

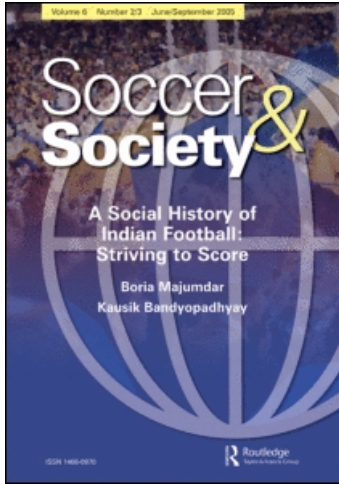
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National and gender identity perceptions among female football players in Israel

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This article attempts to expose the practices that form gender identity among female football players in the Israeli context, with a focus on the relation between gender and nationalism. This exposure will concentrate on the processes shaping gender identity from the beginning of the female football player's career as a professional athlete, and on the significance female football players attribute to their occupation in a field of sports that is perceived as masculine. In this context, the encounter of women in (and on) the field will be examined in terms of how it is conducted and experienced. Moreover, the article also analyses the ways in which women organize bases of power and rewards in the face of the sports establishments and organizations in Israel and within of the private sector.

Introduction

Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male.

Simone de Beauvoir

In football everything is complicated by the presence of the opposite team.

Jean Paul Sartre

The modern nation-state has regarded sports in general and football in particular as an important means of reinforcing its hegemony and of shaping the personal and collective life experiences of those subject to it.¹ Thus, through the imprint of the nation's symbols and colours upon football league uniforms, sport has enabled 'virtual communities' to regard themselves as tight-knit collectives in the face of other national collectives, until at times 'it appears as though the virtual community or nation has become more real in the stadium's bleachers or on the athletics track'.² It is therefore argued that with its introduction at a global level, football was enthusiastically embraced by nationalism.

The central role played by sport and football in shaping collective identities in the modern era led sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s to emphasize sport's functionality in maintaining stability in society. According to this view, modern sport is a

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mechanism for the integration of social categories within one national entity. This meritocratic integration has been criticized for its indifference to gender, class and ethnic characteristics, among others, and for relying solely on athletes' achievements on the playing field. This view was phased out, and during the 1970s and 1980s it was replaced by more critical theories that focused mainly on national and economic aspects of modern sports. These theories stimulated extensive discussion on sport as a cultural field, subject to control and power relations.³

In the past 20 years, with the consolidation of feminist theories in sport, awareness that sport is a central cultural institution, directly related to gender identity and male hegemony, has increased.⁴ According to these feminist theories, sport creates and recreates ideological support of the superiority of men over women, and glorifies women in fields perceived as contrary to their biological 'nature'.⁵ This ideology draws its justifications from assumptions that attribute fragility and physical and mental weakness to women, thereby assuming that the female body is unable to attain physical feats.⁶

The preoccupation with the link between sport and gender has, in recent years, extended the discussion to a national dimension that the state apparatus and dominant teams in the state have the power in the hands to shape and establish different social assumptions and perceptions, including gender perceptions. The mechanisms employed by the state and the various dominant teams (e.g. the elite, the organizations, certain socio-economic or social groups), which serve as social agents shaping national identity, are perceived as central agents in the production and reproduction of gender relations.⁷ According to this view, sports organizations and institutions, which are sponsored by the state, serve as agents that function as tools for the distribution of the ideology that women are inferior, and as a means for reproducing women's marginality in sport in general and in fields considered male, such as football, in particular.

In Israel, as in most countries around the world, football serves as a 'stronghold of masculinity'. This common perception is based on the assumption that it is a male field not intended for women (as fans, players or referees). Nevertheless, a national women's football team has existed in Israel since 1997, and a women's football league has existed since 1998, consisting of 18 teams in 2009. The Women's Football League in Israel suffers from serious management and investment problems. Apart from the scant sympathy it receives and complete disregard by Israeli media, women's football also suffers from budgetary bias on the part of the state (the budget allotted to women's football accounts for about 0.5% of that awarded to men's). Women's football in Israel functions within the framework of the Israeli Football Association, the sole and exclusive institution in the country for the management of league and national team games. This has critical importance in shaping and establishing the identity of female football players, especially in the national sense. The state is a male institution and nationalism is fundamentally structured on the emphasis of essentially male symbols, such as honour, patriotism and courage.⁸ Women have a separate symbolic role in the state. This is a role befitting the male definition of femininity and women's appropriate role in the nation: Mother of the nation, the heart and home of the nation, the bearer of national honour. The woman's symbolic role in Israel is validated by the fact that militarism is the central organizing principle of social life in Israel.⁹ Militarism, which is perceptually related to male identity, structurally and culturally penetrates into the collective air and is taken for granted by leaders and citizens alike, thus affecting the civil status of women. The Israeli

female football player's place in society and the definition of her identity are influenced by the fact that football is perceived as a male field and from the fact that it expresses hegemonic national feelings, which are integrated in male hegemonic ideology.

This article attempts to expose the practices which form gender identity among female football players in the Israeli context, with a focus on the relation between gender and nationalism. This exposure will concentrate on the processes shaping gender identity from the beginning of the female football player's career as a professional athlete, and on the significance female football players attribute to their occupation in a field of sports that is perceived as masculine. In this context, the encounter of women on the playing field will be examined in terms of how it is conducted and experienced. Moreover, the ways in which women organize bases of power and rewards in face of the sport establishment and organizations in Israel and within the private sector are examined.

