

INTRODUCTION



The first time in my life that I delivered a punch to someone's face, Zaynab was on the receiving end.¹ It was in a gym located on the second floor of an old office building on the outskirts of The Hague, the Netherlands. I trained with mostly Muslim Moroccan-Dutch women in a 'women-only' kickboxing class. We gathered there three times a week, between the 6 pm children's and the 8 pm men's training sessions. Zaynab lived just a five-minute walk away from the gym, some of us came from adjoining neighbourhoods and some had to travel for half an hour just so they could exercise for one hour with their peers and friends. After an aerobic warm-up and extensive stretching, the bulk of the training session consisted of paired technique training with pads and other props. The final fifteen minutes of training were reserved for sparring: practising fighting without intending to hurt one's opponent too much. Nazira, the young mother with whom I had partnered for the first forty-five minutes, decided, as usual, to look for a different partner for sparring. Her sparring does not include punches to the face, because she believes it is inappropriate by Islamic standards. She walked to the other side of the gym and joined the pupils with similar motivations or insufficient training for full-contact sparring. I had been kickboxing for more than a year and had not done full-contact yet. But that day, I was motivated to test and improve my kickboxing skills. This gym was relatively new to me: I had joined it for my field research two months earlier. With 30-year-old Salima and 18-year-old Zaynab, both of whom removed their headscarves for this training session, I formed a small minority of sparring partners who were in agreement about punching opponents in the face. The three of us took turns in sparring rounds of one minute.

'Oh my God, I'm so sorry', I said, mumbling because of the mouth guard I was wearing. We had barely started the fight, but when my glove touched her nose, I felt my heartbeat throughout my entire body. 'Whoa!' Zaynab exclaimed, taking a step back. Then she flashed her distinctive grin and I remembered that this is what we were supposed to be doing. It was my automatic apology that was out of place. Zaynab approached me again and we continued the short fight even more intensely than before. The punch in the face was a sign for Zaynab to take it up a notch. Her fighting stance became more active. She moved forward and faster. Then, she landed several

combinations of kicks and punches, one after another. To keep the fight moving, I did the same, giving it all I had until the buzzer went off. One minute had passed. Before that moment, I did not know how exhausting just one minute could be. Zaynab took off her gloves and wiggled her nose with one hand to ease the pain. She smiled and winked at me and said: ‘Don’t worry, next time I’ll get your pretty face.’

The dominant scholarship on Muslim women in general and North-African and Turkish diasporas in particular often focuses exclusively on the veil and Muslim piety. Such myopia can result in essentialized, limited understandings of the lives of Muslim women. However, in the vignette above, we see something interesting taking place. In the Netherlands, girls and young women are increasingly active in kickboxing. While some girls and women join mixed-gender sessions, gender-grouped training has lowered the threshold for many women and girls to engage in sports, and martial arts and combat sports more particularly. With the instruction of a kickboxing teacher and co-gendered sporting interactions, the women learn how to punch, kick and spar. Women-only kickboxing classes are offered by kickboxing clubs known for their competitive fighters, including the gym owners and their trainers. The expertise of the trainers helps create a sporting space in which skills and a life-long passion for the sport are nurtured. There has been increasing interest in combat sports among both men and women, with more people dreaming of becoming professional fighters. Most participants in the women-only training sessions, however, join for purposes of leisure; some join for more serious exercise. Only a few have ambitions to become competitive fighters. Some girls live in the neighbourhood and go to school there, while some women started coming for their kids’ kickboxing practice and now stay an hour longer so they can exercise themselves. Most women have religious reasons for choosing to exercise in a space that is secluded: no men are allowed into the gym during these hours and the windows are blinded. The pleasure the women take in sport participation is part of their identity formation (Alter 1992; Rand 2012; Thangaraj 2015). Monographs on martial arts and combat sports are plentiful (e.g. Beauchez 2017; Rennesson 2012; Wacquant 2004), but women’s experiences are underrepresented, if not non-existent, and monographs on women’s sports often highlight overly femininized practices (e.g. Sehlikoglu 2021; Spielvogel 2003).² This book challenges these heteronormative approaches to sports and gender by centring women’s practices of what is considered a masculine sporting culture. The young women and girls fulfil certain desires and enjoy certain pleasures through sport participation in kickboxing.

The media and research reports often celebrate Muslim women’s participation in sports as a sign that they are now ‘empowering’ themselves and integrating into Dutch society. Those who do this type of reporting tend to focus on the barriers these women and girls have to overcome to participate

in the first place (Rana 2017). This is largely due to the inherent juxtaposition between sport and religion, and the juxtaposition between Muslim women's submission and Western women's agency. In many ways, the Western (white) imagination of the Muslim woman has often been marked by physical weakness, submission and a lack of agency.³ As in the case of Muslim women and girls from the Maghreb in France, their piety is seen as a sign of oppression and racial difference (Beaman 2017; Keaton 2010). Various policy programmes have championed sports and kickboxing as a means of equipping Muslim women with the physical skill and power to protect and empower themselves. Sport is seen to empower Muslim women, but it also racializes them and Islam as governed by violent Muslim patriarchy, against which the fighting sports offer a defence.

Muslim women's participation in kickboxing is understood to be empowering, a view that rests on the belief that Muslim Moroccan-Dutch women are confined to religious dogma and are not allowed to partake in the quintessential secular activity of sport. Modern sport has long been positioned as a practice invented by 'modern European' civilizations, even though various forms of physical activity and sport have a long history in Muslim communities. Therefore, Muslim women who participate in sport are viewed as 'breaking from tradition'. It is not merely that sport participation was initially depicted as forbidden; the narrative shifted to portray Muslim women as not having the agency and strength to participate in sport under the same conditions as non-Muslim women (with religious dress codes being just one thing used to racialize Muslim women). This stereotype presumes that Muslim women are not already agentic beings and that Islam does not encourage women's participation in (combative) sports. The implication is that Muslim women are lacking something that, through modern secular intervention, they can acquire. Although combat sports and self-defence training reportedly have an empowering effect on young women (Hollander 2018; McCaughey 1997, Speidel 2014), the framing of kickboxing as a means of empowerment and integration for Muslim women specifically is problematic. It presupposes a submissive, backwards, underdeveloped group of people who need to be transformed into secular, modern individuals. The juxtaposition of the secular, modern feminist woman and the religious, conservative, backwards woman cannot help us make sense of the articulations of secularity and religion in everyday practices.

In the short fight described above, Zaynab and I, like all the other women kickboxing, negotiate how to play the game and determine what kickboxing means for us. We navigate belonging and non-belonging within this group of women, our respective ethnic and religious communities, and Dutch and European society. Headscarves are a conventional topic in discussions of the embodied practices of young Muslim women (e.g. Amir-Moazami 2011;

Bracke and Fadil 2012; Moors 2009; Scott 2009). By contrast, my focus on young Muslim women's engagement in sports enables us to think about different forms of self-realization. Their involvement in sports is another modality of everyday practices that sheds new light on the dynamics of secular and religious sensibilities. Muslims understand the choice to cover one's hair as a sign of adherence to the faith. The media, politics and mainstream public opinion, however, often interpret the wearing of headscarves as a sign of women's subordination. The freedom to choose is questioned, most extremely in the proposal to tax the wearing of headscarves⁴ and the recent ban on face veils (Moors 2009, 2018). The corporeal practice of kickboxing among Muslim women is, on the other hand, often celebrated by the majority of the public as a means of emancipation and empowerment, while some Muslims deem kickboxing a transgressive practice. Discussions on internet forums, Facebook groups and in the actual locker room demonstrate how the choice of kickboxing is imbued with understandings of whether violence is permissible, whether sports are permissible for women and what form of dress is appropriate for both men and women in kickboxing (Rana 2011).

