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Fighting to fight: Female amateur boxers' experiences of (in) equality in the UK

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ABSTRACT

In the UK context women have been participating in boxing, traditionally considered as a masculine arena, for centuries. Over time, there have been advancements in the inclusion of women in the sport. Nevertheless, boxing remains a hypermasculine, male-dominated sport. Moreover, boxing does not offer the conditions necessary for women to fully participate and to do so with parity of esteem. Consequently, women are largely discriminated against on the grounds of gender.

Aiming to investigate the challenges boxing faces in working towards becoming an egalitarian sport, I conducted feminist qualitative research focused on the participation of women in amateur boxing in the UK context. In order to collect data, I used ethnographic methods consisting of participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The participant observation took place in a boxing academy in the North of England between September 2017 and April 2018. Most of the thirty-two interviewees were members of the boxing community in which participant observation was conducted; however, I also interviewed ex-boxers, staff of sports bodies, coaches, coach educators, and boxers across the country.

The findings suggest that equality has yet to be achieved in boxing. The thesis identifies obstacles that hinder equality within the sport. Among them are the construction of boxing as a masculine and male-dominated sport, the discrimination women experience within the sport and the prevalence of androcentric, neoliberal, and postfeminist narratives celebrating individualism, neglecting inequality, and equating the presence of women to equality. Thus, it concludes that the presence of female pugilists has largely been accommodated within existing gendered power structures, rather than, as yet at least, provoking a more radical paradigmatic shift. If boxing aims to be a sport for all, inequalities must be tackled, otherwise equality is a chimera.

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One swallow does not make a
summer.

Proverb

1 INTRODUCTION

'Boxing is an ancient man sport, like, how long does it take? Does it ever actually become a sport that is as much a woman's sport than a man's sport? I'm not sure': Elizabeth – a female referee based in London– asks herself this question during an interview. It is not certain how long it takes a historically male-dominated sport – or any other public arena – to be a site for all, including women. Nevertheless, we cannot wait until transformation naturally arrives, because it may never happen given there are privileges at stake. Thus, what is certain is that the inequalities that come along with the construction of sports like boxing as 'men's sports', to paraphrase Elizabeth, have to be systematically tackled because they result in discrimination against and underestimation of women.

Aiming to identify the obstacles to boxing being an egalitarian sport, my thesis focuses on women's participation in amateur boxing. Historically, boxing has been constructed as a male bastion, nevertheless, in the UK context; women have been boxing since the 1700s. Consequently, gendered power relations and gender boundaries have been challenged and some positive transformations have taken place. However, boxing does not yet offer the conditions necessary for women to fully participate with parity of esteem.

As this thesis demonstrates, gendered power structures that sustain male supremacy and men's power and privilege in boxing remain largely untouched, despite the participation of women. Moreover, it illustrates that discrimination against women is experienced on a daily basis and that women's participation is precarious. Furthermore, it identifies the existence of triumphalist discourses that perniciously

celebrate equality while veiling manifestations of inequality. This research shows that neoliberal values, such as individualism and entrepreneurialism, put a burden on the individuals who are expected to participate by their own means despite the existence of inequalities. Drawing on these findings, I argue boxing cannot yet be considered a site characterised by equality cultures; important transformations are needed before this can occur.

Equal treatment in sport must not be considered as a gracious gift conferred by key actors nor a conquest gained through individual merit. It is a right. In these terms, equality should not be mistaken for difference; differences between individuals are unavoidable and even expected in the sportive context. However, as this thesis highlights, difference in sport, as in any other field, must not be experienced as inequality.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS

This thesis is a gender and feminist analysis focused on the participation of women in amateur boxing in the UK context and is framed by the following research question:

What are the obstacles boxing faces in working towards becoming a sport that guarantees gender equality and more specifically, the full participation and recognition of women within the sport?

In this view, the research aims were as follows:

- To explore the gendered construction of boxing,
- To investigate the challenges women experience when seeking to be treated as equal peers in historically masculine and male-dominated arenas, and

- To analyse the narratives that celebrate the presence of women in boxing and proclaim that equality has already been achieved.

1.2 METHODS

In order to collect data for this feminist and qualitative research project that uses gender as the main analytical category, I used ethnographic methods consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation. The participant observation took place at Ithaca,¹ a boxing academy in the North of England between September 2017 and April 2018.

Most of the thirty-two interviewees were members of the boxing community in which participant observation was conducted; however, I also interviewed ex-boxers and staff of England Boxing – the organization that governs amateur boxing in the UK – along with coach educators, boxers and coaches across the country.

Well-located in the city, Ithaca has a broad membership, including builders, refuse collectors, factory workers, engineers, lawyers, business owners, public servants, nurses, stay-at-home mothers, and university and college students, among others. However, most of its participants are white Yorkshire men. Coaches and administrators are volunteers – as in most of the boxing academies in the country. The academy offers sex-integrated and female-only boxercise sessions (i.e. conditioning), amateur sessions, as well as youth and children's sessions. The youth and children's sessions have an important role at the academy; thus, very often there are competitive and talented children and youngsters around Ithaca giving it a lively and fresh

¹ This is a fictitious name used to protect the identity of the participants.

atmosphere. Ithaca is a relatively poor facility, but it has the key pieces of equipment any boxer needs to train. There are posters and newspaper clippings on the walls celebrating local boxers: all of them are male. Female pugilists are not part of the heroic narrative, but they are in the gym fighting every day despite their lack of recognition. Ruled by traditions and clear hierarchies, Ithaca was a fascinating site in which to study gender relations and, therefore, to conduct my fieldwork. Interactions, practices and representations are highly gendered, and the tension between gender equality and inequality are constantly present.

1.3 MOTIVATIONS

My motivations to conduct a research on sport and equality is that they are my passion. For twenty years, I trained in capoeira, a Brazilian art form based on physical activity and music, with its origins in the slavery. When I started to train, capoeira was a male dominated activity in which women were overtly marginalized. Today, capoeira is not completely egalitarian, however it has evolved towards it. The ongoing transformation is result of continuous and emancipatory efforts, especially led by women.

In capoeira, women have been pushing for a change. For instance, we have been speaking out against gender based discrimination and violence, discussing the effects of discrimination with men, creating alliances among women and embodying and performing roles that were historically masculine. We, women, have been making capoeira a place for all.

With this background, when I started this research project, I had years of empirical knowledge on the field of physical activities and gender equality, and a great sisterhood that motivated me to conduct this project. Considering that capoeira was not significant in the place where my fieldwork was conducted, I faced the challenge

to choose a sport to explore the participation of women within. Thus, I started to practice different sports and visiting diverse sport venues.

When I first entered the boxing gym, I knew immediately that it was the right place to conduct my research. The gym was highly gendered and the presence of just a few and empowered women in the training sessions made me curious. I wanted to know more about the experiences of women in a culturally considered masculine sport, and the interpretations of gender equality within this context.

Considering my love for sports and also, my experience in capoeira, where I learned the importance of becoming a member of the community to have access to a deep understanding of the sport and the context, I started training in boxing as part of my research project. During fieldwork, I was expecting to learn not only about the obstacles women faced but also the strategies they had developed to transform boxing, as I had witnessed in capoeira. However, the obstacles were so abundant that in this research project, I decided to focus mainly on the challenges women face to fully participate in a yet male dominated sport. I hope this thesis contributes to reflections on the importance of guaranteeing the full participation of women in boxing and eliminate the gendered based discrimination that prevails in the sport.

1.4 THE GRACE PROJECT

This doctoral thesis is part of the GRACE project: Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe² – an ‘Innovative Training Network’ within the European Commission’s Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The project investigates the cultural production

² This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 675378.

of gender equalities in Europe. In this framework, my PhD research project is part of the GRACE Work Package: Urban Cultures of Equality, and within it, it focuses on the sub package of Sport as a Site for the Production of Cultures of Equality, which explores the production and contestation of cultures of gender equality within sport. In these terms, my project offers an analysis of the experiences of women in amateur boxing in regards to equality and inequality in the UK context that is informed by questions of gender and feminism.

My supervisors for this research project are Professor Suzanne Clisby and Dr Alexander Ornella, and the thesis was undertaken to fulfil the requirements of the PhD Programme on Gender Studies offered by the University of Hull, UK.

1.5 STRUCTURE

This thesis is divided into ten chapters; following on from this introduction, chapters two and three provide the literature review and the conceptual framework, respectively. These chapters underpin the research project, providing the concepts and categories I use to analyse the data gathered during fieldwork. In order to understand the wider context of the phenomena of women in boxing, the fourth chapter offers a historical overview of this issue. Meanwhile, the fifth and the sixth chapters provide information about the methods used and a gender analysis of the fieldwork site. The seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters provide the analysis of the data gathered during fieldwork. Finally, the tenth chapter offers a summary of the main contributions of this project, its limitations and some recommendations drawn from the findings. A brief overview of the core chapters is offered below.

Chapter 2 addresses theoretical debates pertaining to gender and sport. Here, I analyse how the presence of women in sport has destabilised gendered power

structures, considering that sport has been constructed as a social sphere underpinned by male power and privilege. I also investigate the experience of women in boxing, which is considered the masculine sport *par excellence*. Highlighting that female pugilists face discrimination on a daily basis, I conclude that the presence of women in boxing, despite being a great advancement, has largely been accommodated within existing gendered power structures within the sport, rather than provoking a more radical paradigmatic shift.

Chapter 3 provides the analytical infrastructure that frames my project. Drawing from feminist theorisations of the participation of women in democracies, the chapter uses Fraser's (2000; 2007; 2013) concept of participatory parity to investigate the participation of women in boxing. It also examines the notion of precarity, drawing on by taking into account that as a result of boxing's gender norms, female boxers are not recognised as subjects within the sport and consequently, their experience is characterised as precarious. Furthermore, it explores debates offered by feminist scholars focused on sport (Cahn, 2015; Messner, 2002; Messner, 2011a) and popular culture (McRobbie, 2004; 2009), who denounce the emergence of narratives that not only veil inequalities but also expect women to be full participants despite the existence of unequal power structures. I argue that inequalities must be identified in order to be eliminated, otherwise equality is a chimera.

Chapter 4 offers an overview of the history of women in boxing with a special focus on the UK context. The chapter illustrates that since the eighteenth century women have participated in boxing; though they have been marginalised from the sport, they have fought to subvert this. Moreover, the chapter emphasises that the women have fought cultural, social, legal and economic battles in order to gain recognition and equal opportunities. As the reader will notice, women's boxing has long been part of British

society and discovering the powerful history of female fighters in this context is inspiring.

Chapter 5 presents the methods and methodological approaches used in my research project. This includes theoretical and ethical considerations that guided the data collection, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for choosing participants, the structure of the interviews, and reflections on my participant observations. Moreover, the chapter recounts my experience of being a young athletic Mexican woman becoming a boxing apprentice in an academy in the North of England in order to gather data through participant observation. It also describes both the profile of the interviewees and the challenges I faced in getting the interviews. Throughout this chapter, I reflect on my position in the fieldwork and my situation among the participants and how this would impact on the data collection.

Chapter 6 provides an analysis of Ithaca, the boxing gym where most of my fieldwork was conducted. The chapter is focused on the following elements: the city where the gym is situated, the hierarchies and power structures within the organization, the materiality of the gym, the relationships that take place within it and the philosophy that guides Ithaca's members. The chapter reveals the constant tension between power relations and egalitarian claims and values at Ithaca.

Chapter 7 discusses how gender differences are produced, reproduced, and challenged in the boxing context. It illustrates that boxing, rather than transforming itself as result of the presence of women, continues to be a male bastion underpinned by male power and privilege; it persists in being an activity through which hegemonic masculinities are forged and celebrated. Moreover, it depicts how gender differences are experienced as a source of discrimination against women. The chapter also sheds

light on situations in which gender differences are contested and oppressive gender meanings are transgressed. Nevertheless, it concludes that, overall, gender divisions are translated as experiences of inequality that are not only normalised but also naturalized.

Chapter 8 investigates the quality of the participation of women in boxing by analysing different dimensions such as recognition, distribution, and representation. The chapter emphasises different problems experienced by women in boxing: the lack of recognition that characterises the female-only sessions; the lack of coaching and training female participants experience in the gym; the racism and sexism that black female participants regularly encounter; the masculine standards and gendered glass ceilings that prevail in the boxing context; and the silenced sexual harassment that female participants can all too often be subjected to. The chapter reveals that women in boxing do not participate as equals, and that they have a precarious experience within the sport.

Chapter 9 examines the narratives that proclaim that equality has already been achieved in the boxing context. The chapter illustrates that triumphalist discourses celebrating the participation of women and present it as if equality had been fully achieved mask the experiences of inequality that prevail in the sport. In a context in which inequality is not recognised as a problem and equality is presumed to have been accomplished, the neoliberal and postfeminist interpretation of the poor participation of women in terms of their personal failure. Consequently, not only are structural inequalities underestimated but also the responsibility of organizations and institutions for ensuring equality is dismissed. In turn, the burden of full participation is put on the marginalised individuals and organizations are relieved of the burden of ensuring equality. Nevertheless, if equal conditions are not ensured by sport organizations, only

a few will be able to participate. Thus, if boxing aims to be for all, equality for all must be guaranteed.

Chapter 10 reflects on the experiences of having conducted this research project and offers the conclusions of this thesis.

2 BOXING WOMEN. THEORISING GENDER AND SPORT

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework pertaining to gender and sport. In order to frame this conceptual analysis of the challenges, obstacles and opportunities for gender equality in sport and in boxing in particular, throughout the chapter, I consider a range of relevant literature exploring the theoretical understanding of the interface between sport and gender, drawing on gender and feminist theory. I also draw on pertinent empirical research focused on women in sport, and especially in boxing. The disciplines in which the sources are located cross anthropology, sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, sport studies and media studies.

This substantial chapter is structured in five sections. The first discusses literature on sport as a site where power structures and relations are created, recreated and challenged. It also considers how sport is configured by gender and the ways in which gender meanings are created in sport. The second section investigates how sport has been constructed as a social sphere based on male power and privilege, as well as a context in which masculinities are forged. The third section explores the ways in which, despite much resistance, women are nevertheless participating in boxing as researchers and as athletes, referees and coaches. Here I highlight the destabilisation of gendered power structures that women's participation and presence in boxing has provoked in this arena. The fourth section discusses how boxing, constructed as a historically male sport, has systematically excluded women. In this section, I explore the different manifestations of discrimination and exclusion that women experience in

the boxing scene. In the fifth and final section, I argue that the presence alone of women in boxing cannot be equated to having achieved gender equality, as women continue to be marginalised and to experience gender-based discrimination in the sport. Thus, I suggest that, rather than bringing about a radical transformation, women's participation in boxing has provoked the rearrangement of gendered power structures.

2.1 POWER AND CONTESTATION IN SPORT

Multifaceted in nature, sport is a major element of our daily life. Sport unites extremes such as 'playfulness and seriousness, leisure and work, individualism and collectivism, pleasure and violence, hierarchy and equality, morality and corruption' (Besnier et al, 2018: 1). The meanings and effects of sport on society are complex, and, importantly, 'not merely a reflection on some postulated essence of society but an integral part of society' (MacClancy, 1996 in Robinson, 2008: 62). Through our participation in sport, we might, for example, modify our own bodies (Dworkin, 2001); shift our aesthetic parameters (Washington & Economides, 2016); change the way we express ourselves, how we interact with others and construct our understandings of the social world (Granskog, 2003); or express ties to a nation state in the context of a sporting event (Besnier et al, 2018); among others. As such, sport is a 'dynamic social and cultural force' (Aitchison, 2007: 1) that plays a fundamental role in the modern world, especially in urban areas of Western capitalist societies.

In sport, social structures, ideologies and cultural beliefs are produced and reproduced. As Elling & Janssens (2009) argue, social hierarchies can determine access to sporting practices and arenas. Hence, those groups who command less social, economic, educational, or cultural capital in a given sociocultural and

patriarchal milieu – for example, working classes, ethnic minorities, older people and women – tend to participate less in sport in comparison to groups representing their hegemonic counterparts, i.e. privileged white young men (Elling & Janssens, 2009: 71). Concerning the reproduction of ideologies in the sportive context, Aitchison (2007: 1) points out that ‘sport can be criticised as being the last great bastion of homophobia, racism and nationalism within contemporary western society’. Sport can also serve to reinforce and perpetuate normative cultural structures, to the extent that, as Besnier & Brownell (2012: 449) state, ‘sport has played an important role in maintaining the sex-gender system in the West’. In these terms, sport plays an important role in recreating and maintaining social hierarchies, representations and hegemonic structures of power.

As a range of authors have argued (Aitchison, 2007; Besnier & Brownell, 2012; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014; Messner, 2002; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008), we see power relations and normative social structures being produced and reproduced in sport, configuring both access to and opportunities within it. Contrarily to romantic discourses that emphasise the egalitarian character of sport,³ critical views point out that ‘sport is not always a level playing field at all and is characterized by significant social divisions and inequalities that mirror those in the wider society as well as reconstituting some that are more particular to sport’ (Woodward, 2009: 72–73). Acknowledging the latter is important in an analysis of sport because power relations that characterise sport do not only occur within this context. They depart from and

³ For instance, in *Body and Soul*, Wacquant (2004: 10) suggests that boxers’ alliances go beyond class, nationality and race and also that in boxing, everyone (making reference specifically to male participants) ‘is fully accepted’ and treated equally due to the egalitarian ethos of the sport.

within a wider context which is replicated in sport. Simultaneously, it is important to understand that each sporting institution and organization accommodates and defines power relations according to its own characteristics.

Sport's structures of power are highly gendered, and, as Travers argues, sport 'normalizes, legitimates and reinforces the ideology of the two-sex system with marginalizing consequences for girls and women, gays and lesbians and gender transgressors' (Travers, 2009: 83). Through the creation and recreation of power relations and maintenance of systems of exclusion, sport becomes a site where inequalities are experienced on a daily basis.

However, while structures of power, ideology and inequalities can be reinforced in sport, they are simultaneously challenged, opening-up possibilities for social transformation. As Messner (2002) suggests, while both the rules and hierarchies of sporting institutions, and the dominant symbols and belief systems transmitted by sport configure the relations and practices that take place within, these social structures do not entirely determine the interactions of individuals within a sportive context. Thus, it becomes evident that individuals contest and challenge normative social structures in sport. This can be observed, for instance, in the adoption of mixed-sex training and more gender-inclusive attitudes in historically male sport as a response to the presence of women in them. Therefore, in sport, power is not only reproduced but also contested.

Thus, although cultural symbols and ideologies are transmitted through sport, and these have a powerful effect on individuals, social agents are not passive receptors (Messner, 2002: 24). Anderson argues, for example, that in the context of men's participation in the traditionally feminised field of cheerleading, heterosexual men

experienced a shift in their gendered expectations towards women, resulting in more respectful attitudes and relationships between male and female athletes (Anderson, 2008b). Sport is inevitably then influenced by the individuals who practice it and the context in which it is situated (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014), and as Hargreaves & McDonald (2002: 52) summarise:

Sport is perceived to be an aspect of culture embodying struggle and contestation, and the concern is with the processes through which cultural practices and the ideologies and beliefs underlying those practices are created, reproduced and changed through human agency and interaction.

Ultimately then, the sporting arena is a space where normative sociocultural gendered expectations and stereotypes are perpetuated and reinforced; for instance, women are expected to be feminine and look attractive while performing any sport, boxing included. Sport is a space historically characterised by systems of exclusion and discrimination, an illustration of this is the largely underrepresentation of women from ethnic minorities in sport. But the field of play is more complex than that. Sport simultaneously provides a space where contestations to power structures and positive social transformations can and do occur and women's entry into a sport that has been historically considered masculine like boxing is one manifestation of these complex power dynamics.

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2.1.1A GENDERED AND A GENDERING ARENA

Feminist scholars in the field have made an important contribution to sport studies, highlighting the significance of gender relations and the impact of gender within sportive contexts. In the late 1970s, and increasingly throughout the 1980s, sociologists and anthropologists started to highlight the influence and effect of power structures in sport which produced 'advantages and disadvantages for particular

individuals and groups' (Markula & Pringle, 2006: 3). During this period, feminist scholars, particularly in the global North, 'established feminism as a legitimate lens through which to investigate sports' myriad practices and cultures' (Caudwell, 2011: 111–112). Since then, feminist analyses of sport have proliferated and developed into the field termed 'sport feminism', which is now recognised as a 'mode of critical inquiry within the academy' (Caudwell, 2011: 112),⁴ characterized for its quest for equality and the denouncement of gender based discrimination in this field. In this context, a key contribution has been the critical interrogation of gendered power relations through the use of feminist theories and gender as a category of analysis in sport studies.⁵ Thus, as feminist scholars have argued, gender traverses sport, and gendered power structures are produced and reinforced in sport. Simultaneously, sport bestows, creates and reinforces gender meanings and relationships. By way of powerful illustration, we can see how sport plays an important role in perpetrating and celebrating sexual differences, as can be most sharply observed through the common sportive practice of sex segregation (Theberge, 1997: 69). Relying on 'the incorrect notion that all men and women are categorically different from each other' (Channon et al, 2016: 1113), sex segregation assumes the existence of fixed sex differences that, supposedly, define women's and men's athletic performance. These perceived differences, considered purely natural and defined upon a binary, universal and fixed

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⁴ Caudwell (2011) highlights that the historiography of sport feminism has been influenced by the trends that aim to classify Western feminisms by waves –i.e. first, second and third–, provoking linear, binaristic, and exclusionary narratives of progress or loss. In this regard, Caudwell analyses the problems of conceptualizing the history using linear and essentialist clusters as this creates not only a misconception of the reality but also a hegemonic narrative that silences alternative views. Thus, she suggests an approach that considers the impact of different feminist trends, approaches, and theories.

⁵ Hargreaves (2004) highlights that sport feminism has occurred not only in academic spaces and at the intellectual level, but also in the sport field, through political actions having impact on sport bodies and membership. Moreover, she suggests that the theory produced by sport feminism within Academia influences what occurs in the sport field, and vice versa.

system, serve as basis to establish divisions and recreate gender differences between female and male athletes. Sex segregation in sport disregards not only that sex itself is complex and subject to fluidity, but also, it institutionalises and naturalizes a binaristic system based on masculine dominance and the exclusion of women and gender transgressors (Travers, 2009: 82). Through the illustration of sex segregation, it becomes evident that sport is both a highly gendered – considering that gender organises the practices, discourses and interactions within sport – and a gendering institution and social sphere – one that reinforces sex differences, and creates and recreates gender divisions, rules and meanings.

2.1.2 THE LEGITIMISATION OF POWER

Gender is 'a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (Scott, 1986: 1067), and simultaneously, power is one of the dimensions of gender (Connell, 2002). Gender is socio-culturally constructed as a fictional dichotomy (Butler, 1988) based on the interpretation of perceived sex differences (Scott, 1986) and the reproductive functions of the bodies (Connell, 2002). As such, gender creates differences that have been used to legitimise power and oppression of men over women and of what is considered masculine over the feminine and the exclusion of those who do not fit this chimeric gender binary. Sport is thus based on a hierarchical and exclusionary construction of gender that relies on the assumption of masculine power and superiority over female oppression and inferiority. In this regard, sport has been an 'ideological underpinning of men's social power and privilege' (Messner, 2002: 142).

Power relations and differences in sport are inscribed through and on the bodies of participants (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Moreno, 2011). In this context, in sport, not only are differences between bodies stressed, but also, within a veiled matrix of domination,

these differences are codified, producing hierarchies between individuals (Moreno, 2011: 9) and shaping power relations between them (Markula & Pringle, 2006: 102). As part of this gendered rhetoric, sport communicates the natural adequacy of men and, conversely, the inadequacy and inferiority of women for exercise and physical activities. An example of this is found in tennis championships such as the Wimbledon Grand Slam, the Australian Open, the French Open, and the US Open, in which male players have to play five sets, while women are allowed to play only three sets (Gander, 2017). This rule communicates the sexist assumptions on the one hand, of the physical and psychological inferiority of women for sport, and especially of their inability to perform the same activity and at the same level of intensity as men do, and on the other, of men's superiority and prowess. In these kinds of ways, sport has served to perpetuate a binary and hierarchical construction of gender based on the perceived existence of natural and absolute sexual differences that define the capabilities, possibilities and status of individuals. As such, it has served to perpetuate 'notions of "natural" male superiority, immutable sexual differences, and normative concepts of manhood and womanhood' (Cahn, 2015: 223).

Gendered hierarchies, ideologies and cultural beliefs that legitimise male power and privilege are naturalized and normalised in sport. Anderson (2008b: 260), highlights that 'gendered institutions are always dynamic arenas of tension and struggle, but perhaps there is no other institution in which gender is more naturalized than sport'. This is problematic, especially considering that the naturalization of gender differences in sport is accompanied by the normalisation of gendered power relations. In this context, based on essentialist discourses 'men are usually heralded as "naturally" more competent and therefore have more status than women' (Ridgeway, 1997 in Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012: 405). Pierre de Coubertin, considered the founder of

the modern Olympic Games, refused to accept women in the first Games that took place in Athens in 1896. He declared that female participation 'would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and improper' (Kale, 2018). Even though this seems long ago, the normalisation of this sexist attitude towards women has remained for over a century. For instance, female athletes participate but in a 'softer' version of the competition (for example, the women's race walk is 20 kilometres, while men's is 50 kilometres, and in the road cycling race, women have to complete 140 kilometres, while men cycle 250 kilometres). In these kinds of ways, gendered hierarchies and ideologies based on male power have been communicated through sport as if they were natural, making it more difficult to unveil power structures and inequalities.

Ultimately then, we must understand sport as a gendered social sphere that serves to produce and reinforce gender discourses and practices. Gendered power relations are created and recreated through sport in specifically located ways and gendered power relations are not only normalised but also naturalized in sport. Therefore, it is important to make visible not only the gendered construction of sport, but also the inequality it provokes. Otherwise, as long as power structures remain veiled and untouched, gender equality will always be an unattainable goal.

2.2 MALE POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN SPORT

As I have thus far argued, sport, configured by gendered power relations, produces and reasserts hierarchies based on male power and privilege (Messner, 2002: 142). Indeed, as a range of key scholars claim, sport is 'traditionally one of the major male preserves and hence of potential significance for the functioning of patriarchal structures' (Dunning, 1986: 79), a social field where ideals of masculinity are forged and affirmed (Cahn, 2015; Connell, 1987; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1988; Messner,

2002), and plays an important role in the reproduction of the patriarchal system (Aitchison, 2007; Messner, 2002; Moreno, 2011). In this vein, sport appears as a masculine arena where power is a male domain.

2.2.1 SPORT, A MALE BASTION

Historically, sport has been a platform for the construction and affirmation of manhood. Besnier et al (2018) and Cahn (2015) stress that in Western countries, during the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, industrialisation and urbanisation shaped social fields, social relations and identities, including the construction of sport and ideals of manhood. During this period, men moved closer to the family and domestic realm (Besnier et al, 2018: 145) and important numbers of male workers started to be employed in sectors where physical labour was no longer a key requirement, i.e. professionals, merchants, and white-collar workers (Cahn, 2015: 11). Nevertheless, physicality was still linked to virility, and sport was configured as a sphere where men could develop their physicality and affirm their masculinity, offering the possibility of preserving the 'image of virile athletic manhood' (Cahn, 2015: 10).

Analysing the linkage between modern sport and masculinity, Moreno (2011) suggests that the increasing movement of women into the public sphere played a relevant role in this construction. She points out that, when sport was being configured as an autonomous sphere of social life, the social status of women – especially White middleclass women from industrialised countries – started to improve as a result of their increasing economic autonomy. The latter, accompanied by the growing participation of women in the public sphere, provoked something of a redefinition of notions of womanhood and manhood. Within this, men's supremacy and social

authority were called into question, but sport – and especially the ‘rough ones’, such as boxing – provided men the physical and moral skills that were considered important for leading society and symbolically maintaining their status quo (Moreno, 2011: 96–98). As such, sport served as a vehicle for reaffirming male supremacy and masculinity, defending them from the threat that women represented to men’s supremacy.

Sport remains to this day a bastion of male dominance (Dunning, 1986; Messner, 2002), serving as an ‘ideological underpinning of men’s social power and privilege’ (Messner, 2002: 142) and where power, privilege and resources continue to be a largely male monopoly (Messner, 2002). The case of female pro boxers is illustrative of this continued male dominance. Despite being at the top of their career, they are not accorded the same television broadcasting time as their male counterparts, they face difficulties in being sponsored and promoted and see a large disparity in earnings as compared to male boxers (Doerer, 2018). In 2016, for example, pro boxer Floyd Mayweather had an estimated net worth of £409.5m, while Lucia Rijker, the highest paid female boxer, earned £27.3k (Houlihan, 2016). In this account, it becomes evident that female fighters not only experience highly inequitable access to resources, but also they do not have the same recognition as male fighters, which according to Fraser (2007) is an obstacle to achieving equality and justice.⁶ Thus, we can observe that sport perpetuates ‘the ideology of male superiority and dominance’

⁶ This is further discussed in Chapter 8.

(Messner 1988: 199) and that it is constructed as an arena where women, even at the highest levels, are pushed to the margins (Messner, 2002).⁷

2.2.2 THE ORDERING VERSION OF MASCULINITY

Constructed as a masculine sphere, the sporting arena is a site where male supremacy is legitimately embodied, performed, displayed, and celebrated. Here, notions of masculinity involving virility, physical skill, and force are cultivated and embodied (Cahn, 2015; Moreno, 2011). Sport develops and activates skills, attitudes, behaviours, postures, bodily movements, performances, and physicalities culturally considered masculine and which are expected to be materialized in masculine bodies, through strength, rigour, determination, resistance, team spirit, and competitiveness (Moreno, 2011: 95).

Sport, being a site for the embodiment of masculine conservative behaviours and attitudes (Anderson & McGuire, 2010), is dominated by a specific expression of masculinity, which Connell (1987; 2002) has termed hegemonic masculinity. This category, used by the author to express an 'ordering version' (Connell, 1987: 183) of masculinity, configures masculine embodiments and is exalted above other identities (Anderson & McGuire, 2010: 251). Consequently, it influences identities and

⁷ Messner (2002) suggests that sport has a centre and margins. According to him, the centre is characterized by concentrating the financial resources, recognition, and institutional support. As such, 'the center is a position occupied by the biggest, wealthiest, and most visible sports programs and athletes. It is a site of domination and privilege' (Messner, 2002: xviii), and as such, it is a bastion of male power. The margins are defined as those sites that do not have access to power. However, in these margins, possibilities to contest and subvert the power structures can be encountered through 'autonomy, community, creativity, and individuality' (Messner, 2002: 148), as they are not under the rigid vigilance of sporting institutions because they are in the margins.

behaviours of most heterosexual men (Connell, 1987; 1995 in Anderson, 2005: 337). Channon et al (2016: 1111) point out that even men who do not participate in sport celebrate male athletic performance, especially bravery, competitiveness, discipline and strength, as they represent the notion of how 'real men' should be. In this view, the sporting sphere serves as an arena where 'images of ideal masculinity are constructed and promoted' (Connell, 1987: 84–85), playing a key role in the definition and legitimisation of 'acceptable forms of masculinity' (Anderson & McGuire, 2010: 249).

Hegemonic masculinity legitimates gendered power relations, imposing power over those who do not fit this frame. In these terms, the main characteristics of this identity are that it subordinates others and encourages the performance of socio-negative attitudes. As Connell (1987: 183) highlights, hegemonic masculinity 'is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women'. Similarly, Anderson (Anderson, 2005; 2008b) and Anderson & McGuire (2010) – who prefer the term 'orthodox masculinity' rather than 'hegemonic' – claim that it is 'a form of masculinity [...] predicated on homophobia, misogyny, physicality and bravado'. In this vein, it is important to highlight that Anderson (2008b: 262) suggests that men, in certain contexts, are able to act in accord with orthodox masculinity 'despite their ascribed traits'. This is in opposition to hegemonic masculinity, which, according to Anderson, is an inappropriate term as it requires men to 'possess both the *achieved* and *ascribed* variables that align with social masculine dominance' (Anderson, 2008b: 262; emphasis in original); this is not always the case. In this way, for Anderson, orthodox masculinity is a more appropriate term to describe those masculinities that perform in opposition to subordinate and marginalised masculinities. Thus, it 'only refers to the conformity of the achieved variables that

currently align with social dominance, something that all men can attempt to approximate' (Anderson, 2008b: 262). Nevertheless, it must be said that under this masculinity men still 'attempt to approximate the hegemonic form of masculinity, largely by devaluing women and gay men' (Anderson, 2005: 338).

While recognising the contribution made by Anderson (2005; 2008) and Anderson and McGuire (2010), I prefer Connell's (1987; 2002) and Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. This is because it places greater emphasis on the impact of gendered power structures and how they are involved in the legitimisation of the domination of men who embody this masculinity over other men, and especially over women. Also, it stresses the benefits (i.e. power and privilege) that patriarchy bestows on those who perform hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and how through cultural institutions and persuasion, men act in compliance with this masculinity. Moreover, it focuses on the practices of men who act in compliance with this kind of masculinity. In regards to the latter, Connell & Messerschmidt (2005: 832) state that hegemonic masculinity is a category that makes reference to the 'things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity'. In these terms, I find the concept of hegemonic masculinity useful in my analysis of how gendered power relations are perpetuated in sport and how men enact and embody a set of gendered social expectations.

The so-called ideal of hegemonic masculinity is by no means accomplished, displayed, or most importantly, desired, by all men. Moreover, it 'may not be the most common form of masculinity practiced' (Coles, 2009: 31). Nevertheless, this normative ideal continues to dominate social constructions of masculinity that men might draw on due to the 'patriarchal dividend'. Connell (1987; 2002) uses the term 'patriarchal dividend' to refer to the support the gender order receives from men, as they gain, in exchange,

a reward in the form of status, privilege or resources due to their condition as men, as Connell explains:

The public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support. The notion of 'hegemony' generally implies a large measure of consent. (Connell, 1987: 185)

Despite the fact that men might attempt to perform hegemonic masculinity, it must be noted that the dominant representation of masculinity in sport is not always hegemonic. Anderson and McGuire (2010: 251) highlight that the hegemonic version of masculinity that Connell (1987) proposes, is accurate only in historical 'periods of high homophobia', as it affirms heterosexuality. The authors emphasise that when homophobia is the dominant mode, hegemonic masculinity is the only possibility offered to men. However, they argue that in contexts in which homophobia is diminishing, more inclusive masculinities emerge (Anderson & McGuire, 2010). Under the paradigm of 'inclusive masculinity' (Anderson, 2005; Anderson & McGuire, 2010), masculinity is gendered inclusive, contests misogyny and homophobia, and 'men are permitted increased social freedom in the expression of attitudes and behaviours that were once highly stigmatized' (Anderson & McGuire, 2010: 251). This analytical distinction is important as it allows for an analysis of masculinities, especially within a context in which homophobia is not a dominant feature of social reality. However, we cannot yet say that sport is an arena in which homophobia and the socio-negative attitudes of men embodying hegemonic masculinity have been eradicated completely. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity still monopolizes power and privilege within sport, thus far retaining a dominant position in this arena.

In sport, not only are power and privilege monopolized by hegemonic masculinity, but also it continues to be a male-dominated preserve. Moreover, the sporting arena still creates and recreates traditional gendered meanings that legitimise masculine power. The manifestation of these characteristics and structure varies between sports. In this context, boxing appears as an activity in which these features are salient.

2.3 WOMEN ENTERING BOXING

Boxing can be considered 'the most masculine of all sports' (Czizma et.al., 1988 in Halbert, 1997: 32). Characterised for its hypermasculine trade and mythology (Paradis, 2012: 85), it is an activity dominated by men – most of its participants are male and it is both governed largely by men and targeted at men (Moreno, 2011). In its training venue, the boxing gym, men similarly dominate, and not long ago, the gym was considered as a '*quintessentially masculine space*' (Wacquant, 2004: 50; emphasis in original).

Through boxing, 'plebeian, heterosexual and heroic' (Wacquant, 1995 in Hargreaves, 1997: 35) masculinities are forged and embodied. Moreover, in boxing, 'behaviours and bodily forms typically associated with masculinity: physical power, strength, violence, aggression and muscularity' (Lindner, 2012: 464) are encouraged and celebrated. In these terms, boxing is a masculine bastion where hegemonic masculinity is recreated and exalted, and a site in which masculine power is continually reasserted and legitimised.

Although boxing has been configured as a masculine sport, women have been participating in it at least since the eighteenth century (Boddy, 2008; Hargreaves, 1997; Smith, 2014; Woodward, 2014), and just in the last few decades, their presence has been increasing and achieved greater visibility (Van Ingen & Kovacs, 2012;

Woodward, 2014).⁸ This is a result of battles and institutional transformations in the sport throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Woodward, 2014) that have made it more accessible to women, at least in formal terms. As Moreno puts it, for more than a century, boxing has been a male preserve, but now ‘women are invading it [...] and there is no turning back’ (2011: 206).

2.3.1 FEMALE VOICES ON BOXING

In modern times, boxing has been a site of research for scholars seeking to understand the history, the culture and the social structures that underpin the sport. In these terms, the body of knowledge about boxing has been mostly produced by men⁹ as Woodward (2009: 10–11) reports, specially taking into account that historically, this sport has been structured by ‘a network of colluding masculinities’ (Woodward, 2009: 11) that has involved, athletes, trainers, administrators, managers, journalists, and researchers. The identification and complicity with hegemonic masculinity by the male members of the boxing community has created a social network and relationships that are difficult for women to access (Woodward, 2007a: 45). Despite this, women have been able to produce a great body of knowledge as a result of their immersion in the boxing culture. Illustrating this point, in the next paragraphs I offer some examples of

⁸ For further analysis in this topic, see Chapter 4.

⁹ Among them, probably the most relevant work is offered by Loïc Wacquant (2004), the French sociologist who, drawing on Bourdieu’s category of habitus, explored body practices in boxing as a result of conducting an ethnography in a boxing gym in Chicago in the 1990s. According to Woodward, among Wacquant’s contributions is that he challenges body mind dualisms and also that he provides a ‘powerful account of the making of embodied selves in boxing’ (Woodward, 2009: 108), exploring the materiality of the bodies in boxing.

the work on women's boxing produced by female researchers who use gender as a category of analysis.

In the field of humanities, Hargreaves (1997) offers a pioneering analysis of women's boxing. Analysing secondary sources and being focused on bodily experiences, she assesses the potential of the presence of women in boxing to disrupt the 'symbolic boundaries between male and female in sport' (Hargreaves, 1997: 33). Hargreaves' contribution is not only her discussion of the contestation of gender, but also that she highlights that the presence of women in boxing, rather than being a new phenomenon, dates back to the eighteenth century.

In the twenty-first century, relevant analyses were produced in the context of the 2012 London Olympics, as this was the first time female boxers participated in the modern Olympic Games. Examples of these analyses are Lindner (2012), who suggests that women in boxing not only challenge symbolically gendered notions but also contest binary understandings and experiences of the gendered body; Van Ingen & Kovacs (2012), who focus on the AIBA encouraging women to wear skirts rather than shorts in the ring, discuss the construction and contestation of gender binaries in boxing; and Woodward (2014), who explores the legacy of the 2012 Olympics, suggesting that the addition of women's boxing to the Olympic programme has the potential to create cultural shifts that may open up the possibility to take women's boxing seriously and displace the narratives that had addressed it as parodic, bizarre or sexualised, and consequently, redefine gendered identities as well as boxing itself. The 2012 London Games gave visibility to women's boxing in the Olympic circuit, mass media and academic circles as well.

A great number of the female researchers focused on women's boxing have used ethnographic methods while conducting research within boxing gyms. In these terms, Halbert (1997) is the first researcher to publish an article based on interviews with female boxers in the US context. In the article, Halbert argues that female fighters are seen as gender deviant (1997: 32), as they do not conform to the gendered norms of boxing. Moreover, she denounces the multiple forms of discrimination against women within the sport. Other examples of researchers using ethnographic methods include Lafferty & McKay (2004), who, conducting interviews and observation in the Australian context, explore how boxing acts as a gender regime, and especially, how gender is done in this arena through structures of power, labour, cathexis and representation in Connell's (1987; 2002) terms. Thus, they analyse the dynamics in a boxing gym that provoke the reproduction of 'condescending, paternalistic, infantilizing, and essentialist discourses that have been invoked for over a century in order to exclude females from participating in sport' (Lafferty & McKay, 2004: 274). Cove & Young (2007), who, gathering data through interviews with Canadian female boxers, their trainers, parents, and partners, explore the impact of gendered expectations and gender stereotypes on women's vertical mobility within the sport. In the Mexican context, Moreno (2011), conducted interviews with a great range of members of the boxing community (i.e. male and female boxers, trainers, managers, promoters, doctors, journalists, etc.), as well as observation through photo and video sources and analysis of secondary sources. Using Teresa de Lauretis's (1987) concept of technologies of gender to investigate how boxing acts as a site where hegemonic gendered ideals, embodiments, and power relations are articulated, Moreno argues that boxing operates as a masculine space that marginalises women, maintaining the sport as a male preserve. Dortants & Knoppers (2013; 2016), using a Foucauldian

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approach and conducting observation and interviews with male and female boxers, male trainers, and a sport consultant in a boxing gym in the Netherlands, explore how diversity is regulated in a boxing gym. They suggest that a positive management of difference might contribute to negotiating gender differences and embracing diversity. Heiskanen (2012), who conducts interviews in a boxing gym in the US, claims that the pugilist's body is a product and an agent of power and that gendered power relations are determined by spatio-temporality. In these terms, she suggests that boxing offers the possibility for the contestation of power. Tjørndal (2019a), whose work is unique as she conducts interviews with female boxers and female trainers in the Norwegian context, reports that female boxers experience systematic exclusion, discrimination, and even sexual abuse by older male coaches. Moreover, her findings suggest that on the one hand, the masculine construction of leadership in boxing prevents the acceptance of female trainers, and on the other, gendered expectations of women to be supportive and act as carers, put the trainers in a difficult situation in the gym. In different contexts, female researchers have entered boxing gyms, interviewing the boxers, trainers and other members of the boxing community and observing the power relationships within the gyms in order to produce critical and creative pieces of work.

Among the female researchers using an ethnographic approach, there are a few that, besides conducting interviews, have incorporated their own training into their participant observation. One of them is Mennesson (2000), who, using a Bourdieusian framework, investigates the impact of female participation on gendered representations, identities and power relations in the French boxing context. The other is Paradis (2012), who also uses Bourdieu's theory to argue the gendered body has a central role within social interactions; she also examines how it is used to legitimise power relations. In these terms, she explores the perception of female bodies in boxing

and emphasises how male boxers apprehend female boxers' bodies as contradictions under the rules of boxing, as well as how this is transformed through their interactions in the gym.

While the authors mentioned above are focused on the experiences of female boxers or expectations placed on them, Woodward (2008) writes about her experience as a white middleclass female researcher —as she describes herself— in a boxing gym in the UK context. She highlights the importance for the researcher to acknowledge 'the spatial and temporal particularities' (Woodward, 2008: 555) that shape her situation in the field and her relationships with the participants, and how these impact her observation of it as well the production of knowledge. Regarding this, she stresses the complexities and barriers of being a female researcher in male bastions, such as the boxing gym. In order to overcome the obstacles, while using ethnographic methods, she reflects on her own gender identity and on that of others to grasp every detail available including data regarding the embodiments, routines and rituals of everyday life.

The scholarship produced by female researchers on women's boxing is diverse. Nevertheless, there are elements in common among their work. For instance, they not only give visibility to the experiences of women in boxing in order to both contest the traditional and sexist representations of gender and to contribute to denouncing discrimination against women in boxing. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that while the authors celebrate the presence of women in boxing, highlighting the potential to negotiate and challenge traditional notions of gender, they nevertheless conclude that women's boxing has not yet transformed the gendered power structures within the sport. Equality has yet to be accomplished in boxing, and academic literature will continue to highlight that.

2.3.2 DESTABILISING BINARIES

As women's boxing literature argues, female boxers are contesting the male hegemony with the sport, destabilising gender meanings. In this context, Halbert (1997) suggests that women pugilists represent 'a triple threat to traditional gender expectations, athletics and boxing' (Halbert, 1997: 32). Female fighters threaten gender norms because they are deconstructing the traditional social construction of femininity by incorporating the qualities that boxing involves, such as aggression, muscularity, and strength. They threaten organized sport as a traditionally masculine institution, as women are participating despite how masculine a sport can be. And finally, they threaten to feminise the boxing as an industry, which until the entrance of female fighters was exclusive to men. In these terms, it is clear that the presence of female fighters in what it has been perceived as a masculine social field is challenging gender notions within the sport (Hargreaves, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012; Lindner, 2012; Moreno, 2011; Paradis, 2012; Van Ingen & Kovacs, 2012). Regarding this challenge in the months prior to the 2012 Olympic Games, Van Ingen & Kovacs (2012: 461) pointed out that female boxers, through their skilled bodies, were 'destabilizing gender polarities' in this binary arena, in which historically only men were participating and displaying aggression and strength. Accordingly, Lindner (2012: 465) points out that women's boxing is making the traditionally masculine sport a social sphere in which binary gender understandings 'can be, and are, challenged via (public) performances of inappropriate embodiments of gender'. Drawing on Butler (1988), Lindner (2012: 466) suggests that female boxers' bodies break boxing's gendered norms, performing and embodying 'gender trouble' in the sport, arguing that '[w]omen's engagement in boxing is "troubling" since female boxers' embodied performance of masculinity threatens to blur already destabilised gender boundaries'. Similarly, Heiskanen (2012:

42) claims that pugilist women entering boxing, considered a masculine space, have 'destabilized the sport's seemingly fixed social organization'. The presence of women seems to be questioning and contesting gender binaries and discourses, making boxing a site for gender contestation.

As such, gender norms and social interactions within boxing have been affected by the participation of women. In these terms, Paradis (2012) focused on bodily experiences emphasises how male boxers apprehend female boxers' bodies as contradictions under the rules of boxing, characterised as a male preserve, as well as how this is transformed through their interactions in the gym. She also suggests that under certain conditions, such as athletic excellence, female physicality has started to be accepted in boxing gyms, allowing women to gain status. This analysis is meaningful as we can observe how the presence of women in boxing is contributing to transforming gender norms in the sport, making women entitled to be considered as subjects.

Women in boxing call into question the larger issues of gender essentialist discourses and gender binaries used historically to naturalize gender differences and normalise inequalities. Essentialist discourses have communicated that strength and aggression are natural and exclusively masculine attributes, as Moreno (2011) reports, while frailty has been considered to be a feminine characteristic (McCaughey, 1998). Consequently, women have been considered inadequate to participate in boxing which legitimises their subordination in the sport (Moreno, 2011). In this context, Hargreaves (1997) highlights that female fighters, by displaying strength and aggression, trouble traditional images of femininity. Accordingly, Theberge (1997), focusing on women in hockey, adds that women in contact sports offer a 'clear and compelling refutation of the myth of female frailty' (Theberge, 1997: 84) by

experiencing and embodying aggression, physicality, strength, and agency. Similarly, Mennesson (2000: 22) claims that female boxers represent a threat to the 'dualistic gender regime of boxing'. Departing from Messner (1996), Mennesson (2000: 22) suggests that by displaying strength, violence and control, women boxers challenge 'categories of sexual identity in sport [...] structured according to a binary logic of athleticism=masculinity=heterosexuality for males and athleticism? femininity? heterosexuality? for females [sic]'. Accordingly, Moreno (2011) observes that women boxers challenge the assumption of strength as an inborn male attribute and with this, one of the foundations of male supremacy. Along these lines, Van Ingen & Kovacs (2012: 461) claim that '[w]omen's entry into the customarily male preserve of Olympic boxing illustrates that pugilistic prowess is not "naturally" masculine', as women can develop it too. The presence of women in boxing, and especially the embodiment of features that were considered naturally a domain exclusive to men, challenge gender binaries (Lindner, 2012: 465) that prevail in the sport. Adding to this, Hargraves highlights that women's boxing 'appears to deconstruct the "normal" symbolic boundaries between male and female in sport' (Hargreaves, 1997: 33). Through their bodies, female fighters contest gender categories, essentialist discourses and traditional representations of femininity.

2.3.3 THE POTENTIAL OF BOXING

The challenge to traditional notions of gender and femininity posed by the bodies of the female fighters is particularly relevant if it is considered that traditional gender norms and discourses have suppressed women's entitlement to use their bodies. Iris Marion Young (2005), in a phenomenological essay focused on the feminine existence, highlights that femininity designates:

[N]ot a mysterious quality or essence that all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. (Young, 2005: 31)

Young (2005) recognises that women have been defined socially and culturally in opposition to men and their bodies configured by constraint and confinement. In this respect, she emphasises that women have learnt that their body is a fragile entity that 'exists as *looked at and acted upon*' (Young, 2005: 39; emphasis in original). Consequently, women's physical engagement is usually approached with 'timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy' (Young, 2005: 34), provoking a fear of getting hurt and making any accomplishment of a physical task difficult and awkward. This construction of femininity results in the restriction of any deployment of physical power by women (Lafferty & McKay, 2004: 271). About this, Moreno, quoting MacKinnon, highlights that: 'it is not that men are trained to be strong and women are just not trained. Men are trained to be strong and women are trained to be weak. It's not *not* learned; it is very specifically learned' (MacKinnon, 1987: 120 in Moreno, 2011: 39; emphasis in original). Thus, as in boxing women train to move, be strong and develop their physical prowess, the sport appears to be a practice of liberating potential for them (Heiskanen, 2012: 41).

