

A Question of Identity and Equality in Sports: Men's Participation in Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics.

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Abstract

Spain has become the first country in the world to officially recognize and promote Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics. In light of the Spanish Gymnastics Federation's recent initiative (Feb. 2009) this paper examines corporeality and sport identity in ways that reflect processes of change, in exploring the interrelation of social theories, international dialogue and anachronistic gender-based ideologies that established gender stereotypes in competitive sports. Subsequently, this paper presents a case study and discusses the official recognition of men's rhythmic gymnastics (RG) by the Federation of International Gymnastics (FIG). Despite gender stereotypes that depict this Olympic sport as unacceptable for the image of masculinity, the male body aesthetic, including masculine gender role identity, the rising involvement of boys and men in this sport throughout the globe can no longer be ignored. Incontestably rhythmic gymnastics for men and boys is growing and how far it will go remains to be seen. The socially constructed and historically specific nature of physicality, corporeality and sport identity need to be renegotiated since exclusions based on genetic characteristics are a contradiction to the value system of sport. (Olympic Charter, rule2 par. 5, 7/7/2007)

Keywords: gender-inclusive, gender fluidity, gender identity, corporeality, genetic personification, men's rhythmic gymnastics

Introduction: sport as "a male preserve"

A plethora of international dialogue focuses on women's access into all traditionally male dominated sports, women's under-representation in competitive sports and in sport governing bodies, the limited coverage of women's sports in the mass media, in addition to debates on gender segregation, women's agency in sports, gender equity policies, masculinities and femininities, difference versus diversity, the engendered body, gendered physicality, corporeality, gender identity, the masculinization or femininization of women athletes in the mass media, and so forth. (Theberge, 1985; Guttmann, 1991; Duncan, Messner, Williams, Jensen, 1994; Hall, 1996; McNay, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Kirk, 2002; Scraton and Flintoff, 2004; Dworkin and Messner, 2004; Clarke, 2002; Evans and Penney, 2002; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Kimmel, 2004; Creedon, 2006; Hills, 2006; Kamberidou and Patsantaras 2007)

Gender research in sports has been extensively developed, women-centred and not without cause. Needless to say, restrictions and social stereotypes have been placed on women's sport participation throughout the history of western society. Competitive sports have always had androcentric references—social and cultural constructions of masculinity and 'masculism'— that initially excluded women's participation. The medical and social discourses of the 19th and early 20th centuries on female physicality and identity (Sandow, 1898; Webster, 1930; Pfister 1990; Guttmann, 1991) established stereotypes concerning performance and capabilities. (Kirk, 2002; Hills, 2006; Kamberidou, 2007) For example, in the 19th century sport activity was considered detrimental for women's physical and mental health, including her social role as wife and mother. Women who engaged in athletic activity were warned that it caused psychological disturbances, the growth of facial hair, displaced uteruses, and so forth. Even during the 1930s female athleticism was condemned and sportswomen were intimidated by fears of losing social approval. (Guttmann, 1991; Kirk, 2002; Hall, 2004; Hills, 2006) Women's involvement in competitive sports, in the beginning of the 20th century, was restricted to a handful of *female-appropriate* sports, as is considered RG today. Many sports, such as bodybuilding, football and ice hockey were perceived as 'inappropriate' or too 'manly' for women. It was not until 1992 that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted to include women's ice hockey in the Olympic program.

Undeniably we've come a long way since the 1952 Helsinki Games, where women represented only 10 percent of the Olympic athletes. At the 2008 Olympics in Beijing women represented approximately 43 percent of the total athlete delegation, up from 41 percent in the Athens 2004 Olympics. However, the "*glass escalator*" (Williams 1992) is not yet gender inclusive, namely women are not promoted up the hierarchy and are still under-represented in all sport governing bodies, in executive bodies of national and international sport organizations and institutions, such as the IOC. In 1981, following the initiative of IOC President Samaranch, two women were elected to the IOC. Since 1981, only a total of 21 women have served as IOC members and today there are only 14 women who represent 14.1% of the total of 113 IOC members.¹

¹ IOC. "Women in the Olympic Movement: Key Figures" November 2006 (update). *Olympic Movement* http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_992.pdf (retrieved 29/09/09).

