**Throwing your hat in the Ring: Women volunteers in boxing**

**Key words**

women volunteers, boxing, feminist-queer theory

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on part of a research project that considers women's sports volunteering experiences. Specifically, we draw on interview data with four women boxing volunteers. Research focusing on boxing and gender has largely been preoccupied with the politics of women's inclusion in competitive boxing, media coverage, and women boxers' gendered identities. Less attention is given to women who volunteer within boxing clubs. Theoretically, we use feminist-queer thinking, which challenges structural constraints, whilst incorporating post-structural and queer deconstructive approaches towards understanding the gendered body. To re-present the women's accounts we offer a story, '*The boxing gym: A women's volunteering story',* and discuss three themes: women as an exception in boxing; women having to prove themselves; and women's sense of belonging within their boxing community. Our closing remarks highlight the precarious position of women volunteers in boxing, and reiterate their role as pivotal constituents in sustaining the future of boxing communities.

## Introduction

A few years ago we were in the audience of the play 'Mighty Atoms'. This production offers a glimpse into the boxing career of Barbara Buttrick. Barbara boxed in the 1940s and 1950s and is credited with supporting the development of women's boxing internationally (Smith 2014; Woodward 2013). The play focuses upon a woman boxer with aspirations of competing in the 2012 Olympics, and a small group of other women training for a white collar 'unlicensed' event. In many ways this play encapsulates the journey that women have made in the world of boxing, from carnival sideshows, unlicensed events, to striving for recognition within national and international competitions. On this latter development, Woodward (2014) claims the inclusion of women for the first time at the 2012 Olympics has gone some way towards legitimising women's boxing. Yet, it is still widely acknowledged that the idea of women boxing remains contested (Chaudhuri 2012; Woodward 2014). Indeed, the positioning of women as boxers has been described as the 'intrusion of female protagonists' (Lindner 2012, 465). Set within this backdrop of contestation, the world of women's boxing has more recently entered a watershed in terms of established amateurs turning professional (Caudwell and Kipnis 2015). This includes the likes of Katie Taylor (Ireland), Nicola Adams (GB) and Clarissa Shields (USA). Unlike their predecessors these women have secured deals with high profile boxing promoters with their fights televised globally. Women's boxing is not only courting the attention of spectators and sponsors but is also experiencing increasing numbers of women participating at amateur clubs and in white collar events (Sport England 2016).

In this golden era of women's boxing this paper re-focuses our attention away from the hype, headline making, and high profile stories that often accompany this sport. Instead,

we report on a small part of a wider research project that explored how women experience volunteering within sport. We draw on interview data from four women boxing volunteers and use their accounts to craft a story, '*The boxing gym: A women's volunteering story*'. Before we invite you to read this story we first situate this within broader research about boxing (and women). Following this we discuss how a feminist-queer perspective is a useful means of theorising the experiences of women boxing volunteers. We then introduce the research context and review the methodological approach adopted. As well as offering a story of the women's volunteering experiences we also discuss three key themes emerging from the interviews, and reflected within the story. These relate to women being positioned as an exception in boxing, women having to prove themselves, and women's sense of belonging in the boxing community. In concluding we offer some closing remarks about the position and place of women volunteers in boxing.

**Women and boxing**

The history of women's boxing is well documented. For example, Smith (2014) and Woodward's (2013) insightful books map out key milestones marking women's active participation in boxing. There is also a growing body of literature exploring the politics of including women in competitive boxing and issues around media representation (Chaudhuri 2012; Godoy-Pressland 2015; Hargreaves 1997; Lindner 2012; Tjønndal 2019; Scott 2020). The context of the boxing gym as a space for exploring the social dynamics of boxing has also attracted scholarly interest. Indeed, Wacquant's (2004) ethnography of a boxing gym in Chicago during the late 1980s exquisitely speaks to the symbolic and cultural processes of becoming a male boxer. Wacquant (2004) reminds us that life at the boxing gym involves immersion into particular kinds of cultural and

embodied practices. Through his account, we learn about the accumulation of boxing capital and its interrelationship with gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. Since this ethnography others have begun to explore women's experiences of boxing (see for example: Carlsson 2017; Channon and Phipps 2017; Crews and Lennox 2019; Hovden and Tjønndal 2019; Lafferty and McKay 2004; McGannon et al. 2019; Nash 2017; Owton 2015; Paradis 2012; Woodward 2013, 2014). This research sheds light on the reasons why women become boxers and their evolving self as they acquire boxing capital. The central lens of this scholarship has very much been about active participation in boxing and how these women navigate their gendered identity within a sport that is often represented as 'all things male'.

