

# Playing without goals: gendered practices in recreational youth football

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Word count (excluding title page, abstract and key words): 7990

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## Abstract

Participating in sports is a highly valued part of growing up in the Western world. This is especially true in the Scandinavian countries, where the voluntary sports organizations are closely connected to the welfare state. Paradoxically, sport is also an institution in which gender essentialism is prominent, even in gender-equal Scandinavia. Based on fieldwork in two football teams for 15-year-old girls in Norway, I explore girls' experiences of gendered practices at different analytical levels. At the *interpersonal* level, gender was present in everyday interaction and how female players were understood as inferior to male players. At the *structural* level, such perceptions of gender-based differences were reflected in the allocation of the clubs' resources. At the *cultural* level, differences were reinforced and legitimized by essentialist ideas of vulnerable, feminine girls and athletic, masculine boys. The gendered practices on the different levels mutually reinforce each other, with the consequence that girls' participation in sport is devalued, both from the girls' and the sport organization's perspective. Revealing this circular process could improve our understanding of the reproduction of an essentialist gender regime in football. The findings also indicate limitations for implementing welfare policy through the gendered institution of sport.

*Keywords:* football; youth sport; gender; sports participation; leisure

## Introduction

### Youth sport in the welfare state

In the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, voluntary community sports clubs are the most prominent organizations for children and youth (Alsarve, 2018; Anderson, 2008; Hanstad, 2011). Here, sport is largely publicly funded and closely connected to the welfare state (Hedenborg, 2019). Both the state and the sports organizations pursue the common goal of 'Sport for all' (Green, Sigurjónsson, & Skille, 2019). In Norway, the national context for this article, sport has been assigned a key role in promoting social inclusion, physical activity, and democratic principles (Skille, 2010). The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF), the umbrella organization that organizes all national sport federations and sports clubs, has a near monopoly on access to public funding for physical activity (Hanstad, 2011). Children and youth are seen as the main target group for the state's sports policy (Meld. St. 26., 2012), and NIF is the largest organization for children and youth (Hanstad, 2011).

At the same time as sport is assigned a role as promotor of the welfare state's values and principles, including gender equality (Rafoss & Breivik, 2012), gender as a defining premise is still central in sport (Cooky & Messner, 2018). According to Messner (2011), no other institution has created and promoted gender-essentialist beliefs in categorical differences between male and female to the same extent as sport. This is illustrated by sex segregation practices, for instance how girls and boys often train and compete separately, (Eliasson, 2011; Cooky & Messner, 2018), media and cultural representation (Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015), and access to sports facilities (Jeanes et al., 2020; Pavlidis, 2018). The gendering of sports organizations and clubs also applies to Norway (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019), despite the country having been declared one of the most gender-equal in the world (*The Global Gender Gap Report 2016*, 2016). The paradox of, on one hand, sport

organizations' role as a promotor of welfare policy and, on the other, the gender-essentialist ideas that dominate sport has received little attention (Alsarve, 2018). In this article, I seek to address this paradox, by examining how gender essentialism is still reproduced in the largest youth organization in a gender-equal country and the role youth themselves play in this process. Participating in sport is a normalized part of growing up in Norway as 93% of all children and youth participate in organized sport at some time (Bakken, 2019). While recruitment to organized sport for children is about the same for Norwegian boys and girls, there is an increasing gender gap during the teenage years (Bakken, 2019). Increasing gender differences in participation in sport during the teenage years and the fact that this is the main target group of public sport policy points to studying girls in this age group.

In Norway, football (soccer) is the largest organized sport for both girls and boys (NIF, 2019). Despite the fact that more girls and women now play football, also in the international context, several studies show that gendered social relations remain significant forces of influence within the sport (Caudwell, 2011). Female players are still regarded as the 'other' and as less athletically competent (Clark & Paechter, 2007), while sociocultural processes normalize men's and boy's involvement (Skogvang, 2014), and a lack of financial and cultural support highlights barriers to women's participation (Kaelberer, 2019).

The combination of gendered influences in football and the sport's popularity across genders makes it a suitable case for studying how gendered practices might influence girls' experiences and participation. Building on ethnographic fieldwork examining two recreational football teams for girls, the study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What can teenage girls' everyday experiences tell us about gendered practices in football?

