‘The Nordic Female Fighter’

Exploring Women’s Participation in Mixed Martial Arts in Norway and Sweden

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to investigate women’s participation in mixed martial arts in the Nordic countries. The study is based on a qualitative and quantitative methodological approach consisting of individual interviews and focus group interviews with Swedish female mixed martial arts fighters and data from a Norwegian survey of participants in Norwegian mixed martial arts clubs. A total of 12 female fighters were interviewed, while 484 respondents participated in the survey. The results show that women exercising mixed martial arts contain a potential to act as feminist role models through their counter-hegemonic renegotiation of norms and views on femininity and, more specifically, the perception of femininity as something fragile and passive. Despite this progressive potential, the informants unanimously affirm that combat sports in general and in different ways are dominated by males. The data indicates that women still represent a small and marginalised group among mixed martial arts participants in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, women participating in mixed martial arts compete less and are less motivated by performance enhancement (developing as fighters, winning fights/tournaments/titles) compared to the male participants. However, both male and female participants value health and fun as the most important reasons for their participation in mixed martial arts training groups.

Keywords
combat sport, gender, hegemony, inclusion and exclusion, masculinities, MMA
Introduction

In contrast to most other traditionally organised sports, in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and other combat sports females and males train together and in many cases also spar with each other (Channon, 2014). This means that regardless of gender the athletes are coached by the same person and both male and female coaches are obliged to relate and interact with male and female athletes (Tjønndal and Hovden, 2016). In this way, MMA and other combat sports break with the tradition of gender segregated sports activities and represent a unique training and coaching environment that is of particular interest for studies of gendered power relations in sport (Hovden and Tjønndal, 2017). MMA and other full-contact combat sports, such as boxing and kickboxing, are often described as ‘hyper-masculine’ sports in which gender/power relations are still prominent. These factors make combat sports a particularly interesting and important study object when it comes to gendered aspects such as women’s participation, health and well-being, as well as athletes’ experiences and identity constructions.

By employing both quantitative and qualitative data, the purpose of this paper is to examine female participation in combat sports in the Nordic countries of Norway and Sweden. By combat sports we mean those that allow the outcome of fights to be determined by knock out, such as boxing or full-contact kickboxing.¹ However, in this paper the main focus is on Nordic Mixed Martial Arts (hitherto referred to as MMA). The research question investigated in the paper is:

What characterises women’s participation in MMA in Norway and Sweden?

Combat sports have been described as a male dominated arena in which identity expressions traditionally understood as masculine are produced and encouraged (Channon and Matthews, 2015; Messner, 1992, 2002; Messner and Sabo, 1990, 1994).
Indeed, combat sport involves characteristics such as strength, endurance, risk-taking, strategy, toughness, muscularity and competitiveness that, taken together, can be considered as core contents of a hegemonic (and dominant) masculinity (Connell, 2005). However, over the past decades both men and women have shown great interest in MMA and other combat sports (Channon and Matthews, 2015; Sánchez García and Malcom, 2010). Since the late 1990s, combat sports have become increasingly popular amongst women in the Nordic region, with quantitative increases in female participation rates in both MMA, boxing and kickboxing (Stenius, 2015; Tjønndal and Hovden, 2016).

This change raises several questions, which at an overall level can be understood as a negotiation of the inclusion and exclusion of girls and women in combat sports. The aim of this study is to investigate this in MMA, both in terms of participation rates (e.g. how many women participate in MMA in Norway/Sweden) and women’s experiences of inclusion/exclusion in MMA (e.g. how do women experience participating in the male dominated combat sport milieu of MMA in Norway/Sweden). Therefore, in this paper we examine the increased participation of females in combat sports from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. More specifically, we use data from interviews and questionnaires to examine power and gender relations in today’s Nordic MMA. The specific aim of the paper is to investigate how processes of inclusion and exclusion are (quantitatively) expressed and (qualitatively) experienced in MMA in the Nordic region.

**Context: MMA and combat sports in the Nordic countries**

Some of the main characteristics of organised sport in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland are its voluntary basis, autonomy and (relative) self-governance in relation to national and local authorities (Alasarve, 2014; Halldorsson et al. 2013; Halldorsson, 2017). In Norway all sport, both elite and grassroots sports, is organised under the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports
(NIF), consisting of 54 national federations. In Sweden sport comes under the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF), consisting of 71 national federations. Compared to other western and non-western countries, Nordic culture is generally seen as being shaped by egalitarianism, a high degree of socialism and high levels of transparency in democracy and democratic processes (Lo, 2015). Additionally, the Nordic welfare states have been described as ‘champions of gender equality’ (Hovden, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2016). This also applies to the organisation of sport in the Nordic countries. However, the focus of research on women in full-contact sports such as MMA has predominately been on other western countries outside the Nordic region and the welfare model. Therefore, we argue that this study provides an original contribution that adds to the international research field of women in MMA (and combat sports in general) by investigating the inclusion/exclusion of women in MMA in Norway and Sweden.