Women's participation in boxing as competitors is only one way in which women are represented within the sport. Like other sports, boxing has a well-established infrastructure of clubs and a committed workforce of volunteers that provide opportunities for people to learn the 'noble art'. It is interesting that whilst women in amateur boxing clubs in Britain may not have been eligible to compete until 1997, they have been an important part of this volunteer workforce within boxing clubs. A recent report describes sports volunteers as 'hidden diamonds' and argues that without them sports clubs would not remain open (Join In 2015). Of course, it should be acknowledged that the workforce, including volunteers in sport, is underpinned by gendered power relations privileging men (Norman and Rankin-Wright 2018). Notably, boxing is just one of a number of sports, including cricket, rugby and rowing, where the regulations and practices within these sports have often excluded women from participating. Like these sports, boxing has utilised women in particular ways to ensure clubs can continue to run. The inner workings of boxing clubs reflect a committed

group of men and women with different responsibilities. The historical and contemporary location of women in boxing raises interesting questions about women's position and place within the sport as participants, and we would add, as part of the volunteer workforce. Indeed, apart from the recent work of McCree (2015) and Hovden and Tjønndal (2019) relatively little is known about women's service roles within boxing clubs. Having outlined the nature of research concerned with boxing (and women), we next discuss how a feminist-queer perspective can help to make sense of women (volunteers) in boxing.

**A feminist-queer boxing project**

Theoretically, our analysis and reading of the story re-presented later sits within what we would describe as a 'feminist-queer' perspective (Drury 2013). In this sense, our approach draws collectively from the feminist project of challenging the structural and institutional boundaries that exist around women's engagement in sport, as well as post-structural and queer deconstructive approaches towards understanding the gendered body (Sykes 2006). Some would claim that these two theoretical positions are somewhat at odds in their different points of focus. We suggest that combining the two approaches offers a mutually advantageous 'middle ground' that goes some way towards overcoming the pitfalls of each approach (Nash 2010; Richardson 2006). For example, we draw from structural feminist critiques of the inherently masculinist and exclusive nature of sport, and believe that they still carry value in considering new ways in which sport can be structured more equitably. However, in using poststructural and queer theories, we distance ourselves from the essentialism that has characterised *some* aspects of earlier radical feminist thought; we use queer theory as a means of examining the complexities and nuances of gender discourses. A queer approach allows us to look

beyond binary configurations of sex and gender and to focus on how such discourses might be negotiated, reproduced and resisted (lisahunter 2018). Crews and Lennox (2019) demonstrate this by drawing on Butler's (2006) conceptualisations of gender, identity and the body to explore the subversive potential of ritualistic boxing movements in rewriting gendered bodily norms. Whilst queer theory has been open to criticism for its tendency towards philosophical abstraction and nihilism (Rooke 2010), when combined with feminism it allows critical deconstructions of normative identities to be undertaken that are simultaneously attentive to the pervasiveness of dominant power relations and resulting patterns of inequality. This theoretical approach represents a significant shift over the last two decades in gender and sport research, and one that is increasingly adopted for its use in exploring the possibilities for the transformation of heteronormative gendered power relations (Caudwell 2011; Knopper and McLachlan 2018; lisahunter 2018; Sykes 2006).

We believe a feminist-queer perspective is particularly useful in the context of boxing. Given the sport's history of male control, its role in shaping heteronormative masculinity, and the continued marginal positioning of women even in contemporary boxing communities, it is important that any analysis of the experiences of women is sufficiently able to account for both the difficulties associated with the structural power relations that govern the sport, and how this influences the embodiment and negotiation of gendered identities at more individual levels. Next, consideration is given to the research context within which our study is situated.

