

# 'I don't think they realise how good we are': Innovation, inclusion and exclusion in women's Olympic boxing

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## **Abstract**

Marginalisation and exclusion of women in elite boxing has emerged as a substantial international problem, threatening women's democratic right to equal participation in sport. Since the London 2012 Olympic Games women's boxing has been an Olympic event. However, only 3 of the 10 weight categories were included in the Olympic programme for women. Today, male boxers compete in 10 out of 10 possible weight categories. While female boxers have gained access to a previously closed realm, discrimination, exclusion and unequal treatment of female athletes remains a widespread problem in international elite boxing. This article explores how the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games involves practices of inclusion and exclusion in elite boxing. In particular, this analysis focuses on the following two research questions: (a) how practices of social exclusion and inclusion affect the involvement and engagement of women in boxing; and (b) how, and in what ways, female boxers have experienced recognition and acceptance in elite boxing after the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games. Using a qualitative approach including document analysis of official press releases from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Boxing Association (AIBA), as well as interviews with athletes and coaches, this study reveals that although women's boxing has gained access to the Olympics, the structural and cultural changes that comprise the social inclusion of women in boxing are yet to be implemented.

## **Keywords**

boxing, elite sport, gender studies, innovation, Olympic Games, social exclusion, social inclusion, power relations, women's boxing

## **Introduction**

Marginalisation and exclusion of women in elite boxing have emerged as serious international problems, threatening women's democratic right to equal participation in sport (Godoy-Pressland, 2015; McCree, 2015). Given the link between boxing, masculinity, violence and aggression, the idea of women's involvement in elite boxing as fighters has faced strong opposition both institutionally and culturally (Lafferty and MacKay, 2004; Tjønndal, 2016a; Woodward, 2006, 2013). With this in mind, the inclusion of women's boxing at mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games can be seen as a meaningful step towards achieving gender equity in elite sport (Kim et al., 2015). While a great deal of research suggests that the Olympic Games reproduce social inequality via elitism, commercialisation, corruption and problematic forms of nationalism (e.g. Bernard and Busse, 2006; Gaffney, 2010, 2012; Travers, 2011; Vanwynsberghe et al., 2012) gender equality is still a politically outspoken goal of the

Olympics. Equality and gender equity are enshrined in the Olympic Charter, which compels the International Olympic Committee (IOC)<sup>1</sup> to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels (IOC, 2015). Additionally, the statutes, bylaws, code of ethics and disciplinary code of the International Boxing Association (AIBA)<sup>2</sup> clearly state that discrimination due to gender is strictly prohibited and punishable by suspension and/or expulsion (AIBA, 2007, 2013a, 2013b, 2016). One of AIBA's main organisational objectives is 'to promote the involvement of women in the sport of boxing and enhance women's boxing programs' (AIBA, 2016).

Boxing has a history of marginalising the participation of women (e.g. Rotella, 2004; Smith, 2014; Tjønnedal, 2016a, 2016d). The practice of the sport has served as a ritual of masculinity in which competitors try to impose their domination on one another (Gems, 2014; Oates, 1980; Sekules, 2012). When women engage in competitive boxing they challenge traditional norms of femininity by displaying aggression and power, qualities that are traditionally attributed to men and masculinity (Tjønnedal and Hovden, 2016). Despite being a sport with a history of resistance to female involvement, women have always participated in boxing (Hargreaves, 1997; Heiskanen, 2012). In recent years, women's boxing has undergone substantial changes. This is especially true with regard to female participation and acceptance (AIBA, 2009, 2014b; Jennings and Cabrera Velazquez, 2015; McCree, 2015). Perhaps the most notable change was the introduction of women's boxing as an Olympic event in the London 2012 Games. Before the Olympic Games in London, boxing was the only summer sport without a female discipline (Linder, 2012). While female boxers have gained access to a previously closed realm, discrimination, exclusion and unequal treatment of female athletes remains a widespread problem in elite boxing (Kipnis and Caudwell, 2015; Van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012). This article explores how the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games involves practices of inclusion and exclusion in elite boxing. The aim of the article is to investigate how the acceptance of women's boxing in the Olympic Games has contributed to increased inclusion and equality for women in international elite boxing. In particular, this analysis focuses on the following two research questions: (a) how practices of social exclusion and inclusion affect the involvement and engagement of women in boxing; and (b) how, and in what ways, female boxers have experienced recognition and acceptance in elite boxing following the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympics.

Using a qualitative approach, including document analysis of official press releases from IOC and AIBA, as well as interviews with athletes and coaches, this study suggests that although women boxers have gained access to the Olympics, the structural and cultural changes that comprise the social inclusion of women in boxing are yet to be implemented.

