Teens' dreams of becoming professional athletes: The gender gap in youths' sports ambitions

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Abstract

In comparatively gender equal Norway, most boys and girls participate in sports at about equal rates. This apparent gender equality is investigated further: do young teens also profess equal ambitions of becoming professional athletes? Drawing on 81 interviews with 12- and 13-year-olds, the study suggest that the boys and girls make similar investments in sports, but there are clear gender differences in the ways they describe their future ambitions. The majority of the boys talk about wanting to become professional athletes and going "all in", but very few of the girls do – the ambitious girls rather talk about skills development. The paper argues that cultural narratives thus shape young people's self-understanding and ambitions, both boys and girls may suffer consequences of this: in a sports-internal logic, the girls may be given limited practical possibilities, resources and support – but boys may risk regret, disappointment and wasting time and resources.

Keywords: Youths, leisure, sports, professionalize, motivation, ambition, elite athletes, gender, boys, girls, narrative identities

Introduction

Historically, women have been discriminated within and excluded from mainstream sports (Messner 1988). Young girls' participation in sports has, however, increased markedly in the Western world (Acosta and Carpenter 2015; Sabo and Veliz 2008; Bakken 2019a), and in Norway, where this study is based, the sports participation rates of young girls and boys are about equal (Bakken 2019a). Gender equality is a central

value in Norwegian public policy; sports for all is an explicit ambition and organized youth sports receive high public funding (Meld. St. 26 2012). Seen from a purely quantitative perspective of participation rates, the Norwegian case gives little reason to worry. Researchers have even concluded that because participation rates in Norwegian sports are gender-equal, this contradicts the 'assumption … that sport remains heavily gendered both ideologically and in participatory terms' (Green et al. 2015: 544).

Gender equality is broadly and commonly understood as ensuring that "girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections" (Unicef 2018). However, how gender equality in sports is understood and operationalized is a contested issue both in research and in practice (for a discussion, see e.g. Kempe-Bergman, Larsson, and Redelius 2020). Participation is but one, albeit central, part. Following the broad definition, gender equality also encompasses equality within sports, such as in distribution of resources and protection against risks like discrimination and harassment – as well as injuries and disappointments. Inequalities in youth sports are also about gender norms that are reproduced in and through cultural narratives in sports, limiting both girls' and boys' experiences and possibilities within sports (Wright 2016). Research has repeatedly found that the field of sports is *not* gender equal in terms of resources, opportunities and protections (e.g. Hargreaves and Anderson 2014; Norman 2014; Cahn 1994; Pfister 2010). Key cultural narratives about gender in sports emphasise the qualities of toughness, aggressiveness and competitiveness, qualities that in our cultural narrative are intrinsically linked to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2008; Hickey 2008). Sport's idealisation of hegemonic masculinity risks marginalizing other types of masculinities, as well as girls and women (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the emerging field of gender in youth sports by investigating young people’s professed sports interests and ambitions. I draw on an understanding of cultural narratives as shared stories in a society, which make up the structure with which individuals understand themselves and their possibilities (Loseke 2007; Andrews et al. 2000; Ricoeur 1991). Through stories told by 81 young boys and girls about their relationships with sports, I examine how they position themselves in their stories about sports ambitions. I find that although boys and girls make similar investments in sports, there are clear gender differences in the ways they describe their future ambitions. I argue that cultural narratives about gender in sports shape young people’s subjectivities and their understanding of their own opportunities within sports in the formative years of their lives. I end by discussing possible consequences of the differently gendered cultural narratives for both boys and girls.

Norwegian context of children and youth sport

Norway is an interesting case for studying gender and youth sports as most young people in Norway are physically active and participate in sports (Jakobsen and Evjen 2018; Bakken 2019b). Social class is the most important factor in participation, with youths with fewer family resources being less active than youths with access to more resources (Andersen and Bakken 2018). Although gender seems to be less significant to participation in youth sports, boys and girls rarely take part in the same leisure-time activities (Fasting and Sand 2009), giving rise to what we may call a gender segregation in youths’ leisure (Eriksen and Seland 2019). Moreover, girls opt out of youth sports at a slightly higher rate than boys (Bakken 2019a), and while boys and girls both experience strong parental pressure to participate in sports, the pressure on boys is perceived to be slightly stronger than that on girls (Strandbu, Bakken, and Stefansen 2020).