**Research context**

This paper draws on data generated from a wider study, which sought to establish an in-depth picture of adult women volunteering in sport and leisure in England (Norman et al. 2017). Interviews were used to explore 54 volunteers' motives, challenges, and strategies to facilitate engagement in a variety of sport and leisure contexts. One of the sports featured in the sample was boxing and this paper draws on four interviews with these women boxing volunteers. Three of the four women were in their mid-30s to mid-50s and had not boxed themselves. The fourth woman volunteer was under 20 and an active competitive boxer and qualified coach. Their roles include supporting club coaching, helping to run clubs, and judging at boxing shows. Two of these women also have senior volunteer roles within the divisional structure of England Boxing.

Like Hovden and Tjønndal (2019), we sought to 'visualise' the women's experiences by crafting a story that captures the women's everyday encounters within their boxing lives. Polkinghorne (1988, 7) describes stories as 'a special type of discourse production [whereby] ... events and actions are drawn together into an organized whole by means of a plot'. Whilst using stories challenges more traditional ways of re-presenting findings (Sparkes 2002), we are mindful of the benefits stories bring. It is through storytelling that order and structure can be brought to the fragmented experiences that constitute our daily lives, helping us to make sense of ourselves, our relationships to others, and our social realities (Smith 2016). As Dowling (2012, 39) notes,

> Our individual stories say something not only about us as individuals but equally something about the context in which we live and work; micro stories about individual lives are therefore also stories about macro societal relations.

Indeed, it is through storytelling that people shape their social realities, which are simultaneously shaped by the grand narratives of society. This provides opportunities to acknowledge how people are influenced by both structure and agency (Smith 2016), and therefore lends itself well to queer-feminist thinking. In offering glimpses into the actions, emotions and lives of others (Bochner 2014), stories can also provide opportunities to better understand different kinds of lived experiences from the perspectives of those we believe we have little in common (Tsang 2000). In part, this is achieved by stimulating the senses and evoking emotions via dialogue in ways that are more difficult to achieve through a series of interview quotations (Duncan 1998). Moreover, it has been argued that stories are a useful tool in knowledge transfer as they can translate research findings in accessible ways to a wider audience (Griffin and Phoenix 2014).

In utilising stories as a means of re-presenting data, we broadly adopt the positions of 'storyteller' and 'story analyst' (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Guided by thematic narrative analysis, the interview data were initially read and reread by Hayley and Annette. Memos were used to articulate links and connections between the different narratives. Together the three authors then met to discuss the emergent themes. At this point Scarlett acted as a critical friend, offering an opportunity to further clarify our thinking and interpretation. This was a cyclical and iterative process that enabled Hayley to lead on initially mapping out the key constituents of the story - context, plot and characters. Here, she was guided by her experiences, insights and field notes derived from visits to the boxing clubs to conduct the interviews. Annette then worked with Hayley to meld together the voices of the women to craft a creative non fiction monologue that was reflective of the interviewees' individual and shared experiences (Bruce 1998).

It is important to recognise that to differing degrees, our individual and collective theoretical lenses, biographies, and emotional and visceral experiences of boxing are situated within, rather than distanced from, the story (Scott 2020). We have all taken part in boxing to different extents. As Wacquant (2004) points out, embodied in a boxer's body is an entire culture, and for Hayley this was more pronounced by her own investment as a boxer and coach. The story then, becomes *and* forms part of our collective embodiment and experiences as researcher/writer/woman/boxer identity. Next we offer April's story, and in so doing acknowledge, like Frank (2010), that people will read this in different ways. Following the story we offer our interpretation and make more explicit the theoretical discussions emerging from within the story.

**The boxing gym: A women's volunteering story**

It's only the small, faded and peeling green sign above the black door that signals this is a boxing club. Well, not just any old boxing club, *my* boxing club. As I walk across the car park, avoiding oily puddles and picking litter as I go, I pause to look at this old school building as if for the first time. It must have been quite imposing once with its red bricks, tall windows and stone pillars, its wrought iron gates now long gone. Anyone walking past these days could be excused for thinking it's just another semi-derelict building on the outskirts of this large, once thriving, industrial city. A city hanging on to its proud history of mining as the recession incessantly bites at its resolve. A city that hasn't managed to reinvent itself like some of its northern neighbours with their riverside developments, thriving nightlife, and designer shops. For those who pause long enough to look beyond the crumbling facade, they are likely to notice small indications that this once busy building is not quite abandoned. The fluorescent adverts in the windows on the middle floor advertising bargain prices for printed flyers, t-shirts

and mugs. The fake snow in the bottom windows where the mother and toddlers' community group have begun their Christmas decorations.

