

‘Will God condemn me because I love boxing?’ Narratives of young female immigrant Muslim boxers in Norway

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw**Anne Tjønndal** 

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Abstract

This article examines the religious and gendered identities of female immigrant Muslim boxers. We aim to investigate the power relations, dominant ideologies and prejudices that are underpinning the life stories of these women boxers, as well as the moments of joy, freedom and transformation that their sport participation may include. The data are derived from life story interviews with two young female immigrant Muslim boxers in Norway. The theoretical framework is based on intersectionality and sociological theories of sport as a space for joy, self-determination and excitement. The narrative analysis shows how the interviewees endure conflict-filled relationships with their families as a result of their choice to compete in boxing. Simultaneously, they are subjected to discrimination and marginalization in the boxing environment. Strict dress codes for competitions and training, as well as a lack of understanding and respect from male leaders in the boxing community are highlighted as a main barrier for the interviewees when they describe their boxing careers. Nevertheless, the narratives express that they love boxing, because boxing represents a space for time-out, mastery and freedom and has become an all-encompassing part of their identity.

Keywords

Boxing, intersectionality, passion, religion, sport, women's boxing

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Introduction

Athletes often express deep passion for their sport. Feminist studies have linked passion in sport to feelings of empowerment and joy for girls and women, especially in male-dominated sports, such as boxing (Channon and Phipps, 2017; Hovden, 2004; Lenskyj, 1986). These sports allow women to show skills often associated with social constructs of masculinity, such as strength, determination and aggression (Thing, 1999). Boxing especially represents spaces where women can expose and develop capacities socially perceived to be masculine. On the other hand, sport history indicates that women have been seen as 'intruders' in male-dominated sports and have faced resistance, trivialization and ridicule (Hargreaves, 1994).

Despite increasing participation rates of women in the so-called 'male sports', the participation of Muslim women therein is scarce (Strandbu et al., 2019). In Norway, this may indicate that the costs and barriers of participating in sport in general, and in 'male sports' in particular, are much greater for immigrant Muslim women compared to non-immigrant Norwegians. In this article we explore how Norwegian Muslim immigrant women in boxing experience their participation in this sport. In boxing, the best possible outcome of a competition is that you beat your opponent into loss of consciousness. This action gives few associations to dominant traditional norms of femininity (Tjønndal, 2019). It is perhaps this premise of the sport that makes up some of the reason why boxing, in many cultures, is considered a practice that goes beyond what respectable women should engage in (Rana, 2017).

This article is based on life story interviews with two female immigrant Muslim boxers in Norway. Our aim is to discuss the power relations, dominant ideologies and prejudices that are underpinning the life stories of these women boxers, as well as the moments of joy, freedom and transformation that their involvement in boxing may include. Specifically, our research questions are: (1) *How do the narratives of female immigrant Muslim boxers in Norway explore the passion, costs and dilemmas associated with participating in this male-dominated sport?* (2) *How do social and structural constraints reflect meanings of intersectionalities of gender, religion and ethnicity?*

To examine our research questions we utilize intersectionality as a theoretical framework. Salem (2018) argues that despite the critiques against its appropriation within neoliberal feminist academia, intersectionality is still an 'extremely useful concept if it addresses relationships of power' (Salem, 2018: 415). While intersectionality continues to be a relevant term in European women's studies, both theoretically (Rodó-Zárate and Jorba, 2020) and empirically (Giorgi, 2020; Naezer, 2020), few feminist scholars have utilized this analytical perspective to empirically explore women's conditions in male-dominated sports. In this context, boxing represents a particularly interesting case study, as it is described as a hypermasculine sport (Woodward, 2006), with a long history of excluding and marginalizing the participation of women (Smith, 2014). Today men still dominate every sphere of the boxing world, including coaching, leadership positions, athletes, referees and officials (Hovden and Tjønndal, 2019; McCree, 2015). In Norway, women and girls' participation in boxing is increasing, making up approximately 27% of the memberships in the Norwegian Boxing Federation (Tjønndal, 2016). However, there are no data on how many of these 27% women/girls in boxing are immigrants, or of what their religion and ethnicity might be.

In the following, we present our theoretical framework and previous research on Islam, women and sport in order to contextualize our study in a broader international literature within women's studies.

