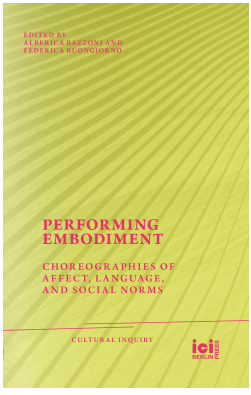
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Embodying and Transforming Female Masculinity through Combat Sports

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ABSTRACT: This chapter explores gender performativity in the context of sport, with a focus on combat sports. It describes the *dispositifs* that construct and deconstruct these identities, starting from a contextualization of the relationship between gender and sport. Next, the chapter analyses gender performativity through Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity. Finally, it discusses a specific aspect of female gender construction: motherhood.

KEYWORDS: embodiment; gender performativity; female masculinity; combat sports; motherhood; mothering

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Embodying and Transforming Female Masculinity through Combat Sports

ELISA VIRGILI

INTRODUCTION

Before I sat down to write this essay, I streamed the Katy Taylor versus Amanda Serrano boxing match that took place at Madison Square Garden, New York, in April 2022. For the first time in boxing history, the main event of the evening was a match between two female boxers. Specifically, it was a fight for the world lightweight title, which went to the Irish Katy Taylor after ten hard-fought rounds and a non-unanimous verdict. Looking beyond the verdict, Serrano (the other fighter) said: 'No matter what happens Saturday night, I think the real winners are the fans and women in general and the sport of women's boxing, be-

cause it's only going to grow from now on.'[1] I remember that when I first saw the fight, I commented on it in a WhatsApp group with some of my boxing mates, who were almost amazed at the match and the technical skills of the female boxers. Several people pointed out that the women's boxing technique was different from that of men: more technical and cleaner. The body is also different, and so is the attitude. But sending in the gym chats, as a joke, a picture of Taylor and Serrano weighing each other up, facing each other in defiance, I thought: why are they using the same script as men's boxing? Why are they imitating the arrogance, the rivalry, and the personal confrontation, rather than the sporting challenge? Do we really want to go to Madison Square Garden to see a boxing match based on the same gender norms? However, at the end of the match, the two female boxers — visibly emotional — shared a long embrace.

In this chapter, I will begin from this image to answer the following question: what effect do bodies, particularly those socialized as female,[2] have on a *dispositif* — to use Michel Foucault's term — such as boxing,[3] in terms of

1 Amanda Serrano, quoted in Brian Mahoney, 'Taylor vs Serrano at MSG Is a Main Event for Women's Boxing', *AP News*, 29 April 2022 <https://apnews.com/article/sports-boxing-new-york-mens-womens-f9c353fa4e3f6a420c7eb5354a8c853e> [accessed 26 November 2025].

2 In this essay, I use the word *woman* to refer to those who recognize themselves as women. However, the categories of combat sports are strictly binary; there are still very few trans women in combat sports, and literature on the subject is scarce. Moreover, gender performativity encompasses other nuances that I am unable to explore here.

3 I interpret the term *dispositif* here in the Foucauldian sense: 'What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the

the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity? Conversely, what effect does the sport of boxing have on women's bodies? How does this typically male sport shape their bodies and performatively construct their gender identity? What is the relationship between the body and female behaviour? How do these two dimensions become intertwined through the gender dimension?

In the first sections, I will explain what I mean by gender performativity in a sporting context, specifically in combat sports, and what the *dispositifs* are that construct and deconstruct these identities through bodies, how they move and how they behave. I will first offer a contextualization of the relationship between gender and sport drawing on recent literature on the subject, the body of which is growing fast and is mainly sociological. I will then analyse gender performativity through the theories of Judith Butler and Paul B. Preciado, and — especially — through Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity. Finally, I will delve into a specific aspect of female gender construction: motherhood. This is undoubtedly a relevant theme when speaking of female bodies in combat sports, but I will try to understand how motherhood, or the desire for it, relates to these kinds of sports. Before starting my analysis, I must

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apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time as the program of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or masking a practice which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality. In short, between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely.' See Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. by Colin Gordon (Vintage, 1980), pp. 194–228 (p. 194).

make a brief methodological note: the author of this article is an amateur athlete, who devotes part of her time and body to training as a boxer in a community gym in Milan. The changes and negotiations with gender identity have therefore also been experienced first-hand, affecting her own body and gender identity.

