two sexes. Only women, for example, do gymnastics on the asymmetrical bars and balance beam while the rings, pommel horse and parallel bars are reserved for men. Furthermore, in tests or as standards for qualifications, higher levels of performance are generally demanded of men. Frequently, therefore, in discussions on sport and gender the topic quickly turns to the question of the 'real' differences between the sexes. Aren't women's bodies different from men's; aren't men's levels of performance higher than those of the 'weaker sex'? It is impossible here to go into the sex-gender debates that have filled countless pages of feminist literature since the 1960s. Without doubt, the differentiation between sex, the biological aspect, and gender, the cultural aspect of being a woman/a man, was important because in broad sections of the population it opened people's eyes not only to the great diversity and multiplicity of gender but also to the socially constructed gender order in our society. Publications and discussions on the construction of gender are currently flourishing. From a constructivist perspective, gender is a structural category (the gender order of society) and an individual practice performed in interactions.<sup>3</sup> This approach emphasizes that gender is not something we have or we are, but something we perform, we do. 'Doing gender' is the construction of gendered identities and images and the enactment of gender in social situations, where we always present ourselves and are perceived as women or men. Sport is an excellent arena for doing gender.

However, gender is not only an issue for the scientific community. Judith Butler's (1990) proposal that we regard gender as process, discourse and performative act has meanwhile reached popular literature as well as the magazines.<sup>4</sup> Information and discussions on homo-, trans- and intersexuality are causing cracks to form in the concept of dual gender, while phenomena like gender play and gender bending illustrate just how gender is constructed and enacted (see, for example, DIE ZEIT dated 28 September 2000). Experimenting with gender characteristics has now become a mainstream trend, the vanguard including sportsmen like David Beckham, with his ever changing hairstyles, nail varnish and shaved chest. He is the idol of both homo- and heterosexuals, and a pioneer of the new 'metrosexual' trend.

Indications that the difference perspective generally seems to have lost currency in the public space are to be found, for example, in the 'men's health movement', which has cast off the myth of the 'stronger sex', or in the success of Natalie Angier's book, 'Woman: An Intimate Geography', which describes women as the very opposite of the 'weaker sex'. In sport the constructivist gender perspective has reinforced demands that women be admitted to 'men's sports' (and vice versa, although men are only excluded from a few sports such as synchronised swimming and rhythmical sport gymnastics).

These tendencies raise the question as to whether this dismantling and/or de-dramatization of gender differences in, as well as outside, sport is a sign pointing towards a new gender order. Or has gender enactment become more subtle? Have gender scripts shifted to other areas, for example to media sport with its focus on (hetero)sexuality? Which course will gender relations in sport and society take in the future?

The discourses of gender have been influenced considerably by the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences and by post-modern paradigms such as deconstruction, anti-essentialism and differentiation. But how does this relate to sport, which takes the body seriously with its abilities and skills, and its joy and pain, and which only exists with the body's complicity, when it is set in motion, put on show and continually honed?

On this point Lehnert remarks: 'Of course, there are real bodies, but without culture they possess no real significance.'<sup>5</sup> How we perceive our bodies, how we judge their

various parts, whether we like our legs or hate our bellies, how we consider changes through pregnancy and ageing, for example, or how we cope with the demands placed on our bodies by factors such as sport – all this depends on our knowledge and experience, and in turn has an effect on our bodies. When we reflect on our bodies, we use language, and language always implies interpretation. Therefore, bodies cannot be ‘thought’ without culture and as a result cannot exist without culture. In sport, too, the material body, its presentation and its achievements, are given sense and significance through perception, interpretation and evaluation, whereby the aims, the regulations and the evaluations of sporting activities are based on social arrangements.

Cross-cultural comparisons, be it the comparison of different sports cultures in modern times or be it a survey of different eras of the past, clearly reveal that it is not movement itself but the meanings associated with it – along with the social constructions of femininity and masculinity as well as the structural and symbolic gender arrangements in a particular society – that lead to the labelling of sporting activities as either male or female. In what way is this significant, though, for an analysis of gender relationships and the future of (women’s) sport?

In answering the questions raised above, I will analyse the present situation and consider future developments with regard to sports participation, media sports and leadership in sport. This choice of foci is related to my theoretical considerations. If sport and different types of sport are social constructs and gender neutral per se, one may assume that men and women show similar patterns of sports participation. Gender differences raise the question as to the causes. These can be explained in terms of gendered scripts and gender arrangements and of individuals ‘doing gender’. Likewise, gender enactment in media sports and gender ratios in the executive bodies of sports organizations can be analysed using the theoretical approach described above. The three topics, moreover, are closely interrelated. Men’s dominance of sports leadership and their control over the development of sport, for example, may have an adverse effect on women’s participation in sport. This is equally true of media sport, whose messages and images provide the scripts for doing gender.