Unlike many other popular sports in the Netherlands that have not seen an increase in mass participation in ethnic minority communities, such as field hockey and tennis, combat sport has proved to be successful in drawing in ethnic minorities (Carrington 2013; Heiskanen 2012; van Sterkenburg and Knoppers 2004). Contemporary research alludes to the historical 'ethnic' roots of combat sports as one explanation for their appeal (Heiskanen 2012).⁵ Kickboxing is an umbrella term for contact-sports based on kicking and punching, with several variations around the world, including 'Dutch Kickboxing' and 'Muay Thai' or Thai boxing. Both Dutch and Moroccan kickboxers are well represented among international champions in various competitions, which effects the popularity of the sport among Moroccan-Dutch youth in particular. It is only in recent times that young women and girls have begun taking up the sport for the purposes of leisure. Following their brothers and cousins to their gyms, where women-only classes became more common, young women availed of this opportunity to engage in recreational sports that allow them to craft different gendered subjectivities to the ones that both their families and the nation expect of them. Kickboxing has been a popular sport in the Netherlands for decades and Muslim women's engagement in kickboxing has recently doubled against the backdrop of national initiatives to promote and increase opportunities for Moroccan-Dutch and/or Muslim women to engage in kickboxing and other combat sports (Frelier and Breedveld 2010).

Punching Back takes the growing presence of young Muslim women in Dutch kickboxing as a point of departure to discuss how state projects

use sports as vehicles to ‘integrate’, ‘empower’ or ‘modernize’ minorities, with the underlying assumption that they are ‘saving’ Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2013; Morris and Spivak 2005). Although there is a growing body of literature on Muslim men and Muslim masculinities (Hossain 2019; Inhorn 2012; Thangaraj 2015), there is a lacuna when it comes to the leisure practices of Muslim women in Western contexts. *Punching Back* engages with the voices, bodily practices and pleasures of Muslim Dutch-Moroccan women to highlight identity formation that involves dealing with various racializations, both local and global. As well as examining the ways in which the state manages its subjects and tries to ‘save Muslim women’, the book explores how young Muslim women navigate gender, religion and racialization to produce pious subjectivities through sports. I consider the various ways in which young girls incorporate the practice of kickboxing into their lives as a way of managing transnational connections during this time of the ‘global war on terror’ and rising Islamophobia. Their interest in the ‘masculine preserve’ (Theberge 1987) reveals how they realize their selves by becoming insiders in the social space of the gym. This is not the unilateral ‘empowering’ process leading to an emancipated, liberal self that sports policies aim for. Instead, the young women demonstrate a variety of ways of being active agents and creating positive selves. Their self-realization in the kickboxing gym cannot be seen as separate from their efforts to be a pious *Muslima* (Muslim woman).⁶ I examine how young Muslim women who kickbox disrupt Western European parameters of secularity and religiosity through their gendered agency. Their secluded, leisurely activity is liberating, but not in the ways outlined by government-sponsored women empowerment programmes. They do not view their involvement in the combat sport as a quest for cultural integration or emancipation from their Muslim communities, but rather as a way of practising both religious and secular forms of self-realization.

This book critically examines how the cultural phenomenon of women-only kickboxing in so-called ‘disadvantaged neighbourhoods’ engages important aspects of representations at the intersection of religion, gender and race/ethnicity in the lives of Muslim women and girls. It argues that young Muslim women use the sporting culture of kickboxing as a way of reproducing, negotiating and contesting their racialized gender subjectivities. The focus on this very particular practice and population allows a more intimate account of people who have often been generalized through singular perceptions, reflections, interpretations and analyses of their existence. The stories, voices and journeys captured in this book facilitate a critical reflection on ‘integrationalist’ sports policies in Europe by demonstrating how ideas of empowerment, integration and citizenship are learned, mediated, negotiated and challenged through bodily training.

How are embodied practices influenced by dominant discourses, policies and stories in the media about Muslim women's bodies? How are notions of self and senses of belonging (re)produced in the process of acquiring bodily knowledge and the acquisition of skills? How are femininity and masculinity performed as part of, and as a challenge to, empowerment paradigms? What is the role of self-realization and self-cultivation in understanding Muslim sport practice? *Punching Back* presents a series of potential answers to these questions by describing and analysing ethnographically how desires and pleasures in sport practices fit and resist normative 'empowerment' expectations. In short, this book argues that the increasing number of Muslim women in sports gives rise to new ways of thinking about and understanding the lifeworlds of Muslim women in Europe, and it intends to disrupt current theories on learning, belonging and secularity. By centring women-only sports, personal projects of self-improvement are approached from the vantage point of a non-religious practice – kickboxing – while taking the religious pursuits of its practitioners seriously. The book draws on three years of immersive, experiential ethnographic research, including interviews and participant observation in multiple kickboxing gyms that offer women-only training sessions, to argue that kickboxing is taken up by young Muslim women and girls as part of processes of self-formation at the intersection of religion, gender and race/ethnicity. It offers a plane of citizenship that incorporates Muslim women, Islam, heterosexuality, gender expression and sport. It is a practice of cultural citizenship that challenges and exceeds normative expectations (Maira 2009; Thangaraj 2015). Thus, Zaynab and her peers, through their negotiations of how to participate in sports, how to fight in a sparring round, and their choice to fight at all, provide a window into how the boundaries of sports and leisure are created in relation to nation, gender, race/ethnicity, class and religion.

DEMOGRAPHY AS DESTINY?

Young Moroccan-Dutch Muslim women are the most widely present group in women-only kickboxing. All of the young kickboxers we will meet in this book were born and raised in the Netherlands, and sometimes their parents were too. First- and second-generation migrants make up 24.7 per cent of all Dutch citizens (CBS 2019). Alongside the Surinamese, Dutch Caribbean and Turkish diasporas, Moroccan migrants and their (grand)children make up one of the largest minority groups in the Netherlands. While the Surinamese and Caribbean migration was an effect of Dutch colonialism, today's Moroccan and Turkish minorities are the result of 1960s and 1970s labour migration. Most Moroccan migrants, from the Rif area, sought temporary

work in the Netherlands and were referred to as *gastarbeiders* (guest workers) (Bouras 2013) because they were supposed to return to their home countries after their work contracts had come to an end. Instead, many settled in the Netherlands; the population of 24,000 in 1973 had grown to approximately 350,000 by 2011 (Bouras 2013).

