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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The discourse of gender equality in youth sports: a Swedish example

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ABSTRACT

Two key value issues in youth sports development intersect in this article: 1) gender equality, and 2) the opportunity for youths to voice their concerns about their own participation. The purpose is to explore ‘gender equality’ as a topic of deliberation in Swedish youth sport, and specifically young sports person’s possibilities for speaking out about gender equality issues. The article draws on material from an interview study with 17 leaders and coaches, and 24 teenage athletes, with a particular attention on a focus group interview with three young badminton players. The findings indicate a dominating discourse about sport and gender that may contribute to undermine both the legitimacy of gender equality efforts and the opportunity for youths to voice their concerns. According to most leaders and coaches in the study, no problems with gender equality exist. However, some of the athletes voice experiences of injustice in their sports participation. At the same time, they indicated that talking about perceived injustice can be problematic in a sporting context. The article concludes that there is ample room for creating opportunities for young athletes to systematically voice their concerns about their own participation, for example concerning gender (in)equality.

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Introduction

Sweden is a country often taken to be at the forefront of gender equality, both overall and specifically regarding sports. For example, according to The European Institute for Gender Equality, in 2020, Sweden had the highest Gender Equality Index score in Europe (The European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020).¹ Also regarding sports, there are signs that gender equality is high with numerous successes for women athletes at the international competitive level, and with 44% of all members of sports clubs being women (SSC, 2019a). However, according to some researchers there are reasons to be cautious when it comes to proclaiming Sweden as the promised land of gender equality (Martinsson, Griffin, & Giritli Nygren, 2016). Specifically, Martinsson et al. (2016) maintain that there exists a gender equality norm in the country, that is, ‘a modernist assemblage of discourses, technologies and ideals of rational organisation that promise progress and a particular fantasy about the future’ (p. 5). Sometimes, this gender equality norm is so strong that it complicates the possibility of pointing to injustice. In this article, I explore Swedish youth sports and young athletes’ possibilities to point out perceived injustice.

Two key issues intersect in the article, both of which are also attributed great value in current youth sports policy. The first issue concerns gender equality, which according to The Swedish Sports

Confederation (SSC) means that 'boys and girls should have the same power to shape sport and their participation in sports' (*Jämställdhetsmål*, 2019). The second issue concerns the right and opportunity for young people to voice their concerns about sports, including their experiences of gender equality. According to the recently adopted national policy *Sports want* (SSC, 2019b, p. 11), 'The sports movement wants children and young people to be given extensive opportunities to both make their voice heard and influence the activities they are part of'. In the following, I will briefly outline some characteristics of each of these two areas.

Gender equality in (Swedish) sports

Gender equality has been a major policy issue in sports worldwide for several decades (Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014). In Swedish sports, there was a breakthrough in the 1980s (Olofsson, 1989), which in 1989 resulted in the SSC's first gender equality policy (SSC, 1989). Thirty years later, the main gender equality objective, that of giving girls and boys, women and men, equal opportunities to practice their sport (*Jämställdhetsmål*, 2019), is still the same, although the SSC has issued new gender equality plans several times (the last time in 2017). There could be many reasons why the main objective has not changed despite so much time having passed. Follow-up studies on gender equality plans suggest that although the situation has changed (that is, improved), the basic premise that sport is an essentially masculine endeavour has not changed. (Åström, 2018; Svender & Nordensky, 2020).

How is gender equality then perceived among sports leaders and coaches? In a Canadian study, Hoeber (2007) concluded that sports leaders in the main either denied the existence of gender inequalities ('they don't exist') or rationalized the existence of such inequalities ('they are expected, natural, or normal'). In their Spanish study about physical activity providers at universities, Soler, Prat, Puig, and Flintoff (2017) identified five 'no's' that undermined gender equality initiatives: 'not my problem, no need, not possible, no time, not fair on men' (p. 286). In a similar vein, Kempe-Bergman (2014) found that many Swedish male sports leaders and coaches were either sceptical ('it's irrelevant') or cynical ('it's impossible') about gender equality initiatives. Additionally, those who advocated gender equality initiatives sometimes highlighted rather stereotypical views of gender. There is only marginal research about how young athletes regard the relevance of gender equality initiatives in sports. In one of these few studies, Hardin and Whiteside (2009) suggested that emancipatory goals in sport for American girls and women were not supported because gender equality was looked upon by young adults (both women and men) as a right that women had not earned. To my knowledge, there are no studies specifically about how teenagers regard gender equality in sports.