Of the Nordic countries, Iceland is the only one to consistently hire professional coaches for all levels of sport and to require that both coaches and PE teachers should have a minimum of three years education in sport pedagogy. In Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden coaching positions are only paid at the highest level of sport, leaving the majority of coaching positions to be filled by unpaid coaches working voluntarily for local and regional sport clubs (Alsarve, 2014; Andersson, 2002; Ibsen and Seippel, 2010). As in several other sporting contexts, male coaches dominate the paid positions (e.g. Norman, 2010).

Historically, the Nordic countries have had restrictive policies for combat sports. For instance, while professional boxing is legal in all the Nordic countries today, both Sweden and Norway have a history of banning competitions in professional boxing and other combat sports. Professional MMA events are now also legal in Sweden, but still illegal in Norway. Historically, Finland and Denmark have been the most liberal in terms of
regulating participation and competitions in combat sports amongst the Nordic countries.

As MMA is illegal at a professional level in Norway, we have chosen to collect qualitative data (following the quantitative data collection) from the neighbouring country of Sweden. Even though the number of professional practitioners is few, their experiences are considered valuable, as these women can be said to represent one of the most included groups in the sport.

The combination of historically restrictive policies towards combat sports, the uniqueness of the Nordic welfare model and culture, and the high level of gender equality in Nordic sports and sport leadership compared to other western countries (in our opinion) makes the Nordic countries an interesting context in which to study the inclusion and exclusion of girls and women in combat sports such as MMA.

**Previous research on women in MMA and other knockout-based combat sports**

While women in combat sports represent an established and growing field of research globally (e.g. Channon and Matthews, 2015; Matthews, 2015), gendered power relations in combat sports in the Nordic region are an under-researched area (Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba, 2018; Tjønndal and Hovden, 2016). In terms of women in non-knockout-based combat sports in the Nordic countries, Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) have studied female wrestlers’ experiences of bodily structure, muscles and the ‘wrestler role’. In their study, Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) demonstrate how Norwegian elite female wrestlers manage the increased muscle mass that results from elite sport and the social price that comes with it.

Another non-knockout-based combat sport that has received scholarly attention in the Nordic countries is judo. Kavoura et. al. (2018) highlight the identity construction of female judo athletes in Finland. Their study explores how women have adapted to an
identity as a ‘natural born fighter’ rather than ‘an ordinary woman’ in Finnish judo. It also
argues that this identity construction does not advance gender equity in combat sports
because it constructs ‘ordinary’ women as biologically inferior and incapable of
participating in competitive judo (Kavoura et. al. 2018). Kavoura, Kokkonen and Ryba
(2014) have studied female judokas in Denmark (and Greece). Here, the authors argue
that ‘the egalitarian Danish culture offers more space for gender performativity and young
judokas seem to be comfortable with challenging the norms’ (p. 94). Using Kavoura,
Kokkonen and Ryba’s research on judo as a starting point, one could hypothesise that
women in Norwegian and Swedish MMA feel freer to challenge gendered norms and
stereotypes than female MMA practitioners in other western countries.
Within the context of knockout-based combat sports, some work has been done on women
in boxing in the Nordic countries, specifically in Norway. Hovden and Tjønndal (2017)
have investigated coach-athlete relationships between men and women in Norwegian
boxing. Their study indicates that female boxing coaches gain less respect from their
athletes compared to male boxing coaches. Additionally, their study reveals cases of
power abuse between older male boxing coaches and young female boxers. Furthermore,
Tjønndal and Hovden (2016) have studied coach leadership among male and female
boxing coaches in Norway. Their study reveals a gendered hierarchy in terms of what is
viewed as ‘good coaching’, where traits associated with male coaches are given priority
over ‘female leadership approaches’.

To our knowledge, only two studies of MMA in the Nordic countries touch on the subject
of gender. In his ethnographic work of MMA in Sweden, Stenius (2015) argues that
fighters (both men and women) are rewarded if they reproduce and protect the
stereotypical image of femininity and masculinity. Simultaneously, Stenius highlights
that MMA opens spheres in which men and women can train together, thus making MMA
an arena in which gendered norms could be challenged and expanded. Secondly, Tjønndal’s (2018) study of participation patterns in Norwegian MMA shows that young men (aged 20-30) dominate as members of Norwegian MMA clubs.

As stated earlier, the focus on women in combat sports has predominantly been in other western countries rather than the Nordic region. For instance, Weaving (2015) shows how MMA (specifically the UFC) represents a sporting environment shaped by hegemonic masculinity and male domination. International studies also underline how combat sports can serve as arenas in which women can contest and reject traditional norms of femininity. For instance, in a study of combat sports and gender, Channon (2014) highlights that the mixed-sex training groups in combat sports provide women with a sporting environment in which they can contest and reshape the dominant and traditional gender roles associated with women’s sporting participation. Similar points have been made by Maclean (2015) in her study of gender dynamics amongst karate practitioners in Scotland. However, Channon and Phipps (2017) argue that female fighters often need to carefully negotiate ‘feminine behaviours’ in order to fit into the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘fighter’. In their conclusion, Channon and Phipps (2017) underline the need for scholarly work on women in martial arts and combat sports in order to focus on the ‘manner in which the performance of alternative femininities by female fighters might work against the sexual hierarchies that their more orthodox counterparts are typically thought to preserve’ (p. 33). One of our aims in writing this article is to build on this by adding to the current body of knowledge about women and femininity in combat sports.