To begin, I contextualise the issues of marginalisation and exclusion of women in elite boxing. In turn, I explain the approaches I use to examine social change, exclusion and inclusion as a theoretical framework. After outlining the methods used, the sample and the analytical approaches, the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games is analysed with particular attention given to the recognition, acceptance, involvement and engagement of women in elite boxing. Finally, I conclude by discussing practices of exclusion and inclusion of women in boxing.

### **Contextualisation: women's boxing**

Contrary to popular assumption, women's boxing is not a new discipline or sport (Gems, 2014; Smith, 2014). There is strong historical evidence of women's involvement in early prize fighting and pugilism in the 18th century (Gems and Pfister, 2014), particularly in England (Hargreaves, 1997). This is not to suggest that women and men have had an equal place in the initial origins of modern boxing because men largely dominated such early boxing events both as participants and in terms of organisation as well as spectatorship (Frisbee, 2016).

With regard to women's participation in modern boxing, AIBA started sanctioning international women's fights in 1994. Some national boxing federations sanctioned women's bouts before AIBA: for example, Sweden and Norway included women in competitive boxing in 1988 and 1989 (Tjønnedal, 2016a). Other countries lifted the ban on women's boxing following AIBA's decision to include women. For instance, the Amateur Boxing Association of England allowed female fighters to enter the ring in 1996. A few countries, such as Cuba, still ban women from competitive boxing. In 2001, the first AIBA championships<sup>3</sup> for women were launched with 10 weight categories (Jennings and Cabrera Velazquez, 2015), which have remained the standard weight classification for women's boxing (AIBA, 2017b).

Studies of women's participation in boxing today suggest that female boxers often experience lack of acceptance in training gyms (Ross, 2011). Deuchar et al. (2016) describe the boxing

gym as an avenue through which young men can construct masculine identities. Because the boxing gym represents a highly masculine space (e.g. Matthews, 2014; Tjønndal and Hovden, 2016), female boxers must often prove themselves over time to be more than dilettantes, and demonstrate willingness to spar and compete in order to be taken seriously as members of the gym (Sekules, 2012; Spencer, 2012; Tjønndal, 2017). Only after gaining skill, stamina and technique are women boxers accepted as part of the boxing gym (Owton, 2015). Scholarly work has also recognised how race, class and sexuality shape women's experiences of boxing (Heiskanen, 2012). Traditionally, boxing gyms have been bastions of white men, but now have a much more diverse membership (Dortants and Knoppers, 2012). Woodward (2007) describes boxing as filled with contradictions between racism and opportunity, and highlights the fact that the negotiation and presentation of raced and gendered identities have a strong presence in boxing. In their study of boxing gyms in the Netherlands, Dortants and Knoppers (2015) underline the fact that the participation of both male and female boxers with different ethnic backgrounds is normalised and accepted. Mennesson (2000) identifies a situation where women boxers occupy an ambivalent position where they challenge existing gender norms, at the same time adhering to the status quo by displaying traditional femininity. She describes identity formation among women boxers as being inseparably sexual and social (Mennesson, 2000). These studies indicate that race, class and sexuality may shape women's participation in boxing differently in various contexts.

Boxing has been an Olympic event since the St. Louis 1904 Olympic Games. The Olympic manifestation of boxing has since undergone modifications in terms of rules, weight categories, context, duration and an increasingly quantified scoring system (Di Felice and Marcora, 2014). However, it was not until the recent London 2012 Olympic Games that female boxers were permitted to step into the Olympic ring, despite women's boxing having long boasted high-caliber acts and international participation across a range of weight divisions. There were only three weight classes included for women in London 2012: 48–51 kg (flyweight), 57–60 kg (lightweight) and 69–75 kg (middleweight). For male boxers, all ten weight categories were included.<sup>4</sup> After the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympics, AIBA has widened the equality gap between men and women by developing the World Series of Boxing (WSB)<sup>5</sup> and AIBA Pro Boxing (APB),<sup>6</sup> competitions engaged in only by men. This constitutes a form of gender discrimination in which powerful groups (the governing bodies and executive committees) have provided men with far greater opportunities than women to compete and represent their country in international elite boxing.

Next, I outline the theoretical framework used to explore inequality, exclusion, inclusion and social change in elite boxing.

### **Theoretical framework: innovation, social inclusion and exclusion**

In this article, I utilise innovation literature to investigate social change and practices of inclusion in sport. The concept of innovation is used as an analytical tool to study the processes of change that led to the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games, and practices of exclusion and inclusion in elite boxing. Here, innovation is synthesized with social inclusion/exclusion in a manner that foregrounds issues of power. For instance, how are social inclusion initiatives 'innovative' in their approach to (for example) equalising power and gender relations between different groups? Innovations can be described as intentional and proactive processes that involve both the generation and practical adoption of new ideas, which aim to produce a qualitative change in a specific context (Ratten, 2011; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; Tjønnndal, 2016b). Furthermore, innovation is often defined in a normative way, described as substantial changes with specific goals of improvement (Ratten and Ferriera, 2016b; Sundbo, 1998). In other words, the social changes worth recognising as innovation should be new to the organisation, be large enough, general enough and durable enough to appreciably affect the operations or character of the organisation (Hartley, 2013; Moore et al., 1997).