After Amsterdam and Rotterdam, The Hague is the third largest city in the Netherlands, with half a million residents. Although the Dutch population in general is ageing, this is not true of The Hague, which has become one of the country's youngest cities. Young people (0 to 19-year-olds) now make up 18 per cent of its population (DHIC 2021). Of The Hague's residents, 56 per cent are considered to have 'a migration background' (ibid.) and have long been officially categorized as 'allochthone'. The categorization of citizens using the concepts of autochthony and allochthony – derived from ancient Greek and meaning respectively 'from this soil' and 'from foreign soil' – became increasingly popular in the 1990s (Geschiere 2009). Introduced as a substitute for 'ethnic minorities', the terms were meant to be neutral,⁷ but they were effectively a racializing measure that did not necessitate the use of racial terms (Wekker 2016). Allochthones were defined as either citizens who were born outside of the Netherlands or citizens who had at least one foreign-born parent. Subcategories further differentiated between 'Western' and 'non-Western' allochthones. But, in everyday usage, allochthone has become synonymous with non-Western allochthone, or even exclusively (children of) 'guest workers' with Moroccan or Turkish, Muslim backgrounds (Geschiere 2009: 150). Paul Mepschen argues that the trope of autochthony 'can be understood as a nostalgic cultural practice in and through which people shape a sense of self, place, and belonging' (2016: 37), while allochthony serves to frame those who do not belong. Recent studies have revealed the essentializing and totalizing dichotomy's further pitfalls, for example, when referring to white autochthone Muslim converts (Vroon 2014) and when seeking to understand religion and secularism in the Netherlands (Beekers 2021).

The ambiguity of the terms and the effect of stigmatization has not gone unnoticed. In November 2016, the Dutch government agreed to no longer use the terms. Citizens are now categorized as 'having a migration background' and can be specified as 'having a Moroccan/Turkish/etc. background' (Bovens et al. 2016).⁸ However, this change does not change the politics of belonging, in which the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are constructed along the same imaginary differentiations (Yuval-Davis 2006) and can be understood as a continuation of the culturalization of Dutch citizenship (Ghorashi 2017). The development of cultural racism (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991) has been observed across Europe (Lentin and Titley 2011; Silverstein 2000; Vertovec 2011). This 'culturalist turn', marking the

categorical shift in focus from ethnicity to culture and religion, includes a strong aversion towards Islam. Problems that were formerly addressed as a national minority problem were translated into a religious minority problem, whereby citizens with Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds were now addressed as Muslims (Baumann 1999). Moroccan and Turkish immigrants and their children were increasingly ‘discovered’ as Muslims (Sunier and Van Kuijeren 2010: 123).

Roughly 5 per cent of the Netherlands’ total population of seventeen million people is Muslim (Maliepaard and Gijsberts 2012). Approximately 35 per cent of Muslims in the country have a Moroccan background and 35 per cent have a Turkish background. The country’s unease with Islam is arguably rooted in Dutch society’s rapid de-confessionalization in the 1960s. While religion had historically been central in processes of identification, the Dutch majority in the wake of the revolutionary social and cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s came to see itself as liberal, progressive and secular (Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010; van der Veer 2006).⁹ Religion – its traditions, institutions and authority – was increasingly depicted as backwards, while the freedoms gained in the 1960s, most notably in the public performance of sexual identity, became mainstream (van der Veer 2006).¹⁰ The growing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands thus led to secular discomfort.¹¹

Since the events of 9/11 in the United States and the killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 and right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 in the Netherlands, anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic rhetoric has increased in the Netherlands, as it has in other European countries (Ewing 2008; Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010; Murray 2006; Pitcher 2009). Muslim minorities in the Netherlands are categorized as the ultimate ‘Other’ in Dutch society and they often have to cope with being pigeonholed as the ‘forever foreign’ who cannot assimilate into the Dutch way of life. The labels ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Muslim’ are frequently used interchangeably in negative public discourse. For instance, there is now an even stronger tendency to criminalize Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth, especially men and boys (de Koning 2016b). Discrimination against Muslims has grown in recent years. In other Western nations, such as the United States, there has been a rise in discrimination against Muslims in the form of increased attacks and problematic media representations of Muslim men (Alsultany 2012; Beaman 2017; Rana 2011); however, there has been little engagement with the voices, stories and experiences of Muslim women (Karim 2009; Rouse 2004). The rise of this form of cultural racism, often termed anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia, is reflected in feelings of belonging that unmark secular whiteness by marking Muslim Dutch-Moroccans as bodies out of place (Douglas 2005; Thangaraj 2015). Polls showed that 45 per cent

of Muslims felt ‘at home’ in the Netherlands before the murder of Theo van Gogh in November 2004; only 27 per cent felt that way in 2007 (Aouragh 2014: 362). Muslim subjectivities in the Netherlands are positioned within these politics of belonging.

THE MUTUALITY OF THE SECULAR AND THE RELIGIOUS

Muslims in contemporary Europe have been subjected to state interventions that combine the regulation of race/ethnicity (integration) with the regulation of religion (secularism) (de Koning 2020). Western European secularism refers not only to the separation of church and state but also to ‘the re-articulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance’ (Mahmood 2009: 65).¹² Current secularist discourse in Europe leans on public debates on Islam (e.g. Douwes and de Koning 2005; Sunier and Van Kuijeren 2010; van der Veer 2006) that cast Muslim practices as a danger to the European self (Bracke 2012; El-Tayeb 2011; Ewing 2008; Moors 2009).

Several studies have focused their attention on the secular as an embodied mode of living (Bakker Kellogg 2015; Mahmood 2005a; Scott 2009). However, approaching the secular ‘through its shadows’ (Asad 2003: 16) has resulted in many studies of the formation of selves as religious subjects at religious sites, such as mosques. The gym as a site of focus qualifies as a secular space of modern self-fashioning (Guttmann 1988; Hirschkind 2011). The ‘non-religious’ space constitutes an embodiment of secularity through varieties of physical practices. A women-only gym that specifically welcomes Muslim women contests the status quo of secularity. I examine how young Muslim women combine pious and secular sensibilities through women-only sports and reveal the intersection of women’s religious, ethnic and gendered subjectivities through emergent forms of embodied practice. The specific instantiation of secularity in the Netherlands, which fuses race and religion through integration governance (de Koning 2020; Korteweg 2017), led me to focus on how young Muslim women configure modern religiosity and personal autonomy in the space of the kickboxing gym.

Muslim men are racialized as violent, dangerous and radicalized both in the United States (Bayoumi 2015; Garner and Selod 2015) and in Europe (de Koning 2020; Korteweg 2020). The racialization of Muslim men, however, does not occur in isolation. The counterpart trope in this discourse racializes Muslim women as passive dupes and the powerless victims of Muslim male tyranny. They are stereotyped as ‘the Muslimwoman’ (Abu-Lughod 2016) who must be saved from her culture, religion and men. Women’s bodily practices are central in politicizing the relationship between the individual

and society, and have become sites for contesting national, ethnic and religious identities and forms of belonging (Moors 2009).¹³

In the kickboxing gym, Zaynab and her friends shape their identities and their own sense of being Moroccan-Dutch Muslims through their engagement with the sport. Their participation in sports is understood as part of processes of ‘integration’ and ‘empowerment’, but little is known about the particularities of the performance of their sport identities. Although sport is often imagined as the ultimate site for assimilating foreign ‘Others’, the lives of these women showcase their agency and various practices of managing the complexities of diasporic life. They smash mainstream stereotypes of the submissive Muslim woman by choosing to partake in combat sports, while cultivating an ethical self by engaging with these sports in gender-grouped settings.

IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION AND SECULAR SPORTS

Historically, sports have been a prime field for producing national citizenship. Since their emergence as separate and regularized types of activity in the mid-nineteenth century, sports have been associated with nationalist projects of integration and citizenship. At the root of the historical development of organized sports is discipline, largely because of the nineteenth-century doctrine of muscular Christianity, which emphasized asceticism, racial purity, masculinity, and action in the service of God, country and empire (Besnier and Brownell 2012). For many nation states, amateur and professional sports still serve to maintain the gender, sexual and racial order. How athletes develop and use their bodies has become a symbolic means of representing a nation and constructing a national identity (see Brownell 1995; Bufford 1993; Alter 1992). As will be elaborated on in chapter 1, the symbolic nature of sports has become increasingly visible in immigrant integration goals in recent years, as European nation states promote sports to encourage the cultural and social integration of minorities. Citizens from ethnic minorities have been particularly encouraged to participate in sports as a point of access for physical health, social bonding and belonging in society.

In addition to highlighting the possibilities for physical, psychological and organizational self-development, the socio-integration value of sports has become a central tenet of sports policies, which contribute to a larger set of discourses on ‘immigrant integration’ that portray immigrants as racialized subjects (Korteweg 2017; de Koning 2020; Schinkel 2018). Immigrant integration is often presented as a break from previous multiculturalist policies, representing the enduring effect of coloniality in a postcolonial period

(Silverstein 2004: 124) as a neocolonial form of knowledge (Schinkel 2018). The state's attempts to regulate people implicitly question the citizenship and belonging of second- and third-generation migrants.

As Wayne Modest and Anouk de Koning (2016) argue, this is part of 'anxious politics', whereby Europe is imagined as a racially and culturally homogenous space that is under threat because of the intrusion of 'newcomers' – both immigrants and refugees.¹⁴ In this discourse, the ordinary iconic figure of 'the Moroccan youth' (Koning and Vollebergh 2019) meets his woman counterpart of the oppressed *Muslima*. Hegemonic discourse on Muslim citizens in the Netherlands characterizes the *Muslima*, the Muslim woman, using the trope of Muslim women's lack of autonomy (Moors 2018). Mainstream Dutch liberal society assumes a dichotomy between the secular/modern and the religious/backwards. This way of thinking is often implicit, but it is also explicitly expressed. For example, the former Dutch Minister of Health, Welfare and Sports delivered the prestigious Van Schoo lecture in 2016, which is published annually by Elsevier; in the lecture, entitled 'The Paradox of Freedom', Schippers claimed that Muslim girls living in 'certain' neighbourhoods in The Hague were vulnerable and not truly free to wear whatever they wanted and choose their partners because of social pressure (Schippers 2016). She continued the long-standing othering of youth with migrant and Muslim backgrounds in Dutch society, pigeonholing them as foreigners living against the grain of the Dutch way of life.

The neighbourhoods that Schippers alluded to are working-class, 'multicultural' neighbourhoods in The Hague. It is these neighbourhoods that house kickboxing gyms. Hockey fields, tennis courts and running tracks are to be found in more middle- and upper-class, white neighbourhoods. The way Schippers addressed 'certain neighbourhoods' is representative of a larger discourse in which the geographical unit becomes a symbol for immigrant populations, crime and deprivation. It is the neighbourhood and the neighbourhood resident that became the focus of integrationalist and secularist policies, and 'integration-through-sports' policies in particular. At the same time, young Muslim women embrace the neighbourhood as the space where practices of self-improvement through sports are realized.

Schippers assumed that her audience would agree that Muslim women are in a subordinate position and lack agency. In questioning 'whether they are really free', she juxtaposes Muslim women and non-Muslim women, whose choices she cannot imagine to be anything other than autonomous. The view expressed by the minister in this lecture indicates a dominant, secular, liberal public understanding whereby white Dutch women's emancipation is considered complete, but that of Muslim and/or migrant women is not.

THE RHETORIC OF EMPOWERMENT

Kickboxing has been a popular sport among Moroccan-Dutch youth for decades – its popularity is reflected in the number of national and international Moroccan-Dutch professional fighters and champions. More recently, the sport has been promoted to appeal to young girls and women from these communities. In mainstream media outlets, young Muslim women and girls taking up kickboxing are often celebrated as examples of feminist liberal agency and empowerment – a transformative force that allows them to be strong and dominant.¹⁵

Empowerment, a term that is used in multiple ways, can be as broad as ‘anything that makes women’s lives better’ (Connell 2010: 171) or as specific as developing a feminist consciousness that leads to agentic and internally motivated acts against collective oppression (Hill Collins 2009; Lorde 2012). In sport research, feminists have argued that sports can be empowering, especially sports that centralize force and power (Hall 1996; Theberge 2003). Considering gender embodiment is always embedded in practices of power (Davis 1997), the idea that increasing physical power can have empowering effects for an individual is understandable. Although the male body is commonly understood to be more powerful than the female body, feminists have been imagining a change in gender embodiment as a form of empowerment. Engaging in physical exercise (traditionally a male-dominated pursuit), especially a practice that teaches strength and power, allows women to acquire traits typically associated with the physically strong in society. This is unsurprising, given that dominant notions of ‘masculine’ identity – both within and beyond the sporting context – were traditionally born of and compounded by images of strength, aggression and muscularity obtained in and through sport.

The idea of physical empowerment implicitly relies on the notion of a hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, a term coined by R.W. Connell (1995), oppresses both men and women, who are forced to rank themselves according to this system. It implies that physical prowess and power are not only dominant and domineering traits, but that sport is a vehicle for obtaining power. Having power, as opposed to not having power, allows one to be empowered (read: to be strong, etc.). In this sense, women’s empowerment is about women gaining domineering traits that men are revered for possessing. This not only solidifies the link between strength, aggression and power, but also reaffirms ‘the centrality of the (physically strong) body’ in acquiring transformative power (Theberge 1987: 390). One could argue that empowerment enables women to have a form of masculinity, since masculinity cannot be equated with maleness and is not innate to the male body (Halberstam 1998). However, the number of women’s

sports studies that engage with ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and demonstrate the opposite, the presence of an ‘emphasized femininity’ (Connell 1987), reveals that the gender binary, as well as patriarchal hierarchies, remain largely intact (Hargreaves 2004). The rhetoric of empowerment is therefore also challenged by sport scholars, as it spotlights individual success and obscures how dominant power hierarchies might be reproduced (Caudwell 2011; Hargreaves 2004; Velija, Mierzwinski and Fortune 2013). This book adds to this critical scrutiny of the rhetoric of empowerment by showing the unwanted side effects of this rhetoric when it is targeted at Muslim women in the Netherlands in particular.

In the Netherlands, the English term ‘empowerment’ is mostly used when talking about women from minoritized communities (Boumans 2012); the implication is that they – in contrast to white communities and white women – lack power. The emphasis on empowerment, as a part of citizen participation, has been traced to the rise of neoliberalism, which accommodates both governmental intervention and withdrawal (Zandbergen and Jaffe 2014). The implication is that ethnic minority communities are ‘lacking’ something that, through Western intervention, they can acquire. The governmental tool of empowerment is therefore often criticized as a marketization of social identities and relations (Kamat 2003). Adam Wright (2012) argues that the empowerment paradigm legitimizes and reproduces neoliberal practices (such as responsabilization and self-esteem) and subjects and therewith conceals the subordination of actors. The promotion of empowerment through kickboxing presupposes a submissive, backwards, underdeveloped group of people who need to be transformed into modern, liberated and secular individuals.

