GENDER

6 In/exclusionary mechanisms of gendered bodies in sport and the degendering of sport policy

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Abstract

In this contribution I reflect on the developments in gender equality in the Dutch sport landscape and sport policy since the turn of the century. Women have entered recreational and elite sport in large numbers and gender equality certainly increased. Nonetheless, many challenges related to the (symbolic) exclusion of gendered othered bodies remain. I argue how several processes of degendering in sport policy issues took place over the last decades, by ignoring or misusing research data, misrecognition of specific marginalised groups or 'forgetting' to turning policy goals into action. Therefore, critical feminist research is still much needed in current times to analyse, disclose and assist in transforming ongoing intersectional inequality regimes in sport.

Keywords: Degendering, social in/exclusion, intersectionality, Dutch sport policy

6.1 Introduction

Creating equal possibilities to participate in sport for all people, disregarding social differences, historically formed the basis for many European sport-for-all policies including the Netherlands since the 1970s, with women among the first targeted groups (Ministry of Sport, 1974). Together with Germany and eight other European countries, the Netherlands ratified the European Sport for All Charter in 1975, that aimed to

> extend the beneficial effect of sport on health, social, educational and cultural development to all sections of the community. (Hartman-Tews, 2006, p. 111)

Since the *Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport* in 1994, national policies were supported by international strategies to enhance gender equality

in the participation in and organisation of sport at all levels. In the early 1990s, combating other inequalities within sports also acquired explicit policy attention in the Netherlands. The Ministry of Sport, for example commissioned studies on the prevalence of discrimination (especially with respect to racialised/ethnic and sexual minorities) and in 1994 the sports sector published an anti-discrimination code (Cremers et al., 2025). Since the turn of the century, sport policies by the Dutch governments and sport organisations, have become increasingly utilitarian, guided by neoliberal perspectives. Within the mainstream policy discourse, the sports sector is seen as social neutral, meritocratic domain, with gender/colour 'blindness' (*everybody is welcome*) as a positive norm that can break down social inequalities in society (Coalter, 2017; Coakley, 2015; Elling et al., 2001).

Despite these developments mainly rooted in more utilitarian neoliberal politics, in 2018 the national government, local governments and Nederlands Olympisch Comité*Nederlandse Sport Federatie (NOC*NSF) launched the *National Sport Agreement* 2018-2022, with inclusion & diversity and social safety as important pillars of Dutch sport policy (Ministry of Sport et al., 2018). The policy approach was more social justice based, emphasizing reducing social inequalities in sports participation, by taking away financial, practical, and social accessibility barriers and fostering inclusion and diversity. Gender did not receive explicit attention, despite a focus on sexual/social safety and on good governance, including social diversity. In the follow up policy *National Sport Agreement II* 2023-2025 (Ministry of Sport et al., 2022) inclusion, antidiscrimination and sexual/social safety remained focus issues, within a more utilitarian overarching approach, focusing on the social impact of sport for health, cohesion and prosperity.

Throughout my more than 30 years research career on gender and its intersections with other axes of social in/exclusion in sport and larger society, I have always intuitively and strategically navigated between policy discourse and expectations on the one hand and critical feminist/queer/antiracist scholarship on the other. In this chapter, I reflect on several of these issues and negotiated routes in this often challenging and paradoxical 'marriage' between sport policy and research on gender equality. I will argue that developments towards gender equality are often paradoxical and layered and how policy developments, discourses and legitimations influenced an overall degendering of Dutch policy on sport and social equality since the turn of the century. With degendering I refer to the reframing, non-recognition or denial of gender inequalities and therefore

(discursively) degendering the problem (e.g. Johnson, 2015; Lombardo et al., 2009).

6.2 Some notes on theory and methodology

My theoretical and methodological perspective has been influenced by many critical feminist scholars on embodiment and social justice and by (first wave) feminist sport scholars.

6.2.1 Gendered inequalities

Critically analysing the in/exclusionary mechanisms or regimes of gendered sporting bodies in and through different sporting contexts has been one of my key research interests and expertise (e.g. Elling, 2005, 2017; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Elling & Cremers, 2022; Elling et al., 2018; Knoppers & Elling, 2001). I depart from a relational and intersectional perspective by reflecting on and *giving public voice* to the racialization and sexualisation of particular gendered sporting bodies, narratives and discourses.[1] Apart from including subordinated or marginalised women and femininities, such a relational intersectionality asks us to explicitly *name* or *unmask* the more privileged and often normative (able, white, heterosexual) men and their cultural behavioural repertoire (culturally most desired or hegemonic masculinity, Connell, 1995). For example, in relation to sport participation the (club) participation of young, able, white men with higher socioeconomic status position is often taken as the norm, from which other groups of men and women are *lagging* behind and are regarded as *disadvantaged target groups* in sport-for-all policies (Ministry of Sport et al., 2018). Such 'lagging behind' in the participation and/or organisation of sport, however, is often related to 'being subordinated' or marginalized by mainstream structures and implicit normative cultures, discourses and body images.