Swedish sports, and the opportunities for youths to voice their concerns

Since the 1960s, the Swedish sports movement, like sports in most countries (Green & Smith, 2016), has come to comprise largely child and youth sport. In Sweden, all sport, regardless of age and level, is organized under one and the same umbrella organization: the SSC. SSC is a non-governmental organization, but it performs a semi-governmental function since one of its tasks is to distribute state support for child and youth sports (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010). Previously, the relationship between the Swedish state and the sports movement was relatively informal, and based on what Norberg (2011) has termed an 'implicit contract'. This implicit contract stated that the sports movement, particularly child and youth sports, is subsidized by the state as long as it fulfils certain political ambitions of the state, for example gender equality and child and youth development. The last decade or so has seen the implicit contract becoming gradually more explicit. For example, since the UN's Convention of the Rights of the Child (from now on The Convention), which includes youth up to the age of 18, became a statutory provision in Sweden in 2020, the SSC is, in its activities, bound to comply with state regulations.

The Convention is seen in SSC policy, in that young people should have the right to express their opinions and be heard on matters concerning themselves. The SSC policy states that, sport should 'be a school of democracy for children and young people, where young people's opinion is taken into account' (SSC, 2019b, p. 11). Even though this ambition is incorporated into statute, research indicates that it can be challenging to put into practice, both in Sweden and elsewhere (CIF, 2011; David, 2004; O'Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010). In fact, both Redelius (2012) and Eliasson (2017) have demonstrated that Swedish sports leaders are uncertain about what a child-rights perspective means. Moreover, in Eliasson's (2017, p. 490) research, a child-rights perspective had 'a very low status in the network of children–adults–state in sport'. In Swedish child and youth sports research on the other hand, the voice of children and young people has been a recurring theme at least since the mid-1970s (see for example, Aggestedt & Tebelius, 1977; Larsson, 2006; Wagnsson, 2009).

In summary, Sweden is sometimes portrayed as a pioneering country regarding gender equality (EIGE, 2020; *Jämställdhetsmål*, 2019). At the same time, researchers caution that it is too soon to proclaim Sweden to be the promised land of gender equality (Martinsson et al., 2016). In fact, they warn that what they call a gender equality norm has obscured the possibilities of working constructively to tackle gender equality issues. To some extent, this norm is mirrored in sports leaders and coaches' perspective of gender equality in sports (Kempe-Bergman, 2014). This situation raises questions about the opportunities for young athletes to speak their mind about gender equality in youth sports. While the SSC aspires to sport being democratic, with young people's opinion being taken into account (SSC, 2019b), this aspiration remains needs to be explored through research. The purpose of this article is to explore 'gender equality' as a topic of deliberation in Swedish youth sport, and specifically young sports person's possibilities for speaking out about gender equality issues. This is explored through conversations among sports leaders and coaches, and teenage athletes on the topic of gender equality in sports. The article sets out to explore:

- the ways in which gender equality issues are articulated among sports leaders, coaches and teenage athletes, and
- what subjectivities 'gender equality talk' engender.

Theoretical framework

Exploring the ways in which gender equality issues are articulated and what subjectivities 'gender equality talk' engender highlights matters of power, regarding who can say what with authority and legitimacy in a certain context. This means that I locate this study within the field of *discourse analysis* (McGannon, 2016). According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, discourse means 'conversation', or 'verbal interchange of ideas'. However, for specific research purposes, this mundane definition of discourse was elaborated and developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Foucauldian discourse analysis has been widely used in research about sport and gender (for example, Markula, 2003; Rail & Harvey, 1995; Svender, Larsson, & Redelius, 2012), but to my knowledge not yet to explore the discursive practice of conversations around gender equality in youth sports.

