

Sport: A Site of Exclusion or Space for Equality?

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ABSTRACT Sport is a mirror of society and *vice versa*. From this perspective, this article highlights the continued existence and impact of biologist and essentialist discourses, hegemonic masculinity, and formal rules based on socially constructed gender differences in sport. Based on a literature review of gender and sport and through utilising a feminist analysis, I conclude that as long as sport remains an arena where gender inequalities are naturalized and normalized, as well as a sphere dominated by masculine structures of power, actions towards equality may have little impact. In this way, the article addresses some of the challenges for considering sport as a site for gender equality. This gains importance due to the importance of sport nowadays and to the existing expectations that it can deliver positive social outputs.

INTRODUCTION

In this article I bring a gender analysis to sport, exploring how gender is configured, reproduced and naturalized in sport. Sport continues to be a prime site for the perpetuation of biologically essentialist discourses, an arena where gender inequalities are naturalized and normalized, and a sphere dominated by masculine structures of power that serve to produce and reproduce gender discrimination. However, while the focus here is on challenges to equality that persist in sport, we should not lose sight of the ways in which sport has the potential to be a key site for building cultures of gender equality as a space within which gendered power structures, relations and ideologies are resisted, challenged and transformed (Birrell 2002; Theberge 2003; Anderson 2008b; Anderson and McGuire 2010; Channon 2014; Hargreaves and Anderson 2014).

In an illustration of the potential for sports to promote equality, Nancy Theberge (2003) provided a sociological analysis of the embodied experience of female adolescents playing hockey in Canada. Here she suggests that this contact sport has an empowering effect especially at the individual level, as it offers the possibility for teenage girls to both actively participate in an activity that was a historically male domain and to experience “forms of embodiment that are grounded in the experience of strength, competency, and agency” (2003: 514) in opposition

to traditional gendered forms of feminine existence. Another illustration of the possibilities that sport could offer for gender equality is provided by Anderson (2008b) who, through an exploration of masculinities among American ex-football players, observes that gender integrated sports may serve as means for the perpetuation of male anti-feminine, misogynist and sexist attitudes. Moreover, in connection with the role of sport in creating gender equality, Carrington stresses that it can act as a “legitimate space for political struggle, resistance and change, and as a modality for ‘self-actualization and the reaffirmation of previously abject identities’” (Carrington 2010 in Channon et al. 2016: 1120). Sport does indeed have the potential to render visible those identities that were once marginalized in the public arena. A good example of this is the way that the London 2012 Olympics brought women’s boxing to wider public attention, particularly through the persona of the charismatic gold medal winner Nicola Adams. Adams has gained international recognition and visibility since she became the first Olympic gold medalist for women’s boxing. The identity of Adams herself is also significant in the promotion of intersectional equality, not only as a successful female boxer in a quintessential masculine sport (Wacquant 2004), but as a successful and powerful black lesbian woman from a relatively disadvantaged economic background in the UK.

Thus, we can see that the dominance of the sporting sphere in public life, culture and media means that it not only has the power to repro-

duce inequalities, discrimination and exclusion, but that it can also become an important catalyst for enhanced gender equality. Here we can look to individual cases of women's empowerment, evidence of challenges to sexist attitudes, attempts to deconstruct hegemonic masculinities and recognise non-binary gender identities in sport to explore how these instances, the opening up of spaces for change within sporting arenas, can lead to societal transformations that benefit a diversity of men and women, not merely the "white, suburban, professional class" (Messner 2011: 157).

Individuals do not meet on a 'level playing field', as it were, in sport because this is not a gender neutral or impartial social space. Rather, sport is defined by structures and hierarchies based on a whole range of identities, including sex, gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, class and (dis)ability that intersect with each other involving exclusions, restrictions and social divisions (Nicholson and Hoye 2008: 12). One of the consequences of the intersection of power structures can be observed through the fact that those groups who command less social, educational, cultural or economic capital in a given socio-cultural and patriarchal milieu, often, for example, older people, women, and ethnic minorities, participate less in sport in comparison to groups representing their hegemonic counterparts that is, younger, male, and 'whiter' (Elling and Janssens 2009: 71).

