

Challenging Norms and Practices in Women's Beach Handball: The Bikini Debate

Hyde-Clarke, Nathalie; Fonn, Birgitte Kjos

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hyde-Clarke, N., & Fonn, B. K. (2024). Challenging Norms and Practices in Women's Beach Handball: The Bikini Debate. *Media and Communication*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8031>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Challenging Norms and Practices in Women's Beach Handball: The Bikini Debate

Nathalie Hyde-Clarke  and Birgitte Kjos Fonn 

Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Correspondence: Nathalie Hyde-Clarke (nathalie.hyde-clarke@oslomet.no)

Submitted: 3 January 2024 **Accepted:** 26 February 2024 **Published:** 16 May 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Sports Journalists as Agents of Change: Shifting Political Goalposts in Nordic Countries" edited by Anders Graver Knudsen (OsloMet University), Harald Hornmoen (OsloMet University), and Nathalie Hyde-Clarke (OsloMet University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i447>

Abstract

Since 1978, the Norwegian Act for Gender Equality has created a strong emphasis on the importance of equality in all parts of society. This implies equal access to all cultural and welfare activities and services—including sports. In the media, we often see strong reactions to examples of discrimination based on gender, such as during the 2021 European Beach Handball Championship, when the Norwegian women's beach handball team was fined by the European Handball Federation for refusing to play in bikini bottoms during their final matches. Media attention was given to the ensuing international outrage, which included well-known music artist Pink offering to pay on the team's behalf in a gesture of solidarity. In November 2021, the sport's International Federation agreed to allow women to compete in a similar uniform to men. This study analyses Norwegian newspaper coverage of the responses from Norwegian women athletes, politicians, and the international sports/media community from July 2021 to March 2022. It also provides an opportunity to determine to what extent the media framed and participated in calls for change.

Keywords

beach handball; gender; Nordic model; Norway; sports journalism

1. Introduction

Beach handball has become a popular sport in international tournaments, but its popularity has also shown itself in unintended ways. For instance, until 2022, the regulated attire in women's beach handball was a bikini, which led to an unwarranted focus on the athletes' bodies both in the media and among the public. This article goes through the course of events that built up to and surrounded the Norwegian team's protest at the 2021

European Beach Handball Championship and the Norwegian newspaper coverage of this protest, eventually resulting in the official decision to discontinue enforcing bikinis for female beach handball players.

The athlete uniform regulations for all beach handball teams are decided by the International Handball Federation (IHF; see Figure 1). As of 2021, the IHF (2014, pp. 91–95) stated that:

Team members must wear identical shorts/bikini bottoms. Male athletes must wear shorts as per the enclosed graph. The players' shorts, if not too baggy, can be longer but must remain 10 centimeters above the kneecap. Female athletes must wear bikini bottoms that are in accordance with the enclosed graph, with a close fit and cut on an upward angle toward the top of the leg. The side width must be a maximum of 10 centimeters.



Figure 1. Athlete uniform regulations for beach handball. Source: IHF (2014, pp. 94–95).

The IHF was formed in 1946 and is the highest overseeing authority of the sport. It has a congress that meets once every two years with representatives from all member federations, organised by region and by country. They agree upon and create the regulations and guidelines for all athletes and teams competing at the international level. To be a member of the IHF, one also must be a member of the regional branch. This means that Norwegian athletes are represented at three different levels: at the national level by the Norwegian Handball Federation (NHF); at the regional level by the European Handball Federation (EHF); and at the international level by the IHF. The relevant federation is also responsible for organising and overseeing

competitions and events at the related level. This is why the EHF was mostly involved in the 2021 case since it was a tournament hosted by the region. That said, any concern raised by the athletes related to international rules and guidelines would need to serve at all three levels before a final ruling may be taken. Once it is accepted in the IHF, it applies to all members and teams across the world irrespective of region or country.

The NHF first lodged a complaint about the uniforms for women with the EHF and IHF in 2006 with no result. They argued that handball is a sport that requires players to body block shots, and therefore the uniforms did not offer the necessary protection for players. Their request for the uniform to be reviewed was supported by other European members in the EHF, including Sweden, Denmark, and France (DuBose, 2022, p. 1141). However, at the time, there was no unified understanding among the players at the international level about whether the outfit was a problem or not, which was also evident from the Norwegian debate. In 2007, after a lot of media focus, the bikinis became one centimetre longer (von der Lippe, 2013, p. 143).

Before the Championship in 2021, Norway again proposed to the EHF that the rules should be changed. Athletes continued to describe the uniform rules as “sexist, discriminatory and exclusionary” (Lie, 2021). Reasons included the embarrassment caused by the media capturing and sometimes commenting on exposed underwear, body hair, or body shape, worry during the menstrual cycle when needing to wear skimpy or white bottoms, and exclusion of players on religious grounds as the uniforms were “insensitive to cultural norms” (DuBose, 2022, p. 1141).

