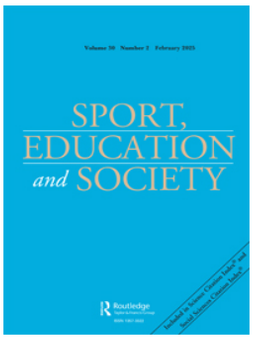

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Of course you should fight with a girl! Doing gender in the inclusion work of budo and martial arts sport clubs

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of gender as a central organizing principle in the inclusion work within martial arts clubs in Sweden, against a backdrop of inclusion being an explicit focus in the policy programs of the sports movement. Based on qualitative data collected through focus group interviews with representatives from three martial arts clubs, this study departs from a social constructionist perspective where gender is understood as a social process or a 'doing'. The analysis of the data reveals two distinct approaches to gender as an organizing principle: downplaying the significance of gender and explicating the significance of gender. Within the first approach the meaning and significance of gender are subordinated by organizing mixed-gender groups and regulating interactions within the groups. The importance of equalizing potential physical differences and avoiding sexism in practice, is emphasized. However, the approach also brings forward challenging situations related to gender and other inclusion aspects, such as religious beliefs and cultural backgrounds. The second approach recognizes the significance of gender as a structural aspect and employs gender-separatist training groups and specific activities for girls and women. These targeted efforts are justified by the respondents because of the male dominance and masculinity norms that exist in martial arts and hinder girls' and women's participation. The findings highlight the complexities and tensions of how gender is constructed and reproduced within the context of martial arts clubs and contribute to deepening the understanding of how these constructions condition the inclusion work.

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To achieve social inclusion in voluntary sports clubs is an ongoing and crucial issue in sports and highlighted in Swedish sport policy (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010), and understanding the conditions for inclusion is key in this endeavor for both research and pedagogical practice. A distinguishing feature in the Swedish sports model is the 'implicit contract'. This is a relation characterized by cooperation and limited control by the government, where the government expresses its intentions and overall aims with the financial support but places the responsibility (and freedom) of the implementations, e.g. of gender equality and inclusion, on the sports movement, with its core of non-profit sport clubs and voluntary sport leaders (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010). It makes the practices of voluntary sport clubs a fruitful site for investigating how inclusion is conditioned (cf. Hammond et al., 2019). This way of governing does, however, affect the impact and outcomes of sport programs. Fahlén et al. (2014) show how large-scale sports programs, initiated and financed by the government, push the responsibility for development down to sport club level, throughout the chain: the

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government – the Swedish Sports Confederation – National Sport Organizations – local sport clubs. The applied self-regulating governing model as a structure of accountability empowers the recipients of projects and funding, but an important result from the researchers is that the main ideas of the programs are to a certain extent left unattended (Fahlén et al., 2014). This is a development that has been noted in many other countries and research also shows that there are challenges with using this mode of policy implementation. Dowling (2020) showed, for example, that the government's intentions of including refugees instead lead to exclusion and upholding of racialized hierarchies in sport.

Over the past few decades, the Swedish state has financed different programmes to promote sports participation of different social categories, mainly focusing on children and adolescents. Gender equality has been a prominent focus of those efforts, driven by the recognition of gender equality issues in sports policy (Larsson, 2014). Recently in Sweden, ethnocultural and socioeconomic segregation has also gained prominence (Dartsch et al., 2019), and people with migrant backgrounds (cf. Arnoldsson et al., 2019) as well as people with various functional abilities have been targeted (cf. Andersson et al., 2023). There is, however, no clear definition of how the concept of inclusion should be understood within research (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017), nor in practice. It is commonly understood as the opportunity for participation, but it involves more than mere involvement (Kiuppis, 2018). In recent years, the issue of inclusion within Swedish voluntary sports has gained significant attention. For example, since 2015, 'Inclusive sport for all' constitutes one of the prioritized areas in *Strategy 2025,* a sport policy program, declaring the goal: 'In 2025, everyone, regardless of gender, age, background, or other prerequisites, will feel welcome to join a sports club' (Swedish Sport Confederation, 2021). Notably, who should be included is not particularly defined. However, the establishment of the *Strategy 2025* coincided with the migration crisis that began in Europe in 2015. In response to this crisis, the Swedish government allocated funds to the Swedish Sports Confederation, to assist in the integration of migrants and asylum seekers into Swedish society through sports activities and involvement in sports clubs (Arnoldsson et al., 2019). This initiative is an illustrative example of the self-governing chain of the non-profit sports movement previously described: where the Swedish Sport Confederation formulated the goals and direction of the investment, based on the purpose expressed in a few sentences in the government's proposition. Eventually, the regional sports federations and local sport clubs designed the activities based on their different prerequisites, which sometimes incorporated education on inclusion issues for managers and coaches. Additionally, the Swedish Sport Confederation allocated funds for evaluation and research efforts, to follow up the program. Hence, the goal statement in the *Strategy 2025* and the government's contingent funds somewhat differ, from for instance, how diversity is managed in Australian sport, in which the government and sporting bodies promote social inclusion, but the sport clubs are left without incentives (Spaaij et al., 2014). One of the National Sports Organizations that received funds from the government was the Swedish Budo and Martial Arts Federation (SBMAF), which distributed money to its budo and martial arts clubs to promote inclusion. Inclusion work is not a novel concept within SBMAF, which is recognized for its proficiency in inclusion, especially regarding ethnicity. Over the years, the SBMAF has implemented various projects and policies, such as 'Open Diversity', to promote inclusion within their organization, aligning with the sports movement's mission and strategic changes.

