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On the unjust stereotypes in sports practice.

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On the unjust stereotypes in sports practice.

From athletic bodies to stereotyping.

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Abstract.

One of the important challenges that democratic societies must confront, in relation with sports, is the fact that sports is becoming an important and meaningful way of life for many individuals. If it is true that according to liberal democratic principles, all individuals must have equal opportunities in choosing meaningful ways of life, and if sports is considered a way of life, this means that sports practice must be open to every person who wishes to endorse it. In this paper I will analyze how true this affirmation is. I will focus mainly on the physical skills and abilities that athletes require which, as I will argue, turn sports practice not suitable for every person who wishes to endorse it. Whether or not this is just, my main issue is to analyze those demands on the body of athletes which are based in gender stereotypes and masculine biases. I will try to argue that these requirements of the athlete's body are a source of injustice on sports, not only because it is an obstacle to achieve gender equality and social justice, but also because persons are not totally responsible for their physical features.

Keywords: Discrimination, gender equality, social justice, sports justice.

Resumen.

Uno de los retos más importantes que toda sociedad democrática enfrenta, en relación a la práctica del deporte, es que ésta se ha convertido en una importante y significativa forma de vida para muchas personas. De acuerdo a los principios democráticos y liberales toda persona debe tener las mismas oportunidades para elegir una forma significativa de vida. Esto implica que la práctica del deporte debería estar al alcance de todas las personas que quisieran adoptarla como una forma de vida. En este artículo analizaré si esto último es verdad. Argumentaré que las capacidades y habilidades físicas requeridas para los distintos deportes generan que su práctica esté fuera del alcance de todas las personas. Sin entrar en consideraciones de justicia sobre este hecho, me centraré en las demandas en los cuerpos de deportistas que están basadas en estereotipos de género. Intentaré argumentar que estos requerimientos son una fuente de injusticia en el deporte, no sólo porque constituyen un obstáculo para lograr equidad de género y justicia social, sino también porque las personas no somos totalmente responsables de nuestras características físicas.

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Palabras clave: Discriminación, equidad de género, justicia social, justicia deportiva.

1. Introduction

In the last decades there has been an increasing number of publications regarding the philosophy of sports. Questions about fair play, doping practices, nationalism, gender equality and the like, have started to rise important objections regarding the boundaries of sport and its practice.

It is to be recognized that in the last 30 years there has been a mayor inclusion of women in sports. We cannot affirm that what once philosophers like Jane English (1987) or Iris Marion Young (1989) assessed about the exclusion of women in sports remains the same. Indeed, structures, institutions and society as a whole have become – to some extent- aware of the exclusion of women in sports in the past, and have tried to remedy this exclusion. It is true, however, that inequalities between genders and arbitrary injustices in sports remain. For this reason, sports and its practice has become a fertile field for analyzing issues regarding judgments of justice, forms of inequality and even structural violence.

Because sports offers a deceiving conception of the values it transmits, it is hard for people to notice the injustices that occur in its practice. It is my intention in this paper to exhibit a form of gender violence produced by what is thought as a normal practice: the demand on the physical body of athletes.

I will try to argue that while it is important to develop the best physical features in the body of athletes in order to obtain a better performance in their sport, it is a dangerous practice to demand certain features that are associated with an ideal stereotype of the athletes body, usually thought through a masculine bias, excluding whoever does not possess those features. Furthermore, I will intent to argue that it can be an unjust practice, because persons are only responsible, to certain degree, for their body and physical features.

In order to achieve my goal in this paper, I shall establish that this article is thought on high performance athletes. I understand by high performance athletes, whether they

are or are not professional athletes, persons who have decided to dedicate their life –or mainly their youth- to a sports accomplishment –i.e. Olympic or World Champion-, making sports their way of life. This should be an important remark because, as I will elaborate further, sports is starting to become a meaningful choice of life for many persons. It is for that reason that analyzing the injustices in sports raises important questions.

2. The benefits of sports.

In order to probe that women do not have equal opportunities in sports, Jane English (1987) distinguished two benefits of sports: *the basic benefit* and *the scarce benefit*. I shall take this proposal as the basis of my argument, although my intentions are different than those of English.

According to English, sports offer a basic benefit

“to which it seems everyone has an equal right: health, the self-respect to be gained by doing one’s best, the cooperation to be learned from working with teammates and the incentive gained from having opponents, the “character” of learning to be a good loser and a good winner, the chance to improve one’s skills and learn to accept criticism, and just plain fun” (English, 1987:284-285)

Because the nature of this benefit is associated with the transmission of certain personal values, the merits and the physical features and skills of practitioners is not important. Therefore, one could say that according to this basic benefit of sports, every person should have the equal right to practice any sport without any restriction except for, say, safety reasons –i.e. a very technical sport or a high risk sport-, or health problems.

If we could use English proposal not only to describe the benefits of sports, but also to make a vague classification on the goals achievable through sports practice, we could agree that the main goal of the *basic benefit* is using sports as a means for making a better life quality. People who share this conception on the benefit of sports are people better known as *sports enthusiasts*, and sports are kind of a hobby or a leisure activity in their lives.

