

# **Pugilistic Pioneers**

## **The History of Women's Boxing in Norway**

## **Introduction**

Boxing and other sports have traditionally been a men's domain.<sup>1</sup> Boxing has strong historical links to masculinity and masculine areas of society such as warfare and military activity.<sup>2</sup> A sport that entails winning by using your fists to beat your opponent has few associations to traditional norms of femininity. As a result, many brand boxing as a savage and primitive endeavour. In his book, Gerald R. Gems describes the historical link between masculinity and boxing:

Boxing has historically served as a ritual of masculinity. The practice of the sport, no matter how inept, served as proof of one's courage and virility. Aggression and violence, pain and injury, even the possibility of death were accepted risks. Boxing was and is war, an individual combat in which competitors try to impose their domination on another. Such intentions hold true whether they take place in street fights or within the regulated confines of the ring.<sup>3</sup>

As a site created by and for men, boxing has been considered synonymous with expressions of traditional norms of masculinity.<sup>4</sup> Historically, it has excluded and marginalized the participation of women.<sup>5</sup> Even in the last couple of years, it has proven to be resistant to female involvement.<sup>6</sup> However, women have always participated in boxing, but on a substantially smaller scale than today.<sup>8</sup>

In amateur boxing, international competitions for women were not arranged until 1994. The first European Championship and World Championship was held in 2001. Just recently, in 2012, women's boxing became an Olympic event.<sup>9</sup> However, while finally gaining acceptance in the Olympic Games, only three out of ten possible weight categories are Olympic categories. The number of women's weight categories will not be increased for the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro 2016.<sup>10</sup> Since the inclusion of women's boxing in the London 2012 Olympic Games the number of female boxers seems to be rising worldwide.<sup>11</sup> However, there are some national boxing federations, such as Cuba, that deny women access to participation.<sup>12</sup>

Boxing has been a part of Norwegian sport for more than one hundred years, but women's amateur boxing is a relatively new phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> In a rather short amount of time, women's boxing has grown rapidly in Norway and Scandinavia. Before 1988, women's boxing competitions were prohibited in Norway.<sup>14</sup> Since then, women's boxing has evolved substantially; from a total exclusion, to the International Boxing Association's (AIBA) acceptance of women's amateur boxing (1994), to the first World and European Championships (2001) - and inclusion in the 2012 Olympic Games. In this short period, women's boxing has experienced considerable growth in regards to acceptance, participation and gender equality.

Thus, Norway, along with the rest of Scandinavia, seems to have been one-step ahead in working towards equality and equal opportunities for female boxers. Today the most popular professional boxer in Norway is a woman: Cecilia Brækhus.

Much scholarly attention has been given to men's boxing, including famous works such as John Sugden's "*Boxing and Society: An international Analysis*"<sup>15</sup>, and Waquant's studies of professional boxing in America.<sup>16</sup> There is also a substantial body of knowledge on women's boxing.<sup>17</sup> To mention a few; Malissa Smith's (2014) recent book "*A History of Women's Boxing*"<sup>18</sup>, and the academic works of Lafferty & MacKay (2004), Mennesson (2000), Linder's (2012), Woodward (2004: 2006: 2015), Heiskanen (2012), Paradis (2009) and Chaudhuri (2012), as well as many others.<sup>19</sup>

Although women's boxing is well documented by sport historians<sup>20</sup>, the progression of women's boxing in Norway remains unexplored and untold. Histories of boxing in Norway have traditionally been of either an official or a sports journalism character. Texts depicting Norwegian boxing are still within these two orientations today. Furthermore, these texts mainly depict men's boxing.<sup>21</sup>

This paper explores the development of women's boxing in Norway. My aim is to describe how participation, possibilities and limitations in amateur and professional boxing for women has changed and advanced Norway and Scandinavia during the last four decades. In this article, I argue that from an international perspective, women's boxing in Norway (and Scandinavia) is a unique case. More specifically, I examine how Norway has been a trailblazing nation for the inclusion of women in boxing, and question what possible underlying factors and historical events have contributed to the unique position gender equality has in Norwegian boxing today.

In order to understand the historical and social development of women's boxing in Norway, I find it useful compare the development of women's boxing to the historical advancement of gender equality policies in Norwegian sport. In the next part of the paper, I therefore describe different phases and gender political discourses in Norwegian sport.

### Political Discourses of Gender in Norwegian Sport

From an international perspective, Norway is seen as a champion in gender equality.<sup>22</sup> This picture of Norway is mainly based on a relatively equally balanced representation of women and men in The Norwegian Parliament and Cabinet.<sup>23</sup> The organizational leadership structures in Norwegian sport organizations have always been male dominated, and remain so today.<sup>24</sup>

During the last three and a half decades political discourses of gender and strategies in

Norwegian sport have been shifting and controversial.<sup>25</sup> The main features have been a development from rights-based gender policies (formal equality) to more utility- and difference-based policies (equality of outcome).<sup>26</sup>

In the beginning of the 1970s there was an extensive mobilization of women into Norwegian sport organizations.<sup>27</sup> An important societal change which influenced this development was a strong women's movement and a political climate with social democratic ideals. From 1970 to 1984 the main objective was to achieve formal rights and opportunities for participation. This strategy was very successful and by the end of the 1970s most sports accepted women.<sup>28</sup> The Norwegian Gender Equality Act was passed in 1979, which opened for preferential treatment in order to obtain equality of outcome.<sup>29</sup>

