

## **Gender Inequality in Sport: Perceptions and Experiences of Generation Z**

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## **Gender Inequality in Sport: Perceptions and Experiences of Generation Z**

Research on Generation Z's (Gen Z) sport education is limited in scope. This study explores Gen Z's perceptions of gender equity in sport, with a focus on topic areas that warrant attention in sport management higher education courses to increase awareness around gender inequality. This study of Gen Z students across four European countries, including Belgium, Norway, Netherlands and England, was conducted through eight focus groups. The 54 participants, all born after 1995, were enrolled in an (under)graduate sport programme. Through a thematic analysis we identified four distinct, yet inter-related themes, and explored their link to the interacting processes from Acker's work (1990). Results indicate that intercultural differences exist. Participants demonstrate an awareness of gender inequality in the media and in school sport, while also illustrating how disparities are shaped in school and sport contexts. These findings are encouraging for developing further social transformation, as awareness is a first hurdle to overcome when working towards social change. Awareness around gender inequality could further be increased in higher education by focusing on knowledge gaps found in this study such as the underrepresentation of women in coaching positions or officiating roles, the lower status job roles congruent to traditional gender norms, and the use of quota schemes. The results of this study are relevant for sport and physical education scholars to address and continue challenging traditional gender stereotypes and beliefs as well as foster career and leadership aspirations for the next generation of prospective employees.

Keywords: Gen Z, gender equality, sport, higher education

## Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the ‘named’ generation following Millennials, referring to individuals born after the mid 1990’s. Gen Z have not known the world without internet-based media, which shapes the unique circumstances in which Gen Z is approaching adulthood (Duffett, 2017). Although Gen Z have a broad outlook of the world, the way they are educated to take up responsibilities depends on the socio-cultural and political conditions of their national contexts in which behaviours, values and ideologies can reinforce gender divisions (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Mahalik et al. 2005) and can result in gender-stereotypical beliefs, different play preferences and career aspirations (Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017, Golden & Jacoby, 2018).

There is considerable empirical evidence that supports the gendered nature and leadership in sport as male dominated (Burton, 2015). Although evidence of women breaking the glass ceiling has been found at the highest levels of Norwegian organised sport after the implementation of quota regulations (Sisjord, Fasting, & Sand, 2017), many sport managers still regard gender balance a non-issue (Knoppers & Elling, 2017). In general, the increase of sport participation rates among girls and women has not translated into coaching and managerial roles. This is not surprising as female enrolment in academic sport programmes that prepare prospective employees for the sport industry is still not equivalent to their male counterparts (Hancock, Darvin, & Nefertiti, 2018; Harris, Grappendorf, & Veraldo, 2015; Moore, Parkhouse, & Conrad, 2004; Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008). Researchers have worked towards understanding the various challenges and barriers among women working in the sport industry (see e.g., Taylor, Smith, Welch, & Hardin, 2018) but have failed to sufficiently examine the considerations of prospective employees (Hancock et al., 2018). This is surprising when considering that educational intervention efforts “...towards change and gender equality in sport organisations are best started at young age” (Betzer-Tayar, 2015; p.

17) and require critical reflection on the pedagogical and educational perspectives used by the teaching staff within academic programmes.

Only few studies focussed on prospective employees and explored female sport administration students' perceptions towards their futures careers (Harris et al., 2015) and the perceptions of leadership among female and male sport management students (Hancock et al., 2018). This study explores the knowledge and perceptions of gender inequality in sport among prospective employees in the sport industry. Two research questions were addressed:

- 1) What are current sport (under)graduate students' considerations of gender inequality in sport?
- 2) What areas of gender inequality in sports are suffering from 'knowledge gaps' within this specific group of Gen Z students?

This research aimed to discover topic areas that need to be emphasised in sport management higher education (HE hereafter) to increase awareness of gender inequality in sport and support the development of gender-aware future change agents and leaders in the sport domain.

