

The Boxing Girls of Kabul

Boxing: A way to Empowerment?



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INTRODUCTION¹

“Afghan women have known and still know bad times. That is why they are searching for another way.”²

In February 2007, Sabir Sharifi and Sheqeb, both male boxers, decided to establish the first women’s boxing team of Afghanistan. They went to several high schools in Kabul and asked if there were girls who wanted to join. In one class there were three girls who showed interest; with them, it all started. Sabir and Sheqeb then visited more classes from several different schools, and even more girls wanted to join. They had to talk with their parents and their family, informed them about the boxing team and asked whether they would consent to their daughters joining the boxing team. The parents agreed. Initially the team did not receive any funding. They trained at home. Soon, however, Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) established the ‘Fight for Peace’ project.³

This project was established in 2007 to support 25 girls between the ages of 12 to 25 with the sport of boxing. In 2007, the girls formed the Afghan Amateur Women Boxing Association, the first female boxing association in the history of the country, under the auspices of the Afghan Boxing Federation.⁴

Since then, the team has won a number of medals in regional and international competitions: from the beginning, the women’s boxing team has successfully participated in several regional competitions; bringing home bronze, silver and gold medals. In 2009, Sadaf Rahimi, Shabnam Rahimi and Shahala Sekandari competed in the Asian Indoor Games in Vietnam, where Shahla Sekandari won her first bronze medal. In 2010, Sadaf Rahimi and Shahla Sekandari attended the Asian Women’s Boxing Championship in Kazakhstan, and in 2011 Shukria Haidary and Sadaf Rahimi

¹ To protect the girl’s privacy, I will use pseudonyms for their names; except when I refer to them regarding competitions and quotes from the documentary of Ariel Nasr ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Screener version, 03-11-2011.

² Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 1 May 2012.

³ Interview with Sabir Sharifi, coach – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 15 April 2012.

Interview with Kanishka Nawabi, Chairman of CPAU, at CPAU’s main office, Kabul, 12 March 2012.

⁴ Cooperation for Peace and Unity (2012) ‘Fight for Peace’. Online available at: http://www.cpau.org.af/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=40&Itemid=59.

travelled to Turkey to compete in the Amateur International Boxing Association (AIBA) Women's and Youth Junior World Boxing Championships. In October 2011, the girls made history by bringing home three medals, after only two rounds of fighting. Shabnam Rahimi (48 kg) won the gold medal, Sadaf Rahimi (60 kg) won silver and Fahima Sherzad succeeded in winning the bronze one. In 2012, Sadaf participated in the Asian Women's Championships in Mongolia, and participated, together with Soema and Shamila, in the AIBA 7th World Women Championship, which doubles as the Olympics qualifying event in China.⁵

The Afghan women's boxing team currently consists of 29 girls from diverse backgrounds, between the ages of 15 to 21. They were born in families that can, generally, be characterized as less conservative than most Afghan families. Most of the girls lived in Pakistan or Iran during the Taliban regime. They all have different wishes for their future, however, they share the dream of becoming better and famous boxers. Besides this, they want to become writers, engineers, journalists, doctors, or the first female trainers of an Afghan boxing team. In spite of the individual, social and cultural obstacles they face, and despite the general lack of professional facilities, the boxers are very determined to continue boxing and to achieve their dream of becoming an Olympic champion.

The achievements of the team have won them a great deal of media attention, internationally and nationally. This attention increased even more at the moment Sadaf Rahimi had a chance of going to the Olympics in London 2012. When I visited the stadium for the first time, it was a surreal but impressive experience to see these girls training in a gym with a poorly maintained floor, broken mirrors, no boxing ring and with facemasks as protection against the dust. The contrast between their practice conditions and their fame, became even stronger when I witnessed the attention the girls received from journalists, who walked around with expensive equipment, filming the girls ten centimetres from their faces. The gym itself was small, but with the journalists present, the girls had even less space to practice.

During the first three weeks of my stay in Kabul, I practiced with the girls. With each training session, I grew closer to the team. I learned the girls' names and they learned my name. When I forgot to greet one of the girls, she felt indignant. I helped them closing their boxing gloves and zipping up their training suits. After a while, I was even allowed to go into their dressing room and after the training we

⁵ Cooperation for Peace and Unity, Project Proposal for the Extension of the Fight for Peace Project (FPP) June 2012 – June 2013, internal document.

drank tea together in the coach's small office. Obviously, the girls perceived me as 'different'. However, it helped that I was a girl and of their age. The fact that I had come to Afghanistan and to the stadium on my own, that I did not bring a camera and that I wore a training suit to box with them, helped greatly as well. Being female, I found myself confronted with difficulties in the Afghan society that are, generally, not faced by male researchers, but I enjoyed many advantages as well, mainly of having access to the girls' world. I even shared unexpected moments of intimacy with them.

After three weeks of training and gaining the girls' trust, I started interviewing team members. Within two months, I had conducted in-depth interviews with twenty of the boxing girls. Most knowledge of the boxing team has been produced by representatives of the media community, and through these interviews I soon realized that the stories published in media articles are too simplified and sometimes outright incorrect. The girls were very willing to talk and I discovered a whole new world behind the standardized stories and the dusty gym. During this time, I also interviewed individuals from Oxfam Novib (ON) and CPAU, the coach Sabir Sharifi, and Ariel Nasr (the documentary film-maker of the boxing team).

1.1. Research question

The quote from Halima, at the beginning of this introduction, provides a glimpse of the essence of the story of the boxing girls. These boxing girls are searching for, what she calls, 'another way'. The main question is, therefore: What other way? Why are they searching for another way? How can boxing be another way? What does this 'other way' mean?

Within the context of Afghanistan, I want to argue in this thesis, women's boxing presents a unique mode of exercising agency, which results in the creation of new spaces of expression and, eventually, in an increasing of freedom for women in Kabul. This argument is based on the observation that the practice of boxing by women is, normally, prohibited in the patriarchal Afghan society in which they do this. This means that the notion of 'exercising agency' cannot be understood without taking the restrictions of this society into account, and therewith the power it holds over the girls. I will show that, within this restrictive social context, the way in which the girls exercise agency can be understood as a praxis that involves meaning-generating, especially of feelings of *empowerment*. Since these feelings affect the

boxing girls' interpersonal relations (and vice versa), they might result in actual social change, not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of others. However, the main point of this thesis is to develop an understanding of how boxing provides the girls with unique ways of exercising agency within a patriarchal environment, analyzed from within the context of the Afghan women's boxing team.

The central question that I want to answer in this thesis is:

How does boxing provide the women of the Afghan women's boxing team with unique ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment?

1.2. Twofold relevance of this thesis

The main concept around which this thesis revolves is that of 'empowerment'. The meaning of this concept is unclear, since it is often approached in different ways and from different perspectives.

More specifically, I will show that the way in which this concept is generally understood by those who study, *firstly*, the boxing team itself and, *secondly*, women's empowerment in Afghanistan as a whole, often conflicts with the way in which it is approached within the academic world. The understanding of women's empowerment that is mostly used by the media and organizations like CPAU and ON, when analysing the boxing team, namely, can be characterized as belonging to the 'development discourse'. I will demonstrate that most existing knowledge on women's empowerment in Afghanistan belongs to this discourse as well. The predominant academic analysis of empowerment is different from this 'development discourse', because it approaches empowerment as a *process* instead of an outcome.

By analysing women's empowerment in the context of the Afghan women's boxing team, I want to challenge the 'development discourse' on women's empowerment. I will do this by showing how the academic approach to this concept, revolving around its nature as a 'process', provides a better understanding of women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

In the following, I will show how I want to embed them in the general structure of this thesis.

1.2.1. External actors

The media often create an image of the boxing team that is too simplified and sometimes outright incorrect. This creates a difference between the ideal world that outsiders perceive or want to perceive, and the more complex way things are in reality. A clear example of this dissonance can be found in the way in which the media depicted Sadaf Rahimi as the first female Afghan boxer going to the Olympics. All of these portraits were written before she actually would go to the qualifications in China. In China she never actually qualified for the London Olympics of 2012. They, thus, clearly presented an idealized and romanticized picture of the way things really were.

CPAU and ON represent the boxing team in a specific way as well. In their view, boxing should be understood as a vehicle for women's empowerment and for the constitution of peace. Although these organizations have a much more detailed and realistic perspective on the boxing team, it is still rather unclear what this form of empowerment they refer to precisely means for the girls themselves and, furthermore, how being empowered exactly plays a role in peace processes.

The way these external actors frame and understand the boxing team is, in other words, not always incorrect, but it is often incomplete. In this thesis, I will therefore challenge the often simplified, idealistic and romanticised assumptions they hold. I thereby seek to provide a better understanding of the everyday realities of the boxing girls, the meaning they attach to feelings of empowerment, and their way of thinking on the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan.

1.2.2. Empowerment

There exists a substantial volume of writing on women's empowerment in Afghanistan, but still this topic is often treated on a quite abstract level. It is often approached by only analysing one specific domain or field. Interviewed are mostly NGO-workers, parliamentarians etc. and results are often expressed in numbers and percentages.⁶ These findings do therefore not contribute to a picture of what women's empowerment means across the various domains and dimensions of the Afghan

⁶ See, for example, the following reports:

- Cortright, D. and S. Smiles. 2010. *Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*. University of Notre Dame.
- Hamid, Z. 2011. *UN SCR 1325 Implementation in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women's Network.
- Hancock, L. and O.A. Nemat. 2011. *A place at the table. Safeguarding women's rights in Afghanistan*. Oxfam Novib.
- Kwatra, A. 2011. *A just peace? The legacy of war for the women of Afghanistan*. ActionAid.
- Sailbi, Z. Kabeer, N. 2009. *Stronger Women Stronger Nations*. Women for Women international.

society. This also means that it is not able to understand how empowerment comes about as a *process* and how it *develops*, but only analyses it as an *outcome*.

Although not much has been written on the process of women's empowerment in Afghanistan, a lot of research has been done on the patriarchal structures that make up the Afghan society. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh argues that in order to understand the empowerment of women in Afghanistan one must understand the family, its impact on the actors within the family and the effect of familial hierarchies in society (2003: 10). Valentine Moghadam (1989, 1992, 1999, 2002), Deniz Kandiyoti (1988, 2007) and Ahmed-Ghosh (2003), for example, are feminist scholars who focus on politics of gender and patriarchal social structures in Afghanistan. They develop a relevant approach to the patriarchal community-based society of Afghanistan, which I therefore want to use to analyze the position of the boxing girls and the ways in which they exercise agency.

Furthermore, a lot of research has already been done on the topic of (women's) empowerment *in general*. I will use the insight gained by this latter research and combine it with the analyses developed by Ahmed-Ghosh, Kandiyoti and Moghadam, and use both these discourses as starting points for my analysis of women's empowerment in the context of the Afghan women's boxing team.

I will thereby show that understanding empowerment as a process, allows to incorporate a notion of power that does justice to the importance of individual consciousness/understanding - which can be characterized as 'power *within*' - and its importance for collective action - which can be characterized as 'power *with*'. This collective action, in turn, can generate the power that is needed to challenge gender hierarchies and improve women's lives (Rowlands 2002: 7,8).

1.2.3. Relevance

In this thesis, I analyse the process of women's empowerment with regard to the Afghan women's boxing team. It is mostly concerned with women's 'power *within*' (expressed in agency), rather than 'power *with*' (the power to bring about change). Even though this latter form of power does not form the main objective of this thesis, my analysis of ways to exercise agency can still be understood as a step towards the understanding of how a practice like female boxing in Afghanistan can bring about social change.

My main objective is to *analyze* the interaction between the power the girls are able to exercise on the one hand, and the power their environment holds over them on the other. By describing this tension, I seek to *understand* how the boxing girls exercise a form of agency. I will do this by analyzing the influence that boxing has on the personal behavior, experiences and thinking of the boxing girls. This, in turn, might lead to a better understanding of the abstract issue of ‘empowerment’ in Afghanistan.

It is not my goal to make general claims about Afghan women or empowerment. I will, rather, attempt to contribute to an understanding of concepts like ‘empowerment’ and ‘agency’ at a very individual level and in the context of Afghanistan. This is based on the observation that without an insider’s perspective on, in this case, the Afghan women’s boxing team, it is impossible to understand the specific meaning of the process of empowerment among a very specific group of women in Afghanistan.

1.3. Analytical framework

The structuration theory of Anthony Giddens provides a useful analytical starting point to analyse ways of exercising agency. This is the case, because it specifically identifies the interaction between agency and structure. In his structuration theory the notions of ‘action’ and ‘structure’ presuppose one another: a structure can hold power over agents and can enable agents to exercise power. Structure is therefore understood as both enabling and constraining human action (Giddens 1979: 69).

The general claim that I want to defend in this thesis is that the practice of boxing provides the girls with ways to exercise agency, because it gives them feelings of empowerment by broadening the ways in which they can act and think differently. This can be the case, even if the girls themselves are not always consciously aware of this.

I will analyse the way in which boxing gives these girls unique ways to exercise agency by focusing on the interaction between structural conditions on the one hand, and the agency of the boxing girls on the other. This analysis will be based on a demonstration of (1) how the environment of the girls constrains them and (2) how the girls are looking for and find ways to exercise agency within this constraining environment. I will defend these claims by answering the following sub-questions:

1. How do the girls experience their environment as ‘normalizing’ and, thus, as holding power over them on the five following levels?
2. How do they broaden their possibilities to act and think differently on these same five levels?

These five levels are: (1) male-female; (2) honour and shame as embodied by the family; (3) marriage; (4) space, looks of other people, (bodily) freedom; and (5) security. The fact that I distinguish these five levels, does not imply that they are completely separated; as will become clear, most of these levels are interconnected.

After answering these questions, this thesis focuses on the way boxing changes the way in which the girls think on a conscious and reflective dimension. In this section, the following question will be answered:

3. How does boxing change the ideas the girls have of themselves and their role in the world on an ideological level?

1.4. Chapter outline

Part one of this thesis consists of chapters 2-5. In chapter 2, I will describe the methodology used in my fieldwork, and in chapter 3, I will discuss existing ways of discursively approaching the boxing team. In this chapter, in other words, I will demonstrate the relevance of this research by discussing how it changes from existing analyses. In chapter 4, I will present the analytical framework used in this thesis. This analytical framework is based on the notions of ‘agency’ and ‘structure’. In chapter 5, I will then discuss the structural conditions of the environment of the boxing girls, which are mainly related to Afghan politics and to its patriarchal environment.

Taking the analytical framework developed in chapter 4, and the analysis of the patriarchal environment described in chapter 5 as starting points, part two (chapters 6-11) will revolve around the above-discussed first two sub-questions. In part three (chapter 12), I will discuss my third sub-question.

I will end with a conclusion that demonstrates, based on the analytical framework, how boxing gives the women of the Afghan women’s boxing team unique ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment. Furthermore, I will describe what this means for the understanding about the abstract issue of ‘empowerment’.

Part One

METHODOLOGICAL – ANALYTICAL – CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK



Photo 1: The day Sadaf Rahimi returned from the 7th World Women Championship in China, which doubled as the Olympics qualifying event.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted three months of field research in Kabul, between March and May 2012. In this chapter, I will outline the adopted methodology by describing the data collection and the sampling methods I used. I will start, however, with a brief description of my personal experiences and a discussion of the constraints I encountered during my field research.

2.1. Experiences and research constraints

Halima has been a great ‘help’ to me to overcome my main research constrain. Halima was born in a small village in Bamiyan in 1994 and moved to the capital five years ago to experience modern conveniences for the first time. Living in the village, she dreamed of going to school and being surrounded by books. I met Halima in the last weeks of my data collection in Kabul. I had never seen her before, because she trains at 06:00 in the morning. She lives a very hectic life. Halima is in 11th grade of high school. She left home when she was 16 and moved into the dormitory of the School of Leadership Afghanistan (SOLA), which is an educational program that prepares a globally competitive class of Afghan women leaders. She often participates in women’s demonstrations in Kabul and is a member of the Afghan women’s writing project. She joined the boxing team in 2007.⁷

2.1.1. Acquaintance with the stadium and the boxing team

The first time I went to the stadium was also the first time that I saw parts of Kabul that were not the airport, the office or the apartment where I lived. It was impressive to see all the contradictory worlds in one city, not realising that I would become part of some of these worlds as well. The longer I lived in Kabul, the more I opened up to the reality of the city, and the more I opened up the more it affected me.

It always was a challenge to travel through Kabul and to get to places. There is a lot of traffic, the roads are bad and I do not speak the language. However, this also created the opportunity to see a lot of areas in Kabul and to find my way of living in

⁷ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 1 May 2012.

the city. The stadium was a good place to conduct interviews, because the girls felt at home there and free to talk. When the stadium was closed for three weeks due to preparations for Karzai's visit at Independence Day, on April 28, I was faced with another challenge, since I had to find good alternatives to meet the girls. At the same time, however, this created the opportunity to see the girls in another environment. It also made it possible to see local Afghan places in Kabul.

The first time I went to the stadium, it felt very good to be outside, away from the dust and the traffic. I heard that the girls were training outside, at the field. In the beginning I was nervous. What would they think of me? Would they see me as another random person coming to watch them? What would they think of the fact that I was wearing a training suit to train with them? The coach introduced me to the team. I changed my shoes. A few minutes later I was playing basketball with them and my shoes were used to create the goal. From that moment onwards, I understood why people say that sport brings people together. I barely knew who were on my team, but that did not really seem to matter. I did not know the girls' names, and could only memorize their faces. At the same time, they were yelling at me, saying things in Dari and laughing to me, trying to explain the rules of the game, pushing me away, and throwing the ball towards me. My feelings of nervousness soon disappeared.

Before I went to Afghanistan, it took me months to prepare. I spent many hours collecting information about the girls on the Internet, trying to imagine what it would be like to be a female boxer in Kabul. Then in all of a sudden, I found myself playing basketball with them. After a while we went inside for boxing practice. They gave me boxing gloves. Some girls taught me how to punch. I tried to join them in the exercises the coach told us to do. After training we had to stand in one line. The girls told me to come stand in the line too. The coach made some last comments about selections for competitions and the attendance list. Then we shook each other's hands and went to the dressing room. Entering the dressing room meant entering a different world once again. The girls laughed, talked with each other about school, played with their mobiles, listened to music and exchanged make-up. Afterwards, they all left the stadium in different groups, depending on where in Kabul they lived, and returned to their homes.

2.1.2. The subsequent months

From that day onwards I always looked forward to the training days. It was a good way for me to get to know the girls and to gain their trust. At the same time, it felt good to train and communicate with them. For a short while each week, I did not have to think about anything else but boxing. The stadium thereby became my first home in Kabul. I learned my way around the city and the stadium, and got to know the people better as well.

After three weeks, I found a good translator: Lina, a girl my age who had just finished her bachelor at Kabul University. She was preparing for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), because she wanted to go to Australia to get a master's degree there.

When interviewing the girls, she always was very energetic, spontaneous and kind. She also had the patience to reformulate and clarify questions. She is a very empathic person and at the end of my stay in Kabul, she was not just my translator, but had also become my friend.

It felt good to box with the girls for several weeks, but it also felt as a relief when I initiated the interviews. These enabled me to learn about the girls' motivations, their aims, their family lives, their lives at the stadium, their perspectives on the political situation in Afghanistan, and their perspectives on Afghan women and the peace process.