The second conception on the benefits of sports, according to English is the *scarce benefit*.

“Beyond the basic benefit of sports, some athletes reap the further benefits of fame and fortune. I shall call these the *scarce benefit* of sports. The term is not meant to imply that they are kept artificially scarce, but that it is simply not possible for prizes and publicity to be attained equally by everyone at once. Although everyone has an equal right to the basic benefits, not everyone can claim an equal right to receive fan mail or appear on television. For this, having the skill involved in the sport is one relevant factor”. (English, 1987:285)

This second conception on the benefits of sports introduces two important elements: on the one hand, the fame and fortune goal, and on the other one, the skill requirement. Regarding the fame and fortune element, one could agree that according to this conception on the benefit of sports, people who practice sports they do so in order to get paid for and, thus, they qualify as what we would call professional athletes.

In contrast with the basic benefit of sports, the scarce benefit could be associated with persons who choose sports as their main activity for life. However, thinking that people who choose the scarce benefit of sports do so only because of fame and fortune is misleading. It is well known that many persons choose to practice sports as their way of life not because of fame and fortune, actually, these are a consequence of achieving a mayor goal which could be the desire to be a world or Olympic champion, or to play in the best league of their sports, and so on.

There are many other reasons why individuals decide to engage in the practice of certain sport as a way of life regardless fame and fortune. Indeed, it is desirable –and important- that people who dedicate their lives to practice a sport get a salary for it, on the same way as any other person gets paid for doing their job, but that is another issue I will not discuss here.

According to English’s classification, then, we could agree that the scarce benefit of spots is related with people that choose sports as their way of life for other reasons than only fame and fortune. However, as I find very attractive English’s classification as a start line, I will make some adjustments on this second conception of the benefit of sports in order to have a better and more complete conception of sports as a way of life.

3. Sports as meaningful way of life

As I remarked before, one of my intentions is to argue that sports can be, and actually is, a meaningful way of life. In the last decades there has been an increasing number of athletes enrolled in International Sports Federations. The Olympic movement is reaching almost every country in the world. Actually, the nationalities of participants in Olympic Games is each time more surprising, as surprising that countries with a recent history of war and political instability have international high level representations in different sports¹. Therefore, there is a significantly important number of persons who, nowadays, is deciding to practice sports as their main activity in life.

It is true that a big majority of persons practice sports. That is why English's classification is so important. It is not the same to jog every day for 30 minutes for many reasons like health benefits, leisure, distraction, maybe even to enter to a 10 k. race, than to practice athletics 8 hours a day with a specific objective for every training, plus strict diets, restrictions in the free time, and so on.

Agreeing that sports is a meaningful way of life is important because in a liberal society people are free to decide, according to their individual autonomy and their own conception of the good, their way of life. Furthermore, as I just mentioned, there is a significant number of persons that are choosing sports as their main activity in life. In that sense, if being a professional ballet dancer or a musician is considered a way of life, there should be no reason to not consider sports as well as a way of life. The contrary would be unjustified.

Therefore, I shall modify the classification proposed by English regarding the scarce benefit of sports to argue that, according to this benefit, people engage in sports practice as a way of life. In this conception, fame and fortune will come as a probable –but not necessary- consequence of the success each athlete achieves². But, it must be clear, the main intention of this conception of sports as a way of life is not –in general terms- fame and fortune. This is important to notice because there is a much more powerful and meaningful reason to why persons choose sports as their way of life. Saying that only because of fame and fortune is, in my view, downplaying the real sacrifice and

challenges that athletes face every day, and it underestimates the sports high performance activity.

But why is it so important to argue that sports is a meaningful way of life? There are enormous consequences in admitting this according to the liberal principals in every democratic society and to aspects of social justice that I wish to assess in this paper. Therefore if we admit that sport is a meaningful way of life for many persons, this brings important analysis that must be done in order to say that social justice is achieved through sports.

According to liberal principles, all forms of life must be available for every person. However, it is true that in sports as in other professions, activities and ways of life, people have special talents for certain sports or for no sports at all. This means that a more extensive analysis must be done regarding what does sports as a way of life mean and who can actually endorse it. This is what I will try to analyze in the next section. My intention is to argue that, although indeed sports practice is only suitable for some persons, the criteria to select who is suitable must be a criteria that adjusts as much as possible to objective reasons not loaded with biases or stereotypes, as I will explain further.

4. Sports as an exclusive way of life

I have argued in extent that sports is a meaningful way of life to many. Indeed, once we agree it is, there are huge consequences and aspects that need to be analyzed in order to achieve justice in sports. It is my intention to focus mainly on one problem that arises.

It is true that sports requires special skills, abilities and features in the athlete body. Because of its own competitive nature, it is not possible to broadly affirm that whoever person, regardless of their physical talent and features, can practice sports and therefore choose sports as her way of life. In other words, every person is free to choose sports as a way of life. However, the competitive nature of sports and the great physical and technical implication it entails will not allow any person not the practice *per se* of the

sport in question, but the success or the competitiveness it demands which is a relevant feature of high performance sport.