Ongoing pressure to review the uniforms at that stage had continued for well over a decade, and the EHF announced that the issue would be addressed in a meeting in April 2021. However, the discussion was delayed until August 2021 when a new commission was appointed (DuBose, 2022, p. 1141). It was with this in mind that the Norwegian beach handball team went to the June–July 2021 European tournament in Varna, Bulgaria. When there was no indication that the change had been implemented, they planned a demonstration, as they wanted to be able to play with shorts that covered more of the thigh. Then they learned that they would be fined 50 euros per person per match. In total, the costs would come to 50,000 euros. The NHF was prepared to pay but, at a technical meeting, it was later claimed that they were told they would have to pay interest and faced the possibility of disqualification. The EHF has since said that this was a misunderstanding (Lie, 2021). The team ended up warming up in shorts but had to play matches in bikinis (Haarstad & Sandholt, 2021). In the bronze final of July 18, they decided to play in shorts. The team received a fine of 1,500 euros (Leerstang, 2021).

The case took a special turn on July 25 when pop artist Pink (Alecia Beth Moore) announced her decision to pay the Norwegian women’s national team’s fine. Pink is known for her commitment to feminism and women’s rights. “The European Handball Federation should be fined for sexism,” she wrote on her Twitter account, which at the time had over 31 million followers (Mjelstad, 2021). Pink praised the protest of the Norwegian players: “I am VERY proud of the Norwegian female beach handball team FOR PROTESTING THE VERY SEXIST RULES ABOUT THEIR uniform. The European handball federation SHOULD BE FINED FOR SEXISM. Good on ya, ladies. I’ll be happy to pay the fines for you. Keep it up” (as cited in Mjelstad, 2021).

Many others also offered to pay the fine. However, the NHF elected to pay the fine themselves and donated the money received from the public to a foundation that works for equality in sport (NTBb, 2021). The Norwegian team finished in 4th place in the tournament, but they got far more attention for this issue.

International reactions were reported in *The Independent*, the *BBC*, the *New York Post*, the *Washington Post*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Bild* (With, 2021). The bikini rule was finally changed in 2022, after considerable pressure from the NHF and others (Gamlemoen, 2022). In 2022, they became the first team in the world not to play beach volleyball in bikinis. They chose to play in shorts from the first tournament in 2022 on.

This study analyses the Norwegian newspaper coverage (print and online) of the responses from Norwegian women athletes, politicians, and the international sports/media community from July 2021 to March 2022, while awaiting the final decision. We consider whether and to what extent Norway's position as a "country of equality" played a role in how the discussion was reported in Norwegian media. We also give a short analysis of the photo material in the articles. We do this by analysing the news frame employed in the articles in light of previous research on beach handball coverage in Norwegian media.

2. Literature Review

Both sports organisations and the media have global reach and are social institutions (Fink, 2015; Kian & Hardin, 2009; Parry et al., 2023). Sports coverage therefore has the potential to influence opinion on a broad scale. While often delegated to the back pages or last segment of broadcast news reports, sports events have been shown to have intense political, economic, and cultural ramifications. Sport, particularly men's, has benefitted from increased media investment, but has also been changed by it (Parry et al., 2023, p. 594). There have been modifications to rules to benefit television audiences, and commercial channels are keenly aware of how they should package events to appeal to their audience. It is therefore not unexpected that research has found coverage of women's sports to continue to be problematic (see Parry et al., 2023). Patterns that dominate include the small number of reports about women's sports as compared to men's, and the sexualisation of women athletes. Hardin et al. (2002) found that men were depicted twice as often as women in editorial sports photos. Scholars, especially from liberal-feminist traditions, refer to this as the "symbolic annihilation" of women (a term first coined by Gaye Tuchman in 1978). There is some evidence of change, but the proportion of coverage given to women's sports is still lower than men's (see Kian & Hardin, 2009; Parry et al., 2023). Female athletes are also evaluated differently than males (Lewis & Weaver, 2015).

Some research has suggested that women journalists are more likely to challenge and improve existing norms (see Kian & Hardin, 2009). This is supported in Parry's (2023) study, where media in the UK were starting to change more traditional frames by allowing for deeper and more critical reviews of female sports players and teams. It was noted that female journalists were more likely to express concern for the players or humanise the teams, and that most reports on women's sports were by women journalists. This may not be as obvious in a Nordic setting, as constitutionalised principles of equality mean that women have played a long and pivotal role in Norway and other Nordic countries. Yet, despite such state support, scholars in Nordic countries note that there are still slight discrepancies in terms of participation, recognition, and political influence (Pfister & Sisjord, 2013). This is more noticeable when women compete on the international stage where there may be competing philosophies and perspectives on the importance of women in sport. The question of what is deemed to be acceptable attire is one area where the difference is most apparent.