Boxing gives women the possibility to experience a new kind of femininity and gain empowerment. In this regard, feminist literature (Hargreaves, 1997; McCaughey, 1998; Theberge, 2003; Velija et al, 2013) points out that contact and combat sports offer an opportunity for women's empowerment, as they are a source of health, confidence and pleasure as well as an opportunity to be part of a social network. McCaughey (1998), who offers an ethnography on women's self-defence in the US

which mirrors the boxing context, emphasises that self-defence is a turning point in our culture considering that women have been forced to dismiss the physicality of their body and conceive themselves as inborn passive and vulnerable objects. The practice of combat sport thus challenges these representations and offers the possibility for women not only to learn and internalise new and assertive bodily dispositions but also to conceive a new femininity and expressions of the female body. Similarly, Nancy Theberge (2003), who examines the possibilities that ice hockey offers for empowerment, suggests that contact sport gives girls and women the chance to experience strength, competency, and agency. For her, the participation of women in contact and aggressive sports – such as hockey or boxing – might be a source of women's and girls' empowerment and a means of challenging gendered constructions of feminine bodily existence. In view of this, boxing provides women the chance to reprogram their bodies and internalise a new kind of bodily knowledge (McCaughey, 1998), disrupting representation of a vulnerable femininity (Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Thus, boxing opens up the possibility of developing and extending women's physical capacities to gain control over and ownership of their bodies, opposing in this way, traditional and oppressive gendered social norms.

Boxing offers women new ways to perceive and use their bodies and construct their gender identities, and, simultaneously, women are leading to a new construction of boxing and contesting gender within it. In this regard, Moreno (2011) observes that though female pugilists find it hard to publicly and overtly recognise the impact of their presence, they are conscious of their agency and influence within the hypermasculine boxing world. Female boxers are proud of themselves, and their strength and vigour can be easily appreciated in the boxing scene; they are 'fight[ing] for their right to

transcend' (Moreno, 2011: 211). Through boxing, women pugilists are transforming themselves; moreover, they are challenging the boxing scene.

Women's boxing challenges gender notions. In this view, the presence of women in this sport has had a significant and positive impact on the sport and wider society. Nevertheless, boxing is still preserved as a masculine arena, dominated by male power and privilege, and what is more, it is based on gender hierarchies, making it a site in which inequalities are created and recreated.

2.4 EXCLUSION IN BOXING

Discrimination against women in boxing is an expression, which is both a cause and consequence of the inequality that characterises the sport. As such, it preserves boxing as a masculine arena and, especially, a site dominated by male power. In this context, discrimination appears as an exclusionary mechanism (Moreno, 2011) that on the one hand, produces and reproduces women's subordination and exclusion. while on the other, reasserts masculine power within the sport. Discrimination against women in boxing not only hinders women's inclusion, prevents parity of participation, and leads to a lack of recognition in the pugilist scene, but also it creates a precarious situation for women as it reproduces inequalities between male and female athletes. Thus, boxing is far from being an egalitarian sport, despite romantic descriptions that might characterise it as such. For instance, Wacquant states that in boxing:

The gym culture is ostensibly *egalitarian* in the sense that all participants are treated alike: whatever their status and their ambitions, they all enjoy the same rights and must acquit themselves of the same duties, particularly that of 'working' hard at their craft and displaying a modicum of bravery between the

ropes when the time comes. (Wacquant, 2004: 53; emphasis added)¹⁰

Counteracting egalitarian descriptions of boxing, feminist literature (Cove & Young, 2007; Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Lindner, 2012; Mennesson, 2000; Moreno, 2011; Paradis, 2012) reports that not all individuals are treated the same and not all have the same rights, since sex and gender differences result in situations of inequality for women. Consequently, women experience discrimination in boxing expressed in the form of exclusion, marginalisation, obstacles, stereotypes, harassment, differential treatment, and unequal access to opportunities and resources compared to their male peers.

2.4.1A GENDERED LACK OF SUPPORT

Gaining status is a challenge for everybody in boxing (Wacquant, 2004); nevertheless, the literature reports that it is far more difficult for women than it is for their male counterparts due to the masculine values and rules that govern the sport (Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Mennesson, 2000; Moreno, 2011; Paradis, 2012). For instance, boxers have to develop what Wacquant (1995: 66–67) calls ‘pugilist capital’, a term that involves ‘a set of abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of [...] boxing in the form of recognition, titles, and income streams’. This capital, which results from intense labour, is materialized in the form of skills, dispositions of body, and knowledge, and it represents a means to gain status in the boxing scene. On this matter, due to the gender hierarchies in boxing, women experience significant

¹⁰ In regards to Wacquant’s observation on the egalitarian treatment he received – as a white French academic – by the male black and working class participants of the gym, Woodward highlights that such treatment is an illustration of how ‘hegemonic masculinity might override difference of class and “race”’ (Woodward, 2007a: 41). Thus, the identification as men was the bond among the participants.

difficulties in developing pugilist capital and, consequently, in gaining recognition in the boxing gym.¹¹ Similarly, legitimisation, respect, and ‘the privilege of belonging’ (Wacquant, 2004: 46) to the boxing gym are also gained through the development and display of skills. A gendered lack of access to good coaching and sparring blocks women’s access to status and recognition, leading to marginalisation and potentially a loss of women’s interest in the sport (Lafferty & McKay, 2004). However, this can change and tends to improve when women have developed skills and athletic excellence that attracts the attention of the coaches. In this regard, Lafferty & McKay (2004) point to the existence of a purportedly meritocratic system in boxing that defines when and which women would have the right to be trained. However, this remains a flawed system that allocates coaching time and quality in ways that are problematic, subjective, and also often likely based on gender bias, leaving many women behind.

Thus, as discussed above, a common expression of discrimination in boxing is the difficulty women face in receiving coaching (Cove & Young, 2007; Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Having sufficient access to good quality training makes the difference for any athlete. In this regard, the literature reports that even if women have overcome the obstacle of gaining entrance to the gym (Halbert, 1997), once in it, trainers and managers ‘often fail to assist them’ (Halbert, 1997: 18). A lack of opportunities to be coached prevents female boxers (and indeed anyone) from developing the skills and knowledge necessary to ‘produce value’ – in Wacquant’s terms (1995: 67)– and consequently, from gaining recognition as boxers. These

¹¹ This is further analysed in chapter 8.

processes of exclusion ultimately situate women in a subordinate position in the boxing gym.

The gendered and sexist expectations from the boxing coaches have negative consequences for women's access to training. Based on the assumption that men are considered to be more suited to sport and that they have fewer domestic obligations than women, and therefore more time to focus on their athletic development, women are left behind. Thus, stereotypical assumptions and expectations concerning 'men and women's physical abilities, dedication, and potential success' (Cove & Young, 2007: 268) can influence a coaches' decision to train men rather than women. This means that boxing is not a level playing field for women, but rather is a sport in which, due to gender biases, women are marginalised by default.

Being taken into account and taken seriously as boxers by their male peers is another of the obstacles women experience in boxing. Consequently, women can find it difficult to find male partners to train with, especially for sparring, which is a crucial element of the boxing routine, as it simulates a fight situation. Wacquant (2004: 78) observes that '[t]he point of sparring [...] is to approximate the conditions of the fight [...] [in it] the brutality of the confrontation is greatly attenuated'. On this matter, the literature (Heiskanen, 2012; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Paradis, 2012) describes cases of men who refuse to spar with women, arguing that for the sake of the safety of the female boxers, it is better not spar with men. Paradis (2012: 99) points out that the refusal of male boxers to spar with women is usually encouraged by coaches who instruct men either not to spar with them or to 'go easy' on them. Lafferty & McKay (2004), similarly report that women are given fewer chances to spar in comparison to men, and men retain a privileged position as they are constantly being asked to spar by the coaches. The obstacles to sparring for female fighters relies on 'condescending,

paternalistic, infantilizing, and essentialist discourses' (Lafferty & McKay, 2004: 274) that hinder their opportunities to participate in a practice supposed to be focused on the technicality rather than the brutality (or gender) of the fighter. The lack of recognition by male boxers and its consequences, such as the paucity of sparring opportunities, impedes women in the development of the technical abilities that any boxer would require not only to secure fights but also to acquire *status* in the gym.

Another manifestation of discrimination against women in the boxing scene is the lack of support by key actors who tend to be men. Heiskanen (2012: 32) reports, for example, that gym administrators and trainers 'were, at first adamantly against having women at gyms'. Nevertheless, the literature reports that the financial profit some major male players – i.e. promoters and sponsors – can gain through women's fights, usually surpasses their expectations based on their gender bias (Halbert, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012). Thus, despite the sexism and the resistances of some boxing businessmen to female boxers, they may focus on 'the cash value in staging female fights' (Heiskanen, 2012: 33) and promoting female fighters, whether they support women's boxing or not. As Heiskanen (2012: 33) suggests, financial interests may override gendered preconceptions for the sake of a 'pecuniary gain'.

In comparison to male pugilists, female boxers experience significant difficulties in securing support from their acquaintances while trying to make a career in boxing. Here, Wacquant (2004: 51) provides evidence of the role of a network in the boxer's life, stating that male boxers' wives and girlfriends are expected 'not to interfere [...] with the training, except to help extend its effects into the home by taking full charge of household maintenance and the children, cooking the required foods, and providing unfailing emotional and even financial support'. On this subject, Lafferty & McKay (2004) and Moreno (2011) suggest that in contrast to male boxers, who usually have

full support from coaches, families and partners, female pugilists struggle to have a network to support them financially, materially or emotionally during their boxing careers. Moreover, Lafferty & McKay (2004: 253) report 'the existence of a highly gender-segregated system of labor' that differentially allocates resources during the production of male and female boxers in ways that are detrimental for women. Accordingly, the absence of support from a wider network results in fewer opportunities for women to advance in boxing in comparison to their male peers.

2.4.2 GENDER ESSENTIALISM

The widespread essentialist and homogenising assumptions that the female body is weak and frail and therefore unsuited to boxing, continue to pose significant obstacles for female boxers. Reminding us that boxing is a '*quintessentially* masculine space' (Wacquant, 2004: 50; emphasis in original), Paradis (2012) emphasises that physical characteristics identified not only as masculine but also those considered ideal for boxing – i.e. leanness, muscularity, fierce appearance – would be aligned with the boxing *doxa*. Therefore, bodies with these characteristics – believed to be male bodies – are located higher in the social hierarchy of the sport, while other bodies – perceived as female bodies – would be excluded. As male bodies are aligned with the *doxa*, they have more access to capital and opportunities to grow within the sport (Paradis, 2012: 93). Thus, the gendered construction of boxing, and consequently, the gendered scale of value in which the bodies are conceptualized in it, gives men a *de facto* superior position in comparison to female pugilists as men embody the 'norms by which one gains recognizable status' (Butler, 2015: 35) in boxing.

The non-reproductive functions of female bodies have been either neglected or dismissed in the boxing scene as a reminder of the male *ethos* of the sport. Reflecting

on the impact of biologically driven bodily changes among boxers, Paradis (2012: 102) highlights the role of periods in the boxing scene, stating that menstruation usually goes 'under the radar'. Despite the effects that menstruation might have on many female boxers – for example, provoking pain or problems for weight management, causing women's exclusion from fights – it goes unnoticed or at least unremarked upon, almost a taboo within the sport. Ultimately, then, by disregarding differences and needs of female bodies, it is communicated at the symbolic level that, if women want to participate in the sport, they have to adapt their bodies and functions to the masculine structure of boxing.

2.4.3 STEREOTYPING

Stereotyping is a manifestation of discrimination experienced by women boxers on a daily basis, and, as Moreno (2011: 65) points out, the challenge that female fighters may represent to boxing is counteracted through 'representation strategies' that draw on gender stereotypes as their main tool. Similarly, Halbert (1997) suggests that female pugilists continuously receive moral and social sanctions in the form of stereotypes or negative labels for having challenged traditional conceptions of femininity through their participation in the sport. The negative labels or stereotypes associated with women boxers reported by Halbert (1997: 16) are: '(a) extremely overweight or husky, (b) different or strange, (c) manly or butch, (d) lesbian, (e) ugly, and (f) Foxee boxer'¹². Thus, in an attempt to avoid being stigmatized, female boxers create strategies to manage their identities. Halbert (1997), for example, found in the 1990s that female boxers refused to disclose their lesbian or bisexual identity, and

¹² Defined by Halbert's participants as 'a woman who is a stripper, not a boxer' (1997: 17).

tried to enhance their femininity. Nevertheless, the denial of non-heteronormative sexualities is changing, and an illustration of this is the gold medallist, Nicola Adams, a black British female boxer who has openly recognised being bisexual (Cartner-Morley, 2016). In this regard, Dashper (2018: 1748) mentions that although 'Adams herself does not conform to heteronormative ideals of femininity through her appearance and sexual orientation, she was represented in broadly positive ways by the British press during the 2016 Games'. Adams performs an 'acceptable sporting femininity' (Dashper, 2018: 1748) based on her friendly and charismatic persona and on the fact that her outstanding performance has made her a celebrity. However, if a pugilist is not a celebrity or does not have the social characteristics needed to be accepted, it is possible that she might feel the need to manage her identity, which may include denying her sexuality. The management of identity in order to counteract the stereotypes distracts women boxers from developing their pugilist capital. Moreover, stereotypes delegitimise women's status as boxers (Halbert, 1997: 17), focusing public attention on the stigmas rather on women's athletic skills.

2.4.4 WOMEN'S SEXUALISATION

For Lafferty & McKay (2004: 254), boxing 'is a panoply of sexual violence, misogyny, celibacy, homophobia, and compulsory heterosexuality'. As a result, not only female boxers, but women overall are sexualised in boxing (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). However, women's sexuality is considered a distraction for male fighters that must be eliminated during training (Halbert, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Woodward, 2007b). Wacquant (2004: 67) points out that a male boxer 'is taught that he must forsake all sexual contact for weeks before his fight for fear of losing his vital bodily fluids and sapping his physical strength and his mental

resolve'. Under the sexist and heteronormative assumption that women's role is to have sexual intercourse with men, female sexuality in boxing is seen as a threat. In this context, women are stigmatized as 'Delilahs' who threaten both the performance of male boxers and the gendered symbolic organization of the gym. In order to avoid these, they are prevented from boxing; however, if their presence cannot be avoided, they are not expected to participate actively. Illustrating this, Wacquant (2004: 51) recounts that when the wives and girlfriends of the male boxers are in the gym, they are 'expected to remain quietly seated, motionless, on the chairs that line the flanks of the ring; and they typically move carefully along the walls so as to avoid penetrating the actual training "floor", even when the latter is vacant'. This practice has changed since Wacquant wrote this in the late 1990s, as today women are actively participating in the sport. Nevertheless, feminist scholarship (Halbert, 1997; Hargreaves, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004) reports that boxing still communicates the idea that female sexuality must to be either rejected or policed and repressed.

2.4.5SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Women's sexuality is not only considered a threat in boxing but also is the subject of violence. Despite the seriousness of the problem of sexual violence against female boxers, the literature provides little information about this. An exception is Halbert's (1997) work, which points out the existence of sexual harassment against women throughout the boxing industry perpetrated by other boxers, promoters or/and sport authorities, in both the gym and in the fight context. One of the testimonies she offers is by a female fighter who narrates a case of sexual violence against her and her female peer:

'Nobody was sure about the rules and regulations [...] Hours before that fight

they took us into this back room [...] they did a Pap smear and a rectal examination [...] they were trying to find a way to stop this fight, or it seemed to me [...] Yeah, it was horrible'. (Halbert, 1997: 22)

Halbert (1997: 22) highlights that extreme experiences like the one quoted here were not typically mentioned by the interviewees in her study; however, she points out that female fighters reported they continually suffered from sexual harassment in the gym, involving cases of 'sexual suggestiveness'. Women's sexuality is seen a threat for male boxers, and simultaneously, women become the target of violent practices by men leading to the violation of women's rights.

Discrimination is continually experienced by women in boxing as result of a system of exclusion that preserves boxing as a masculine bastion and also the sexist and heteronormative hierarchy that sustains it. It becomes evident, then, that the participation of women in boxing, despite being a great achievement, has not as yet led to the elimination of the gendered power structures in this sport (Hargreaves, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Thus, despite the participation of female fighters in the boxing scene, 'the hypermasculine mythology [...] of boxing has not fully been displaced by egalitarian beliefs' (Paradis, 2012: 104). Accordingly, male supremacy and a regime based on binary sexual differences persist in boxing (Menesson, 2000; Moreno, 2011), making it a social field in which gender differences are not only reinforced but also a space in which inequalities are created and perpetuated.

Women in boxing continue to experience discrimination and inequalities in the form of obstacles and difficulties in securing full participation, as well as in gaining recognition as pugilists and access to resources. Nevertheless, women are participating, and this challenges the masculine ethos of the sport. As Moreno (2011: 209; my translation) warns us, gender is not fixed; therefore, 'gender meanings would not remain

untouched by the micro uprising' led by female boxers. Indeed, female fighters are contesting gender meanings and practices, contributing to a redefinition of 'boxing as an exclusively masculine practice' (Menesson, 2000: 32). However, gender norms and hierarchies are highly resistant to radical change. Thus, in the boxing context we can see the ways in which the 'oxymoron' of the female boxer and the presence of the female body as 'matter out of place' in the boxing ring has been manipulated to render it coherent to the dominant masculine paradigm rather than forcing any radical transformations of that paradigm (Moreno, 2011: 209-211). Ultimately, it seems that dominant gendered power structures in boxing have suffered some rearrangement but as yet have resisted deep transformation.

2.5 GENDER POWER REARRANGED

The potential for the transformation of women's participation in sport has been to some extent neutralized by a lack of radical reform in its sexist structure. Instead, women have had to adapt their identities, bodies, and practices to adhere to boxing's masculine structure. Lafferty and McKay (2004: 274) suggest that sport has been able to 'accommodate "difference" while not making any changes to its hypermasculine structure'. Similarly, Mennesson (2000: 22) points out that, although women continue to make inroads into traditionally male-only activities such as boxing, the amount of impact these 'encroachments' have actually had on the hegemonic gendered representations, identities, and relations cultivated in sport remains up for debate.

2.5.1 BINARIES PRESERVED

Women's presence in boxing has thus far *not* provoked any significant shifts away from a system of binaries based on biological differences between females and males

(Travers, 2009). On the contrary, gender binaries are maintained to avoid ambiguity within gender categories caused by the achievements of female bodies in a seemingly masculine sport. As a result, there is an exaltation of femininity, and consequently, women are expected to portray a hyper-feminine identity; as Moreno puts it: 'the hyper masculine boxing field, imposes hyper feminine behaviours' (2011: 209). Hargreaves (1997: 45) likewise claims that '[t]he potential radicalization of the female body in sport is contradicted by the ever-present expression of compulsory heterosexuality and the attempt to justify female boxing on the grounds that it has an authentic feminine element'. Hyper femininity thus contributes to the establishment of clear distinctions between male and female bodies and performances. In this way, the gendered power structure of boxing that 'demarcates hierarchical boundaries between men and women [...] normalizing compulsory heterosexuality' (Travers, 2009: 82) as well as gender discrimination is preserved.

In boxing, where traditional gender notions are clearly established and femininity is expected, if not exalted in women, acting in accordance to them appears to be a strategy for gaining acceptance. Halbert (1997) highlights that because boxing is perceived as a masculine sport, female boxers might be seen as gender deviants as they do not conform to conventional gender norms, thus making them subject to negative social sanctions. In this regard, Butler (2015: 35) suggests gender norms create 'zones where many are expected not to appear', and if they decide to do so, they are exposed to a vulnerable situation characterised for its precarity. In these terms, it seems that the gender configuration of boxing tends to communicate that women are not expected to appear, but if they do, they suffer the consequences of their defiance in the form of negative labels, ostracism, and harassment. In order to avoid or counteract this vulnerable situation, and also to gain recognition and the 'right

to appear' – in Butler's (2015) terms – in the boxing scene, women adopt a feminine identity in boxing through their clothes, attitudes, behaviours, discourses, or corporeal and spoken language (Halbert, 1997; Mennesson, 2000; Moreno, 2011; Paradis, 2012). Mennesson (2000) similarly mentions that women in her study declared that they had decided to participate in the assault version of boxing and focus on the aesthetics of the sport since these were considered more 'soft' style approaches and therefore more feminine in nature. This stands in opposition to the more 'hard' and masculine combat versions that emphasise the efficiency of the punches. Despite the presence of women in boxing, female participants' reproduction and embodiment of societal notions of womanhood and femininity upholds the traditional gendered structure which operates under the logic of binary gender opposition (Mennesson, 2000: 22).

To counteract the threat that women's participation in boxing poses to defined gender binaries, both unofficial and official mechanisms have been used to impose expectations on women's behaviour. Van Ingen & Kovacs (2012) highlight the Amateur International Boxing Association's (AIBA) encouragement for women to wear skirts rather than shorts in the ring during competitions. This took place in the months that preceded the 2012 Olympic Games, when women's boxing was to be showcased for the first time in history. As such, the AIBA was more concerned with solving an 'identification problem where traditional gender binaries are increasingly difficult to sustain' (Van Ingen & Kovacs, 2012: 461) than with celebrating and supporting the historical event of women's participation in Olympic boxing. It seems that the AIBA was trying to communicate that the only way women could officially participate in a 'man's' sport was by presenting as overtly feminine. The measure received strong criticism by media and ultimately was not implemented; nevertheless, it depicts the

importance of femininity in the context of boxing, especially given the sport's masculine structure and its continuous attempts at reinforcing binary notions of gender through the surveillance of women's bodies and identities.

2.5.2 REPRODUCING HIERARCHIES

Acting in accordance with more feminine-defined traits is not the only strategy female boxers have had to deploy in their attempts to gain acceptance. Aside from adhering to established expectations, women are commonly drawn to display a 'feminine masculinity' (Halberstam, 1998 in Paradis, 2012: 95), using this as a tactic to gain recognition. By performing behavioural traits associated with masculinity, a female boxer would have more opportunity to extend her pugilist, symbolic, and social capital (Paradis, 2012: 102) in the ring. This suggests that to gain respect, a woman must go beyond simply excelling at her sport. She must also 'emulate the hypermasculine model' (Lafferty & McKay, 2004: 274). This stands in stark contrast with the expectations of femininity, and it both increases the demand on women to carefully craft their identity and further validates a male supremacist ideology.

Female fighters challenge traditional representations of femininity (Velija et al, 2013); nevertheless, gender essentialist discourses that conceptualize women as weak and fragile have not faded, even among women. McCaughey (1998) and Mennesson (2000) report that some female fighters might categorise their achievements in combat sports as uncommon for women, considering also that it would be hard for any female to attain their level of skill. Following this thread, Meân & Kassing (2008) report that elite female athletes define themselves as special and unique, especially differentiating themselves from women who choose not to participate in sports. By excelling in sports, women defy conservative notions of femininity that define them as

passive. Nevertheless, defining themselves as women out of the ordinary and out of the norm reproduces the idea that the average woman is unsuited to sport, which not only recreates essentialist discourses but also, according to Halbert (1997: 32), supports women's subordinate status.

Women's empowerment through contact and combat sports such as boxing seems like an appealing and effective way to challenge the masculine structure of sport while reversing traditional notions of femininity. Unfortunately, it also leads to contradictions that minimise their transformative potential. For instance, Theberge (2003) claims that the participation of women in contact sports may lead to individual empowerment, which does not equate either to societal empowerment nor to feminist awareness. Moreover, Cockburn & Clarke (2002: 662), studying Year 9 girls in PE classes in the UK context, highlight that even though girls are resisting traditional gender norms, they 'remain in a disempowered position in the hierarchy of power and possibilities in sport and PE'. Another pitfall of the empowerment discourse surrounding combat sports is that women and girls mirror the male model of supremacy that uses force and domination to achieve power, thereby reinforcing the masculine ethos of the sport. As a result, this attempt at empowerment does not contribute to the elimination of biological essentialist discourses, nor does it overcome notions of male supremacy. Messner (2011b: 152–157) corroborates that essentialist constructions and dichotomist systems sustaining male superiority in sports have not been reversed, and further he elaborates on how the relationship between men and power has not been questioned with regard to sport. This clearly increases the difficulty for women's advancement in the sporting arena.

2.5.3 AN INCOMPLETE REVOLUTION

The perception of women in boxing is complex and replete with contradictions. Hargreaves recognises it is difficult 'to assess the extent to which the sport is a subversive activity for women or an essentially assimilative process with a radical façade' (Hargreaves, 1997: 47) questioning if the involvement of women in boxing is a mirroring of patriarchal structures or a revolutionary act. Following this same thread, Lindner (2012) suggests provocatively that women in boxing cannot be read as a sign of progress. She asks us to reflect on the meaning of their participation, considering that boxing is 'an institutional and cultural context as well as bodily activity that is, by definition, damaging and associated with corruption, exploitation and with long-term consequences for health and wellbeing' (Lindner, 2012: 466). Women's participation in boxing is just as diverse and ambiguous an experience as their presence in society, and what women face in the ring every day is akin to what they must confront in their daily lives. What women's boxing literature reveals is not only women's struggle to overcome discrimination, exclusion, and societal obstacles in order to gain recognition as professional boxers, but that throughout this process gendered power structures have not been eliminated but have merely adapted to fit traditional gender binaries. Thus, men's power and privilege remain intact despite women's participation. This indicates that equality is far from being achieved in boxing, and that many of the necessary and crucial revolutionary advancements within both sport's discourse and the boxing ring itself have yet to be implemented.

2.6 CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have addressed debates on gender and sport that revealed how gendered structures are created, contested, and rearranged in the sporting arena.

Here I have started from the premise that sport is a social and cultural force with a great impact on contemporary societies. Sport is not only a site in which gender ideals, discourses, and norms are produced, reproduced, and challenged, but also a social field permeated by gendered power structures. I have explored how sport has been constructed as a male bastion where hegemonic masculinities are forged and embodied. Understanding boxing as one of the most masculine sports, I have considered how the participation of women in boxing has destabilised gendered hierarchies and gender notions within the sport. Nevertheless, despite some positive challenges to the male hegemony, I have also focused on evidence exploring the continued discrimination against women in boxing and the sexist and androcentric arena as resistant to radical change. Finally, I conclude that the presence of female pugilists, despite being a great advancement in a sport that has been traditionally considered as masculine, has largely been accommodated within existing gendered power structures, rather than, as yet at least, provoking a more radical paradigmatic shift. Hence, this incorporation of women into boxing has been framed by the accommodation of women and their bodies into the hegemony in ways that has, thus far at least, served to limit the possibilities for gender equality in the sport.

3 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK. DELUSIONS OF EQUALITY

This chapter provides the conceptual framework for this thesis. Here I outline the analytical infrastructure that frames my project and underpins the analysis of the data presented in later chapters.

First, I introduce the concepts of participatory parity (Fraser, 2000; 2007; 2013) and precarity (Butler, 2009; 2015), discussing their adequacy for analysing the participation of women in boxing. Second, I explore the debates offered by feminist scholars focused on sport (Cahn, 2015; Messner, 2002; 2011a) and popular culture (McRobbie, 2004; 2009), who identify and denounce the emergence of narratives that underestimate the impact of inequalities and uncritically celebrate the presence of women in social fields where they have been previously excluded. Their work provides an important contribution to my interrogation of the boxing scene.

Throughout the chapter, I argue that in sport, neoliberal, classist, and sexist narratives persist. Moreover, I show that they can serve to obscure inequalities in sport, hindering equality for, access to, and the full participation of women and their recognition within the sport.

3.1 PARITY OF PARTICIPATION

Feminist theorisations of the participation of women in democracies provide a suitable framework for analysing the participation of women in sport because, as has occurred in democratic systems, the reforms that have been opening the doors for women to

participate in sport have not eliminated sport's androcentric bias. Identifying the relevance of analysing sport using the theorisation offered by feminist political scientists, Travers (2009) offers an analysis of male dominated and sex segregated elite professional and amateur sport in North America – or the sport-nexus, as she calls it. She uses Nancy Fraser's theorisation as part of her framework, including the formulation of participatory parity as a measure of gender justice, which is a condition of democracy (Fraser, 2007 in Travers, 2009). Consequently, she argues that since women do not have effective conditions to participate in sport, sport undermines gender justice and consequently, democracy (Travers, 2009: 80). Following Travers (2009), I use Fraser's concept of parity of participation (Fraser, 2000; 2007; 2013) to interrogate female presence in boxing, taking into consideration that as a consequence of the gendered hierarchies that prevail in this sport, the conditions do not yet allow women to fully participate and, consequently, be treated as equals.

Participatory parity is a key element to full participation in any social interaction, since it 'applies throughout the whole of social life' (Fraser, 2007: 29), sport included. Moreover, for Fraser, 'justice requires parity of participation in a multiplicity of interaction arenas, including [...] public spheres, and voluntary associations in civil society' (Fraser, 2013: 166). Considering that boxing clubs can be situated in these two categories, it seems appropriate to apply the concept of participatory parity to the boxing scene.

Fraser's definition of participatory parity is understood as meaning that participants must have the quality of being equal *peers* (2000; 2007; 2013). On this subject, participatory parity is not a question of numbers, nor is it conditioned by them, but a matter of the quality of participation. Thus, it is 'a qualitative condition, the condition of being a *peer*, of being on a par with others, of interacting with them on an equal footing'

(Fraser, 2013: 166). This is relevant in the case of boxing because as a cause and consequence of the existence of gendered power structures, women are not treated as equals. Thus, it becomes relevant to explore how the quality of the participation of female boxers is hindering equal treatment and justice in the sporting arena.

For Fraser, parity of participation is a principle situated at the centre of her conception of justice. As she puts it: '[a]ccording to this principle, justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as *peers*' (Fraser, 2007: 27; emphasis in original). In this sense, she identifies that there are three conditions to be satisfied to make possible participatory parity: redistribution, recognition and representation.

Redistribution, recognition and representation are not only requirements for participatory parity, but also, in Fraser's (2013) theory of justice, they are – respectively– the economic, cultural and political dimension of dimensions of both gender and justice . Reflecting on these, she states:

Whereas distribution foregrounds impediments rooted in political economy, and recognition discloses obstacles grounded in the status order, representation conceptualizes barriers to participatory parity that are entrenched in the political constitution of society. (Fraser, 2013: 13)

Fraser (2013) acknowledges that these dimensions are mutually irreducible. One cannot be reduced to the other, rather there must be a synergy between them. We thus need these elements to achieve not only justice but also participatory parity. In this sense, to achieve justice and equality, both distribution, recognition and representation must be guaranteed.

Redistribution is related to the economic structure of society, and as such, for Fraser (2007, 2013) it acts as a class differentiator. Thus Fraser (2013: 164) uses

redistribution to refer to material resources, highlighting its role not only to 'ensure participants' independence and "voice" but also to impede dependence and economic inequality (2013: 118). While Fraser acknowledges material resources when making reference to distribution, my understanding of distribution in this thesis goes beyond material goods. I also consider the social and cultural manifestations of re/distribution. Following, Bourdieu (1986) when making reference to redistribution, I consider the distribution of capital in its social, cultural, and symbolic forms, while acknowledging that:

Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. (Bourdieu, 1986: 46)

Therefore, I will consider capital in its different forms, but with a particular focus on pugilist capital (Wacquant, 1995: 67), which is crucial in boxing as it gives the fighter 'abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles, and income streams'. Consequently, the equal distribution of capital is a crucial element for a boxer as it opens the possibility to participate and gain recognition in the sport.

Recognition is a matter of social status related to the 'the effects of institutionalized meanings and norms on the relative standing of social actors' (Fraser, 2000: 116). In this sense, for Fraser, recognition is intertwined with the 'patterns of cultural value, of culturally defined categories of social actors – status groups – each distinguished by the relative honour, prestige and esteem it enjoys vis-à-vis the others' (Fraser, 2000: 117). In the case of boxing, the others are represented by women and all those who are not given the honour and prestige afforded to men by hegemonic masculinities.

Misrecognition is the corresponding form of injustice of recognition and is understood as a form of institutionalised social subordination that impedes equal participation (Fraser, 2000: 113–116). This is manifested when actors are excluded, or considered invisible, deficient, or inferior, as are most women in boxing.

Representation is the political dimension of justice. It determines who is entitled to be included –or not– in a community, to make justice claims and to be taken into account in ‘public processes of contestation’ (Fraser, 2013: 195). Thus, it makes reference to the terms and rules that enable individuals to be included, take part in public deliberations and processes of decision-making on public affairs. Moreover, it defines who can access justice.

Misrepresentation is the political injustice of representation that occurs when someone is denied the opportunity to participate ‘on a par with others in social interaction’ (Fraser, 2013: 196). The politics of representation, misrepresentation and misdistribution are complex and interrelated, as Fraser alludes to below when defining representation.

Establishing criteria of social belonging, and thus determining who counts as a member, the political dimension of justice specifies the reach of those other dimensions: it tells us who is included in, and who excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition. (Fraser, 2013: 195)

In the boxing context, women suffer from misrecognition as they have not been neither fully integrated into boxing (Dortants & Knoppers, 2016; Tjørndal, 2019b) nor are they yet considered full members of the sport (Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Moreno, 2011) and they struggle to occupy power positions within boxing governing

bodies (McCree, 2015). Thus, in order to achieve representation in boxing, women must be considered full members and included in decision making processes.

Considering Fraser's (2000; 2007; 2013) discussion of participatory parity and the discussion in the literature review of the discrimination against female pugilists (Cove & Young, 2007; Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Lindner, 2012; Mennesson, 2000; Moreno, 2011; Paradis, 2012), I would argue that women in boxing experience, especially, misrecognition, unequal distribution of resources and misrepresentation. Consequently, they are not participating on equal terms or as equal peers in Fraser's terms. Moreover, I consider that their participation is precarious, taking into account the discrimination, misrecognition and misrepresentation they experience in the boxing field. I thus also draw on the concept of precarity offered by Butler (2015) to construct my framework in order to understand women's participation in boxing.

3.2 A PRECARIOUS EXPERIENCE

Butler, who reflects on precarious life in relationship with the nation state, suggests that precarity is manifested when an individual has no control over what is occurring to her, and this is experienced as vulnerability or violence (Butler, 2009: ii). For Butler, precarity is provoked by an external agent, as she puts it: "[p]recarity" designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler, 2015: 33). It is important to mention that while Butler is referring to cases of maximum vulnerability and violence that is politically induced by the nation state, these are not subjects of analysis in my research. However, I will use precarity in boxing to analyse the experience of female fighters considering that they have greater difficulties in accessing networks of support (for

instance, the coaches) than their male peers, and for this, they are exposed to more vulnerability and even harassment.

The definition of precarity that Butler offers is focused on the impact of gender norms for recognition and how they cause violence and harassment to those who are misrecognised. As Butler states, 'precarity is [...] directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization and violence' (2015: 34). Thus, gender norms dictate who has the right to be recognised and taken into account as a subject (Butler, 2009; 2015). In this view, 'precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable. And in this way, precarity is the rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless' (Butler, 2009: xii-xiii). In taking this framework to the boxing context, it becomes evident that when women fighters are considered as gender deviant (Halbert, 1997), and their bodies are seen as inadequate, unable, and unintelligible for the boxing *doxa* (Paradis, 2012), they are thus experiencing precarity. Similarly, when female boxers suffer harassment (Halbert, 1997; Moreno, 2011) and misrecognition in the boxing gym by coaches, peers, and promoters based on the fact that they are women in a male space, they are also living precarity. In this frame, precarity is a condition experienced by women in boxing as a result of the prevailing dominant gender norms that permeate the sport.

Gender norms define who is entitled to be recognised. As Butler puts it: 'the compulsory demand to appear in one way rather than another functions as a precondition of appearing at all' (Butler, 2015: 35). Therefore, to achieve recognition it is crucial to observe the norms (Butler, 2009: iv); not doing this, would lead to misrecognition (Butler, 2009: iv). Consequently, in the case of boxing, without

observance of the gender norms of the sport, there are few possibilities to participate in it. In this regard, performances of hyper-femininity (Halbert, 1997; Moreno, 2011), undertaken by women in boxing to auto-police their bodies and appearances, are strategies to gain recognition and make space for participation. In these terms, Butler's theorisation of precarity provides a rich body of work for analysing the impact of gender norms in boxing.

3.3 MYTHS OF EQUALITY

Following this outline of the importance of the theorisation offered by Fraser (2000; 2007; 2013) and Butler (2009; 2018), I offer a discussion of the other feminist debates (Cahn, 2015; McRobbie, 2004; 2009; Messner, 2002; Messner, 2011a) that inform my framework. These are relevant for my research because they argue that not only have gendered power structures been rearranged, but also that the participation of women has been maliciously interpreted as a sign that equality has been already achieved. Moreover, they are important as they identify the emergence of narratives that either underestimate or normalise inequalities and expect women to participate in sport despite the obstacles that inequality creates for them.

The increasing presence and visibility of women in sport has been accompanied by the false belief that all women have access to full participation in sport. As Messner (2011a: 152, 157) and Cahn (2015: 310) claim, sport has failed in addressing not only gender and sexuality differences but also class and race differences, provoking misrecognition and inequality in the access to opportunities, especially for under-privileged social groups. Illustrating this, situated in the US during the 1990s, Dworkin (2001) highlights the existence of barriers related to class and race differences when women are trying to achieve an ideal femininity within the fitness context. In this vein,

Dworkin identifies that white and middleclass women have more chances to accomplish feminine body ideals in comparison to working-class and non-white women. Arguing the existence of glass ceilings to build up the ideal body in fitness, she explains that white middleclass women not only have more available time to work out, but also, due to social constructions of race and class, their bodies have more chances to adhere to the ideal of femininity prevailing in the fitness scene. Making reference to the importance of analysing the intersection of different power structures in the experience of inequality, Cahn (2015: 310) suggests that the 'dilemmas faced by women athletes today, cannot be separated from other axes of power, especially the politics of sexuality, race and economic inequality'. Thus, in my analysis, I take into account not only how gender but also sexuality, race, ethnicity and age configure experiences with regards to gender equality and inequality in boxing.

The participation of women in male-dominated sports has challenged gendered power structures (Cahn, 2015); however, these structures, rather than having been completely transformed or even eliminated, have been merely rearranged (Messner, 2011a).¹³ As Messner (2011a: 152) argues, the current situation of women and girls in sport is predicated on a 'contemporary reorganization of gender relations and a concomitant emergence of a newly hegemonic professional class-based gender ideology'. Messner calls this ideology soft-essentialism and defines it as follows:

Soft essentialism is a belief system that assumes natural differences between boys and girls. But in recognising girls' and women's right to choose participation in public life, soft essentialism does not endorse categorical social containment of women in domestic life. Meanwhile, boys and men are a largely

¹³ For further analysis of this topic, please see Chapter 9.

unmarked (and implicitly undifferentiated) category in the discourse of soft essentialism (Messner, 2011a: 161).

Soft essentialism is problematic because it dismisses the impact of cultural and material constraints based on gender, class, or race that prevent women's participation. Moreover, this ideology remains underpinned by traditional gender roles, conceiving women as responsible for the maintenance of the domestic sphere. Hence, it is pernicious in its recognition of women's right to attend sport sessions so long as they do not use sport to excuse attending to their household chores. Highlighting the right that women have to choose to participate in sport, soft essentialism not only veils inequalities that determine their right to participate and the quality of their participation, but also it expects women to accommodate their participation in a context in which power structures are preserved. Considering these points, while analysing the data, it is crucial to observe how gendered power relations and essentialism have been rearranged in sport.

The current context of sport offers women the opportunity to participate, but they are expected to do so despite the existence of inequalities. Analysing models of participation offered to women and girls in sport, Messner (2002) uses the commercial slogan of 'Just do it' to define a corporate and individualistic model based on the liberal feminist tradition. The 'Just do it' model for girls and women's access to opportunities and resources is focused on their agency and relies on the assumption that they would be able to share 'men's institutional power and privileges in sports' (Messner, 2002: 152). He denounces this model as it is based on a malicious and simplistic understanding that women should be able to easily overcome gender and other inequalities and start to participate with men on equal terms. This seems unlikely to

him, especially taking into account that in this model, men's social power and privilege in sport remain untouched (Messner, 2002: 146–153).

Another element to be considered in the analysis of the participation of women is the misinterpretation of the female presence as the ultimate sign of equality and even of feminism. In these terms, the presence of women and girls in sport has been misinterpreted as the 'final triumph of feminism' (Messner, 2011a: 152). The manifestations of this celebratory approach must be taken into account, considering that the mere presence of women could be interpreted as a metaphor for the advancements made in the sport and justify the lack of transformations to power structures in this arena.

3.4 POSTFEMINIST AND NEOLIBERAL NARRATIVES

The misinterpretation of the presence of women and girls in sport as the final triumph of feminism is pernicious because it makes sport into a setting where postfeminist discourses can easily emerge, and this must be analysed. Rooted in neoliberal and Western societies, postfeminism is a harmful interpretation of feminism, which departs from feminism itself, and communicates that feminism is no longer needed. McRobbie (2009), who analyses postfeminism in popular culture, describes the relationship between feminism and postfeminism as follows:

[P]ost-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. (McRobbie, 2009: 12)

Postfeminism considers that feminism has already 'passed away' (McRobbie, 2009: 12). Consequently, it not only prevents the renewal of feminism but also permits its

dismantlement. Moreover, it cancels the opportunities for social criticism and transformation that feminism demands.

Postfeminist perspectives, like other ideologies such as soft-essentialism or models of participation like the 'Just do it' model, expect women to participate in the public sphere while accepting the existence of inequalities caused by power structures, rather than calling for a paradigmatic shift. As McRobbie points out, postfeminism is '[c]oncerned with the progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order' (McRobbie, 2009: 14). In this regard, it is assumed that women – especially young privileged white women – have already achieved freedom and equal opportunities (McRobbie, 2009: 12) within a meritocratic system configured by power structures that benefit those who are already privileged. In this context, those women who have succeeded via meritocracy are used as a 'metaphor for social change' (McRobbie, 2009: 15). Moreover, they are considered role models for other women who are expected to excel without feminism, as it appears that the privileged ones have made it in this way.

Neoliberal parameters form the basis of the conditions under which women are supposed to participate in sport. As Messner (2002) argues, the participation of women and girls in sport has been driven by neoliberal values and parameters, especially individualism, equal opportunity, and fairness, which are conceptualized in the sporting arena through the notion of a 'level playing field'. Making reference to the 'Just do it model' of participation, Messner highlights that it 'operates from a naively optimistic liberalism that assumes that if we simply open doors, women will be able to march "from the margins to the center", and everything will be okay' (Messner, 2002: 148). This is unlikely to occur, for instance, considering the obstacle posed by the discrimination experienced by women in boxing.

Commented [ABS4]: added

Accordingly, Cahn (2015), who analyses the role, representation, and participation of women in sport in the US in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, identifies the reproduction of a 'narrative of progress' rooted in the economic and political neoliberal realms. According to Cahn, this narrative, focused on how 'the promise of rapid improvement and ever-growing opportunity for women in sport masks power differences' (Cahn, 2015: 371). The narrative of progress promotes the chimera of the existence or near achievement of equal opportunities for women in sport; for instance, it suggests that in sport, gender gaps have been closing and women are approaching equality (Cahn, 2015: 371). Uncritical, gender-blind, and optimistic neoliberal narratives in sport make inequalities appear as minor harms, which hampers the possibility of tackling them as problems. Thus, it is crucial to identify and analyse the different ways in which they are manifested.

As it is contextualized in the neoliberal system, individualism is communicated as the only way for women to fully participate and be recognised. McRobbie (2009: 19) points out that the success attained by privileged young white women is seen as a result of a neoliberal 'regime of personal responsibility, which expects the individual to excel by herself. Moreover, she suggests that as the individuals are expected to take full responsibility for their development (2015: 301), hard work is seen as the element that would define the athlete's success, recognition, and quality of participation. Thus, the assumption is that through individualism, hard work, dedication, willpower, and self-determination anyone can succeed in sport.

The promise that despite any obstacle, with hard work anyone can participate, attain success, and be recognised, makes participation, success, and recognition in sport seem to be a matter of individual choice. In this view, it is taken for granted that sport ensures equal treatment and equal access to opportunities for all. Cahn (2015: 313)

identifies this as a sporting myth that says that with 'hard work on a level playing field anyone who wants to succeed badly enough can become a "winner" on the field and off'. This myth is pernicious because it claims that success in sport is not influenced by structural inequalities, rather that equal treatment and equal access to opportunities are matters of individual choice and attainment. However, as Cahn (2015) stresses '[i]ndividual "opportunity" is not separable from structural barriers that make "choice", in too many instances, more mirage than material' (Cahn, 2015: 313). Considering that inequalities hinder the possibilities for full participation in sport, the assumption that anyone who wants to succeed just has to set it as a goal and work hard for it becomes a fallacy since the sporting arena is not a level playing field. Rather, sport is permeated with and characterised by gendered and intersectional power structures and hierarchies, which impose obstacles to participation on the basis of gender and other forms of marginalised identities – hence, especially for women, but also for gay, lesbian, queer, black, economically disadvantaged, and disabled individuals.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Within this theoretical framework, I have outlined concepts, debates, and perspectives that will be key points of reference for interpreting and analysing the participation of women in boxing and the opportunities and obstacles to achieving gender equality within it. In so doing, I have discussed the adequacy of using the concepts of participatory parity (Fraser, 2000; 2007; 2013) and precarity (Butler, 2009; 2015) in my research. I have argued that as long as women boxers cannot access participatory parity, and as long as they experience precarity, equality is far from being achieved within the sport.

Also, I argue that women are participating in sport in a context characterised by the emergence of narratives that not only underestimate inequalities but also expect women to be full participants in sport despite the existence of unequal power structures. Moreover, women are expected to participate under androcentric and neoliberal models in which parity of participation is seen as an individual responsibility rather than an outcome resulting from structural, institutional, or organisational power dynamics. The impact of these narratives and models of participation on women's experiences of boxing will be analysed in this thesis.

4 A TOUGH FIGHT. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S BOXING HISTORY

Unless women get more
recognition, we will be fighting just
as a novelty for the rest of our
lives. There will be no future.

Marian Trimiar, 1987

This chapter offers an overview of the history of women in boxing. Its goal is to investigate the resistances, negotiations and challenges that female fighters have faced throughout history. Women's boxing history is relevant as it mirrors the marginal position that patriarchy gives to women in Western societies, while also showing how women fight to subvert this. Moreover, it demonstrates that the fight for equality and social transformation is not a linear process, as when it seems that progress has been achieved, backlashes put this into question; as Woodward (2015: 130) points out: '[c]hange is uneven and has not followed a linear path'. The history of female fighters is characterised by the gains and losses in the fight for recognition and better conditions. Moreover, it is exciting and inspiring because it demonstrates that despite the tough context, the best option is to keep fighting for equality.

Furthermore, Woodward suggests that 'the local boxing experience must be considered by researchers in relation to the wider sporting field of boxing' (2008: 537). In this view, exploring the history of women in boxing is relevant for my ethnographic research because it contributes to observations that, on the one hand, throughout time, women have been prevented from participating in boxing, and on the other,

despite obstacles, they have nevertheless been doing it. Moreover, this chapter shows that the discrimination against women in boxing, which is analysed in the data chapters of my thesis, is neither specific to my fieldwork, nor an isolated problem; rather it is a historical and wider phenomenon that is intertwined with social, cultural and economic issues. Women's boxing mirrors not only the complexity of social phenomena but also the tension created by the participation of women in male-dominated spheres, along with the obstacles and challenges that women have experienced when they have defeated androcentric barriers to making choices about their lives and own bodies. Women's boxing is a recounting of fights in the ring and beyond.

In this chapter, I offer a feminist analysis of primary and secondary sources. The former are sport bodies' regulations, websites, blogs, advertisements, social media accounts, databases, and personal communication via email or WhatsApp with members of the boxing community; all of these sources were accessed online between 2016 and 2019. The secondary sources are online newspaper articles (primarily from the last 25 years), journal articles, essays and books on women's boxing history. The facts narrated, highlight historical and cultural aspects of the UK context. However, elements related to the European and the US context are also mentioned.

This thesis analyses the participation of women in amateur boxing (also called Olympic boxing);¹⁴ however, in this chapter I focus not only on amateur boxing but also on

¹⁴ Amateur boxing follows the International Boxing Association's (AIBA) rules and guidelines (AIBA, 2019) which seek to preserve the health and safety of the competitors. Amateur boxing is sex segregated, and it uses a system of age and weight classification (there are ten weight groups for men's boxing and five for women's). In order to compete, all athletes and team officials must be members of

prizefighting, professional boxing,¹⁵ and boxercise¹⁶ in order to offer a more comprehensive overview of the transformations of women's boxing over time.

4.1 THE FEMALE BRUISERS

Women have participated in organized fights since the eighteenth century. The first records of professional female fighters using their fists to defeat an opponent are traced to the first decades of the 1700s in Great Britain. Boxing literature (Boddy, 2008; Hargreaves, 1997; Smith, 2014; Van Ingen, 2018; Woodward, 2015) reports that in the 1720s and 1730s bare-knuckled female contests were popular, especially in London. Thus, the UK can be considered the cradle of women's boxing in modern times.

The first female fighters were working-class women who fought for a prize using bare-knuckles, feet, and legs. During the bouts, such as the one depicted in the eighteenth-

the AIBA's national federations. In addition, boxers must pass a medical examination to confirm they are 'fit to compete'; women must not be pregnant.

During competitions, the bouts last three rounds of three minutes each. Five judges score the boxers using the AIBA's scoring system to determine the winner of a round; this is usually the one who has more technical and clean punches. A referee is always present in the bouts, ensuring that AIBA's rules are followed.

¹⁵ In prizefighting or professional boxing, the fighters compete for money (unlike amateur fighters). The rules vary from country to country; however, in general terms, professional boxing is sex segregated and the fights go from three to twelve rounds (each of them is three minutes long); there are three judges, and the winner is the one with the most points at the end of a bout. The points are given depending on the following criteria: defence, effective aggression, clean and hard punching, and ring generalship (Boxing914, 2019).

¹⁶ Boxercise's main goal is to help participants keep fit. The sessions, which can be sex segregated or sex integrated, target people of all ages and all fitness levels; they are characterised on the one hand by involving elements of boxing training (i.e. shadow boxing, punching bags, skipping), and on the other by not including bouts or sparring.

century drawing by Collett and Clowes (see Figure 1), the fighters were putting their bodies at serious risk, as the bout was finished only when one of the fighters was not able to fight anymore (Smith, 2014: 5). However, the risk was deemed to be worthwhile when considering the prizemoney and recognition that the winner would gain (Hargreaves, 1997; Woodward, 2015). The most prominent female fighters in the eighteenth century were Elizabeth Wilkinson Stokes¹⁷ and Hannah Hyfield who used the bare-knuckle boxing style of James Figg.¹⁸ Hyfield's fighting name was 'The Newgate Market Basket-Woman' which 'spoke of the rough world of work demanded of 18th century women that not only required inordinate physical strength, but also a fierce independent pluckiness that would have them risk injury or maiming as part of their work-a-day world' (Smith, 2014: 5).¹⁹ Given this account, it is evident that defining the boundaries of gender norms depend on the individuals' social strata.