It is evident, then that sport is a space in which sex and gender power relations are produced and reproduced within the wider patriarchal system in which it plays out (Messner 2002; Aitchison 2007; Messner 2011; Moreno 2011). In this framework, sport is a social construct dominated by hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Messner 2002) an "ordering version" (Connell, 1987: 183) of masculinity which is "predicated on homophobia, misogyny, physicality and bravado" (Anderson and McGuire 2010: 250) that sustains male power and privilege (Dunning 1986; Messner 1988). In this respect, Messner claims that "sport is clearly a potentially powerful cultural arena for the perpetuation of the ideology of male superiority and dominance" (Messner 1988: 199). Similarly, Hortensia Moreno highlights that "in sport, what is at stake is a social supremacy [...] translated in the legitimacy of a power traversed by gender" (Moreno 2011: 9, *my translation*). Sport works not only to sustain and legit-

imize the privilege and power of men over women but also situates what is considered feminine in a subordinate position to what is perceived as masculine. Moreno, who provides an analysis of women's boxers in Mexico, argues that sport has been historically constructed as a male preserve and that athletic activities have been communicated as the monopoly of men, and women addressed as the "weaker sex" who might face restrictions from entering into this social sphere (Moreno 2011).

Ultimately, sport continues to be an arena where women experience overt and structural forms of discrimination (Theberge 1997, 2003; Moreno 2011; Hargreaves and Anderson, 2014; Cahn 2015). Indeed, the range of manifestations of exclusions women face within sports continues to be imaginatively, if somewhat disappointingly, diverse. The paucity of women in top positions in sporting bodies is one example of overt exclusion. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, based at the University of Central Florida, reports that in the context of the 2016 Rio Olympics women represented just 5.7 percent of International Federation presidents, 12.2 percent of the vice presidents and 13.1 percent of the members of the executive committee (Alvad 2016). In connection to power positions, Van Amsterdam et al. (2017) point out that the ideal figure of leadership among sport organizations is still embodied by a specific type of corporeal masculinity which hinders women's access to top positions and representation in these organizations. Another example of the discrimination against women in sport is illustrated by the 2017 Forbes' ranking of the top 100 world's highest-paid athletes which reports that there was only one woman on the list on 2017, the tennis player Serena Williams, placed in the 51th place (Badenhausen 2017). In connection to the gender pay gap, the men's national England team's football captain, Wayne Rooney, was paid a weekly wage of £300,000 while his female counterpart, captain of the national England women's football team, Steph Houghton, received £1,200 (Perasso 2017), that amounts to a gender pay gap of 250 times less pay for the female equivalent position.

Looking to other illustrations of overt forms of exclusion in sport spaces, the oldest golf club in the world, the Muirfield Golf Club, is a notable example. Situated in Scotland, the club took 273 years to admit women as members. In 2016 they

held a vote about whether the time was right to finally admit women members, however two-thirds of the (male) members voted to remain a men-only association. While Muirfield may not have felt ready to be so daring, the wider world disagreed, and the Club received widespread criticism from the media and public opinion was not on their side. This negative publicity contributed to the decision to prevent Muirfield from hosting the Open Golf Championship, known also as the British Open. Hence, finally, in 2017, after 273 years, despite continued opposition from some members, and in a move that had rather more to do with economics and loss of prestige than gender equality, the Club voted to allow female membership (Tsang 2017).

Neither Muirfield itself, nor golf as a sport, represent isolated cases of women's exclusion. Numerous other prestigious golf clubs around the world have historically discriminated against women, and various sports have prohibited women from using their venues. A classic example is within football - from 1921 to 1971 female football players in the UK were banned from playing on the Football Association pitches on the basis that they were "unsuitable for females" (Love 2017). One might suggest that the real reason for the ban was that the FA were more concerned that women's football was becoming rather too popular for their liking. On a day-to-day basis, women as sport practitioners can experience sport as a hostile environment as a consequence of permeating sexism. In this sense Lafferty and McKay (2004), who conducted an ethnography in a boxing gym in Australia, suggest that women boxers are not only patronized or underestimated in the boxing gyms but also, due to the "gendered structures of power and labor" (2004: 269) in these spaces, they encounter less access to resources than men to develop themselves as boxers.