Theoretical background

Sport and masculinity

Patriarchal hegemonic ideology sets a binary classification of two clear categories: male and female.¹⁰ In accordance with this division, human beings define their gender identity, and that of others, by following the clear limits between the two categories. The limits become more clearly defined in sport. Sport methodically produces and maintains the ideology of men's superiority and women's inferiority.¹¹ It serves as a central locus for the construction of male identity and for creating opportunities for the men who watch or engage in sport to establish their dominance in society. In addition, the standards by which sport achievements are measured are male standards, and attempts to compare women's abilities with those of men justify the differences and reinforce these standards.¹²

Gender relations are a determining factor in sport. This field's structure and the values shaping it reflect dominant perceptions in terms of masculinity and femininity.¹³ These perceptions derive their justifications from arguments claiming a link between physical activity and physical ability, where women are perceived as weak and fragile, thereby lacking in athletic ability.¹⁴ The social label of 'sissy' attached to a man who 'throws like a girl' expresses negative evaluation, whereas the label of 'tomboy' given to women is accepted and attributed to greater value in the eyes of society. This is one of the reasons that many men who engage in sports place a great deal of emphasis on keeping the gender limits apparent. Out of fear of isolation, ostracism, derogatory comments and doubts regarding their sexual preferences, many men who engage in sport tend to express a blatant negative attitude towards women, lesbians and homosexuals.¹⁵

As a result of the significant role sport plays in defining masculinity, clear borders between the sexes are maintained by means of trivializing women's sport: sports which integrate male elements such as force, violence and dominance over the other is perceived as 'real' sport, and sport which expresses grace, gentleness and coordination, such as dance, is perceived as female and therefore as 'non-sport'. For this reason, in order to justify their position in competitive sport, which is perceived as male, female athletes produce and reproduce the 'male' nature of the game by adopting those same practices of aggression, dominance and control during the game.¹⁶

Sport and femininity

The fact that sport and physical activity are cultural fields which have been perceived to date as masculine is one of the most difficult barriers women face. The competitive dimension, which is a basic element of all sport branches, contradicts the position of many women towards sport, as it encourages dominant male values.¹⁷ Throughout history limitations have been placed on the participation of women in sports in Western culture, by means of social control and supervision mechanisms. Women's participation in sport was considered a threat to the maintenance of traditional ideology regarding gender roles.¹⁸ In order to justify women's inferiority in sport, science was recruited to supply explanations of their biological inferiority.¹⁹ Ever since the Olympic Games were reinstated in 1896, the medical establishment has warned women who expressed a desire to participate (especially high class white women) that their participation would make them 'masculine'. They were told that as a result of their masculinity their fertility would be affected, their voice would be deepened, their facial hair would grow and their limb muscles would become overdeveloped.²⁰ All these could harm the female athletes' ability to 'knit and perform additional housework tasks'.²¹

The most dramatic change in the world of sport occurred in the 1970s when an increasing number of girls and young and adult women joined sports. Coakley lists a number of reasons for this increase in the USA: women's movements which led to political change, health and fitness programmes and the increase in media coverage of women's sport. In addition, the most significant reason was government legislation for equality in the school and college curriculum, the Title IX law, which was passed in 1972. Title IX was part of a series of laws which obligated equal opportunities in education. Since 1972 all institutions of learning (from grade schools to colleges and universities) have provided equal opportunities to girls and young women to participate in all branches of sport. Although many institutions have found diverse ways to circumvent this law, and the government has had to ensure its enforcement and publish clarifications regarding its implementation every few years, since the twenty years following this legislation equality of opportunities has gradually stabilized and the rate of female participation in sports in the USA has increased accordingly.²²

Nevertheless, the obstacles women face in penetrating this cultural field, do not end in legislation alone. Social structure, which discriminates between femininity and masculinity and the corresponding stereotypes that are rooted within the socialization processes in society, undermine women's identity categories and are an additional obstacle in their path to complete participation in sport. One central categorical perception is related to male and female physical and external appearance, as expected by society. Caudwell claims that the effect of physical activity on body appearance is obvious and clearly visible, but the distance between 'female masculinity', as she describes the female athlete's body, and male identity is great.²³ Sport, it should be remembered, is one of the factors that repeatedly reconfirm the existence of clearly distinguishable gender categories. Muscular women thereby challenge the binary distinction between 'male' and 'female' categories, and the accepted triangular link between men, muscularity and masculinity.

Moreover, the sexual identity and sexual orientation of women who engage in sport have been examined under critical eyes. The very fact that certain women engage in a sport within the framework of a women's team has increased the stigma regarding the link between engagement in sport and masculinity, and the myth that

women who engage in sport are lesbian was thus formed.²⁴ This myth has led women to avoid this occupation and to diminish their desire to join it.

An additional myth which undermines women's place in sport is that female athletes could suffer psychological damage.²⁵ At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the development of psychoanalysis, the claim that women lack the emotional strength to cope with this demanding occupation gained popularity. This argument was also derived from the assumption that biological differences exist between the sexes, and that they affect the psychological dimensions of men and women. Moreover, the accepted perception has been that women lack the 'masculine' trait necessary for engaging in sport – the mental ability to separate the 'I' from physical activity, that is, the ability to separate body and mind which equips athletes with the ability to surmount obstacles and difficulties which come their way.²⁶

The messages transmitted today to female athletes by society contain a double standard: they can engage in male sports, but should continue to behave like ladies in their daily life.²⁷ Women who engage in physical activity are thus confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, Western culture presents a model of the ideal female body, and on the other hand, it presents a model of the ideal athletic body, while both models are connected to typical character traits of femininity and masculinity. As these models do not overlap, the paradox created by the clash between them emerges in the female's experience in sport. In other words, the female athlete realizes that in order to succeed she must adopt traits perceived as male, such as force, assertiveness, independence and competitiveness, while at the same time she must continue to manifest expected hegemonic femininity.

Femininity is a socially structured standard for external appearance, behaviour and values.²⁸ Owing to the existence of a hegemonic structure of femininity, every body type is attributed a social value formed as a result of comparing it with the female ideal. By means of an entire range of social mechanisms, women learn that 'feminine women' are valued more in Western society. Many female athletes, therefore, tend to emphasize directed female performance in their external appearance, and to convey normal sexuality by expressing greater value in maintaining traditional roles – marriage and motherhood – over engaging in sport.²⁹ The accepted perception is that female athletes who remain true to their 'real gender' form the appropriate and desired image of women in sport.

In addition to a discussion on the shaping of female athletes' identity, which includes conflicts regarding their sexuality, their body and the blurring of the dichotomous borders between the categories of 'male' and 'female', this article attempts to illustrate the link between femininity, sport and the nation-state. This link, which has a great deal of significance for women in the Israeli context, is a factor that affects the meaning that they attribute to their presence in this 'male' cultural field.

