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# Being women in a male preserve: an ethnography of female football *ultras*

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## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the characteristics of contemporary sports audiences from the perspective of gender, focusing on the phenomenon of female *ultras* or 'professional' football fans. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in an Italian football *ultras* group composed of male and female fans, this paper offers an analysis of female participation in communities of organized supporters. In examining the role and position of women inside the considered group, the paper pays attention to their perception of the existing gender differences showing how female *ultras* explain inequalities on the basis of 'natural' and 'innate' differences and capacities between men and women. Existing patterns of male dominance are supported by female fans' own discourses and performance of their gender identity in the 'male preserve'. Rather than questioning male dominance and gender hierarchies, female supporters' efforts appear aimed at being recognized as *ultras*' despite being women'.

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## Introduction

Sociological literature analysing sports fans is a growing, yet still relatively under-researched area within the study of sport (Doidge, 2015; Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Hargreaves, 1994). An increasing number of quantitative and qualitative studies have attempted to explore the social phenomenon of sport supporters looking both at the general audience attending sport events (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002) and at groups of organized 'professional' supporters (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Wann & Hamlet, 1995).

Concerning football<sup>1</sup> supporters, academic literature has frequently described fans' communities as internally homogeneous groups and little attention has been given to the presence and experience of women in them (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015). According to Crawford and Gosling (2004, p. 378), a 'malestream approach' has traditionally characterized the vast majority of social studies on sport followers that, while placing great emphasis on the issue of masculinity and its relevance in sport fandom (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1999; Dal Lago, 1990; Elias & Dunning, 1986), have not usually addressed the 'dependence of masculine identities on a produced and reproduced hierarchical duality with the feminine' (Free & Hughson, 2003, p. 138).

However, in recent years, a growing number of studies on female fans have been conducted focusing on women's experiences as professional supporters (Llopis Goig, 2007; Pope, 2011; Pope & Williams, 2011;

Selmer, 2004; Sültze, 2005). These studies generally highlight a similarity in the ways men and women support their favourite team (Selmer, 2004), but they also underline how female fans have to deal with a more inhospitable environment characterized by misogynist prejudices and sexist behaviours connected to a diffused macho culture (Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011). The possibilities of engagement by female fans in many supporters' communities is limited by a series of prejudices that portray women as 'inauthentic fans' who only attend the stadium to watch the (male) football players (Crawford, 2004; Sültze, 2005). These same studies have also focused on the strategies through which women negotiate their presence in this complex scenario. In many cases, female fans do tend to comply with the traditional gender norms characterizing the organized supporters' group and to consequently accept and reproduce the marginal and ancillary position accorded to them in the stadium's stands (Selmer, 2004). However, several expressions of resistance to male dominance – mainly carried out through the creation of 'female-only' groups of supporters – have been described in the literature (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015; Sültze, 2005).

This article, by exploring how the social construction of gender occurs within an Italian football *ultras* community, intends to contribute to the existing knowledge on women's participation in male-dominated communities, particularly to that which is concerned with female participation in groups of organized supporters.

The term *ultras* is the Italian word used to refer to professional, dedicated sport fans who 'in addition to supporting their team, go to great lengths to enrich the experience of the match for themselves and the others' (Cere, 2002, p. 8), consistently following their favourite team during championships and tournaments and organizing the so-called 'choreographies', for example, performing the cheering and generally animating the stadium during the match. Choirs, flags, banners with messages, smoke bombs and firecrackers are the constitutive elements of such choreographies. More than just a form of entertainment, choreographies can be understood as the main means of communication by the *ultras* communities (Dal Lago, 1990). Choirs, banners, flags are used by *ultras* groups to state their dedication to the team (Doidge, 2013), to express approval or disappointment toward choices of the football club, to contest the existing practices of control and repression enacted in the stadiums, and to affirm their strength and position in relation to the other groups of supporters (Dal Lago, 1990). Due to this high communicative value, decisions on what and how a given choreography should communicate are fundamental for any *ultras* group and the organization and the performance of choreographies are activities of key importance in the daily life of these communities of supporters.