In his early career, Foucault defined discourse as the 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (1972, p. 54). This indicates that the focus of discourse analysis is simultaneously what discourse says (the content) and what it *does* (the practice). For example, equal opportunities discourse may produce particular ideas about gender (cf. Svender et al., 2012). Later, Foucault broadened his understanding of discourse to mean:

the ensemble of more or less regulated, [...] deliberate, [...] and finalized ways of doing things, through which [objects are formed], and the way in which subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately altering reality [are constituted] (Foucault, 1998, p. 463)

In this quote, Foucault supplements the focus on how objects are constituted through discursive practice, with a focus on how subjectivity is constituted through that same practice. In relation to interviewing, it pairs the focus of content with who, or what, interview participants *become in relation to the content*. The invitation to talk about gender equality in sport does not only engender information about how gender equality is perceived by the participants, or what gender equality 'is' (object), it also engenders subjects of gender equality. For example, using this approach, Kempe-Bergman (2014) shows how interviews with sport leaders and coaches about gender equality in sport engender different conceptualizations of gender equality as well as different approaches to these conceptualizations.

It should be noted that the focus of discourse analysis is not primarily on individual statements. Rather, focus is on relationships between sets of statements, for example the ways in which certain ideas *about* something (such as gender equality) in social practice are linked to certain *approaches and attitudes* towards the issue – that is, subjectivities. While discourse analysis is principally regarded as a 'qualitative method', it does not entirely ignore the quantitative dimension. Quantity, in terms of what is common or unusual, respectively, expresses a power dimension. It points to how discourses make certain approaches possible or difficult to attain (Svender et al., 2012).

Material and method

In the article, I draw on material from a larger study about gender equality in Swedish sports (CIF, 2018). I was in charge of a sub-study using semi-structured interviews (Qu & Dumay, 2011) with sport leaders, coaches and athletes. At the outset, the interviews were to be conducted in the form of focus groups involving two (leaders and coaches) and four (youths) persons, respectively. Focus group interviews have been suggested to allow for exploration of collectively constructed meaning (Bryman, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and could thus be appropriate for the purpose of discourse analysis.

Regarding selection, I discussed with representatives of The Swedish Research Council for Sport Science, who ran the project, what sports to include. We agreed on the different kinds of sports (individual and team based) that should be included; both male and female dominated ones. In the end, badminton, equestrianism, gymnastics, ice hockey, taekwondo and wrestling were selected. The national federations of these sports were contacted requesting that they suggest six to eight clubs from which I would select two to visit for interview purposes. To some extent, clubs were selected based on their convenience (easy to travel to; clubs in different sports situated in close proximity to each other). All clubs were located in the southern third of Sweden, which includes almost 90% of the country's population. Prior to visit, I contacted the selected clubs to ask the contact person to invite one leader (board member or person with primarily administrative tasks in the club) and one coach,² preferably one man and one woman, and four athletes, preferably two girls and two boys, aged 15–19 years, for interview. While most clubs managed to muster interviewees, many secured fewer than had been requested. Sometimes, I met a 'full line-up' (that is, two plus four persons), while on other occasions, I met only one person, typically a coach. In the end, I interviewed 17 sports leaders and coaches (10 men and 7 women, in 10 interviews) and 24 young athletes (15–19 years old; 14 girls and 10 boys, in 9 interviews). The number of male and female leaders and coaches reflects the overall situation in Swedish sports. In 2019, 61% of club leaders were men, and 72% of all training sessions were coached by men (SSC, 2019a). Concerning the athletes, the number of girls in the study was disproportionally high, since only a little more than one third of teenage (12–20 years) participants in youth sport in 2019 were girls.