Said that, it seems that persons who wish to choose sports as their way of life not only require to be determined on all the sacrifices, challenges, efforts it implies and to be sufficiently autonomous to decide on their way of life. But because of the competitive nature of sports, they must have physical skills and abilities that can allow them to reach their achievements, whether or not they will actually achieve them³.

High performance sports, then, because of its nature, has two elements: the subjective element, which is the autonomous will to compromise to its high demands or, in other words, the autonomy to choose sports as a way of life, and an objective element, which are the skills and abilities needed in order to be competitive in a certain chosen sport.

Both elements are equally important in order to achieve the goals of an athlete. The objective element will be useless if there is no subjective element, and vice versa.

This leads me to the first controversial issue I want to remark although I will not elaborate much on it. I am arguing that sports is a meaningful way of life. As any other way of life it must be open to everybody who wishes to endorse it. However, this is not totally true: in order to be able to fulfill ones chosen –or desired- way of life –in sports-, one must have been blessed by “*the natural lottery*” with an athletic body or with the genetics in order to achieve the athletic body needed for the sport one wants to practice.

For example, if I would have wanted to be an Olympic 100 meters runner I would have probably failed because, according to my genetics, I will never be able to build naturally the muscle needed in order to run 100 meters under 11 seconds and, therefore, be competitive and have an actual opportunity to become an Olympian. It is actually not surprising that most short distance runners who hold Olympic and World records are black athletes, since they are naturally stronger and their genetics allows them to build muscle in better, more effective and powerful ways than many white persons⁴.

There are many other examples that could be given in order to accept that a significant factor in the success of an athlete depends on her physical body. Much of it

depends on the hard work the athlete and her team carry out: physical trainer, nutritionist, head trainer, even physiotherapist; but there is a part of her body's complexion that will not depend on her merits, nor on her work, but on her circumstantial luck in having the adequate body for being an athlete.

In egalitarian terms, although -as I will elaborate later- this is not a case of distributive justice, natural talents are matters of brute luck. Brute luck is fortune over which individuals have no control (or which they are not responsible for). Contrarily to brute luck, option luck is the result of the risks that were deliberately taken (Knight, *et al.*, 2011:4). However, according to the principles of the liberal equality theory, people do not deserve advantages that come as a result of their natural talents because, as said above, natural talents are a consequence of brute luck which is out of the control of individuals. One cannot choose to be born handicapped, on the same way that one does not choose to be born in an athletic body. The outcomes that will depend on those circumstances should not be deserved ones because, according to liberal principles, our fate must depend on our choices taken in a context of equal opportunities (Kymlicka, 2002). However, it is a fact that I will never be on an equal playing field for becoming a 100 meter runner as Carmelita Jetter, but this inequality is due to brute luck. I did not choose to be born in a thin and small body and it would be thought as unjust that due to this fact I cannot achieve my goals as a 100 meter runner. However, Carmelita Jetter is neither responsible for having her body and strength, therefore, although an important factor for her becoming one of the best 100 runners in the world is the outcome of a circumstance – she being born in a powerful body-, she is on her right to try to become the best 100 meter runner in the world. The contrary would be unjust.

As I have tried to argue, people are not totally responsible for their physical complexion and features. I have tried to challenge this fact with some of the principals of liberal equality theory. However, I suspect that this needs a thorough and more serious analysis: until what extent is sports and its practice just if, according to these principles, people are not responsible for their natural talents and features and, therefore, should not obtain benefits from them?

I said before that this is not a distributive justice issue. According to the two principles of the liberal equality theory, basic liberties –by which Rawls means the standard civil and political rights recognized in liberal democracies: right to vote, to run for office, due process, free speech, etc. - are so important to liberalism that they conform the first principle of Rawls theory of justice: “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all”(Rawls, 1999:63). This first principle is widely accepted in or society. However, it is the second principle of Rawls theory which is most controversial and has generated the mayor debates. This second principle –the difference principle- is about fair shares and distribution of economic resources. It is in this context that the principles I have challenged before are to be explained and debated. For that reason, I had warned before that this situation is not to be solved by a distributive criteria and the arguments of the difference principle of Rawls theory are useful only to the extent that we can perceive the problem I wish to show. As I will note further, not all the social problems are to be solved with a distributive criteria. I believe the issue I wish to assess in this paper escapes the scoop of the liberal equality theory.

However, I think this to be a quite philosophical issue which I do not intend to analyze on this paper. What I do want to analyze is something much less complex and controversial and, in some sense, easier to accept regarding the social construction of the athlete’s body.

5. Sports as an exclusive way of life

As I have been elaborating during this paper, I believe that sports as a way of life requires two elements, the objective and the subjective. The latter raises no important issue for now. However, regarding the objective element there are some questions that I think need to be addressed.