The word *ultras*, although sometimes used as a synonym of the English term 'hooligans', refers mainly to an Italian and Southern American way of performing the fan identity.<sup>2</sup> The main difference between hooligans and *ultras* refers to a different level of organization of the two communities of fans: hooligan crews recognize a leader, but are generally distinguished by a higher level of spontaneity in comparison with *ultras* groups, whose internal hierarchical organization is strictly defined (Marchi, 2014). Moreover, the performance of cheering through organized choreographies is a distinctive characteristic of *ultras* communities (Dal Lago, 1990). Lastly, for what concerns violence, hooligans crews and *ultras* communities share the same 'fighting culture' that identifies opponents in other *ultras* groups, police, and football authorities (Marchi, 2014). However, in the *ultras*, this culture of violence is mainly ritualized in the choreographies which are metaphors of a real fight where physical violence is symbolically replaced by jokes, insults and other verbal provocations.<sup>3</sup> In the '*ultras* world', real fights are rare, highly regulated,<sup>4</sup> and appear more similar to 'micro-transgressions' (Dal Lago, 1990, p. 159) involving few people in quick scuffles than to episodes of urban guerrilla.<sup>5</sup>

This article, after introducing the research, first considers how role and positions within the group are distributed between men and women, highlighting the permanence of a rigid division of gendered roles justified on the basis of a series of assumptions – equally diffused between male and female supporters – that portray men as 'more naturally apt' at being *ultras*. Secondly, attention is given to the specific ways through which female fans negotiate their presence within the 'male preserve' (Elias & Dunning, 1986), observing how they contribute to their own subordination and to the maintenance of male dominance within the group. Aiming at contributing to the existing knowledge on supporter cultures and women's position in men's cultures, the conclusions discuss if, and to what extent, the

social constructions of gender within fans' communities can be considered a peculiar expression of the *ultras* particular subculture rather than dynamics common to other male-dominated social contexts.

## Methodology and context of the research

The *ultras* group considered in this research<sup>6</sup> is composed by the supporters of an Italian football team participating to the *Serie A* championship, the main professional league competition for football clubs in Italy. The group's story dates back to the early 1970s. Since then, although going through several highs and lows, the group has sought to remain the most influential community of supporters of the related football team. The group's sympathizers are composed of a large community of about 1500 people. However, this analysis focuses on the very 'core segment' of the group, namely on those supporters that are engaged in the group on a daily base and involved in the organization and management of the weekly choreography.

Male fans are overrepresented in the group, which is composed of 7 female fans and 28 male *ultras*. It is worth to mention that around the core team a varying number of girlfriends of the male *ultras* can be found. Although their stories will not be specifically considered in this paper, how they play a central role in the processes through which *ultras* women negotiate their gender identity within the group is noted.

The male supporters are aged between 18 and 60, with a large predominance of young people occupying leading positions in the internal hierarchies. Female *ultras* are aged between 20 and 50. Both male and female supporters have a working-class background. While many of the male fans have dropped out of school after the completion of the low secondary school, all the women completed their secondary education. As for the occupational status, male *ultras* are mainly employed as manual workers, but some are working in the informal sector and some are unemployed. The female fans were all formally employed in low-qualification jobs at the time this research was conducted.

The materials considered in this article have been collected between September 2015 and December 2016. The research started with a semi-structured interview conducted with the head of the group in September 2015 which focused on the *ultras* subculture and the *ultras* community. Following this first meeting, participant observations were carried out in several settings and in relation to a variety of events involving the group (126 single observations for about 620 h spent in the field). In a first phase, observations took place mostly at the group's 'headquarter', a formerly abandoned bowl court located in front of the stadium, which the group occupied at the beginning of 2015. Observations at the centre were conducted both during organized special events (i.e. music events, book presentations, pre and post-matches parties, beer and food festivals) and in 'standard' days: since the occupation, the centre has progressively become a familiar place for the members of the core group who meet there almost every evening after work to chat and have a drink together. In a second phase, other observations were conducted in conjunction with matches (both away and played at home games) and events in public domains (i.e. sport festivals) where the researcher has been invited to participate together with the group. In the last phase, some observations took place in 'private' settings and events, such as dinners and parties at the *ultras'* houses. Before commencing the study, I had no previous relationship with the group<sup>7</sup> and these three stages of observations correspond to the progressive creation of a relationship of trust with the members of the observed community.

The access to the field has been, in fact, not completely smooth: while no major problems emerged in attending the group's headquarter – as this is conceived as a space 'open to everybody' – participation in the group's activities in the stadium, such as the possibility of sitting next to the group in the *curva*,<sup>8</sup> was accorded to me only after a certain level of confidence was acquired.