It is telling that in Dutch sports policies, the religious and ethnic backgrounds of young women and girls are the precondition to be recognized as in need of empowerment. The dichotomy of girls perceived as powerless and a powerful sport further fuels the assumption that kickboxing is a form of feminist agency for young Muslim women. The empowerment of young Muslim women is assumed to require physical force, which is not associated with other popular sports in the Netherlands, such as field hockey or tennis. Muslim girls and young women are assumed to be in need of the masculine characteristics of kickboxing, including the ability to endure and inflict pain, in order to defend and emancipate themselves. This reproduces ideas of Muslim women and girls as submissive subjects who lack physical power and agency and who are in danger or under threat.

As with media reports about Muslim sportswomen more generally, representations of Muslim women in combat sports have fixated on their struggles to compete. Pakistani-British Ambreen Sadiq, reported to be one of Britain’s first Muslim women boxers, was often depicted as having had to ‘overcome

opposition in her community' (Gledhill 2010). In an article in *The Telegraph*, Ambreen was asked to talk about 'what it's like battling prejudice and racism from her community – and even her family' (Sanghani 2014). Likewise, Bengali-British Ruqsana Begum, the current British woman atom-weight (48–50 kg) World Kickboxing Association Muay Thai champion and captain of the British Muay Thai team, must 'break down' (Badshah 2014) or 'kick down' barriers (Gubuan 2015), with details of her accomplishments being side-lined. Researchers also employ this rhetoric of barriers and challenges (e.g. Kleindienst-Cachay 2011; Pfister 2011). Although it is good that researchers wish to illustrate women's agency in overcoming challenges, they all too often conclude that Muslim women's experiences lag behind those of their 'Western' counterparts. There is also a singular narrative of overcoming oppression that flattens out their complex identity, their desires, their pleasures and their stories. Muslim women's agency is celebrated only in so far as it confirms and solidifies the metanarrative that they are always controlled or always resisting being controlled (Ratna et al. 2018: 634). Such essentialist representations of Muslim sportswomen are as predictable as they are ubiquitous. Samaya Farooq Samie and Sertaç Sehlükoglu (2015) make the same point in their unpacking of the media representation of Muslim women at the 2012 London Games. That various media sources relied on and perpetuated discourses of fear and suspicion to transmit messages about the 'strangeness' of Muslim sportswomen illustrates the pervasiveness of negative thinking about Muslim women (ibid.: 14). Scholars also suggested that Muslim sportswomen lead a double life – 'trapped' between modernity and tradition, the global and the local (Hargreaves 1994: 91) – and that Muslim sportswomen are at least able to strike a 'balance between two cultures' (Kleindienst-Cachay 2011: 102). Both of these common tropes in sports research create opposite poles and do not account for diasporic life, which involves managing many cultural terrains and transnational connections.

This essentialist depiction of immigrants and Muslim women in particular as 'lagging behind' is inherent in sports policies, the sports media and Western public perceptions more generally. A tenet of sports policies, and therefore also sports studies, is that participation in sports is the end goal – and, particularly in the context of immigrants and Muslim citizens, the final stage of emancipation. Non-participation of any kind by immigrant and Muslim citizens is therefore perceived as 'backwards'. Sport participation is seen as a performance of this universal (white) womanhood and progressive modernity. This temporal discourse according to which Muslims are 'backwards' or 'lagging behind' is a way of othering Muslims, who are 'denied coevalness' (Fabian 2014: 31). Their way of life and choices are deemed to be from another time and out of sync with today's secular mainstream Western culture. The discourse surrounding Muslims and Muslim women

in particular thus perpetuates orientalist and colonialist perspectives on the non-Western Other, situated at an earlier historical ‘stage’ of evolutionary human history. Peter van der Veer (2006) points out that Muslims’ ‘strict morals remind the Dutch too much of what they have so recently left behind’ (119), a reference to the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The notion that Muslim women are one step behind is part of a temporalization and stigmatization of Muslim women. Lila Abu-Lughod (2002, 2013) has argued that this temporalizing and stigmatizing discourse surrounding women in particular involves the idea of ‘saving Muslim women’. In her reflections on ‘the war on terrorism’, human rights discourse, the (face-)veil, honour killings and non-fiction biographies, she demonstrates how contemporary discourses on freedom, rights and equality turn the Muslim woman who needs saving into an essentialist icon. In trying to understand and help Muslim women, historical and political dynamics are denied and a new form of ‘colonial feminism’ (Ahmed 1992) and white and Western supremacy come into play. Gendered orientalism is not only seen in development work in countries like Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2013; Kipnis and Caudwell 2015). It is also implicit in sports policies in Europe, where discussions about the participation of Muslim women in sports are undergirded with ideas of the Muslim woman in need of saving. For the same reason, Muslim women’s choice to engage in sports in gender-separated settings is perceived as ‘backwards’. For example, gender-grouped swimming was banned in The Hague in 2009, with the municipal government proclaiming it as ‘not suited in this time’.¹⁶ Even those scholars and politicians who see gender-grouped sports as a means of increasing participation consider participation in gender-mixed sports as full emancipation.¹⁷

Both in the Dutch context and worldwide, the femininity of ethnic minorities is often constructed as antagonistic to physical activity.¹⁸ Young Dutch Muslim women and girls who take up kickboxing confront important aspects of representations of the intersection of gender and ethnicity. They participate in a form of exercise that is widely perceived as aggressive and that is offered to them with the aim of ‘empowering’ youthful minority femininity. This book complicates these discourses that deny young Muslim women their agency, instead demonstrating their desires and pleasures in sport practices and identities. As we will see, young women and girls turn the sport into a source of casual comfort for themselves,¹⁹ at least within the walls of their gym during women-only sessions. While there might be a tendency to want to ‘save’ young Muslim women and girls by encouraging them to participate in sports, this book aims to shed light on how the participants determine for themselves what form their participation will take, what they want from such sporting activities, and what role sport will play in their lives. To understand what kickboxing means for them and how it might or

might not have positive effects for them individually and (Muslim) women collectively, it is important to take seriously their narratives and practices that revolve not only around power, self-esteem and individuality, but also around sociability, comfort and piety.

MUSLIM SELF-IMPROVEMENT

To become fitter, healthier, happier – reasons for engaging in sports vary, but they are often related to self-improvement (Spielvogel 2003). Both elite and amateur athletes strive to become the best versions of themselves. Becoming an athlete is, however, embedded in various moral registers outside of sports. Even more than in elite sports, participants in recreational sports do not necessarily strive to become the best in their discipline, because sports might not be the most important or the sole important goal in their lives. Zaynab's choice to engage in a sparring bout and Nazira's choice to refrain from it are embedded in pursuits of ethical formation through the cultivation of sensibilities *within* the everyday (Das 2012: 134). For both of them, the process of becoming better kickboxers is not separable from the process of becoming better Muslims. Situated in the kickboxing gym, the ethnography presented in this book highlights the nuances of ethical formation and the cultivation of religious subjecthood as an intrinsic part of everyday life.