A crucial shift happens in Norwegian sports when children reach 12 years old. Before that age, mass sports dominate and, in theory, is available for all. Norwegian children's sports are regulated until this age, limiting professionalization and supporting children's right to choose what and how much they want to train (Norges idrettsforbund 2015). From age 12, however, mass sports are increasingly professionalized, becoming more serious, more expensive and demanding more commitment from both the young person and their parents (Johansen and Green 2019; Strandbu, Bakken, and Stefansen 2020). Consequently, the choice to try to become a professional athlete commonly is made around this age in Norway. The 12- and 13-year-olds in this study are in this situation: at the brink of youth, with its strong impulses to experiment with identities and group belonging, accompanied by encouragement from parents, sports clubs and early years schooling to make sports commitments.

Gender in sports: representation and distribution of resources, practices and ambitions

Research in the field of gender and sports has given much attention to *representations* of men and women in sports, for example, in the media and the coaching literature. Research has suggested that despite increasing female participation, representation of female athletes in United States media decreased between 1989 and 2009 (Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum 2013). A recent German longitudinal study also finds that there has been an *increasing* gap in coverage of men's and women's Olympic sports over the last 16 years, indicating a growing marginalisation of female Olympians (Braumüller, Emberger, and Hartmann-Tews 2020). In a recent U.S. study, only 5% of sports broadcasters tweeted about women's sports (Hull 2017), and a British study finds a 3,6% coverage on sportswomen in British media over a two year-period (Godoy-Pressland 2014).

Even when female athletes are visible in the media, the coverage tends to trivialize their achievements, present sexist imagery and focus on the surrounding drama rather than the sports events themselves (Cooky et al. 2010), and while men are more likely to be described as experienced and outgoing, women are more likely to be described in terms of their emotions (Angelini, MacArthur, and Billings 2012). The Norwegian sports media is also largely male dominated (Hovden and von der Lippe 2019). Research has found that boys' and girls' athletic bodies are described very differently in the coaching literature (Alsarve 2018). Swedish coaching textbooks portray boys' bodies as functional and boys as 'athletes who hold high physical capacity' that becomes greater with puberty (Grahn 2014, 742). Girls' bodies are characterized as problematic, non-performing and disadvantaged compared to boys, and girls' changes through puberty are described as 'develop[ing] rounder and softer forms' (Grahn 2014: 742; see also Grahn 2016).

Another common way of considering gender in sports is *distribution*, which includes studying participation rates and distribution of material resources such as field time, equipment, sponsorships and access to the best coaches. As pointed out in the introduction, much research has found near-equal participation rates among boys and girls in youth sports, but regarding resource distributions, ample evidence has indicated that a substantial gender pay gap favours men in sports worldwide, particularly in football (Sporting Intelligence 2017). In Norway, this pay gap has led the men's national team members to ask the Norwegian Football Association for equal pay in solidarity with the women's team (Archer and Prange 2019). In youth sports, more girls than boys quit as they lack satisfactory facilities and training possibilities (Persson et al. 2019). In an ethnographic study on two football clubs in Norway, Persson, Stefansen and Strandbu (2020) found that boys received free clothing, training camps,

tournaments and trips abroad, while girls had to pay for them. Whereas boys were prioritized on the field, girls had to yield, and boys had professional coaches, but girls did not.

In order to examine how gender shapes youth sporting experiences and future ambitions, understanding the inequalities in gender representation as well as resource distribution is vital as these are the material and symbolic structures that young people live with. However, we have limited knowledge about the impacts of gender inequality in representation and distribution on young people and their understandings of themselves and their relationships to sports such as their motivations and drive to succeed. Much of the research exploring youths' sports preferences and motivations has relied on psychological frameworks focused on understanding individuals' motivations and preferences (see e.g. Horn 2000; Tudor and Ridpath 2018). Such frameworks have frequently been employed in the coaching literature with the explicit or implicit aim to keep up the young people's motivation to perform better.