Innovation in sport organisations can substantially change how sport is played, viewed and organised (Winand and Hoeber, 2016). On an institutional level, innovation is crucial for sport organisations because it provides possible solutions to challenges of exclusion, development and athletic performance (Balmer et al., 2012; Ringuet-Riot et al., 2013). The normative assumptions in innovation provide a fruitful approach for understanding how social inclusion initiatives, such as the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympics, provide innovative solutions to social problems of gender inequality in elite sport. This theoretical framework can also be useful in sociological analyses of new and innovative inclusion initiatives aimed at democratising other power relations in sport. Social exclusion in sport occurs because of lack of knowledge, power, access to services, facilities, choice or opportunity (Bailey, 2005). Social inclusion, on the other hand, is about making sure that everyone, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, is able to participate in sport (Collins, 2014; Spaaij et al., 2014). Building on the understanding of innovations as processes, initiatives, products or projects aimed at solving social problems, or creating qualitative change, it is valuable to

connect the concepts of inclusion/exclusion and innovation to analyse social change in sport. How do new processes and projects in sport organisations' 'innovations' contribute to levelling power relations between people regardless of gender, race, class or sexuality? Using innovation as an analytical tool for understanding change and practices of exclusion and inclusion, I build on Donnelly and Coakley's (2002) and Bailey's (2005) frameworks of social inclusion. They describe inclusion as a proactive approach to social wellbeing that calls for more than the removal of the barriers and risks associated with social inequality and exclusion (e.g. Donnelly and Harvey, 1996). This suggests that social inclusion extends beyond bringing the 'outsiders' in. It is about closing the social, economic and physical distances that separate people in modern societies (Fangen, 2009). Such an understanding of inclusion is inherently linked to a relational perspective on power and equalising power relations between different groups (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002). In other words, just like innovations, changes described as social inclusion must be large enough, durable enough and general enough to affect the organisation and practices of sport.

Bailey (2005) describes three important dimensions of social inclusion in sport: the spatial dimension, the relational dimension and power. The spatial dimension refers to social inclusion as the closing of social and economic distances between groups of people. The relational dimension considers social inclusion to be a general sense of belonging and acceptance among the individuals in the previously excluded group. Finally, power is about equalising power relations between the dominant and the marginalized groups (Bailey, 2005). In turn, Donnelly and Coakley (2002) describe five cornerstones of social inclusion: (1) valued recognition; (2) material wellbeing; (3) proximity; (4) human development; and (5) involvement and engagement. Valued recognition is described as 'conferring recognition and respect on individuals and groups' (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002: ix). This includes recognising the need for common worth through universal programmes such as healthcare, while still acknowledging the individual differences in development. Material wellbeing refers to having access to the material resources needed to allow individuals to participate fully in community life, such as a reasonable house and a job with an adequate income. Proximity is about sharing physical and social spaces to provide opportunities for interaction. Human development is about nurturing the skills, capacities, choices and talents of people so that they can live a life they value and make a meaningful contribution to their surroundings; examples include arranging learning and developmental opportunities for both children and adults (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002). The last cornerstone of social inclusion, involvement and engagement, means having the right and

the required support to make decisions affecting oneself, family and community, and to be engaged in community life.

## **Methodology**

This article focuses on innovation for social inclusion in elite sport. The study this article is based on employed a qualitative textual analysis approach consisting of a purposeful sample of existing texts (Markula and Silk, 2011).

### *Sample*

The study employed a textual analysis strategy of existing texts. In all qualitative textual analyses, the sample is selected; it is not random (Patton, 2002). In this study, a purposeful sampling technique was adopted to ensure texts that reflected information-rich cases on women's boxing in the Olympic Games. The selection of texts is based on a sampling technique which Patton (2002) refers to as 'homogenous samples'. A homogenous sample entails selecting a small, homogenous sample of texts to describe a specific phenomenon: in this case, the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympic Games. When selecting texts for a qualitative textual analysis some substantial factors must be considered: (a) what type of medium are the texts published in? (newspapers, magazines, books, television, radio); (b) what types of text are they? (written articles, photographs, moving images); (c) what is the time frame of the texts? (one week, one month, a year) (Bratberg, 2014). At the time of data collection all of the texts were published online. The sample includes two different types of texts: first, texts with a 'top-down' perspective on the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games that included official (written) statements, press releases, announcements and open letters from IOC and AIBA; and, second, texts depicting 'bottom-up' responses to the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympics including newspaper and magazine articles featuring interviews with female boxers and boxing coaches responding to the statements from the governing bodies and executive committees of boxing. The time frame of the texts spanned several years, from the official announcement of women's boxing becoming an Olympic discipline in 2009, through the first Olympic Games to include women's boxing in 2012, to the second Olympic Games featuring women in the programme in 2016. The final sample resulted in 81 texts, where governing bodies of boxing (e.g. the 'top-down' perspective) had produced 37 of the texts included in the sample, while 44 of the texts were published in newspapers and magazines featuring responses from athletes and coaches (e.g. 'bottom-up' perspective).