Since in our view muscularity and masculinity are closely linked to MMA and other knockout-based combat sports, we have reviewed some of the research on this topic. Research findings show that in order to be perceived and/or feel ‘real’ or ‘masculine’,
men in general should ideally have a muscular body. According to Morrison, Morrison, and Hopkins (2003), muscles *per se* tend to make men feel more manly and (heterosexually) attractive. Besides this, research has shown that in general women and girls often express a fear of becoming (too) muscular (Grogan, Evans, Wright, and Hunter, 2004). This is also reflected in Sisjord and Kristiansen’s work on Norwegian female elite wrestlers (2009). However, these results are challenged by other research findings. The approach to muscularity can be said to vary with the kind of sport the female subject participates in (McCreary and Saucier, 2009), while research on the media, for example, shows that well-trained and fit female body ideals are now being increasingly embraced and accepted (Choi, 2003; Grogan et al., 2004).

Social notions of ‘violence’ from a gender perspective are also of importance for this paper in order to chisel out the cultural understandings of women in combat sports. It is debatable how far we can describe participation in combat sport as ‘violent’ *per se*, with international campaigns such as ‘Love Fighting, Hate Violence’ arguing for a clear distinction between combat sports and acts of violence. Although this debate is not the focus of our article, research on social gendered perceptions of violence and violent acts may be helpful in explaining the stigmatisation and marginalisation of female practitioners of MMA and other combat sports. Gill (2007) has shown that violent, aggressive females are considered as one of the most stigmatised social groups in (Anglo-Saxon) society. This underlines why female participation in combat sports was for a long time perceived as a non-question and could explain why the inclusion of women in knockout-based combat sports has been slow, even in the Nordic countries. For instance, boxing was the last Olympic sport to include female athletes when women’s boxing was included in the programme for the 2012 Olympic Games in London. In contrast, aggressive and violent males in sports are not understood as a stigmatised or deviant
group, because throughout western history the connections between violence, and even 
war, men and masculinity have shown that aggression, physical courage, risk-taking and 
other acts of violence are essential components of masculinity (Hirose and Pih, 2009; 
Hutchings, 2008).

McCaughey (1997) employs ‘physical feminism’ as a perspective for understanding the 
expressions and political functions of women’s violence in general and self-defence in a 
males-dominated society in particular. Such ‘violent practices’ often rescript the female 
body and female fighters, thereby redefining the female body and feminine ideals and 
highlighting the importance of including corporeal dimensions in social and progressive 
change. McCaughey’s (1997) physical feminist perspective is applicable to combat sports, 
because the actions of self-defence and female fighting have the potential to challenge 
traditional views, create ‘new’ female bodies and deconstruct social norms of ‘violence’ 
as a (hegemonic) masculine monopoly. McCaughey (1997) also links physical contact 
power to an emotional pleasure of hitting, screaming and kicking, which drastically 
challenges stereotypical, traditional and hegemonic ideals of women that shape ‘new’ 
kinds of feminine ideals. Traditional hegemony has, namely, taught women to be 
subordinate, passive and beautiful objects (Connell, 2005).

To conclude, women in combat sports have challenged a cultural understanding of sport 
vioence as a masculine monopoly. More precisely, these fighting females challenge the 
feminine stereotype of a passive, mouldable (heterosexual) female object that nurtures 
the absence of violence and aggressiveness to construct an ideal feminine identity (cf. 
Brandt and Carstens, 2005; Channon, 2014; Gill, 2007).

**Theoretical Framework**

The notion of hegemonic masculinity has had a huge impact on critical analyses of gender
As a consequence of this influence the notion has also been frequently debated and problematised (Demetriou, 2001; Hearn, 2004). In this paper we cannot fully enter into these theoretical discussions and therefore focus on our use of the term and the link between hegemonic masculinity and its consequences for individuals’ participation in combat sports. We thus interpret hegemony as a power that ‘produces’ explicit and implicit ‘rules’ of inclusion and exclusion. Hegemony, in other words, signifies an ideology or worldview that, through social institutions and other powers, becomes an ordinary part of people’s everyday practices (Connell, 1983; Gramsci, 1971).

In short, there are two central assumptions in Connell’s theory. First, patriarchy is taken as a ‘given’ (but not natural or static) societal structure. This means that there is a hierarchical relation between men, in general, and women, that, at an overall level, supports men and masculinities. Second, there are power differences between women/men and other women/men as well as between ideals of femininities/masculinities. This means that some women/men and feminine/masculine ideals are superior to others and that in specific situations women's/men’s sexuality, ethnicity, education, age, functionality and economic income may be significant and influence the subject’s position in the social hierarchy. As a consequence of this, hegemony is something that is constantly done, alters and changes, especially if women or ‘new’ expressions of masculinity are able to challenge and change its content (Connell, 1993, 2005).