On the other hand, one need point out that gender issues in sports do not only concern women, as men also have a gender (Kimmel, 2004) and are subject to gender stereotyping, distinctive social expectations, social inequalities and exclusions.² The patriarchal and gendered practices of modern sport, namely the impact of gendered social structures and gendered social behavior, have shaped not only women's lives but men's lives as well. The discourse on gender in sport and sport identity will have to eventually move away from the restrictive focus on girls and women, especially in light of recent examples such as the rising participation of men in the competitive sport of RG throughout the world who are demanding official recognition. (Tsopani, Dallas et al., 2006)

Sport has been depicted as “a male preserve” (Theberge 1985) and it has been commonly assumed that women's participation leads to their masculinization. So it is interesting to consider how gender identities are constructed by men who participate in women's sports, such as rhythmic gymnastics. Could this be perceived as a potential agent for the transformation of gender relations in sports? If men's rhythmic gymnastics is officially recognized by the Federation of International Gymnastics (FIG), will this lead, for example, to the masculinization of the Olympic sport of rhythmic gymnastics (RG) or to the participants' femalization? Rhythmic gymnastics developed on the basis of biological difference with a focus on women's physical fitness and health, including gender stereotyping concerning femininity or female gender role identity. It is considered the ideal means for the construction, expression and (re)production of *femaleness* and *womanhood*, as defined when this sport emerged. (Sandow, 1898; Webster, 1930; Fellows and Torrey, 1942; Pfister, 1990; Guttmann, 1991). It has however had an impact on men's gymnastics by modernizing and reforming it. If FIG officially recognizes men's RG, and subsequently mixed groups and mixed pairs, will this signal the beginning of a process that will eventually break down the structurally secured gender segregation system of competitive sports? Undeniably the sport is growing and how far it can go remains to be seen.

² In Greece, for example, there is a tendency to interpret *gender* to mean women only, in gender scholarship, discourses, at conferences, symposia and in the curricula. It seems that primarily female students register for classes concerning gender issues. At the University of Athens only recently have a few male students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Science registered for our elective course *gender issues in sports* because —as is the case internationally (Kimmel, 2004)—it is assumed to be focused exclusively on women.

Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics: a sport taboo has been eliminated in Spain

In the last two decades men have been demanding equal participation in competitive RG, and specifically that FIG takes the necessary steps towards making men's RG an official sport.³ Men's RG teams have been active in Japan, Australia, Canada, the United States, Russia, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Greece, Spain and Italy. A growing number of male rhythmic gymnasts have been participating in competitions— solo, individual, team and even mixed pair— on a non-competitive (unofficial) level, since FIG recognizes only women's RG.

Rhythmic gymnastics for men may sound atypical or peculiar to many, as did wrestling, hockey, bodybuilding, football, etc. for women in the past, but it has become a reality. In February 2009 the President of the Spanish Gymnastics Federation, Antonio Esteban Cerdán, announced the organization of the 1st National Championship of Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics and the Spanish government supports the federation's initiative. This is a ground-breaking venture since it is the first federation that recognizes men's RG. "Our country is a pioneer in this direction. The time had come to make an exceptional decision", stressed rhythmic gymnast Rouben Orihuela Gavila, spokesman of Spain's men's RG.⁴ Certainly, there are still problems to confront. The championship will be held based on the code of point in effect for women's rhythmic gymnastics and the athletes will not be able to compete outside their country's borders since FIG does not recognize male participation.⁵



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³See various men's RG competition programs on YouTube; and at the *Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics* website <http://www.menrg.com>; and at *Sov Sport* <http://www.sovsport.ru> (retrieved Oct. 1, 2009)

⁴ See *Sport 24* at <http://www.sport24.gr/html/ent/712/ent.275712.asp> (retrieved Oct. 1, 2009). In Greek.

⁵ *Ibid.* 2009.

Men's RG, very popular in Asia, originated from Japan where high school and university teams have been participating in national competitions such as the National Athletics Meet, All Japan Rhythmic Gymnastics Championship, All Japan Inter-Collegiate Competition, All Japan Junior Championship, All Japan Amateur Championship and Inter High School Competition. Men's RG combines men's artistic gymnastics, women's rhythmic gymnastics and the Wushu martial art form. Men's artistic gymnastics and Wushu martial arts emerged in Japan from stick gymnastics—which were promoted in order to improve the health and physical strength of the population. The technical rules for the Japanese version of men's RG were established in the 1970s. Performed with music, as free-exercises and exercises with apparatus, at the National Athletic Meet by both men and women, they were named rhythmic gymnastics due to their resemblance to the FIG rhythmic gymnastics framework, evolving into what is known today as the Japanese men's rhythmic gymnastics.⁶