The texts depicting the ‘top-down’ perspective (see Table 1) represent the complete sample of published statements by IOC and AIBA on the inclusion of women’s boxing in the Olympic Games.<sup>7</sup> IOC and AIBA were chosen because these two sport organisations represent the governing bodies of the Olympic Games and Olympic-style boxing.<sup>8</sup>

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**Table 1.** Texts from AIBA and IOC.

	Official statements, announcements and letters	News and written articles
2009–2012	9	13
2012–2016	4	11

**Table 2.** Texts from newspapers and magazines.

	Interviews with boxers and coaches	Written articles/news/features
2009–2012	14	17
2012–2016	7	6

Together, IOC and AIBA make up the two most powerful sport organisations in Olympic boxing internationally. While other perspectives might matter on this subject, AIBA and IOC have global superiority as governing bodies of Olympic boxing. The selection of texts representing the ‘bottom-up’ perspective (see Table 2) is to some extent limited in a practical sense by the language abilities of the author. This part of the sample includes texts from the press of English-speaking countries (mainly Great Britain, USA and Canada) as well as Scandinavian-speaking countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark). Great Britain and the USA have dominated elite women’s boxing and gained medals both in the London 2012 and the Rio 2016 Olympic Games (AIBA, 2017a). Furthermore, Great Britain was the host of the first Olympic Games to include women’s boxing, which resulted in some increased media attention (Tjønndal, 2016d). However, these countries were chosen over others for this sample for three reasons: (1) their long historical traditions of women’s boxing (e.g. Gems, 2014; Smith, 2014; Tjønndal, 2016a); (2) their athletic success internationally<sup>9</sup>; and (3) their advancements in gender equality in sport<sup>10</sup> (Hovden, 2012).

### *Methods of analysis*

The sample represents both the ‘top-down’ perspective from the governing bodies of boxing, and the ‘bottom-up’ response from athletes and coaches. Although the analysis of the material aims to give an in-depth description of the inclusion of women’s boxing in the Olympic Games, published texts are always written according to a certain standpoint (e.g. Bratberg, 2014; Herd, 2016). The past is neither neutral nor objective. In this case, the ‘top-down’ perspective represents the institutions’ own presentation of their politics in relation to the inclusion of women, while the ‘bottom-up’ texts represent reactions to these politics of inclusion. The texts were coded and categorised using the computer- assisted qualitative data analysis software HyperRESEARCH. A qualitative content analysis approach was applied as a strategy for analysing the material (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Content analysis uses a descriptive approach in both the coding and interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In analysing, categorising and coding the material, my aim was to describe the characteristics and content of each document by examining ‘who says what, to whom and with what effect’ (e.g. Bloor and Wood, 2006). Using this approach, the analysis of the material resulted in three distinct topics that are highlighted in the findings of this article: (1) gaining formal access to the Olympic Games (material from 2009–2012); (2) controversies over women boxers’ outfits (material from 2009–2012); and (3) the development of women’s Olympic boxing after London 2012 (material from 2012–2016). The aim of the sample and the analysis is not to represent the sum of the ‘total opinion’ about women’s elite boxing; rather, this analysis is based on an interpretative point of entry epistemologically (e.g. Markula and Silk, 2011). More specifically, the analysis conducted here is based on interpretations substantiated through an argumentation constituted by dialogue between data and theory for constructing an understanding of the phenomenon analysed (Bratberg, 2014). Hence, the analysis, discussion and conclusions in this article only represent one possible interpretation. However, it by no means represents the ‘only’ or ‘one true’ interpretation of the phenomenon analysed. The interpretations and readings of these texts are also shaped by my personal identity and social location (e.g. Herd, 2016). The author is personally invested in women’s boxing as a competitive fighter and a national champion, and has represented her country in numerous international tournaments over the last decade. As a qualitative researcher, this grants me a great deal of knowledge about the inner workings of international elite women’s boxing, which I generally consider to be an advantage in qualitative research (e.g. Thagaard, 2003). However, it also shapes my interpretations and reading of the analysed texts, which is important to keep in mind when considering the analysis in this article.