As the above examples illustrate, even if women have gained the right to participate in sport spaces, institutions and activities there remain significant obstacles that hinder gender equality in sport. The sporting world of course suffers from and is implicated in the perpetuation of gender inequalities in similar ways to other social spheres. In diverse institutional arena worldwide - in politics, paid and unpaid employment, within the family and at school - we see similar manifestations of sex segregation, gender inequalities, glass ceilings, the under representation of women in leadership positions, gender pay gaps, and lower status accorded to fe-

male identified individuals. Similarly, gender-based discrimination against women in sport is by no means the only form of systematic discrimination, exclusion and marginalization from sport. Different groups of men also face discrimination in sport (Anderson 2005, 2008b; Anderson and McGuire 2010), especially those who do not display the ascribed attributes of hegemonic masculinity perceived as a prerequisite of most sports, such as being "strong, masculine, good looking, [...] hyperheterosexual" (Anderson 2008a: 104), white, Western and young. However, not all forms of difference and discrimination are experienced in the same ways. Anderson (2002) focused on experiences of gay male athletes, and argues that if men do not display or embody hegemonic characteristics i.e. being heterosexual, but if they are able to demonstrate that they are good athletes *despite* their sexuality, they might be accepted in sports. Such shifts towards inclusion can further contribute to a greater fluidity in hegemonic masculinity, increase the acceptance of subjugated masculinities and even of female athleticism (Anderson 2002: 873).

While we can clearly see that unequal gendered power structures are reinforced and perpetuated in sport, sport is simultaneously a context in which individuals can and do challenge gendered power relations and ideologies. Messner, analysing organized sport during the 19th and 20th century, concurs that sport "has become a fundamental arena of ideological contest in terms of power relations between men and women" (Messner 1988: 199). However, for Messner, this contest is framed within a context where, on the one hand, the presence of women in sport and their claims for equal opportunity challenge the ideology of male superiority that prevails in sport, and on the other, women still experience violence, marginalization and exclusion which are used as a means to maintain a *status quo* based on male power and privilege. Nevertheless, the resistances in sport against significant transformations towards gender equality makes evident that there are still obstacles that have to be faced, understood and overcome if we are ever to seriously consider sport as a site for the creation of cultures of gender equality.

There is a popular narrative often recounted through the popular media that sport offers great possibilities to improve peoples' lives and to bridge social divisions, including those based on gender. Countering this narrative, much aca-

demographic literature and research on sport argues that the role of sport in effecting positive social change has been overly romanticized (Coalter 2008); in addition, it has been stressed that there is little evidence supporting the idea that sport necessarily delivers positive outcomes within society (Nicholson and Hoyer 2008; Coalter 2015), including for gender equality (Cooky 2009; Anderson and McGuire 2010; Hancock et al. 2013). Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that sport has become a “dynamic social and cultural force” (Aitchison 2007: 1) that has the power to shape society and culture. At the same time, sport has also been shaped by individuals within situated socio-historical contexts (Hargreaves and Anderson 2014). Thus, as Robinson asserts, “sport is not merely a reflection on some postulated essence of society but an integral part of society” (Robinson 2008b).

Applying a gender analysis to sport helps us in our broader theoretical understandings of how gender is produced and reproduced and its impact in different spheres of society. As Moreno, points out, bringing a gender lens to sporting arena “offers a unique opportunity for studying the feminine/masculine binary and the opposition, configuration and demarcation relationships established within it” (Moreno 2011: 5; *my translation*). In sports, performative acts, among them those expressing gender differences, are an important means of corporeal communication, indeed, in sport individuals are constantly “doing gender” as well as performing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987; Messner 2002; Claringbould et al. 2015).