WE ARE HERE TOO!

In recent decades, we have witnessed an increased presence of women in all types of sports, at different levels (professional or amateur) and with varying modalities of participation.[4] Despite this visible increase, differences in terms of gender opportunities remain in most sports, both in terms of accessibility and professional recognition.[5]

The mass entry of women into sport began gradually in the 1980s, in conjunction with a different style of consumption, which also involved a different idea of sport on two different and perhaps complementary fronts: on the one hand, there was an increased awareness of the social function of sport; on the other hand, a different body culture began to take shape, which had an influence in the areas of both psychophysical well-being and aesthetics, understood as a tendency towards a well-defined body norm. In Western countries, sport — especially that practised in

4 YouGov, *Women in Sport Report 2021: The Growth in Women's Sport — and What It Means for Marketers* (YouGov, 2021) <https://commercial.yougov.com/rs/464-VHH-988/images/YouGov-Women-in-sport-wp.pdf> [accessed 26 November 2025]; Lynda B. Ransdell, Jamie M. Vener, and Katie Sell, 'International Perspectives: The Influence of Gender on Lifetime Physical Activity Participation', *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 124.1 (2004), pp. 12–14 <https://doi.org/10.1177/146642400312400105>.

5 See Taylor Kennedy Gersch, 'The Gender Pay Gap: Seeking Fairness for Women in Professional Sports', *Oregon Review of International Law*, 22 (2021), pp. 147–96 <https://hdl.handle.net/1794/26270> [accessed 26 November 2025].

commercial gyms — became a tool for creating a body that resembled the ideal proposed by the media: a toned and lean body, far from the images of femininity of the 1950s and 1960s. Sport thus became a way of performing a specific gender identity. What has been decisive for this increase in participation has been the presence of women in all types of sport, a presence that had previously been very low and limited to sports considered typically feminine (such as artistic gymnastics and volleyball), while women were barely present in sports such as football, cycling, and boxing — sports that attracted (and perhaps still attract) media, public, and economic attention. Women gradually began to practise sports that were considered typically male, and not without difficulties: at the 2012 Olympics, for example, we saw the first women's boxing match. In the same years, interest in women's football also began to grow, starting with English football. As these sports gained visibility, so did debates about the so-called 'masculine' bodies of female athletes and whether they should wear skirts instead of trousers.[6]

All modern sports have been based on the idea of a white male body that is considered neutral. All spaces, imaginaries, norms, and performances have been based on this standard. Athletic bodies reproduce and reinforce a stereotyped idea of gender. Women who play sports, especially sports not designed for the female body, are somehow violating a gender norm. They do this by entering spaces that were inaccessible to them until a few decades ago, by stepping into public and media spaces and claiming labour rights and recognition; they do this by changing

6 Cathy van Ingen and Nicole Kovacs, 'Subverting the Skirt: Female Boxers' "Troubling" Uniforms', *Feminist Media Studies*, 12.3 (2012), pp. 460–63 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.698091>.

their bodies, which are supposed to be 'graceful and pretty', thus challenging gender binarism. They do this by making an exception to the norm, an exception to the normed female body.

PERFORMING GENDER IN SPORTS

By gender performativity, I mean that gender is constantly constructed in the repetition of acts (whether linguistic, such as using certain words, or bodily, such as making certain gestures, walking, or playing sports).[7] In this sense, gender is not merely an external social construction but the assumption of a bodily posture: the embodiment of a norm through various social *dispositifs*. If gender is constructed in this way, that is, by repeating a norm, then this norm can be changed through the repetition of gestures and postures that are exceptions to, or failures of, this norm. How, then, do these exceptions to the norm take shape in combat sports, or, rather, which bodies and subjectivities appear as exceptions to the norm?