The focus on gender inequalities in and through sport aligns with a broader theoretical perspective on *social inequality*, as historically developed differences in possibilities and opportunities between social groups. Social exclusion is a process that undermines the accessibility to democratic invol-

1 Social inequalities related to socio-economic position, physical abilities and other -isms, however, have certainly been underdeveloped in my work, resulting in potential bias regarding abled and higher socioeconomic status bodies.

vement and/or participation in several social spheres of life – including sport - as a result of an absolute or relative lack of sufficient economic, cultural and social resources and power (Anthias, 2001; Nussbaum, 2011).

Possessing sufficient relevant human capital or enough chances to gain these forms of capital, fosters mechanisms of social inclusion and power equality. As Anthias (2001) and others have argued, symbolic and material status positions of people, their possibilities and identifications are dynamic and context specific and are partly dependent on the meanings given by the people themselves, by others and by institutionalised *inequality regimes* (Acker, 2009; Lombardo et al., 2009). This is no different in sports, where gendered, sexualized and racialized powers interact and simultaneously open up power enactment and closure among different groups of sporting women and men (Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Knoppers & Elling, 2001).

Sport in general is no longer and has in fact never completely been a bastion of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, this was the case for particular sporting domains, like national professional team sports, that influenced mainstream definitions of and connotations with sport. Nowadays, women have entered the sporting arena in large numbers and in all sports as athletes, being celebrated at the Paris 2024 Olympics, with about equal numbers of men and women athletes and medal events (International Olympic Committee, 2024). Gendered inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms have become more context specific, dynamic, and paradoxical than ever before. As scholars like Acker (2009) have argued, the relative invisibility of systematic intersectional inequality regimes, supports their continued existence. And there is ample historical evidence that progress in gender equality and other human rights in sport and society is unstable and nonlinear over times (Hovden et al., 2018). And this progress is currently under attack in many countries.

6.2.2 Moral and utilitarian perspectives on inclusion

Gender equality approaches and (other) sport for all policies are rooted in the conviction that sports are valuable leisure activities, that women and other subordinated groups should have equal possibilities to join (Hartman-Tews, 2006; Hylton & Totten, 2001). Or, as Nussbaum (2011) argues, that marginalised groups of women should have similar capabilities, or similar 'abilities and opportunities to act and choose', including the freedom to refrain from joining (sports).

Such an inclusionary perspective is related to the potential positive meanings and functions sports can have for all human beings, but mainly departs from a moral, social justice perspective of democratic rights and equal possibilities (not) to participate. Moral legitimation is formulated in terms of – the judicial anchoring of – equal rights (to work, education and health), equal distribution (of resources), equal valuation (of qualities and practices), and equal treatment (anti-discrimination; Fraser, 2001). The inclusion of some minority or underrepresented groups, like (ethnic minority) women or people with disabilities, may require specific efforts or regulations. Fraser (2001, p.38) argued that claims for redistribution should be based on the moral reasoning of a '*justificatory standard of participatory parity*'. The installation of specific regulations for *redistribution* (e.g. the allocation of public women-only swimming hours, or gender quota for governing bodies of nation sport organisations), can be legitimated by the *recognition* of (Muslim) women as a marginalized group with unequal opportunities to (the participation in and) organisation of sport.

Sport policies by (local) governments and sport organisations, however, are often mainly legitimized by the broader societal function or value of sports. Such *utilitarian* or *functional* legitimations refer to economic and quality aspects from profit perspectives like market discipline and efficiency. Sport policy makers are often sport evangelists with a priori belief in the benefits of sport for individuals and society, especially with neoliberal politics becoming dominant in many western societies since the 1990s, including the Netherlands (Coakley, 2015; Coalter, 2017; Elling et al., 2001). Such a functionalist approach tends to overlook the fact that the sports landscape is not social neutral but has historically primarily served the interests of privileged groups and therefore, ultimately, reinforces existing inequalities and social structures (Coakley, 2015; Hylton & Totten, 2001). Moreover, when expected positive outcomes (e.g. health enhancement, broader societal integration) become the main legitimation for being included in sports, such expected 'return on investment' in fact denies equal rights, values, distribution, valuation and treatment of marginalised groups.