### ***Gender inequality in sport***

Throughout the 1970s several political reforms to women's inclusion permeated society (Straume, 2012). An important historical initiative was implemented in 1979, when the right for women to participate in sport was included in the international convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (UNHR, 2020). In 1981 two women were co-opted as the first female International Olympic Committee (IOC) members and in 1990 the first woman was elected on the IOC Executive Board. Since 1991 the IOC required any new sports within the Olympic programme to include women's events. Even though a gender balance is scheduled to be achieved in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games following the implementation of athlete quotas, achieving gender equality in leadership remains an issue (IOC, 2020). The significant positive progress of female participation at the

Olympics (Donnelly & Donnelly, 2013), however, is not reflected in the evolution of female enrolment in sport management degree programmes (Hancock et al., 2018; Harris, Grappendorf, & Veraldo, 2015; Moore et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2008) and the number of females employed within the sport industry (Burton, 2015; Joseph & Anderson, 2016). The persistence of male dominance in the leadership and governance of sport assists in maintaining the power imbalance (Connell, 1995; Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2003). There is a continuing absence of female presence within decision-making positions, such as management, coaching and officiating within sport (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Elling, Hovden, & Knoppers, 2019), which precipitates the importance of making significant changes in the roles sport management HE programmes have in developing change agents. Considering the popularity of sport management programmes, these might even be well placed to lead social transformation agendas within HE more broadly.

Despite the increased participation of women in the sport domain, the media has a social responsibility when it comes to the representation of women in both the quantity of coverage and the depiction of female athletes, professionals and managers and their accomplishments within sport (Lumpkin, 2009). In countries such as the UK, Sweden and Malta over 80% of sports coverage is dedicated to showcasing men's sport (Women in Sport, 2018), which illustrates that work still remains to be done to address social transformation. Furthermore, according to Kane, LaVoi and Fink (2013), there is a focus on the physical appearance of female athletes rather than their sport skills and achievements, resulting in the commercial leverage of hyper-feminine and hyper-sexualised qualities. Due to these gendered expectations of female athletes, those who violate traditional gender norms are at risk of scrutiny (Fink, Kane & LaVoi, 2014). Although the media still reinforces the superiority of masculinity and heterosexuality in sport, it seems that social media platforms also create opportunities to honour the voices of female athletes when women can represent

their authentic selves (e.g., not only as an athlete but also as a mother) (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Such gender disruptive discourses should be embraced by HE teachers who are pursuing social transformation, as it offers an opportunity to critically reflect upon the gendered norms circulating in the sports industry. Engaging in transformative learning experiences with students of all gender identities is crucial to empower individuals and groups to become change agents within their communities. To these ends, a critical pedagogical approach can foster reflective capacities in HE teachers around how they relate to students who face inequality, disempowerment and/or discrimination. Reflective practices can empower HE teachers to start deconstructing the structures of gendered privilege and power (Andrews 2020, Spear & da Costa, 2018).

### ***Gen Z's knowledge and identity construction on gender inequality in sport***

In this paper we adopt a constructionist perspective which posits that an individual's awareness of gender inequality in sport does not exist separate from their involvement in sport, and this, in turn, shapes their knowledge and identity. This implies that knowledge and identity are dynamic, changing in time and depending on perceived experiences. For instance, students' learning opportunities within sports programmes administered at different levels and fields of education can hinder or stimulate their interest in social change. However, research demonstrates that the majority of teachers are almost exclusively interested in transmitting didactics in learning contexts that can reinforce the hegemonic masculinity (Dowling, 2006; Parker & Curtner-Smith, 2012). This observation points to the need to create working partnerships between HE students and teachers to explicate attitudes on gender balance in sport and to co-produce a process of social transformation.

Dowling (2006) illustrates how gendered substructures are reproduced in daily organizational activities, which can be transferred to sports. These gendered processes were

identified as the organizational logic in the work of Acker (1990). It offers a comprehensive framework through which to study gendering processes related to practices/structures (or rules and roles that promote one group over another), culture (or slogans, symbols and metaphors emphasizing skills such as strength, speed and power to create an environment that values skills traditionally associated with maleness), interaction (or individual-level interaction that enacts dominance and subordination and/or silences or privileges one group over another) and identity construction (or the individual acceptance of gender norms). For the purpose of this study, different themes (i.e., culture and society, governance and law, commerce, media, participation and events) were purposefully chosen to reflect the general elements of the sports ecosystem in which (under)graduate students have been taking part as either participants, spectators, volunteers or consumers (e.g., see Rundh & Gottfridsson, 2015). The underlying assumption is that for (under)graduate students in the field of sports, these themes can be a starting point to gain more insight into their experiences and considerations of gendered processes. Acker's (1990) theoretical framework has been influential in understanding how gender inequality is created and sustained in organisations, pinpointing its operation at multiple levels. In this study, Acker's (1990) framework is applied to identify knowledge gaps related to different processes that shape young people's identity and knowledge of gender inequality in sport. This study was born out of a collaborative Erasmus + Project, entitled the GETZ project, to raise awareness, educate and empower the next generation of sport leaders who can illicit change for greater gender balance in sport.