Since the 1970s, sociology has turned its attention to combat sports.[8] In the 1990s, sociologists began to look at the relationship between gender and sport from a phenomenological perspective,[9] which in some ways has something in common with the gender studies and queer

7 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

8 Alex Channon and George Jennings, 'Exploring Embodiment through Martial Arts and Combat Sports: A Review of Empirical Research', *Sport in Society*, 17.6 (2014), pp. 773–89 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2014.882906>.

9 Cristiano Barreira, 'The Essences of Martial Arts and Corporal Fighting: A Classical Phenomenological Analysis', *Archives of Budo*, 13 (2017), pp. 351–76 <https://archbudo.eu/index.php/latest-publication/2017-volume-13/the-essences-of-martial-arts-and-corporal-fighting-a-classical-phenomenological-analysis> [accessed 26 November 2025].

theories that were developing in the same years. These studies focused on the subjective experiences and embodiment (that is, the social experiences of human beings) of those who practise combat sports (who are both the subject and object of this strand of research).[10] In the same years, the phenomenological perspective became the interpretive framework for analysing drag queen shows and butch nights, showing how gender is performance. The issues sometimes intersect; for example, Elise Paradis shows how boxing practices can also be analysed from a gender perspective, in terms of how bodies and gestures change.[11] In this sense, the body is an archive or a 'somatheque' in which various norms, teachings, and movements that define gender (and are defined by gender) are sedimented by those who embody them, leaving space for the negotiation of norms.[12] Women in combat sports are often referred to as 'masculine' because the way they use their bodies and make gestures is normally defined as such. But exactly how is this masculinity defined?

When I say that gender is a performance, I am referring to all genders. Therefore, just as a certain type of femininity is constructed through sports that reproduce typically feminine movements and bodies (sports without physical contact and with slim and tapered bodies), typically masculine movements and bodies are reproduced in other sports (namely, 'violent' sports with a lot of physical contact and with muscular bodies).

10 See Channon and Jennings, 'Exploring Embodiment'.

11 Elise Paradis, 'Boxers, Briefs or Bras? Bodies, Gender and Change in the Boxing Gym', *Body & Society*, 18.2 (2012), pp. 82–109 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X12440829>.

12 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo junkie: sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (Grasset, 2008).

If we consider that masculine bodies are the bearers of 'markers of masculinity',[13] we could say that this fact shapes the experience of male athletes and affects their attitudes and behaviour, whether they adhere to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity or construct themselves in reaction to it. Hegemonic masculinity is the 'dominant' mode of being male, the most desirable one in any society,[14] characterized by a decided heterosexuality and an aversion to anything feminine or homosexual. On the opposite side, we find normative femininity. Precisely because they are socially and culturally constructed, masculinities need contexts in which to define themselves; although experienced by individuals, they are also created and shaped collectively and sustained in the practices of institutions. Given the role that homosociality and competition play in dominant masculinity, some places are traditionally considered 'more masculine' than others, including within the context of sport. Boxing gyms are generally a masculine environment permeated by values — respect, courage, competition, and physical strength — that are considered to be linked to a specific gender affiliation.[15] Women boxers tend to be fewer than men in such gyms, and the percentage decreases in professional boxing. This may be for practical reasons, such as the difficulty of juggling sport with private lives and care responsibilities, or because of the perceived difficulty of entering typically male territory, with the pressure to be at least 'as good as a male boxer'.

13 Michael Flood, 'Men, Sex, and Homosociality: How Bonds between Men Shape their Sexual Relations with Women', *Men and Masculinities*, 10.3 (2008), pp. 339–59 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X06287761>.