How sport clubs act on inclusion impacts the transformative potential of the initiative, meaning the work on inclusion to promote equality is of pedagogical importance (cf. Watson et al., 2013). In this study we investigate what and how the sport clubs, being at the end of the chain as policy actors (cf. Evans et al., 2024; Hammond et al., 2019) responsible for accomplishing the ideas, do in the name of inclusion and how that shapes gendered subject positions. We therefore join critical sport research, in asserting that sport is an arena that actively (re)produces, maintains, and potentially challenges (in)equalities (Dashper & Fletcher, 2013; Hills & Croston, 2011; Hammond et al., 2019; Metcalfe, 2018). The authors of this article examined inclusion efforts in budo and martial arts sports clubs, finding that inclusion was primarily understood as gender-focused and largely equated with gender equality work. This aligns with the strong gender equality discourse in Swedish sport.

Nonetheless, gender and gender equality, being a salient feature in the martial art club's inclusion work, thus constitute a condition for the possibilities of achieving inclusion. Yet, the enactment of gender in the inclusion efforts remains an underexplored area of research. In this article, we return to the empirical material with the aim of exploring gender as a central organizing principle in the work of inclusion within martial arts clubs, and we ask: How is gender constructed in efforts to increase inclusion? Understanding the ways in which gender is constructed and reproduced within these contexts provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for achieving inclusion in voluntary sports clubs.

Central theoretical concepts

Gender plays an indisputable role in shaping the experiences and opportunities of individuals within sports (cf. Watson, 2018). Exploring how gender is constructed and how these constructions shape room for action for gendered subjects i.e. how individuals are positioned as active participants, is of vital pedagogical importance (cf. Metcalfe, 2018). In this study, the focus is on the constructions of gender in sports clubs' representatives' narratives on inclusion. Doing so, social categorizations, such as gender, ethnicity, age and functionality, are here studied as a process, as something that is 'done'. The actions and statements of individuals are not solely explained by their gender; rather, gender is discernible within the structures, norms, and practices that shape our interactions. In the theoretical framework of 'doing gender,' the gendered subject is studied as a socially constructed entity, negotiated through ongoing interactions, rather than being dependent on any inherent quality or essence (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender constructions, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), can be understood as routines – methodical and recurrent patterns – within social interactions, influenced by normative views related to binary gender categories.

How inclusion and gender equality initiatives are shaped depends on what appears reasonable and logical to think and act, which is regulated and framed within dominant norms and power structures (Foucault, 1998/1976), entailing that inclusion work is an act of power. Power, therefore, becomes a central concept here, understood as something that is both productive and restrictive, in the sense that power both creates and limits room for action, which takes place in a constant negotiation and is always relational (Foucault, 1998/1976). Categorizing certain groups risks creating stereotypical ideas and contributing to notions of normality and deviation. Norms can be described as contextually specific beliefs, ideas, and unwritten rules about what is normal, desirable, and true. If norms are followed, they can be difficult to detect; it is when they are exceeded, they become visible. West and Zimmerman (1987) frame this as accountability, which links everyday social interactions to the persistence and repetition of gender roles. Importantly, this does not diminish individual agency in the act of 'performing' gender. Instead, the concept of accountability contextualizes these factors and emphasizes the need to acknowledge how inequality is perpetuated during interactions. From this perspective, gender is not merely a collection of traits, a variable, or a role; it emerges as a result of social actions, meaning that gender, as a dynamic process, should be understood as an interactional scaffolding, a social structure upheld through social control (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Previous research

