

# Multidimensional gender stereotypes in 21st century competitive sport in Hungary

Abstract of PhD Thesis

**Piroska Béki**

University of Physical Education  
Doctoral School of Sport Sciences



Supervisor:	Andrea Gál, PhD
Official reviewers:	Timea Tibori, CSc Anetta Müller, PhD
Chair of the final exam committee:	Ferenc Túry, PhD
Members of the final exam committee:	István Vingender, PhD Attila Szabó, DSc

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In present day Western societies, owing to the changes in gender roles, differences in the norms, values, forms of behaviour and activities that used to exist traditionally between men and women are much less apparent. Nowadays the participation of women in economy, politics, or generally on the labour market is more widespread and visible than ever; however, parallel to this 'conquest', we can witness another social process in the opposite direction: although not to the extent of females, but the emergence of males on traditionally feminine social terrains has also started. Throughout the 20th century, concepts of masculinity and femininity modified much more than the definition of biological sex, even though the development of medical science, particularly genetics has led to a number of related problems and solutions (sex chromosomes, atypical levels of sex hormones, the phenomenon of transsexuality, the possibility to do sex reassignment surgeries, etc.). These issues, along with the long-standing dilemma of gender equality-inequality (of opportunities) have all underlined the relevance of gender studies in Western social sciences.

The emergence of women and their increasing participation in competitive sport have made it clear that they are able to reach high levels of physical and psychological performance. Female athletes have proven (which had been proven by historical heroines earlier) that the 'weaker sex' can be stronger, braver, more enduring and more successful than a man, which has posed serious challenges to the centuries-long gender stereotypes. This is how sport became one of the main terrains of overcoming gender-related generalisations and how researchers and professionals were driven to deal with the relations of sport, gender and society. Nevertheless, comprehensive research focusing on the gender aspects of sport has been relatively scarce in Hungary.

In my dissertation, based on the existing literature and theoretical considerations, I formulated a theoretical model for the examination of gender stereotypes which are related to women and men participating in various kinds of sports. The dimensions incorporated in this model are related to various stereotypes in connection with women participating in sport, gender identities, sport socialization and gender roles. The given dimensions were then divided to further sub-units for better understanding, which analyse psychological factors, sexual orientation, feminine behaviour and appearance.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The topic and relevance of my dissertation, that is, the investigation of gender-related stereotypes in sport is primarily justified by the increasing number of women in all areas of competitive sport. On the one hand, the dissertation deals with exploring and analysing the points of connection between gender identity, sport socialization, sport selection, gender roles and stereotypes, and on the other hand, it extends to the examination of the experiences and attitudes of Hungarian female competitive athletes and future sport professionals. My objective was twofold: in the first, more emphatic and more extensive theoretical section I discuss the gender related theories which serve as a background for the professional, sport political and social judgement of female sport, their most often used concepts, research directions and the results of previous investigations in Hungary and abroad. In the second part of the dissertation, my empirical research is presented, which focused on the perceptions of women's sport and the gender stereotypes still existing today. My work primarily concentrated on women; however, since the two genders can only be understood in relation to one another, I reflect on men's sport and the related aspects as well.

In connection with the topic of my research, I formulated the following **hypotheses**:

1. By present day, the gender-related social acceptance of sports has changed in comparison with Metheny's categorization.
2. In the perceptions related to masculine sports and their participants no stereotypes can be observed, but the *raison d'être* of the female branches of traditional male sports which are characterised by a high level of aggression and extreme physicality is still questioned.
3. Stereotyping appears to a higher extent among men than among women, and the former are more strongly attached to traditional gender roles as well.
4. Among respondents with less qualified parents the gender stereotypes related to different sports are weaker than among those having parents with higher qualification.
5. Feminine sports are usually selected by the parents at the early age of their daughters, while masculine sports are typically chosen by the female athletes themselves, after trying a number of sports.

## **METHODS**

During my research I combined quantitative and qualitative methods, and applied a questionnaire-based survey and in-depth interviews.

### **Survey**

Since I did not have the opportunity to use a validated questionnaire that I could use for my research, I created a self-made questionnaire, which consisted of 19 questions, including open and closed-ended ones as well. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study; the pilot survey was conducted in 2012 among the students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Science of Semmelweis University, and included 100 participants. Following this, the survey was carried out in the 2013/2014 academic year with the participation of students enrolled in higher education programs related to physical culture (N=1107). The questionnaires were distributed in all of these institutions, in all years, in BSc and MSc programs as well. The results of the survey were processed by mathematical-statistical methods. To verify the hypotheses, two-sample t-tests, chi-square tests and stereotype indexes were applied, whereas to analyse and present the results coming from the various questions, text clouds were used.