The socio-cultural framing of gender within different countries also has an influence on gender inequality within any given sector, including the sport sector. The GETZ project partners were chosen because of their comparable socio-cultural environments and similar indicators of gender empowerment (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). A

study conducted to benchmark governance in national sport federations across eight European countries showed that Norway stands out with better results for sport governance overall, as well as for equality along gender lines specifically (Solenes, Gammelsæter, & Egilsson, 2018). Not all challenges exist in every country, or to the same degree. For example, the implementation of quotas and targets are more common practice in Norway, whereas in the UK, the implementation of such top-down measures is not only less prevalent but also viewed as less positive (Hovden, 2012). Considering the potential of a critical pedagogical approach for working towards social transformation, we examined student perceptions who are likely to become future employees in the sport industry. Including all genders may provide insight into gendered beliefs and knowledge gaps that influence the underrepresentation of women in the sport sector.

## **Methodology**

Our methodological orientation is characterized by a concern for lived experience and meaning in order to “encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviour, opinions and perceptions of participants on the research issues” (Hennick, 2007, p.6). Focus groups were used for data collection because this “tool gives a ‘voice’ to the research participants by giving them an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand their experience” (Liamputpong, 2011, p. 4). The focus groups did not have the intention of seeking agreement between participants, nor challenging participants who share traditional perspectives on gender inequality.

## ***Participants***

To ensure sufficient diversity in opinion, a convenience and purposive sampling method was used to select undergraduate and graduate students from the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway and England. At university level, the gender balance among students is fairly equal.

However, within the educational programmes that prepare future employees for the sport industry, female students are underrepresented in the partner countries (see Table 1).

#### INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

To invite study participants, an information letter was posted on online learning platforms to inform students about the purpose of the study and to explain how students who belong to Gen Z could volunteer to take part. The study procedures were approved by lead researchers' Ethics Committee for Human Sciences. Table 2 provides an overview of the study participants at each university.

#### INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Within our sample female students are slightly underrepresented (i.e., 46% female participants), which concurs with the general student population of the faculties involved. 42 study participants are first year-students and most of them have not been exposed to courses that cover gender inequality issues. In England this is covered in one or two sessions of the undergraduate courses 'Contemporary Issues' and 'Socio-political Approaches to Sport'. Five first-year students from the Netherlands followed a course entitled 'Sport & Culture' in which gender inequality is briefly introduced. A minority of our sample consists of second-year students (n=4) and graduate-level students (n=8) who have been exposed to courses that briefly cover gender issues. For the second-year students from Norway this consisted of one lecture entitled 'Sport for All' during which women and leadership were covered in six slides. The graduate students from Belgium had been exposed to the course entitled 'Diversity and Inclusion' in which gender inequality is briefly discussed. Overall, introduction to the topic was very limited and not driven by theory.

#### ***Data collection***

The focus groups were conducted in the main language used at each partner university, four

conducted in Dutch, two in English and two in Norwegian. The focus groups were organised on the university campus in the first half of 2019 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview guide was developed based on a literature review on gender inequality in sport and framed using the six themes set out by the GETZ project which were: culture and society, governance and law, commerce, media, participation and events. The semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit data regarding students' perceptions and experiences of gender inequality in sport, students' personal commitment and attitudes towards gender inequality in sport, and specific action students had taken to promote gender inequality in sport. Example questions under the theme governance and law are: "The board rooms of sport organizations are still dominated by men, why do you think it is important to have female members on board?" and "How do you think this could be changed?". These questions were then followed by a number of probing questions designed to elicit more in-depth insight such as, "How do you feel about taking-up a leadership position in a sport organization?" were included to help the research participants to talk about their personal opinions, experiences and promote critical thinking. Those involved in conducting and facilitating the focus groups were attentive to hear the responses of all participants and aid the process of critical thinking and discussion.

### ***Data analysis***

Each focus group was audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and analysed using the qualitative software package MAXQDA. Data analysis was led by researchers who are native Dutch speaking and fluent in English. The transcripts of the focus groups in Norwegian were translated to English. Data were analysed using transcripts in Dutch and English, using a content analysis approach (Mason, 1996), in which themes were identified in relation to what processes are perceived to lead to the gendering of sport and what kind of knowledge is

constructed among members of Gen Z on gender inequality in sport. The first two authors read the transcripts and coded passages of text with reference to Ackers (1990) four interacting processes (i.e., structural, cultural, interaction and identity processes) that lead to the gendering of organizations. For example, statements referring to different equipment for males and females in sport were categorised as ‘processes that construct symbols and images that explain, reinforce or oppose divisions along lines of gender’. Themes, codes and quotes were discussed in English among the researchers to achieve intersubjective agreement on the interpretation of the identified passages and codes. The participants have all been given an identification code: E1-E20 for English participants; B1-B20 for Belgian participants; D1-D5 for Dutch participants and N1-N9 for Norwegian participants.