In the early 1980s, the focus on gendered power structures in sport organizations and the insufficiencies of the current political strategies increased.<sup>30</sup> These situations led to an ideological shift and a transition towards an emphasis on democracy and social justice to stimulate equality of outcome.<sup>31</sup> From 1985 to 1994, new claims were brought to the political agenda. These new claims stressed the necessity of preferential treatment and women-centered perspectives to promote gender equality.<sup>32</sup> The Central Women's Committee was appointed. Their overall responsibility was the implementation of strategies to integrate women into all organizational activities in Norwegian sport.<sup>33</sup> In 1987 a gender quota regulation was passed. The main objective of the quota regulation was to improve gender balance in decision-making bodies by securing a minimum representation of each sex on all boards and committees.<sup>34</sup>

In 1994, The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) passed a policy of "full" gender integration. The objective of the new integration policy was to ensure that a gender perspective was integrated into all organizational activities, meaning that all organizational branches should promote gender equality.<sup>35</sup> However, there was no overall political program or plan for how to implement this new gender-political approach. Today, the gender quota regulation is the only political means, directed specifically towards women, still in effect.<sup>36</sup>

## Methods

For this study, I have chosen a qualitative description strategy as my methodological approach.<sup>37</sup> Although description is foundational to all qualitative methodologies, qualitative descriptive studies are a valuable methodological approach in themselves.<sup>38</sup> The qualitative descriptive study is particularly useful when researchers want to know 'the who, what and where' of events.<sup>39</sup> In this paper, I aim to describe the development of Norwegian women's

boxing over the last four decades. For this purpose, a qualitative descriptive study is a fruitful methodological approach, as the desired outcome is a straight description of a social phenomena.<sup>40</sup> Milne & Oberle (2005) define qualitative description method as:

”a stand-alone method that affords a comprehensive summary of human experience without an in-depth level of interpretation. The goal is to stay close to the surface of data while capturing all the elements of that experience, and the inherent scientific rigor is a reflection of a researcher’s ability to achieve that goal”<sup>41</sup>

A qualitative descriptive study is not however, void of theoretical framing and assumptions. In this paper, I use political discourses of gender in Norwegian sport as a theoretical lens. My strategy has been not only to describe how women’s boxing has evolved in Norway, but also to frame the advancement of women’s boxing within the context of the historical development of political strategies and discourses of gender in Norwegian sport.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Material and Selection Criteria*

In order to explore the historical development of women’s boxing in Norway I looked for enunciations: places where my object of analysis was likely to be discussed.<sup>43</sup> Using this strategy I selected a sample of texts and documents. These documents consisted of newspaper and magazine articles, boxing club history recollections and written documents from the Norwegian Boxing Federation (NBF) and The International Boxing Association (AIBA). Thus, the material consisted of a wide range of document types; documents concerning the development of women’s boxing, stories and articles about Norwegian female boxers and official documents from the National Boxing Federation (NBF)<sup>44</sup> and The International Boxing Association (AIBA).<sup>45</sup> In a Scandinavian context, women’s boxing is a sport with relatively few active athletes.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, documentation concerning women’s boxing is limited. While men’s boxing seems to be well documented in Norway, finding accounts of women’s boxing proved a challenging task. Following this, my selection criteria for data were any written texts and documents concerning women’s boxing that I could gain access to. Using these texts as data, I was able to form a description of how boxing for women has changed and advanced in Norway during the last three and a half decades.

## Women, Boxing and Gender Equality in Norwegian Sport

Measured in active participants, boxing is considered a relatively small sport in Norway.<sup>47</sup> In 2013, The Norwegian Boxing Federation was comprised of 4595 registered members, but only 1095 of these memberships were held by women.<sup>48</sup>

Women's amateur boxing emerged during the 1980s in Norway. The inclusion of women, as well as the development of women's boxing is related to the development of political discourses of gender and strategies in Norwegian sport. The 1970s marked the decade when Norwegian women went from being a marginalized group to a critical mass in Norwegian sports.<sup>49</sup> During this decade, women's participation increased in all organizational levels of sport.<sup>50</sup> In regards to strategies for increased gender equality, the situation during the 1970s reflected discourses and strategies in which the inclusion of women in sport was based on men's standards and norms – often resulting in rebuilding gendered hierarchies in national and local sport organizations.<sup>51</sup>

During the 1980s, there was a significant development of new sports and exercise opportunities for the general public. Women were also gaining formal access to sports that previously had been limited to men.<sup>52</sup> With this development, there was a substantial increase in female participation in organized sport.<sup>53</sup> Because of the increased female participation, The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) appointed The Central Women's Committee.<sup>54</sup> The committee developed a double strategy for increased gender equality, consisting of:

- 1) A special and segregated action program for women's sport built on preferential treatment and (2) an overall policy to include women in all organizational activities and in particular in leadership and coaching.<sup>55</sup>

In 1991 another progressive gender political strategy was implemented in Norwegian sport organizations: the gender quota regulation was included in NIF, with the aim of improving the gender balance in decision-making bodies.<sup>56</sup> This secured a minimum representation of each sex on all boards and committees within sport organizations.<sup>57</sup>

The gendered political strategies and initiatives in Norwegian sport after the 1990s demonstrate a complex political landscape. In Norwegian sport, gender equality policies have moved from predominantly focusing on gender inequality to including other inequalities such as race, ethnicity, disability and religion.<sup>58</sup> These gendered political strategies have undoubtedly had an effect on the historical development of women's boxing.