The anthropology of Islam has been concerned with the cultivation of religious subjecthood, with scholars taking a variety of approaches and positions. With regard to Muslim women's agency, the work of Saba Mahmood (2005) has been particularly influential, as her ethnography goes against modern liberal ideas of agency based on resistance to social norms. Her canonical work on the Islamic Revival Movement in Egypt argues that the participants and their embodied means of subject formation illustrate the need for an alternative way of thinking about agency that 'uncouples the notion of self-realization from that of autonomous will' (Mahmood 2005: 14). Religious observation is an expression of agency. The implementation of religious and social norms in the everyday lives of these Muslim centres on the cultivation of piety. Individual feelings and desires matter less than the training of elaborate 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1982; Foucault and Sennett 1981). We have to include the perspectives of the actors who engage and struggle with the particular constraints of their lifeworlds, in pursuit of their own envisaged self-realization. Above all, Mahmood (2005) insists that we can only understand agency when we take into account the power structures in which it resides.

Feminism, anthropology and Muslim women's practices have been called a troublesome threesome (Jacobsen 2011) as religious subjectivities

challenge feminist theories and politics. Not only Mahmood, but more and more feminist anthropologists argue that we cannot study Muslim women only or simply as victims of patriarchal norms and structures (Abu-Lughod 2013; Jacobsen 2011; Moors 2009). If we view Muslim women as agents, we can see that not only religious specialists, but also ordinary Muslims partake in the production of Muslim identity through everyday ethical practice. This line of reasoning emphasizes women's dignity and self-realization as an alternative to the dominant secular languages of equality, individual rights and autonomy (Jouili 2011). By following Talal Asad (1973) and Mahmood (2005), and highlighting the cultivation of piety (as active self-realization), scholars of Muslims in Europe have countered overly simple, homogenizing discourses within minority and migration studies (e.g. Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003; Fadil 2008; Jacobsen 2011; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006). They have furthermore shown that the self-realization practices of Muslim women in Europe are neither linear nor unambiguous (Amir-Moazami 2005; Jouili 2015). There is a continuous struggle and internal ambivalence that cannot be overlooked – a complexity of everyday life that challenges essentialist assumptions.

The above approach – whereby Islam is not seen in essentialist terms – enables greater attention to socialization and processes of power, and to the meaning of Islam in Muslims' everyday lives. Since the publication of Asad's influential essay 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam' (1986), in which he argues that Islam should be understood as a 'discursive tradition', anthropologists have been analysing the various ways in which Islam is produced and reproduced in the specific contexts of everyday life.²⁰ How Islam is articulated in everyday life may reflect the many ways in which Muslims systemize Islam and it is the anthropologist's job to seek to ensure that 'the efforts of the practitioners ... achieve coherence' (Asad 1986: 17). Drawing on Asad, the focus on piety by Mahmood and others gave rise to scholarship on the formation of religious subjects that revealed the contextual, diverse nature of Islam in the everyday lives of Muslims (e.g. Lambek 1993; Marsden 2005). But Mahmood's approach has also been criticized (e.g. Schielke 2010; Soares and Osella 2009) for over-emphasizing attempts by Muslims to lead pure and pious lives, with the consequence that everyday lifeworlds have not been studied enough.

Scholars such as Kai Kresse (2013), who argues that we should speak of a 'worldly Islam', and Magnus Marsden and Konstantinos Retsikas (2013), who urge anthropologists to 'de-exceptionalize Islam', inspired the way in which this ethnography examines not only religious techniques of the self, but also the broader skills of self-formation. The techniques and sensibilities of Muslims – like everyone else's – are always local and contextual. Contributions such as these do not undermine Asad's understanding of Islam as a

discursive tradition, whereby expression of coherence of Islamic societies around the world is emphasized. At the same time, anthropologists increasingly stress that ‘being Muslim’ is not the sole and/or foremost identification marker for the people they study. Samuli Schielke, for example, wonders if ‘there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam’ (2010: 2).²¹ It is not helpful to separate out aspects of Muslim life as un-Islamic or secular; they are instead ‘fully implicated in all of the processes important to the lives of the people under study’ (Marsden and Retsikas 2013: 25). Marsden and Retsikas (2013) have urged anthropologists to be aware of the ‘exceptional’ position given to Islam, a call that has been echoed by several colleagues (Bracke and Fadil 2012; Fadil and Fernando 2015; Fernando 2009; Schmidt 2008). This has had its consequences for the specific debate about ‘ordinary ethics’ (Lambek 2010) within the anthropology of Islam. But regardless of whether recent studies have found that multiple forms of self co-exist or conflict, they have contested deterministic notions of the influence of Islam in the lives of Muslims.

There is an undeniable and perhaps irreducible ‘tension in human practice between an existential power to determine the meaning of one’s circumstances and structural power that threatens to limit the exercise of one’s will to knowledge’ (Rapport and Harris 2007: 328). It is up to the anthropologist to unravel those mysterious interrelations between the personal, on the one hand, and the historical and cultural, on the other. By focusing on the body as a site of knowing, I will analyse the relation between the individual and sociocultural milieux. It is anticipated that the ethnography – the stories, voices and journeys captured in this book – will facilitate critical reflection on ‘integrationalist’ sports policies in the Netherlands and on how young women confront representations of the intersection of gender, ethnicity and religion.

BODY TECHNIQUES

In addition to examining the everyday practices of religion, this book purposefully prioritizes a non-religious practice. Asad argued that religious ‘body techniques’ (following Mauss 1934) that are key in the cultivation of religious subjects need to be understood as agency (Asad 1973). Investigating body techniques in kickboxing and the cultivation of an ethical self within that practice might draw on other sensibilities and strands of life. The life stories of the young women that we will get to know in this book furthermore demonstrate that the juxtaposition of sports and religion is perceived in different ways. The persistence of gendered orientalism in discourses surrounding Muslim women’s bodies and corporeal practices demands a

new approach in which it is not only women's religious subjectivities but also their broader being-in-the-world that are foregrounded. Taking cues solely from the literature on the cultivation of pious selves would result in an over-emphasis on the importance of religion in the women's lives. While incorporating scholarship on the cultivation of piety, we need to refer to a larger platform of social action. Especially because of the general tendency to frame Muslim women as being in need of 'saving', it is essential to emphasize their agentic power and diversity.

At the same time, this book also intends to challenge the field of sport studies, in which the same 'body techniques' are centralized in order to confirm the existence of a specific athlete's 'habitus'. The concept of habitus, also derived from Marcel Mauss's (1934) theory of 'techniques of the body', has been used in numerous studies of sports (e.g. Alter 1992; Bourdieu 1990; Wacquant 2004). Its widespread use is unsurprising because habitual, corporeal practices and embodied knowledge are central to success in sports. Habitus refers to a system of embodied, habitual and sedimented dispositions that function as enduring schemes of perception, thought and action. To be able to function successfully in a particular field, such as kickboxing, one needs to have 'incorporated' particular bodily techniques to such an extent that they feel like second nature.

Sport scholars have stressed the malleability, contextuality and changing dynamic of habitus and how it is constituted through embodiment, but they have demonstrated little theoretical advancement in their understanding of agency and how it relates to embodied subject formation. It is therefore helpful to go back to both Asad's and Pierre Bourdieu's source of inspiration for their theories, Marcel Mauss's *Techniques du Corps* (1934). Mauss understood bodily techniques as 'physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of action' and stressed the importance of education in understanding bodily techniques 'in group life' (Mauss 1973: 85). To truly understand how group life is construed in daily life, we have to understand the development of habitus as a social act (Crossley 1996).