However, this study is situated in a small but growing body of research which has investigated *gendered sports identities*. Studies in this school of research have shown how gender is reproduced and negotiated in sports for both boys and girls (Broch 2013; Jeanes 2011), and that even professional athletes' identities are shaped by a traditional male hegemony (Mean and Kassing 2008). In an analysis of an U.S. all-girls sports programme, Cooky (2009) described how the girls' sports interests were co-constructed by the girls themselves and the adult organizers—but in different ways in two different sports programmes. These findings demonstrate that structural frames may induce and encourage interest—or the opposite (Cooky 2009). Studies have also shown a large gender gap in sports ambitions: few girls aim for the top (Nielsen and Olesen 2014). Zanin and colleagues find that girls are likely to reproduce stereotypes of girls

and women in sports if they are not exposed to ‘alternative enactments of feminine identities’ within sports (Zanin, Preston, and Adame 2019, 18). Research has repeatedly found that young people’s interpretation of the gendered world of sports affirm a view of sports as a masculine endeavour (Hardin and Greer 2009; Eliasson 2011). This is also the case in comparatively gender equal Scandinavian countries, e.g. in terms of shaping young danish girls’ ideas about their own possibilities within sports (Skrubbeltrang 2019) and limiting young Norwegian girls’ motivations and ideals (Persson, Stefansen, and Strandbu 2020).

Altogether, the international research on gender identity in sports paints an overarching picture of how young girls' and boys’ identities are shaped by gendered representations and unequal distribution across Western countries – including Norway. Together, this points to a problematic discrepancy between the apparent gender equality in terms of participation, as is the case in Norway – and a substantially masculine field where girls and women struggle to fit in and feel that they belong.

Narrative identities

This study compares young boys’ and girls’ practices on the one hand, and their preferences and motivations on the other, aiming to address whether even in Norway, where the gender rates in youth sports are about equal, girls’ and boys’ sport practices and/or motivation differ. I approach the young persons’ narratives with the understanding that, following the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, “self-understanding passes through the detour of understanding the cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself” (Ricoeur 2006: 158). That self-understanding is formed by understanding cultural signs means that there are powerful restrictions on how the self may be formed (McNay 2000: 80). In other words, their perception of their future self may constrain and shape them now (McNay 2000: 94). The accounts of boys’ and girls’ sports

practices, their emotionally investment in sports and their ambitions, are here understood as types of self-presentation drawing on cultural signs to present oneself normatively and defensively in what appears to be a coherent narrative (Ricoeur 1991). In the same way, the narrative a person tells about oneself influences others' self-understanding. While the analysis of the young people's account of their ambition and motivation is built on their everyday accounts, this fundamental character of self-narratives forms the basis for the analysis.

The study

This paper draws on an ongoing multi-sited qualitative longitudinal study, [anonymised]. The aim of the larger study is to investigate how inequalities appear and are perpetuated in young people's lives, encompassing themes such as school, health, leisure and relationships with friends and families. The first wave of the study, which this paper is based on, consists of 81 in-depth interviews with 40 girls and 41 boys. Written parental consents were obtained. These 12- and 13-year-olds were recruited via their schools in four highly different communities: a wealthy urban neighbourhood within commuting distance to the capital Oslo, a suburban area with a diverse and multicultural population, a rural small town with below average income and a rural industrial village. We selected these communities based on statistics from Statistics Norway (2019) and Ungdata (2019) to represent differences in the local employment structures, socio-demographic profiles and levels of urbanization (see Eriksen and Stefansen kommende). The youths' parents in two of the sites are also interviewed, partly in order to explore their orientations toward youth sports and how this is classed (Eriksen and Stefansen 2021). The young people were involved in a wide range of sports from tennis and gymnastics to alpine skiing. Football dominated among the boys,

while among the girls, handball and dance were equally as popular as football (for more details, see Eriksen and Seland 2019).

The research group[2] conducted the interviews at the schools during school hours and covered the youths' pasts, everyday lives and ideas about the future. We opened with general questions about where and how they lived, if they had siblings, whether and where their parents worked, etc. In order to address their everyday lives, we employed the life mode interview approach (Haavind 2001), designed to grasp social practices and the social processes motivating those practices, through detailed descriptions of one specific day – the day before the interview. The life mode sequence started with the participants' morning habits, and then followed their practices throughout the school day, afternoon and evening, including their leisure activities, schoolwork, social media use and time spent with friends and family. We ended by asking about their thoughts about the future, including future hopes and dreams for their sports engagement.