In the beginning, when I was still only boxing with the girls, I started to notice that their reality is very different from the way it is portrayed by the media. After talking with them, I realized that I had to put the ideas I initially had about this team and about their ideals aside. For weeks, I therefore found myself without a theoretical base to analyse and approach their situation, since the one I arrived with turned out to be unfitting and not true to their reality. Regardless of this, my interview guides were still very useful. They gave focus to my conversations with the girls, a focus that mainly revolved around the motivations they had to start boxing, the problems they had with their families, the struggles they experienced with their social environment, and their message to the outside world.

During the interviews, I noticed that the girls found it difficult to express themselves. Even though they knew what they were doing, what their aims were,

what they had to do to reach their goals, and how they could live with all the obstacles and difficulties that were part of their everyday lives within Afghanistan, they still had a hard time talking about it. As Halima explained it to me:

“They cannot explain their ideas, because in their whole life no one ever asked them what their idea is. No one asked for their opinion. They are sitting and waiting for others to tell them what to do. They are not used to expressing themselves. But when you live with them, you will get to know them and understand them a bit.”⁸

This made it difficult for me to formulate the right questions and to create an overall image of the boxing team. However, since I spent three months with the boxing team, I slowly began to understand the complex world of the girls. Furthermore, Halima had been with the team for five years and she could therefore help me a lot with clarifying my thoughts. She clarified the feelings of the girls, even though they themselves were unable to express them. This helped me eventually to change the focus of my research and to reformulate my questions in light of the reality I witnessed.

2.2. Data collection method

My thesis is based on literature research, semi-structured interviews, unstructured conversations and field observations. In order to collect as much data as possible, I needed to remain flexible: it is difficult, after all, to interview women in an environment where women are restricted in public spaces and where there is always a security risk. The eventual analysis of the data I collected is based on the coding of all the interview transcripts, field notes and observations I made in Kabul.

In the following, I will describe these different parts of my data collection in detail.

2.2.1. Literature research

The literature research did mainly include: (1) academic literature on patriarchy and gender politics in Afghanistan, and the structuration theory of Giddens; (2) reports on women’s rights in Afghanistan; (3) media articles with regard to the boxing team. Literature on patriarchy and gender politics, and reports on women’s rights in

⁸ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 3 May 2012.

Afghanistan helped me to develop a better understanding of the current circumstances of women in Afghanistan. The structuration theory of Giddens proved very valuable in order to prepare for the interviews and field observations, and to analyse them. The media articles were not directly relevant; however, they did help to understand the existing discourses around the boxing team and the specific contribution of this thesis. After conducting the field research, I was able to really understand the specific meaning of the process of empowerment in the context of the Afghan women's boxing team.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

I have based the semi-structured interviews that I conducted with the girls on an interview guide. This guide is divided in several sub-questions, informed by the central question of my thesis. The first two sub-questions focus on the 'agency' aspect. The second two sub-questions are related to structural conditions. The last sub-question is related to social change. The interview guide can be found in the appendix.

The Afghan women's boxing team is the central focus of this research project. Since the boxing team can be approached in many different ways, and since it forms a concentration of several different, but related aspects and dimensions of life in Afghanistan, an in-depth understanding is needed that is holistic, comprehensive and contextualised at the same time. Therefore, the main method I used to collect data consisted of in-depth interviews. Conducting these interviews gave me the opportunity, namely, to develop a detailed understanding of each person's personal perspective and personal context.

Sometimes, I had to step out of the role of interviewer, in order to be able to answer questions about my own feelings and to tell the girl I was interviewing about myself. This was beneficial for my research, because for most of the girls it was difficult to express themselves, especially since my questions were very personal. If I gave examples of my own experiences or described hypothetical situations, it was easier for them to answer my questions.

Above all, my translator functioned as interpreter at the same time. She understood exactly what I wanted to research and the difficulties that came with this research. For example, my questions were sometimes just too straightforward. It was

therefore difficult for her to formulate these questions in an appropriate manner, but together we managed to do this. The interviews often turned into conversations about the girls' personal perspectives and experiences.

In total, I have conducted interviews with twenty boxing girls, having addressed the same topics in every conversation/interview. In the beginning, I was cautious to use my tape recorder, but quickly realised that they did not mind me using it.

2.2.3. Unstructured conversations

During my stay in Afghanistan, I travelled around in Kabul a lot, and often found myself spending up to three hours in a car travelling to and from interviews. I tried to use all the time it took me to travel efficiently. For example, when I was with my translator in the car, we discussed our interpretations of the interviews. When I was with my translator and the boxing girl(s) in the car, we had time to finish the interview or talk even more. These moments were very valuable for my results. I always kept a small notebook with me in which I wrote down relevant notes after these conversations.

2.2.4. Field observations

My field observations started during my first visit at the stadium and ended after I said goodbye. The field observations formed the basis for my interviews. In the beginning I mainly observed, from an outsider perspective, the way the girls acted, the way the girls interacted with each other and the coaches, the way the girls reacted to me, the topics the girls talked about, and the different groups in the team. In the meantime (by just being at the stadium, interviewing them, talking with them, and boxing with them) I got to know them better and I became part of these interactions and groups. This made me look at things differently. It helped me to better understand the individual behaviour of girls at the stadium and other social environments, the relations between the girls, the relations between me and the girls, the relations between the girls and coaches, and the relations between the girls and journalists.

2.3. Sampling

In total, I have conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with the boxing girls. I also talked with individuals from ON and CPAU, with the boxing coach and with

Ariel Nasr, via *Skype*. In order to answer my main question, I also wanted to interview the girls' family members, and women who stopped boxing. This turned out to be very difficult. I managed to interview the brother and sister of one boxing girl and had a conversation with the brother of other boxing sisters. I was also able to conduct an interview with one girl who had stopped boxing.

2.3.1. Sampling method and study population

I have tried to make the group of girls that I conducted interviews with as diverse as possible, differing in age, popularity, ethnicity, social-economic and educational background, and the time they had been boxing. I also conducted interviews with girls who were refugees and those who were not. The greater the diversity between the girls, the more opportunity I had to identify different motivations and experiences.

I always tried to pay attention to all the girls and kept the diversity aspect in mind. Of course, I could not avoid getting developing a better relationship with some girls than with others. In the end, this only worked in my favour, because they gave me a more in-depth understanding of the social dynamics of the team by sharing very personal experiences and views.

I wanted to interview family members to explore their views on the team as well. The family and the girls were often very welcoming to me, but their neighbours problematized the situation. Often, the girls felt sorry because they could therefore not invite me at their homes. Instead of meeting their parents, brothers and sisters, the girls then told me about their families perspectives on their boxing.

I have visited the house of one of the boxing girls. There, I spoke with her, her sister and brother. Their parents were not aware of my visit. I had to leave before they came home from work. Also, I spoke with the brother of boxing sisters.

I wanted to speak with Shahla, who left the boxing team after her marriage. She got pregnant, moved to Mazar-i-Sharif with her husband and refused to talk to anyone anymore. I did not get into contact with her. I did have a good conversation with Salma, who had to leave the boxing team due to the financial problems of her family. I saw her two times after she left the team. I started an interview with Sodaba that I was unable to finish. She left the team after she got married and I was unable to contact her after her marriage.

2.3.2. Sampling frame

To generate my sample frames, I relied on the ‘flow population method’ (Ritchie and Lewis 2011: 94). This term is used when samples are collected in a particular location or setting: in this case the Ghazi stadium. The only and most important way to get in contact with the girls in the beginning was to box and train with them. Hereby, I gained their trust. This was necessary, since the questions I wanted to ask them were very personal. In the beginning, I was worried that the different personal relations would influence my research in a negative way, but this did not turn out to be a problem. As I already stated in the introduction, I grew closer to the team sooner than I thought. Because of the high level of media presence and because of the fact that there were always many other individuals visiting their practices, the girls kept a certain distance to strangers at the stadium. Many people only briefly visited the team, but I remained a constant visitor for a longer period of time. Their sense of ‘us versus them’, which characterizes their interactions with the world around them, had become central to me as well. I thereby became part of the ‘us’, which highly benefited my research.

EXISTING DISCOURSES

This thesis revolves around the central question what boxing means to the boxing girls in relation to the abstract concept of ‘empowerment’. As briefly stated in the introduction as well, this concept can be understood and has been defined in many different ways.

In this context, Wendy James shows that there is a ‘climate of language’ that makes it difficult to see the difference between those who advocate empowerment and those who only analyse it (Cheater 1999: 13). This means, and I agree with her on this point, that there is a difference between political interest in this concept, the use of language and the representation of human experiences.

More practically, she discerns this tendency in what she calls the new ‘democratic management-style discourse’, which she also defines as the ‘development discourse’, a discourse mainly used to argue that aid projects stimulate ‘empowerment’, ‘community participation’ and ‘people-focused approach’. This form of discourse, she argues, rarely engages with the actual human realities of the situations to which it is applied. James therefore argues that social sciences should aim to make these differences more visible and to focus more specifically on different forms of empowerment (Cheater 1999: 13,14).

Other scholars, like Jane L. Parpart, Shirin M. Rai and Kathleen Staudt, support James’ claims by arguing that ‘empowerment’ has become a popular, largely unquestioned ‘good’, defended by institutions like the World Bank, Oxfam and other NGOs. They show that ‘empowerment’ has therewith become a ‘motherhood’ term that is as unquestionable as it is uncritical. The term is mostly used, in their view, when ways are discussed in which the productivity or efficiency of a developing country is discussed, which means that it is based on a rather romantic and, eventually, false understanding of what empowerment means, overlooking the more subtle aspects of this concept once it is understood as a gradual and complex process instead of as a static result (2002: 3).

It is important to notice in what way the concept of ‘power’ is understood

differently in the ‘development discourse’ on the one hand, and the social sciences on the other. According to those arguing within the first discourse, empowerment goes beyond the social, political, economic and cultural environment of people and is understood as a clear and rather static *result*. As James shows, an academic analysis of empowerment, on the other hand, seeks to do justice to the everyday language of politics, community and power, bodily life, social relations, actions and feelings. Those arguing within the second discourse, in other words, try to develop a more nuanced analysis of power and understand empowerment *both* as a process and an outcome (Cheater 1999: 19,20).

In this chapter, I want to demonstrate the different ways in which women’s empowerment can be approached in light of the boxing team, women’s empowerment in Afghanistan, and the social sciences. I will argue that the discourse created by the media, CPAU and ON can be understood as belonging to the ‘development discourse’. I will demonstrate that most of the existing knowledge on women’s empowerment in Afghanistan belongs to this discourse as well.

The academic analysis of the process of empowerment is different from this approach. I will describe in what way this analysis is different, challenging the ‘development discourse’ on women’s empowerment with regard to the boxing team. I will do this by analysing how the ‘development discourse’ is not able to do justice to the manner in which, as this thesis shows, boxing empowers the girls. I will furthermore argue that the academic analysis of empowerment *is* able to do this.

The analysis of this specific case study will thereby critique existing debates on empowerment and can therefore be understood as a contribution to current debates on women’s strategizing for empowerment. With this analysis, I therefore also hope to better the understanding we have of women’s empowerment in Afghanistan.

In order to develop this argument, I will therefore firstly discuss the way in which the media, CPAU and ON have approached the team, thereby creating a rather static and romantic understanding of what empowerment means. I will show how this thesis challenges these frameworks. Secondly, I will discuss existing literature on women’s empowerment in Afghanistan and its limitations, eventually showing how this thesis contributes to this body of knowledge.

3.1. External actors

The media, ON, and CPAU represent the boxing team in a specific way. The way in which they frame the team is not incorrect, but often incomplete and one-dimensional. This is mainly due to a generally accepted perspective on women's empowerment. First, I will describe the way the media frames the boxing team. Second, I will discuss the understanding of ON and CPAU of the boxing team.

3.1.1. Media

Media attention increased when there was a chance that Sadaf Rahimi would go to the Olympics in London 2012. When it became clear she was not going, media attention strongly decreased. Till now it was primarily the representatives from the media community that produced the existing knowledge about the team. The structure and content of the articles written are often identical. They discuss the following seven points:

1. Ghazi stadium

Almost all articles start with a discussion of the Ghazi stadium. The place where the girls train, namely, was used by the Taliban to publicly flog and execute women. Men and women were shot, hanged or stoned to death, often in front of their family members. As one reporter writes:

It was known as the stadium of death. Ghazi Stadium was where the Taliban held public executions, stonings and mutilations during their brutal rule of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. This once blood-soaked pitch is now a field of dreams.⁹

2. Gym

Besides the stadium, the gym is mostly mentioned. The girls train in an improvised gym with dusty floors, broken mirrors and no proper boxing ring:

Rahimi and her teammates, including her sister Shabnam, cannot train in a proper boxing ring, because one does not exist in war-torn Afghanistan.

⁹ Itasaka, K. NBC (20 December 2011) 'Afghan girls punch their way to equality'. Online available at: http://worldblog.nbcnews.com/_news/2011/12/20/9582548-afghan-girls-punch-their-way-to-equality?lite.

Instead dozens of girls and women in the team shuffle around in mismatched uniforms inside a small, dirty improvised gym complete with padded flooring.¹⁰

3. Boxing as taboo

Most journalists pay attention to the fact that boxing, especially for women, is a very unusual sport in today's Afghanistan. Many people in the conservative Afghan society consider female boxing as a taboo. During the oppressive Taliban regime, for example, boxing was completely banned from public sport spheres. During the Taliban rule, women were stripped of their rights and even today they remain second-class citizens.

“Boxing is an unusual choice for any young woman, anywhere in the world, but in deeply conservative Afghanistan, it is an act of courage.”¹¹

4. Sadaf Rahimi

Despite of the fact that Sadaf never qualified for the Olympics, the boxing team received a lot of media attention because journalists thought that Sadaf would become Afghanistan's first female Olympic boxer. This attention is phrased as follows:

Rahimi, who fights in the 54-kilogram weight class, will get into the Olympics through a wild card berth. She plans to travel to London on Feb. 19 to train for several weeks. In May she will fight in a competition in China, but win or lose there, she will be at the Olympics in London.¹²

At the Olympics in London in 2012 female boxing makes its Olympic debut. Sadaf Rahimi is the first and only girl who will participate in the Olympics in 2012. She wants to gain honour and dignity for herself and all the other women in Afghanistan. She wants to improve their image. Sadaf Rahimi is

¹⁰ Walsh, N.P. and Mobasherat, M. CNN (3 April 2011) ‘Afghanistan's first female Olympic boxer eyes London dream’. Online available at: http://articles.cnn.com/2012-04-03/asia/world_asia_afghan-female-boxer_1_female-athletes-afghan-females-afghan-women?_s=PM:ASIA.

¹¹ Itasaka, K. NBC (20 December 2011) ‘Afghan girls punch their way to equality’. Online available at: http://worldblog.nbcnews.com/_news/2011/12/20/9582548-afghan-girls-punch-their-way-to-equality?lite.

¹² Huffingtonpost (2 February 2012) ‘Sadaf Rahimi, Afghanistan Girl, To Box at Olympics’. Online available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/10/sadaf-rahimi-boxing-olympics_n_1267823.html.

expecting to wear black tights under her boxing gear at the Olympics to cover her knees.¹³

5. Women's rights and empowerment

Journalists often state that each punch thrown by a boxing Afghan girl is part of the fight for equal rights for women. The girls not only fight for a medal, they claim, but for women's equality. Journalists therefore often describe the boxing women as breaking down gender barriers and as fighting against prejudice in Afghanistan:

“This is the sound of women fighting against prejudice in Afghanistan.”¹⁴

“Afghan sisters strike a blow for equality as they aim for Olympic boxing glory.”¹⁵

6. Peace

The media often frame the practice of boxing as a fight for peace:

“The boxing women represent a symbol of hope; hope for many women in Afghanistan who still have no rights, and hope for a peaceful Afghanistan.”¹⁶

7. Sahar Gul

Many media articles position the women's boxing team in a larger perspective, understanding it as part of the fight for women's rights in Afghanistan. During the time most journalists thought that Sadaf would go to the Olympics, Sahar Gul was rescued and her family persecuted. Journalists often referred to her as an example of the bad situation of women in the country, contrasting this situation with the boxing team:

¹³ Huffingtonpost (2 February 2012) ‘Sadaf Rahimi, Afghanistan Girl, To Box at Olympics’. Online available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/10/sadaf-rahimi-boxing-olympics_n_1267823.html.

¹⁴ Marony, S. Voice of America (December 2011) ‘Afghan Women Use Boxing to Fight Stereotypes’. Online available at: <http://www.voanews.com/articleprintview/149056.html>.

¹⁵ The Star (2 January 2012) ‘Afghan girls throw punches, aim for Olympic Gold’. Online available at: <http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2012/1/2/reutersworld/20120102150811&sec=reutersworld>.

¹⁶ Saner, E. The Guardian (11 March 2012) ‘I'll proudly fight for women and Afghanistan’. Online available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/mar/11/sadaf-rahimi-afghanistan-woman-boxer>.

Female boxing is an unusual sport in a country like Afghanistan, where most of the women are still struggling for their rights and get little respect in the male-dominated society. Recently in Baghlan province in the north, 15-year-old Sahar Gul was locked up, beaten with cables and tortured by her husband and in-laws after she refused to work as a prostitute. They deny any wrongdoing. She became the bruised and bloodied face of women's rights in Afghanistan after being rescued in late December when an uncle called police.¹⁷

In most articles, the circumstances of the boxing team are dramatized by emphasizing the absence of a boxing ring in a war-torn country, describing the gym as small, dusty and dirty, and referring to the oppressive nature of the Taliban regime. Journalists thereby create a static image of Afghan women's boxing as playing an unchanging role in the fight against the Afghan patriarchal culture. They conceptualize Afghan women as victims and men and the Afghan culture as perpetrators. Often, they thereby romanticize the notion of 'resistance'. The boxing girls are presented as heroes fighting for equality and peace, because they are seen as victims at the same time.

This has severe consequences for the understanding of empowerment. Nowhere, for example, journalists describe *how* these girls are breaking down gender barriers, *why* and *how* they fight for women's rights, and *how* boxing specifically empowers them.

3.1.2 Cooperation for Peace and Unity and Oxfam Novib

CPAU and ON represent the boxing team in a specific way. According to their view, boxing is a vehicle for women's empowerment and peace. Although they have a much more detailed and realistic perspective on the boxing team, it remains unclear in what way, exactly, they believe boxing empowers the girls.

3.1.2.1. Cooperation for Peace and Unity

CPAU established the project 'Fight for Peace' through the first Afghan Amateur Women Boxing Association (AAWBA), under the auspices of the Afghan Boxing

¹⁷ Huffingtonpost (2 February 2012) 'Sadaf Rahimi, Afghanistan Girl, To Box at Olympics'. Online available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/10/sadaf-rahimi-boxing-olympics_n_1267823.html.