While constructions of gender in inclusion efforts are relatively sparsely researched, the design and effects in terms of how gender is done in gender equality work have been thoroughly scrutinized by researchers. According to Larsson (2014), gender equality is, in Nordic countries, characterized by three approaches to gender and gender equality in sport: a gender-neutral, a gender-specific, and a more critical approach (Larsson, 2014). The gender-neutral approach stems from neoliberal political discourses, with the idea that sport participation or leadership is based on individual preferences. The gender specific approach is founded on the ideas of significant sex differences, supporting a traditional, stereotypical view on gender. These two approaches take a stand in a binary gender model,

interpreted as a biological body, seeing gender as a stable category. The critical perspective is more radical, challenging conventional ideas on gender as well as (competitive) sport practice. Herein, gender is perceived as socially and within sport constructed.

In gender equality, as in inclusion work, rationales to engage in such efforts differ from a more 'business driven' rhetoric aiming to increase the number of members, for example, to a more 'social justice' approach appealing to moral and a sense of doing right (Spaaij et al., 2014). Regardless of which narratives are used to legitimize gender equality or inclusion, sport organizations seem to diagnose inequality, non-participation, and underrepresentation as issues of the individual, placing obstacles and solutions with the target group (cf. Ekholm et al., 2019; Svender et al., 2012). In gender equality work, this has led to framing gender equality as an issue of and for girls and women, where girls and women become objects to be 'fixed' and adjusted to a masculine norm and conventional ways of organizing sport (Kempe-Bergman et al., 2020; Svender et al., 2012). Further, gender equality work means establishing specific ideas about what a certain group of people are like, what they want, and need, identifying certain groups as needing special measures, not seldom linked to certain ethnicity, gender, age, or functional ability (cf. Ekholm et al., 2019; Svender et al., 2012; Jeanes et al., 2022). This stereotyping is entwined with ideas of normality and deviance, and the relationship between them, where those who constitute the norm have privileges and interpretive priority, while those constructed as the target group of inclusion are marginalized and excluded. This risks an inclusion work that advocates assimilation rather than valuing difference (Dowling, 2020; Frisby & Ponic, 2013). Overall, sport organizations who lack the ability to address structural barriers and mechanisms generating inequality, such as power relations of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Shaw & Frisby, 2006), will most likely lead to measures failing to challenge the main problem. These mechanisms of how conceptualizations of gender constitute an important condition for action are well described in previous research on gender and gender equality. Hovden (2012), Larsson (2014), as well as Kempe-Bergman et al. (2020) point out that the understanding of gender is of importance for how a gender equality work is formed; what is constituted as the problem is reflected in the ideas of reasonable solutions and actions. Similarly, Hammond et al. (2019) show how established discourses shape the room for action in inclusion work, but less is known specifically about how constructions of gendered subjects in the broader realm of inclusion work condition the room for action.

This study was conducted in the empirical context of martial arts, which is seen as a masculine domain that might act as a barrier to women's participation (Alsarve & Tjønndal, 2020; Kavoura et al., 2015; Maclean, 2015; Maor, 2019) and imposes expectations on women to adhere to feminine norms (Mierzwinski et al., 2014). It has further been suggested that martial arts training can challenge societal perceptions of women's vulnerability and improve their safety by altering gendered power dynamics (Lindsay et al., 2023; Noel, 2009). Both male and female participants recognize martial arts potential to empower women physically and mentally. Women martial artists reported gaining self-confidence and self-defence skills, while men acknowledged the equal physical capabilities of their female counterparts in martial arts. Drawing on notions of hegemonic masculinity, Alsarve and Tjønndal (2020) explore how gendered power relations can be challenged by participation in mixed martial arts (MMA) in Norway and Sweden and highlight women's potential as feminist role models through their engagement in a traditionally male-dominated sport. Nevertheless, despite the progressive potential, women in martial arts risk remaining a small and marginalized group (Alsarve & Tjønndal, 2020; Kavoura et al., 2015). Mixed-gender training sessions are, according to Channon (2014), common in martial arts and combat sport and contrast to the typical gender segregation in sports. Channon (2014) argues that integrated training can question orthodox ideas about gender differences and gender injustice. Here Maclean's (2019) study shows that the colored belts used by athletes to make their ability visible might contribute – yet not completely – to abolishing gender differences in mixed-gender trainings. Further, in a scoping review of women's experiences in martial arts, Lindsay et al. (2023) found that mixed-gender training can help women improve their skills, establish friendships, and challenge negative gender stereotypes.