This book will shed light on processes of self-realization and the role of agency therein because it examines body techniques and how they are learned and mastered, but even more so because it centralizes a group of people and a cultural practice that are not commonly studied in this combination. I therefore build on the intersectional feminist understanding of self-realization, whereby class, race/ethnicity and gender are taken into consideration (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2009; Lorde 2012) and, more particularly, reference is made to the work of feminist anthropologists of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 1999; Mahmood 2005a; Moors 2018) who intervened in feminist theories of agency, free will and individual autonomy. This intersectional approach to becoming a recreational athlete, in this

case a kickboxing *Muslima*, will elucidate the importance of centring body techniques.

Learning body techniques is the central focus in this book, and in chapter 2 more specifically, because it is in the development of learned capacities that enculturation, or ‘enskilment’ (Ingold 2000; Palsson 1994) happens. Experiential ethnographic research with an emphasis on apprenticeship has therefore been crucial in the empirical research for this book.

A METHOD OF LEARNING KICKBOXING

To understand the crafting of Muslim women’s subjectivities in Dutch women-only kickboxing, I conducted extensive research in two gyms in The Hague from 2011 to 2013. However, when I started my research, I was not new to kickboxing. In 2009, I began training in women-only kickboxing in Amsterdam as a student at the University of Amsterdam. I started out of sheer curiosity: like most other students at the gym, I had never engaged in sports before, apart from the two hours of compulsory physical education at school. A volunteer at a community centre had invited me, thereby introducing me to one of the most popular sports in the neighbourhood.

Amsterdam was known to be the cradle of Dutch kickboxing, but The Hague experienced a boom in fight clubs and more informal kickboxing venues when I moved there in 2010. While the then mayor of Amsterdam prohibited fight events in the city for a period of five years (which will be discussed at greater length in chapter 5), The Hague benefitted from both national and local governmental programmes that funded recreational martial arts and other sports for ethnic and religious minorities. New kickboxing gyms and informal training sessions in community centres and after-school programmes mushroomed in The Hague, mainly in the Southwest neighbourhoods that were home to many second- and third-generation migrants. Most notably, the availability of kickboxing training for women only rapidly increased, lowering the threshold for many girls and women to take up kickboxing as a leisure and sports activity.

Having some experience of kickboxing prior to joining two gyms in The Hague in 2011 was both an advantage and a disadvantage. I was readily accepted by the trainer and some of the more advanced students, but it was more difficult to connect with the absolute beginners. Having been raised as a *Muslima* by a brown Pakistani father and a white Dutch mother in a family in which boys were more engaged in sports than girls, but also having the same skin and hair colour, made me an insider to the young women in this research. Not having Moroccan heritage, living in a different neighbourhood, working at a university, not observing Islam meticulously, being older

than many of the women and having a different ('white' or 'posh') accent when speaking Dutch highlighted the fact that there were also significant differences. Because my ethnic and class identity was a point of difference, I did not experience subtle and not-so-subtle exclusion and racism as frequently and explicitly in Dutch society as many of my interlocutors.

The book is based on immersive research with a feminist ethnographic approach (Abu-Lughod 1990; Visweswaran 1997), not only because I home in on the experiences and stories of women, but also because I analyse gender not merely as personal identification, but as social constructions in the context of specific structures of power. As an experiential ethnographer (Thangaraj 2015; Wacquant 2004), I trained at two gyms in the Southwest of The Hague on a daily basis and paid attention to ethnographic apprenticeship (Downey 2005; Palsson 1994). Experiencing the pain of getting punched in the face or kicked in the stomach, feeling an unease about hurting someone that later turned into excitement and pleasure, adjusting to unspoken dress codes and behavioural patterns – it all helps to make sense of the meanings and values that people attach to their movements and bodies. I involved my own body to access experiential, embodied knowledge on the production of kickboxing subjectivities. Becoming a kickboxer through learning kickboxing informed the methodology for understanding the shaping of a fit, beautiful, heterosexual body and the cultivation of an ethical self. Every now and then, I switched from participating fully in sparring exercises in order to become a better fighter, writing my field notes with hands that were still shaking at the end of the night, to having my notebook out and silently observing training sessions.

The ethnographic approach I took called for sensuous scholarship (Stoller 2010), whereby my own body served as a data-gathering instrument and the starting point of analysis. When I began to regularly attend kickboxing classes, I experienced how sedimented dispositions and habitual practices were part of my kickboxing practice. Kickboxing challenges embodied knowledge about how women are supposed to behave. In the first few months, I felt that I had to overcome the fact that I did not like to fight and that I did not enjoy watching others fight. I avoided pain and apologized instantly whenever I hurt someone. Part of the enskilment of kickboxing is changing one's perspective of what pain and violence mean and realizing how the experience of pain is part of gendered socialization. A further exploration of movements, sartorial practices and discursive practices revealed what a good Muslim woman in kickboxing is.

Outside of the gym, I met my fighting classmates to go jogging, to shop, to eat out, to go walking around town, to flirt with boys, to go to high school, to visit fitness gyms, to attend taekwondo training, to meet their parents at home, to hang out in the park and to gather in mosques. In the process of

sharing these aspects of their daily lives as part of participant observation, I favoured informal talks and more sustained social interaction over formal interviews. I conducted sixteen formal interviews with gym owners, trainers and fighters, but a more natural conversational approach in daily activities was more useful with the girls and young women that are at the heart of this book.²²

Zaynab, her peers and their families live in the Southwest of The Hague, in the neighbourhoods of Schilderswijk, Moerwijk, Zuidwest and Transvaal. This part of the city contains more women-only sport and leisure centres than other neighbourhoods and its kickboxing gyms are visited by more Muslim women than other gyms. When the weather allowed it, I would ride my bicycle to the gym from the city centre where I lived; on rainy, snowy and windy days, I preferred taking trams and buses. I came to know The Hague Southwest by joining kickboxers on their walks, bike rides and bus rides to other training facilities, to go eat out or to meet friends. Following these trajectories through the city and through their lives resulted in friendships that allowed me to better understand how larger sociocultural and historical forces play out in everyday life.

BOOK STRUCTURE

Like Zaynab, most of the young kickboxers I met did not take sport participation for granted and did not come from families in which sport was an inherent part of women's and girls' upbringing. Their stories give an unprecedented insight into how sport participation became part of their life stories. The chapters are ordered to mirror the life trajectory of a young girl that becomes a kickboxer: from choosing a leisure activity in her neighbourhood, to aligning this activity with religious pursuits, to potentially becoming a professional fighter. Concentrating on this micro-level, the book provides insights into lesser-known parts of Muslim-minority gender subjectivities in Europe.

Chapter 1 introduces the neighbourhoods of The Hague Southwest, where there are many kickboxing gyms. It outlines the setting and context of the neighbourhood and city and takes a closer look at how women-only kickboxing is embedded in 'integration-through-sports' policies. The chapter then gives a brief history of the Dutch system of subsidizing sports and its relation to neighbourhood policy before describing the neighbourhood in which this research took place. This is followed by a description of the two gyms on which I focus and the people who frequent them. Situating my research within the broader contexts of Dutch and European society and debates on sports and integration, I argue in this chapter that sports create

a vicious circle for Muslim youth – a vicious circle in which race and gender power imbalances are reproduced. Common preconceptions regarding the empowering workings of sports will be critically analysed and I will show how they are reproduced in the everyday workings of sports.