¹⁷ In 1722, Elizabeth Wilkinson Stokes, known as 'The City Championess', was the first woman to become a boxer (Smith, 2014: 2).

¹⁸ James Figg is considered the first British pugilist champion. He also opened an Amphitheatre (*circa* 1719) where pugilist contests and 'trials of skills' involving weapons took place. Later, in 1743, the first pugilism governing rules, introduced by Jack Brough, are published (Early, 2018: xiv).

¹⁹ Other names of female prizefighters that illustrate this point include: the Famous Boxing Woman of Billingsgate, The Fighting Ass-Driver from Stoke Newington, The Female Boxing Blacksmith, The Market Woman, and The Vendor of Sprats (Woodward, 2015: 33-34).



Figure 1. *The Female Bruisers* by John Collet/Butler Clowes. London, 1770.

Painted by John Collet and engraved in mezzotint by Butler Clowes, the drawing depicts two women opposing each other. The scene takes place in the street, in front of what appears to be a brothel and a butcher's shop. The butcher is offering either salts or a guinea to one of them, while the other, a market woman who is on the floor, helped by a man whose hands seem to be under her back (BritishMuseum, 2019; Murden, 2016). Most of the spectators of the scene are amused, while others are surprised and a few are concerned. The original piece is part of *The British Museum* collection.

Gender norms in the eighteenth century depended on the socio-economic background of the individuals under consideration; this contributed to the acceptance of working-class women as prizefighters, but it did not exclude the impression that they were troubling gender notions. In a 1720s context, boxing was starting to be identified as a 'manly art' (Smith, 2014: 1). However, female fights 'were irresistible within a milieu where gender views, while quite clearly delineated through custom and dress, held a

fascination for the possibilities of what happened when genders were mixed up' (Smith, 2014: 6). Among the working classes, traditional gender divisions were fluid, as women performed activities that involved their physicality, i.e. cart drivers, farmers or blacksmiths (Smith, 2014). Thus, the gender trouble probably had more impact among spectators from the middle classes, who often attended the spectacles, than for the performers themselves or audiences from working-class backgrounds.

At the end of the second decade of the eighteenth century, female fighters had public acceptance, but they were still marginalised. The participation of women in prizefighting during the last years of the 1720s coincided with a time when boxing was growing technically (Smith, 2014: 3-4). Significantly, women were not allowed to train at the most popular boxing academy of that time: the Figg's Academy. This was where many young British gentlemen were learning the noble art of self-defence. Thus, women were recognised as fighters but not as holders of the rights and privileges men had.

During the eighteenth century, a period of war, boxing became a virtue of British manhood. In the 1780s, when England was engaged in a war against the US and also against France, boxing started to be a symbol of English courage, which evoked bravery and fair play (Smith, 2014: 1, 9). Consequently, women's boxing lost the acceptance it had gained in the first decades of the century.

4.2 FIGHTING AGAINST CONSERVATISM

In the late 1780s, as pugilism was evolving as a sport,²⁰ it increased in popularity, especially among the middle and upper classes. However, the acceptance of boxing did not include female boxing. Therefore, female fighters remained in the margins, without access to boxing schools or official training. As Smith (2014: 10) puts it: '[w]ithout any clear sponsorship or system of promotion, female pugilism as a sport remained precarious at best'. Thus, women's boxing lost its boom, and from active participators, women became passive spectators 'marvelling in support of British might' (Smith, 2014: 10).

By the nineteenth century, women's boxing had to fight against conservative discourses. Even though in the beginning of the century female fighters had a 'modicum [of] acceptance' (Smith, 2014: 12), between 1815 and the 1820s they lost legitimacy as a consequence of the medical discourses claiming that contact sports were dangerous to women's health. The public perception was that boxing was not appropriate for women at all. Moreover, during those years, the British evangelical Christian movement and Parliament campaigned against pugilism, proclaiming especially that female boxing was an abomination and unnatural activity. Simultaneously, as pugilism was considered to gather both the rabble and the crowds, it was identified as a threat to the British middle and upper classes, and they refused to continue supporting pugilists, especially women. By 1824, boxing was losing popularity, and this was echoed by the press which made evident the disgust of the

²⁰ In that time, it was considered that boxing had attained such sophistication and technique in its moves that it was considered to be scientific. Into this account, Daniel Mendoza, a Jewish fighter, published *The Art of Boxing* (1787), a book that instructed readers in boxing (Smith, 2014: 10).

middle and upper classes with the sport (Smith, 2014: 11–13). In this climate, by the 1830s not only did women's boxing become invisible, but also women were not even allowed as spectators in boxing matches or sparring exhibitions.

By the mid-nineteenth century, boxing moved its hub from England to the US; nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, there was a resurgence of pugilism in Europe. During the 1880s, both male and female fighters became visible again, especially in vaudeville and burlesque shows in France and Germany and in music halls in Great Britain (Smith, 2014). In these terms, Gems & Pfister (2014) highlight that circuses, fairgrounds and vaudeville theatres had different rules than the rest of the society. In this context, women in vaudeville contested the dominant gender norms and the representation of women as the 'weak sex'. For instance, they included women who were making their income from performances (in the public realm) that involved the display of physical prowess. The glory days of boxing in Europe had passed; however, it survived the rearrangements of the industrial era, and female pugilists remained active.

At the end of the nineteenth century, women's boxing experienced an important institutional backlash with its prohibition. This occurred in many states in the US and in different countries in Europe. In the case of Great Britain, it was banned in 1880 (Woodward, 2010).²¹ This reform attempted to prevent women from participating in boxing; however, this did not stop them from fighting.

²¹ Woodward (2015) points out that this took place soon after the publication of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules (1867). These are considered the 'launch of modern boxing' (Early, 2018: xvii) and they applied to both amateur and professional fighters. They ruled for the use of gloves to protect the boxer's hands, eliminated wrestling, established a set of rounds for a fight with a duration of three minutes each, designated judges and adopted a point system to designate the winner of the fight. As a

In the early years of the twentieth century, women had an active presence in the boxing arena' nevertheless, this did not accord them full acceptance. Women were participating, '[w]hether as spectators, including those female journalists who reported on the fights, or as practitioners –on stage, in the gym, or in the ring' (Smith, 2014: 49).²² This occurred in a context where boxing was a good business and female presence was used by the promoters to prove that boxing was a respectable sport (Smith, 2014: 61). By 1904, women's boxing was displayed in the US in an attempt to have it included in the modern Olympic Games; however, the Olympic committee rejected it.²³ Thus, though women's boxing had gained legitimisation, it was still perceived as marginal and subordinated to male structures.

In countries like Great Britain, the World War I era had an important impact on women's lives, including those of female boxers. As men were in the frontlines, there was a wider allowance for women to undertake 'masculine activities' such as boxing. Though female boxing was still taboo, women were fighting in carnival sideshows, on the vaudeville stage and in saloons of the middle classes (Smith, 2014: 65). Moreover, in that time, boxing started to be perceived by women as a way to give them a 'sense of themselves and their own possibilities – especially when equating boxing with self-defense' (Smith, 2014: 71). As Van Ingen (2018: 138) puts it, '[b]oxing has always reflected broader historical and cultural narratives'. The first World War posed significant economic and social challenges for everyone, including women; these

consequence of the application of these rules, bare-knuckle fights were virtually eliminated by the end of the nineteenth century (Early, 2018: xvii).

²² An example of a female journalist is Paris-based Djuna Barnes, who, during the 1910s and 1920s, wrote about boxing, highlighting the sexual attraction of male boxers to women (Smith, 2014: 70–71).

²³ Conversely, men's boxing was accepted in the Olympic programme.

challenges were accompanied by shifts in sociocultural norms and expectations that opened up possibilities for women's participation in sport.

During the years between the World Wars, especially in England, Germany, and the US, women participated more consistently in boxing. Especially in the latter, 'women did make important inroads as spectators, managers, and promoters in the sport' (Smith, 2014: 83). Nevertheless, at the end of World War II the outlook for female pugilists changed negatively (Smith, 2014: 79–83). In that period, the possibilities for women to become boxers were hindered as a consequence of the discomfort their presence provoked in the boxing scene, which, after all, had remained a male domain.

4.3 THE MIGHTY ATOM

After World War II, women faced great obstacles to gaining recognition and making a living as professional boxers. However, there were still female boxers who successfully subverted the masculine structures of boxing. Among them is Yorkshire-born Barbara Buttrick, known as 'The Mighty Atom of the Ring'. Since the beginning of her boxing career in the late 1940s, she has been actively advocating for women's right to participate in boxing. Smith (2014: 86) describes Buttrick as 'a post-war woman unafraid of taking the hard road and equally unapologetic about the path she chose to get there'. Born in 1930 and raised in Cottingham,²⁴ a village in the north of the city of Hull, Barbara became a pioneer of professional female boxing, a worldwide champion, and an icon of women's boxing.

²⁴ According to Smith, Buttrick's family house was in 18 Linden Avenue, Cottingham, UK (2014: 87).



Figure 2. Barbara Buttrick, me and the girls. Hull, September 14th, 2017.

I was fortunate to be able to meet and talk to Barbara Buttrick during 2017 when she visited Hull from the US during Hull's tenure as UK City of Culture. I am very proud of the photograph we had taken together.

Now in her late 90s, Barbara Buttrick has inspired many female boxers in the UK. Simultaneously, she was inspired by another English female pugilist: Polly Fairclough. Known for her ferocity in fights at fairgrounds between the 1920s and the 1940s (Smith, 2014: 54), Fairclough sold her story to the newspapers at the end of her life, amidst financial instability. Buttrick learned of Fairclough when her mother gave her some pages of the *Sunday Despatch* newspaper to clean her muddy boots after participating in a football match (Sheffield, 2019). Through them, Barbara learned about Polly's prowess, motivating her to envisage herself as a boxer (Smith, 2014: 93). Reading Polly's story in the newspaper was the fate that changed Buttrick's life and probably women's boxing history.

Since the beginning, Barbara demonstrated that women have all the abilities and determination needed to excel as athletes. When she was 18 years old, she moved to London to pursue her boxing career. During the day, she worked as a typist at the YMCA, and in the evenings, she trained at the Mayfair Gym, impressing everybody with her talent. She was always ready to fight and constantly beat women fighters from all over the world. Even female boxers in Australia knew about the prowess of the Yorkshire fighter who was 'four feet, eleven inches tall and [...] under one hundred pounds' (Jennings, 2016). Despite Barbara's magnificence, it was not easy for her to get support because women were not perceived as suitable for boxing during the 1950s. Boxing was under men's control, affecting her negatively. For instance, the Variety Artists' Federation and the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC) made it almost impossible for Barbara to participate in boxing shows, arguing that women's boxing degraded the audience, womanhood, and boxing. Thus, despite the audiences who wanted to see bouts, the BBBC threatened owners of boxing venues with closure if she or any other woman happened to box in them. The boxing establishment was not prepared for the revolution she represented, and her career was constantly hindered by the English boxing authorities of the time.

Barbara realised that being a professional fighter was almost impossible for a woman in the UK. Thus, she decided to go to the fair – as Polly had done years earlier – to continue boxing. She travelled across Great Britain (see Figure 3) and France, gaining popularity, impressing the crowd and training every day. Barbara was taking women's boxing beyond frontiers in all senses.



Figure 3. 'Barbara Buttrick on boxing booth at the Goose Fair'. Nottingham, c.1950. Source: Sheffield (2019).

Barbara's first appearance on the fairground was in 1949 at Epsom, UK. In 1950, when she was in her twenties, she travelled with Professor Boscoe's Boxing and Wrestling Show in Yorkshire. She also went to the West of England where she issued a challenge to any girl in the crowd. Once in the United States, before becoming a professional boxer, she joined the Athletic Show and the carnival travelling throughout North America. On the fairgrounds of England, France and America she gave around 1,000 exhibitions, always winning the prize money (Sheffield, 2019).

The University of Sheffield owns photographs, handbills and programmes regarding Buttrick's career, which were donated by the boxer herself. The collection is part of the National Fairground and Circus Archive.

In 1953, Buttrick left the UK and went to the US with the aim of becoming a professional boxer. In an era of boxers such as Mohammed Ali, she was recognised

as a great fighter (Smith, 2014). She competed constantly and had great achievements. In 1954, she fought in the first women's fight broadcast on public television in the US and on radio in Canada; in 1957, she became the Women's World Boxing Champion; and in 1960, she became the first female boxer in the International Boxing and Wrestling Hall of Fame (Hargreaves, 1997: 36–37). Throughout her career, she had 1,000 exhibition matches and 32 professional fights, losing only once.²⁵ She retired in 1960, but she continues to advocate for women boxers. Nowadays, Buttrick resides in Florida and presides over the Women's International Boxing Federation, which is, globally, one of the most recognised boxing organizations (Smith, 2014: 19). Buttrick triumphed despite the hostilities and obstacles that a sexist society and a male-dominated sport imposed on her; now, she deserves recognition for her achievements in fighting as a boxer and for her right to be a boxer.²⁶

4.4 SEARCH FOR BETTER CONDITIONS

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, the US has been the hub for female boxers, leaving the UK aside. In America, women's boxing was accepted; consequently, during the 1970s, several American states lifted the ban on women's boxing, permitted new licences, and approved bouts of more than four rounds (Smith, 2014; Woodward, 2010). However, even in this context, women were marginalised and constantly fighting to be considered professional boxers or to take part in amateur

²⁵ This was against Joann Hagen in 1954. About this, Barbara declared: 'she was five foot seven, and outweighed me by 30 pounds. We went eight rounds in Canada. But I wasn't particularly worried about her punching power or anything like that' (Tsjeng, 2017).

²⁶ Recognising Barbara's legacy, in 2012, the exhibition 'Girls in the Ring' at the Cultural Olympiad, held in Hull, included pictures of her (Woodward, 2015: 141), and in 2017, Buttrick was part of the programme for the Women of the World festival during the year that Hull was the UK City of Culture in 2017.

competitions.²⁷ Women were resisting discrimination actively, and an illustration of this is the hunger strike Marian Trimiari staged for a month in 1987, advocating for better conditions, pay, and recognition for female boxers. While holding the strike she declared:

It's my heart, it's my love [...] Unless women get more recognition, we will be fighting just as a novelty for the rest of our lives. There will be no future. (The Houston Chronicle News Services, in WNYCNews, 2012)

Among the obstacles, in last three decades of the twentieth century there were also relevant milestones that contributed to consolidating women's boxing. For instance, in 1973, Cape Coral's Carol Polis was appointed as the first female judge in pro boxing (Longa, 2018). In 1977, Eva Shain became the first woman to judge a heavyweight professional fight.²⁸ In 1988, Sweden lifted the ban on women's amateur boxing (WNYCNews, 2012), which had a 'cascading effect on the sport' (Van Ingen, 2018: 140), as it made other countries lift theirs. In 1994, the AIBA²⁹ lifted the ban on

²⁷ Smith points out that the headline of an article in the *Sacramento Bee* published in California in 1985, summed up accurately the state of women's boxing: 'Women Fight Discrimination in Battle for Bouts' (Smith, 2014: 186).

²⁸ She was one of the three judges assigned to the Muhammad Ali–Earnie Shavers bout at Madison Square Garden in 1977 (Goldstein, 1999).

²⁹ AIBA is boxing's worldwide governing body (AIBA, 2019). With 203 national federations and five confederations. In the UK, England Boxing is the national governing body for Olympic boxing. 'It is responsible for the governance, development and administration of boxing in clubs and competition. It also represents England as a member of the AIBA and the European Boxing Council [...]. England Boxing represents more than 19000 members across over 900 affiliated clubs, and is committed to maximising the potential of the sport' (EnglandBoxing, 2019a). Boxing clubs in the UK, which are self-sustained and reliant on volunteers (i.e. coaches, treasurers, cleaning staff, etc.) to reduce costs, can apply for funding to England Boxing, which is in turn sponsored by Sport England. The latter is a UK executive non-departmental public body that 'helps people and communities across the country get a sporting habit for life. It also protects existing sports provision' (GOV.UK, 2019). Thus, when applying,

women's boxing. Echoing this decision, in the same year, the ban on women's boxing was also lifted in the UK, opening the doors for the first amateur contests (Dixon, 2010). In 1996, in the US 'women's professional boxing was formally accepted' (Woodward, 2010). Important reforms were made in that time; however, there was still a long way to go in the efforts to achieve full recognition for female fighters.

In the US, during the 1990s, female boxing was growing as a big business, especially under the guidance of promoters such as Don King. First-class female boxers from all over the world were fighting in the US, attracting the attention of the audience. Female boxers were on the canvas; however, the numbers were still not big enough to match female boxers appropriately with one another for the fights (Bunce, 2014). In addition, especially in professional boxing, the regulations were not sufficient, and for the sake of pecuniary gain, it was usual to see mismatches of boxers with a lot of experience fighting novices (Smith, 2014). The mismatching of female boxers, especially in terms of experience, not only put women at physical risk but also called the legitimacy of their fights into question.

By the end of the twentieth century, women boxers gained attention due to their abilities and as an effect of media strategies. In the US, daughters of boxing legends, talented athletes, and good-looking boxers were part of the scene. Such was the case for Laila Ali, J'Marie Moore, and Melissa Del Valle 'Salamone'. At that time, films about women in boxing were also released.³⁰ There was a new boom in women's boxing;

clubs must take into account Sport's England's priorities, i.e. to get more people to be more active, and to sustain participation in sport (EnglandBoxing, n.d.).

³⁰ For instance, *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Honey Girl* (2000). Years later *Girl Fight* (2011) and *Mary Kom* (2014) were released.

nevertheless, female fighters were not being paid as well as male fighters, and their fights were not even broadcast on TV. Thus, despite the popularity achieved during the last decades of the twentieth century, female pugilists were still participating under precarious conditions.

The reforms that took place during the nineties made it feasible for women to participate in boxing. However, gender discrimination hindered equal opportunities. An illustrative case is that of the English boxer Jane 'The Fleetwood Assassin' Couch, who fought against the BBBC, the same body that had prevented Buttrick from boxing in the 1950s (Smith, 2014: 235). The BBBC denied Jane her boxing license, arguing that the emotional instability caused by premenstrual tension might negatively affect female fighters' performance. Jane, with the support of Britain's Equal Opportunities Commission, denounced to the British Industrial Board that she was being discriminated against by the BBBC (Bennett, 1998). Couch won the legal battle, got her boxing licence, and got her first bout in 1998, becoming the first woman in the UK to win a BBBC-sanctioned contest (see Figure 4). Jane had to defeat boxing's sexist rules in the Court before she could fight in the ring, making evident the 'circuitous narrative of institutional resistance and negotiation' (Woodward, 2015: 144) that women's boxing creates.



Figure 4. 'WIBF Welterweight Champion Jane Couch the 'Fleetwood Assassin' at Caesars'. London, November 1998. Credit: John Gichigi /Allsport. Getty Images Europe.

Jane was born in Lancashire in 1968 and started to fight at the age of 26. Inspired by a TV documentary about women's boxing, she decided to leave street fights and drug abuse to become an athlete. Starting with Muay Thai and kickboxing, she made her first appearance in the boxing world in 1996 in a fight that had a TV audience of 3.5 million. After her successful legal battle against the BBC for gender discrimination, in November 1998, she opposed Simona Lukic at Caesar's Palace in Streatham, in London. The fight was the first ever women's professional contest under the jurisdiction of the BBC since its formation in 1929. In 1999, she successfully defended her WIBF welterweight title in a fight that was the first female title bout in the UK to be sanctioned by the BBC. In December 2008, Jane announced her retirement as a fighter. Nowadays she works as a promoter and manager (Williams, 2018).

Jane Couch's first fight was jeopardized by a mismatch: Couch fought against the less experienced Simona Lukic. Barbara Buttrick 'expressed her dismay at the obvious mismatch – one that in her mind would only serve to leave the sport open to more criticism and controversy' (Smith, 2014: 235). Jane Couch had won the legal battle

against discrimination; however, women's boxing was still rejected and considered gender deviant. Key actors in the British boxing scene, such as promoter Frank Maloney, described Jane's first fight as a 'freak show' (Bennett, 1998).³¹ Women boxers troubled gendered representations, and Maloney vocally criticised female boxers. Nevertheless, Maloney also challenged gendered representations in boxing, becoming the first transgender boxing manager in the UK³² (Stadlen, 2015). Heterosexuality and hyper masculinity dominate in boxing;³³ however, they are constantly contested, demonstrating the fluidity of gender in boxing and beyond.

4.5 TRIUMPH AND QUEERNESS

The first years of the twenty-first century brought great transformations for women's boxing. The most remarkable milestone came in the London 2012 Olympic Games, when women's amateur boxing was included for the first time in the modern Olympic Games' 116-year history (Lindner, 2012). This was the result of the decision the International Olympic Committee (IOC) made in 2009 (Smith, 2014). By then, national

³¹ Williams (2018) reports that, making reference to Jane's fight, Maloney declared to the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper: 'In my opinion all officials should have boycotted it, and I take my hat off to those officials at the Boxing Board of Control who have declined to work the show'. He also told the BBC: 'The only reason for women to be in the ring is as ring card girls'. However, Maloney's rampant sexism did not stop Jane fighting and getting stronger.

³² Maloney came out as Kellie in the Summer of 2014 (Stadlen, 2015).

³³ Making reference to the masculine structure of boxing, Kellie Maloney declared in 2015 to the press: 'They say they've changed but the boxing world doesn't change, it's a club of old boys' (Stadlen, 2015). Since she came out, she has been outspoken about the male construction of the sporting world and the difficulties that this poses for transgender people (Conner, 2015). However, Maloney's position in relation to the discrimination against female boxers is not clear.

squads had started preparations for the Games. In 2009, in the UK, GB Boxing³⁴ held the first women's assessment camp (GBBoxing, 2019b).³⁵ And in 2010, it selected the first ever female GB Boxing squad, which included the following boxers: Nicola Adams, Lucy O'Connor, Nina Smith, Natasha Jonas, Amanda Coulson, Ruth Raper, and Savannah Marshall (GBBoxing, 2019b). From Spring 2010, they trained at the GB Boxing's headquarters at the English Institute of Sport in Sheffield alongside the male squad (GBBoxing, 2019b). Exciting moments were coming for the British squad.

Triumph, charisma and queerness came together with the first Olympic gold in women's boxing: Nicola Adams, a black, working-class, bisexual female boxer got the first medal for female boxing at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Adams was also 'the first women [sic] in history to box for Great Britain at an Olympic Games' (GBBoxing, 2019b). In the following Olympic Games, at Rio 2016 (see Figure 5), she won gold again, becoming 'the first British boxer to retain an Olympic title for 92 years by winning gold' (BBC, 2016). Adams became a role model not only for athletes but also for the LGBT+ community when she made public her bisexuality. In this vein, she declared to the press: 'I [...] receive lots of messages from people because of my sexuality. It's nice to think that just because I'm open about being bisexual, other girls feel they can be open about who they are too' (Adams in BBC, 2015). Woodward (2015: 144) notes that Adams' biography is characterised by the intersection of

³⁴ GB Boxing, focused on elite athletes, manages 'the World Class Performance Programme for boxing and prepare[s] and train[s] the boxers that compete for Great Britain at the Olympic Games'. GB Boxing's primary source of funding is UK Sport, which is made-up of contributions from the National Lottery and the Exchequer (GBBoxing, 2019a).

³⁵ Twenty-three women boxers nominated by the national governing bodies (NGBs) of England, Scotland, and Wales attended the event (GBBoxing, 2019b)

inequalities which resulted in 'marginalization through her class position and sexuality and as a black woman'. Thus, she adds 'Adams's gold medal was the culmination of a long journey, for women's boxing as well as for the athlete herself' (Woodward, 2015: 144).



Figure 5. 'Adams celebrates winning the flyweight gold medal at the Rio Olympics'. Rio de Janeiro, 2016. Credit: Reuters.

Nicola Adams's friendly personality, along with her powerful and appealing appearance, have helped the boxer to build her 'profile and celebrity status, which is important for her commercial viability as an athlete' (Dashper, 2018: 1747). Though she transgresses traditional gender and sexuality standards with her non-feminine look and open bisexuality, Adams' athletic excellence and historical sportive successes, along with her status as a celebrity and media friendly persona, have been key aspects in the positive acceptance by the press and the audience of the Yorkshire-born world champion.

Adams has overcome social and economic constraints in becoming a double British Olympic boxing champion, a successful pro boxer in the US scene, and a role model worldwide. Women, and especially black women, have been erased from the history

of boxing (Van Ingen, 2018); thus, the attention that Nicola Adams has gained, even from non-sport actors (see Figure 6), through her achievements subverts the history of racism and sexism that black female boxers have experienced. Simultaneously, her open bisexuality, non-feminine look and ethnic background challenge traditional gender, sexual, and ethnic representations in boxing.



Figure 6. 'Nicola Adams OBE, boxing champion'. Source: BarbieMattel, 2019.

In the context of International Women's Day 2018, toy manufacturer Mattel, Inc. unveiled a Barbie doll in the likeness of Nicola Adams.

The launch of Barbie Nicola, a black, bisexual, working-class, English Olympic medallist and professional boxer based in the USA, must not be read as a vindication of the alterity Adams represents. Contrarily, the doll in her likeness seems like a reconfiguration of Mattel's products in a context in which the company has been strongly criticised for the traditional Barbie doll, as a classist, racist, heterosexual and conservative representation of what is supposed to be an empowered and successful American woman (Spigel, 2001 in Messner, 2002: 16-17). In this context, in order to increase its market and ensure financial benefits, the company seems to adopt multicultural and feminist values without transforming the essence of the product: Barbie Adams is still ultra-skinny, beautiful, sexy,

and glamorous, as Barbie has always been. It may well be the case that Mattel does not oppose female boxing, multiculturalism, LGBT+, and black people's rights, but their main focus is their own financial gain. Thus, Mattel creates products consistent with these progressive trends through key figures such as Nicola Adams.

Adams is not the only one challenging gender and sexuality in boxing; other figures who are also doing that include the black American boxer Patricio Manuel, who became the first transgender male to compete in a professional boxing match in the US in 2018. Manuel's career began in women's amateur boxing, qualifying for the US Olympic squad for the 2012 Olympics but prevented from participating by an injury. Later, as a consequence of his decision to transition in 2013, his long-time gym and coach rejected him. Eventually, he found a new coach, but obstacles did not fade: many opponents refuse to fight against him after learning he is trans (Levin, 2018). Despite obstacles, he got his license to fight as an amateur. The decision by USA Boxing to give him the licence was influenced by the IOC's rule prior to the 2016 Olympic Games that mandates that 'female-to-male transgender athletes should be allowed to compete "without restriction"' (Bohn, 2018).³⁶ This mandate motivated Patricio to get his pro-license. His debut was in 2018 in a fight sanctioned by the California State Athletic Commission, known for its progressive approach (Bohn, 2018). Manuel won the fight, but the rampant sexism of the audience provoked a mixed

³⁶ According to the Association of Boxing Commission (2012), transgender athletes must observe the following policies to compete: 'Transsexual female individuals must comply with the IOC. Transsexual male individuals must provide legal evidence of their gender and be prescribed CHT. Transgender female individuals taking a testosterone suppressant must compete as a male individual until 2 years of medical treatment has been prescribed. Transgender male individuals must be being prescribed CHT' (Association of Boxing Commission, 2012 in Jones et al, 2017: 708).

reaction to his triumph. As a response to the boos of the crowd, he declared to the press: 'They don't know how much I love this sport, how happy I was in that moment. I refuse to give them power over me by feeling even angry toward it' (Bohn, 2018). Maybe Manuel's biggest opponent throughout his career has not been a boxer but the sexism and transphobia of some members of the boxing community.

4.6 UK INITIATIVES

Boxing is characterised by its patriarchal culture; however, it has not remained unchanged, and positive initiatives promoting the participation of women and the development of female boxers have taken place at the local and national levels. For instance, in the UK amateur boxing context, two national female boxing training camps were held in 2009 and 2010.³⁷ They were the first of their kind (see Figure 7) and attracted around fifty participants each (Porter, 2010). Another significant initiative in England focuses on developing skills among coaches to train female boxers. An illustrative case is the seminar 'Coaching Female Athletes in Boxing' coordinated by coaches from the East Midlands (EnglandBoxing, 2019b). The seminar, designed by a coach of his own accord, had among its goals raising awareness of the obstacles female boxers experience in their careers due to gender bias and eliminating gender stereotypes in coaching. A few years after the seminar was held, England Boxing incorporated sessions on coaching female boxers into its official training program for coaches. In boxing, most of the coaches are men, thus the initiatives targeting coaches has great importance for bringing about a radical transformation. For in boxing – and

³⁷ Both hosted by the Bradford Police & College Boxing Academy.

elsewhere – men must be targeted by the gender equality initiatives and not only women, as is usually the case.



Figure 7. 'First Amateur Boxing Association of England's Female Box Camp'. Bradford. 2009. Credit: Naz Bhardwaj in Porter (2009).

Initiatives promoting boxing skills among female boxers have been held by local gyms in the UK since the early twenty-first century. Being recognised as good practice, they have been recreated by boxing bodies with the support of key actors, such as Sport England.

A milestone for women's boxing in England was achieved in 2018 with the first England Boxing Women's Winter Boxing Cup (see Figures 8 and 9); its goal was 'to create more competitive opportunities in women's boxing' (EnglandBoxing, 2018). This was an important event and the first of this kind hosted by England Boxing and Sport England. However, at the local level, boxing gyms throughout the country have also been hosting female-only events for many years. These initiatives not only create more opportunities for women in boxing but also contribute to counteracting the discrimination women have experienced over time.



Figure 8. Referee Hilary Lissenden and the Winners. England Boxing Women's Winter Box Cup. Manchester, 2018. Credit: Ale Benitez.

Figure 9. Women's Winter Box Cup. 2018. Source: EnglandBoxing (2018).

England Boxing Women's Winter Box Cup gathered not only female boxers but also female referees and officials.

4.7 UNDER WESTERN EYES

With the boost in women's boxing in recent years and the widespread discourses of cultural diversity in Western societies, female boxers with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds have gained visibility. In these terms, the 'explosion of the promotion of the politics of diversity as part of neoliberal governance which in recent years has increasingly included sport' (Woodward, 2015: 136) may have been affecting gender and ethnic politics in boxing. Consequently, female Muslim amateur boxers (see Figures 8–11) have caught the Western public eye with their achievements. Among them is Somali-born Ramla Ali, who came to the UK as a refugee. She started

competing despite requests from her family to stop boxing (Edwards, 2018). Now, Ali has become the first British female Muslim champion (Barton, 2018) and the first Somali boxer competing at the AIBA World Boxing Championships in 2018 (AIBA, 2018b). Another figure is Amaiya Zafar, an American Muslim amateur boxer who at the age of sixteen, in her first tournament, was prohibited from competing for contravening the official uniform: she was wearing long sleeves, leggings and hijab in compliance with the standards of her religion. However, she did not give up. She successfully lobbied against USA Boxing, which in 2017 adopted a new religious exemption rule and allowed Zafar to compete. She is now the first American athlete to wear a hijab in a boxing match (Boren, 2017). Another talented Muslim boxer who has advocated for Muslim athletes to wear the headscarf is Zeina Nassar, a German boxer and ambassador of the Nike-sponsored pro hijab movement within sport (Tardiff, 2019). In what seems to be a global trend of young Muslim amateur female boxers, more and more of them are joining boxing gyms with the aspiration to compete. These include Safiyyah Syeed, an eighteen year-old boxer from the UK, who joined a boxing club as part of her recovery from bulimia and anorexia (Kellaway, 2019). Her dream now is to participate at the Olympics. Zafar, Nassar, Syeed and many other Muslims are now permitted to compete wearing the hijab or headscarf, as in 2019, the AIBA allowed wearing hijabs and full body form fitting uniforms if required for religious reasons. This change makes evident both that boxing adapts to gender and ethnic differences and that “[b]oxing is also part of and a motor for global social transformations” (Woodward, 2015: 10).



Figure 10. Ramla Ali, Muslim Somali boxer based in the UK. Source: AIBA (2018b).



Figure 11. Amaiya Zafar, Muslim American boxer. Source: Zafar (ca. 2018).



Figure 12. Zein Nassar, Muslim German boxer. Source: Nassar (2019).



Figure 13. Safiyyah Syeed, Muslim British boxer. Source: Alex Cousins/SWNS in Bakar (2019).

The boom of female Muslim amateur boxers has been accompanied by important media coverage, which gives them visibility in the public sphere. Newspapers (i.e. Figure 11), websites (i.e. figures 8 and 9) and social media channels (i.e. Figure 10) portray them in strong, athletic, and confident stances. With these boxing figures, it seems that the hegemony of the representation of the boxer as a huge black male is coming to an end.

4.8 AIBA'S PEAKS AND TROUGHS

Amateur female boxing has been consolidating in recent years, and the AIBA has played a key role in these advances. In this context, the Association³⁸ passed a resolution in 1993 to allow women's boxing; in the same year, the first AIBA female

³⁸ The AIBA held its first Congress in London in 1946 (AIBA, 2019).

bouts were held.³⁹ In 1994, the AIBA lifted the ban on women's boxing and in 1999 approved the first European Cup for Women (GBBoxing, 2019b). In 2001, the AIBA held the first Women's World Amateur Boxing Championship in the US.⁴⁰ In 2005, the AIBA executive committee proposed that the IOC include women's boxing at the Olympic Games; this was not successful (Smith, 2014).⁴¹ In 2007, the AIBA established a 'women's commission, the announcement of a new junior female boxing competition series, and closer alignment of the rules governing men's and women's boxing' (Smith, 2014: 253), setting precedents for the IOC's 2009 decision to include women's boxing in the Olympic Games (Woodward, 2015: 142). In 2018, as a consequence of the pressure from the IOC to achieve greater gender equality in boxing (Etchells, 2018), the AIBA developed a programme for increasing the number of women in the ring and on the Executive Board (AIBA, 2018a). In the same year, it held its first Gender Equality Forum to create innovative approaches to promote equal opportunities for girls and women in boxing (EUBC, 2018). The AIBA has taken important steps to improve the situation of women in boxing; however, not all its endeavours have involved radical reform of the sexist structures of boxing.

The participation of women in boxing still faces resistance. As Woodward puts it, while making reference to the reconfiguration of boxing as a democratic and egalitarian

³⁹ According to Smith (2014), they had a key role opening the doors to female boxing in the 2012 Olympic Games because women were already participating in amateur boxing in international events sponsored by the association.

⁴⁰ The UK was not represented because, according to the selectors, there were no female fighters ready to compete (Bunce, 2014). This may have been an expression not only of the lack of a pool of female boxers for competitions, but also an effect of the actions of boxing authorities during previous decades, which had been focused on limiting, rather than encouraging, female participation in the sport.

⁴¹ 'In 2005, the IOC board opposed women's boxing on the grounds that there was insufficient strength in depth around the world to ensure equitable contests in the Olympic ring' (Kelso, 2009).

sport, '[c]hange is uneven and has not followed a linear path' (2015: 130). Illustrative of this is that once it was revealed that women's boxing was part of the programme for the Olympic Games, in 2010, the AIBA made a disturbing announcement about women's uniforms: female boxers were supposed to compete in skirts (see Figure 14).⁴² The resolution about the skirt on the one hand, was evaluated and approved by the AIBA's Women's Commission (Smith, 2014: 255) and defended in the press by the president of the association who declared that the skirt was important to distinguish 'the difference between the men and the women' (BBC, 2012). While on the other, it faced criticism from the boxers, the audience, and the press worldwide. Irish world champion Katie Taylor called the skirt a 'disgrace' (BBC, 2012) and declared to the press: 'I don't even wear mini-skirts on a night out, so I definitely won't be wearing mini-skirts in the ring' (BBC, 2012). In 2011, Elizabeth Plank, journalist and boxer, launched a petition through Change.org to reverse the AIBA's decision, arguing that the use of the skirt was sexist and misogynist and that it undermined female boxers (Plank, 2011). The petition collected more than 55,000 signatures within two months (Van Ingen, 2018: 137-138; Wikipedia, 2019). However, it was not until March 2012 that the AIBA ruled that wearing the skirt was optional during its events. British champion Natasha Jonas declared: '[t]he only people who would want to see women in skirts are men' (Creighton, 2011). Jonas' statement highlights how the participation of women in boxing has been shaped by masculine structures; however, this has been always contested.

⁴² A theoretical discussion on this topic is offered in Chapter 2.



Figure 14. 'Polish boxers wore skirts at the recent European Championships', 2011. Source: BBC (2012).

In September 2010, a year after women's boxing had first become part of the Olympic Games, the AIBA encouraged female pugilists to wear a skirt as part of their uniform at international events. The 'invitation' to wear skirts was strongly criticised; consequently, it was not implemented as an official rule. Nevertheless, a couple of countries (i.e. Poland and Romania) made their athletes wear the skirts for fear of retaliatory action. It not was until March 2012 that the AIBA confirmed that it was not mandatory to wear skirts (Paradis, 2015).

4.9 FRONTLINE BODIES

Sexist initiatives in amateur boxing have raised public attention; however, there have been issues that have not received as much attention by the media, but still have had negative consequences for the boxers. The debut of women's boxing in the 2012 Olympics was a key moment in the history of the sport; however, this did not include gender parity (Smith, 2014: 137). An illustrative case is the weight groups in which women could participate during the Olympic Games. Whereas, in 2012 London and 2016 Rio Olympic Games, there were ten weight categories in male boxing, there were

only three for women (TelegraphSport, 2016). Having just a few weight categories for female boxers means that ‘with the exception of women who normally contested in one of the three weight categories (flyweight, lightweight, and middleweight) all others [...] need to gain or lose a substantial amount of weight (and in some cases muscle mass) in order to compete’ (Smith, 2014: 254). Lucy O’Connor, who retired due to ill health from the GB boxing squad for the 2012 Games (Poseidon, n/a), highlights the extreme attempts female boxers undertake to maintain their weight in a category unnatural to their body for a long period of time and the negative impact these have on the physical and mental health of female boxers. She also emphasises that another negative consequence of having only three Olympic weight categories for women is that many talented female fighters in a weight not close to them are not considered for the squads. Consequently, national Olympic teams leave behind many female boxers who are not in the Olympic weights, concentrating all their resources on just a few fighters. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics has been postponed for one year due to the coronavirus pandemic (McCurry & Ingle, 2020); however the inclusion of boxing in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics was already confirmed.⁴³ For 2020, Olympic boxing was supposed to feature two more weight categories for female boxers than the existing ones (thus, women will compete across five weight classes), and the men’s categories were reduced to eight (Tokyo, ca. 2018). Moreover, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics was supposed to feature ‘186 men and 100 women (compared to 250 men and 36 women in Rio)’ (Binner, 2019). Despite this change, O’Connor suggests that in Tokyo, ‘Great

⁴³ Olympic boxing at the 2020 Tokyo Games was under threat of expulsion as a result of the concerns of the IOC over the AIBA’s governance, finance, and sporting integrity problems – see Putz (2019). In order to overcome the problems and especially to deliver the sport at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the Olympic Boxing Task Force was created (Binner, 2019).

Britain boxing will most certainly be behind the curve having stifled the development of the majority of female boxing in this country' (2016: n.p.). Being part of the programme for the Olympic Games has been a great achievement for female boxers. Nevertheless, this has not removed the obstacles related to the gendered configuration of the sport nor eradicated the gendered power structures that dominate boxing.

The boxers' bodies are the sites in which gendered power structures are materialized (Woodward, 2015: 108). Illustrative of this is the AIBA's ban on headguards among elite male competitors, based on studies reporting that concussions are more likely when wearing them.⁴⁴ Arguing the lack of evidence on the effect of headguards on female boxers, as the studies only considered men in their samples, the Association still obliges female competitors to wear them. Consequently, female fighters may be at risk of concussion. Thus, if boxing wants to be accessible to all and embrace equality, it must stop putting female boxers' bodies at risk as a consequence of sexist rules based on gender essentialism.

4.10 NEW AUDIENCES, OLD STEREOTYPES

Nowadays, female boxers still face obstacles and precarious conditions; nevertheless, this has not stopped women from participating. The current participation of women in boxing may have an impact of the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympic Games, as it introduced boxing to new audiences and showcased the female boxers' talent (Huzair, 2014). Consequently, many women started to join boxing gyms, either hoping

⁴⁴ This ban came into action in 2013.

to be part of the Olympic team, or just to gain fitness from the recreational style of boxing: boxercise (Smith, 2014). Therefore, in countries like the UK, boxing is now a feasible option for women wishing to engage in physical activity.

The women's boxing Olympic legacy has developed in a context where initiatives focused on engaging women in sport have been launched, boosting boxing's visibility. For instance, in the UK, in 2014, Sport England launched the nation-wide media campaign 'This Girl Can' with the goal to engage women in sport to be physically active. Based on evidence that suggests that building confidence in women is a means to increasing their participation in sport, the campaign highlights that 'regardless of size, ability or experience' (SportEngland, 2015) any woman can practice sport and be active. 'This Girl Can' seeks to challenge models of orthodox femininity and portrays women in different sports, including boxing. However, it still reproduces gender stereotypes, communicating that women are active but above all else, feminine (see Figure 15).

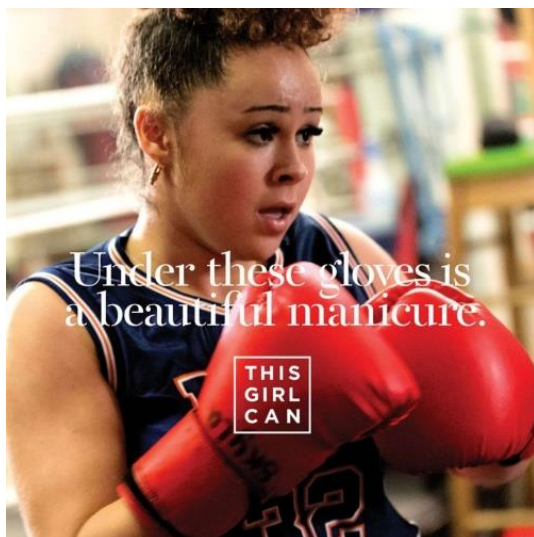


Figure 15. This Girl Can banner. Source: TheDots (2019).

The This Girl Can uses very stereotypical representations of women. However, it portrays positively the diversity of women in the UK, and it also acknowledges the relevance of showcasing ordinary women doing sport. In this vein, women from different ethnic backgrounds, ages, and body shapes are represented in it.

Boxing's current popularity among women relies not only on the visibility it has gained with the 2012 Olympics and other campaigns, but also on its potential to develop a fit body, which is culturally considered an ideal in Western and capitalist societies. In this context, boxercise, a training based on boxing used to keep fit and in which body punches on the head are not allowed, has gained great popularity.⁴⁵ Illustrative cases of the widespread use of boxercise include female public figures (see the images below of the top model, Adriana Lima, left, and UK singer, Ellie Goulding, right) showcased during their boxercise sessions, demonstrating boxing's fitness efficacy. It is becoming evident how body, gender, and neoliberal politics intersect in sport, and the resulting visual materials are images in which boxing appears as a commodity, the consumption of which produces hyperfemininity and sex appeal through a lean and strong body.

⁴⁵ In my thesis, references to mixed conditioning sessions or female-only sessions are to boxercise trainings.



Figure 16. 'Victoria's Secret – Train Like An Angel with Adriana Lima'. New York City, 2016. Credit: Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for Victoria's Secret.



Figure 17. Ellie Goulding. 2017. Source: Instagram user elliegoulding in Mwanza (2017).

The image above of Adriana Lima is highly sexualised and eroticised. In the case of Goulding's photo, her attractiveness and fitness level are given great emphasis. These images might suggest that stereotypical female beauty and selling sexual allure may be more important than the women's boxing skills and the effectiveness of their technique.

4.11 GENDER GAPS

Currently, women are practicing boxing, but parity has yet to be achieved. For instance, the percentage of women in amateur boxing clubs in the UK is small.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ England Boxing and Sport England do not have recent figures available related to the number of people training in boxing nowadays. I have approached England Boxing twice asking them (via email) for the most recent figures of registered boxers by sex in England and they have not provided the information requested, replying that 'unfortunately [they] cannot share the data requested'.

Consequently, female boxers struggle to be matched for local competitions. They also find difficulties in sparring in their home gyms. Thus, some of them travel, at their own expense, to different gyms looking for sparring partners. Women's boxing has gained acceptance, but the small number of women and the lack of support hinder the potential of many female boxers. At the elite level, female boxers also experience obstacles as a consequence of the masculine construction of sport. Female champions such as Stacy Copeland, Katie Taylor, Nicola Adams, Natasha Jonas, Kimberly Connor, and Claressa Shields are among the pool of talented female boxers who have turned pro. The financial rewards are appealing and going pro seems to be a natural step in the Olympic champions' careers. Despite being in the boxing major leagues, female pro boxers are constantly struggling to have their bouts televised, to reach out through their promoters, to have coverage in the press and to have positive representations in social media. Moreover, they struggle to get equal pay. For instance, Heather Hardy and Shelly Vincent, whose rematch was added to the final HBO card in 2018 (the second female fight the network aired in 45 years of covering boxing), were allocated a budget of \$10,000 dollars, whereas the night before, male fighters were allocated a multimillion dollar budget (Doerer, 2018) (see Figure 18). Being a woman represents a disadvantage for female boxers even at the highest levels.



Figure 18. Hardy's post in Instagram. 2019. Source: Hardy (2019).

Active on social media, Heather Hardy, also known as Heather "The Heat", undefeated WBO World Featherweight Champion, is outspoken about gender inequality in boxing. Depicting herself as an excellent and tough fighter, she constantly advocates on social media for equal pay and for equal opportunities for women in pro boxing. Also, she continually denounces the obstacles female fighters face in this arena.

4.12 CONCLUSION

During my fieldwork, I was told many times, usually by male participants, that the participation of women in boxing was something 'new' and that it was just a matter of time to achieve equality: 'it will come naturally' (Field note, 20 March 2018). Since the 1720s, when women started to participate in prizefighting, women boxers have experienced gender-based discrimination. Moreover, the recognition and full participation of women have been hindered, and the conditions boxing has offered to female athletes have been precarious. This is a consequence of the social

construction of boxing as a male preserve and also of the sexism that still permeates the structure of the sport and society overall.

Throughout the history of boxing, despite the obstacles, female boxers have been fighting against masculine power and privilege. Moreover, they have been taking ownership of the sport, communicating that it does not belong only to men. Simultaneously, there have been reforms and initiatives promoting female participation and gender equality. These have been in response to major social, economic and cultural shifts including the tension created within the sport by women's demands, the cascade effect of decisions taken in the past, and the pressure brought by key actors. Accordingly, female fighters have gained recognition, and their conditions have been ameliorated. However, this has not been a linear process: progress has been usually followed by backlashes; rights gained have been followed by discrimination and exclusion. Moreover, the steps towards equality have not come 'naturally'. They have been the result of the efforts and battles women have had within the ring and beyond. In them, boxing's resistance to change has been evident, as well as its potential for transformation and equality.

Women have been practicing boxing since the eighteenth century, and nowadays, in the words of the UK 'This Girl Can' campaign: all girls and women can be boxers. Nevertheless, it takes a lot of strength and dedication to challenge the pernicious sexism in the sport. Thus, in order to make boxing a sport characterised by equality, and a site where anybody, regardless of differences, has the right to fully participate and be recognised, audiences, sporting bodies, boxing academies, coaches, and boxers of all genders have to keep on fighting with the same determination female boxers have had hitherto.

5 METHODS. BODIES ON THE LINE

This chapter presents the methods and methodological approaches used in the context of my research project. In order to collect data to conduct feminist and qualitative research, I used ethnographic methods consisting of participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The participant observation took place in a boxing academy in the North of England between September 2017 and April 2018. The interviewees were members of the boxing community in which participant observation was conducted; however, I also interviewed ex-boxers and staff of England Boxing – the sporting body that governs amateur boxing in the country – along with boxers, coaches and coach educators affiliated with other UK boxing academies.

This chapter includes the following: theoretical and ethical considerations that guided me during the data collection, the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to choose the participants, the structure of the interviews, and my reflections on my participant observation and experience in the field.

5.1 EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I drew on ethnographic approaches as my main method of data collection. Specifically, I immersed myself in the arena of amateur boxing over several months, practiced boxing as a member of a boxing academy, and spent many hours in the boxing gym, talking to other boxers and coaches, taking notes, and keeping a field diary. As part of this, semi-structured, in-depth interviews as well as participant observation were also used as methods of inquiry. Due to the fact that an ethnographer needs ‘not only to observe, but also to become a participant, in her or his field situation’ (Bolin &

Granskog, 2003b: 8), I decided to become an active boxing practitioner. In this way, I was able to embody the sportive cultural setting that I explored.

The decision to be both researcher and boxing apprentice gave me the chance to engage in 'extreme ethnography', defined by Bolin & Granskog (2003b: 11) as when the anthropologist 'is' or 'becomes' one of those whom she studies. Participating in 'extreme ethnography' was a positive experience because it gave me a greater insight into boxing's subculture, as stated by Cohen and Eames, 'the only way to record another culture is to live it, learn it, and understand it' (Cohen and Eames 1982, 30 in Bolin & Granskog, 2003b). Moreover, it helped me to build relationships of trust with my fellow participants; however, sometimes being an 'extreme ethnographer' put me in the direct path of various difficulties which reveal themselves within the following field note:

The coach pairs me up with a guy who is my height and weight, but with far more experience than my few months of training. The coach tells us to do full sparring. 'Time!' the coach shouts. I start to feel non-stop jabs in my head and face. I cannot react with the same speed and power, and it leaves me in shock. This is the first time that I am attempting full sparring. As I am trying to react, I continue asking myself: 'Why am I doing this? Is this what fieldwork means?' (Field note, 3 November 2017).