Over the last 20 years, the Japanese version of men's rhythmic gymnastics has been introduced at international competitions, where male athletes, as their female counterparts, are assessed according to their natural abilities, skills and coordination of movement, such as hand/body-eye co-ordination, and so forth. However, the main focus in men's RG is on strength, tumbling and martial arts skills, as opposed to dance and flexibility in women's RG.⁷

⁶In individual competitions, only four apparatus are used: the double rings, the stick, the rope and the clubs. However, apparatuses are not used in Group competitions. The Japanese version includes tumbling performed on a spring floor. Points are awarded based a 10-point scale that measures the level of difficulty of the tumbling and apparatus handling. See *Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics* at <http://www.menrg.com> (retrieved 01/10/2009)

⁷Recognized by FIG as an independent sport exclusively for women in 1962, rhythmic gymnastics, is a multidimensional activity that combines elements of gymnastics, theatrical dance, ballet and apparatus manipulation. Women's RG displays aesthetic harmony through graceful movements, flexibility, endurance and self-expression. It is a sport in which one or two apparatus—rope, hoop, ball, clubs and ribbon—are manipulated by single competitors or by pairs, trios or even more (generally five). International competitions are distinguished between Juniors (under age sixteen), and Seniors (ages 16 and over). The largest events in the sport are the Olympic Games, World Championships and Grand-Prix Tournaments. Analytically see Tsopani, D., Tasika, N. Pantazidou, E., Tinto, A. (2005). Also see: anon. "History of RG & Kalev" *Kalev* <http://www.kalev.net/kalev-history.htm> (retrieved 1/12/2009).

Men's RG programs were presented for the first time—on a non-competitive, unofficial level— in the World Gymnaestrada in Berlin in 1975 and in 1995, at the 20th World Championship of RG in Budapest in 2003 and subsequently at the World Cup in Baku in 2003. The first Men's RG World Championship in which five countries participated— Japan, Canada, Korea, Malaysia and the United States— was hosted by Japan on November 27-29 2003, and subsequently three more countries— Australia, Russia and Mexico— joined in and participated at the 2005 Men's RG World Championship.⁸

Moreover, the Italian Federation of Gymnastics adopted Fulvia Leoni's (2002) *Code of Point for Mixed Pair competitions in RG*. This code of point is used in National Competitions of RG in Italy, as well as in Greece, to evaluate mixed pair programs. Leoni's code of point was used for the first time in Greece, in 2004, in the mixed pair competition of RG during the *Gymnastics Festival*, organized by the municipality of Thessaloniki and the Gymnasts Union of Northern Greece, on the occasion of the SPORTEXPO, held 15-16 October 2004.⁹

It seems that in today's postmodernist reality, the outdated gender stereotypes that institutionalized and structured corporeality and sport identities no longer apply and need to be renegotiated.

“Empirical observations of sport demonstrate the absence of absolute categorical differences between men and women [...] that, when acknowledged can radically deconstruct dichotomous sex categories.” (Dworkin and Messner 2004: 25-26)

Children and adults participate in Men's RG¹⁰

⁸For more on this see: *Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics* at <http://www.menrg.com> (retrieved 25/10/2008).

⁹See the *Sports Cultural Union* website: <http://yitane.com/rhyth.%20page.html> (retrieved 01/10/2008). In Greek.

¹⁰ Participants came from four continents: Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. See *2005 Men RG International in Japan* website <http://www.nucurve.com/martialgym/Gallery2005/index.htm> (retrieved December 1, 2009).



2005 Men RG International¹¹



USA 2003¹²

¹¹ See Ibid. Men's rhythmic gymnastics, in its current form, consist of both Group and Individual competition. Group Competition consisted of 6 gymnasts performing Free-exercise. Individuals compete with apparatuses of Sticks, Rings, Rope and Clubs.

¹² See the *Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics in USA* website <http://www.menrg.com/USA/indexUSA.html> (retrieved December 1, 2009).



Spain, 2009



Case study on men's participation in rhythmic gymnastics (RG):

Methodology and Results

Three hundred and seventy (370) questionnaires were distributed at the 20th RG World Championship in Budapest in 2003—where *Men's Group Rhythmic Gymnastics* were presented for the first time with FIG's approval. From the 370 questionnaires that were distributed 299 were completed by 223 women and 76 men between the ages of 14 and 74.