In western societies with a (re)emergent focus on neoliberal and utilitarian principles in the last decades, gender equality and broader inclusion policies run the risk of dissolution. There are different mechanisms and processes of such degendering developments. Lombardo et al. (2009, p. 4) argue that changing sociopolitical developments in the mainstream meanings, or discursive politics, of gender equality often involve 'a simplification of social problems and the required solutions', like *fixing, shrinking*,

stretching and *bending* gender equality. Others also showed that inclusion and equality policies may sometimes be not more than a kind of window dressing or showcasing of (gender) equality priority, without effective implementation (Acker, 2009), or 'doing the document, instead of doing the doing' (Ahmed, 2007).

6.2.3 Transformative mixed methods and intersecting analyses

My research on gendered in/exclusionary mechanisms in and through sport has been strongly empirical, being a firm advocate of mixed methods (Elling, 2015). Whereas the research field of social constructivist feminist sport studies is dominated by qualitative methodologies, I have often combined different 'hard' and 'soft' methodologies. Especially in relation to societal and political agenda setting it is important to substantiate ongoing gender inequalities with clear numbers about differences in the participation and organisation of sport and for example the normalisation of exclusionary processes like negative speech acts.

However, to really understand power relations and in/exclusionary mechanisms and what the impact is on both more privileged and marginalised groups, counting people and collecting numbers alone is never enough for an in-depth understanding. Qualitative research, centring people's meaning and lived embodied experiences are therefore indispensable, as well as critical discourse analyses of mainstream societal discourses in the media, governmental policy and organisational cultures.

In the use of all methods, a continuous reflection on our position of power as scholars over the collection, analyses and interpretations of data about the lives of the people we study is key, in particular in relation to our privileged social status positions (Elling, 2017). With respect to quantitative data this has resulted in being more careful regarding gender, ethnic and sexuality categorization. For more than ten years ago, we started to changed the standard question 'What is your gender?' with binary options 'woman/man' to 'How do you see yourself?' with options 'woman/man/other/do not want to say'. With a growing group of especially young people identifying in non-binary gender categories, this has now become the standardised question in surveys, also by the central office

for statistics in the Netherlands.[2] In both quantitative and qualitative analyses, an intersectional gender perspective requests a constant check on which men and women results refer to and whether gender differences may be 'hidden', for example in bivariate analyses, without taking note of possible contrasting intersectional inequalities.

6.3 Paradoxes of gender (in)equality and the degendering of Dutch sport policies

With increasing overall gender equality in sport and society at large, several equality and diversity paradoxes appeared. In this paragraph I will address four paradoxes and related legitimations for the degendering of sport policies.

6.3.1 Similar participation as proof of equality

Different compared to many other countries, the general (weekly) sport participation of girls/women (54%) and boys/men (57%) in the Netherlands is about similar for more than two decades (CBS/RIVM, 2025). This gender similarity in general sport participation has been used by the national government to abstain from reopening policy on gender inequality.

As a follow up of an accepted motion in parliament in 2016, the Mulier Institute was commissioned to do an inventory about women's discrimination in (elite) sport. We acknowledged the many positive developments that had occurred over time, but also gave substantiated evidence for putting gender back on the sport policy and research agenda (e.g. underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and inequalities in the media portrayal and in payment/sponsoring; Elling & Van Ginneken, 2016).

However, the similarity of general sport participation between men and women was used as argument that no specific policy regarding gender inequalities was required:

2 From the 0,3% of the national population 15+ identifying as non-binary, genderqueer or other gender identities apart from man and woman, nearly half (46%) is between 15 and 24 years old (CBS, 2024). Since especially (even third generation) people of colour may be asked daily where they are from, apart from questions on migration history and/or national identification, we recently included a question on skin colour in a questionnaire, with the options: white/non-white/black/brown/coloured/other/do not want to say.

> Overall there is a positive development and there are no obstructions for gender equality in sport. I therefore see no reason to governmental action or measures. (Ministry of Sport, 2016, p. 1)

Something similar had happened with the findings of our first study on sport participation and sexual orientation commissioned by the Ministry of Sport in 2002 (Elling & Cremers, 2022).[3]

6.3.2 Nonrecognition or forbidden target group due to political sensitivity

Next to the degendering of governmental sport policies, the increasing political sensitive issue of migration, also affected in a dissolution of ethnic inequality issues. This can be witnessed, for example in the name change during the execution of a national policy program (2005-2010), from integrating *ethnic minority* youth through sport ('Meedoen allochtone jeugd door sport') to integrating *all youth* through sport ('Meedoen alle jeugd door sport'; Cremers et al., 2025). Even though intersectional data on (club) sport participation continuously showed that especially ethnic minority girls and women are underrepresented in (club) sport, they were not recognised as a sport-for-all target group in national sport policies.