As both participant and researcher in the field, I continually maintained a feminist perspective. This gave my fieldwork an epistemological dimension, as the collection and interpretation of data used gender as the main analytical category. As part of my feminist perspective, I was aware of my positioning and standpoint (Haraway, 1988; Woodward, 2008) in the context of my fieldwork. In this regard, I paid special attention to how my gender, age, nationality, academic background, feminist ideology, class, ethnicity, and role in the field might affect my participants, as well as the collection and

interpretation of data. Nevertheless, by staying conscious of these conditions, I tried to maintain a critical mind-set towards the information and conduct my research through the use of systematic procedures. Most importantly, I remained sensitive and open to the meanings, actions, and interactions observed within the boxing academy, as well as the agency of the actors within my research.

Finally, in this subsection, I must address the ethical considerations taken into account during my research. These were led by the guidelines established by the University of Hull and the GRACE Project. Once I had gained ethical approval from the corresponding authorities, I contacted the head coach where I had decided to conduct my fieldwork to ask for his permission. When he agreed, I informed the coaches and gym attendees about my research activities.

As part of the ethical considerations for the research, I gave an information sheet and a consent form to the individuals I interviewed. The former included my contact details and a research briefing, whereas the consent forms included a closed question about the agreement of the participant for the interview to be audio-recorded, as well as their understanding that the information would remain confidential and anonymous but that they could withdraw at any time. Before starting the interview, the forms were signed by the interviewee and the researcher.

Before selecting Ithaca, I joined boxing sessions in other locations in the city. After trying different options, I decided to conduct my participant observation at Ithaca Boxing Academy.⁴⁷ The decision was driven by safety and security reasons. On the one hand, this was related to the academy's convenient location within the city. Thus,

⁴⁷ The following chapter offers an overview of Ithaca.

considering that the boxing sessions take place in the evening, I preferred to choose a site with easy access and that would not be dangerous at the night. On the other hand, the fact that Ithaca is known for having experienced coaches made me feel safe during the training sessions. Another reason was the relatively friendly atmosphere at the academy. This made it a site where I – a Mexican woman, boxing apprentice, and researcher – could more easily blend in.

I spent most of the time during my fieldwork at Ithaca. Nevertheless, it must be said that for research purposes and in order to have a wider perspective on the topic of the participation of women in boxing in the UK context, I also visited some other boxing academies in different English cities.

5.2 THE PARTICIPANTS

While attending my boxing sessions at Ithaca, I identified most of my interviewees and established initial contact with them. Others were identified and contacted using networks inside and outside the academy. One participant in particular, who seemed to be engaged with my research and with boxing in general, acted as a gatekeeper, putting me in contact with women involved in boxing at the competitive level who otherwise would have been difficult for me to reach.

The GRACE project framework required that individuals be at least 18 years old in order to participate in research. Based on this, I used the following criteria to select the participants: being at least 18 years of age and being involved in boxing to any extent. As part of the latter, I considered women and men who were amateur boxers, ex-boxers, or participants in any session at a boxing gym. In addition, I included women and men who had made a career out of boxing such as coaches, referees, or coach educators, and even incorporated those who were either involved or previously

involved with boxing by way of being a boxer's relative. Departing from that and using snowball sampling as a recruitment strategy, I gained access to a great variety of people to participate in the project.

The identity of the participants is kept anonymous throughout my research, through the use of pseudonyms. Below is a table detailing some of the participant's characteristics; the reader will find the participants classified under a binary category of gender, i.e. women and men. In light of this, it must be said that queer and feminist theory have made great contributions to disrupting the heteronormative and binary gender categorisation that I use, but nevertheless, the boxing culture and the practices that take place within the boxing gym still rely on and reproduce gender as a binary category. As Kath Woodard addresses:

The destabilization of gender identities is proposed by postmodernist research approaches which seek to challenge the fixity of a gender bound self and body (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1988; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994). However, boxers – along with other people who actively participate in sport – do not share these fluid categorizations but adopt classifications based upon gender differences, often involving polarized oppositions that are perceived to be firmly embedded and embodied. (Woodward, 2008: 548–549)

Overall, I interviewed thirty-two people. Thirteen of them were women and nineteen were men. Five were between eighteen and twenty-four years old; ten between twenty-five and thirty-four y/o; ten between thirty-five and forty-four y/o; four between forty-five and fifty-four y/o, and three between fifty-five and sixty-four y/o. Twenty-three participants were part of the boxing community of Ithaca, while nine were not. Twenty-six live in Yorkshire and the Humberside region, two live in London, and four in the East Midlands region. Four of them were attendees of mixed-sex boxercise sessions, and two were attendees of female-only sessions; meanwhile, six were carded boxers,

eight were coaches – one of which was also coach educator (most of the coaches had been carded boxers when they were youngsters), one was a referee, and two were staff members of a boxing body. There were three ex-carded boxers, two ex-coaches, and one former staff member of a boxing body. Four participants were parents of a child under ten years old attending boxing sessions. The time the interviewees had been involved in boxing varied from two months to forty-five years. Twenty-eight people were White English, one was Indian English, one English Pakistani, one Black and one Arab/Brown. The participants are listed in the table below.

Table 1. The interviewees.

| | Pseudonym | Gender (Woman/Male) | Age distribution | Attending Ithaca (Yes/No) | Place of residence (by region) | Involved in boxing as | Number of years involved in boxing | Ethnicity |
|---|-----------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Justin | M | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Attendee of boxing sessions | 4 | White English |
| 2 | Emily | W | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Parent of a child boxer | 2 months | White English |
| 3 | Lauren | W | 25–34 | N | Yorkshire and Humberside | Staff of a boxing body | 1 | White English |
| 4 | Michelle | W | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Carded boxer | 7 | White English |
| 5 | Steven | M | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Coach | 15 | White English |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----------|---|-------|---|--------------------------|--|----|---------------|
| 6 | Elizabeth | W | 35–44 | N | London | Referee | 13 | White English |
| 7 | Kayla | W | 18–24 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Ex-carded boxer | 5 | White English |
| 8 | Ryan | M | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Attendee of boxing exercise sessions | 8 | White English |
| 9 | Sarah | W | 45–54 | N | London | Ex-coach | 15 | Black |
| 10 | Victoria | W | 18–24 | N | East Midlands | Carded boxer | 4 | White English |
| 11 | Justin | M | 18–24 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Carded boxer | 4 | White English |
| 12 | David | M | 45–54 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Attendee of boxing exercise sessions | 5 | White English |
| 13 | Brandon | M | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Coach | 13 | White English |
| 14 | Tyler | M | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Ex-carded boxer | 14 | White English |
| 15 | Alicia | W | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Attendee of female-only boxing exercise sessions | 10 | White English |
| 16 | Todd | M | 45–54 | Y | Yorkshire and | Coach | 38 | White English |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|---------|---|-------|---|--------------------------|---|-----|----------------|
| | | | | | Humberside | | | |
| 17 | Anna | W | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Attendee of female-only boxing sessions | 1.5 | White English |
| 18 | Andrew | M | 18–24 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Carded boxer | 9 | White English |
| 19 | Dustin | M | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Coach | 25 | White English |
| 20 | Evan | M | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Parent of a child boxer | 1 | White English |
| 21 | Robert | M | 55–64 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Coach | 45 | White English |
| 22 | Gary | M | 55–64 | N | East Midlands | Coach and coach educator | 30 | White English |
| 23 | Bradley | M | 55–64 | N | East Midlands | Ex-coach and ex-staff of a boxing body | 40 | White English |
| 24 | Linda | W | 18–24 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Attendee of boxing sessions | 2 | Indian English |
| 25 | Peter | M | 45–54 | N | East Midlands | Staff of a | 5 | White English |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|----------|---|-------|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|----|-------------------|
| | | | | | | boxing body | | |
| 26 | Kathrine | W | 25–34 | N | Yorkshire and Humberside | Ex-carded boxer | 12 | English Pakistani |
| 27 | Aaron | M | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Parent of a child boxer | 10 | Arab/Brown |
| 28 | Amanda | W | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Parent of a child going to boxing | 1 | White English |
| 29 | Darren | M | 35–44 | N | Yorkshire and Humberside | Coach | 18 | White English |
| 30 | Megan | W | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Carded boxer | 5 | White English |
| 31 | Derek | M | 35–44 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Coach | 15 | White English |
| 32 | Brian | M | 25–34 | Y | Yorkshire and Humberside | Carded boxer | 5 | White English |

My research does not seek to produce statistically representative data. Consequently, neither the number of the participants nor the sampling are statistically representative of boxers in the country. In this context, the willingness of individuals to participate in the project, their suitability to provide relevant and in-depth data, as well as fulfilling the selection criteria were the most important features to be considered while selecting the participants and defining the sample.

On several occasions, they helped me gain access to other participants. During the interviews, some interviewees found the addressed topics intriguing and declared their enjoyment of the conversation, while others became bored, anxious, and possibly disappointed: however, they decided without coercion to continue on until the end of the interview. I am grateful to all of them.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used as one of the methods to collect data for the research. To this end, I prepared a guide with open-ended questions which was modified according to the involvement of the interviewee within the sphere of boxing. The topics addressed were as follows: sporting behaviour of the participant;⁴⁸ meaning and role of the boxing academy in the city; masculinities in boxing; women in boxing; sex segregation and sex integration in boxing; and meanings and challenges for both gender equality and for the participation of women in boxing. Generally, I followed this structure. Nevertheless, I occasionally adapted the questions and maintained certain flexibilities during the conversation/interview to allow for new concepts and topics to emerge.

The interviews were conducted in spaces which best suited the interviewees and interviewer. Regarding safety and ethical concerns, they took place in changing rooms and offices of boxing gyms, bars, cafes, work places (i.e. shops and offices), meeting rooms and, once, in the house of an interviewee. The interviews were conducted in four cities in England.

⁴⁸ This included the number of hours per week the person trained in boxing, number of years involved in boxing, and whether the person did any sport other than boxing.

Audio recording was used (with consent) during each interview. The length of each was between forty-five and ninety minutes. All interviews have been transcribed. Additionally, field notes were elaborated after each interview.

5.3 A RESEARCHER AND A BOXING APPRENTICE

For the purposes of my research, I became a boxing apprentice and boxing novice. Before starting this project, I had never considered doing this. Furthermore, I was morally opposed to it,⁴⁹ acknowledging the violence and brutality involved, along with the physical risks such as concussions. Nevertheless, as a strategy to ‘produce [...] knowledge and embodied interrelationships between the researcher and the subjects of the research’ (Woodward, 2008: 537), I began training.

I immersed myself in boxing to grasp the gendered culture of the sport. With this in mind, I attended boxing conditioning sessions, female-only sessions, and sessions directed at carded boxers at the Ithaca Boxing Academy. I also spent time in the academy observing the children’s sessions and carded boxers sparring, analysing how gendered structures impacted on the gym, on my participants and on myself, considering that ‘[r]esearchers are also situated within gendered spaces and are

⁴⁹ Boxing is very popular in my home country, and Mexico has produced popular fighters such as Julio Cesar Chavez and El Canelo Alvarez. Also, due to the cultural and geographical proximity to the United States, Mohamed Ali was a well-known and admired figure in my country. Moreover, as a youngster, I attended some boxing shows with my father. Despite this exposure, I am not a boxing fan, especially considering the violence and the health risks it entails. Nevertheless, I find boxing tremendously interesting, as it seems to mirror the extremes of the society and the culture we live in. Moreover, I feel great respect for the boxers, not only for their discipline and commitment while training but also for their courage on the canvas and determination to give their all for what they are passionate about: boxing and becoming good boxers.

constructed and constitute themselves within embodied frameworks of gender' (Woodward, 2008: 546). In addition, I was part of the audience for local boxing shows. In total, I spent 140 hours in the field, over a seven-month period between late September 2017 and early April 2018.

My observations and reflections on my fieldwork were documented in field notes through the use of a template which enabled me to systematically collect data. It must be said here that having completed my fieldwork, I can now say that I enjoy boxing training, as is recounted within the following fragment of a field note.

The coach asks us to pair up [...] I pair up with guys who punch me quite hard, but I find myself enjoying it. I am gradually starting to like the Senior's session more and more as my understanding of boxing gradually increases, including tips on how to move and how to react. (Field note, 26 February 2018)

I invested time and energy going to Ithaca, the goal being 'to immerse physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally' (Sparkes, 2015: 45) in the boxing culture. On this subject, boxing training allowed me both to understand the sport and my participants, and to a certain extent, to embody the demands of the sport (Wacquant, 2004) as well as the gendered expectations on women. In this context, for instance, I became very aware, as female boxers are, of my diet and being fit. Consequently, I started to obsessively weigh myself; nevertheless, I luckily did not have to deprive myself of food, as is the common practice of many boxers trying to 'make weight' for any given fight. I also made a special commitment to my training. I worked very hard and tried not to miss any sessions. I did this to earn the trust of the coaches, and consequently, to get more out of my training, but also to look good (i.e. fit), as dictated by the standards of the fitness industry for women in Western countries.

The decision to conduct my participant observation by becoming a boxing practitioner was life changing. Participating in the trainings intertwined my professional and personal lives – as Sparkes (2015: 45) warns – because, I considered the trainings not only my duty as a researcher, but also part of my weekly exercise quota in my quest to be fit. In this context, I trained several times per week, sometimes attending one or two trainings per day, chatting with boxers, coaches, and the boxers' parents, usually using gender as my main analytic category. In this way, I experienced the gendered materiality of being part of the boxing gym.

I visited the gym several times per week and spent time in and amongst the boxing community, following DeWalt et al (1998: 260) who mention that the observer might take part in 'the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture'. In light of this, I tried to get involved in the daily trainings in order to complete the rites of boxing. For instance, I completed the medical test and received the card that officially permitted me to compete in England (Figure 19).



Figure 19. My England Boxing competition record book

I find it important to note that due to what I determined was a consequence of the gendered bias within boxing culture, I did not develop adequate boxing skills, and I especially did not get enough experience sparring.⁵⁰ I therefore did not feel confident enough to engage in full sparring inside the ring with more experienced boxers, nor did I compete in any formal fights.

During my fieldwork, the everyday trainings held special importance. Despite their being the 'least known and least spectacular', as Wacquant (2011: 222–223) informs us, they have a great importance in cultural terms, as the 'definition of culture [...] defines what is conceived as "people", their "everyday lives", and thus, ultimately the ethnographic field' (Markula, 2015: 29). Consequently, I focused my participant observation on the everyday interactions at the gym and on the training sessions that boxers attended on a daily basis.

Being an apprentice and novice in boxing gave me the chance to be both a researcher and a participant. Additionally, in becoming, as a researcher, 'one of the socialized bodies' (Wacquant, 2011: 88) in boxing, I shifted constantly from one role to the other, informing my research as a participant and reflecting critically as a researcher. On this topic, Bolin & Granskog (2003b: 13) highlight that 'being whom one studies creates a dynamic tension in which the ethnographer slides in and out of being his or her own collaborator, both as participant and observer'.

Fortunately, I did not experience the shift between athlete and researcher, or more precisely, the embodiment of a researcher-boxing apprentice, as a negative experience. In fact, it was a nourishing experience for me because it allowed me to be

⁵⁰ This is further analysed in Chapter 8.

out in the field on a regular basis without feeling like a complete ‘outsider’, in Woodward’s (2008) terms. Woodward uses this term when analysing the status and the presence of the researcher within fieldwork, as well as the tension created between subjectivity and objectivity during research. Moreover, it helped me to better understand the sport, the athletes, and the context that I was exploring.

Doing ‘extreme ethnography’ in Bolin and Granskog’s (2003) terms – which for me meant being a researcher whose training and ongoing boxing education was used to conduct her participant observation – gave me access to first-hand experiences, as Sparkes (2015: 45) points out. This helped me to acknowledge what Wacquant (2011: 87) calls the ‘powerful allure of the combination of craft, sensuality, and morality that binds the pugilist to [her] trade,’⁵¹ as well as to observe how gendered relations are experienced in this sportive sphere.

The main instrument during my fieldwork was my body. Molnar & Purdy (2015: 3) suggest that ‘the researcher may have to put his/her body on the line to become an instrument of data collection’. Following this, I put my body in the boxing gym and in the ring. I wore leggings, trainers, boxing gloves, and a head and mouth guard, hit and tried not be hit, all for the purpose of collecting data. Doing this gave me the opportunity to reflect on many of the topics covered in my research, such as sex segregation while I was getting the jabs of male youngsters in my same weight bracket, and to think about the lack of opportunities women have for getting experience due to gender discrimination, such as men not wanting to pair up with me for body sparring.⁵² As De Beauvoir stated, ‘[t]he body is not a *thing*, it is a situation ... it is the instrument of our

⁵¹ Free adaptation.

⁵² This is further analysed in Chapter 7.

grasp on the world, a limiting factor for projects' (De Beauvoir [1949] 1994 in Woodward, 2008: 543; emphasis in original). Considering this, my fit, small, able, young, and female body aided me in grasping information in the field by being a member of the field. Through my body, and its particular situation, I collected and interpreted the information.

Putting my body on the line led me to use all my senses in the process of data collection. As part of this, and informed by Kawulich (2005: 1), who suggests one uses all five senses while doing research, and by Sparkes (2015: 56), who highlights the centrality of the materiality of the researcher's 'fleshy, messy, material (biological), and sentient body throughout the ethnographic process', I included descriptions in my field notes on what I observed, heard, smelled, touched, tasted, and felt during my time in the boxing gym. This process made my intellectual journey in the boxing gym as sensual, corporeal, and material as possible.

Participant observation was the method that best suited my research for the reasons stated above. Additionally, it enabled a field in which to identify and contact possible participants for the interviews and to build a relationship with them. My expectation was that they would familiarize themselves to my presence in the gym and that this shift would positively impact not only their decision to participate in the interview, but also on the comfort, familiarity and trust that they would develop while I conducted my research.

Familiarizing myself with the boxers was a semi-successful endeavour. I found it particularly challenging to establish familiar and friendly relations in the boxing gym during the relatively reduced amount of time required of my fieldwork. Or maybe it was difficult because I was 'just' an apprentice, and therefore I was not very high in the

boxing hierarchy or/and because I am a woman. Nevertheless, participant observation allowed me to engage in direct contact with boxers, something which I had not done previously, making the experience central to my research.

Finally, it must be said that I chose to 'go native' for participant observation, to use the ethnographic argot, by becoming a boxing apprentice. I was aware of the importance of 'going native' and, moreover, going *critically* native. This approach was nourished by reflexive (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and carnal sociology (Wacquant, 2005; 2011). I considered what Wacquant tells us in the following passage:

“[G]o native” but “*go native armed*,” that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools, with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort. (Wacquant, 2011: 87; emphasis in original)

Based on this, I was in the boxing gym, being aware of my position as a researcher, interpreting the data through a feminist lens, and considering my research questions and the theory that informs my research. At the same time, I remained receptive to the perspectives and opinions of the boxers, as well as to the everyday empirical evidence that may oblige me to sometimes make intellectual turns in my research.

5.4 LITTLE MEXICAN

While conducting my participant observation, I was aware of my position in the fieldwork and my situation among the participants. In light of this, departing from Woodward (2008: 537) who suggests that '[t]he researcher carries embodied distinctions [...] all of which are constitutive elements in the research process', I acknowledged that the gathered data and its interpretation would be impacted by my gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, class, academic background, ableness, level of

fitness, and experience in sport. Therefore, this subsection highlights the main factors that 'shaped my location and connections' (Wacquant, 2005: 448) during fieldwork, as well as some of the challenges and advantages experienced in it.

I started boxing training with the intent of conducting participant observation for my study. Despite the fact that this endeavour involved physical work and immersing myself in a culture preoccupied with attaining a disciplined boxing body, I was always aware of my role as a researcher. This led me to continually analyse all that was being done and said in the boxing academy.

The coaches, boxers, and parents with whom I spoke in the gym were informed that I was there to research boxing. On a daily basis, they remained indifferent. Nevertheless, it was a challenge to get interviews with them. Many possible informants said they were not good at speaking and refused to do it. Fortunately, despite this, I gained access to a numerous willing participants. Many of the informants focused their attention on my situation as a PhD student. In this respect, as a way to express their support of my academic journey, they agreed to an interview.

When I requested and described the interviews, I highlighted that my study was part of a project from the European Union. This characteristic piqued their interest. Thus, I utilized this element to underline the importance of their participation. Nevertheless, despite mentioning this, key informants such as staff of England Boxing remained reluctant to accept my interview and data requests.

During conversations in the gym and one-on-one interviews, I stated that I was conducting research on women in boxing. This evoked empathy from some of the female boxers; however, in male coaches it seemed to stir up suspicion, and as such they kept their distance from me. Others were friendly to me, but declared that during

the interviews they tried to convey with a narrative that promotes gender equality and the participation of women in boxing –even if they did not fully understand it or they did not agree completely with it, when taking into account the issues addressed. This is depicted in the following statement of one of the coaches, during a conversation after an interview:

I did not know if I was saying right or wrong when I was speaking with her [laughs]. (Field note, 21 March 2018)

Analysing her role as a researcher in historically male sports such as boxing, Woodward (2008: 550) emphasises that her presence in the field has been ‘marked by difference’, considering her gender, age, biography, and even her accent and dress. Likewise, my fieldwork at Ithaca was characterised by the dissimilarity between me and most of the participants. One of the main factors that impacted my fieldwork was my gender. Being in a historically male-dominated sport as a woman, I embodied the ‘other’ or what has been historically named the ‘athletic intruder’ (Bolin & Granskog, 2003a) in boxing. This caused me to directly experience the effects that stem from a lack of initiative in the participation and inclusion of women in boxing, such as the absence of female changing rooms or sanitary provisions, to name but two. I also faced the sexist misinterpretation of women’s participation in the sport.⁵³ This was expressed in the fantasy that some of the participants had in regards to my presence in the gym, as shown below:

Making reference to me, one of the guys at the mixed conditioning session says to the others: ‘You know, she is coming to see me’. Somebody else says, ‘No,

Commented [ABS5]: added

⁵³ This is further analysed in Chapter 6.

she comes to see me'. I then say, 'No, I'm not coming to see you guys. I am coming to train'. (Field note, 1 November 2017)

When I started my study, I underestimated the obstacles I would have to face as a woman in boxing, despite the alerts issued by other female researchers (Lafferty & McKay, 2004; Mennesson, 2000; Woodward, 2008). Months later, almost at the end of my fieldwork, I realised how mistaken I was. At this point, I even I dropped out from the mixed conditioning sessions⁵⁴ based on the obstacles that were in the way of developing my boxing skills and undertaking training. This was because, overall, my male mates refused to pair up with me for body sparring, the most important part of training, and I did not receive any support from the coach to counteract this. Moreover, in these sessions, I very often received sexist comments; an example is offered in the following field note:

I am trying to set a day for an interview with one of the guys attending the boxercise session. I say: 'Let's make it next week', making reference to the interview. The coach pops up into the conversation and says: 'Let's make love!' I pretend I didn't hear that. He starts to chase again; he asks me: 'Is it true that Mexicans are good lovers?' I'm unsure of how to respond. 'When are you going to ask me for the interview?' he says. I reply seriously, saying: 'Whenever you are free; we can schedule it'. I am trying not to lose my temper when my potential interviewee adds: 'You know that the coach has a car? You can do the interview there'. They both laugh. (Field note, 27 November 2017)

Another important element that influenced my experience and interactions within the gym was my nationality. Being from Mexico helped me to gain sympathy since the country is well known for its boxers. There were also some participants who had

⁵⁴ Whereas I dropped out from this particular session, I kept on going to the female-only sessions and the trainings for amateur boxers.

travelled there. Thus, my nationality gave me greater access to initiating conversations.

Another of the elements connected with my nationality was my language. Being a non-native English speaker was a challenge while conducting my fieldwork. The boxing gym where the participant observation was conducted is situated in a city in the North of England where the accent is especially strong, and where neither migration nor tourism are as intense as in other parts of the country. Therefore, the locals generally were not used to speaking with foreigners. Given this context, it was a challenge to understand all that was said in the gym, especially at the beginning. Nevertheless, over time, I became familiar not only with the accent but also with the slang used in the gym.

When I joined the boxing gym, I was very fit and strong. Moreover, I was familiar with combat sports on account of my 17 years of experience in capoeira, a Brazilian art expression that involves martial arts, acrobatic movements, and music. Thus, the 'bodily capital' (Bourdieu, 1978; Wacquant, 1995) I have accumulated through years of training allowed me greater access to the field, as I was able to quickly learn the positions of the body that the sport required. Moreover, my bodily capital gave me confidence to exist within the atmosphere of a boxing academy that can be especially intimidating for women. Despite being a committed and quick learner, as a consequence of what I hypothesized was the short time of my fieldwork, I could not undertake all the rites of passage necessary to being an accomplished boxer, nor could I build strong relationships with boxers and coaches. As a result, I did not gain the full membership needed in order to be considered as part of the gym's community. However, only a few could claim to have full membership as aspects such as gender, ethnicity, age, skills, etc. interfere in their access to it.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Throughout my fieldwork, I was not considered a boxer, but a female and old – in boxing's terms – novice or apprentice of boxing. This prevented me from accessing a higher quality of coaching. Nevertheless, the fact that I was learning the noble art of boxing evoked empathy amongst the interviewees and provided me with greater access to the pugilistic world. In this process, I remained always critical towards gendered power structures and my own presence in the field, recognising that the interpretation of the data was influenced by my feminist lens as well as my situation as a female Mexican middleclass researcher in the North of England.

6 ITHACA, AN OLD-FASHIONED BOXING GYM

Now, whoever has courage and a strong and collected spirit in her breast, let her come forward, lace on the gloves and put up her hands. (5.363–364)⁵⁵

Virgil, *The Aeneid*

In this chapter, I give an overview of Ithaca Boxing Academy⁵⁶ where most of my fieldwork was conducted. The goal is to offer information that aids understanding of the context where the research project took place. It builds on analysis of interviews with the project participants, field notes taken between September 2017 and April 2018 as part of my participant observation, and also sociodemographic data gathered from secondary sources.

Here, I provide a snapshot that captures Ithaca Boxing Academy's structure, philosophy, and atmosphere, as well as some of the social practices within it. Moreover, I explore how differences in gender, age, class, and ethnicity are interpreted and experienced, especially regarding salient aspects of the academy.

The chapter begins by offering sociodemographic data of Hull, the city where Ithaca is located, and also of the academy itself. Then, I detail the sessions that are offered at Ithaca, the profile of its members, issues related to the materiality of the venue, and the quality of the services provided. Next, I describe the structure of the organisation

⁵⁵ Free adaptation.

⁵⁶ This is a fictitious name used to ensure the anonymity of the informants.

and the composition of its community and explore the essence of some of its policies and statements, as well as the philosophy that permeates the organisation. Finally, I analyse the social role that Ithaca has according to its members.

6.1 A PHYSICALLY INACTIVE CITY OF CULTURE

Situated in the North of England on the Humber Estuary, Kingston upon Hull – abbreviated to Hull – is a unitary authority in the East Riding of Yorkshire with a population of 259,778 inhabitants, according to 2019 estimates. In this population, males account for 50.5% and females for 49.5%. The largest five-year age group in the city is 25–29 year olds, compared to 50–54 year olds nationally. According to UK's most recent census (March 2011), 89.7% of Hull residents described themselves as White British, compared to a national figure of 79.8%. Therefore, Hull's BME population is 10.3%, compared to 22.2% nationally. The 2011 Census reported also that 91.5% of Hull residents were born inside the United Kingdom, compared to a national figure of 86.2% (GeoWiseLtd, 2019).

Popular for being the UK City of Culture 2017 and simultaneously known for being a deprived area, Hull is described as follows by one of the participants in the research:

Hull is seen as the 'City of Culture' and all that. That's a big winner for it, but it's still seen as being almost off the map. (Bradley, M, 55–64 y/o, ex-coach and ex-staff of a boxing body, East Midlands)

In regards to the levels of deprivation, according to the latest release of the English Indices of Deprivation (2019), Hull was among the five local authorities ranked within the highest proportions of highly deprived neighbourhoods in England (UKGovernment, 2019). Regarding adults' health and wellbeing, in 2019, 70% of adults in Hull were likely to be overweight or obese (NHS Hull, 2019a); 24.9% of adults in the city smoked,

compared to the 14% national average (NHS Hull, 2019b). In 2018, 27.1% of people aged 16–64 were living with disability, which was higher than the 20.3% national figure (GeoWise Ltd, 2019). Concerning physical inactivity, for the period November 2018 to November 2019, according to the Active Survey, 59% of people in Hull did not do any physical activity in the 28 days previous to the survey (Sport England, 2020). Therefore, in a city like Hull, sport venues, such as boxing academies, play a major role in the physical and mental wellbeing of the inhabitants, in addition to individual, social, and community development.

6.2 ITHACA'S MEMBERSHIP AND TRAININGS

Located in a highly urbanised area in Hull, the Ithaca Boxing Academy attracts a great diversity of people. According to the academy's 2017 database, 22% of the registered members were female, while 78% were male. Among them, there were children (from the age of 4 y/o), teenagers, young adults, adults, and seniors (the oldest member was 60 y/o). The largest six-year age groups at the gym are 4–10, 11–17, and 18–24 year olds. Most of the members of the academy were White English (87.6%), while others were White from different countries of Continental Europe (especially from Eastern Europe), and a few considered themselves to have an Arab background. While conducting fieldwork, there were no participants with a Black African background – neither boxers nor coaches. Among its members, fewer than 1% were listed as having a physical disability. With reference to their place of residence, most of the people going to the academy lived in Hull; however, there were some who commuted around 20 miles to attend Ithaca's training sessions. These came because the academy is well known in the region as a place with good coaches and boxers. Ithaca, like every other boxing gym in the city, prides itself on being the best.

The boxing academy offers different kinds of training.⁵⁷ These include the following sessions: kids,⁵⁸ children,⁵⁹ juniors and youth,⁶⁰ senior,⁶¹ and conditioning. The children, juniors and youth, and senior sessions have special relevance at Ithaca. In these sessions, the coaches identify young talent, but especially they help to develop the boxing careers of the amateur fighters and prepare them for upcoming competitions. For these reasons, and also due to the high number of participants in them,⁶² these sessions have between two and five coaches.⁶³ Contrastingly, the conditioning sessions have from one to three coaches.

The conditioning sessions are joined by a couple of amateur boxers; however, most of the attendants are people interested in being fit and not necessarily in becoming boxers. Due to this, most of the coaches at Ithaca do not value the conditioning sessions very highly; quite the contrary, they seem to despise them, finding not only the desire to be fit superfluous, but they also see fitness as an activity that is simple to teach. This perspective can be observed in the quotation below:

If you want to keep fit, okay. There's a load of keep fit places [but] I'm not giving up my time to come in, so someone can just keep fit for the sake of just because

⁵⁷ All of them are in the evening and in the last hour.

⁵⁸ Below 7 years of age.

⁵⁹ From 7 to 14 years-old.

⁶⁰ From 14 to 18 years-old.

⁶¹ Carded boxers with experience either of participating in at least six bouts or competing at the England Boxing National Amateur Championships. They also must be not older than 40 years-old, which is the limit for competing in amateur boxing.

A carded boxer is someone between 10 and 40 years-old who has her/his medical form – a card – filled by a doctor approved by England Boxing. The card, which is a basic requirement to participate in competitions, indicates that the boxer is fit to box.

⁶² Each of these sessions has on average 30 participants.

⁶³ Usually there are two or three coaches in them.

they want to keep fit. Also, to get someone fit is the easiest thing in the world [...]. There's no art in that [...]. If [any coach] wants to give his time up, come in and do that, that's all well and good, but I don't. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The target group of the conditioning sessions are adults;⁶⁴ however, at Ithaca, sometimes there are also teenagers and even children attending. The conditioning sessions are based on boxercise⁶⁵ and are offered in two modalities: female only and mixed gender. In the former, there is no physical contact, whereas in the latter, there are rounds of sparring; in these, punches are allowed – except on the head. The mixed-gender trainings – in which, despite being advertised as such, most of the participants are men – are more popular than the female-only sessions. The female-only training sessions are discussed further in the thesis;⁶⁶ however, it must be mentioned here that they are the sessions that receive the least attention and human resources at the gym. For instance, the gym allocates to them only one coach, whereas the 'mixed' sessions have two and sometimes even three coaches. Thus, it is evident that the sessions at Ithaca have a clear hierarchy: the female-only sessions occupy the lowest strata.

The entrance fees for the sessions at Ithaca are low. This makes the gym an affordable and accessible sport venue, especially for less privileged individuals,⁶⁷ which can be

⁶⁴ Specifically, adults who are not boxers. However, the sessions are sometimes joined by carded boxers who seek to maintain their fitness levels.

⁶⁵ They are training sessions based on the concepts of boxing, with the goal of keeping fit. They include shadow boxing, skipping rope, punching bags and different exercises to develop strength and conditioning.

⁶⁶ See Chapter 8.

⁶⁷ For 2017, the fees, which are £2 for schoolchildren and £3 for the rest of the participants, are the same for one-hour sessions of both conditioning and boxing training sessions.

observed in the following statement from Emily, a divorced single mother, who takes her son to Lthaca:

I get working tax credits and child benefit, and that tops my wage up for it to be a normal living wage. If I didn't have those benefits, then I wouldn't be able to afford to take them [the children] anywhere. So yes, I can squeeze it out, and it [the boxing session] is quite reasonable £2 an hour. (Emily, W, 25–34 y/o, parent of a child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Due to the prices of the sessions, and probably due to the historical association between boxing and individuals with a working-class background (Wacquant, 2004), an important sector of the boxing community at Lthaca is composed of people who would see themselves as working class. Members include builders, refuse collectors, floor polishers, lorry-drivers, and clerks. Nevertheless, boxing is not as exclusive to the working classes as it used to be (Trimbur, 2011; Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2007a). In this regard, at Lthaca, one can also find people from the middle classes and emergent service workers. Among the former group are university and college students, public servants, lawyers, dentists, ophthalmologists, nurses, constructors, engineers, and shop and company owners. Despite their official data not being publicly available, empirical observation makes evident the complex socio-economic composition of the boxing community at Lthaca:

While being at the front door of the gym, I can see Jack. He has just arrived to pick up his two teen sons who train at the senior's session. I cannot hold it and tell him: 'Oh my God, you have a beautiful car!' He says smiling: 'Thanks darling!' He is driving a shiny and brand new luxury Mercedes Benz CLA 180. (Field note, 12 February 2018)

6.3 NOT A GLAMOROUS FACILITY

In contrast to some of its members, the financial situation of Ithaca's Boxing Academy is not very privileged. This is evident especially in conversations among the head coach and the parents of the young boxers. In these conversations, the head coach discusses with parents on the one hand, the embarrassing precarity of the gym and its lack of resources, and on the other, the plans for renovation the coach has for when the gym gets funding. The gym subsists mainly on the fees each person pays upon entrance, aid from sponsors, benefits from fundraising events, and subsidies from the local authorities, which never seem to be enough for the needs of the gym.⁶⁸ Ithaca is not a glamorous facility; however, it is fully equipped. It has a ring, punching bags, and plenty of leather ropes. The equipment also includes weights, treadmills, and stairmasters. Also, there is a rack with gloves, pads and head guards to be used by anyone.⁶⁹ Despite its limited resources, the gym has all the equipment that a boxer would need.

The sounds of the gym play a great role at Ithaca. As Wacquant (2004: 237) explains, 'the gym is first and foremost made up of sounds or, more to the point, a symphony of specific noises, immediately recognizable among a thousand others'. At Ithaca, when the session is on, you can hear the boxers breathing noisily each time they give a punch: 'Eeesh! Eeesh!'; some other boxers shout instead: 'Aaagr!' Also recognizable among the various noises is the sound of the chains on the bags moving from one

⁶⁸ According to some participants, the poor condition of the gym may be related to managerial issues rather than the sources of subsistence.

⁶⁹ Unable to withstand the smell of the communal equipment, most attendants at the gym purchase their own.

side to another with each punch. The boxers' gloves make rhythmical sounds as they hit the coaches' strike pads. One can hear other noises, such as the combination of punches and defences that coaches dictate to the boxers.⁷⁰ In the background, one might hear pop music, disco, or the Rocky soundtrack playing over the speakers. The timer used for the fights is always on, and the bell rings every 3 minutes. The gym has the great atmosphere of traditional boxing; nevertheless, beyond its cinematic allure, its austerity and shortcomings might create discomfort to some participants.

Ithaca struggles to offer a quality and an inclusive service to its attendants. Among the challenges is the lack of maintenance of the building itself and problems with the provision of services. For instance, the heating and water fountain are constantly broken. Thus, in winter, the gym gets so cold that boxing shows are often cancelled owing to the low indoor temperatures. This is discouraging for boxers and coaches, as the shows always bring excitement. Besides, their cancellation prevents the gym from raising extra money, considering the revenues that the shows represent. Furthermore, as the water fountain is broken, throughout the year, the boxers drink water from the sinks in the bathrooms – which are not always clean. Moreover, in the gym, there are neither female changing rooms, women's restrooms, nor sanitary provisions. Thus, women adapt their needs to the masculine infrastructure of the venue.⁷¹ Another issue in terms of inclusiveness is the lack of access for people with disabilities.

⁷⁰ In boxing, the basic punches are classified by numbers. For instance, 1 is jab, 2 is cross, 3 is left hook, 4 is right hook, 5 is left uppercut, and 6 is right uppercut. Thus, what the coaches dictate are a combination of numbers.

⁷¹ In the case of the toilets, women and men share the lavatories. In regards to the changing rooms, women tend not to use the male changing rooms to avoid any discomfort.

Despite the simplicity that characterises the gym, Ithaca has a modern and eye-catching website. Among the main images on the website, there is one with a strong and attractive woman – a model – in a combative and confident stance. The photo, which could be interpreted as a celebration of the participation of women in boxing, is juxtaposed with the paraphernalia at the venue, which praises only the male boxers' success. Though Ithaca counts at least five female national champions in its recent history, on the walls of the gym among the many newspaper clippings, photos, and posters, not a single image of a woman can be found. Therefore, it seems that only women for whom sex appeal is their most salient feature (as evidenced by the website) are represented in the visual imaginary of the gym; whereas, real female boxers who have contributed to the success of the gym are not represented.

6.4 PASSIONATE VOLUNTEERS

Since it was established in the mid-twentieth century, Ithaca has been a volunteer-led organisation. The volunteers have a great sense of commitment and contribute with labour to the gym by performing different activities.⁷² Some of them do coaching, while others clean the gym, organise fundraising events, serve food during the boxing shows, create content for the website, are in charge of the finances of the gym, etc. In

⁷² The boxing academy, as a volunteer-led organisation, is representative of a situation that occurs nationwide. Moreover, not only the posts at the boxing academies, but also the whole structure of amateur boxing in the UK – except for a few posts at England Boxing – is volunteer-led. For instance: medical registrars, commission members, referees' & judges' examiners, referees' & judges' educators, officials (including referees, judges, officials in charge, timekeepers, gloving up assistants), regional chair, regional secretary, regional treasurer, regional welfare officer, regional web administrator, regional coach, chair of a club, club committee member, club treasurer, club secretary, head club coach, assistant club coach, club welfare officer, female chaperone, event volunteer, and volunteer coordinator are all volunteers (EnglandBoxing, 2019d).

order to undertake their boxing duties, the volunteers use the time that normally they would allocate to their families. The case of a coach in this situation is illustrated as follows:

[I'm coaching at Ithaca] four nights in a row [...] If I'm not working and I haven't got family commitments, if I've got nothing on, I'll be here [...] I have an understand[ing] wife and, also, my son's [training] here [...] so it fits together.
(Dustin, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The coaches are among the volunteers that invest the most time at the academy. They not only lead the training and sparring bouts during the week, but also, on the weekends, they usually travel with the boxers to shows and competitions in the region, across the country, and sometimes even overseas.⁷³ All the coaches at Ithaca are white Yorkshire males between 35 and 64 years old.^{74, 75} Among them there is a great camaraderie; however, there is also a hierarchy. The highest position is held by Robert, the head coach. He is respected by the boxing community; nevertheless, he is also considered by some ex-boxers to be an old-fashioned man, especially regarding women's participation in boxing.

Despite the criticism, the head coach still has great legitimacy. The loyalty of the coaches, the trust of the boxers, great charisma, full commitment to Ithaca, and a long-life experience help him not only to lead the gym but also to retain the popularity of

⁷³ Nevertheless, they do not always accompany the boxers when they would need them. For instance, during interviews, female boxers reported that coaches sometimes refuse to go with them to other gyms to participate in sparring bouts to practice their skills.

⁷⁴ During the time I conducted my fieldwork, for a period of two months, there was a coach with an Arab background; nevertheless, he did not stay at the gym, presumably due to time constraints.

⁷⁵ Qualification courses should be taken by anyone who wishes to be involved in coaching competitive amateur boxing within an England Boxing affiliated club (EnglandBoxing, 2019c).

Ithaca in the region. He is passionate about boxing, and especially about Ithaca. With a big smile, he leads the children's sessions, chats with the parents and cheers up the adults in the conditioning sessions while shouting his own version of the Olympic motto: 'Faster, fitter, stronger!' he says, encouraging the attendants to make a big effort in every movement. With a more serious look, he observes the amateur sessions, gives advice to the coaches and boxers, and moral lessons to the young boxers. 'You are what you do', he tells children and young people, trying to encourage them to work hard individually to have a positive result. Also, with a firm bodily posture and an experienced gaze, he referees the sparring bouts during the children's and amateur's trainings. 'Everything is about winning', he says after giving each boxer technical advice. When he is not coaching, preaching moral lessons, or socialising, he is either on his mobile phone matching boxers for the upcoming shows or taking photos of the sessions to upload them to his social media channels to advertise the gym, but also to show to his contacts the development and efforts of the boxers. He is not only committed to Ithaca's community but also proud of it.

The other coaches are also very committed to Ithaca. They take their role seriously; moreover, they understand their responsibility not only as boxing coaches but as role models and advisors to the boxers, especially the male fighters, adopting a paternalistic role. Trimbur (2011: 243) points out that '[t]he boxing experience is used as a theoretical template when trainers intervene in the social lives of their fighters'. In the following quotation, one can observe the relevance this coach gives to his position in the gym and how, for him, his duty goes not only into the public scene and the athletic field, but also into the private sphere and the moral realm:

You [as coach] are building them [the boxers] up and building their confidence. You're in a responsible position where you're telling the kids [the boxers] what

you think are the right things. Not just teaching them sports, but telling them the right things. Some of them are listening to you more than they would do their parents or their own teachers. The juniors [...] think you've got the answers to life's questions. Sometimes they can ask advice on loads of things, not just boxing. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

6.5 FAMILY ATMOSPHERE

The community of Ithaca is made up of the coaches and athletes, as well as the relatives of the practitioners, especially the young ones. The family members are at the gym on a regular basis – one can find them sitting next to the ring, watching the training sessions. There are women among them, who are usually the mothers of young male boxers; however, most of the time, there are men, who are the fathers, and sometimes the grandfathers, taking their young ones to the sessions. The composition by sex of the group of relatives, and also the activity of going to boxing with the sons, is highly gendered, as Angela, mother of one of the kids at Ithaca, notices:

[Coming to boxing is] a father-son thing, it's kind of the bonding thing. But, I'm separated from the kids' dad, so he has them on the weekend. So like, during the week it's obviously my job if it's a during the week thing. So, that's why I take him [her son]. But [...] I do think that it's definitely a father-son sort of stereotypical thing to do. (Emily, W, 25–34 y/o, parent of a child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside).

Entire families are very often at the gym, lending the space a family atmosphere. Besides, it helps that the academy is a child friendly space, which is the case not only because of the special attention and care the coaches give to children during the training sessions, but also because there is a good understanding of the boxers who have to take their children to the academy when there is no one else who can take

care of them at home. Among the people who take their children to the training is Megan. She is a senior boxer who recognises the importance of the acceptance of her child at Ithaca for her boxing career; this acceptance was also a reason that made her choose Ithaca among the different gyms available to her:

My son comes to the gym with me [...] and that's where Ithaca is really good, because they're really supportive of that. If I bring him in, no one's going to question that. Whereas in another local gym [...] there was even a sign on the wall saying: Kids £3, Adults £5. So, I went in, and [...] one of the coaches was like, 'Oh, we can't have toddlers in.' And I was like: 'He's 6. You've got a sign on the door.' And he was like: 'No, no, we don't mean babies. We're not having babies in.' (Megan, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Ithaca tries to be a welcoming place for everybody and also to comply with the equality frameworks of UK sport governing bodies, as in this way, their chances of success when applying for funding are higher. In this view, drawing from Sport England documents, the gym has designed policies and statements that stress its commitment to equality. The framework developed not only acknowledges the inequalities that social minorities can experience, but also expresses the academy's commitment to fighting against discrimination and promoting equal treatment and respect for diversity. The equality policies at Ithaca are acknowledged by all the coaches and older members; nevertheless, sometimes social practices infringe their egalitarian essence without any sanction. For instance, whereas the academy is seen by young boxers as a good place to train and develop their career for the opportunities it offers,⁷⁶ Ithaca is considered by others as an organisation that does not offer full access to opportunities

⁷⁶ This is not only because of the fame the academy has gained over the years, but also because of the opportunities the boxers expect to have within it. For instance, to get fights, to travel to championships, to attend training camps, and even to get to an elite level and be part of the national boxing squad.

to all the fighters. For instance, female boxers complain often about the unequal treatment they receive in comparison to their male counterparts; for instance, they do not get as much coaching as their male peers. In these terms, it seems there is a constant conflict between the academy and the boxers who seek equality of opportunity.

6.6 WINNING IT ALL

Core aspects emphasised at Ithaca are success and competitiveness. Among the boxers of other boxing academies in the city, Ithaca is well known for being focused on kids with talent and young fighters with boxing skills and a promising future as amateurs or even as professional boxers.⁷⁷ In this context, the relevance of succeeding in the ring is continually stressed, especially by the head coach, as can be observed in the field note below:

Robert is giving some advice to Megan. He is telling her that she has to approach more to the opponent. Then, he adds: "Everything is about winning. We want to win, we don't want something else, do we?" (Field note, 25 January 2018)

In a context where winning is emphasised, adults without previous boxing knowledge find it difficult to be taken seriously in the gym, because the coaches see the talented, experienced fighters as the safest investment of their time, knowledge, and energy. In my case, though I had the fitness level needed for boxing and the will power to learn the trade, because I did not have any skill or knowledge of boxing when I first joined the gym, I usually was left behind by the coaches; very seldom did they call me to do

⁷⁷ Ithaca is an amateur boxing gym; however, sometimes professional boxers train there. They attend at times when the gym is free and are coached by Ithaca's most experienced trainers.

pad work or gave me technical guidance. Consequently, I did not make great improvement in boxing while conducting fieldwork. I noticed that I did not receive as much attention as my male counterparts, especially in comparison to those who were, like myself, not very experienced.⁷⁸ But especially, I noticed that the lack of attention I received was because I was not in the ideal age range to start boxing.⁷⁹ Thus, one can assume that from the perspective of the coaches, the chances that I could develop the pugilist capital required to be a successful fighter, in the short term, were low; therefore, they decided not to invest time in me. Nevertheless, it must be said that it is not only the beginners who struggle to get opportunities to develop their boxing skills. Also, quite experienced boxers who are new to the gym (those who used to train in other academies) have to be patient, disciplined, and show their talent and commitment in order to get the attention of the coaches. If they succeed, they gain the right to have good quality coaching and to be called to get in the ring for sparring. However, if they earn that right, they will occupy a second place as the boxers that have successfully competed for Ithaca are given priority. In this vein, it seems that due to the competitive, hierarchical, and meritocratic system that prevails in boxing, or at least at Ithaca, the opportunities for an adult beginner to be taken into consideration as a potential boxer are scarce.

⁷⁸ The lack of attention by the coaches to female participants is further analysed in Chapter 8.

⁷⁹ I was between 35 and 36 years-old, which is late to start learning a sport in which the age limit for competing is 40 years-old.

6.7 ATHLETICS AND MORAL LESSONS

The institutional philosophy of Ithaca has as its core values discipline, friendship, and success. In this context, Ithaca has as a mission not only to ‘produce champions in the ring’ as the head coach states, but also to contribute to the personal development of those who attend the gym, especially by developing discipline and self-confidence. Being aware of the latter aim, many parents take their children to Ithaca expecting they will learn to defend themselves and develop discipline, self-esteem, and confidence. This is the case of Salem, father of an 11 year-old boy, who does not like the sport but has been taken to Ithaca for five years:

I bring my son [to] boxing because even little kids, they push him at school [...]. I don't want him to fight. But, I want him to be able to say, "Hold on!"... and boxing gives that confidence. (Aaron, M, 35–44 y/o, parent of Salem, child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The centrality that fighting has in boxing is very often underestimated at the academy. The narrative of the participants and coaches is focused on the positive learning and effects of boxing rather than on the aggression the sport entails. In this context, besides the importance of self-confidence, self-defence, and discipline, the relevance of friendship and comradeship is continuously stressed at Ithaca:

Boxing, how we run the gym, is not about violence; it's about skill. If you notice, when you come to a boxing show: they [the boxers] touch gloves, they do their best, and at the end, they put their arms around each other. (Robert, M, 55–64 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The role of comradeship seems contradictory, considering boxing is an individual sport and an especially violent one. However, for the pugilists, there is no discrepancy between comradeship and boxing. The friendship and respect they have for their

colleagues is noticeable, especially during the trainings. In them, the boxers usually show recognition of the others' skills, as can be observed in the field note below:

Amir and Tomek are sparring tonight. They look to me as warriors: strong, skilled, and tough, with no mercy for the other. When the training is over, they go off the ring; they are exhausted and completely sweaty. Suddenly, Tomek expressively hugs Amir telling him 'Cheers, man!' Both smile amicably and [look] fulfilled. (Field note, 20 February 2018).

The comradeship is salient during the trainings, and it is noticeable not only among boxers of the same academy, but also between boxers of different academies. This can be seen, for instance, when either female or male boxers visit another academy with their coaches for sparring in order to get experience. In this regard, both coaches and boxers, who in competitions are adversaries, in the context of the training are friendly and respectful.