## **Results and discussion**

This section addresses the two research questions presented in the introduction: 1) What are current sport (under)graduate students’ considerations of gender inequality in sport? 2) What areas of gender inequality in sports are suffering from ‘knowledge gaps’ within this specific group of Gen Z students? As evidenced below, we identified a perceived progressive identity construction among participants deriving from lived experiences in sport and PE consistent with the four gendering processes theorized by Acker (1990).

### ***Gendering structural processes***

The roles of women (i.e., administrative versus managerial positions) and rules in sport governing boards (i.e., use of quotas) are two central themes from the focus groups that detail the process of gendering structures depicted in Acker’s (1990) theoretical framework.

#### *Views on the roles of women in sport*

In general, participants perceived sport governing boards to be male dominated with few

exceptions in mixed or female dominated sports such as dance, tennis or handball. However, some participants discussed the number of women in isolation from the roles of these women in those organisations, identifying a knowledge gap in understanding the structured nature of gender inequality. This is well illustrated by N7, M who said:

‘I think that saying everything in sport is male dominated is wrong. The top leaders in Norway are men, but in the middle leadership and in administrative positions is approximately 50-50. Or 40-60-ish so to say that everything is male dominated is wrong in my opinion’

This suggests a belief that the mere presence of women within a sport organisation is sufficient to provide equality within the governance of that sport organisation. Students appear to rarely consider or challenge the unequal positions that women often hold within organisations and how this may limit their ability to influence the strategic direction of their sport. The lower status job roles congruent to traditional gender norms across for example officiating positions or coaching roles (Vos & Scheerder, 2011) were not discussed in depth and appear to be a first knowledge gap among the Gen Z students. Participants seemed to understand the benefits of including female board members because of the wider range of opinions and different perspectives but were, except for the Norwegian students, not familiar with any positive female role models working in sport leadership positions. The lack of representation of women within positions of power and as visible role models can result in other women failing to view themselves as adequate leaders (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). The cultural and social context of students seems to be associated with this first blind spot, implying that broader societal inequalities act upon students’ perceptions and contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality.

#### *Views on policy measures*

The majority of study participants were unaware of quota schemes, did not recall what these were, or how the quota system was operationalised within their own country. This is therefore recognised as a second knowledge gap among the Gen Z students. Participants' thoughts about gender equity policies were rather diverse, covering a more progressive attitude among Norwegian students compared to study participants from Belgium, the Netherlands and England. In general, participants noted that knowledge, skills, personal commitment, and engagement as well as personal interest should, in first instance, be considered during the recruitment process. Some participants, in particular those from Norway, also discussed the importance of achieving equal leadership in sport boards:

It is important that it is not only men who get to exert power. Women are looked down on. It is not always correct that men have more knowledge about sport. Women should also be included because we also have opinions. (N2, F)

The relationship between structure and culture as separate, yet inter-related, processes appeared quite clearly in the data but was also implicitly reflected in the determination of participants' ability, willingness, and perceived self-efficacy to be a board member. In particular, participants from Norway seemed confident about women's leadership capabilities as shown by N7, M, saying:

'Two of the top three football clubs in Norway are managed by women. It is obvious that women can manage business just as good as men. (...) Norway is a leading country in equality along gender lines with evidence in Prime ministers, ministers, industry leaders, etc'.

Another aspect indicating intercultural difference was that Norwegian students mentioned more current national female leaders within the sports industry including, for example, Monica Knudsen (Manager LSK – Female football team premier league), Tove Dyrhaug (RBK – Football club) and Lise Klaveness (Technical Director of Sport in the Norwegian

FA). Students from Belgium, the Netherlands and England were less able to identify any female leaders within their own countries (i.e., a third knowledge gap) and instead highlighted that women are not getting enough room to commit and engage as sport leaders. Students recognised that most decision-makers in sport were white men of an older generation. Participants stated that “I feel like they only want the males to do it” (D2, F) and “even if I would like to be a board member, I don’t think they will listen to me” (B18, F). These observations of how sport is governed confirms students’ perceptions elsewhere of what has been referred to as ‘the old boys’ network’ (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008), which illustrates the way in which men “differentiate themselves from other groups of men and from women” (Collinson & Hearn, 1996, p. 156). According to Evans and Pfister (2020), patriarchal selection practices and organisational cultures reinforce the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, despite evidence that men in leadership positions recognise the problem. The perceptions from Gen Z students present a challenge. Firstly, it appears from the results that the study participants do not know what they need to do to challenge the existing inequality in sport because they do not entirely agree with quotas as a policy measure to tackle this widely recognised problem and secondly, if sport management HE programmes fail to attract larger numbers of female students then it becomes a self-perpetuating issue.

