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**ONSIDE**



# Power Playing the Patriarchy

*An exploratory research on perceptions of  
gender equality, sports and feminism  
according to ONSIDE grantees*

by

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## Abstract

Since its very existence, sports have been an unwelcoming arena for women and queer persons. Feminist literature on equality issues within and beyond sports has been burgeoning since the 1960s, however, often representing only a select group of women. This qualitative research presents itself along a more inclusive discourse, drawing from the experiences of women and queer persons from 12 countries across 3 regions, engaged directly in initiatives at the intersection of feminism and sports. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with grantees of the ONSIDE Fund administered by global multi-dimensional women's fund Women Win. The purpose of this research was to demonstrate how ONSIDE grantees perceive and relate to gender equality in sports and what characterizes their lived experiences as feminist advocates in this field. The findings indicate the myriad complexity of the context in which gender equality is advocated. Overall, the findings were three-fold: (1) Important mechanisms contributing to gender inequality must be understood to grasp the issue of equality in sports and society at large, (2) Advantages of and barriers in sports make women's experiences complex but also spark important solutions, (3) Feminist principles vary across contexts but overall are valued for their sense of empowerment. Feminists receive considerable backlash from their societies' status quo which becomes visible in sports. Hence, the power play of the patriarchy remains strong but continuously challenged in its own game.

*Key words:* gender equality, sports, feminism

## Samenvatting

Sinds haar ontstaan is sport een onwelkome arena voor vrouwen en queer personen. Feministische literatuur over genderongelijkheid binnen en buiten de sport is sinds de jaren zestig in opmars, maar vertegenwoordigt vaak slechts een selecte groep vrouwen. Dit kwalitatieve onderzoek presenteert zich langs een inclusiever discours, puttend uit de

persoonlijke verhalen en ervaringen van vrouwen en queer personen uit 12 landen verspreid over 3 regio's, die direct betrokken zijn bij initiatieven op het gebied van feminisme en sport. Semigestructureerde interviews zijn afgenomen met vertegenwoordigers van begunstigen van het ONSIDE Fonds, beheerd door vrouwenfonds Women Win. Het doel van dit onderzoek was om met deze casestudy te laten zien hoe zij aankijken tegen en zich verhouden tot gendergelijkheid in de sport en wat hun ervaringen als feministische activisten op dit gebied kenmerkt. De bevindingen schetsen de complexiteit van de strijd voor gendergelijkheid. In het algemeen waren de bevindingen drieledig: (1) Belangrijke mechanismen die bijdragen aan genderongelijkheid moeten uitgelicht worden om de noodzaak van gelijkheid in de sport en de maatschappij in het algemeen te begrijpen, (2) Er zijn voordelen van en belemmeringen in de sport die de ervaringen van vrouwen complex maken, maar ook tot belangrijke oplossingen leiden, (3) Feminisme is context-gebonden, maar wordt in het algemeen gewaardeerd vanwege haar emanciperende karakter. Feministen ervaren tegenwerking van de status quo in hun samenlevingen, en in sport is dit duidelijk zichtbaar. Het machtsspel van het patriarchaat blijft sterk, maar wordt met zijn eigen spelregels voortdurend uitgedaagd.

*Sleutelwoorden:* genderongelijkheid, sport, feminisme

*“A culture is remembered for its heroes and heroines, and sport constructs them and influences our perceptions of them continuously. In popular consciousness, heroes and heroines are men and women who are ‘larger than life’, ‘inspirational icons’, special people with extraordinary qualities that are constructed and represented in particular ways to encourage us to admire and idealize them [...]. But heroes are more easily defined than heroines and there is greater social importance attributed to the production and celebration of male heroism.” (Hargreaves, 2013:1)*

### **Power Playing the Patriarchy**

Hargreaves’ (2013) statement ties into a multilayered issue around gender differences in sports and reflects the initial motivation for conducting this research. While representing half of the world’s population, one could assume women consequently make up half of its potential. Yet a Google search on “best athletes of all time” unsurprisingly directs one to a multitude of internet pages showcasing mainly successful sportsmen. Sporadically “big” women athletes pass the revue but nowhere as often as their male-identified counterparts. Multiple conclusions can be drawn from this but the most obvious one is that throughout history, the playing field has been a site of inequality. The struggles experienced in sports are both personal and societal, connected to the specificities of cultural, political, religious contexts and to global processes, and arguably these do not stand alone (Hargreaves, 2013). Kosofsky (1993) stressed three decades ago that gender inequality in sports is part of a wider issue of gender inequality throughout societies.

Acknowledging that there are several terms among which equality, equity and justice, this research underscores the United Nations’ (UN) usage of gender equality which refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for both women and men across a wide range of arenas (UN Women, n.d.). Because of its recognition worldwide, and its dedication of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal to gender equality, therewith pointing to a global

statement of intent and an international call to collective action, the United Nation's conceptualization remains an important source to draw from. However, as this research includes also trans women and non-binary persons, gender equality is not perceived as a binary notion and therefore extends the UN's definition, including those who do not resonate with heteronormative cis perceptions of "woman" or "man". In this research binary terms however often are used, echoing much of the existing literature on gender equality in sports and in the understanding that socialization into society remains a binary practice (Dietert & Dentice, 2013).