In the first phase of the analysis, interviews were read and discussed collectively by the research group. The interviews cover many areas of the youths' lives, and the topic of gendered sports identities emerged inductively from the empirical data, rather than from a pre-constructed research question (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). Key themes were identified: the participants' practices, their emotional investment in their sport, and their ambitions and motivations for sports. In the first phase, I coded the material according to these three themes. In the second phase, I identified the differences and similarities in the young people's narratives, comparing and contrasting how they positioned themselves in their stories about sports investment and ambitions.

[2] The following researchers conducted the interviews: x, x, x, x and myself. I translated the interview quotes.

In the below presentation of the analysis, vignettes and examples are provided to give a rich rigour through a requisite variety (Tracy 2010).

Findings

I will start by briefly showing the similarities between boys' and girls' sports investments. This will serve as the basis for a more in-depth analysis of the other theme, motivations and ambition, presented in the two subsequent parts, where I analyse their motivations and ambitions in terms of gender. I show the boys' talk about wanting to become professional athletes and lastly, the girls' lack of expressing the same wish.

Boys' and girls' sports investments

For most of the study's participants, training is something they do almost every day and there are no substantial gender differences in terms of time spent training. Both boys and girls who are highly invested in sports typically prioritize sports over other important aspects of their lives. In particular, the time spent training limits their time for school work, family and friends. Martin, for example, spends most of his free time playing football—so much so that he often does not have enough time to complete his homework in the afternoons. Kristine, asked to introduce herself at the beginning of the interview, explains: 'My name is Kristine. I just turned 13, and I like to be with friends, but I don't have much time as I train every day from Monday to Friday—football. [I] haven't got much time to spend with my family as I […] have training.' Although many socialise with their friends through sports, both boys and girls also note that they prioritise sports at some cost.

Another similarity between boys and girls who prioritise sports is that both emotionally invest in sports and often strongly identify with their sport. Behrouz, for example, defines his whole life through his interest in football. It is the first and main

topic he talks about in the otherwise broad-ranging interview, and it is through football that he mentions the central events in his life, such as changing schools: ‘I moved here one and a half years ago. Then I started at [the current] school, and I like it here. And then I got an email about starting to play at the [local] team. So I started playing with the recruits, and I have continued to try to climb upwards’. Asked to discuss changing schools, he answers, ‘It was fine. I was a bit nervous in the beginning, but then everybody came over and said, “Hi”, and then we played football’. Football not only dominates his everyday life and goals, but Behrouz seems to see his life through the lens of football. Anine has a similar relationship with handball. She describes her first encounter with the sport as falling in love: ‘I actually kind of just fell in love with the sport. I think it is that much fun’. She explains that she loves the competition and excitement equally and experiences a high level of competence and skills. For both boys and girls, the emotional investment is significant – for many, sport is not only a hobby, but a vital passion in their lives. Thus, these boys and girls are similar in their investments in sports, both in terms of time spent and sacrifices made and in terms of emotional investments. The importance of sports is not particularly gendered.

Going ‘all in’—boys aiming for the top

Despite gender similarities in these central aspects of sports investment, one striking difference between the boys and girls who are invested in sports is in the ways in which they talk about their future opportunities within sports. A majority of the boys talk about aiming for the top, being the best and becoming professional athletes. Martin provides a typical example of the way the boys tend to talk. Saying that he is the best player on the team, he goes on to qualify that statement: ‘I think that I could be a decent player. I don’t think everybody thinks that [about me]. But on the team that I play for now, there I am simply the best’. Dreams of professional careers are sometimes stated in what

seem to be more modest terms. For instance, Petter, who wants to be a professional football player, says: ‘To kind of be realistic, I might not—there is a *tiny* possibility for me to start playing for a super-team that everybody knows. But maybe I can play for the first team in the club I play for now, and then have another job on the side’. However, whether talking with apparent humility or boldness, the boys who are invested in sports, clearly state that they desire professional careers.

When talking about their future in sports, the boys often use the Norwegian word *satse*, which means ‘bet’ and, in the context of doing sports, is translated to ‘going all in’. Amund, when asked what he wants to be when he grows up, answers that: ‘I want to be an architect. And I want to go all in on either cross-country skiing or orienteering. I want to train and study. Study in order to become an architect and train in order to go all in.’ He also plays an instrument in a youth orchestra, but he says that he wants to quit soon, because he has decided that music is not what he wants to ‘go all in’ on. The term ‘satse’ or ‘going all in’ encompasses ambitions of becoming as good as one can be, becoming a professional athlete, investing in and prioritising a particular sport and training with the primary aim to be excellent. It also encompasses a risk. *Satsing*, translated as ‘betting’, also indicates ‘stakes’. Prioritising one activity over others implies, as we saw above, letting other activities go.