14 Raewyn W. Connell, 'Politics of Changing Men', *Arena Journal*, 6 (1996), pp. 53–72.

15 See *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity*, ed. by Kath Woodward (Routledge, 2004).

While the male presence that characterizes the gym is taken for granted, the female presence, by contrast, is always perceived as strange, as an exception, and must therefore be justified and legitimized. Or rather, female athletes must legitimize themselves in a space where their presence is not taken for granted. The female body in a boxing gym continues to be perceived as a foreign body, acceptable only if it is a defeminized body, that is, if it has less accentuated feminine features and 'hits like a man'. At the same time, the female presence is rendered reassuring by those who produce accessories and clothing for combat sports: pink gloves, coloured leggings, and short tops instead of loose tank tops.[16]

In the boxing context, constant displays of virility seek to convey the image of the strong and aggressive man that many young boxers want to project. They will often talk about women as sexual objects and show possessive behaviour towards their partners, especially in social spaces outside the gym. All this happens within a framework in which heteronormativity acts as a legitimizing device for this type of masculinity. Hence, talking about gender construction again means talking about masculinity and femininity in their multiple dimensions. The discussion of female athletes allows us to understand how the construction of the female gender takes place through changes and contradictions because in masculine activities such as combat sports, gender characteristics and norms become more apparent by contrast.

However, not only do female bodies adapt to be able to enter this world; perhaps the real challenge is to see

16 Piroska Béki and Andrea Gál, 'Rhythmic Gymnastics vs. Boxing: Gender Stereotypes from the Two Poles of Female Sport', *Physical Culture and Sport*, 58.1 (2013), pp. 5–16 <https://doi.org/10.2478/pcssr-2013-0009>.

how the presence of these bodies changes the environment they enter and the subjectivities of which it is composed.[17] Starting from the assumption that masculinity is not necessarily linked to a body biologically identified as male, and that it is not simply an effect of the male body, I argue that femininity is also not defined by a biologically female body. Even for a woman, being masculine does not automatically mean that she is similar to or imitating a man. Halberstam explores this issue in his book *Female Masculinity*,[18] which describes a long history of female masculinity that intersects with gender and sexual orientation.

Masculinity is a difficult thing to define, even though it usually seems easy to recognize, especially when a person enters the gym. In general terms, Western normative society seems to identify it quite clearly; indeed, it consolidates the more normal versions of masculinity, which some define as hegemonic and others as 'heroic masculinities'. Whatever term we prefer to choose, these subjectivities are based on the subordination of possible alternative versions of masculinity itself, that is, on making one way of being male (usually straight, white, and successful) prevail over others.

In combat sports, whether on TV channels such as DAZN, or in films, novels, or biographies, the ring is a metaphor for dominant masculinities and their relationship to subordinate masculinities; in this metaphor, heterosexual white masculinity resists all attacks (the enactment of masculinities is a site that offers essentialized and

17 Elisa Virgili, 'Practicing Otherwise. Feminist Boxing Challenges Mainstream Narratives of Combat Sports', in *Boxing, Narrative and Culture: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lennox (Routledge, 2023), pp. 72–86 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003312635>.

18 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998).

polarized versions of masculinity, race, and class).[19] The masculinity to aspire to is not that of the winner, but that of those who resist and endure pain. In our mainstream imagination, boxing is both a physical and psychological journey in which man trains to resist and fight life's adversities without giving in to emotions.[20] Masculinity becomes legible precisely when it abandons the body of middle-class white men, that is, when it abandons its most obvious position, so obvious that it is no longer conceived as a social construction but as natural normality. Women's presence in the gym, through varying degrees of the 'imitation of masculinity', is functional in this mechanism in revealing what the dominant masculinity is, but it can also be a device for highlighting and deconstructing it. As Paul Smith explains:

> And it may well be the case, as some influential voices often tell us, that masculinity or masculinities are in some real sense not the exclusive 'property' of biologically male subjects — it's true that many female subjects lay claim to masculinity as their property. Yet in terms of cultural and political power, it still makes a difference when masculinity coincides with biological maleness.[21]

This statement shows that it is the correspondence between masculinity and men that underpins the social legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity itself, but also that an inquiry beginning with cis males could be extremely effective. These subjectivities (that is, cis men) are even

19 Kath Woodward, 'Rumbles in the Jungle: Boxing, Racialization and the Performance of Masculinity', *Leisure Studies*, 23.1 (2004), pp. 5–17 <https://doi.org/10.1080/0261436042000182281>.