On the other hand, Lindsay et al. (2023) also noted that mixed-gender contact in martial arts can be problematic due to discomfort, religious and social reasons, and concerns about physical safety and sexual connotations, therefore suggesting that single-gender groups may be beneficial for some, but gender segregation should be voluntary. Based on seemingly contradictory conclusions on whether mixed-gender training is a successful way of challenging traditional gender norms and achieving gender equality, Hills and Croston (2011) suggest that mixed-gender practice in an educational setting needs a gender conscious approach and needs to be intentionally organized. While previous research in the context of budo and martial arts have demonstrated how women experience their participation in a masculine domain, showing that traditional femininity somewhat can be challenged, women still tend be marginalized. Here, we follow that research, examining the implication of the design and organization of budo and martial arts practice for gender constructions, within the frame of inclusion work.

Material and method

This study is based on a re-examination of material gathered for a report on inclusion for the Swedish Budo and Martial Arts Federation (SBMAF). SBMAF consists of 18 sports disciplines, organizing different sports, such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu, kickboxing, arm-wrestling, capoeira, and mixed martial arts. The clubs participating in the study offer mainly budo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu and Kyokushin, which are three of the more common disciplines. The clubs include all ages, children to adults. The participants in this study often move fluently between disciplines and make a point of not distinguishing their narratives across disciplines. In the following sections, we use the term martial arts since it is the term most used by the respondents, even if the federation is named 'budo and martial arts' and consists of many different specific disciplines.

The study employed a qualitative research design, and the data collection for the study was carried out through focus group interviews. The goal of the interviews was to explore participants' experiences, thoughts, and meaning-making regarding inclusion as a concept and practices in a collective knowledge-building process (cf. Roulston, 2010). Interview situations where participants can build upon or challenge each other's reasoning help researchers examine complex processes, such as inclusion and inclusion work in this case (cf. Sevilmiş & Yıldız, 2022). Three focus group interviews were conducted, each consisting of four to five participants, representing three different clubs. The number of participants was kept within this range to allow for meaningful interaction and discussion without limiting each participant's ability to express their opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The researchers served as moderators to guide the discussions and ensure that all participants had the opportunity to contribute. Selection criteria included diverse representation in terms of gender, age, role and expertise as well as geographical diversity, to ensure diverse perspectives and insights representative of the broader activities of the SBMAF (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant overview.

Focus group	Participant	Gender	Age	Experience	Club commitment
Club 1	1	M	30–50	Less than 5 years	Athlete, board member, coach
	2	M	Under 30	5–15 years	Athlete
	3	F	Under 30	More than 15 years	Athlete, board member, coach
	4	M	30–50	More than 15 years	Athlete, coach
Club 2	1	M	Over 50	5–15 years	Athlete, coach
	2	F	30–50	5–15 years	Athlete, board member, coach
	3	F	Over 50	More than 15 years	Athlete, board member, coach
	4	M	Over 50	More than 15 years	Athlete, coach
	5	F	Over 50	More than 15 years	Athlete
Club 3	1	M	Over 50	More than 15 years	Athlete, board member, coach
	2	F	30–50	Less than 5 years	Athlete, parent
	3	M	Over 50	5–15 years	Athlete
	4	F	30–50	More than 15 years	Athlete, board member, coach

The clubs were recruited via an initial and a reminder e-mail, and clubs willing to participate were engaged in a dialogue. The recruitment procedure faced severe challenges, as the study was conducted amid the pandemic, where sports clubs barely had any activities, and we had to settle for three focus groups. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to ensure comprehensive coverage of inclusion-related aspects, such as norms, organizational structures, and inclusion practices. The interviews were conducted via a digital platform and the researchers made efforts to create a comfortable and inclusive environment for the participants, despite the remote setting. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The diverse roles of the participants, including practitioners, coaches, and other active club members, provided multifaceted insights into inclusion efforts within martial arts clubs. In the interviews, it was revealed that some of the participants had a foreign background, and some identified as HBTQI, but this was, due to ethical reasons, not part of the selection criteria. The interviews lasted between 70 and 90 minutes, providing ample time for in-depth exploration of the topics.