## 1980-1990: Consolidation Phase - Pioneers of Women's Boxing in Norway

Before the recognition of women's boxing, the presence of women was still noted in Norwegian boxing clubs. For example, the first record of female boxing referees can be traced back to 1983, when Laila Haugstad, Gretha Byrgesen and Vigdis Kløvstad became certified referees.<sup>59</sup>

Until the 9<sup>th</sup> of September in 1984, The Norwegian Boxing Federation (NBF) had prohibited women's boxing competitions. NBF allowed women to compete after a committee - appointed by NBF itself - submitted a rapport, urging NBF to allow women to participate in competitions. The committee argued that there were no valid physiological or anatomical arguments for denying women participation, and that it was unreasonable to exclude half the population of Norway from participation in boxing.<sup>60</sup> At this time, there was an ongoing debate in the Norwegian and the Scandinavian boxing communities concerning women's boxing. A recollection of this debate can be found in several articles from Norwegian and Swedish boxing magazines in 1981 and 1982. One example of this is from the national magazine "*Boxning*", which had women's boxing as a headline on one of its editions from 1981, the title reading "*Boxing for women – have we lost our minds?*" with subtitles such as "*The boxing ring must be kept free of women*".<sup>61</sup>

This was during a time when professional boxing for women was growing in the United States, and female participation was increasing internationally.<sup>62</sup> This was one of the factors that started the debate in Norway as well as the other Scandinavian countries: Should women be allowed to participate and compete in boxing?<sup>63</sup> Some of the articles published in Scandinavian boxing magazines suggested that women were welcome to become members of boxing gyms, and even take on leadership roles in the clubs – as long as they stayed clear of the boxing ring itself.<sup>64</sup>

# Vellykket PR og informasjonsfremstøt for norsk boksing

AV ODDVAR ERVIK



Et av kvinnestrukturkursene på Hundalsjøen i fjor sist. Ulni Aamund, trener ved U-skole, Tjønsberg.

Utgangspunktet for denne nye kvinnestrukturkursen var å gi kvinner som er interesserte i boksing og andre aktiviteter som kan brukes i kroppsløysunderservisning.

I tillegg til boksing var det også muligheter for å gjøre andre aktiviteter som kan brukes i kroppsløysunderservisning. Dette ble gjort slik at jeg ble påmeldt som deltager på kurset og fikk en god anledning til å komme inn med informasjon om boksing som et aktivitetstilbud.

Kurset ble arrangert på Hundalsjøen hotell i tiden 12-17 juni og det deltok ca. 70 lærere vesentlig fra Østlandsområdet.

Kurset var lagt opp med 2 dager på 3 timer hver dag hvor en kunne velge mellom skakaktivitetstilbud.

En kunne da velge mellom disse tilbud i løpet av kurset:

Aktiviteter i så - brettspill - hushall - boksing - bordtennis - bruk av undervis-

ningshjelpemidler - tåkløp - felledans - fotball - bilidrett/lopp - frisbee - judo - jazzdans - sjakk - kajak - massasje/skadebehandling - innlæring - orientering - rømt - seiling - utleie - walkyhall.

Ved siden av disse aktivitetene var det også en obligatorisk fellesmiddag hver dag hvor forskjellige emner ble tatt opp, og det var en samling hver kveld etter middag hvor planene for påfølgende dag ble gjennomgått.

Når det gjaldt boksing hadde jeg lagt opp dette som et emnekurs på 3 timer som inneholdt en informasjonssund om norsk boksehistorie pr. i dag, de viktigste regler, utstyr og teknikk og litt om kurser og utdanning.

En praktisk del hvor vi gjennomgikk oppvarming, utgangsstilling, grunn, forarbeid, slag og forskjellige treningsøvelser. Til slutt fikk de ta på utstyr og prøve litt forsiktig sparring.

I konsentrasjonen med andre populære aktiviteter var det også interesse for boksing, men det gikk mest på å få informasjon om sparring. Det var seg nemlig at det ble et stort oppmerksomhetsspørsmål om boksing og dette var jo litt skremmende da dette er personer som har utdannelse i idrett og steller med det til daglig.

De fleste reagerte helt fælevisningsaktig på or-

det boksing og avspaserte det med «ått», «brøtten» og «slått».

Da de imidlertid fikk vite hvordan sporten ble drevet, hvor mange som deltok og hvilke strenge regler som ble fulgt, ble reaksjonen skakt mer positiv. Uttrykk som «jeg visste ikke at boksing var slik» og «hadde ikke anelse om at det var så strengt» «slått» gikk igjen. Det ble også trukket sammenhengene med andre idretter når det gjaldt skader og dette med karantenebestemmelser, og vi kom fram til at boksing slo ikke var så risikofull som de fleste hadde trodd.

En del av lærerne mente at teorien var fin og variert og godt kunne brukes i kroppsløysundervisning på skolen. Det var også de som mente at en kunne bruke boksing som valgfag i ungdomsskolen der forholdene lå til rette for det. Det var også interesse for prisene på treningsutstyr og de kunne tenke seg å bruke sandsekk f.eks. i aktivitetstrening.

Ved siden av dette kunne kurset vise jeg og så video og foretatte litt om boksing i fritiden og benyttet en hver anledning til å spre informasjon om sporten vår. Her hadde jeg jo og så god hjelp av forbundets formann som jo forevrig var litt av en humorspødder på dette kurset.

Kurset var lagt opp og organisert på en meget god måte av kursarrangeringen ved NBF og det var tydelig at det lå mye erfaring og kunnskap bak dette opplegget.

Tilsvarende så resultatet av dette?