Although talk of going all in is common among boys in all four sites, it is most common in the wealthy urban neighbourhood. Here, it becomes particularly clear how tightly the all in-narrative is entangled with professionalization. Many young people growing up here share similar stories about expensive equipment, costly trips to exciting international destinations and access to key resources that, in different ways, aid their professionalization projects. Jonas, for instance, aims to become a professional tennis player and talks at length about how his success depends on hard work, not only talent

and ability. Yet external circumstances beyond his individual grit contribute to his potential future success: he has his own tennis coach in southern Europe where Jonas's family have a holiday house. Kristian comes from a family whose members are all active in both alpine skiing and mountain bike racing. He has several expensive bikes and talks at length about various brands. He plans to create an Instagram account dedicated to his biking to get sponsors:

> Now, I'll create a new profile on Instagram, one that is open, as I'll try to get sponsored by a firm that dad's mate is the CEO of. I want to only show biking there. And perhaps get some sponsorships deals. That would be cool. Then I can post stuff there if I do really well or have very good photos.

Kristian's idea to get sponsors—and the fact that he has family connections to a company that might sponsor him—testifies to the abundant economic and social resources surrounding him. That the professionalization of youth sports has already set in at ages 12 and 13 years is thus reflected in young people such as Kristian, who is aware of his possibilities and remarkably strategic about how to achieve his aim of becoming a professional athlete.

The high valorization of sports achievement among boys shapes the self-understanding of other young people—including those who do not necessarily think of themselves as aspiring athletes. Øyvind played tennis for five years but quit a year ago as he felt that he was not good enough, and all the others on the team had become better than him: 'The others started to surpass me a bit. They were good, so then I felt a bit excluded'. However, he wants to be really good in any sport that he does; otherwise, he insists, there is no point in doing it: 'If I am to play a sport, I have to do that one sport full time. I want to be really good in one thing. I don't want to be pro, but I want to be

good at it'. Øyvind, although he realises that he is not good enough to make it as an athlete, wants to go 'all in', or not play at all. Talk of going all in does not necessarily create more athletes, but it does seem to possibly induce the ambition and the will to at least try in young boys. Particularly in highly achievement-oriented subcultures, talk like this may indicate a logic holding that leisure activities are only worthwhile if they might lead to professional or semi-professional careers. This logic, as I will go on to show, is deeply gendered.

Girls aiming for skills development

Anine, who describes her first encounter with handball as falling in love, appears to be genuinely driven in her descriptions of her day-to-day practices. She loves both competition and her own skills development, and these aspects of sports are important motivations for her. For example, she states that she loves physical education: 'It is the speed, and [I have] a bit of a competitive instinct'. Despite her competitive instinct, she describes her ambitions merely in terms of 'develop[ing as a player] and g[etting] a better understanding of the game'. Noticeably compared to the boys' talk about their relationships with sports, the girls do not talk about wanting to become professional athletes or going all in. Anine is typical of the girls in what is *not* in her narrative: instead of wanting to become a professional, she states that she merely likes to develop as a player.

Only one girl explicitly talks about going all in and thinking about pursuing a professional career. Janne plays both handball and football and had recently chosen to quit the school band as 'it was too much for me with handball and football and baton twirling'. She chose handball as she 'always thought that 'it is fun to watch handball and play handball, so that is all really. And then I also want to become really good at it'. She goes so far as to state that 'I have always wanted to play handball. I actually want to

go all in a bit'. Even Janne, the only girl who explicitly talks about investing deeply in a sport, adds 'a bit' after this statement.