Football, nationalism and gender

Smith surveyed the historical structuring of the nation and listed the ways researchers and historians have examined this term.³⁰ Initial explanations were influenced by approaches that considered the nation an organic being, and claimed that nationalism is a result of common genetic, ethnic and community foundations, and has therefore always been in existence. Others have claimed that nationalism has always been present throughout history, although it is not part of human nature. In contrast, modernist theoreticians argue that nationalism is a new phenomenon which is part of

the modernization process that began with the French Revolution whose purpose was to serve the function of producing a common denominator and a unifying collective identity.³¹ Finally, the ethno-symbolic approach claims that nationalism is a historical phenomenon which is formed as a result of a common consciousness of the collective, which is composed of myths, symbols and ethnic foundations. The circumstances which make nationalism possible offer several interpretations. The concept of the nation is an expression of the process of forming an abstract mechanism, which provides the elite who created it with the opportunity to form a sense of belonging, loyalty and unity among the community.

Sport is a wide field with a great deal of significance and influence on the process of creating and founding a nation. The state's existence and permanence depend on the fact that those defined as its citizens identify with it. At the same time, citizens feel a need to belong to a greater collective manifested in the nation-state. Modern nationalism has been linked to sport, and especially football, from its start. By the very fact that sport is an event for the masses, it is a multi-beneficial tool for the nation-state. Athletes, whether singly or as part of a group, embody the achievements of their nation-state of origin. Their uniforms bear the state's symbol and flag's colours, and when they win, their nation's flag is raised and their national anthem is heard. The state nourishes its citizens with national consciousness in daily practice through language and symbols bearing latent national sensibilities which enable the consolidation of national identity accompanied by the individual.³² It can even be said that the nation-state succeeds by means of sport to force itself on individuals and groups (as athletes and spectators) when it demands that they place their national identity above everything and forgo all other social differences.

The usage of sport and 'sporting war' among states is one of the most salient ways of intensifying national sentiments among citizens and awakening feelings of loyalty, brotherhood and unity. The intertextuality of sport and war, or in other words, the way that sport discourse borrows images and connotations from military discourse, draws the schism between men and women, as male sport branches, football among them, are characterized by 'combat' and aggressiveness.³³

Football is the most popular game in the world.³⁴ It is extremely common and institutionalized in almost every country on earth. The number of fans and spectators who take an active part in football games taking place in their country as well as in international competitions (as club members, spectators on the field, TV viewers at home, sports section readers, etc.) accounts for millions of people. The rituals perpetuating the football game as a battlefield have a unifying effect on the citizens of the state, and each competition between two national teams becomes a source for awakening national sentiments and for unifying citizens under the flag.³⁵ Expressions of such sentiments reach their height within the framework of the World Cup, the *Mondiale*, which takes place every four years.

The discourse which identifies football with male militant identity and with national identity is one which undermines women and leads the state and its institutions to encourage the game's male expressions and symbols. The state itself repeatedly confirms hegemonic masculinity, regulates relations between the various types of masculinity, and maintains the existing social order by institutionalizing the game of football.³⁶

Shafir and Peled distinguish between three types of public discourse in Israeli society: (1) liberal civilian discourse, according to which the system of rights and obligations of an individual and the issue of his/her belongingness to the collective

are determined by civilian status; (2) ethnic discourse, according to which the issue of collective belongingness is determined by ethnic identity; and (3) republican discourse, according to which belongingness to the collective is determined by the extent to which the person contributes to the collective and realizes the central values of the collective ethos.³⁷ According to this typology, public discourse in Israel awards superfluous rights to its male Jewish Zionist citizens. Such rights are awarded to this group because its identity fulfils all three criteria set by public discourse: their citizenship grants them belongingness on the basis of liberal discourse, their Jewish identity grants them belongingness on the basis of ethnic discourse and their support of Zionist ideology and participation in the Zionist state's mechanisms (the army, the national team, etc.) is evidence of their contribution to the collective and the realization of its values. By contrast, the access of minorities to such resources and entitlements are determined in an unequal and differential manner.

Sorek believes that the prominence of the ethnic and republican discourse in diverse areas of life in Israeli society excludes Arab Israelis from the Israeli collective identity, which is discernible in the ongoing discrimination against them in various areas of life.³⁸ Israeli sports in general, and football in particular, serve as a locus for 'integrative intermingling', a public stage for values blind to national and ethnic identity, such as professionalism and ambition. This stage enables 'evasion' of the ethnic and republican discourse and strengthens the liberal civilian discourse, which is normally marginalized.

Although Jewish women accept their belongingness to the nation from a liberal and ethnic discourse, their national status from a republican civilian discourse requires examination. Jewish women's contribution to the nation is still perceived as marginal in comparison with that of men (in military service, for example). According to Sorek's model in relation to Arab Israelis, it can be assumed that women in Israel prefer to conduct a 'quiet resistance' adjacent to full participation in the male football scene. That is, from a desire to integrate and escape their marginality in society, they prefer to separate the football game from the national agenda and the gender power struggle it creates. This article examines whether Israeli female football players adapt to the sports field as an apolitical field in the national sense or in the gender sense, in order to use it as a means for optimal integration in Israeli society.

Women's sport in Israel

Today women in Israel are engaged in virtually every branch of sports in which men engage. In many branches, women's sports have been notably successful, and women have reached impressive international achievements.³⁹ In Olympic sports, such as artistic gymnastics, sailing and judo, Israeli women have reached a respectable position in terms of representation in the Olympic Games and European Championships. In tennis, Israeli women have done well to secure decent places in the world tennis rankings. The Women's Basketball League in Israel is extremely advanced and professional. The number of girls and young and adult women who belong to the Basketball Association in Israel accounts for some 1700, and there is growing public interest in women's basketball games.