- 2) What can gendered practices in youth football teams tell us about the reproduction of gender-essentialist ideas within sport?

By studying everyday practices in local sport clubs, the article seeks to illuminate how processes on different analytical levels interact and reproduce sport as a gendered space for youth. Considering the role sport is assigned in official policy and the role it plays in the life of a majority of children and youth, it is important to understand how young girls experience and navigate gendered practices in sport.

### **Gendered practices in youth sport**

Previous studies of gendered practices in children and youth sport have found that feminine and masculine ideals are prominent. Drummond (2016) found that, even from the age of 5-6 years old, Australian boys distinguish between behavior they regard as appropriate or inappropriate for boys while taking part in sports. Showing certain emotions such as crying when losing were not seen as acceptable. Gendered ideals also affect boys and girls differently as regards to whether they perceive sport as a valued activity for them. When interviewing British youth about media representations of elite athletes, Metcalfe (2019) found that sport was seen as a normalized part of male life and identity, while it was not seen as a central part of girls' everyday life. In an American study, Daniels (2009) found that girls' perception of their own physical and athletic skills was influenced by how female athletes were portrayed in the media. The findings indicate that gendered ideals conveyed through cultural representations influence youth's sport practices and self-perception.

Eliasson (2011) highlights that children and youth are themselves active in creating and reproducing such gendered cultural ideals. In the Scandinavian context Fundberg (2003) followed one boys' football team from the boys were 11 to 15 years old. He analyzed

everyday interactions in the club as opportunities for adult men to socialize and communicate ideas of normality and masculinity to the boys. The boys themselves played an active part in this process. Masculine ideals were emphasized by verbally sanctioning behavior seen as deviant, such as for instance homosexuality, when boys asked other boys who sat too close to keep “fag distance” (Fundberg, 2003). Likewise, Eliasson’s (2011) study of one football team for boys and one for girls aged 11 to 12 years found that girls and boys were seen as inherently different in behavior, aggressiveness, and physical abilities and that these differences influenced how practice was organized and how the children behaved.

Several studies indicate that gendered cultural influences might have consequences for sport participation, also in the Norwegian context. When interviewing 81 13-year-olds from different areas of Norway, Eriksen and Stefansen (2021) found large gender differences in athletic ambitions. While the majority of the boys who participated in sport wanted to become professional athletes, this applied to very few of the girls. The authors argue that, even within the gender-egalitarian Norwegian context where boys and girls are recruited to sports at about the same rate, cultural narratives still shape young people’s self-understanding. Based on a nationally representative survey study in Norway, Skauge and Rafoss (2020) found the same gendered pattern of ambitious boys, on the one hand, and girls who are less motivated to participate in sport, on the other. While I study football, a sport that has historically been known to be particularly gendered, the literature presented above illustrates that gendered practices seem to apply across national contexts and sports. Therefore, the findings from one sport such as football should be viewed in relation to other sports.

### **Understanding gendered practices in sports: three analytical levels**

Inspired by critical feminist theory and especially Raewyn Connell, “gender” in this article refers to a social structure understood as “large scale patterns in relationships among people

and groups, and the persistence of these patterns through time” (Connell, 2021, p. 73). A central point for Connell, is that gender as both practice and structure should be studied in its historical context. Understanding social structures begins by analyzing institutions, as all institutions incorporate a specific pattern of gender relations. This institution specific pattern is what Connell (1987) refers to as “gender regimes”. Gender regimes are part of wider social patterns on the macro-level, which can be referred to as the “gender order” of society (Connell, 1987). The gender regime will often to a certain degree correspond to the larger gender order, but might also deviate from it. How gender is understood within a specific institution and within society at large influences people’s relations, praxis, identity, and ideas. This does not imply that individuals are passive within the gender regime and gender order they are a part of, but that they are active agents that can both adhere to and resist ideas of gender that they are exposed to (Connell, 2002).