## **Formal access and acceptance: the London 2012 Olympic Games**

For the first time in Olympic history, women's boxing competitions were included in the London 2012 Games. In the Olympics, boxing has been the last 'bastion of masculinity' (Linder, 2012). In 2009, AIBA and IOC announced that women's boxing was to be included in London 2012 (IOC, 2009). With this announcement, AIBA also stated that getting women's boxing into the Olympic Games had been one of the organisation's top priorities since 2006 (AIBA, 2009). One of AIBA's (2009) arguments for the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympics concerned the public image of the sport:

Having women's boxing at Olympics would help improve the overall image of the sport. If women come in, people will feel the sport is more common, not so dangerous, and that would be a very good thing for the image of boxing.

Claiming that the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympics would help the image of boxing downplays the democratic rights of female boxers to equal participation in sport (Tjønndal, 2017), while suggesting that the inclusion of women can be used to normalise the image of the sport. This can be understood as a commercial justification of the inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympic Games (Bernard and Busse, 2006; Travers, 2011). However, based on the Olympic Charter and AIBA's statutes and bylaws (AIBA, 2007, 2013b, 2016; IOC, 2015) combating inequality, marginalisation and social exclusion of women is a political goal in its own right. By claiming that the inclusion of women in the Olympics could change the overall image of the sport, female boxers are depicted as a tool that can be used to replace stereotypes of boxing as a violent activity for men (Gems, 2014; Matthews, 2014; Smith, 2014). Responding to the announcements from IOC and AIBA, the British Minister for the Olympics commented on the inclusion of women's boxing:

It will be a landmark moment come London 2012 when for the first time every sport will have women participating in it. London 2012 will now create the first ever generation of boxing heroines and hopefully inspire even more women to take up the sport (BBC, 2009).

The announcement of women's boxing as a future Olympic discipline in 2009 reflects a social inclusion initiative aimed at equalising power relations between male and female athletes in elite boxing. The introduction of women's boxing into the Olympics can be interpreted as a change substantial enough to potentially alter the character of AIBA as a sport organisation (Hartley, 2013; Ratten, 2011). In this way, the introduction of women's boxing in the Olympic

Games can be described as an ‘innovation’ (e.g. Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; Sundbo, 1998; Tjønndal, 2016c). Donnelly and Harvey (1996) argue that social inclusion extends beyond bringing the ‘outsiders’ in. Following their definition of inclusion, the introduction of a limited number of women boxers into the Olympics can scarcely be defined as an ‘innovative’ social inclusion initiative that closes social, economic and cultural gaps between male and female elite boxers (Bailey, 2005; Fangen, 2009; Sundbo, 1998). However, it can be argued that the inclusion of 36 women boxers in the Olympic Games cannot be characterized as innovation in the way Sørensen and Torfing (2011) as well as Moore et al. (1997) describe it: normative, lasting, substantial and qualitative changes to an organisation with specific aims of improvement.

In London, 3 out of 10 possible women’s weight divisions were included (51 kg, 60 kg and 75 kg), meaning 36 female athletes were allowed to compete in the Olympics. The formal acceptance of women’s boxing in the Olympic Games suggests some important aspects of social inclusion. Giving women the formal right to compete in the Olympics represents parts of the spatial dimension of social inclusion (Bailey, 2005). Formal access is a necessary starting point when the aim is to close social and economic distances between groups of people (e.g. Collins, 2014; Donnelly and Harvey, 1996; Spaaij et al., 2014). With women’s boxing recognised as an Olympic event, some national sport federations began paying more attention to and increasing their funding for women’s boxing, beginning the work of closing economic distances between male and female boxers in their respective countries (Tjønndal 2016a, 2016d). However, other countries deny women participation in competitive boxing altogether (McCree, 2015; Tjønndal, 2017).

Access to adequate material resources is also part of Donnelly and Coakley’s (2002) five cornerstones of inclusion and, while women boxers still have less funding and fewer resources than their male counterparts (Chaudhuri, 2012; Kipnis and Caudwell, 2015), the Olympics changed the opportunities for female boxers in many countries (Jennings and Cabrera Velazquez, 2015). British Olympic gold medallist Nicola Adams<sup>11</sup> responded to the news of women’s boxing being introduced into the Olympics in this way:

We’ve achieved so much already without having access to funding. We took a team to the Worlds for the first time and we’ve just won three gold medals in the European Championship. With all the extra backing that should come our way, there’s no reason we can’t be up there competing with the likes of the Russians. I’ve always thought about

how I'd feel fighting and winning an Olympic medal in London. I've always wanted to make my family and friends and country proud and I can aim to do that now (The Guardian, 2010).