### **From a male alliance to the women’s movement – the participation of women and men in gymnastics and sport**

Gymnastics, Turnen (German gymnastics) and sport were developed by men and for men from the end of the eighteenth century onwards.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that, sporadically in Europe and the USA, women started to take part in sporting activities. In spite of frequent and considerable opposition there was a slow but steady increase in the number of women participating in physical activities and of female members of gymnastic and sports clubs.<sup>7</sup> The development of women’s sport is reflected in their participation in the Olympic Games. If the founder of the Olympic movement, Baron de Coubertin, had had his way, the women’s role would have been merely to marvel at the athletes from the spectators’ stands.<sup>8</sup> And so it was that at the first Olympic Games in 1896 women were not admitted to the contests. In 1900, on the initiative of the organizers but without the consent of the IOC, women took part ‘officially’ in tennis and golf competitions and ‘unofficially’ in at least eleven sports at the Paris Olympics.<sup>9</sup> Later archery, ice skating and swimming were added to the women’s programme. After a lengthy dispute between the IOC, the international amateur athletics federation and the international women’s sports association, women were first entered for athletic competitions at the Olympic Games in 1928. In that year the proportion of women

among the Olympic contestants was 9.6%. In 2004, the percentage of female athletes had risen to 40.7%.

After the Second World War interest in sport in European countries grew steadily. This is to be seen not only in the successful growth of the sports federations, which in Germany and Denmark, for example, were able to record increasing membership figures year on year but also in surveys in which more and more people reported that they took part in sporting activities.<sup>10</sup> At the same time there was an above-average increase in the number of female club members, as well as of girls and women who were taking up sport outside of the organizations, so that the difference in sports participation between the sexes steadily decreased. In Denmark 46% of the male and 37% of the female adult population is a member of a sports club.<sup>11</sup>

If population surveys are to be believed, the number of women taking part in sporting activities now equals or even surpasses that of men in some European countries. In the Scandinavian countries, as well as in Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, more than 50% of the male and female population participate in some form of sporting activity.<sup>12</sup> This is only true, however, if one construes sporting activity as a broad and comprehensive term which includes everyday activities such as walking and recreational cycling. If one takes the intensity and frequency of sporting activities into consideration, and if one defines sport as an activity involving competition, men are still ahead of women. According to a study conducted on behalf of the European Commission 18% of men and 12% of women in Europe reported to have been physically active 'a lot' in the last seven days.<sup>13</sup> Men participated on 2.1 days, women on 1.3 days in vigorous physical activities.<sup>14</sup> On days with vigorous activities, men spent an average of 124 minutes, women 61 minutes on their activity.<sup>15</sup> A Danish survey has shown that 31% of the male adult population but only 17% of the female population participate in sport competitions.<sup>16</sup>

Considering present trends in sport and demography, it seems likely that the lead that men have with regard to sports club membership will continue to shorten. This is suggested by, among other things, the increased provision of health sports and seniors' sports in the clubs, the demand for which comes especially from women. In addition, it must be taken into account that the proportion of women in the over-60s age group is rising.

It would not, therefore, appear too far-fetched to forecast a 'women's future' for sport. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that gender is only one of the factors that determine whether a person takes up sport. Ethnic and social backgrounds, as well as religion, combine to form typical patterns of either participation in, or abstinence from, sport, and these factors influence girls and women more than boys and men. In other words, girls and women from an Islamic cultural background and/or from the lower social strata are marginalized and underrepresented in sport for a great number of reasons.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sports have a gender**

The impression that gender differences in sport are gradually losing their distinct contours must be contradicted, or at least qualified, when one takes a closer look at gender preferences with regard to the sports taken up.

An analysis of the forms and types of sport that men and women participate in reveals an ambivalent picture.<sup>18</sup> What is conspicuous is that women are increasingly taking part in sports that for many years were absolutely taboo for them and which in the last two or three decades have been undergoing a 'sex change'. It is taken for granted today, for example, that women take part in the biathlon (originally a military discipline), water polo, the

marathon, the 'iron man', soccer or cycling, all of which were exclusively men's sports until the 1970s. Today female athletes even compete successfully in combat, strength and risk sports such as weightlifting, bodybuilding, ice hockey, boxing, hammer throwing, Sumo wrestling and ski jumping without being stigmatized as freaks. Does this mean that women have conquered men's last strongholds?