### *Gendering cultural processes*

Acker (1990) views gendering cultures as a process that aims to make the invisible visible through the use of slogans, symbols or metaphors emphasising skills such as strength, speed and power to create an environment that values skills traditionally associated with masculinity. In relation to this process, two distinct themes including the coverage and representation of female elite athletes in the media and the use of derogatory statements or metaphors as powerful tools in the process in stereotyping were found.

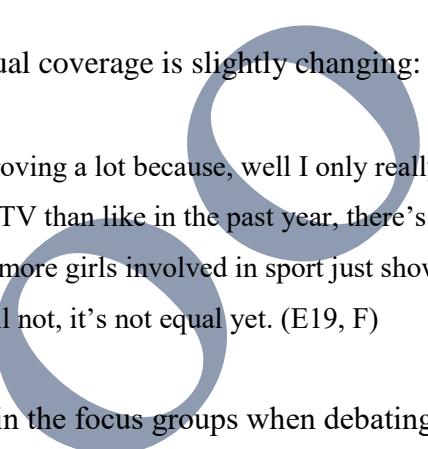
### *Coverage and representation of female athletes*

Participants mentioned unequal media coverage of female and male athletes. This evidence concurs with the aforementioned findings of Women in Sport (2018), indicating that from a commercial point of view the media, prefer to use men as key representatives and emphasise male-dominated or female-dominated sports. For instance:

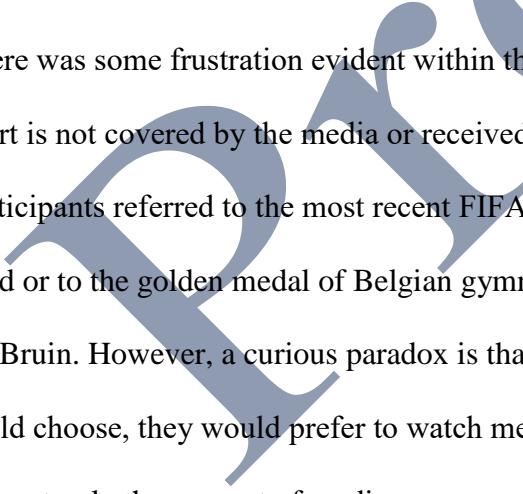


It's not about gender, but what sells. Right now, it's the Euro Championship in handball for women that sells, and therefore there's a lot about it in the media. Ada Hegerberg sells. But there are more sports featuring men that sell than sports featuring women. (N7, M)

However, some perceived that this unequal coverage is slightly changing:



I don't think it is equal, but it's improving a lot because, well I only really watch netball but it's getting shown a lot more on TV than like in the past year, there's a lot more coverage on all of it and it's getting more girls involved in sport just showing it on TV, but I think it's improving but it's still not, it's not equal yet. (E19, F)



There was some frustration evident within the focus groups when debating that women's sport is not covered by the media or received poor TV scheduling compared to men's sport. Participants referred to the most recent FIFA Women's World Cup when England finished third or to the golden medal of Belgian gymnast Nina Derwael or the Dutch swimmer Inge De Bruin. However, a curious paradox is that several participants mentioned that if they could choose, they would prefer to watch men's football over women's football. They argued that not only the amount of media coverage of male athletes influences their viewing/reading behaviour but that it is particularly the way female athletes are profiled (e.g., as less hyped than men) and how they are labelled (e.g., as being clumsy when making mistakes) that explains why they prefer following sportsmen or male-dominated sports. This questions how progressive Gen Z really are as there appears to be a contradiction between their perceptions

about right and wrong in terms of the amount of media coverage and their own actions in terms of viewing behaviour. The desirability to change appears to be limited within the area of media representation, as several participants prefer to stick with the status quo and continue to accept ignorance instead of challenging the existing inequality.