20 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 26.

21 Paul Smith, *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture* (Westview Press, 1996), pp. 4–5.

willing to question themselves. However, they rarely spontaneously question their own privileges (not just gender), not so much because they lack the will to do so but because it is difficult to understand their position in the absence of conflict and confrontation.

I am not saying that women in gyms have a pedagogical function, nor that they have to engage in conflict. Rather, it is a matter of understanding how boxers, and more specifically female masculinity, can sabotage the mechanism of heteronormative genders. What are the effects of the feminization of masculinity and the masculinization of femininity? Weakening on one side and strengthening on the other? If we continue to think in these terms, however, we risk falling back into a binary in which masculinity is always the pole of power.

QUESTIONING NORMS THROUGH BODIES

I will now give an example of a body that has challenged the neutrality of bodies in sport and shown once again how the norms designed for a neutral body are actually based on a male body. The story is that of Shannon Courtenay, a twenty-eight-year-old English boxer who until October 2021 held the WBA bantamweight world title. However, on 8 October of that year, at the weigh-in for her title defence against Jamie Mitchell, scheduled for the following evening at the Eco Arena in Liverpool, the boxer was found to be one kilo overweight. She was given two hours to lose the weight and return to the competition.

This is an interesting point in the story, for the boxer not only refused to lose weight. The following day, she explained her choice on Instagram as follows:

> I was on weight and ready to go yesterday, then last night unexpectedly my period started, which

> causes women to gain weight. We didn't have any weight issues during camp and I was really in good shape and ready all week. To say I'm devastated is an understatement because this has never happened before — I'm always professional, but this was physically out of my control. It happened and I can't change it, but what I can do is go out there tomorrow [Saturday] night to win and get the belt back right after and that's exactly what I'm going to do.

A statement like this, which confirms that the neutral body is actually the male one, had never before been made in the field of boxing. The issue of menstruation in sports is still under-discussed, but it has gained attention precisely in relation to the growing presence of menstruating athletes.[22] The preliminary results of research that I am conducting in northern Italy with twenty women between twenty and thirty-five years of age, concerning the relationship between boxers and menstruation, reveal that menstruation is indeed a problem, especially in terms of weight and not only because of the pain or the impact it has on athletes' performance.

Shannon Courtenay's statement and the preliminary interviews I have conducted with boxers (in particular, professional ones) offer, first and foremost, a reflection on the diversity of bodies compared to a sporting standard based on a neutral male body. Even if the majority of female athletes say that they do not notice any great difference in their performance depending on their menstrual cycle (even if

22 Mikaeli A. Carmichael and others, 'The Impact of Menstrual Cycle Phase on Athletes' Performance: A Narrative Review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18.4 (2019), 1667 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18041667>.

medical studies say the opposite),[23] and even if they do not want to change their training and do not discuss it with their coaches because it is not something that might determine a radical change in their athletic preparation, on the specific issue of weight (linked to a precise rule), criticism and contradictory claims emerge. All the athletes I have spoken to perceive it as a problem because it does not depend on their own will and athletic preparation. Of course, many athletes use the contraceptive pill to regulate their cycle, and some use it continuously to avoid menstruation during competitions, but this does not solve the problem of water retention and therefore weight. It should also be noted that women's hormonal balance is more delicate than that of men, and excessive loss of fat mass tends to alter hormonal cycles. One of the main consequences is hypomenorrhea, infrequent menstruation with reduced flow, which can develop into amenorrhea, the complete absence of menstruation. In the long term, this condition can affect the reproductive system.[24]

This world champion talking about her cycle in a press conference was the first time anyone had undermined the taboos and sense of shame that still surround menstruation.[25] Courtenay's statement also highlighted the very mechanisms of a sport based solely on the male body. The solution is not to look for ways to lose weight during men-

23 Necip F. Kishali and others, 'Effects of Menstrual Cycle on Sports Performance', *International Journal of Neuroscience*, 116.12 (2006), pp. 1549–63 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207450600675217>.