Intersectionality: Sport, gender and religion

In this article we use intersectionality to view women's identity as multidimensional and to investigate interlocking oppressions and privileges of young Muslim women boxers in Norway. We also describe how modern sport may represent a space for joy, passion and excitement for women athletes (Elias and Dunning, 1986).

The concept 'intersectionality' is given many different meanings in feminist and post-colonial scholarship (Crenshaw, 1989; Salem, 2018). Intersectionality proposes that gender cannot be used as a single analytic frame without also exploring how ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality and/or social class come to bear on one's experience as a woman. Consequently, scholars need to attend to multiple forms of overlapping and mutually reinforcing or competing systems of oppression and privilege that many women face in addition to gender. In this way intersectionality as an analytic tool grasps processes and mechanisms of intersected social differentiations, which mark complex asymmetries of power (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). For example, how does doing gender intersect with doing ethnicity and religion among female Muslim boxers and how may such practices generate subordination and marginalization in one context and a privilege in another?

Thinking intersectionally thus exposes the privileges of white heterosexual men in sport and helps us see how such privileges are constructed and how they operate within both individual and institutional sporting practices. Applied to female Muslim boxers, an intersectional perspective implies a sensitivity to multifaceted institutional and individual practices of power, and how they are articulated and negotiated in the boxing gym as well as in the interviewees' families, and thus contributes to illustrate their challenges, survival skills and capacity to be in control.

An intersectional perspective provides a sensitivity to how multiple identities produce hierarchies, exclusion and social recognition and construct shifting dynamics between majorities and minorities within a country's population (Brah, 2003). In such practices, ethnic and religious minority groups are most often marked as 'the other' and marginalized, based on complex axes of oppression, resulting in ranking and exclusion (Gullestad, 2002). However, exploring processes of interlocking oppressions and 'othering' as well as the opposite, the interlocking privileges of the majority seen as the normal and unmarked, must be contextualized. Changes in context will reflect a shift in meanings of various social identities and statuses. Particularly at the interpersonal realms of social life, a privilege in one context may become a liability in another (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). The power of the majority in these contexts lies in their privileged status of defining and categorizing other social groups, but this situation does not mean that such definitions cannot be questioned, resisted and changed (Brah, 2003).

Empirical analyses with an intersectional approach include an exploration of what practices are attributed to the majority category or to the minority (Brah, 2003; Gullestad, 2002). In this process, it is important not to depict white majority women in ways that celebrate them as subjects, who already possess active, controlling, proprietary power

over their lives and bodies and Muslim women as the opposite, as controlled embodied objects (Ratna and Samie, 2017).

Islam, women and sport

There are few studies of Muslim women in boxing. There are some studies that suggest that in some Muslim communities it is not socially acceptable for women to engage in competitive boxing (Kipnis and Caudwell, 2015; Mitra, 2009). Mitra (2009), for example, argues that Muslim women boxers in India are in danger of being victimized by forces both within Islam and outside. Yet, she finds that boxing empowers young women, against all possible odds. While there are limited empirical explorations on Muslim women boxers, there is a broader discussion on Islam, women and sport. Barriers for Muslim women's sport participation have been explored by sport sociologists since the early 1980s (Sfeir, 1985). This research body has highlighted different barriers, from family life to religiosity and culture. In a study of Muslim girls in Britain, Kay (2006) identified that family greatly influences possibilities for sport participation, and that the family context can be both supportive and constricting. Likewise, Dagkas et al. (2011) found that parental influences were significant for Muslim girls and young women's sport participation in England.

Regarding religiosity and culture as barriers for sport participation, the literature shows diverging findings. Dagkas et al. (2011) conclude that religious consciousness increases during adolescence, thus improved recognition of religious requirements in policies and practices is necessary to provide inclusive sporting environments for Muslim girls. They identify inflexible dress codes, particularly concerning wearing of the hijab (headscarf) and gender organization of training environments as essential (Dagkas et al., 2011). These findings are supported by a Danish study of physical education classes, which indicated that Muslim girls wearing hijab did not participate in sporting activities that involved contact with boys (With-Nielsen and Pfister, 2011). In contrast to these findings, Walseth and Stranbu's (2014) study of Muslim women in Norway illustrated that many Muslim young women do not mind doing sport in gender-mixed groups. These contrasting findings exemplify that Muslim women are not a homogeneous group (Ratna and Samie, 2017). With-Nielsen and Pfister (2011) additionally argue that the different ways Muslim women embody their faith through dress codes affect their possibilities for sport participation in European societies. Nakamura (2002) also notes that sport participation among Muslim women, like any other group of women, varies with ethnic and socio-economic background.