Ethical aspects were considered throughout the research process in accordance with guidelines for *good research practice* from the Swedish Research Council (2017). Informed consent was obtained from all participants upon describing the aim and purpose of the data collection, and their privacy and confidentiality were protected. In the analysis and reporting of the findings to ensure anonymity, the participants and clubs are referred to by number. Neither health-related information nor sensitive personal data was collected from any participant, hence ethical approval was considered redundant according to national regulation.

Analytic approach

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts served as the primary data for the analysis. The original study aimed to understand how inclusion was conceptualized and negotiated, and the analytic procedure followed a thematic approach as outlined by Bryman (2018). This process allowed for the identification of patterns, themes, and connections within the data, and provided a detailed output on the different strategies that the sports clubs deployed to achieve inclusion. Next, which is the focal point of this study, the strategies for inclusion that were identified were revisited and scrutinized with a particular focus on the appearance of gender, as this was specifically identified as a central aspect in the negotiation of inclusion and exclusion in the data. The researchers read the texts multiple times and sorted the material based on different approaches to gender as an organizing principle in the everyday practices of the sports clubs. Thereafter, the material was analyzed in relation to the theoretical perspective that inspired the study, specifically drawing on the work of West and Zimmerman (1987) when aiming to elicit how gender was done. Inspired by Foucault (1971), the analysis involved formulating analytical questions posed to the material, such as: What problems and solutions are framed in the different strategies for inclusion? What is perceived as reasonable, and logical, in relation to increasing women's participation? How are gendered subjects positioned in relation to problems and solutions when reasoning on inclusion? The theoretical perspective provided an interpretive lens for data to explore gender as a central organizing principle in the work of inclusion within martial art clubs, including the power dynamics at play. The analysis is presented under two subheadings in the subsequent section: *Downplaying gender* and *Explicating gender*.

Results

Respondents in this study are actively identifying and articulating male norms in sports, particularly in budo and martial arts. The masculinity norms, often referred to by the respondents as 'macho' norms or culture, are a key factor in the respondents' decision to focus their inclusion efforts primarily on women. This focus is also influenced by the perception that budo and martial arts are

inherently violent. Woven into the macho culture highlighted by the respondents, are also elements of sexism. The respondents believe that the 'macho norm' characterizes the public's ideas about budo and martial arts, which can be exclusionary. The masculinity norms and the male-dominance in martial arts, are recognized as barriers to women's participation. They attempt to resolve this with two distinct organizing principles, *Downplaying gender* and *Explicating gender*. The goal of both these principles is inclusion where anyone can participate regardless of gender. In all clubs' reasoning about and practices for inclusion, both logics are visible and activated but to varying extent. These two approaches lead to certain consequences that need to be resolved and the development of strategies to do that.

Downplaying gender

Aiming at inclusion by downplaying the significance of gender as an organizing principle, mixed-gender groups are framed as the ideal approach to organize sport practice, where girls and boys, women and men train together and spar with each other. The mixed-gender groups are assumed to contribute to inclusion and gender equality by subordinating the meaning and significance of gender. Mixed-gender groups seem, however, to prompt structuring the sport practice to manage conceivable gender aspects, such as regulating the sport practice and the interactions between athletes as well as coaches. For example, different actions are taken to equalize potential physical differences and abilities. The system with different colors on the belt, based on experience and level of performance that is applied in budo and martial arts, is framed as facilitating this division. The athletes are also encouraged to verbally communicate their experience and ability in different techniques to the sparring partner, so they can adjust to the other during practice.

Further, the sport clubs indicate that there are risks of sexism in budo and martial arts, evoked by a mixed-gender practice. The clubs declare the importance of, and how to avoid derogatory language, such as comments or jokes. They emphasize the importance of trainings to be safe, injury free, fun, comfortable and meaningful for everyone. According to this respondent, the risk of sexism is particularly evident in budo and martial arts, due to the physical closeness:

> I am thinking about this very thing with the sexism and stuff like that. It is extra sensitive, or you become extra aware that you shouldn't do that kind of thing when being so close to each other in our sport. It is extra tasteless if you would act in a sexist way. (Club 3, person 3)

Mixed-gender groups appear to bring forward challenging situations related to gender and other inclusion aspects. Club 1 discusses what inclusion issues are the most important to consider. One of the respondents starts by describing a situation that occurred: 'one man did not want to train with women, due to religious reasons' (Club 1, person 3). The club experienced another, related situation:

> Person 1: (…) we had situations where some people didn't want to train with each other, especially these big, big guys were like 'I don't want to train with you who's small'. And that's what we wanted to change.
> Person 3: someone put it like 'we don't want to include exclusionary behavior'.
> Person 1: Exactly, maybe it was at that time that it really, now when you are saying it, I remember the debate, it was, it was a semester where we debated quite a lot on the board; 'How are we going to handle this in a good way?'
> Person 2: (…) so we have explicitly decided that you can't train with us if, for example, you only want to train with men.
> Person 1: Yes exactly. And that, it can be considered problematic if you want to.

