



Universiteit Utrecht

**Tackling stereotypes: A study of female and women rugby players'
negotiations of male hegemony in rugby culture**

Anne Meijers

Student number: 5632226

Supervisor: dr. Gianmaria Colpani

Second reader: dr. Eva Midden

MA Gender Studies

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Abstract

Women's rugby has the potential to empower women through the development of strength, assertiveness and confidence. However, women who play rugby also face social repercussions for their participation in an allegedly masculine sport. They are assumed to be masculine and lesbian, and are subjected to sexism and homophobia. This thesis conceptualizes the link between the representation of rugby as a masculine sport and the experiences of female and women rugby players in the Netherlands, answering the question: *How does the representation of rugby as a quintessentially masculine domain influence female and women rugby players' negotiations of gender and sexuality in the Netherlands?* A case-study of RUS, the only all-women rugby club in the Netherlands is conducted to answer this question. As a qualitative research, the case-study comprises of interviews and focus groups with members of RUS. The first chapter conceptualizes gender through Judith Butler and compulsory heterosexuality through Adrienne Rich. The co-construction of gender and sexuality, and the gender performances associated with them are used as a framework to study the experiences of female and women rugby players. The representation of women's rugby is divided in two forms of representation: media representation and 'political' representation in the decision-making process of the governing bodies of rugby in the Netherlands. It resulted from my data that women are underrepresented in media displays of rugby in the Netherlands. In the governing bodies of rugby women are taken less seriously and are subjected to sexism and misogyny. The underrepresentation of women's rugby reifies the notion that rugby is a masculine sport and this notion influences the gender negotiations of members of RUS. While respondents state that RUS is accepting of gender and sexual diversity, femininity is valued as a counterweight to the dominance of masculinity in the rugby culture. Furthermore, the identity of RUS as a *women's* club is the base for a feminist politics that seeks equality in the rugby culture. The unequal representation of women in the rugby culture appears to necessitate a gender-based politics for members of RUS, while within the club the gender binary is actually destabilized.

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Lastly, I want to thank all members of RUS for enriching my life and creating an amazing group of strong, confident and *badass* people, with whom I feel completely at home.

Introduction

In my third year of university, I joined the all-women student rugby club RUS.¹ A teammate of mine told me that joining RUS and starting to play rugby might have been the best decision she ever made, and I could not agree more. As a member of RUS, I became more aware of the strength of my body, I gained confidence, and, falling for a teammate, I discovered my bisexuality. As a feminist and student of Gender Studies, I decided that I wanted to study the liberatory and empowering potential of women's rugby that I experienced myself. However, reading up on the subject I found that women's rugby is not experienced as a liberatory site for everyone or in every context. Female and women rugby players are stigmatized as masculine and lesbian and experience sexism and homophobia.² To gain further insight in the experiences of female and women rugby players, I conducted interviews with members of RUS. These interviews brought to my attention the lack of representation of women's rugby in the Netherlands, leading me to pursue the research question: *How does the representation of rugby as a quintessentially masculine domain influence female and women rugby players' negotiations of gender and sexuality in the Netherlands?*

Existing literature on media representations of men's and women's sports has discussed how these representations reproduce male hegemony in the sporting domain.³ This literature suggests that men's sports receive a disproportional amount of media coverage relative to women's sports. Also, media representations of women's sports often focus on the appearances and personal (heterosexual) relations of athletes, instead of their athleticism and skill.⁴ In addition to the differential media coverage of women's sports in the media, the members of RUS that I interviewed also reported a lack of representation in the decision-making processes of the governing bodies of rugby in the Netherlands. I will argue in this thesis that these two

¹ RUS is an acronym of Rugbyende Utrechtse Studenten, which translates to rugby playing students of Utrecht. All translations from Dutch to English in this thesis are my own.

² Anima Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team: How whiteness and heterosexuality shape women's sense of belonging in rugby,'" *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2015); Matthew B. Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women's Rugby," *Social Problems* 56, no. 1 (2009); P. David Howe, "Kicking Stereotypes into Touch: An Ethnographic Account of Women's Rugby" In *Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise*, ed. Anne Bolin and Jane Granskog (State University of New York Press, 2003).

³ Janet S. Fink, "Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really 'come a long way, baby'," *Sport Management Review* 18, no. 3 (2013): 332.

⁴ Fink, "Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex," 331.

forms of representation are co-constructed, and together, they (re)produce the image of rugby as a quintessentially male domain.

It is well documented that women participating in the ‘masculine’ domain of sports in general, and rugby specifically, are often perceived as deviant, and subjected to sexism and homophobia.⁵ Literature that focusses on the experiences of female and women athletes illustrates that these athletes have different ways of dealing with these challenges. In some cases, athletes are reported to adopt a strategy of apologetics, emphasizing their femininity and heterosexuality to gain social status.⁶ In other cases they resist social norms and unapologetically celebrate gender non-conformity and sexual deviance.⁷ Literature about women’s rugby has the tendency to equate performances of femininity with compliance with male hegemony in rugby, and performances of masculinity and sexual diversity with resistance to this male hegemony. However, I illustrate in this thesis that the navigations of gender and sexuality of female and women rugby players are more complicated than this, and theorize how these navigations are influenced by the representation of rugby as a quintessentially male domain.

Method and methodology

To answer the research question, I have conducted a case-study of the women’s students’ rugby club RUS. This rugby club based in Utrecht was founded in 1985 and is the only all-women rugby club in the Netherlands.⁸ Using a qualitative research method, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews and organized two semi-structured focus groups. The first focus group consisted of two participants, and the second focus group of three. Due to the risks of the COVID-19 virus, I asked interview participants whether they preferred to meet in real life or online, which resulted in five face-to-face interviews and two interviews conducted on Zoom.

⁵ Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team’; Susan A. Basow and Amanda Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 28, no. 3 (August 2004); K.L. Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic: Queer Resistance in Women’s Sport,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 18 (2001); Susan K. Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women’s Sport,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1993); Ezzel, “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch.”; Howe, “Kicking Stereotypes into Touch.”; Vikki Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To? Challenging Hegemonic Femininity in Women’s Sport,” *Quest* 53, no. 1 (2001); John Paul, “Sport and Bodily Empowerment: Female Athletes’ Experiences with Roller Derby, Mixed Martial Arts, and Rugby,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2015).

⁶ Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team.’; Ezzel, “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch.”

⁷ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic.”

⁸ “Over RUS,” Rugbyende Utrechtse Studenten, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.rus-rugby.nl/over-rus/>.

All interviews were recorded with consent of the respondents. I conducted the focus groups in collaboration with a fellow member of RUS who is currently conducting research on the experiences of women and queer rugby players in the Netherlands for her Master's program Cultural Anthropology: Sociocultural Transformation at the UU. Because our research subjects overlap, we decided to organize the focus groups together to minimize the effort for our research participants. Due to COVID-19, we decided to organize both focus groups online. We prepared conversation topics that addressed both of our research questions and we recorded the session with permission of our respondents. I have transcribed the seven individual interviews and one of the focus groups. The other focus group was transcribed by my fellow researcher, after which we exchanged our transcripts of the focus groups. Because the rugby community in the Netherlands is relatively small and well-connected and RUS is a small rugby club, it is difficult to guarantee the anonymity of my respondents in the transcripts. Therefore, the transcripts are not added in the appendix of the research.⁹ I have used the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo to code my transcripts. The coding process has helped me to structure my data and recognize overall themes that shaped the experiences of my respondents.

In total I collected data from twelve participants, eleven women and one non-binary participant. In selecting research participants, I aimed for diversity in sexual orientation, resulting in a sample made of five participants who exclusively date men, four participants who exclusively date women and three participants who date men and women. The percentage of people who are non-heterosexual is higher in my research than at RUS, where approximately one third of the members is non-heterosexual. Eleven out of twelve participants are white, reflecting the lack of racial diversity in the Dutch rugby scene.

As a feminist researcher, I was well aware of my own positionality during my research and how this could affect my respondents. Because I have known most of my respondents for years, they felt comfortable sharing information with me. They were very open about their experiences and discussed private details of their lives with me. In advance, I emphasized that the respondents could stop the interview at any time and that they could ask me to remove information after the interview, if they shared things that in hindsight they were not comfortable with being used in the research. One of my respondents asked me to send her the transcripts and asked me to remove certain personal details, which I did. Being a member of RUS has also influenced my research in that it provided me with information about the club, the traditions

⁹ The transcripts are available with the author upon request.

and the members that an outsider would not have. Because I had access to a lot of insider information, it was important for me to keep the interviews very loosely structured. Using a feminist research approach, I wanted my participants to express their “ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher”.¹⁰ While I tailored my questions to the participants, for example by bringing up subjects I knew my participants had experience with, I kept the questions very broad and open for interpretation, allowing my participants to formulate their own experiences.

Shulamit Reinharz argues that researchers working in a feminist framework might use unconventional terms and gives the example of using ‘participant’ instead of ‘subject’, to signal your participants’ agency.¹¹ In my research, I have also taken the liberty to use a new phrase to refer to my participants, namely *female and women rugby players*. I have opted to use this phrase to be inclusive to both non-binary players, who might identify as female but not as woman, and transgender players, who might identify as woman but not as female.

Build-up of the thesis

The first chapter of this thesis is the theoretical framework and consists of two parts. In the first part, I discuss the theories I use throughout the research to analyze my data on women’s rugby in the Netherlands. The most important theories I discuss are Judith Butler’s critique of the gender binary and Adrienne Rich’s theorization of compulsory heterosexuality.¹² Together the theories of Butler and Rich explain the social pressure on women to perform femininity and heterosexuality, and how these two concepts are connected and co-constructed. In the second part of this chapter I provide an overview of literature that shows how the intersections of hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality shape the lived experiences of female and women athletes and rugby players.