Federation in February 2007. CPAU supports the team with a monthly fee for scholarships, a salary for the coach, food and transportation. The general objectives of CPAU are community peace-building and developing a strong and inclusive civil society in Afghanistan. The boxing project is part of these overall efforts. As CPAU states, girls and women are amongst the most vulnerable groups in the Afghan society. This project is therefore aimed at promoting girls and women through the practice of sports. This initiative is, thus, aimed at helping these women employ boxing as a means to develop empowerment.¹⁸

According to CPAU, boxing is also a sport that strongly challenges the stereotypes of submissive Afghan women hiding in blue burqas. With this project, CPAU tries to give the boxing girls new hopes for the future and to help them fighting violence at home and outside. In the past, the girls have received peace-building classes, in which they received non-violence and conflict resolution skills and tools.¹⁹ Kanishka Nawabi, chairman of CPAU, sees the boxing girls as ambassadors:

“Women who box are an example for others. They fight for the sport and for peace. They do not have violence as a goal. Afghanistan is having a tough time with struggle and conflicts. We try, by supporting this group, to promote peace and cultural change. Yes, these women box, but they do not have violent motives. They are a kind of ambassadors of peace, amongst their youth, their family, and other Afghan women. So, we are trying to use them as a kind of trainers, kind of resources for conflict resolution.”²⁰

According to Nawabi, the empowerment process starts with the girls’ ability to come out of their homes and to be able to continue their objectives and dreams. It depends on the kind of successes they have. According to him, the whole idea of women in sports will be valuable to the people of Afghanistan once they start bringing back medals. By winning medals and by generating media attention, other families will be encouraged to let their women go out as well. Other aspects related to empowerment, according to Nawabi, are the following:

¹⁸ Cooperation for Peace and Unity (2012) ‘Fight for Peace’. Online available at: http://www.cpau.org.af/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=40&Itemid=59.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Interview with Kanishka Nawabi, Chairman of CPAU, at CPAU’s main office, Kabul, 12 March 2012.

“I think there are many things to this empowerment factor. They find the ability to interact with other like-minded women in their environment, in the region, in the country. They get the kind of credit, recognition by the medals they get for instance. By the achievements they do. So, they are no more the oppressed women around the corner, or at home, an Afghan typical woman, a nobody having access to nothing. There are 29 at the moment very empowered and influential women. That is the idea I think. There is no way back, for everyone. I think this is a very vast way of empowering the women.”²¹

Nawabi is aware that this whole process has to be managed carefully. At the current moment, the girls receive a lot of media attention. He suspects that this could therefore become a policy issue for politicians and influential conservatives. He even thinks that when Taliban realize this is getting out of their control, they may get involved.

According to Nawabi, there is a fundamental lack of equipment. The situation needs to be improved in order before the girls are able to compete at international competitions. This means that he is already thinking on a larger scale, which is, of course, to be expected from an NGO perspective. NGO's, after all, try to enlarge projects to reach more people. Nawabi indeed wants to create more boxing teams. At the moment, all the girls in the team are boxing on different levels. It would be good, he argues, to create different boxing teams at different locations in Kabul, as well as one national women's boxing team. Secure and standard facilities will create women's interest in this team.

CPAU is aimed at helping women employ boxing as a means of women's empowerment. With this project, CPAU tries to give these women new hopes for the future and to help them fight violence at home and outside. However, this leads to many questions: what does this empowerment mean for the women themselves? What are their future perspectives? How does boxing help them fight violence at home and outside? Nawabi talks about the women as ambassadors for peace and as role models for other women. But in what way do the girls see themselves as role models?

This project, in other words, mainly approaches the boxing team from outside and does not base its claims concerning the empowerment that boxing constitutes on the experiences of the girls *themselves*.

²¹ Interview with Kanishka Nawabi, Chairman, at CPAU's main office, Kabul, 12 March 2012.

3.1.2.2. Oxfam Novib

Oxfam Novib believes that the ‘Fight for Peace’ project is a unique opportunity to help challenge stereotypes about Afghan women. The women are personally courageous and, with the right support, could become inspiring advocates for change in their country – and outside.²²

ON believes that this project can change the stereotypical image of Afghan women. According to ON, the boxing girls are brave. With the right kind of support, they will become inspiring defenders of change in their country and outside. ON is aware that the boxing team needs practical support to make their Olympic dream a reality. The team does not get enough funding and little support from the Boxing Federation or National Olympic Committee. ON states that the project should be promoted further through international media. They thereby claim that this is the best way of promoting the team, and to be able to create future projects of this kind.²³

Roslyn Boatman, spokesperson of ON, states that the boxing team is a peace building project. She hopes that the team will contribute to a more peaceful society. Being more empowered and more engaged, she argues, will help the girls in the peace process. According to her, the boxing team therefore is a great example of building confidence and breaking down gender barriers and traditional stereotypes:

“From a programmatic point of view we want to break down stereotypes and empowering women. It is a really great example of women’s empowerment in Afghanistan.”²⁴

According to Boatman, this form of empowerment is organic in nature. The girls gain confidence through sport, which means, in her eyes, that they are empowered. Besides that, she states that the girls love boxing. They learn a sport and have fun at the same time.

Boatman is aware that the girls need good facilities. They need a boxing ring and basic boxing equipment. They need proper trainers and go to training camps.

²² Geelen, F. Oxfam Novib (25 February 2011) ‘Fighting for Peace’. Online available at: <http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/?id=GUID-9C37C0AF550247A19B7C2550FD724980>.

²³ Geelen, F. Oxfam Novib (25 February 2011) ‘Fighting for Peace’. Online available at: <http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/?id=GUID-9C37C0AF550247A19B7C2550FD724980>.

²⁴ Interview with Roslyn Boatman, spokesperson Oxfam Novib, Kabul, 10 April 2012.

Boatman is also an advocate of having more teams. On the one hand, she thinks it is beautiful to watch the skilled girls showing the other girls how to punch. On the other hand, she says that this does not help the girls who are really good. The girls who are really good should be recognized as being different from the rest of the team. She states it takes time, training, facilities, venues, coordination, acceptance, and investment to create more teams. Sadaf could be a role model for this.

However, the same questions can be asked as above, regarding CPAU: even though ON states that boxing provides the girls with confidence, they do not argue specifically *how* the boxing girls challenge stereotypes and *how* they can be role models. They also do not show *how* empowerment helps in the peace process and *how* they get more confidence and *why* this is important to them.

3.2. Empowerment

In the following, I will provide an analysis of existing literature on empowerment as well as the position of women in Afghanistan. Firstly, I will discuss what has so far been written on women's empowerment in Afghanistan and describe the limitations of these writings. I will then discuss existing academic schools of thought on the situation of Afghan women and on the concept of 'empowerment' in general, that are relevant for this thesis. Finally, I will clarify how this thesis contributes to the current knowledge on the concept of women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

3.2.1. Women's empowerment in Afghanistan

Much has been written on women's empowerment in Afghanistan, but the topic is often approached in an abstract manner. In most reports on the status of Afghan women, for example, empowerment is understood as a broad phenomenon that advances across various domains. Furthermore, if empirical work on women's empowerment in Afghanistan is done, it is mostly domain-specific. These latter studies refer to domains such as the position of women on the labour market, the percentage of women in parliament, women's role in the household, the education level of women, etc. Interviewed are mostly NGO-workers, parliamentarians etc. and results are often expressed in numbers and percentages.²⁵

²⁵ See, for example, the following reports:

- Cortright, D. and S. Smiles. 2010. *Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*. University of Notre Dame.

- Hamid, Z. 2011. *UN SCR 1325 Implementation in Afghanistan*. Afghan Women's Network.

The role played by Afghan women in the reconstruction of Afghanistan became a focal point for international media and for the international community. Most current reports therefore focus on the situation of women since 2001. The status of women in Afghanistan was cited as one of the justifications for military intervention.²⁶

The times in which we live at the moment are discussed by many as a critical time for Afghan women, who are afraid to lose the fragile gains in women's rights made since the fall of the Taliban. Women in Afghanistan have achieved real progress in areas such as political participation, the rule of law, and education since 2001, but these gains remain fragile. Many reports discuss the role women played both in the peace process and in the stimulation of reconciliation. It is often stated that the representation of women in peace negotiations and post-conflict recovery planning is fundamentally important. To create a stable and secure future for Afghanistan, women must have a central role in achieving reconciliation and in building peace, it is argued.²⁷

Many stakeholders in the West have high expectations of the empowerment of Afghan women. Women's empowerment thereby has become a development objective in its own right. While women have made significant progress in the public sphere since 2001, their status in the private sphere remains largely unchanged. In the patriarchal society of Afghanistan, women are still confronted with disapproval of both their family and their community if they challenge traditional gender roles.²⁸

In general, the findings discussed in these reports do not result in a picture of what women's empowerment precisely means *across* various domains. Often, they do not acknowledge the individual experiences of Afghan women *themselves* either. This raises the following questions: How do Afghan women find ways to struggle with family and community disapproval? How do women precisely challenge traditional gender roles? And how does this empower them? How can empowerment, furthermore, be a process instead of an end in itself?

- Hancock, L. and O.A. Nemat. 2011. *A place at the table. Safeguarding women's rights in Afghanistan*. Oxfam Novib.

- Kwatra, A. 2011. *A just peace? The legacy of war for the women of Afghanistan*. ActionAid.

- Sailbi, Z. Kabeer, N. 2009. *Stronger Women Stronger Nations*. Women for Women international.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Cortright, D. and S. Smiles. 2010. *Enhancing Security and Human Rights in Afghanistan*. University of Notre Dame.

3.2.2. Patriarchy in Afghanistan

Ahmed-Ghosh argues that in order to understand the empowerment of women in Afghanistan one must understand the family, its impact on the actors within the family and the effect of familial hierarchies in society (2003: 10). The exchange system of women and concepts of ‘honour’ and ‘patriarchy’ have been extensively discussed in anthropological and feminist literature. Examples are Levi Strauss (1969), Rubin (1976), Abu-Loghod (1986), and Bordieu (1965). A small number of female scholars have examined these concepts as well with regard to Afghan women’s lives; for example Inger Boeson (1983) and Nancy Tapper have studied the case of Pashtun nomad women.

Ahmed-Gosh (2003), Moghadam (1989, 1992, 1999, 2002) and Kandiyoti (1988, 2007), furthermore, are feminist scholars who focus on politics of gender and patriarchal social structures in Afghanistan. Moghadam and Kandiyoti argue that notions of patriarchy in feminist theory are often not very helpful and abstract. They therefore try to develop better analytical tool that helps analysing processes of transformation in a patriarchal society like Afghanistan.

It is from within the context of this, on a patriarchal community based society of Afghanistan, analyzed by thinkers like Moghadam, that I want to understand the position of the boxing girls and analyze the ways in which they exercise agency. Obviously, the political environment has an influence on their lives, but according to their own experiences, politics is far from their primary concern. In chapter four, I will discuss the perspectives of Moghadam, Kandiyoti, and Ahmed-Gosh to illustrate the context of Afghan women and to analyse the ways in which boxing can be understood as empowering the girls.

3.2.3. Empowerment

As stated above as well, not much research has been done on the process of women’s empowerment in Afghanistan. However, there is a lot of literature on the process of (women’s) empowerment *itself*. I will use these studies, combined with the works of Kandiyoti, Moghadam and Ahmed-Ghosh, as a starting point to analyze women’s empowerment in the context of the Afghan women’s boxing team. In the following, I will provide an analysis of the ways in which this concept has been understood.

Whereas Paulo Freire (1973) does not use the term ‘empowerment’, his

emphasis on education as a means for inspiring the fight of individuals and groups against social inequality, provides a good basis for social activists who are concerned with empowering the poor and marginalized. These activists understood empowerment as a way of inspiring the poor to resist the status quo. From the perspective of business and personnel managers, empowerment was also seen as a means for improving productivity within established structures. Development agencies adopted this interpretation in the 1990s, beginning to use the language of empowerment as well (Parpart, Rai and Staudt, 2002: 5).

The notion of empowerment can, of course, only be understood once it is related to a theory on the constitution of power itself. In the 1990s, power is mainly understood as ‘being vocal’, of having a right to ‘voice’. In this context, empowerment refers to the ability to exert power over something, and to make things happen. Even today, it is often used as referring to a form of action, suggesting the ability to change the world, to overcome opposition (Cheater, 1999: 1).

This approach is limited. In my view, empowerment is not simply the ability to exert power over people and resources. In order to understand this limitation, it is important to understand some of the more nuanced notions that have been developed of power.

One of these nuanced notions is developed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault’s exposition of power moves away from the more traditional understanding of power as the ability to exert power *over* structures, people and resource. The question Foucault asks is not: “How does power manifest itself?” but “How is it exercised?” He rejects the notion that power is something held by specific individuals or groups, arguing that power *permeates* society. It is not a procession exercised over others, he claims, it is relational (Foucault 1982 in Faubion 1994: 337). The following citation explains his understanding of relational power:

The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individuals or collective; it is a way in which some act on others. Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures. (Foucault 1982 in Faubion 1994: 340)

This also means that Foucault's notion of empowerment revolves around the exercise rather than the possession of power. Empowerment cannot transcend power relations; it is enmeshed in relations of power at all levels of society. People, he argues, are empowered by resisting power relations, but this very action/agency may also strengthen their embeddedness in the status quo (Parpar, Rai, Staudt, 2002: 4).

Jo Rowlands, furthermore, stresses that empowerment is a process. This observation changes the perspective of power and empowerment in a fundamental way. It allows, namely, to incorporate notions of power that do justice to the importance of individual consciousness/understanding (power *within*), and its importance for collective action (power *with*), that in turn have the ability to change gender hierarchies and improve women's lives (Ibid.: 7,8).

Power *within* is, in other words, rooted in self-understanding, on the ability to act on one's own. Power *with* is the ability to work collectively, which can result in politicized power with others, providing the power to bring about change. Power *within* can therefore inspire women to recognize and to challenge gender inequality in their homes and communities. This means that the process of women's empowerment can produce a redistribution of power and resources towards women and result in gender balance. Eventually, empowerment therefore requires the transformation of power relations (Ibid.: 7,8).

The core of the debate on women's empowerment as a process lies in a tension between agency on the one hand and structures on the other. Central to this analysis is a sense of agency and of the self, understood in a wider context. Women's power *within* is expressed in agency. But structural conditions must be taken seriously as well (Ibid.: 11).

3.2.4. Relevance

In this thesis, I analyse the process of women's empowerment with regard to the Afghan women's boxing team. I am therewith mostly concerned with women's power *within* (expressed in agency), rather than power *with* (the power to bring about change). Even though change is not the main objective of this research, the analysis of ways of exercising agency can still be understood as an important step towards understanding the ways in which a practice like female boxing in Afghanistan can eventually constitute social change.

The main objective that I want to pursue in the process of answering the research question is *analyzing* the interaction between the power the girls are able to exercise and the power their environment holds over them. This allows me to *understand* how the boxing girls exercise agency, which in turn can result in a better understanding of the abstract issue of ‘empowerment’ in Afghanistan. I aim to answer this question by interpreting the impact of boxing on the personal behavior, experiences, and thinking of the girls.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this thesis, I will analyse the way in which boxing provides the girls of the Afghan women's boxing team with ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment. Since they live in a restrictive patriarchal society, the manner in which they do this cannot be understood without firstly looking at the impact this society has on them. The structuration theory of Anthony Giddens provides a useful analytical entry point to analyse ways of exercising agency. Giddens, namely, develops a very helpful framework to identify the interaction between agency and structure. In this chapter, I will discuss the analytical components of Giddens' structuration theory, which will guide this thesis.

4.1. Structuration theory

Giddens' structuration theory consists of a focus on recurrent social practices and their transformations, which means that it neither takes the individual, nor society as a first. Analysing social change, Giddens argues, means specifying universal conditions of social transformation (Giddens 1984: 203).

The framework of this thesis is formed by the structuration theory of Giddens, who introduces his theory as follows:

I have never thought of structuration theory as providing a concrete research program within the social sciences as a whole, let alone within a particular discipline, such as sociology. It is an attempt to work out an overall ontology of social life, offering concepts that will grasp both the rich texture of human action and the diverse properties of social institutions. Some of these concepts should be useful as sensitizing devices for research purposes, while others help provide an explication of the logic of research into human social activities and cultural products. (1990: 310)

Even though Giddens does not explain how one can design a research project based on his theory, I will, in the following, discuss those concepts of structuration theory that are relevant to this thesis: agency and structure.

With the structuration theory, Giddens wants to develop an ontological framework for the study of human social activities. He developed this theory to fill a lacuna within theories of action in the social sciences. Even though many philosophical works have been written on purposes, reasons, and motives of action, these works never had much impact on the social sciences. This is partly the case, because the philosophy of action developed by British and American philosophers never paid much attention to issues that are central to the social sciences: issues of institutional analysis, power and social change (Giddens 1979: 2).

Giddens' sociological perspective attempts to overcome the dualities of structure and agency. In his view, grasping the interplay between these two notions forms the key to social research. His theory of structuration is therefore based upon the following two main claims: (1) social theory should include an understanding of human behaviour as action, and (2) such an understanding is never complete without a focus upon the structural conditions of social institutions or societies (Cassel 1993: 241).

The general basis of Giddens' theory and of this thesis is formed by the idea that to be a human agent means having power. Every human being, in other words, is able to make a difference. Furthermore, the potential for change lies in the power differentials that are inherent to every social interaction (Giddens 1979: 114).

In this thesis, I want to understand the behaviour of the boxing girls, who are the main social actors, as *action*. I thereby also try to make this understanding compatible with a focus upon the structural components of the Afghan society they live in.

4.1.1. Agency

The notion of agency can be approached in different ways and defined with reference to various concepts. The 'dialectic of control', 'power' and 'action' are most important to this thesis. Before I will discuss these concepts it is important to understand Giddens' notion of a human being. According to Giddens, individuals are knowledgeable reflexive agents who can justify actions (Tucker 1998: 61). Giddens'

concept of agency understands a person as reflexive, “able to monitor his/her experience and give reasons for his/her actions” (Giddens 1987: 21). In the following, I will briefly define his concepts of ‘power’, ‘action’ and the ‘dialectic of control’.

4.1.1.1. Power and action

Giddens’ perspective on power is linked to his understanding of agency: to be a human agent is to have power. According to Giddens, power is prior to all circumstances. Agency means that an individual has the power to intervene in a course of events, without always doing this consciously (Giddens 1987: 284).

There are many types of power. One definition of this concept is particularly relevant to this thesis. This is power in the sense of the transformative capacity of human agency. This means the capability of the actor to intervene in a series of events so as to alter their course. Agency therefore depends upon the capability of actors ‘to act otherwise’ or ‘to make a difference’. ‘To make a difference’ refers to the transformation of processes. Therefore, agency is equated with the transformative capacity (Giddens 1987: 284,285).

This means that a social agent is able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such interventions, with the effect of influencing given social patterns. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to make a difference in a certain state of affairs. To act means to exercise power, and power becomes an element of action. (Giddens 1984: 14) Action can thus be defined as: “a stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporal beings in the ongoing process of events in the world” (Giddens 1979: 55).

4.1.1.2. Dialectic of control

The dialectic of control refers to the relation between agency and power. On the one hand, the actor always has a certain amount of power over the other. This amount of power concerns the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realization of these outcomes depends upon the agency of others (Giddens 1979: 6). On the other hand, the actor is also subordinate in a social relationship. To a certain extent the agent may be unable to change a situation, due to social and material constraints. The recognition of this mutual dependence necessitates an explanation of the concepts that are linked to this dependence. These concepts are, in turn, related to the overall concept of ‘structure’.

4.1.2. Structure

In structuration theory the notions of ‘action’ and ‘structure’ presuppose one another. Structure plays a fundamental role in the constitution of agency. The concept of ‘structure’, in turn, refers to various other concepts (Outhwaite 1990: 63). The ‘duality of structure’ is most relevant to this thesis.