Although the opportunity structures in sports are not equal in Norway, handball is perhaps the sport – apart from skiing – where women may dominate professionally to the same extent as men; handball is even thought of as a 'typical women's sport' (Von der Lippe 2002). Thus, for girls like Janne and Anine, there ought not to be fewer opportunities to become professional athletes than for boys. Nevertheless, to the extent that the girls want to become professional athletes, they express that desire not at all, or in highly subdued terms. For example, Karoline, an active alpine skier, tells the interviewer that she wants to continue her upper secondary education in a sports programme. When asked if she has any worries about the future, Karoline clearly communicates skiing's importance to her. She answers that she worries that 'by 2030, the temperature may have increased 1.5 degrees Celsius, and then the snow may disappear—and it won't be possible to go skiing. Perhaps one can create fake snow with a snow canon—I don't know?', she ponders. Her worries regarding climate change, however realistic, centre on her future skiing possibilities, indicating her motivations and dedication to the sport. These worries are in stark contrast to her modest wishes for her future in skiing: she wants to attend an athletics programme in higher education, but her ultimate aim—at least the one she tells the interviewer—is to become a personal trainer at a gym.

Moreover, the girls have different ways of talking about being the best than the boys. For example, Synnøve, who plays handball and football, explains that she is highly dedicated to both sports and enjoys 'that sense of skill when you score a goal or are really good in defence, or it is really cool to get that feeling of "I really nailed this"'. She gets that feeling 'a lot', she says, 'particularly when I play handball as one scores so

many goals there'. She plays on the best teams for the handball and football clubs. Nonetheless, her reflections on elitism in youth sports emphasize the quality of niceness rather than ambition:

> It is no fun if the first team meets the second team, and they beat you. It is not nice; you don't get a good feeling at all. I also think it is wrong to define teams in terms of first and second, as someone will always be better than others, and I think they ought to split it differently. Because otherwise, someone will be left with that bad feeling of giving it all for the sport, and then they won't get anything back. And that is not very nice for them.

Synnøve's self-presentation as skilled and competitive as long as it does not hurt others' feelings is typical of how the girls talk, and it is also a typical feminine way of expressing oneself. U.S. research has shown that adult women are reticent to promote themselves (Smith and Huntoon 2014), and gender stereotypes influence the interests of children as early as 6 years old, a time when children start to connect brilliance to boys rather than girls (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017). In the light of this, it is notable that Synnøve and the other girls in this study who have grown up in a more gender-equal country than the U.S. may be in an in-between position. They do not self-promote their ambitions, but they do not hide that they are skilled. Instead, their self-narratives simultaneously accommodate traditional gender norms of niceness and moderate ambitions and present themselves as skilled and competent.

Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to contribute to the field of gender and youth sports by investigating how gender shapes young Norwegian boys' and girls' sports interests and ambitions. The findings from this study suggest that although boys' and girls' sports

investment is similar in key aspect – time spent training and their emotional investment in their sport – there is a clear gender difference in how boys and girls talk about their ambitions within their sports. Boys highly invested in sports explicitly state that they want to become professional athletes, whereas the girls equally invested do not despite their similar sports investments. This finding is supported by studies from other comparatively gender equal countries. Ekengren et al (2020) find that professional athletes in Sweden portray themselves and their careers in equally gendered terms: whereas male players are singularly revolved around performance, female players' narratives shift between different plots of discovery, relations, and performance. The women saw their careers as 'unstable and were several times ready to quit because of limited opportunities (e.g. money), female role models, and … seeing sport as a 'project of youth'' (Ekengren et al. 2020: 607). In the following, I discuss the possible reasons for and the consequences of the boys' and girls' different accounts of their ambitions.

Where do the differences in boys' and girls' ambitions and hopes for the future come from? The young people studied are positioned in the midst of the organizational shift from mass sports to increasingly professionalized youth sports. They are therefore likely receiving ample signals from adults that they have to get serious and choose a sport (Johansen and Green 2019). Although there are no reasons to claim that boys receive more encouragement to choose to become more serious with their sports, girls' greater developmental maturity at 12 and 13 years old might make them more realistic about their future sports careers.

Moreover, the ways in which the boys and girls self-narrate are likely to be shaped by the deeply gendered nature of distribution and representation in Norwegian sports (Von der Lippe 2002; Lie and Rognerud 2018). How we form and narrate ourselves is restricted by past and present cultural signs informed by gender, social class

and life history (Thomson 2011; Ricoeur 1991). Observing mostly male professional athletes in the media or having experiences of inequality in distribution, such as more financial support for the boys' sports, are significant threads that contribute to making up the fabric of the cultural narratives of gender in sports. As boys and girls talk so differently about the futures they envision within their sport, despite the fact that their sports investments are so similar, it is likely that they have internalized the possibilities presented to them by their culture, shaping their self-understanding and ambitions (see e.g. Skrubbeltrang 2019).