Substantial to the context of this research, the UN recognizes sports as an important tool to realize gender equality (UN Women, 2020). This has widely been acknowledged in academic literature (e.g. Belliotti, 1979; Huggins & Randell, 2007; Beutler, 2008) and international sports and humanitarian institutions who underscore the importance of leveraging the positive impact that sports can have on individuals, societies and cultures (Hancock et al., 2013). Sports have the potential to counter women's current underrepresentation in social, political, educational, and legal positions by promoting social integration, physical and mental health and self-esteem (Hancock et al., 2013). Growth in sponsorship for women's sports is expected particularly in grassroots events (Pegoraro et al., 2009). Hence, international initiatives at the frontline of gender, sports and development are burgeoning (Chawansky & Hayhurst, 2015), among which the ONSIDE Fund, administered by Women Win.

The ONSIDE Fund is part of a broader ONSIDE initiative that envisions a world in which all girls and women exercise their right to play. Its mission is to drive a sustained feminist sports movement that transforms sports (ONISIDE Fund, n.d.). The ONSIDE Fund provides flexible funding to grassroots organizations and groups around the globe that are governed by feminist principles. After the first cohort was selected in 2020, a diverse

portfolio of grassroots feminist sports organizations was established. This research aims to draw from the experiences of these grantees and amplify the voices of the women and queer<sup>1</sup> persons at the heart of these initiatives. The guiding question hereby is: “*How do ONSIDE grantees relate to gender equality in sports and what characterizes their lived experiences as feminist advocates in this field?*”

A focus on ONSIDE grantees is interesting because it enables a comprehensive analysis of the first-hand narratives of a wide range of women and queer persons engaged directly in initiatives at the intersection of feminism and sports. Considering that most sociologies of sports are written by men about male sports, and that much of the existing literature focussing on women oftentimes casts women as a homogenous group rooted in White, Western, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied notions, this research aims to position itself along a more inclusive discourse (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Hargreaves, 2013). Furthermore, queer athletes have long not been on the sporting radar because the atmosphere towards them was far from tolerant (Krane, 2018). Taken together, this suggests relevance for this research as the lack of representation currently observed, arguably is a great flaw in an otherwise progressive domain of study. As such, this research aims to provide a qualitative contribution to contemporary academic debates around gender equality in sports and feminist sports theories.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Gender Equality in Sports***

As gender equality underlies this research, it is important to understand where it derives from, what it relates to and what consequences it has in sports. To comprehend this, the concept of gender requires explanation. Echoing Pfister (2010) is defined as a socio-

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<sup>1</sup> Queer here serves as an umbrella term for those whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity falls outside hetero-sex attraction and the traditional notion of male-female binary, honoring the fact that under this umbrella an infinity of unique identities exist (Villarreal, 2019).

cultural construct as opposed to the natural binary category that is often presumed. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” – are feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s famous words with which she argues from an existentialist viewpoint that women are not inherently born as such but through society’s gaze are conditioned into womanhood (Beauvoir, 1953:301 in Stimpson & Herdt, 2014). Indeed, this where inequality becomes tangible.

Among many scholars, Birrell (1988) argues that sports are celebrated for their masculine skills and values, making them a heavily gender-stereotyped enterprise (Giordano & Harris, 2005). Therefore, traditionally education and socialization through sports have been understood as “masculinizing” and thus tied to patriarchal ideology. An important implication is the struggle with inequality which continues to plague women seeking sporting opportunities and careers (Kidd, 2013). Roth and Basow (2004) emphasize that this is problematic as women are likely to gain self-confidence and enjoyment from participation in sports and herewith stress an important empowerment element.

There are many social factors that steer women out of sports (Kosofsky, 1993). Although Kosofsky (1993) in her article refers to women in professional sports, plenty of research suggests that these conditions are applicable more widespread (Deem, 1982; Fink, 2016). She elaborates on four topics that explain discrepancies in possibilities, namely: history, masculinity, gender-based nurturing, and the media (Kosofsky, 1993). Women’s absence in sports throughout history can be explained by the strong pervasive association with masculinity. Excluding women from sports meant preventing society from feminizing. The historical construction of sports and the corresponding association with masculinity has resulted in gender-biased nurturing which adds challenges for women's equality in sports by constraining them from participating and developing athletic skills. Furthermore, the different roles of women and men in sports are strongly reinforced by the media which perpetuate rigid

and negative stereotypes about women athletes (Kosofsky, 1993).

More recent research demonstrates remaining accuracy of Kosofsky's findings. The common phrase "you throw like a girl" evokes the impression that women are unathletic beings or arguably that women athletes are faulty imitations of men (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014; Drake & Radford, 2019). Within the confines of the court, they are women first and athletes second. Mass media contributes to transmitting gender differences and inequality through daily visuals according to Trolan (2013) who explains that this feeds into the different socialization that women and men – in becoming – experience early in life. Hence, from the early days of sports and still anchored in popular belief today, women are perceived as outsiders (Pfister, 2010). The divided socialization plays a significant role in the prevailing devaluation of women, gays and lesbians in sports, and is even more unwelcoming to gender *deviants* such as transgender people (Travers, 2008). The binary system evidently closes doors. Although an increase in possibilities for women to participate in sports is visible, women are far from achieving equality in the most influential positions in sports (Hovden, 2013). Both Western and non-Western patriarchal societies have historically undermined the notion of women athletes by profiling women as inferior (Trolan, 2013; Samie et al., 2015).