It is important to note that I undertook this research as a woman. Especially on the initial stage of the research, this entailed some difficulties in the relationships with male supporters, whose position toward me was marked by both suspiciousness because of my professional role and interest because of my gender. However, the fact of being a woman facilitated the creation of a deeply confidential

relationship with the *ultras* women, who felt more at ease in discussing their position in the group with someone who could share the challenges they experience as women.

In total 23 in-depth interviews<sup>9</sup> were conducted with the *ultras*, of which 6 were with the women involved in the group. Interviews focused on the interviewees' paths of participation into the group, on the relationship between their private life and their *ultras* identity, and on the meanings they associate to the participation in the *ultras* community. A QDA software (Nvivo) has been used for the analysis of the collected materials that have been explored through the application of a framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). In so doing, the analysis of the materials has been carried out by drawing both on *a priori* questions and concepts derived from the aims of the study (i.e. looking for concepts and examples of gender inequalities in the materials) and on recurring themes and topics emerging from the inductive inquiry of the data.

### Women's position and role in the *ultras* community

In 1986, Elias and Dunning suggested that groups of organized supporters could be understood as 'male preserves'. According to the authors, a rigid internal division between genders, different opportunities to engage in collective, shared actions for men and women and the practice of violence as an endemic element of these contexts' social life made sport communities an unwelcoming area in society for women (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). Beyond limiting the same possibility of accessing the organized supporters' groups, these characteristics would make women's permanence within these male *enclaves* particularly hard (Woodhouse & Williams, 1999). Previous research on female fans' positions and roles within the sport fans' communities has similarly highlighted that enormous gender differences are noticeable in terms of access to power (Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011; Gosling, 2007), not to mention the low possibilities of gaining a leadership role within the group's hierarchies (Selmer, 2004). Even the opportunity to attend regular meetings where decisions about the group are taken is largely limited or totally precluded to female members of many *ultras* communities (Woodhouse & Williams, 1999). This is also the case of the group considered here, that is led by a men and where the participation to the weekly assembly is granted only to the two oldest women.<sup>10</sup> Beyond these extremely visible kinds of limitations of women's full participation to the group, the tasks that the members of the group are meant to perform are also divided according to their gender (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015).

About an hour before the game, the vast majority of the group leaves the centre to bring 'the materials' inside the stadium. Both males and females are involved in this activity, but with an important distinction. Men bring in the materials that are needed for choreography (banners, flags, rods, drums); the objects with a greater symbolic value, that are more exposed to the attacks of the opposing supporters. Women bring inside the stadium the materials needed for the self-funding of the group: sweaters, t-shirts, stickers and other gadgets that will be sold to raise funds for the next choreography. Before the match, the female fans are involved in the sale of these objects and in the management and control of the cash, while males are busy in preparing the choreography (i.e. defining where the banners should be put, which songs should they sing) [...] Even during the game, female *ultras* are only marginally involved in the choreography: none of them starts the choirs, plays drums, stay on the balustrade, or waves the flags. These are all men's things. (Fieldnotes – May 2016)

Although both male and female roles are equally necessary for the successful realization of the group's activities during the match, a rigid division of roles between male and female *ultras* is noted. Girls are in charge of specific tasks corresponding to mostly 'administrative' roles, such as the selling of gadgets or the distribution of the fanzine; a self-produced magazine through which the group communicates with its members. In so doing, they take part in the group through roles that are recognized to be less prestigious and that guarantee less visibility.

The 'level of prestige' of the *ultras* activities is in fact determined on the basis of their immediate relevance for what Dal Lago (1990) has described as the 'representation of the battle' – that is the exhibition and seldom practice of violence as a *mis en scene* of a fight between two opposite armies – occurring every week in the stadium. According to Dal Lago (1990), choreographies are the main 'tools' through which this representation of the battle occurs because it is through them that the *ultras* group affirms its core values, expresses its commitment to the team or the city, and provokes the opposite groups

(Doidge, 2013). Consequently, all the actions directly connected to the performance of the cheering – such as starting the choirs, waving the flags, playing the drums – are recognized to be more prestigious (Numerato, 2015). Through the tasks they are meant to perform, women ‘prepare the stage’ for the representation (i.e. the money they collect selling the gadgets is used to buy the materials for the next choreography, the fanzines they distribute may explain the message beyond a given choreography), but they are not playing a primary role in the *mis en scene* (Fritzsche, 2010). In fact, the sporadic participation of a woman to the representation of the battle is always welcome with astonishment.