Chapter 2 enters the two gyms in The Hague Southwest and describes how members of the women-only classes become recreational kickboxers through learning together. It explores the process of acquiring bodily knowledge and techniques as a means of (re)producing group formation and a sense of belonging. Kickboxing shows us that learning is not merely a transfer of knowledge from the trainer to her pupils, and not merely about modelling and copying. It is a form of coordination between a person's body, perceptions, resources, tools and environment that, in this case, is very much based on peer learning. It is precisely through learning together that group formation and a sense of belonging are produced. Learning kickboxing is not a linear process, because it is imbued with ideas of race/ethnicity, gender, class, age and locality. This chapter therefore renders explicit the specificity of bodies and contexts and shows that becoming a kickboxer is different in different environments.

Chapter 3 explores some of the implications of learning and sociability in the context of women-only kickboxing in The Hague. While kickboxing is seen as stereotypically masculine, the gendered, religious and racialized social and cultural context of the young women provides for a different kind of kickboxing practice, in which skill, ambition and subjectivity take different forms. In women's kickboxing practice, acquiring fighting skills goes hand in hand with crafting alternative gender subjectivities that play with notions of masculinity and femininity while keeping close to gender conformity. This chapter examines the rhetoric of empowerment and self-defence and practices of aesthetics and sociability in the gym. Thus, the chapter reveals how skill is developed differently in women-only kickboxing and how new gender subjectivities are crafted in the gym while an apologetic position vis-à-vis men is upheld.

Chapter 4 asks how gender subjectivities in women-only kickboxing are imbued with religious embodiment and ambition. Muslim women in sports are often ascribed feminist agency for contesting not only gender roles, but also what is considered 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Examining the strategies and choices involved in women-only kickboxing, this chapter argues that the gender subjectivities that are crafted are based on a pious ideal. A religious and gendered embodiment allows young women to contest and negotiate gendered, sexual and religious subjectivities, and is a strategy to claim space in a masculine and secular setting. The spatialization of the halal gym enables pious cultivation of the self and the collective, and reveals that both secular and religious sensibilities are crafted in women-only kickboxing.

Chapter 5 examines in fine-grained detail how a girl from a so-called ‘disadvantaged neighbourhood’ becomes a competitive kickboxer. Alia’s life story illustrates her decisions to practise kickboxing, choose a gym and become a competitive fighter. The chapter demonstrates the complexities of racialization and its intersection with religion and gender by spotlighting the expectations, ambitions and relations with family and friends of those who pursue a kickboxing career. I argue that the negotiations of gendered subjectivities are temporal and shaped through discourses of gender and relationships with their male counterparts. Alia’s life story shows that self-realization does not only concern religious pursuits; rather, different spheres intersect in her everyday life and add to her notion of self. Describing Alia’s career with an emphasis on her personal, agentic power, this chapter enables a deeper understanding of the subtleties of self-formation.

Based on the findings gathered in this book, I examine gendered self-realization in the conclusion by reiterating that, on the one hand, kickboxing is perceived as an emancipatory, liberal practice, precisely because of the racial and religious backgrounds of the women and girls, while, on the other hand, it reinforces heteronormative and racialized identifications. This exploration will unpack the essentialized identity of ‘the Muslimwoman’ by theoretically intervening in debates on gendered subjectivity, secular and religious sensibilities, and belonging.

NOTES

1. The names of the kickboxers in this book are all pseudonyms, except for the names of international champions that were not part of this study; their full names are given.
2. The work of Adele Pavlidis and Simone Fullagar (2014) on roller derby, not a combat sport but a contact sport nonetheless, is a notable exception.
3. See Abu-Lughod (2013), Ahmed (1992) and Nguyen (2011).
4. In 2009, Member of Parliament Geert Wilders, leader of the right-wing political party Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Party for Freedom), suggested a headscarf tax of €1,000 per year to discourage people from wearing headscarves.
5. It should be noted that Bruce Lee played a significant role in making combat sports very popular in the global south, even before they became popular among diasporas in Western nations (Bowman 2010).
6. *Muslima*, although not mentioned in most dictionaries, is the Arabic word for a Muslim woman, used globally by Muslimas themselves.
7. For a more elaborate account of ‘ethnic communities’ in the Netherlands, see Rath (1991).
8. At the time of the writing of this book, in 2021, the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics is considering abandoning the binary distinction of Western and non-Western, but still uses the existing migration classification system to create new terms. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/uitgevoerd/het-gebruik-van-westers-niet-westers-door-het-cbs>.

9. The Dutch sociopolitical system has often been described as ‘pillarized’, with Protestants, Catholics, socialists and liberals running their own schools, political parties, media, etc. The transformation during the 1960s is described as ‘de-pillarization’. See also Geschiere (2009), Kennedy (1995), Van Rooden (2004).
10. Paul Mepschen, Evelien H. Tonkens and Jan Willem Duyvendak frame this discourse as a form of ‘sexual politics’ and show how representations of gay sexuality exemplifying Dutch tolerance are mobilized by right-wing anti-Islam politicians to ‘shape narratives in which Muslims are non-modern subjects’ (2010: 962).
11. See also Bracke (2012).
12. Note that ‘the idea that modern religion is subject to secularization, and hence confined to the private sphere and the inner self, expresses an ideology more than a historical reality’ (Meyer 2008: 720).
13. This is especially visible in the Muslim headscarf controversies around Europe. See, for example, Bracke and Fadil (2012), Moors (2009) and Scott (2009).
14. See also Lentini and Titley (2011), Silverstein (2005) and Vertovec (2011).
15. See Khoja-Moolji (2018) for an excellent critique of the production of the ideal Muslim woman-/girl-subject.
16. Dutch original: ‘passen niet in deze tijd’. See Wisse (2009) and, for a historical account of gender-segregated swimming, Elling (2005).
17. Debates on gender-separated swimming have taken place elsewhere. In January 2017, the Swiss government won a case at the European Court of Human Rights, a result that obliged parents to send their children to mixed swimming lessons (de Koning 2017).
18. See, for example, Chin and Andrews (2016) and Willms (2017).
19. It is also regarded as such by men (Green 2011). It should perhaps also be noted that women-only kickboxing was not a comfort for all women, for instance, those who did not return to class.
20. Asad’s essay ‘The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam’ (1986) was an intervention in a debate that had begun in the 1970s. Whereas Clifford Geertz (1968) understood local variations of Islam as expressions of a universal, symbolic religious system and Abdul Hamid El-Zein (1977: 251) criticized Geertz for assuming a universal essence of Islam and argued for the ‘native’s’ model of Islam, Asad argued that the binary approaches of scholars such as El-Zein, but also Ernest Gellner (1981), were inadequate and that an anthropology of Islam ‘should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of Qur’an and the Hadith’ (Asad 1986: 14).
21. It has to be noted that there have been ongoing published debates about this issue. See also Deeb (2015); Fadil and Fernando (2015).
22. I have followed the ethical principles outlined by the American Anthropological Association. All participants were informed that I was a researcher and that I was conducting research. Although pre-teen students were present at the gyms, the research focused on students above the age of sixteen. When the participants were below the age of eighteen, verbal consent was acquired from their parents as well.