For all the discussion of women in 'men's sports', it must be remembered that only a small number of young women take an interest and wish to make their mark in such sports. The great majority of women who take up sporting activities – just like a large number of men – choose so-called 'soft sports' such as cycling, hiking and swimming.<sup>19</sup> Here, a distinct convergence of interests is observable between the sexes.

Largely unnoticed by the mass media, but clearly recognizable if one takes a look at the statistics and results of surveys, is the development of 'women's domains' in sport. Rhythmic dancing and movement classes, as well as health and fitness activities from back pain therapy to relaxation techniques, are almost exclusively sought out by women. Sports associations such as the German Gymnastic Federation or the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations (DGI), which provide many health-oriented courses, including all kinds of gymnastics from aerobics to rhythmic gymnastics, now have a 50–70% proportion of women participants.<sup>20</sup> One sport which has become an almost exclusive preserve of girls is horse riding.<sup>21</sup> For girls horses are more than just sports apparatus, but their fascination mostly vanishes when they grow older.

The 'women's sports movement' is part of the current focus on body and health, which is connected with the concern about having or getting the 'right' body, which includes efforts to keep a slim figure, dealing with 'problem zones' and, generally, a more or less rigorous body management.

A much noted trend is the emergence and rise (and sometimes decline) of new types of sport, although it must be added that most trend sports are taken up by only a small minority of the population.<sup>22</sup> Some of the new sports, like inline skating, attract both sexes as well as many age groups, whereas lots of others, from streetball to skateboarding and including one of the latest trends, Parkour (moving through the town or countryside in the most direct way possible), are clearly located in a youth environment oriented to male values.<sup>23</sup> And it is above all risk sports such as ice climbing, adventure races, BMX cycling, base jumping (parachuting from fixed objects), free climbing, etc. – all of them promoted and sponsored by the media – that contribute considerably to the reproduction of gender differences and may be interpreted as the demonstration and enactment of masculinity.<sup>24</sup>

In summary, it can be stated that new – even if perhaps porous – lines of demarcation have developed in sport between the sexes. On the one hand there are very few types of sport today from which one of the two sexes is formally barred (such as men from synchronized swimming). In the light of past developments, which have all been towards opening up different sports for women, it seems likely that any restrictions that still exist for men and women will be removed in all sports. By contrast, men and women's interests in a number of leisure sports appear to be moving increasingly in different directions.

What, then, will be the effects of the inclusion of women or men in sports which are (still) regarded as typical of the opposite sex? First of all, it must be said that the mere authorization to take part in a sport does not mean that gender differences are thus eliminated. On the contrary, in many sports this may lead to new and more subtle forms of gender enactment. In figure skating, for example, masculinity continues to be demonstrated, in spite of – or perhaps even because of – the 'feminization' of the parts of the routine. And gender differences are put on display most impressively in pair skating

and ice dancing.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to sports with an objective outcome due to the measurability of performance, in figure skating the presentation and aesthetic value are part of the evaluation. In this way the ruling taste (in Bourdieu's sense of the term), ideas about the 'right' posture and movements, as well as the existing gender arrangements and gender ideals, influence the performances of the athletes, the evaluations of the judges and, as a whole, the image which the media and audiences have of the skaters, of their programmes and of the discipline of the sport itself. 'Doing gender' is an important part of figure skating and the variety of movements and the artistic freedom in this sport allows the athletes, men and women, to do gender in various ways.

Up to the present the deconstruction of gender and the redefinition of 'doing gender' have been studied most intensively in sports which, such as bodybuilding or boxing, are traditionally associated with masculinity and defined as being male sports.<sup>26</sup> Female bodybuilders have to present themselves as women although their muscular bodies signal masculinity. Studies revealed that ideals of body and beauty, along with the prevailing ideas about femininity, undergo radical change when women intrude into the world of sport traditionally occupied by men.<sup>27</sup> However, this does not simply mean the disintegration of gender dichotomies. The results of these studies indicate, instead, that ambivalences emerge in the construction of gender and that conformity and resistance coexist, where women athletes either wish to, or have to, fulfil the traditional ideals of femininity in spite of their 'male' sport. Camilla Obel's study is especially captivating since she states on the one hand that 'bodybuilding is a challenge to categorical ways of thinking about femininity, masculinity and the body'.<sup>28</sup> In her view women bodybuilders cause the disintegration of not only the imagined polarities of femininity and masculinity, but also of nature and culture. On the other hand she inferred from interviews that women bodybuilders do indeed wish to embody bodybuilding, attractive femininity and heterosexuality at the same time.