Connell’s perspective has received its share of criticism. One critique is that Connells social theory of gender takes for granted men’s global dominance over women and make this its primary focus of analysis (Demetriou, 2001). According to Demetriou, this implies determinism as the dominated have limited or no opportunities to affect the current gender order or gender regime. Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) propose that such critique derives from not taking into consideration how central the notion of practice and human agency is in Connells theory, especially related to the concepts gender regime and gender order. These concepts are essential to understand the relationship between structural constraints and human agency as they highlight the contextual and historical elements underpinning specific gender orders and gender regimes.

In this article, I analyze gendered practice on different analytical levels, as separate, but also parallel and intertwined processes. I study the gender regime within recreational youth football as an example of the gender regime within sport. As described in the background

section, this gender regime deviates from the gender order in the otherwise gender-equal Scandinavian welfare states. Cooky and Messner's (2018) notion of "the unevenness of social change" refers to how social change in the form of increased female participation in sport may be paralleled by a continuity of gender inequality within sport. This description is highly applicable to the Norwegian context where despite being a gender-egalitarian society with high sports participation rates among girls, gender essentialism is still prominent in the sport institution's gender regime. Cooky and Messner propose that, to understand the process of uneven change within sport, three levels of analysis can be applied: 1) the personal and interpersonal level, 2) the structural level, and 3) the cultural level. I take cue from this perspective and structure my analysis accordingly. This must be understood as an analytical approach, since the levels are intertwined and connected.

The personal and interpersonal level refers to everyday "doing" and "undoing" of gender (Cooky & Messner, 2018). This implies studying individual everyday practices. Fundberg's (2003) study reveals how masculine ideals are transferred from adult men to young boys in interaction on and around the football field. The structural level of analysis focuses on the specific institutional context, and includes the sports organization's gendered division of labor, power, and resources (Cooky & Messner, 2018). One example is how female sport club members may have limited access to facilities such as playing fields (Jeanes et al., 2020). The third analytical level is the cultural level. This level refers to shared beliefs, ideologies, and mediated symbols (Cooky and Messner, 2018). As Metcalfe's (2019) study described, such shared beliefs can be seen in how adolescents assign different value to participation in sports according to gender.

The different levels of analysis are intertwined. Culture impacts individual behavior and how institutions are organized. At the same time, individuals have agency when responding and acting within a specific institutional and cultural context. Investigating gender means



investigating how people understand, relate to, and behave within a specific context. Practice and agency are essential in feminist gender theory as coined by Connell, as it opens up for seeing the connection between the micro level and the structural macro level (Ferree, 2018). As structure is present in everyday practice, structure is also open to changes through practice (Connell, 1987). In accordance with this perspective, my concern is how gender is practiced in the selected clubs and by the girls themselves, and the implications these practices might have for reproducing or challenging the gender regime. Cooky and Rauscher (2016) note that there is a lack of empirical studies investigating how processes at the individual, structural, and cultural level interact and affect female sport participation. The aim of this article is to contribute to filling this gap.

## **Method and analysis**

### **Research design and context**

The two sport clubs I examined differ on significant parameters such as organization, purpose, size, and standing in the local community. Ringsville Sport Club<sup>1</sup> is located in a municipality with fewer than 10 000 inhabitants. It offers several sports, with football being the most popular. The club organizes football teams at most age levels for both males and females, including adult men's and women's teams that play in local leagues. Its primary focus echoes the Norwegian Sports Federation's slogan "Sports joy for all." In contrast, Center Sports Club is located in a larger town. Although Center organizes football for most age levels, its ambition is to be represented at the highest national level for both men and women. Center devotes significant attention and resources to recruiting and developing youth players who can later play at senior level. The two different approaches to youth sport reflect the

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<sup>1</sup> All names are fictional. Minor details have been changed to prevent identification. The presentation is based on information from club websites and other official documents available through the Norwegian Football Federation.

conflicting views in the Norwegian public debate on how to strike a balance between the development of elite athletes, on the one hand, and mass participation, on the other (Helle-Valle, 2008). This was an important reason why the two different clubs were selected. While the clubs have different goals, both teams are oriented toward football as an enjoyable leisure activity for everyone. Both clubs can be said to support football for girls as they have three training sessions a week, use accredited coaches, and play matches in local leagues.