In the second and third chapters, I analyze the data I collected in interviews with members of RUS. The second chapter discusses the representation of women’s rugby in the Netherlands. The data I collected about the representation of women’s rugby can be divided in two ‘categories of representation’, the first being media representation and the second being, by lack of a better term, political representation. In this context, political representation does

¹⁰ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

¹¹ Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, 22.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002); Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980).

not refer to state politics, but to the decision-making process in governing bodies of rugby in the Netherlands. Based on the data I collected, I illustrate that both in the media and in political institutions, men and their interests receive a disproportional amount of representation. In media representations in the Netherlands, women's rugby seems to get simply overlooked. By exclusively covering men's rugby, print and visual media reproduce the image of rugby as a quintessentially male domain. The outsider status of women in the Dutch rugby culture is reproduced in the governing bodies of rugby in the Netherlands as well, by men who ignore women's input in meetings, make sexist comments and objectify women. In this second chapter, I theorize how media and political representations of women's rugby, or rather the lack thereof, reproduce the masculine image of rugby and how this affects the members of RUS.

The third chapter focusses on the stereotype of the masculine lesbian rugby player. I argue, based on Butler's conceptualization of the interconnectivity of the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality, that this stereotype results from the idea that rugby is a masculine sport. The chapter discusses the different ways in which female and women rugby players navigate this stereotype. Two different yet related strategies are most prominent: the first strategy consists of emphasizing the femininity and heterosexuality of female and women rugby players, and the second strategy is the unapologetic transgression of boundaries of hegemonic gender and sexuality. Both strategies are adopted by members of RUS and I will theorize the interconnectivity of these two strategies.

In the conclusion of this research I combine the insights of the separate chapters to answer the research and theorize the influence of the representation of rugby as a quintessentially masculine domain on female and women rugby players' negotiations of gender and sexuality. Additionally I provide suggestions for further research.

Theorizing intersections of gender, sexuality and women's athleticism

Women's sports have incited considerable interest from researchers who study the negotiation of femininity and masculinity by women athletes. The participation of women athletes in the traditionally 'masculine' terrain of sports often transgresses the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women, and might even challenge the notion of gender as binary that is prevalent in modern society.¹³ This chapter provides the conceptual tools to understand why women's participation in sports opens up discussions about their gender, biological sex and sexuality. After outlining Judith Butler's conceptualizations of gender and Adrienne Rich's understanding of compulsory heterosexuality, this chapter illustrates how gender and sexuality influence the lived experiences of women athletes.

Conceptualizing gender and compulsory heterosexuality

Judith Butler's leading theory about gender builds on Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of gender as the cultural interpretation of the sexed body. According to Butler, Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one" means that gender does not naturally follow from sex.¹⁴ In Butler's reading of Beauvoir, *sex* refers to the anatomical and factual aspects of the body while *gender* refers to the cultural meanings that that body acquires.¹⁵ From this distinction follows that gender is not biologically determined. According to Butler, there is no natural or unnatural gendered behavior. Because gender is socially constructed, all gender is unnatural.¹⁶ This means that women who perform certain 'feminine' qualities, for example being nurturing and caring, do not do this because it is natural to them, but because they have been taught to act in this way. Butler moves beyond Beauvoir by stating that the body is always interpreted through our cultural understanding of gender. For Beauvoir it is a fact that a body is either male or female. Persons with a female body are taught and pressured to become women and persons with a male body are taught and pressured to become men. Butler criticizes this distinction between sex and gender, because the differentiation between male and female bodies is already a cultural interpretation of those bodies. She states

¹³ Krane, "We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?," 117.

¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," *Yale French Studies* no. 72 (1986): 35.

¹⁶ Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," 35.

that because “there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings, [...] sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along”.¹⁷

According to Butler gender is performative, which means that gender is not something you *are*, but rather something you *do*. She states that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”.¹⁸ While gender is performative, meaning that our bodies have the potential to perform different genders or to perform the same gender in different ways, we are always under the pressure to perform the gender that matches our sexed body. Discursive practices shape and reproduce binary gendered ideals that prescribe the acceptable behavior and appearances for men (masculinity) and women (femininity). Adherence to discrete gender categories is, according to Butler, what humanizes people in contemporary society, while not performing gender in the ‘right’ way results in social punishment.¹⁹

The relation between masculinity and femininity is not just binary and oppositional, it is also hegemonic, meaning that masculinity is privileged over femininity. Sociologist Mimi Schippers defines hegemonic masculinity as “the qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”.²⁰ Hegemonic femininity, on the other hand, is defined as “the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”.²¹ While there are multiple forms of femininity, depending on the historical and cultural context, Christine Aimar et al. argue that there is one privileged, hegemonic version of femininity that is leading in the Western world, which is “constructed within a White, heterosexual, and class-based structure, and it has strong associations with heterosexual sex and romance”.²² The characteristics linked to this hegemonic femininity include being emotional, gentle, passive, maternal, dependent and compassionate. Hegemonic masculinity, on the other

¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.

¹⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), 522.

²⁰ Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony,” *Theory & Society* 36 (2007): 94.

²¹ Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other,” 94.

²² Christine M. Aimar, Shannon M. Baird, Precilla Y. L. Choi, Kerrie J. Kauer and Vikki Krane, “Living the paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity and Muscularity,” *Sex Roles* 50, nos. 5/6 (2004): 316.

hand, is linked to strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence and independence.²³ The strong associations noticed by Aymar et. al between hegemonic femininity and heterosexual sex and romance are not coincidental. Indeed, also Butler argues that a binary gender system and heterosexuality are mutually dependent: “The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, [...] requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality”.²⁴ Heterosexuality presumes the attraction between people of *opposite* genders and is thus reliant on stable gender categories that are not just different, but oppositional.

The implications of compulsory heterosexuality had already been theorized by Adrienne Rich in her famous essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”.²⁵ Rich is concerned with the erasure of lesbian existence as a consequence of compulsory heterosexuality and the implications thereof for lesbian and women’s empowerment. Compulsory heterosexuality can be described as society’s hegemonic belief that all individuals are or should be heterosexual.²⁶ While Butler and Rich both agree that society is structured through compulsory heterosexuality, and that this reifies and stabilizes gender categories that privilege masculinity and ‘man’ over femininity and ‘woman’, they have different visions on how to counter compulsory heterosexuality and male hegemony. As an advocate of lesbian feminism, Rich argues for the representation of lesbian existence, not as “a marginal or less ‘natural’ phenomenon, as mere ‘sexual preference,’ or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations”,²⁷ but rather as a quintessential *female* experience that has the potential “to change the social relations of the sexes [and] to liberate ourselves and each other”.²⁸

For Butler, a politics of liberation would not focus on any essentially *female* experience, but rather it would seek to subvert the existing categories of gender. As a theorist of queer feminism, she advocates the subversion and displacement of “those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power [...] through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place”.²⁹ In the next paragraph I illustrate how female and women

²³ Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?,” 117.

²⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.

²⁵ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”

²⁶ Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?,” 117.

²⁷ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 632.

²⁸ Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 657.

²⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 44.

athletes either emphasize their femininity or try to deconstruct the gender binary while navigating the ‘masculine’ sporting domain.

Deemphasizing women’s athleticism through homophobia and sexism

Because traditionally men were deemed the natural occupants of the terrain of sports,³⁰ many sports require ‘masculine’ characteristics, such as strength, assertiveness, competitiveness, confidence and independence.³¹ The woman athlete who displays these masculine characteristics finds herself at the margins of the category ‘woman’ and is always at risk of transgressing the boundaries of femininity. While some researchers have studied the techniques used by men to trivialize women’s accomplishments in sports,³² others have focused on the strategies employed by women to deal with sexism and homophobia in the sporting terrain.³³ This section will outline the sexism and homophobia that is directed to women athletes, and the next section will provide an overview of the different ways in which rugby players have dealt with this homophobia and sexism.

Susan Basow and Amanda Roth argue that the challenge women athletes pose to male hegemony, by virtue of resisting hegemonic femininity, is defused by limiting and deemphasizing women’s physical power and capabilities. One way of doing this is “to associate female athleticism with female sex appeal”.³⁴ Some sports in which the emphasis on women’s sex appeal is clearly noticeable are cheerleading, figure skating, gymnastics and dance. Revealing outfits take the attention away from the athletic performances of the women athletes and redirect the gaze to their bodies instead. Through the *performance* of femininity these sports become acceptable for women to perform.³⁵ The emphasis on femininity within these sports is intertwined with heterosexuality. The revealing outfits of the athletes do not just emphasize their femininity, they also work to ensure the desirability of the athletes to men.

However, not all sports leave room for this display of femininity. Intrinsic to some male dominated sports, such as rugby, football, soccer or ice hockey, are ‘masculine’ characteristics,

³⁰ Paul, “Sport and Bodily Empowerment,” 403.

³¹ Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?,” 117.

³² Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism.”; Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer.”

³³ Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team’; Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic.”; Howe, “Kicking Stereotypes into Touch.”; Ezzel, “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch.”; Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?.”; Paul, “Sport and Bodily Empowerment.”

³⁴ Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism,” 252.

³⁵ Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism,” 252.

such as aggression, competitiveness and strength. One way in which the power of women participating in these ‘masculine’ sports is undermined is the questioning of their biological sex. Basow and Roth explain that women who perform exceptionally well in masculine sports are sometimes accused of being biologically male.³⁶ They illustrate this with the example of a 10-year-old soccer goalie who performed exceptionally well in an amateur game in Lewisville, Texas, in 1990.³⁷ One father of the opposing team questioned the girl’s sex and asked for it to be verified in the bathroom. The request was denied, but it generated a lot of discussion in the local area.³⁸ Such accusations evidence the strength of the binary constructions of gender and sex. The oppositional and hegemonic difference between men and women is so much ingrained in our cultural understanding that for some people it is hard to accept that allegedly masculine characteristics can actually be embodied by a female person. Of course, such sexist remarks are not a genuine expression of confusion, but they are meant to “threaten women’s power by admitting it exists and claiming that its very existence implies that the woman is not a real woman”.³⁹

A third way in which the empowering possibilities of women in sports are undermined is through the stereotype of the “lesbian bogey woman”.⁴⁰ This stereotype is prevalent in literature about women in sports.⁴¹ It is generally accepted that “[n]onconformity with hegemonic femininity often results in heterosexism and homonegativism [and that] women in sport who do not conform to the feminine ideal and who are perceived as masculine are labeled as lesbian”.⁴² More importantly, the masculinity and lesbianism of women athletes is considered something negative. For example, tennis player Martina Navratilova has had to endure a lot of homophobic and sexist remarks throughout her career. She was ridiculed in the press as “a ‘bionic sci-fi creation’ who was bisexual and must have a ‘chromosomic screw loose’”⁴³ and by comedian Arsenio Hall who questioned: “If we can put a man on the moon, why can’t we get one on Martina Navratilova”.⁴⁴ This comment of Hall provides a perfect example of

³⁶ Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism,” 253.