4.1.2.1. Duality of structure: enabling and constraining

One of the main aims of Giddens’ theory of structuration is to transcend the dualism between action or agency on the one hand, and system or structure on the other, through an analysis of the duality of structure. His theory implies that the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they organize (Outhwaite 1990: 63). Hereby, this concept expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency. Structure is, in other words, understood as both enabling and constraining human action. The potential for change lies therefore in power differentials that are inherent to every social interaction (Giddens 1984: 305).

4.2. Agency and structure in the context of the boxing team

Based on this discussion of Giddens’ theory, the main aim of this thesis can be conceptualized as follows: I will analyse how boxing provides the boxing girls with unique ways to exercise agency by focusing on the interaction between structural conditions on the one hand and the agency of the actors involved on the other.

According to Giddens, social agents always have a certain extent of control, a degree of freedom. The girls can exercise power, because they have a certain degree of freedom. The girls are boxing, because they want to make a difference; primarily in their own lives. The girls themselves decide that the benefits of change are more important than the constraints of their situation. In this thesis, I will show what these benefits are and why it is so important for these girls to escape from their situation. I will examine the way the girls are exercising agency by answering the following question: How does boxing broadens their possibilities to act and think differently?

As already stated, structuration theory does not begin with the individual or society. From this perspective, the girls can be understood as active agents who are nevertheless constrained by a patriarchal system. They always have to operate within a set of accepted constraints, mainly in their relationships with men. It is this

patriarchal structure that enables and constrains them. I will examine the way their environment influences them by answering the following question: How does their environment holds power over them?

Giddens believes that social change can take place when actors reflect on themselves and choose new courses of action (Giddens 1984: 3). An indication of the girls' ways of exercising agency and feelings of empowerment should, according to this theory, thus be sought in a change in their way of thinking. I will do this by answering the following question: How does boxing change the ideas the girls have of themselves and their role in the world on an ideological level?

In the following chapters, I will describe how the girls exercise agency, how their environment enables and constrains them to achieve their goals, and how their ideas of themselves and their role in the world change on an ideological level. Before analysing how boxing gives the girls' ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment, however, I will devote one chapter to their political and patriarchal environment.

GENDER POLITICS AND PATRIARCHY IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is one of the very few places in the world where women are still excluded from the public sphere. According to Moghadam, the struggle over gender and laws for women are rooted in the nature and capacity of the state and in domestic social structures. Moghadam studies the situation of Afghan women through a historical and sociological lens (Moghadam 2002: 19). According to her analysis, the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has been historically constrained by the following two factors:

- (1) The patriarchal nature of gender and social relations, deeply embedded in Afghanistan's traditional and fragmented ethnic-based society, and (2) The existence of a weak central state, which has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of Afghanistan's tribal feudalism, especially among the Pashtuns. (2002: 20)

Although these two factors are interconnected, I will in this thesis primarily focus on existing patriarchal structures in Afghanistan and on the ways in which the boxing girls function within its this system. Before I discuss the patriarchy of Afghanistan, I will describe how the position of Afghan women became politicized.

5.1. Gender politics

Women and gender issues have played and still play a specific role in the politics of public space. Women's rights and the conception of the place of women have become highly politicized and central to the political conflicts in Afghanistan (Moghadam 2002: 19). In the following, I will provide an outline of the historical development of Afghan gender politics, which can be divided in five eras:

5.1.1. King Amanullah

Due to the reform programme of King Amanullah in the 1920s Afghan legislation

regarding women was among the most progressive in the Muslim world. The reign of Amanullah included reforms to improve women's lives and women's position in the family. His agenda included the liberation of women from tribal cultural norms. Amanullah wanted to promote gender equality by campaigning against the veil, against polygamy, and encouraging education for girls. He established an education system and modernized society (Ahmed-Gosh 2003: 4). However, women in tribal and rural areas outside of Kabul did not receive the benefits of these reforms. His campaign for women's emancipation offended conservative Afghans in the rural areas. They felt that the reforms were too Western and against the doctrines of Islam. In 1929 Amanullah was forced to leave the country (Moghadam 2002: 21).

5.1.2. Daoud's Republic and Soviet Invasion

In 1953, Mohammed Daoud became the Prime Minister of Afghanistan, under King Zahir Shah. Like Amanullah before him, Daoud understood the rights and visibility of women as a central symbol of modernity. He declared veiling a voluntary option. Women were encouraged to contribute to the economy and politics as well. With the help of foreign aid, a 'modern' state developed in the 1950s. Still, the state was not able to respond to economic crises and insufficiency of the parliament. Daoud cultivated links with the Parcham faction of the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). It is during the PDPA rule that rapid social change and economic change was implemented (Ahmed-Gosh 2003: 6).

The PDPA raised the same issues that brought about the downfall of Amanullah: they pushed through changes without first building and maintaining a strong coalition. The programme was not acceptable to the predominantly traditional and Islamic society. Mullahs and tribal leaders viewed compulsory education for women as going against Islam. By undermining all the representative institutions, Daoud isolated his already unstable government. Although he extended social rights to women and gave them equal rights in the constitution, the lives of the majority of Afghan women were defined by illiteracy, ill health and exclusions characterized their lives. In 1978, the PDPA overthrew Daoud and began to implement a communist regime. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, but they were unable to defeat Afghan resistance and failed to establish Soviet-style socialism. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan descended into chaos, into a state of total war (Moghadam 2002: 22,23).

5.1.3. The Mujahidin period

The Mujahidin, who continued to get support from the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and China, fought against the Soviets. The Kabul government collapsed, the Mujahidin took over power in 1992 and declared Afghanistan as an Islamic state. The Mujahidin began to fight each other, but they all agreed on one thing: the role of women. Women were increasingly precluded from the public sphere. One of the first orders of the government was that all women should wear a burqa (Moghadam 2002: 25).

The Mujahidin years remain among the most brutal in the collective memory of Afghanistan. The different Mujahidin resistance factions led the country into civil war. Refugees fled the countryside and gathered in cities where they became increasingly dependent on an impoverished state. The destruction of agriculture and the monopolisation of trade routes by militias further contributed to urbanization. Although the worsening situation of Afghanistan during this period did not attract the attention of the West, the prevailing anarchy evoked a local reaction. A movement began to arise in southern Afghanistan: the Taliban (Sailbi 2009: 14).

5.1.4. Rise of the Taliban

The Mujahidin civil war opened the door to interference by the Afghan Taliban. With the support of Pakistan, the Taliban took power in Kabul in 1996. The Taliban practiced what it preached: respect for Islamic morality. Its programme was based on the restoration of order, freedom of movement and trade, the prohibition of drugs, etc. Initially there was a sense of relief, but it was for a very short time (Ahmed-Gosh 2003: 7).

The members of the Taliban were educated in the madrassas of northwest Pakistan in the 1980s. The Taliban of 1994 consisted of a few hundred theology students who had studied in North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Their respect for the Islam determined their approach to the state. The Taliban wanted to establish a moral order such as existed before the modernizing reforms of the 1950s (Moghadam 2002: 25,26). Pakistani aid and widespread popular support allowed the Taliban to get more power in Afghanistan. The Taliban rejected urban culture and infrastructure and prohibited all movies and television shows, while enhancing state media, like radio programmes and newspapers. Music, photography and Internet were

banned as well (Ahmed-Gosh 2003: 7). Even though they managed to conquer almost the whole country, they never established a real government. Afghanistan thereby became a classic failed state (Barfield 2010: 253).

The regime imposed by the Taliban, particularly in terms of gender relations, represented a regime of 'traditional' social control. The Taliban set up the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. This department monitored and controlled women's behavior (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 7). Decisions about the mobility of women had previously been monitored by households or at the communal level. Now it was authorized and enforced by the Taliban. The Taliban gave new meaning to social exclusion of women. Women were no longer able to go outside except to buy food. If they did leave the home they had to be accompanied by a *mahram* (male relative). Education became for males only. Women were not allowed to work anymore and they had to wear a burqa. Women who did not conform were publicly beaten. The manner in which the Taliban enforced their interpretation of Islam and patriarchy made it impossible for almost all women to engage in education, work and travel (Sailbi 2009: 14).

5.1.5. Western intervention

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US and its allies overthrew the Taliban in less than three months. The brutal oppression of women under the Taliban regime was mentioned as one of the justifications for the US military intervention in October 2001. The Bonn Agreement, signed in December 2001, paved the way for the establishment of the Afghan Transitional Administration, headed by Hamid Karzai. Karzai presented a potentially unifying figure in Afghanistan's factious political environment, because he is a Pashtun with no ties to the Mujahidin or to other exiled political parties. In October 2004, both men and women went to the polls and elected Karzai as a President (Sailbi 2009: 15).

The overthrow of the Taliban and the Bonn process permitted Afghanistan to address, at a national level, gender issues, public finance reforms, health programmes, a transportation system, and an emergency employment programme. Despite the attempts of the Karzai government to exercise national political control, many areas remain in the hands of warlords (Ibid.: 15).

Moghadam argues that interventions by foreign powers have precluded the

implementation of the projects of nation-building, citizenship, and the advancement of women in Afghanistan (Moghadam 2002: 28). Kandiyoti argues that gender issues are becoming highly politicised in counterproductive ways in those contexts where armed interventions strive for governance and ‘democratisation’ (Kandiyoti 2007: 503).

Both Moghadam and Kandiyoti develop an interpretation of gender politics in Afghanistan. When analysing the boxing girls, I will approach Afghan politics and the Western intervention as important factors in their lives. Furthermore, I will describe the girls’ perspectives on political issues. However, as already stated above, the main focus of this thesis is the situation of the girls in patriarchal social structures and the way they deal with these structures.

5.2. Patriarchy

Ahmed-Ghosh, Kandiyoti and Moghadam propose a unique point of entry for the identification of patriarchal structures in Afghanistan and different forms of women’s strategies in dealing with these patriarchal structures. I will therefore use their framework to analyse in what way boxing provides the girls with unique ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment.

5.2.1. Classic patriarchy

All societies know gender systems, but not all societies are patriarchal in nature. A general definition of patriarchy is a “kinship-ordered social structure with strictly defined sex roles in which women are subordinated to men” (Moghadam 1992: 35,36). Patriarchal societies are characterized by low female literacy and educational attainment, high fertility rates, high maternal mortality rates, and low female labour-force participation in the formal sector of the economy (Moghadam 1992: 36).

Contemporary Afghanistan is situated in what John Caldwell calls the ‘patriarchal belt’, and is the most extreme case of that which Kandiyoti identifies as a ‘classic patriarchy’. Classic patriarchies can be found in a geographical area that includes North Africa, the Islamic Middle East and South and East Asia. The essence of classic patriarchies lies in the functioning of the household. The central social unit is the extended family, where the senior man has authority over everyone else (Ibid.: 36).

5.2.2. Characteristics of Afghan patriarchy

The family lies at the heart of Afghan society. Perceived as the receptacles of family honour, women's complimentary and subordinate relationship to men in the family ensures the unity, cooperation and ultimate dignity of the family and the community. In this honour also lies her oppression. (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 9)

Control over women manifest itself in two crucial ways: property and marriage, and can be characterized as manifested in the following four spheres:

1. Honour-shame complex

The honour-shame complex rests on women's behaviour and the control of their sexuality. Historically, Afghan gender roles have been related to property relations. Women are regarded as men's property. That is why men control women's behaviour. The honour of the family is invested in women. Men need to safeguard the family honour through their control over female members. Social structures are characterized by their institutionalization of extremely restrictive codes of behaviour for women. The control over women is seen as necessary because women are regarded as the potential source of social *fitna*: disorder (Moghadam 1992: 37).

2. Public-private space

The concepts of public and private space are perhaps nowhere more relevant than in Afghanistan, where women's access to public space has long been contested and denied. The honour-shame complex forces women to remain in the private sphere. Men are ranked as first and as highest, whereas women belong to the second sphere. They are subordinate to all men, but also to older women, especially to their mother-in-law. In the public sphere, power is shared by males. In this environment, it is difficult and almost impossible to see women having roles like students, citizens or incoming employees (Moghadam 1989: 49).

3. Marriage

In a classic patriarchal society, girls are married off at a very young age. A husband is

principally responsible for a woman's honour. Young brides marry into large families and gain respect mainly via their sons. Late in life, they acquire power as mothers-in-law. Marriage and prices paid for the bride are defined in agreements between households and are an indicator of status. The heaviest expenses a household has to bear concern marriage (Moghadam 1992: 134).

4. Pashtunwali

Historically, the population of Afghanistan has been fragmented into ethnic, kin-based and regional groupings. One of the few commonalities in this diverse country is the Islamic faith. Afghan Islam consists of a combination of practices from the *Shari'a* and tribal customs, particularly *Pashtunwali*. Women are mainly reduced to the status of property among Pashtuns, whose tribal honour code, *Pashtunwali*, is highly masculinist in nature. Pashtuns are more restrictive of women's rights than other ethnicities in Afghanistan. *Pashtunwali* promotes dependence between the sexes rather than equality. Being Pashtun is synonymous with the code. Members of the community discuss control of all resources in terms of honour. The community is the community of men. Women are incorporated into the concepts of resources, and the status of women is based on their reproductive functions. The system of exchange is based on the entire family, not on individuals (Moghadam 2002: 20). Pashtuns make up 40 per cent of the Afghan population. Kabul is home to around 25 per cent Pashtuns (Barfield 2012: 24). In the boxing team there is one Pashtun girl.

5.3. Challenging patriarchy

Moghadam, Kandiyoti and Ahmed-Gosh all argue that the situation of Afghan women should be understood as the result of the patriarchal social structures in society. In Afghanistan women do not exist outside these patriarchal family and community structures. Therefore the process of empowerment should be understood within this patriarchal system.

As Ahmed-Ghosh states, although the family and the community may be places for self-expression and even empowerment, they also cause women's oppression. However, this does not mean that the only way women can empower themselves is to distance themselves from family and community. In order to initiate a process of empowerment family and kinship networks do not necessarily have to be destroyed, but they must be rearranged (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 10).

Kandiyoti proposes an analysis of women's strategies in dealing with and rearranging these patriarchal systems. She uses the term 'patriarchal bargain' to explain the way women strategize within a set of concrete constraints. Because of the obstacles that patriarchy puts in women's way, women try to find new ways to escape. Patriarchal bargains can influence the potential for specific forms of women's resistance (Kandiyoti 1988: 275).

Moghadam states that Afghan women are held 'hostage' by patriarchy in which only men have rights and access to public space. Some women find security and status in family life and prefer not to negotiate in the public sphere. Others challenge the patriarchal project in a rather passive way. 'Public women' pose the greatest threat to the patriarchal community: those who work, go to school, or travel. Although women in Afghanistan are very restricted by a patriarchal system, there is space to challenge this system (Moghadam 2002: 28).

This thesis will demonstrate how patriarchal family and community structures hold power over the boxing girls and the way these girls are exercising agency within these structures, by finding ways to 'bargain' with patriarchy. In what ways are the boxing girls restricted by a patriarchal system? Why do they sometimes pose a 'threat' to the community? How do they challenge this system?

Part Two

IMPACT ON THE PERSONAL BEHAVIOUR AND EXPERIENCE OF THE GIRLS

Boxing as broadening the ways to *act and think differently* without
always doing this consciously



Photo 2: Set of boxing gloves, boxing gym Ghazi stadium

BACKGROUND GHAZI STADIUM AND BOXING GIRLS

The second part of this thesis focuses on the impact of boxing on the personal behaviour and experience of the girls. I will thereby try to answer the following questions: how do the girls experience their environment as ‘normalizing’ and, thus, as holding power over them on the five following levels: (1) male-female; (2) honour and shame as embodied by the family; (3) marriage; (4) space, looks and behaviour of other people, and (bodily) freedom, and (5) security? And: how do they broaden their possibilities to act and think differently on these five levels?

My main aim in this second part is to demonstrate how the environment of the girls constrains them and how the girls look for ways to exercise agency in this constraining environment.

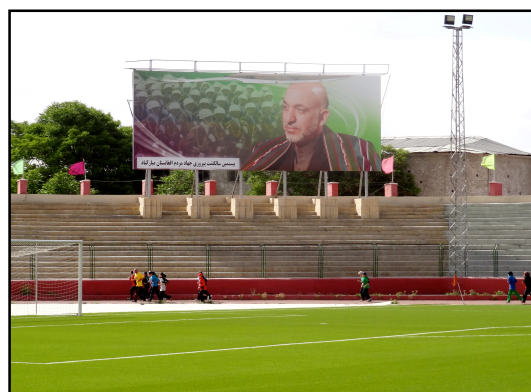
Before I will answer these two questions, I will briefly describe the background of the Ghazi stadium and the boxing girls, since this allows me to provide a better picture of the practice of boxing and the obstacles the girls have to overcome.

6.1. Ghazi stadium: from a field of nightmares to a field of dreams

“When I am running at the stadium I feel I hate this place. I have heard many stories that they were cutting people’s hands and heads in the football place. I think the grass is growing with blood and the whole place is bloody. It feels like I am running on other people’s blood.”²⁹



Public execution of Zarmeena by the Taliban.
16 November 1999. Ghazi stadium.
Filmed secretly by a RAWA member
(photo 3)



Training sessions of the Afghan
women’s boxing team. 16 May 2012
Ghazi stadium
(photo 4)

The Ghazi stadium, located in south-eastern Kabul, cannot be understood without discussing its horrific past. It was here, on November 16, 1999, that the Taliban started executing women. The following report is a description of this practice:

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) - Thousands of people watched as a woman, cowering beneath a pale blue all-enveloping burqa, was shot and killed today in the first public execution of a woman in Kabul since the Taliban religious army took control three years ago. The woman, identified only as Zarmeena, a mother of seven children, was found guilty of beating her husband to death with a steel hammer as he slept. The reason for the killing two years ago was a family dispute, according to a Taliban soldier, who didn’t give his name. Zarmeena was taken from the back of a pickup truck that drove into the sports stadium. Two female police officers, both in deep blue burqas, held Zarmeena’s arms. Witnesses said the convicted woman walked slowly, each step followed by a pause. When she reached the center of the field she was

²⁹ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 May 2012.

ordered by one of the women to sit. Behind her a young Taliban soldier, his head wrapped in the traditional turban, took aim with his Kalashnikov rifle. But suddenly Zarmeena stood up and tried to flee. A policewoman stopped her and forced her to sit, said witnesses. The Taliban soldier moved closer and shot her three times. Afterwards from the crowd several people shouted: “God is great.”³⁰

For years, the Taliban used to publicly flog and execute women at the Ghazi stadium. Men and women were shot, hanged or stoned to death, often in front of their family members.

On December 15, 2011, the stadium reopened again. The grass has been replaced with bright green artificial turf, part of a U.S.-funded stadium renewal.³¹ Today, it is the place where 29 women hold two hour boxing practices, three times a week.