This article is structured into three subsections. Firstly, I consider the argument that sport has been constructed as and remains a male domain. Secondly I draw on debates that suggest that hegemonic masculinity is a key element in the perpetuation of sport as a patriarchal system. In the third section I explore how gender differences are normalized through sex segregation in sport.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Sport as a Male Domain

As Acker states, “gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power” (Acker 1992: 567). The sporting arena is permeated by gender as a sphere in which identities, symbols, behaviour, meanings, and actions, as well as divisions of labour,

spaces and distribution of resources are defined in and through the dichotomy of male –female, masculine – feminine (Acker 1990: 146).

Sport is the ultimate site for the celebration of physical excellence as manifest through the body – indeed the motto of the Olympic Games is *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Faster, Higher, Stronger). Here the body is highly visible, and understandings, definitions and perceptions of the sporting body tend to be underpinned by biologically essentialist assumptions about the power, capacity and ability of the gendered body. As Clarke and Clarke (1982) highlighted, sport “appears to involve natural, physical skills and capacities, [and it] presents these ideological images as if they were natural” (Clarke and Clarke 1982: 63 in Messner 1988: 199). Within this context, socio-culturally constructed gender ideologies can be masked under a veil of naturalising discourses that are both widely shared and used to justify continued gender inequalities. Through such discourse, men are heralded as “‘naturally’ more competent and therefore [with] more status than women” (Ridgeway 1997 in Claringbould and Knoppers 2012: 404). Sport is a key site through which normative values are transmitted, dominant values that understand gender not as a social construct, but as something natural, ahistorical and immutable.

As Moreno (2011: 7) highlights, a widespread biologically essentialist justification defines women through certain physical and behavioural characteristics, for example, as fragile, vulnerable, passive, abnegated, etc., portraying them as inadequate bodies within the sporting realm. As such, women who practice sport can represent a symbolic challenge to gendered ideologies (Cahn 2015); and women’s sports may lead us to “rearticulate gender ideals” (Butler 1988a: 103). In order to develop a better understanding of biologicist and essentialist discourses in the configuration of sport, I draw on Elizabeth Grosz’ (1989) feminist framework. Grosz differentiates between essentialism and biologicism stating that essentialism “refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganisation” (1989: para. 6). For Grosz, some of the attributes used to conceptualize women’s ‘essence’ are nurturance, empathy, supportiveness, intuitiveness, emotional responses, concern and commitment to helping others. Moreover, gender is

constructed as a binary opposition whereby men are defined conversely to women. Sport tends to be related to so-called masculine characteristics, such as “physical power, strength, violence, aggression and muscularity” (Linder 2012: 464). As a consequence, men have been considered to be naturally adept at sport, and women have not.

Biologism defines individuals’ opportunities and social positions through biological characteristics and adduces that cultural factors are an effect of biology. It is no coincidence that in so doing biologism supports power relations which usually serve to disadvantage women. This discourse underscores perceived differences between women and men and attempts to explain and emphasise these differences based on ideas about human reproduction, nurturance, neurology, neurophysiology and endocrinology. Indeed, as Grosz argues, biologicism appears as a form of essentialism that represents “an attempt to limit women’s social and psychological capacities according to biologically established limits. Under this discourse [...] women are weaker in physical strength than men; [and] by their biological natures, more emotional than men” (Grosz 1989: para.7).

The myth of the weakness of women has been learned, internalized and socialized (Dowling 2001), and portrayed as a desirable ‘feminine’ quality (Moreno 2011). The idea of women’s weakness communicates, through science and sport discourses among others, an inborn physical incapacity of girls and women to perform any other physical activity than the tasks related to domesticity and reproduction. Within this patriarchal myth making, women continually need the assistance of those with physical power, that is men, and simultaneously, they are supposed to be vulnerable to men’s physicality. The frailty myth is at once pernicious and damaging for all women and girls. Moreover, in her feminist analysis of sport, MacKinnon (1987) states that as women, “we have learned actual disability, enforced weakness, lack of spirit/body connection in being and in motion. It is not that 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). Building on this, Iris Young (2005) argues that women, influenced by patriarchal and essentialist social structures and conditions, “lack confidence to move freely, to have a physical en-

gagement with things, to trust in the strength and the physical capabilities of our bodies [and, as a result, even a] relatively untrained man [...] engages in sport generally with more free motion and open reach than does his female counterpart” (Young 2005: 33).