Additionally, Mishra (2013) stresses that Western tendency has long been to homogenize and universalize women's experiences. It is important to consider factors that make up one's identity to explain differences between experiences. Examples of identity markers are ethnicity, skin color, social class, age, nationality, sexuality, able-body-ness, and religion (Mohanty, 1984). The understanding of how these identity markers combine and influence each other is referred to as intersectionality (Lutz, 2015). This allows us to understand the variety of circumstances that women worldwide find themselves in, which shape their lived experiences.

More widespread discrimination has always been apparent in sports, from the

exclusion of people of color, to amateur and professional female athletes and queer players (Caudwell, 2007; Krane, 2018; Trolan, 2013). Exceptionally, in the Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender and Sexuality (edited by Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014) several authors use the lens of intersectionality to elaborate on the experiences of those who are often forgotten in sports, among other, people of color, disabled athletes, and cultural, ethnic, and religious minorities.

Acknowledging the multitude of inequalities at play, it is not surprising that feminist scholars turn to the field of sports for analysis of gender relationships (Birrell, 1988). Sports feminism has grown into an established field within sport studies and does not stand in isolation, as it is intrinsically connected to more overarching feminist issues (Caudwell, 2011). As such, the scope of debates on the nature of feminism occurring outside of sports studies adds to sports feminism, and vice versa as one would hope (Caudwell, 2011).

### ***Feminist Theory in Sports***

Defining feminism is no straightforward task and should not be demanded, as this would be accompanied by a clear-cut idea of what one would have to do, say and be to acquire that designation (Thompson, 1994). From a broad perception the words feminist and feminism, are used to describe the ideas that advocate the emancipation of women, the movements that seek to realize this, and the individuals who are dedicated to these goals (Offen, 1988). Hence, at the heart of normative feminism lays the belief that women must be equal, empowered, and autonomous (Black, 2019). Ferree and Tripp (2006) argue that twenty-first century feminism undoubtedly has global dimensions, yet cannot and should not be considered one singular movement. This also applies to feminist sports theories, which Birrell (1988) describes as a dynamic and continuously expanding mosaic of theoretical traditions taking gender as its point of departure. Various movements in the 1960s and 1970s lead to significant changes for women in sports (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018).

Scraton and Flintoff (2013) offer an accurate overview. The authors point out that liberal feminists have advocated for equal access and opportunity in sports, critiquing the hegemonic *malestream* course of action. Radical feminists have addressed structural power relations as the result of systemic perpetuation of male power through patriarchy (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Furthermore, they have argued that women's involvement in sport is objectified, controlled and restricted through sport attire which ought to resemble a *heterosexy* image. Marxist feminists have pointed to capitalism for an explanation of unequal opportunities in sports, and socialist feminists claim both patriarchy and capitalism explain women's oppression.

More contemporary, poststructuralist feminists provide conceptual challenges to all the prior movements, focussing on diversity and stressing that the term "women" has minor significance in our fragmented and changing world. They plea for the recognition of a multitude of femininities, masculinities, and sexualities. Within poststructuralist feminism, there is a particular focus on the body and the ways in which women's bodies are disciplined. Queer theory has developed from poststructuralist feminism, particularly focussing on gender and sexuality, and offering a deconstructionist approach to sexual identities and heteronormative discourse (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

Since the early days of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, Black feminists have challenged dominant White feminist theory and activism by arguing that the experiences of Black women have not been made visible and that the sites of their oppression can be different from theirs (Hooks, 1989). The historical invisibility of Black women in feminism, according to Mirza (1997) speaks of how narrative constructions of race, class and gender are conceived of as separate entities as opposed to potential intersecting identity markers. Black feminism is therefore characterized by a framework of difference which disputes the universalistic approaches of liberal- and radical feminism (Scraton and Flintoff, 2013).

The blossoming of women's movements since the 1960s brought forth challenges with established traditions in social sciences, primarily related to existing notions around knowledge production (Naples & Gurr, 2014). In response to Marxist feminism, and postcolonial feminist challenges, the Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) was developed which calls attention to the knowledge that arises from experiences which are common to women and disputes the traditional androcentric approach to social sciences that historically favored Western viewpoints that are alienating to many (Naples & Gurr, 2014).

## **Method**

### **Type of Research**

This research is located within a qualitative paradigm and designed upon the aim of interpretative exploration. According to feminist epistemology, this type of research acknowledges that reality is inherently entangled with the human condition (Reiter, 2017). The governing principles in this research are inspired by the Standpoint Theory, a critical feminist theory concerned with the relationship between knowledge production and practices of power, as a method it is used prescriptively to research and analyze intersubjective discourses (Harding, 2004).