Det er jo vanskelig å si noe helt sikkert, men jeg er nok så overbevist om at mange av de som tidligere hadde en fælevisningsaktig holdning til sporten. De som ikke hadde noen holdning til det fikk rett fikk i hvert fall kunnskaper som gjorde at de kunne ta et standpunkt ut fra en rasjonell vurdering.

U: Fra den utstrakte avisutledningen som ble sendt ut i forbindelse med dette så at det blir noe av det som kan endre folks holdning til vår idrett i tiden framover.

**Sentrum BK - Leif Hvalby**  
Leif Hvalby takket for seg i forbundstyre ved siste ting. «Forbundsaker er ingen ting for meg, sier Leif». Det er i klubben jeg har hjemme og det er der jeg kan utføre det beste arbeidet til bokseklubbens beste. Resultatet så vi ved NBF i Moss - tre mesterskap og beste klubb i SSB på Leif - norsk bokseklubb trener nå !!

**Nye skjemaer**  
Nye skjemaer av året er dokumentasjon som skal fylles ut av juryformannen/oppvarmeren på skole/turneringen. Den sendes sammen med øvrige papirer til NBF. Nytt er også: Første møtes legeskjema for undersøkelse av person som søker startbok.

## Til ettertanke

Fotballskader koster 18 mill. kroner i årene 1978-79 og 80. I tillegg kommer samfunnets utgifter til lege- og sykehusbehandling.

Spillerne som ble skadet på fotballbanen i løpet av de tre årene som undersøkelsen omfatter ble sykdomsfraværet 95.000 dager. Hvis av de 3000 skadene førte til et gjennomsnittsfrafall på 30 dager.

(saken fra bladet Norsk Idrett)



## 1 Article from "Norsk Boksing" - Norwegian Boxing Magazine, October 1983. Perhaps the first depiction of a woman boxing in a Norwegian magazine

Looking at the development of gender equality policies in Norwegian sport, the inclusion of women in boxing came some years later than in most other sports. There have been similar trends in other masculine sports such as wrestling and ski jumping.<sup>65</sup>

As a sport organization, NBF promoted the inclusion of women in boxing since the late 1980s.<sup>66</sup> In 1988, the president of NBF signed an open letter showing the organizations' support for women, stating:

To all women participating in boxing, welcome as boxers!  
Our sport is demanding and hard, historically it has been dominated by men. As a woman you will probably be confronted with some negative reactions when you are involved in a sport traditionally preserved for men. We hope that you will pay no mind to these types of reactions. Please know that all members of the Norwegian Boxing Federation welcomes you to our sport. We believe women will contribute positively to Norwegian boxing.<sup>67</sup>



The statements in this letter are an example of the support NBF officially promoted during the late 1980s and 1990s. In 1987, the year before NBF publicly supported and welcomed women, the government had passed the gender quota regulation.<sup>68</sup> Although the quota was not implemented into sport organizations until 1991, it most likely pressured sport organizations like NBF to focus on gender equality.<sup>69</sup> Although the gender equality law was passed in the late 1970s, and gender equality had been a topic of political discussion in Norwegian sport for years, it took time for equality to become a topic in masculine sports like boxing and wrestling.<sup>70</sup> NBF's support of women could be an effect of the current gender political strategies in Norwegian sport.<sup>71</sup>

While women could participate, it was not until the 1990s that women's boxing gained recognition as a sport.<sup>72</sup> In Norway, one of the first well-known female boxers was Helga Risøy. She competed both in amateur and professional boxing. Before turning to professional boxing, Risøy had a successful career as an amateur boxer.<sup>73</sup> Risøy won the tournament *Norway Box Cup* in 1988, and she represented Norway in the first unofficial international competition in 1989 in Sweden.<sup>74</sup> Risøy was also a board member of The Norwegian Boxing Federation. Being a part of the governing body of amateur boxing in the country, she fought for women's rights to equal opportunities in both Norwegian and international boxing.<sup>75</sup> In this way, she was a pioneer both inside and outside of the ring. The International Boxing Association banned women's boxing from international competition in 1991, and since professional boxing was illegal in Norway at the time, Risøy had to move to the United States to start her professional career.<sup>76</sup> Her career as a professional boxer lasted from 1993 to 1997.<sup>77</sup>

### 1990 – 2014: Increased Participation and International Success

Even though participation among women was on the rise, Norwegian boxing magazines rarely published news about female athletes during the 1990s. Men dominated both the covers of the magazines and the content within. In 1993 AIBA sanctioned official boxing fights for women. The Swedish Boxing Association had already been arranging women's bouts for five years.<sup>78</sup> Sweden was the very first nation to legalize amateur boxing for women.<sup>79</sup> An important figure behind the early development of women's boxing in Sweden was Bettan Andersson.<sup>80</sup> Andersson's importance for the development of both Scandinavian and international women's boxing cannot be overstated. She was, alongside with Risøy, one of the first well-known and

acknowledged women boxers in Scandinavia. In addition to this, she became the first woman on the board of AIBA in 2006.<sup>81</sup>