Club 2 has a similar experience:

> I had one guy in my group who recently had arrived from Syria, a political refugee, he said 'I don't fight with women'. He refused it; to stand in front of a woman and practice non-contact drills, it was no real hits. So, we do have challenges (…). (Club 2, Person 4)

A bit further into the interview the dialogue circles back to this incidence and person 6, one of leaders in the club, explicates the stance of the club:

> Of course you should fight with a girl! That's how we do it in this club and we should not make a big deal out it, right?! (Club 2, Person 6)

In Club 1, Person 1 recalls the same type of situation further back in time, when men who, by the respondent, were described as immigrants from Eastern Europe came to Sweden and did not want to fight with women and discussions also arose:

> It seemed hard for some people, with that background, to accept that 'here everyone practices on same conditions. Everyone is welcome and some exercises you do together with a woman. So yeah, that is a problem. And I don't really know how to deal with it in practice, except just say 'here we do it this way'. (Club 1, Person 1)

So, the overarching idea of inclusion may imply competing inclusion aspects, where different ideas of who and what is to be included are at stake. Consistently in the empirical material, gender is seen as the superior inclusion principle. For example, gender outmanoeuvres religious belief and ethnocultural background. The man who, for religious reasons, wants to refrain from physical contact with women is seen as problematic and was eventually excluded from the club. Thus, inclusion of women came at the expense of excluding the right to religious expression. The situations described by Club 1 and 2 led to the development of guidelines, a 'dojo etiquette', stating that 'everyone trains with everyone', clarifying that athletes cannot refuse to spar against certain type of athletes. The dojo etiquette regulates behaviors of athletes and coaches, what behavior is expected and accepted and what is unacceptable, bodily, and verbally, such that discrimination and harassment is not allowed. Thus, the striving of mixed-gender groups imposes specific requirements and regulations, and especially during trainings and sparring situations. The budo and martial arts clubs are, as part of their inclusion work, engaged in creating activities where gender should not matter. However, as the clubs do not regard their sport and club as gender neutral, they argue for actions to downplay the significance of gender.

Explicating gender

The clubs emphasize that gender-mixed groups where girls and boys, women and men, train together work well and are an approach that is supposed to lead to greater equality. At the same time, the idea of mixed groups as consistently the best approach to include girls and women is challenged. The activities in the studied clubs are dominated by boys and men as participants, and all clubs state that they actively work to achieve a more even gender distribution. To increase the participation of girls and women, the clubs employ specific strategies. One way of doing it, conducted by Club 1, is to govern the composition of participants at the influx of new, young athletes, by applying gender quotas in the recruitment. The club has a queue to the youngest training group, and to achieve a more gender balanced group, girls are given priority. Another way is that women, in some cases, are offered to participate free of charge (Club 3) and the clubs organize activities specifically aimed at the target group, taking the form of gender-separated activities.

Just as in the downplaying gender approach, the overarching goal is that gender should not matter and that women should participate in the same extent as men in the sport clubs' everyday activities. But instead of disregarding gender in their organizing principles, the clubs are explicating the significance of gender as an organizing principle. This way of thinking recognizes the need of organize alongside of 'ordinary' activities. For gender to not matter, the sport clubs argue for a need to make visible and challenge existing norms in ways that are not always possible within 'ordinary' activities. A conclusion where they emphasize the significance of gender and leads to two distinct practices: the organization of gender-separatist activities for girls and women, and a strategic use of women as role models.