While there is a large and rising amount of research on sports journalism, and journalism on and by women in sports is becoming more common (as shown in this thematic issue), there is previously little research on beach handball from the Nordic perspective. However, Gerd von der Lippe, a prominent Norwegian sports

researcher, conducted two studies that make it possible to compare national media coverage and attitudes to women's uniforms over time (von der Lippe, 2005, 2013).

According to von der Lippe (2013, p. 141), women athletes' dress codes are often tied to the date when women were introduced to sports in an organised way: "Thus, there is often a relationship to the general fashions of women's clothes." This is also the case with male athlete outfits, but it is likely that the particular focus on the female body in Western culture has had a more profound effect on female athletes. Beach volleyball started in the United States in the 1920s, developed further in the 1970s, and became an international sports game in the 1990s, with its introduction in the 1996 Olympic Games. It is therefore not surprising that the bikini became the dress code for women at a time when the fashion industry's message was to "show more female skin" (von der Lippe, 2013, p. 143). A quote from the Fédération Internationale de Volleyball from 1996 states openly that the outfits were designed to put the players' bodies on display:

The Permanent Committee recommends that the fabric used allows men's shirts and women's tops to be tight fitting: The design should be with open arms for men and with open back, upper chest and stomach for women. Also, the length of men's shorts and width of women's bathing suit bottoms has been defined to suit the beach volleyball image and not to hide the athletes from public, media and sponsors. (as cited in von der Lippe, 2013, p. 143)

The fact that this game is played on the beach and under the sun and high temperatures may be one reason for the clothing, but that does not explain the different rules for women and men. One aspect of this rather revealing attire is how it has been communicated to the public—not only have the curves, shapes, and skin of the players attracted attention, but photographers have also tended to focus on the players' bottoms. This has often been accompanied by the "excuse" that the players tend to give each other signals behind their backs (Associated Press, 2021; von der Lippe, 2013, p. 144).

The outfit was first discussed in the Norwegian press in 1998 when two Norwegian players took part in the Olympic Games. Von der Lippe (2005) then analysed the Norwegian media debate in 2004, after a final decision on the dress code in women's beach volleyball. She found three different opinions: a feminist discourse; an equal rights discourse; and the so-called neoliberal discourse. The last was characterised by a belief in "free will" and "free competition," and a willingness to adapt to the current culture in the field, a culture that was also largely taken for granted. The argument was that the athletes were free to choose and chose the bikini because it was the best solution (even though they were dependent on sponsors to carry out their sport, von der Lippe points out). The difference between the feminist and equal rights discourse was primarily determined by whether the regulating body emphasised restrictions and rules that were meant for both sexes, or the power imbalance between the female players and the (often male-dominated) sports field (von der Lippe, 2013, p. 144). This is in line with well-known differences within feminist or gender equality thinking (see, e.g., Holst, 2017).

Interestingly, in 2004, some Norwegian female players were strong advocates of what von der Lippe calls the neoliberal stance. One player was quoted in the VG newspaper saying:

We are playing in the costume that suits us best, and that looks best. I could never have played in shorts, that's quite old fashioned....I am satisfied when I am playing in a bikini, and I think that all the other girls feel the same. (as cited in von der Lippe, 2013, p. 145)

The research also indicated that newspapers at the time wrote that the players “scoff at the criticism,” whereas a male player stated that “sex appeal is part of the sport” (von der Lippe, 2005). The study goes on to report that an external sports commentator stated that there were eight reasons to watch sand volleyball: four bikini tops and four bikini bottoms. He was reported to have said this with “a grin.”

The image analysis in von der Lippe’s (2005) study is also interesting for our research, as the (possible) discussion about the attire was soon interpreted by the tabloid media as an opportunity to show photos of female players in bikinis. Both the major Norwegian tabloids made the discussions front-page material, with large photos and the word “sex” in large types in the headlines.

Our research therefore builds on this earlier study by examining Norwegian sports coverage about the matter in 2021.