Thus, the naturalization of gender and the legitimization of gendered power structures through biologicism and essentialism provide a convenient but somewhat thin veil for gender inequality. Furthermore, sport is a space that continues to be permeated by biological essentialism with the result that “sport is clearly a potentially powerful cultural arena for the perpetuation of the ideology of male superiority and dominance” (Messner 1988: 199).

Sport as a Home for Hegemonic Masculinity

Since the end of the last century women have been increasingly participating in sport, yet the historical construction of sport as a male domain prevails (Dunning 1986; Connell 1987; Messner 1988, 2002; Cahn 2015). To date, sport remains an arena where power, privilege and resources are a male monopoly, or as Dunning states, sport is “one of the major male preserves and hence of potential significance for the functioning of patriarchal structures” (1986: 79). We can see that sport serves as terrain of patriarchal ideology and in this context, a key element in the construction of sport as a bastion of patriarchy is in the championing of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell 1987). Sport then is not only a male domain, but importantly, becomes a site for the celebration of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity embodies power and privilege as well as discourses, regulations, norms and values ensuring the maintenance of a social organization based on a masculine and heterosexual power. Sport has an essential role in the construction and perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity, as it is a key site through which hegemonic masculinity is forged, performed, embodied, depicted, promoted and exalted (Connell 1987; Theberge 1997; Messner 2002; Anderson 2005; Meân and Kassing 2008).

Hegemonic masculinity is an identity that acts as a ‘regulatory fiction’ in Butler’s terms (1988b). It is a conceptual weapon used to legitimate gendered power relations and impose power over those who do not fit this fictional hegemonic frame. By using the category of hege-

monic masculinity I make reference to a specific kind of masculinity which “is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women” (Connell 1987: 183). Thus hegemonic masculinity exerts power over women and also over those men who do not display the characteristics of this identity. As Meân and Kassing (2008) assert, “sport identities are not only constructed by the passion, dedication and love for sport, but also by gender, and with it masculinity and heterosexuality represent the hegemony, the paradigm” (2008: 129).

Anderson (Anderson 2005, 2008b; Anderson and McGuire 2010), who prefers to talk about ‘orthodox’ rather than ‘hegemonic’ masculinity, makes an important contribution to the discussion describing normative or orthodox masculinity in sport as “a form of masculinity that is predicated on homophobia, misogyny, physicality and bravado” (Anderson and McGuire 2010: 250) and that also involves “risk taking [...] self-sacrifice, the marginalizing of others, a willingness to inflict bodily damage, and the acceptance of pain and injury” (2008b: 261). These characteristics and behaviours are problematic not only because of the dramatic consequences they may have but also because, as hegemonic or orthodox masculinity is constructed as the norm, the consequences of the valorization of these behaviours, despite being discriminatory and pernicious, could themselves be normalized.

The so-called ideal of hegemonic masculinity is by no means accomplished or displayed, or, importantly, desired, by all men. Nevertheless, this normative ideal continues to impose a social construction that men “can [and should] attempt to approximate” (Anderson 2008b: 262). Connell points out that “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” (Connell 1987: 185). In this respect, Channon et al. (2016) mention that even men who do not participate in sport, celebrate male athletes’ performance, especially their bravery, competitiveness, discipline and strength, as they represent the notion of how “real men” should be (2016: 1111).