Specifically, a total of 299 participants responded to a closed questionnaire concerning men's participation in RG— 69 female rhythmic gymnasts, 33 female coaches/trainers, 100 female judges, 28 female members of the technical committee of rhythmic gymnastics (MTCRG), as well as 41 journalists, 11 parents and 17 members of the audience of both genders.

The 299 respondents were classified into seven groups, according to their group category (gymnasts, judges, coaches/trainers, MTCRG, journalists, parents, audience) in order to examine the homogeneity (sameness) of views or lack of homogeneity. Additionally, they were classified into two group-units according to their relationship

to the sport: (1) the internal environment (direct relationship to the sport of RG) and (2) the external environment (indirect relationship). The statistical evaluation of the data was prepared with the SPSS v.15 statistical package-program and the level of significance was set at .05 ($p < .05$).

According to the results, an overwhelming majority of the respondents—mostly women— support the official participation/recognition of men in RG (Chart 1), despite gender stereotypes that depict the sport as unacceptable for the image of masculinity, including the male body aesthetic. Additionally, 60,5% of the respondents were in favor of the participation of men in mixed group and in mixed pair competitions! (Chart 2) and 52.5% believe that men’s participation in RG will increase the popularity of the sport. (Chart 3)

Chart 1

Specifically, the majority of the respondents in the seven groups were in favor of men’s participation in RG (76,9% in favor and 23,1% opposed). In regard to the classification of the respondents into two group-units, namely the internal environment and the external environment or direct and indirect relation to RG ($\chi^2 = 27.4$, $p < .001$), an overwhelming majority in both group-units (94,3% and 82,6% respectively) supported men’s participation in RG and only 5,7% and 17,4% respectively, were opposed.

**Men’s participation in Rhythmic Gymnastics (RG):
In favor (Yes) and opposed (No)**

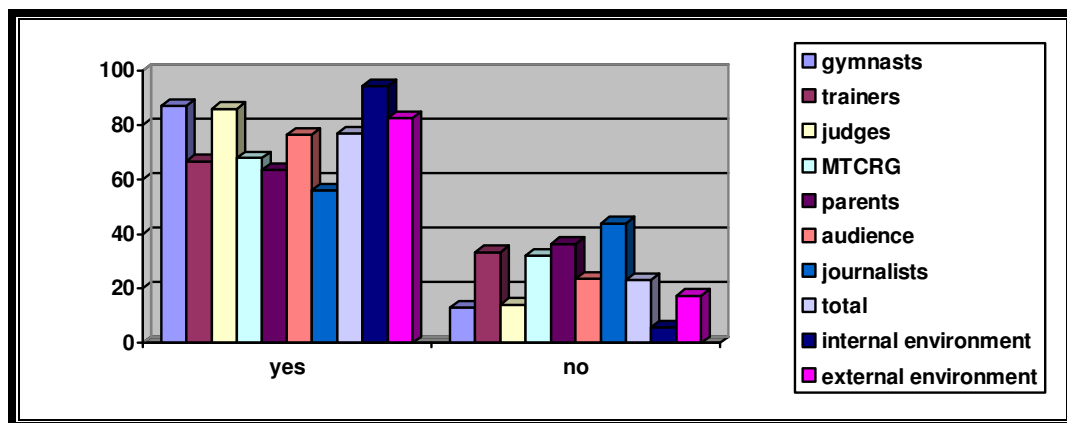


Chart 2

Although the responses in the seven group categories varied with regard to the participation of men in Individual and in Group competition programs, the total majority in the seven group-categories supported male participation: 54,5% in favor and 45,5% opposed. With regard to male participation in Mixed Pair and Mixed Group competitions, a greater majority of the respondents approved: 60,5% in favor and 39,5% opposed. Such a possibility could have a catalytic effect on the gender segregated sport system.

With regard to the results in the two group-units (internal environment and external environment), over half of the respondents supported male participation in Individual competitions (53,6% and 55,3% respectively). Concerning the Mixed Pair and Mixed Group competition programs ($\chi^2 = 0,82, p > .05$), the percentages in both group-units were similar/favorable— 60,9% and 60,2% respectively— in contrast to 39,1% and 39,8 % of the respondents who are opposed ($\chi^2 = 0,12, p > .05$).