What consequences might these different ways of being ambitious or professing ambition have for boys and girls? Just as cultural narratives contribute to shaping self-narratives, the stories the young boys and girls tell about themselves also shape themselves and others (Ricoeur 1991). The stories people tell about themselves shape the way they think of themselves, but they also have an impact on how others view them. In an internal logic of sports, gendered narratives may push more girls than needed to drop out of sports if those with potential are not recognized. The limited resources in mass sports (Helle-Valle 2008) are most likely to go to those who show not only the most potential but also a strong determination to go all in. Consequently, if girls do not state any particular ambitions, they might be given limited practical possibilities, resources and support as the absence of expressions of ambitions may be misjudged and used to legitimize granting sports organisations fewer resources. In this perspective, boys come out the winners.

When considering the consequences of this gendered narrative for youths' lives, it is relevant to go beyond the internal sports argument. Investing much in sports at a young age, as these boys and girls do, is likely to prove beneficial to their physical health and development, especially in supportive climates (Holt and Neely 2011).

However, *satsing*, translated as ‘betting’, also indicates ‘stakes’. As the study has shown, both boys and girls prioritise sports at some cost to the time they may spend with friends, family or doing homework. These young people are at a stage when the demands of life may seem overwhelming. In the West, rapidly increasing mental health issues among youths have been related to constant, relentless infringements of youths’ well-being (Eriksen forthcoming). Young people feel a strong pressure to succeed in aspects of life that are possible to measure, such as education but also sports, and not succeeding constitutes a personal failure (Eriksen 2020).

In this context, it is vital to acknowledge that realistically, not many boys will make it to the top—even though constant reiteration of the all-in narrative may increase the pressure on individual boys to join. As Seippel, Dalen, Sandvik and Solstad (2018) argued, talent development has negative consequences for those who do not make it. Both the young people and their families spend much time and resources on sports, forsaking ‘friends, family, and education preparing for something that is likely not going to happen’ but is likely to leave them ‘humbled, frustrated, and disappointed’ (Seippel et al. 2018: 677). For those who make it, an athletic career may not come without sacrifices as research has shown that injuries to the body and the self accompany health compromises and unreasonable risk (Walk 2004). The girls’ arguably more realistic understanding of their own possibilities thus might save them regret, disappointment and wastes of time and resources.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how gender shapes young people’s sports interests and ambitions through the kinds of stories the boys and girls tell about their relationships with sports. The data show that there is a clear gender gap in youths’ sports ambitions. Among the young people with high levels of sports investments, almost only boys

explicitly state that they want to become professional athletes, even though the boys and girls in this group are mostly alike. While previous research has shown that there is a gender segregation of boys and girls into different arenas in leisure (Eriksen and Seland 2019), these findings suggest that gender segregation also exists in terms of ambition. Both boys and girls may suffer consequences from their differences in professing ambitions of becoming a professional athlete: in a sports-internal logic, the girls may draw the short straw – but in a more holistic view of youth life, it may be the boys.

The fact that this discrepancy in boys' and girls' ambition is so palpable even in Norway, where youth sports participation is about equal, refutes the notion that equal participation rates will lead to or create gender equality in relation to identity, motivation and aspirations. It is highly likely that this gender difference in professed ambitions may be identified in less gender-equal countries as well. This has implications for future research on gender equality in sports as it suggests that even as gender equality in participation rates is increasing in Western countries, it does not automatically follow that gender equality in terms of possibilities within sports will increase accordingly.

The results do not reveal any differences between the girls who participate in sports that are relatively speaking well-represented in Norwegian media and have many female role models (e.g. handball and cross-country skiing) and the girls who participate in sports where women are less well-represented sports (e.g. football). This may be interesting to pursue in future research. In addition, the importance of social resources is beyond the scope of this paper, but the results raise the question of the importance of well-connected, wealthy parents in making possible dreams of athletic careers. To assess whether these self-narratives at 12 and 13 years old have consequences as the youths grow older, it is vital to follow the same young people over

time. In particular, future research and practitioners should focus on youth sports at the intersection of gender and social resources, paying attention to internal as well as external sports issues.

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