### **Participants**

This research employed purposive sampling, a technique typically used in qualitative research whereby participants are deliberately chosen based on the qualities they possess (Etikan et al., 2016). Out of the 32 organizations that the ONSIDE Fund regranted to in the first cohort, the 26 organizations which applied in English were invited per email to take part in this study. Within the ONSIDE collective, grantees are grouped into five geographic regions, of which four were reached out to and three are represented in this research, namely: 1) Europe and Central Asia, 2) Middle East and North-Africa and 3) Sub-Saharan Africa. From the approached organizations, 12 agreed to a semi-structured interview.

All interviews were conducted in English, through Zoom with one representative from each organization, who were informed about the aims and procedure of the research by means of an information letter and asked to provide consent prior to the interview through a Qualtrics survey. The interviews on average lasted approximately 47 minutes. Below, Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees*

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender identity</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Sport</b>
Grantee_A	27	Non-binary	Armenia	EU/CA	Football <i>LBTQ org</i>
Grantee_B	29	Woman	Botswana	SSA	Rugby
Grantee_F	48	Woman	France	EU/CA	Football <i>LBTQ org</i>
Grantee_G	33	Woman	Germany	EU/CA	Cycling
Grantee_J	25	Woman	Jordan	MENA	Martial arts
Grantee_K	33	Non-binary	Kenya	SSA	Soccer <i>LBTQ org</i>
Grantee_L	20	Woman	Lebanon	MENA	Basketball
Grantee_N	25	Woman	Netherlands	EU/CA	Urban sports
Grantee_P	36	Woman	Poland	EU/CA	Diving
Grantee_S	36	Woman	Syria	MENA	Cycling
Grantee_T	28	Trans woman	Tanzania	SSA	Netball and football <i>LBTQ org</i>
Grantee_U	22	Trans woman	Uganda	SSA	Netball <i>LBTQ org</i>

To enhance validity, this research sought to reach a sufficient sampling size. Sim and colleagues (2018) argue that qualitative studies conducted within a particular community with

participants that share similar experiences will evoke similar concepts which affect the sample size accordingly. Despite of the wide range of countries included, the sample can be considered homogeneous as interviewees were selected on the basis of their partnerships with ONSIDE. In addition, Bernard (2013) suggests that 10-12 knowledgeable people is satisfactory to grasp the core of a well-defined study of lived experiences.

### **Measuring Instrument**

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, as it was the most accessible method considering the online multinational research context. This type of interview is based on a set of questions asked in an open-ended manner, by which the researcher determines the flow of the interaction, but it takes place in a reciprocal relationship with the interviewee (Musante & DeWalt, 2010; Boeije, 2009).

The interviews were guided by fourteen questions divided over four topics, namely: (1) Gender equality (example questions: *How does gender equality become visible or tangible in your experience?*), (2) Gender equality in sports (example question: *How do you believe gender equality and sports relate?*), (3) Women's empowerment and socio-cultural context (example questions: *What are some of the social and cultural barriers that women face that make empowerment difficult?*), (4) Feminism (example questions: *How would you describe the societal reaction to feminist issues in your country?*).

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed in an edited form, excluding most pauses, stutters and filler unless it added context. Upon completion, the interview transcriptions were analyzed thematically with help of qualitative analysis software Nvivo12. Thematic analysis helps identify patterns in one's data set as well as analyzing and reporting these patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Floersch et al., 2010). In accordance with Patton (2002) the significance of a theme was not determined by its frequency. Its substantive significance was deemed more

essential, referring to the consistency of themes across respondents. A combination of inductive and deductive coding was performed, meaning that the themes identified were linked to the data itself but also coherent with the provided theoretical lens. Three main themes emerged: (1) mechanisms that contribute to gender inequality, (2) advantages to, barriers in and solutions around gender equality in sports, (3) lived experiences of feminist activism in equality issues.

## **Results**

This section outlines key findings derived from the interviews. Quotations from the interviews will be *italicized*. As noted, every interviewee comes from a different country. The scope of this thesis does not provide much space to reflect on the particularities of each context individually, which is why important similarities will be highlighted. Difference in answers are mentioned only in case of significant disagreement.

The organizations that interviewees represent are dedicated to empowering women and/or queer persons and strive for gender equality. As indicated in Table 1, a wide range of sports are used. What ties the narratives of interviewees across different sports is the shared experience of gender equality that remains hindered by a range of mechanisms. Based on the context of their specific locations, mechanisms that contribute to gender inequality can be different, yet there are noteworthy similarities that point to an unwelcoming atmosphere in the domain of sport.

### **Mechanisms that Contribute to Gender Inequality**

In order to grasp the inequalities experienced in sports, all interviewees emphasized on the importance of understanding more widespread inequalities and the mechanisms that provide their foundation. Indeed, inequality in sports merely reflects deeply rooted disbalanced power-relations in society. Patriarchy and socio-cultural and political context consisting of norms, roles, and legislation were recurring topics throughout all interviews.