(a) Men’s participation in Individual and Group competition programs,

(b) Men’s participation in Mixed Pair and Mixed Group competition programs

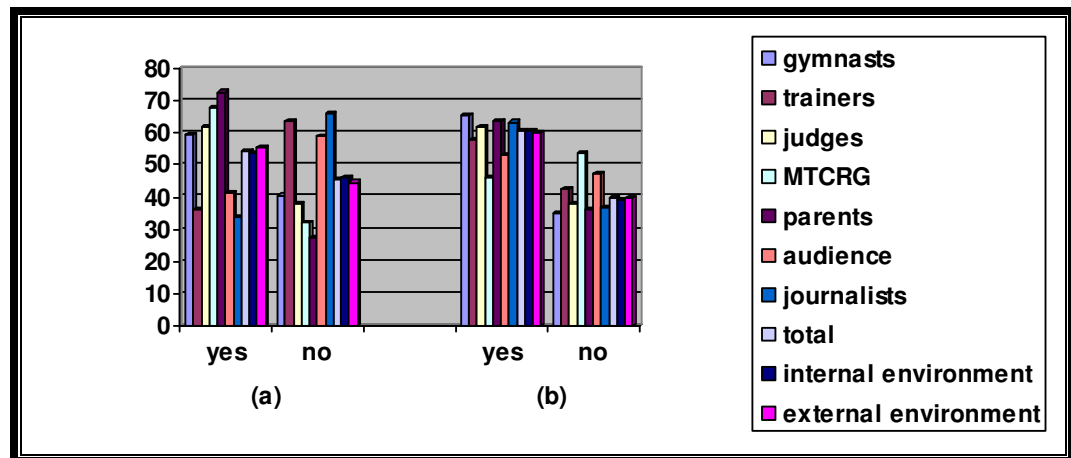
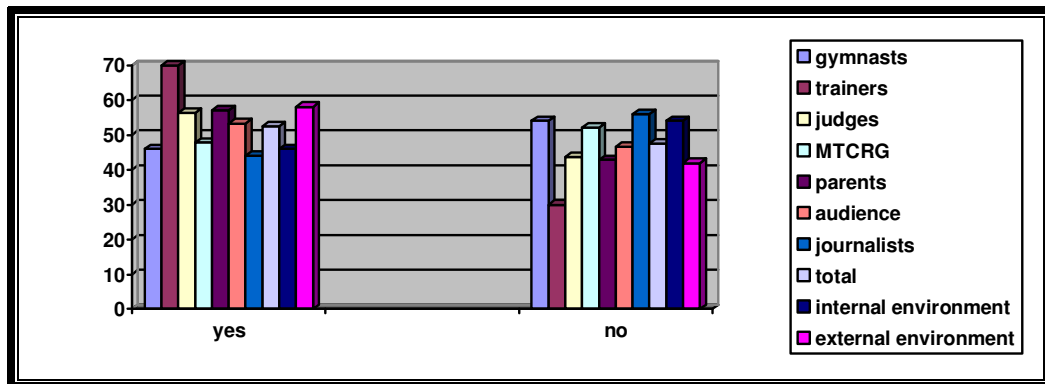


Chart 3

Over half of the respondents (52.5% as opposed to 47,5%) in the seven groups ($\chi^2 = 5,01, p > .05$) considered that men’s participation in RG would increase the popularity of the sport. On the other hand, 54,1% of the respondents of the internal environment believed men’s participation would not increase the sport’s popularity as opposed to 45,9% who believed it would. Conversely, the majority of the external environment, that is 58,1% believed it would increase the popularity of the sport as opposed to 41,9% who did not—($\chi^2 = 3,56, p > .05$).

Will men's participation in RG increase popularity of the sport?



Discussion: Gender Identity-Sport Identity

“The direction of the gendered society in the new century and the new millennium is not for women and men to become increasingly similar, but for them to become more equal [...] Such a transformation does not require that men and women become more like each other, but, rather, more deeply and fully themselves.” (Kimmel, 2004: 293)

There is no specific regulation in the Code of Point of Rhythmic Gymnastics (FIG, 2006) that clearly excludes or prohibits male participation. Men's exclusion from the so-called *female-appropriate* sport of RG is self-understood, as had been women's exclusion from many sport activities in the past. One need point out that the structurally secured and enforced gender dichotomy/segregation system in competitive sports, a result of the biological *difference* between men and women, has always been considered an unavoidable and conventional practice, enforced in the name of gender equity and equality. (Patsantaras and Kamberidou, 2006)