24 Saskia J. Verhoef, Merel C. Wielink, and Edwin A. Achterberg, 'Absence of Menstruation in Female Athletes: Why They Do Not Seek Help', *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 13 (2021), 146 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13102-021-00372-3>.

25 Elisabeth A. Kissling, 'When Being Female Isn't Feminine: Uta Pippig and the Menstrual Communication Taboo in Sports Journalism', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 16.2 (1999), pp. 79–91 <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.16.2.79>.

struation and thus adapt to a norm created at a time when women's bodies did not enter the ring, but to think about different practices and rules, without these becoming further limitations for women, but on the contrary to begin again at the roots of how we think about sport and competitiveness. This became even clearer when Courtenay mentioned the possibility of being able to choose whether to become a mother or not. In fact, like many other female athletes, she had suffered from amenorrhea for almost three years and, a few months before the famous match, had had a medical consultation about this, precisely to understand how reversible her condition was and whether there was any possibility of permanent damage to her reproductive system. This inevitably leads us to a further reflection on the subject of motherhood, and on two issues in particular: the transformation of the body and the question of labour contracts.

MOTHERS, MONSTERS, AND BOXERS

Female athletes, especially those practising male sports such as combat sports, often experience a dichotomy between a sports culture defined by masculinity and a daily life where a certain type of canonical femininity is required. If this dichotomy is evident in many aspects of female athletes' lives,[26] it becomes even more pronounced in the case of motherhood. How then can we reconcile these two seemingly opposed aspects? Or rather, how might we redefine and perform a form of motherhood that is not strictly linked to a docile and reproductive canonical femininity?

26 Vikki Krane and others, 'Living the Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Muscularity', *Sex Roles*, 50 (2004), pp. 315–29 <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:SERS.0000018888.48437.4f>.

This starts with the embodiment of motherhood: the image of the body, what one eats, and how one represents oneself and one's desires.[27] In this regard, much research has inevitably focused on changes in the female athlete's body. Some studies have highlighted that the sports world creates pressures that lead to unhealthy practices such as disordered eating, excessive exercising, and training with injuries. Thinking about female athletes' bodies and gender performativity from the perspective of motherhood provides us with a foundation for examining the paradox of the physically active female body. On the one hand, there is a body that always wants to be the same, to perform in the same way; on the other hand, there is a body that is changing and that needs to understand how to negotiate this change in a sporting activity.

The concept of gender and its canons is linked to historical context (in other words, it changes across time and place), and 'acceptable' femininity can be perceived differently depending on, for example, race and sexual orientation, but also class or — in our case — the practice of a sport. As with masculinity, precisely because there are multiple femininities, there is also a privileged, or hegemonic, femininity. In the contemporary Western historical-cultural context, hegemonic femininity takes the form of a thin and toned body. In the case of combat sports, this body also takes on masculine traits such as broad shoulders, narrower hips, and well-defined muscles. These are all characteristics that clash with the image of the maternal body. Within the male domain of sport, women are expected to perform hegemonic femininity while distancing themselves from behav-

27 Patricia Marten DiBartolo and Carey Shaffer, 'A Comparison of Female College Athletes and Nonathletes: Eating Disorder Symptomatology and Psychological Well-Being', *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 24.1 (2002), pp. 33–41 <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.24.1.33>.

iour that may be perceived as masculine. They are faced with the contradiction that to be successful in sport they must develop characteristics associated with masculinity (strength, assertiveness, independence, competitiveness) that are at odds with hegemonic femininity. On the other hand, professional female boxers and elite ice hockey players often present a feminine image even during competitions (for example, wearing pink clothes or accessories). The question therefore is: how can women perform gender and motherhood with a body that has masculine features?