### **Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

The semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out in order to explore the subjective opinions of female elite athletes. Between 2012 and 2016, national level female athletes involved in traditionally masculine and feminine sports (N=98) were interviewed about how they see their selected sport and female athletes themselves. During the elaboration of the semi-structured interview guideline I found it crucial to ask questions by which the dimensions of the research and the related hypotheses could be investigated. The questions that I planned to ask from all of my interviewees were precisely formulated, so that the answers could be compared with one another. The other part of the interviews consisted of the questions that emerged spontaneously throughout the conversations.

## **RESULTS**

In the presentation of the research results I synthesised the data coming from the two methods of data collection, and this is how the relations between gender and sport and the stereotypes in connection with the representatives of various sports were revealed. Following this, I undertook a comparative analysis based on the views of elite athletes involved in feminine and masculine sports related to their sport socialization, sport selection, gender identity and gender roles.

### **Connections between sport and gender in the mirror of stereotypes**

In my questionnaire I listed the sports included in the Olympic programme and, relying on Metheny's categorization from 1965, I was interested to see how much the perception of various sports has changed; which sports are regarded to be completely masculine (1), masculine (2), neutral or androgynous (3), feminine (4) or completely feminine (5). This was also needed because the answers to the questionnaire contributed to the sampling process of the interview research. The results are reflective of the Hungarian situation, as the popularity and the performance of various sports can also exert an influence on the perceptions. It also has to be taken into consideration whether it is the women's or the men's national team which is more successful in a given sport, since for example, in handball the female branch is performing better, which certainly affects its social acceptance. This sport, which was originally labelled as masculine appears to be androgynous in my research (3.1). In sports originally labelled as feminine or completely feminine, where male competitors did not appear for a long time, now it is possible to compete in teams, regardless of gender. According to the results, the stereotypical judgement has remained in connection with these sports.

Based on the evaluations on a Likert-scale, figure skating (1.9), synchronised swimming (1.4) and rhythmic gymnastics (1.3) were considered to be feminine, while heavy field athletics (4.2), wrestling (4.5), judo (3.9), football (4.0), boxing (4.4) and ice hockey (4.1) were viewed as masculine (Table 1.)

Table 1. Perception of sports based on the survey results (Likert-scale)

	Value	Sports
Feminine	1-2	figure skating, rhythmic gymnastics, synchronised swimming
Masculine	4-5	wrestling, judo, boxing, weightlifting, football, ice hockey, heavy field athletics
Androgynous	3	water polo, volleyball, handball, basketball, taekwondo, canoe, kayak, marathon running, pole vault, cycling, speed skating, rowing, cross-country skiing, biathlon, track and field, table tennis, tennis, badminton, gymnastics, triathlon, swimming, fencing, sailing, surfing, diving, equestrian, sprint, field hockey, archery, shooting modern pentathlon, bobsleigh, curling, luge, snowboarding, ski jumping

The evaluation of the situation of women's sport was measured by a Likert-scale, in which respondents had to give their opinion in connection with the equality of the sports of the two genders. The results indicate that the perception of women's sport varies: 21.8% of the respondents did not agree with the statement that female and male sports are completely equal. The largest proportion (45.1%) partly agreed with the statement, whereas one-fifth of the participants feel that the two fields are completely equal.

Based on the opinions of the respondents, from the sports included in the Olympic programme, they regarded boxing as the most masculine sport (31.8%), followed by weightlifting, heavy field athletics and wrestling. There are sports in which the respondents fully reject the *raison d'être* of the female version. The highest percentage of answers in this respect was given to weightlifting (30.8%) and boxing (22.7%), but from team sports football (11.7%) and ice hockey (11.1%) were considered as sports not appropriate for females. This result was also interesting because before the research I had expected that boxing would be seen as the least appropriate sport for women. Although it was indeed boxing which was regarded as the most masculine sport, the existence of the female version was questioned to a higher extent in the case of weightlifting. Thus, for future sports professionals these two sports seem to be the least acceptable for women.

To females competing in masculine sports and males competing in feminine ones stereotypes are attached, according to which those engaged in feminine forms of movement are representatives of femininity, whereas in masculine forms of exercise, masculinity is presented regardless of the gender of participants. Concerning one of the most traditionally masculine sports, football, I assessed answers to open-ended questions in connection with what expressions they characterise it with, and how they characterise women who are

involved in it. Based on the aforementioned Likert-scale, more than 80% of the respondents perceived football as masculine, 26.5% claiming that it was completely masculine. Similarly, women competing in football were mostly seen as masculine (43.7%), and as negative stereotypical answers, labels such as lesbian and aggressive also appeared, but even if to a much lower extent, positive attributes such as feminine (10.3%), enduring (8.7%), tough (6.9%) and skilful (7.2%) were also articulated.