Apart from such degendering by non-recognition of intersectional inequality regimes, exclusionary processes were strengthened by refusal of the necessity for redistribution. Since the late 1990s, several Dutch municipalities, – especially with right wing populist government coalitions – no longer allowed public swimming pools to offer women-only swimming (lessons) hours, specifically accommodated for Muslim women (Elling, 2005; Michalowski & Berendt, 2020).[4] Such political decisions are framed in a functionalist discourse that only mixed sport participation is beneficial for integration in society and runs at odds, with a democratic, inclusionary sport-for-all perspective that all people should have similar possibilities to participate. Especially when it is known that Muslim women are underrep-

3 The findings showed that general sport participation did not largely differ between self-identified homo-/bisexual men and women compared to a 'matched' group of heterosexual respondents but also affirmed a lower representation of gay men in voluntary sport associations and especially in traditional men's (team) sports, related to fear and experiences of homonegativity.

4 Specific structural investments of sport organisations may require the inclusion of Muslim women (e.g. separate women hours, only female personnel, masking windows).

resented in sport participation and that mainstream structures and cultures impedes equal participation possibilities (Fraser, 2001). Moreover, being able to (learn how to) swim is not only a common leisure activity, but also a matter of safety in a water-rich country like the Netherlands.

6.3.3 Forgotten policies and competing issues

With the mainstreaming of gender equality policies, a socio-political competition between prioritizing different forms of inequality and different gender related policy issues also contributed to the degendering of Dutch sport policy (Acker, 2009; Lombardo et al, 2009).

In the last decade combating sexual transgressive behaviour received increasing political attention and policy measures and actions were taken in sport (e.g. founding of a Centre for Safe Sport), in succession of an advice report by a governmental commission due to serious incidents (Van Veldhuizen et al., 2022). This policy attention was fuelled in the following years due to many incidents of (sexual) transgressive behaviour in elite sports and other societal sectors (e.g. TV shows) and the global #MeToo movement. Disregarding the fact that certainly not only, but many more women than men turned out to be victim of sexual assault and mainly men were perpetrators, policy and actions on combating sexual assault in and outside sport became largely degendered (Johnson, 2015). The main focus to contribute to a safer sport in national sport policy (Ministry of Sport et al., 2018, 2022) has been in installing procedural measures (e.g. appointment of confidants, request certificates of conduct, rules of conduct), with hardly or no attention to gendered structural and cultural aspects. Moreover, the degendering of safe sport policy, was reinforced by the broadening of the social safety aspect, including antidiscrimination, match fixing and criminal interference (Van Veldhuizen et al., 2022).

Gender remained also absent in a renewed attention for antidiscrimination policies in sport in the last decade, after a long period of absence since the 1990s. After a serious racist incident in 2019, an action plan to combat racism and discrimination in football, *Our Football is For Everyone* (OVIVI), was initiated by the football federation (KNVB) and the national government, with a main focus on combating racism and to a lesser extent also homophobia (Cremers et al., 2025). Despite the fact that the football federation, also has gender equality plans, OVIVI has gained most social and political attention, deprioritising gender equality. Interesting, a similar

policy plan with the same title, launched by the football federation and the Ministry of Sport to combat homophobia in football in 2012, remained a policy document and was not turned into 'doing the doing' (Ahmed, 2007; Elling & Cremers, 2022).

Also gender inclusion and diversity policies related to sport governance became less prioritised in the Dutch sport landscape, partly due to 'forgotten' policy goals and the stretching of gender equality policy towards broader diversity and inclusion issues, like age and (mainly in football) ethnicity (Claringbould & Van Liere, 2018; Elling et al., 2018; Cremers et al., 2025). At the turn of the century more than nine out of ten board members of national sport federations were men and many federations didn't have any woman on their boards. In 2003 a national network of women in sport (LNVS), supported by the NOC*NSF and the Ministry of Sport launched an initiative of actions to reach a target of 25% women in the boards of national sport federation by 2005. Policy attention slowly faded away before the target was reached. By 2010, 21 percent of board members in Olympic federation boards were women and one in four boards consisted solely out of men. In 2024, after the Netherlands had been passed in the ranking of gender diversity in sport governance by several other European countries with quota (Elling et al., 2018), NOC*NSF also introduced quota, with at least 30 percent of both genders being represented in sport federation boards. That it took two decades to reach the target for 2005, can be explained by an overall degendered sport policy, combined with a strong resistance towards introducing quota (Claringbould & van Liere, 2018). Dutch (sport) organisations have a strong belief in gender neutral, objective and meritocratic recruitment and selection processes, solely based on 'quality', reflecting the supposed egalitarian Dutch society. Moreover, that several women had broken *the glass ceiling* was regarded as proof for existing gender equality. Due to the stretching of gender equality towards broader diversity and inclusion policies, in recent years, several young, ethnic minority women entered national sport organisations and the Ministry of Sport. They help in showcasing diversity in their organisation, but these women 'ticking two or three boxes', may also be relative vulnerable in sport organisations with prevailing structures and cultures rooted in hegemonic masculinity.