Walk past often enough and you will also notice, whatever the season, the windows in the top left of the building are always open. For those of us who regularly make our way through that black door and up the uneven stone steps, worn away from years of feet running up and down, those open windows represent relief; an occasional draft of cold air offering respite from the heat and sweat created by the steady stream of grunting bodies. The open windows also allow something else to escape, muffled but still distinguishable, a familiar sound to any boxing club, the three minute round timer. The high-pitched, electronic 'beep', 'beep beep', 'beep', 'beeeeeep', that any boxer is programmed to obey without question. The timer rules - bag work, sparring, shadow boxing - all dictated by the round timer. And you keep on going, muscles straining, sweating from every pore, until the next beep signals that you can stop. But only for a minute, before you repeat, and repeat and repeat and repeat. Only when instructed by the coach, do you finally stop - then and only then.

I make my way slowly up the dark, narrow staircase, the window on the landing providing some much needed light. I stop periodically to reflect on the photographs that adorn the brick walls, photographs of our heroes, local male boxers looking focused, strong, powerful. So old and faded are some of the images they give the men a ghost like quality, their movements frozen in time. Harry's always makes me smile, arms raised in celebration, big grin on his face, sitting on the shoulders of Frank, his corner man - a partnership that lasted his entire boxing career. Such a legend in these parts is Harry, his name still bandied about even though he's been gone, what, ten years now? A

founding member of this place, Harry was one of the 'old guard', working down the mine all day, often found propping up the bar at the working men's club most nights, desperately looking for an outlet, an escape from the monotony of his life. Boxing was his saviour. And then there's Geoff, my other half. He's a young 'un in this photo. It's his fault I'm here on this cold December afternoon I reflect, smiling to myself. I think back to how it all started. I thought if I want to be with this bloke I'm going to have to join him or I'll never see him. Boxing was everything to him, still is. It started with me just doing the odd hour here and there. In fact my first ever job was selling raffle tickets at some charity event which happened to also be our third date, I remember fondly. Before I knew it I seemed to be here every night, and weekends - working behind the bar for the shows, collecting member fees, painting the changing rooms, sourcing and buying kit - treasurer, secretary, fixtures, I've done them all. Then I got asked to do the Level 1 coaching course, 'cause we didn't have enough coaches for the numbers of kids coming through the doors. And one night became two, then three, then four as I took every opportunity to coach the lads and lasses that come here.

As I approach the top of the stairs I notice the windows are in desperate need of a clean and mentally add it to my 'to do' list that I never seem to get to the bottom of. As I make my way through the open archway into my second home, our motto 'Fight the Good Fight' proudly painted above the entrance for all to see, I spot a couple of new photographs from last month's event. My favourite, although I'd never admit it to any of the lads, is Sarah totally in the zone, pure concentration, ready to tease with a few jabs, then unleash that powerful cross, followed by her lethal hook. She's been bitten by the boxing bug, just like me. Can't get enough, and fits right in with all the guys. She had a tough time at the start though - having to contend with the whispering and

giggling as she arrived, making her way to the changing rooms, head held high. Then the furtive looks from the lads as she warmed up on the bags, or went through the skipping drills; the averted eyes when Geoff asked for someone to partner her for a spar; and the ill disguised groan from whoever Geoff picked, ‘cause there was never a willing volunteer. But she persisted, trained harder than any of them, night after night, slowly, somewhat grudgingly, earning their respect. I guess any newcomer has to do their time - show commitment by not missing a session, give 110% effort in everything they do, demonstrate that boxer’s grit, determination, discipline and respect. But it felt that for Sarah it took just that little bit longer to become accepted, a status that seems to be constantly under review, periodically tested in ways that don’t seem to happen for our long serving lads. Even now, a newcomer arrives and looks horrified at the prospect of stepping into the ring with her. You see the rest of them, trying to keep the smirks off their faces, knowing the new kid is going to get a quick lesson in speed and resilience through Sarah’s lightning combinations, as she dances across the canvas, goading her opponent to take their best shot. She’s just one of the lads really.