3. Method

This study utilises framing to understand how the information was shared with the public. Frame analysis refers to how a situation is defined following “principles of organisation, which govern social events and our subjective involvement in them” (Goffman, 1974, as cited in Carter, 2013, p. 3). Robert Entman, one of the most important architects of the framing notion, built on this by adding that framing entails the selection of specific aspects of perceived reality to imbue them with importance when communicating. According to Entman, frames often appear as packages, consisting of (in particular) four important elements: a problem definition; a causal explanation; a (moral) evaluation; and a proposal for a solution (see Van Gorp, 2007, pp. 64–65). The media effectively utilises frames to indicate to the public what is important and how it can be understood in the greater scheme of things. Journalists can influence how audiences understand or engage with issues through the choice of images and words they use (Lewis & Weaver, 2015; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). Framing scholars argue that the repetition of themes means that frames persist over time and structure social relationships (Kian & Hardin, 2009, p. 188). While journalists may not intentionally decide to use specific frames, they do select which narratives or images to employ based on the need to explain complex stories in a limited time and within certain constraints (Lewis & Weaver, 2015).

On the other hand, it is important to note that journalists do not write in a vacuum. Framing can take place both *by* the media and *through* the media (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 68). The obvious example is when strong (economic or political) organisations or other powerful social actors influence media frames strategically, but frames may of course also be a result of communication with other, less powerful, actors in society. It is therefore a more symbiotic relationship than any cause-effect study may imply and should be viewed accordingly. Van Gorp (2007, pp. 68–69) however goes on to point out that the choices of the media are always important. Although not always intentional, they are active choices.

Media coverage is therefore important in shaping how the public perceives and assesses certain issues. This is of particular interest in this study on how the beach handball bikini debate was covered, and whether sports journalists presented information in a way that was affected by social trends, public sentiment, and calls for change.

This study was based on a critical analysis of Norwegian newspaper coverage (print and online) from July 2021 to March 2022. Media articles were identified as part of a retriever search using *beachhåndball* (beach

handball) and *kvinne* (women) as search terms. The corpus included 33 articles from 14 different local and national newspapers. It is interesting to note that the corpus included reports from the major national papers to local and regional newspapers in West, South, and Mid-Norway. We also decided to include opinion pieces for context and insights into the public state of mind but found only one. With a relatively small total sample, we were able to close-read all articles in the corpus and assess all the images. The articles were written in Norwegian and have been translated into English by the research team for this study. Every effort has been made to keep the wording as close to the original as possible.

One reason for the small sample may be that the European tournament took place only days before the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo started and, as mentioned earlier, beach handball is not as big a sport in Norway as ordinary handball, for example. A lot of the sports coverage was therefore concentrated on the Olympics. It is also important to note that, in the summer, when most of the public is on holiday, more newspapers than usual use the services of the Norwegian News Agency. Recently, there has also been a considerable concentration across the local and regional levels with a certain degree of collaboration between newspapers in the same media houses. It is therefore not unusual to find the same or similar article replicated across different publications.

Not all articles name their journalists; some simply refer to the press association that first ran the story. Of the sample, 19 have clearly specified journalists. A slight majority (10) were written by male journalists, the remaining being written by female journalists (7) or a mixed team of male and female journalists (2).

4. Findings and Discussion

Notably this study demonstrates that from July 2021 to March 2022, there was one dominant news frame used to report this story to the public across all the newspapers examined. It was one of overwhelming support for the call to change the rules. The dominant topic of all the articles in the coverage was the fact that the Norwegian beach handball team had protested against the rules by playing in shorts and were fined for it. Subsequently, this was also the problem definition. The causal explanation for the players' act of civil disobedience (playing in shorts and not bikinis in protest) was the strict rules for clothing in the sport imposed on the female players by the IHF, and that previous and sustained challenges to these rules had not been addressed.

There is not one single article in the corpus that has a different frame or interpretation of events. Arguably, it could have been possible to offer an alternative frame, if desired. Two pieces of information could have been interpreted differently: One was that the EHF had accepted the Norwegian proposal for change for discussion at their forthcoming meeting that August; the second was that, by signing up for the tournament in July, the Norwegian team had agreed to abide by the existing rules in place at that time. Therefore, had the general social and political mentality been different, a second frame may have been used: The Norwegian players overreacted and chose civil disobedience instead of waiting for the result of the formal process. However, this perspective does not appear at all.

One reason for the dominant frame could be attributed to a lack of variety in opinions. Nearly all sources are either female players, their (organisation) spokespersons, or people outside the handball field that support their cause. We have already alluded to the fact that in contrast to 2004, no player in the corpus defended the

bikini rule. There are two possible ways of understanding this complete consensus. It could point to a general agreement about the attire. However, one would be remiss not to point out that there may be an element of self-censoring due to the very public act of disobedience taken by the team—any bikini defender may not have been willing to take the social cost of uttering it. That said, it is likely that if there were players who were in favour of the existing rules, the journalists would have tried to contact them, as conflict is one of the key requirements in present-day journalism. Instead, we interpret what appears in the quotes as the players' unified agreement regarding the dysfunctionality of those rules, which is echoed by international players and their organisations' spokesmen.