#### *Use of derogatory statements or metaphors*

Participants emphasized disparities within several sports such as football, gymnastics, dance, horse riding and weightlifting based on their lived experiences. The culturally embedded differences between characteristics of men such as power and strength and features related to women including grace and flexibility were reinforced by the use of derogatory statements or metaphors (Hardin & Greer, 2009). The problem arising from such culturally embedded habits, is that the language perpetuates myths on topics such as sex, gender and sexuality which lead to participants saying: “Girls playing football are more masculine compared to other girls. This is related to sexuality and the fact that one thinks football is a masculine type of sport.” (N7, M)

Due to the association between sport and masculinity, female athletes are often presumed to be non-heterosexual regardless of their sexual identity (Fink et al. 2012). The foundation of these stereotypes is due to the perceived lack of adherence to traditional femininity demonstrated through participating within ‘masculine’ team sports (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Fynes & Fisher, 2016). As such metaphors are still frequently used even by Gen Z to differentiate between men and women in sport. According to the participants, metaphors are often used in the context of sport to present women in an inferior manner relative to their physical potential and capabilities. One participant (N5, M) suggested that a frequently used term in the domain of sports is “You kick like a girl”, suggesting that they are inferior to the capabilities of boys. Another participant (N1, M) mentioned that “women are still being

looked down at in football and told that they're not physically capable". Such persistent and disempowering thoughts about girls' physical capabilities were mostly in relation to male-dominated sports, because: "there is that stereotype that women aren't... obviously I don't think this, but women aren't as strong or physical as the men, that sort of thing" (E5, M). These notions support the view of 'sport appropriateness' which is associated with traditional femininity, thus, deeming sports such as football and rugby as less appropriate for women's participation (Chalabaev et al. 2013),

Derogatory statements were also raised in relation to girls' mental capabilities in order to, "know the rules of certain sports" (E10, M). This finding is congruent with the attitudes towards female referees within the UK and their exposure to sexist comments explored by Forbes, Edwards, and Fleming (2015). One participant stated that "it can be quite sexist sometimes or like within certain sports people think that girls' sports are easier" (E19, F). It was evident from the focus groups that these stereotypical statements exist, however, that they are also not being challenged by Gen Z participants. Instead of disagreeing with these statements or providing examples of how these stereotypes have been challenged in their lived experiences, participants provided more examples of how they are perpetuated in society. As illustrated here by one participant (E12, M): "girls might think that because of stereotypes they're not meant to be interested in sport. Whereas, a lot of boys may feel pressured into, oh well I'm a boy so I have to like sport". Previous research suggests that sporting characteristics such as strength and muscle are viewed in opposition of femininity and therefore, sports women are often perceived as performing their gender inappropriately and their sexuality is questioned (Butler, 1990; Griffin, 1998). Moreover, examples were also provided in which boys were stereotyped as being voyeurs who participate in mixed sport classes to stare at women as if they are pieces of eye candy.

I think that it's good that group sessions in the gym are mixed – including both women and men – but last year for example I participated at a Zumba class and there were 2 or 3 guys. These men participated, from time to time, but from the coach they were not allowed to stand in the back of the class because this would be an indication for the fact that they attend the session to check women. I was a bit shocked by this point of view. It might be that some men come to stare at women but in that moment, I felt pity for these guys. They had to stand in the front and were stereotyped as men that participate to stare at women's butts. (B12, F)

So, the results indicate a perpetuation of a stereotyping culture, which Gen Z participants recognise is wrong, yet seem to continue to accept and leave unchallenged. Educational interventions focusing on behaviours of all genders are therefore increasingly important to support, encourage and to enable change.

### ***Gendering interactions***

Themes related to the individual-level interaction that enact dominance and subordination and/or silence or privilege one group over another in this study include: the sex segregation in the sport and school system.

#### ***Sex segregation in the school system***

The hegemonic masculinity embedded in the school system was regarded as another important (destructive) context: "I feel like within school it's like girls' sports are seen as, you're seen to be like weak or like it's not as competitive as the boy's sport, so I feel like it's within schools that it starts" (E19, F). Such destructive beliefs picked up at school, might be internalized by young people and might be related to the separate supervision and different ways of coaching in physical education (PE) classes. At schools in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK it seems to be quite normal to have "single-sex classes for PE" (B18, F).

Additional differences in the formal school context that reinforce divisions along lines of

gender relate to the profile of the PE teachers and the types of sport provided in PE as illustrated by the following participant:

We had a female teacher for the girls and a male teacher for the boys. (...) The girls mainly did gymnastics and dancing, and the boys went to play football, basketball, and hockey. (...) We did not really talk about these differences. This was just how we knew it. (B19, M)

This finding relates to the work of Preece and Bullingham (2020) who established that teachers often have preconceived gender stereotypes due to socio-cultural factors and socialisation, further reinforced by external pressures such as parents, peers and government.