³⁷ Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism,” 253.

³⁸ Gary Libman, “Kicking Up a Storm: The goalie was a girl, but one parent wanted proof. Others wondered why the issue was even raised,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-11-08-vw-5779-story.html>.

³⁹ Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism,” 253.

⁴⁰ Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer,” 343.

⁴¹ Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team’.”; Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic.”; Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer.”; Ezzel, “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch.”; Howe, “Kicking Stereotypes into Touch.”; Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?.”

⁴² Krane, “We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To?,” 119.

⁴³ Basow and Roth, “Femininity, Sports and Feminism,” 253.

⁴⁴ Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer,” 343.

compulsory heterosexuality, because it suggests that all women should have sexual relations with men. Together these two comments show that women who transgress boundaries of acceptable femininity are no longer deemed desirable for men and are consequentially excluded from the category of heterosexuality. Butler's conceptualization of gender and sexuality as co-constructed categories can explain the stereotype of the masculine lesbian athlete, and this is done extensively in the third chapter. Besides the social repercussions for individual athletes, the stereotype of the mannish lesbian athlete also holds negative consequences for sports teams, because it can make it more difficult for them to attract new players and to find sponsorships.⁴⁵

Negotiating gender and sexuality on the rugby pitch

Due to its aggressive and physical nature, rugby is seen as a men's game even more than most other sports. Therefore, female and women rugby players' participation in the sport challenges normative ideas about women's passivity and weakness.⁴⁶ Simultaneously, however, some researchers have found that women rugby players employ tactics that apologize for their transgressive behavior, limiting the empowering and liberating potential of women's participation in rugby. Research on women rugby players has identified different strategies employed by them to navigate their image of being masculine and lesbian. These strategies range from compliance with hegemonic femininity and compulsory heterosexuality to an 'unapologetic queer resistance'.⁴⁷

In his paper "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch", Matthew Ezzel analyses how women rugby players from a collegiate rugby team in the United States use 'defensive othering' as a strategy to create a collective identity as a *heterosexy-fit* rugby team. This *heterosexy-fit* identity combines the social privilege of heterosexuality with the social privilege of 'being sexy', which is inseparably tied to hegemonic femininity. Ezzel explains defensive othering as a tactic deployed by subordinate groups to distance themselves from the negative labels or stereotypes attributed to that group, without denying the validity of the stereotype.⁴⁸ For example, the rugby players he interviewed reproduced the stereotype that women rugby players are "'scary, butch lesbians,' 'she-males,' 'he-shes,' 'lesbian man-beasts,' and 'butch, big – definitely gay'."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Howe, "Kicking Stereotypes into Touch," 237.

⁴⁶ Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch," 111.

⁴⁷ Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'."; Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic."; Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch."; Howe, "Kicking Stereotypes into Touch."

⁴⁸ Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch," 112.

⁴⁹ Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch," 118.

They did not negate this stereotype but they only explained that the stereotype did not apply to them, because they were straight and sexy. So, the women accepted the stereotype that women rugby players are generally masculine and lesbian, but distanced themselves from that stereotype by positioning themselves as the exception to the rule.⁵⁰ It is important to note here that the collective identity of a ‘heterosexy-fit’ rugby team is established through a careful construction of that identity. Femininity should not be seen as something that can be retraced to the essence of these rugby players. Heterosexual femininity is *performed* by them to reap the benefits of normative gender identification and avoid the repercussions faced by women who fail to comply to this norm.

The invocation of hegemonic, and thus heterosexual, femininity by women rugby players is observed by sociologist Anima Adjepong as well. Their research focuses on the southwest of the United States.⁵¹ In addition to the defensive othering noticed by Ezzel, Adjepong identified two other strategies that were employed by heterosexual and bisexual women rugby players in their research. While some of Adjepong’s respondents, like Ezzel’s, “suggested that their team was different from those other lesbian rugby teams”, others “outright rejected the idea that women’s rugby was a ‘lesbian sport’ [or] highlighted the idea that the stereotype was just that, a stereotype”.⁵² Even though these rugby players voiced less explicit homophobia than the players interviewed by Ezzel, they did distance themselves from the lesbian stereotype. Additionally, besides the intersections of gender and sexuality, Adjepong also takes race into consideration, arguing that this category is often neglected in studies of rugby. Referencing Patricia Hill Collins, they state that “politics of normative gender and sexuality rely on logics that construct white people as carriers of normative gender”.⁵³ So while the function of race remains implicit in most studies of women’s rugby, Adjepong points out that the norms of compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic femininity that are studied are actually specifically ‘white’ norms.

While Ezzel and Adjepong observed homophobia and apologetic femininity in the teams that they studied, other researchers noticed an acceptance of non-normative sexualities⁵⁴ and an unapologetic resistance against hegemonic femininity⁵⁵ in women rugby players. K.L. Broad

⁵⁰ Ezzel, “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch,” 118.

⁵¹ Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team,’” 5.

⁵² Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team,’” 8.

⁵³ Adjepong, “‘We’re, like, a cute rugby team,’” 2.

⁵⁴ Paul, “Sport and Bodily Empowerment.”

⁵⁵ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic.”

conducted an ethnographic research of women's rugby in the United States in the early 1990's. During this research, they observed that the women rugby players "performed gender transgressions, asserted sexual fluidity, and enacted 'in your face' presentations of a stigmatized self", which Broad identifies as queer resistance.⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that the data presented by Broad does not differ so much from the data presented by Ezzel and Adjepong. For a large part, the 'performed gender transgressions' that Broad observed amount to the fact that these women keep playing rugby even though they are told by their families and (boy)friends that rugby is not appropriate for women,⁵⁷ which is something both Ezzel and Adjepong observed as well. However, in contradiction to Ezzel and Adjepong, Broad states that the women observed in their research did not apologize for this transgressive behavior. Also, one of the participants of Broad remarks: "I think [rugby] is something unusual that some women can't do. It makes me proud to know that I can do it".⁵⁸ Similar sentiments (i.e., that rugby is not for all women) were also expressed by the respondents of Ezzel.⁵⁹ Instead of reading these comments as unapologetic behavior, Ezzel argued that they actually support the idea that men are the natural rugby players.

Conclusion

What becomes apparent in the accumulation of research about women's rugby is that there are many different ways in which women rugby players perform gender to navigate their social and cultural contexts, and that there are multiple ways in which researchers can interpret these gendered performances. Female and women rugby players' *performance* of femininity was equated by Ezzel and Adjepong with compliance with hegemonic femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. However, studying this performance of femininity through a Butlerian lens, it could also be read as a subversive practice, challenging the gender binary that separates femininity and masculinity. By playing rugby and performing femininity, these players challenged the idea that you have to be masculine in order to be a rugby player. The other way around, as I illustrated above, the unapologetic gender transgressions applauded by Broad might in some instances actually reproduce hegemonic discourses about women and men. Therefore, instead of reading the performance of heterosexual femininity and the performance of queer gender transgressions as two opposing strategies that are either hegemonic or counter-

⁵⁶ Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic," 188.

⁵⁷ Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic," 189.

⁵⁸ Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic," 190.

⁵⁹ Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch," 116.

hegemonic, I make an effort in my research to integrate these strategies in a single theoretical framework and illustrate that emphasizing femininity and transgressing gender boundaries can occur simultaneously and interchangeably.

Women's representation in the Dutch rugby culture

Discussing sexism in the Dutch rugby culture with my informants generated an incredible amount of information. The stories my respondents shared with me ranged from 'well meant' sexist comments to outright misogyny. Sexist comments were made, for example, by older rugby men who applauded the rising interest for rugby among 'normal girls', while misogynistic remarks were mostly uttered by members of men's *student* rugby clubs. One of my respondents illustrates this with an anecdote. She tells me that when she attended a gala of a men's student rugby club, she witnessed a honorary member of the club making a plea for the admittance of women in the club. He stated that it would be amazing if his now 7-year-old daughter could be playing for the club in about ten years. The student president of the club responded to this by stating: "the only way your daughter will enter [our club] is if she would be fucked by one of our members".⁶⁰ Needless to say, the honorary member and his wife were outraged by this disgustingly sexist comment. In addition to verbal acts of sexism, men in the rugby culture also take women's rugby less seriously, which is evidenced for instance by men watching only men's games and not women's games, and referees not showing up on time when they officiate women's games. Instead of discussing these instances of sexism separately, in this chapter I focus on the larger representational framework that makes them possible: on the one hand, the lack of representation of female and women rugby players in the media; on the other hand, the obstacles to their political representation in the decision-making process of the governing bodies within the Dutch rugby world, specifically the Dutch Rugby Union (RN) and the Dutch Student Rugby Union (NSRB).

Media representation of women's rugby in the Netherlands

The lack of media representation of women's sports in general is well documented. Janet Fink has created an extensive overview of research on media coverage of men's and women's sports in multiple, mostly western, countries. This overview shows that even though women's participation in sports has increased greatly over the past fifty years, the media attention in broadcast, print and new media did not follow this trend. Women's sports receive far less media coverage than men's sports.⁶¹ Additionally, Fink illustrates that the media attention that women

⁶⁰ Original: "de enige manier waarop jouw dochter binnen komt bij [deze club] is omdat ze geneukt wordt door een van onze leden".