Low participation rates among Muslim women in sport is not exclusive to Norway, but has been recognized in many countries, both inside and outside of Europe (Lenneis and Pfister, 2017; Walseth and Fasting, 2003). Some studies highlight that Muslim women who participate in sport challenge stereotypes that portray Muslim women as passive, weak and oppressed (Agergaard, 2016; Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012). This indicates that the social and religious expectations that Muslim women are subjected to are susceptible to negotiation and change. Benn et al. (2011) argue that it is not Islam that prevents Muslim women from doing sports, but rather that sport in Western countries has rules and organizational practices that do not accommodate the needs of Muslim women.

Our framework commits us to be sensitive to how Muslim women are influenced by a myriad of different conflicting and contradictory social influences in ways that matter, and how they use their agentic capacity to resist and struggle against oppressive practices within their families, in sports communities or in the wider Norwegian society, and seek freedom, self-determination and joy.

Sport as a space for time-out, self-determination and excitement

Exploring the multiple conflicting influences Muslim women experience in boxing includes also experiences of boxing as a space for joy, freedom and mastery. Several studies (Hovden, 2004; Rana, 2017; Thing, 1999) have described the transformative and liberating potential of sport and how sports may represent space for excitement and a 'time-out' from daily constraints, because the logic of competitive sport differs from the logic of everyday social order. Elias and Dunning (1986) have named sport as a 'quest for excitement', with its own rules and inner logic. Sport is considered as a space where the participants can play with their embodiment, creativity and emotionality and experience bodily flow and joy. Modern competition of sport is therefore seen as an antithesis to the drudgery of modern work and everyday life (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Additionally, Thing (1999) argues, the inner logic of sport also contributes to make sporting contexts a place of strong communities, in which athletes and coaches share strong feelings and commitment.¹ Feminist sport studies link passion for sport to feelings of freedom and mastery for women (Hovden, 2004; Lenskyj, 1986; Thing, 1999). It is described as a space in which girls and women can experience empowerment, excitement, freedom and challenge stereotyped notions of femininity. In this way it may represent a showcase for women's performing capacity in prestigious male-dominated arenas (Tjønndal, 2019). In this study we explore how the female Muslim boxers express their commitment for boxing and what their identity as boxers means for them in their everyday life and how their involvement in boxing influences their life situation and represents a space in which they experience social recognition, mastery and self-determination.

Method: Life story interviews

This article is based on life story interviews with two young Muslim female boxers of immigrant background. A life story interview can be described as the story an individual chooses to tell about her life, told as completely and honestly as possible (Atkinson, 1998). A life story interview is often constructed through multiple conversations, and it can focus on specific periods of a life, or a lifetime. A central premise of life story interviewing is that the researcher should be left with a story about the life of the participant, and that the re-telling of this story depicts the experiences that the participant highlights as important events in her life (Atkinson, 1998).

We chose this approach because we experienced that we were able to gain access to two unique individuals as participants. The two research participants had, seemingly against all odds, chosen to become competitive boxers. They experienced conflict-filled and complex relationships with their families, because of their choice to compete in boxing, yet they have endured and remained athletes in their sport. Thus, to re-tell their life

stories represented a rare opportunity to bring forth a counter-story of the inherent social inclusive capacities of competitive sport. Because one of the authors is a competitive boxer herself, she had encountered the two research participants in tournaments, sparred with them, and had conversations with them at training camps. During these events she became aware that they were struggling with managing 'home life' with 'boxing life'. Because of mutual trust between the researcher and the research participants, the participants agreed to the life story interviews, providing we ensure as much de-identification of their individual experiences as possible.