#### *Sex segregation in the sport system*

Belgian participants also mentioned another important factor that reinforces divisions along gender lines by pinpointing differences related to coaching approaches in sport clubs often implying a more competitive-oriented coaching approach for boys than for girls. The fact that many sport clubs do not facilitate similar conditions for women and men was raised by young people from Norway as an issue that hinders the participation of girls and women. For instance, N7, M stated that: "women are not prioritized when it comes to training hours, facilities, trainer's competencies." In general, participants were quite enthusiastic about mixed classes and teams in PE and facilitating more mixed trainings sessions and competitions due to a general belief that more interaction in the sport and school would be beneficial for the technical development of young girls. The assumption that girls are technically underdeveloped and in need of support illustrates how deeply this inferior way of thinking about girls' capabilities is ingrained into young peoples' minds. The perception that knowledge and power, as argued earlier, are not equally shared along lines of gender, is something that young girls seem to experience from an early age, and this is reflected within lived experiences of informal interactions within sports clubs at a young age. Such unequal

power dynamics are problematic as they can foster the idea that knowledge does not have to be shared equally when discussing game tactics in boys' dressing room and excluding the girls from this physical space. Such subtle yet powerful interactions reinforce from an early age the subordination of women and the dominance/superiority of men in the sport system. Aligning with this findings, previous research also uncovered differences in the implied ability, activity and agency levels along gender lines, implying that boys would have greater levels of ability and are therefore also challenged at a qualitatively different level than girls (Hourigan, 2020).

### ***Identity: Gen Z students identify themselves as tolerant and accepting***

Participants reported similar views regarding identity processes, another key element in Acker's (1990) framework. They were highly critical about gender inequalities in sport. Participants mentioned that sport "is supposed to be equal but that there are big differences" (N5, M). Examples given included "the unequal gender split in the media" (E20, F), "the pay gap" (E17, M), "stereotypes related to type of sport" (N2, F) and "imposed sex segregation in competitions and during PE classes at school" (B9, F). The more conservative understanding of certain beliefs and attitudes (e.g., male superiority, homophobia, stereotypes) were perceived as belonging to earlier generations, such as (E19, F) stating "I think that now our generation, we are not as earlier generations, we don't have such extreme views. We are more accepting different things now". In a similar vein a participant (B13, M) stated that "I think that I'm more open and have less restrictive ideas about what women might or should do" when referring to individuals from earlier generations. This concurs with recent research on the gender-sensitive attitudes of college students (Ramos-Galarza, Apolo, Pena-Garcia, & Jadan-Guerrero, 2018). They discussed the rights of equality along gender lines in sport as modern and important aspects of their own sense of self and values, identifying themselves as

more progressive than earlier generations (Seemiller and Grace, 2019). For example,

I don't see why anyone would care if there's a woman in an officiating role, it's, I don't understand you know if they're doing a good job then what's the issue? I think when we get to, when our generation gets to that point, I don't think we'll be forced into roles I just think it will just happen naturally. (E10, M)

The same participant continues to say:

The generation that's in power now I don't think they're going to change, I think that it's just a generation thing, it's just what they believe. But then I think it's going to be a waiting game in terms of, I genuinely think that when we are of that age, it will just happen, I don't know, I don't know anyone from my age seriously thinks that women or different races can't do a certain job. (E10, M)

While this participant recognises that structural constraints for women in sport still exist, he seems to think that forcing transformation towards a gender balance is unnecessary because everything will work out in the long run, which again questions how progressive the Gen Z participants really are.

Gen Z was depicted by young people in this study as being more aware of barriers for women and of the fact that there is still a long way to go towards achieving a gender balance. This notion was reflected in the focus groups by participant (B13, M), who, mentioned that “male ballet dancers are more accepted nowadays just like girls who are playing soccer. There are some positive evolutions compared to the past, but we are not there yet”. It should be noted that examples provided by Gen Z within the focus groups that challenged gendering processes were limited to recognising the increased sport participation opportunities for women in general and in male-dominated sports in particular, which reflected their own active participation experiences. There were, for example, no insights shared in relation to the invisible processes that influence the roles and rules of women in sport governing bodies.

This in itself, is not surprising given that the majority of study participants were first-year students with only limited introduction to critical issues in governance and leadership in sport.