⁶¹ Fink, "Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex," 332.

do receive often focuses on their “physical appearance, femininity, and/or heterosexuality”.⁶² The differential coverage of sports reproduces gender differences by simultaneously reporting and displaying men’s strength and athleticism and neglecting and undermining the same qualities in women.

Since rugby is not a very popular sport in the Netherlands, it is not surprising that the coverage of rugby matches in the Dutch media is almost nonexistent. In March 2019, an international rugby match played by the Dutch men’s team was broadcasted for the first time live on television in the Netherlands.⁶³ While the increase of media attention for rugby in the Netherlands is a positive development, the media coverage of this game also made painfully clear how men’s rugby is still favored over women’s rugby, because the international match played by the women’s team on the same day on the same pitch went unreported. Moreover, the women’s team played in a higher competition and, unlike the men’s team, they actually won their game. The defeat of the men’s team was not only broadcasted live on television, but was also covered in written media. The Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* published an article titled “Rugby players lost badly against Portugal, but are live on tv”,⁶⁴ which reported extensively on the men’s team and did not acknowledge the women’s game in any way. Talking about sexism in rugby culture, some of the members of RUS whom I interviewed brought up this match day. They were outraged about the differential media coverage in favor of the men’s team. Some of them created a social media post about the unequal representation in *De Volkskrant*, which gained considerable momentum. The Facebook post was shared almost 500 times, which is impressive considering the marginalized position of rugby in the Netherlands in general, and women’s rugby specifically.⁶⁵ In this post, they call on women’s rugby clubs in the Netherlands to speak out against the lack of media attention for the women’s team. The post states:

Women’s rugby deserves the attention that it needs, so we call on all women’s clubs to shine a light on this situation. Apparently women are not that equal to men after all, and it’s just a few days after International Women’s Day. RUS asks all women to take action and share this message!⁶⁶

⁶² Fink, “Female athletes, women’s sport, and the sport media commercial complex,” 331.

⁶³ Guus Peters, “Rugbyers verliezen dik van Portugal, maar zijn wel live op tv,” *de Volkskrant*, March, 10, 2019, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/sport/rugbyers-verliezen-dik-van-portugal-maar-zijn-wel-live-op-tv~b58511fd/>.

⁶⁴ Peters, “Rugbyers verliezen dik van Portugal, maar zijn wel live op tv.”

⁶⁵ RUS – Rugbyende Utrechtse Studenten, Facebook, March 11, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/rugbyendeutrechtsestudenten/posts/1995524803878317>

⁶⁶ Original: Dames rugby verdient de aandacht die het nodig heeft, daarom roepen wij alle dames verenigingen op om deze situatie onder de aandacht te brengen. Blijkbaar zijn de dames helemaal niet zo gelijk aan de heren

While the message of this post is clear, it was not received by the Dutch Rugby Union (RN), as illustrated by a video they released later the same year to promote rugby. The video was meant to encourage more people to start playing rugby and was titled “Rugby. Gewoon doen!”, which translates to “Rugby. Just do it!”.⁶⁷ While the intention of this video was to deliver the message that rugby is a sport for everyone, one of the respondents explains why the video fails to convey this message:

In the video you saw Dirk Danen, a known man of the Dutch men’s team, who talks about when he started playing rugby, and says that he was a bit nervous in the beginning, but everything worked out for him. Well, there you have a healthy white muscular man in the Dutch national team. It’s a completely unconvincing message when he says ‘you can do this too’. Completely unconvincing. [...] What seven-year-old girl will think when she sees that video: ‘ha, I can do that too’.⁶⁸

Besides the white able-bodied male international rugby player, the video only featured shots from professional men’s rugby teams. Again, women’s rugby is not represented through media, leaving intact the idea that rugby is a men’s sport. The RUS member quoted above co-wrote the Facebook post about the lack of representation of women’s rugby and she also wrote an article for the RUS newsletter on this promotional video. In this well-written piece, she explains why the video is failing to convey the message that rugby is for everyone and she challenges RN to ‘show, don’t tell’. In my interview with this RUS member, we talked about this article. She tells me that she did not share the article outside of RUS (meaning on social media) because she felt she did not have a large enough reach for this to be effective. She adds that the board of RUS did not want to publish it on the public channels of RUS because it was not too long after the Facebook post mentioned earlier and “they did not want to rub the Dutch Rugby Union (RN) the wrong way too much”.⁶⁹

The examples above illustrate that women’s rugby is not well represented in the Netherlands, and that female and women rugby players are aware of this fact. My respondents

en dat een paar dagen na International Women's Day. RUS roept alle dames op om in actie te komen en dit te delen!

⁶⁷ Rugby Nederland, “Rugby. Gewoon doen!,” Facebook, September 22, 2019, https://fb.watch/4_SDOKgBDW/.

⁶⁸ Original: “in het filmpje zag je dus Dirk Danen, nou een bekende man uit het Nederlandse herenteam, die dan verteld over dat hij was gaan rugbyen en dat ie dat een beetje spannend vond maar dat dat hem allemaal gelukt is. Goed dan staat daar dus een gezonde witte gespierde man in het Nederlands team. Totaal ongeloofwaardige boodschap als hij zegt 'dit kan jij ook'. Totaal ongeloofwaardig. [...] Wat voor meisje van zeven denkt als ze dat filmpje ziet 'hé, dat kan ik ook’”.

⁶⁹ Original: “ze wilden ook niet te veel tegen de haren instrijken bij Rugby Nederland”.

note the importance of women's rugby's representation in the media to convey the message women are equal to men. Furthermore, the increase of media representation of women's rugby is important, because current the male-centered media coverage of rugby in the Netherlands reproduces the idea that men are the 'natural' occupants of the sport and the 'natural' possessors of its required qualities such as strength, speed and aggression. Not every form of representation of women's rugby would be effective to counter male hegemony in rugby culture, as media representations of women's sports often focus on women's appearance, their performance of femininity and their assumed heterosexuality.⁷⁰ Instead, media representation of women's rugby should focus on the skill and athleticism of the players.

The display of women's strength and athleticism in the media could provide a counterweight to the cultural fiction of male hegemony based on natural differences. Female and women rugby players perform behavior and exhibit physical traits that are culturally interpreted as 'masculine', and doing so they undermine the conceptual strength of a binary gender system. As Butler explains, gender is grounded in the repetition of normalizing acts, and breaking with these normalizing acts opens up the possibility for gender transformation.⁷¹ So, female and women rugby players break with the normalized acts for women by performing 'masculinity'. In doing so, they show, although they might not be aware of this, the arbitrariness of the gender construct. However, the power of female and women rugby players to destabilize the binary and hegemonic gender construction is undermined by the marginalization of women's rugby in the media.

'Political' representation of women's rugby in the Dutch Rugby Union and Dutch Student Rugby Union

The oppositional and hierarchical gender categories are not solely reproduced through the differential media coverage of rugby in the Netherlands, as the previous section illustrates, but they are also reproduced through political representation. Political representation refers in this context to the ability to influence the decision-making processes in the governing bodies of rugby in the Netherlands, specifically the Dutch Rugby Union (RN) and the Dutch Student Rugby Union (NSRB). This section illustrates how sexism in these rugby unions works to reproduce the 'otherness' and inferiority of female and women rugby players.

⁷⁰ Fink, "Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex," 331.

⁷¹ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520.

The rugby competitions in the Netherlands are organized by the Dutch Rugby Union (RN). All rugby clubs that take part in the competitions have to be members of RN. As the highest governing body of rugby in the Netherlands, they have the political power to make decisions affecting almost all rugby clubs in the Netherlands.⁷² For example, they are in charge of the policies about transgender players and the distribution of resources. All member clubs of RN are invited to attend general meetings (ALV's), which are held at least once a year. At these meetings the board members of all the member clubs of RN can represent the interests of their clubs. Considering the enormous influence of RN policies on the experiences of all rugby players, it is very important for clubs to be able to represent their interests. Sadly, it emerged from the conversations with some of my respondents who have attended RN meetings that women are not taken seriously by all attendants of these meetings. In fact, they are still often perceived as outsiders and even space invaders.

In a focus group with two members of RUS who have held board positions in either RUS or the Dutch Student Rugby Union (NSRB), we talked about the sexism they experienced in the Dutch rugby culture. Discussing the general meetings of RN, my respondents stated that at these meetings it is mostly “older men” that can be explicitly sexist. They both agree that these men act very condescendingly towards the women who are present. One of them states that in her attendance of such general meetings she “has experienced multiple times that those older men speak quite condescendingly about women’s rugby” and adds that “jokes can be funny, but they are often serious”.⁷³ She further experienced sexism by men who expressed the assumption that she surely had nothing interesting to add to the meeting, and there was even one man who asked her “are you the girl from the media?”,⁷⁴ while she was wearing a suit with the emblem of RUS (a woman holding a rugby ball) and the word ‘president’⁷⁵ on her chest. This comment exposes the strong somatic norm that separates insiders and outsiders in the governing bodies of the Dutch rugby culture. The contestation of somatic norms by ‘space invaders’ is theorized by Nirmal Puwar, who states that “there is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time. While all can, in theory, enter, it is

⁷² The only exceptions are a few teams that do not play in the national competition.

⁷³ Original: “Nou, dat ik op die ALV's meerdere keren tegen, er tegen aan ben gelopen dat eh dat die oudere mannen best wel een beetje neerbuigend eh praten over dames rugby. Dat er vaak, ja weet je, grappen zijn best leuk maar ze menen het vaak”.

⁷⁴ Original: “En daarnaast heb ik ook wel als ik in m'n bestuurspak op die ALV's kwam dat er dan standaard van die van die oudere mannen waren die, ja die een beetje zo'n houding aannamen van eh, nou wat kom jij doen. En heb jij nog wat te vertellen, vast niet, weet je. Op zo'n manier. Ik heb ook een keer gehad dat iemand aan mij vroeg 'oh ben jij het meisje van de media?'”.

⁷⁵ Original: ‘Voorzitter’.

certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the ‘natural’ occupants of specific positions”.⁷⁶ That women present at RN meetings are not recognized as rugby players and board members illustrates that the somatic norm at these events is male.