Characteristics that are rewarded in many sports have been connected to hegemonic masculinity production and have, for example, emphasised strength, speed, toughness, risk-taking and durability (Alsarve, 2018). Connell (2000, 2005) argues that sport is one of the most influential social institutions for reproducing societal patriarchy and remaking
perceptions of the superiority of men and masculinities. That is, men’s physical and
‘better’ performances in sport can be seen as symbolic proof and legitimacy of men’s
hegemony in society in general. It is therefore important to make these hegemonic
expressions and traditions in sports visible in order to discuss and, if desirable, challenge
them.

Among others, Wachs (2002) has argued that Connell’s theory is too abstract and that it
mainly focuses on men and masculinities (Wachs, 2002, p 177). In our paper, the
ambition is to be specific about what gender and hegemonic masculine power contains
and how ‘it’ is experienced or challenged by sports participants. Our second ambition
has been to involve both men and women in our analysis.

Mixed methodological approach

The quantitative data used in this paper is based on a Norwegian questionnaire, whereas
the qualitative data was collected through interviews in Swedish MMA clubs. We argue
that the mixed method approach is adequate, mainly due to the complexity of the studied
phenomena. It also has the potential to nurture the respective strengths of the quantitative
and qualitative approaches. However, the combination of these two approaches can be
debated.

There are also challenges with this combination in terms of how to integrate the
quantitative and qualitative findings. It has been argued that quantitative and qualitative
methods stem from conflicting epistemological and ontological assumptions and
therefore cannot be mixed or merged (Morgan, 2007; Östlund, Kidd, Wengström, and
Rowa-Dewar, 2011). Critics of this posture argue that such a purist view poses a threat to
scientific advancement (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005).

In some cases one method is given priority over another, although here the (pragmatic)
ambition is to draw on the strengths of both. We thus perceive describing and discussing the quantifiable data that signals significant results in themselves to be a strength, although we also see a value in being able to complement these with qualitative data in order to add nuanced narratives to the numbers (which are also interesting *per se*). A metaphor used for this approach is ‘triangulation’, which aims to capture the complexity of the studied phenomenon or phenomena (Östlund et al., 2011). For instance, if the statistics show that women are in the minority, but that their numbers increase in MMA, it could indicate a progressive movement within the sport. By specifically asking questions about women’s experiences of MMA, a more nuanced image of these statistics can be portrayed.

The quantitative approach

The quantitative results are based on an electronic survey distributed to members of the Norwegian MMA Federation (NMMAF). The aim of the survey was to map who participated in Norwegian MMA and their motives for participation. The sample consisted of a random group of members in Norwegian MMA clubs associated with the NMMAF. At the time of the data collection 67 clubs were registered in NMMAF, of which 43 clubs volunteered to participate in the survey. Five clubs declined to participate and 19 clubs never responded to the invitation to do so. The survey was conducted in the autumn of 2016. A total of 484 respondents were included in the analysis, making the response rate 74%, a fairly high rate for an electronic survey (Tufte, 2018). One of the reasons for the high response rate in this survey could be that Nordic MMA is an under-examined field, meaning that the members of Norwegian MMA clubs could be more positively inclined to participate in research/surveys than sports that are more commonly exposed to research activities.
The variable measuring of MMA participation is divided into days per week (survey question: *In an average week: how many days per week do you participate in MMA training?*), with the numbers 1-7 representing the number of days per week. The same applies to the variable measuring of the physical activity level in general (Survey question: *In an average week: how many days per week are you physically active or participate in sport continuously for 30 minutes or more?*). The age variable and the MMA experience (*How many years have you trained in MMA?*) variable are both measured in number of years. The response alternatives measuring education were divided in degrees to match the Norwegian education system, with the higher education variable (table 1) coded with two values, where 1 = *academic degree at university level* and 0 = *no education above secondary school*. There are four naturally dichotomous variables in the quantitative analyses: 1) mixed-sex training group variable, 2) the competitive athlete variable, 3) the previous combat sport experience variable and 4) the gender variable. The mixed-sex training group variable is coded with 1 = *My MMA club trains in mixed sex training groups*, and 0 = *My MMA club trains in gender separated training groups*. The competition/competitive variable is coded with the values 1 = *I compete in MMA*, and 0 = *I do not compete in MMA/I only train recreationally*. The combat sport experience variable has the values 1 = *Yes, I have experience from other combat sports*, 0 = *No, I have no experience from other combat sports*. Lastly, the gender variable is coded with 1 = men and 0 = women.