Notwithstanding the above, a background report submitted to the Advancement of Women Committee in Israel in 2002, which examined women's sports coverage in the media and the representation of women in sport, found that no procedures or standards apply to women's sports coverage that would oblige sports sections to reach a certain

coverage quota on television (state or commercial channels) or in the written press. As a result, the extent of media coverage of Israeli female athletes is significantly lower than that awarded to Israeli male athletes. In those cases when female Israeli athletes do get extensive coverage, they are often represented in a negative light with an emphasis on gossip and personal and athletic failures.⁴⁰

In addition to media bias, women's sports in Israel also suffer from a budgetary bias. It can be generalized that almost every local authority in the country which funds and accompanies women's and men's teams in the various branches, awards women's teams a significantly lower annual budget than that awarded to men. The Basketball Association allotted, for example over half a million NIS in 2002 to each team in the men's super league, while the women's league had to suffice with an annual budget of only 80,000 NIS per team (the Basketball Association's management is comprised of 33 men and 4 women).⁴¹ Similar budgetary gaps can be found in the Football Association's and the Israeli Sports Gambling Council's budgeting for women's sports, and for this reason, a public committee has been formed whose task is to set criteria for the advancement of women's sports.

Public discussion on this issue reached a height in June 2004 when a court ruling was passed on a petition submitted to the Supreme Court by the A.S. Ramat Hasharon coach, Orna Ostfeld, and by the chairwoman of the team, Rachel Ostrovich, to attain rights for the team equal to those of men's basketball teams. According to the decision, judges ruled that the Ramat Hasharon Municipality would award A.S. Ramat Hasharon an annual budget of 150% of that allotted to men. The aim of the ruling was to obligate higher budgeting to women's teams by affirmative action in the basketball branch, as well as in others. Besides the Supreme Court ruling's practical significance, there was an added value to the feminist effort to advance women's sport in Israel. The media frenzy provoked by the ruling contributed a great deal to this advancement by increasing public awareness and attempting to change common beliefs in society regarding the legitimacy of women's sports branches in Israel.

Another significant field in women's sports status in Israel is sports management. The sports law was amended in 2004 thanks to the women's lobby and the Women's Advancement in Sports Organization. The law now requires appropriate representation of women in the sports groups' management and labour force. Nevertheless, although some 25% of all people who take part in sport are women, women still lack adequate representation in the institutions and organizations which manage sports in Israel. Thus, for example, since the start of 2009, the Football Association's management comprises 29 representatives, 4 of whom are women. The absence of women in positions of influence and power and in decision-making positions further impedes the advancement of women's sport.

Therefore, due to low budgets, lack of media exposure and the absence of state support, in many sports women fail to come up with any outstanding achievements. Women's football is one such branch of sports. Women began playing football as early as 1993, in a manner that was neither institutionalized nor established in any way. In 1997, the world football association, FIFA, gave the Israeli Football Association an ultimatum. The men's national team could participate in international tournaments on the condition that a national women's football team be established. Within two weeks a national women's football team was put together. This team takes part in official international and friendly games. In January 2009, the team ranked 60th in the world. In 1997, a year after the Israeli national team had been formed, the women's league was established. There are currently 18 teams in the women's league

across the country. In addition, during the 2008/9 season, 21 young women's teams from three different leagues participated.

Methodology

This article aims to uncover the different meanings Israeli female football players attribute to their athletic activity in national and gender terms. In order to extract these meanings, a number of methods were used to collect data. These methods include collecting background information by conducting observations on a number (8) of games and practices of the Israeli national football team and women league teams from 2003 to 2006. These observations were mostly gained through informal conversations with a number of the female players, including a group conversation that was conducted with the Israeli national team.

In-depth data was gathered mainly by interviews conducted with 10 players. Each interview included five general content categories: a general description of the team the interviewee plays in, including the team's practices, staff and games; initial engagement of the player in sport, including what factors led to the decision to participate, initial experiences and feelings; the environment including parents' and friends' reactions; football in general and women's football in particular as a national sport; other fields of interest, future ambitions and political/feminist positions. Each interview was conducted in the interviewee's home in order to provide a sense of security and encourage openness. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. The subject of the study and its sociological and social implications were explained to the interviewees. A sharing approach guided the interview, which allowed the interviewee's speech to be given centre stage for expressing her experiences.⁴² Throughout the interview, active listening, as part of the approach, was implemented which assisted in the sensitive identification of the mechanisms examined in the words used by the interviewee and in the interviewer's clarification questions.

The data analysis method used in the current study was based on data distribution into thematic units of meaning raised by the interviewee.⁴³ This method allows the classification and organization of the large amount of information provided by the interview, as well as the identification of mechanisms which shape the process of establishing gender identification, which is one of the key aims of the study. Thus it could be more clearly ascertained how each interviewee places herself and her identity in relation to the process or activity she conducted.

Gender identity is shaped by the social context within which it functions. This point of departure guided the interview analysis in the current study. Ten different women from diverse backgrounds described their distinct female experience in a cultural field perceived as male. The multitude of meanings and experiences expressed by these women was first recognized using a qualitative analysis method. Using the same method, patterns were then identified which clarified the process (in contrast with the factors) which led to shaping the interviewee's identity.

Results: shaping female identity in a male field

Data analysis reveals that female football players' identity is netted and multidimensional. This net is woven as a result of the complex relations between material and social circumstances in which Israeli female football players function. The social circumstances include Israeli society as a whole and the gender relations it fosters. As

such, sport is a cultural field that includes the branch which is perceived as masculine (football), and the surrounding family and community. The complexity of the female football players' identity is expressed in four discourse types which systematically came up through their interviews:

- (1) 'Playing for myself' – the emphasis on personal discourse and the absence of national discourse: pleasure gained from the drive for personal success in the game as opposed to success on a national collective dimension, and avoidance of militant rhetoric, characteristic of international football.
- (2) 'As a national team, we interest no one' – discourse expressing acceptance of women's football's marginal position in Israel: this discourse includes the acceptance that public interest is deficient and is an expression of women's lack of belongingness to football.
- (3) Negative evaluation of women – negative views of the woman's body and of women's inferior physical and mental abilities in sport in comparison to men in accordance with the accepted stereotypes in the game.
- (4) Sport as a hobby – discourse which emphasizes the transient dimension of women in football, while accepting women's traditional role in society.