Since I did not know, or have contact with, the interviewees in advance, I could not send them information about the research before we met for interview. Participation was voluntary, and I started conversations recounting The Swedish Research Council's research ethics principles about informed consent, confidentiality and the use to which the information would be put (The Swedish Research Council, n.d.). Further, I asked permission to record the interviews on a Dictaphone before the interviews commenced. All names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.³

The interviews were based on an interview guide which entailed questions about: a) gender patterns in sports and how they could be interpreted, b) the impact of beliefs about gender on sport practice, c) changes over time (only in interviews with leaders and coaches), and d) ambitions for change. In this article, I will draw on my conversation with leaders, coaches and young athletes concerning themes a, b and d.

The analysis followed the overall approach of discourse analysis as described above. This analysis is characterized through tracing and mapping the structural relationships between statements of different kinds (Kempe-Bergman, 2014; McGannon, 2016). I searched for statements about gender equality (object), that is, the different ways in which gender equality was conceptualized, and statements that signalled different approaches or attitudes towards the issue (subject). While space is limited in a journal article, I have endeavoured, where possible to display the *conversations* that took place during the interviews. This is because, in discourse analysis, focus is not only on what is said, but also on how it is said. The role of the discourse analyst is to make empirically substantiated proposals about how the relationship between subject and object, in this case sports leaders and coaches, and athletes talking about gender equality, can be understood (McGannon, 2016).

My conversations with the leaders and coaches serve mainly as a backdrop to how three young badminton players in one of the focus groups, two girls and one boy of about 16 years of age, talk with me about gender and gender equality in their sports experience. I will focus specifically on these three youths because they were the interviewees who raised concerns about gender equality issues. This does not mean necessarily that it is uninteresting that few youths raised concern about gender equality but rather that the selection is based on the particular subjectivities that are key to the SSC's aspirations concerning gender equality and the possibility for young athletes to speak their mind.

Findings

The findings section will be structured as follows: I will begin by briefly describing *how leaders and coaches portray teenage girls and boys in sports*. My account primarily draws on conversations with leaders and coaches regarding themes a and b in the interview guide: gender patterns in sports and how they could be interpreted, and the impact of beliefs about gender on sport practice. I will then move on to give some examples of *how leaders and coaches talked specifically about gender equality*. This part draws in the main on conversations about ambitions for change (theme d in the interview guide). Finally, I will offer an in-depth account of my conversation with *three teenage badminton players, two girls and one boy, regarding their experiences of sport participation*.

Girls, boys and gender equality in sports – the perspective of leaders and coaches

Overall, when leaders and coaches articulated perceptions about girls and boys in sports, girls were taken to 'naturally' embody values such as aesthetics and care, while boys were taken to 'naturally' embody values such as competitiveness and aggression. Moreover, it was taken for granted that boys are (always) better at sports and take competition more seriously. For example, this perception is noticeable when sports leaders and coaches explain why girls and boys need to be separated during sports practice, or when the genders can practice together. This account may seem descriptive, but my intention so far is just to point out that these perceptions about girls and boys are key ingredients in the discursive terrain of youth sport in Sweden. These ways of reasoning about gender, which are consistent with previous research (Kempe-Bergman, 2014; Svender et al., 2012), chiefly follow what Messner (2011, p. 155) has termed soft essentialism, an ideology that 'valorizes the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for girls and women, while retaining a largely naturalized view of boys and men, a view that is especially evident [...] in youth sports'.

I will now move on to the question how soft essentialism as a dominant perspective on gender relates to leaders and coaches' views of gender equality. Based on the interviews, I have constructed three approaches among leaders and coaches to this. The first approach, I call 'don't know – can't

act'. This approach means that club representatives do not know why their activities attract primarily participants of a particular gender. Further, the leaders and coaches express uncertainty as to what to do about it – if anything at all. A representative of a wrestling club voices this approach in the following way:

We've felt that there's limited interest among girls, even though we're open to them, but we can't do much for them when they don't come. [...] After all, there's not much we can do about things.

A representative from another wrestling club expressed the same approach, although this time the situation was reversed. In this club, the majority of young wrestlers were girls. Still, nor could this leader point out what had contributed to this pattern. The 'don't know – can't act' approach was articulated in several interviews. It included no explicit considerations about gender equality issues, which suggests that gender equality is in fact something of a non-issue to a lot of leaders and coaches. The occurrence of skewed distribution of genders in club activities raised few, if any, concerns among most leaders and coaches.