6.2. Background of the boxing girls

The boxing girls are between the ages of 15 and 21. Seven of the twenty girls I have interviewed are Tajik, twelve girls are Hazara and one is Pashtun. Seven girls are from Parwan, nine from Kabul, two from Bamiyan. One girl is from Baghlan and the only Pashtun girl was born in Iran. Eight girls are still in high school, four girls go to university, and the others have finished high school, but could not go to university because of family and/or financial problems. Seven girls lived in Iran and nine girls in Pakistan during the Taliban regime. They come from families with an average number of seven children. Furthermore, nine of the girls take extra classes in subjects such as computer science, English and German. Some girls are tailors or make carpets. Others work a lot in the household. All the girls want to box as long as possible and aspire to win medals at competitions abroad. Besides that they want to study in Afghanistan, or abroad; mostly medicine, journalism or economics. Some of them want to become a coach or boxer for the rest of their lives. Others want to become teachers in high school. One girl wants to work at the airport, one wants to be a writer, another girl wants to be a nurse in her province Parwan, one girl wants to earn money to take her

³⁰ Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (17 November, 1999) ‘Taliban Publicly Execute Woman’. Online available at: <http://www.rawa.org/murder-w.htm>.

³¹ Magnowski, D. Reuters (15 December 2011) ‘Taliban death stadium reborn as Afghan sporting hope’. Online available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/15/us-afghanistan-stadium-taliban-idUSTRE7BE0LB20111215>.

mother on *Hajj*, and one girl wants to become a businesswoman in Germany. Six girls have been boxing for 5 years, since the start of the boxing team. The others have been boxing between 6 months and 1,5 years.

MALE – FEMALE

In this chapter, I will show how the girls experience their gender as ‘second’ and constantly feel they are ‘abnormal’ because being male is seen as ‘normal’. In this sense, I will argue, these gender norms hold power over the girls, over what they do and over the way they think about themselves. However, I will then describe, the practice of boxing slowly leads to a change in their experience of their gender, which they start to see in a more positive light. I will demonstrate how leaving the house and how the practice of boxing also brings about a change in their way of thinking about the world.

7.1. Reasons and motives

Giddens differentiates between motives and reasons. His theory of agency is composed of three levels: discursive consciousness, practical consciousness and unconsciousness. Discursive consciousness refers to the conscious reasons that people give to explain their behaviour. Practical consciousness refers to unarticulated beliefs and knowledge that people use to orient themselves. Motives refer to overall plans or programs. Much of everyday life, he argues, is not directly motivated. Motives tend to have a direct impact on action, which in some ways breaks with routines. (Cohen 1989: 51).

In this section, I will demonstrate the difference between the reasons and the motivations behind the girls’ decision to practice boxing. It will thereby become clear that their *reasons* for boxing are directly related to their everyday lives. However, their *motivation* to start boxing refers to existing forms of power, in that sense reflecting the control their environment has over them, over what they do and over the way they think about themselves.

7.1.1. Reasons

The girls heard about the boxing team from other girls, classmates, their teacher, the coach, friends, or they saw them on TV. They asked their parents for permission to

join the team. If their families did not allow the girls to join the team, the coach called the parents and tried to convince them. The fact that there were secure facilities and that transportation was provided to and from practices, eased the decision of some of the parents. Some girls already played football, taekwondo or basketball before they joined boxing.

The main reason for the girls to join the boxing team was that they liked playing sports, in particular boxing. Their parents' approval formed a precondition to box. Since they liked boxing, they wanted to improve themselves, to go abroad to participate in competitions and to become famous by becoming professional boxers.

Furthermore, they started boxing because it is good for their health. Before they joined the team, they often felt sick and weak, but now that they have started boxing, they feel fit and strong. This is important to them.

Finally, each of the girls has specific and individual reasons to start boxing. Some joined because of the salary they receive on a monthly basis. Others joined to prove to their families that they can do more. One girl joined because her family wanted her to lose weight. Others started because they felt unsafe in the streets and wanted to learn how to defend themselves. Another girl joined because she felt unsafe in her own family and wanted to learn how to protect herself from her uncle. Another girl joined because she wanted to be like Mohammad Ali. Sadaf joined boxing because she has the wish to go to Olympics. She saw her nephew boxing and thought "Why should a girl not be able to do this?" Some explicitly stated that they started boxing to help their country. By boxing, they say, they can show other Afghan people and other countries that boys and girls are equal.

7.1.2. Motivation

The girls, thus, all have specific reasons to start boxing, but 'underneath' these reasons, stronger desires and motivations can be discerned. These are the result of an unconscious struggle against dominant forms of power that determine prevailing norms about being male or female and, as such, hold power over the girls. Doing something that goes against the prevailing norms of the system makes them feel empowered within this system.

Before they started boxing, the girls spent most of their time at home or at school. Some of them never talked with males outside their family. They were never

really encouraged, or even allowed, to do something like boxing. Before joining the team they say, they always felt weak and were under someone's control or supervision. They also often felt bored and felt as if they were unable to do anything at all. They were afraid of everything, mostly of communicating with other people. They experienced pressure from everything, especially at home, and could never decide something for themselves.

Now that they practice boxing, the girls *choose* what they want to do: boxing. It is important that they herewith do not *consciously* challenge social perspectives. They primarily practice boxing, simply, because they want to be boxers and because they want to have the opportunity to go outside. They love boxing primarily because they feel more powerful. Halima describes the feeling of power this gives her as follows:

“Every Afghan girl wants to feel power, because they do not have it in their daily lives. A girl like me cannot decide for her life. And this is the worst feeling in the world, because you see yourself as a useless thing.”³²

When boxing, in other words, the girls experience a certain power and freedom that they do not have in their daily lives. Halima describes the difference between this feeling and her everyday life as follows:

“When I am standing in the ring no one is telling me what to do. It is my right to decide. I can do what I want. The whole decision in the ring is ours, but it is not in our daily lives.”³³

The feeling of power here described can best be defined as the experience of *confidence*: boxing provides them with the confidence needed to talk with people, to act in school, family- and public life. They feel that they can understand people and the world better and, in this sense, have a better grip on the world.

Trough boxing, they also feel stronger and more capable of defending themselves, both against people in the streets and, as Sodaba observed, against every problem in life. The girls, in other words, feel they can do everything they want because by practicing boxing, they experience the feeling that they can progress in life and, thus, have control over their fate. They also repeatedly observe that boxing

³² Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women's boxing team, Kabul, 3 May 2012.

³³ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women's boxing team, Kabul, 3 May 2012.

makes them feel relaxed and forget their problems. Nasrin describes the change that boxing brought about in her life as follows:

“Boxing changed my life completely. Before boxing I was weak in everything. I did not have confidence in myself. I was weak, because I was like other girls who cannot go to school, who cannot participate in sport, who are in home all the time and cannot go outside. I did not have women’s rights. Boxing changed my life. I do not feel under pressure anymore. I feel I can face everything. I do not feel nervous. In previous time no one knew me, but after I joined boxing, I became famous. It is good for me. I could not defend myself, but now I can defend myself as an Afghan woman. Now I have rights and can do everything I want.”³⁴

7.2. Starting to act and think differently

The following quote from Arezo illustrates the observation that boxing has an important influence on the way in which the girls feel more free and, eventually, change their way of thinking:

“At home I felt like a prisoner. I could not do anything. Boxing makes me feel good. I feel like a free bird. Boxing gives me the energy to do things. Boxing changed my way of thinking. It made me more open-minded.”³⁵

Based on these descriptions, I want to argue that the practice of boxing provides the girls with feelings of empowerment. Even though the girls do not consciously realize this, the way they talk about themselves and their place in the world shows that they start to develop a more positive view of their gender. Boxing, in other words, slowly changes the ways in which they act and think about other things and the world.

I will now demonstrate how this process, through which they slowly feel more confident and powerful, results in a change in their way of thinking about themselves and the world. This, in turn, manifests itself in a change in which the girls act. This process can be divided into three different stages. Halima explains these stages symbolically as follows:

³⁴ Interview with Nasrin, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 April 2012.

³⁵ Interview with Arezo, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 11 April 2012.

“The first time the coach showed me the picture of the daughter of Mohammed Ali, Laila, I was thinking about her clothes. How can she wear that? For the second time I was thinking about the freedom and the rights that she has. She could do this, because she had all the opportunities and rights. Why don't I have these rights? For the third time I saw her picture my aim was to be like her; to have all these things and to bring it for my daughters and sisters in Afghanistan. I do not know about the other girls, because I do not know them that well. But for Shahla, Sofia, Arezo and Nasrin it was the same. We did have a very small view of the world, but now it has completely changed. And this is why we love boxing. We get more power and freedom, our view of the world changed, and we do show other people we can do it.”³⁶

Many of the girls have changed since they joined the boxing team and are still changing. In the above-cited passage, Halima explains this process by referring to Laila, describing the following three stages.

In the beginning, the girls generally have a low level of self-confidence. They are worried about their headscarves and wear them very tightly. They are not relaxed with the coach and are very shy. After they shake hands with the coach, they wash their hands in the dressing room. They wear something underneath their clothes. However, this changes relatively quickly when they realise that other girls are not acting in the same way.

By practicing in the stadium the girls discover another world, as well as the behaviour of other girls. They hear about other countries, where women have the same rights as men. They hear about the opportunities other women have and they do not have. They see other women believing in themselves. When they learn that not everyone has to hide that she practices boxing, and realise that other women have more rights and more freedom than they do, they start wanting this freedom for themselves as well.

It is therefore mainly their perception of *differences* that changes their views and that still continues to change these views. Boxing, in this sense, helps a few girls and could potentially help other girls to develop a more comprehensive and subtle view on women, women's rights and opportunities, and the world. They learn about other worlds and want to have that world in their lives too: thereby, they want to

³⁶ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women's boxing team, Kabul, 14 May 2012.

become different themselves. In the stadium they have, to a certain extent, the possibility to be different. There, they have the freedom to stand up and say: “Yes I am a boxer.” This makes them feel powerful, changes their way of thinking and provides them with new expectations of life.

7.3. Conclusion

Before the girls started boxing, they were influenced by the patriarchal social patterns in which they grew up, experiencing their gender as ‘second’ and ‘abnormal’. They felt weak, under pressure, and unable to do anything at all.

Boxing gave and still gives the girls ways to exercise agency. This makes them feel more powerful. Exercising agency should, in this context, be understood as the capability of the girls to make a difference or to act differently than prevailing norms dictate them to do. Since boxing stimulates a constant interaction between feeling more empowered on the one hand, and acting and thinking differently on the other, the girls slowly start to think differently about themselves, about what they do, and about the world.

The girls did not start with boxing to change themselves. They just wanted to practice a sport and did not think this would change them. However, these changes did happen, which shows that empowerment is a process that, most of the time, does not happen consciously.

I have now described how social norms hold power over the girls, how they exercise agency by boxing, and what this means to them at an individual level. In the next chapter, I will describe the way family structures hold power over the girls and how boxing gives them ways to broaden their possibilities to act and think differently at this level.

HONOUR AND SHAME AS EMBODIED BY THE FAMILY

“You cannot clap with one hand.”³⁷

In this chapter, I will discuss the influence that the family has on the girls. I will thereby argue that feelings of shame and the opinions of others in the family hold power over both the family and the girls. Since it is considered to be a shame if a girl leaves a household, the fathers of the girls often forbid them to do this. I will demonstrate how the girls find strategies to convince their parents to give them the permission to box.

8.1. Perspective of (extended) family

This section focuses on why and how feelings of shame and the opinions of others in the girls’ families hold power over the girls and other family members. Before I will describe in what way this happens, I will pay attention to family members who do have a positive and encouraging role.

8.1.1. Encouraging family members

In some families, the mothers, brothers, sister and/or fathers play a really supportive role. Girls from these families are often more ambitious, due to this supportive role of family members. For example, the mother of the Rahimi sisters has a less conservative perspective on the Afghan society and the position of her daughters in this society than most Afghans have:

“I am a forward thinking mother. I do not want my children to go back in time. We want Afghan society to stand on its own feet. I want my children to finish school, to get a job and continue their sport. I do not know about other mothers, but I am proud of my children.”³⁸

³⁷ Interview with Amina, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 27 April 2012.

³⁸ Mother Rahimi sisters, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

Despite the difficulties that the girls face in a restrictive social environment, they are all allowed to go to the stadium to practice boxing. They have many friends at school who want to join as well, but who are not allowed to by their families. The importance of this ‘privilege’ is illustrated by the following words of Sadaf:

“I am a lucky Afghan girl who has permission from her family to go out and play sports. Other girls are more restricted. A neighbour’s girl lives around the corner. She cannot go to school, or play sports. She cannot even leave the house. They see me sometimes and say: ‘Sadaf you are so lucky. You are able to play sports and go to school, and travel abroad.’ They say: ‘We long for the day when we can go abroad too.’”³⁹

8.1.2. Honour and shame

The families of the girls are, in most cases, not supportive of the girls’ plans to practice boxing, because the family plays a central role in the society of Afghanistan as well as in the constitution and preservation of its patriarchy. The central social unit of the country is the extended family, where the senior man has authority over everyone else in ‘his’ family.

The girls always need permission of this senior man to do something. Without the permission of the family, it is not possible for them to practice boxing. It therefore takes a long time to get the families permission and to build consensus. This means that the families that these girls come from are rather liberal compared to most other families in Afghanistan: the girls all managed to convince them. Some families are really supportive, others tolerate their daughter’s plans, but are not specifically encouraging, which is the case in most families. The main problems the girls face are not caused by their parents, but by other family members.

The main reason why many family members object to the girls starting to box is related to the honour-shame complex. The family feels the social pressure of other family members or neighbours. The siblings of the parents of the girls usually raised the most objections against the girls boxing. They tell the parents that boxing is not a good sport for girls, but they mainly object to the idea that the girls are allowed to go outside, which they consider to be a shame for the family as a whole. For example, if

³⁹ Sadaf, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

a girl goes outside, other people will think that she has a secret relationship with someone. This is why people experience a strong need to keep women in the private sphere. When the pressure of the extended family is too high, the father will not allow his daughter to box. The feeling of shame that the practice of boxing can cause, is illustrated by the following description of the father of one of the girls and the brother of another girl:

“My father did not have any problems with my poetry. It is an honour for him. When I asked him to go to boxing he did not agree, because then I would go outside the home. I would get to know a whole world and this was dangerous for him. When we have visitors at our house, they talk about their daughters. Then my father stands up and says: ‘My daughter is the best poet in the world’. He is very proud of me. But about my boxing he never talks. This is one of my biggest wishes that one day my father will stand up and talk about my boxing the same as about my poetry.”⁴⁰

“I did not tell my friends that my sister is in such a place, because they ask questions. They ask bad questions and they also make jokes on me. ‘What kind of brother are you?’”⁴¹

8.1.3. The need to prove

The fact that the extended family often does not agree with the girls practicing boxing, and the fact that the father is often not supportive of the girls’ plans, has an important impact on the girls and the family. Even if the girls get permission to box, their fathers still hold power over them. For example, in some instances the father asked his daughters to wear a hijab to hide the fact that they practice boxing.

The main way in which the fathers exercise power over their daughters, however, is by putting them under pressure to achieve and to prove that they can actually box. This is important for his honour and thereby for the honour of the whole family. In the family’s perception the girls need to win championships to be able to say that they actually are boxers. This is apparent in the following quotes:

⁴⁰ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 May, 2012.

⁴¹ Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

“I need to show results of what I did in boxing. I need to prove myself for my family. Since I did not get a medal, I am not boxing in their view.”⁴²

“One day I will prove that I am a good girl. One day I will prove that it is good that I went to boxing. One day, if he is still alive by then, I will prove that I can box in his name.”⁴³

“They will understand afterwards, when a girl has become a champion, champion of the world, an Afghan girl. Then they will understand the value of girls and boxing.”⁴⁴

Besides the impact this has on the girls, the view of dominant family members affects other family members as well. Illustrative of this aspect is the way Arezo explains the pressure of her aunts and uncles on her mother:

“When I came home I saw how sad my mother always was, because she was put under pressure by her brothers and sisters. They told her that she had to choose: or she had to make us quit boxing or she should leave Kabul. We went to the doctor with her. The doctor said: ‘If you want to feel better, you should not listen to the stories of other people.’ He told her that she should let us box. Even when Taliban comes to stop us, it would be our destiny and no one can do anything against destiny. My mother began to feel better. She told me always to be careful. She told me that it is not the Taliban, but our own family haunting us. Even though our own nephew would stand before the car, we should just get in. Our parents have more confidence in us now.”⁴⁵

8.2. Patriarchal bargaining

In the previous section, I have demonstrated how feelings of shame and the opinions of other family members hold power over the girls and their families. The girls can be understood as active agents who are constrained by the norms of the patriarchal system in which they live. They want to do something that conflicts with the norms of this system, which follows from the fact that family members who do not agree with

⁴² Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 1 May 2012.

⁴³ Interview with Soghra, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 9 April 2012.

⁴⁴ Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

⁴⁵ Interview with Arezo, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 15 May 2012.

their decision to start boxing have to be forced, convinced or ignored. This results either in a losing of all contact between the girl and/or her family with those family members, or in the families hiding the fact that the girls are boxing.

As stated in part one, in patriarchal societies women try to find strategies and coping mechanisms to carve out their place in the world. They strategize within a set of concrete constraints, which Kanidyoti defines as ‘patriarchal bargains’. I want to argue that the girls are, in a sense, consciously and unconsciously bargaining with their patriarchal environment to be able to box. I will now demonstrate how the girls deal with the Afghan patriarchal system and how they find strategies to convince their parents to give them permission to box.

8.2.1. Being like a boy

At the moment, the boxing team is still in a first phase: they try to find ways and to create mechanism to bargain with their environment. Even though Kabul is a very specific location where things are very different from the rest of the country, it is still a place where women are not free to live the lives they want. The lives of girls/women differ in extreme ways from the lives of boys/men. Within the Afghan community, for example, it is considered a compliment to say to a girl that she is ‘like a boy’.

Brothers/men in general have a central position in the family. The brother has all the rights. Therefore, girls want to be like boys: after all, boys have the right to talk and to do the things they want. Being like a boy means that you can make decisions on your own. Being a girl means being weak, being unable to make decisions and to think. The following two citations make clear (1) that the girls are aware of the fact that it is not in their favour that they were born as girls in Afghanistan, and (2) that being ‘like a boy’ seems the only solution they have to live the life they want:

“When someone is born in Iran he or she can do everything, even without permission of their family. But when girls are born in Afghanistan parents wonder why their child is not a boy. From the beginning girls face problems till they get married and till they die.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Interview with Sofia, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 11 April 2012.

“I want to be like a boy. Every time my father says ‘be careful. I let you join boxing as a boy, not as a girl. I trust you, but be like a boy the rest of your life.’”⁴⁷

In order to persuade a family to allow their daughter to practice boxing, it has to see that the daughter can do this by herself. Most of the girls want to be like boys, because this gives them the opportunity to box. Being like a boy means showing your family that you can go to boxing practice on your own, that you can pay for it yourself, that you have self-confidence and that you can defend yourself. If they are like a boy, they can convince their parent to give them permission to box.

Sometimes, not only the girls themselves, but also other family members try to convince and/or defend the fact that the girls want to box or are already boxing. One of the girls describes how her mother defended the fact that her daughter is a boxer:

“The first time I started boxing my relatives did have many problems with us. Why do you choose boxing? Where are you going? But my mother said: ‘It belongs to my daughters. They can do what they want. I know my girls and they are not bad. People can also be bad while they stay at home.’ Now our relatives have good contact with my parents. They ask questions like: ‘When is your competition? What do you do?’”⁴⁸

8.3. Conclusion

The girls can be understood as active agents who are constrained by a patriarchal system. Feelings of shame and the opinions of others in the family hold power over the girls and the family as a whole. Often, the father in the family holds direct power over the girls, but the gaze and opinions of the extended family has an important influence on his decisions. It is considered to be a shame for the father and the family if a daughter leaves the household: other people, mainly the extended family, might think wrong things about the daughter. This is the main reason why fathers often forbid their daughter to box.