Some journalists apparently tried to include opposing voices, as two news articles indicated an additional step to probe further into the matter: Reporters from *Østlands-Posten* (on 15 July 2021) managed to contact the EHF for a quote and reporters from *VG* (on 14 July 2021) wrote that they tried to contact the IHF but got no reply.

In the news articles, we find that most of the coverage is concerned with the moral evaluation of the problem. This is either argued to be based on concern for the players or is framed as a social and cultural concern that the uniform regulations are outdated. Since moral evaluation is of interest in this study—and this is a clear departure from previous media coverage—we focus in more depth on these elements and outline them below.

4.1. Moral Evaluation 1: Concern for Players

In the corpus, the mental and physical well-being of the players is at the core of the concern, and so the debate is not only about calls for equality. There are typically two groups of people who comment on this: the players themselves; and representatives of relevant organisations.

The players offer a variety of justifications as to why the clothing is a problem. Some point to the fact that the bikinis are uncomfortable and have made the players feel “naked” and that it has intensified the pressure on athletes in the sport (Meese & Johansen, 2021). Others again state that they would prefer to get more attention for their sports achievements rather than their clothes, and some also mention the question of culture, that the rules have prevented women from participating (Meese & Johansen, 2021; Nakken, 2021). Some players also state that women should have the freedom to choose, that it is apparent from context that none of them talks about the individual right to choose, but that female teams should also be able to choose shorts if that is what they want (as cited in Leerstang, 2021). Only one foreign player says that she does not have anything against it if other people want to play in a bikini, but that it is “incredible” (as cited in Egelandsdal, 2021). Another says that she has heard some players say that “now that we have a lot of clothes, this will be very hot,” but she also points out that the male players have played in shorts and a singlet for years, “so it should probably be fine” (as cited in Stensland, 2022a). The journalist adds that she “laughs a bit exasperatedly.”

The unified agreement among the players stands in contrast to previous studies when players were contacted for comment. Today a former world champion in beach handball, Ane Brustuen, puts it this way:

It should be equal and you should be able to play in whatever you want. In the big picture, the requirements also help to exclude some nations, with regard to women's outfits. (Johnsen, 2021)

She goes on to say that one of the important things in beach handball is the show effect: “There are shorter matches, more intensive and more ‘showing.’ Very often it is in warmer regions, so then there is sun and music” (as cited in Johnsen, 2021). To the extent that this quote—from a former player—could be interpreted as support for the bikini rule, it is the exception; a clear majority does not express anything similar.

The arguments raised by the NHF president Kåre Geir Lio used more emotive language. Lio called the bikini rule unreasonable and unwise, and pointed out that he had expected the rule to be changed earlier:

Here they sleep during class. It is shameful and unfair to the girls. Every summer I have been president since 2015, I have answered questions about this and not talked about the medals they have won and the good performances they have made. (as cited in NTBa, 2021)

This clearly points to a perception that the focus of previous media coverage has been on the wrong element of the sport, to the detriment of the players, and a strong belief that this needs to be addressed.

4.2. Moral Evaluation 2: The Need to Modernise Rules

The other prominent moral evaluation of the problem was that the rules in 2021 were outdated and out of touch with the current social, cultural, and political environment. While concern for the players and the need to modernise rules that were perceived as discriminatory against women players point in the same direction, it is important to be aware that the arguments are not necessarily identical. It is therefore important to acknowledge that this category contains responses largely from public figures. Norwegian Minister of Culture Abid Raja reacted strongly on Twitter:

OMG!...This is completely ridiculous! Damn it, there are so many changes of attitude that are needed in old-fashioned international old man rule in sports....The worst thing is that they just don't even understand the equality point. Is it even possible?! (as cited in NTBa, 2021)

Quotes are also taken from international figures, such as the French national team manager Valérie Nicolas who reacted to the handling of both the EHF and the IHF: “It is unfair. Money and fines should not have been part of the discussion. To create change, the nations must stand together, and we are doing that now” (as cited in Meese & Johansen, 2021).

The Norwegian Minister of Culture also informed the media that he had sent a letter to the Swedish and Danish ministers responsible for sports, inviting them to a joint statement against the IHF's rules for clothing in beach handball, saying:

I think it's weird that in 2021 we are still there that when women themselves say they want to choose their own clothing, they still have to be squeezed into minimal panties. It is shameful that the IHF does not consider the equality aspects of this when several people point out that it is sexist. (as cited in Johnsen, 2021)

Progress in gender issues and concern for women can be seen as two sides of the same coin. There are however different gender equality policies, and these may be interpreted and implemented differently across national

contexts. Some stress that men and women should be treated as equals in almost all respects, whereas others would pay more attention to gender-specific traits. In the extreme version of the first approach, the argument that women feel uncomfortable when people look at their (almost) naked bodies would have little impact, whereas the principle that both sexes should wear the same clothes, would have more. It is also interesting to note that the argument that something is old-fashioned had also been used to defend the bikinis in 2004, demonstrating a clear shift in societal norms and expectations in the past two decades.