One of the issues that arises when we consider how female athletes perform hegemonic femininity is the representation of the female body. The norm imposes toned but not excessively muscular bodies on female athletes because this would make them appear as masculine; they would be performing, so to speak, a female masculinity. If they are asked to be dominant and strong, this must not be too visible, so as not to contradict hegemonic femininity. This creates the dichotomy mentioned above. Muscle development in female athletes therefore creates the paradox that while a firm and toned body is perceived as ideal, large muscles symbolize strength and masculinity. In this sense, William Russell speaks of a tension between the 'sporting body' and the 'social body',[28] which we can call here a tension between the sporting gender and the social gender — in other words, a tension between the gender performed in the gym and the one that is, or must be, performed in everyday life. This performance concerns not only the body, or gestures, but also one's behaviour, that is, one's attitude in a broader sense. The norm urges women to be gentle, feminine, and

28 William D. Russell, 'Comparison of Self-Esteem, Body Satisfaction, and Social Physique Anxiety across Males of Different Exercise Frequency and Racial Background', *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 25.1 (2005), pp. 74–90.

delicate in order to be perceived as female and relegates characteristics such as aggressiveness and competitiveness strictly to the realm of sport, characteristics that — as we have seen — instead construct masculinity. When female athletes bring these characteristics into everyday life, into their behaviour, their movements, and even their clothing, they are perceived as different from normal girls.[29]

In the context of sports, female athletes are constantly reminded that they are different. They are larger, more assertive, and more muscular, and they eat more than normal women. Female athletes are also not considered feminine because of their bodily shape and their casual attire. To be considered socially acceptable, they sometimes have to create an alternative identity to that of an athlete, namely that of a feminine woman. The problem is that these characteristics cannot be separated. One cannot perform two completely different types of femininity by simply changing clothes; as we have seen, the two identities are intertwined. Moreover, as Butler reminds us, gender performativity does not remain within the realm of voluntary choice, or rational decision, but is part of subjectivity in a broader sense. This is even more evident in the case of motherhood. Since the end of the twentieth century, the number of mothers among professional athletes has increased, and this social phenomenon has become increasingly visible, partly because of the athletes' own desire for recognition.[30]

29 Heather Barber and Vikki Krane, 'Creating Inclusive and Positive Climates in Girls' and Women's Sport: Position Statement on Homophobia, Homonegativism, and Heterosexism', *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 16.1 (2007), pp. 53–72 <https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.16.1.53>.

30 Beatriz Martínez-Pascual and others, 'Pregnancy in Spanish Elite Sportswomen: A Qualitative Study', *Women & Health*, 57.6 (2017), pp. 741–55 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2016.1202883>.

Whereas in the past motherhood almost inevitably meant the end of an athlete's career, there are now more and more athletes who continue or resume their sports careers after becoming mothers.[31] However, they usually have to face practical obstacles (such as a lack of adequate maternity leave policies) and emotional factors that expose them to greater stress than female athletes who have not made the same choice, and especially relative to male athletes.[32]

Although existing literature on this topic is scarce, some research has shed light on the main factors that hinder this way of being an athlete. First, like many working women, female athletes do not have access to adequate maternity leave policies and childcare services. This is a structural problem that has an even greater impact in a field where women have only recently become professionals and where the system has not yet adapted to their presence and their bodies.[33] A second factor concerns media representations of motherhood in sports, which focus on the 'return' to sport after motherhood and the biological barriers that this entails (such as weakened or inferior bodies, the natural desire to be a mother). Other representations emphasize the ideal of the good mother who should prioritize care over a sports career. This creates a narrative

31 Kerry R. McGannon and others, 'Negotiating Gender and Sexuality: A Qualitative Study of Elite Women Boxer Intersecting Identities and Sport Psychology Implications', *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 31.2 (2019), pp. 168–86 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2017.1421593>.