It is true, as I have been arguing, that the nature itself of sports demands certain features in the body of the athletes. Because sports is *mainly* a physical activity⁵ normality would suggest that athletes have an athletic body: low body fat, big –or at least visible- muscles. Indeed, persons who dedicate more than 4 hours a day to an intense physical activity have a much faster metabolism and process food faster. In

addition, if they have a special meal plan and a specialized and planned physical training, probabilities are that athletes will have a specific –athletic- body. After all, their body is their working tool.

However, not all bodies react the same way and not all persons have the same genetics. It is true that an athlete will have an athletic body, but this does not mean that all athletes must have the same body. I am afraid, however, that this last clarification is somehow ignored and expectations are that every athlete must have *the athletic* body.

What do we mean, then, by an athletic body? Is the conception that society has of an athletic body misguided? Is it perhaps influenced by a masculine bias?

Let us assume that it is justified that I cannot become an Olympic 100 meter runner because I lack the physical skills and genetics required to achieve such a power in my body in order to run 100 meters in less than 11 seconds. Since ingesting growing hormones is a penalized practice according to the International Olympic Committee, we can assume as quite impossible that my thin body will sometime be as powerful as Carmelita Jeter, or even Alison Felix –who is quite thinner-. Since I will not take any issue regarding the justice of this fact, we will just assume that becoming a short distance runner is not an option for me no matter how much I really want to become a 100 meter runner and assist to some Olympic Games in that sport. On the other hand, my sisters' dream has always been becoming a gymnast. Contrary to me, her body is not so thin and slender, she is quite robust and quite muscular and hence, her movements tend to be robust, additionally, she is extremely tall. Despite of that, she has great balance, flexibility, coordination, strength, and she is very technical. However, it is hard to accept that she will ever make it into the National Team and represent our country in the Olympic Games. The reason is that, although she, indeed, has an athletic body, her genetics and natural features are different to those required, according to a social construction, for a female gymnast.

It is naive to think that just because all the female gymnasts we see each four years in the Olympics have a similar body, all gymnasts in the world have the same body. Perhaps we are not aware that in order to qualify as a *good female gymnast* –and obtain good qualifications in their performances- , girls must have a slender, non-muscular,

small body, or what commonly is called a *female* or *feminine body* –I will return to this latter-. This criterion excludes persons like my sister who, although she does have skills and she has worked hard to get a good technique, because the features of her body are not what we normally expect of female gymnasts she will not be considered to form part of the National Team, even further, the qualifications she receives from the judges after her performances might be low because, according to her physical features, her movements are not *artistic* enough.

One could question how just is this fact if no matter how hard she tries and how many nutritional disorders she has, my sister will never have a slim body. Moreover, she is not responsible for the robust complexion of her body and finally, she is probably much more athletic than other gymnasts (her body fat is lower and her muscular mass has a better proportion).

I am not an expert in gymnastics, and hence I cannot tell precisely why it is so important for gymnasts to keep a slender and small complexity, moreover, if they can still perform physically and technically well enough with a more robust body or, in other words, a not so slim body. I do not wish to take issue with any sports in particular, the same can be said in many other sports like synchronizes swimming, diving, skating on ice, etc. This invites us to think that there could be an injustice on how the selection and evaluation of a good athlete –especially in sports where the judges’ appreciation plays a fundamental roll, but not exclusively those sports- are addressed.

I do not think it is a coincidence that all the above mentioned sports require specific and similar features of the female body. It suggests that there are preconceived ideas, masculine bias and stereotyping issues about how a female athlete should look. Furthermore, if this is true, I suspect the injustice would be greater since athletes are getting punished or praised because of facts that do not depend on their choice and are out of their control. They are circumstantial facts for which nobody, and much less the athletes, are responsible.

My point may be clear after the following real life example. In 2012, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) informed Taylor Townsend that, although she was number one in the Junior Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) ranking, and she had just

won the Open of Australia on her category, she would not receive any funding from the Federation in order to compete in the next US Open, nor in the following events until she lost weight. Taylor then was 16 years old, weighed over 176 pounds (80 kilos), and is 5 feet tall (1.65 meters). Although the USTA after argued that the measure was taken because of health problems, it did not specify exactly what health problems was it thinking about, nor it offered any medical certification where it could probe that Taylor was risking her health due to her weight.

Since there was no medical examinations on Taylors body, the USTA could not know if Taylor was actually overweighed, this is, if her body fat percentage was higher than the percentage considered healthy for women according to her age and height, or if her robust complexity was due to a big muscular mass. It did not know either Taylors Body Mass Index so it could not probe that she was overweight. Furthermore, it could not probe either her heart condition, nor her joints, articulations, ankle conditions, or any other study that could probe that some part of her body was in danger because of her overweight. It had nothing more than the sight contrasted with an ideal stereotype of the female tennis player that did not correspond to Taylors' complexion and, therefore, it concluded that Taylor had overweight problems.