4.3. Signs of Intentional Journalistic Framing

Part of our research objective was to determine whether there were any explicit signs in the articles that the journalists supported the players' cause themselves and had adopted a frame to that effect. As discussed in the previous sections, most of the media reviewed created a space where voices protesting the rules were heard, suggesting an implicit form of support. There was also a clear framing of the issue in such a way that it supported the calls for change, but there was little in terms of actual explicit content of a journalist's own perspective or opinion on the matter.

The choice of headlines and some leads indicate a clear leaning in support of the protests. All were positive to change and either encouraged the Norwegian team to continue their acts of protest or made calls to the EHF to change their regulations. As such, even if there was little independent information from the journalists themselves, the reports were presented in such a way as to show clear signs of a need for change. For example, one headline read: "Forced to undress" (Haarstad & Sandholt, 2021). Another referred to an "unreasonable rule" in the subheading (Aas, 2021).

One article (Meese & Johansen, 2021) however was worded in such a way that the reader was left in no doubt as to what the journalists thought:

Players "feel naked" and several of them feel "discomfort" playing in bikini panties, yet they are threatened with fines and punishment if they get dressed....Only a few inches of extra fabric was needed before the European Beach Handball Championship organiser threatened fines of around NOK 500 per person [to those] who did not participate in bikini panties, as well as an unspecified punishment.

In the corpus, only two articles stood out as providing independent commentary or analysis of the case. The first was an op-ed (Gulla, 2021) and the second was a news article (Stensland, 2022a, 2022b). The op-ed was written by a female board member of the youth wing of the Centre Party. It located the case in a broader debate of gender in sports, and the lack of investment in and tendency to sexualise players in women's teams. It argued that decisions were linked more to media ratings than comfort or consideration of the players' needs or wishes. It ended with the disbelief that there was even a discussion as to whether the rules should be changed, as clearly the current policy was discriminatory. While this tone stands out from the corpus, it is not that surprising to find it in the op-ed section where articles are chosen based on their provocative content. Perhaps though it is more interesting to note that it was the only one in that section, as all the other articles were news reports. This suggests that even if change was a desired outcome, and there was a clear outspoken sector in the public sphere, that debate was not nearly as rampant in the comment sections.

The second critical piece was a news article published in the regional newspaper *Porsgrunns Dagblad*. It appeared in two guises. First as an online publication and then as a print version. While the headings were slightly different, the main content was the same. The article was written by a male journalist (Stensland, 2022a, 2022b). While there was still a reliance on the quotes of one of the players, the journalists' perspective was more explicitly addressed when they referred to the need to “defy gender-segregated regulations.” This was one of the few articles where negative comments about changing the rules were also considered, and the player was asked to respond to those as well.

In all, we see that despite being parts of frames supportive of change, most of the content of the articles, outside the quotes, was presented in a neutral tone. Except for the headlines, there were only a few examples where the journalists' own views (or the fact that they were siding with the players) were revealed through their choice of words.

4.4. What Were the Accompanying Images?

Of the sample of 33 articles, 22 were accompanied by photographs, of which four had two images. Most of the photographs depicted players, with three exceptions. There was one of an EHF representative (an older man in a suit), one of the Norwegian Minister of Culture Abid Raja, and two of the artist Pink—these were head shots, with one full-bodied image of Pink.

There were 12 team photos of which four were formal group photos; in all cases, players were in the preferred shorts. The other eight were “in-game”—of these, six were “typical” photos of bikini-clad players taken from behind and two were photos where the Norwegians were playing in shorts and the opposing team was in bikinis, also taken from behind. There were eight individual shots of players, of which three were head shots, two were hand and leg shots (in shorts), and two were close-ups of the bikini bottoms. Notably, the *minority* of the images were “sexualised” like those most often associated with female sports. In cases where sexualised images were used, they were done so to illustrate the problem and acted as a visual reminder of the need for change.

This is a departure from the images used in von der Lippe's 2005 study. In 2021, the focus was more on teams (solidarity), rebellion (playing in shorts while others do not), and the individual who spoke out. In that way, the images also supported the findings in the verbal text analysis.