The same male norm and condescending behavior towards women is prevalent at meetings of the Dutch Student Rugby Union (NSRB). The NSRB is a rugby union that consists only of student rugby clubs. Their meetings, held once or twice a year, have many rules and traditions and are characterized by a lot of beer and nudity. When I asked members of RUS about the relationship between men and women at these meetings, they all stated that women were less respected, were taken less seriously, and had to work harder to be able to have a say. One of my respondents even attended a NSRB meeting a few years ago in which lesbian pornography was played on a large screen for the entire duration of the meeting. This display was clearly meant for the male attendees. As my respondent notes, the women who were on the board of the NSRB seated themselves strategically underneath the screen, so they did not have to look at it. The display of lesbian pornography works simultaneously to assert compulsory heterosexuality and male dominance because women are portrayed as sex object to be viewed by men, instead of subjects with political power. In defense of the NSRB, my respondents did note that lesbian pornography is no longer shown at the meetings and that the NSRB is making an effort to professionalize.

Besides the objectification of women as sex objects, the political power of women at NSRB meetings was further undermined by men leading the meetings who ignored every discussion point brought up by women attendees. One respondent tells me that the man leading one of the meetings she attended did not take into consideration anything she or her fellow board member brought to the meeting. She went to see him during the break to tell him respectfully that he could not just “wipe everything related to women’s rugby off the table. It doesn’t work that way”.⁷⁷ Instead of getting mad during the meeting, she chose a quiet moment to convey clearly that she did not agree with the way he was treating her and her fellow board member. In addition to remaining calm, female and women board members also need to come to the meetings well prepared and should refrain from making comments that are not beneficial to the meeting. A respondent, who has been a board member of the NSRB herself, remarked: “Sometimes I got the feeling that some people (meaning board members of RUS) just said

⁷⁶ Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender, and Bodies out of Place* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), 8.

⁷⁷ Original: “je kunt niet alle punten die ook maar die over damesrugby gaan zomaar van tafel vegen, dat werkt gewoon niet zo”.

something in order to say something and then I think ‘please just think before you speak. Does it really add something?’”.⁷⁸ There seems to be a double standard here, as all respondents who attended NSRB meetings noted that the men at these meetings are talking mostly bullshit.

In addition to having something useful to say, a respondent states that you have to be able to take a joke in order to be respected and argues that you are not going to make a lot of friends if you are being bitter and critical all the time. Instead, you should just play along for the most part. She states that:

fifty percent, I think even more, of everything those people have to say is just theatre. But it is just fun to see, you know. They are whining for half an hour about RUS not having a men’s team while, actually, nobody cares. [...] Sometimes you shouldn’t take things too seriously to keep it fun.⁷⁹

Even though part of the sexism that female and women rugby players experience in these ‘political’ settings is perceived as a joke or an act, the consequences of this sexist behavior should not be trivialized. The sexist behavior of men towards women in the rugby culture has a profound impact on the state of women’s rugby in the Netherlands. As Judith Butler explains, referencing Michel Foucault, “juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent”. This means that systems that are said to merely represent subjects actually simultaneously produce these subjects. This becomes problematic, according to Butler, “if that system can be shown to produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine. In such cases, an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of “women” will be clearly self-defeating”.⁸⁰ As the examples in this chapter illustrate, the subjects of the NSRB and RN are definitely assumed to be masculine, and consequently they fail to represent women’s rugby properly. While the NSRB and RN are said to represent both men’s and women’s rugby, the sexist views held by the people (mostly men) leading these unions actually reproduce the inferiority of female and women rugby players through their decision-making. Their perception of women’s rugby as inferior actually produces the inferiority of women’s rugby by granting it

⁷⁸ Original: “af en toe dat ik wel het gevoel had dat sommige mensen maar iets zeiden om te zeggen en dan denk ik als je iets zegt denk dan alsjeblieft wel gewoon na, want ja weet je wel voegt het echt iets toe”.

⁷⁹ Original: “vijftig procent, ik denk nog wel meer, van wat al die mensen te zeggen hebben is gewoon toneel. Maar het is gewoon mooi om te zien, weet je wel. Wordt er een heel half uur gezeikt over dat eh RUS eigenlijk ook geen mannen team heeft terwijl dat, ja, niemand eigenlijk echt boeit, maar het is wel gewoon weet je wel, soms moet je dingen ook niet allemaal te serieus nemen, dat houdt het ook een beetje leuk”.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 4-5.

less access to, amongst other things, (financial) resources, competent referees, and media attention. Without these recourses women's rugby does not have the ability to improve in the same measure as men's rugby, which results in a lower level of rugby.

Conclusion

While female and women rugby players develop strength, aggression, assertiveness and body positivity,⁸¹ this personal development and empowerment is not represented in media coverage of women's rugby and it also does not allow them equal representation in the governing bodies of rugby in the Netherlands. The neglect of women's rugby in the Dutch media and in the promotion video of RN perpetuates the stigma that rugby is a masculine sport and that men are the natural and superior rugby players. The assumed inferiority of female and women rugby players is reproduced in the governing bodies of RN and the NSRB. Here too, men are considered the norm within rugby and women are perceived as space invaders and outsiders. Butler's argument that political systems actually produce the categories they are said to represent, links the two forms of representation discussed in this chapter together. The NSRB and RN are supposed to represent rugby in the Netherlands, but their male-centered view of rugby makes that they only represent the interests of men's rugby. Assigning the lion's share of recourses and attention to men's rugby they allow men's rugby to develop while women's rugby remains marginalized. In this way, the prioritization of men's rugby by RN and the NSRB reproduces men's superiority on the rugby field, which supports their belief that men's rugby is superior, leading to the continued marginalization of women's rugby. Changes in this seemingly vicious circle are made slowly through women's careful negotiations of their behavior. In meetings of RN and the NSRB, representatives of RUS attempt to provoke change by being well-prepared (in contrast to most men), being businesslike but not too serious, and by laughing away sexist comments and 'not taking things too seriously'. While the change is slow and painful, members of RUS do report that there is improvement in the treatment of women at RN and the NSRB and that the popularity of women's rugby is increasing.

⁸¹ Paul, "Sport and Bodily Empowerment."

Navigating the masculine stereotype

The previous chapter has illustrated how media representations of rugby in the Netherlands reproduce the idea that rugby players are naturally men, and not women. It perpetuates the connection between masculinity and rugby and ignores the challenges that female and women rugby players bring to the male hegemony on the rugby pitch. The lack of media representation and political representation of women's rugby allows misunderstandings of female and women rugby players to remain intact. While the previous chapter focused mostly on the men's perspective on women's rugby, in this chapter the focus will shift to women's perception of women's rugby. Interviewing members of RUS, I discovered that many of them held prejudices against female and women rugby players before they joined RUS. They reported thinking that female and women rugby players are large, masculine and, in some cases, lesbian and this stereotype made them hesitate about joining a rugby club. Many members of RUS had never seen female and women rugby players before they joined the club, which can be explained by the overall lack of representation of women's rugby. Joining RUS, they were surprised to find that not all rugby players are masculine and manly.

Paradoxically, while many new players initially reported negative attitudes towards the imagined masculinity of female and women rugby players, all respondents also note that RUS is a very inclusive space in which all gender expressions and sexualities are welcomed and celebrated, and they value RUS for its inclusivity and diversity. In this chapter, I discuss different tactics that female and women rugby players use to navigate the masculine lesbian stereotype of the woman rugby player and I theorize the interrelatedness of these different strategies.

The masculine and lesbian rugby player

Literature about women's rugby often discusses the idea that rugby is generally considered a masculine domain, and that women who play rugby consequently transgress the boundaries of hegemonic femininity by virtue of playing the sport.⁸² Contrary to men's rugby, women's rugby is also associated with homosexuality, which is not coincidental. In the first chapter, I have discussed Butler's theory on the co-construction of compulsory heterosexuality and the gender

⁸² Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'."; Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic."; Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch."; Howe, "Kicking Stereotypes into Touch."

binary. Butler argues that a binary construction of gender forms the foundation for heterosexuality, because heterosexuality is defined as the attraction between persons of *opposite* genders.⁸³ I have also discussed the definition of femininity as the qualities and characteristics ascribed to women and masculinity as the qualities and characteristics ascribed to men. So, women are expected to perform femininity and men are expected to perform masculinity. Additionally, since compulsory heterosexuality and the gender binary are co-constructed, women are assumed to be both feminine *and* attracted to men. The inseparability of femininity and heterosexuality, in our cultural understanding, results in the prejudice that women who are not feminine are also not heterosexual. The ideas that rugby is a masculine sport *and* that masculine women are homosexual result in the stereotype of the lesbian rugby player. This stereotype is reported in many studies of women's rugby.⁸⁴ While literature may not always explicitly mention the masculinity of the stereotypical lesbian rugby player, the masculinity of the lesbian player is always implied. One of P. David Howe's respondents provides an example of the conflation of masculinity with lesbianism when she argues that her team's uniforms make them look like men and thus like lesbians: "Look at the uniforms that we wear on the pitch. [...] The use of uniforms cut for men certainly doesn't do the image of the sport any good. We look like a bunch of dykes".⁸⁵ The statement that a masculine appearance is harmful for the image of the sport shows that this player considers being perceived as a lesbian as something negative. As we will see in the next section, she is not alone in this opinion.

Emphasizing heterosexual femininity

Many female and women rugby players regard the masculine and lesbian stereotype as harmful, and they have different ways of countering this stereotype. One way in which the 'harmful image' of the masculine lesbian rugby player is contested is through the careful construction of a heterosexual image. Ezzel's respondents construct their heterosexy-fit identity through their difference from other rugby players who they describe as "huge, scary women with goatees",⁸⁶ who prey on attractive women like them. These players describe themselves as an exception to the rule, and by doing so they do not only reproduce the stereotype of the masculine lesbian

⁸³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.