This example helps me clarify my point. As I have been insisting, I agree that athletes require special physical skills and features in order to perform in a better way in their sports. In this case, Taylor needs a complete physical preparation: not only does she need power in her legs, arms, back, even in her wrists and forearm, but she also needs a good cardio resistance. Tennis matches usually last in average from 1 to 2 hours, which means it requires a great physical condition. It would be unacceptable for a tennis player to lose a match due to a bad physical condition, say, because she got tired at the last set. It is true that not all athletes have the same abilities, for instance, Rafael Nadal has a much higher physical strength than Novak Djokovic, but both have the minimal required in order to play a whole tournament. When I say that it would be unacceptable that a tennis player loses her match because she did not have the physical strength to fight the last set I do not mean that due to the fact that Nadal is stronger than Djokovic he beat him in the final –actually, this is not always true-, but I do mean that a professional tennis player must have the minimal physical strength required to get

through a tournament. I say *minimal*, but it is not minimal at all. It is well known that tennis is a very high demanding sport which requires great physical condition. It is for that reason that we could doubt that the restriction imposed to Taylor was justified. It would be quite naive, and actually downplaying towards the other tennis players in the world suggesting that an overweighed athlete leads the junior world ranking.

However, the question persists: let us suppose that Taylor was indeed overweight, would this fact give any reason to the USTA to take away all the funding from her until she lost weight? Moreover, considering that, as it seems, her physical skills, although overweighed, did not undermine her performance since she was number 1 of the junior world ranking and at age 15 she had made it to top 20 of the senior world ranking, nor it affected or could potentially affect her health –supposing her overweight was not so bad and no mayor risk could be predicted-, would it still be justified for the USTA to impose such a restriction in Taylors' career?

In order to address this issue, I believe it is necessary to distinguish the reasons behind the demands on the physical body and features of the athletes, for it is not the same to demand specific skills, features and abilities motivated in achieving a better performance in the specific sport, than the demands on the physical body and features of athletes that are motivated on a stereotype loaded with a masculine bias.

I am now making a distinction between two similar cases. The first one was the fact that, no matter how hard I try, due to my genetics and physical body I will never be able to compete against Carmelita Jetter. As I said earlier, this issue escapes from the scoop of this paper. The second case, the one I am interested in now, differs from the first one in the fact that I can actually perform accurately in the sport I have chosen to fulfil my goals. However, because of my physical features I am being excluded from practicing it and for having the opportunity to fulfil my goals.

In this second case I believe the injustice lies in two facts: That I can actually perform accurately in my sport, and because I lack the physical features –that are not related with the better performance of my sport- I am excluded or discriminated; and the fact that I am not responsible for my natural features. I did not decide to be born in my own body.

The first source of injustice I will analyze with a gender equality approach. The second one, I will analyze regarding issues of social justice.

6. *The paradox in the social construction of the athlete's bodies*

In 1979 Iris Marion Young described the exclusion of women from sports. According to her account, the construction of society made women and sports be exclusive concepts. She argued that in contemporary American culture –although not only American, I believe- there is an objectification of women. Society identifies the feminine body as an object and as a source of desire, not only for the body *per se*, but also for sensualizing other objects.

On the other hand, in sports the body is

a spontaneous subject and the subject is wholly embodied. The identity of body and active subjectivity reaches its paradigm in sport; the very stance, muscles, movements and directionality of the athlete exhibit directly her or his intentions and projects [...] Sport call upon the body's capacities and skills merely for the sake of determining what they can achieve. (Young, 1987:263)

By its nature, then, sport exhibits the essential body-subject. Masculinist culture defines women, on the other hand, as the essential body-object. Thus, woman and sports are mutually exclusive concepts. She continues arguing that this incompatibility between women and sports is not an accident, but a conceptual and symbolic necessity.

To the degree that in our society the female body is objectified, women must be excluded from the concept of sport. It follows that if there is a particular female person participating in sport, then, either she is not “really” a women, or the sport she engages is not “really” a sport. (Young, 1987:263)

I do believe that many gender inequalities persist in sport. However, I also believe that the exclusion of women from sports is less obvious now a days. Perhaps that is precisely the problem. Before it was easier to argue that women were being excluded from sports because there was much less women athletes than men athletes. Now numbers might start to get equal (Messner, 1988), despite the fact that there is still a masculine dominance in sports or, what has been catalogued as the masculine bias of sport.

This masculine bias of sports can be explained in many ways. It is accepted now a days that the historic relations between sexes has always been charged with a masculine dominance. I do not intend to argue about this because it would take me away from my main question. However, it is through sports that we can also appreciate this masculine dominance:

Football, based as it is upon the most extreme possibilities of the male body (muscular bulk, explosive power and aggression) is a world apart from women, who are relegated to the role of cheerleader/sex objects on the sidelines rooting their men on. In contrast to the base and vulnerable bodies of the cheerleaders, the armored male bodies of football players are elevated to mythical status, and as such give testimony to the undeniable “fact” that there is at least one place where men are clearly superior to women (Messner, 1987:277).

The historic image of female body is, therefore, related to weakness, objectification and sexuality. A few decades ago, still an important number of the population thought that there was a tension between traditional prescriptions for femininity and the image presented by an active, strong and muscular women.