One of the consequences of the construction of hegemonic or orthodox masculinity as a norm is that rules, values, expectations, embodiments, and performances in sport are defined

by this identity. In this sense, Milner and Brad-dock (2016) drawing on Burke (2013) state that “men, through authoritative positions in sports, have defined sports excellence in ways that permit men, rather than women, the opportunity to embody excellence and continue to occupy authoritative positions, and subsequently make moral and legislative judgements in athletics” (2016: 53). One of the manifestations of the power of hegemonic masculinity in sport is that when women excel in sport, there is a suspicion that they are not “true women”. Here we can look to two notable cases, those of Dutee Chand, a sprinter who in 2013 became the first Indian to reach a final at a global athletics event (Slater 2015), and Caster Semanya, a South African middle-distance runner, medallist in the Olympics at Rio 2016 and London 2012. Their success as women in a male space led to extreme measures to ensure they did not destabilize this hegemonic patriarchal world. Both Chand and Semanya were subjected to sex/gender tests by athletic federations, a subjugation that itself could be seen as form of gender violence. They were banished into exile, banned from competitions based on contentious gender profiling drawing on biologically essentialist discourses. These athletes were simply too good to be ‘real’ women, and that they were also non-Western women no doubt contributed to the level of alarm and violent reaction of the sports world to their success. They could not be permitted to be (non-white) women, the world clearly was not ready to see women be such great athletes. It thus had to ‘proven’ that they were in fact ‘men’ or ‘not women’, that they were performing in some kind of biological disguise. As a consequence, their identities and their bodies were questioned, policed, and subjected to the physical violence of medicalisation and symbolic violence of being denied their self-identification as women. They were exiled from their sporting arenas, they were simply too dangerous to be given space to compete. As Pieper (2016) articulates;

“Sport authorities found it inconceivable that strong, muscular women could be authentic or natural. With this line of reasoning, “real” women were those who preserved Western notions of white femininity. Moreover, the fear of male imposters bolstered the conviction in masculine advantage” (Pieper 2016).

The Chand/Semanya cases provide a stark illustration of the lengths to which the sporting

world will go to preserve hegemonic male dominance. Sport is perhaps the ultimate site for the celebration of dominant hegemonic masculinity. As Messner states, what is celebrated and enforced in major sports, especially by coaches, are “masculine styles and values of physicality, aggression, and competition” (Messner 2002: 21). Linder (2012), who critically analyses women’s inclusion in Olympic boxing in 2012, highlights that contact sports involve characteristics perceived as highly masculine, such as “physical power, strength, violence, aggression and muscularity” (Linder 2012: 464). Thus we can clearly see that, not only are sports seen as a hegemonic male domain, but also those women who participate in them are perceived as outsiders, and those women who dare to excel may be exiled.

Hegemonic masculinity is a hierarchical and dichotomist identity based on power structures that marginalize women, different groups of men (Connell 1987: 85) and non-binary identities. These structures are themselves both discriminatory and violent but to attempt to destabilize them presents us with a challenge due to the endurance and “resiliency” of this idea, as Anderson suggests;

“No form of masculinity is self-reproducing. The reproductive process is laden with social tension and ultimately can fail (Anderson 2005b). But in the arena of sport, the process of reproducing orthodox masculinity has proven resilient (Pronger 1990). Men’s team sports have consistently resisted the cultural and institutional challenges of both women and gay men (Anderson 2002, 2005a; Messner 2002). It is this reproduction process, the specific mechanisms that explain the resiliency” (Anderson 2008b: 263).

Sport as a Site of Sex Segregation

In the 21st century it tends to be the case across most, although by no means all, cultures and institutional contexts, that it is considered a discriminatory practice to segregate individuals on the basis of their perceived biological sex. However sport remains one of the last bastions of sex segregation. Through sex segregation we again see blatant biologism and essentialism at play. Segregation by sex in sports assumes an inborn incapacity of women to excel or perform as well as men, and, further, that women’s deli-

cate bodies should be protected from harm to the extent that ‘ungendered’ sports must not be countenanced, even if we are talking about non-contact sports such as darts or snooker. Were this assumption based on essentialist presumptions about ‘race’ there would be an international outcry, and rightly so, nevertheless, in most sports, this argument is accepted. Hence, as Milner and Braddock (2016: 7) note “sports arenas are one of the final places where sex segregation and the labelling of women as inferior are regarded as socially acceptable”. Sex segregation thus remains one of the most common gendered practices in sport through which gender is produced, reproduced and institutionalized.