I make my way through the big cavernous space on the third floor, three old science labs knocked into one big room, green paint peeling from the walls, and the buzz of the strip lighting prominent in the quiet of this late afternoon - the calm before the storm. I make my way to our makeshift kitchen in the far corner of the room, desperate for a strong brew, and to take this rare moment of peace to reflect on the evening ahead. Tuesday is the juniors - Josh has come on in leaps and bounds since he first arrived. He’ll be regional champ one day. Mark’s the joker in the pack, doesn’t take himself too seriously but trains hard, and helps out with the young lads on Saturday mornings. When he’s around the atmosphere in the room just lifts somehow. Then there’s Asif,

huge potential, if we can get him to train a little more often, and Zara, learning to channel her energy, and not give in to her quick temper. The lads would wind her up something rotten when she first arrived, knowing she would take the bait. Fists first, think later was her mantra. But she's learnt to shut them up with her caustic comebacks and withering looks. It's a right mix we get here, some have had a difficult life already for such young 'uns, but I feel we're a positive influence for them. I love watching them develop and grow, I get a real sense of satisfaction from seeing them achieve and looking at how far they've come, knowing that we've helped them with that. I know it's corny but we're like a big family, there for each other unconditionally. We say to them, you might be in that ring on your own, but you're not alone - whether you do good, bad, whatever, we do it together - from Keith who's helped you with your diet, to everyone who spars with you day in day out. I'm thrilled when they win, but when they don't we just say you gotta learn to handle it, get up, get on, and start dealing with the hard knocks of life.

Finishing off my cuppa, I begin my first job of the evening, tidying the place up. I pick up Sarah's hoodie, casually flung into the corner by the bags. She'll be in tomorrow night with some of the other lasses. When I first started coming here, women in a boxing gym was a right rarity. Now we have five carded female boxers and the ladies only boxing class I started. A female coach makes all the difference I think, as well as the role models young girls have to look up to now - Katie Taylor, Nicola Adams - first making names for themselves at the Olympics, and then as professionals. Who would have thought it? Professional women boxers. London 2012 was really the inspiration behind starting the ladies class here almost seven years ago. Having a female boxing coach was huge back then, still is really, so I'm chuffed that I was the first in the area to

become qualified. Pity others didn't quite see it as an achievement at the time. I recall some of the guys had quite a lot to say when I first started coaching and females started trooping into 'their' gym. I had my work cut out, that was for sure. But these days I get it more from folk outside of boxing. I smile, thinking back to the conversation I had with a bloke down the pub last Friday night. Me and Geoff were quietly drinking our pints at the bar after another long week, chatting through the evening's training and, quite literally, this guy took one look at me, turned to Geoff and said 'Never in a million years is she a boxing coach'. Then there was the time I was sat in the crowd at one of the Saturday night boxing events at the town hall. Everyone was cheering, out of their seats, as one of our young boxers stepped up his game - lightening combinations putting his opponent on the canvas. As we sat back down, these two coaches in the row in front turned round and said to me 'You do know it's a man's sport'. I thought they were having a laugh at first, trying to engage me in conversation in between bouts. As it dawned on me that they were being deadly serious I felt a rush of emotions - embarrassed, humiliated, exposed. In that moment I felt like I'd been stripped of my boxing credentials, a harsh reminder that I am an unwanted guest at times in this sport. As I began to seeth inside I thought, there's no way I'm going to let those Neanderthals know they've rattled me. So, as calm as you like I held their gaze and nonchalantly said, 'And that's why you need women running the sport'! I shrugged my shoulders and added sarcastically 'because *you're* obviously doing such a good job'. They looked at each other as if to say what's her problem? God, it still makes my blood boil now.

I guess I should be used to the whole judging a book by its cover as one of those barriers I have to deal with at times. I'm definitely the token woman in a man's world – and whilst it's slowly getting better, there's no doubt I still get really irritated with it all.