Changes in body ideals and the images of women athletes are also the topic of a book entitled 'Built to Win'.<sup>29</sup> The two authors describe the phenomenon of how female athletes with strong personalities and lots of self-confidence like the football player, Mia Hamm, are idolized in the United States. Especially in top-level sport, in 'male' domains in particular, a demonstrative enactment of femininity and eroticism increases a sportswoman's 'market value', or even makes her marketable in the first place. Here, one could mention athletes such as 'FloJo', the glamorous and successful runner, or the players of the US soccer team, who presented a very feminine image as winners of the World Championships with make-up and ponytails.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, one must take into consideration that women's integration into 'male' sports' is liable to trigger off comparisons between men and women, thus contributing towards cementing a gender dichotomy since in sport differences are 'embodied'. Thus, if men's bodies and performance are considered the standard then in most athletic disciplines, women must appear as the weaker sex. Finally, it must be borne in mind that women's integration into 'male sports' has so far been accompanied by a large degree of adaptation to, and fitting in with, prevailing sport ideologies, structures and practices. Whether women could succeed in establishing a different kind of everyday sporting practice within traditional 'male' sports in keeping with women's qualities, experience and personal circumstances is debatable, not least because in women's sports, too, there is a trend towards a constant enhancement of performances, which means that techniques and tactics are increasingly being adapted to those of men.

While women now take up men's sports and, in order to integrate, adjust to the norms and values which dominate them, men's interest in 'typical women's' physical activities

is negligible. This is just as true of recreational as it is of top-level sports. Men who (wish to) do synchronized swimming or sports aerobics are rare exceptions. Rhythmic sports gymnastics, too, is entirely a women's preserve.

### **Media sports – human-interest stories, bare bosoms and football, football, football**

Any analysis of either the current sporting landscape or the development of sport is impossible without taking the mass media into account. An event is only real when it surfaces in the media. Even if this sentence may not be accurate in such a drastic form, it is true to say that the mass media have constructed a new reality in sport which is consumed by the public. And for sponsors of sport the only events that count and the only sportsmen and women that exist are those who appear on television. In the sporting reality constructed by the media women are scarcely present. A glance at the sports pages of newspapers shows clearly that nothing, or very little, has changed with regard to the underrepresentation of sportswomen both in newspapers and on television, a fact which was documented in the 1980s already. Now, as before, only 5–15% of mass media sports coverage (whether space in newspapers or time on television) is devoted to women's sports. A study carried out in 2005 of over 10,000 articles in 36 newspapers from nine countries revealed, for example, that only 6% of the articles referred to women's sports.<sup>31</sup>

The way women athletes were and still are depicted today contributes to the marginalization of women's sports due to the emphasis placed on femininity and sexual attraction. Especially in the popular press women athletes continue to be referred to as 'Goldmädels, Rennmiezzen und Turnküken' [literally: golden girls, racing pussycats and gymnast chicks], terms which Klein and Pfister chose as the title of their study of the media coverage of women's sport, published in 1985. In past decades the sexualization of women athletes (as well as several male athletes) has gained increasing importance. It cannot be denied, however, that male as well as female athletes are actively involved in the staging of their performances, the construction of their images and their presentation in the media. It simply arouses greater attention and excitement when volleyball players allow themselves to be photographed with bare bosoms or figure skaters appear almost nude in *Playboy* than when a women's handball team wins the German championship. Public attention at (almost) any price seems to guarantee at least financial success.

There are, of course, journalists, both male and female, who report enthusiastically about women's sports. A good example of this is the coverage of the victory of the German team in the women's football World Championship. 'GERMANY WORLD CHAMPIONS: Football Heroines Celebrate Their Historic Triumph' was the headline, for example, of *SpiegelOnline Sport* on 30 September 2007.

It is difficult for journalists, however, to set themselves against the trend and against the alleged interests of readers and viewers. In Germany the lack of interest of journalists in women's sport has always been explained with the need to meet the expectations of consumers. Sports reports are still largely produced by men and for men, while women continue to form a small minority of sports journalists.<sup>32</sup> Those women who venture into the 'lion's den' of sports journalism have to learn to adapt if they do not wish to be 'mauled'. Among the consumers of sport, too, men are in the majority, and it is a fact that women are much less tempted than men to either go to the stadium or sit in front of the television to watch a game of football.<sup>33</sup> Women's interest in media sports coverage depends, among other things, on the type of sport. Thus, when gymnastics or figure skating is shown, the proportion of women viewers increases. Women therefore have nothing against watching sport in general, and, if the appropriate sports are provided, they can

indeed be won over as sports consumers. This is especially true of the coverage of major events like the Olympic Games, where women are presented (almost) in relation to their participation in the Games. Here, women make up 40% to 60% of the audience.