The views of males engaged in masculine sports are the strongest and the most dismissive of the participation of women in masculine sports as well. In their words, the defence of masculine terrains which women have 'invaded' is clearly manifested. On the other hand, women competing in masculine sports are much more permissive in the cases of both genders. In their opinions they are more willing to accept and tolerate athletes who choose sports which are traditionally not considered as appropriate for them, regardless of their gender. The opinions of women participating in feminine sports are more dismissive compared to those involved in other sports. They find it harder to accept if a female chooses a masculine sport or a male chooses a feminine one.

In the case of football, it could be marked that while men lag behind women in terms of success, regarding viewership, the game of men is assessed as entertaining or very entertaining, female football is perceived as impossible to enjoy. At the same time, from the opinions about handball it turned out that the male and the female versions go 'head-to-head' with each other in such judgements, and among respondents both were claimed to be entertaining or very entertaining.

Women's ice hockey has emerged in Hungary only recently and counts as a new, upcoming branch inside the sport. Performances are still far behind the men's results, and this is also reflected in attendances. The results revealed that female ice hockey players may have to continue their struggles for recognition: future sports professionals find the men's game entertaining, but over half of them regard the female version impossible to enjoy. At the judgement of sports, water polo belongs to the neutral category. This can also be explained by the fact that although the female version is relatively young, achievements are improving. The play is perceived as very entertaining in the case of both genders. In the case of basketball, which, according to the results of the survey, is seen as a neutral sport, the play of men is regarded as very entertaining, but the enjoyment level of the female version could only reach the neutral level. This is also interesting because female teams have been more successful in

recent years on the international stage. The viewership of volleyball can mainly be connected to the gender of consumers. Although the female branch of the sport is becoming more successful, we can still remark that its increasing popularity is a matter of the decision of male sport consumers. While the male version is mostly seen as neutral in terms of entertainment, female volleyball is a preferred choice of viewers. It can be marked that even though this sport may also be more spectacular in the way men play it, the data show that it is still the women's game which they find more entertaining. Nevertheless, this might also be influenced by the general view that female volleyball players are pretty, which is even more emphasized by the tight jerseys and shorts they wear. Moreover, wearing skirts is also becoming more common, which will then articulate the femininity of the athletes even more.

I was also interested to explore how the female athletes themselves characterise their own sport, and how much this diverges from the opinions articulated by the students studying in sport related university programs. Both the respondents of the survey and the interviewees were therefore asked about their own sport and its representatives. In the case of every sport, competitors and future sports professionals emphasized the positives in connection with their own sport, although they were aware of the specificities which may cause negative views related to their sport. From these, I selected the ones that were in connection with the topic of my research.

Male and female respondents had very different opinions about combat sports, when they characterised the male and female competitors of their sport. In the interviews, women engaged in combat sports characterised their sport as technical, but masculine, which demands endurance, willpower and hard work. According to their views, the risk of injuries is lower here, since they use body protectors during trainings and matches. They are aware that they are engaged in a masculine sport which is socially less acceptable for women, but they think that the characteristics needed for success, such as the strong ability to fight and determination, make them more confident, and this helps them in their everyday life as well.

In wrestling, men see themselves as well-built, manly, handsome and muscular, whereas they characterised women as masculine, unattractive, broad-shouldered and dumb. Men participating in judo, ice hockey, boxing and weightlifting judged themselves as well-built, athletic, muscular and sporty, while women in the same sports were perceived as masculine, ugly, fanatical and energetic. They also claimed that there are very few feminine women among female ice hockey players, who compensate for this in a way that they dress in a



feminine way in their civil life. In the reverse case, women described the men in a similar manner, but they found their own appearance to be tasteful and pleasant. While men see female boxers as masculine, women see them as feminine.

Based on the interviews, women competing in feminine sports are proud that their sport is indeed among the most feminine ones. Rhythmic gymnasts are not much in favour of the idea that nowadays men also participate in the sport. According to their opinion this is rather funny than aesthetic. Nevertheless, they unanimously think that in order to achieve success in their sport, they have to train more than the average and with strong determination, which demands an extraordinary level of persistence.