At the end of a party held at the *ultras* centre, during the fireworks, the boys climb on the roof of the building and light some smoke bombs. One of the *ultras* girls, Giulia, is invited to go up with them. She holds one of the smoke bombs. I am sitting next to another *ultras* woman, Paola, who as soon as she sees what was going on, starts screaming joyfully and takes her smartphone to film the event, which is not the smoke bombs and the fireworks, but Giulia on the roof, with the men. (Fieldnotes – June 2016)

Female participation in the more prestigious activities is not ‘officially’ precluded or forbidden. Relevant activities are portrayed as expressions of a leadership that everyone can conquer by demonstrating extraordinary courage (Doidge, 2015) through the performance of risky actions aimed at defending the group’s honour (i.e. fighting against opposite fans or policemen). On an abstract level, women have the same possibilities of men to play the more relevant roles if they demonstrate their commitment and braveness through these ‘heroic deeds’ (Llopis Goig, 2007). However, heroic deeds are concretely considered as a ‘male thing’ and women’s participation in these actions is not only rare, but strongly discouraged by men.

On the bus that will bring us to the stadium where the away match will be played, Giacomo [the *head* of the *ultras* group] reminds the general rules: stay together and be on the watch at each stop [because it is when fights with other groups of supporters often occur]. Then he adds another recommendation for the women: if there is a fight, we must go back immediately on the bus. [...] ‘You better run, don’t disturb, and let us do the rest’ he says. (Fieldnotes – September 2016)

Discouraging women’s participation in fights originates from the intention to prevent the failure of the deeds because of them, but it also allows men to display that kind of hyper-masculine, macho identity that guarantees recognition among the *ultras*<sup>11</sup> (Selmer, 2004). By excluding women from the role of potential ‘allies’ in the deeds because of their supposed vulnerability, and consequently acquiring the role of ‘heroes’ in charge of their defence, men re-affirm a very traditional model of masculinity where chivalry and sexism are strictly intertwined (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jones, 2008).

In this context, the participation of women in heroic deeds and thus the demonstration of their braveness can only occur if they decide – at their own risk – to ignore the rules of conduct suggested by the group. In fact, the stories of heroic deeds involving women collected during the study are all stories of extraordinary individual endeavours undertaken by a single woman.

Sandra is a middle aged *ultras* woman who used to be very active in her youth, but she still regularly attends the matches. Her deeds – such as when she confronted alone a group of supporters of an opposing team with just a broken bottle as weapon – are told as myths. Sandra is highly respected by everybody in the *curva*, but while women express their esteem saying that ‘she had the balls’, the typical men’s comment is ‘she was barking mad’. (Fieldnotes – August 2016)

From the men’s perspective, there seems to be no possible middle position between being vulnerable and being crazy for women, and since neither vulnerability nor craziness are considered among the qualities of a good leader, these women have not reached prestigious roles in the group’s hierarchies despite their heroic deeds.

In line with previous studies (Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011; Lenneis & Pfister, 2015), this research also thus confirms that football supporter communities are still a male preserve inasmuch as they are based on a rigid gender hierarchy and do not grant women the same possibility as men to have power and access to prestigious roles. But how are these differences perceived and justified by the male and female *ultras*?

Although acknowledging a difference in the internal composition of the community in terms of the number of women and men, and despite recognizing that the *ultras* world is a highly masculine environment, differences in opportunities and roles were never or just slightly mentioned by male supporters.

Quantifying women and men has no sense, there are obviously more men. There are many women, though. Women who are as engaged as men and women who only want to go in the *curva* and mind their own business. We are the same, identical, equal to the same ... there is no difference. The only difference is that women are not involved in fights, but there have been women who also participated in the clashes and who never pulled back when serious problems occurred. There is enough parity. Actually not parity, there is respect. Obviously the male side is more *ultras*, but there are women, in the past years, who have demonstrated to have more *ultras* mentality than many men. There are women who can really kick your ass. (Interview with Paolo, male, 37)

The idea that there is no difference in the relevance of male and female roles within the community emerges in most of the male accounts. However, when asked to reflect upon the actual existence of a differentiation in the position and role of the women in the group, the male *ultras* commonly 'naturalise' the differences existing between men and women stating that the two genders are 'naturally gifted' for certain roles because of their physical characteristics (weakness vs. strength) that would reflect in different attitudinal traits (reflexivity and diplomacy vs. instinctiveness and aggressiveness). In men's accounts, differences in body 'naturally' decide who men and women are, their capacities and preferences, and which positions they can consequently have in the group. Because, for them, physical difference explains everything, in men's words there is no blame and no expectation toward women to act differently or to engage 'more', but a diffused idea that 'women do what they can'. The division of the social order and the relationships between gender 'embed themselves in two different classes of *habitus*, in the form of opposed and complementary bodily *hexis*' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 30) that are reproduced by men's 'principles of vision and divisions' (*lvi*) and, as we go on to see, are adopted by the women too.