5. Concluding Remarks

From 2022 on, the proposed solution became the result: The rules were changed. Arguably the actions of the Norwegian players were key to bringing this change about, but it is important to acknowledge it was after years of discussion at the regional and international level, and not just based on an act of protest in 2021. And while the response to the protest may have to do with the fact that Norway is a country known for gender equality, there is no doubt that this event was given more weight in 2021 than in 2004 due to a larger change in international sentiment linked to the #Metoo movement (a global campaign that placed unwanted sexualisation of women in the spotlight).

This research concentrates on how a single actor (the NHF) was able to exert influence across time and alter how the issue was framed on a national and international level. While it is not a comparative study across nations, it does open some illuminating findings into the evolution of coverage in sports journalism. Conducted almost 20 years after an Olympic Games where the female sand volleyball players' attire became the object of in-depth analysis in a study by von der Lippe (2005), we find several departures. Firstly, instead of competing discourses, there is one overarching narrative or frame with two different moral evaluations in 2021. The first speaks to care for players' well-being and the second to the need to modernise rules. Both are packaged within the larger discussion around equality and the need for change.

Secondly, whereas the mere discussion about the players' attire attracted front-page attention and huge stories inside some of the largest news outlets in the country in 2004, the coverage could be argued to be more subdued in 2021 in terms of space and layout. That said, at its pinnacle, when the temperature of the debate increased, it took on more of a character of disbelief expressed by powerful social and political actors, as seen in the title of the only op-ed in the corpus (Gulla, 2021) as well as in the Minister of Culture's exclamation "Is it possible?"—joined with Pink's expressions of outrage against the "very sexist rules."

Thirdly, the use of images is another interesting departure from the earlier study. Although many of the photos showed players in bikinis, the sexualised images were in the minority and then used to demonstrate the point. There was more emphasis on the team and the individual who spoke. We found only one front page image in a major tabloid's sports section, and in this photo, the bikini-clad keeper looked strong, muscular, and ready to stop the ball, adopting an aggressive stance.

It is noteworthy that a majority of the articles in this study were written by male journalists or teams of journalists where at least one is male. These articles had no discernible difference in overall approach or discourse to those written by women journalists, and all were supportive of calls for change. This suggests that in Norway the gender of the journalist has less impact on whether they are likely to advocate change than was suggested in studies by Kian and Hardin (2009) and Parry et al. (2023). This may be attributed to the older, stronger, and more entrenched values of equality in the country's social and political fabric.

This study has shown that when the Norwegian team decided to be the first team in the world not to play beach volleyball in bikinis in 2021, it was the result of years of debate, negotiation, and changing norms. While there may have been the expectation that, given the headlines advocating for new rules, sports journalists would be the agents of change, in this instance this was not the case. That said, there has been a considerable movement in journalistic norms over the years when it comes to gender and sports that allowed for the media to present and word the debate so that it supported calls for change from the athletes and national federation. In this way, the media was certainly a facilitator.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Aas, E. U. (2021, July 19). Kulturministeren reagerer etter norsk trusebot i beachhåndball-EM: "Fullstendig latterlig." *Aftenposten*. <https://www.aftenposten.no/sport/i/Wqx6Qd/kulturministeren-reagerer-etter-norsk-trusebot-i-beachhaandball-em-fullstendig-latterlig>