The academy offers participants an opportunity for training in boxing but also for socialising. The conditioning sessions have a relaxed atmosphere. Usually, the training sessions are not physically demanding and the breaks between the exercises are prolonged because the coach is chatting with some of the attendants, which makes him forget to put the timer on again. In these sessions, mockery of someone's lack of attention, skills, strength, or fitness level are very common. Also, in the 'mixed conditioning session', sexual talk is frequent and everyone, including the coach, is involved. In contrast, the amateur boxers' session is characterised by the discipline of the boxers and the severity of the coaches. Thus, it is not easy to connect with people in it. Also, the atmosphere is very competitive, and the rules are rigid. In these training sessions the boxers are not allowed to chat; the punishment for chatting is not being called for sparring or pads, which is the worst thing that can happen to a boxer on any training night. In the amateurs' session, children, youth, and adults are treated with the

same severity; everybody is expected to be committed and respectful. Moreover, sometimes the sessions are so physically demanding and require so much attention that one might find it better to focus on the training than trying to socialise. Despite this, as most of the boxers have been at the gym for many years,⁸⁰ they have established friendships and meaningful relations. Though at Ithaca romantic relationships are not allowed among the boxers, there is a heterosexual romantic relationship between two talented young boxers. Because of the camaraderie and discretion that prevail in boxing, it is hard to tell they are a couple. However, if one looks closely, they constantly show affection to each other.

At Ithaca, boxing is clearly seen as a way to develop personal, social, and athletic skills. In this view, the boxing community gives both boxing and the academy a relevant social role that sometimes seems to be romanticized. From this perspective, coaches, parents, and boxers assume there is a direct relationship between participation in boxing and the prevention of negative social behaviour, which for them is extremely relevant in the context of a deprived city where people struggle for access to opportunities. Thus, they assume Ithaca has a great potential for individual and social change:

Just say there are 30 young juniors in there [boxing]. That's 30 more kids off the streets. Not all of them, but some of them could be getting up to all sorts if they weren't in there. That's 30 kids already off the streets in there doing something worthwhile, so they're getting fit. It's building their confidence without a doubt. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

⁸⁰ Some of them attend at least three times per week.

According to those at Ithaca, boxing prevents negative social behaviour, particularly among young males. In this view, it is considered that boxing, due to the discipline and commitment that it requires, can easily engage people, and in this way, prevent crime, as well as alcohol and drug use, especially among youth in disadvantaged situations.

Alicia, an attendant at the conditioning sessions comments on this point:

[Ithaca] helps so many children in the city who hang around in the streets and get into crime, alcohol and smoking, gangs and things like that...so it's so worth [it] for them to come and not be nutty. (Alicia, W, 35–44 y/o, attendee of female-only boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Ithaca's role in preventing negative behaviour seems to be idealised. This is especially clear when considering that most of its members not only were already in a protective environment when they joined the gym,⁸¹ but they also had access to social or cultural capital that allowed them to participate in sport. Regarding this, sport literature reports that there is a strong relationship between social structures and sport participation, reversing 'the current fashion for arguing that sport can contribute to increased "social inclusion" and suggests that various aspects of social inclusion *precede* such participation' (Coalter, 2015: 21; emphasis added). Moreover, it stresses that there is little evidence of a 'direct causal relationship between involvement in sport, moral outlook and criminal or deviant behaviour' (Crabbe, 2008: 22). Taking into account these considerations and acknowledging that sport itself does not provide the most effective means to achieve social progress, the positive impact of sport participation among Ithaca's members must also be recognised. For instance, it offers people

⁸¹ This is according to the data gathered during fieldwork.

chances to have a healthier routine and be part of a supportive network, as illustrated below:

Some of the lads in there [boxing] come from not the greatest of backgrounds, you get loners, but now they're in there and they're part of a team. We all rely on each other; they're helping each other [...], now they belong somewhere. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Nevertheless, the hierarchical and meritocratic system that exists in boxing makes the chance of being part of the network and developing both a membership and a sense of belonging to the gym a privilege for a few.

Another role given to the academy and boxing is that they ensure access to opportunities. In this context, according to the participants, boxing offers not only life experiences that could be beneficial, particularly for those with a disadvantaged background, but also opportunities with benefits that go beyond the sporting realm. In the following fragment, Derek, one of the coaches at Ithaca, reflects on the opportunities boxing has for disadvantaged kids:

We get to travel abroad [to boxing competitions]. Some of the kids you're taking have never been out of the city, never mind the country. So you take children to Leeds, they've never been to Leeds before. Take them to Scarborough, they've never been to Scarborough before. Some kids might think, 'God, it's only Scarborough!' 'It's only Bridlington!', but some kids have never done that. (Derek, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Boxing participation is also seen as a means of attaining social status. In the understanding of the participants, the status that boxing confers comes not only with the achievements and skills a boxer can gain or develop, but also with the social recognition that boxers have in the wider social context. In this regard, in the narrative used at the academy, even if it is not explicitly mentioned, the link between the respect

society has for boxers and the violence boxers embody is implied and taken for granted. From this perspective, for the Ithaca community, being a boxer, especially a successful one who is well versed in the moral lessons of boxing, is a great way to gain status inside and outside the boxing scene. Moreover, among the boxing community, the status a boxer can attain through athletic excellence is perceived as a tool to counteract the effects caused by coming from a disadvantaged origin. This is illustrated as follows:

People give Hull, sometimes, a bad reputation, and what we try to do, myself, and not just me but a lot of the other [boxing] clubs [...] is try to help people. Put them on the right track, the rights, the wrongs. 'You are what you do in life, make a great impression, be respected, respect yourself'. That's what the gym's all about, really. It really is, and then, people like boxing. Maybe they don't like the boxing, but people respect boxers as people. (Robert, M, 55–64 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Therefore, in the view of the fighters, boxing offers opportunities and status that otherwise might be difficult to get, especially if one has a disadvantaged background. These benefits, along with the sense of belonging to a community, the passion for boxing, the emotions involved in fighting or coaching (such as the 'adrenaline rush' which is often mentioned by the boxers), the feeling of being fit, and the interaction with others, make boxing a central aspect of people's lives and make the academy a space where they enjoy spending time. Such is the case of Todd, one of the coaches at Ithaca:

I love boxing, I like being in the gym and I love the atmosphere of the gym. I love being around boxers and showing them [some skills] and watching them improve. I like meeting people and people have become friends as well. I like that part of it. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

6.8 CONCLUSION

Ithaca Boxing Academy's committed community, volunteer-led structure, austere venue, athletic and moral lessons, philosophy, and perspectives on the social role of boxing make it a distinctive place in Hull. Moreover, the academy is a 'big part of the city' as one of the boxers expressed during an interview. People from the city – boxers and non-boxers – and across the region recognise the role Ithaca has in offering Hull's citizens a space to practise boxing. Moreover, it provides a site for interacting and socialising with others. The relevance boxing and the academy have in Hull, along with their role in the interactions between people in the city make Ithaca a great field in which to conduct a gender analysis of both the participation of women in boxing and the understandings of gender equality. This becomes interesting considering the context of the academy, where not only social hierarchies and bias are so salient, as was narrated throughout the chapter, but also, where there is a constant tension between power relations and egalitarian claims and values.

Having offered to the reader a snapshot of the site where I conducted my fieldwork, in the following chapters, I analyse the data gathered during it: I investigate how boxing produces and reproduces gender meanings, discourses, and practices; how it recreates gendered power relations and the effects this has on women; and how gender equality is proclaimed to be already achieved. In the analysis conducted, I take into account mainly data gathered at Ithaca; nevertheless, data collected in different gyms is also considered.

7 BOXING AS A GENDERED AND A GENDERING SPORT

Sport provides a context in which the fiction of separate, categorically different, and unequal sexes can be constructed and made to appear natural, even in this allegedly "postfeminist" era. Messner, 2002

This chapter investigates how gender differences are produced, reproduced, and contested in the boxing context. Gender is understood as a result of the production and reproduction of differences between women and men, as well as between what is considered feminine and masculine. In West and Zimmerman's (1987: 137) terms:

Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the "essentialness" of gender.

Gender has been used to legitimise social divisions (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 126) and norms based on men's dominance and masculine hegemony. Moreover, gender norms define who can be recognised as a subject and who cannot; and, indeed, those who deviate from gender norms risk experiencing precarity in the form of harassment, pathologisation, or violence (Butler, 2015). Thus, as Joan Scott (1986: 1067) argues, gender is a 'primary way of signifying relationships of power', being the base of gender inequality and discrimination. Similarly, Ridgeway & Correll (2004: 511) suggest that

gender not only marks identity difference but also organizes inequality on the basis of that difference. Thus, in this chapter, processes of doing, of making, but also of destabilising gender are analysed in relationship to inequalities and women's experiences of boxing.

Doing gender makes reference to the reproduction of differences that, in this context, are often translated into inequality and precarity. Therefore, it is relevant to analyse the possibilities for change and especially for equality. In this vein, I briefly analyse how gender is undone in boxing. For this, I use Deutsch's (2007) approach, which draws on West & Zimmerman (1987): if gender is done (produced, reproduced, and accomplished), it can be undone. In saying this, she points out the possibilities social interactions offer for resisting, contesting, and challenging gender. Thus, using Deutsch's investigative perspective, I will examine situations in which gender difference is given an unoppressive meaning.

Acknowledging gender is both done and undone, and also that it is interlinked with a system of inequality, amateur boxing is considered a 'social relational context' in Ridgeway & Correll (2004: 511) terms, acting as a milieu that enables both the production and contestation of gender, as well as the reproduction and challenge of inequality. Also, it is understood as a gendered institution in Joan Acker (1992: 567) terms, taking into account that gender is present in the 'processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power' in boxing. Additionally, drawing from Moreno (2011), who uses Teresa de Lauretis's category (1987), boxing is analysed as a 'technology of gender'. By this, Moreno (2011) suggests that sport marginalises and discriminates against women; it codifies and prescribes differentiated activities and styles for women and men, aiming to affirm masculinity and male dominance in the sport, and produces gender representations according to a binary and hierarchical

system affecting bodily dispositions, perceptions, and the actions of individuals. In these terms, boxing as a technology of gender does gender by creating gender differences, boundaries, and inequalities.

This chapter is organised in four sections; the first three are focused on the production and reproduction of gender, while the fourth emphasises how gender is challenged and contested. Thus, the first section serves as a framework for understanding the gendered cultural presumptions that prevail in boxing. In this initial section, the relevance of gender essentialism in creating differences between individuals is highlighted, especially how these differences legitimise the discrimination against women in the boxing context. The second section examines how boxing has been culturally constructed as a masculine activity, and also how it has been used as a site for affirming hegemonic masculinity. The third examines how women are perceived in boxing and how they experience participating in a masculine activity in a male-dominated arena. Finally, in the fourth and final section, I investigate how gender is undone and destabilised. Here, I analyse situations in which gender stereotypes, representations, and embodiments have been transgressed and consider the possibilities undoing gender has for achieving equality.

7.1 DOING GENDER, NATURALIZING INEQUALITY

Doing gender involves creating sociocultural differences that classify and distinguish individuals differently according to their physical sex. Once the differences have been created, they are used to affirm “essentially different natures” and the institutional arrangements based on these’ (West & Zimmerman, 2009: 114). In this framework, patriarchy and male dominance are seen as responses to the existence of gender differences, ‘as if the social order were merely a rational accommodation to “natural

differences” among social beings’ (Fenstermaker and West 2002, 207 in West & Zimmerman, 2009: 114). Accordingly, there is a widespread assumption that inequality and marginalisation in boxing are not only natural but also fixed and unavoidable, as we can observe in the quotation below:

It [boxing] is always going to be male dominated. More and more women are coming in, but it’s more so a male-dominated sport, and I think it always will be. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The participant quoted here acknowledges that despite the presence of women in boxing, the sport will remain a male domain, as it has always been. Moreover, he perceives that the male dominance in boxing is fixed and inherent to the sport. In this sense, it seems that women’s exclusion from boxing is merely a natural response rather than a result of social divisions.

7.1.1 GENDER ESSENTIALISM

Gender essentialism is characterised by regarding gender differences as ‘natural, fixed, deep-seated, discrete, informative, and fundamental, beliefs that often rest on a biogenetic understanding of the sources of gender difference’ (Skewes et al, 2018: 12). In these terms, gender essentialism serves to justify that women and men are naturally different based on a gendered hierarchy that is underpinned by male power and dominance. Skewes et al (2018) argue, in a study that assesses gender essentialist thinking (GET) among Australian and Danish participants, that GET ‘is associated with support for the gender status quo’ (Skewes et al, 2018: 12). In this way, for Skewes et al (2018), gender essentialism supports men’s supremacy, while it enables gender inequality and discrimination against women and those masculinities that do not conform to the archetype:

[G]ender essentialism is associated with acceptance of social arrangements that disadvantage and harm women, such as support for discriminatory hiring practices and unequal gender roles, it may also be associated with negative assessments of men who fail to abide by masculine norms. If gender essentialism supports an unequal gender status quo for those who adhere to gender norms and amplifies backlash against women and men who do not adhere to them, then its only real beneficiaries are norm-adhering men. (Skewes et al, 2018: 13)

Drawing from gender essentialist thinking, during boxing trainings, decisions are made based upon sexist assumptions about sex and gender differences, suggesting that women *per se* are not only different to men but also inferior to them. This problem is narrated by a female boxer, who despite her skills and experience, struggled to pair up with men who did not recognise her as a boxer because she is woman. Under the gender norms that prevail in boxing, she was unintelligible to her male peers, so she experienced precarious participation. In addition, she found difficulties in developing pugilist capital, as often not only men refused to train with her, but she was paired up by the coaches with inexperienced women, rather than with men of similar weight, experience, and skills. Thus, she not only suffered a lack of recognition as a boxer but also suffered from a redistribution of pugilist capital.⁸² Through the lines below we can observe how instead of a careful management of the characteristics of the fighters, decisions in boxing tend to be made based on gender essentialism, hindering female boxers' careers:

[At the gym] there's always things like... "the girls can go on here", "we'll put the girls on the circuit", "we'll put the girls on the sparring", "we'll put the girls on the

⁸² A further gender analysis of recognition, distribution, and precarity in boxing is offered in the following chapter.

bags". They [the coaches] very often separate you [...] they think you [as women] fit together better but sometimes that's not necessarily the case. Say if it's me and two of the younger girls and... one brand new person [...], there's not really much I can gain from sparring with these people, because they're a lot bigger, or less experienced than me. Just because we're girls doesn't necessarily mean that we fit together. (Megan, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Thus, based on gender essentialist thinking, the coaches assume that all women are more or less equal. Consequently, the difference in skills and experience not only between women and men but also among women are neglected. Moreover, the potential of the trainings, in terms of improvement or development of new skills, is hindered by a gender-blind management of the differences. In these terms, Acker (1992: 566) argues that physical characteristics are used to define one's gender and categorize individuals under the binary categories of female and male. Illustrating this, in the case above, we observe that perceived sexual differences create a gendered social division in the gym, ordering the practices that take place within –such as the trainings–, as well as its social structure, characterized by the marginalization of women, which can be expressed in the lack of access to resources, such as quality training.

7.1.2 TESTOSTERONE AT PLAY

Framed in terms of gender essentialist thinking, in boxing there are widespread assumptions that justify both men's privilege and male dominance in the sport and women's marginalisation. For instance, there are beliefs based on men's natural superiority, strength, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and, consequently, adequacy for boxing. On the contrary, there are assumptions that women are not naturally equipped for boxing. As an illustration, in different situations, some of my male

research participants claimed that women were physically strong but not suited to boxing. They claimed that women could be good at other sports, but not boxing. Also, they delimited female strength to certain activities historically considered appropriate for women (indeed, only biologically possible for them), such as giving birth. Moreover, as illustrated below, the participants argued that men's attitudes and preferences, including the attraction of boxing among men, in contrast to women, was something natural, and more precisely, biochemical. In this view, male dominance in boxing was perceived as fixed:

I would say that it [boxing]'s probably a male-dominated sport in the fact, and this is the only reason that I can think of, is the fact that probably men have more testosterone and are more bothered about how other men – not so much women – how other men perceive them. (David, M, 45–54 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In the boxing arena, testosterone plays a key role in the process of doing gender, as it is considered 'the male' hormone that defines and shapes masculinity, as observed in the quotation above. The assumption that testosterone configures men's identity, physical performance, and behaviour is based on a mistaken endocrinological conception. Psychologist Cordelia Fine highlights that '[t]estosterone affects our brain, body, and behaviour. But it is neither the king nor the kingmaker – the potent, hormonal essence of competitive, risk tasking masculinity – it is often assumed to be' (Fine, 2017: 22). Analysing how testosterone has been used to explain sex differences and, especially, to justify gender discrimination, Fine (2017) points out the complexity of human nature, suggesting that much more than testosterone is involved in the definition of our social behaviour, as many other factors in our bodies intervene. She emphasises that testosterone is not an absolute marker of behaviour. In addition, pointing out the fallacy of the dichotomist and essentialist view on gender, Fine (2017:

112) argues that in certain contexts and populations, females are more competitive or risk-taking than males. Therefore, drawing from scientific literature, she denies the two-sex system emphasising that most people possess a 'complicated array of masculine and feminine characteristics' (Joel, 2012 in Fine, 2017: 111).

Despite the new understandings of the complexity of the impact of testosterone, under a patriarchal framework in the sporting field, testosterone is still considered to be the great gender marker that shapes behaviours and possibilities for men differently to women – favouring men. Consequently, there have been relevant institutional efforts not only to maintain testosterone as 'the' male hormone, but also sport as a male dominion, excluding those successful and talented female athletes with higher levels of testosterone than is perceived to be the average for women. Illustrations of such exclusions include the cases of Caster Semenya and Dutee Chand, South African middle-distance runner and Indian sprinter, respectively, known not only for their brilliant performance as athletes but also for their hyperandrogenism and the sexist reactions of sporting organizations, the media, and fellow athletes to this. During fieldwork, testosterone was mentioned several times, especially by male participants, to explain aggressive behaviour among them, the attraction men feel for boxing, and the reason why boxing is male dominated. Some others also claimed that testosterone creates the need in men to compete and to fight. In this regard, Fine suggests that testosterone has been perniciously used to 'polarize the competitive behaviour of the sexes' (2017: 111). The presence of higher levels of testosterone in men was used not only to explain masculine dominance in boxing but also to justify why women should not participate or be recognised in the sport. Testosterone has had a key role in naturalizing the male status quo in boxing, as well as female inferiority in both the social and the boxing arenas:

Maybe men think, “Okay, if I was to walk in a dark alley, someone could maybe try and grab me, and I can defend myself.” But, I don’t think women go, “Look, I want to be able to know how to fight. I can fight other women and be the champion.” So yes, I think it comes down to testosterone, really, do you know what I mean? You [women] don’t have testosterone to try and prove who’s the best in fighting. Maybe, like I say, you want to look good, but you don’t have to do boxing to do that. You can just do cardio workout, or running. (Aaron, M, 35–44 y/o, parent of a child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Female bodies have certain levels of testosterone (Fine, 2017). Moreover, in response to this quotation, some female participants declared during interviews, in opposition to what the male participant suggests above, not only that they loved boxing fights but also that their biggest dream was to become regional, national, and even world champions and prove they were the best fighters. However, the widespread discourse in boxing dismisses the complexity of sex and gender differences and the voice of female participants, and thus legitimising gendered hierarchies through essentialism.

7.1.3SEXIST ASSUMPTIONS

Gender essentialism plays a key role in boxing in the configuration of social expectations, as illustrated below, but also it is the rationale behind rules, norms, and divisions such as sex segregation. Sex segregation in the context of sport assumes the existence of natural differences between women and men, taking for granted that all men are naturally more competitive, more aggressive, and physically superior to all women. Milner & Braddock (2016: 7) argue that ‘sports arenas are one of the final places where sex segregation and the labelling of women as inferior are regarded as socially acceptable’. Drawing from the sexist assumption that women without exception are frail, weak, and not suited to sport, sex segregation has also been presented as a strategy to ensure a level playing field and to protect women from the

physicality of men (Anderson, 2008b). Sex segregation disregards not only that sex itself is complex and subject to a fluidity that belies standard normative gender representations, but it also denies the existence of physical differences that affect the athletic performance of the trained body, that is height, cardiovascular ability, bone density, etc. (Pieper, 2016: 7). Sex integration in boxing occurs when a female boxer is about to compete; in this context, the coaches tend to ask all the experienced boxers, both female and male, to spar with her. However, sex segregation is still a common practice in boxing, not only during competitions where it is compulsory, but also in the training sessions where it is usually taken for granted that women not only are not as strong as men but also are less skilled. Indeed, as Pieper (2016: 8) highlights, 'the presumed need to protect women athletes degraded female athleticism and reaffirmed a belief in male physical superiority'. Indeed, I found that during gender-integrated training sessions, when women try to pair up with their male peers, female boxers struggle to find partners among men, as they consider that they will not develop pugilist capital if they train with women. While conducting fieldwork, I struggled to pair up with men for body sparring exercises where the goal was to develop technical skills. In the cases when I succeed in convincing one of my male peers to exercise with me, most of the time, they did not take me seriously. Along the same lines, female regional champions reported that men used to underestimate them on the grounds of gender:

You [as a female boxer] get your big British boys [boxers from the English boxing squad] who think they're hard. They do not make the comments but, like, at first, [when you are in the ring], they'll take a step back and look at you, and then they'll take the mick, and they'll pretend to flick you, and stuff like that, whilst looking away. It's not until they realise that I actually enjoy what I'm doing and I want to succeed at what I'm doing, when I throw my first shot, that they'll get a bit of a shock [...] They assume, "Girls in the gym are not serious."
(Victoria, W, 18–24 y/o, carded boxer, East Midlands)

The quotation above illustrates that in boxing, a female body is equated with a non-skilled body. This occurs even at the highest levels – i.e. the English squad – where the athletes are supposed to have experience and, therefore, have already seen that female athletes are fully capable of boxing. However, the first reaction towards women in boxing is rejection. In this scenario, it is only when women show they are very skilled – as it is the case of the boxer in the quotation above – that they are treated as peers. However, what happens if women do not have the chance to prove they are skilled? What happens if they are not skilled at all? They are not even considered as peers. Why do women always have to prove that they deserve to be treated seriously? These questions show there are a great variety of problems to solve in the boxing community if it aims to accomplish equality.

7.1.4A BLOODY TABOO

Differences between female and male bodies are emphasised constantly in boxing. However, despite the relevance biological differences are given in boxing, there is a salient one that remains in the margins. This is menstruation, which is taboo and hardly mentioned (Paradis, 2012). For instance, at Ithaca, in the toilets – which are mixed-sex – there are no sanitary disposal bins, nor do the coaches talk about it with the female fighters or apprentices. Though menstruation plays a key role in the weight management and health condition of many female fighters, during fieldwork, a coach educator reported that he had noticed that male coaches find it embarrassing discuss periods with female boxers, and most of the time they do not do it. The lack of consideration for menstruation and its effects mirrors the male dominion in this arena and also reflects the lack of recognition of female bodies in boxing: it communicates that the bodies that matter in boxing are not female.

Hence, boxing is a milieu in which gender differences are used to justify social arrangements based on an unequal gender status quo. In this context, gender essentialism plays a major role proclaiming the existence of essential, fixed, and natural differences between men and women, based on 'a biogenetic understanding of the sources of gender difference' (Skewes et al, 2018: 12) that assumes men's superiority in both the physical and the social dimensions. In this framework, salient biogenetic features such as hormones are used as decisive markers of difference to communicate men's status quo and women's inferiority. Use of these markers reproduce gendered power structures and discourses, which are configured a set of gendered expectations – i.e. female bodies are not adequate for boxing in opposition to male's bodies –, norms – i.e. sex segregation – and practices – i.e. marginalisation of female bodies and their cycles such as menstruation; these expectations create gender inequality. However, as result of gender essentialism, inequalities are naturalized and mistakenly considered unavoidable consequences of biological differences.

7.2 A MAN'S WORLD

Historically, women have participated in boxing, but it is only recently that their presence has gained more recognition. This is a great advance considering the obstacles women boxers have faced throughout history. Nevertheless, their presence has not radically transformed boxing. Boxing is still a male-dominated site, as further analysed in this section, and a 'quintessential masculine space' (2004: 50), as Wacquant puts it. These can be observed in the field note below:

Boxing is a man's world, I think while I'm at the boxing show at Ithaca. Nineteen bouts throughout the night. Thirty-eight boxers, only one of them is female; she

is a girl. Two coaches per boxing academy, fourteen in total, one female. Ten officials, two of them are female. Two referees, both male. Audience, sixty percent is male. Boxing really is a man's world. (Field note, 16 December 2017)

Boxing reproduces and creates gender meanings and structures. Considering that boxing has been considered a masculine activity and a male bastion, it continues to reproduce this scheme as illustrated in the field note above which was written after a boxing show at Ithaca. This kind of show occurred every season and had as a goal to give the athletes experience in competitions. In the shows, local boxers participated and the atmosphere was family oriented. In these shows, as occurred in the daily life in the gym, male domination was the norm and the presence of women was still scarce. Moreover, the higher up one looks in the hierarchy, the fewer women there were. The participation of women in boxing in recent years, as observed throughout the thesis, has not achieved gender parity, though it has been understood by members of the pugilist community as a sign that boxing has evolved towards becoming a more gender-inclusive sphere.⁸³ Thus, the presence of women has been incorrectly interpreted as meaning boxing is no longer an 'ideological underpinning of men's social power and privilege' (Messner, 2002: 142). Under this chimera, the current patriarchal configuration of boxing is a site where gender inequalities are reproduced. Moreover, gender essentialist and sexist beliefs that continue to prevail in boxing are either underestimated or neglected because they are seen as part of the sport's past, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Many years ago, [boxing] was a male-dominant environment, because, you know, there was this ideology that men did the contact sport [and] women [...] took care of the housework [...] I'm talking a long, long time ago. And it was an

⁸³ This is further analysed in Chapter 8.

image, or a perception, and it never really managed to go away until recently.
(Steven, M, 25–34 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The quotation above suggests that it is only recently that sexist assumptions have faded away. Boxing and our society have evolved throughout time and we have made some advancements in the equality field; nevertheless, hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy have yet to be surpassed. Thus, we cannot proclaim that equality has been achieved as there are still cultural and material constraints women continue to face as they try to participate in boxing.

Being resistant to change, boxing continues to be not only a male-dominated organisation but also a site where masculinity is forged and affirmed. For instance, in accordance to Moreno's (2011) findings, it was identified that the coaches, officials, and boxers are predominantly men and notions of masculinity involving virility, physical skill, and force are cultivated and embodied in boxing. Thus, despite Steven's optimism, as the quotation above expresses, it must be said that traditional normative gender representations and roles that enforce caring labour within the domestic sphere for women and attributes such as aggression as natural in men have not faded away. Moreover, as Messner (2011b) and McRobbie (2009) suggest, the participation of women in masculine activities – such as boxing – has led to a reorganization of gendered relations but not to a transformation of the social order. In this view, not only are men's power and privilege unaltered but also, the mere presence of women is used to proclaim that equality has been achieved, disregarding expressions of gender inequality in boxing.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ This is further analysed in Chapter 9.

7.2.1 AFFIRMING MASCULINITY

Commented [ABS6]: added

West & Zimmerman (1987) suggest that sex classifies individuals as females or males. As they put it: “[s]ex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males” (1987: 127). Whereas, gender makes reference to the proposed and continuous performance of attitudes and activities by an individual, according to their sex category. In this perspective, the individuals do gender on the daily basis through social interaction, ‘to produce recognizable enactments of masculinity and femininity’ (1987: 137). In this frame, I observed that boxing was used as a means to do gender considering that some of the male participants perceived boxing as a setting to perform acts of masculinity and reinforce their identity, especially in interaction with other men. This illustrated in the quotation below.

Some men have that, they’re like, “Look, I wonder how it feels if I just [punch somebody].” Do you know what I mean? “Can I take a punch? Can I punch somebody?” Men think like that. Especially fighters who have that, as soon as he sees another man, you size him up already. You think, “Okay, he’s big, but what can I do to defeat him?” Straight away, you’re thinking like that. That’s a fighter’s mentality. You look at another man, you’re thinking, “You know what? If this guy starts with me, what am I going to do? I’m not really scared of him. I can do this, maybe he can do this,” and you’re picturing that already. But, women don’t think like that. I don’t think women think [about this]. (Aaron, M, 35–44 y/o, parent of a child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Drawing on Connell (2009: 2), I understand masculinity as the ‘pattern or configuration of social practices linked to the position of men in the gender order, and socially distinguished from practices linked to the position of women’. For instance, in the quotation above, one can observe how the participant emphasises that women and

men do and think differently. Acknowledging there are multiple masculinities,⁸⁵ for instance, inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2005; 2008b; Anderson & McGuire, 2010), I take into consideration the relevance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; 2002; 2005 [1995])⁸⁶ in the boxing context. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant pattern of masculinity 'constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women' (Connell, 1987: 183); illustrating this, the participant above identifies boxing as a context where men can prove to themselves and to others their dominance and supremacy . Although it can be subject to resistance (Anderson, 2008a; Anderson & McGuire, 2010), men conform to norms of hegemonic masculinity because it preserves their social dominance (Connell, 1987). In boxing, hegemonic masculinity plays a relevant role in sustaining male power and men's privilege; therefore, it finds great support among male members. As Woodward suggests, '[t]raditional masculinities could be on the ropes elsewhere, but men's boxing would surely be a place where they are fighting back and hegemonic masculinity might be holding on' (2007a: 10). Thus, hegemonic masculinity remains a dominant feature within the pugilist milieu.

Hegemonic masculinity is an identity characterised by aggression and physical strength, both of which are considered attributes that sustain male dominance and consequently are characteristics that men must enact to achieve their status both as

⁸⁵ Please see the literature review chapter.

⁸⁶Anderson (2008a) and Anderson & McGuire (2010) prefer the term orthodox masculinity; they suggest that competitive, organized, institutionalized contact sports – such as boxing – have served to transmit the dominant and conservative ethos of orthodox masculinity between generations (Anderson & McGuire, 2010: 251) .

men and as power holders. Drawing from Connell (1987), Messner (2002: 60) points out that 'the institution of sport historically constructs hegemonic masculinity as *bodily superiority* over femininity and over nonathletic masculinities'. Based on gender essentialist thinking, highlighting the role of nature and biology in the configuration of masculinity, and also taking for granted the existence of essential characteristics of men as a social group, the male participants in my research argued that the violence and the physicality involved in boxing are what attract males to the sport, as illustrated below:

On a percentage scale, I would say the percentage of men [in boxing] that want to feel more superior is higher than the other token [men going to boxing looking for releasing their anger or stress] [...] When you look at lions, there's always a king of a pride of lions, isn't there? You might get three lions and there can only be one leader. I think that's the way that [...] the male side of boxing is how they want to be perceived: I'm the best'. (David, M, 45–54 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

They [men] don't want to be the weak one [...] So, that's why they go into boxing [...] so that they look macho, basically. They can defend themselves. Because, men think like that. (Aaron, M, 35–44 y/o, parent of a child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

As observed in the quotations above, the participants –who were boxercise practitioners– took for granted both the existence of a relationship between physical violence, dominance, and masculinity, as well as men's need to feel superior in comparison to other men – i.e. among them, those who can be identified as nonathletic masculinities or who do not know how to fight. Connell (1987: 183) points out that '[h]egemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of

masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works'. In these terms, it seems that boxing offers men a chance to affirm hegemonic masculinity.

Aggression, physical power and violence are core elements of hegemonic masculinity, especially in the sportive context (Messner, 2002). Thus, though aggressiveness, violence, and toughness are salient features of boxing, as performed by both male and female fighters, they are more accepted when performed by men. Although women have gained more recognition in boxing than in the past, the boxing culture is still resistant to displays of female violence. This seems paradoxical in the context of a contact sport. However, pugilism normalises and celebrates the display of aggression by men. As Messner (2002: 164) stresses, sport 'reproduces and valorises dominant values of male heroism based on competition and winning, playing hurt, handing out pain to opponents, group-based bonding through homophobia and misogyny, and the legitimisation of interpersonal violence as a means of success'. In the following field note, one can observe not only the importance of competition between men in the boxing context but also how, for the sake of winning, hurting one another is allowed and even expected:

Two boys around 12 years old are sparring at the amateur training. One of them is dramatically bleeding from the nose but the round is still on. The boys are expressing anger but no pain at all. The round is over. One of the coaches cleans the nose of the boy with toilet paper. The parents, mostly men, are unperturbed, so are the coaches. Nobody shows empathy for the pain these boys are experiencing. The next couple enters into the ring as if nothing had happened. (Field note, 11 April 2017)

Woodward notes that 'boxing involves more physical contact than most [sports] and crucially is premised upon the aim of physically injuring an opponent' (Woodward, 2008: 541). Thus, regarding the incident recounted above, we can note the regulation

of the emotions among the boxing community in order to show either anger or indifference rather than pain or empathy. Moreover, we observe the existence of a gendered expectation of violence and pain tolerance among male fighters as a salient feature in the configuration of masculinity.

7.2.2 RISKY BEHAVIOURS AND TOUGH ATTITUDES

Risky behaviour and tolerance of pain caused by injuries while training or competing are considered bargaining chips for obtaining success in the ring, acceptance by the coaches, and membership in the gym. Trimbur (2011) suggests that in boxing, characterised for its masculine and heteronormative codes, male boxers are supposed to 'fight through the pain. That is, rather than focusing on the *fact* of physical suffering, fighters are asked *to* respond to that suffering by summoning a masculine will and determination' (Trimbur, 2011: 340; emphasis in the original). At Ithaca, there was a young male boxer who frequently used to participate in competitions, but who suddenly suffered a hand injury playing another sport. As he told me, the doctors suggested he stop boxing for some months, but he started training earlier than he should have. In the training sessions, during the breaks, he was constantly moving his hand. It was evident that he was in pain. Nevertheless, for him it was more important to continue with his pugilist development. Wacquant (2004) suggests that boxing allows us to observe embodiment processes, as there seems to be no distinction between the mind and body while it is practiced. Drawing on this idea, Woodward (2008: 543) highlights that '[t]he merging of mind and body offers a useful means of understanding not only how but also why people subject themselves to such punishing training regimes and participate in what seems to be so brutal a sport'. In these terms,

the embodiment of the risky behaviour and the tolerance of pain is illustrated in the quotation below:

I know Jamal quite well. He got in the ring. I wasn't cornering him. I knew straightaway there was something wrong. He looked really spaced out [...] he won, but he boxed terribly [...] I said to him after, "Are you okay? It looked like you'd just had a sparring session and had been hit really hard." He said, "I'd just come off Ramadan." I cannot understand anybody – and especially grown adults – that don't refuse a bout. They [dehydrated boxers] could die [...] But they're like, "I don't want to let the club down." I'm like, "Yes, okay, but with your super-dehydration, you might die." (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

The quotation above depicts both, the embodiment of pain tolerance and physical sacrifice in boxing, especially by male boxers, as it was observed during fieldwork. Moreover, it also illustrates the aim of satisfying one's coaches and representing the gym well no matter the consequences for the boxer. Therefore, in the case above we observe how sportive, gender, and religious expectations intersect in the boxing context; and if they are not questioned, they can lead to dramatic consequences putting at risk the bodies of the athletes.

The masculine and heteronormative codes that characterise boxing have impacts not only on the body but also on the emotions and relationships among members. Trimbur (2011) conceptualizes the relationship between boxers and trainers as 'tough love', emphasising the harsh treatment boxers get from male trainers. The toughness on the boxers has different goals, such as caring for them, pushing them towards pugilistic success, demonstrating moral superiority over the fighters, and developing in them masculine identities (Trimbur, 2011: 335). Based on my own observations, I felt that the trainers were tougher on male boxers – especially with the teenaged boys – whereas with female fighters they were usually milder. However, this was not always

the case; Michelle, a female boxer, who at the time of the interview had trained only for a couple of months at Ithaca, demonstrated this:

I like people to say it how it is: if I'm doing that wrong, then I'm doing it wrong. If it's shit, it's shit. That's why I like [Ithaca]. For my first fight for [Ithaca], I won it [...] I went back to the changing rooms and one of the coaches said to me – he didn't even congratulate me – he said I boxed fucking shit [laughter]. That's exactly what he said, and I didn't know what to say [laughter]. (Michelle, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Toughness and lack of empathy were the norm among the coaches rather than the exception. Thus, though the boxers deserved to be treated well and even congratulated for their achievements, such as the case of the boxer quoted above, they were treated badly. Therefore, the toughness and aggression associated with the masculine behaviour that boxing involves are not limited to the boxers on the canvas; they are also a practice that affects the relationship between the coaches and the athletes.

7.2.3 BEING A MACHO MAN

Toughness, pain tolerance, risky behaviour, and bodily superiority are relevant features in the performance of hegemonic masculinity within the boxing context. However, there are other aspects associated with its construction, such as compulsory heterosexuality (Connell, 1987; Messner, 2002), sexism, and homophobia. Coaches and athletes at Ithaca emphasised that discrimination based on sexual orientation was not accepted and that everyone, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation was welcome in the gym. On this subject, I learnt that some of the coaches at Ithaca trained LGBT artists for a couple of days in the context of an art festival celebrating gay pride in the city. Moreover, from the artists themselves, I learnt also that they felt

welcomed at the gym and had been treated respectfully. Moreover, they enjoyed being at the gym, transgressing symbolic boundaries (Field note, 21 July 2018). Despite the inclusive policy, initiatives and attitudes shown by some coaches at Ithaca in special events such as the gay pride celebrations, in the everyday routine, when I conducted my fieldwork, there were no openly gay athletes (male or female) among the gym members. Accordingly, a young male coach stated the following:

I've never coached a gay male. Not because, you know, of any kind of refusal, or anything like that. Simply because I cannot remember a time where a gay male has entered the gym, or even contacted us on the website. (Steven, M, 25–34 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

At Ithaca maybe a gay male has never been overtly discriminated against. However, the hypermasculine culture that prevails in boxing, the dominant role hegemonic masculinities play in it, and the absence – at least in the gym – of gay participants, make it hard for non-hegemonic masculinities to feel welcome at the boxing gym. Thus, they were neither overtly excluded from, nor actively integrated into boxing.

Trying to identify the participants' understanding of the lack of transgender, gender-fluid and non-binary individuals, the attendants suggested, as Anna observes below, that being a heterosexual man, and especially a 'macho' man, is part of the social expectations to be performed in boxing:

Normally when it comes to boxing, you [a male boxer] are a macho man. They [the boxers] don't see being gay as being macho, unfortunately [...] I think there's got to be some kind of acceptance. Because, with them [male boxers] not being 'macho', then I can't see them being accepted as much in the professional kind of way with some of the guys. (Anna, W, 25–34 y/o, attendee of female-only boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

According to Anna, the macho man is the best representation of hegemonic masculinity in boxing, an identity related with being athletic, dominant, aggressive, and being heterosexual. Thus, being a 'true' male boxer is constructed in opposition of being gay, which in this particular context, could be perceived as not adequate for boxing, as if one's sexuality could define one's virtuosity for a sport. During the interviews, male boxers and coaches declared gay members were welcomed in the gym. Nevertheless, the culture that prevailed in the gym still relied on practices and performances related to hegemonic masculinity, which could serve to discourage the participation of non-heterosexual individuals in the boxing gym and reinforce the representation of the macho.

Commented [ABS7]: added

As a site where hegemonic masculinity is forged, the culture and social practices that predominate in boxing are shaped by heterosexuality and the subordination of women. In this context, a relevant aspect of social bonding is made through sexual talk, which, as Messner observes, is usually performed by a group of men (Messner, 2002: 34). Sexual talk and banter are social practices normalised in boxing, taken as a way of expressing not only the bonds among men, but also of communicating that (sexual) power over women and heterosexuality are what characterise that particular group of men. Sexual talk I identified in field work included mockery among male boxers ridiculing non-heterosexual orientations and jokes sexualising women. These instances seem to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Sexual talk among men was common in the context of both amateur boxing trainings and the conditioning sessions as a mechanism of identification and socialisation. In light of this, Woodward (2008: 538) suggests that '[t]o be able to say that you "hang out" with boxers, as "one of the guys", supports an identification with a powerful, longstanding version of masculinity'. When the male members and the coach were familiar to me, sometimes, I was the

target of sexual jokes in which they created the delusion that one of them and I, usually the coach, were casual sexual partners.⁸⁷ Whereas in my case, the sexual talk made me feel upset but not vulnerable, during an interview, a female boxer in her 20s reported she had been a target of uncomfortable and constant sexual jokes from a group of male boxers while being the only woman in an amateur boxing camp abroad. She explained that she felt, acting as a group, men's sense of power is unlimited. Those who were sexualising her were her own colleagues, and no one was eager to defend her. On the contrary, the violence and sexism the sexual jokes involved were celebrated with laughs by the group of men. As Woodward (2007a: 14) suggests, complicity among men, in the form of laughter or silence, plays a major role in the affirmation of masculinity. This complicity can be explained through the patriarchal dividend, which, according to Connell, is the 'advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women' (Connell 1995 in Woodward, 2007a: 14). Thus, even if not all the male boxers were actively participating in the sexualisation of the female pugilist, the complicity of some of them acted in accordance to a sexist ideology based on men's power and male privilege.

7.2.4 INCLUSIVE MASCULINITIES

Hegemonic masculinity prevails in boxing; nevertheless, inclusive masculinities are also performed in the pugilist arena. Anderson (2008a) and Anderson & McGuire (2010) label 'inclusive' those masculinities that show support for gay men, are not particularly concerned with the expression of femininity by men, and are not misogynist. At Ithaca, some men performed masculinities that could be identified as

⁸⁷ For further analysis, see the methodological chapter.

inclusive. According to Anderson & McGuire (2010), inclusive masculinities might contest misogyny and homophobia in their interrelations and performances; however, they would not confront openly these phenomena. Instead, they will create coping strategies and develop their own counter-narratives. While conducting fieldwork, I found that one of the coaches at Ithaca could be identified within the paradigm of inclusive masculinity. Even though he was rigid and very disciplined, he demonstrated more of a caring love for the boxers, rather than expressing the toughness that often characterises coaches. Furthermore, he gave quality training to both men and women. Though he treated men and women equally, he was not able to recognise gender inequalities in boxing; he did not identify, or did not acknowledge, discrimination or male dominance; nevertheless, I found that his positive social behaviour helped to make women – including me – feel more comfortable and included at the gym.⁸⁸

The presence of inclusive masculinities in boxing is relevant as it illustrates not only the fluidity of masculinities but also how the dominance of hegemonic masculinity can be contested. Nevertheless, boxing's androcentric and patriarchal hierarchy has not faded away. As a site characterised by its reluctance to change, it has resisted the challenges posed by the participation of women and the emergence of those who perform inclusive masculinities. As Acker (1992: 568) points out, despite the participation of women in institutions historically dominated by men, in which sport could be included, and the changes their participation has involved, it is still males in leading positions who dominate these institutions. In the following quotation, a young

⁸⁸ He was also inclusive in terms of nationality. Acknowledging that at the gym there were no native English speakers, he usually asked in a discreet, kind, and respectful way if we understood the directions or advice the coaches had given.

female ex-boxer suggests, pessimistically, that there is a small chance of meaningful transformation in boxing. She highlights that if the head coach, being within the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity, is leading the organisation, the presence of inclusive masculinities has little effect in the overall structure of boxing:

There's an overshadow of the head coach [...] then they [the other coaches] can't really do a lot to change anything because they're under one person. Not that they're getting paid or anything, but it's almost like you can't deal with the agro. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Despite the increasing presence and recognition of women and inclusive masculinities in boxing, the sport remains a social realm dominated by men and a site where hegemonic masculinity is forged, reproduced, and celebrated. During fieldwork, I identified a set of aspects associated with its construction which indeed are celebrated in boxing. For instance, the display of aggression by men, the tolerance to pain caused by a male opponent, the subordination and sexualisation of women, compulsory heterosexuality (Connell, 1987; Messner, 2002), and sexism and homophobia. Drawing on Connell (2005), Woodward (2007a: 12) points out that boxing has demonstrated a low potential for subverting heterosexist and patriarchal orthodoxies. In this context, women and those who embody non-hegemonic masculinities participating in the sport are being continually reminded that it is still an arena dominated by hegemonic masculinity.

7.3 AN INTIMIDATING SPORT

Constructed as a male and masculine arena par excellence, boxing has historically marginalised women. In this context, boxing has been a sport in which not only power and privilege are held by men, but also where women are considered as 'second-rate men' (Lafferty & McKay, 2004: 274). Similarly to what Lafferty & McKay (2004)

suggest, Sarah, an ex-boxer and coach points out that in boxing, there is a widespread sexist assumption that women and girls have a subordinated position by default on the grounds of gender:

Some clubs see the girls as second-class citizens still. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

The boxing gym is an intimidating place for anybody. However, as illustrated in this section, for women, the experience is more intense. This is because they are considered second-class citizens, which implies on the one hand, that boxing's male attendants see themselves as the legitimate participants of the sport, and on the other, that female participants are seen not only as subordinate to men but also invaders of the sport. Wacquant (2004) points out that boxing is not for everybody, suggesting that one may need to have a certain character and social background to handle the discipline and hard work that pugilism requires. In addition, my impression during fieldwork was that it is necessary, as well, to be able to cope at the gym with the lack of diversity regarding gender and ethnicity, at least in the Hull context. In the city, most people outside the scene considered a woman joining a boxing gym an act of bravery – or madness. 'It is very brave of women boxers to step into a male field', a mother of a schoolboy attending boxing told me once, suggesting that boxing was not an especially inviting sport for women. From my perspective, to participate in boxing, a woman needs to tolerate being among competitive men, many of whom are seeking to reaffirm their masculinity. Accordingly, my research participants emphasised that generally women may feel uncomfortable at the gym as illustrated below:

I suppose it [the boxing gym] can be intimidating for a woman because there's just a lot of – you're just surrounded by men, male egos. It can put a woman off, can't it? But they [men] are just training. It just depends. Some women get intimidated. (Michelle, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Here Michelle suggests that the gym is a space dominated by men trying to affirm their dominance. She recognises that this may intimidate female participants.⁸⁹ Accordingly, Darren comments in the following quotation on how the configuration of boxing as a male dominated sport, affects negatively on the participation of women; this in response to my question if the presence of a female coach could change this configuration and make boxing more inviting for women.

A female coach can help but equally it's just very difficult. You get a girl coming for the first time [to the gym], there are like 10 lads, 12 lads, [and because of that,] she doesn't want to come back again. (Darren, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

As Darren highlights, the presence of a female coach can contribute to promote women's participation within the sport. However, this might not change the masculine structure and configuration of boxing. As a masculine field dominated by men, the organisation, social practices, norms, and spaces in boxing are made by and for men. Acker points out that the law, politics, religion, and the academy, among others, are gendered institutions 'historically developed by men, currently dominated by men, and symbolically interpreted from the standpoint of men in leading positions, both in the present and historically [...] defined by the absence of women' (Acker, 1992: 568). Drawing on Acker, sport can be considered a gendered institution, which in the case of boxing not only has been characterised as being created and ruled for and by men, but also where women have been historically marginalised. In this context, in order to participate, women have to adapt to the reality that the patriarchal and masculine arena imposes on them, as is illustrated in the case below:

⁸⁹ Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe how after pointing out that the gym is dominated by egocentric men, she normalises the situation.

[If I would have to be weighed], I would not be comfortable if it was [amidst] a bunch of girls. There are far more men than women at the [Ithaca] sessions [...] and the weighting thing is very particular [...]. Last week, a couple of girls were weighed and they did it first. They didn't strip down [and] they did not want to do it [get weighed] with everyone... They [the gym]'ve only got one [weighing] room and you [as women] were still able to get weighed, but you just had to wait after you felt comfortable with this. (Justin, M, 18–24 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The quotation above depicts when carded boxers were weighed at the gym some days before a competition. At Ithaca, when being weighed male participants used to take their t-shirts and pants off, whereas females did not undress as they did not feel comfortable doing so. Considering this, coaches called the female boxers first to the weighing room. Nevertheless, as there was not a clear strategy in place to manage gender differences, the weighing was a complex moment for both the male coaches and the female boxers, as Justin narrates above.

7.3.1 DISCIPLINING THE BODY

Being an institution shaped by male dominance, women have fought to gain recognition in boxing. However, most of the time, the diversity that women represent, rather than being recognised, is disciplined and accommodated. Thus, masculine standards shape the participation of women. An illustration of which is the uniforms. During fieldwork, a female referee recounted how female officials have to wear a uniform which was originally designed for men. The only difference between men's and women's clothes was the size. In the same trend, in the quotation below, Megan narrates how a couple of years ago (she did not specify when), female competitors

had to wear a groin cup.⁹⁰ This illustrates how in sports institutions, norms and rules do not take female bodies into account and are resistant to including women:

They [the coaches]’re like, “That’s the rule,” but we [female boxers]’re like, “Yes, but we don’t need a groin guard.” And they’re like, “Yes, I know, but that’s the rule. That’s the ABA rule, that all boxers will wear a groin guard.” [...] But the rule finally changed. The officiators, the men way up on high, are just not really willing to accept that females. They’re not going to adapt anything, and they’re probably not going to encourage it either. (Megan, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In the case above, we observe the lack of management of gender diversity in boxing expressed on the one hand, in the imposition of masculine standards on women, and on the other, in the dismissal of differences between male and female bodies. Moreover, we observe that the perception of female athletes is that boxing bodies care neither for their inclusion nor for their advancement. Thus, if boxing aims to be a sport for all, boxing bodies must demonstrate that they take into account everybody, including women, and seek for their wellbeing and development.

Configured as a masculine institution, boxing has been prescribed as suitable for men and boys but not for women and girls. These gender divisions affect the bodily dispositions, perceptions, and actions of individuals (Moreno, 2011), as they are not only internalised but also embodied. During an interview with the mother of a schoolboy attending boxing sessions, her six year-old daughter took part in the

⁹⁰ On its website, England Boxing ‘recommends’ female participants wear ‘crotch protectors’ while sparring and competing (EnglandBoxing, 2019e).

conversation.⁹¹ The girl wanted to explain why she had dropped out from boxing as we observe below:

Emily: Why don't you want to do it [boxing], Lily?

Lily: It's cramping my style.

Emily: It's not – your style, what's your style? [...] Is it also because there are too many boys doing it?

Lily: It's not just that, either.

Emily: But, it is a little bit of that?

Lily: Yes.

Emily: Is it too tiring or is it easy?