Sex segregation relies on presumed innate biologically essentialist discourses assuming the existence of fixed and given sex differences between women and men that define their performance in sport. These differences are considered to be purely natural, clearly defined upon a binary, universal and fixed system. Through this mechanism the dominance and supremacy of men and the inferiority of women in sport is perpetuated and maintained. However, sex is not a binary system, nor is it predicated upon external genitalia. Our biological sex is determined through markers such as chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics making sex a complex and rather less ‘objective’ account than we tend to be led to believe (Fausto-Sterling 2012). Sex segregation disregards not only that sex itself is complex and subject to a fluidity that belies standard normative gender representations, but 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). Moreover, sport is ‘socialized’ as a male dominion, one in which masculine styles and physicalities are valued and forged, and where women have been considered as outsiders, trespassers even. Men and boys have greater symbolic capital –or face more social pressure- that facilitates their taking part in sport activities from an early age. Indeed, as Pieper (2016) highlights “the presumed need to protect women athletes degraded female athleticism and reaffirmed a belief in male physical superiority” (Pieper 2016: 8). Channon et al. (2016) similarly argue that “one of the most problematic aspects of sex segregation in sport is that it reinforces the incorrect notion that all men and

women are categorically different from each other with respect to specific dimensions of athletic performance" (2016: 1113). Simply put, just as gender inequalities are based on presumed or normative gender differences, sex segregation serves to naturalize and normalize gender inequalities.

The ideal of the masculine body, a message transmitted through sex segregation, contributes to the reproduction of othering, to the perpetuation of ideas of what is not ideal. What then is not ideal is whatever is the 'other'; the not-masculine body, signifying inferiority and unsuitability in sport. This not only affects women but also different groups of men who do not fit with the parameters of hegemonic masculinity. However, despite reifying the superiority of men through biological essentialism and serving to maintain the sexist organization of sport, sex segregation is often presented as one of the main policies to ensure a level playing field for the sake of women. Women are supposed to be grateful that they are being protected from the unavoidable failure that would inevitably result from any attempts to compete against male bodies.

A classic illustration comes immediately to mind here; envisage all those children's sports days taking place each summer the world over. Eager parents watch their six year old children compete in the egg and spoon races, the hopping and jumping races, the running races. I wonder, are these parents grateful that wise head teachers are careful to segregate their young charges by sex? That children barely formed have already learned gender segregation and understand that girls should not run alongside boys? Otherwise who knows what chaos could ensue? Perhaps Jasmin might outrun Malek and Jason might have his masculine feelings hurt when Sarah proves to be more adept at the egg and spoon?

Segregation based on biological difference ensures different standards, rules, and expectations for girls and boys, women and men. This once more takes for granted that due to natural reasons, women's and girls' performance in sports will be poorer than men's and boys'. The exception to this rule may be in sports historically coded as female. In such cases, while women may be permitted to outperform men in 'women's sport', these sports are seen as low status and likely too feminine for serious male partici-

pation. However, as Anderson declares, they "are perceived to be inferior solely because women do them!" (2008b: 53).

Another argument used to justify sex segregation in sport is based on the idea of risk and danger. In this argument, masculine violence is taken for granted; consequently women and men should be separated. On this basis, sex segregation is presented as a way to protect women from the physicality and sexuality of men which are considered uncontrollable and violent *per se*. Here women are supposed to be thankful that sporting associations are taking care not to put their fragile female forms at risk of harm by running alongside or in any way engaging with men on the sports field. However, as Anderson (2008b: 258) notes, one could alternatively wonder "whether the hegemonic view of segregating the sexes in order to protect women from men's violence does not, instead, engender such violence". Sex segregation reinforces the idea that it is preferable to normalize and institutionalize sex differences and maintain the inferiority of women rather than transform constructions of gender and masculinities that support violence and enforce subordination.