The femininity of women participating in feminine sports is also reflected in everyday life; their slim figure, body posture and hairstyle all reveal the sport they do. Their attractive, feminine appearance and their inner characteristics, which are needed for success but are traditionally regarded as masculine, reflect some ambivalence.

The results of the survey indicate that opinions diverge in the three sports which are regarded to be feminine. From the athletes participating in these sports, only women were included in the sample of my research. According to my results, rhythmic gymnasts and synchronised swimmers think of themselves as pretty, graceful, feminine but teenage-figured and elegant, appropriately for their sport, but on the other hand, they label their male counterparts as simply feminine and homosexual. Figure skaters only characterised women participating in their sport; they see themselves as pretty and feminine. All in all, it can be remarked that in the feminine sports examined in the research, women judge the men involved in these sports in a negative way.

In order to reveal the gender stereotypes related to various sports, I applied a 26-item Likert-scale section in the questionnaire, with the help of which on the one hand, I analysed the answers to the individual questions, and on the other hand, I created a combined stereotype-index. (Answers to the items were standardized and then the standardized variables were merged into one variable. Finally, based on the distribution of this aggregated variable, the examined sample was divided into five equal parts.)

I also investigated how much the respondents regard some of the most popular sports (football, handball, basketball, volleyball, water polo and ice hockey) to be entertaining if they are played by women. Within this, I was also interested to see whether the gender

stereotypes related to these sports influence their assessment. Significant differences could only be found at football, water polo and ice hockey; the female versions of these sports are perceived as more entertaining by those with lower levels of stereotyping.

### **Early stages of gender socialization and sport socialization, specificities of sport selection**

Gender role behaviour in childhood and future sport selection are often interconnected. Therefore, as a first step I examined whether female athletes engaged in masculine or feminine sports differed in their childhood activities, and if yes, to what extent. Beforehand I thought that the childhood activities of women choosing masculine forms of movement can be characterised as masculine, whereas those choosing feminine sports would give an account of feminine activities. However, during the interviews, the athletes did not reinforce this assumption, as they did not recall remarkable differences in this respect. In both groups, the appearance of 'girlish' and 'boyish' games was equally characteristic in childhood, the latter mainly owing to the presence of a brother. In lack of a brother, early sport selection was defining; teammates influenced what to play in childhood. I did not find real 'tomboys' in any sport, as female athletes reported on a childhood game structure which cannot be stereotyped.

The importance of parental guidance in connection with sport socialization also came to the surface in my research, since the love of sport was present almost as a tradition in the families of all my interviewees. Parents were more permissive in connection with sport selection if the mother was engaged in masculine, or the father was engaged in feminine sports. In other cases they generally tended to select neutral or feminine forms of exercise for their daughters.

However, according to my results, mothers did not only 'pass on' their positive attitudes to sport to their daughters, but also their type of sport: Mothers of respondents engaged in feminine sports were involved in gymnastics, synchronised swimming, equestrian, basketball and ballet when they were younger, or they were not involved in competitive sport, only the father. On the other hand, with women participating in masculine sports, the mothers were most typically engaged in handball, but took part in other sports as well. With respect to feminine forms of exercise, it was always the parents, mainly the mothers, who chose the sport for their daughters, but it is not surprising, since, in order to reach the international level, one has to start these sports in early childhood. Masculine sports are of different nature in this regard, as these were chosen later, usually after trying other sports, with the exception of football, which appeared as the first sport in childhood, perhaps even chosen by the parents.

This was also characteristic of my interviewees; they all chose the various masculine sports after trying others, in many cases, against the will of their parents. Therefore, family support is much less apparent in this latter group. Thus, in terms of sport selection, major differences could be marked.

### **Opinions about gender roles**

Concerning gender roles my primary intention was to discover to what extent female athletes insist on patriarchal traditions or reject them. Since in Hungary, inequalities between the two genders are most articulate related to housework, in my research I asked the female representatives of different sports how much, according to their view, housework can be regarded as a woman's obligation, and how much they share duties with men in the household. Since rhythmic gymnasts and synchronised swimmers are very young, they do not manage their own household yet, so I also asked how much they consider the example they saw at home one to be followed. As it turned out from their answers, the majority of their parents pursue traditional roles, so most of the housework is done by women. The athletes investigated agree with this and see it as an example to follow, and even though they do not have their own household yet, in a relationship they would be willing to accept a 90%-10% distribution of work.