At both clubs, I followed one team of girls aged 14–15 years from 2018, through two football seasons. I observed during training, matches, one tournament, and team meetings, and interviewed the head coaches and a selection of players. Thirty-eight field sessions were conducted, 23 in Ringsville and 15 in Center. The approach is ethnographic fieldwork. This method has the advantage of observing interactions directly while also ascertaining how informants talk about and understand the field of study (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). My purpose was to observe and thoroughly describe everyday life in recreational football for girls. I used an open approach and wrote down as much as possible of what happened in a chronological, descriptive, and detailed manner. An open ethnographic approach when studying institutions that youth participate in opens up for revealing what actually happens in practice, as this might not be in line with intentions described in policy and ideals (Gilliam & Gullø, 2017). This is especially beneficial when studying children and youth, as it enables them to have a clearer voice in research (Leonard, 2016).

The interview guide was prepared based on previous research, the project's research questions and observational data. The main topics included: 1) training and everyday life, 2) the football season, 3) the club, coaching, and the coaches, 4) general interest in football, and 5) gender in football. All of the players who were present during the first period of fieldwork were asked to participate in interviews. Eight players from each team were interviewed, 10 of them before changes were made to the way the teams were organized between the first and

second seasons. The same 10 were interviewed a second time. Accordingly, 26 interviews were conducted with 16 informants. The study was conducted in accordance with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data's ethical guidelines.

The semi-structured individual interviews lasted for between 30 and 70 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I introduced gender as a topic by asking the girls whether they watched football matches on TV and, if so, if they watched both men's and women's teams. In all interviews, this led to the informant describing differences between men's and women's football, and it was easy to ask other gender-related questions. These questions included: 1) whether they ever played football with boys, and if there were any differences between playing with boys as opposed to girls, 2) their thoughts about the conditions for female players in elite football, and 3) if they thought that girls and boys in youth sport were being treated differently and whether they had any experience of this themselves.

I used NVivo to code the transcribed interviews and field notes thematically based on the overarching fields of interest of the study. These included everyday life, gender, social relations, physical activity, sport participation, and local club organizing. While writing reflective notes, I also revisited small excerpts of these data and added new thematic codes within this category. The new thematic codes added for the category 'gender', were: 1) body and biology, 2) puberty, 3) comparisons between boys and girls, 4) gender differences, and 5) gender discrimination.

## **Findings**

In this section, I explore the gender regime in football through gendered practices in youth football teams on different analytical levels. I present the levels separately but draw connections between them when discussing the findings. The intertwining between the

different levels is essential to understanding how gender essentialism is reproduced within sport (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

### **The individual level**

The individual level includes the everyday ‘doing’ of gender. This includes interaction and how individuals talk about and understand gender (Cooky & Messner, 2018). All 16 players interviewed made gender-related remarks about skills and playing styles. When asked if girls and boys played differently, they identified speed, strength, and technical skills as examples of advantages boys had over girls. Based on these differences, the majority concluded that boys, in general, were better football players. This understanding also had an impact on their own ambitions. Sofie, one of the most skilled and eager Ringsville players, was clear in her reasoning when asked about the differences.

Sofie: The boys are better than the girls are, in general. And it’s more—at least I think so—exciting to watch the boys.

Interviewer: How are they better? Are they better at dribbling, are they faster, or what makes them better?

Sofie: They’re physically stronger. And they are better to watch. It’s much more serious in boys’ football. That’s why I’m not going to make a living from playing football.

Interviewer: Because?

Sofie: It’s not special when it’s girls’ football.

In this excerpt, Sofie links boys’ physical strength to why they are better football players than female players. She also relates these physical differences to why boys’ football is more interesting to watch and “more serious”. Because she believes girls’ football is not as “special” as football for boys, she does not intend to pursue football as a career. Of the 16

girls who were interviewed, 13 said they watched football matches. Of these, 10 stated that they only watched men's matches because they found them more entertaining than women's matches. Previous studies have found that women's elite football is less valued than men's (Kaelberer, 2019). Cooky and Rauscher (2016) argue that this notion might influence girls' participation in sport and how they understand their potential for sport and physical activity. Sofie was not the only one who did not aim for a career within football. Of the 16 interviewed girls, only two said that they would be interested in pursuing a career within football. The findings are in line with Eriksen and Stefansen's (2021) study of gender differences in sporting ambitions among Norwegian teens across sports. The girls interviewed in my study implied that their lack of ambitions was related to their view of female football as "not special", as Sofie put it.