⁸⁴ Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'. "; Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch."; Howe, "Kicking Stereotypes into Touch."

⁸⁵ Howe, "Kicking Stereotypes into Touch," 235.

⁸⁶ Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch," 119.

rugby player, they also reproduce the idea that it is bad for a woman to be masculine and/or attracted to other women.⁸⁷

Similarly, Adjepong's respondents also reacted to the lesbian stereotype by 'heterosexing' the rugby field. Adjepong adopts the term 'heterosexing' from Jayne Caudwell, who uses this term to refer to "player's efforts to destabilize the lesbian stereotype that characterizes women's sports".⁸⁸ Adjepong's participants relied on 'heterosexing' to counter the lesbian stereotype, meaning that players who dated men emphasized their heterosexuality while players who exclusively dated women did not highlight their sexuality. Adjepong identifies three main strategies used by women who dated exclusively men or both men and women to distance themselves from the lesbian stereotype: they "(a) suggested that their team was different from those other lesbian rugby teams; (b) outright rejected the idea that women's rugby was a 'lesbian sport'; or (c) highlighted the idea that the stereotype was just that, a stereotype".⁸⁹ While Adjepong argues that these three strategies reproduce compulsory heterosexuality, I believe that for the last strategy, highlighting the idea that it is just a stereotype, this is not *necessarily* the case. In the data I collected, many of my respondents implied that the lesbian rugby player is just a stereotype. However, they did not do this to promote a heterosexual image of women's rugby. They argued that the stereotype of the masculine lesbian rugby player is reductive and does not do justice to the diversity of sexualities and gender expressions that can be found in women's rugby. For example, one of my respondents stated:

I really like that RUS has both. Yes, we might have some stereotypical, heavysset, somewhat masculine lesbian women, but we also have really girly girls at our club. And that is what I really like, that we have so many women in different shapes and sizes. I think that's beautiful.⁹⁰

So, emphasizing that the lesbian rugby player is just a stereotype is not necessarily a tactic to heterosex the rugby field. However, I do agree with Adjepong that *their* respondents highlighted

⁸⁷ Ezzel, "Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch," 118.

⁸⁸ Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'," 8.

⁸⁹ Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'," 8.

⁹⁰ Original: "Ik vind het juist heel mooi dat RUS het allebei heeft. Ja, we hebben inderdaad misschien wel de stereotype wat gezette, volle, lesbische, beetje mannelijke vrouwen, maar we hebben ook de echte echte poppetjes erbij zitten. En dat vind ik zo leuk dat we in dat, ja, als je kijkt naar vrouwen en welke vormen en maten daarvan zijn, daar hebben we er echt veel verschillende van. En dat vind ik eh, vind ik juist heel erg mooi".

the idea that the lesbian stereotype was just a stereotype in an attempt to ‘heterosex’ their own team.

Celebrations of sexual diversity and multiplicity

In contrast to Adjepong and Ezzel, K.L. Broad found that their respondents did not reproduce the lesbian stereotype and the negative attitude towards it. Broad argues that their research shows that the subculture of women’s rugby in the early 1990’s was characterized not by female apologetics, but instead by unapologetic transgressions of gender boundaries and challenges to heteronormativity.⁹¹ Broad argues that their respondents resist hegemonic femininity by virtue of playing rugby, because playing rugby requires and causes them to look ‘unfeminine’.⁹² An example they give of this is that female or woman rugby player are required to cut their finger nails, because long nails are seen as a safety hazard. Match officials occasionally check the nails of players to make sure they are short enough.⁹³ Additionally, rugby causes women to look ‘unfeminine’ because of the bruises, broken noses and cuts that they sustain on the field. Broad appears to argue that women’s participation in rugby is in itself a transgression of gender boundaries and is therefore *unapologetic*. However, the feminine apologetic is premised on the transgression of gender boundaries through the participation in sports. Without this transgression of hegemonic femininity there is nothing to apologize for. I argue that women who play rugby always challenge hegemonic femininity on the field, which they may or may not apologize for when they are off the pitch. In the case of Broad, they did not apologize.

In addition to the transgression of hegemonic femininity, and of course linked to it, Broad argues that their respondents challenged heteronormativity “through assertions of sexual multiplicity and fluidity”.⁹⁴ This is exemplified with songs that celebrate women’s sexual activities and that are, in the words of one of Broad’s respondents “inclusive of all sexual preferences so we can all be united instead of seeing each other as straight or gay or whatever. It reminds me of what women can do... ANYTHING!”.⁹⁵ Broad argues that this unapologetic celebration of sexual diversity and multiplicity challenges the homo/hetero binary. This is in contrast to women rugby players who employ the straight feminine apologetic, who do not only

⁹¹ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 181.

⁹² Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 189.

⁹³ Interestingly, I recently learned from a friend who plays for a men’s team that their nails are never checked. There appears to be a double standard that requires women to cut their nails and not men.

⁹⁴ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 191.

⁹⁵ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 193.

reproduce the notion that being a lesbian is something undesirable, they also “[recreate] the notion of stable sexuality firmly placed on the homo/hetero binary, where players apologize in order to remain in the category of non-lesbian”.⁹⁶

The unapologetic transgression of hegemonic norms of sexuality and gender Broad observed in their respondents provides a different strategy of navigating the lesbian stereotype. Instead of distancing themselves from the lesbian stigma, rugby players ‘reveled’ in their deviant sexuality. However, the unapologetic celebration of sexual diversity that Broad applauds these players for does have limits. For example, Broad explains that the introduction of new players into rugby is carefully managed by older players to make sure the new players are not scared off. Instead of being open and unapologetic from the start, older players initially hide or downplay their sexuality to bond with new players. One of Broad’s respondents recalls:

I know one lesbian couple that were horrified because they called each other ‘honey’ [by accident] in front of a bunch of young, straight players. It turns out the players thought it was cute, but the couple were worried about that for a while. They didn’t want to scare them away cause they were really good players.⁹⁷

This quote shows that even though female and women rugby players might be unapologetic and assert their sexual multiplicity and fluidity in some contexts, in others contexts they are in fact worried about how their sexuality might be received by others. From Broad’s data it appears that sexual fluidity and diversity is celebrated within the team, but players are aware of the lesbian stereotype and actively avoid association with this stereotype to attract new players. In the next section I discuss how this claiming of sexual and gender diversity – as opposed to the tactic of distancing oneself from the lesbian stereotype – plays out within RUS in the Dutch context

Inclusivity of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions at RUS

Discussing femininity and masculinity with members of RUS, they state that everyone is welcome and accepted at RUS and that there are no norms at the club that prescribe what it means to be a woman. One player states:

⁹⁶ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 191.

⁹⁷ Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 194.

[T]here is no longer such a thing as just masculinity or femininity because they can also coincide or be something in between, it doesn't matter at all. We are open to all kinds of expressions. I think everyone agrees with that in the end.⁹⁸

This sentiment is echoed by many other respondents as well. An incident supporting this statement is the coming-out of a player as non-binary in the group chat of RUS. They received only positive responses in the chat, and talking about this in a focus group they state that "it is not an issue at all".⁹⁹ The acceptance of non-normative gender identifications suggests that the culture at RUS is informed by a queer politics. Queer politics is characterized by a resistance against normalizing forms of social control and seeks to destabilize heteronormative, dichotomous gender constructs.¹⁰⁰

Besides the inclusivity of non-normative gender expressions, members of RUS also stress the acceptance of non-normative sexualities such as homosexuality and bisexuality. Asked about the acceptance of non-normative sexualities at RUS, one respondent tells an anecdote. They recount their first time drinking with the team after joining RUS, when a teammate was asking players about their celebrity crushes,

and then five people go before you and they name as many men as women. [...] Those are the little things that make you realize instantly that it's okay here, and it makes it a lot easier to be much more open about it yourself.¹⁰¹

Open conversations about sexuality are a common occurrence at RUS and new players are invited to join these discussions from the beginning. So, unlike Broad's respondents, members of RUS do not hide their sexuality around new players. In addition to the acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality, respondents also note the acceptance of sexual fluidity.¹⁰² One respondent states:

⁹⁸ Original: "er bestaat niet meer zoiets zoals alleen mannelijkheid of vrouwelijkheid want dat kan ook samenvallen of er tussenin maakt helemaal niet uit. En wij staan gewoon open voor allerlei expressievormen. Dus eh en ik denk dat iedereen het daar uiteindelijk over eens is."

⁹⁹ Original: "Het is geen issue of zo nee".

¹⁰⁰ Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic," 186; Steven Seidman, "From Identity to Queer Politics: Shifts in the Social Logic of Normative Heterosexuality in Contemporary America," *Social Thought & Research* 24, no. 1/2 (2001): 9.

¹⁰¹ Original: "En dat er dan vijf mensen voor je gaan en dat er evenveel mannen als vrouwen worden genoemd. [...] Dat zijn hele kleine dingetjes waarin je wel gelijk merkt oh het is hier gewoon oké, oké prima dan is het ja gewoon een stuk makkelijker om er zelf ook een stuk opener over te zijn".

¹⁰² Meaning everything outside of the homosexual/heterosexual binary.

I really started to discover more about myself in many aspects after I joined RUS. [...] I started to shift more and more from straight to gay. And I started to see sexuality as a fluid concept. Not something fixed, but more like a spectrum.¹⁰³

Another player identifies as heterosexual, but she also started reconsidering her sexuality after she joined RUS. She talks about the visibility of bisexuality and homosexuality at RUS and reflects:

Because of that, I became more aware of the possibility of [...] bisexuality in my case and of the esthetics of women as a romantic partner. [...] I think because it is more normal [at RUS to date women] you are going to consider more, or investigate more, whether that is the case for you too.¹⁰⁴

The same respondent also explained that being part of an all-women club inspired her thinking about the position of women in society, about what it means to be a woman and about feminism. What she describes connects to Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum. This lesbian continuum encompasses a broad definition of lesbian experience that is not limited to having or desiring to have genital sexual experience with other women, but it also includes many other forms of connections between women such as "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny [and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support".¹⁰⁵ Rich theorizes the connection between lesbianism and women's empowerment through the rejection of the idea that women need men to live complete and fulfilling lives.