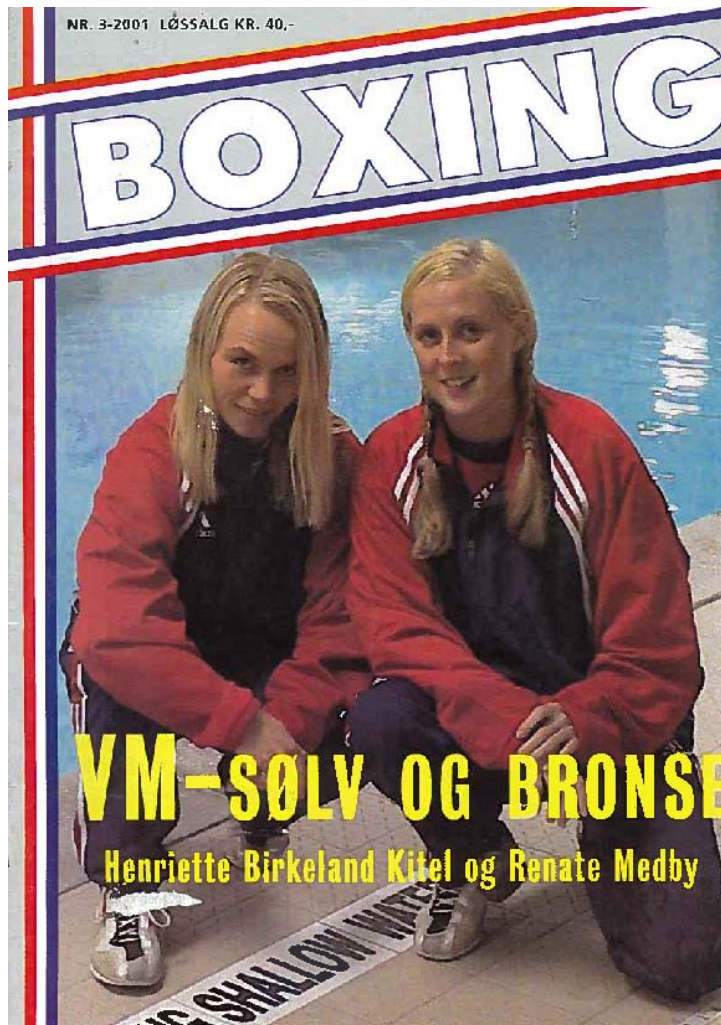
During the 1990s, several unofficial National Championships in women's boxing were held in Norway.<sup>86</sup> Among the winners of the first unofficial National Championship in 1996 were Anita Berthelsen from B-30 in Trondheim and Susanne Estensen from Bodø.<sup>87</sup> Unofficial championships were also held in 1997, 1998 and 1999.<sup>88</sup> In 2000, NBF arranged the first official National Championship for women.<sup>89</sup> It is possible that women's inclusion in boxing during the 1980s and 1990s was more or less a result of the political policies implemented by NIF. This might also explain some of the reasons why women were not included in the official National Championship until 2000. With the policy of "full" gender integration from 1994, the focus on women's equality lessened in NIF and thus, in Norwegian sport organizations like NBF.<sup>90</sup>

From 2000 to 2005 the numbers of female participants in boxing clubs increased, and along with it the number of female boxers in the National Championship.<sup>91</sup> Some of this increase can be understood as an effect of the NBF's promotion of *fitness boxing*, which targeted women specifically. At first, only a few boxing clubs adopted this non-combative style of boxing. The introduction of fitness boxing did however lead to an increase of 2100 new registered female members in NBF.<sup>92</sup> A few years after NBF introduced fitness boxing it had become a popular form of exercise for women, and for many it acted as a gateway into competitive boxing.<sup>93</sup>

The boxing club B-30 in Trondheim took on an active role in promoting competitive women's boxing. In 2000, 2001 and 2002 they supported female boxers from all parts of the country by arranging 'women only' training camps.<sup>94</sup> The policy behind the 'women only' training camps was to offer women the possibility to train together. At the time, this was an opportunity most female boxers did not have in their local boxing clubs. The idea behind it was that they would stay active longer, have more self-esteem and help each other develop as athletes.<sup>95</sup> The implementation of this kind of preferential treatment of women as means of promoting equality of outcome is closely related to the dominant political strategies related to gender in Norwegian sports during the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>96</sup> Many male dominated sports in Norway, such as snowboard, have tried similar women's projects to facilitate gender equality.<sup>97</sup>

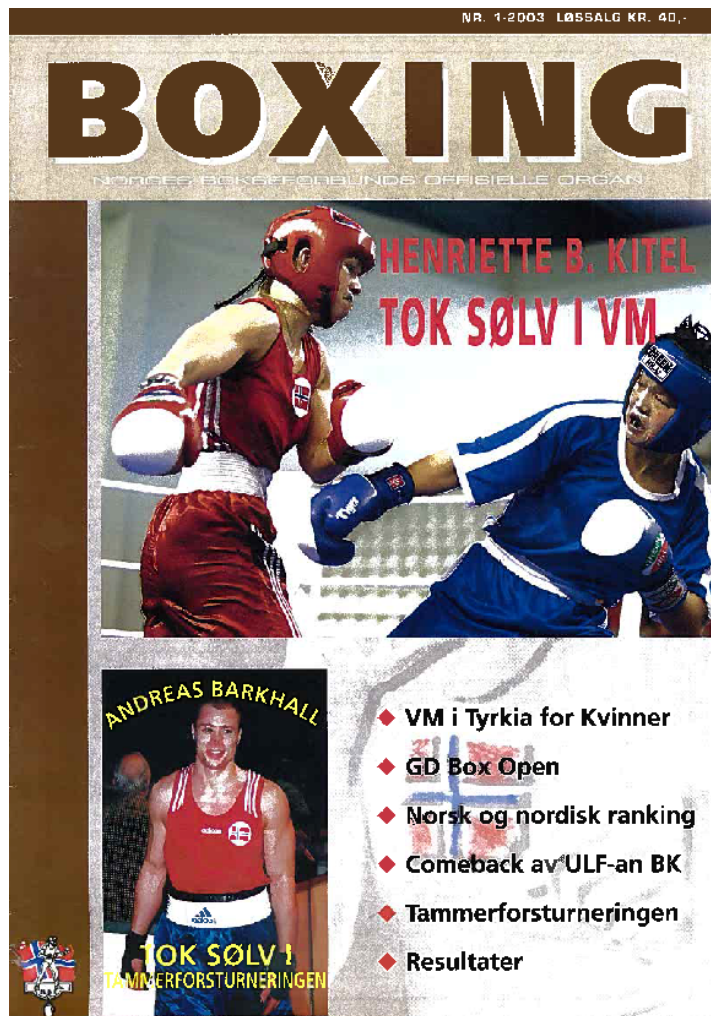
The 1990s marked a phase where several talented female boxers emerged in Norway. When the first women's European championship was held in 2001, Henriette Birkeland Kitel won the gold medal in the featherweight division.<sup>98</sup> The same year, Birkeland Kitel won the