- Associated Press. (2021, July 27). Why Olympic beach volleyball players wear bikinis. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-27/explainer-why-olympic-beach-volleyball-players-wear-bikinis?embedded-checkout=true#xj4y7vzkg>
- Carter, M. J. (2013). The hermeneutics of frames and framing: An examination of the media's construction of reality. *SAGE Open*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/215824401348791>
- DuBose, R. (2022). An unexpected result of gender equality initiatives in sports—The sexualization of female athletes. *Mitchell Hamline Law Review*, 48(4), Article 9. <https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/mhlr/vol48/iss4/9>
- Egelandsdal, P. (2021, July 29). Beachhåndball. New Zealand-kaptein ut mot bikiniregel. *Dagbladet*. <https://www.dagbladet.no/sport/new-zealand-kaptein-ut-mot-bikiniregel/74060536>
- Fink, J. S. (2015). Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really "come a long way, baby"? *Sport Management Review*, 18(3), 331–342. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.05.001>
- Gamlemoen, P. S. (2022, June 21). Endelig får de kle seg slik. *Aftenposten*. <https://www.aftenposten.no/sport/i/66EAGQ/endelig-faar-de-kle-seg-slik>
- Gulla, I. (2021, July 27). Har vi ikke kommet lenger? *Dagsavisen*, 28–29.
- Haarstad, T., & Sandholt, R. K. (2021, July 13). Tvunget til å kle av seg. *Dagbladet*. <https://www.dagbladet.no/sport/tvunget-til-a-kle-av-seg/74011581>
- Hardin, M., Lynn, S., Walsdorf, K., & Hardin, B. (2002). The framing of sexual difference in SI for kids editorial photos. *Mass Communication & Society*, 5(3), 341–359. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0503_6
- Holst, C. (2017). *Hva er feminisme?* Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning, 51(3), 476–480. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-291X-2010-03-08>
- International Handball Federation. (2014). *Rules of the game: Beach handball*. https://www.ihf.info/sites/default/files/2019-05/0_09%20-%20Rules%20of%20the%20Game%20%28Beach%20Handball%29_GB.pdf
- International Handball Federation. (2024). *Congress*. <https://www.ihf.info/about/congress>
- Johnsen, N. (2021, July 19). Det er nok noe med showeffekten. *Oppland Arbeiderblad*, 26.
- Kian, E. M., & Hardin, M. (2009). Framing of sport coverage based on the sex of sports writers: Female journalists counter the traditional gendering of media coverage. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2(2), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2.2.185>
- Leerstang, A. (2021, July 27). Superstjernen vil betale truseboten: –Stå på jenter! *Porsgrunns Dagblad*, 18.
- Lewis, N., & Weaver, A. J. (2015). More than a game: Sports media framing effects on attitudes, intentions, and enjoyment. *Communication & Sport*, 3(2), 219–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479513508273>
- Lie, R. (2021, July 15). Det kommenteres mer på antrekk enn på prestasjoner. *Trønder-Avisa*, 22–23.
- Meese, S., & Johansen, S. M. (2021, July 16). Frankrike støtter norsk bikini-protest. *Bergens Tidende*, 31.
- Mjelstad, M. (2021, July 26). Beachhåndball. Superstjerne vil betale norsk "klesbot." *Dagbladet*. <https://www.dagbladet.no/kjendis/superstjerne-vil-betale-norsk-klesbot/74052454#:~:text=Den%20uventede%20hjelpen%20fra%20artisten,underkant%20av%2016%20000%20kroner>
- Nakken, S. (2021, July 17). Noen må ta affære. *Østlands-Posten*, 12.
- NTBa. (2021, July 20). Får bot etter truse-protest. *Bergensavisen*, 37.
- NTBb. (2021, July 27). Inntekter fra norsk trusebot gis til veldedighet. *Nettavisen*. <https://www.nettavisen.no/sport/inntekter-fra-norsk-trusebot-i-handball-gis-til-veldedighet/s/12-95-3424159986>
- Parry, K. D., Clarkson, B. G., Bowes, A., Grubb, L., & Rowe, D. (2023). Media framing of women's football during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Communication & Sport*, 11(3), 592–615. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795211041024>

- Pfister, G., & Sisjord, M. K. (2013). *Gender and sport: Changes and challenges*. Waxmann. <https://doi.org/10.31244/9783830978732>
- Stensland, T. H. (2022a, January 10). Martine og laget krevde likestilling – vant pris på Idrettsgallaen. *Porsgrunns Dagblad Pluss*. <https://www.pd.no/martine-og-laget-krevde-likestilling-vant-pris-pa-idrettsgallaen/s/5-40-566272>
- Stensland, T. H. (2022b, January 11). Det var utrolig moro. *Porsgrunns Dagblad*, 18.
- Tewksbury, D., & Scheufele, D. A. (2019). News framing theory and research. In M. B. Oliver, A. A. Raney, & J. Bryant (Eds.), *Media effects* (pp. 51–68). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429491146>
- Van Gorp, B. (2007). The constructionist approach to framing: Bringing culture back in. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 60–78.
- von der Lippe, G. (2005). Klesdiskursen i sandvolleyball i OL – 04. *Norsk Medietidsskrift*, 12(3), 234–256. <https://www.idunn.no/doi/10.18261/ISSN0805-9535-2005-03-04>
- von der Lippe, G. (2013). Discourses on women’s dress codes in beach volleyball and boxing: In the context of the current consumer culture. In G. Pfister & M. Kristin Sisjord (Eds.), *Gender and sport* (pp. 140–158). <https://doi.org/10.31244/9783830978732>
- With, S. (2021, July 20). Beachhåndballjentene går verden rundt. *Dagbladet*. <https://www.dagbladet.no/sport/gar-verden-rundt/74034769>

About the Authors



Nathalie Hyde-Clarke (PhD) is a professor of media and communication studies and the Vice Dean for Education for the Faculty of Social Sciences at Oslo Metropolitan University (Norway). Her research considers the evolving relationship between media and society and its effect on different communities and sectors.



Birgitte Kjos Fonn (Dr. Philos.) is a professor of journalism at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, and the coordinator of the university’s MA degree in non-fiction. She has written and edited several works on both historical and contemporary media issues and is a former journalist.