'Playing for myself' – personal discourse taking precedence over national discourse

The establishment of a nation-state and the significance of a sense of belonging to the nation are extremely meaningful processes for citizens, as they trigger myths, memories, traditions and symbols of an ethnic heritage.⁴⁴ National discourse is characterized by loyalty and dedication to nationalism – to the point of self-sacrifice and the creation of segregation between the citizens of the state and the citizens of another state on the basis of elements which are perceived as elements of ideal national identity. Among these elements of identity, a conscious link is forged between myths of masculinity and war, which is encouraged by the state and its institutions. Thus the link between football and masculinity, and at the same time the military subtext which ensues, are central to the nation-state.

Because football is a national sport with characteristics perceived as male, and because the aim of the nation-state is to maintain the existing social order, it utilizes football as a means of attaining these goals. The state promotes football as a source of identification for extensive segments of the male population and as a foundation for creating and sustaining models of hegemonic masculinity and male myths. Interwoven within football are nationalist sentiments, male alliance and myths of masculinity.⁴⁵

Moreover, in public consciousness, the parallelism made between the football game and the battlefield in the Israeli context is connected strictly to men's football. Social structuring since the establishment of the state which ascribes the Israeli fighter myth to men presents a barrier between women's ambitions to establish a significant and accepted league and unsympathetic public opinion. Just as the accepted social perception of the female soldier is of being 'less worthy' in the military system, even if she serves in combat positions, she is similarly undervalued as a female football player in comparison with the male football player.⁴⁶ Public discourse is directed by the perception that football is not the 'natural' or 'normal' place of a woman, resulting in disdain for female football league in Israel. That is, a woman's status in Israel hinders her legitimate acceptance in fields rooted perceptively in military contexts.

The interviewees in this study attribute significance to the personal dimension of their participation in institutionalized women's football in Israel. Contrary to the national significance attributed to men's football, they separate the personal from the public dimension of the game, while casting doubt on the need to link the two. This phenomenon was expressed in two discursive practices: love of the game and avoidance of military rhetoric, and emphasizing the importance of personal success during international games.

Love of the game and avoidance of military rhetoric

The significance that female football players attribute to the game has a different objective from a national perspective. They reject military or combative symbols, and some even strongly oppose the acceptable perceptual link between the battlefield and the football game, or the insinuation that rivalry, other than athletic, exists between two opposing teams.

Israeli female football players express a self-perception of loving the game in the most 'authentic' and genuine way, and avoid usage of military rhetoric emphasizing the victory of the 'nation' over defeat of the 'enemy'. They share a similar vocabulary and language style, which insinuates that they 'teach' and convince each other of this love in order to avoid a dissonance between the considerable investment in the game and the small return. This is a discourse of justification, and their usage of the word 'love' is chosen in order to justify, on the one hand, the fact that they engage in an athletic activity that is perceived as male and, on the other hand, the considerable investment in an activity which has little compensation. While they often hint, or sometimes directly state, that they wish for worthy compensation (money, public recognition, recognition by the Football Association, advancement in life and media attention), they repeatedly say that this is marginal, insisting that the true reason they play for is love of the game. They use words such as 'pure' and 'real' when they describe their feelings for the game, and thus distinguish themselves from men who play football. When they describe their true and 'clean' love they suggest that the male game is 'dirty' and that a man plays professional football not out of love for the game, but out of an aspiration for recognition, prestige, status and wealth.

The importance of personal success during international games

National identity is not permanent, but rather it is process strife with tension which is derived from competing identities on dominance and hegemony at its base.⁴⁷ This identity is perceived as collectivity, while the participants shaping it represent identities defining individuals and groups or both. These individuals' experiences in various spheres of life have an implication for the role of national identity in their lives. Such experiences include the field of sport in general and football in particular.

There is a link between football and nationalism because football contributes a great deal to the consolidation and maintenance of national identity. Nationalism appropriates football, and advancing the sport is in its interest. The state's national team presents itself as representative of the nation as a whole, and its spectators imagine themselves as an entire national community. Therefore, international competitions 'symbolize the unity of the state ... and intensify the sense of all for one'.⁴⁸ Symbols from military terminology are often expressed during international games. The football game becomes a battlefield: player and fan corps are mobilized under the national

flag in order to defeat enemy corps, and victory uplifts the nation's morale and brings it pride.⁴⁹

The findings in this study depict a different picture. Interviews with female football players reveal contrasts and contradictions regarding national sentiments awakened during the game. Although they speak in terms taken from the terminology of national collective identity, thus expressing their identification with the values dictated by the nation, at the same time, they express an individual identity which functions within the personal and familial context. On the one hand, the players recognize the national significance of the national team's victory, and are to a certain extent driven by patriotic sentiments and national symbols that contribute to national pride. They understand that they should be patriotic and are interested in expressing the link between sport and nationalism in their game as well, because nationalism gives added value to athletic victory. On the other hand, they consider the situation from a cynical and realistic view and play 'for themselves'. They say that it is difficult for them to 'arouse patriotism' when the nation does not support their actions. In other words, becoming a member of the national team is the peak of a young Israeli female football player's ambitions, and she recognizes the importance of a team victory for the state, yet she asserts that she 'does not play for this reason', but rather for herself and in order to achieve her personal goals.

Similarly, from the viewpoint of the establishment, represented by the coach, the role of the nation and national sentiments is secondary when it comes to women's football. In the 'pep talks' he or she gives to the female players prior to an international game, the coach expresses the understanding that it is the mental link to the home, the family and the personal pride of each player to the close community surrounding her that will motivate the team to win. This type of motivation technique is conducted alongside the patriotic national discourse which, the players believe he is 'obliged' to express as national coach. In addition, due to the fact that both the players and the coach know in advance that no serious press coverage of the game or its outcome (even if it is victory) will take place, personal rather than national victory is given precedence, as both sides know that the social rewards given to the young girl and her close environment (family) are more immediate and personal, while the team as a whole can not expect any national recognition or rewards. At the same time that the interviewees attach importance to the personal dimension in the context of the national team, they also tend to come to terms with the regretful attitude of the media towards the national team and the resultant lack of public interest.

Acceptance of the lack of public interest: 'As a national team we are of interest to no one'

The interviewees spoke at length about the absence of an audience in the stadium bleachers and the lack of public interest in women's football in the national sense. Several of the interviewees mentioned that there is a significant difference between the number of fans that attend their games and the number that can be found in the bleachers of the men's national team and league games. The number of people who watch the women's national team from the bleachers serves for the female football players as evidence that in Israel women's football is not a national sport. That is, the ongoing absence of an audience in the stadiums reaffirms continually the nonexistence of national sentiments by the citizens of the state towards the women's

national team, and at the same time, adds another layer to the players' acceptance of this reality.