silver medal in the first World Championship for women in amateur boxing. Another boxer, Renate Medby, won the bronze medal in the same championship.<sup>99</sup>



2 Birkeland Kitel and Medby on the cover of "Boxing, 2001

In 2002, Norway sent four women to the World Championship in Antalya, Turkey: Birkeland Kitel (57kg), Medby (51kg), Kari Jensen (54kg) and Ingrid Egner (60kg).<sup>100</sup> The Norwegian team competed in the largest weight divisions under the championship – ranging from 22 to 24 participating boxers.<sup>101</sup> During the championship the Norwegian women met nations like Sri Lanka, Greece, India, Korea and Hungary in the ring.<sup>102</sup> In 2003, Birkeland Kitel became the European Champion for the second time. In the same championship Jensen and Ingrid Brevik Hegle won the bronze medal.

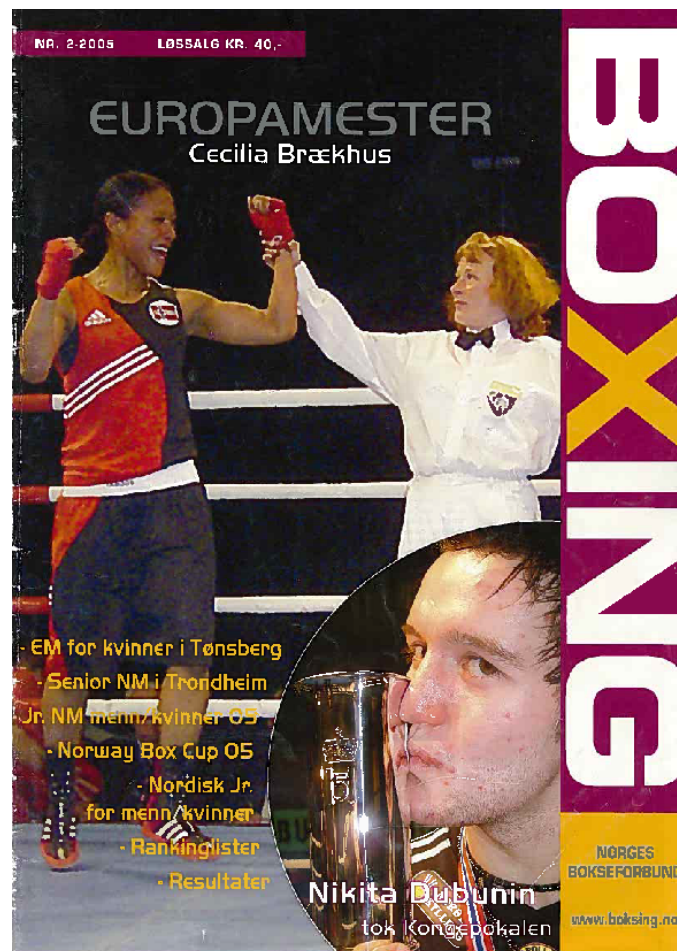


3 Birkeland Kitel on the cover of "Boxing" after winning silver in The World Championship, 2003

A milestone for Norwegian women's boxing was reached when Jensen was awarded *Kongepokalen*<sup>1</sup> during the National Championship in 2004. For the first time, this national sports trophy was awarded in women's boxing.<sup>103</sup> This award also signified that 2004 was the first year with a minimum of 15 women boxers participating in the National Championship.<sup>104</sup> That same year Cecilia Brækhus<sup>2</sup> became European Champion and Jensen won the silver medal. 2005 was another remarkable year for women's boxing as Brækhus once again became European Champion, while Birkeland Kitel and Siren Søråas both won the silver medal in the same championship.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Kongepokalen* is a trophy awarded the best man and woman in a senior National Championship in several different sports organized by The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF).

<sup>2</sup> Currently the undisputed world welterweight champion and the first woman in the world to hold the WBA, WBC, IBF and WBO titles simultaneously.