The girls constantly deal with the rights they are given as women by their family. They try to find new strategies and ways to fit into their family and get their parents’ permission to box. ‘Being like a boy’ is one of these strategies. Strategies

⁴⁷ Interview with Hosai, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 22 April 2012.

⁴⁸ Interview with Sofia, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 11 April 2012.

like these are directly focused on those who 'govern' them, in this case mostly their male family members. Through the creation of these strategies and through their struggles with their environment, the girls exercise agency.

MARRIAGE

Coach: “Today there was a little drama on the radio, it was like a joke. ‘What would happen if there were no women?’ It said: ‘Men would use more eye make-up. And they would use lipstick.’”

Shahla: “Men would sweep the floor.”

Shabnam: “That would be nice. They would be washing the dishes and clothes. We would just be relaxing.”

Coach: “No, I will choose husbands for you. For all three of you!”⁴⁹

Expectations about marriage hold power over the girls. They know that once they are married, they will have to quit boxing. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that boxing at least changes their ideas on what their husbands can ask of them, even if they, ultimately, are still powerless. First, I will explain how expectations about marriage hold power over the girls. Then, I will demonstrate that boxing changes their ideas on what their husband can ask of them.

9.1. Marriage as the end of boxing

The biggest threat for the girls’ boxing career is marriage. The main reason why girls quit boxing is them getting engaged or married. Getting married does not only mean the end of boxing, the girls also fear they have quit their education. Many girls have been approached by men who asked for their hands in marriage, but they turned them down because they do not want to get married at a young age. The girls want to get married when they are older, because they know their husbands will most likely not allow them to box. They want to finish their education first and want to box as long as possible. A few girls even said that they did not want to get married until they are thirty years old. So far, Shahla has been the only girl who continued boxing after she got engaged. This is the case, because she was strongly supported by her parents and because she has a strong motivation to box:

⁴⁹ Conversation between Shahla, Shabnam and Sabir Sharifi, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

“In the future I want to be the most progressive and bright of all Afghan girls, a champion. I hate those people who think that girls cannot achieve anything, that girls are meant for work at home.”⁵⁰

After she got married, her husband did not want to let her box any longer and she got pregnant. She now has to stay at home and take care of her son. One of the girls states about Shahla:

“I know Afghan people. They will not let you box after marriage. I know it is not possible for me to continue boxing after marriage. They will say they accept it, but they will change their mind after marriage. The nature of Afghan people is like that. I say this, because I have seen it. When Shahla engaged, her fiancée allowed her to box. After their marriage, she got pregnant and quit boxing.”⁵¹

During my research, I interviewed a girl who was engaged. I asked her what the man she was going to marry thought about the fact that she was boxing. She told me that he was really supportive. I asked her what would happen after they got married. She said he was a very liberal man and that, after her marriage, she could still do whatever she wants. She also told that he promised to build a boxing gym in their new house. I asked her whether she could still come to the stadium to box. She said: “Yes, of course. And I will have my own gym.” However, after her marriage she quit boxing and I never saw her again. The fear that the girls have of being forced to quit boxing after their marriage is fuelled by these examples and has greatly changed their perspectives on marriage.

9.2. The girls’ perspective on marriage

Boxing changes the girls’ ideas on what their husbands can ask of them, even though they are, eventually, still powerless. Older girls and the girls who have witnessed a sister or friend getting engaged and leaving the boxing team, are the most directly aware of the fact that they are powerless when it comes to marriage. They therefore wish to marry a man who allows them to box. They all say they will tell their

⁵⁰ Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

⁵¹ Interview with Safia, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 27 April 2012.

husbands that they want to box and they all hope their family in law will accept the fact that they practice boxing. However, if this is not accepted, the girls know they have to quit. Furthermore, if their husband does not allow them to box, they will have to stop boxing as well. The following quote illustrates the fact that the girls are completely controlled by the man they will marry:

“Only God knows. When someone comes to propose me he has to be open-minded and he should let me box after marriage. Only God knows what will happen in the future, but I wish that my husband lets me box.”⁵²

Girls who have witnessed a sister or friend getting engaged and leaving the boxing team, are well aware of the fact that they will have to quit boxing after marriage. These are also the girls who fear the idea of getting married the most. For example, I talked with Hosai about the engagement of her sister, who is two years younger and was forced to quit boxing as well. She explains that she does not even want to think about a potential husband:

“My sister is engaged, but I do not want to be engaged. I do not have a good idea about marriage. When someone gets married her life completely changes. When I look at my sister before and after engagement I see two different people. Before that she did everything she wanted. Now her husband tells her what to wear and what to do. She should ask permission for everything. Because of this I do not want to marry. In our society it is like that. When girls get married they cannot do things like boxing anymore. Because of this marriage has no meaning to me. After marriage your life will completely change. I want to stay alone for the rest of my life. In the future I will take care of myself. I do not need a husband to support me.”⁵³

The younger girls are more naive, and mostly believe that they will be able to convince their future husbands to give them permission to practice boxing. If they have to choose between boxing and marriage, they say they will choose boxing. Soghra was the most determined not to quite boxing after her marriage. About her future plans, she states:

⁵² Interview with Ghazal, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 15 May 2012.

⁵³ Interview with Hosai, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 22 April 2012.

“I want to box the rest of my life, even if I get married or get children.”⁵⁴

Then her sister said:

“I will be there to choose her husband. Many boys proposed her, but we said ‘no’. Life is not just spending time. We must do something. We must improve. When Soghra wants to marry with someone I will talk with him. If he wants to marry her, he must accept the fact that she is a boxer. That is the first thing.”⁵⁵

9.3. Conclusion

Expectations about marriage hold power over the girls. In general, getting married means the end of boxing. At this moment it seems that there is no way or strategy to overcome this problem. Even though the girls are rather powerless regarding this issue, boxing has greatly changed their ideas on what their husbands can ask of them. They all wish to marry a man who allows them to box, go to school and who gives them the freedom to do what they want to do.

⁵⁴ Interview with Soghra, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 9 April 2012.

⁵⁵ Interview with Roya, sister of boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 9 April 2012.

SPACE, LOOKS OF OTHER PEOPLE, AND (BODILY) FREEDOM

In the previous chapters, I have explained how the patriarchal environment of the girls holds power over them on an individual and familial level, as well as on the level of marriage. I have also shown how they still find ways to exercise agency within this repressing environment and how they, in other words, broaden their possibilities to act and think differently on these levels.

In this chapter, I want to focus on the ways in which the larger social environment in which the girls live holds power over them and, again, on the ways in which they deal with the restrictions posed by this environment.

Since they experience looks and witness the behavior of other people, they feel a constant normalizing pressure on how to behave and act, how to dress, etc. In the stadium, however, they have more (bodily) freedom and do not experience the gaze of other people so strongly. The stadium therefore allows them to move more freely, dress more relaxed, etc. In the experience of the girls, the stadium is a place where they can do what they want: boxing. And boxing, in turn, boosts their confidence and provides them with ways to deal with the normalizing gaze and behavior of other people.

When the boxing team was just established, the girls often were harassed, which affected them deeply. Now that they have been boxing for a longer time, they are not harassed as often as they used to be, and when it happens, it has less impact on them. They now feel more confident, and are able to deal much better with the harassment. Before I will describe their strategies to deal with this harassment, I will focus on the ways in which it held and still holds power over them.

10.1. Neighbours and random strangers

As I have already stated, the girls were often harassed in the beginning of their boxing careers. They were not able to go to the stadium together, because of the potential reactions of other people. Halima describes this as follows:

“For the first years we were not coming together to the stadium. We were parking along the streets and every other minute we were sending one girl. We were not going together, because people would recognize it sooner. When they see one girl they do not care. Now it is possible. Now everyone knows we are coming for boxing.”⁵⁶

The worst case of harassment took place when Shabnam and Sadaf had participated in their first competition, in Tajikistan: many people blackmailed them, as well as Sabir Sharifi. Strangers called their father and asked him why he allowed his three daughters to box. Their father became afraid and did not give them permission to box for two months. Sabir eventually convinced him to let them train again. He told him that there was no time to be afraid and that he would take care of his daughters. They still do not know who called their father and what they told him. Their father knows, but he does not tell his daughters because he does not want to scare them. Their father also took their mobile phones away for one year and returned them with changed numbers. They have not received any new threatening calls, but they do not answer anymore if they receive a call from an unknown number.

When they started boxing, the girls also experienced many problems with their families. In most cases, however, their family situations are ‘stable’ now, and many people in their social environment know that they are boxers. They are not harassed as much as they used to be. However, they still constantly experience disapproving looks of other people.

Especially neighbours often give the girls a hard time. In most cases, the neighbours know that the girls practice boxing, but do not say anything. Other neighbours stop their mothers in the streets and ask them why they give their daughters permission to box. They also often tell their mothers that something bad might happen to their daughters. The mother of one of the girls therefore decided that it would be better if her daughter would quit boxing. Neighbours also wonder where the girls go and from where they return so late. Some neighbour have told the father of boxing girls that his daughters would never find a good husband because they practiced boxing. The following quote is from the mother of the Rahimi sisters who was stopped in the street because her daughters are boxers:

⁵⁶ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 1 May 2012.

“I ran into a friend when I was out with Shabnam. She said: ‘I saw your daughter somewhere. What kind of mother are you that you choose this for your daughter?’ I said never mind. A lot of people in my family say that boxing is too rough. ‘Why does she do it?’ If their husbands loves them a broken nose will not matter.”⁵⁷

Besides being harassed by neighbours, all the girls have been harassed and are sometimes still harassed by random people in the streets. When they come out of a car, walking at the bazaar, shopping at the shopping centre, people pass condescending comments to them, saying things like: “She is a boxer.” “Why is she boxing?” “It is not good for you.” They often ask: “Why?” Safoora describes her experience with the looks and the condescending behaviour of strangers as follows:

“They are not only watching you. You can see the hate in their face, in their eyes. Why? Because you are a girl and you came out. Outside they have a small mind that can oversee their own family and nothing else. ‘My daughter is the best, she is wearing a burqa, she is staying at home. But look at her. She is one of the bad girls.’”⁵⁸

10.2. Dealing with harassment

In the beginning the girls stayed home if they felt unsafe because of the harassments. Now, they have built up more confidence and experience their bodies and their bodily integrity in a stronger sense. They all go outside again and have developed different strategies to deal with this harassment.

10.2.1. Using boxing skills

One of these strategies consists of the use of their boxing skills. Five of the girls have hit someone because he commented on them in a condescending way. It was difficult to find out exactly what these individuals were saying to the girls, because they were often ashamed of retelling it. The girls who had hit someone felt the need to do this, because they believe people will never stop doing this if girls do not respond. They experienced hitting these men as the only option left.

⁵⁷ Mother Rahimi sisters, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

⁵⁸ Interview with Safoora, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 2 April 2012.

Mina, who was harassed by her own classmates and two boys in her neighbourhood, was convinced that hitting them was not a solution. According to her people would call you a boxer in a negative way when you hit someone:

“I have to respond with my language, not with my boxing skills. I cannot use my boxing skills, even not when people are telling me the worst things. I think it is because of my personality.”⁵⁹

10.2.2. Ignoring

Another way of dealing with harassment is to ignore comments passed to the girls by random strangers on the streets. On the one hand, they know they cannot say anything back because it will create problems. This makes them feel sad and insecure. On the other hand, they do feel secure because they practice boxing. They are proud of their accomplishments and they want other people to feel the same way. The two sides of this way of dealing with harassment is present in the following quote:

“I always ignore them, because I know they come from bad families. They do not have manners. Boxing is not easy. It is a very difficult sport. I am always proud of myself that I can do it.”⁶⁰

10.2.3. Hiding

“Outside the stadium it is really different. I am not telling everyone that I am a boxer. I do not tell my teacher, because she will make fun of me.”⁶¹

Some girls try to hide the fact that they are boxing from their extended family, neighbours and other people. In general, they do not want neighbours to know, because they do not want to have to justify themselves or cause problems. They use different strategies to hide this.

Some girls are careful with what they wear. In the car, for example, they cover their faces with their scarfs. Three girls wear a hijab, so no one will expect that they are boxers. Their father told them to do this, because of the unsafe situation in Kabul.

⁵⁹ Interview with Mina, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 24 April 2012.

⁶⁰ Interview with Kamila, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 12 April 2012.

⁶¹ Interview with Amina, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 27 April 2012.

He is afraid something bad will happen to his daughters. The girls in the boxing team often ask them why they wear a hijab, but they ignore them.

The girls tell some people in their school about their boxing, but they say their coach is a woman. In school, they change their clothes very quickly. They go by bus to boxing practice and try to avoid people when they leave.

Some girls tell their neighbours that they are going to university with the minibus that picks them up to go to the stadium, even hiding the fact that they are boxing from their neighbours for up to nine months. For the same reason, these girls also try to avoid journalists.

10.3. Conclusion

I have tried to show that the social environment of the girls holds power over them. When the boxing team was just established, the girls were often harassed and this had a deep impact on them. Even though they are harassed less, they still experience the disapproving looks of other people and constantly experience the normalizing pressure telling them how to behave and act, how to dress, etc. This pressure comes mainly from neighbors and random strangers in the streets.

Now that they have practiced boxing for some time, the girls have gained more confidence and experience their bodies and their bodily integrity in a stronger and more positive sense. They all go outside and have developed different strategies of dealing with the harassments. Some girls use their boxing skills, others try to ignore it, and some try to hide the fact that they practice boxing. In this way, they exercise a form of agency in a very restrictive environment.

SECURITY SITUATION

The main focus of this thesis is to demonstrate how boxing provides the girls with ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment. This means that the security situation in Afghanistan is not directly related to this focus. However, it does have an important influence on the ways in which the girls exercise agency. I will therefore describe why the girls believe that boxing was not possible eleven years ago because of the security situation in Afghanistan, and why it is possible for them to box now.

To put this question in a historical perspective, I will first discuss the girls' lives as refugees in Iran and Pakistan and in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Furthermore, I will argue that feelings of security and danger hold power over them, showing how the constant threat of attacks decreases their possibilities of boxing. I will also demonstrate how the security situation of the stadium and in Kabul helps them boxing.



Photo 5: 'Read Quran before burn it', Kabul city centre

When discussing the security situation in Kabul, the girls often refer to the Quran burnings and the attacks on April 15, as examples of events that had a negative influence on their lives and on their perspectives on Western and Afghan forces.

On February 21, two weeks before I came to Kabul, several burned Qurans were found at the Bagram air base, where American soldiers are stationed. This led to demonstrations all over the country, including Kabul, Jalalabad, Parwan, Laghman, Logar, Paktia and Kapisa. Several of the demonstrations became violent and resulted in casualties and an unknown number of injuries. These demonstrations were the result of religious outrage, built-up frustrations and, 'simply', groups wanting to stir trouble.⁶²

Sunday April 15, when I had been in Kabul for 1,5 months, suicide bombers struck across Afghanistan in coordinated attacks, with explosions and gunfire rocking the diplomatic area of Kabul. Taliban fighters took over buildings and tried to enter parliament. A joint operation by Afghan and international forces to displace the attackers from the buildings they had occupied continued into Monday morning.⁶³

11.1. Life in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan

Six of the twenty girls have lived in Afghanistan all their lives. Five girls lived in Iran and nine girls in Pakistan during the Taliban regime, when they were very young. Some of them were born in Iran or Pakistan. Their individual background as refugees, and the places where they grew up, has had an important influence on their way of thinking and of experiencing the world. The experience of being refugees in Iran, for example, influenced their whole way of thinking. The girls who lived in Pakistan and Iran came back in 2002 or in subsequent years that followed.

Most of the girls who lived in Pakistan faced many problems in that country, because they were refugees. Most of their families had financial problems. Their parents could not find jobs. At a very young age, the girls and their siblings therefore had to make carpets. They were unable to attend school. Many of their sisters are now illiterate. The few girls who liked living in Pakistan are the girls who could go to school there and whose parents had jobs. One girl enjoyed living in Pakistan because she had more freedom there than she has in Afghanistan. She could wear jeans, ride a bicycle and play with boys and girls together.

⁶² Bijlert, M. Afghan Analysts Network (22 February 2012) 'The Quran burnings and the different faces of anger'. Online available at: <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=2523>.

⁶³ Boone, J. The Guardian (15 April 2012) 'Taliban launches largest attack on Kabul in 11 years'. Online available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/apr/15/taliban-largest-attack-kabul>.

The girls who lived in Iran had a relatively good life. In Iran, they could go to school and their parents could work. Even though their life was better than in Afghanistan at that moment, they were discriminated as well.

Obviously, the girls who lived in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime experienced the least amount of freedom. They could not go to school and had to stay at home all the time. Safoora said that she could not even claim to live in Afghanistan because she had to stay inside all the time. Life in that time was not good, especially not as a woman. The girls were very young and constantly lived in fear. Some of them have specific memories of this time. Tahmina remembers that the Taliban beat her aunt with a leather whip, because she tied her hair a bit too high. Ghazal remembers that the Taliban wanted to arrest the owner of their house, because he was against the Taliban. The Taliban arrested their father, because they thought he was the owner. They wanted to take their father to prison, but he resisted and was beaten as a result of this. Eventually, they arrested him and put him in prison. The father spent one night in prison until it was made clear he was innocent. After some time they arrested the owner of the house.

Halima has many bad memories from the time the Taliban were in Bamiyan as well. When they came to her village, they sent the women and children to the mountains. When they returned at least two of the men had been killed. She describes her worst memory of the Taliban regime as follows:

“We had a really old woman in our village. She could not come with us to the mountains. When we came back, we saw her. They raped her, they killed her and hang her in a tree without any clothes. And that was the most horrible thing I have ever seen in my life. I cannot forget that woman. I hate them, because they are talking about Islam, God, but they are like animals. They are against the rules of the Holy Quran. In which book has God said you can rape an old woman, kill her and put her in a tree so everyone can see her? Where in the Quran does God say you have the right to cut other’s people noses or ears? And because we look different than other nations, we look like Chinese and we are not Sunni, but Shiite, they had the worst behaviour to us. When they saw a Hazara they cut the nose. They said you do not have any nose, why do you need this part? They were cutting the noses, they tortured people, they

raped the women, they were cutting the breasts and they were doing lots of other bad things. I do have many bad memories from that time. They are using the word of God, but they do not know anything about God.”⁶⁴

Halima claims that she therefore cannot accept the writings of the Quran. She says she cannot understand that Allah can be the source of justice, when he at the same time allows a man to have four wives, prevents women to be judges, and claims that women should be stoned if they are found guilty of adultery while men will not receive the same punishment. She explains why she does not want to be a Muslim as follows:

“If God is the source of justice, then this is what humans do to the Quran. Humans can do the worst things you cannot even imagine. I wish we were not Muslim. I am not praying. I do not believe in the Quran. I just believe in God.”⁶⁵

Her fear for religion originates in the atrocities she has witnessed the Taliban committing in the name of God.

