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The Art of Being Big, Strong and Full of Power

Swedish Combat Sports, Norms and Gender from the 1990s up until today

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Abstract

Generally, men have dominated the field of modern sports. Consequently, many sports carry associations where traditional ‘male’ characteristics and qualities are valued and traditional ‘female’ characteristics and qualities are devalued (see eg Messner, 1992). More precisely, many sports ‘create’ men and ideals of masculinities. In this paper combat sports (MMA, boxing, karate, Japanese jujitsu etcetera) are studied as examples of sports that shape gender and body ideals. Combat sports express at least two typical ideals of masculinity: muscle strength and (sanctioned) control of violence (Brace-Govan , 2004; Gill, 2007). Women who have exercised these sports have thus been challenging men’s ‘monopoly’ of being strong, big, violent and powerful and other traditionally ‘male’ norms.

The aim of this paper is to study, from a gender perspective, how Swedish combat sports have changed since the 1990s. The main question is: How is the increased number of women in combat sports to be understood? Is it a sign of a (feminist) emancipation or has the inclusion of women been on exclusive terms - that is, do men’s domination find new ways to exercise its powers? In the end, this paper also raises questions of the changing contents of violence and muscularity.

In so far, the material consists of focus group interviews and individual interviews with combat sports women, from the elite to the recreational level. Magazines will be analysed during 2016-2017. Theoretically, the paper draws on theories of hegemony and gender (Connell, 1983, 2005, Hearn, 2015).

The preliminary results show that women, on one hand, portray active subjects that challenge male (sporting) traditions and male norms. Combat sports, some women tell, are increasing ones self-esteem and self-confidence. On the other hand, the female versions of combat sports are not taken as seriously as the male version, which becomes obvious by lower compensation and less media attention. Women are also expected to act as feminine subjects and are thereby 'forced' to relate their bodies, clothes etcetera to social and more general understandings of feminine ideals (cf. Clasen, 2001).