4 Cecilia Brækhus – European Champion - on the cover of "Boxing" in 2005

The last woman to win a medal in the European Championship was Lotte Lien. She became European Champion in the welterweight division in 2009.<sup>106</sup>

As demonstrated here, Norway's international success has predominantly been in women's boxing. In men's boxing Reidar Walstad was the last to win a medal in the European Championship when he won the bronze medal in 1998. While Norway has four medals in the women's World Championship, only Ole Klemetsen (1991) and Geir Hitland (1993) have won medals in the men's World Championship.<sup>107</sup> This has been a continuing tendency in Norwegian amateur boxing. In 2013, Norway won eight gold medals in the Nordic Championship; the women won five of the eight.<sup>108</sup>

Since 2005, the number of women registered in Norwegian boxing clubs has been at a standstill, consisting of about 20-24% of the registered memberships in NBF.<sup>109</sup> In 2004, 28 women were ranked by NBF, meaning that there were 28 active female boxers in Norway during the season of 2003-2004.<sup>110</sup> Rankings from 2005-2014 show a range of 27- 31 active women boxers.<sup>111</sup> It is important to consider that the rankings only show the number of

women in competitive boxing. They do not give insight into how many are taking part in boxing in total, given that many boxing clubs offer other forms of boxing, like *fitness boxing*, *boxercise aerobics*, *merkeboksing*<sup>3</sup> and *diplomboksing*.<sup>112</sup> The records of NBF and local boxing clubs do however tell a story of a male dominated sporting context - which is arguably the case for boxing worldwide.

*Merkeboksing* and *diplomboksing* originated in Scandinavia as a way of increasing recruitment of athletes. Meant as a gentle semi-contact version of amateur boxing, competitors are not allowed to put any power behind their punches. In *Merkeboksing*, there is no announced winner of the fight, while in *Diplomboksing*, the fighter with the highest technical score is the winner. Here, fighters are scored on three factors; 1) guard, 2) punches and 3) footwork and movement. When *merkeboksing* and *diplomboksing* was introduced in Norway, NBF allowed girls and boys to compete against each other.<sup>113</sup> As skill and technique are awarded in these competitions (rather than power and physical prowess), NBF saw no reason to deny boys and girls the opportunity to box together.<sup>114</sup> This is still a common practice at local boxing events around Norway. It is possible that this practice of mixed-sex boxing bouts is unique to Scandinavia.

#### *Women's Boxing in the Olympic Games: A Boost for Norwegian Women's Boxing*

Boxing has been a part of the Olympic Games since 1904.<sup>115</sup> In 2006, AIBA started working towards the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympic Games.<sup>116</sup> In 2009 AIBA succeeded and three weight categories (51kg, 60kg and 75kg) were included in the program for the London 2012 Games. By AIBA's competition rules, women normally compete in ten different weight categories, ranging from 45kg to 81+ kg.<sup>117</sup> The gender inequality and marginalization of women in international boxing is evident through The International Olympic Committees' (IOC)<sup>118</sup> decision to omit seven weight categories in the Games. For men, ten of eleven weight categories are included. IOC justified the decision to omit seven weight categories for women by arguing that the number of athletes in the Olympic Games could not increase any further.<sup>119</sup> Prior to the Games in London, boxing was the only summer sport without a female discipline.<sup>120</sup>

After IOC and AIBA announced that women's boxing would become an Olympic

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<sup>3</sup> *Merkeboksing* & *Diplomboksing* are boxing competitions exclusive to Scandinavia.

event, the Norwegian Boxing Federation boosted its efforts to develop their female boxers. NBF implemented these efforts by introducing a new project called *Female Box*.<sup>121</sup> The aim of Female Box was to motivate upcoming boxers, and to prepare the top boxers for the Olympic Games.<sup>122</sup> Birkeland Kitel (former European Champion) became one of the head coaches for the project. At the start of Female Box in 2009, twenty-four boxers were invited to train together under supervision of Birkeland Kitel. After one year, twelve of the twenty-four were chosen to become the 'Female Box Team', whose main goal was to qualify athletes for the Games in London 2012.<sup>123</sup> Of these twelve, three fought to qualify for the Olympic Games during the World Championship in China.<sup>124</sup> None of the Norwegian boxers was able to qualify for any of the three Olympic weight categories.

With the limited number of weight categories for women in the Olympic Games, only twelve slots were open for European women. No Scandinavian women were able to qualify.<sup>125</sup> The economic resources, time and effort NBF put into the Female Box project is an example of the unique position women's boxing has in Norway today. A project with organizational and economic support, specifically for the benefit of female boxers would be unlikely in many national boxing federations outside of Scandinavia.

In 2014 NBF renewed the project, renaming it *Female Box Next Generation*.<sup>126</sup> The main goal for this project, which is still ongoing, is to stimulate young boxers to compete at a top international level.<sup>127</sup> The renewal and continuing support of Female Box is an indication that NBF wishes to continue to support and develop women's boxing.

### Cecilia Brækhus: a Pioneer for Professional Boxing

Cecilia Brækhus is in many ways a pioneer in Norwegian women's boxing. Although she had a long and successful career as an amateur boxer, it was her transition into professional boxing that made her a well-known athlete among the Norwegian people. In 2007, when Brækhus started her career as a professional boxer, the sport was illegal in Norway. As a consequence, Brækhus had to travel abroad to compete. Her debut fight as a professional boxer took place in Switzerland.<sup>128</sup> Brækhus started her professional career with Stonehand Promotion (now named Team Stonehand) based in Melhus, Norway. However, after only four professional fights, Brækhus signed with Sauerland Promotion in Germany.<sup>129</sup> The transition from Stonehand Promotion to Sauerland in 2008 was exceptional. Moving from a small Scandinavian promoter to Sauerland, one of the biggest professional boxing promoters in Europe was something no one had anticipated. Brækhus was the first woman to sign with Sauerland, earning her the alias

“The First Lady”. Since her, only Swedish boxer Klara Svensson has followed in the ranks of Sauerland women.