The respondents were recruited through email lists provided by the MMA clubs. Each respondent was sent an email with information about the purpose of the study and a personalised link to the survey itself. The survey is registered with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and follows the ethical guidelines for survey research in Norway.
The qualitative approach

A total of 12 female fighters were interviewed in four individual interviews and two focus groups (with four participants in each). The focus group interviews lasted approximately two hours and the individual interviews about an hour each. Most of the interviews except one, which was conducted by telephone, were conducted face-to-face in office milieus. One focus group was held in a combat clubhouse and the other at a café next to the combat sports club. All the conversations were semi-structured and included questions about the informants’ sporting experiences, reasons for choosing a combat sport as a sporting activity, responses from family members and friends and whether they had any experience of gender discrimination. The informants were between 18-55 years of age and the oldest women was no longer an active fighter, but involved at an organisational level and as a leader in a club.

The informants had different backgrounds. Two were born outside Sweden in another Nordic country and had moved to Sweden to study, one as a student teacher and the other as a medical student. Another informant was a law student. One informant worked as a social worker, one worked for a sports organisation, one was unemployed and another had taken time out from her work to focus on becoming a professional fighter. The other informants worked as physiotherapists, administrators, office workers and consultants. The informants were also differently merited as fighters: one was as relative a newcomer with only a few months of experience, while other informants were experienced at a high national and international level. Most of the informants had also tried other combat sports, such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu or submission wrestling.
In the analytical process the overall ambition of using qualitative data has been to find and make visible norms and perceptions of the ideal combat athlete or fighter and what they ought to be, feel and look like etc. Inspired by the work of Wetherell and Edley, different ideals and norms were identified and, with Connell’s work in mind, the idea was to critically analyse their ‘inherent’ dilemmas and contradictions (Connell, 1983, 2005; Edley, 2001a; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Of special interest in this paper is how the informants’ narratives can be linked to terms of gendered power and processes of inclusion/exclusion. Therefore, the qualitative results are focused on ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ factors for participation in, or dropout from, the combat sports milieu.

Results and findings

Our mixed method approach navigates the layout of the results and the following discussion. The results/findings and the discussion revolve around three areas: First, which qualitative and quantitative results point in the same direction, i.e. what common or convergent conclusions can be drawn from the respective data? Second, how does the data complement each other? Third, does the qualitative and quantitative data contradict each other, and if so how? (cf. Östlund et al., 2011).

Participation patterns in MMA

The quantitative results are presented in three tables (tables 1, 2 and 3). Table 1 presents some general characteristics about who participates in Norwegian MMA, while tables 2 and 3 analyse the characteristics of female and male participants separately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std.dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>27.24</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9.3% of the MMA participants in the survey are women (n = 45), while 90.7% of the participants are men (n = 439). The low participation rate of women concurs with previous studies of combat sport in the Nordic countries (Stenius, 2015; Hovden and Tjønndal, 2017). The results also reflect the findings of studies of participation in combat sports in other geographical locations (Channon and Jennings, 2013; 2014). Furthermore, table 1 indicates that the youngest participant is 14 years of age, while the oldest is 57. The average age amongst the Norwegian MMA participants is 27 years of age (min = 14, max = 57, mean = 27.24). The MMA participation variable indicates that participants in Norwegian MMA clubs train MMA on average 4 days a week (min = 1, max = 7, mean = 4.12) and are physically active on average 5 days a week (min = 1, max 7, mean = 5.93).

The MMA experience variable shows that the participants range greatly in experience, from 1 year to 26 years, with the average experience being 3.6 years (mean = 3.66). The education variable demonstrates that 60.6% of the participants have no academic degree above secondary school (n = 293), while 39.3% (n = 191) have completed some level of higher education. The competition/competitive variable shows that only 17.9% of the participants compete actively in MMA (n = 88), while 82.1% train MMA for recreational, social or health reasons (n = 396). The mixed-sex training variable shows that the majority train in mixed-sex training groups (95.5%). Lastly, the experience with combat sports variable demonstrates that 67.7% had experience of other combat sports before they

Table 1: Descriptive statistics MMA participation in Norway

| MMA participation | 484 | 1 | 7 | 4.12 | .995 |
| MMA experience | 484 | 1 | 26 | 3.66 | 3.37 |
| Physical activity | 484 | 1 | 7 | 5.93 | .765 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dummy variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Obs. 0</th>
<th>Obs. 1</th>
<th>Percentage 0</th>
<th>Percentage 1</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-sex training</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience combat sport</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
started training in MMA (n = 328), while 32.3% had no previous experience with combat
sports (n = 156).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std.dev.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Health</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Social</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Intrinsic/fun</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>.501</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation: Performance</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.78</td>
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<table>
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<th>Dummy variable</th>
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<th>Obs. 1</th>
<th>Percentage 0</th>
<th>Percentage 1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience combat sport</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Descriptive statistics female MMA participants*

Looking at the female participants (n = 45), 48.8% have a higher academic degree (n = 22), while 51.1% have no higher education (n = 23). Only three of the female participants compete in MMA (5%). 47.5% of the female participants have previous experience of other combat sports (n = 21).

In the gender separated analysis we included four motivation variables from the survey. These variables represent questions related to the respondents’ motivations for participating in MMA. The motivation variables were based on a variety of statements in which the respondents were asked to rate their agreement on a scale from 1 = *I disagree strongly*, 2 = *I disagree*, 3 = *neither disagree nor agree*, 4 = *I agree*, 5 = *I agree strongly*.