If, as has been argued here, sex segregation creates and reproduces gender inequality, and acts as an ideological prop underpinning male supremacy and power (Anderson 2005, 2008b; Milner and Braddock 2016; Pieper 2016), does sex *integration* offer the chance to build gender equality and challenge sexism in sport? Could sex integration offer possibilities to symbolically destabilize sexual hierarchies in sport? Channon et al. (2016) argue that integration could on one hand contribute to a greater recognition of the capabilities and experiences of women in sport and foster positive heterosexual relations as well as encouraging more acceptance towards non-binary individuals, and on the other the authors point out the existence of pitfalls of sex integration for accomplishing equality. Therefore, one must be cautious of suggesting that integration in itself could become a panacea for all sporting inequalities. As Milner and Braddock (2016: 97) suggest, if sex integration were to be filtered into the existing male dominated paradigm, integration could merely result in supporting the inclusion and sporting participation of those women who feel comfortable and secure in practicing sport with men under male rules and norms. Thus, without challenging both

pernicious and systematic structural barriers to women's equitable participation in sport, other athletes who may have internalized a sense of inferiority as sporting women (or indeed non-binary people or non-hegemonic men), would remain marginalized. Furthermore, Messner (2011) notes that dismantling sex segregated sports, activities or teams, could eliminate female-only sport spaces that have been created as alternatives for those women who feel more comfortable, due to individual and structural patriarchal socio-cultural reasons, practicing sport in a female space. This is a discussion that should be pursued considering that female-only spaces- though based on sex segregationist discourses-ensure the participation of a considerable number of women in sport.

CONCLUSION

As we can see from the foregoing discussion, there are no simplistic solutions to bringing greater cultures of equality into sport. The focus of debate certainly needs to include but also move beyond sex integration vs. sex segregation. There will always be difficulties in achieving social impact and gender equality in and through sport if sport structures and institutions, as well as values, norms and perceptions, continue to be underpinned by a sexist ideology defined by male power and privilege.

Sport can and does provide a great opportunity to help us understand gender and society. Sport is a window through which we can observe bodies, identities, performances, discourses, ideologies, symbols and structures which could help us to better understand who we are as individuals and as communities. Moreover, sport has been lauded as an ideal context and a tool for social inclusion, and, if this is the case, then sport should also represent a suitable site for the development of cultures of gender equality. However, as long as sport remains such a highly gendered, sex segregated and exclusionary arena, structured in ways that serve and support male power, and configured and organized on essentialist assumptions of masculine supremacy, the potential of sport as such a site for cultures of equality remains limited.

As argued in this article, popular notions of sport are underpinned by widespread biologically essentialist discourses which take for granted that behaviours, roles and attributes given to

gender identities are fixed, ahistorical and immutable. Women are defined and learn through processes of gendering to be weaker, more passive, and less competitive than their sporting male counterparts. Sport is a gendered arena where one's identity defines not only the suitability of individuals for sport but also the values, characteristics rules and embodiments that are socially accepted within it. Hegemonic masculinity plays a key role in sport and represents a threat for women, men and non-binary identities through its promotion of particularly situated dominance, exclusion, and even violence, with consequences within sport and beyond. Despite these critiques, the dominance and desirability of hegemonic masculinity remains a largely unchallenged and unquestioned paradigm. Gender roles and norms are naturalized, regulated, and institutionalized in sport through mechanisms such as sex segregation. Sex segregation on one hand purports to ensure a playing level field for women, assuming a poorer performance in comparison to men, and claims to create a secure place for women, based on the assumption that men are naturally and inevitably violent. Within this context, not only are gender differences, but also gender inequalities presented as normal.

Despite the construction of sport as a male dominion and the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity in sport, there have been gains towards equality, for example, the increased visibility, participation and recognition of women and LGBT individuals, as well as the enhanced visibility of inclusive masculinities in the sporting world. Indeed, in recent years there have been several challenges made to the patriarchal and sexist ideology of sport. Nevertheless, building cultures of gender equality in and through sport is a major challenge that involves transformations not only in sport but in gendered conceptions of society. Ultimately, however, despite gender-progressive transformations in sport, if male superiority remains unchallenged, sexism and patriarchy in sport will endure.

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