The second approach, I have designated 'know – try to act'. This approach means that the club representatives put in place particular measures to achieve equality. To these leaders and coaches, gender equality *is* an issue to monitor. In this study, the 'know – try to act' approach includes attempts to involve young people in the systematic evaluation of the activity. These leaders and coaches do not see it as problematic that young athletes are offered opportunities to have the opportunity to speak their mind. The following quote from an interview with two coaches in taekwondo illustrates this approach. A male coach introduces the topic of 'value based clubs':

Male coach ... it was probably about ten years ago that we sat down and decided that: 'We'll become a value based club'. It's about equality [...] it shouldn't matter what skin colour, religion or gender you have. Everybody should feel equally seen and heard, and the same rules should apply to everyone. So we started working on it then, and made a new effort five years ago. Partly it was about getting more female instructors at all levels. [...] The choice of words, how to approach each other, is also extremely important. No one should feel offended ... no derogatory words should be used.

Researcher Do you need to struggle to achieve this?

Male coach Yes, it's a continuous work. Each semester, it's important to ask ourselves: what have we done well and what do we need to change? [...] Then it's very much that it should feel equal, safe, secure. Nobody should feel outside ... We have women who practice in [the] niqab, several religions together ... a lot of different people. So these are questions we ask ourselves several times each semester, and think about what we can do better.

Female coach It's very mixed, really. My athletes represent all kinds of religions, ages, genders, skin colours and ...

Male coach ... sexualities.

Female coach Yes, sexualities too.

Male coach A boy has come out [as gay] quite recently ... and he said that it feels very safe here.

In this study, the 'know – try to act' approach was expressed only in this one interview with taekwondo representatives. Although this is not a comprehensive survey, this exception suggests that systematically involving youth in the systematic evaluation of club activities is not a dominating discourse in Swedish club sports.

The third and last approach I have designated 'know – but reluctant to act'. This approach means that club representatives consider gender equality efforts, but hesitate to actually implement these, and when this is done, the coach fails or refuses to recognize these as related to

gender equity. Below is a quote from a coach who, however reluctant, actually sees himself as forced to take measures:

We don't assume anything regarding gender ... just as we don't assume anything in relation to what skin colour people have, or what they believe in. [...] When I work with groups I want everyone to have fun and stay with the club. And that means that you sometimes have to put on other glasses [...] Though I don't see myself as having a normative function, or telling girls that they should hang out with boys and vice versa, or mix. I know that these girls are better off in that group, yes, then it must be like that. I arrange a girls' night and then I think a bit like this: "This is probably damn affirmative action", so it's far from my own picture of how I'd like to have it. But it's clear, gender and age are something that I can take into account.

Although this club representative seems to be aware of possible gender inequality, in this case that girls need to be supported by affirmative action, he underlines that he would prefer to refrain from performing this 'normative function'. The coach prefers to embrace what he believes is a gender neutral approach, although he also admits to not being able to live up to this aspiration. This suggests that gender equality issues occupy a tenuous position for some coaches, and should preferably be avoided. A leader from another club reasons in similar ways:

Now we've deliberately decided that we need more girls (female leaders) as role models. ... I'm not that keen on pursuing this gender politics [...] I'd prefer to lift out that paradigm completely, but somewhere you still have to ... live in the reality. So, female role models, absolutely.

This leader seems to find some merit in affirmative action, but he is reluctant to play any part in what he refers to as 'gender politics'. Evidently, the 'paradigm' of gender politics, as an expression of gender equality measures, is not appreciated among a number of leaders and coaches, even among those who actually take some gender equality measures.

In fact, a number of the club representatives were explicitly negative about gender equality measures. They could not see why such measures were even necessary and relevant. The following is a quote from an ice hockey coach:

... this gender debate that's going on ... you can say different things about it. Is there actually any interest among girls [to play hockey]? When I grew up, the girls weren't interested in playing hockey. Still, they had the same opportunities as me to go out on a frozen lake and skate and play. So, this basic interest, I don't know if the girls have it. [...] Then, why small girls play with rabbits while boys play with a puck and a stick; that probably goes back to well before you and I were there.