## ***Patriarchy***

Although not all interviewees refer specifically to the word patriarchy, the red thread throughout the interviews has been the multi-layered impact of disproportionate amounts of power in all aspects of society held predominantly by men. Grantee\_S explained her observations as follows:

*[...] here in Syria we live under a patriarchal system and culture. When you raise kids, [...] you start from the beginning. It comes in their minds, those rules related with the patriarchal system which says that the man is above women, the man has the responsibility over women. Not just responsible, but who is able to take a decision on her behalf, she is not able to do anything. The patriarchal system is a huge issue.*

Grantee\_F acknowledges this “[...] still France is very much deeply influenced by the patriarchal misogynist culture.” However, several interviewees emphasize that where patriarchy historically is thought to have implications on men and women’s relationships, these dynamics are becoming less binary.

Interviewees from organizations that identify as LBTQ<sup>2</sup> stress that patriarchy should be seen as a continuum, where it is not just men opposed to women and queer persons but sometimes cisgender heterosexual women against queer persons. Grantee\_A, explained their take on this:

*“Historically LBTQ women especially were left out from LGBTQ organizations’ work and women’s work. [...] this patriarchy and men-orientedness, is also seen within the LGBTQI movement. And this kind of heteronormativity is also seen in women’s organizations.”*

The tiers of patriarchal hierarchism cause social disadvantage on women’s behalf and often exclusion altogether for queer persons in society which consequently holds important

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewees use LBTQ without the letter G as men are (often) not included.

implications in sports. Because of this, much talent goes unnoticed due to less opportunity to develop and showcase skills and lack of possibility to play. It has been suggested by several interviewees that if it was not for patriarchy, there would be more women in sports.

### ***Socio-cultural and Political Context***

Building forth on the section above, patriarchal notions are embedded in various domains within society, ranging from social interactions to legislations. Grantee\_J captured what all interviewees agreed to: *“Every culture has something that could affect women”*.

When asked about how women are typically valued in society, a rather pessimistic image is given by Grantee\_B:

*“[...] it's a cultural thing; when they say a woman holds the knife on the sharpest side, it says that a woman carries all the burden and should stay home and do all of this work, you know, be a caretaker and everything. It does not promote a woman in her in her whole entirety”*.

Almost all interviewees argue that gender-based stereotypes from an early age on are an important indicator of gender inequality in society. Particularly interviewees from countries in the MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa regions elaborate on segregated gender roles. It was for instance frequently argued that women are limited in the roles and spaces they can take up as Grantee\_K explained:

*“Yes, so remember like I said, things around cultural barriers. Especially, our focus is on queer women, but we cannot leave any other woman behind because the inequalities are actually intersectional. So I actually think it really affects someone, when there is no structure to even address the person you are as a woman [...] we as women are supposed to be visible, but only to a certain extent and not past a certain extent. I think culture plays a big role [...]”*

This selective visibility appoints to the ambiguity that characterizes womanhood for many interviewees. Their presence in some spaces, predominantly the domestic sphere is widely applauded but the public sphere is deemed off-limits. Grantee\_L, expressed how expectations from men play an important role in the way women take up space:

*“I can say cultural, because we were raised to be housekeepers you can say [...] it goes from way back when traditions were handcuffing us, and men were handcuffing us too, you know like ‘you’re a woman, you should just stay at home’, in the tradition.”*

What this illustrates is the prevalent notion that women ought to adhere to tasks and activities that are deemed feminine, which among others does not include sports. Interviewees argue that women are discouraged from starting to play sports. When they do, difficulties are faced because their participation clashes with their other roles. Especially mothers are limited by childcare duties and domestic chores, however the latter applies to a wider range of women. Moreover, most interviewees have stressed that the sport they play is typically considered exclusively male which can make it much harder to claim your place in it.

Grantee\_P said:

*“I mean, for example in diving, that was the sport which was really [associated] with gender inequality because it comes from soldiers, the army. So it was really considered as a sport for the guys, for tough guys. But, at the end of the story, we [women] changed the rules.”*

This suggests that as a result of pre-determined roles and responsibilities that cultures and customs prescribe, certain places and activities are deemed inappropriate for women. The binary division comes with more complicated consequences for queer individuals as they are not as easily placed within the status quo resulting in additional exclusion. Bearing in mind the intersecting discriminations at play, Grantee\_U underscored that no woman has it easy in

sports: “So, society has really boxed us into believing that, you know, women or girls in all their diversities, they can’t be part of sport. That that’s not their game, you know, that that’s not their thing.”

Among many statements made, interviewees are very vocal about the notion that sports long have been and still are among the most visible domains in which gender inequality become visible. Although many also addressed improvements in their countries on policy and legislation level, not much is done to follow through. As long as inequality remains rooted in the behaviour of the majority and is unpunished by the systems in power, changes on paper are not really changes at all.

### **Advantages, Barriers and Solutions Around Equality in Sports**

Given the mechanisms described, there are several barriers that ONSIDE grantees describe with regard to sports particularly as well as their strategies to counter them. In order to understand the frustrations surrounding gender inequality in sports and the aspirations to combat this, it is important to first gain an understanding of the perceptions of ONSIDE grantees regarding the value of sports for women and LGBTQ persons.