The rejection of compulsory heterosexuality at RUS, through the celebration of sexual diversity, opens up space for members of RUS to discover their sexualities. Like the respondents of Broad, my respondents queered the hetero/homo binary by accepting that sexualities can change over time and by supporting the idea that sexual actions do not define your sexuality:

At parties people make out with each other a lot, also people who might not have the label [sexuality] that they are taking on at that moment, but that doesn't matter. Nobody

¹⁰³ Original: "En ik ben mezelf gewoon bij RUS heel erg gaan ontdekken op heel veel aspecten. [...] En toen ben ik steeds meer gaan verschuiven van hetero naar gay. En ik ben seksualiteit gaan zien als een vloeibaar principe. Niet als een vaststaand iets, maar als een soort spectrum".

¹⁰⁴ Original: "daardoor werd ik me ook wel meer bewust van de mogelijkheid van, van biseksualiteit in mijn geval en van de esthetiek van vrouwen als liefdespartner. [...] Dus dat het meer normaal is en dan ga je denk ik ook eerder overwegen, of meer onderzoeken bij jezelf of dat bij jezelf ook van toepassing is of niet."

¹⁰⁵ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 648-49.

will say ‘huh, but I saw you make out with a girl yesterday, so you are gay right?’ or something like that.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, I asked a lesbian player whether she ever reconsidered her sexuality after she joined RUS and she replied:

No, I did make out with a man once when I was very drunk. Later I thought ‘what the fuck, this could only happen with RUS, making out with a man again after about seven years’. Really gross [she laughs].¹⁰⁷

While this player did not reconsider her sexuality, she did feel like she had the freedom to experiment with her sexual activities without facing social repercussions. Together, these anecdotes illustrate that non-normative sexualities are accepted within RUS and that players feel like they can experiment and discover their sexualities without judgement. Members of RUS appear to adopt a queer politics in resisting binary norms of gender and normative social conventions.

Destabilizing the masculine lesbian stereotype

While the previous section illustrates the acceptance of gender non-conformity and sexual diversity at RUS, many members of RUS did express their dissatisfaction with the stereotype of the masculine lesbian rugby player. Like some of Adjepong’s respondents, some of mine highlighted the idea that the stereotype of the lesbian rugby player is just that: a stereotype. However, as I noted before, I would not interpret this rejection of the lesbian stereotype as a strategy to ‘heterosex’ the rugby field. Unlike Adjepong’s respondents, members of RUS do not deny that there are many lesbian rugby players. My respondents are mostly annoyed with the inaccuracy of the lesbian rugby player stereotype and offended by the stigma that lesbian equals masculine, which is implied in this stereotype. A lesbian player explained to me why she thought the lesbian stereotype is harmful and should be contested. In high school she did not acknowledge her own attraction to women because she thought all lesbians were real ‘dykes’

¹⁰⁶ Original: Op feestjes wordt er natuurlijk wat af en aan getongd, ook tussen mensen die misschien niet het label hadden wat ze op dat moment dan een beetje invullen of aannemen, maar dan ook dat boeit dan achteraf niet. Niemand gaat dan zeggen ‘huh, maar ik zag je gister met een chick tongen, dus je bent toch gay’ of weet ik veel wat”.

¹⁰⁷ Original: “Nee, ik heb wel eens toen ik súper dronken was weer met een man gezoend, toen dacht ik ja what the fuck, dat kan ook alleen maar bij RUS gebeuren, na zeven jaar ofzo weer een keer met een hele.. man gezoend. Was echt héél vies [lacht]”.

with short hair and she did not recognize herself in that stereotype. When she started playing rugby, she met two team members who were dating each other and did not fit the masculine lesbian stereotype and she thought: “Oh, so you can also be just normal and have a girlfriend”.¹⁰⁸ She adds that one of these teammates is very feminine *and* a lesbian. For this player, the lesbian stereotype (even detached from rugby) kept her from discovering and accepting her own sexuality because she could not recognize herself in the stereotype. While this player means to destabilize the restrictive connection between gender performance and sexuality, she simultaneously reproduces hegemonic femininity by implying that being feminine is normal for a woman and being masculine is not.

Another reason why the stereotype of the lesbian rugby player is contested is because it scares away potential players. We already saw this in Broad’s example of two women hiding their sexuality in order to not scare away new players. The same problem is evidenced by other research as well. For example, one of Howe’s informants states that “there are many rumors that circulate that suggest this club is just a disguise for a lesbian love-in. We really have to work hard to change the image of the game”.¹⁰⁹ This quote suggests that potential players are scared away because they believe there are a lot of lesbian players on the team. It suggests that potential players are homophobic and stay away for that reason. However, the data I have collected at RUS suggests that it is not the sexuality of stereotypical lesbian players that scares away potential members, but rather their assumed large physique and their ‘beast-like’ appearance. A third-year player states that she initially hesitated about playing rugby because of the lesbian stereotype. Then she encountered two members of RUS promoting rugby at an information market for prospective students. Seeing these two smaller and feminine-looking rugby players convinced her to try rugby, thinking “if you can play rugby, so can I”.¹¹⁰ Incidentally, both of the rugby players she met date women, so she was actually convinced to play rugby by women who partly matched the stereotype that initially held her back. While this respondent used to think that women rugby players ‘weren’t her type of people’, based on the lesbian stereotype, it seems that it was actually the idea that women rugby players are masculine, large and strong that held her back. A different player shares a similar story. She initially thought rugby was not for her and when I asked her why, she responded:

¹⁰⁸ Original: “oh, maar je kan ook gewoon normaal zijn en een vriendin hebben”.

¹⁰⁹ Howe, “Kicking Stereotypes into Touch,” 237.

¹¹⁰ Original: “als jullie rugbyen dan kan ik het ook”.

I remember thinking like, they might all be big beast-like women or something [laughs]. Just a huge prejudice. Anyway, when I saw pictures and read about the jurkendispuut [a group of players who like to wear dresses after games and to events] on the website I thought well, I guess they are not just beast-like women, but also normal women like me.¹¹¹

While I stated in the previous section that members of RUS resist social norms of binary gender and sexuality, the quotes above illustrate that at times members also reproduce these norms. By making a distinction between ‘beast-like’ women and ‘normal women like me’, this player reproduces the norm that women should be feminine and that masculine women are ‘beast-like’ and not normal.

But what if the emphasis on inclusion and acceptance of all sexualities and gender expressions and the emphasis on femininity – which seem to contradict one another completely – are actually two different sides of the same coin? All of the respondents emphasized the femininity of members of RUS in a reaction to the stereotype that female and women rugby players are always masculine. They attempt to convey that female and women rugby players, including lesbian players, do not necessarily have to be masculine. Members of RUS share the opinion that rugby is a sport for all women, regardless of gender performance or sexuality. However, through their choice of words they do reproduce hegemonic femininity, stating that feminine women are normal (‘you can also be just normal and have a girlfriend’) and that masculine women are ‘beast-like’.

The friction between the inclusion and acceptance of all gender performances and sexualities on the one hand, and the emphasis on femininity on the other hand, parallels “the transition from the identity politics of gay liberation to the queer politics of difference”.¹¹² The strategy of female and women rugby players to emphasize femininity is comparable to the assimilationist strategy of gay politics. In both cases, marginalized groups seek acceptance into the mainstream by underscoring other normative identifications. Sociologist Steven Seidman argues that gay identities were recognized “only on the condition that every other key aspect of the gay self exhibits what would be considered ‘normal’ gender, sexual, familial, work and

¹¹¹ Original: “En ik weet nog wel dat ik dacht van ja, dat zullen dan misschien allemaal grote beestige vrouwen zijn ofzo [lacht]. Gewoon echt een heel erg vooroordeel. Maar goed, toen ik dus foto's zag en ook las over het jurkendispuut op de website dacht ik van nou, volgens mij zijn het niet alleen maar beestige vrouwen, maar ook gewoon normale vrouwen zoals ik”.

¹¹² Broad, “The Gendered Unapologetic,” 187.

national practices”.¹¹³ Like gay people, women athletes were also seen as social deviants. In their case not because of their sexuality, although women athletes were always suspected of lesbianism, but because of their transgression of gender. To gain access to the institution of sport they, like homosexual people, emphasized their normative identifications. In their case, these normative identifications were whiteness, femininity and heterosexuality, as we have seen in numerous examples by now. However, as I illustrate in the next section, women in the Dutch rugby culture were confronted with multiple normative identifications they had to navigate. While the emphasis on femininity enhanced their acceptance in society in general, in the Dutch rugby culture masculinity was valued for rugby players over femininity, and female and women rugby players had to perform masculinity to gain respect from rugby men. How these dual norms were dealt with by players of RUS is exemplified by a discussion that came to be known as *the tie-discussion*. This discussion also illustrates a shift in the culture of RUS that is similar to the shift from identity politics to queer politics.

The tie discussion: from identity politics to queer politics

The tie-discussion took place when the new president of RUS decided in 2020 to wear a tie with their formal suit. From the inception of RUS, board members had decided not to wear a tie because for them this piece of clothing represented the male dominated rugby culture. The Dutch Student Rugby Union (NSRB) pushed for women to wear a tie when RUS wanted to join, and members of RUS had to fight to be allowed not to wear it. Their argument was that RUS is a women’s rugby club and women do not wear ties. They wanted to create their own rugby culture and norms instead of assimilating to the men’s culture. For them, not wearing a tie was an act of feminism. For older generations of RUS members, it was very important to be accepted into the rugby culture *as women*. While it was easier for them to be welcomed into the rugby culture in the Netherlands if they performed masculinity, as was normative in rugby culture, they created a politics based on their identity as women instead. Women of RUS resisted simultaneously societal norms of women’s passivity and weakness by playing rugby, and rugby norms of masculinity by for example wearing dresses¹¹⁴ and constructing a feminine group identity. I would argue that these players resisted compulsory heterosexuality by resisting the norms imposed on them by men, and gaining strength from their identification as women instead. This is not to say that all members of RUS identified as lesbians, but it does mean that

¹¹³ Seidman, “From Identity to Queer Politics,” 6.