### **Inequality and exclusion: boxing in skirts?**

Prior to the London 2012 Olympic Games, a topic of discussion within AIBA was the official competition outfits of female boxers (Linder, 2012). The debate centred on whether or not women *should be allowed* to wear traditional boxing shorts, or if skirts should be mandatory (Paradis, 2009). AIBA proposed that skirts should be mandatory for female boxers in the Olympics (The Globe and Mail, 2011; Van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012). AIBA's argument was that if women boxers did not wear skirts, spectators would not be able to distinguish between male and female boxers, and that it would be confusing for them<sup>12</sup>. In an interview, the president of AIBA commented: 'I have heard many times, people say, "We can't tell the difference between the men and women", especially on TV, since they're in the same uniforms and are wearing headgear' (Business Insider, 2011).

Some national boxing federations, such as the Polish boxing federation, supported AIBA's proposal of mandatory uniforms for women (Kick It Out, 2012; Tjønnedal, 2016d). A representative of the Polish boxing federation proclaimed that: 'By wearing skirts, it gives a good impression, a womanly impression. Wearing shorts is not a good way for women boxers to dress' (BBC Sport, 2011).

In the analysis of the material, such arguments were recurring among representatives of AIBA and national boxing federations who supported making skirts mandatory for women in the Olympics. Supporters claimed that if women boxers wore skirts, it would be easier for the spectators to determine the gender of the athletes and, second, that skirts would make women boxers 'look elegant' (BBC Sport, 2012a; Sportette, 2011; The Washington Post, 2011). The suggestion of making skirts mandatory for women in the London 2012 Olympic Games caused substantial resistance from both coaches and female athletes, but also from national federations and the public (Linder, 2012; Van Ingen and Kovacs, 2012). An online petition on Change.org gained more than 50,000 signatures, petitioning AIBA to reverse its recommendation that women boxers should be required to wear skirts during the London 2012 Olympic Games (Change.org, n.d.). Coaches and athletes from different nations also voiced their disagreement with AIBA. One of the texts depicts how Britain's head coach argued that the women competing

in the Olympic Games had earned their right to be treated equally with male boxers: ‘They are boxers and they want to wear a normal boxing kit. They have earned the right to be boxers and they want to go as boxers, not female boxers’ (BBC Sport, 2011). Several female elite boxers voiced their resistance to the proposition. Norwegian boxer and former European champion Lotte Lien asserted her opinion on the matter, saying:

The suggestion is ludicrous! It is an initiative from those who feel that the sport of boxing is too masculine for women. They think giving us skirts will make it better to watch women’s boxing. But it’s really just treating male and female boxers differently. I will never box in a short skirt. I don’t even wear miniskirts when I go out with my friends. I will never wear it in the ring! (Aftenposten, 2012).

British lightweight champion Natasha Jonas also commented on her feelings about being forced to wear a skirt in the ring:

Personally, I think it’s more for the aesthetics; nothing practical is going to come from wearing a skirt, The only people who would want to see women in skirts are men. It should be the boxer’s choice whether they want to or not. You shouldn’t be forced to wear one (Business Insider, 2011).

The resistance from athletes, coaches and spectators represents a ‘bottom-up’ reaction to the governing bodies’ ‘top-down’ inclusion politics. The discussion regarding women’s skirts is here interpreted as a symbol of the power AIBA, IOC and national boxing federations hold over female boxers. The sexualisation of female boxers through ‘feminine’ competition outfits (Linder, 2012; Woodward, 2006) illustrates that while the introduction of women’s boxing in the Olympics might have been a social inclusion initiative, it is not particularly ‘innovative’ (e.g. Moore et al., 1997; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; Sundbo, 1998) in terms of levelling gendered power relations in elite boxing (Tjørndal, 2016c). Equalising power relations between dominant and marginalised groups, such as men and women in boxing, is crucial for presenting social inclusion initiatives as innovative solutions to social problems (Bailey, 2005; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). Attempting to force women to wear skirts underlines how the inclusion of women’s boxing in the London 2012 Olympic Games was missing substantial factors of full social inclusion.

Involvement and engagement are crucial parts of full social inclusion in the way that Donnelly and Coakley (2002) as well as Bailey (2005) define the term. When women boxers are subjected to being forcefully pressured into wearing skirts, it reflects the fact that they have very few

rights in relation to making decisions which affect them. AIBA's suggestion with regard to women's skirts is analysed as an example of how governing bodies in masculine sports often try to 'feminise' their female athletes to make them adhere to traditional norms of femininity. When pinpointing gender differences, as is the case here, this often incorporates gendered relations of power (Hovden, 2000). The arguments for mandatory skirts for women also demonstrate how key actors can express resistance to social inclusion and innovation in elite sport (Pill et al., 2012). From an innovation perspective, this suggestion can be viewed as an example of an attempt to obstruct the process of making elite sport equal and socially inclusive for women. After encountering broad resistance to the suggestion, the president of AIBA released a statement saying:

All seven of our commissions met jointly, and one issue on the agenda was about the women's uniform. And they are so divided. At the European women's championships, the Polish team wore skirts they designed themselves. Some Canadian boxers said they preferred the skirts because of easy movement. And other women have said they do not like them and would like to wear the shorts. It's divided. So it will be optional (ESPN, 2012).