What the girls understood as limitations on female football players influenced peer interaction when playing football outside the football club. I asked whether they ever played sports with boys and if there were any differences when playing with boys as compared to girls. The most common experience was of playing with boys in physical education (PE) classes in school. Aina described it as more *fun* to play with boys, and she explained why.

Aina: [The boys] are not afraid to use force. So, you can push.

Interviewer: You can push back?

Aina: Yes. Unlike [when you play with] other girls who are more sissy-like. Or, I wouldn't say that they're sissies, but they don't have the same physique. [...] They are not used to playing so roughly.

Aina describes how the boys' physique leads to rougher play. She highlights this as a more "fun" style of playing, indicating two things. First, the boys' style of play is more valued. This

illustrates how the masculine style is portrayed as the norm within football's gender regime. Second, Aina portrays herself as capable of playing in the same way, but only when she plays with boys. She limits herself to a more feminine style of playing when she is playing with girls. Thus, she both distinguishes herself from other girls and highlights the hierarchy between the feminine and masculine playing style. This hierarchization between femininity and masculinity corresponds with findings from other studies of football (Fundberg, 2002; Hjelseth & Hovden; 2014) as well as findings from other male-dominated sports such as skateboarding (Bäckström, 2013).

The girls' stories from PE underscore how taking for granted differences related to physique and playing style influenced peer relations between boys and girls. Like Aina, Nora described herself as a girl who liked to play football the masculine way. She first explained that she thought girls were more afraid than boys "to use their body" in one-on-one encounters on the field. When I asked her if she was afraid to do the same, she replied "No!", laughed, and added:

If I win the ball from a boy in PE, then everyone's like: "Wow! You were beaten by a *girl!*" to the boy. So, the boy gets dissed, and I get no praise.

Nora's quote illustrates how it can be taken for granted amongst peers that boys excel over girls in football. This idea is so established that a boy who loses the ball to a girl gets dissed instead of the girl being acknowledged for her performance. All of the girls told more or less the same story about PE classes: Boys dominate because of their physique and aggressive playing style, and their superiority is taken for granted. Fagrell et al. (2012) contend that, when it comes to sports such as football, PE becomes a learning situation where masculinity

dominates and where girls, as a result, often become passive observers. This points to how the gender regime within football can spill over into peer relations in other arenas.

The view that female football players are inferior to their male counterparts is not new. It has been found in research on media representations of elite athletes (Ravel & Gareau, 2016; Kaelberer, 2019). The girls in this study participate in reproducing such beliefs, as most of them see girls as having limited potential as football players compared to their male peers. Instead of contesting the notion that female players have limited physical abilities, some of the girls described themselves as being capable of playing football in the most valued way: like boys. This illustrates how shared ideological beliefs, or the cultural level, are expressed through the individual “doing” of football.

### **The structural level**

Soon after starting my field work in Center, I heard stories about the girls being allotted limited resources compared to boys of the same age and skill level. Access to resources is an example of what Cooky and Messner (2018) refers to as the structural level. Lena, who attended school with boys from the club, offered an overview of the benefits given to her male classmates.

Lena: The boys get to travel to London and get lots of money from the club, and stuff [like that]. We don't get that. And they get to train indoors and have priority at indoor training, on the heated pitch [during winter], and we don't.

Interviewer: Because you train outside now [in late November]?

Lena: We train outside now. They do as well, but when winter comes, and after the New Year, they get to train inside every day, and we only get one day [a week], and there's a lot of those sort of things. And they get lots of sponsored clothes and new jerseys, and we have to pay for everything ourselves, so [I've noticed] a lot of differences already.

They get to go to training camps and lots of stuff [like that]. I think that's strange.