¹¹⁴ The ‘jurkendispuut’ is an example of this.

they could be placed on Rich's lesbian continuum, through their bonding against male tyranny and women-identification.¹¹⁵

Over time women's participation in rugby became less contested,¹¹⁶ and the pressure for women to perform masculinity subsided. That is why the new president of RUS felt comfortable to wear a tie and defended this decision by stating that "times are changing and I am not forced to wear a tie now, I choose to wear one".¹¹⁷ Some of the older members¹¹⁸ in the crowd were not happy with this development. They argued that the president of RUS is the face of the club, and since RUS is a women's club the president should represent its feminine character. Other members defended the decision to wear a tie by stating that even though RUS is a women's club, the category of 'woman' is not fixed and does not equal femininity.

Since it was mostly older members of RUS who objected the president wearing a tie, this discussion is considered to represent a generational shift. A shift that, I argue, parallels the shift from lesbian feminism to queer feminism. Seidman explains the difference between gay identity politics and queer politics by stating:

Whereas gay identity politics aims to change the status of homosexuality from a deviant to a normal identity, queer politics struggles against normalizing any identity. Queers are not against identity politics but aim to deflate its emancipatory narrative by exposing its exclusionary and disciplinary effects.¹¹⁹

Employing a tactic in line with lesbian feminism, older generations of RUS aimed to change the status of rugby women from a deviant to a normal identity. They stived to be included in the rugby culture as women and to normalize women's participation in rugby. At this time, in agreement with Rich's liberatory strategy, players of RUS focused on their quintessentially *female* experience as female and women rugby players. Younger members of RUS started to question what this *female* identity of RUS actually entails. Adopting a queer politics they started to move beyond the binary construction of man and woman. In accordance with Butler's conceptualization of the body as "a field of interpretive possibilities",¹²⁰ the younger generation of RUS understand that the female body is not shaped by a feminine essence. Instead, the body

¹¹⁵ Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 648-49.

¹¹⁶ Although this thesis clearly shows that there is still a long way to go to reach equality.

¹¹⁷ Original: "want tijden veranderen en het is nu niet een opgelegd iets dat ik een das draag, ik kies ervoor om een das te dragen".

¹¹⁸ Meaning people who have been a member of RUS for many years.

¹¹⁹ Seidman, "From Identity to Queer Politics," 9.

¹²⁰ Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," 45.

has the potential to appropriate different genders, or the same gender differently. So, being a woman does not require, for them, the performance of femininity. The shift from lesbian feminism to queer feminism should not be taken as a chronological change in which lesbian feminism is replaced completely by queer feminism. It would be too simplistic to make a clear distinction between the two. In reality they are often employed simultaneously or interchangeably. For example, while the non-binary president of RUS decided to wear a tie and to challenge binary notions of gender, they also promoted and represented women's rugby as the face and leader of RUS.

There appears to be a difference between personal politics at RUS that allows members to express themselves however they want, and a more public politics that represents the interests of RUS as a *women's* rugby club. Butler states that "in the case of feminism, politics is ostensibly shaped to express the interests, the perspectives, of 'women'. But is there a political shape to 'women,' as it were, that precedes and prefigures the political elaboration of their interests and epistemic point of view?".¹²¹ This question perfectly reflects the struggle at RUS illustrated by the tie discussion. While many members of RUS would argue that there is not a well-defined category of 'woman', a politics based on this constructed identity is still needed to be able to make any political progress.

Conclusion

Focusing on the experiences of female and women rugby players, this chapter illustrates that they are profoundly influenced by the idea that rugby is a men's sport. The idea that rugby players are naturally masculine results in the stigma that female rugby players are masculine as well. Additionally, through the co-construction of the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality, female and women rugby players are imagined to be masculine *and* lesbian. Existing literature illustrates how female and women rugby players either resist and deny the lesbian stereotype and emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality,¹²² or celebrate and embrace their sexual diversity and gender nonconformity.¹²³ Female and women rugby players' performance of femininity is understood to be a strategy of apologetics that complies with hegemonic femininity and undermines the liberatory potential of women's participation in

¹²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 164.

¹²² Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'. "; Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch."

¹²³ Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic."

sports.¹²⁴ Contrarily, female and women rugby players' celebrations of sexual diversity and gender nonconformity are understood to challenge the gender and sexual binaries that prioritize men and heterosexuality over women and non-normative sexualities.¹²⁵

The data I collected at RUS challenges the clear-cut distinction between emphasizing femininity and consequently reproducing male hegemony in rugby on the one hand, and queering the gender binary and resisting male hegemony in rugby on the other hand. Members of RUS articulate clearly that they greatly value the diversity of members of RUS when it comes to appearance, gender expressions and sexualities. In other contexts, they emphasized the femininity of some members of RUS and stated that they were encouraged to join the club by seeing these 'feminine' girls on information markets or in pictures on the website. That these respondents were happy to see feminine looking women on the team seems to suggest that they comply with hegemonic femininity. However, these respondents stated that it was great to see that you can be both feminine and a rugby player, and that femininity and masculinity are not mutually exclusive. The stereotype of the masculine lesbian rugby players initially led them to believe that all rugby players were masculine, but feminine players provided proof of the diversity of female and women rugby players. Thus, instead of seeing female and women rugby players' performance of femininity as compliance with hegemonic femininity, it can also be read as a resistance to the masculine and male norm in the rugby culture.

As I illustrate with the tie-discussion, the emphasis on femininity can be part of a feminist politics that seeks to resist male hegemony and receive recognition and respect within the rugby community *as women*. The tie-discussion illustrates a different, queer feminist strategy as well, which questions the category of 'woman' and seeks to destabilize constrictive gender norms. These different strategies are used simultaneously and interchangeably by members of RUS, because within informal settings members of RUS celebrate their diversity, but in formal settings the need to provide a strong united front as women seeking representation requires, for the members of RUS, a strong identification *as a women's club*.

¹²⁴ Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team'."; Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch."

¹²⁵ Broad, "The Gendered Unapologetic."

Conclusion

Both the assumed masculinity of rugby and women's negotiation of the masculine lesbian stereotype have been reported and theorized extensively. In this case study of the female and women rugby players of RUS, I attempted to theorize the link between these two phenomenon more strongly. In the first analytical chapter it became apparent that the presumed masculinity of rugby is produced and reproduced through the marginalization of women's rugby, both in media portrayals of rugby and in the governing bodies of the Dutch rugby world. Sexist views of women's inferiority and otherness result in the undermining of women's agency and the neglect of women's perspectives in RN and the NSRB. The male-centeredness of RN and the NSRB results in an unequal allocation of resources in favor of men, and thus it reproduces men's superiority on the rugby field and the idea that rugby is a men's sport.

The example of the Facebook post created by some members of RUS shows that female and women rugby players are aware of the inequality in the rugby culture (also among members who have not attended meetings of RN or the NSRB) and evidence a feminist consciousness. This feminist activism is based on a shared experience *as women*, as it calls for all women to share the Facebook post and take action. The emphasis on the *female* experience of female and women rugby players as a feminist tactic is also illustrated in 'the tie-discussion'. Older generations of RUS members emphasized their femininity to push back at the masculine standards that dominated, and still dominate, the rugby culture.

The emphasis of femininity as a feminist tactic to counter male hegemony in the rugby culture is an alternative reading from the more common understanding that emphasizing femininity complies with hegemonic femininity. Other authors have argued that female and women rugby players who emphasized their femininity and heterosexuality did this as an 'apologetic' that undermines the liberating potential of women's participation in rugby.¹²⁶ My respondents, in contrast, appreciate the performance of femininity of female and rugby players because it shows that the connection between femininity and weakness is a cultural fiction.

Studying the experiences of female and women rugby players through a Butlerian lens has showed that female and women rugby players can transform and destabilize existing gender categories in many different ways. One way is by combining the performance of femininity with a performance of strength and aggression, by virtue of playing rugby. Another way is

¹²⁶ Adjepong, "'We're, like, a cute rugby team.'"; Ezzel, "'Barbie Dolls' on the Pitch."

through the celebration of sexual diversity and gender non-conformity, which is the case at RUS as well.

In answer to the main question, *how does the representation of rugby as a quintessentially masculine domain influence female and women rugby players' negotiations of gender and sexuality in the Netherlands?*, I would state the following: In the case of RUS, diversity of gender expressions and sexuality is accepted normalized, however, in relation to rugby men, the femininity of female and women rugby players is emphasized to provide a counterweight to the dominance of masculinity in the rugby culture. It is mainly in 'political' situations, for example the activist Facebook post of RUS and the attendance of RN and NSRB meetings, that the identity *as women* is invoked because this is considered necessary to achieve equality and respect. While there appears to be a transition from an women-based politics in the vein of lesbian feminism to a queer politics that criticizes the gender binary, at this moment these two tactics are still used side by side. Luckily, my respondents reported an increase in respect and popularity for women's rugby, so I can end on a hopeful note.

Discussion

While I am very happy with the huge amount of data I collected in the focus groups and interviews I conducted with members of RUS, much more than I could possibly discuss in the scope of this research, I believe that participant observation would have been a very valuable addition to this research. The rugby culture is rich in traditions and social rules, and it would have been interesting to observe how these traditions relate to feminist consciousness my respondents reported.

Furthermore, this research did not discuss race explicitly, although the norm of hegemonic femininity I referred to throughout the research is a specifically white norm. I did not reflect on the influence of race on my respondents, who were almost exclusively white. A future research might focus on the influence of the representation of rugby as 'the white men's game' on the navigations of gender and sexuality by female women rugby players of color.

These are just two suggestions for continued research on the experiences of female and women rugby players, but there are so many more possibilities. Sports is a domain that, in my opinion, does not receive enough attention in mainstream feminism, while its liberatory potential is enormous.

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