*Ultras* women appear largely aware of the different sets of possibilities they have within the group. In interviews and informal conversations, they reported many examples of differentiation based on gender, especially for what concerns the participation to the weekly meeting of the group – where 'as a woman you cannot really have a say' (Interview with Paola, female, 30) – and the progression in the internal hierarchies.

[The path to the most prestigious positions in the group] is a bit easier for the boys, based on what I see. There are guys who have started when I began and who are already invited to the assembly [while I am not]. If you are a man you can show that you are ready. For example, on the bus [during away matches], if there is the need to be on the watch, if something happens they are there in the front line. At the stadium they wave the flags or maybe if there is the need to defend the group they intervene [in fights]. The boys are always on the front line. It's a big help because it makes them more visible. (Interview with Federica, female, 20)

However, also among female *ultras*, the unequal positions of men and women within the group are again represented as 'natural' and justified on the basis of a difference in the physical strength or in the 'innate' capabilities of men and women. When they recognize that some positions are precluded to them, female *ultras* do not question the internal stratification of roles and the rules determining this stratification. Instead, they portray these differences as related to their own (lack of) capacities. Women appear to have internalized those 'silent recalls to the order' characterizing the world they are in and thus 'they just become what they are' according to the dominant discourse, 'thus confirming, and first in their own eyes, that they are naturally consigned to what is low, twisted, picayune' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 30).

Obviously, I have never been considered to prepare the flags, or to wave them, or to start the choirs. I'm not able now and obviously I wasn't able when I was a child. But selling the materials, they let me do that, or they let me distribute the fanzine, the stickers. They have always let me do anything I could do, according to those who were my skills. Concerning the difference between sexes, at the time, as now, it was not a problem. (Interview with Lisa, female, 25)

Among both male and female fans, women's marginal position – when acknowledged – is thus explained mainly by referring to innate and unchangeable physical and attitudinal traits that makes the male dominance 'normal' even in the women's eyes. In Bourdieu's words, 'the dominated apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 35).

## Being *ultras* despite being women

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) affirm that a given pattern of male dominance is the output of the both the policing of men and subordinated and marginalized groups' reaction to it. The two authors stress the importance of exploring how women contribute to their own marginalization and subordination in male-dominated environments, as well as if and how they seek to overturn men's domination. Women's negotiation of their presence and performance of their female identity within a male environment can be analysed, in this perspective, as an element able to reinforce or question the pattern of male dominance distinguishing the group.

Given the highlighted low problematization of the group's stratification of gender roles on behalf of female *ultras*, the internal power distribution is rarely contested. More than being a horizon that women seek to subvert, it becomes a context inside which women try to create their own space. This space is defined through a series of actions that are aimed at winning the male respect 'despite being women' and at proving to men their commitment and dedication to the cause.

The entrance of a new member into a supporter community usually 'occurs through a process of tuition and socialization' (Crawford & Gosling, 2004, p. 480) where new supporters undertake a journey toward the acquisition of the social norms of the community. Membership to the group is acquired when the supporter conforms to the expectations of the existing fan base since 'gaining entry to the interpretive community of football fans is a matter of being able to articulate and master the implicit cultural codes that police the boundaries of acceptance' (Back, Crabbe, & Solomos, 2001, p. 77). The permanence and progression within a supporter community similarly depends on the individual's ability to keep corresponding to these expectations (Brown, 1998; Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemontte, 2000). In this perspective, similarly to male 'newbies', female *ultras* demonstrate their dedication to the group by showing interest and getting actively engaged in the community's activities.<sup>12</sup> The engagement in the group's activities is described as a long and hard journey aimed at acquiring men's trust through a demonstration of dedication and commitment.