However, society normally evolves. Social practices tend to evolve with time once it notices that they are wrong or unjust. This also is true on sports. Society has started to accept that women can also be athletes and that there is nothing wrong with it. While some will still think it attacks femininity, it will always be normal to have dissenting opinions about situations.

This in no way is a defensive argument, saying that practices evolve does not mean that practices are not unjust anymore. Indeed, while it is true that women have more inclusion in sports, this inclusion is still ruled by a masculine bias which, as a matter of fact, not only affects women but also men.

So, going back to my main point, my intention was to argue that the demands on the athlete's body must find its limits once it achieves the best version of the particular athletes' body in order to perform in a better way in her or his sport. This is to say that, assuming that Taylor is indeed overweighted and a big probability exists that if she loses some of her extra weight she will be faster, stronger and more resistant and, therefore, much of a better tennis player, then the *suggestions* (not imposition) that she ought to lose some weight may seem accurate⁶. However, it seems accurate not because it is

unacceptable to have a robust tennis player –whether she is overweighed or has a robust complexity-, but because of the fact that losing weight will actually make her a better player and will give her more opportunities to achieve her goals or greater goals. But, even when the Federation could prove that Taylor would become a better tennis player if she ought to lose some weight, the restriction imposed still seems unfair and unjustified, since it is Taylor who must decide, according to her own conception of success, how good a tennis player she wants to become and how many sacrifices she is willing to assume. Therefore it is important to notice the difference between a suggestion that if she wants to become a better player she ought to lose some weight, and the requirement that she ought to lose weight in order to be funded by the Federation.

However, the real life example, as all the other examples I have been offering in different sports, do not seem to seek the achievement of a better athlete from the requirements they make on the body of the athletes. On the contrary, I believe they respond to a masculine bias I have been elaborating in this section.

According to the social process of women's integration in sports, it is not hard to understand the stereotype created about the female athletes. Before, one of the main reasons why women were excluded from sports was because their body was thought to be weak and fragile. In addition, women's body has historically been objectified and associated with sexuality and pleasure. Once women started gaining presence and power in different sectors of society, they did also in sports, but only in sports associated with the idea of weakness and fragility, plus sexuality and pleasure-giver object. This created the *feminine athletic body*.

Again, my intention is not making a personal issue with anybody, but one of the mayor reasons that explains why Maria Sharapova has usually more attention of the media in compared with Serena Williams although Serena has much greater sports achievements is because Maria has the ideal stereotype of the *feminine athletic body*. This stereotype is so imbedded in our society that people are much more interested in Maria Sharapova not only for her sports achievements, but also and mainly for her personal life issues which should be irrelevant. It is normal for magazines and media

companies to publish the “top 10 sexiest tennis female players” or just the “top 10 sexiest female athletes”. This kind of practices only reinforces the stereotype of the female athlete, since it is not usual to see athletes from sports like judo, wrestling, weightlifting, basketball, boxing, and so on in those lists. And the most damaging part of this is that the reinforcement of these stereotypes is sending the message that we only want *nice looking athletes*, and we exclude all those persons who wish to become athletes but do not have the physical requirements.

I believe, then, that there is a paradox regarding women’s inclusion in sports. Athletic women like Maria Sharapova have caught the media attention and is in the eye of gossip because of her achievements and talent in tennis, but also because of her physical looks. She has actually turned to become an icon, many girls in the world want to become like her. This is quite a contradiction. Society has passed from denning access to women in sports because they were weak, fragile and it was thought that with their muscular bodies they would lose their femininity, to opening access to women in sports, actually liking athletic bodies, but not all athletic bodies, only *feminine athletic bodies*. Muscular bodies are nice as long as they are not too muscular. Marked abdominals are sexy as long as they are not a huge six pack. Strong and defined legs are attractive as long as they are not terribly muscular, and so on.

Indeed women have won power and presence in sports, however, it is still not opened to all women. Instead, what we have created are stereotypes of the feminine body which, as I just explained, is masculine bias, but it also depends to a large degree in the natural bodies obtained by brute luck which escape our control and our choice. Women have won presence and power in sports, however, this does not mean that gender equality is achieved nor that violence against women does not exist in sport. I believe that in sports, just as like in society as a whole, women are still being objectified. As long as sports is mediatized and not taken as a serious and meaningful way of life, women will still be objectified and discriminated according to their *feminine athletic body*. If this were not true, we would have more female athletes from sports like judo, box, football, basketball, wrestling, weightlifting, etc., as models of brands and in TV programs, and we would actually get to see these sports in the TV during their World Championships and Olympics.

Much is yet to be done regarding equality of gender in sports. However, in order to remedy these problems it is necessary first to notice them. In the next section, and final section, I would like to explain in a more detailed way the structural process that affects society and sports regarding the stereotyping. I do not believe that the stereotype of the female athlete is an accidental one. However, in order to notice it, we must notice the basic structure in which relations between men and women occur, and understand the history of social relations that have created this stereotypes, not only in the feminine body, but also in the masculine body.