This coach seems to assume that anybody would have the same opportunities to pursue their interests in the same effortless manner as he himself experienced. Put differently, his reasoning can be articulated as: 'since it was easy for me to start playing ice hockey, it should be as easy for anybody to start playing ice hockey'. Based on such understanding, gender equality initiatives appear unreasonable.

The dominance of the 'don't know – can't act' and 'know – but reluctant to act' approaches to gender both suggest that gender equality is, in different ways, a non-issue. This is the discursive terrain wherein young athletes participate in sports. I will now move on to explore how teenage athletes negotiate this discursive terrain.

Becoming 'angry feminist'

Few of the interviewed athletes voiced any concerns that can be related to gender equality. There could be many ways to interpret this. It could be that there are no gender equality problems. Or it could be that young athletes are reluctant to bring up a 'sensitive' issue with someone they do not know (that is, the interviewer) in a 'random interview'. Or it could be that the dominant discourse offers limited possibilities to articulate concerns. While it is not within the scope of this article to confirm any of these suggestions, the interviews provided me with one occasion on which young athletes actually did articulate gender equality related concerns about their sports practice. For some reason it became important for these youths to speak their mind in my

presence. It started with one of the girls, Camilla, telling me about a particular occasion during a training session:

Camilla says So I can say one thing, and that was also with our coach on Wednesdays, once when I did wrong, when I played with Cajsa, a girl in our group, then he said: 'If you do it right, maybe you can beat the boys too'. Like I couldn't beat them anyway?! I got kind of angry, but I didn't show it.

Cecilia interjects Well, that's also one thing that I came to think of now, I don't know if it was when we had [the same coach], I think we had [another coach]. [...] Then it was like this, that we had some fitness, and then it was like: 'The girls can do five, the boys can do ten'.

Right, he was really rotten, Camilla confirms.

Cecilia continues And now it's getting a little feminist (which is apparently not a good thing in her experience, given how she looked at me, turning up her eyes), but why couldn't the girls do as many as the boys? I know the boys have more muscles and so on, I understand that biology, but then, why couldn't we do that also?

Camilla and Cecilia indicate that they have noticed that coaches may implicitly embody a taken for granted notion that 'boys are always better at sports'. In listening to this interview, it struck me, based on my own coaching experience (in track and field athletics), that situations like this probably happen often. However, it may well be that the assumption that girls are always worse (or weaker) than boys is so taken for granted that there is only marginal possibility to challenge it (possibly this is also why research says so little about the phenomenon). Nevertheless, Camilla's account may well crystallize how a lot of girls (and boys, depending on the sport) experience sports practice where gender (in)equality is a 'non-issue'.

The girls' account highlights that since the notion that 'boys are always better at sports' is *implicitly* embodied among coaches, it may be difficult for girls to challenge it without being regarded as 'angry feminists'. The interview excerpt indicates an indignation that can be felt by girls as they are subjected to, what they believe are, unfair generalizations, in particular because they experience marginal, if any, opportunity to question such generalizations. In the interview excerpt below, Cecilia voices another gendered generalization:

Cecilia One thing in our group that I think about is that the boys don't take the training as seriously. Some boys then, Camilla says.

Cecilia goes on So there are some who piffle and do stuff and don't take it seriously.

I ask What does that mean, that they don't take it seriously, What do they do then?

Well, poke at each other, at us, jump at each other, talk away time, Cecilia replies.

Camilla adds And when [the coach] talks, they don't really listen, and jump at him too.

Is this true? I ask Calle – actually holding him responsible on behalf of the boys in the group for this alleged behaviour.

Calle laughs Yes!

I conclude This is interesting, so the girls are more "now we're here to play badminton"?

Not always (laughs)! Camilla replies.