While women are allowed to choose between wearing skirts or shorts (BBC Sport, 2012b; Mail Online, 2011), national boxing federations can still require their female athletes to wear skirts in competitions, demonstrating that some central agents are still resisting the inclusion of women in elite boxing. Poland and Romania are examples of two nations that have been known to make skirts mandatory for their female boxers.

### **Resources, recognition and involvement: the road to Rio 2016**

Following the London 2012 Olympic Games, AIBA announced that it was working towards increasing the number of weight categories for women in the Rio 2016 Games. This request to increase the number of women's weight categories, and thereby the number of female participants, was denied by IOC. During the Olympics in Rio 2016, there were still only 3 weight divisions and 36 slots open to female boxers. This is a small number of athletes compared to the men's 10 Olympic weight categories, which included approximately 250 boxers. As a response to why it would not increase the number of women's weight categories, IOC stated:

The IOC Executive Board decided that to control the size and cost of the Olympic Games, any changes requested by the international federations for the 2016 Olympic

Games should in principle not result in a higher number of athletes or increased number of medals (AIBA, 2013c).

IOC's decision meant that in order for there to be more weight categories for women at the Rio Games, the number of weight categories for men would have to be reduced. The possibility of reducing the number of men's weight categories in order to increase the number of female boxers was not discussed publicly by AIBA. This can be understood as an example of the unequal power relations between men and women in elite boxing. Reducing some of the male categories to make room for the women would have reflected an attempt to equalise these gendered power relations and close the social distance between male and female boxers (Bailey, 2005; Donnelly and Coakley, 2002).

While the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games was a pivotal moment in modern boxing history, the London 2012 Olympics did not bring forth the improvements many female athletes were hoping to see. US middleweight and gold medallist Claressa Shields explained that being in the Olympics had not made life as a female boxer easier: 'After the 2012 Olympics I went without getting endorsements for the first three years, in those three years I had a lot of time to think and rediscover myself' (Rio Olympics, 2016). Even when becoming the first US woman to win a gold medal in boxing, Shields struggled to get access to the economic and material resources she needed to succeed as an athlete. Her struggles as a female boxer illustrate the lack of material and economic resources many women boxers experience.

Material wellbeing is not the only cornerstone of social inclusion female boxers are missing (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002). Swedish boxer Anna Laurell Nash described some of the difficulties she experienced in her journey to the Rio 2016 Olympics, discussing AIBA and IOC and their views on women's boxing: 'I don't think they realise how good we are, I think they think it's just a kind of boxing exercise to keep fit. But to me, it's my life, I've built my whole life around this' (Expressen, 2014). As Nash expresses, she does not feel that she is taken seriously and valued as a professional athlete. Another Olympic boxer, Jennifer Chieng from Micronesia, stated that when she tells people she is a full-time boxer she 'usually just gets brushed off' (Rio Olympics, 2016). Many female boxers tell stories similar to these, explaining that they do not feel respected for their athletic abilities and skill (e.g. Kim et al., 2015; Kipnis and Caudwell, 2015; Tjørndal and Hovden, 2016). Shields also talked about the lack of recognition, belonging and acceptance as a female fighter:

As far as boxing goes, we are just not getting on that platform to where we're getting some recognition. The best female boxers need to be on that platform to where we can get that recognition and just get the same equal treatment as the men (Rio Olympics, 2016).

The experiences of Nash, Chieng and Shields can be interpreted as manifestations of the lack of acceptance women boxers experience in the gym (Garcia, 2013; Heiskanen, 2012; Owton, 2015; Sekules, 2012). Their voices express how women are still lacking vital factors of social inclusion, such as involvement and engagement, valued recognition, material wellbeing and spatial and relational inclusion (Bailey, 2005; Donnelly and Coakley, 2002). The lack of development in women's Olympic boxing between London 2012 and Rio 2016 demonstrates how elite female boxers still have limited involvement and engagement in their own sporting careers.