#### ***Advantages***

When asked about advantages of sports, it first and foremost is stressed that sports have a positive influence on overall health and wellbeing. This contains both physical and mental components. The physical aspect relates to maintaining a healthy weight, condition and building self defense techniques for women to fend for themselves in situations where they feel endangered. Moreover, physicality also relates to freedom of movement, especially stressed by interviewees who use cycling as a tool. Mental benefits include increased confidence, improved self-image, a stronger mindset and reduced anxiety.

Secondly, the interviewees emphasized that sports, and more importantly the organizations that facilitate them, foster a sense of safety, community and belonging that

women and LGBTQ persons long for within the often hostile surroundings in society. The pitch has been described as a place of unity that creates solidarity, a place to call home. Grantee\_F shared:

*“So, providing a safe space, a place where we can express ourselves, be safe, to be in a good environment. But also a place from where to build strength, and to go to other social groups and to start conversations about discrimination, about our possibilities.”*

Interviewees argue that sports help socialize especially younger members into society, either by teaching them important aspects of culture in terms of norms and values or by re-socializing them to unlearn toxic elements of society. Sports can also provide a good base from which conversations start.

For the various reasons outlined here, interviewees believe sports hold enormous potential for collective and individual change. Building on her argument, Grantee\_K explained:

*“Sports is actually a tool for advocacy. But sports is also a passion for so many people, it’s what they love, what they want to do. But actually, when it comes to gender equality, sports actually disrupts the notion that men can do certain things and women cannot do certain things. The fact that you can disrupt notions [...] this gives us a platform to challenge some of these systems, some of these structures”.*

Several interviewees draw to the reality that women are taught not to prioritize themselves. Within the organizations however, women are encouraged and empowered to focus on their own wellbeing and to negotiate and resist the societal constraints on their leisure choices.

### ***Barriers***

According to all interviewees many barriers are faced when it comes to sports. One of the biggest difficulties is the availability of safe spaces for women to train. Often, pitches are

exclusively reserved for men or dominated by them. Related to the latter, when women manage to find spaces to practice, male audiences tend to create atmospheres characterized by intimidation. Referring to the experiences that girls and women in her network have with outdoor exercise equipment in parks, Grantee\_N stressed:

*[...] they really felt unsafe there, because it's such a display of like, this very tough vibe with all this raw energy and people showing off and grouping together, playing loud music. Often, people really felt unsafe and therefore uncomfortable to use it.*

Another issue is related to accessibility. Many interviewees have argued that some women are hard to reach, which is especially the case for organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region where a significant part of the population lives in the countryside. Moreover, lack of resources provides an important barrier. The interviewees elaborated on difficulties of allocating funds for their organizations, as men's sports organizations tend to be favored. This also applies to sports equipment, which is scarcely available to women. Promotion of women's sports initiatives also significantly lacks. In the case of team sports, women's games are usually played at inconvenient times and there is less media coverage. When there is, the language used is typically degrading.

Finally, the interviewees stressed that there is a lack of women in decision making positions in sports. Therefore, their role models to mobilize younger generations to participate in sports are scarce. As some grantees have pointed out, the term equality does not accurately cover the barriers experienced as this assumes that equal resources create equal opportunities which is not always true. Instead, Grantee\_G among others argued for the use of gender equity.

### ***Solutions***

Given the barriers, interviewees employ various strategies to bridge the existing gaps. When asked how their organizations contribute, all interviewees emphasize that the very

existence of their organization adds to the mission by giving women and queer persons a safe space to come together and practice sports and therewith challenge the status quo. Being “here” increases visibility and empowers which in turn leads to more equality. Social media has been named as an effective means to draw attention to gender equality and other feminist issues that grantee organizations advocate for.

Several interviewees indicate that their organization provides trainings on leadership skills. The women- and queer led organizational structure itself provides important leadership positions in which skills can be acquired that are beneficial both within and beyond sports. Furthermore, interviewees indicate that education is an important means for change, as Grantee\_J elaborated:

*“Actually, education is the key of everything. A school degree, or a college degree is not just education, education is about mental education, having certain moral thoughts in the community, in the society that people should be aware of, moral messages, main ideas. And I think all the feminist institutions and organizations should work on that. Don't work on fighting, or debating or challenging people.”*

The purpose of education is to build and strengthen capacity of women and queer members but also the communities surrounding them. This is done by facilitating trainings and courses as well as activist campaigns. Interviewees emphasize the importance of engaging with their local communities to convey their messages more widespread and to increase collective awareness. Interviewees indicate that this increases visibility which is thought to be a key strategy to mobilize gender equality.

### **Feminist Lived Experiences**

The organizations which the interviewees in this research represent are feminist, however, some do not explicitly refer to themselves as such. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the role that feminism plays for grantees and what responses they typically receive

from society. For many, feminism equals empowerment, which evokes a sense of militancy that blossoms in the communities that women and queer persons create for themselves.