Life stories were compiled following three lengthy encounters (2–3 hr) with each research participant. The first interview focused on their experiences with sport participation and their engagement in boxing. This interview touched on topics such as what boxing means to them in their everyday life, how they were introduced to the sport, their love and dislike of the sporting environment and their experiences with Norwegian sporting cultures. The second interview discussed their childhood and memories of their home country and their coming to Norway. Central topics were family life and traditions, religious and social expectations they are surrounded with as daughters and sisters. The third and final interview was about boxing, their positive, passionate feelings attributed to boxing, and their dreams and aspirations for their future in sports, including their reasons for staying engaged in boxing at the cost of hurtful conflicts with family members. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian.

Analytical strategy

In accordance with our promise to keep the participants' individual experiences as de-identified as possible, we chose narrative analysis as our analytical approach. By deconstructing the life stories into thematic narratives, we protected participants' identities. Analytically, we emphasized an inductive approach in the coding and categorization of the empirical material. We did this in order to re-tell participants' life stories as transparently as possible, and to remain true to their stories (Atkinson, 1998). This meant that our analytical process involved re-reading of the transcribed texts numerous times, followed by an 'in vivo' coding process, where our categorizations were closely related to the words, phrasing and themes brought up during the talks with the research participants.

However, our narrative approach also denotes a critical reading of their life span, because we as researchers are the ones who have deconstructed and interpreted their life stories. This means that our analyses give priority to shedding light on some of the events and relationships in their lives, while neglecting others. The thematic narratives we have constructed from the material represent the experiences the informants have highlighted as the most important events in their careers as competitive boxers. Considering the difficult life situations of the research participants, this analytical approach seemed the only way to re-tell their life stories while adhering to our promise of de-identifying their individual experience.

The analytical process led to narratives of three themes: (1) How the informants started boxing, (2) how they negotiate their identity and existential issues in relation to reactions from family and the boxing environment and (3) their passions and doubts associated with their choice to stay involved in boxing. This type of thematic narrative

analysis focuses on specific narrative accounts in order to grasp the interplay between the action of storytelling and the circumstances surrounding the act of telling. This is a process in which it is possible to embrace not only the content of the narrative and how the teller controls the story, but also how the teller locates his/her story within a broader social context (Atkinson, 1998).

De-identification strategy and researcher reflexivity

In our presentation of the analysis, it is essential to secure that the interviewees are substantially de-identified, especially because they are facing difficult life situations. In this way, we are only identifying which quotes are from which narrative, by listing them as 'participant A' and 'participant B'. Furthermore, in the quotes, we have removed all references to specific family members and simply used the term 'family'. A central part of this de-identification strategy also includes the removal of any information about the sport performance level and the ethnic background of the interviewees. We view this de-identification strategy as necessary in order to comply with national ethical guidelines for doing research on minorities and marginalized groups (NESH, 2016).

The fact that one of the authors (who conducted all the interviews) shared the passion for boxing with the research participants was helpful in the process of establishing a trusting research environment. However, while this connection was helpful, this interviewer was also faced with the challenges of an outsider perspective. The interviewer had very little knowledge of the interviewees' ethnic and religious background, political situation in the former homeland the interviewees had fled from, or the branches of Islamic faith they belonged to. In addition, the two researchers, who are both white ethnic Norwegian academics, do not share the same socio-economic background with the research participants. This kind of asymmetric researcher–informant relationship is often criticized for contributing to a homogenization of minority women as well as holding Western (white) ethnocentric stereotypes of Muslim women (Rana, 2017). We addressed these challenges, firstly, by following national published guidelines for research ethics on minorities and marginalized groups of people in our research process (NESH, 2016). Secondly, by involving the participants in outlining a de-identification strategy. This second step included the participants reading the transcription of their quotes and the deconstruction of their life stories into thematic narratives. Thirdly, through critical self-reflection of our own positions and interpretations of the life stories. Critical self-reflection was done in two ways. The author who did not conduct the interviews acted as a critical discussion partner for the interviewer after each individual interview, to discuss issues that the interviewer struggled with after the conversations with the research participants. Secondly, both authors engaged in individual analysis and reflections of the transcribed material, which they collectively critically reviewed as part of the construction of the narratives.

Analysis

In the analysis, we present three narratives constructed from the life stories of research participants to illustrate the feelings of passion, ambivalences and dilemmas these young female immigrant Muslim boxers live with. These narratives are: (1) getting into boxing,

(2) negotiating self-identity in relation to reactions from the family and the boxing environment, and (3) passions and doubts that come with choosing continued participation in boxing. Before we begin the narratives, we give just brief de-identified information on their background.