Paradoxically, in games taking place in Europe, Israeli female football players draw motivation from the large crowds the rival team attracts to the stadiums in the countries where the games are played. This motivation, generated from the presence of the rival audience in the stadium in international games, overturns the acceptable role of a crowd for the Israeli women. While traditionally the presence of spectators is a significant form of encouragement for the team they support, they are in fact a motivation for the Israeli female football players due to the fact that these spectators of the rival team recognize their presence. Because the Israeli audience is almost completely absent during women's national team games in Israel and abroad, the crowd that the rival team draws becomes a significant element in shaping the Israeli female football players' identity. The very presence of such a large number of spectators in the bleachers abroad sends (much greater than that found in Israel) Israeli women the message that they are not 'transparent', because as a team they have national significance in the eyes of the rival country's citizens.

Lack of public interest in women's football affects not only the fact that Israeli female football players receive no social rewards or social recognition for their activities, but it is also an influencing factor on their participation in football from childhood. As they advance from one professional level to the next to reach a position in a legitimate football team, they are confronted with technical barriers put up by the Israeli Football Association and state institutions which halt their professional training process and even discourage them from pursuing this field. The lack of institutionalized frameworks for girls aged 13–15 is one example. The long break has a major influence on their motivation to return to the field after two years and therefore many girls drop out of the game. Such steps hinder female football players from gaining maximum experience on the field. This experience requires providing adequate resources to enable a player to reach her maximum potential.

Because discrimination in women's football varies in extent, the girls describe a gap between fantasy and reality as they build their professional track in the field. During interviews, a discourse emphasizing the centrality of discrimination in women's football in shaping their identity as female football players was discernible. As such, their need to talk about unfair budget distribution by the State and the Israeli Football Association was recurrent. They expressed deep disappointment with the way they are compensated as players, as a club and as an entire league. The establishment sends female football players the message that success is up to them, that is, their success in a game will lead to greater rewards, exposure and promotion of women's football in Israel. Yet the same establishment withholds the tools needed for success, thus leading to their 'failure' by preventing them from professionalizing, practicing, and playing with appropriate apparatuses. Paradoxically, when these women achieve the desired result, despite all the obstacles, they do not receive the promised compensation.

By discriminating against women's football, the establishment does not allocate sufficient resources to the women involved in the field, and moreover it discourages them from pursuing it. Within this framework of reality, interviews with the Israeli female football players revealed a sense of non-belonging and isolation. They express disappointment and bitterness with discrimination on the part of the football association and the various sports bodies, yet they admit the acceptance of the existing situation. This discourse, we argue, is one of the foundations of the view that female football

players share hegemonic social perceptions regarding the link between masculinity and sport, which is clearly expressed in their negative evaluation of women.

A negative evaluation of women

At the crux of inequality between men and women is the assumption that women differ from men physically and mentally, and are therefore incapable of performing activities perceived as male.⁵⁰ Many women accept this postulation and even adopt it in an attempt to explain why they or others are unsuccessful in performing certain activities. This is expressed even by women who penetrate a 'masculine' social field and serve in positions perceived as 'male'. In a study on women who serve in 'masculine' positions in the Israeli army, Sasson-Levy illustrates how these women adopt practices of distancing from what they perceive as 'traditional' femininity and how female combat soldiers express a negative evaluation of women and femininity.⁵¹ The adoption of such stereotypes towards women is similarly expressed by the Israeli female football players. It seems that they perceive the character of the men's game as desirable and worthy of admiration, especially for the enhanced physical activity they manifest, and that they perceive themselves and the character of their game as inferior and 'feminine'. Although they do not make explicit use of the word 'feminine', they choose language and expressions to convey this meaning. In this study, two central themes emerge, which deal with a negative evaluation of women: one that discusses women's athletic ability in football and the other, body perceptions.

Adoption of stereotypes of women's abilities

Willis claims that women who engage in sport often attempt to compare their athletic activity with that of men and in this fashion they reinforce male sport as the standard.⁵² That is, women who engage in 'masculine' sports perceive it as a uniform branch with similar traits in all the cultural fields that the people in it take part. They adapt themselves and compare their achievements with the male standards it sets, without taking into consideration the fact that this is not in keeping with differences between the sexes.

Israeli female football players assume that women have low physiological abilities because girls are directed and socialized differently from boys at an early age. A tone of acceptance of the existing situation can be discerned, as they ignore the fact that women need not be physically compared to men since they do not play against them in the league. The separation between the women's league and the men's league creates a situation in which the game comprises women, and if these women were given athletic support only from the age of 15, their performance level would be similar. That is, although professional comparison between men and women is irrelevant to the games, the interviewees see this as the reason for the low level of their game. The standard of a good game is still the men's game.

The female football players are convinced that regardless of physical ability, when it comes to 'pure football', women could be better players than men. That is, they perceive themselves and other females as leaders and achievers, more so than boys, during childhood as well as adolescence, and that they are better players of the game itself, physical abilities including agility and strength aside. On the other hand, it is apparent that they are unable to ignore the accepted perception that strength and

agility are the foundations of the game, and thus they reaffirm the justification for legitimacy granted to football by society as a male sport.