### ***Conclusion***

The results of this study indicate a relatively high level of awareness about gender inequality issues in sport among Gen Z HE students from Norway, England, Belgium and the Netherlands. Nonetheless, the study provided insights into areas that are suffering from ‘knowledge gaps’, consistent with the structural processes theorized by Acker (1990).

The first knowledge gap relates to the unawareness about the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles as well as coaching and officiating positions. The second knowledge gap consists of a lack of understanding about the use of quota schemes. The third knowledge gap relates to the unawareness of Gen Z students from Belgium, the Netherlands and England regarding female role models. Two elements (i.e., governance and media) can help to explain why this knowledge gap was absent among Norwegian students. First, Norway stands out with better results for sport governance overall, and for equality along gender lines specifically (Solenes, Gammelsæter & Egilsson, 2018), implying more female role models with whom the youngest generation can identify. Second, differences exist in media coverage and representation of female athletes, professionals and managers and their accomplishments within sport in Norway compared to the other countries. However, according to a recent study on gendering of media sport in the Nordic countries, it seems that changes related to a redistribution of resources to address the imbalance of

media coverage, visibility, attention and social recognition between all genders is as relevant for Nordic countries as for other countries (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019).

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that there is a gender paradox, implying that young people's considerations of gender inequality are not always aligned with how they behave (e.g., viewing behaviour) and perceive themselves (i.e., rather progressive). This questions how progressive Gen Z attitudes and practices actually are, and how widespread reform and change motivations are across the cohort. The gender paradox is an interesting issue that could be explored in future research, while the three knowledge gaps and the disjuncture related to students' perceptions about female leadership and their country's progressive stance, are topic areas that could be emphasised in sport management HE.

In practice, many sport managers still regard gender diversity as a non-issue and continue to be resistant to implementation of top-down measures (Knoppers & Elling, 2017). This reinforces the need for a bottom-up approach which can be integrated in HE. Transforming inequality requires student-teacher collaborations that enhance reflective practice (Olivier & McCaughy, 2012). As learning is expressed through students' interpretation and understanding of knowledge (Dowling, 2006), reflection can be facilitated through the integration of written journals, visual sociology and reflective conversations (Knowles, Gilbourne, & Cropley, 2014).

The results of this study reiterate a key role for educators to develop a level of critical awareness but also leadership skills to develop Gen Z students to become change agents of the future. However, developing prospective employees who are more aware of current issues and less ignorant of attempts to implement change provides a challenge. It is clear that many of the Gen Z participants have not experienced equality in sport due to the existing structural constraints and lack the leadership skill set to

challenge the status quo. Yet, they ‘feel’ that everything will work out in the long run. So, the challenge for HE is three-fold: 1) to explore if and how the identified knowledge gaps could be addressed, 2) to encourage understanding about the current societal structures and where change can be enacted within sport, and 3) to ensure that gender inequality cannot be accepted, that change has to be created and acted upon through leadership of all genders.

The increasing mobility and digitalization and the new patterns of knowledge and skill transfer require new ways of recognizing, validating and assessing learning in HE. Regarding gender inequality, the challenge for HE educational sport programmes is to shape identities, and to promote awareness and a sense of care for others in an increasingly interconnected world. Transnational partnerships in HE, such as the one in this study, may contribute to transforming gender inequality in sport. According to Lehtomäki, Posti-Ahokas and Moate (2015) transnational partnerships can be effective when a wide range of learners are invited to share, act and reflect upon global issues. In particular, when such partnerships are diverse at a geographical, disciplinary, cultural and social level (Lehtomäki et al., 2015). The challenge for HE is to find ways to engage (both ideologically and practically) students (i.e., those who participate in international mobility as well as non-mobile students) in evaluating and re-thinking global issues – such as gender inequality in sport – in order to achieve an authentic critical pedagogy: transforming gender inequality in sport. Instead of merely focusing on international student exchange, HE programmes can create a diverse and interactive online learning environment to address global issues such as gender inequality in sports. Useful in this context are the experiences shared by Lopez, Nordfjell, Gaini and Heikkinen (2017) on the use of e-learning tools such as podcasts, blogs and discussion

boards, to encourage interaction, engagement and sharing of perspectives and opinions to address gender inequality in an online course.

In conclusion, this study focused on the perceptions of gender inequality in sport among students from Gen Z. Our results do not seek to impose an absolute truth, but rather to reflect and contribute to further awareness raising among the world's youngest generation that could consequently, contribute to a better coexistence between genders in the domain of sport and a social transformation of leadership in sport.

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