Female competitors shared similar views in every kind of sport; housework is primarily a female activity and they only share some duties with their spouses because besides work and sport they have less time to perform them. This is especially significant in cases when both people in the relationship are competitive athletes. Therefore, in the opinions related to gender roles, the respondents' type of sport was not reflected; it was rather the traditionally patriarchal approach of Hungarian women which could be marked.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In my dissertation, through the empirical research I conducted I presented the characteristics of the stereotypical perceptions of sports and sporting genders among future sports professionals. As I see it, the opinion of young people studying in sport related fields who constituted one of my samples, can be crucial in connection with how the recruitment of various sports will take place in the near and distant future. Preceding the empirical research I

reviewed the wide-ranging western literature along with the limited Hungarian literature and provided an overview of the theoretical background, and then formulated the theoretical framework related to the topic. These steps helped me in formulating my multidimensional model and my questions, and then to word my hypotheses in connection with masculine and feminine sports, and the Hungarian specificities and differences of stereotypes related to female athletes.

The results verified my assumption, according to which by present day, the alignment of sports to genders, and thus, their social acceptance has changed in comparison with Metheny's categorization. According to the 1965 theory of Metheny, a segment of sports is accepted for women, furthermore, a number of sports was deemed as appropriate for women especially (aesthetically beautiful, etc.), but on the other hand, the other segment is not at all recommended (lifting heavy weights, etc.), and furthermore, there are some sports, which are acceptable for both genders. In Hungary, compared to half a century ago, much fewer sports belong to the two single-gender categories. The social acceptance of sports in Hungary is partly a matter of their success, and in addition to this, the female branches appearing in the sport and their inclusion in the Olympic programme can also influence the way they are judged. Therefore, according to my results, only three sports remained in the category of feminine sports, figure skating, synchronised swimming and rhythmic gymnastics, while seven of them proved to be masculine in nature, wrestling, judo, boxing, heavy field athletics, weightlifting, football and ice hockey. In the case of these sports, not even the performance of females matters; these forms of exercise are still not regarded to be appropriate for women.

My second hypothesis, according to which in the perceptions related to masculine sports and their participants no stereotypes can be observed, but the *raison d'être* of the female branches of traditional male sports which are characterised by a high level of aggression and extreme physicality is still questioned, was partly verified. The *raison d'être* of the female versions of such sports was indeed questioned by students studying in sport-related programs; however, their views included stereotypes, which characterise women with masculine features. It was not verified, either that sports demanding a high level of physicality would now belong to the category of sports accepted for women.

My third hypothesis, according to which stereotyping appears to a higher extent among men than among women, and the former are more strongly attached to traditional gender roles as well, only proved to be partially correct. Men tend to be significantly more stereotyping,

which was evidenced by stereotype-variables. I have also shown that the sport of the respondents has an influence on their stereotypical thinking, what is more, if a man is engaged in a feminine sport, he is less likely to judge in an extreme way, and if a woman chooses a masculine sport, her judgement will also be less harsh against her fellow athletes. The results also underline that men articulate their opinions in a more prejudiced way, even in the case of these sports.

Contrary to my previous expectations, I did not experience that the representatives of sports on the so-called opposing poles would show differences in terms of their views related to traditional gender roles. In both groups they consider the patriarchal type of role division, which is also characteristic of their families, and which reflects a disproportionate weight of housework among the activities of women. They would divide these tasks in a 70 to 30 ratio between men and women, so in this respect my results are only partially in accordance with previous international research experience.

I had to reject my hypothesis, in which I assumed that among respondents with less qualified parents the gender stereotypes related to different sports are weaker than among those having parents with higher qualification. Among masculine sports, for a long time boxing has been one which recruits its most of its talent base from the lower and lower-middle classes, similarly to judo and wrestling. Among female athletes included in the sample this was also characteristic, as the majority of them came from these strata and only one boxer had a family with an upper-class background. It is to be noted here that while in Hungary, a significant ratio of male boxers come from the socially disadvantaged Roma minority and sport may serve as a channel of social mobility for them, the same cannot be said about their female counterparts. Female competitors in team sports and in feminine sports do not come from the highest social strata, but rather from the middle class, but there were more and also less affluent families in the sample.

On the other hand, my hypothesis, according to which feminine sports are usually selected by the parents at the early age of their daughters, while masculine sports are typically chosen by the female athletes themselves, after trying a number of sports, proved to be correct. During the interviews carried out with them, it was revealed that, apart from some exceptional examples, female athletes engaged in masculine sports made the decision to choose that sport by themselves, whereas those involved in feminine sports did so owing to parental guidance.

It was also underlined that the sporting history of the parent also exerts an influence on the sport selection of the child.

#### **LIST OF PUBLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR RELATED TO THE TOPIC**

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