The statement used for the health motivation variable was *I participate in MMA to keep in shape, stay fit and healthy* and the statement for the social motivation variable was *I participate in MMA because it’s a place for me to meet and socialise with my friends.*

The statement used for the intrinsic motivation variable was *I participate in MMA because it is fun!* Finally, the statement for the performance motivational variable was *I participate in MMA in order to develop as a fighter, compete and win fights and titles.*
The female participants scored highest on the intrinsic/fun variable (mean = 4.57) and the health variable (mean = 4.12), and lowest on the social variable (mean = 3.36), meaning that health and fun represent the most two important reasons for engagement in Norwegian MMA clubs, while socialising/meeting friends appears to be the least important reason for participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std.dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Health</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>.751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Social</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Intrinsic/fun</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Performance</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.945</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dummy variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Obs. 0</th>
<th>Obs. 1</th>
<th>Percentage 0</th>
<th>Percentage 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>80.61</td>
<td>19.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience combat sport</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>29.61</td>
<td>70.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Descriptive statistics for male MMA participants*

Comparing the male participants to the female participants there is a substantial difference in terms of education. Only 24.9% of the male participants have an academic degree (n = 109). There is also a difference in terms of competitive participation. Amongst the men, 19.39% actively compete in MMA (n = 85). A greater proportion of the male participants have also had previous experience of combat sports (70.39%, n = 309). In terms of motivation, the male and the female participants are fairly similar. The male participants also score highest on health and intrinsic motivation, while social motivation has the lowest score. However, the male participants score higher on performance motivation than the women.

*Voicing women’s experiences of MMA as a heterogenic milieu*

We now turn to the qualitative data of our study, where the focus is on female fighters’ experiences. These results confirm that the MMA milieu is a heterogeneous area with women (in a minority position) and men of different ages from different ethnic and
educational backgrounds training and sparring either against each other or side by side. The females described male co-members as helpful, that they all felt welcome and that the club’s board and coaches also supported initiatives to attract more women to the club. Some informants described the clubroom as a second home, which they visited at lunchtime for gym training (e.g. weight lifting) or in the afternoon for a training session. The sport as such is described as individualised, where people can practise and compete at their own level. Even though MMA is an individual sport, the informants said that their training partners became ‘team-mates’ and that the MMA club was a community in which they spent a lot of time and travelled to competitions together.

When asked what a typical fighter was like, the informants all said that there was no such thing as a ‘typical’ practitioner. Prejudice about the ‘crude fighter’ was not confirmed and those who ‘just wanted to fight’, which emerged in one of the focus groups, usually disappeared after about 6 months or a year. The initial training sessions focused on somersaults, tumbling techniques and other physical exercises that did not involve violence or fighting but were more about safety and smoothness. This meant that the female fighters had different body sizes and were committed to the sport for different reasons. According to the informants, one reason for this diversity was that MMA was a relatively cheap sport to participate in compared to other sports. These narratives complement our quantitative data, which indicates that the majority of MMA practitioners are either students or have low levels of education and are therefore likely to have limited economic resources for leisure activities such as sport (see table 1).

Despite these narratives of combat sports as a heterogenic and inclusive milieu with men and women sparring and practising side by side, more critical voices exemplified how the male version of the sport, i.e. the sport as practised by men, was regarded as a norm. The females narrated, for example, that men’s MMA was conceived as more valued than
women’s and that a hierarchy was apparent both in the media and in competitions. For example, the prize money was higher for men due to the fact that there were more contests and weight classes for men to choose from.

*Motives for participating in MMA*

The informants’ reasons for involvement in MMA nuances our statistic data. At a general level, MMA was perceived as fun and increasing self-esteem. One informant expressed that she wanted to win and be the best, and how ‘lovely it is to see when the opponent grimaces and wretches in pain’. Another participant said that ‘it is lovely to sweat’ and that the training resulted in a better posture and stronger body. Some of the participants had chosen MMA because they did not like team sports. Another reason that some of the informants talked about was that combat sports enabled them to experience their own strengths and weaknesses and showed them how important it was to have respect for an opponent’s and your own psyche and body.

The qualitative findings reveal a more nuanced image of women’s motives for participating in MMA. While these quotes illustrate that health and fitness are important motives for MMA participation, as is the case with the quantitative results (see table 1), they also highlight that some women are motivated by performance and competition goals; something that was not prevalent in the quantitative results.

The informants also seem to relate to stereotypes of women and femininity. As one informant puts it, ‘I don’t wear make-up or earrings, it’s good, because then I don’t have to remove these things before the training sessions, they are just in the way anyway’. This could be interpreted as indicating that the MMA (or combat sports) *per se* breaks with or challenges certain types of imagined femininity (with earrings and make-up), as other scholars have noted in earlier research (e.g. Stenius, 2015; Kavoura et. al. 2018). Later
during the interview the same informant returned to the make-up topic and repeated that
she did not use it and did not care what others thought about that. She continued by saying,
‘but then, at the closing ceremony I used make-up and everybody reacted and said “wow,
damn you are looking good!”’. This exemplifies how female MMA practitioners have to
balance femininity (e.g. expectations of being a woman) with their role as a fighter
(athlete) and navigate their ‘alternative’ femininity (Channon and Phipps, 2017).