### ***Role of Feminism***

Feminist objectives provide the guidelines by which the organizations of interviewees are lead. Grantee\_K explained:

*“When it comes to feminism and women’s empowerment, the agency that feminism gives, agency to participate, agency to be included, voice out your opinion, [...] to really take up space [...], create equal opportunities. I think that is actually at the core of women’s empowerment.”*

However, feminism is not understood and practiced the same way. While most interviewees debunk the notion of the importance of a universal feminism, Grantee\_G argued somewhat differently:

*“[...] the initial idea of feminism was that women in different countries are faced with quite similar challenges, which was primarily focused on patriarchy and male domination in societies. [...] I have the feeling that, for example, Western feminists see or define women's rights in Muslim countries different than women's rights in Western countries. It is as if women in Muslim countries have different wishes or different challenges, or as if patriarchy does not exist there, you know. They don't focus on the barriers that their sisters in the Islamic countries are facing.”*

### ***Resistance to Feminism***

When asked about responses to feminist issues in society, most interviewees agree that it has a rather daunting image which causes much resistance. Among other things, interviewees indicate that feminists are typically deemed angry people who intend to disrupt the hegemonic state of affairs in society. It was often noted that men feel threatened by empowered women. Several interviewees from Sub-Saharan African countries note that

feminism in the viewpoint of society is seen as something Western, a White practice that intends to abolish local cultures. Grantee\_B phrased it as follows: “*Well, from what I gather, I know people think feminism is like a cult. They think it's evil. They think it's a bunch of people that are angry.*” Accordingly, Grantee\_J stressed:

*“Other people, they focus on the negative effect of feminism, they consider it as something negative and they forbid it and they even fight it [...] some people think that feminism is actually a group that is fighting men, but we don't want to fight men, we just want to empower women.”*

The discrepancy between their missions and the mainstream vision in society, according to grantees shows the importance of their work. The resistance to feminism shares common ground with the resistance to women in sports. One might argue that the former is a result of the latter. Women advocating loud and proud for their place in the public sphere and especially in the male dominated domain of sports causes discomfort to the people who initially claimed this space. In their efforts to reach more equality, many have sought allyship with men, in the hope but most of all in the understanding that without their support this shall remain a difficult ordeal.

## **Discussion**

This study’s aim was to grasp how ONSIDE grantees relate to gender equality in sports and what characterizes their lived experiences as feminist advocates in this field. In sum, all grantees recognize and relate to the issues of gender equality in sports, but foremost emphasize the importance of understanding this in relation to more widespread inequalities. As grantee organizations lay at the intersection of feminism and sports, sports are considered a tool to combat other inequalities. While sports indeed are considered an innovative instrument, a universal language and a promising method to build bridges across and within cultures (Beutler, 2008; UN Women, 2020), the particularities of personal and circumstantial

situations cause different experiences. Hence, there is a fine line between sports in inequality and inequality in sports. In sports, none are pioneering in inexplicable experiences, as many of the same limiting mechanisms and barriers were addressed. With regard to feminist lived experiences, the importance of intersectionality is underscored. Overall, feminism evokes empowerment, agency and a sense of unity within their own communities, however, also resistance from the status quo. As such, this research highlighted contemporary mechanisms, barriers, advantages and solutions to gender equality and experiences related to feminist activism.

### **Mechanisms**

Patriarchal structures, rooted in norms and values across the countries and cultures represented in this research are important mechanisms to understand the hinder in gender equality in sports and more widespread. The testimonies of grantees echo DeKeseredy's (2021) explanation that patriarchy comprises of social institutions and relationships that allow men to maintain power and privilege. It is important to understand what values continue to drive the system.

Grantee\_K and several others elaborated on the intersectionality of inequalities at play, which demonstrates the accuracy of Mohanty (1984) and Lutz' (2015) argumentation that different overlapping identity markers create a variety of discriminations. For instance, gendered socialization into different roles provides an important explanation for inequality, which reflect the findings of Kosofsky (1993) and Trolan (2013). Grantees indicate that societies' expectation of women in the domestic sphere can cause people to consider their presence in sports as anomaly. This is reflected in the work of Bhotmange (n.d.) who explains that women historically are considered the mistresses of domesticity while men are the master of all else.

Although acknowledged in different forms by all grantees, gender roles in Sub-

Saharan African and MENA countries were especially emphasized. Prah (2013) and Adnane (2015) indeed underscore historical role asymmetry in these regions. While most grantees acknowledge attempts being made on policy and legislation level in their countries, in practice this remains overshadowed by deeply rooted social and cultural norms. Moreover, a study by Dixon (2009) demonstrates that mothers face additional challenges in pursuing sports, which reflects what several grantees mentioned about balancing motherhood and leisure activities.

Furthermore, despite courageous efforts to increase inclusion and safety for athletes off all sexual orientations and gender expressions (Griffin, 2012), queer grantees draw to the prevalence of persisting discrimination, which in some of their countries is reinforced through law.

### **Advantages, Barriers and Solutions**

When it comes to the value of sports that grantees elaborate on (e.g. mental and physical health) the literature outlined afore and current findings strongly reflect each other (e.g. Roth & Bastow, 2004; Hancock et al., 2013). Moreover, grantees value the sense of community and inclusion that their organizations provide. The study of Warner and Dixon (2012) underscores that this sense of community provides benefit both on and off the field.

Furthermore, barriers provide a severe burden. The issues mentioned include: the male dominance at (shared) pitches, accessibility issues due to geographic location, lack of resources and fewer leadership positions resulting in fewer role models. Many of these issues correspond with the issues that feminist movements (e.g. liberal, radical, post-structural) have been fighting for in sports since the 1960s (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Yet the *malestream* course of action is increasingly being challenged by those who refuse to be side-lined.