Body perceptions

Research indicates that women who engage in sport emphasize their 'feminine' sexuality out of a need to express 'normal' sexuality in a cultural field where athletic women are perceived as male.⁵³ That is, the way female athletes physically present themselves in society and the way they speak of their body and that of their colleagues, emphasize the meaning and significance they attribute to accepted feminine sexuality. Although they are in a male cultural field, and they are expected to display accepted male characteristics such as force, agility and aggressiveness, they still take offence when society treats them as 'masculine', as this image reflected upon other gender identity categories. In their interviews, they confirm that the perception of disciplining and normalizing the body occurs in society in order to maintain the existing social order.⁵⁴

Even in cases where the female athlete does not consider her body features as feminine as perceived by society, it is important for her to convey femininity so as not to undermine social axioms which dictate how a woman must look and behave. They attach a great deal of meaning and significance to this fact in their world, for the reason that football is almost strictly male. Despite such a perspective, it was found in this study that an approach, which allegedly overturns this analysis and challenges the perceptions which guide it, constitutes an acceptance and confirmation of the dichotomous gender order. Bordo's study, which focused on anorectic women, discovered that the sense of achievement gained from weight loss instils in the patient a feeling that she is in complete control over her body.⁵⁵ Bordo claims that in a culture characterized by over-consumption, the will to conquer and subjugate the body expresses an aesthetic or moral rebellion. For one of the interviewees, her body's 'masculine look', and the pride she takes in describing it, similarly constitutes the discourse of power, resistance and control. She clearly states that she enjoys the fact that her body gives her the feeling that she 'can do anything'. On the surface, it seems that when she separates herself from the rest of the girls in this matter, she protests against the 'mask' the other girls put on when they exit the football field, although in effect the practice she chooses to use is an imitation of male practices and of male discourse (taking pride in an injury, for example) and a distancing from 'traditional' femininity. This indicates identification with the collective consensus regarding the gender dichotomy in sport.

Sport as a hobby: the transient career of the female football player versus the eternal role of the traditional woman

The process of building a female athlete's identity is shaped not only through opposition to male gender identity or the social dichotomy between male and female identity, but also as a result of the categorical analysis conducted between masculinity and femininity in sport. The identity shaping process is largely affected by the perception of the essence of sport itself, and the role it plays in the female athlete's life.

Because sport is conceived as a male social field and because 'sport' and 'femininity' are categories which do not integrate into the conventional social perception, the presence of women in sport poses a threat to definitions of masculinity.⁵⁶ This situation creates a social expectation for the female athletes to maintain elements of

female identity evident in accepted cultural codes. An inseparable part of such elements of identity is the woman's place in the job market. We now turn attention to the way female football players perceive their participation in football from the perspective that football as an organization constitutes a workplace.

In the existing job market, a division determined by gender exists. Certain professions are perceived as male, while others are perceived as female.⁵⁷ Similarly, within each profession there is a hierarchical separation between the genders according to various fields included in the profession. The differences in income and social image in various professions found in the job market reflect the discrimination between occupation and gender as also the concomitant division in tasks according to gender.

The entrance of women to the male workplace has been a threat to definitions of masculinity as well as to their professional standards. 'Football' is a profession that is perceived as 'masculine' and has a position within the job market with a corresponding salary. Because there is fear that a woman who engages in professional football may sever the order of gender separation in the professional world and threaten definitions of masculinity and femininity by penetrating a male occupation field, some even outwardly present the occupation as a hobby. That is, it is important for them to present to society a picture which does not threaten the way it perceives the professionalism of the game as an occupation.

It should be noted that women who play in the women's football league receive a meagre salary. Some do not receive a salary at all. Income is determined according to various criteria in each group, and depends, among other things, on the ability the player demonstrates on the field and her position in the Israeli national team. There is a link between excellence and the salary awarded, although despite their ability to turn football into a profession with a corresponding salary, the women present their experiences in this cultural field as a hobby. This fact is astounding when we take into account their strong desire to play football out of pure love for the game. Thus it can be assumed that such a move is a form of subversion of the social foundations they share with their surrounding society – foundations based on the dichotomous discrimination between men and women, with sharper implications for the relations between gender and sport.

Israeli female football players believe that academic achievement is more valued in society than participation in sport. They aspire to be professional players until the age of retirement, yet they will not pay the price of being unable to support themselves financially. Although their love for the game is unconditional, their commitment to a football career is not. Moreover, they define 'success' not as a successful career in football, but as academic achievement and success in a career which is perceived as more conventional and conformist. Their image of the Israeli football player is someone who engages in the profession out of monetary interests, for whom the game is nothing more than a 'business'. At the same time, they describe his relative ease, in social terms, in supporting himself financially after retirement as well. They recognize the fact that a man has existing social networks which will in any case enable him to continue his work, so that an education is unnecessary for him. For the female football players, it is clear that, in order to advance to the centres of power, recognition is necessary. Often such steps require good connections with the central people and membership in powerful social networks more than professional skills. Men have many more opportunities to establish these connections or networks. The interviewees have a realistic view regarding raising a family. They express

acceptance of the fact that they will have to stop playing in order to get married and have children.

Acker claims that the job market is also defined by gender, and that most workplaces are arranged to provide more advantages to those who live a 'male lifestyle'.⁵⁸ That is, the standard of the good employee or the most appropriate for the position includes a person who can commit to long working hours, control his/her feelings and body (does not menstruate, get pregnant or breastfeed) and adapts him/herself to the organization's demands. The assumption is therefore that women repeatedly digress from this standard and are always found in conflict between home and work. In accordance with this theory, female football players expressed in interviews the perception that the combination of a football career and family is impossible, and that one has to be given up for the other. They also expressed their opinion in support of women who have played in the past and have already taken this step.

In their discussion on football as a workplace, the interviewees again expressed the same ambivalence found in their position towards the involvement of women in a male cultural field. It cannot definitively be said that they accept the fact that football is a transient stage in their lives. Although they accept the reality without criticizing the relative ease with which a man can realize his dream of a football career, they understand that they will be forced to give up football rather quickly. Nevertheless, a sense of a missed opportunity is insinuated: while they get a lower salary, will retire at their peak in order to raise a family and simultaneously develop their academic career, their male counterparts gain a higher salary, prestige and social recognition, and can retire not only without a financial loss, but as part of a social network which will provide them with support for many years to come.