At the beginning I was not active in any way and then I slowly started attending more often the stadium [...] Then I started to come at the centre, at the beginning just to say 'hi', then I stopped a little more. I began to come even before the game until I was here at 9 am even when the game was at 3 pm to fold the fanzine, prepare sandwiches, draft beers. [...] It took so much work, I earned the trust above all, I got to show myself willing to help, to lend a hand, and I got in gradually, little by little. [...] I started with small tasks, until I was invited to go on the bus with them in away games [...] You have to work so hard to be noticed, you have to show yourself interested, in our group we are really 4 or 5 women, we are very few so let's say that as a woman you have to do more to be noticed, show that you are willing to work. (Interview with Federica, female, 20)

However, women's demonstration of their dedication occurs through the performance of a series of tasks that contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes and sustaining men's dominant position. The activities that women are in charge of are not only the less prestigious ones, but also imply a high level of self-control on behalf of the female *ultras* whose conduct is expected to be more controlled, responsible, and moderate in comparison with that of men. The exploitation of these tasks implies a limitation of women's possibility of self-expression and, moreover, it is strictly functional to the men's possibility to enjoy themselves. Women thus accept to sacrifice themselves for their men, receiving in return protection from the men that they assume they cannot provide themselves. Women's acceptance of certain roles goes along with the performance of a traditional female identity that describe women as individuals in need of defence by men.

In the *curva*, female *ultras* sit together at the bottom of the stairs, near the balustrade. Their position is not only functional to the sale of the material – as it makes them visible – but it is also important for their and the materials' defence: in that position, women are, at the same time, close to the escape route (the exit) and surrounded by a large number of men on each side. Stefania explains me that 'we need to remain here. If something happens *they* will protect us and *we* will run'. Once this position is reached, they never walk away too much from this point and they never walk away all together from the bag containing the gadgets and cash. Next to them are also placed banners and flags that are not used. Men, instead, are constantly moving up and down from the stands and from the balustrade. In general, the behaviour of women is much more responsible and controlled than that of men and boys and it appears characterised by a certain static nature. Males are awarded more freedom of moving inside of

the *curva* and they have greater possibility of distraction and loss of control. [...] Also the cultural norms concerning the consumption of alcohol and substances are different for men and women. A woman who uses hard drugs or loses her control because of alcohol is strongly stigmatised by the entire group, while the same behaviours are considered 'normal' for the men. Watching over money and materials and remaining sober, women grant to men the possibility to enjoy themselves with less worries. (Fieldnotes – May 2016)

Although the process of evaluation concerns both male and female fans, demands to demonstrate that one is a real fan are more often addressed to women than to men. Coddington (1997) states that women's progression into sport fans communities is difficult and slow because subjected to a continuous evaluation exactly because they are not male. As pointed out by Hoeber and Kerwin (2013, p. 328), 'it is assumed a man is a sport fan unless he says he is not [while a] woman is assumed to not be a sport fan, unless she proves she is one' because a taken for granted equation between 'being male' and 'being a real fan' exists in many sport fan communities. As members of a minority group, women are often stigmatized and their recognition as legitimate fans is much more questioned than men's dedication (Crawford & Gosling, 2004). These unquestioned assumptions and gender stereotypes contribute to creating and fostering male dominance within supporters' communities and to limiting women's possibility of progression in the group.

Lisa is a *ultras* since she was a child. She has experience in this world, she has demonstrated her commitment and braveness, and her strong character is recognised by everyone in the group. However, she has not yet reached that kind of recognition (i.e. participation in the weekly meeting) that is accorded to many boys who have joined the group more recently. [...] When the members of the group talk about Lisa they usually say that 'if she was a man, she would already be the leader of the group'. (Fieldnotes, May 2016)

Because of these prejudices, active participation in the group activities is not enough for the observed female *ultras* to demonstrate their dedication to the cause. In order to be recognized as real *ultras*, they also need to engage in a sort of 'partial denial' of their femininity aimed at minimizing the differences between them and the men (Halberstam, 1998; Lenneis & Pfister, 2015).

Even when they are not at the stadium, the use of dresses and skirts is uncommon among the female *ultras*. They always dress in jeans and T-shirt, exactly like the *ultras* men [...]. Make-up is largely avoided too [...]. Among *ultras* women the expression of femininity occurs primarily through small, almost unnoticeable, accessories, such as bracelets, earrings and necklaces. These usually come in the colours of the supported team as to say 'I am wearing them not because I am a woman, but because I am a supporter'. (Fieldnotes – January 2016)

The partial defeminisation of women's image is appreciated and sustained by the men as a sign of devotion to the cause. For example, one of the men describes the path of Paola in the group saying that 'she has changed so much. You should see her before. She used to come here with such heels and skirts. Now she is committed. You can see that'. (Fieldnotes – July 2016)

Through their engagement in the group's activities and their aesthetical transformation, female *ultras* seek to differentiate themselves from the other women attending the *ultras* activities, that is the wives and girlfriends of the *ultras* men. This process of differentiation is aimed at demonstrating to men that they are at the stadium not just because they are 'someone's woman' or because they are looking for a boyfriend. In so doing, *ultras* women apply to other female supporters the same categories and prejudices that men use to question the legitimacy of female supporters (Crawford, 2004; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013) or to keep women out of the sport fan context (Jones, 2008).