Both of the interviewees came to Norway as children. They came as refugees from war-torn homelands. They have different ethnic background and belong to different branches of the Islamic faith. Both interviewees were old enough to remember life in their homeland and had experienced the devastation of war and conflict up-close. They fled to Norway with their families to avoid further victimization from war.

Into boxing

A girl at school asked me to come with her to the boxing gym. I didn't really know what boxing was. When we got there, I saw what boxing really was . . . It was a community where women and men trained together and were treated equally by the coach. The coach was a man. I never had a male coach before, I was a bit intimidated at first, but he was really kind and understanding . . . Little by little, the boxing club became a second family to me. In the beginning, I suffered from anxiety, and I had to push myself just to walk down the stairs to the basement where the boxing gym was. Sometimes I would go down the steps just to run back out again . . . Without boxing, I would not have overcome my anxiety. (participant A)

After we came to Norway, I had a lot of trouble adapting to life here. I struggled at school, did not have any friends, and I missed home. I just wanted to stay in my room, I didn't want to eat or talk to anybody . . . When I found boxing, it helped me adapt to Norway and our new life here. Boxing was something I mastered, and it gave me confidence. For the first time in my life, I found something I realized I could really excel at. (participant B)

Both participants talk about their lives '*before*' and '*after*' boxing. Such wordings demonstrate that boxing represents a dramatic shift in their lives. This is particularly visible in phrasings such as '*When I found boxing*'. Such expressions indicate that for these women, boxing is not simply a leisure activity, but something that empowers them.

The narratives suggest that boxing represents a space for mastering, for overcoming worries, loneliness and anxiety. This indicates a well-known effect of sport and involvement in sport competitions (Vallerand and Miquelon, 2007). Boxing, as other competitive sports, requires full concentration and engagement in the skills, logics and the rules of the game and attention to nothing else (Wacquant, 2006; Woodward, 2013). In such situations, there is no space for worries or problems outside the so-called 'inner logic of sport' (Elias and Dunning, 1986). The narratives reflect such a decoupling from everyday life, where boxing may provide a new space to experience new forms of mastery, joy and embodiment (Hovden, 2004; Thing, 1999).

As a competition sport, boxing is supposed to value strong involvement and peak performances independent of the athlete's gender, race or ethnicity (Hovden and Tjønndal, 2019). The narratives indicate that by achieving athletic success as boxers, the interviewees experienced being treated as boxers and capable athletes and thus becoming part of a sporting majority context. However, their commitment to and success in boxing were interpreted quite differently in their families and Muslim communities.

Negotiations of self-identity: Reactions from home and the boxing environment

The conflict with my family began once I started competing in boxing, when they saw YouTube clips of me fighting. In the video, I was boxing in shorts and a t-shirt, so my legs and arms were showing. The referee wouldn't let me wear tights and a long-sleeved t-shirt . . . My family said I was ruined. That I was naked in the video. (participant B)

My family does not want me to forget what's important: following the religion, education and being a good girl. A good girl doesn't go outside a lot, she doesn't party or drink. Good girls stay at home, respect the elders, protect the culture and the language. Good girls shouldn't talk to others, especially not boys. So I should not really spend time with boys. That's a problem, because in the boxing gym there are almost only boys and all the coaches are men. (participant B)

It's kind of just the whole combination of everything: that I show my skin, that I punch, that others can see this, that I have a male coach and that I train with men. It's very hard for me, because none of these things really matter to me, but it is so important for them, and my family is very important for me . . . The pressure to quit boxing became impossible to deal with. They are afraid that my boxing career will ruin the reputation of the whole family and that I will be labelled a whore. (participant A)

These narratives illustrate how the meaning making of female boxing in the families seems to represent the opposite of what it means for the female boxers themselves. Phrasings such as '*none of these things really matter to me, but it is so important for them*' are narrations of situations that represent continuous negotiations of self, through encounters of the conflicting meanings of religion and gender embedded in their identities. Their statements indicate how women's involvement in a gender-mixed and male-dominated sport such as boxing makes their family's acceptance of a boxer identity for young Muslim women almost impossible.