32 Margie H. Davenport and others, '"It's Going to Affect our Lives, our Sport and our Career": Time to Raise the Bar for Pregnant and Postpartum Athletes', *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 57 (2023), pp. 893–94 <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2023-107256>.

33 Elizabeth A. Sully, Ann Biddlecom, and Jaqueline E. Darroch, 'Not All Inequalities Are Equal: Differences in Coverage across the Continuum of Reproductive Health Services', *BMJ Global Health*, 4.5 (2019), pp. 1–6 <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2019-001695>.

of the impossibility of two identities (that of the mother and that of the athlete), based on the biological and social incompatibility of the two roles.

A third factor, not necessarily in tension with the previous two, is that of the physical and mental strength acquired through motherhood. This emphasizes that female athletes can make a greater effort thanks both to the determination given by the spirit of sacrifice associated with sport and to the conviction that motherhood is something that strengthens women. This last factor also fits into the framework of neoliberal feminism that often accompanies discourses on the empowerment of female athletes. In turn, maternal and work empowerment are feminist ideals, widespread in media representations that describe motherhood as 'self-regulated' and 'balanced' with (un)paid work.[34] Neoliberal practices related to bodily self-governance (for example, family planning) and career investments (time and sacrifice) are part of the neoliberal feminist ideal of 'good motherhood'. This ideal portrays athlete-mothers as powerful and autonomous, and female athletes as self-determined subjects who have made this choice consciously and who demonstrate that they can do it all, thus overshadowing persistent structural inequalities.[35] This is not only a view that others have of female athletes, but also one that some athletes have of themselves and which they have embodied. Athlete-mothers thus be-

34 Hao Wu, 'Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*', *International Sociology*, 38.2 (2023), pp. 249–52 <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809231158884a>.

35 Sara Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21.1 (2020), pp. 3–24 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>.

come 'athlete-activists' who want to demonstrate that they can be both, as when they publish pictures on social media of their bodies first modified by motherhood and then returned to the canon of the athlete's body. However, they also show that this path is often obstructed by the sporting system and its rules, which in some cases impose a forced choice. In this sense, then, they also denounce the sexism behind it all.[36]

CONCLUSION. NEW SPORTING FEMININITIES: MOTHERHOOD, MOTHERING, AND BOXING

In this chapter, I have explained how gender identities are constructed, or rather normalized, through combat sports. We have seen how femininity is negotiated or subverted through the performance of a sport that has long been constructed around masculinity, and that this femininity is not simply socially constructed but incorporated by blurring the boundaries between the biological and the social, between nature and culture. We have also seen that bodies perform new femininities through combat sports, especially in the case of motherhood.

These bodies shift from essentialism to post-structuralism, which we can translate as a terminological shift from *motherhood* to *mothering*. We can therefore speak of *maternal performativity*, and in order to think of mothering as performative, it is necessary to think of it as an active practice that one embodies, not as an event — however desired — that one undergoes and that transforms bodies. With regard to the idea of performative mothering, Mielle Chandler states that '[i]t is my position

36 Cheryl Cooky and Dunja Antunovic, '"This Isn't Just About Us": Articulations of Feminism in Media Narratives of Athlete Activism', *Communication & Sport*, 8.4–5 (2020), pp. 692–711 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479519896360>.

that "mother" is best understood as a verb, as something one does [...]. To be a mother is to enact mothering'.[37] It is here that we find the subversive potential of this type of subjectivity, a subversion of the norm that imposes a certain form of motherhood and maintains its agency in performing it. In other words, what is perceived as a failure, from the point of view of the norm, is the construction of a new femininity.

37 Mielle Chandler, 'Emancipated Subjectivities and the Subjugation of Mothering Practices', in *Redefining Motherhood: Changing Identities and Patterns*, ed. by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly (Second Story Press, 1998), pp. 270–86.

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