7. The normalization process of stereotypes in sports.

I have suggested that there is a selection filter unidentified but that distinguishes between athletes that have not only the abilities and skills to be competitive in their sports, but also the physical complexion that satisfies the stereotype of the athlete body. I mean unidentified, because while there is identified criteria towards who is a better runner or swimmer –time-, and who won the tournament in volleyball –score- and so on, there is not a specific criteria stating that “only thin, tall and feminine athletes can enter the national team on synchronized swimming” and “only muscular, thin, strong and proportionate men can enter to the national soccer team”. There is no explicit criteria that excludes athletes that do not have the athletic body from performing in sports and having the opportunity to fulfil their achievements, and if there happens to be any disposition with that kind of restrictions it could be challenged on trials because of being discriminatory. However, as I said before, it is naïve to think that only because all the female gymnasts we see in the Olympics are thin and small and all the male gymnasts are strong and muscular, all gymnasts, or potential gymnasts –boys and girls- in the world have those attributes. This suggests that, indeed, there is a criteria –stereotype- that guides the selection process of athletes and that does not depend completely on the merits, abilities and skills of the athletes.

In order to understand the unidentified criteria I am referring to, I will use the concept of *normalization* suggested by Iris Marion Young (Young, 2006). According to this scholar, there are issues of social justice that cannot be addressed by a distributive theory of justice. “The claim that the subject of justice is the basic structure is in tension

with Rawls's emphasis on distributions –of rights and liberties, offices and positions, income and wealth, and so on” (Young, 2006:91). This is not to deny the importance of patterns of distribution, but focusing only on distribution issues leaves unattended some aspects of social justice related to structural processes that do not fit well under a distributive criteria.

Such is the case of a normalization process. According to Young Normalization

“consists in a set of social processes that elevate the experience and capacities of some social segments into standards used to judge everyone. In this process the attributes, compartments, or ways of life that are “normal”, in the sense of exhibited by a majority or by dominant segments, come also to have the connotation of being “best”. To the extent that other people do not fit or fail to measure up to these standards because of their bodily capacities, group-specific socialized habits and compartments, or cultural membership or way of life, they tend to suffer stigmatization and disadvantage.” (Young, 2006:95)

As I said earlier, it is expected that a person who dedicates at least 4 hours of the day to a high intense physical activity, plus a strict meal plan, and a perfect relation between training-resting times, will probably have an athletic body: low body fat, high percentage of muscle mass, and an appropriate and healthy Body Mass Index – regardless, as I said earlier, on how athletic they actually look. It is also true that some specific features are needed in some specific sports. For instance, height is an important –but not essential- feature of basketball players. But this does not mean that, only because of the fact that height is an important feature of basketball players, and *normally* basketball players are taller than 1.90 cm (75 inches), all basketball players *must* be higher than 1.90 cm in order to become good players. The same is to be said of many sports. Some, indeed, need such specific physical skills and features that maybe whoever does not have them cannot become a good athlete in that sport, but it is not because of their physical semblance but because of their skills.

The example I have been giving regarding the 100 meters runners helps to understand the difference between a normalization process of stereotypes in the athlete's bodies, and the specific skills needed in order to become a competitive athlete. It is true that the “natural lottery” gave me other natural talents but not one that would allow me to develop such a muscular mass in order to compete against Carmelita Jetter and

have real opportunities in becoming an Olympian 100 meter runner. However, this is not because I do not look strong and powerful enough, but because I cannot run 100 meters in less than 11 seconds. This is a specific time criteria that I cannot fulfil. There are some white, slim 100 meter runners that do not look like Carmelita Jetter and still they can run fast enough to be in an Olympic final⁷. Although maybe society expects that 100 meter female runners look like Carmelita Jetter or Marion Jones, and maybe there is a normalization process in the sense that just because normally all 100 meter female runners look like Marion Jones, all female 100 meter runners must look like Marion Jones. However, since the most important criteria is an objective one: time, it is difficult to exclude female athletes from becoming a 100 meter runners just because they don't look like a normal 100 meter runner⁸.

Hence, the normalization process is hard to identify because, as I said, it is hidden in the expectations of society and of persons involved in sports. However, we must realize that specific features in athletes are only necessary *as long as* it makes them better athletes and not because they do not fulfil a stereotype that has been created by a history of masculine domination and by a normalization process. The case of Taylor Townsend allows us to understand this difference. Even assuming she was indeed overweighted, she still proved to be the best tennis female player of her category. People could argue that she could be even better player if she lost weight, assuming she had extra weight, and this could indeed be true. However, if this were so, maybe the restriction that the Federation imposed over her was not proportionate and was not justified with good arguments. This makes us think that the restriction imposed on her were due to a stereotype that she did not fulfil.

Normalization process of the stereotypes of the athlete's bodies is not irrelevant and it can lead us to very unjust situations in sports, especially when we are not totally responsible for our features. This means that there are demands on our bodies that we will never be able to fulfil, no matter how good athletes we are.