On the other hand, the female boxers express that they do not accept the family's interpretations of what it means to be a '*good Muslim girl*'. Therefore, their boxing involvement causes processes of 'othering', including practices of expulsion, exclusion and stigmatizing from their loved ones (Brah, 2003). The family context, previously experienced as a space shaped by love and belonging, has changed to a space of contradictory identity conflicts and daily constraints. This situation makes the women constantly question whether their boxing involvement and love for boxing is '*worth the price*'. This situation also reflects the differences in meanings of gender vis-a-vis sports in Muslim families compared to the dominant meanings in Norwegian sport organizations (Walseth and Strandbu, 2014). In the women's Muslim communities, being a female Muslim boxer is still seen as an unacceptable and non-existent identity category. This places the interviewees in a continual squeeze of being a '*good daughter*' and a '*good Muslim*' against a successful female boxer.

However, the boxers' voices also testify an agentive capacity when resisting the reactions and control from the religious authorities in their families. Despite facing a myriad of different sanctions and contradictory messages rooted in their intersectional identities, the interviewees appear strong and persistent in their struggle for greater self-determination.

Their resistance indicates that they do not accept being imprisoned by the dominant intersectional meanings of gender and religion of their families (Ratna et al., 2018).

However, the narratives also show that the negotiations to keep their identity as both female Muslims and boxers do not only apply to their families and community. Equally, their identities as female Muslim immigrant boxers cause stigmatization in the boxing environment:

One of the coaches told me that I shouldn't believe in 'my stupid religion'. He said 'you believe in shit, fasting and all kinds of nonsense'. He didn't like that I covered my skin for training. In my religion and culture it's very important to respect your elders, the elders are always right and you should listen to them. But, what am I supposed to do when an elder speaks to me like that? I felt it was wrong no matter what I did. (participant B)

The first time I fought I wore tights and a long-sleeved shirt, it was okay . . . but for my second fight I was told that it was forbidden to cover the arms and legs. Then I really had to consider my options . . . After some discussion, I was allowed to wear a t-shirt instead of a singlet, to cover my shoulder, but I still had to wear shorts that showed my bare legs . . . Aren't Muslim girls supposed to be allowed to compete in boxing? We're really not supposed to show skin. I don't understand why I'm not allowed to wear clothes that cover my body. (participant A)

Here the boxers negotiate their identities of being both a female athlete and a young Muslim woman, similarly to what Mitra (2009) has found among Indian female boxers. The narratives reflect how the incompatibility of this intersectional identity led to a position where '*It was wrong no matter what I did*'. The situation shows how the young women's age is interlocking with gender and how confusing it is for a young Muslim woman when the coach, '*an elder*', questions and does not respect her religious beliefs. This situation from participant B can be read as an example of what Kay (2006) and Dagkas et al. (2011) have identified as cultural barriers for sport participation among Muslim girls and women in European societies.

Participant A criticizes, on grounds of dress codes in boxing competitions, the boxing system and its rules and regulations by asking '*Aren't Muslim girls supposed to be allowed to compete in boxing?*' She questions the fairness and acceptance of diversity in the Norwegian boxing environment, saying: why is it that female boxers need to show their skin? Where does this rule come from? This points to the interlocking privileges of the white Norwegian majority's notions of gender and their power of defining, marking and stigmatizing other social groups as deviant (Brah, 2003; Gullestad, 2002). Participant A's narration of her frustration with dress codes for female boxers also resonates with Ratna and Samie's (2017) point that the ways Muslim women embody their faith through dress codes affect their possibilities and experiences of participating in sport. Similarly to With-Nielsen and Pfister (2011) and Dagkas et al. (2011), who analyzed other sporting contexts, it would appear that young Muslim women boxers who care less for body-covering may experience fewer cultural barriers and less discrimination compared to those who are concerned with covering their arms and legs.