In 2009 Brækhus became the World Champion when she defeated the Danish Vinni Skovgaard for the WBA<sup>130</sup> and the WBC<sup>131</sup> titles.<sup>132</sup> Becoming World Champion in professional boxing made her a famous athlete in Norway, a country where boxing had limited participation rates and popularity. In 2010 she defeated Victoria Cisneros from the United States and Mikaela Lauren from Sweden, securing her the WBO<sup>133</sup> and the WPBF<sup>134</sup> World titles.<sup>135</sup> In 2013 she was awarded the prize "*Name of the year*", an award given to the Norwegian peoples' favourite athlete regardless of sport.<sup>136</sup> This was in many ways extraordinary considering that professional boxing was still illegal in Norway at the time. Brækhus is still the undisputed world welterweight champion, and the first woman to hold the WBA, WBA, IBF and WBO titles simultaneously. She remains undefeated as a professional boxer.<sup>137</sup>

In addition to her exceptional accomplishments in the ring, Brækhus has been politically active about the prohibition on professional boxing in Norway. Since 1982, professional boxing has been illegal.<sup>138</sup> The Norwegian government had illegalized professional boxing to prevent the development of other, more violent professional sports, such as cage fighting, which was growing in popularity internationally during the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>139</sup> The Norwegian Medical Association (NMA)<sup>140</sup> was (and still is) a strong advocate for the prohibition of professional boxing. The NMA argues that boxing should be kept illegal in Norway because of the physiological risks and dangers that comes with the sport, such as risks of brain damage and death.<sup>141</sup>

In December 2014 the Norwegian government announced that professional boxing would once again become legal.<sup>142</sup> It is unclear what actually promoted this decision. The NMA and the Norwegian Neurological Association (NNF) opposed the decision to legalize of professional boxing and stated that boxing today is more dangerous than ever before.<sup>143</sup> Additionally, there has been broad political resistance towards legalizing professional boxing, and The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) itself has expressed concerns about legalizing professional boxing, agreeing with the NMA on the physiological dangers of the sport. Under these conditions and with such strong political resistance, how could professional boxing once again be legalized? Many have attributed Brækhus' success and her popularity as a springboard for the process of the legalization of professional boxing in Norway. With a highly successful athlete such as Brækhus it seems like the image of professional boxing is changing among Norwegians. Her popularity might have



contributed to the destabilization of the myths commonly associated with (men's) boxing, myths such as boxing being an uncivilized, brutal and dangerous activity for violent men. AIBA itself has argued that with the inclusion of women, the sport has a less dangerous and unsafe image internationally.<sup>144</sup> It is possible that Brækhus has had a similar effect on the image of boxing in Norway.

Some national sport commentators go as far as claiming that it is impossible to envision the recent legalization of professional boxing without a popular and successful athlete like Brækhus outspokenly promoting the cause.<sup>145</sup> Today, Brækhus is one of Norway's most popular athletes. She has been unable to fight and compete in Norway her entire professional career. Bringing home one of Norway's most popular athletes has undoubtedly had an effect on the debate and the political process of the legalization of professional boxing in Norway. In the male dominated world of boxing, it is astonishing that one could argue that it took a woman and her achievements in the ring to rekindle the debate on professional boxing in Norway.

## Closing Remarks

Prior to the Olympic Games in 2012, AIBA estimated that there were more than 500,000 licensed women boxers worldwide.<sup>146</sup> Women's boxing today is practiced in more than 120 countries.<sup>147</sup> Women's participation seems to be growing, but international boxing still face many challenges before formal gender equality and equality of outcome can be achieved.<sup>148</sup> In regards to this, it is important to note that women's opportunities for sport participation vary greatly among countries and cultures.<sup>149</sup> In some countries, women are still denied participation in boxing.

Cuba, a famous boxing nation, did not send any women to qualify for the Olympic Games in 2012. Jose Barrientos, president of the Cuban Boxing Federation stated that Cuba had no program or training for women who wanted to become boxers as they deemed boxing to be an 'unfit sport for women'.<sup>150</sup> In order for women's boxing to keep growing a substantial effort is needed to ensure equal access, formal equality and equality of outcome in boxing organizations worldwide.

In many countries, female boxers experience discrimination. In Poland, female boxers have been required to compete in skirts instead of traditional boxing trunks.<sup>151</sup> In 2011, the head coach of the Polish boxing team stated that: "By wearing skirts, it gives a good impression, a womanly impression. Wearing shorts is not a good way for women boxers to dress".<sup>152</sup> Although national boxing federations, such as the Polish Boxing Federation, are

responsible for the restraints they enforce on female athletes, AIBA has played a central role in the discussion on mandating outfits for women.<sup>153</sup> Prior to the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympic Games, AIBA proposed this uniform rule for women.<sup>154</sup>

While boxing internationally arguably still has a long journey ahead before gender equality is achieved – women's boxing in Norway has grown rapidly over the last four decades. One of the reasons behind this success could be the political policy of gender equality in Norwegian sports.<sup>155</sup> A consequence of the policy could be that Norwegian women have greater opportunities to participate and compete in boxing compared to women in other countries. This, combined with a greater access to economic resources, makes up some of the key factors in explaining Norway's international success in women's boxing.

In this paper I have argued that women's boxing in Norway and in Scandinavia, is a unique case when considered from an international perspective. With projects such as *Female Box* the Norwegian Boxing Federation has recognized that women in highly male dominated sports cultures might thrive and develop further when given support. Researching how women's boxing is viewed, practiced and managed in other contexts and countries will give important insight into women's opportunities and limitations in boxing internationally. Boxing provides a sporting context where women have the opportunity to express emotions, learn self-defence and experience personal growth and physical achievement. Women, independent of their country of residence, should have equal access and possibilities to experience these positive effects that participation in boxing can facilitate.

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