This story, with different details, came up in all the interviews with the Center girls except one. In a later interview with Wilma, I learned that, because of the lack of indoor training facilities in winter, the girls had several practices cancelled due to weather conditions. Wilma also described how they would play on a field covered in ice, “making it impossible for us to play football properly,” while the boys played on the heated, ice-free, artificial turf next to them. Their head coach confirmed the girls' examples, adding that he was frustrated with how the club organized the girls' youth teams compared to the boys' teams. Both teams' coaches were critical of such instances where girls were treated unequally in relation to their male peers. Such experiences can be seen as an example of what Pavlidis (2018) refers to as “the spatiality of inequality”, meaning how sport is spatially gendered in terms of who has access to what, where, and when. Jeanes et al. (2020) found that more female representation and increased focus on gender equity did not necessarily challenge perceptions of the club as a space for male privilege. This was especially evident in the use of space and who had access to the best facilities.

In total, 10 informants described instances of gendered structural differences at their club. Three of the Ringsville girls linked gendered structural practices to coaching. They told me that the boys had “more serious”, paid coaches from an earlier age, whereas the girls' coaches were volunteer parents, suggesting that the club takes boys' football more seriously. Isabelle also described the boys' coaches as “stricter.” I asked her if she thought there was a reason for the boys' coaches being stricter. She shrugged and answered, “I don't know, maybe they think the boys have a better chance of making it as football players.” If Isabelle's assumption is correct, this can be understood as an expression of how unequal opportunities in elite sport (Skogvang, 2014; Kaelberer, 2019) influence what happens in youth sport. This can



also be seen as a structural expression of the view of female players as having limited potential. This impression of girls' football being taken less seriously was strengthened by Maja, who provided other examples from Ringsville.

Maja: [The boys] have training every day on the Astroturf, so they get the best hours, and then we get training at, like, 11:00 a.m. on Sundays. I'm not too happy about that. So that sort of stuff. Yes. Example: We were training at the grass field, and there were two goals. We divided the field [between the girls' and boys' teams], and that was fine. And we had one goal, and the boys had the other one. And then suddenly they had, like, a "claim" on [ironic voice] the other goal as well, because they were supposed to play a training match within the team. [Rolls her eyes, and the interviewer laughs.]

Interviewer: Their coach said that?

Maja: The other team's coach was like, "No, the boys are entitled to that goal because they have a game tomorrow."

Interviewer: Did they get the goal?

Maja: Yes. [Sighs].

Maja describes a coach explicitly stating that the boys should be given priority, even when doing so directly affects the girls' opportunity to play the sport the way it is supposed to be played, namely with proper goals. Who occupies what space and how can be understood as expressions of social relations (van Ingen, 2003). Van Ingen (2003) points to how those with less power or privilege in a specific field tend to be relegated to less desirable environments. Gendered practices in everyday interactions when it comes to the use of space and facilities clearly communicate where the priorities lie (Jeanes et al., 2020).

While girls in both clubs gave concrete examples of gendered practice at the structural level, such as access to facilities and resources, it appears that the differences were greater at Center, where elite teams generate commercial income. Previous research into how ideas of gender might influence the organizing of sport has primarily focused on elite and/or adult athletes (Clark & Paechter, 2007; Scraton, Caudwell & Holland, 2005). According to Messner and Musto (2016), we are only now starting to understand how social processes still limit and marginalize girls in sport. This issue is a major public concern because sport, especially in the Nordic region, is seen as a meaningful part of growing up (Hedenborg, 2019). Pavlidis (2018) criticizes research on gender relations in sport for failing to consider facilities in analyses of how women and girls experience inequality in sport. These girls' experiences support the argument that this is an important aspect. To understand these structural practices, requires a closer look at the cultural level as well.

### **The cultural level**

The cultural level, such as shared gendered beliefs, symbols and ideologies (Cooky & Messner, 2018) was frequently expressed through interpersonal communication. The girls were often literally surrounded by boys practicing at the same time. On several occasions, the boys' presence gave rise to a discussion of the differences between coaching boys and coaching girls. At a field session in Ringsville, Assistant Coach Edward and I were watching the girls do a drill. Suddenly, I heard loud shouting from the other half of the field, and I shifted my attention to a male coach leading a practice session for seven-year-old boys:

The coach shouts commands and comments to the boys, who are running around doing a drill. His voice is audible over the whole field while he shouts, "Hey! What are you doing? Run as if you're at football practice!" to a little boy who is walking to collect a

ball that's rolled off the field. I'm quite shocked at the way he's communicating with the children. "I wish I had a remote to tune that out," Edward suddenly says. I'm not sure what he means, but I assume he's noticed me watching the other coach, and I ask if he's referring to him. "Yes, he's exhausting ...." Brigit [the female head coach] adds, "Yeah, you talk to girls at that age very differently." She uses a high-pitched, enthusiastic voice: "Come on! Let's do cartwheels!" Edward and I laugh. "Yeah, if not, it would be empty here," Edward replies, pointing to the girls. (Field notes, training, April 11, 2018)

In this example, the coaches note what they perceive as differences between the nature of boys versus girls and what these differences imply in terms of coaching and communication styles: Girls require a high-pitched, enthusiastic voice coaching them and room to try out other activities during football practice. LaVoi et al. (2007) argue that discourses on the practice field can strengthen stereotypes and amplify a gender-binary way of thinking, which can affect both boys and girls. The idea that shouting aggressively at little boys is not as problematic as it would be for girls can amplify the pressure on boys in sport and limit the motivation of those who do not respond well to this type of communication. In the excerpt, Edward seems critical of this communication style in general, not just towards girls. At the same time, both Edward and Brigit can be said to highlight the communication style as *especially* problematic when directed at girls. Treating players on the field differently based on a naturalized view of gender can strengthen and construct differences between boys and girls (Eliasson, 2011; Messner, 2011). The fact that coaches in both clubs pointed to a need for different communication styles when working with girls fits with previous studies that have found an established idea that there is a difference between *coaching* and *coaching girls*. Literature directed at youth coaches presents coaching boys as the norm, whereas coaching

girls is a challenge due both to social factors and to girls' physiques (Grahn, 2014; LaVoi et al., 2007).

Highlighted differences were not limited to the social aspects of coaching. At my first practice with Center, I met Assistant Coach Einar. While the girls were warming up, I asked Einar if the warm-up drill they were doing was a common practice. He confirmed that it was, and that the girls played less often than boys, which meant that practices had to include as much "ball contact" as possible. To my surprise, he then started to explain how puberty had a negative effect on girls' football skills and their physicality in general.

He said that girls develop [physically] until they're about 14 years old, when they stagnate. "You see them hitting records at that age that they're unable to beat later because of hormones and stuff. It's the opposite for boys. Testosterone gives [the body] strength, while estrogen breaks [it] down." (Field notes, training, April 27, 2018)

This statement surprised me and made me curious about how the coaches talked about physical differences between girls and boys. When I interviewed Ringsville's Head Coach Brigit a few weeks later, she voiced a similar opinion, but in a more nuanced manner. She recounted telling the girls and their parents at a meeting years earlier that, after the girls turned 12, their bodies would undergo changes that could negatively affect their performance, but that such changes were normal and temporary.

Although the examples illustrate how coaches might be involved in reproducing gendered cultural beliefs about the problematic female body during puberty, it is important to note that the coaches themselves are influenced by the same gendered culture. Such statements echo findings from studies of the coaching literature. In textbooks for coaches, puberty is often referred to as a critical time for athletes, when testosterone makes boys

stronger and faster, while girls experience challenges and limitations (LaVoi et al., 2007).

This literature connects being an athlete to having a masculine, functional, and athletic body, an ideal that is contrasted to “problems” with girls’ bodies and physical development during puberty (Grahm, 2014). Messner (2011) found that, among coaches, this type of literature was referred to when they were asked to explain why they treated boys and girls differently.

The coaches illustrate how what happens on the individual level is connected to the cultural level: They describe a belief system in which female players are seen as different from male players. As discussed previously, such ideas are also expressed in media representations in a way that might influence girls’ perception of their athletic potential (Daniels, 2009). In other words, these ideas are present in our culture, also outside the context of the sport clubs. The local practice within sport clubs needs to be understood in this context. This belief system is also reflected at the structural level in how the clubs organize youth football for girls versus boys. How athletes and coaches understand girls as compared to boys and how local sport clubs allocate resources reinforce and confirm the established gender regime. If girls are regarded as second-order athletes within the sport, clubs can legitimize giving them fewer resources. If girls are given less desirable training times, equipment, and facilities, and fewer opportunities to practice their sport, their development as athletes is diminished, thus increasing the gap between them and their male counterparts. This cycle can confirm and reinforce the dominant discourse about female players’ limitations. Combined with limited access to resources, this may limit girls’ individual motivation to stay in and participate in a sport, and thereby legitimize continued unequal access to facilities and training. This circular process reproduces an essentialist gender regime within football, despite increased female participation.