Gender separatist groups, as an organizing principle, imply distinguishing an underrepresented group, which undoubtedly are girls and women. Trainings and camps for girls/women only are common practices within the clubs and apart from one club that offers specific trainings to those with intellectual disabilities no other categories are singled out. The clubs thus state that both gender-mixed activities and separate girls' training activities can function inclusively, which may seem contradictory. Club 2 are problematizing why training groups specifically aimed at girls is a reasonable approach:

> Person 3: We have girl groups, but we don't have boy groups. The reason we have girl groups is because martial arts is not associated with women, but many girls opt out of martial arts and for us this is how these girls' sessions are. It's like our, it's the first fix, we want them to come to the girls' training and then we will indoctrinate them to a lot so that they start to learn karate.
> Interviewer: So, it's a bit of a lure to sort of bring them in later?
> Person 3: Yes … I have been allergic to 'girls' training' all my life. But now I can understand that there is a point of building different things that start with 'self' – in girls.

Person 3 is referring to self-esteem and self-confidence and argues that these can be more easily accommodated within a gender segregated environment. Club 3 reasons along the same line, arguing that gender segregated practices are a way of counteracting the potential downsides of mixed groups:

> Interviewer: Ok, so it is good to mix, but is there anything negative with that?
> Person 1: I heard both, from for example women, that this way some people think it's ok, but for others it's been a way in to know that there's a group for women only when they start, that it feels comfortable at first, like that. Exercising with other women just like that. Some people think it's stupid, like, but … Yes, some people can experience it as a good entry point to daring to try the sport at all.

The clubs justify the targeted efforts and gender-separated training by stating martial arts carry male norms, which risk excluding or hindering girls and women. The gender separate activities are performed the same as the 'ordinary' activities, indicating that, according to the respondents, it is not the sports activities themselves that are the problem, but the relationship between women and men. This reasoning is also strengthened by the fact that the clubs deploy policies or guidelines for interactions as a part of their strategies for inclusion, but this is never mentioned as a needed or valuable tool in gender separatist settings.

The importance of women as role models is highlighted by the clubs, and one of the interviewees asks the question:

> Is it the case that in that capacity [female coach with high rating, our note] we also automatically become role models that make other girls want, dare and be able to instruct? (Club 2, Person 3)

To which another member of the club replies with emphasis: 'You are good role models!' (Club 2, person 4). Representation of women and the symbolic value appears to be important in getting more girls and women to participate and apart from the above-mentioned importance of role models, one of clubs also deliberately uses women in in their visual communication. This way of actively trying to shape the outside world's perceptions of the sport and who can participate is given importance in the inclusion work. The principle is based on assumptions that broadened participation and increased inclusion can be promoted by challenging and nuancing the external image of what budo and martial arts are, which can be attained by accentuating the significance of gender as an organizing principle.

Discussion

The two organizing principles highlighted in the result reveals different ways of approaching gender. One, downplaying gender, does not acknowledge any differences between girls/women and boys/men in terms of their preferences or abilities in sports activities, and does not prefer gender as an

organizing principle. The other approach is explicating gender and the significance of gender as a structural aspect. We argue that the participating clubs' way of engaging in both, seemingly contradictory, organizing principles in parallel, signifies their norm critical ability: On one hand, the clubs strive for gender not to matter, but on the other hand, they recognize the potential impact of gender norms and power structures on the participation of girls/women in mixed-gender activities.

The respondents express a strong desire to have mixed-gender groups, where girls and boys, women and men, train together, which is also a prominent theme in previous research on gender and martial arts (cf. Channon, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2023). This implies that gender does not matter, or at least it *should* not matter, in the sport practices, rendering the *downplaying gender* approach. The reference to alternative classification models, such as belt color and weight, is presented as ways to undermine the significance of differences between girls and boys or women and men. This 'undoing' of gender differences by using grades, has the potential to construct a 'unisex karate embodiment', according to Maclean (2019). The way in which the clubs in our study advocate for and apply mixed-gender groups in senior age differs somewhat from what has emerged in previous studies, where coaches and leaders portray mixed-gender training as unproblematic before puberty, but not in older ages (Svender & Nordensky, 2020).

Within the *explicating gender* approach on the other hand, the respondents express a need for different strategies to create inclusion. One example is the club applying gender quotas when recruiting children to balance gender representation, favoring girls. In doing this, they raise the question: Is it fair to give girls special treatment at boys' expense? The club justifies this with the desire for a more even gender distribution and to face factors hindering girls, such as gender norms. The club treats girls and boys differently to make conditions equivalent. These actions are a form of compensatory measure, meaning the activities are designed to compensate for girls/women by providing access to resources, training in skills and developing characteristics they usually do not get the opportunity to, due to traditional notions of gender. As developed below, we note the way the sport clubs frame and legitimize gender-separated activities somewhat nuanced, compared to the study of Svender et al. (2012).