As I empty the bins I mentally plan out my next few hours, trying to take my mind off this frustrating male orientated world. I'd better give the canvas a quick vacuum, I don't think it's been done since I did it last month. Then I've a couple of hours coaching, and then when I get home I really have to start that admin I keep putting off. My thoughts are abruptly interrupted when Michelle bounds through the door. Cheeks rosy red from the cold, red hair trying to escape from beneath her woolly hat, and breathless from sprinting up the stairs, she barely gets her words out, 'Is it you tonight?' she gasps, 'Are you running the session? Is it you?' And before I can answer, she is joined by an excited and eager group of youngsters, all vying for my attention. 'Hey, April, check out my new boots' says Helen, proudly pulling them out of her bag, bright white with three gold stripes. 'April, I've forgotten my wraps' shouts Sabrina, 'April, where've you put those blue gloves I had last week?', 'Can I partner with Stacy this week April?', 'Dad said he'll pay up when he gets me later', 'Is Geoff coming?', 'Can I help with the warm-up April?', and on and on and on they go, the volume getting higher and higher. I can't keep up with this sudden change of scene, this barrage of questions such a contrast from the silence and reflection moments earlier. I usher them towards the changing room like a small flock of sheep, boundless energy that will soon be put to good use as I spot the skipping ropes hanging from their pegs. But, they are a welcome distraction from all the stuff that irritates me about the club. And, I am the ultimate optimist - I hold onto the thought that somewhere in the future these barriers will cease to exist. No one will question girls wearing boxing gloves and football boots, or lads in ballet shoes. It's good that it is beginning to even out, slow progress being made. It should help with more women coaching and volunteering in boxing, more of us to challenge those outdated beliefs. A burst of laughter disturbs my thoughts yet again. 'C'mon April - Game face on' I say to myself, the canvass will have to wait for another day. 'Right you

lot, get a wriggle on', I shout towards the changing room as I start setting the timer, 'I want wraps on, and let's see you skipping. We'll be sparring in five minutes'.

**Women as an exception in boxing: 'A token woman in a man's world'**

It is well documented that enduring masculine values shape boxing communities and can result in women being positioned as an exception in boxing (Carlsson 2017; Lindner 2012; Paradis 2012; Tjønndal 2019). All of the women interviewed discussed in some way their sense of 'minority' status within the boxing gym. Despite feeling welcome in their boxing communities, the women were clearly sensitised to the gendered dynamics of the boxing world. This was evident in a number of ways. Some of the women referred to the gendered volunteering roles that were taken up within the gym. Indeed, it is commonly recognised in sport more broadly that women take on roles such as cleaning, catering and offering emotional support (Downward et al., 2005). In this respect the roles the women boxing volunteers occupied were those associated with the servicing of men's and youth involvement in boxing. These roles do little to disrupt the broader gendered power relations that shape boxing communities, and instead serve to reproduce women's status as marginal to men. This marginal status is perhaps more pronounced when women take on roles within boxing clubs that are traditionally taken on by men. A number of the women in this study who were involved in coaching, refereeing and acting as the corner person at boxing shows had a strong sense that they were positioned in ways that Lindner (2012) describes as 'intruders' in these roles or, as April put it, she felt like an 'unwanted guest'. Women's marginal presence in boxing communities is not only evident in terms of the numbers. Their material experiences demonstrate how they may be included in a boxing gym but at the same time differentially positioned as 'other'.

**Women having to prove themselves: 'Never in a million years is she a boxing coach'**

Whilst men are often granted automatic access to the boxing community, by virtue of their gender and *pugilistic capital* (Wacquant 2004), it appears that women have to 'earn their place'. The narrative demonstrates the heightened sense of awareness of the need to 'prove themselves' felt by women in boxing. This was particularly the case when the women volunteers reflected on other women at their gym who boxed, but was also evident through some of the reactions to specific volunteering roles they undertook. The volunteers believed that women boxers had to serve a longer, more gruelling, apprenticeship. Expectations around boxing performance placed on women appear to exceed those required of men in order for them to be recognised as, what Paradis (2012) describes as, a 'contender'. This is also acknowledged by Tjønndal (2019), who argues that women's acceptance within training gyms is dependent on their replication of masculine boxing norms. This, it seems, is also reliant on the appropriate performance of boxing physicality. Women must *prove* that they are skilful; that they have a repertoire of sharp punches, a sturdy defence, technically good footwork, and that this can all be brought together in the ring. This is also acknowledged by McGannon et al. (2019), who argue that physicality is often central to women's acquisition of social capital in boxing spaces. This boxing bodywork is inextricably linked with muscularity (Nash 2017; Scott 2020). However, this creates a complex relationship for women and boxing. The types of bodies that are traditionally valued in boxing communities are male, first and foremost, and those that embody *pugilistic capital* are afforded higher status. A 'trim', 'taut' and 'hard' (male) body is a sign of a boxer who is ready to spar or fight (Wacquant 2004). For women, however, the 'script'