Cecilia adds The girls can also be trashy and talk and so on, but I'd still say it's the boys who do it the most.

Just as with the idea that 'boys are always better at sports', Camilla and Cecilia point to the idea that 'boys are always more serious about sport' is also to a great extent implicitly embodied in leaders and coaches. Again, this appears to lead to girls struggling to challenge the idea. Moreover, the idea that boys are more serious about sports compared to girls may mean that boys are offered

greater autonomy and freedom in their sports endeavour. As Camilla and Cecilia indicate, the boys may create disruption without being seen as problematic. The opposite is true for girls. They are perceived by coaches as ‘troublesome’ to deal with (cf., Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). While rowdy behaviour among boys is not necessarily taken to indicate a lack of seriousness regarding their sport investments, with girls, this is not so.

Camilla Sometimes when I play with some boys in our group they say, “I didn’t hit it as hard as I could” and “I let you win”, and so, and then I also get angry. It feels like I’m getting mad at everything now. [...]

Cecilia adds Yes, and I also think that sometimes, when you play with boys, you feel bad because they’re better. So when I play with Calle I feel bad because he’s better, and I don’t know ...

But are there any of the girls who are better? I ask.

Yes, Cecilia replies, I’d say Camilla is better.

But you don’t feel as bad when you play against her then?

Well, I can feel bad when I play with girls, but not in the same way.

So it means something special when you play girl-boy then? Is there another kind of dynamic then?

Yes, you could say that.

If you play against someone of the same gender, it’s a little more: “whatever!”

Yes, a little.

Camilla interjects But you have a connection with Caroline and Cecilia, they understand if you make a mistake, but if you play with the boys it’s just: “But, oh, how bad are you?!”

Yes, Cecilia confirms, and like Calle, you usually tell me what to do better and so, and that’s just to help me, but I feel so inferior.

Yeah, I’m trying to help, like, “Next time, do it this way,” says Calle, a bit defensive.

Cecilia goes on And that’s good, but still ...

Is it easier for a boy to make suggestions or can girls do that as well? I ask. What would happen if a girl told a boy: “If you do like that instead, then ...”?

Camilla replies So, I kind of did that once to a boy in our group and he just [said]: “But you can’t do that either!” (Laughter)

Here, Camilla and Cecilia indicate that they do not experience the genders to be equally treated in badminton. Girl/boy encounters seem to signify something different when compared to girl/girl or boy/boy encounters. In girl/boy encounters the whole gender order seems to be put under pressure. This is further emphasized by Camilla in that she recounts what boys might say when they lose a point: ‘I didn’t hit it as hard as I could’ and ‘I let you win’. In this way, Camilla’s feat is diminished and the gender order, including the notions that ‘boys are always better at sports’ and ‘boys are always more serious at sports’, is safeguarded.

The athletes’ examples of experiencing prejudice and injustice are expressed in a way that they seem to have otherwise suppressed and stigmatized – which engenders the position of ‘angry feminist’. It is almost as if they find the interview a longed-for possibility to speak out about their experiences. In fact, the young interviewees indicate that while Calle is free to offer tips and tricks that can improve the girls’ play, the mere suggestion that the girls could do the same seems, again, to challenge the gender order in this context.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of the article was to explore ‘gender equality’ as a topic of deliberation in Swedish youth sport, and specifically young sports person’s possibilities for speaking out about gender equality

issues. Two questions were of specific interest, firstly, in what ways gender equality issues are articulated in Swedish youth sports among sports leaders, coaches and athletes, and secondly, what subjectivities 'gender equality talk' give rise to and how these materialize in individuals.

In the study, I have demonstrated that some leaders and coaches remain ill-informed of gender equality issues; they 'don't know and can't act', while a few are working systematically towards gender equality; they 'know and try to act'. Still other leaders and coaches, however, are explicitly sceptical about gender equality endeavours (cf. Hoeber, 2007; Kempe-Bergman, 2014; Soler et al., 2017). They 'know, but are reluctant to act', mainly because they do not, for some reason, want to be associated with what they see as 'gender politics'. In my understanding this indicates that gender equality is largely a 'non-issue' and this places the SSC's gender equality goals (*Jämställdhetsmål*, 2019) in a contentious position, which may weaken their legitimacy and the efforts to reach them. Moreover, it potentially undermines young athletes' opportunities to speak their minds about gender inequality.