“They were cutting the heads of people and saying ‘We are doing this by the name of god who is the most kind and merciful.’ And then they cut the head. When I was in Bamiyan I was always asking God: ‘You do have all the power. Why are you not doing anything? Why are you not stopping them?’ This is why I do not believe in religious things.”⁶⁶

11.2. What makes boxing possible now and not eleven years ago?

When I asked whether the girls think it is possible to practice boxing now and not eleven years ago, they all referred to the Taliban regime, which would never have allowed the boxing to take place. The Taliban was against all sports, especially against women practicing sports, and forbade female education as well. Women could not go to school and were unable to visit family members.

⁶⁴ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 3 May 2012.

⁶⁵ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 3 May 2012.

⁶⁶ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 3 May 2012.

At the moment, it is possible to practice boxing in Kabul, since it is secure, which makes the girls feel relatively free and independent. Although the financial situation of many of their families is still not good, the current situation has greatly improved their lives: they like to live in Afghanistan, because it is their country, their homeland. They also feel that their country has progressed, because they are able to study now. Each of the girls has a different perspective on why the situation in Afghanistan is secure now. Most girls think the peace is caused by President Karzai and the current government. Others believe it is a result of the Western forces or a combination of the two. Some girls answered my question by referring to Zahir Akbar, the head of Olympic Committee. They think he made it possible for them to box. One girl even mentioned Ahmad Shah Massoud as the person who made their situation better. Two other girls referred to the Afghan National Army as the main cause of their security. In their opinion, it is not because of the Western forces, but rather because of the Afghan military and their hard work that the situation in Afghanistan is stable.

According to Sofia, the Taliban bombarded the Afghan population with propaganda during eight to nine years. Most people were prevented from going to school. Therefore, the population became close-minded. According to her, it possible to box now, because women have changed:

“When Taliban was here everyone had to stay inside for months and years. But now after these years it became for the rest of their lives. Now women still think it is the man’s right to beat her. Even if you do not know him. Even if he is not your husband. These stupid ideas came out. Afghan women are unaware. But Afghan girls think different. At least one per cent believes in themselves. And even if they do not believe in themselves they want to try once, because they have seen many bad things during the wars. What changed in Afghan society that it is possible to box now? Women changed.”⁶⁷

11.2.1. Western forces

“There is a very direct clear link between the international interventions and the ability of the girls to box. I have been living here throughout. I lived here

⁶⁷ Interview with Sofia, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 11 April 2012.

during the civil war. I was here during Taliban. We are talking about 2001 when you could never imagine doing what the girls are doing now. It was out of question for the girls to come out of their homes. To sport was out of question obviously. To wear a t-shirt was out of question. Everything was out of question. There is a very direct link.”⁶⁸

As Kaniska Nawabi states here, Western intervention greatly increased possibilities for women. Most of the girls, however, cannot imagine that the Western intervention is one of the reasons that they can box now. They were very young during this intervention; some of them were only infants. They did not have to live through the same experiences as their mothers and some only returned back from Pakistan or Iran after the invasion and the fall of the Taliban regime.

When I asked whether they thought it was the Western intervention that created the opportunity for them to box, they directly responded by saying that it is a very political question, which is difficult to answer. They told me they did not know anything about it. One girl even refused to talk about it. Most girls started to ask questions, like: “Why can they not bring peace in our country?”⁶⁹ “If foreign people say that Afghans are bad why do they cooperate?”⁷⁰ “If Afghan people say they can protect themselves why do we have these attacks all the time?”⁷¹ Some girls have a positive view on Western forces, but the majority of the girls have a neutral or even negative understanding of them.

Only a few girls were convinced that the presence of Western forces is positive for their situation and the state of Afghanistan. According to them, the situation in their country changed because of the Western intervention. They told this intervention brought about security and created opportunities for women. They say Western forces are very helpful and that if the West had not intervened in Afghanistan, there still would have been war. One girl is extremely positive about Western forces:

“Taliban controls other provinces. Kabul does not need American soldiers as much as other provinces. We are always supporting them, because it is not so

⁶⁸ Interview with Kanishka Nawabi, Chairman of CPAU, Kabul, 12 March 2012.

⁶⁹ Interview with Salma, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 22 March 2012.

⁷⁰ Interview with Nargis, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 8 April 2012.

⁷¹ Interview with Sodaba, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 23 April 2012.

easy to come to Afghanistan. It must be hard for their families in America. We are proud that they are working for us.”⁷²

However, the majority of the girls does not understand why Western forces have so much power. They think Afghan people can control their own country. According to them, it would be good if Western forces would leave Afghanistan. They think the Afghan forces are able to protect Afghanistan themselves. They often referred to the presence of Western forces in villages in a negative way. Kamila, for example, observes:

“When one foreigner dies, they kill many Afghan people. How can they say they are here for peace? When Afghan people die, no one does something. They say they are here to bring peace and to help, but I do not see it.”⁷³

Some girls mentioned the Quran burnings as examples of the fact that Western forces do not respect their culture and religion. Mina expresses this as follows:

“The Quran is everything for us. So it is a big mistake of them. Quran is something the prophet let for us. If someone burns it, our religion will be destroyed.”⁷⁴

Zahra and Halima had a different perspective on the Quran burnings. In their perspective it is obviously not respectful of anybody to burn the Quran. However, the message will never be destroyed:

“The Americans burned our Qurans, which is a big disrespect for us, but it does not mean you have to go, fight and kill Afghans. At the same time Taliban are burning schools. In these schools they have a lot of Qurans. No one ever comments on that. On the day they burned the Qurans they were fighting. I could not believe it. When the Taliban are burning Qurans everyone is quiet. Why? Because they cannot think bigger. And that is the result of our scholars. On Friday in the mosque they will say: ‘Look at these Americans,

⁷² Interview with Nazbanu, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 9 April 2012.

⁷³ Interview with Kamila, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 12 April 2012.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mina, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 24 April 2012.

they burn the Quran!’ If Allah created the Quran, he can safe it as well. They cannot destroy the Quran by burning it. The message of Allah will always be the same.’⁷⁵

11.3. The current security situation

All the girls agree that the current security situation in Afghanistan is not good. They state that it does not affect the practice of boxing specifically, but holds power over their lives as a whole.

On the one hand, this means that feelings of security and danger hold power over the girls. The constant threat of attacks decreases their possibilities of boxing. When they are at school or at the stadium, there is always the possibility that something will happen. Almost all the girls referred to the attacks on April 15 as an example of this possibility. One moment you are preparing to go to the stadium, and the next moment fighting breaks out at several places around the city. For a week, the girls were unable to attend practice. On April 15 they were at school. Their parents called them and were nervous something had happened to them. Since these types of attacks happen on a more or less regular basis, the girls are forced to live the life of constant insecurity. This decreases their confidence in safety and long-term security, as well as their trust in both Afghan and Western forces. It also affects their ability to go to the stadium, school, and to visit their families. It is not only these attacks, but the environment in general that makes them feel unsafe. Safoora expresses this as follows:

“It is not only the Taliban. If someone wants to take me and rape or kidnap me, they can. There is no police to stop them. Many girls are tortured everyday. For example Sahar Gul, who was tortured by her family in law for five months. There was no one to help her. Is this security?”⁷⁶

On the other hand, the girls are, to a certain extent, used to this security situation. It is uncertain, but uncertainty has become a large part of their everyday lives. Above all, Kabul is more secure than other provinces and cities in Afghanistan. Setting up a women’s boxing team outside of Kabul would therefore not be possible at the moment.

⁷⁵ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 1 May 2012.

⁷⁶ Interview with Safoora, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 8 April 2012.

11.4. Conclusion

As I have already stated at the beginning of this chapter, the security situation in Afghanistan is not directly related to the patriarchal environment of this country. Nevertheless, it affects the girls' ways of exercising agency as well and is therefore important to mention: after all, security and feelings of danger hold power over the girls. When the Taliban regime controlled the country, many girls left Afghanistan and went to Iran or Pakistan. The girls who stayed in Afghanistan experienced what it is like to live in constant fear and without freedom. Because the Taliban regime was overthrown, it is more secure now in Kabul, which is why, according to the girls, it is possible to box now. In their perspective, the link between the Western intervention and their boxing activities is less direct.

In short, the security situation has constrained and still constrains the girls in the practice of boxing, but also in living their lives normally. In this sense, this situation holds power over them. Compared with the security situation as it was eleven years ago, however, the girls have more freedom of movement and opportunities. One of these opportunities is boxing. Boxing, in other words, provides the girls with ways to exercise agency in this relatively unsafe environment.

Part Three

COGNITIVE AND ATTITUDINAL IMPACT

Change on a conscious and reflective level



Photo 6: Shabnam Rahimi and Sadaf Rahimi during a training session, boxing gym Ghazi stadium

COGNITIVE AND ATTITUDINAL CHANGE

“We should change people completely. It will take a long time. I can do it for my daughter, but not for my own son.”⁷⁷

In the previous five chapters, I have focused on the ways in which the girls exercise agency by boxing, which involves feelings of empowerment. These feelings, as I have argued, broaden the ways in which they are able to act and think differently, without always doing this consciously. As illustrated, exercising agency means finding strategies to deal with the constraints posed by the girls’ familial and social environments as well. This mainly takes place on a conscious level, since it is the only way in which the girls can initiate and continue their boxing practice.

In the final part of this thesis, I want to demonstrate how boxing changes the way the girls think on a conscious and reflective level. How does boxing, in other words, change the ideas they have of themselves and their role in the world on an ideological level? And how do they see themselves and their role in the development of Afghanistan, as well as the role that the Taliban and the Western forces will play in the country’s future?

12.1. Role models

Boxing has changed the ideas the girls have of themselves and their role in the world on an ideological level. The girls want to better their environment and the lives of themselves and others, because they know how hard it is to live in this environment, being a woman. They believe that boxing can help to bring about equality and peace in Afghanistan. When I asked how they thought boxing could result in social change, they referred to themselves as role models on the following three levels: (1) within their own family and for other families; (2) for other Afghan women, and (3) for Afghanistan in general.

⁷⁷ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 1 May 2012.

12.1.1. Family

Even though most of the men in the families of the girls do not agree or support the girls boxing, many girls have managed to convince their fathers and other family members. However, as I have described above as well, they still need to prove that they are boxers by winning medals. By doing this, they become the pride of the family. In this way, they want to encourage their families to think differently about them and about girls in general.

The girls also hope that other families will learn about them and what they do, so they will encourage their daughters to practice boxing or other sports. The following quote illustrates the importance of winning medals and makes clear that the girls aspire to become role models for other families:

“I want to show the human rights of Afghan people. Some families did not allow the girls to go boxing. When I get a medal, when I become famous I want to show other families that Afghan girls can do everything. Why do people not allow their girls to go to boxing? By boxing I can show myself to other families and they can allow their girls to join boxing. By this I can help in the improvement of our country.”⁷⁸

12.1.2. Afghan women

Furthermore, most of the girls in the team want to be role models for other Afghan girls and women as well. They state they are boxing for the sake of other women in Afghanistan. Halima puts this aspiration into words as follows:

“When I am fighting with my friends in the ring, I feel like I am one of those women in this country who is beaten by someone. I imagine the one in front of me as a man and I do want to beat her so badly. I feel all the pain of Afghan women when I am standing in the ring. I cannot forget their pain. Even though I was not Sahar Gul or other women, but I do feel their pain. I know what being a woman means in Afghanistan. I know what it means when someone beats you. I know how it feels to be nothing. The main reason for me to continue boxing is not to punch someone, but to box because of other women, my sisters in whole Afghanistan. We are always waiting for someone to come

⁷⁸ Interview with Kamila, boxer - Afghan women's boxing team, Kabul, 12 April 2012.

among the people to make history and to help to get our freedom, but we never thought we could be that person. So I hope that with all that I am doing now, my younger sister does not need to hide that she is a boxer. So, I am doing it because of other women in Afghanistan. To open the way for them.”⁷⁹

Most of the girls are very aware of the difficult situation of other women in their country and committed to the concept of changing it. According to many of the girls, many women have the ability to do things, but they are not doing it, because they do not get the permission. By boxing, the girls therefore want to show other girls and women that they can and should do the things they really want, even a tough sport like boxing. They thereby want to show that men and women are equal and that women should have confidence in themselves. They put these ideals into words as follows:

“Afghan women need to get a shock to stand up. They must know their rights to fight for it. This shock can do this. It can be a poem, it can be a sport. For me it was boxing.”⁸⁰

“If other people see how we improve our life by boxing, other girls will also see that they can do it.”⁸¹

“By boxing I want to improve women’s rights. Women should learn how to stand against someone. It is a woman’s right to do what she wants. Other people should not control women.”⁸²

The girls want to become famous by winning competitions and by being present in the media, partly to show other women what they could accomplish if they would really try:

“In competitions we can show women’s rights and we can show that we are equal to boys.”⁸³

⁷⁹ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 May, 2012.

⁸⁰ Interview with Nargis, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 8 April 2012.

⁸¹ Interview with Amina, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 27 April 2012.

⁸² Interview with Zainab, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 24 March 2012.

⁸³ Interview with Sofia, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 11 April 2012.

“By sport we can show ourselves. Other countries and other people will see that Afghan girls can do everything. When Afghan girls go abroad for competition and stand in the ring, they are the proud. Everyone can be proud that Afghan girls can play a tough game like boxing in a very poor country, which has known war for the last 30 years. When other people see us they can be proud of us.”⁸⁴

12.1.3. Afghanistan

“I box because I want to advance myself, and advance Afghanistan.”⁸⁵

All of the girls believe that boxing can help to bring about peace in Afghanistan. Before I will describe how they think this can happen, it is important to state that the girls do not think boxing is the only way to constitute peace. In their view, not only sports can help to improve the situation in Afghanistan: in their view, everyone can help and participate. They therefore state that all people should cooperate in order to change their country.

The explanations they provide of the manner in which boxing can help to bring about peace consist, most of the time, of two reasons. By showing other countries, through the media and competitions abroad, that Afghanistan has a women’s boxing team, they believe they can (1) make others aware of their and Afghanistan’s need(s), and (2) change the ideas people have of Afghanistan.

Media and competitions abroad are important, they argue, because these allow them to share their problems with people from other countries. If others learn about the circumstances in which people live in Afghanistan, they think, these people, will know how to help. The most important ways in which people can help Afghanistan, according to the girls, is through financial and educational support.

In the girls’ perspective, everyone thinks about Afghanistan as a terrorist country. This is mainly the case, they argue, because the media only shows the on-going war. If they would show the boxing team, people will develop a different idea of their country, since not many people expect there to be a women’s boxing team in Afghanistan. In this way, they can show other countries that Afghanistan is good in

⁸⁴ Interview with Sodaba, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 23 April 2012.

⁸⁵ Interview with Nasrin, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 April 2012.

sports too and that there is peace in Afghanistan as well. The following quotes demonstrate the way in which the girls conceptualize these ideals:

“Just a few years ago girls were not allowed to leave their houses. They could not even go to school. And now I can train at the Olympic stadium, and go out of the country to compete. We should do something to show other countries that Afghanistan is also a nation where women can do sports, where women can make progress.”⁸⁶

“There was war in Afghanistan for three decades. Our country situation is not good. Not everyone can allow girls to go boxing. Everyone sees Afghanistan as a terrorist country. People have bad ideas about Afghanistan. I want to show that Afghanistan has sport and good things. Afghanistan is not only a terrorist country. Not all people are Taliban. It is a sport country. It is a good country.”⁸⁷

“When there was war in our country we could not participate in any sport. Now there is peace. Now we can box. When we participate in competitions in other countries they will know that there is sport in Afghanistan, so everyone will know that there is peace. In Afghanistan there is not only war. There is peace as well. It is peaceful enough for girls to participate in boxing. In Afghanistan there is peace because can girls can participate and girls can participate in competitions abroad. By this we can show how our country really is. When people in European countries see us, Afghan girls in competitions, they know there is peace in our country.”⁸⁸

12.2. Taliban and Western forces

“War has destroyed many things in the past and destroys the dreams and wishes people have for the future.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

⁸⁷ Interview with Soghra, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 9 April 2012.

⁸⁸ Interview with Tahmina, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 15 April 2012.

⁸⁹ Interview with Salma, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 22 March 2012.

The girls have certain ideas of themselves and of the way in which boxing can bring about change in their country. The ideals they hold are mainly related to equality and peace. Of course, the situation in their country and the possible changes boxing can bring, are influenced and defined, to a large extent, by Western and Afghan forces, as well as by the Taliban. How do the boxing girls think the upcoming withdrawal of the Western forces from Afghanistan will affect their lives and their boxing? What is their perspective on the potential role of Western forces, Afghan forces and the Taliban in the future?

12.2.1. Withdrawal of Western forces

In general, the boxing girls are uncertain about their future, the future of Afghanistan and the future of boxing. This uncertainty is mainly caused by the upcoming withdrawal of Western forces.

The girls are used to the ‘stable’ situation created by Western forces and most of them cannot even imagine what will happen after they leave. An often stated phrase was: “God knows what will happen with the boxing team.” The following quote illustrates this uncertainty:

“I cannot say what will happen. Everyday everything can change. I cannot say what will happen. We do have plans, but we never know what will happen in the future. In the situation in which I grew up I cannot exactly say I will do this. I never know what is going to happen. What I do know is that even a smile can change your life.”⁹⁰

The girls doubt whether the Afghan military is strong enough to control the situation once the Western forces have left, and are afraid that the Taliban will return. On the other hand, most of them are afraid as well that the situation would get worse if the Western forces would stay. The following quote illustrates these doubts:

“If they protect Afghanistan longer it would be good. If they keep killing Afghan people and burn our Qurans, they will destroy our country.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Interview with Halima, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 May 2012.

⁹¹ Interview with Zainab, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 24 March 2012.

Some girls believe the Western forces will stay longer than two years and that, by the time they leave, the Afghan government will be able to control the situation. They therefore argue that the Western forces should stay in Afghanistan until the Afghan forces and population will be able to handle the situation on their own.

12.2.2. Karzai and Afghan National Army

Some girls have trust in Karzai and the Afghan National Army, especially after the attacks April 15. These girls are convinced that no other forces have to be present in Afghanistan to guarantee the country's safety. They also claim that the Western forces have broken most of their promises and that makes their situation worse. When they leave, Afghanistan will improve, in their eyes. Even though they say they trust the Afghan forces, there always remains some doubt, as illustrated by the following quote:

“When Western forces leave the Afghan military can protect Afghanistan, because they are trained. I just want that people leave who are against us. I have a positive view about the future. It will be better, because we have our Afghan military. When I see them in TV it makes me very happy. Maybe they can control our country.”⁹²

12.2.3. Return of the Taliban

“I heard in the news today that a woman from Kunduz was stoned, and given 150 lashes. And after she was hung. After hearing this, I froze in my place. I said if it is like this now, when there is a government and our president Karzai is ruling, what will happen if they enter Kabul?”⁹³

Some girls are convinced that the Taliban will take over power again when the Western forces leave, and that a new war will break out. If this happens, they state, they cannot continue boxing, since everyone will then be too concerned about their lives and security and the girls will be forced to stay inside again. The future therefore scares them. They are worried where they can go with their families once the Taliban

⁹² Interview with Ghazal, boxer – Afghan women's boxing team, Kabul, 15 April 2012.

⁹³ Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: 'Boxing girls of Kabul', Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

return. Some of the girls are afraid that the Taliban will remember that they were boxers and will therefore kill them.