Lily: It was tiring, but it hurts as well, because it hurts on your – Sometimes, when you [are] punched from the sides and it hurts.

Through Lily's words in the fragment above, we observe how boxing acts as a technology of gender (Moreno, 2011). Thus, boxing prescribes differentiated activities and styles for women and men, producing gender representations and embodiments according to a hierarchical system in which physical strength is conceived as a masculine quality and frailty as a feminine one, marginalising women and girls from the sport (Moreno, 2011). For instance, we can see how Lily had internalised a model of femininity, with which boxing was interfering: that she was not comfortable within a male-dominated space (one of the reasons she stopped attending), and that in boxing even schoolboys learn, embody, and reproduce a model of masculinity that normalises

⁹¹ Her mother was directing the questions to her.

both inflicting and tolerating pain. As such, boxing is still a male domain where masculinities are embodied and forged from a young age.

Whereas men and boys embody hegemonic masculinity in boxing, femininity is interiorized and materialized in female bodies within the boxing context, despite practicing a sport culturally codified as masculine. Being the right weight to compete and training hard to increase the chance of winning a fight are relevant elements of the boxing body culture, which affects both female and male boxers. Nevertheless, in investigating female pugilists, while conducting fieldwork, I witnessed and personally experienced that boxing culture affects women in a particular way, as both boxing's expectations and gendered expectations of the body are combined. Consequently, female boxers auto-police and rigorously discipline their bodies and their femininity. Conversations about the number of kilometres to be run, the hours spent at the gym, the food allowance per day, the number of times a day one gets on the scales, and the weight to be lost are commonplace among females at the gym. These conversations have an obsessive tone and are expressed with guilt and disappointment, as no workout or diet seems to be sufficient to fulfil their gendered-boxing expectations. The importance women give to exercising regularly and dieting constantly is not only in the interests of performing well at the fights and making weight for the competitions, but also in the pursuit of looking good. The latter consideration involves using exercise and diet to try to develop an ideal female body, which within the UK boxing context is athletic and slender. Washington & Economides (2016) argue that sports, such as CrossFit, are modelling very specific representations of female attractiveness in which female athletic bodies are the archetype. Moreover, they suggest that the current emphasis on muscularity, strength, and fitness among sportswomen, rather than subverting conventional gender roles and representations,

has reinforced heteronormative models of attractiveness, femininity, and the body. Similarly, it seems that the development of strength and muscularity in women in boxing, rather than a subversion of sexist gender representations, have just amplified the gender expectations of women's bodies, as the standards are higher if one wants to get the ideal feminine athletic body.

Patriarchal expectations of women to have an attractive body combined with the extreme physical requirements of boxing – intense workouts and rigorous and continuous diets – result in a problematic bodily experience for amateur female pugilists; one that sometimes involves putting their bodies at risk. Despite the dramatic effects of this combination, the negative consequences on female bodies usually go unnoticed, especially by the coaches and relatives of the boxers.

7.3.2 BODIES AT RISK

Drawing on Foucault, Woodward (2008: 540–541) suggests that '[t]he punishing regime of the [boxing] gym is not only physically demanding, it also involves techniques of the self (Foucault, 1988), expressed both through body practices enforced upon themselves and control in relation to others in order to satisfy the demands of the trainer and the sport'. In light of this, the self and the body appear intertwined within power relations and in constant tension between the disciplinary power and the emancipatory resistance. Below, Victoria's experience of self-discipline is offered in order to illustrate the embodiment of both gender and boxing's disciplinary techniques.

Being a talented and ambitious carded boxer between 18 and 24 years old, Victoria's dream is to box at the Olympics. Before boxing, she practiced other sports at the competitive level. Thus, her body shape has always been one with 'very little body fat,

toned, muscular and lean', as she narrated. It was when she started boxing, at the age of sixteen, that she started to have a problematic relationship with her body. She recognised that the pressure of making weight for the fights triggered in her an obsession with losing weight. The same year she started boxing, she developed anorexia, bulimia, and a body dysmorphic disorder. She stopped consuming enough food or water and started to wear sweat gear to training. She convinced herself that she was fat. Instead of the muscles she was developing through boxing, she could see nothing but bodyfat. She was frustrated and had a bad temper all the time. Auto-policing and disciplining her body were common practices. Right after eating, she looked at herself in the mirror, weighed herself (always finding a difference), and after crying a bit, she used to go for a run or started an intense workout to lose the weight she thought she had gained. This cycle took place each time she ate something. She taught herself not to feel hunger. She lost twelve kilos in a couple of weeks. Consequently, she started to lose hair, be injury prone, pass out, fall asleep in the daytime, and suffer from constant headaches. She also stopped having periods. She missed social events to avoid looking at food. At that time, she could not recognise that she was unwell, nor could the people around her. She made her parents think that her condition was a temporary effect of the boxing lifestyle. Nevertheless, later on, they realised that she had a problem, and she started to get treatment. She managed to gain weight but was pulled out from the championships. The reward for getting better was getting into the ring again, as she recalled:

Boxing was a curse and a reward at the same time. If it wasn't for the boxing, I would not have tried to get rid of that eating disorder. The boxing may have caused it from initial impact of getting on the scales, [but also] seeing all these little models on the pages of the Gazette. The boxing could have triggered it, but if it wasn't for the boxing, I'd have had no motivation to overcome it.

(Victoria, W, 18–24 y/o, carded boxer, East Midlands)

Boxing was not the only element that caused Victoria's dramatic bodily experience. Gender expectations and representations also triggered her anxieties, leading her to develop eating disorders. During interview, she recognised that not only was she using boxing as an excuse to lose weight, but also boxing was the ideal context in which to hide eating disorders. After all, losing weight, compulsively going to the scales, dieting, and working out intensively are common practices among boxers. The problem was that her expectations for having as 'perfect' a body like those 'little models on the pages of the Gazette' (Interview notes, 20 November 2018) were in contradiction with her muscular, athletic figure resulting from boxing. Washington & Economides (2016: 147) suggest that '[i]n addition to having to sort out how to achieve an ideal body through various health and fitness regimens, women involved in sport have an additional burden of not transgressing boundaries of gender', noting that sports women are pressured to be sportive while still fulfilling the standard of emphasised femininity. Tall, with thick muscles, a tiny waist and a large strong back, Victoria felt she did not fit the feminine standard of beauty. She had as reference points not only the clothes designed for women her age, which did not fit her athletic body shape, but also top models portrayed in magazines, newspapers, and website adverts. Trying to look like one of them and convincing her family she was just following a rigid and healthy boxing lifestyle, Victoria dropped from 64 to 52 to kilos in a couple of weeks. She did not like her body, nor was it performing well. She was passing out often, she was tired, and her vision was blurry. She was dehydrated. When I interviewed Victoria, she was healthy, on her weight, and training hard to become a boxing champion. She stated she had learned from her experience and could talk openly about it, which she could not do in the past. Additionally, she was practicing self-care and had developed

a critical view of the contradictions female athletes face while trying to accomplish sport and gender expectations simultaneously, since sport expects the development of muscularity and strength, while normative traditional representations of femininity rely on female passivity, frailty, and weakness.

7.3.3 SUSAN BORDO (2004: 16) HIGHLIGHTS THAT THROUGH

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BODILY HABITS OF EVERYDAY LIFE, OUR BODIES LEARN – ALTHOUGH NOT CONSCIOUSLY– ‘EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION CONCERNING THE APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR FOR OUR GENDER, RACE, AND SOCIAL CLASS’. ILLUSTRATING THIS, VICTORIA’S CASE REVEALS HOW WITHOUT BEING NOTICED, THE BODIES ARE SHAPED, ALMOST LITERALLY, BY BODILY PRACTICES INFLUENCED BY SPORT EXPECTATIONS AND ALSO BY MEDIA, IN ORDER TO COMPEL WITH STANDARDS ACCORDING TO ONE’S GENDER, AGE, SPORT PRACTICED, ETC. MOREOVER, THIS CASE SHOWS HOW GENDER NORMS ARE SO INGRAINED THAT IT IS THE INDIVIDUAL HERSELF WHO AUTO-POLICES HER ACTIONS AND, ESPECIALLY, HER BODY, REPRODUCING ESTABLISHED GENDER REPRESENTATIONS AT ALL COSTS, INCLUDING HER WELLBEING. THEREFORE, IT MUST BE SAID THAT BOXING IS A DANGEROUS GROUND, AS THE DISCIPLINE AND DEMANDS IT REQUIRES VEIL RISKY PRACTICES CAUSED BY GENDERED ANXIETIES IN ORDER TO CONFORM WITH GENDER REPRESENTATIONS. FINALLY, THIS CASE REVEALS HOW

FEMALE BODIES ARE SITES OF STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN THEMSELVES, CONSIDERING THAT ON OUR BODIES BIOLOGY AND A PATRIARCHAL CULTURE INTERSECT, CREATING DRAMATIC EXPERIENCES AS THE ONE REPORTED HERE.

GENDER DEVIANTS

Women are prevented from participating in boxing through its construction as a male domain and masculine activity on the one hand, and on the other, through the representation of femininity as passive, frail, and weak. These constructions maintain gender binaries in sport and ensure the marginalisation of women from it. But when women trespass the normative gender boundaries and participate in sport, especially in those culturally considered masculine, such as boxing, they are considered gender deviants for not conforming to conventional gender norms (Halbert, 1997; Moreno, 2011). Consequently, they experience precarity (Butler, 2015) and are the target of exclusionary mechanisms (Moreno, 2011) in the form of moral or social sanctions (Halbert, 1997) that aim to exclude them from the athletic scene. Stigmatization, negative labels, and stereotypes focused on female sexuality, physical appearance, or performance, reinforce gender representations and are used as tools to sanction those who have challenged and transgressed gender norms and representations. Halbert (1997: 16–17) reports that the labels or stereotypes associated with female boxers being sanctioned for their participation in the sport are: '(a) extremely overweight or husky, (b) different or strange, (c) manly or butch, (d) lesbian, (e) ugly, and (f) Foxee boxer'. Halbert's article was published more than twenty-years ago; nevertheless, these labels remain in use. For instance, while conducting fieldwork, coaches and female boxers reported that people inside and outside boxing often

attempted to stop women from competing, arguing that someone could break their nose and their good looks would be ruined. This is illustrated by Gary in the lines below

The idea of women boxing is usually probably quite frowned upon a lot of the time. It's like, "What are you doing boxing?" (Gary, M, 55–64 y/o, coach and coach educator, East Midlands).

As Gary reports, there are still stereotypes and social expectations related to femininity that prevent women from participating. In these terms, those who participate in the sport and break the stereotypes and expectations, receive social sanctions. For instance a mother of a schoolgirl narrated that the schoolteacher dramatically had classified her six-year-old daughter as a tomboy for attending boxing sessions. In addition, the girl's grandfather, using homophobic discourses, had tried to convince the family not to take her to the boxing gym anymore, claiming that she would become lesbian if she practiced boxing. Neither the regional boxer nor the schoolgirl have stopped practicing because of what people said. Nevertheless, their stories show that boxing continues to be an activity in which not only women do not get the recognition of their community as boxers, but also their femininity is stigmatized if they dare to participate in it.

Based on sexist assumptions that female boxers are gender deviants, stereotypes are tools used not only to perpetuate and reinforce conservative gender representations but also to prevent women from participating, legitimising the discrimination against them. Among the representations that act against women in boxing, shaped by patriarchy and heterosexuality, is that women must look attractive in order to please men. In these terms, female participation in boxing represents a deviance to be avoided in order to look after their physical appearance. Thus, even though pugilists train to avoid being hit, the chances of being punched and suffering the immediate

consequences of it (having the lip, eyebrow, or nose bruised or broken) are high. In the following quotation, Kayla, a female ex-boxer who fought at elite levels, makes evident the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the sport:

Todd will always say things like, "Oh, you shouldn't be getting your pretty face smashed in." You just think, "Well, I'm here to do the sport, so it doesn't matter." I don't mind things like that, but I think a lot of women [do]. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

When I conducted fieldwork, Kayla was not practicing boxing anymore. She recognised that one of the reasons she stopped boxing was not having found adequate support to develop her career as an amateur or professional boxer. She highlighted that gender stereotypes created resistance among some of the coaches to training her. Despite the negative impact of gender stereotypes in boxing and their widespread use, their existence is neglected, denied, or disregarded by the community. The stigmatization of female boxers, the stereotypes, and denial of them are illustrated in the following quotation from the coach involved in Kayla's case:

I'm getting more used to it [women boxing], without a doubt, but I'm still not 100% comfortable with it. I still don't like it that much [...] I just don't like women fighting [...] I've never tried to talk anyone out of it, obviously, but I was only trying to help any way I could, and I would never say that you shouldn't. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Todd's belief was that his attitude did not have any negative impact on the participation of women in boxing. Nevertheless, drawing on Kayla's interview, it seems that his attitude contributed to her decision to drop out of boxing. According to my observations during field work, Todd's statement above expresses an attitude that prevailed at Ithaca among many male participants (athletes and coaches). This was combined with men's animosity towards the presence of women in boxing and the obligation they had

to coach them or train with them, considering that discrimination against women was not only prohibited by law and by the norms of the gym, but also because it was considered politically incorrect. This combination provoked a tense relationship between female boxers and some of the male coaches and participants, as well as situations where there was discrimination, but it was not overt. Nevertheless, the discrimination was there and was enough to make women struggle in the gym.

In sum, boxing is an intimidating sport for its competitiveness, discipline, physical demands, and aggression. However, it is especially intimidating for women because on one hand, they are perceived by default as inferior participants on the grounds of gender, and on the other, because boxing is still a sport dominated by men and with rules and expectations made for men and by men. In regards to the latter point, the expectation on women is to adapt to boxing's masculine structure. Thus, it seems that difference, rather than being respected and included, is accommodated to the existing hierarchies.

7.4 GENDER OTHERWISE

Through reproducing gender stereotypes, embodying oppressive gender expectations, and reproducing social practices and restrictive norms based on gender differences, gender is continually 'done' in boxing. It is not only produced but also reproduced. Nevertheless, it is also undone. Undoing gender refers to those situations where gender does not have relevance as a marker of differentiation, and, especially, when it does not have an oppressive meaning (Deutsch, 2007). Thus, undoing gender offers the chance to analyse when differences are recognised, but they are not translated into inequality.

Gender-integrated sport activities, including training sessions, offer the possibility to undo gender. Anderson (2008a) suggests that male-only team sports socialise men into a sexist, misogynistic, and antifeminine ethos, whereas gender-integrated team sports contribute to counteracting sexist and socio-negative behaviour against women. This results from both the contestation women make to gender understandings through their performance in sport and the familiarity men gain from sharing experiences with women. Illustrating how gender is undone in boxing through gender-integrated sport activities, Allen, a man attending conditioning sessions at Ithaca, recognised that after having trained with women, he realised that female attendants train 'as hard as blokes'. In addition, Steven, a young coach, stated that he had witnessed that female boxers were just as capable as males in the boxing ring. From these cases, it is clear that gender differences, and more specifically, gender stereotypes and prejudices against women, seem to be challenged for male participants when they have interacted with female boxers.⁹²

7.4.1 CHALLENGING GENDER

Social interaction has potential to undo gender as it opens up the possibility for resisting and challenging oppressive gender meanings and creating alternative ones (Deutsch, 2007). In these terms, during fieldwork I witnessed how women, in interaction with others, trouble sexist stereotypes, giving new understandings of what a woman can do in boxing. Among them was Sarah, a black female coach who was

⁹² Nevertheless, as analysed in the previous section, this was not always the case and there were still men who found hard to accept women in boxing and challenges to gendered notions.

aware of the gender stereotypes and power relations that characterise the amateur boxing scene, as we observe below:

I have been known to go into a competition, just to mess with people's heads and their perceptions, in sandals and a handbag. I've got, obviously, my [boxing] kit on. Then, I'll have my little sandals and, maybe, a matching handbag. I've seen men knock each other and laugh and I'm thinking, "Yes, wait until I get in that corner." Then, I will put my trainers on and they [male coaches] will see what I do in the corner. My boxer will win and will do it tactically, and they [the coaches] will then give me the nod as if to go, "To me, you're alright". (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

In the quotation above one can observe how gender can be undone in boxing by contesting the representation of emphasised femininity. It also shows how through contestation, gender differences acquire new meaning, which leads to recognition.

Undoing gender differences does not make them disappear, but their sexist and traditional meanings are challenged. In this vein, I want to explore situations when, as a boxing practitioner and researcher, I experienced the transformation of sexist and essentialist gender meanings. For instance, when I was practicing boxing, I realised that I could do more with my female body than I had been told I could by a sexist and patriarchal society. I challenged social and individual gendered boundaries, embodying a practice that from a sexist perspective, I had learned was reserved for men. My experience is illustrated in the following field note:

I like body sparring. Before boxing, I would have never imagined that I would enjoy being punched or punch[ing]. It is fun to punch and pleasant to be punched – at least in body sparring. In boxing, I break and challenge my own gender boundaries. As a woman, you are supposed not to fight, not to punch, not to use your body in such a way, but now, I've realised that I can do otherwise, I can do what I was told I could not. (Field note, 29 November 2017)

The undoing gender approach allows one to identify when oppressive gender meanings are or could be transgressed or challenged and, especially, when inequality could be eliminated, considering that gender as a system of difference 'will always bolster a system of inequality' (Deutsch, 2007: 109). The assumption that difference may be a source of inequality seems to be acknowledged by some members of the boxing community, as in Derek's words below:

I know the whole aim of this [interview] is about equality, so for me, it's difficult because I see them as boxers. I see males and females, but I don't see them as being any different. (Derek, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Derek is the coach who can be considered to model inclusive masculinity. Being aware that my research was about gender equality, he tried to be aware of gender differences, of treating boxers of both genders equally, aiming to be fair. Ridgeway & Correll (2000: 110) suggest that a feasible strategy for reducing inequality is to acknowledge sex categorisation with the condition of limiting the inequality that it implies. Thus, it seems that giving equal treatment to pugilists and simultaneously acknowledging the existence of differences between them are key elements in achieving equality in boxing.

Giving less importance to gender differences is another way to undo and challenge gender. Deutsch (2007: 116) highlights that gender has been given a 'master status' in the configuration of social structures and interactions; drawing on Ridgeway & Correll (2000: 116), she suggests that this is highly pernicious, considering that inequality and, specifically, the reproduction of female disadvantage rests on the importance sex has been given, especially to create social divisions. Therefore, a

strategy for contesting gender and achieving equality is eliminating the master status sex and gender have nowadays, as illustrated below:

Some people [women] didn't want to spar with the boys, whereas we would spar with the boys. If you're a boxer, you're a boxer. You spar with people your weight. It's nothing to do with gender. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

In the quotation, we can observe how gender categories are interpreted as obstacles for some women to participate in boxing, as well as the possibility of using other differences than gender to organize boxing participation.

Another manifestation of how gender was undone in the gym, and specifically, how gender acquired a non-oppressive meaning, was the solidarity and complicity among women on the grounds of gender within the masculine and sexist structure that characterises boxing. Even though, one cannot make generalizations in this regard, I observed, how women tried to help other women to feel included in the training sessions, for instance, by inviting the new participants to train with them. This was my experience while being a female novice in the gym. So, I felt a special bond with the female boxers, who called me to pair up with them, as they were aware of the difficulties a women experience in the boxing gym to be taken into account. In the same trend, as Megan comments below, when a female participant comes into the gym for the first time, and feels intimidated due to the male dominance, in order to feel more confident, she usually looks for other females to be with.

I'll notice it is when other young girls come in the gym, or even women come in the gym, and you can sometimes see that they do feel a little bit threatened and a bit, sort of like "Ohh, there's no other girls here", or they'll specifically come over and talk to me and train near me. I think it's, you know, it's a sort of a comfort thing that there's another woman about. (Megan, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Commented [ABS9]: added

Through the lines above, we can observe not only the importance of the solidarity among women to 'welcome' new female participants, but also, the positive impact of having female athletes in the gym to promote women's participation in boxing. Thus, it seems that the presence of women, gives the message that the sport is a place not only for men, but also for female participants, contesting in this way the idea of boxing as a male monopoly.

The solidarity among women can be interpreted as a manifestation of how gender is undone as it is through gender identity politics that women are empathetic with their peers. Also, gender is undone as women's solidarity contributes to brake the sexist idea that 'women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another' (hooks, 1986: 127). In my perspective, the empathy women (not all) have for other women (not all) in boxing, was an illustration of how gender was challenged by female boxers.

7.4.2 BELL HOOKS CRITICISES THE IDEA OF A 'COMMON OPPRESSION' AMONG WOMEN AND HOW THIS CONCEPTS, BLURS CLASS PRIVILEGES AND RACIAL DIVISIONS AMONG WOMEN. MOREOVER, HOOKS HIGHLIGHTS THAT '[S]USTAINED WOMAN BONDING CAN OCCUR ONLY WHEN THESE DIVISIONS ARE CONFRONTED AND THE NECESSARY STEPS ARE TAKEN TO ELIMINATE THEM' (HOOKS, 1986: 127). IN THIS REGARD, I OBSERVED THAT WOMEN –AT LEAST WHERE I CONDUCTED MY FIELDWORK– ON THE ONE HAND, WERE NOT OPENLY AGAINST THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER, CLASS, AND RACIAL INEQUALITIES. AND ON THE OTHER, THEY WERE NOT POLITICALLY MOBILIZED AGAINST GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BOXING –THEY DID NOT WANT TO BE EVEN LABELLED AS FEMINISTS–, THEY WERE AWARE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BOXING, AND TRIED TO CHANGE THE SITUATION OF WOMEN AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL AND ON THEIR DAILY BASIS. THEREFORE, EVEN IF GENDERED POWER STRUCTURED WERE NOT CHALLENGED, GENDER MEANINGS WERE CONTESTED BY

WOMEN'S ACTIONS ON THE DAILY BASIS. EQUALITY DISTORTED

Eliminating the master status sex and gender has for differentiating individuals is a strategy for achieving equality. Nevertheless, I observed that in the boxing arena, gender differences and gender inequality tend to be denied. Under this rationale, very often it is mistakenly argued, under what seems to be a postfeminist discourse, that men and women already get the same treatment and have the same access to opportunities.⁹³ During fieldwork, as a response to my question about whether male and female boxers were treated differently in, Ryan, an attendant at conditioning sessions, and Michelle, a female amateur boxer, stressed that gender differences were irrelevant in the boxing context. In addition, during the interview, they highlighted that gender inequality and discrimination against women were almost eradicated in the pugilist arena:

We were all boxers, and as the coach used to say: There are no boys, there are no girls, there are just boxers here. (Ryan, M, 25–34 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Everyone in the boxing gym is treated exactly the same. No man is treated different to no woman. (Michelle, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In Western countries, and especially in the UK context, equality and inclusion are values that, even if they are not exactly understood, are part of the vocabulary used in diverse social spheres, including sport, with the aim of being politically correct. Under these circumstances, the recognition of difference is sometimes synonymous with

⁹³ This is further analysed in the chapter 9.

incorrectness. Thus, highlighting that gender differences do not have any impact in boxing; that there are neither female nor male boxers, just boxers; and that male and female boxers are treated equally seem to be part of the rationale of political correctness. Nevertheless, denying difference and inequality is problematic, as it creates the delusion that equality has already been achieved. And, as the reader will notice throughout this thesis, even if important advancements towards gender equality have been made, inequality and discrimination against women persist in the boxing arena. In this regard, Ridgeway & Correll (2000: 112) point out the following:

What is remarkable about the gender system, after all, is not that it never changes. Rather, it sustains itself by continually redefining who men and women are and what they do, while preserving the fundamental assumption that, whatever the differences are, on balance they imply that men rightly are more powerful.

Undoing gender has led to the transgression of sexist gender meanings. For instance, female boxers and coaches are troubling and contesting conservative representations of femininity, and more and more coaches are understanding they have to treat boxers equally. Nevertheless, gender differences still are experienced. Thus, it is important to say that the processes of undoing gender have not, yet, accomplished the elimination of gender discrimination in the boxing context.

7.5 CONCLUSION

Boxing currently relies on gender essentialist beliefs that naturalize inequalities. In this vein, the construction of boxing as a male-dominated and masculine activity is misunderstood as being a consequence of 'nature' rather than a result of sociocultural and intentional processes. Consequently, the cultural presumptions that prevail in boxing make discrimination against women appear to be legitimate, fixed, and

unavoidable. In this view, it seems that despite the participation and gradual recognition of women, gendered power relations have just been rearranged, and boxing is still based on a heterosexual patriarchal hierarchy.

Considered as a masculine field where men continue to hold positions of power, boxing has been preserved as a bastion of male privilege. Constructed as the masculine sport par excellence, it celebrates attributes culturally considered masculine, such as aggression, toughness, and tolerance to pain. Also, it has been a site where hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's (1987; 2002) terms, is forged, affirmed, celebrated, and embodied. Though there are displays of non-oppressive masculinities, or what Anderson & McGuire (2010) call inclusive masculinities, boxing is still a sport made and ruled by hegemonic masculinities.

Women participate in boxing, but as the sport is still configured as a masculine and male arena dominated by gender essentialist assumptions, they face obstacles to their attempts to fully participate and be recognised as equal peers. In Fraser's (2007) terms, full participation and recognition as equals are conditions of participatory parity, a measure of gender justice. Rather than being equal peers, as men continue dominating the sport and being the power holders, women have to adapt their participation to masculine standards. Thus, it seems that participatory parity has not been achieved in the sport.

The participation of women in boxing is precarious. Drawing on Butler (2015: 34), who suggests precarity is intertwined with gender norms, as it is experienced by 'those who do not live their gender in intelligible ways', my impression is that women experience precarity. For instance, they are sanctioned morally or socially through stigmas, stereotypes, or negative labels for being considered to have troubled gender norms

that dictate that boxing is a male activity. Moreover, female differences, such as menstruation, are either underestimated or disregarded, communicating that female bodies do not matter – or that they are matter out of place – and they do not have the right to be recognised as a subject of boxing.

Nevertheless, although gender stereotypes and inequalities are produced and reproduced in boxing, gender can be simultaneously undone or destabilised, and its sexist meanings are contested. Representations of femininity are challenged, for instance, in gender-integrated trainings when males realise that women can perform well, or when women perform roles usually undertaken by men, i.e. coaching, and they excel. Social interactions open up possibilities for contesting gender and challenging inequality; nevertheless, even though the data gathered is not representative, and I lack hard evidence, it is my impression that the cases involving social interaction in which gender was challenged were interlinked with strong performances by women in masculine activities, i.e. doing sport and coaching boxing. Taking this into consideration raises the following questions. What happens when either women have a standard or low performance or they perform in feminine activities? Is gender not challenged in those cases? Is it necessary always to demonstrate excellence in comparison to men in masculine activities to contest gender meanings, gain recognition, and be accepted as an individual with equal rights?

The contestation of gender meanings in boxing is taking place every day; nevertheless, gender inequality remains. In the following chapter, I examine the different manifestations of marginalisation and discrimination against women in the boxing arena.

8 WOMEN IN BOXING: PRECARIOUS PARTICIPATION

Hermana, yo si te creo

[Sister, I believe you]

Spanish feminist groups, 2016

This chapter explores the quality of the participation of women in boxing drawing on Fraser's theoretical development of participatory parity (2013) and Butler's category of precarity (2015). The aim is to shed light on the obstacles women face to full and equal participation in the sport. The chapter shows that female fighters do not yet participate as equals as a result of the androcentrism that continues to prevail in boxing.

According to Fraser (2013), there are three conditions for achieving participatory parity and, consequently, to overcoming gender subordination, and these are: distribution, recognition and representation. Under Fraser's framework, these elements are not only conditions of parity of participation, but they correspond to the economic, cultural and political dimensions of both participation and justice. She differentiates them as follows:

Whereas distribution foregrounds impediments rooted in political economy, and recognition discloses obstacles grounded in the status order, representation conceptualizes barriers to participatory parity that are entrenched in the political constitution of society. (Fraser, 2013: 13)

Along with the introduction of the concept of participatory parity to achieve social justice, Fraser suggests using a status model to claim recognition, rather than using a standard identity model. Highlighting the problems of the latter, she critiques identity models that call for the recognition of a specific group, denying and depreciating those identities that do not correspond to the hegemonic group, which results in social subordination (Fraser, 2007). To overcome this, she suggests the use of a status model based on 'the equal standing of partners in interaction' (2013: 11), which is relevant for achieving equality, considering that the condition of being a peer with others is crucial not only to justice but also to equality. Thus, in this chapter, I will stress the importance of women being recognised as equals in interactions in the boxing context.

Participatory parity requires institutionalised patterns of cultural value, giving participants equal respect and equal opportunity for achieving social esteem (Fraser, 2013: 164). However, as we will observe in this chapter, androcentrism acts as one of the major obstacles to ensuring equality and social esteem, which consequently hinders participatory parity and justice, especially for women. In these terms, androcentrism is defined as an 'institutionalized pattern of cultural value that privileges traits associated with masculinity, while devaluing everything coded as "feminine," paradigmatically – but not only – women' (Fraser, 2013: 162). Since boxing has been historically an androcentric social field, configured as a masculine sport based on men's power and privilege, the participation of women, rather than being egalitarian, is characterised as unequal, deficient, and precarious.

This chapter is organised into five sections. The first addresses parity of participation, highlighting that despite the progress made over time in regards to the advancement of women, women in boxing still struggle to participate on equal terms and sometimes

even to participate at all. In addition, in this section the female-only sessions are analysed as a paradigmatic case that shows how women struggle to fully participate and especially to be recognised as equal members in the boxing gym. The second section, which is the largest, explores the cultural dimension of participatory parity, that is, recognition. Here, I highlight the existence of gender stereotypes and gendered glass ceilings in order to examine the obstacles to women being respected and to having access to equal opportunities, which are elements that correspond to recognition. In the third section, I explore distribution, which is the economic dimension of participatory parity. In this section, I focus on the access women have to coaching, understanding it as a relevant resource in boxing. However, I also explore female fighters' access to material resources via sponsorships. In the fourth section, which is brief, I denounce the racism that prevails in boxing and how it hampers the possibility of people of colour belonging to the boxing community. The final section briefly explores sexual harassment as a manifestation of the precarious participation women have in boxing. Throughout the chapter, it becomes evident that despite participating in boxing, women continue to be marginalised in this sport.

8.1 PARTICIPATING IN THE MARGINS

In 1996, the Amateur Boxing Association of England (today England Boxing) lifted the ban in Britain on female pugilism, allowing women to compete and join affiliated clubs (Bunce, 2014; GBBoxing, 2019b). After more than two decades, however, there are still boxing gyms in the UK that unlawfully do not allow women as members. Drawing from the data collected during fieldwork, as illustrated below, the rejections women face while trying to participate seem to communicate the aim to maintain boxing as a male bastion and a site for male privilege and power. Boxing is resistant to

transformation, especially in regards to gender relations Woodward (2007a: 9). This resistance is illustrated in the following quotations, in which female participants denounce the obstacles women face in boxing.

I lived in Manchester for a little bit [...]. I went to gyms so I could train whilst I was over there. I walked into a gym and he [the coach] said, "We don't train girls", so I walked out. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

There were gyms that would not let women in, full stop. They used a whole manner of excuses: "We don't have the space, the changing facilities and the toilets. The men might like them and won't concentrate on their training." All sorts of ridiculous excuses. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

As these quotes illustrate, there are barriers that prevent women from boxing. One is difficulty in gaining access to a training facility, as the participants reported above. In light of this, it seems that the rejection women have experienced in boxing throughout history has not yet radically changed. When women have overcome the initial barriers to their participation, they encounter resistances to participating on equal terms with their male peers and being recognised as full members of boxing organisations.

Fraser argues that when women are not recognised as equal and full members, there is no participatory parity, and in turn, there is injustice. This takes into account that 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers' (Fraser, 2013: 164). Thus, not being considered a 'full member in interaction' (Fraser, 2013: 164) hinders equality and, above all, justice. An illustration of how the barriers to participation create situations of inequality and injustice in boxing is seen when an elite (male) boxing team visited Ithaca for

sparring.⁹⁴ This was a major event. The boxers (male and female) were ready and joyful; however, suddenly, it was communicated that women would not be allowed to participate. 'These guys haven't come down to spar with you, they've come down to spar with the boxers', the male head coach told the female fighters (Interview note, 24 November 2017). The female fighters at Ithaca were already experienced boxers. However, women were not considered 'real' boxers and were prevented from participating that night. Acknowledging that the denial was maybe because there was nobody with whom they could be matched, they noticed there was a group of pugilists in their weight class and with similar experience. Highlighting this, the female boxers insisted on participating. The head coach simply refused to allow them to do so. The decision was not accompanied by any explanation other than the one quoted above, which the female fighters classified as sexist. Some of them left the gym in response. This scene is very vivid in the memories of the female pugilists at Ithaca; however, the situation seems to have improved since this incident. The attitude of the coaches towards women is more inclusive, and there are also now sex-integrated sparring sessions in which female and male boxers spar with each other. Nevertheless, participatory parity has not yet been accomplished, as women are considered neither full nor equal peers.

8.1.1 THE GHETTO OF THE FEMALE-ONLY SESSIONS

Women are not yet considered as equal peers to their male counterparts because boxing has been configured as a masculine preserve, where structures and

⁹⁴ According to the research participants, this took place around three years before this study was conducted.

relationships based on men's power and women's subordination are produced and reproduced. In this context, when women manage to participate, it seems boxing only allows them to do so under the condition that they remain in the margins, that is, in a subordinated position in relation to men. In these terms, and following Messner (2002), men would be considered to be in the centre of boxing. The centre of sport is 'where the power, status, excitement, and resources are' (Messner, 2002: 148). Moreover, according to Messner (2002), the centre of sport is configured on and through male privileges and power; it reproduces the gender order, affecting sport and beyond. In contrast to the centre, in the margins there are no power, privilege, recognition, or resources. In these terms, an illustrative example of the margins reserved for women in boxing are the female-only sessions (FOS).

Messner (2002) explains that one of the models that women's participation has followed in Western countries since the twentieth century is ghettoization, which is one way of classifying the FOS. With the term *ghettoization*, Messner (2002: 138–141) refers to the phenomenon that separates women and men, putting women together into female-only sessions, sports, organisations, and/or teams. In these gender-segregated spaces, it is also frequently the case that women practise an adapted version of the sport, making it a 'softer' and less prestigious modality. For instance, the FOS are based on boxercise workouts, characterised by the absence of physical contact.⁹⁵ Additionally, they are characterised as being recreational and non-competitive. At Ithaca, these characteristics of the FOS positioned their members in an inferior position to the 'real' – male – boxers as analysed further in this section.

⁹⁵ Boxercise sessions in the context of amateur boxing gyms – or at least at Ithaca this is what it occurred – tend to be despised, especially by the coaches, as analysed in Chapter 6.

This form of social subordination that members of the FOS experience is manifested in lack of recognition and obstacles to participating as equals, as well as in the marginal treatment they receive. An illustration of the marginalisation and subordination of the FOS at Ithaca was the lack of coaches in these sessions, causing poor training. The lack of coaches was a result of most of the coaches refusing to lead the FOS on a general basis, as they considered them less prestigious than the amateur boxers' sessions. Also, the training sessions were cancelled frequently, due to a lack of coaches, an issue that seldom occurred in the rest of the (largely male) sessions.⁹⁶

Drawing on the data collected during fieldwork, I identified that within the hierarchy of the gym, the participants of the FOS were considered not only inferior to men, but also to those women attending mixed-gender sessions and especially to those who were already amateur boxers. These differences among women was a perception shared especially by male coaches. In this regard, if female boxers – those attending in mixed-gender sessions – are considered 'second-rate men', as reported not only by boxing literature (Lafferty & McKay, 2004: 274) but also by the female participants in this research (Interview note, 7 July 2017), FOS participants were seen as third-rate athletes.

Women attending FOS were not considered full members of the gym, and they were not equal peers with the same rights to access consistent, good quality training, unlike their counterparts attending mixed boxercise and amateur sessions. Alicia's comment below is illustrative of how the female-only sessions were perceived:

⁹⁶ The quality of these sessions as well as the lack of coaches, is analysed below.

This is one of the better gyms for men and women being treated the same, I mean apart from our [female-only] sessions (laughs). (Alicia, W, 35–44 y/o, attendee of female-only boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Messner recognises that ghettoization may also have some, albeit limited, benefits for women. He points out, for example, that 'ghettoization helps women's sports sidestep the vicious counterpunch of patriarchal backlash' (Messner, 2002: 140). Considering that boxing has historically been a male-dominated sport, FOS have been held in boxing gyms in the UK with the aim of involving women in boxing. Thus, the FOS have emerged as an option for women to participate in a socially defined male space. In this sense, it was identified during fieldwork that women participating in these sessions felt they were not under the spotlight of the male gaze, and they enjoyed exercising with other women in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere (Field note, 13 February 2018). Thus, FOS can provide a safe and friendly option for women to participate in this masculine, competitive, and violent sport, as Ashleigh notes:

It can be quite intimidating for someone who's never boxed before, particularly a female, to go into a club and join a session where there might be loads of guys who've boxed for ages. By putting on female-only sessions, it breaks down that barrier and makes women feel more comfortable going into boxing clubs. (Lauren, W, 25–34 y/o, staff of a boxing body, East Midlands)

Another positive impact of the FOS is that they can provide an entry point for women into competitive boxing. For instance, during fieldwork, I found that many female amateur boxers had initially accessed boxing through the FOS. From these female-only sessions, they had then transitioned to mixed-gender sessions where they started to consider competing as amateur boxers. As such, female-only sessions can become a point of entry into this male-dominated sport for women boxers, and in this way they have the potential to develop female amateur boxing at local, regional, and national

levels. However, as a result of the marginalisation of FOS, the potential of these training sessions for recruiting female amateur boxers or for developing boxing skills among female participants can be squandered, as Megan and Kayla note:

They [the coaches] don't perceive the ladies' session as a recruitment area for active boxers. They just don't care [for those sessions]. (Megan, W, 25–34 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Now they [female sessions] are just rubbish. The idea of a female session is a girl that doesn't actually want to train with all the lads because they feel intimidated or whatever. So, they go to a female session to train, to learn boxing, a bit of self-defence. A coach should then pick them out and say, "Actually, I think you're good enough to come to the six o'clock [mixed] session. Why don't you come?" You come, and then you go, "Oh, you're good enough to come to the eight o'clock [amateur] session." That doesn't happen. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Due to the coaches at Ithaca not attending or coaching the sessions, they were not aware of the potential of the female-only sessions. However, if they happened to be present at one of these sessions, the coaches, it seemed to me, automatically underestimated them as well as their participants.

Members of the FOS were not recognised as full members of the gym, both because of their gender and because they were not aiming to compete, which is considered crucial within the Olympic boxing culture in the UK. Fraser (2013: 164) argues that obstacles to participatory parity are 'institutionalized value patterns that deny some people the status of full partners in interaction—whether by burdening them with excessive ascribed "difference" or by failing to acknowledge their distinctiveness'. Drawing from this, in the context of boxing, women have been considered not only as radically different to men but also as inferior to them. Thus, the poor quality and lack of care of the gym for the FOS sent the symbolic message that female participants,

despite taking part in the gym activities, would not be recognised on a par with the rest of the (largely male) gym members. As Messner (2002: 138–141) highlights, under the ghettoization model, women's sports, and female-only sports sessions and teams, are subordinated and are thus marginal to the 'main' teams, sports or training sessions – which often are male dominated.⁹⁷ Because it was assumed that the women taking part in the female-only sessions were not planning to train to become boxers or intending to compete, but rather their focus was on keeping fit through boxercise, they were dismissed, as Alicia –who seems to have internalised the narrative that FOS participants were not 'real' boxers– states below:

They [the coaches] just didn't seem to bother with the ladies' sessions as much as they did with the actual boxers' because it was an only female fitness kind of session. They didn't seem to bother with our session as much. (Alicia, W, 35–44 y/o, attendee of female-only boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In conclusion, women are taking part in boxing, and female-only sessions can serve to increase the participation of women in boxing gyms. It is a great achievement that women are joining the sport as they are not only exercising their right to participate in the public sphere, but also reaping the benefits that practicing sport brings – i.e. gaining confidence, socialising, being healthy, being active. Nevertheless, women are not fully participating, rather women are participating in the margins of the sport and in a condition of subordination. These conditions occur as result of not being recognised as equal to men.

⁹⁷ Drawing on Nancy Theberge (1997), Messner (2002: 138) illustrates this point making reference to women's hockey, which was considered an adapted and soft version of hockey, as compared to the version practiced by men, and consequently subordinate to it.

8.2 RECOGNITION AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Fraser (2013: 168) suggests that women will have reciprocal recognition and status equality when, within the institutionalised patterns of cultural value, they are constituted as peers and have an equal opportunity to participate. Conversely, when the cultural norms ascribe women a status of inferiority, invisibility, or exclusion, and when, in this context, equality of opportunity is not available to them, women will be misrecognised. Thus, according to Fraser, in order to achieve participatory parity in cultural terms, it is required that 'patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem' (Fraser, 2013: 164). In this subsection, I examine patterns of cultural value in boxing which both impede equal respect and obstruct equal opportunities. In so doing, I focus on stereotypes, stigmas, and prejudices against women that lead to a paucity of respect and examine the existence of glass ceilings and other manifestations of discrimination that prevent equality of opportunity.

8.2.1 STEREOTYPES AND STIGMAS AS OBSTACLES TO BEING RESPECTED

Women struggle for recognition due to the androcentrism that shapes the cultural patterns of value that prevail in boxing. Analysing the data, negative labels in the form of gender stereotypes, stigmas, and prejudices were identified as part of the cultural patterns of value in boxing that prevent women's recognition.⁹⁸ The most common

⁹⁸ An analysis of how stigmatization, negative labels, and stereotypes are used to reproduce traditional gender representations is offered in Chapter 2.

negative labels associated with women in boxing –especially in the case of female referees and coaches– were to be called a fool, an invader, a hooker – making reference to women’s accomplishments in boxing as a result of sexual favours – and pointing out women’s ignorance of and inadequacy in boxing. All these were configured by androcentric values that undermine and block women’s recognition and participation in boxing.

As analysed in the previous chapter, female boxers are seen as gender deviants because they do not conform to conventional gender norms. In this sense, Halbert (1997) suggests that negative labels or stereotypes are used against female pugilists as moral and social sanctions for having challenged traditional conceptions of femininity through their participation in the traditionally masculine sport. Accordingly, it was observed during fieldwork that stereotypes were used to sanction women, marginalising and excluding them from the sport. For instance, as a consequence of the stereotype related to women’s supposed lack of boxing knowledge or skills, female members not only were dismissed as equal peers, but also their participation was either blocked or accorded little value. Moreover, their performance was met with disapproval and evaluated as deficient on the grounds of gender, as illustrated below:

I stopped a boy in a contest at the British Universities Championships, and one of the coaches said to me about being a woman not knowing about boxing.
(Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, referee, London)

Within the boxing milieu, the cultural pattern of value that prevails does not recognise women as individuals who could be well versed in pugilism; contrarily, it is taken for granted that women are alien to the boxing culture. Moreover, under an androcentric framework that conceives boxing as a masculine field, stereotypes are used not only to sanction women for being gender deviants but also to justify their exclusion. In this

regard, stereotypes seem to be a strategy for reminding women they do not belong to boxing and, as Wacquant (2004: 50) highlights, that their presence 'is only tolerated, as long as it remains incidental'. Thus, stereotypes serve both to reinforce the idea of women's inadequacy within the boxing scene and to legitimise their marginalisation. In this context, women, rather than being full and legitimate members, are considered invaders of the boxing field, and as imposters, the inadequacy of their bodies is constantly remarked upon; this can be observed below:

Because I'm a woman official, by a lot of the coaches, by a lot of the parents, I don't have any place in the ring as a woman, [according to them,] I shouldn't be a referee. (Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, referee, London)

Within a context where it is mistakenly assumed that women do not belong to boxing, those who are already participating struggle to be recognised as they are often dismissed and disrespected. In the following quotation, Sarah narrates how she experienced misrecognition and disrespect by male colleagues who were resistant to believing, within their sexist and racist framework, that she, a black woman, was a coach:

They'll [male coaches] say things to the guy that runs my club, "Is she really a coach?" and I'm standing there. They'll go, "Yes." Then, they'll go, "Do you let her do the pads and everything?" (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Women's achievements within the boxing milieu are continually dismissed. However, when their accomplishments are recognised, they tend to be associated with men's power. For instance, when women occupy a relatively powerful position, it can be presumed that they gained their power through a sexual bargain, as a result of a sexual favour. Women are thus located in a subordinated position to and in a dependent relationship with men, who in an exchange for a sexual favour may bestow upon women a share of their power, a share of their male space. Women can thus be

labelled 'hookers', communicating that women's achievements are not the result of their knowledge, experience, talent, or skills but gained through exploiting their sexuality as illustrated below:

They [male colleagues] came back and said to me that J. [another male colleague] had been saying stuff and that I only got where I am in boxing because I sleep around and stuff [...] I phoned J. and I called him on it. I said, "What were you doing saying that about me? First of all, it's a horrible thing to say, but you know it's not true. You know, you've seen how hard I've worked to get where I am." [...] It's an easy thing for them [men] to do, isn't it? It's easy. There are two ways that they can get to me, one is by saying you're a woman, therefore you use your sexuality to get where you are. (Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, referee, London)

In the quotation, Elizabeth narrates how she was sexualised, suffered misrecognition, and had her merits discredited. She concludes her narration by emphasising how her gender and her sexuality were used to delegitimise and discriminate against her. Within boxing, negative labels against women correspond to the sport's institutionalised patterns of cultural value. As we observed, these deny equal respect and prevent women from achieving social esteem within the boxing milieu. As a consequence of the lack of equal respect, women experience a subordinated status which impedes their recognition and, consequently, their participation as peers.

8.2.2 GENDERED GLASS CEILINGS

Under Fraser's (2013) framework, in addition to equal respect, institutionalised patterns of cultural value must ensure equal opportunity to all individuals for accomplishing recognition and, above all, participatory parity. Here, I focus on access to equal opportunity, by which I mean, the absence of gender bias while being trained or applying for a position within a boxing body.

The data collected during fieldwork suggests that women struggle to have access to equal opportunity in the pugilist scene. Additionally, I found that gender discrimination and a lack of equal opportunities can and does dramatically affect women's boxing careers.

One manifestation of the lack of opportunity in boxing is the gendered glass ceiling. This concept refers to barriers based on gender discrimination that serve to hamper women's participation, advancement, and success in leadership positions. The term 'glass' is used to point out that the obstacles are both artificial – i.e. socially and culturally produced – and can be largely invisible (EIGE, 2019). Though the obstacles are imperceptible for some, especially for those who do not experience their impact, women are aware of the existence of the glass ceiling, as Sarah observed:

I don't expect anyone to hand anything on a plate to me ever, but it just seems that once you want to push past that glass ceiling... [As a woman you hear:] "You're okay at this level. How dare you even set your sights to this level."
(Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Sarah, as a black woman, faced multiple obstacles in boxing. During the interview, she highlighted that she was pushed by the boxing culture to normalise them, though she was aware they were not normal, and that if she wanted to be recognised, she had to surpass them.

A key element of the androcentric system that creates the gendered glass ceilings is that masculine participation is considered the standard against which female participation is evaluated. Illustrating this point, Kayla recalls the following:

The coach told me to box like Luke Campbell, which is difficult because he's left-handed, and tall, and a male. He's got longer arms. He [the coach] didn't actually say something that would maybe help my style in the ring. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In the case above, Kayla narrates how she was asked to box as a male Olympic boxer, with whom she did not have any similarity in terms of gender, physicality and experience, and consequently, with whom, it was futile to be compared with. Thus, as her coach had the expectation on her to box as a male –Olympic– boxer, the advice offered to her was not only unrealistic but also sexist as after all, she was asked to box like a man.

In a context where the masculine standard prevails, women's merits, skills and knowledge are neither taken into account, nor recognised as equal or valuable to men's. Moreover, as women and men are socially constructed in a dichotomous and hierarchical relationship in which men are seen as the holders of power, women's participation is subordinated to men's. Hence, and as the following quotations illustrate, within the boxing milieu, it is harder for women to gain recognition and equal opportunities to participate on a par with men, as men are considered the points of reference for women's participation:

We were the only gym around Yorkshire who had that many girls, so it was almost like a big thing. [But] they [the coaches] didn't promote it. I just don't think they're ever going to be interested, if you know what I mean, because maybe we're just not as good as the lads (sarcastic laughter) or something.
(Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In the case above, Kayla highlights that the gym did not recognise the value of having many girls training, as their participation was overshadowed by men's boxing. Similarly, she suggests that the gym underestimated the potential of the female participants, considering them not as capable as male participants.

Another illustration of the gendered glass ceilings is offered by Sarah. Below she recounts that women experience difficulties while trying to gain status or better

positions in the boxing hierarchy. In this regard, she highlights that despite women having the same qualifications as men, as a result of gender-based discrimination, women are considered 'second-class citizens' by default, and they are not given the chance to participate on equal terms:

Everyone wants to go to the international bouts, so they [boxing bodies and gyms] will promote a man over a woman [...] But if somebody [a woman] has put in the time and effort and is willing to progress, it's to allow them [women] to progress and not see them as a second-class citizen. I still think that happens and not only in the coaching, but in the judging and refereeing as well. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Whereas women face difficulties in participating and advancing in boxing due to the gendered glass ceilings, men tend to be favoured because of the construction of boxing as a male space. During fieldwork, female coaches, female pugilists, and FOS attendees declared they had experienced discrimination, while men were favoured by default. For instance, female participants reported that they did not receive as many opportunities to train as men, and when they had the chance to be trained, the time allocated or the quality was lower.