Few teenagers who participated in the study raised concern about gender equality. In that sense, gender equality is also a 'non-issue' to these teenagers – either because 'all is well' or because gender, through the dominant perspective of soft essentialism (Messner, 2011), is normalized to the extent that different approaches to gender are hard for teenagers to articulate. In one interview, two girls who play badminton, did voice concerns about how training sessions are permeated by gender stereotypes. During the interview it became clear that they felt that what they had to say about gender in their sport practice to me was stigmatized. The dominant discourse in youth sport, which includes the notion that gender equality is a 'non-issue', meant that speaking about gender inequality engendered an 'angry feminist' subjectivity. This finding resembles Craig's (2011) observation that while football coaches could deliver critical feedback to players quite freely, the reverse scenario was not equally unproblematic. Critical feedback by players to coaches puts the players in a contentious position.

In practical terms, the findings of the study highlight the complexities that need to be taken into account in Swedish sports regarding its undertaking to become a 'school of democracy for children and young people, where young people's opinion is taken into account and participation made possible in relation to the child's age and maturity' (SSC, 2019b, p. 11). In relation to gender equality this would seem to be a challenge. Even though not many of the young athletes that I interviewed voiced concerns to the extent that Camilla and Cecilia did, my assessment is that overall the discursive terrain of youth sport leaves young athletes with few 'opportunities to both make their voice heard and influence the activities they are part of' (SSC, 2019b, p. 11.). These results are in accordance with other Swedish research about child and youth sports and young athletes opportunities to voice their experiences about their participation (Eliasson, 2017; Redelius, 2012). Apparently, sports leaders and coaches have, and are by young athletes given, such a comprehensive interpretive prerogative that children and young people are silenced (cf. Mills & Denison, 2018).

Based on the findings of this and other studies (Eliasson, 2017; Redelius, 2012), my conclusion is that there exists a gender equality norm in Swedish youth sports much in the same way that, according to Martinsson et al. (2016), applies to Swedish society more broadly. Although gender equality may be high overall, it seems difficult – and sometimes stigmatizing – to speak out about perceived injustice. Should the SSC wish to encourage young athletes to speak their mind about gender equality and other equity issues specifically in youth sports, there is an urgent need to interrogate the dominant discourse in this environment. This discourse, which promotes adult-centred perspectives and which to some extent gives prominence to the idea that gender equality is a 'non-issue', undermines the possibilities for young athletes to speak their mind about perceived injustice, for example, about gender equality. If girls and boys are to be given equal opportunities and conditions to practice and lead sports (*Jämställdhetsmål*, 2019), and if they are 'to be given extensive opportunities to both make their voice heard and

influence the activities they are part of' (SSC, 2019b, p. 11), then sport leaders and coaches need to some extent 'step down' from their elevated position as the primary knowledgeable sports subjects.

Notes

1. The Gender Equality Index is composed of data from a number of domains, including health, knowledge, money, power, time, work and violence, where the health domain measures gender equality in health status, health behaviour and access to health services (EIGE, 2020).
2. It should be noted that Swedish sports clubs are run in the main as a non-profit leisure time enterprise, where neither leaders nor coaches are employed. The average number of members in a club is 186, which means that the degree of familiarity in a club is often tangible.
3. The Swedish provision for such research (2003: 460) states that on ethical review of research concerning people that all research must acknowledge overall guidelines concerning research ethics issued by The Swedish Research Council, but that not all research must obtain permission from the Swedish Research Ethics Authority. Since the research did not document 'sensitive personal data' (information concerning ethnic background, political opinions, religious or philosophical belief, union membership, health, a person's sexual life or sexual orientation, genetic data, or biometric data that uniquely identifies a person) or 'personal data on violations of the law', it was deemed that no ethics application was necessary.

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