In all discussions about media sports it must be taken into account that the media coverage and its consumption, the development of sport, the situation and status of sportswomen as well as the fascination of, and the public interest in, women's sport are all intricately interwoven. The lack of media interest in women's football, for example, leads to the fact that sponsors likewise take no interest in the sport, which in turn has an effect on the game and development, thus contributing generally to its marginalization. Without sponsors or a redistribution of the overall profits generated by football the professionalization of women's football is impossible. And if the players' performance is inadequate and the games are not sufficiently attractive, the prejudice is reinforced that women cannot play football and that it is not worthwhile reporting on their matches. This negative image then has the effect again that few girls show any enthusiasm for the game.<sup>34</sup>

Changes are currently observable in media sports and further changes may be expected in future, not least due to the spread of the new media, above all the internet. The new media not only provide instant and unlimited access to information about sporting events (including those in women's sports) but they also give marginal groups and sports the opportunity of presenting themselves to the public. It is doubtful, however, whether presentations on the internet are able to make up for the marginal role of women's sports in the print media and on television since successful and popular websites on the internet also require ample resources.

The way women competing in men's sports are presented in the mass media may also be described as ambivalent. Generally speaking, there is a wide acceptance of women football players, women wrestlers, women weightlifters and women boxers. Women's boxing especially has now almost gained cult status, as exemplified not only by the film *Million Dollar Baby* but also by the world championship fight of the German boxer, Regina Halmich, which took place on 30 November 2007 in a stadium filled to capacity and which was watched by between four and five million television viewers. Another good example of public interest in women playing men's sport is the film *Bend It Like Beckham*. There is generally a perceptible increase in programmes and reports containing aesthetically pleasing images and moving stories, distinctly aimed at a female public. For the media as well as for male consumers of sport, moreover, women athletes who radiate an aura of eroticism in tough men's sports seem to hold a special attraction. Thus, today women who kick a ball are suddenly considered particularly attractive and even sexy.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is questionable whether the focus on female athletes in some articles and programmes indicates a change in media attention. One has to take into consideration the numerous sports magazines and sports channels which focus on men's sports only, explained by their orientation to male target groups that are important for advertisers. It may be assumed that the increased commercialization of sport and the trading of broadcasting rights, along with the growing importance of television for the financing of sport through sponsors, will push typical women's sports like gymnastics, as well as women's sport in general, even further into the margins.<sup>36</sup>

Sports stadiums, and in particular the fans' stands, are still male strongholds, as mentioned above. However, changes appear to be taking place here, too. One new phenomenon, for example, is the fact that girls are beginning to show a growing enthusiasm for ski jumping and football matches, even forming fan communities.

In contrast to the male fans, however, the girls' interest in ski jumping or football cannot (only) be explained by their need to identify with the stars of their favourite sport. For the female fans, ski jumpers and football stars seem to play the same role as film stars or music idols, i.e. that of 'love objects'.<sup>37</sup>

### **The power in men's hands – structures of control and leadership**

The analyses of club and federation boards that are available reveal unanimously that men continue to be in firm control of the sporting world.<sup>38</sup> The higher the positions are, the smaller is the percentage of women who occupy them. Power in sport is still to a high degree in the hands of men. This is true of the leading committees of national as well as international sports federations such as the IOC. In 2003 there were 7,048 senior officials above club level working in an honorary capacity in the Danish sports system. Of these 31% were women. Of the executive committee members of the Danish Sport Federation (DIF) 10% were women; in the Danish Sport and Gymnastic Associations (DGI) the corresponding figure was 33%. This can be contrasted with overall female membership: women represent 39% of DIF members and 47% if DGI members.<sup>39</sup> In Germany, too, women are marginalized in the decision-making committees of sports associations. In 2003, out of a total of 290 executive positions recorded in the leading committees at the DSB (German Sports Confederation) level, 233 were occupied by men and 57 by women, the proportion of positions held by women being 19.7%.<sup>40</sup> In 2003, the IOC had 12 female and 114 male members.<sup>41</sup>

I cannot here go into the complex causes of women's underrepresentation in executive bodies, but I would like to point to the fact that the structures and mechanisms which hinder women's careers in sport are similar to those existing on the labour market.

Looking at the future, one must also pose the question: what will change if and when women have more say? Although it cannot be automatically assumed that women are 'by nature' more cooperative, more empathetic and less aggressive than men, empirical studies on women's leadership styles suggest that, due to their specific experience and the specific circumstances of their lives, women are able to bring about change and provide fresh impetus to the work of political and sports bodies, for example with regard to both aims and strategies.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, they could ensure that, throughout planning and decision-making processes, the actual circumstances of women's lives are given greater consideration in the world of sport than has been the case up to the present. In addition, the greater inclusion of women means the harnessing of hitherto unused abilities and competences which, in view of the complaints about the lack of interest in holding voluntary office, is an aspect that should not be underestimated.