Being in the end of the chain and thus responsible for implementing governmental expectations concerning inclusion initiatives prescribed to the Swedish sports movement (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Fahlén et al., 2014), forces sports clubs to formulate both problems and solutions. In these processes, where gender issues come forward as the major problem for the clubs to solve, the respondents' reason nuanced about structural conditions linked to especially gender. They define masculinity norms as the problem that the inclusion measures should solve. Further, their understanding of gender primarily takes its starting point in a social constructionist approach, where gender is largely about socially created notions. Stereotypical views on men and women, such as having different needs and interests, what Larsson (2014) terms the gender specific approach, are missing. So too is the neoliberal idea that sport participation is entirely up to each individual (the gender-neutral approach). Instead, the respondents acknowledge power structures hindering gender equality and try to change sports practice.

We contend that the participating clubs' simultaneous engagement with these seemingly contradictory approaches described above – integrated or side-by-side – signifies their commitment to a norm-critical perspective. Their ways of organizing are not by un-reflected routine but are legitimized by arguments rooted in an awareness of how gendered power structures matter. They recognize how sports practices continuously construct gender, as well as equality, and that the design and implementation of sports practices are far from neutral; they carry inherent implications. The clubs' increasing norm awareness, apparent as problem formulations rooted in a structural understanding of what hinders or promotes sports participation, is a vital part of pursuing a more equitable sports setting. It shifts the focus from an individual-oriented thinking that risks getting stuck in a 'treat everyone equal' rationale that does not bring about comprehensive changes. This aligns with how Hills and Croston (2011) argue that sport activities must be intentionally designed to promote equitable participation and collaboration.

Concluding remarks

The respondents exhibit an understanding of gender that emphasizes norm-critical and constructionist perspectives that researchers have called for (Larsson, 2014; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Svender et al., 2012), and that potentially opens the way for a less rigid understanding of gender (cf. Hills & Croston, 2011; Watson, 2018; Noel, 2009). However, when it comes to inclusion, the conceptualizations are less clear, leaving inclusion as a less well-defined and perhaps even unprocessed concept, which might reflect a hampered ability to deal with the complexity of intersecting social categorisations. This observation aligns with Spaaiji's study on how sports clubs understand and manage diversity (Spaaij et al., 2014). While our results draw on a small sample, they suggest that the sport clubs fails to show a convincing ability to apply their norm-critical competence experienced from gender equality, to establish inclusion. There seems to be an ontological gap between how sports organizations approach gender compared to other social categorisations. For example, when they are facing situations where two different inclusion aspects collide, their strong commitment to gender equality comes to the fore in a self-evident way. This is seen in the situations where men not wanting to train with women, arguing differences in body size or in the case of the man refusing to shake hands with women, citing religious belief. In both cases, the strong gender equality discourse, with its emphasis on gender and women's opportunities to participate, breaks through and is prioritized over other ways of thinking about and doing inclusion. The 'everyone should train with everyone' ultimately protects women's participation. This is somewhat problematized by the clubs, but the position of gender, and especially women's rights, ranks highest in inclusion, which calls for a more intersectional perspective. Finally, the reflexivity demonstrated by the clubs shows an awareness of potentially excluding aspects (e.g. norms and power relations) in their organizing and renders certain adjustments of practice (cf. Hills & Croston, 2011), but do not necessarily lead to comprehensive systemic changes.

Examining the construction and reproduction of gender in efforts to promote inclusion, offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by voluntary sports clubs in achieving inclusive practices, in line with Hammond et al. (2019). Doing so, this article contributes to further understanding the conditions for inclusion, which is crucial for both research and pedagogical practice. What we have shown here is that the self-regulatory mode of policy implementation deployed here is influenced by established discourses on gender, which seem to constrain how both policy and practice are shaped (cf. Hammond et al., 2019). In both research and in practice, discussions on how conceptualizations of gender shape potential actions for gender equality have been central for a long time in the Nordic countries (cf. Larsson, 2014). While gender equality discussions benefit from such critical perspectives, the same rigor is not always applied to inclusion efforts. Our findings underscore that the recent shift toward inclusion does not render these discussions obsolete. Instead, the findings highlight the need for ongoing intersectional engagement in how social categorisations are constructed in inclusion work and thus condition inclusion in voluntary sport clubs.

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