6.3.4 Silent consent for exclusionary practices 'to protect women's sport'

The in-/exclusion of intersex and transgender bodies most probably showed the most contrasting and debated developments in sport policy and practices in the Netherlands and worldwide. After many decades of harmful exclusionary regulations of intersex and transgender women from (elite) women's sport, more inclusionary regulations were introduced. The 2004 International Olympic Committee regulations for conditioned inclusion of 'fully transitioned' transgender people in elite competitive sport followed changing international legislation aimed at recognition of human rights for transgender people and protection from discrimination (e.g. Elling, 2017; Erikainen, 2016). Several national sport federations, introduced guidelines to stimulate participation and social inclusion of gender and sex diverse people in the gender category of their preference at lower competitive levels and in recreational sport, stimulating understanding and respectful dialogue (Braumüller, et al., 2020). The Dutch sports federation NOC*NSF published a first general advice document in 2014 and updated guidelines in 2020 and 2023, in cooperation with non-governmental advocacy organisations like the Transgender Network and the organisation for sex diversity NNID (NOC*NSF, 2023).

In the most recent *Framework on fairness, inclusion and non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations*, the IOC (2021) opened up towards further inclusion of intersex and trans people from a human rights perspective and dispends general applicable gender/sex regulations for all sports. By giving away responsibility on in-/exclusionary rules for gender/sex categories to international sport federations, a growing group of federations, followed leading 'hardliner' federations like World Athletics, World Aquatics and World Rugby with strict eligibility rules for the female competition category. These regulations are often framed in terms of 'inclusion, fairness & safety' policies, necessary 'to protect women's sport'. Many of these regulations, however, have (re)introduced rather simplistic 'sex testing' procedures based on the detection of the 'male' y-chromosome or maximum testosterone levels to exclude intersex and trans women from women's sport (Erikainen, 2016). A very complex social-medical-ethical-judicial issue of the inclusion of bodies with gender and sex variations that transcend the binary gender/sex classification in sport competition, is being simplified and 'fixed'. Due to the complexity and sociopolitical sensitivity of the topic, the Dutch national sport federation and the Ministry of Sport are very hesitant to speak out in public. This 'silent

consent' misrecognises the harm done to the (sporting) lives of current and future transgender and sex diverse women. The blaming and exclusion of gendered individuals as 'cheaters' also is another example of degendering the problem of sporting structures and cultures, invented by men and strongly rooted in a binary sex/gender system.

6.4 Some closing words

The Netherlands is known to be a relative progressive society, for example with respect to multi-ethnicity/culturality, lgbt+-rights and gender equality. However, apart from being forefront in some respect, the Dutch also have the tendency to overestimate their progressive development and meritocratic culture and rather see themselves as taking the lead and being an example to other countries, than reflect and act on ongoing systematic (gendered) inequalities and injustice.

The discrimination and exclusion of specific (gendered) groups in the participation and organization of sport is mostly strongly condemned by governments and sports federations and addressed by specific policies, codes, action plans and projects. And in the last decades, sport at all levels and in many aspects has unmistakenly become more gender equal. However, many in-/exclusionary mechanisms of gendered bodies still persist, although often less explicit and formal, and more often paradoxically and intersectionally related to other inequality regimes, and therefore less visible and more difficult to prove and to transform. Moreover, inequality regimes are institutionalized in the same organizations that are responsible for combating them and hegemonic masculine practices and ideologies are still prevalent, but valued as gender neutral, objective, democratic and meritocratic.

Therefore, it is necessary to remain critical of sociopolitical discourses concluding that inclusive and diversity policies are no longer necessary or use other degendering legitimations and strategies (forgetting to follow up plans, misframing figures, misrecognising marginalised groups) I referred to in this chapter.

Especially in relation to the social safety of gendered, racialized and sexualised bodies and the organisation and control of (women's) sport, there is still much to study, disclose and transform.

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