Of all the girls, Shahla was the most concerned about the international troops leaving Afghanistan and the potential return of the Taliban. It was not clear, however, whether her marriage and her new-born child were the true reason why she quit boxing, or if she was afraid that the Taliban would come back, remember that she was a boxer and kill her. Her fears clearly echo through her following statement, and were fuelled even more by the fear of her brother, illustrated by the second quote.

“The Taliban are here. They are like ordinary people. They walk in the bazaars and in the city normally. They do not necessarily wear turbans, long robes or long beards. I am scared of them. I am scared that they take me somewhere. That is why I do not go to university. It is been almost two months since I stopped going to classes. I am behind in my courses. It is dangerous for me if I continue. Since everybody knows. After Vietnam, after Kazakhstan everybody knows that Shahla Sekandari is a boxer. But if I quit now, well I cannot. My heart will not accept it.”⁹⁴

“When we remember those bitter memories of the war, those moments come back to life for us. Shahla was small then. Shahla was about four years old then. I was six or seven. I remember these things. If there comes again a war, they will come to our house. They will kill all of us. They will say that you are becoming *kuffar*. You are becoming non-Muslim, because you had relations with foreign people. That is why I really do not like the girls to box. Nothing except this.”⁹⁵

Shahla has left the boxing team, but her fears are shared by the other girls who lived in Afghanistan during Taliban regime. Nargis states:

“Last evening I saw on TV that Taliban said they only support the cricket team. When Taliban sees us on TV for example, they will kill us. But I am too young to die. I want to live. Taliban do not believe in sport, not for girls and

⁹⁴ Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011, 52 minutes.

⁹⁵ Brother Shahla, Screener version of the documentary: ‘Boxing girls of Kabul’, Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011.

not for boys. Now we are training in the stadium against the Taliban, which makes us proud. But we are also afraid they will return.”⁹⁶

Sadaf fears the Taliban as well, since she is the most famous of all the boxing girls at this moment. She states:

“When Taliban will come back to our country, they will first kill our trainer and then me, because I am famous now. My pictures are on the Internet. I am at the TV all the time and everywhere on the Internet. They will try to attack me. I am very afraid the Taliban will kill me. I do not want to quit boxing, but sometimes I feel so afraid that I think I have to quit for me and for my family. When the situation becomes worse I will quit.”⁹⁷

12.3. The girls’ perspective on equality and peace in Afghanistan

“If we constantly see the difference between men and women we cannot bring peace in our country.”⁹⁸

As discussed above, the girls want to be role models for their families, other families, Afghan women, and the Afghan people in general. They also want to be role models for the new generation.

According to the girls, there is no peace in Afghanistan because the Afghan people are not cooperating and do not view themselves as belonging to one nation. They say the country is too fragmented on too many levels: some people have more power than other people, there is a difference in power between men and women, ethnicities, Taliban and the government. The girls often refer to peace as being like the friendship between two people, which means that if the Afghan people would all be friends and cooperate, there could be peace in Afghanistan. In their lives, they strive to constitute more equality between men, women and between different ethnicities. They think this struggle will help in the peace process. According to their perspective, peace in Afghanistan cannot exist without equal relations between men and women and different ethnicities. Halima explains this as follows:

⁹⁶ Interview with Nargis, boxer – Afghan women’s boxing team, 8 April 2012.

⁹⁷ Interview with Sadaf, boxer - Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 April 2012.

⁹⁸ Interview with Mina, boxer - Afghan women’s boxing team, 24 April 2012.

“It is not unpeaceful because of Taliban. If people are good with each other they can easily fight with Taliban. The whole idea is this. Everybody loves power. It is naturally in everybody, especially men. They love it a lot. They gave Taliban the power to control women. And now they do not want to loose it. But when women know their rights and stand against them, they have to fight. But I am sure they cannot stop these women anymore. Once people got to know something they will not leave it. First they have to accept by force, but for another generation it comes like an idea. They should accept a woman as a woman. The father will accept it by force, but for the son it will be different. The son will come up with another idea. And then, by that time fighting with Taliban is very easy. People will understand Taliban and men have power and how they are controlling the whole society.”⁹⁹

12.4. Conclusion

Boxing changes the way the girls think about themselves and their role in the world on a conscious and reflective level. They see themselves as role models, who can encourage and inspire not only their own families, but also other families, other women, Afghan people, and people outside of Afghanistan to think differently about the position of women in Afghanistan and about the Afghan society itself. They want to make women and Afghan people in general aware of the fact that Afghan women can do anything they want to, even a tough sport like boxing. Hereby, they also want to show people outside of Afghanistan that their country is not only defined by war and terrorism.

The ideal changes that the girls think boxing can bring about mainly relate to equality and peace. Most of the girls are uncertain what will happen when the Western forces leave their country. A few trust the Afghan National Army and the Karzai’s government. Others think that the Western forces will stay longer than two years. Some fear that the Taliban will return.

In the girls’ perspectives, new ways of thinking about gender relations can form the start of a system based on equal gender relations. This form of thinking is crucial, they argue, because peace in Afghanistan cannot come about if men and women as well as different ethnicities are not understood as being equal.

⁹⁹ Interview with Halima, boxer- Afghan women’s boxing team, Kabul, 14 May 2012.

The ideas the girls have of themselves, their role in the world, on Western and Afghan forces, Karzai, and Taliban are abstract, fragmented, and sometimes quite naïve. This means that they do not always realize consciously how their view on the world and themselves has changed and still changes.

CONCLUSION

The central question around which this thesis revolves is the following:

How does boxing provide the women of the Afghan women's boxing team with unique ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment?

This question is based on the idea that the agency of the boxing girls cannot be understood correctly without taking into account the patriarchal environment they live in. I have answered this question within the framework of Giddens' structuration theory, which means that I have analysed how boxing provides the girls with unique ways to exercise agency by focusing on the interaction between structural conditions on the one hand, and the agency of the girls on the other.

I have hereby demonstrated: (1) that the environment of the girls constrains them and (2) that the girls are developing ways to exercise agency in this constraining environment.

I have done this by seeking to answer the following two sub-questions: *First*, how do the girls experience their environment as 'normalizing' and, thus, as holding power over them on the following five following levels: (1) male-female; (2) honour and shame as embodied by the family; (3) marriage; (4) space, looks and behaviour of other people, and (bodily) freedom, and (5) security? *Second*: how do the girls broaden their possibilities to act and think differently on these same five levels?

Furthermore, I have demonstrated that boxing has an ideological influence on the girls by answering the *third* sub-question: How does boxing change the ideas the girls have of themselves and their role in the world on an ideological level?

13.1. Main findings

The main conclusion of this thesis is that boxing provides the girls with ways to exercise agency in a complex and constrictive society and thereby stimulates their feelings of empowerment. This form of empowerment, I have shown, is mainly

created through the broadening of ways to act and think differently, even though the girls are not always consciously aware of this.

Boxing greatly empowers them on different levels, mainly by showing them that they experience their gender, their family, their clothes, their social environment etc. in a different way, even though they do not know precisely how or why.

The ideals and beliefs they hold of themselves and of the ways in which boxing causes changes on all these levels, form an indication of this change. As demonstrated, however, these ideals are still very abstract, fragmented and sometimes quite naïve, which means that most of the girls are not consciously aware of the way in which the practice of boxing has changed the ways in which they view themselves and the world they live in.

13.2. Theory building

This thesis demands some concluding remarks on theory building. The main objective of this thesis has been to *analyze* the interaction between the power the girls are able to exercise and the power their environment holds over them. This, namely, allows to *understand* how the boxing girls exercise agency, and can, in turn, result in a better understanding of the abstract issue of ‘empowerment’ in Afghanistan.

With these conclusions, I want to contribute new ways of thinking about the complex issue of women’s empowerment in the context of the Afghan women’s boxing team. I have argued that within this context, women’s empowerment should be understood as a process instead of only an outcome. Herewith, I have tried to show that what could be understood as the ‘development discourse’, which is mostly used by journalists and by organizations like ON to describe the boxing team, does not do justice to the complexities of what is really going on.

As stated in chapter three, Rowlands argues that empowerment should be understood as a process that takes place on two levels: individual consciousness/understanding (power *within*), and collective action (power *with*), which can change gender hierarchies and improve women’s lives (Parpar, Rai, Staudt, 2002: 7). I have shown that these two forms of power can be recognized in the way boxing provides the boxing girls with a form of empowerment.

13.2.1. Power within

This thesis has mainly focused on power *within*, which is expressed in *agency*. This means that I have analysed the personal behaviour, experiences and the thinking of the girls on an unconscious and conscious level. According to Giddens, social agents always have a certain extent of control, a certain degree of freedom. Even though an actor may be in a social relationship in which he or she is almost completely controlled and/or dominated, the fact that this actor is in a relationship gives him or her already a certain amount of power over the other (Giddens 1987: 284,285).

This means that the boxing girls are neither homogeneous nor passive victims of patriarchal domination. They have the ability to exercise power, because they always have a certain degree of freedom. Boxing provides the girls with ways to exercise agency, which brings about feelings of empowerment because it broadens the ways in which they can act and think differently. In the second part of this thesis, I have demonstrated how the practice of boxing enables the girls to act and think differently on five different levels. As Parpar, Rai and Staudt state: “When existing power relations do not change, it is still important to reflect upon how the agency of women can be achieved without the transformation of existing power relations” (2002: 11).

Feeling empowered in the sense of ‘power *within*’ can inspire women to recognize and challenge gender inequality in their homes and their communities. Indications of the girls’ feelings of empowerment are formed by the ideals they hold of themselves and the beliefs they have regarding the way boxing can bring about social change. The girls see themselves as role models, who can encourage their own families, as well as other families, women, Afghan people and people outside of Afghanistan to think differently about the position of women in Afghanistan and about the Afghan society. They aspire to make women and Afghan people in general aware of the fact that Afghan women can do anything they want, even a tough sport like boxing. They hereby also want to make people outside of Afghanistan aware of the fact that Afghanistan is more than a country defined by war and terrorism. According to them, creating new ways of thinking about gender relations can result in a system based on gender equality, since they believe peace in Afghanistan cannot exist without equal relations between men and women, but also between different ethnicities.

13.2.2. Power with

Real empowerment requires the transformation of power relations. Power *with* is the ability to work collectively, which can result in politicized forms of power with others, which in turn creates the power to bring about change. It can produce a redistribution of power towards women and result in gender balance (Parpar, Rai, Staudt, 2002: 4). The analysis of ways to exercise agency can be understood as a step towards the understanding of the ways in which a practice like female boxing in Afghanistan can bring about social change, especially regarding gender equality.

As demonstrated, the girls mainly practice boxing, because they want to be boxers. They strive to achieve their own personal goals. In this sense, they are not feminists. They are not activists. They are boxers.

I have argued, however, that these girls can be understood as wanting to be different. Through boxing, they express their rights to be human beings. The girls are surrounded by politics, politics that mainly have a negative influence on them. They are not consciously boxing to make political statements. The only thing they want to do is to achieve their personal goals. Even though the girls are not consciously aware of the fact that people all over the world see them and hear about what they are doing, this is a very powerful thing in the Afghan society, that may even initiate change on a larger scale.

The way in which the boxing girls try to find strategies to cope with their environment, can be understood as a struggle: not so much a struggle against men, but a struggle against forms of power. They challenge the dominant normative order of their society by entering the public sphere as women. Their strategies, therefore, are strategies of confrontation. According to Giddens, an analysis of ways of exercising power is in fact an analysis of these strategies. This means that every power relationship constitutes, at least potentially, the possibility of a strategy to challenge it, to struggle against it.

Exercising power may therefore open up a whole field of possibilities, responses, reactions and results. The strategies developed by the girls can therefore result in new ways of thinking about gender inequality. As demonstrated in this thesis, however, these strategies are complex and often originate in personal and contradictory struggles. Still, in a system like the Afghan society, these strategies can actually result in a real empowerment of women.

13.3. Concluding remarks

The Ghazi stadium is of symbolic value to the girls and thus to this thesis. I therefore want to conclude with the following words.

In a sense, the stadium has its own identity, because of what it has to tell. From a historical and political perspective, the stadium is like a legend to the girls, a symbol of things that took place during a previous generation. In that time, most of them lived in Iran or Pakistan. However, the stadium haunts them as well, because for many in Kabul it is still the absolute symbol of the cruelty of the Taliban. The stadium reminds them of the people who were killed there, and this, of course, scares them. It also reminds them of what could happen again in their country and to them, may the Taliban come to power again.

From a personal perspective, the stadium is beautiful, haunting and relieving at the same time. Each girl has a different relationship with it. It is scary, but it is also liberating to be there. It represents a place of power and freedom. Boxing gives them ways to exercise power. Boxing reminds them of another way of being.

At the same time, however, the reality of the stadium can never be understood without the social and political reality that surrounds it: the walls that protect the girls from the normalizing gaze of neighbours, and from the harassments to which they are vulnerable when walking on the street, imprison them at the same time, symbolizing the fact that they are not free to do anything they want *anywhere* they want. In this sense, boxing is intrinsically connected to the political and social system in which it is embedded.

The idea that the practice of boxing sends out a message is kept alive by the girls who do not benefit in any way from the political and patriarchal system in which they live. Maybe one day the ideals they herewith represent will be materialized by people who realize that the limits this system places on human experience and human lives are just too high. Let's hope that by that time, the girls will actually *be* empowered instead of only *feeling* empowered.

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Screeners version of the documentary: 'Boxing girls of Kabul', Ariel Nasr, 03-11-2011, 52 minutes.

Illustrations

Cover photo: Training session Afghan women's boxing team, Ghazi stadium field. Photo taken by the author on 16 May 2012.

Photo 1: The day Sadaf Rahimi returned from the 7th World Women Championship in China, which doubled as the Olympics qualifying event. Photo taken by the author on 23 May 2012.

Photo 2: Set of boxing gloves, gym Ghazi stadium.

Source: TIME (23 July 2012) 'For a Female Boxer from Afghanistan, An Olympic Journey Ends'. Online available at: <http://lightbox.time.com/2012/07/23/afghan-female-boxer/#3>.

Photo 3: Public execution of Zarmeena by Taliban. 16 November 1999. Ghazi stadium. Photo from a video film by RAWA.

Source: Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (17 November, 1999) 'Taliban Publicly Execute Woman'. Online available at: <http://www.rawa.org/murder-w.htm>.

Photo 4: Training session of the Afghan women's boxing team, Ghazi stadium field. Photo taken by the author on 16 may 2012.

Photo 5: 'Read Quran before burn it', Kabul city centre. Photo taken by the author on 24 March 2012.

Photo 6: Shabnam Rahimi and Sadaf Rahimi during a training session, gym Ghazi stadium.

Source: Christoffer Hjalmarsson, photojournalist, 2012.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research question: *How does boxing provide the women of the Afghan women's boxing team with unique ways to exercise agency within a patriarchal environment?*

To answer the main question I have formulated the following operationalization questions. Although I have separated the questions into the sub-categories of 'agency' and 'structure', the questions regarding 'agency' always also refer to 'structure' as well, and vice versa.

Introduction

- 0.1. What is your name?
- 0.2. How old are you?
- 0.3. Where do you come from originally? Kabul or somewhere else in Afghanistan?
- 0.4. Have you always lived in Afghanistan? Or did you live in Iran or Pakistan?
- 0.5. To which ethnic group do you belong?
- 0.6. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- 0.7. Do you go to high school or university?
- 0.8. To what high school do you go?
- 0.9. When did you start boxing?
- 0.10. How often do you train?
- 0.11. What do you do besides training?
- 0.12. Who are your friends in the team?

Agency

The first two questions are focused on 'agency' aspects.

- 1. *When, why and by whom was the boxing team established?***

With this question I seek to examine what the reasons and motives of the girls are to box.

- 1.1. What does boxing mean to you?
- 1.2. Why did you start sporting, and in particular boxing?
- 1.3. How do you look back at the start of your boxing?
- 1.4. What role has boxing played in your life until now?
- 1.5. How do you experience boxing now?
- 1.6. What is the main reason for you to box at this moment?

2. To what extent and how have the women gained more power through the practice of boxing?

Power in this question is defined in the sense of transformative capacity.

This question focuses on spaces of opportunities created in the lives of the women by boxing and how boxing affects them in a negative way.

- 2.1. How was your life before boxing?
- 2.2. How did boxing change your life?
- 2.3. How and what spaces of opportunities are created in your life by boxing? How is boxing helping you in anyway? Does it give you more freedom?
- 2.4. Are there any problems you face with regard to your boxing activities?
- 2.5. What is your perspective regarding your future in relation to your boxing activities?
- 2.6. What do these future plans mean to you?

Structure

Actors have power, but are also in ‘conflict’ with structural conditions. Therefore, the other two questions focus on the impact of structural conditions.

3. *How do cultural standards enable and constrain the practice of female boxing?*

Enabling and constraining can be understood as created opportunities and possible limits and threats. This question focuses on an understanding of cultural standards (family perspectives, social environment) that enable and constrain the women in their boxing activities and their experiences with this.

- 3.1. How do you feel about being a woman in Kabul?
- 3.2. How does society (school, neighbours) react to your boxing activities and how do you experience this?
- 3.3. What is your family's perspective on your boxing activities? How do you experience this?
- 3.4. What are your future perspectives regarding your social life? (school, work, marriage)
- 3.5. What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

4. *How has the Western intervention enabled and constrained the practice of female boxing?*

This question focuses on how and what opportunities and related limits and threats are being created through Western intervention to the everyday lives of the women and their boxing activities.

- 4.1. Can you remember the time the Taliban was here?
- 4.2. How do you look back at that time? How has your life been living in Afghanistan in those times? (or Iran/Pakistan)
- 4.3. How has life been since 2001?
- 4.4. What is the main difference between those two periods?
- 4.5. What is your perspective on Western forces?
- 4.6. Do you think Western forces made it (indirectly) possible for you to box?
- 4.7. What do you see as negative aspects of their presence?
- 4.8. Do you think your life and boxing would have been different if there was no intervention going on? How would it be different?

- 4.9. Do you know what happened at the stadium?
- 4.10. What does it mean to you to sport at the Ghazi stadium?
- 4.11. How does the current security situation affect you boxing activities?
- 4.12. How do you see the future withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan as affecting your life and boxing?
- 4.13. How do you feel about the future of Afghanistan? Are you hopeful for a better future?

Social cohesion and peace

5. How does the women's boxing team, if even at all, promote and enhance social cohesion and a climate of peace?

The questions about social cohesion are focused on: (1) if and how the boxing team is uniting different groups within the Afghan society; (2) the extent to which the boxing projects addresses the larger social context, and (3) the extent to which the boxing team is stimulating social exclusion or inclusion, and for who.

- 5.1. How do you think more women can participate?
- 5.2. There are women from different ethnicities in the boxing team. How do you think about this? Do you think it is coincidental or is there a reason?
- 5.3.a. Hazara and Tajik women: Why do you think most of the girls in the team are Hazara and Tajik?
- 5.3.b. Pashtun women: Is it easier for any particular ethnic group to participate?
- 5.4. Do you want to receive peace-building classes again?
- 5.5. What would you like to learn?
- 5.6. Do you know the title of the boxing project is 'Fight for Peace'?
- 5.7. What do you think of this title?
- 5.8. What do you think about all the media attention the team gets?