for the ideal boxing body is, as yet, unwritten (Nash 2017). Boxing physicality directly conflicts with the types of physicality 'learnt' by girls and women from broader social norms; women are afforded greater social capital for embodying heteronormative forms of emphasised femininity that directly conflict with expectations around 'the boxing body'. A female body exhibiting *pugilistic capital* is therefore not always read unproblematically as a sign of hard work, but sits in a tentative position somewhere between 'legitimate sporting body' and 'deviant unfeminine body'. We would argue that the female boxing body represents a queering of normative understandings of how boxing bodies may appear. Women boxers have to 're-learn' new forms of physicality that both conform to the norms of embodiment within the boxing gym but conflict with expectations about how they should look as a woman (Paradis 2012). In this sense, April's narrative demonstrates the significance of boxing as a context in which the complexities of embodied gender identities appear particularly magnified (Crews and Lennox 2019).

Access to the boxing community is also complex for women who volunteer in coaching and refereeing roles. Like their boxer counterparts they are not immune from the discourses and practices that circulate to position them as 'other' in the boxing world (Hovden and Tjønndal 2019). April's account highlights the default assumption that men are the automatic guardians of boxing knowledge, leaving her to feel 'stripped of her boxing credentials'. In the wider boxing world it is assumed that April does not have the required boxing acumen to perform in the ring, let alone to carry the responsibility of coaching a new generation of skilled boxers. Yet in the context of her own boxing club, April is an influential and respected figure who is valued for her boxing expertise. As such, it is women's boxing *knowledge*, as well as their physicality

that plays a key role in allowing them to negotiate their place in boxing communities. Like Hovden and Tjonndal (2019), our findings illustrate that women's success in boxing coaching roles is heavily dependent on their ability to demonstrate knowledge derived from levels of experience and qualifications that exceed those expected of their male equivalents. Importantly, April's narrative also demonstrates that women involved in the coaching and organisation of boxing communities appear to face more opposition than women involved simply as competitors. At an ideological level, we could assume that this is a result of them being perceived as an even greater threat to the traditions on which the boxing world is built.

**Sense of belonging: 'That's why you need women running the sport!'**

An overwhelming feeling emphasised within the narrative was an outlook that the women were an integral part of 'their' boxing club. This was manifest in a number of ways and included embodying a sense of belonging at the club. Whilst the clubs had seen better days and were often in disrepair, they were places where the women were eager to return to and be part of. Like Wacquant (2004) recalls, they embody a spirit of belonging in a very visceral sense. As April's narrative reveals, the boxing club is a place that holds value and significance that is akin to being part of 'a big family'. The women interviewed speak with affection about the young people they support and are proud of their achievements within and outside the ring. Interestingly, although boxing is an individual sport, the women conveyed a feeling of a collective endeavour with the young people they support. As April says, even when the young boxers are in the ring, 'they are not alone'.

Part of this sense of belonging involved a strong desire to recall and preserve the historical traditions of their boxing communities. Whilst the women may have been perceived by men as a 'threat' to the established boxing norms, the women's stories revealed that in fact they acted as ambassadors of the legacy and heritage of their clubs. During interviews the women used photographs, trophies and posters as aide memoires to help recollect their histories at their club. These were often nostalgic journeys that evoked vivid accounts of events, incidents and characters that had become ingrained within the traditions and folklore of the clubs. By recalling and passing on these tales the women were becoming encultured and also sustaining the heritage of their clubs. To some extent their role in the legacy of club history also moves beyond this. They themselves had become an integral part of the making of their club's symbolic and cultural history. That is, as the first woman coach, the first woman referee, the first woman to have her own photo in the club's staircase 'hall of fame'. Echoing Carlsson's (2017) arguments, a significant point to highlight here is that April's story demonstrates the transformative potential of individual women operating at localised levels to instigate change in otherwise male-defined sports spaces. The sense of belonging experienced by women in boxing communities provides an important indication that change is possible, and that male dominated spaces can be receptive to including and valuing the presence of women.