Feminist boxing literature reports that a common expression of discrimination in boxing is the difficulty women face in receiving coaching in comparison to their male counterparts (Cove & Young, 2007; Halbert, 1997; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). In this trend, Lafferty & McKay (2004) highlight that women in boxing suffer from a lack of access to quality coaching, and consequently, women tend to lack boxing skills, which compounds their misrecognition and marginalisation. The importance of having equal access to good quality and quantity coaching is evident. In the quotation below, we can see how in the boxing gym, the male privilege of getting access to sparring was normalised by the coaches – as women could spar only once men had finished:

You [as an amateur boxer] need to be sparring. You'll noticing the lads are always in sparring. They're never not sparring. The girls are always last. [There was a time that] I didn't drive and I was catching late buses all the time. I'd train the whole session, so I was tired from the whole session. Once the lads had sparring, they'd [the coaches] get me in the ring and I was like, "It's eight o'clock, I need to go home." "Oh well, do you want to spar or not?" (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Kayla's narrative above also illustrates how the coaches' refusal train women was sometimes manipulated to appear as if it had been the female athlete's decision not to be trained. In this way, the lack of coaching women received, along with the marginalisation they experienced, could be perniciously seen as women's responsibility, despite being a manifestation of both the glass ceiling and gender-based discrimination.

Gendered glass ceilings perpetuate the marginalisation of women not only from access to quality coaching, but also from occupying positions involving power, leadership, and recognition. Gender bias and discrimination in selection processes deny women access to equal opportunities and also the possibility to participate as full – and powerful – members in boxing organisations. During fieldwork, women denounced their lack of opportunity and the obstacles they continually face to progressing in boxing. Similarly, during an interview, a male participant narrated that he witnessed how a female candidate was not considered in the selection for a leadership position despite having the qualifications needed for the post. In her place, the organisation chose an inexperienced male candidate. The negative impact of gendered glass ceilings on women trying to occupy decision-making and leadership positions in boxing is experienced frequently not only by female members of boxing bodies but also by female boxers, referees, and coaches.

8.2.2.1 Excellence as a condition for participation

During fieldwork, I observed that women acknowledged that they were expected to work twice as hard as men because the androcentric structure of boxing did not ensure a level playing field. Proving one's excellence in order to be recognised is an unofficial requirement for both women and men in boxing. Nevertheless, the configuration of boxing as a masculine domain, and the gender discrimination that characterises the sport, makes attaining recognition far more challenging for women than for men. It is only when women display extraordinary prowess, skills, and boxing knowledge that they are recognised as equal and respectable participants, rather than as deficient by default. Therefore, it seems that the gendered glass ceiling may be broken when women achieve undeniably high standards, demonstrating they are 'perfectly capable' of performing in the boxing scene, as Elizabeth narrates below:

When I was in the ring [refereeing], one of my friends was in the crowd, and he heard somebody saying, "She shouldn't be in there, she's not strong enough." Just at that minute that he said it, these two boxers were giving me grief. I stopped them, I called time and I talked to them [...] This guy that was standing next to my friend just went completely quiet, because I was showing that I was perfectly capable to deal with that situation. (Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, referee, London)

Elizabeth illustrates on the one hand, the discrimination and stigma against women in boxing, and on the other, the recognition they can gain once they have demonstrated excellence and challenged the sexist representations of women's assumed limitations. However, gaining recognition in Fraser's (2007) terms, that is being treated equally, only through excellence and challenging gender norms poses important questions. For instance, what happens to those women who do not challenge gender traditional notions by excelling in masculine domains? Are they never recognised? What

happens if women are unable to excel because they cannot access the conditions necessary to do so – at the individual, social, and cultural levels? Are they never recognised as full members? It seems that as boxing is currently structured, recognition, particularly for the female body, is reserved only for those who have achieved great things. Moreover, recognition appears to be only for those who have been approved by masculine standards. Within a sport characterised both for being androcentric and for considering excellence as the only way women can gain recognition and greater equality of opportunity, many women will be left behind.

8.2.2.2 Differences among women

The social construction of boxing perpetuates inequality both between women and men, and also among women. In this regard, gendered glass ceilings seem to affect some groups of women more than others. In the quotation below, Kayla narrates how she was prevented from participating in boxing because she is a woman:

I walked into a gym and he [the coach] said, "We don't train girls," so I walked out. Then I went into another gym and I asked him [another coach], "Do you train girls?" He was like, "Hmm, yes, it depends how good you are". I was a boxer but [...] imagine someone who hasn't even boxed for a while and they just wanted to go for a bit of fun and they just sent them out. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Above, Kayla makes it clear that, from at least some of the coaches' perspectives, a condition for women entering a boxing gym is being able to demonstrate talent and experience. Thus, those women who have not had the opportunity to develop skills and experience will be marginalised. Moreover, because amateur boxing gyms in the UK aim to look for talented boxers and to turn them into champions (Fieldwork note, 16 October 2017), the underrepresentation of women in boxing will appear to be women's own fault – for not being talented or experienced – rather than the result of

the lack of equal opportunities and gender-based discrimination, which prevents women from participating in the sport.

According to the national sporting associations, boxing in the UK context is supposed to ensure the absence of barriers to participation (EnglandBoxing, n.d.). However, in the amateur boxing scene, discrimination still acts against social minorities, including women. In these terms, gender, acting as a status differentiator, according to Fraser's definition of recognition, prevents women from gaining recognition as full members of boxing clubs and, consequently, from fully participating in the sport. Women can find themselves being dismissed and even discredited. Moreover, women struggle continually to access equal opportunities as a result of a gendered glass ceiling, which is largely maintained by male coaches who, based on subjective and gender stereotypical criteria, decide who can participate, be recognised, and advance in boxing.

8.3 DISTRIBUTION

In this section I analyse how gender, acting as a class differentiator, mediates distribution, which according to Fraser (2013) is the economic dimension of participatory parity. Distribution relates to material resources, which in the context of boxing could take the form of revenue, income, sponsorship, or financial support. Moreover, in this thesis, I consider within the category of distribution, access to capital in its sociocultural forms such as human resources (i.e. coaches) and services (i.e. training). In order to analyse the obstacles women face in accessing distributed resources, I focus particularly on women's access to being coached and good quality training, and to being sponsored, highlighting how the maldistribution is caused by the

androcentrism that prevails in boxing. As the reader will observe, an egalitarian distribution of resources has yet to be achieved in boxing.

8.3.1 THE ANDROCENTRIC DISTRIBUTION OF COACHING

Currently, women do not have full access to the most relevant human resource in boxing: the coaches. Consequently, they also lack the most essential service a gym can offer: training. The some of the coaches refuse to train women by not calling them for sparring or not offering them technical advice while training, as reported below:

They [male coaches] don't watch you sparring anyway as a girl. They just go, "Yes, well done. See you later." The head coach just turned around each time I was sparring. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The refusal of coaches to train women may result in female dropout. However, rather than considering women's dropout the responsibility of the coaches, the gyms, or even the boxing bodies, the coaches and male boxers tend view female dropout as being the women's fault (Field note, 24 January 2018). In this context, women are not only suffering from maldistribution of coaching but also made responsible for this. The following quotation illustrates both how women are prevented from being coached and how abandoning the sport is seen as the only feasible option for them:

This is what some of the clubs will do [...] You'd come [to the session] and they'd ignore you [as a woman]. You'd literally get no pads, no direction, nothing until, usually, unless you're hard-headed, you leave of your own accord. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

During fieldwork, I identified that the maldistribution of coaching that women experienced was normalised by the male coaches, who seemed to think that limited access to coaching was the only option a gym could offer to women. The coaches

justified not giving women the same attention as the male boxers, because, they argued, there was a pool of experienced male boxers and resources (i.e. the number of coaches) were limited.

According to my fieldwork observations, it was believed that the only way to give the gym more opportunities to participate in competitions was to focus on the male boxers. This is coincident with the findings of Cove & Young (2007), who reported that coaches participating in their study were more likely to work with male boxers who, as a result of the gendered structure of boxing, would have already been accepted in the gym, giving them access to boxing skills and experience. According to the coaches, these characteristics guaranteed that their investment of time and knowledge while training male boxers would have positive results; this is contrary to the perception they had of coaching women. Women's lack of prestige and acceptance in boxing, in addition to the stigmas and gender stereotypes that act against them, impact negatively on the coaches' willingness to train them. However, the coaches refuse to accept that things could be done in any other way, as illustrated in this response of a male coach to my question about why female participants at Ithaca tend to be marginalised by the coaches:

Because we [coaches] give up our time, we volunteer [...] what we've got to be realistic on, as well, is the fact that how many coaches are here? We've got to prioritise things and if you've got competitive boxers that are going in Championships and all that, we've got to give them [male boxers] the time to let them compete, nationally. (Dustin, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Female participants suffer from the maldistribution of coaching in boxing gyms. This occurs in amateur sessions; however, according to the data collected, those most affected by this problem are the attendees at the female-only sessions (FOS). As was

mentioned in the first section of this chapter, at least at Ithaca, the FOS are characterised by their lack of coaches. That is, while in other sessions there were between two and five coaches, the FOS had only one coach, which limited the quality of training. Moreover, as the FOS coach himself declared, he was not qualified to lead the whole session, teach the basics to the brand new participants and follow-up the development of those with more experience by himself. The problem with the FOS at Ithaca was not the coach himself, but the gym's mismanagement of resources. Though the gym was aware of the weakness of these sessions (Field notes, 7 February 2018 and 9 October 2018), it did not distribute the resources – i.e. coaches – needed to develop the pugilist capital of members of the FOS. Here, pugilist capital is what gives the fighter 'abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles, and income streams' (Wacquant, 1995: 67). In this sense, as a result of attending the FOS, women were not recognised as full members of the gym, and they struggled to gain access to distributed resources.

8.3.2 MALDISTRIBUTION AND MISRECOGNITION INTERTWINED

The problems female boxers face in terms of distribution of and access to resources are intertwined with the struggles they experience in being recognised in a masculine and androcentric sport. In the case above, analysis showed the FOS members lacked access to coaching as a result of the lack of recognition they had within the gym. However, there are multiple expressions of how the lack of recognition women suffer in boxing is interrelated with the lack of access to resources. For instance, the lack of recognition affects women's chances to be promoted to participate in fights and, consequently, to be sponsored; in this way, it becomes evident how distribution and recognition are frequently intertwined (Fraser, 2013: 172). The following quotation

shows how misrecognition of female fighters expressed through stigmas and stereotypes is related to the difficulties they have in gaining audiences, and consequently, the trouble they face in trying to access the distribution of revenues from the fights:

A female boxer is not going to headline a show as the main attraction. They're going to be on the under card, but I can't see any time soon where a female is going to be the headline, the main event. They're going to be the supporting act, because if you've got an all-female show, it wouldn't sell out. (Todd, M, 45–54 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Todd denies any possibility for women to be the main attraction of a boxing show, claiming that the audience would not be interested in women's boxing. In this regard, it is important to mention that at Ithaca, Todd was training both male and female boxers. Thus, it is hard to imagine the quality of the training the female pugilists received, if his perception was that women's boxing was neither worthy nor interesting.

As a result of the lack of recognition and maldistribution, female boxers struggle not only to receive quality coaching but also to secure sponsorship, which is a way of accessing material resources such as uniforms, equipment, or support with transportation to attend training sessions in different cities. Considering that amateur boxers make a considerable investment of time to develop their careers, it is crucial for them to be sponsored. Having access to sponsorship makes training viable. Kayla explained that to make her career sustainable at the highest levels of amateur boxing, she applied for sponsorship. She applied for 'companies, estate agents, supplement companies, sports shops. [...] even for just bits of equipment or whatever because it [training to be an elite boxer] is expensive. However, no one really seemed interested' (Interview note, 21 March 2018). She deduced she did not secure sponsorship because the economic agents were resistant to women in boxing, as illustrated below:

The only way you can get paid is through sponsors and it's really difficult to get them, especially when (laughter) you're a girl. (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Getting sponsorship is a challenge for both male and female boxers, but it seems especially difficult for women. Ultimately, androcentrism results in both women's lack of recognition and the maldistribution of resources, preventing participatory parity.

Women struggle to get access to resources in boxing. As we observed in this section, they face obstacles in accessing coaching, good quality training, and sponsorship. Under Fraser's (2013) framework, the lack of access to resources is the expression of the maldistribution that exists in boxing, in which gender acts as a class differentiator that defines who can access resources and who cannot. Maldistribution in boxing creates a subordinate situation for women in relation to their male colleagues, and even among women – as is the case of the participants of the FOS. Moreover, resource maldistribution limits the participation of individuals and consequently produces and reproduces a system of inequality and injustice. In the case of female fighters, for example, not having access to good coaching and quality training limits their chances of developing the pugilist capital (Wacquant, 1995) that would allow them to fully participate in boxing.

Maldistribution is linked to the stigmas and stereotypes against women in boxing and, more generally, to the construction of boxing as an androcentric and masculine field. However, the obstacles women encounter in accessing resources and participating in boxing tend to be normalised, or even considered women's responsibility. If boxing is aiming to promote women's full participation, it is essential not only to eliminate the obstacles female participants face, but also to stop normalising gender inequality.

8.4 REPRESENTATION

According to Fraser (2013), representation is one of the three conditions of justice and it corresponds to the political dimension of participatory parity.⁹⁹ Representation, in Fraser's terms, is linked with the jurisdiction of the state and the making of rules that constitute the state and can be understood on two levels. One level refers to membership, or belonging to a community, and it includes processes of inclusion and exclusion. The other level relates to procedures and decision-making processes on issues that matter to the community (Fraser, 2013: 195). In sum, representation is related to the possibility of belonging and taking part in the procedures and rules that define how to belong.

In opposition to representation, Fraser suggests the term misrepresentation, which is a form of injustice. This may hinder participation, provoking not only injustice but also inequality. Misrepresentation is the result of being denied participation as a consequence of some boundaries and/or rules. Fraser puts it as follows:

[M]isrepresentation occurs when political boundaries and/or decision rules function to wrongly deny some people the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction – including, but not only, in political arenas. (Fraser, 2013: 196)

Drawing on this, and considering my research is not focused on the political, but on social and cultural spheres, I adapt Fraser's understanding of representation to examine how gender and race, as sociocultural constructions, determine the representation of individuals in the boxing community, and consequently, their access to full participation. In this brief section, I analyse how gender and race play key roles

⁹⁹ While distribution relates to economic issues, recognition relates to cultural ones.

in defining who is allowed to belong to boxing and who is not. I conclude that boxing membership, at least within the region where the fieldwork was conducted, is obstructed by the social injustices of both androcentrism and racism.

8.4.1 RACISM, AN UNLAWFUL CULTURAL PRACTICE

Racism is sanctioned by the AIBA and by England Boxing. Nevertheless, race-based discrimination is still a common practice in boxing, affecting the presence and the quality of the participation of people of colour. Indeed, one of the findings of this research is that racism prevents many from participating and being represented in boxing. Black people encounter major obstacles to belonging to the boxing community and to having a voice within it to the extent that neither representation nor participation is guaranteed. As one participant explained during an interview, they believed this social group is highly marginalised and occupies a subordinate position within boxing organisations in the UK, commenting that ‘people of colour are most definitely being overlooked’ in boxing (Interview note, 2 July 2018).

As with gender-based discrimination, racism is a structural problem that permeates boxing organisations and clubs, systematically marginalising and excluding people of colour. And, as in the case of women, people of colour can be made to feel responsible for their supposed inability to participate. They are unjustly blamed for being in the margins and not attaining the same positions of power as their white male counterparts, as Sarah notes in this extract below:

A [male and white] friend of mine is a CEO [...] and he says, “There are hardly any women or people of colour that want to be [in power positions].” No, that’s not true. I don’t believe that they don’t want to be in the position of a manager, a coach or whatever. They’re not being allowed to pursue it, whether that’s at the lowest level of being allowed to take the course, to being encouraged to get

involved at the club level, judging or whatever it might be. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Sarah's observation is interesting because it denounces on the one hand, how privileged groups make social minorities responsible for being discriminated against, and on the other, the obstacles that these groups experience while trying to participate.

Black women within the boxing community face intersectional resistances to participation and representation as consequence of the gender and race-based discrimination that exists in the sport. There remains a paucity of non-white female pugilists in the UK, and particularly so in the North of England. The following narrative is the response of a Muslim female boxer, based in Yorkshire, to the question of whether she had met any women of colour in boxing during her 10-year career:

Oh, personally, I've not met [black people]. Have I? I don't think I have met any, no, that's true. Mostly English, white people, white girl boxers, many, I've met so many. Black girls... obviously, you know Nicola Adams? Yes, that's the only one that I know of, and a few others that I've heard of just by reading, like, England Boxing articles or, you know, when you follow boxing online? But personally, no, I've not met any other one. (Kathrine, W, 25–34 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Public figures such as Nicola Adams are extremely important for the representation of social minorities in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.^{100,101} However, as the boxer above recognises, it is hard to find non-white people, especially women, represented in boxing at the grassroots level. The obstacles black women face to gaining representation in boxing, that is to belonging to the pugilist community, to having a

¹⁰⁰ Another example could be Ramla Ali. For further details, see Chapter 4.

¹⁰¹ In terms of male pugilists, a notable case of UK black boxers is Anthony Joshua, gold medallist in London 2012 and professional boxer.

voice, and participating in decision-making positions, are present throughout the boxing hierarchy. However, according to the participants, the challenges are greater as someone attempts to advance in the boxing hierarchy. For instance, one of the interviewees narrated that he witnessed how a black female coach, after having struggled to gain a certain degree of acceptance firstly in her club, and then at the national level, experienced critical obstacles to advancing her career at the international level. For no given reason, she was denied the opportunity to attend international courses that would have helped her to position herself as an international coach. The participant presumed it was due to racism. Drawing from this, and as the following quotation denounces, it seems that the racist rationale that organises the participation of people of colour in boxing is that it is acceptable for them to participate so long as they remain in the margins:

I'm not sure if it's a conscious decision, but, most certainly, some regions were not happy about letting people of colour progress. "You're okay to carry the spit bucket, but nothing more". (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

In the challenges racism poses for people of colour, the presence of black people in key roles in boxing has a great importance because they can have a positive impact on the representation of the black community and the potential to contest, on a symbolic level, power relations and hegemonic representations. As such, people of colour in leadership roles have the potential to resist and counteract discrimination, fostering cultures of equality and justice, as Sarah again explains:

I met a black male coach. I was at a national championship. He came up to me and he said, "I just want to say that it's amazing to see you", and he shook my hand. I was like: "If it wasn't for people like you, we wouldn't be able to make it through." He knew what I meant. I said, "Can I ask you something? Has it been hard for you?" He said, "They [white people] just won't let me in." He was about

60. His daughter is a coach now. He nearly cried when he said it. He said, “They just won’t let me in.” I was like, “You know what? I’m going to jar open the door for all of us”. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Our intersectional identities, such as gender and race, continue to play a role in determining our ability to belong to the boxing community and, consequently, to participate in it. Gender and race-based discrimination are still obstacles to access for women and black people, as they seek to be represented and to fully participate in boxing. Nevertheless, there have been some positive transformations, in the sense that a few black women have managed to occupy leadership positions, such as the interviewee, Sarah, herself a black female coach presented in this section; these women have contributed to the representation of their community. However, boxing could do far more to guarantee the equitable representation and participation of all, and not just of those who have managed to break the gender and racial glass ceilings.

8.5 A PRECARIOUS PARTICIPATION

For Butler (2015), precarity is a socially induced condition of vulnerability and violence resulting from gendered norms which dictate who has the right to appear and how in public space.¹⁰² Those living under precarious conditions are ‘those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways [and] are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence’ (Butler, 2015: 34). In boxing, gender norms have historically denied women the right to appear in the pugilist arena or to be recognised

¹⁰² In this sense, precarity is related to Fraser’s understanding of representation, especially considering that according to Fraser (2013: 199) the individuals who lack a political voice ‘are unable to articulate and defend their interests with respect to distribution and recognition, which in turn exacerbates their misrepresentation’; this results not only in a situation of vulnerability but also one of injustice.

as subjects, as boxers, and these stereotypes continue to pose significant challenges to equitable participation today. Women thus continue to be at risk of experiencing precarity in boxing.

Butler (2015) suggests that precarity is differently distributed among people, making some social groups and individuals more vulnerable to violence and misrecognition than others. For instance, gender and race prevent black women from being recognised as full members of boxing as a result of the androcentrism and racism that prevail not only in boxing but in wider society.

Despite resistances, women have been participating in boxing for many years. However, as deviants from gender norms (Halbert, 1997), female fighters have experienced a lack of recognition and precarity in the sport. In the following quotation we observe how Victoria, rather than being recognised as an equal peer in the boxing gym, was given a subordinate position by her male colleagues:

In training, you'll get the odd boys who'll look [at] you and they'll give you a dirty look, and then they'll walk off and they won't spar with you. If it's, like, body sparring we all change partners in the session and they won't spar with me. They'll look at me, give me a dirty look and walk off. (Victoria, W, 18–24 y/o, carded boxer, East Midlands)

Victoria's female body was marked, as observed above when she describes the 'dirty look', which she clearly understood as a deliberate critique of her female embodiment. The 'dirty looks' represent a form of gender-based harassment,¹⁰³ itself a form of

¹⁰³ According to the Equality Act 2010 (Section 26), harassment is when a person harasses another, engaging her in unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, and the conduct has the purpose or effect of violating the person's dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading,

violence that rendered her participation precarious. The precarity that Victoria experienced from time to time – because, as she explained, she did not feel this as a constant experience – while participating was a consequence of the androcentric gender norms enacted and embodied by some of the members of the gym she attended.

Having their female embodiment negatively marked is a common problem for women in boxing as a result of not being recognised as an equal, but rather as women ‘invading’ a male sporting space. One of the most dramatic consequences of the gender-based discrimination women suffered was sexual harassment, which impacted negatively on their participation. Sexual harassment is understood as an unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature, the purpose or effect of which violates someone’s dignity, or which creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment for her. Sexual harassment is an expression of the inequality as well as the precarity lived by women.

During fieldwork, different situations were reported in which women had been sexually harassed. All of them were cases involving male coaches or male staff members of boxing bodies as the perpetrators and female boxers or female staff as the victims. For instance, some male participants reported that while training in a different gym than Ithaca, a female friend training with them dropped out of boxing to avoid a coach in a senior position that used to approach her in a sexual way, making her feel uncomfortable (Interview note, 16 December 2017). One female boxer told me that when she was being weighed, she started to take off her T-shirt (she was wearing a

humiliating or offensive environment for her. In the framework of the Act, protected characteristics are the following: age; disability; gender reassignment; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation.

sports bra under it); following this, an official start to flirt with her and to use sexual language. Feeling distressed by the situation, she left the room (Interview note, 30 November 2018). Another female boxer narrated how, even though she did not express any interest in the coach, beyond her communication with him about the sport, he used to tell her constantly, in what she perceived was a sexual way, that she 'looked nice'. In another interview, a female official told me that when she started her career, 'a couple of the older guys had touched her bum' (Interview note, 3 March 2018). She was outraged and told them to never touch her again, but she said that she has felt since then that boxing has seemed hostile to her.

While it is clear that cases of sexual harassment occur in the boxing context, usually against women, their incidence may be misrecognised and downplayed. During an interview, for example, I asked the male coaches if they knew about any cases of sexual harassment in their gym or others. They either denied the existence of this problem or minimised it, as illustrated below:

No, I haven't heard about any [case of sexual harassment in boxing]. It may happen, but... My main focus is on boxing; my main focus isn't on gossip or chit-chat. (Derek, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

I found that it was not only male members, but also female members who tended to deny the existence of sexual harassment, or they did not consider it as a systematic problem. It seemed that it was hard for them to recognise that women were or had been vulnerable in boxing. However, throughout the interviews, women reported cases like those narrated above, without necessarily recognising or naming these incidences as harassment. The lack of recognition or denial of harassment as a problem may be linked to women's precarity within the sport, feeling vulnerable and not wanting to make waves, or merely because it is perceived as normalised behaviour in this

masculine arena. Here Elizabeth comments on the lack of reporting of sexual harassment:

They [England Boxing] have very strong sanctions taken against coaches who behave inappropriately to women. Part of the problem is that you need to get the girls reporting it. I'm not sure they [girls, women] still feel able to, they feel that somehow their boxing will be compromised if they report it, they won't be able to stay at the club, you know, they're scared. (Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, referee, London)

Since boxing does not guarantee women a secure and respectful environment, the precarity and violence that harassment represents can continue to hamper their participation. The solution is not just creating official channels for denouncing sexual harassment but fostering a culture in which women feel safe to denounce it.

Precarity is experienced as uncontrolled vulnerability or violence, and it is caused by not being recognised by the gender norms as an intelligible subject. In the context of boxing, in which women have struggled to be recognised as full members, as equal peers, and have been considered gender deviants (Halbert, 1997), women have experienced a precarious participation. This final section has been focused on sexual harassment, considering it a violent manifestation of women's precarious participation in boxing. Here I have highlighted how, on the one hand, harassment is a systematic problem, and, on the other, it is hard for the boxing members, women included, to recognise it as a phenomenon that undermines women's participation. In order to eliminate sexual harassment, boxing needs to foster a culture based on equality, considering women as intelligible subjects within boxing and ensuring that violence is neither normalised by the perpetrators nor by the victims.

8.6 CONCLUSION

There have been advancements over time to ensure and promote female participation in boxing; nevertheless, women still experience obstacles that undermine the quality of their participation. As we have observed in this chapter, boxing does not offer the conditions necessary for women to fully participate and to do so with parity of esteem.

Drawing on Fraser, participatory parity was understood in this chapter in its three dimensions. These are *recognition*, which corresponds to cultural factors; *distribution*, which has an economic base; and *representation*, with its political dimension. Within this frame, we can see that women cannot fully participate in boxing as they lack *recognition*, as equal peers, and, therefore, cannot interact on equal terms. They experience a lack of respect and do not have access to equal opportunities, which derives from the lack of access to *distribution*. In terms of *representation*, it is also clear that women, and especially black women, experience serious obstacles to belonging to the boxing community, to taking part in decision-making processes, and to climbing the boxing hierarchy.

Drawing on the framework of participatory parity as developed by Fraser, I have also used Butler's concept of precarity. This served to help me analyse how women, being considered gender deviants in boxing, suffer from vulnerability and violence expressed in the form of gender-based discrimination and in some cases sexual harassment, both of which can become normalised and misrecognised within the sport. Hence, women do not fully participate in boxing, nor are they considered equal members; conversely, they are considered gender deviants and can become targets of violence and discrimination, which renders their participation precarious.

The chapter also examined how both androcentrism and racism act as obstacles to the participation of women and black people. While social minorities are participating in boxing, they are doing so in the margins, in a subordinate condition where the androcentric and racist ethos of boxing has not been transformed. Thus, if boxing aims to ensure the participation of all individuals on equal terms, androcentrism and racism must be tackled through systemic action. Moreover, in order to achieve a positive transformation, patterns of cultural value must ensure all individuals be considered as equal peers and be able to interact on equal terms. As Arendt argues here, it is only through egalitarian interaction that equality is possible:

[O]ur political life rests on the assumption that we can *produce* equality through organization, because man [*sic*] can *act in* and *change* and *build* a common world, together with his equals and *only* with his equals. (Arendt, 1966:301 in Butler, 2009: vii; emphasis in original).

These lines by Arendt are a great inspiration as they highlight that we, individuals, have the potential to create equality. Moreover, as Arendt points out, it is only by interacting with others as equals, that equality can be possible. Today, equality in boxing – and elsewhere – has yet to be achieved.

9 BOXING'S MIRAGE OF EQUALITY

Although women's professional boxing traces back more than 100 years, women professional boxers have not gained the same recognition or been afforded the same opportunities to compete as male boxers.

Halbert, 1997: 12

This chapter analyses the discourses that proclaim that equality has already been achieved in the boxing context and examines the impact of neoliberalism and postfeminism on understandings of equality and interpretations of the participation of women in boxing. Its aim is to shed light on the importance of interrogating triumphalist views on equality and women's participation, taking into account that they not only dismiss the systematic discrimination and inequalities female participants experience within boxing but also perpetuate discriminatory gendered power structures. Drawing on Foster (1994), I highlight that in boxing, equality remains a presumption rather than a feasible reality. Locating my analysis within a feminist theoretical framework (Cahn, 2015; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014; Taft, 2004), I emphasise that neoliberal and postfeminist narratives perceive female participation and recognition in public domains –sport included– as individual responsibilities and the result of women's personal success, rather than rights that must be respected and guaranteed by boxing organisations without restriction. Furthermore, drawing on McRobbie (2009), I investigate how the fact that women are participating in pugilism

has been perniciously interpreted to infer that equality of participation has been achieved – despite evidence that suggests otherwise.

Neoliberalism operates not only at the level of the state and the economy, but it also shapes social organization, culture, and individuals in society. In other words, neoliberalism ‘reaches beyond the market’ (Brown, 2009: 38), affecting the conduct and the bodies of individuals (Rottenberg, 2014; Woodward, 2009). Thus, according to the rationale of neoliberalism, people are expected to regulate themselves (Woodward, 2009) and act ‘freely’ and rationally, making choices and bearing responsibility for these choices (Brown, 2009: 43). Brown highlights that this is because neoliberalism ‘involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*’ (2009: 39–40; emphasis in original). Neoliberalism is a powerful ideology that impacts on every social field, including sport, as well as on political and social movements such as feminism.

Feminism has been both impacted by neoliberalism and distorted by it. Feminist literature (McRobbie, 2009; Messner, 2002; Ringrose, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014) points out that it has been through liberal feminism, that neoliberalism has permeated the most in feminism. Ringrose (2007) suggests that neoliberalism has co-opted liberal feminist claims because the liberal representation of a de-raced and de-classed woman, who seeks to become ‘somebody’, participating in the public field and securing her rights as an individual, coincides ‘with a neoliberal programme of individualization, autonomous self-hood and self-responsibilization [...] in globalizing contexts of marketization, insecurity and risk’ (Ringrose, 2007: 480). Thus, it seems that the rhetoric of liberal feminism has been taken on by the (neo)liberal and individualist ethos, creating a new rhetoric that incorporates liberal feminist principles and claims into a neoliberal discourse.

Feminist literature (McRobbie, 2004; 2009; Ringrose, 2007) identifies as *postfeminism* a trend that proclaims that feminism has already accomplished its goals and that equality has been achieved, and which makes claims for women's progress 'in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order' (McRobbie, 2009: 14). In this framework, it is considered that feminism¹⁰⁴ has already been surpassed. Therefore, it is seen as unnecessary (Taft, 2004) and as passing away (McRobbie, 2009: 12), although reality suggests otherwise.

Throughout this chapter, drawing on Ringrose (2007), I use the notion of postfeminism to make reference to a political, theoretical, and representational terrain characterised by the destabilisation of and backlash against gender equality and women's rights. Also, I use the concept of postfeminism as an analytical tool to trace and analyse the effects of liberal and neoliberal discourses on gender relations, as well as pernicious interpretations of feminist conquests and how they act as obstacles to achieving equality and to building up equality cultures in boxing.

This chapter is organised in three sections. The first analyses understandings of equality and the participation of women in boxing. Here, I highlight that while equality is celebrated and considered as having already been achieved, this is in fact just a presumption, rather than being an effective right or a widespread value. The second section argues that the triumphalist views on the presence of women in boxing as a marker of equality completely disregard the precarious quality of women's participation as well as the gendered power structures that prevail in the sport. The third section

¹⁰⁴ Especially those feminist claims demanding social justice, social transformation, and the elimination of oppressive systems not only based on gender but also on sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, ableness, etc.

explores the model of participation offered to women in boxing. Here, I highlight not only how restrictive the model is, but also how it prevents effective social transformation towards equality.

9.1 PRESUMPTIVE EQUALITY

Drawing on Foster (1994),¹⁰⁵ I suggest that in boxing there is presumptive equality. Throughout this section, I highlight that proclaiming that equality has been achieved prevents the efforts to move towards effective equality. In the analysis of my data, I found that the three aspects suggested by Foster to define presumptive equality can be traced throughout the discourses on gender equality and women in boxing. These are as follows:

‘[F]irst, the presumption that equality for women and girls has been achieved; second, the presumption that men and women are equal in the sense of being equivalent, symmetrical populations, having different but equal problems; and third, the presumption that men and boys are equally disadvantaged [...] as women and girls.’ (Foster, 1994: 1)

Additionally, other aspects supporting the thesis that equality is a presumption in boxing were identified. One of them is the presumption that women must be content with the current state of affairs, suggesting that they ought to be happy to be allowed to participate in boxing, as though this were not their right. Considering these, I suggest that in boxing, equality is, so far, an uncertain assumption.

¹⁰⁵ Foster (1994) introduced the notion of presumptive equality to feminist debates while analysing the discourses on the schooling of boys and girls in the Australian context.

9.1.1 INEQUALITIES CORRECTED?

According to Foster (1994: 1), the belief that 'equality for women and girls has been achieved' is the first aspect identified as presumptive equality. Accordingly, in boxing, the widespread discourse is that inequality has been eliminated and that equality has been ensured; the assumption is that there is nothing else to do in this matter but to be proud of the progress attained. From this celebratory perspective, equality is used to communicate that 'past inequalities have been corrected' (Foster, 1994: 1). Illustrating this point, in the following quotation a male participant reflects on the acceptance women in boxing have had throughout time:

Back in the days, it wasn't like that. They [boxers] thought women shouldn't do it [participate in boxing]. But I think it's all changed now. It's different, I think, there is equality ... what's her name? One of the Olympic boxers, she was a girl. (Justin, M, 35–44 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The participant highlights that the recent inclusion of female boxing in the Olympics is a clear sign of the achievement of equality. According to him, it has 'all changed now' as women are gaining recognition; however, he cannot remember the name of Nicola Adams, the first UK female boxer to become an Olympic champion in the 2012 Olympic Games. While acknowledging and celebrating the advancements women have made in boxing, we cannot claim yet that equality has been achieved.

The second aspect identified by Foster (1994: 1) to define presumptive equality is that 'men and women are equal in the sense of being equivalent'. In this regard, during fieldwork I observed that equality was understood as sameness and interpreted as treating women and men indistinctly, as illustrated in the quotation below:

One of our norms is going to be equality, which is why we treat everybody the

same in the gym, regardless of what they've done, what they can do, or what they will do [...] As a gym, we facilitate individuality quite well. "If you [a woman] want to box that way, box that way. If you want to act that way, act that way. But as long as you come in and you do what's expected of you – exactly how we treat the males –, then that's fine." (Steven, M, 25–34 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Equating equality and sameness, as the coach above does, is problematic because it disregards the historical inequality experienced by women and dismisses the fact that women – or at least most of them – continue to experience discrimination in boxing; therefore, they are not truly treated 'the same as' men, as the coach suggests.

Male boxers frequently stated, by way of illustration, that equality has been achieved, that men do train with women in the gym. However, the inclusion of women in the training sessions is perceived almost as a favour to women, as expressed here:

I think the gym already has come making it equal: we [men] spar with the girls, we train with the girls...we train pretty much equal in the gym, obviously, we just don't fight against the girls. (Andrew, M, 18–24 y/o, carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The participant highlights that nowadays, men treat women equally by training with them and sparring with them. However, I would argue that what underpins this attitude is an implicit understanding that boxing is a male bastion, a sport made for men and by men in which men decide if women can participate and on what terms. In this regard, the expectation is that if women participate in historically masculine fields, their participation will be under masculine paradigms, norms, and power structures. Thus, despite women's participation in boxing, the hierarchical, essentialist, and dichotomist constructions of gender have not been broken down within the sport.

9.1.2 THE TILTED PLAYING FIELDS

One of the widespread assumptions in boxing is that women have gained equal access to opportunities, or that women and men are now situated on a level playing field. However, playing fields are never level; they always tilt to some degree or other. In this regard, Woodward (2009: 72–73) suggests that ‘sport is not always a level playing field at all and is characterized by significant social divisions and inequalities that mirror those in the wider society as well as reconstituting some that are more particular to sport’. I would argue that gendered power structures produced and reproduced within boxing prevent a level playing field for its athletes, and if these structures are not eliminated, there are few chances for women and non-normative sexualities and genders to advance. However, this seems to go unnoticed in boxing, as illustrated in the quotation below in which the absence of both level playing fields and equal opportunities for women are completely dismissed:

Whether you're stood next to a girl or you're stood next to a boy, it doesn't make any difference. Just because you [women]’ve got high heels on and I [a man] have got trainers on, if we're running 20 miles, then that's your problem, not my problem, we're both running 20 miles. There should be no difference between a man and a woman. (David, M, 45–54 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

For David, then, gender stereotypes pervade but also the universal access to opportunities is taken for granted. From David's perspective, any obstacles women face in their careers are individual problems – as in it being their problem if they try to run in high heels – and men do not perceive themselves as playing a role. Men who do not recognise their patriarchal privilege and are not committed to the elimination of gender discrimination and the full participation of women pose serious obstacles to the fight for equality.

While defining presumptive equality, (Foster, 1994) identifies that female progress is misread as an affront to men and that the participation of women and girls has been misinterpreted as a gain at men's and boys' expense. Accordingly, in boxing there is a constant demand for respecting men's and boys' privileges not only as a response to the increasing participation of women but also as a resistance to undertaking structural transformations to foster equality effectively. In the quotation below, a coach comments on men's resistances to change – and especially, to losing their *status quo* – that he witnessed at the main boxing body in England:

Me being involved in England ABA, [I've realised] we still got the stick in the muds, the old timers. When I say the old timers, people [men] that have been in boxing for years, before any females were in, and they still quibble. They do. I saw them at meetings asking: "Oh, why are the girls getting this? What about the males?" (Robert, M, 55–64 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Foster (1994) makes reference to the patriarchal dividend suggesting that when men are asking 'Why are the girls getting this? What about the males?', as the coach reports above, they are not only complaining about women's advancement but also defending other men's interests and power in order to defend their own. The claim for women's rights does not jeopardize men's rights; however, it does question an unfair system of privilege that has benefited men. Thus, if boxing presumes to have achieved equality, it must end not only the system of privileges but stop creating an antagonism between women's and men's rights, as they are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, it must communicate that ensuring equality for women contributes to building a more just and equitable community for all.

9.1.3 YOU HAVE TO BE HAPPY

In boxing there is an expectation for women to be happy about the current state of affairs. Taft (2004: 72) highlights that postfeminism promotes the idea that women and girls 'should be satisfied and content with the current social order', blocking any attempt or desire to promote or demand social change. In this framework, women's participation is seen as a gracious gift, rather than as a right which must be respected and guaranteed. Illustrating this, the quotation below follows this privilege rather than rights discourse:

I think the women are so pleased that they're now accepted within boxing. They recognise that it's hard to get a good match because it's still growing, so they're quite happy to mix in alongside the men. The male and female in the GB squad will train together very, very frequently. At grass-roots' level in clubs – you say you go to train in a club – the men and women are there side by side. (Peter, M, 45–54 y/o, staff of a boxing body, East Midlands)

Here, Peter expects women to accept the situation of inequality which undermines their boxing careers, as for instance, they do not have many opportunities to fight. The latter is a consequence of the low number of female fighters, which is a result of the lack of skill of boxing bodies to foster the participation of female carded boxers. As a staff member of a boxing body, he expects women to understand the situation passively rather than boxing institutions taking responsibility for the underrepresentation of women in boxing. Moreover, he suggests that although they cannot fight, they are 'pleased' to be accepted into boxing, particularly because they are allowed to train with their male peers. However, he not only dismisses the obstacles female pugilists face to train with their male counterparts due to gender discrimination, but also fails to recognise participation as a right rather than a privilege. In what could be a response to the quotation above, a female participant criticises

men's expectation that women should be grateful for participating in boxing, including being coached and taken to championships:

All the bad things, they [male coaches]d say, "Well, I took you to championships, so you should be grateful." "Well like, why? (sarcastic laughter) Because you take everyone to championship. I'm there to box for you." (Kayla, W, 18–24 y/o, ex-carded boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Through Kayla's words, we observe that some members of the coaching community do not recognise the participation of women as a right to be ensured but as a gift which can be given – or not – in an arbitrary manner. For Kayla, women should not be expected to be grateful for being coached; rather than being discretionary, it is an athletes' right to receive appropriate coaching.

During fieldwork, another of the aspects identified under the frame of presumptive equality was that gender differences were not considered sources of inequality or injustice. In the extract below, the participant suggests that the boxing gym is a gender-inclusive environment where men are collaborative with their female peers during the training sessions and women receive equal treatment due to the fact that gender differences have been surpassed:

If we say to one of our males, "Can you do a few rounds with Amy or Susan?" or whoever it is, they will get their head guard on, and they'll get their gloves on, with a gum shield [...] The males don't treat the females any differently. They don't protect them or put them in a bubble. Because, again, I think that creates the idea that females are so much different to males [...], I think we deal with the equality side really well. (Steven, M, 25–34 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

The atmosphere referred to by the participant was rather an exception than the norm. For example, in my research I found that males did treat females differently; with some men even arguing that they did not want to hurt the female participants while sparring,

preferring not to train at all with them. I also observed, and as I discussed in the previous chapter, that gender essentialism was used to justify the marginalisation of women in the gym and explain why boxing was male dominated. As both Messner (2011b) and Ringrose (2007) have argued, gender differences have been proclaimed, from a postfeminist perspective, to be abolished for the sake of equality despite evidence that the hierarchical, essentialist, and dichotomist constructions of gender have not been reversed.

Among the consequences of the presumption of equality is that inequalities are obscured and dismissed, and indeed, during fieldwork, I identified that inequality was often neglected. Illustrating this point, in the following quotation, a coach at Ithaca seems reluctant to address inequality:

In terms of us [the gym] allowing for the equality, it's about us not highlighting the problem so fluently. I think we need to tackle it [inequality] – and I'm not saying that we won't tackle it – but we don't need to make a deal of it that brings the issue into our gym. If the problem isn't there now, I don't want to highlight it, in case it does raise a problem. (Steven, M, 25–34 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

It seems that for Steven, his reluctance to address inequalities was seen as a way to avoid bringing an unnecessary crisis into the boxing arena, that rendering inequalities more visible would only exacerbate the problem. I would argue that denying inequality may provoke its normalisation but not its eradication; nor would it make it less pernicious. As Taft (2004: 73) points out, veiling gender oppression makes it difficult to tackle inequality because it is not acknowledged as a problem, and as such, it is unlikely to be solved. Fostering equality involves addressing inequalities and tackling them, rather than ignoring or denying their existence.

9.2 EQUALITY DISTORTED

Situated in the UK context and analysing popular culture, McRobbie (2009) suggests that in a putatively postfeminist era, women and girls have been used as 'metaphors of social change' where power relations had remained intact. Drawing on feminist literature (McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose, 2007), in this section, I analyse how women in boxing have been deployed as metaphors of change communicating that equality has been achieved and that there is nothing else to do in regards to gender equality and women's participation.

9.2.1 THE EXCEPTION DOES NOT PROVE THE RULE

The ideal woman who embodies this 'metaphor of change' is the woman who despite the masculine configuration of the sport is nevertheless visibly successful within it. These women are 'subjects *par excellence*, and also subjects of excellence' (McRobbie, 2009: 15); they portray female success and symbolize 'capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation' (McRobbie, 2009: 57). They are the emblems of social transformation because they are the ones who have been able to take part in sport successfully. This paradigm dismisses not only the poor quality of women's participation, but also that the 'metaphors of change' neither represent the majority of women nor symbolize a necessary structural transformation that may lead to equality. They are exceptional individuals and as such, an exception. Nevertheless, the belief is harmfully widespread that if they have gone through the obstacles that inequality poses, through hard work and self-motivation, anyone can do it. During fieldwork, I identified a few women who could represent the metaphor of change under a postfeminist framework; most of them were women with power positions within boxing organisations. During conversations and interviews with

them, they recognised that they had suffered gender discrimination; nevertheless, they emphasised that this was not a problem because they were hard working, self-confident, and goal orientated, considering that these characteristics had been enough to overcome any obstacle related to the masculine configuration of boxing. Illustrating this point, I offer a fragment of a conversation with a woman involved in boxing who constantly highlighted that there were no barriers for her:

I don't know whether there are barriers for women getting involved in other aspects of the sport like that still, I don't know because I don't have that barrier because I just go in and I do it because I can, right? That's my background, so I can go and do everything I want. (Interview notes, 20 June 2018)

The participant above, who is among the few women in power positions in boxing in the UK context, represents a privileged social group – middleclass English white women who have undertaken postgraduate studies and live in an affluent region of the country. During our conversation, she underlined that the self-assurance given by her social context, in addition to her personality, academic background, and good communication skills, had contributed to her successful career in the boxing body. McRobbie (2009) points out that the successful girls and women, as portrayed by postfeminism, are usually subjects who have benefited from the economic and social system. They are 'the privileged subjects of social change' (McRobbie, 2009: 15) deployed to communicate that a transformation marked by female participation and success has already taken place. However, what is disregarded by this discourse is that in a neoliberal context, access to opportunities, free choice, and equality symbolize a presumption rather than a feasible reality. Access to these things is mediated by a system of privileges relying on gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, nationality, and ableness that creates barriers excluding large social groups and benefiting a few. In this view, the concepts of access to opportunities, free choice, and

equality are used to rationalize economic, political, and cultural advantages among those already privileged (Woodward, 2009: 77). Indeed, as Cahn (2015: 13) suggests, '[i]ndividual "opportunity" is not separable from structural barriers that make "choice," in too many instances, more mirage than material'.

9.2.2 THE MYTHS OF MERITOCRACY

The representation of women as metaphors of social change relies on the idea that girls and young women are increasingly participating and gaining recognition as a result of a meritocratic system (McRobbie, 2009: 67). The promise of meritocracy is that as a consequence of working hard, and having the right attitude, high moral character, integrity, and innate abilities, anyone can attain prosperity, success, and freedom (McNamee & Miller, 2014; McRobbie, 2009). Relying on meritocracy, postfeminism proclaims that recognition and equal treatment for women can be attained through merit, rather than through any paradigmatic shift. In this framework, women are expected to be self-sufficient and to open up possibilities for themselves which 'entails self-monitoring, the setting up of personal plans and the search for individual solutions' (McRobbie, 2009: 59).

During fieldwork, I observed that female participants, especially in higher positions within boxing's hierarchy – i.e. carded boxers, female referees and coaches – self-monitored continually, acknowledging that in boxing the promise is that with merit, everyone can progress and succeed:

I have actually really fought for this [being a coach]. I've earned my respect, I think, because I was in the gym for about four years, just helping with the training, and was not allowed to be in the corner. I learnt my trade. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Sarah's words are illustrative of the merits women collect in seeking to fulfil the goal of developing their careers. Sarah suffered gender and race-based discrimination, and was systematically marginalised, especially in the beginning of her career. However, she was eager to become a coach and worked extremely hard for it. She gained recognition by demonstrating she was capable of being a coach. Throughout her journey, she put in a lot of energy and work, not only into developing boxing abilities, but also into trying to demonstrate that she was as capable of coaching as men were. While I am not suggesting that men do not also work hard to gain recognition in their field, I am suggesting that gendered power structures prevailing in boxing pose extra obstacles to women who had to excel to attain equal treatment and recognition for their success.

Meritocracy relies on the assumption that the system will distribute its resources according to the merit of the individuals. However, McNamee & Miller (2014), who analyse meritocracy in the US context, identify that the benefits and results of merit tend to be overestimated, suggesting that meritocracy is a myth. Meritocracy does not necessarily provide the benefits it promises due to the existence of non-merit factors – i.e. cultural and social capital – that overshadow the effects of merit (McNamee & Miller, 2014: n.p.). In this framework, women in boxing who acted with self-management and self-demand and were very proactive in seeking access to resources did not necessarily achieve their goals; their merits did not necessarily lead them to be fully recognised or to be able to fully participate. For instance, no matter how hard they worked, they struggled to get the right experience to be called to certain championships, either to box or to coach, or they even struggled to obtain the right training. As Lafferty & McKay (2004: 269) point out, gendered structures of power and labour in boxing 'result in women having less access to resources than do men and,

consequently, fewer opportunities to develop their pugilistic capital'. Thus, it seems that in boxing, gender rather than merit, acts as a decisive factor in the outcome of boxers' careers.

In the boxing context there is a widespread belief that attaining individual merit is the key to a successful sporting career; thus, it is an individual's responsibility to gain access to opportunities and success. Accordingly, the obstacles women face in gaining recognition are perceived to be a result of a lack of understanding of how to navigate through the sport, a result of their individual lack of effort or ability, or a result of not having sufficient role models. Illustrating this point, here we see the response of a male participant who was asked why there were just a few women participating in the senior training sessions at Ithaca:

I think you [women] have the same opportunities [as men], up to the individual to take upon that. Maybe, [the problem is that] you don't have enough role models to look up to. (Aaron, M, 35–44 y/o, parent of a child boxer, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Woodward (2009: 77) points out that neoliberalism excludes or disadvantages different groups – women, ethnic minorities, children, etc. – formally or informally from the basic rights of citizenship 'by virtue of a supposed incapacity to exercise such rights or discharge the accompanying obligations'. In the extract above, the participant seems to assume that women already have access to equal opportunities in the sport but infers that a paucity of female role models is their fault, as if this were within their control. Problematizing not only meritocracy but also the access to opportunities in the neoliberal sportive context, Woodward (2009: 79) points out that '[t]he meritocratic implications of equal opportunities might lead to an extremely unequal society with large disparities between a[n ...] elite and a disadvantaged people who come to be

classified as victims of their own lack of ability'. Consequently, inequality is reproduced, leaving out many, especially the most disadvantaged who do not have real agency in their condition and situation, but who are seen as being responsible for their own exclusion. As Taft (2004: 73) similarly argues, equality has not yet been achieved, and meritocracy is intersected by sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism. There is thus the need to not only provide the principle of access to equal opportunities within boxing but also to ensure that disadvantaged groups are able to access these opportunities.

9.2.3 AN INSTRUMENTAL USE OF WOMEN

Within postfeminist narratives where women are deployed as metaphors of change, the presence of female pugilists has been used to demonstrate that boxing organisations are committed to equality and embracing change. Thus, the participation of women in boxing is exploited by boxing gyms to comply with the law, rules, or codes of governance,¹⁰⁶ without being necessarily committed to women's advancement or raising awareness of the need for affirmative action, as Elizabeth observes below:

I have been pushed forwards because they need women officials, because we [in boxing] don't have many. So, in order to show that we're modernising and that we're adhering to the sports governance code, you know, because we're funded a lot by Sport England that would show we're trying to push forward. (Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, Referee, London)

¹⁰⁶ This suggests that as it occurs in the instrumental use of equality, the presence of women has been deployed to show an organisation's commitment to the advancement of women, at least in discursive terms, in order to fulfil the requirements of funding bodies, codes of governance, etc.