Summary

This study has attempted to examine female football players' experiences by relating to elements of national and gender identity in the Israeli context and by focusing on the penetration of women into a cultural field that is perceived as male. Women's participation in institutionalized football games in Israel constitutes a contrast to the existing gender order and a challenge to the hegemonic perception which attributes male characteristics to the game. Although it can be assumed that due to this fact the female players would present a discourse protesting this culture construction, the findings of the present study point out that none of the interviewees chose to use the feminist arguments or the gender motive to explain or justify the fact that she plays football. The female football players described at length their pure love for the game and the fact that it is their personal desire to play, as this has been their wish since they were young girls playing football in the neighbourhood. Their discourse is not a social protest with an aggressive or political character which constitutes taking action in order to advance their aims as women. Neither is this discourse, at its most basic level, an expression of a desire to prove to men that women have the same abilities. This is in contrast to male discourse whose motivation to participate in a sport perceived as 'male' is extremely gender oriented, out of fear of being perceived as 'female'.⁵⁹

In contrast to previous studies which have found that the accepted perception of men's football is that it is the most national sport, arousing patriotic sentiments and expressions of national fraternity, this article indicates that this perception cannot explain women's football in Israel. Women's football in Israel is not a national sport. The country's citizens (both men and women) do not feel national identification with

women's football and their presence is not felt at the stadium. Print and electronic media do not cover national team games or the women's league in any significant way that would contribute to national sentiments among the public for the women who participate in them. Moreover, as this article tries to show, Israeli female football players also share the majority of the hegemonic postulations related to the link between gender and national football, and accept most of the perceptions at the root of these postulations.

It appears that Israeli female football players adopt strategies of action similar to those taken by Israeli Arab football players and fans. These fans and players attempt to resolve the tension that exists between their Palestinian identity and their identification with the Israeli football teams by adopting a non-national perception of the game.⁶⁰ Similarly, it appears that the female football players adopt the perception that football is an apolitical practice both in the national context and in the power relations between the sexes. In other words, they prefer to resolve the tension created between their gender identity and their desire to participate in a branch that is structured and firmly established in the accepted perception as male by neutralizing the gender element and the national element from the equation.

Thus the article points to the critical and ambivalent role of the national aspect in shaping the female football player's gender identity in Israel. Alongside their feelings of national pride and identification with the country's symbols, the players confirm the accepted link between masculinity, football and nationalism in their perceptions and do not view women's football as a game that arouses national sentiments in the same way that men's football does. They present a picture that does not threaten the way society perceives definitions of masculinity, femininity and their link to sport. This includes the adoption and acceptance of the hegemonic ideology in regard to gender and nation, gender and body, gender and the job market, and a consequent political inactivity towards changing the social order.

Finally, the article indicates that the penetration of women into the Israeli football field has not succeeded in establishing gender awareness on a political basis in an attempt to unravel the complex ties between nationalism, masculinity and sport. Therefore, it appears that disengaging the field of sport from other social fields permits women who engage in it to experience the game in a way that is withheld from their male counterparts. The historian and philosopher Johan Huizinga determined that an authentic game experience is possible only if it is not implicated by achieving any other aims external to the game.⁶¹ Israeli female football players who do not gain, or ask for, status, power or prestige from their participation in the game enjoy a sense of joy and happiness that is gained from the freedom and autonomy of the game itself. Time will tell if this feeling will continue to satisfy those females who choose to kick the ball in the football fields of their country, or whether in the future they will prefer to trade it for the opportunity of a more complete integration in their life and off the stadium.

Notes

1. Ben-Porat, *Football and Nationalism*; Burdsey, 'Contested Conceptions of Identity'.
2. Jarvie, 'Nationalism and Cultural Identity', 25.
3. Parker, 'Sporting Masculinities'.
4. Ben-Porat, 'Gender and Sport'; Bryson, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony'; Mean, 'Identity and Discursive Practice'; Parker, 'Sporting Masculinities'.

5. Mean, 'Identity and Discursive Practice'.
6. Sabo, 'Psychosocial Impacts of Athletic Participation on American Women'; Willis, 'Women in Sport in Ideology'.
7. Hobsbawm, 'The Nation as Invented Tradition'.
8. Nagel, 'Masculinity and Nationalism'.
9. Kimmerling, 'Patterns of Militarism in Israel'.
10. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'.
11. Bryson, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony'; Mean, 'Identity and Discursive Practice'.
12. Mean, 'Identity and Discursive Practice'; Willis, 'Women in Sport in Ideology'.
13. Messner, 'The Meaning of Success'.
14. Sabo, 'Psychosocial Impacts of Athletic Participation on American Women'; Willis, 'Women in Sport in Ideology'.
15. Eitzen, 'Sport is Expressive'.
16. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'.
17. Bryson, 'Sport and the Maintenance of Masculine Hegemony'.
18. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'.
19. Birke and Vines, 'A Sporting Chance'.
20. Ibid.; Griffin, 'Changing the Game'.
21. Caudwell, 'Football in the UK', 100.
22. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'.
23. Caudwell, 'Football in the UK'.
24. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'; Eitzen, 'Sport is Expressive'.
25. Sabo, 'Psychosocial Impacts of Athletic Participation on American Women'.
26. Birke and Vines, 'A Sporting Chance'.
27. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'; Krane *et al.*, 'Living the Paradox'.
28. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.
29. Clasen, 'The Female Athlete'.
30. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*.
31. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Hobsbawm, 'The Nation as Invented Tradition'.
32. Ben-Porat, *Football and Nationalism*.
33. Mean, 'Identity and Discursive Practice'.
34. Kuper, *Football against the Enemy*.
35. Ben-Porat, *Football and Nationalism*.
36. Connell, 'Debates about Men'.
37. Shafir and Peled, 'Citizenship and Stratification'.
38. Sorek, 'Palestinian Sports in Historical Perspective'.
39. Bernstein and Galily, 'Games and Sets'.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Devault, 'Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint'.
43. Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*.
44. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*.
45. Connell, 'Debates About Men'.
46. Sasson-Levy, 'Masculinity as Protest'.
47. Thompson, 'Nations, National Identities and Human Agency'.
48. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*.
49. Ben-Porat, *Football and Nationalism*.
50. Birke and Vines, 'A Sporting Chance'.
51. Sasson-Levy, 'Feminism and Military Gender Practices', 'Masculinity as Protest'.
52. Willis, 'Women in Sport in Ideology'.
53. Clasen, 'The Female Athlete'.
54. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.
55. Ibid.
56. Clasen, 'The Female Athlete'.
57. Hartman, 'Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex'.
58. Acker, 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies'.
59. Coakley, 'Gender and Sports'.
60. Sorek, 'Palestinian Sports in Historical Perspective'.
61. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

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