Yet despite the positive and rewarding experiences of involvement in boxing communities reported by the women, it is important to be cautious about the extent to which this signifies meaningful change to the gender dynamics of boxing on a broader scale. There is no doubt that the women involved in this study felt valued, that they belonged in their boxing gyms, and that they served as positive role models to a new

generation of female boxers. April's story also highlights how the visibility of women challenged normative expectations around the types of bodies and individuals who might take on particular roles in boxing communities (Carlsson 2017; McGannon et al. 2019). April speaks of countering sexist comments from men outside of her boxing gym; she describes how she stands up for herself by correcting others' misconceptions about women as boxers. This inevitably goes some way towards forcing others to reflect on their own bias and consider alternative possibilities for who may be involved in boxing. However, it is also apparent from the narrative that April's acceptance in the boxing community is largely dependent on her own individual agency. It is her confidence in her own ability, her knowledge and achievements in boxing that enable her to challenge the views of others and refuse to be marginalised. This is not something that can be achieved by *all* women. In this sense it is important that we question the potential for boxing communities to be viewed as spaces for the automatic inclusion and acceptance of women.

**Concluding comments**

For many years women have 'thrown their hat in the ring'. As we highlight at the beginning of this paper, the play *Mighty Atoms* pays homage to the inroads Barbara Buttrick made as a boxer. Barbara was also instrumental in establishing the Women's International Boxing Federation (WIBF), supported the development of competitions and advocated more broadly for women within boxing. Barbara's contributions inside and outside the ring are reflective of the many women who have succeeded her; women whose endeavours are often not recognised within the wider world of boxing. In this paper we have brought to the fore the experiences of a small number of women who

volunteer in boxing. We wanted to recognise these 'hidden diamonds' (Join In 2015) as an integral, rather than overlooked, part of boxing communities. Whilst their stories may not be as appealing or seductive as those women boxers who have recently shone as amateurs and taken the world by storm as professionals, our volunteers' accounts help to shed light on the significant everyday encounters and experiences of women within a boxing gym.

Our findings go some way towards responding to calls for more research to explore the position of women in leadership roles in traditionally masculine sports (Hovden 2010; Norman and Rankin-Wright 2018), as well as the need to highlight boxing as a unique space for the exploration of embodied gender identities (Crews and Lennox, 2019; Tjønndal, 2019). The findings also extend recent research (e.g. Stride et al. 2020) that centralises the experiences of women sports volunteers as a valuable resource in understanding the gendered dynamics of the structure of sport.

Women hold a precarious position in boxing. They have been legitimised through official governing bodies as boxers and officials, yet they continue to be marked as 'other' within boxing gyms. As Hovden and Tjønndal (2019, 251) assert, there are 'contradictory gendered expectations' ever present within the world of boxing. Importantly, our findings also illustrate the amplified challenges experienced by women volunteers negotiating their place in leadership roles in boxing. These women appear to be under even greater scrutiny than their competitor counterparts; their success is measured on their ability to demonstrate levels of boxing knowledge that exceed those expected of their male equivalents. Their presence and proficiency in these roles is questioned in a way that metaphorically renders them unfit to enter the ring. Our

findings also bring to the fore the significance of the gendered embodiment of boxing physicality. Like Crews and Lennox (2019), we challenge the idea that boxing is a space in which normative gendered bodies are simplistically reproduced, and instead highlight the ways in which boxing offers a site for the negotiation and formation of alternative ways of embodying gender. However, we recognise that embodying 'acceptable' boxing physicality is of course not readily attainable for all women. For instance, we might question whether normative understandings of boxing physicality are dependent on able-bodiedness, as well as other identity markers. Similarly, whilst April can be viewed as a positive example of a woman who has 'successfully' entered the boxing world, we must also be cautious in not underestimating the importance of her own individual agency in achieving her status. As her narrative demonstrates, the legacy of the institutional exclusion of women from boxing has not yet been erased. The resolution to this, we would argue, lies in the continued involvement of more women in the sport. April's narrative indicates that rather than 'undoing' the traditions of the boxing world, the women who volunteer in boxing gyms are in fact pivotal constituents in sustaining and nurturing the future of boxing communities. Just like boxers need a gum shield and gloves to enter the boxing ring, boxing needs women; we are the lifeblood of many boxing gyms.

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