This episode is interesting because the informant challenges a femininity norm but also
confirms it (make-up on a woman makes you look nicer and attractive, in this case to
young men). Being ‘attractive’ to the (heterosexual) male gaze can also be said to be a
central aspect of the hegemony of masculinity (Connell, 2005). Another informant took
a more radical position and emphasised that she never wore any make-up or earrings.
This positioning, which complements and broadens the complexity of women’s MMA,
is developed in the section below.

The ‘freak’ – notions from the surroundings

We asked for experiences from the ‘surroundings’ and how, for example, friends reacted
when they heard that the informant was involved in combat sports. In one of the focus
groups, one of the women, who was also a medical student, opened up and talked about
her experiences of breaking with the more traditional norms of femininity: ‘There’s so
many things, my tattoos, that I’m living with another woman, my body language, my
clothes, my ethnic background... (pause)... I think the other students regard me as a
‘freak’.’ As the informant tells the story, another says that many of her acquaintances are
surprised when she describes her sporting activity: ‘They say things like “oh, not you?!
Why are you doing that? It’s dangerous!” But I like the sport and when we go to town I
sometimes act as a bodyguard for my friends’.
Not all, but some of the informants’ experiences reveal some kind of negotiation between different ideals or norms of femininity. Previous research has also highlighted this phenomenon, for example when the sporting female in an attempt to develop a strong and successful body ‘risks’, or as a result of the training, shapes a body that challenges the normative perceptions of what a female body should look like and how it should perform (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009; Choi, 2003; Gill, 2007; Grogan et al., 2004).

Another thing that relates to this theme, and that was discussed in one of the focus groups and two of the individual interviews, is the feeling of being able to do things with your body that you were unable to do before taking up combat sport. Somersaults, tumbles and different kinds of flexibility, such as doing the splits, were mentioned, but also the joy of sweating without caring what others thought. However, on the other hand, one informant said in the interview that she was not comfortable with sweating in front of men or practising with them, but preferred the club’s female training sessions. This leads us to the final section on the qualitative results.

The contradictory content of mixed-sex training sessions

Several of the women articulated that in general their experiences of practising combat sports with men were positive. As sparring partners men gave them tips and tricks about how to improve their skills, minimise injuries through better falling techniques and thereby become better and more successful as competitive fighters. But some informants did not agree with this. An informant in one of the focus groups said that she was not comfortable with sweating or letting men grab or throw her and that initially she had the same feeling about other women touching and grabbing her body during training: ‘I don’t know, it was just a strange feeling with another woman lying on me, grubbing around (laughter), but now I’m used to it’.
The informants were conscious about this and that the sport’s character of close physical contact did not appeal to everybody. They had all seen many women as well as men dropping out, presumably due to this uncomfortable body contact. Some informants also related to the borders of the comfort zone in relation to the mixed-sex training sessions and said that there was always a risk that men would access ‘parts’ of the body, but that during training they just ‘saw a body’ without any other intentions.

Some of the informants thus perform a counter-hegemonic action as fighting females that challenges men’s monopoly of being aggressive, fighting, sweating etc. However, as mentioned above, all the informants were not comfortable about performing such activities and the mixed-sex (progressive) session seemed to include a dropout factor. This can also be linked to the quantitative results, which indicate that male practitioners of MMA are far more engaged in competing in MMA than female practitioners. The results from the quantitative survey indicate that while only 5% of the female respondents compete in MMA, almost 20% of the male participants are engaged in competitive MMA fighting (see tables 2 and 3).

**Discussion and conclusion**

Our quantitative results indicate that women represent a small minority and a marginalised group of MMA participants in the Nordic countries. Amongst the Norwegian survey participants, only 9.3% were women. Gender balance in sport participation in the Nordic countries is similar, which gives us reason to hypothesise that there may be similar trends in MMA participation rates in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland. However, quantitative data on MMA participation in the other Nordic countries is needed to confirm (or debunk) this hypothesis. Additionally, women in MMA have less experience of other combat sports compared to male MMA practitioners. Of the female MMA practitioners, 47.5% had experience with other combat sports, while 70.4%
of the men had combat sport experience. The women also have a far higher level of education than the men. Amongst the women in the sample, 48.8% had a university degree, compared to only 25% of the men.

Furthermore, the quantitative data shows that women participating in MMA compete less and are less motivated by performance enhancement (developing as fighters, winning fights/tournaments/titles) than male participants. However, both male and female participants value health and fun as the most important reasons for their participation in MMA training groups. Contrary to this data, which in a way confirms a stereotypical image of women as less competitive and more socially oriented than men, one of the informants expressed a strong commitment to becoming a professional MMA fighter. She, like other women in her training group, participated in ‘big’ international competitions with prize money and had, at the time of the interview, chosen to invest wholeheartedly in earning a living from MMA. This informant can be interpreted as a representative of the 5% of women (in the quantitative data) who are competitive MMA athletes.