Over the past 30 years there has been a growing discussion about strategies to increase the proportion of women in leadership positions. In the 1970s, with the rise of the new women's movement, the idea of introducing gender quotas was at the centre of heated debates. In the 1980s and the early 1990s there was a shift towards advancement schemes for women and the setting of targets. Today there seems to be a new formula for increasing the presence of women at the senior management levels of politics and industry, a formula which in future can also perhaps be applied to sport. This is the concept of mainstreaming.

Mainstreaming is an approach in women's and gender politics which is being encouraged above all in the European Union. Subsequent to the demands made at the 4th Women's World Congress on 15 September 1995 in Peking, mainstreaming – along with the 4th Campaign for Equal Opportunities – was declared 'a main pillar of European equality policy'.<sup>43</sup> Stiegler describes mainstreaming as the 'permeation of the gender

question into hitherto androcentric patterns of thinking, forms of organisation and ways of doing things'.<sup>44</sup> Löffler emphasized that women's politics must not 'remain a tributary of European politics but . . . flow into the "mainstream" of business and industry, growth and cross-border opportunities'.<sup>45</sup> Mainstreaming means the inclusion of both sexes in all industrial, social and political decision making. It is based on the premise that social, industrial and ecological problems can only be solved if the genders of both the decision makers and those affected by the decisions are taken into account. Linked to this is, firstly, the advancement of women, hitherto a discriminated group; secondly, the establishment of framework conditions to ensure equal opportunities; and, thirdly, the creation of gender awareness, particularly among men. One key measure is 'gender controlling', the 'analysis of all political activities from the perspective of the contribution they make to equal opportunities'.<sup>46</sup> This means, for example, that we abandon the ideology of gender neutrality in politics and that we stop regarding gender politics as a women's issue. It is not possible here to go into either the requirements or the problems of mainstreaming. One of the main criticisms of mainstreaming is that this strategy might be used as a pretext for abolishing projects designed exclusively for women. Furthermore, nothing is achieved by simply ensuring a numerical balance of men and women in individual areas or committees. The inclusion of women in management positions, for example, would lead to new kinds of inequality if there was no provision at the same time for the greater involvement of men in child rearing. Moreover, it is not easy to balance the interests and needs of women against those of men (and vice versa) or to implement mainstreaming successfully. This requires not only 'good will' but also knowledge, competence and influence. And in many countries mainstreaming, as well as gender equality in sports organizations, is simply not an issue. In Germany on the other hand a resolution was passed by the German Sports Confederation to introduce gender mainstreaming in 2003.<sup>47</sup> And a survey conducted in 2004 showed that almost 30% of German sports federations had already implemented or wished to implement this strategy, with some federations carrying out pilot projects.<sup>48</sup> The success of these projects remains to be seen, although the relatively large degree of willingness to bring about change in the hierarchical gender relationships existing in sport points to a considerable shift in patterns of thinking towards gender democracy.

### **Instead of a résumé: post-feminism, backlash and women's boxing**

Today the demand for equality between the sexes seems to have been superseded by new trends. Post-feminism has established itself not only in the United States but throughout the world, to a certain degree as a theoretical construct but above all as an attitude and way of life.<sup>49</sup> Young women who combine sexual attractiveness with self-assurance and self-assertiveness accuse their feminist 'mothers' (the members of the 'second wave' of the women's liberation movement) not only of a general hostility towards men, stemming allegedly from a persecution complex and a feeling of victimhood, but also of spirituality and superstition as well as excessive theorizing and an aversion to sex. Even if these reproaches are untenable and in many cases preposterous, they did have an effect. Surveys in the renowned *Time* magazine show, for example, that fewer and fewer women consider themselves feminists.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand an increasing number of women take feminist aims for granted, such as equal rights for men and women. Moreover, celebrities like Madonna or the heroines of the soap series currently being shown on television seem to provide conclusive evidence that women today can achieve everything and especially that, in doing so, they can have lots of fun and be at the centre of attention. Even in cyberspace masculinity and femininity are no longer enacted as the contrast between Superman and

the Playboy Bunny. The 'virtual superwoman' is called Lara Croft, an archaeologist who is 'sexy, clever and packs a powerful punch'. An 'amazon with a wasp waist, a silicone bosom and big round eyes', Croft defends herself 'fearlessly against all enemies: animals, monsters and men' during her expeditions.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the question arises whether gender is still of any significance at all in the age of MySpace, 'Second Life' and numerous virtual reality games. In the virtual world everyone can give themselves any identity they like, and in doing so can we also cross gender borders.