I believe that the demands on the athlete's bodies that do not depend on their performance in their sport is a type of violence that often occurs in sports practice. The stigmatization that all female gymnasts have to cope with because mainstream society

thinks of them as anorexic is not accidental but certainly not justified. It is well known that female gymnasts suffer when trying to fulfil the expectations of not growing higher nor wider.

However, it is unfair that female gymnasts have to also suffer of this type of labeling, because not all gymnasts are anorexic and because the damage caused, not only to their health and body, but also to their mental health sometimes remains forever. Not only gymnasts go through this stereotyping issues, in general, all athletes suffer to some extent this type of violence which is unjust, not only because it is due to a masculine dominance that also has affected sports, but because persons are not totally responsible for their physical features and, no matter how hard they try, some athletes will never be able to achieve the body expected and, therefore, will never be able to fulfil their chosen way of life.

Finally, I would like to finish with one last idea. I have been arguing that stereotypes of the athlete's body are masculine bias and are also a consequence of a normalization process. I have insisted in female athletes, but sometimes I have also referred to male athletes. This is because I believe that, although women are the most affected by this masculine bias in sports, men are also victims of it.

There are many examples to probe my point. I wish to start by the fact that there is no male category on the synchronized swimming (although it is true that in the last Swimming World Championship there was a mixed category, which should certainly be welcomed as good beginning for gender equality in this sport), or with the fact that while female gymnasts are expected to be slim, small and *feminine*, males are expected to be strong, muscular and *masculine*. Usually, a male who practices skating on ice will be stigmatized as gay because males are expected to perform traditional masculine sports on the same way that women are expected to perform in traditional feminine sports.

So much of what I have been explaining in women athletes can apply, inversely, to male athletes. Hence, men are also victims of the normalization process and the masculine bias of the stereotypes of athlete's bodies. This is important to have in mind because stating that only women are affected by these structural problems I have just

described would be misleading and unjust. This is a structural problem that affects everybody and until we are not aware of the damage it can cause to both men and women we will not be able to change it.

8. Conclusions.

Injustices in sports practice matter because sports is becoming a meaningful way of life for many persons. In order to readdress these injustices, I have argued that it is first necessary to recognize the practice of sports as a way of life.

I believe that this recognition will imply a set of legal and public policies that will provide a greater protection to persons who choose to practice sports as a way of life.

I have argued that the practice of sports implies a subjective and an objective element. This means that not every person who wishes to engage in sports practice as her main activity can be considered as a high performance athlete. The objective element in sports practice requires that individuals who engage in the practice of a sport as their main activity in life must have the skills and abilities required in order to be competitive and have real opportunities to fulfil mayor sports objectives.

While we must accept the fact that some persons are blessed by the natural fortune for becoming athletes –and certain type of athletes-, I have argued that we must not confuse skills and abilities that will allow athletes to achieve a better performance in their sport –whether natural talents or developed talents-, from those physical features that depend on gender stereotypes and masculine biases and that not always contribute to a better performance in sports.

I have offered arguments to prove that the selection of athletes many times depends on a gender based stereotype which is unjust because persons are not totally responsible for their physical features and, furthermore, it has not always proven to be a criteria that will contribute to a better performance.

I believe this to be an important source of unjust practices which needs to be readdressed. I have argued, as well, that detecting these type of normalized and hidden practices is the first step for the achievement of justice in sports, as it is the goal of

many sports practitioners and for many persons who just believe in equality of opportunities.

Notes.

¹ A recent example is the Soccer national team of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the last World Cup. A not so recent example but also important is the case of the Indian 400 meter runner, Milkha Singh, among many other cases.

² As I said before, it is desirable that athletes engaging in sports as their main activity in life and who are representing their country in international events ought to have a protection which must include salary and health services, amongst others. Actually, I believe that considering sports as a way of life will contribute to a better protection of the athletes in this respect which is not irrelevant, since training is the main activity of athletes.

³ It is well known that one of the risks an athlete assumes is the fact that maybe she will never achieve her goals even though she had all the physical abilities and the best preparation for it. Many times success or failure in sports is relative, since it only depends to certain degree in the merits and will of the athletes.

⁴ On the other hand, since their bodies are usually heavier because of their muscular mass, it is not so common to have black swimmers as it is to have white swimmers. This kind of examples suggests that many sports depend in a great degree to the physical, natural and undecided features of individuals.

⁵ I am aware that there are certain sports that don't require so much a physical strength as mental or tactical, say, chess or shooting. However, in general terms, and for the purposes of this paper I will assume it does imply some physical activity.

⁶ Although another issue not irrelevant but that I do not wish to assess here is relative to how much authority over athletes do the National Federations and Professional Clubs have?

⁷ A recent example is the Bulgarian Ivet Lalova who managed to qualify to the final in 100 meters in the Olympic Games in Athens, 2004. Another most recent example is Dafne Schippers, a Dutch white runner who won the gold medal in World Championships of 2015 in 200 meters and silver medal in 100 meters.

⁸ Although this may happen in early ages. There are countries that have a selection process for athletes which starts selecting children for specific sports according to their specific features, but that is another issue I will not discuss in this paper.

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