In my research, I found that boxing gyms and bodies claimed to be committed to equality and to the advancement of women in order to both comply with the rules of sport bodies and ensure financial benefits. Nevertheless, it was positive that gender equality was at least taken into account to abide by the rules. Declaring a commitment to equality can be a strategy towards obliging organisations to establish basic norms and frameworks to support equality and the advancement of women. Illustrating this point, I noted that male coaches were extremely aware of the sanctions by England Boxing and the AIBA to prevent and eradicate sexual harassment. Thus, they were very careful of their behaviour to avoid being accused of an offence. Imposing norms and codes of governance, and even conditions to securing financial resources, may be currently the most effective strategies to encourage boxing to embrace a culture of non-discrimination. However, imposition does not necessarily lead to the embracing of change.

Hence, the creation of equalities frameworks to counteract discrimination against women in boxing has not necessarily, as yet at least, been translated into the adoption of interactions and practices based on equality. Moreover, pointing to women's participation as proof of attaining equality is harmful because it obscures the fact that women have yet to be given access either to effective equality or to full participation. The female-only sessions (FOS) at Ithaca are an illustration of the misuse of the presence of women in boxing. As was analysed in the previous chapter, these sessions were seriously marginalised within the boxing club. They were, for example, not provided with enough good coaching, and most of the coaches refused to lead those sessions because they did not consider them 'worthy'. The number of women attending the sessions was low, fluctuating from three to eight participants, so the financial benefits from the fees paid by the FOS' participants were not high. Thus, it

seems that the motivation to hold the FOS at Ithaca was neither genuine interest in the sessions nor the direct financial gain the FOS represented. From this perspective, despite of the gym's dismissal of the FOS, my hypothesis is that these sessions were used as a way to communicate Ithaca's commitment to equality, diversity, and the participation of women in boxing. This may have been done to give to the gym a positive and progressive image in the eyes of its clients and funding bodies. However, highlighting the presence of women in a context where women are discriminated against, rather than being a sign of commitment, seems to be a discursive means to mask the inequalities behind celebratory discourses of equality and of women as metaphors of change.

During fieldwork, I observed that women's participation in boxing is not only used by boxing gyms to express their compliance with the law, rules and codes of governance, but also to get financial benefits from women. In this context, the participation of women in boxing was not necessarily perceived as a manifestation of women's freedom or a more equal society. Rather, it was addressed –even by staff of national boxing bodies, as reported in the lines below–, as a strategy to get financial benefits. You don't have to be a very clever businessman to understand if I let the other half of the population come in, there's some revenue there and we can train them. (Peter, M, 45–54 y/o, staff of a boxing body, East Midlands)

Commented [ABS10]: added

In Peter's narrative, one may observe the instrumentalization of the participation of women in boxing. As mentioned in the literature review, Heiskanen (2012: 33) suggests, financial interests may override gendered preconceptions for the sake of a 'pecuniary gain', making reference to the interest of boxing businessmen into female boxers, as they see in female boxers' participation, a financial benefit for them. Even though, from a feminist perspective, this is unacceptable in any context, it is especially ominous when this discourse comes from a staff member who is supposed to promote

women's participation without looking for a benefit and regarding that women have the right to participate.

9.2.4 DELUSIONS OF EQUALITY

When I introduced my research project in the gym to potential participants, mentioning that it was about gender equality, with a special focus on women in boxing, the most frequent response, especially from men, was that women were participating in boxing and in other male-dominated fields, implying that equality had been achieved. This response was usually accompanied by listing the name of those girls and young women who had succeed in the context of the gym and also nationally and internationally. The names given were always the same four or five female boxers.

I asked F [-] for an interview. When I told him that my project was about gender equality and women in boxing, he replied: "But there are women in this gym. You have A [-], you have B [-], you have C [-]. The situation for women is good in the UK. Here women are boxers, they are also prime ministers. There is equality. What do you want to learn about equality?" (Field note, 18 October 2017)

Highlighting that women were participating and especially that some of them were succeeding – as if they represented the majority of women – provokes the denial of the impact of inequality and discrimination and can mask the inequality that prevails in boxing:

I've seen the girls at Ithaca and they are pretty serious. They are good. I think it is not particularly a bad place to be a girl. Isn't it? (Ryan, M, 25–34 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

It seems that the two participants above assume that given that women are participating in a historically masculine sport, we now have equality. Foster (1994) and

Ringrose (2007) suggest that equality has been uncritically equated to girls' and women's greater participation and achievement in previously male-dominated disciplines. The celebration of equality through quantitative terms in boxing, based on comparing the number of women participating nowadays to numbers in the past, creates the mirage that equality has been achieved as there are certainly more women taking part in pugilism than before. However, reducing equality to the numerical participation of women leads to a distortion of reality, as neither the low number of women nor the quality of the participation is called into question. During fieldwork, when the presence of women in boxing was discussed, male participants tended to overestimate the number of female boxers, coaches, and officials as the quotation below illustrates:

Twenty years ago, they [women] were intimidated to come in, but I don't believe they are now. There are a lot of females, especially in Hull, involved in boxing. Like I say, the city of Hull have got more [women]. I think they've got on par competitive carded females as what they have males. In other gyms is the same. So, you've got two gyms there, predominately, half [...] is competitive females. I think the days of [women] being intimidated at coming in and all the rest of it are gone. I don't think that's an actual problem. I think that stigma's gone now, it's gone completely. (Dustin, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Although England Boxing was unable or unwilling to provide data disaggregated by gender, key participants within the institution stated that in both the UK and in Hull, female carded boxers constituted approximately 20%, rather than the 50% figure suggested by the participant above. Moreover, in contrast to what the coach suggested, stigmatization of women in boxing has not faded away. It is true that the situation of women in boxing has ameliorated but gender inequality continues to be a problem and must be recognised as such.

I thus argue that triumphalist views on equality and the participation of women contrast with the reality. Nevertheless, the presence of women and girls in masculine fields and the good performance of a few has been used as evidence that both women's participation and recognition are attainable, regardless of any gender discrimination. Ringrose (2007) suggests that within a postfeminist context, characterised by the pernicious deployment of liberal feminism, '[g]ender taken as a stand alone variable or measure can be used to prove either the "facts" of gender inequality or equality' (Ringrose, 2007: 480; emphasis in original). When my participants used female participation as an indicator of the existence of equality at Ithaca, they took into account the presence of women, making reference to young white British female athletes; the absence at the gym of black or non-British female carded boxers was not questioned. Equating women's participation with equality but leaving aside the articulation of gender with other categories – i.e. sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, or ableness – provokes an 'abstract and dislocated ideal of equality' (Ringrose, 2007: 473). In other words, the notion of equality gets distorted if gender is not considered a relational category.

In the following quotation, a male participant suggests that despite how hard women are fighting for equality of rights in boxing, the boxing community and wider cultural stereotypes may mean that they do not gain the same opportunities and recognition as men.

I would say their [women's] expectations are very similar [to men's] in the fact that they've entered into that kind of field [boxing], they've entered into that kind of environment, so their expectations are that, "I'm putting all this effort in, I want the same out basically as a man." But I don't think they would ever get the same out of it as what a man would get. For instance, maybe the public wouldn't pay for the competition level status than they would if it was, say, Anthony Joshua

or something like that. (David, M, 45–54 y/o, attendee of boxercise sessions, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In boxing, women and girls symbolize metaphors of change within a context in which gender equality has been proclaimed. Nevertheless, the male paradigm has not been contested and women are expected to conform to the existing male-dominated structures.

9.3 A FORMULA TO PARTICIPATE?

Within a neoliberal and postfeminist framework, people are seen as individuals who are responsible for the quality of their participation in the public sphere. In conversations with male participants in particular, a common understanding emerged, underpinned by what could be argued was a neoliberal and postfeminist ethos that certain elements should be taken into account – a formula almost – regarding women's participation and equality in boxing.

The perception of the existence of a formula for women to fully participate and have access to equal treatment is not exclusive to boxing. For instance, analysing the context of education, Ringrose (2007: 473–474) points out that 'we are now witnessing a shift [...] towards a celebratory, neoliberal discourse of girls' new found equality as a formula for the hard work needed to attain [...] success'. However, regardless of the social context, assuming that it is through following a formula that women will be able to participate individualises the responsibility for success. From this perspective, the lack of participation is seen as the individual's *fault* for not having followed the *formula to success*.

From this starting point, in this section I provide a critique of this model of participation that puts the responsibility of full and equal participation on women as individuals. In

so doing, I explore the ways that this discourse serves to obscure structural gender inequalities as well as obfuscate the duty of organisations to guarantee gender equality.

9.3.1 JUST DO IT

'Just turn up into the training sessions and be yourself. Have a go at it, work hard and get stuck in' was a common recommendation on how to build up a boxing career. The widespread perception was that to successfully participate in boxing, it was just a matter of having a goal and working towards it. However, gender discrimination makes it harder for women to achieve full participation; so to expect success to be merely a matter of 'just turning up into the training' fails to recognise any forms of structural inequalities, not least in terms of gender. This approach is similar to the model of participation of women and girls in sport that Messner (2002) identifies as the 'Just do it model', which takes its name from the Nike slogan. This paradigm is based on both neoliberal values that highlight individualism and on the liberal feminist tradition that celebrates women's and girls' agency, women's participation in masculine spheres, and their access to power, opportunities, and resources. According to Messner (2002: 152), the 'just do it' model assumes that women will be able to share 'men's institutional power and privileges'. He warns that the model is highly problematic because not all women will be able to access power and privilege due to the existence of oppressive structures of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and others that prevent the participation of the vast majority of women. Moreover, he highlights that though a few women may be able to 'just do it', the gendered power structures that sustain sport will remain unchallenged and discrimination against women will persist.

In the boxing context, female pugilists are expected to perform a set of attitudes and behaviours in accordance with the 'just do it' approach. For instance, during fieldwork, women were expected to work hard to become successful boxers, despite gender discrimination. The expectation was that women must portray self-confidence, self-motivation, courage, determination, discipline, and genuine interest. According to the participants, these characteristics would contribute to women's recognition and access to resources, and ultimately, they would be treated equally to men. In the following quotation, a coach responds to a question on how to foster women's participation in boxing:

Stand up for yourselves. Push yourselves forward. Don't hide your light under a bushel, in other words, don't hang back. Push yourself. Push yourself forward, look people in the eye. Sell yourself. (Robert, M, 55–64 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Women are expected to do their best to convince others of their worth to participate in the public field, especially in masculinised arenas. Here the coach recommended that women be self-confident and 'lean in' to convince the boxing community of their worth. His advice was well intended. However, it was also problematic because it fails to acknowledge the discrimination and precarity experienced by women and that not everyone starts with the same advantages. As previously discussed, meritocracy is a system intersected by gender bias. Thus, no matter how hard women work or how self-motivated they are, the possibilities for them to fully participate are limited by discriminatory structural frameworks. Therefore, rather than 'just doing it' we must recognise structural barriers and transform patriarchal configurations that make participation a male privilege rather than a right for all.

9.3.2 PAY THE PRICE

Under the neoliberal rationality, regardless of the field, individuals are expected to be entrepreneurs (Brown, 2009; Rottenberg, 2014; Woodward, 2009). They themselves are the product and value is added through their skills and attitudes. As entrepreneurs, with creativity and discipline, individuals must find a network for their product and identify the opportunities for it. Rottenberg (2014: 420–421) claims that neoliberalism creates governable individuals, constructed as entrepreneurial actors who are expected to optimize their ‘resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation’. This is played out in a context in which equality, opportunity, and free choice, rather than being understood as a matter of social justice are interpreted in individualised terms.

Taking for granted the access to opportunities and freedom of choice, entrepreneurs are expected to pay the price if they want to fully participate and be recognised. Within this rubric and based on a problematic interpretation of liberal feminism, women are supposed to adapt to the masculine structure of sport characterised by male domination, its hierarchical relationships, and its ‘tough love’,¹⁰⁷ in Trimbur’s (2011) terms. In this regard, I identified that women, especially at the highest point of the boxing hierarchy (i.e. coaches, referees, and elite boxers), adopted masculine values and acted according to the norms of the dominant ‘masculine’ paradigm, as both Elizabeth and Sarah illustrate below:

You [as a woman in boxing] really do have to just get on with it [within the

¹⁰⁷ Within the boxing context, Trimbur (2011) suggests that this term refers to the reluctance of male coaches to demonstrate affection and care for the participants, despite the interest one may have in them. This attitude is associated with the social construction of hegemonic masculinity.

masculine boxing culture] and not be too timid and not be too sensitive. (Elizabeth, W, 35–44 y/o, referee, London)

I'm not going to get angry about it [boxing being a masculine and male-dominated arena]. I'm just going to get on with it. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

Both Elizabeth and Sarah explained during the course of the research that they had experienced gender discrimination, especially at the beginning of their careers. They both felt that to best adapt themselves to boxing and become successful within this culture, they had to adhere to its masculine norms, even if this involved suppressing their thoughts and feelings. They perceived this was the only way if they wanted to fully participate. Boxing did not offer them another choice, and it made them feel solely responsible for their exclusion. I argue that veiling a system of inequalities and conferring the responsibility for marginalisation on the marginalised individuals is pernicious and must stop if we are to achieve equality in boxing.

Nowadays, success and failure are perceived as a result of a 'regime of personal responsibility' (McRobbie, 2009: 19). This process of individualisation deflects responsibility away from socio-economic structures of power within institutions. Analysing postfeminism, Taft (2004) points out that this trend of feminism both celebrates girls' agency and dismisses the effect of social injustices, hiding oppressive systems and relations that affect girls' access to opportunities. Therefore, 'it places the responsibility for achievement on the shoulders of each individual' (Taft, 2004: 74). Accordingly, Cahn (2015) suggests that the rhetoric of the neoliberal system, which emphasises individual responsibility and disregards structural inequalities, can cause great emotional, psychological, and physical harm to the individuals in the sportive context. In this sense, the bodies become highly regulated, as they are the target of different mechanisms of power (Woodward, 2009). I observed that young female

boxers who were striving to succeed in the field were also stressed by the pressure they felt to continuously prove themselves and demonstrate excellence. Additionally, they felt the pressures and anxieties created by a patriarchal and consumerist society to look good – translated into being thin, fit, and strong while simultaneously maintaining their femininity. These pressures were felt to strongly by some young women that it affected their health and wellbeing, in some cases leading to eating disorders resulting from the continuous and rigid training and dieting that they imposed on themselves while trying to build up their boxing careers. In boxing, every athlete acknowledges her or his responsibility for building up their boxing career. Similarly, in the case of women, I observed that they appeared to see the successful development of their career as a wholly individual enterprise and for the most part did not take into account the lack of access to support, resources, and recognition.

Within a rhetoric that the only two possibilities offered to the individuals are tremendous success or shameful failure, Harvey claims that under neoliberalism, '[p]ersonal failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed' (Harvey, 2005: 76 in Trimbur, 2011: 337). Thus, based on the fallacy that an individual's destiny is purely under her control, the victim suffers not only because of the failure itself and its consequences but also because of having failed – as if it were a choice rather than the result of a convergence of social *and* individual factors. In this framework, a lack of access to equal participation can be perceived as a result of inadequate individual decisions and conscious actions, such as poor decision making, lack of hard work, and lack of self-confidence (Trimbur, 2011: 337). In the following quotation, which seems to echo both neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, a boxing coach advises women in boxing to be assertive and to invest time and effort in boxing in order to open up opportunities for themselves:

If you really want to keep in the sport, put the time in and let the coaches know what your actual aim is and what you want to do [...]. If that person keeps coming up, whoever it is, and they keep turning up, they keep training and they approach the coach and say: "Look, I want to fight, I want to do this. I want to learn more, can I do this, can I do that?" We [coaches]'re not mind readers, at the end of the day, if that's what they want to do, our coaches will welcome it. My advice [to women] is just put the time in and let the coaches know what you want to do. (Dustin, M, 35–44 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

According to the advice above, if a woman fails to be recognised in boxing, it will be seen as an individual fault, a consequence of her lack of commitment, clear communication, and self-confidence. In this context, the system seems to claim that 'it is all up to you', as Sandlin (2004) entitles an article in which she analyses the influence of the American myth of meritocratic success on welfare education programmes in the US context. In this article she highlights how success is considered an individual responsibility and failure an individual's fault. As Rottenberg (2014: 424) points out, the demand for self-realisation is nothing new in Western culture. However, she suggests that postfeminist discourse has targeted women and girls as never before, persuading them not only to accept responsibility for their fate as individuals but also to dismiss the effect of power structures and systems of inequality.

9.3.3 PUSH FORWARD

Hence, under neoliberal ideology, barriers that we might otherwise perceive as having been created as a result of structural inequalities are individualised and, as such, should be overcome by individuals. The belief is that individual agency will counteract the obstacles related to any structural inequality. Trimbur (2011), while analysing discourses of inequality and anti-black racism within a neoliberal context in a boxing gym in New York, suggests that the discourses from the coaches towards the black

boxers advocating personal responsibility, in a milieu characterised by structural inequalities, seek to empower the individuals. Trimbur (2011: 337) highlights that the black boxers, while acknowledging and criticising structural inequality and racism, preferred to focus on their individual responsibility as a strategy to succeed in a neoliberal context, as it was the most feasible and efficient way to navigate it. Similarly, during fieldwork, I observed that in a context in which the responsibility for surpassing inequalities was perceived as an individual responsibility, the presumption was that women themselves had the duty to overcome gender discrimination by any means.

In what seems to be a call for women not to allow gender discrimination to define either their boxing careers or their experience as women, in the following quotation Ithaca's head coach gives female boxers motivation boosting advice:

You've got to believe in yourself, be confident in who you are, know that you can do what you want to do. Don't let barriers hold you back, you can do what a man does if you want to do. (Robert, M, 55–64 y/o, coach, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Drawing from the quotation above, we observe that while the coach is well intended, his advice is still problematic. Despite acknowledging the existence of barriers against women, he encourages them not to allow themselves to be defeated by them. Portraying men as symbols of agency, power, and privilege, he reminds women that they can aspire to do what men do if they work hard and are self-confident. The possibility of challenging men's power and privilege for women to be recognised in boxing is out of the question. The promise offered to women is that they can attain power and privilege within a masculine structure, rather than transforming boxing's masculine ethos. In this context, the efforts seem to be focused on the capacity of the

individual to adapt to the system and their ability to develop self-confidence, instead of on developing the conditions for the individuals to transform the system.

I thus found that female boxers were situated knowers who were well able to understand and acknowledge not only the effect of gender hierarchies but also the difficulty of transforming them. Nevertheless, female participants preferred to focus on their individual agency to surpass the barriers that the system had imposed on them. Thus, the power structures that create the inequalities remained untouched, and boxing gyms and bodies were largely absolved of responsibility to eradicate discrimination and inequality. By way of illustration, below Sarah understands discrimination as a sociocultural phenomenon within boxing, but simultaneously normalises this and seems to see discrimination as immutable. Sarah's words echo those of a range of participants who perceived that it was easier to adapt to the exclusionary structure of boxing than to attempt to transform it:

We know that discrimination happens. It's not a new concept, but don't let that put you off from achieving your goals – what you're setting out to do. See that [discrimination] as bumps in the road or hurdles. Rather than focus your energy on that, try to think of ways that you can just progress as a human being, as a female and as an athlete. I think it [discrimination] can also be used as an excuse. Yes, we acknowledge it happens; it's there and it's in our subconscious, but, regardless, keep pushing forward. (Sarah, W, 45–54 y/o, ex-coach, London)

During the interview with Sarah she also talked about the systematic discrimination she had faced throughout her boxing career as a black woman. Nevertheless, perceiving that any transformation was unlikely, she, as an individual, had preferred to work towards overcoming the barriers caused by discrimination rather than to focus on discrimination itself. Though her perspective seems empowering and pragmatic,

the idea that discrimination can become an excuse for not being able to accomplish one's goals is problematic. Discrimination is a structural, sociocultural injustice, not a matter of individual choice, and while there will be some individuals able to overcome it – as Sarah has endeavoured to do – there will be many others who are unable to surmount discriminatory barriers.

Rottenberg (2014) argues that under the neoliberal regime, liberal feminism has been co-opted, making it a narrative used not only to hide the contradictions and inequalities created by liberal democracy, but also to entrench a 'neoliberal rationality' based on individualism. In this context, she characterizes the subject created by neoliberal feminism, as follows:

Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care. (Rottenberg, 2014: 422)

In this framework, my research reports that even if women were aware of structural inequalities, including those involving race and gender, as Sarah demonstrated, they felt they had to navigate through them if they wanted to participate. Moreover, they acknowledged that the only way to overcome inequalities, was to act efficiently 'optimizing [their] resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation' (Rottenberg, 2014: 420). The latter was intensified by the fact that women did not expect anything positive from boxing organisations, as historically, they have discriminated against women, and especially black women. Consequently, the role of the organisations was underestimated, while the burden to fully participate was on the individuals, as Sarah expresses in the lines above.

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9.4 CONCLUSION

Neoliberalism is a political project that rests on dogmas and assertions based on 'the scientific foundations of modern liberal economics' (Clarke, 2005: 58). As Clarke suggests, '[t]he point for neoliberalism is not to make a model that is more adequate to the real world, but to make the real world more adequate to its model' (2005: 58). Along these lines, postfeminism, as a neoliberal interpretation of liberal feminism, dictates how the world should be using rigid and unrealistic assumptions that communicate that 'there is nothing left to be done' (Taft, 2004: 72) in the field of equality. Masking reality and taking for granted that inequality is no longer a problem (Ringrose, 2007), postfeminism celebrates the achievement of equality.

Echoing postfeminism, in boxing, equality has been proclaimed as having been achieved. However, rather than a reality, this is a mirage. Women continue to experience discrimination and precarity in boxing. Equality has yet to be achieved, despite triumphal claims to the contrary.

Drawing on Foster (1994), this chapter identified different aspects that sustain the thesis that in boxing there is presumptive equality. Equality has been proclaimed as having been achieved because women are now participating; this circumstance is contrasted to periods in history in which women were completely marginalised from boxing. Moreover, equality has been understood as sameness, implying that equality means treating women as if they were men within an unchallenged masculine framework. Another aspect identified within the analysis of presumptive equality in boxing is that the steps taken by women towards equality in a masculine arena have been interpreted as actions that are detrimental to men's rights. From this perspective, efforts towards bridging gender gaps, rather than being perceived as positive actions

that benefit the whole community, are seen as threats to men and boys. In this context, it is evident that there continues to be a resistance to change and especially to the full participation of women in boxing.

The (mis)understandings of equality observed in this study have harmful consequences. The triumphalist celebrations of the achievement of equality create the chimera that social transformations are no longer needed. Consequently, the social order remains intact and even unchallenged, and inequalities are obscured and dismissed. This serves to disregard both the precarious participation of women and the gender discrimination that persists within boxing. Within this context, if a woman succeeds in gaining recognition, the expectation is that she should be happy that she was allowed to participate in boxing, as if her participation were not a right but rather a discretionary gift. Men are still considered the measure or standard for female participation, and women are just accommodated within the sexist male configuration of boxing, where power and privilege remain a male monopoly. Therefore, the gendered power structures that have historically characterised boxing remain intact. Within a context in which presumptive equality reigns and, simultaneously, equality discourses are in vogue, the myth of equality is used by boxing organisations to create a progressive façade that attracts both clients and benefits from funding bodies.

Equality has thus been distorted in boxing. Rather than develop a comprehensive understanding of equality as social justice and the absence of discrimination, there is a simplistic interpretation based on the presence of women in boxing that is used to demonstrate that equality has been finally achieved. There is no doubt that positive moves have been made towards greater inclusion, and it is a great advancement that women are taking part in pugilism. Nevertheless, gender inequality prevails and

following a postfeminist trend in popular culture, as McRobbie (2009) suggests, women have been used as 'metaphors of social change' within boxing.

The notion of women as metaphors of change creates the delusion that all women can participate, despite any structural barriers, taking for granted that the social arena has evolved positively towards equality. Proof of this evolution is based on simplistic evidence. For instance, it is often highlighted that there are successful women in boxing, and that more women are now taking part – which is accurate – but the figures on female participation tend to be overestimated. Successful women in pugilism are still a minority, an exception to the norm that most women continue to be marginalised.

Hence, the representation of women as a metaphor of change relies on the idea that girls and young women are increasingly participating and gaining recognition as a result of a meritocratic system (McRobbie, 2009: 67). This assumption not only disregards the negative impact of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism (Taft, 2004: 73), but it also assumes that women and girls can do or be anything, as long as they work for it. Thus, the promise is that with individual agency, a positive attitude, and the right skills, anyone can attain success. This myth of meritocracy obscures the fact that both succeeding in participating and gaining recognition are not only the consequences of individual merits but also of a system of economic and social privileges that benefit only a few (McNamee & Miller, 2014).

Drawing on Messner (2002), I observed that women are expected to follow a formula towards successful participation in boxing which echoes neoliberal and liberal feminist principles. According to this formula, equality has been achieved, social transformations are declared as not needed, and it is promised that with self-motivation, discipline, and hard work, women will be able to participate in boxing on a

level playing field with men if they follow their rules. Within this framework, participation is seen as an individual responsibility rather than a right; it is seen as a result of a free choice, as if not having access to participate was also a choice. Poor participation levels are interpreted as the fault of the individual or the result of bad decisions rather than as the absence of opportunities and resources.

The current model of participation that prevails in boxing promises women the possibility to fully participate and be recognised. The condition for this is that they be docile, apolitical, autonomous, and willing to conform to the norms of a hierarchical and masculine structure. This model dismisses structures of inequality based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, age, ableness, etc. and pretends that equality has been achieved, despite the prevalence of gender discrimination and continued experiences of precarity. Thus, the pernicious offer to women is to participate 'in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order' (McRobbie, 2009: 14), despite the great transformation they could represent in boxing.

10 CONCLUSIONS

In the UK context, women have been participating as prize fighters since the eighteenth century (Boddy, 2008; Hargreaves, 1997; Smith, 2014; Van Ingen, 2018; Woodward, 2015). Nevertheless, over time, they have been marginalised and excluded from the sport (Smith, 2014). Yorkshire-born Barbara Buttrick, pioneer of female boxing, is an example of this. From the beginning of her career in the 1940s, Buttrick experienced gender based discrimination – i.e. she was prevented by the English boxing authorities from fighting in boxing venues (Smith, 2014). However, she fought so hard to be recognised that at 90 years-old she was one of the first female fighters to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame. Throughout time, women have been fighting to participate in a sport originally reserved for men. They have been fighting to fight.

The conquests gained by women overtime have contributed to advancing equality in boxing. The advancements towards equality have been the results of battles on the canvas and beyond. For example, women have fought in the courts, such as Jane Coach did when the BBBC denied her boxing license (Smith, 2014), in the mass media while campaigning – successfully – to reverse the AIBA's sexist decision about female boxers wearing skirts for competitions (Van Ingen, 2018), and in training sessions while trying to get recognition from male coaches and peers, as this thesis documented. Women have gradually gained more equal treatment. However, the quest for gender equality continues.

The steps towards equality, including the recognition and full participation of women, have not followed a linear process. As Woodward puts it: '[c]hange is uneven and has

not followed a linear path' (2015: 130). In the history of women's boxing there have been victories and backlashes. Regarding the latter, this thesis argues that although women are actively participating in boxing as athletes, coaches and referees, their presence has neither transformed gendered power structures within the sport nor been translated into equality. Moreover, it highlights that if the current discrimination against women in boxing is neither recognized as a problem nor tackled, the participation of women will remain precarious and they will remain excluded, just as they have been for the last three centuries.

Drawing on a historical review of the female presence in boxing,¹⁰⁸ the literature review on women in this sport,¹⁰⁹ and on my early observations in a boxing gym in the North of England, I foresaw the tensions created by the presence of women in a hypermasculine arena. Moreover, I identified that within the boxing context, gender inequalities and gender-based discrimination are hardly recognized. The findings later confirmed that sport is an arena where equality has yet to be achieved, despite claims to the contrary.

Aiming to shed light on the possibilities for boxing as a site for the production of cultures of gender equality and the challenges for women to participate in equal terms in sport, as part of the Horizon 2020 GRACE Project, I decided to investigate the experiences of gender equality and inequality in amateur boxing. While conducting a gender and feminist analysis of the participation of women in amateur boxing in the UK context, my research question and research aims were as follows:

Research question

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁹ See Chapter 2.

- What are the obstacles boxing faces in working towards becoming an egalitarian sport, specifically in what matters to the full participation and recognition of women within it?

Research aims

- To explore the gendered construction of boxing,
- To investigate the challenges women experience when seeking to be treated as equal peers in historically masculine and male-dominated arenas, and
- To analyse the narratives that celebrate the presence of women in boxing and proclaim that equality has already been achieved.

I used ethnographic methods to collect data. These included thirty-two semi-structured, in-depth interviews with female and male boxers, ex-boxers, boxers' relatives, staff and ex-staff of boxing bodies, coach educators and coaches, all based in the UK. Moreover, I conducted participant observation at Ithaca boxing academy between September 2017 and April 2018. Though it was challenging to be a young woman from Latin America in a boxing gym in the UK, I immersed myself in the gendered culture of English boxing and established a relationship with my participants, situated as both a researcher and a boxing novice.

The theoretical frameworks that I used to underpin the analysis were the concepts of parity of participation (Fraser, 2000; 2007; 2013) and precarity (Butler, 2009; 2015). Participatory parity, in Fraser's (2007; 2013) framework, is understood as justice (Fraser, 2013: 11) and the term refers to having the possibility to be treated as an equal peer in social interaction (Fraser, 2007: 27). For this, she takes into consideration that distribution, recognition, and representation are conditions of participatory parity, that correspond respectively to the economic, cultural and political

dimensions of both participation and justice. In regards to precarity, according to Butler (2015), the term makes reference to the condition of vulnerability and violence resulting from gendered norms which dictate who is considered a legitimate subject in public space. Those experiencing precarity are 'those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways [and] are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence' (Butler, 2015: 34). In boxing, gender norms have denied women the right to be legitimate members of the sport, resulting in experiences characterized by stereotypes, sexual harassment and discrimination. Moreover, I took into account feminist debates (Cahn, 2015; McRobbie, 2009; Messner, 2002; 2011a) that denounce narratives based on neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies that underestimate the impact of inequalities, uncritically celebrate that gender equality has been achieved and expect the participation of women in masculine areas without challenging gendered power relations.

Boxing still faces diverse challenges to becoming an egalitarian sport. Focused on the participation of women, this study identified three obstacles for the advancement of gender equality. The first is the construction of boxing as a male-dominated and masculine sport. The second is the discrimination experienced in boxing as an expression of the sexism that prevails in the sport. And the third one is the existence of narratives that interpret the obstacles women face as individual problems rather than manifestations of the inequalities that prevail within the sport and beyond. In this context, in a perverse shift based on neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, not only are inequalities dismissed, but also, women, as individuals, are made responsible for their own exclusion. As a result of this scenario, inequalities persist, power structures remain intact, the masculine paradigm remains unbroken, and institutions and organisations are excused from embracing diversity and ensuring equality.

Regarding the first obstacle, this study found that gender equality in boxing is hampered by its gendered construction. With this, following Acker (1992: 567), I emphasise that in boxing, 'gender stands for the pervasive ordering of [...] activities, practices, and social structures in terms of differentiations between women and men'. And also, I consider that this pervasive ordering of gender in boxing is traversed by power structures where what is considered as masculine concentrates the power and privilege, and what is considered as feminine, is considered inadequate

Commented [ABS12]: added

Arguing the existence of historical inertia, the participants considered that despite women's participation, boxing is unlikely to be transformed. For instance, Todd, a male coach, declared that boxing 'is always going to be male dominated. More and more women are coming in, but it's more so a male-dominated sport, and I think it always will be'. This perspective, based on a fixed male and masculine essence that does not question male privilege, is widespread in boxing and is used to justify not only the lack of women but also the male monopoly on power.

The gendered construction of boxing is also linked with the fact that masculinities are forged and celebrated within it. Drawing on Wacquant (2004: 50), who reports that the boxing gym is the '*quintessentially masculine space*', this thesis confirmed that boxing is still an arena where culturally considered values associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; 2002; 2005 [1995]) – i.e. violence, bravery, resistance to pain, male dominance – are exalted and embodied by its participants. Illustrating this, Aaron, a father of a child boxer, and an ex-boxer himself, declared in interview that men 'don't want to be the weak one [...] So, that's why they go into boxing [...] so that they look macho'. This investigation showed that boxing is a site where some of the male attendees see the sport as a site for affirming their hegemonic masculinity and

where the archetype of a boxer is a masculinity characterized for its superiority and for being 'macho' in their own terms.

Considering boxing has been constructed as a masculine site, women are considered inadequate. As Halbert (1997) reported long ago, female boxers are still perceived as gender deviants as they do not conform to conventional gender norms. Consequently, stigmas and stereotypes are used as social sanctions for having challenged traditional conceptions of femininity through their participation in the sport. In this regard, female participants reported cases when stereotypes and stigmas against them inhibit their chance to participate in fights or to get quality coaching, sponsorship, access power positions, etc. For instance, young female boxers reported being targeted by coaches and peers for their beauty, rather than for their technique or skills. Also, female referees and coaches were stigmatized for being women. Such was the experience of Elizabeth, a female coach, who throughout her career has been told by male coaches, staff of boxing bodies and audience members that she does not know about boxing because she is a woman. Thus, being a woman in boxing is equated to being inadequate, which is clearly an obstacle to women being treated as equals.

The male dominion of power and privilege in boxing, and consequently the exclusion and marginalisation experienced by women, is justified via gender essentialism. As this study demonstrated, salient biogenetic features such as body mass and hormones – i.e. testosterone – are used as markers of gender difference. As such, they are used to communicate men's proclivity to boxing and explain their need to display their superiority. About this, David, an attendee to boxercise sessions, argued that boxing was a male-dominated sport because 'men have more testosterone and are more bothered about how other men [...] perceive them'. In this regard, this study found that

in boxing, inequalities are naturalized and mistakenly considered unavoidable consequences of biological differences.

In addition to looking at boxing as a gendered sport, my thesis also examines the reproduction of gender differences within it. An illustration of this is the importance of sex segregation in boxing. This occurs not only in the competitions but also in the training sessions in which differences, such as experience and skills, have a second place. Female boxers argued in interviews that the perception of most of the coaches is that all women are, by default, less skilled and less competitive than men. Consequently, senior female boxers claimed that very often they were made to train with unexperienced female participants, as the coaches gave gender a primary status. Thus, they argued for the importance of considering other characteristics, rather than just gender, when undertaking activities in the gym; they especially emphasized the coaches should not underestimate female athletes on the grounds of gender.

Some women manage to participate in boxing, despite the obstacles. Their participation has given them the chance to have the bodily experience of an activity historically reserved for men and realize that, paraphrasing de Beauvoir's formulation, one is not born, but rather becomes, a female athlete. It must be also said that some women in boxing have achieved success and recognition within the sport. They are aware, as some the interviewees declared, that they are contributing to subverting sexist assumptions, demonstrating that women are perfectly capable of performing in boxing.

Women's participation in boxing has been characterized for being challenging. Illustrating this, this investigation showed not only the resistances women encounter among male coaches and athletes on a daily basis, but also it documented the

complexities of being a woman in boxing as a consequence of having internalized gendered expectations and norms. This was illustrated with the case of Victoria, an elite female boxer, who embodies on the one hand, gendered anxieties to look 'well' created by a patriarchal system, and on the other, the sport's expectations for performance. As a result of these pressures, she developed eating disorders with dramatic consequences. Clearly, boxing's demanding and rigid physical discipline combined with the expectation on women to look fit, as well as attractive and feminine can result in risky behaviours that put the bodies of female athletes at risk. Thus, in order to prevent physical and emotional damage, coaches might learn to identify when a boxer is at risk from eating disorders, dehydration, training while being injured, etc. Initiatives focused on reflecting on how gender expectations are experienced in boxing might also usefully be put in place to help ease these pressures before they cause problems.

Along with its gendered construction, another aspect identified as keeping boxing from being an egalitarian sport is the androcentrism that prevails within it. Androcentrism is defined as an 'institutionalized pattern of cultural value that privileges traits associated with masculinity, while devaluing everything coded as "feminine," paradigmatically – but not only – women' (Fraser, 2013: 162). As such, androcentrism hinders participatory parity that makes reference to the possibility of women being treated with equal respect and equal opportunity for achieving social esteem (Fraser, 2013: 164). This creates power structures, relationships and practices based on men's power and women's subordination which are manifested in different forms. For instance, exclusion, lack of recognition, and lack of representation. The consequences of these are a precarious participation and lack of participatory parity, and as a result of the latter, injustice in sport.

Due to the androcentrism that prevails in boxing, women are considered neither full members nor equal peers. Sometimes, this changes when a particular woman gains experience and develops skills, but there are some women, who despite their development, still struggle to be recognized as full members of the gym and achieve participatory parity. As documented in this thesis, this is the case of the women attending the female-only sessions (FOS) in the gym where fieldwork was conducted.

The FOS aim to promote the participation of women in boxing gyms, offering them the opportunity to be active without being subject to the male gaze. They are an adapted version of the boxing trainings, characterized for not having body combat and not being competitive. As I observed, women attending to these sessions have the chance to use and have control over their bodies and to socialize with other women. Nevertheless, they were isolated from the rest of the members of the gym and not considered full members, thus the female-only sessions became a ghetto. Making reference to women in sport, Messner (2002) suggests that the *ghettoization* model, which separates women and men, putting women together into female-only sessions, women's sports and organisations, results in a subordinate position of these women, as confirmed during fieldwork. The FOS at Ithaca were dismissed by most of the members of the gym arguing that those women attending were not worthy to be trained because they did not want to fight. The coaches considered these sessions a 'waste of time'. Consequently, women in the FOS received neither quality coaching nor attention from the gym. In response, FOS attendees declared, as clients, they must be treated with dignity and as full members of the gyms. Moreover, elite female boxers argued that these sessions could be used as a site for the recruitment of female participants. Overall, women agreed that FOS members should be treated with dignity.

The FOS were an alternative for women to train in a non-masculine model which seems to defy the male structure of boxing. However, the findings suggest that the price of doing this was the marginalisation in and dismissal by the gym. Moreover, the FOS revealed that in the boxing context, women are accommodated to the masculine structure of boxing and are pushed to participate under masculine standards and schemes – i.e. in competitions, using aggression, etc. – otherwise they are marginalized. However, it must be said that it was identified that even when women participate under the rules of boxing and adapt themselves to the male hierarchy of the gym, they were not always recognised as full members.

Misrecognition is an expression of the androcentrism that prevails in boxing. According to Fraser, when women are considered inferior, invisible, and are excluded and not ensured equality of opportunity as a result of the institutionalisation of cultural norms, they are misrecognised (Fraser, 2013: 168). In this framework, I observed that women in boxing, were very often underestimated on the grounds of gender. For instance, in the case of elite female boxers, when they trained with a coach or a male peer who did not know them, they were considered in the first instance, incapable and unexperienced. It was not until they demonstrated expertise that they started to be respected and taken more seriously. In sport, no one is fully recognised until proving mastery in the discipline. Nevertheless, as reported in this study, women have to break a gendered glass ceiling and work 'twice as hard' as men do, as the presumption is that they are, by default, second-rate athletes, as one of my female participants denounced.

Misdistribution, as this study shows, is another expression of androcentrism that acts as a barrier to equality. Fraser (2013: 193) defines distribution as the economic dimension of participatory parity. In this framework, the findings suggest that women

struggle to gain equal access to revenue, income, sponsorship, financial support, and quality coaching and training. For instance, a female ex-elite boxer narrated that she not only faced obstacles to being sponsored as a woman but also to being trained. Although she was an elite athlete, according to her testimony, most of the male coaches at her gym did not give her the training she required. Women are not considered adequate for boxing; therefore, they are not only not recognised as legitimate members but also barred from accessing adequate resources to build their boxing career. In this regard, Fraser (2013: 172) suggests that misdistribution and misrecognition are frequently intertwined.

Representation, the political dimension of participatory parity, makes reference to the possibility of belonging to a community and taking part in procedures and decision-making processes (Fraser, 2013: 195). This study suggests that women boxers, referees, and coaches are underrepresented in boxing in numerical terms, and they also are misrepresented. The latter claim refers to their struggle to be considered and allowed to participate in the decisions of the boxing community. For instance, there are resistances to including them on institutional boards, as the stigmas against women in boxing prevail.

Women, but especially black women, struggle to be represented and to participate in boxing. They are systematically overlooked and marginalized. For instance, in a presumed case of racism, one of the participants reported that a black woman was denied the opportunity to participate in an international course despite having the experience to be eligible. Also, in the context of my fieldwork, I noted a lack not only of representation but also of recognition of black women in boxing. Moreover, as one of the participants pointed out, black people were blamed for their marginalization, as if being excluded were a matter of choice rather than a result of structural inequalities.

In this context, I observed that the leadership of one of my participants, a female black coach, was vital for the black community whose members who could see in her a role model and a representative. Acknowledging her position, she was committed to promoting the representation of black people in boxing.

Androcentrism and racism prevent the full participation of women and black people and cause a precarious situation for them. Butler (2015: 34) defines precarity as a socially induced condition of vulnerability and violence resulting from gendered norms which dictate who has the right to appear and how in the public space. In these terms, this study shows that the gendered and racialized norms of boxing have denied women, and especially black women, the right to appear and be recognised as full members of the boxing community. Moreover, not being recognised as legitimate subjects have made them targets of violence and harassment. In this regard, this research reports cases of female boxers being sexually harassed by male boxing officials, coaches and peers.

Precarity poses significant challenges to equitable participation in boxing, since it is linked to a subordinate condition and is experienced as a situation of vulnerability to violence. Thus, it is vital everyone is recognised as a legitimate subject in boxing and is treated with respect, dignity and equality.

Equality is not feasible, accessible and universal in boxing, yet. Nevertheless, as this thesis shows, there are triumphalist discourses that celebrate the achievement of gender equality in boxing, and these constitute the third obstacle to boxing becoming a site for equality identified in this thesis.

Underpinned by neoliberal and postfeminist trends, the narratives that perniciously celebrate equality put the responsibility to fully participate on the individual and argue

that transformation in the gender order is not needed as women have already gained access to equal opportunities. Consequently, the burden of participation is on the individual and gender power structures remain intact. These discourses hamper gender equality, neglecting and dismissing the existence of inequality as a structural problem.

Presumptive equality refers to the presumption that equality has been achieved (Foster, 1994). This is problematic as it prevents the efforts to move towards effective equality. In the context of boxing, this investigation identified a few elements that indicate the existence of presumptive equality. These are as follows.

The first element suggesting presumptive equality in boxing is the belief that gender inequalities have been corrected and discrimination has been surpassed. Illustrating this, some of the male participants argued that gender discrimination was not a problem anymore. As proof, they mentioned positive advancements, such as the participation of women in the Olympic Games. Although there has been progress towards equality, women are still misrecognized, underrepresented, and in general experience precarious participation on a daily basis. Thus, inequalities have not been surpassed.

The second element that supports the thesis of presumptive equality in boxing is the belief that women and men are already treated equally – despite evidence to the contrary. A few interviewees declared that in boxing, there were neither women nor men, there were just boxers, highlighting that everyone was treated equally. Nevertheless, I observed that gender differences still mean inequalities, especially for women.

The third aspect that defines presumptive equality is the interpretation of the advancement of women as an attack on men's rights. Illustrating (Connell, 1987; 2002) category of the patriarchal dividend, which refers to the complicity among men to maintain their status quo, some of the participants reported that gender affirmative actions were often interpreted as an affront to men's rights. Women's rights are by no means detrimental to men's rights. However, they challenge men's power and male privilege, and this seems to be why women encounter so many resistances in boxing and elsewhere.

The fourth element of the presumption of equality is the expectation it places on women to conform to the current state of affairs, characterized by gender inequality. This thesis showed that women are expected to be satisfied with participating in boxing and wait passively and patiently for any transformation to occur. In this context, any attempt or desire to question the status quo is blocked. Moreover, women are asked to be content with and grateful for any opportunity to participate, as though participation were a gift granted by men, rather than a right.

Presumptive equality takes for granted that equality has been achieved. However, inequality has not been surpassed. Thus, inequality has to be acknowledged and tackled as a widespread problem. Otherwise, inequality will continue to be dismissed, normalised and reproduced.

In the boxing context, triumphalist discourses on equality are widespread; consequently, equality seems to be distorted. Thus, this investigation identified that the presence of women is perniciously interpreted as evidence of the achievement of equality in boxing. For instance, when I discussed with some of my male study participants the existence of gender inequalities in boxing, many of them emphasised

that there were women participating; therefore, there was equality. Reducing equality to the participation of a few women, veils the discrimination experienced by the vast majority of women.

Women participating successfully in boxing are exceptional and exceptions. In fieldwork, successful women were used as 'metaphors of change', a term McRobbie (2009) suggests is used to denounce how women participating successfully in previously male-dominated fields have been used in a postfeminist era to communicate not only that transformations in gendered power structures are not needed but also that society is embracing change and fostering equality. The participation and recognition exceptional women have gained in boxing, and elsewhere, are important conquests. Nevertheless, being recognized as a full member in the public arena must not be dependent on one's excellence. Without any doubt, as a sport, boxing might celebrate the best individuals. However, celebrating the prodigious cannot legitimize exclusionary practices, behaviours, or narratives in detriment to others.

Being the best in boxing, as documented in this thesis, is seen as a result of a meritocratic system. Nevertheless, gender, race, age, and other qualities influence one's opportunities to participate and succeed, which calls boxing's 'meritocracy' into serious question. The findings suggest that it is more likely that men get more quality training than women, thus they would have more opportunities to develop the skills required to gain support from the gym and sponsors, leaving women behind. Also, it was found that there are differences even among women. In this case, white middle class women declared they were given access to more opportunities than others. Consistently, women of colour reported being prevented from participating in elite events because of they were black. Thus, this investigation showed that what operates

in boxing is not a meritocratic system but a system of privileges that favours those who are already privileged.

Despite the existence of gender-based discrimination, the widespread belief in boxing is that if women are marginalised, it is a consequence of their lack of motivation, discipline, and work, rather than an expression of gender inequality. This investigation identified that there is even a formula for women to participate and be taken into account. This formula contains values, behaviours and attitudes and is communicated via advice and suggestions that an individual has to follow to be taken seriously. These are described below.

Women in boxing, especially those building up a career, were advised to participate and succeed by 'just doing it', as the Nike motto recalls. According to Messner (2002), this philosophy creates a model of participation in which women are expected to participate in sports that are culturally considered masculine and to adapt to a patriarchal organisation without challenging its gendered power structures. This approach implied women should not only to turn up to the trainings, work hard and be disciplined but also dismiss the effects of gender-based discrimination. In turn, they were promised access to resources – i.e. quality training – and recognition. However, 'just doing it' is not feasible when there are structural barriers preventing participation.

'Paying the price' is another aspect of the formula women in boxing are expected to follow. This implies women have to accept the gendered hierarchical relations and practices that prevail in boxing in exchange for being taken into account. I observed that women, especially those at the highest point of the boxing hierarchy, such as coaches, referees, and elite boxers, were aware of the negative effects of gender differences in boxing. Nevertheless, they had decided to focus on their careers and

'get on' with the masculine boxing culture in order to avoid marginalisation. Arguing a cultural and historical inertia, female and male participants explained that paying the price was the only way to participate in boxing, considering that it has been and will always be male dominated. Normalizing gendered power relations as a condition to participate preserves the condition of subordination given to women in a patriarchal system. Thus, if boxing aspires to be an equal sport, participation must not be conditioned on following oppressive rules and norms.

Another component of the formula for women to participate in boxing is to act as entrepreneurs. The advice for female athletes is to 'sell themselves', as a male coach pointed out. In this context, the expectation is that female boxers work individually, optimizing their resources through efficient and innovative strategies, making themselves worthwhile athletes. Illustrating this, I found a female elite boxer who was continually making efforts to build her boxing career by herself because she realized that her own gym did not offer adequate opportunities for experience. Thus, along with training by herself whenever she could, every weekend she used to go to different cities in order to train with other young women and gain experience. She was continually working to 'sell herself' – as her coach recommended. However, this was never enough to get the attention she needed from her own gym.

The last aspect identified as part of the formula recommended for women seeking to participate is the suggestion of pushing forward. In this regard, women are expected to surpass inequalities by any means, as the belief is that individual agency has the power to counteract gender (and any other) inequality. In fieldwork, I identified that women were asked not to be affected by barriers and obstacles created by gender discrimination, as if this were a matter of personal will. In this context, some of the male coaches mistakenly argued that equality will come naturally to the boxing

context. In the sportive context the determination and work of the individual are crucial. However, sporting organizations, especially at the grass roots level, like the boxing gyms, must ensure the conditions for everyone to participate in equality, despite individual circumstances.

This thesis sheds light on the misunderstandings of both the presence of women in boxing and equality within the sport. Highlighting that there have been advances with regards to women's inclusion and participation in boxing throughout history, this research documents some of the backlashes to gender equality we are currently witnessing. Among them, it highlights that the presence of women in boxing has been equated to equality, which dismisses the precarious participation of women in the sport. This attitude also veils the fact that the women present in the sport have adapted to the androcentric structure of boxing, thus hindering a radical transformation of the gendered construction of boxing. Additionally, the thesis documents the existence of narratives characterized for naturalizing and normalizing gender inequality, neglecting and dismissing the effects of inequality, putting the burden of participation on individuals, and proclaiming that no transformation is needed as equality has been achieved. Thus, it becomes evident that equality has yet to be achieved in boxing, considering the androcentrism and racism that prevails.

Gendered power structures persist in boxing, and thus, the presence of women in boxing is not enough if they are not ensured equality and justice in sport; as the saying goes, 'one swallow does not a summer make'. Therefore, if boxing aims to be an equal sport, it must accept the existence of inequality and tackle it as a problem. Moreover, it must embrace diversity rather than accommodate women to the existing androcentric structures of the sport. In this regard, equality must not be understood as the absence of difference, as it now is. As (Woodward, 2009: 82) suggests, difference

and equality are not mutually exclusive. Thus, we need to embrace new understandings of difference in boxing.

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