However, the narratives also mark how the two boxers have very different relationships with their coaches. Participant B considers the coach as '*part of the problem*', while participant A talks of the coach as her '*greatest support in life*':

Without my coach, I would not be strong enough on my own to face the conflict with my family . . . It was so bad that I just hoped that my family would kick me out. But they didn't. I became a ghost in their home. No one talked to me or recognized that I existed. They did not want me to move out because it would bring shame to the family. I cried myself to sleep every night. I was exhausted, broken and wanted to kill myself. I probably would have, if it weren't for my coach. My coach saved me, he taught me that the hardest fights are outside of the ring . . . He helped me get a job and an apartment so I could move out, support myself and my boxing . . . The struggle with my family, it's like a boxing match, I can't give up until the fight is over! (participant A)

Words such as '*my coach saved me*' show the importance of the coach for her life and wellbeing. In this situation the support and understanding from a coach could be crucial and indicate how close and decisive a good coach-athlete relationship can be also for an athlete's life outside the sporting activities, and how sport enables the creation of strong communities and feelings of belonging (Thing, 1999). For this young woman, the choice to continue with boxing still implied a continual fight against social and religious prejudices and multiple power asymmetries both inside her family and the sporting communities, if she should be able to win her family back.

Together, the narratives point to how these Muslim female boxers are exposed to multiple layers of discrimination and marginalization from male stakeholders in boxing as well as from religious authority within their families. The behaviour of some coaches and referees seems to exemplify a lack of respect for being a Muslim woman in boxing and the gendered conduct it includes. The narratives demonstrate how being a Muslim woman and a boxer may result in being treated as 'the other' by both the Norwegian boxing community and their own families, and having to face marginalization through systematic marking (Crenshaw, 1989; Gullestad, 2002). In other words, the research participants' situation mirrors how their interlocking identities construct them as a minority in the sporting context as well as in their families, and how this status causes oppression and othering in both contexts (Cooky et al., 2010). The narratives also express how the gendering of power in sport as well as in the families are embedded in men's privileged position of defining and categorizing what is best for women (Hovden, 2004). In boxing, this refers to the male leaders who define rules such as dress codes, while in their families it refers to the actions of socially ignoring participant A, as a strategy to force her to comply with the family's wish. Their passion for boxing thus implies continual negotiations of self-identity and existential dilemmas, of whom they want to be and whom they want to belong to.

Passion and doubt

It's impossibly difficult to argue with your family every day. Especially about something as stupid as sport. But I can't help it. I love boxing, I can't stay away. If I could stop boxing, I could live at home and have a good relationship with my family again . . . But that's not going to happen. (participant A)

My first fight was when I realized that I really love boxing. It made me forget the outside world completely . . . I can't feel any pain in the ring. Outside of the ring, I could have all sorts of trouble and pain, but inside the ring . . . for me . . . there is only joy . . . I want to be a good

daughter and a good Muslim. Maybe my family is right, and I'm wrong . . . Will God condemn me because I love boxing? I should pick a sport that respects my religion. But it's boxing I love . . . there's just something about the feeling I get in the ring . . . It's hard to put into words, what boxing means to me. When I put on my gloves, all my fears fade away. I'm just there, in the moment, nothing else matters . . . I feel free. (participant B)

It's very lonely . . . It's very painful to lose your family because of sport. I still cry myself to sleep, because I'm wondering if it is worth it . . . to sacrifice so much for sport. But I always come back to the same conclusion. I love boxing, and it is worth it . . . And I remind myself that loneliness can't kill me . . . My biggest dream is that my family will come to see me fight. That they will be proud of me . . . and accept me for who I am. (participant A)

These narratives reflect the doubts that follow choosing boxing over family. Statements such as *'Maybe my family is right and I am wrong'* and *'I'm wondering so much if it is worth it'* are expressions of existential crisis brought forward by the multiple and contradictory expectations of what it should mean to be a female Muslim boxer. On the other hand, the narratives contain strong messages of why the costs of remaining a female Muslim boxer are *'worth it'*. To be in the ring is described as moments of freedom and time-out from the social order outside the ring and thus a full dedication to the *'inner logic of sport'* (Elias and Dunning, 1986). In the ring, they forget their fear, existential questions and the multiple conflicts of their daily life. Thus, boxing seems to include moments of release from the social control over their bodies they experience elsewhere in their lives (Lenskyj, 1986).