Lack of relational inclusion and lack of recognition remain barriers for women in elite boxing. Social inclusion in sport is about making sure that women are able to participate and be equally respected alongside their male counterparts (Collins, 2014; Donnelly and Coakley, 2000; Hovden, 2000). While gaining acceptance for the London 2012 Games broke down some formal and central barriers for elite women boxers, it does not ensure full social inclusion of women in this part of elite sport. While women's boxing continued to be a part of the Olympic programme in Rio 2016, female boxers still face lack of equality and inclusion in sponsorships, endorsements and media attention relative to male boxers across cultures (e.g. Chaudhuri, 2012; Kim et al., 2015; Tjønndal and Hovden, 2016). This indicates that women's material wellbeing, recognition, power and involvement in international elite boxing are still somewhat limited (Bailey, 2005; Jennings and Cabrera Velazquez, 2015). What is said in interviews featuring these female boxers can be understood as a lack of a general sense of acceptance and valued recognition as professional athletes (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002). However, gaining formal access to the Olympics may have produced some form of qualitative change in elite boxing (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). In another interview, Nash explained her perception of the matter:

I've been boxing since 1997. When I started, boys, men and old men came to me and said, 'You shouldn't be boxing, girls shouldn't be boxing', but a lot of that has changed. The sport has changed a lot and we do get a lot more respect now, especially since we are in the Olympics (Lokaltidningen, 2016).

## Conclusion

This article suggests that although women have gained access to a previously closed realm and gained the formal right to participate in the Olympics, there is still a way to go before female fighters can achieve full social inclusion in international elite boxing. In addition to mere entry, acceptance, a sense of being welcome and valued, reciprocity in interaction, cultural change to reflect the values and experiences of those previously excluded, and a sharing of power reflect the real structural change that is social inclusion. Little of this has occurred in the case of women's boxing in the Olympics (Jennings and Cabrera Velazquez, 2015; Linder, 2012; Tjønndal, 2016d). A few women may be in the ring, but they are there under conditions over which they have little or no control themselves. This appears to have remained the case for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

Social inclusion is a complex and challenging concept that cannot be reduced to one simple meaning or dimension. Women may have gained inclusion in terms of physical and social places of interaction (proximity), as well as some level of increased recognition, but most women engaging in boxing are still lacking the spatial and relational dimensions of inclusion, as well as material wellbeing, power, involvement and engagement. The interviews and reactions of the female elite boxers in this article are interpreted as expressions of the lack of recognition and acceptance of women athletes in elite boxing. The introduction of women's boxing into the Olympic Games in London and Rio may have had some effect on the status and recognition of women's boxing, but not enough to produce lasting social change in the culture, structure and power hierarchies of international elite boxing. Elite boxing is still a sport managed by and for men (Tjønndal, 2017).

An innovation must have a significant impact on the culture and organisation of sport, which does not appear to be the case for women's boxing in the Olympics so far. Women have gained formal access to the Olympic Games, but it is a narrow access including only a minimum number of athletes. It represents a necessary first step in an innovation process for social inclusion but, as this article suggests, there are still many factors missing before this process can be described as an innovation promoting equality and social inclusion in elite sport. As of January 2017, AIBA has changed its official rules and now allows all elite women boxers to compete in the same format as men: 3 x 3 minute rounds. Further studies on the continuing development of women's boxing in the Olympics are necessary in order to examine if this area

of elite sport is developing towards lasting social change in terms of social inclusion of women as a marginalized group.

While the introduction of women's boxing into the Olympics can be interpreted as an inclusion initiative on its own, the debate on women's competition outfits highlights how the entry of women's boxing was not 'innovative' in terms of levelling gendered power relations in elite boxing (Hartley, 2013; Ratten and Ferriera, 2016a; Tjønnedal, 2016c). It does, however, raise questions of gendered power relations in international elite boxing. The decision to deny women access to more weight divisions in Rio is here interpreted as an example of the current marginalisation of women's boxing. While women boxers are breaking down barriers punch by punch, the introduction of 36 female boxers into the Olympics has not succeeded in making a substantial impact on the masculine culture and social norms of elite boxing. At best, the inclusion of women's boxing in the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games are examples of the early stages of an ongoing innovation process for equality and inclusion of female athletes.

## Notes

1. The abbreviation IOC will be used in this article.
2. The abbreviation AIBA will be used in this article.
3. Mainly the European Championship and the World Championship.
4. Approximately 250 male athletes.
5. See <http://www.worldseriesboxing.com/> for more information on WSB.
6. See <http://www.aibaproboxing.com/boxers/> for more information on APB.
7. At the time of data collection.
8. Previously known as amateur boxing.
9. As is the case for Great Britain and the USA.
10. Particularly for the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark).
11. Since this material was collected and analysed Nicola Adams has chosen to become a professional boxer.
12. From 2011 AIBA removed its own announcement on the topic of women's skirts, but information on the suggestion is still available in a variety of newspaper articles and online forums.

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