The girls [...] who come at the stadium they have a more difficult path because in the beginning everybody think they are there for the boys. When I see a girl who comes to the stadium with shorts or with a tight-fitting T-shirt, I think 'Hey darling, you are at the stadium, you are not here to find a man'. Maybe it's hot and [the way she dresses] is ok, or perhaps she really cares about football, but the first thing I think, the first thing other people think is that girls come to the stadium for the boys...and I say this even if I am a woman. (Interview with Lisa, female, 25)

The way of acting of the *ultras* women largely complies with the expectations of men toward gendered roles within the group and does not subvert the structured hierarchies based on gender differences. Men's role and power are not challenged, but accepted and to look as much as possible like a man without being a man seems to be the only strategy the female participants perceive as effective to gain some power in the *ultras* world.

The negotiation of women's presence inside the group implies rather the attempt of acquiring the status of 'quasi-men' than the questioning of the male dominance and, to a large extent, *ultras* women thus contribute to their own subordination within the supporter community.

## Conclusions

Although being aware that the presented findings refer to a specific *ultras* community and that the results of this study should not be immediately generalized to other groups of supporters, the analysis suggests, in line with previous studies, that football fans' communities can still largely be considered as 'male preserves', that is social worlds whose dynamics and internal structure are based on a traditional division of roles and on a rigid diversification of the possibilities offered to men and women within the group. Women's access to these social contexts, their progression toward the core of these groups are still deeply restricted and hindered by a diffused macho culture and a series of prejudices that portray their support as 'less authentic' than that of men. These prejudices contribute to the creation of a hostile social space for women who, in order to gain or maintain their position in the group, have to show their commitment and dedication more than men. Moreover, to conform to the cultural norms regulating the supporter community women are supposed to perform tasks that are perceived as less prestigious in the *ultras* world and that contribute to reinforcing gender disparities by placing female *ultras* in an 'ancillary position' in relation to male supporters. My research also indicates that women themselves contribute to reinforcing the patterns of male dominance in the *ultras* community. Not only do female supporters, like the male supporters, appear to accept gender disparities as 'natural' consequences of innate male and female traits, but they also engage in a process of defeminization seeking to acquire a status of 'quasi-men'. More than claiming to be recognized as 'women and *ultras*', female fans seem to aim at being accepted as *ultras* 'despite being women'.

Discussing these results in relation to the broader sociological debates on women's position in men's cultures and the nature of supporters' communities, it is possible to ask if, in relation to gender dynamics, the *ultras* world should be considered as a unique, *sui generis* reality (Elias & Dunning, 1986) or as a social environment 'osmotically informed about other social spheres' (Theweleit, 2004, p. 116). The emerging results suggest that processes of social construction of gender in the *ultras* community largely follow similar paths to those common to social contexts characterized by strong gender inequalities. In this perspective, the dynamics observed in the *ultras* world concerning gender relationships and hierarchies do not differ substantially from that which occurs in many other male-dominated sport, leisure, but also work environments where women are marginalized, and asked to partially deny their femininity to obtain recognition and power (Leblanc, 1999; McRobbie & Garber, 2000; Messern, 1997).

However, *ultras* communities emerge as *sui generis* realities when it comes to gender relationships insofar they seem to be 'unbreakable preserves of masculinity' (Marschik, 2003, p. 8) where the possibility of 'sharing the stage' with women is never really contemplated. In line with other studies (Sültze, 2005), the presented results underline how women in the observed *ultras* group are not considered as 'candidates' for the more prestigious position even when they succeed in following 'all the rules of the game', i.e. even when they demonstrate their commitment by actively taking part in the group's activities, when they partially deny their femininity acquiring the status of 'quasi-men', and when they show their braveness through heroic deeds. In this scenario, it seems that women can access real power only through actions that overtly challenge the same existence of a male preserve, that is by creating their own, separated, female-only group of supporters (Cere, 2002; Crawford, 2004; Lenneis & Pfister, 2015).