As previous indicated, boxing as a presumably masculine sport requires strength, technique, determination and aggression (Smith, 2014; Tjønndal, 2019; Wacquant, 2006; Woodward, 2006). The boxing ring seems to represent a space where the interviewees can escape the gendered and religious norms they have to cope with outside the ring. In the ring they experience moments of empowerment, freedom and mastery, but outside the ring they still cope with a continual existential doubt and still wonder if *'God will condemn me because I love boxing?'* Their dreams are that their love for and dedication to boxing will transcend the social and religious resistance, prejudices and boundaries they are facing as female Muslim boxers in Norway. Participant A described acceptance of her boxing career from her family as her biggest dream in life. During the interview, when asked if they had a plan to reconcile their boxing ambitions with their family life, neither of the participants could think of any pragmatic ways of moving forward. They still live with a hope of change and acceptance from their families.

Conclusion

The narratives of the two Muslim women boxers exemplify how the conflicts they experience as boxers, as Muslims and as young women arise from multiple and contradictory meanings embedded in their identities. Their stories underline how the social differentiations are continually at play in their daily lives and create asymmetries of power, almost impossible to manage. It is, however, often difficult to pinpoint which of these social differentiations takes precedence in different settings, but it seems like diverse and contradictory meanings of gender and religion shape most contexts. This is not surprising, since

gender is seen as having significance in all social relations and interactions and thus considered essential in the construction of self-identity and the identity attributed to you by others. Simultaneously, gender is always interlocked in other identity dimensions, Islamic faith being a dominant one in this case. Therefore, the use of intersectional lenses can open our eyes to the multidimensional and complex discourses of ‘othering’, mastery and power operating in the lives of these young female immigrant Muslim boxers.

The two young women are affected by multiple sets of conflicting rules, norms and expectations in their everyday life. These cause them to be squeezed between a white Norwegian male-dominated boxing culture and a male authority in interpreting Islam in their families. The boxers’ voices strongly illustrate the challenges of having ‘one foot in each camp’ and how multiple levels of ‘othering’, stigmatization and exclusion lead to continual negotiations of self-identity and feelings of loneliness. But even though they are facing recurring intersected marginalizations from their own families as well as from male stakeholders in boxing, they, against all odds, talk about boxing as their passion and love in life. What makes this possible? Is it because by going toe to toe against other women in the boxing ring they achieve embodied feelings of joy, self-confidence and agency in ways they do not experience in their lives outside of the ring? Further research is needed to answer this question.

Additionally, the narratives presented here communicate that these two young women cannot stop boxing, because boxing includes a time-out from the social order outside the ring and indispensable moments of mastery, excitement and freedom (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Such reasons are strong enough not to stop boxing, despite sanctions or threat of rejection from their loved ones, or ridicule from coaches and referees. But are such costs worth the price? The decisive answer ‘yes’ still does not exclude doubts.

The interviewees describe boxing as a space for building a new identity between two social worlds. In this process doubt, anxiety and loneliness become essential parts, but also experiences of joy, belonging and freedom linked to a dominant Norwegian identity as a capable athlete. The latter was strong enough to make them fight the existing expectations, restrictions and requirements associated with being a good Muslim woman. This situation indicates a choice which opened a door to construct a new, more self-affirming Muslim female identity, which is simultaneously vulnerable, and a demanding alternative. It is an identity which on the one side implies ambivalence, doubt, handling of colluding power relations, continual negotiations of the self, but on the other side is a gateway to new forms of mastery, empowerment and opportunities for self-determination.

In both life stories we find critiques of rigid dress codes for female boxers. This part of our data is especially relevant for altering policies and practices in sport organizations. The question of accommodating Islamic (and other) religious observance in sport uniforms and competition clothing is one that governing bodies of sport are slowly waking up to. Strict rules for competition uniforms create barriers for Muslim women’s sport participation. Since these interviews were conducted, the International Boxing Association (AIBA) has made an important rule change allowing female boxers to wear a hijab during competitions. This rule change will undoubtedly lower some of the barriers some Muslim women face when they choose to enter the boxing ring. Interestingly, there has never been an official rule from AIBA preventing athletes from wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt or tights under their standard competition uniform (singlet and shorts). The narratives of the

boxers from our research show that, despite this, referees, coaches and officials interpret the international rules of boxing differently, and sometimes these local interpretations result in discrimination and marginalization of Muslim women who box.

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Note

1. Sport as such a creative, joyful and socially cohesive space represents the ideal of what sport should be, and what it is for some athletes and coaches. However, sport, like any other social context, is also riddled with cases of violence, abuse and lack of power for athletes.

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