Parallel to post-feminist tendencies one can observe a backlash in many areas. Backlash refers here to a political and ideological movement, a response to the threat posed to the hierarchical gender order by feminism: 'Backlash has been constructed as a residual practice that halts or reverses the quest for equality. Triggered by the perception that women are making great strides toward equality, backlash is a reaction to the possibility that women may actually achieve equality.'<sup>52</sup> Backlash tendencies are to be observed, for example, in the decreasing proportions of women in various political decision-making bodies or in the stagnation of the number of women in leadership positions in sports organizations. In the United States opposition is growing to the policy of equal rights in sport guaranteed by Title IX, with the financial backing of women's sport having come under attack, the argument being that the abolition of the privileges granted to men would threaten the existing sport system.<sup>53</sup> Further, the very rejection of the term 'feminism' mentioned above can also be interpreted as a symptom of backlash. And, finally, one could discuss the extent to which post-feminism and backlash are intertwined.

Analyses of the equal opportunities of men and women in different areas of society have revealed namely that the new assertive women of today are 'of course' allowed to take up all kinds of jobs and careers but that promotion and success often end at a 'glass ceiling', a common term used in England and the United States to denote an insuperable, transparent barrier which denies certain groups access to the top levels of power: 'The glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for an individual, based on the person's inability to handle a higher level job. Rather, the glass ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women.'<sup>54</sup>

Young women's interest in hitherto male sports like bodybuilding and boxing seems to be consistent with post-feminist tendencies found in other areas, for example in popular culture and above all in music. According to Ann Hall 'women's boxing and women's bodybuilding [are] cultural metaphors, barometers if you like, of changes occurring in women's sport generally at the end of the century, as well as changes in feminism'.<sup>55</sup> Few academic studies of women's boxing have so far been undertaken, but it is clear that this sport – whether one likes it or not – has two sides to it as far as women are concerned. On the one hand, boxing could debunk traditional myths about the 'weaker sex'.<sup>56</sup> And, here, the aversion which many people have to women's boxing is quite revealing, showing as it does the prejudices and stereotypes that influence our judgments and, generally, our taste (in Bourdieu's sense of the term). On the other hand, the reports and pictures of women's boxing that appear in the media make sufficiently clear that women boxers are marketed as sex objects and the matches as sensations. Jennifer Hargreaves commented: 'The diversities and representations of the female body in boxing make it difficult to assess the extent to which the sport is a subversive activity for women or an essentially assimilative process with a radical façade.'<sup>57</sup>

The object here is not to discuss the arguments for and against boxing in general, and women's boxing in particular. My purpose, rather, is to show that women's boxing is part of a trend that will alter the way women are seen and judged. The current development seems to point towards men and women being allowed in future to compete in all sports

and towards the decline of the myth of the stronger and the weaker sex. Allowing the other sex to take part in types and forms of sport that were previously considered typical of one sex increases the range of sports on offer and thus might lead to a growing interest in sport on the part of both men and women. There is a price to be paid for these developments, however: currently they are linked, among other things, to a sexualization and marketing of the female (and perhaps also male) body. In addition, many of the problems which only men had to face in the past are now harassing women. And so far they have not found any better remedies than the men for dealing with the increasing requirements – and manipulations – of performance, for example.