Our qualitative results confirm the quantitative, but can also be seen as complementing and nuancing them. MMA women have the potential to act as female role models through their counter-hegemonic negotiation of norms and views of ‘traditional’ femininity and, more specifically, the perception of femininity as something fragile and passive (cf. Gill, 2007). Individual’s emotions of being comfortable with sweating, grabbing, punching, kicking and throwing with other women (and men) are examples that complement and nuance our quantitative data. These dimensions of MMA can also be regarded as emancipative and progressive, in that they broaden the traditional views of females and femininity.
Both the quantitative and qualitative data show MMA’s progressive potential for women. However, our qualitative data complements this image with women’s experiences of practising MMA in everyday life. Men and masculinities dominate in different ways, but exclusion and inclusion seem to go hand in hand, representing two sides of the same coin. Here it is also important to emphasise, which is rarely mentioned in previous research, that women taking part in an activity (such as MMA) that is permeated by men and masculinities as hegemonic can still develop self-confidence, personal development and express ‘alternative’ femininities. Thus, the hegemonic ‘system’ can be said to contain both progressive and destructive aspects. In other words, if we consider the Nordic MMA arena as a male hegemony, our results can be interpreted in terms of whatConnell (2005) calls the contradictive content or inherent dilemma of hegemony. This means, that being marginalised or subordinated does not necessarily mean an exclusive marginalisation/subordination, but could imply simultaneous aspects of emancipation and progression. At least some of the female informants’ narratives indicate this.

The most important contribution of the qualitative data that our quantitative survey did not capture is how women negotiate their femininity between the female stereotypes of sport on the one hand and society on the other. It was possibly the male interviewer who raised the narratives about earrings, make-up, clothes and tattoos and how others perceived these MMA women, but their narratives express how MMA offers a comfort zone for developing an athletic femininity in which femininity is never questioned but where bodily competence is in focus. This dilemma has been identified by previous research and is in line with McCaughey’s (1997) ‘physical feminism’, which claims that women should engage more extensively in physical activity, employ more physical contact power and appreciate the emotional pleasure of hitting, screaming and kicking. Such physical feminism challenges traditional ideals of women that, for example, teach
women to be passive and beautiful objects.

An interesting finding from the qualitative analysis, which (at least to our knowledge) has not come to light in the previous research on MMA, is how the mixed training sessions build on women’s trust in their male training partners. The interviewed women argue that there is always a risk that men (and women) will touch and access ‘sensitive’ parts of their bodies during exercising, and that familiarising yourself with the way you touch others and how others touch you during MMA training sessions represents a unique learning process, since people do not normally touch each other in this way in modern society. In this sense, a negotiation of the woman’s body occurs as either a kind of sexualised object or an active and ‘neutral’ training partner. Here it would be interesting to follow up with interviews of men’s experiences of these training situations in mixed-sex training groups in MMA and other combat sports.

The purpose of this paper has been to examine female participation in MMA in the Nordic countries with the specific aim of investigating how processes of inclusion and exclusion are expressed and carried out in knockout-based combat sports. A clear limitation of the present study is that the analysed data only represents two of the five Nordic countries. However, the study represents a first step towards acquiring more knowledge about Nordic women’s experiences of MMA and other combat sports. As highlighted earlier in the paper, there is a gap in the established field of women and combat sports concerning participation in MMA in the Nordic countries.

By employing a mixed method approach, the paper shows a broad image of this phenomenon and the complexity of its progressive and problematic aspects. Although Norway and Sweden can be considered as relatively gender equal countries, this study shows that men still dominate combat sports and MMA. However, this does not seem to
prevent (some) women from participating and growing in self-confidence and self-esteem, which the combat sporting activities seem to contribute to. The perceived reasons for exclusion are that combat sports are not for everyone, especially those who are not comfortable with hard physical contact that involves touching sensitive parts of the body.

The study has further shown that some informants negotiate between a ‘societal’ femininity ideal and a combat sport femininity ideal, which to a large extent confirms the findings of previous research outside the Nordic region.

References


Matthews CR (2015) The tyranny of the male preserve, *Gender and Society*


NOTES

1 The authors acknowledge that there are other types of combat sports that do not regularly feature knockouts as a determinant of victory (e.g. taekwondo, judo, BJJ, etc.). In this paper, the use of the term ‘combat sports’ refers to full-contact, knockout-based combat sports.
2 Such as national team coaches, men’s professional football leagues.
3 As of November 2018, MMA practitioners in Norway can train in clubs organised by the Norwegian MMA Federation (NMMAF). NMMAF and local clubs can host practice/demonstration matches and amateur fights (within a restrictive set of rules). Professional MMA fights are however, illegal in Norway.
4 Term used to describe judo athletes.
5 Abbreviation for the Ultimate Fighting Championship.
6 See the LFHV website for more information: http://lfhv.org/
7 Referring to the Summer Olympics.