Solutions of interviewees focus on the creation of safe spaces, increasing visibility through (online) advocacy around the importance of sports for women and queer individuals

and other feminist issues, as well as educating communities on these topics. The internet and social media have proven to be helpful for grantees to spread messages, as also acknowledged in the work of Johansson and Scaramuzzino (2019) on digital advocacy and presence.

### **Lived Experiences**

Feminism provides the foundation of the organizations of grantees. As an ideology it among others empowers and paves the way to inclusivity and equality in sports. While this is widely acknowledged in academia as well (Birrell, 1988); Scraton & Flintoff, 2013), the feminist perspective on sports is also critiqued as it would promote masculinity over femininity and therewith uphold patriarchal values (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020). Nonetheless, can also serve as a site to challenge traditional values, which offers an accurate explanation for the backlash that grantees experience from those who find themselves on the dominant side of the power continuum in society.

Especially by grantees from Sub-Saharan African and MENA countries, a societal fear of ‘contamination’ of dominant Western models of feminism is voiced. Grantees point to the importance of intersectional approaches to feminism, given their diverse lived experiences. Therefore, it is important to speak of feminisms in the plural. The argument raised by Grantee\_G with regard to feminist issues in Muslim countries, shows how Eurocentric imagining of the Western self occupies a privileged “insider” status which casts Muslim women as “outsiders” which also applies in sports (Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). This corresponds with Black feminist accusation that White discourses in feminism have disregarded their issues and struggles (Flintoff & Scraton, 2013). Moreover, Grantee\_G, a German woman with Iranian roots and Grantee\_L, a Lebanese woman with Palestinian roots emphasize that intersectionality does not only apply across countries but also within countries (e.g. minority versus majority differences).

### **Limitations**

This study contains limitations worthwhile addressing. First, the research sample provided little ground to explore societal and regional differences between grantees in-depth, while this is arguably an interesting and important component to consider. Moreover, because of the range of countries included, many topics came to the fore which consequently did not allow deeper analysis of themes.

Second, because of the wide variety of sports that grantees play, there was not enough ground to make separate conclusive remarks on gender equality, while arguably there are. With first and second limitation combined, it must be emphasized that only a general conclusion can be drawn about the experiences of ONSIDE's first cohort. Considering that not all regions were reached or included, this research must acknowledge its limited representativeness.

Finally, although to great extent the same topics and questions were discussed regardless of the length of the interview, the varying durations<sup>3</sup> somewhat complicated the analysis and reporting of findings. Nonetheless, interviewees are represented relatively evenly in this research. Furthermore, due to connection problems during several interviews, words and sentences went missing or were too unclear to include, making the data arguably condensed. Nevertheless, the variation in interview length did not constitute an obstacle to answering the research question nor was this the case for the missing data which was negligible in amount.

## **Recommendations**

Building upon the findings and limitations, various recommendations can be made. First, to increase the validity, future inquiries should include a broader scope of interviewees. In the context of ONSIDE, this could be done by incorporating not only grantees but also organizations who did not receive funding. Moreover, representation of all five regions would

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<sup>3</sup> Between 18 and 90 minutes.

allow a more comprehensive analysis.

Second, it is valuable to have more in-depth insight in how the initiatives of grantee organizations actively work on establishing gender equality, for instance by placing greater emphasis on solutions that they employ. Moreover, grantees themselves could benefit from exchanging stories and strategies and as such learn from each other's work.

Third, given the complexity and persistence of the mechanisms, barriers, and backlash that grantees experience, this draws to the importance of funding opportunities that the ONSIDE Fund provides as well as the awareness that NGO's such as Women Win bring to this field. The challenges that grantees face depending on the intersecting characteristics that mark their specific contexts calls on the awareness of practitioners in the field, like NGO's, to adapt their support accordingly. The findings in this research for example demonstrate the additional barriers that queer organizations encounter, which should be considered more in future grant applications.

In all, this study scratched the surface of several important themes related to gender equality in sports and lived experiences of feminist activists, in which some may find inspiration to continue exploration. As such, this study was intended as a stepping stone for future research on grassroots organization's attempts to realize gender equality in a variety of contexts; a focus on feminist identities and male allyship especially remain important themes to consider.

### **Conclusive remarks**

Whether as players, feminists or both, women and queer persons remain plagued by the power of systemic patriarchy, but their resistance is fierce and persistent. Hargreaves (2013) accurately notes that gendered heroism is continuously being challenged by women determined to appropriate the narratives of maleness through which they transform themselves from victims to superstars. Many feminists argue that to claim an identity that

historically was exclusively male in a macho culture can be seen as symbolically heroic. The fight for equality in sports has come a long way and develops continuously. However, it remains to be seen whether sports alone will make a meaningful change in broader equality issues. For the master's tool may not ever completely dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984). Yet the tireless commitments that speak loudly in the testimonies of interviewees evoke a sense of undeniable hope that power playing the patriarchy one day indeed will lead to a tied game.

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