Sport in the past belonged to men – its future belongs to all human beings! Whether or not this will come about, I do not know. But it would be a good prospect.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article was written in 2008. The data and trends are valid in 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> Buytendijk, cited in Pfister, 'The Future of Football', 100.
- <sup>3</sup> Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*; Connell, *Gender*.
- <sup>4</sup> No author, 'Intersexualität', 43; Schmidt, 'Tragödie als Schurkenstück', 252–3.
- <sup>5</sup> Lehnert, *Wenn Frauen Männerkleidung tragen*, 24.
- <sup>6</sup> German Gymnastics was developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was a political movement and included a broad variety of games and exercises. Gymnastics did not emphasize competition and records but fitness and mass participation (of men).
- <sup>7</sup> Pfister, 'Olympia nur für Männer?'
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Drevon, *Les Jeux Olympiques Oubliés*.
- <sup>10</sup> Opaschowski, *Neue Trends im Freizeitsport*; Klages, *Mitgliederentwicklung im Deutschen Sportbund*.
- <sup>11</sup> Pilgaard, *Danskernes motions – og sportsvaner 2007*.
- <sup>12</sup> European Commission, *Eurobarometer 2006 – Health and Food*. [http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph\\_publication/eb\\_food\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_publication/eb_food_en.pdf), 65ff.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 66.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 69.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 72.
- <sup>16</sup> Pilgaard, *Danskernes motions – og sportsvaner 2007*.
- <sup>17</sup> Kleindienst-Cachay, 'Sportengagement muslimischer Mädchen und Frauen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland'.
- <sup>18</sup> The term 'sport' is used here for different kinds of body cultures and physical activities.
- <sup>19</sup> Opaschowski, *Neue Trends im Freizeitsport*.
- <sup>20</sup> Pfister, *Kvinder på toppen*.
- <sup>21</sup> Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund. *Bestandserhebung 2007*. [http://www.dosb.de/fileadmin/fm-dosb/downloads/2007\\_DOSB\\_Bestandserhebung.pdf](http://www.dosb.de/fileadmin/fm-dosb/downloads/2007_DOSB_Bestandserhebung.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> Opaschowski, *Neue Trends im Freizeitsport*.
- <sup>23</sup> Wheaton, *Understanding Lifestyle Sport*; Donnelly, 'Studying Extreme Sport'.
- <sup>24</sup> Messner, *Taking the Field*.
- <sup>25</sup> Pfister, 'Doing Gender'.
- <sup>26</sup> Obel, 'Collapsing Gender'.
- <sup>27</sup> Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*.
- <sup>28</sup> Obel, 'Collapsing Gender', 85.
- <sup>29</sup> Heywood and Dworkin, *Built to Win*.
- <sup>30</sup> Pfister and Fasting, 'Geschlechterkonstruktionen auf dem Fußballplatz'; Rinehart, 'Babes and Boards'.
- <sup>31</sup> Schultz Jørgensen. *The International Sports Press*. 2005. [http://www.playthegame.org/Knowledge%20Bank/Articles/International%20Sports\\_Press\\_Survey\\_2005.aspx](http://www.playthegame.org/Knowledge%20Bank/Articles/International%20Sports_Press_Survey_2005.aspx).
- <sup>32</sup> Pfister, 'Frauen in Führungspositionen'.
- <sup>33</sup> Opaschowski, *Neue Trends im Freizeitsport*; Heddal, 'Motivation og tv-sport'.
- <sup>34</sup> Pfister, 'The Future of Football'.

- <sup>35</sup> See among many other sources *Berliner Zeitung*, May 11, 2002 about the new image of women's football (<http://www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fcgi/2002/0511/sport/0299/index.html>).
- <sup>36</sup> Pfister, 'Gender, Sport und Massenmedien'.
- <sup>37</sup> Fechtig and Janke, 'Ich liebe Lars Riecken'.
- <sup>38</sup> Pfister, 'Frauen in Führungspositionen des Sports'; Pfister, *Kvinder på toppen*; Hovden, "'Heavyweight' Men'.
- <sup>39</sup> Pfister, 'Gender Issues'.
- <sup>40</sup> Pfister and Radtke, 'Männlichen und Weiblichen Führungskräften im Deutschen Sport'.
- <sup>41</sup> Pfister, 'Frauen in Führungspositionen des Sports'.
- <sup>42</sup> Pfister, 'Frauen in Führungspositionen'.
- <sup>43</sup> Löffler, *Frauenförderung in der Europäischen Union*, 107.
- <sup>44</sup> Stiegler, *Frauen im Mainstreaming*, 27.
- <sup>45</sup> Löffler, *Frauenförderung in der Europäischen Union*, 10.
- <sup>46</sup> Stiegler, *Frauen im Mainstreaming*, 21.
- <sup>47</sup> Henkel, 'DSB arbeitet nach der Strategie des Gender Mainstreaming'.
- <sup>48</sup> Haag, 'Zukunftssicherung von Sportvereinen durch Gender Mainstreaming'.
- <sup>49</sup> Hall, 'Boxers and Bodymakers'. In theoretical discourses post-feminism is based on post-modern notions. Like other theoretical approaches feminism is criticized as being narrative and the concept of gender as being essentialist and ahistoric (Gillis, Howie and Munford, *Third Wave Feminism*).
- <sup>50</sup> Hall, 'Boxers and Bodymakers', 21.
- <sup>51</sup> See [www.laracroftism.de](http://www.laracroftism.de).
- <sup>52</sup> Greendorfer, 'Title IX Gender Equity', 82.
- <sup>53</sup> In the USA the equal rights of men and women in sport are anchored in Title IX, which took effect in 1972. Title IX is part of the Educational Amendments Act and forbids 'sex discrimination in education programs and activities within an institution receiving any type of Federal financial assistance' (ibid).
- <sup>54</sup> Morrison, White and Van Velsor, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, 13.
- <sup>55</sup> Hall, 'Boxers and Bodymakers', 31.
- <sup>56</sup> Hargreaves, 'Women's Boxing'.
- <sup>57</sup> Quoted in Hall, 'Boxers and Bodymakers', 9.

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