Accordingly, men's RG, if officially recognized by FIG, could be incorporated into this official gender segregation system as *Men's RG*— as in the pioneering example of Spain's Gymnastics Federation and the organization of the 1st National Championship of Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics. Moreover, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) could consider voting in favor of including Men's RG in the Olympic program, as it had included women's ice hockey in 1992, since exclusions

based on genetic characteristics are a contradiction to the value system of sports, as defined by the Olympic Charter. (rule 2, paragraph 5, 7 July 2007)

The gender fluidity in the sport of RG, not to mention audiences' observations that men's participation would increase the popularity of the sport (Patsantaras, Tsopani, Dallas, Kamperidou, Mitsi, 2006), indicate that changes are inevitably underway. One need reiterate that the majority of the external environment in our case study (58,1%) believed that men's participation would increase the popularity of the sport. (Chart 3) Additionally, the joint participation of female and male athletes¹³ could have a catalytic effect on the gender segregated sport system, that is to say it could break down the structurally secured gender barriers. Specifically, the majority (60,5%) of the 299 participants who took part in our study were in favor of the participation of men in mixed group and in mixed pair competitions (Chart 2). Could Gymnastics—the gateway for women's initial participation in competitive sports— become a social space for gender equality, a space that will signal radical future developments in high performance sports and sport identity?

Let's not forget that competitive sports and the ideological foundation of Olympic sports—despite social exclusions—has always been identified as “a space of social emancipation”. (Patsantaras 2008: 56) Sport has always been an arena for contesting the status quo, not only by white women and women of colour, but also by men of colour. (Dworkin and Messner, 2004) Undeniably, sport identity has been associated with various socio-cultural meanings since the appearance of Olympic sports in the 19th century when women were excluded. In the beginning the Olympic movement was non-inclusive even to certain *categories* of men, such as men from the so-called Third World countries who were excluded from institutional positions, such as the IOC. (Patsantaras and Kamberidou, 2006)

Identity is a complex multidimensional construct and likewise athletic identity is a social construct, influenced by the social environment. The struggle for status or identity within sport is a struggle for equality, rights and recognition within society. Indisputably, injustices within sport often reflect larger societal injustices. Gender, racial, ethnic and class boundaries are constructed by sport and have been used to either preserve, reproduce, camouflage or even eliminate socio-political conflicts. For instance, sport in South Africa has been crucial in advancing the rights and liberties of

¹³ With regard to trends and views concerning mixed pair competitions in RG also see Di Cagnio, Tsopani, Bosco, Maridaki, 2003.

oppressed groups. Sport, as an instrument of integration and harmonious race relations has repeatedly contributed to the construction of ethnic and racial identities, including the shaping or even undermining of collective identities.

Athletic identity is a social construct, a web of ideas and beliefs about masculinity and femininity (Messner, 1991; Hall, 1996; Clarke, 2002; Patsantaras et al., 2005). To be exact, gender is “a fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviours.” (Kimmel, 2004: 10) There is no one universal pattern of masculinity and femininity, but multiple examples of masculinities and femininities. This does not mean that gender is disappearing in today’s social reality. On the contrary, it is being transformed from a static biological perception (sex) and analytical category into a dynamic social category (social gender -human agency), the meaning of which is evolving and changing the expectations of the social environment and as a result affecting and changing gender identities.

Current discussions on the gender subject, no longer focus exclusively on the biological gender (sex), as an analytical category, but on the “*social gender*” (Kamberidou, 2007: 586) which formulates, defines and redefines identity according to evolving socio-cultural interpretations. In the new theoretical framework, in the current post-structuralist deconstruction of binary categories (Dworkin and Messner, 2004: 17), gender identity and corporeality are being contested and renegotiated, in other words viewed as linguistic conceptions, socio-cultural manifestations, transformable meanings and evolving elements of change. (McNay, 2000; Evans and Penney, 2002; Kirk, 2002; Scraton and Flintoff, 2004; Macdonald, 2002; Clarke, 2002; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Kimmel, 2004; Creedon, 2006)