## **Conclusion**

Based on fieldwork, I have described gendered practices in two football teams for 15-year-old girls in Norway. The girls' experiences point to how gendered practices on the individual, structural, and cultural level work in a circular way that reproduces an essentialist gender regime within football. Within this gender regime, it is permitted to let girls play without goals, both literally and figuratively. When girls are portrayed culturally as having limited potential on the football field and this is reflected structurally in their access to facilities and resources, this limits the objectives that are available to girls in relation to football. As highlighted by Cooky and Messner (2018), different analytical levels must be seen in relation to each other to understand how gender inequality in youth sport is still present despite growing female presence. The youth's own actions and assessments are essential to understanding how an essentialist gender regime is reproduced in youth sport. Leonard (2016) argues that children and youth have agency in the institutional orders they meet, and that this agency involves both resistance, acceptance, and transformation of the existing structures. The girls in this study are themselves active in reproducing the current gender regime, as they to a large degree accept the premise that female players have other (and limited) qualities and because they, understandably, allow their motives and participatory patterns within football to be shaped accordingly.

In a time when developed countries increasingly see sports as a solution to lifestyle diseases in the population, more countries seek policy inspiration from the Scandinavian countries as they have the highest sports participation rates in the world (Green et al., 2019). This study reveals how notions of gender permeate the institution of football on different levels, and how, despite a growing female presence, gendered hierarchies that limit girls are still being reproduced. This is also the case in Norway, despite sports organizations being seen as deliverers of the state's public health policy. Football has historically been a male-

dominated arena and may be an extreme case for studying gendered practices. In addition, only two clubs were studied here. On the other hand, both clubs have a formally stated vision that everyone who wants to participate should be included. Center even has an official policy to strengthen the club's activities for girls. There is no reason to expect these clubs to be worst cases as regards to gender equality. A recent study from Norway found that almost twice as many girls as boys reported opting out of youth sport due to a lack of opportunities within their club, indicating that this might be an issue across sports (Persson, Espedalen, Stefansen & Strandbu, 2019).

NIF receives substantial funding to keep *all* citizens physically active, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and social background (Meld. St. 26., 2012). Given this mandate, and the high number of girls in sports and strict laws concerning gender equality, it was surprising to find that, within the country's most popular sport for children and youth, it appears to be acceptable to create and/or sustain poorer conditions for girls – to let them play without goals. This indicates gender inequality in youth's access to publicly funded leisure activities. Such practices would not be accepted in other arenas in Norwegian society. If this happens in Norway, it is not unlikely that the findings here will also apply to other national contexts.

Cooky (2009) found that gendered differences in athletic aspirations were used by practitioners to explain why it was difficult to recruit girls to local sport clubs. The findings described here may help explain why girls' athletic aspirations limit their participation, and point to the importance of looking at gendered practices at different levels within as suggested by Cooky and Messner (2018). The findings indicate that measures taken to increase girls' participation in sport cannot just address recruitment or local sport clubs, but must also address gender inequality within elite sport, access to facilities, and cultural representations in general. According to Connells perspective, practice is always a response to a specific situation. Using the terms gender regime and gender order, helps illuminate how gendered

practices in youth sport is underpinned by a specific historical and cultural context within the institution of sport in general. How youth respond to and interact with the gendered practices they encounter at the individual, structural, and cultural level must be included to understand the reproduction of, and changes to, both specific gender regimes and the larger gender order. In sum, the intertwining of gendered practices on different levels within the *whole* institution of sport must be taken into consideration both by practitioners, policy makers and researchers when discussing gender differences in young people's sport participation.

*This work is part of the research project "Participation in Sports among Norwegian Youth", funded by Norwegian Social Research OsloMet, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Norwegian School of Sport Sciences.*



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