In consideration of these reflections, studies on *ultras* appear relevant for enhancing the understanding of both supporter culture and women's involvement in men's cultures insofar they allow us to look at how women's participation in sport fan communities – intended as male-dominated environments – contribute to reproducing or questioning the male dominance and the internal order of those social contexts. In this perspective, although the results of this article highlight the persistence of traditional gender norms in the *ultras* community and the acceptance of these norms on behalf of *ultras* women, further research focused on examples of female empowerment with the *ultras* world – such as studies on the female *ultras* leaders and female-only *ultras* groups – should be conducted.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. In this paper, term 'football' is used as a synonymous of 'soccer'.
2. More detailed information on the characteristics and history of the Italian *ultras* community can be found in the studies of Dal Lago (1990), Roversi (1994a), Marchi (2014, 2015) and Doidge (2013, 2015), among others.
3. In this perspective, choreographies are integrated in the 'culture of violence' that, according to Elias and Dunning (1986), distinguishes the groups of organized supporters, making them an unwelcoming social context for women.
4. Detailed norms of conduct regulate when and how a fight can happen. For example, a 'real *ultras*' should never use knives and fights should never involve 'common fans'. According to Roversi, by establishing these rules and limits, *ultras* groups have actually played a fundamental 'control function on the manifestations of sport violence since they have let they member behave in an adequate and coordinated manner in the ambiguous and uncertain situations' (Roversi, 1994b, p. 10).
5. It is important to note that, despite this, *ultras* are commonly portrayed as violent and dangerous individuals in media and public discourses. For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between *ultras* and violence (also in comparison to the hooligan subculture), see Marchi (2014, 2015), Roversi (1994a), and Dal Lago (1990).
6. The data considered in this article have been collected within the two European research projects Partispace and Youthblocs. Partispace project receives funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 649416. Youthblocs receives funding from the European Commission's MSCA- Action under grant agreement No 701844.
7. The researcher has made her role explicit to all the members of the group since the beginning of the study, but field-notes have been taken after each observations in the attempt of reducing the level of perceived 'intrusiveness' of the research. While in the field, jottings – that is brief words or phrases written down during an event about which more extensive notes will be written later – have been taken. Again, seeking to make the observations less intrusive as possible, jottings have been written down on a smartphone since using a notebook would have been inappropriate and difficult during, for example, a football match.
8. The *curva* is the specific sector of the stadium's stands where *ultras* traditionally sit.
9. It is important to note that interviews took place in Italian and that original fieldnotes are in Italian. Quotes from the interviews and the fieldnotes have been translated to English for the purpose of this article.
10. These women are aged, respectively, 37 and 45. They are members of the group for at least 10 years.
11. The macho identity is the 'masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in [the] given pattern of gender relations' (Connell, 1995, p. 76). Behaviours that question the macho identity, such as, for example, the expression of weakness and sensitivity in the form of fear or of crying, are strongly stigmatized. Men displaying a non-macho masculinity are 'expelled from the circle of legitimacy' (Connell, 1995, p. 79) and their progression in the group's hierarchy is precluded.
12. Concerning the issue of expectations, it has been possible to notice that having and displaying knowledge of football (i.e. knowing the names of the football players, understanding the rules of the game or being informed on the new changes in the team's composition) are not considered as fundamental or important qualities to be recognized as 'real' *ultras* in the observed group. In line with other research (Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1999; Doidge, 2015; Numerato, 2015), the study shows how football is somewhat 'marginal' to the workings of the considered community, where it is the demonstration of commitment to the group and its subcultural identity (that can be displayed also by knowing, for example, the group's traditional mottos and choirs, its story and past leaders) that actually matters.
13. Concerning the studied group, it is important to note that some changes in women's position has been recently observed. At the beginning of this contribution, it was specified that the studied community of supporters is managing a cultural centre. Concerning the activities carried out at the centre, female *ultras* take part in the decision-making processes, have responsibility over key projects, and have promoted and started their own projects. Getting engaged in the centre has led men to a deeper acknowledging of women's key role in the group. Moreover, in the centre, women enjoy the possibility of being involved in the same roles as men and have more opportunities to engage in collective activities within a context where the exhibition of physical strength and aggressiveness is not central. The cultural centre and the stadium are 'connected but separated' spaces and, at this stage, it is not possible to say if transformations in gender relations at the centre will foster similar developments also in gender dynamics within the stadium. Nonetheless, this initiative has already sustained some changes that could find a consolidation in the future.

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