Until the 1970s social scientists studied only class and race as primary factors of social status and identity. Today, in regard to the foundations of identity, gender has been incorporated into race and class. (McNay, 2000; Dworkin and Messner, 2002; Kimmel, 2004) Gender, a major theoretical category, a conceptual tool for understanding the social world is the axis around which identity is constructed and social life organized. (Kimmel, 2004; Hall, 2004) The “*social gender*” (Kamberidou, 2007: 586), the gender subject, whether male or female, in this analytical framework, is a conveyor of *identities*, i.e. evolving social expectations, human agencies, potentials, opportunities, functions, disciplines, and so forth. This does not however

mean that the *biological gender* (sex) has been eliminated or will no longer exist as a social category. This does not mean that the gender subject has been *castrated* or will become *genderless*. It signifies, however, that the biological factor, as an analytical category, is less and less interrelated to conventional views and outdated stereotypes concerning identity, corporeality, maleness or femaleness. It provides a form of “*gender-neutrality*” (Kamberidou, 2007: 584, 586), namely gender-inclusive perspectives and expectations in all social spheres. For example, there is no regulated gender segregation system imposed by rules and regulations in the economy, in the political arena, in information society, in science and technology, in medicine, and so forth. Gender is *deactivated* or *neutralized* as an analytical category in these social spaces.

In sports, however, in contrast to other social spaces, identity continues to be “*genetically personified*.” (Kamberidou, 2007: 587) Namely, corporeality in competitive sports is examined and viewed exclusively in its biological dimension— as a static entity, a physio-organic-anatomical unit, instead of a totality of cultural representations and evolving interpretations. Sport identity, the athlete, regardless of gender, is perceived as a means, an instrument or a tool for high performance or victory at all costs, despite the consequences on the body from intensive training, doping, enhancement technologies, etc. In other words the athlete, male or female, is not perceived or examined as a gender subject/social subject but is ‘measured’ as a static material entity. Competitive sports are not structured as *gender-neutral* or gender inclusive. Certainly arguments exist, according to which, the human body is not a product of social and linguistic interpretations and indeed this may apply to certain biological parameters related to certain performance-records in specific Olympic sports. Nevertheless, the historical context of the Olympic phenomenon has shown us through many examples and models (Patsantaras, 2008; Theberge, 2007), that this is not the case, but rather that outdated ‘biological facts’ and social theories have been accordingly integrated into social structures and structural thinking, formulating and reproducing social views and gender stereotypes concerning performance and capabilities. For example, restricting the number of competitive sports and events for women at the Olympics has usually been justified in terms of the supposedly “intrinsic limitation of their biological make-up.” (Pirinen, 2002: 95) A ‘fact’ that has been disproven today. Consequently, the exclusion of men from competitive RG based on biological *difference* (Hargreaves, 2000; Clarke, 2002), as

that of women in the past from many competitive sports, is inconsistent with prevailing social values on gender equality, gender equity and human agency. (McNay, 2000; Evans and Penney, 2002; Olympic Charter)

Conclusion

Competitive sports—traditionally viewed as a domain where men are encouraged to pursue a ‘masculine’ gender role identity—convey strong messages about masculinity and femininity. The socially constructed and historically specific nature of physicality (Macdonald, 2002; Hills, 2006), corporeality (Kamberidou, 2007) and consequently sport identity must be re-examined beyond traditional notions and outdated stereotypes. (Pfister, 1990; Guttmann, 1991; Kirk, 2002) For example the pioneering initiative of the Spanish Gymnastics Federation. Incontestably rhythmic gymnastics for men and boys is growing, and the official recognition of men’s RG by FIG and subsequently that of mixed groups and mixed pairs could signal the beginning of a process that will lead to radical transformations in the sport system. A process that could eventually break down the structurally secured gender barriers.

The multi-variable, multifaceted and complex transformation processes of gender identity, and consequently sport identity, requires the establishment of an interdisciplinary, inter-cultural network of researchers—that will collaborate with sport federations, NGOs, the IOC and governments—to address issues of identity and discrimination directed at individuals or groups due to gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so forth since they result in their exclusion from full participation and their consequent struggle for inclusion and recognition. Research should no longer be limited to the medical or sport science framework or how sport medicine constructs the athletic body as gendered. Required are theoretical approaches, reflective and critical analyses in the humanities and social sciences which contribute to the understanding of the gender subject in today’s diverse multicultural societies. Incontestably, as traditional social categories diversify, sport identity diversifies and is challenged. Sport sociologists, for example, could consider a cultural studies approach to their scholarship, focusing on theoretical accounts which centralize on gender along with race, racism and ethnicity, especially since “sport is an area where controversial issues of national identity and affiliation are easily evoked/provoked.” (Sugden, 2006: 225)

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