

# In dialogue with Kathrine van den Bogert and Jasmijn Rana

Elsa Charléty and Lise Zurné

Sports, whether it concerns national matches, street football, (kick) boxing in community centres, or the Olympics, are always intertwined with questions of identity, gender, ethnicity and belonging. In the Netherlands, ethnic and religious minorities are often asked to assimilate to the supposedly Dutch values of sexual equality, and Muslim women in particular are cast as being in need of liberation and emancipation. As sports are often considered a form of secular feminist empowerment, sports participation has become a site where such racialised, religious and gendered politics play out. In 2022, two ethnographic monographs have been published on this particular topic, namely Kathrine van den Bogert's *Street Football, Gender and Muslim Youth in the Netherlands: Girls Who Kick Back* (Bloomsbury Academic) and Jasmijn Rana's *Punching Back: Gender, Religion and Belonging in Women-Only Kickboxing* (Berghahn Books). Whereas Kathrine focuses particularly on the challenges girls with Moroccan-Dutch and Muslim backgrounds negate while playing street football in urban spaces, Jasmijn analyses the various ways young Muslim women challenge gender norms and religious subjectivities through kickboxing. The LOVA editorial board has asked the two authors to engage in a conversation about the similarities and differences between their research projects, and the ways in which their findings relate to broader gendered processes of national belonging, identification and positionality.

**Elsa:** So, I would like to start by asking you about the origins and timelines of your projects.

**Jasmijn:** What's interesting about our timeline is that our fieldwork actually happened at the same time. So we actually met in the Schilderswijk during our research.

**Kathrine:** I think you were actually at the end of your research while I was just starting.

**Jasmijn:** Yeah, there was a little overlap. And I remember we actually met during a football match. We also found that we had an interlocutor in common.

**Kathrine:** Yeah, more than one I'd say.

**Jasmijn:** There were people you knew from football, but they were kickboxing at the same time, or they started with one sport and then ended up doing the other. I did some research at various locations, but the bulk of it, I ended up doing in The Hague. The main reason was also because kickboxing was criminalised in many cities, especially in Amsterdam, and in The Hague there was actually a kind of "kickboxing boom."

**Elsa:** I have a question about the criminalisation, because I remember you arguing it is framed as fear for "rowdy men" basically, but how does this relate to your project and women kickboxing in particular?

**Jasmijn:** It's a whole different way of framing what kickboxing is in terms of gender: while kickboxing is promoted as a way of keeping men off the streets and having them an outlet for their aggression, for women it's understood as a form of empowerment, emancipation and agency. And actually, there is a fear in Dutch society for Moroccan Muslim men and their power, yet it is the same fear they use to empower Moroccan Muslim girls. "They should be able to fight for

themselves and to stand up against their men” so to say. A classic case of Spivak’s “white men saving brown women from brown men.” And I think that’s a very important difference in our two research projects: the political and cultural connotations of kickboxing versus football.

**Kathrine:** Yes. I was working on an NWO-funded research project about women’s football in the Netherlands, specifically focused on girls playing street football from ethnic and religious backgrounds, and the way this proposal was formulated was quite in line with this idea that, well, we study how this will be good for their integration.

**Jasmijn:** That’s problematic right?

**Kathrine:** Yes, I agree. So I was a bit hesitant in a way to start that project because I didn’t want to go in that kind of direction. I do try to reflect on that in the book, that even if the research ends up differently, you reproduce this idea that this is a community or a group that needs to be studied because of a supposed need of integration, which is problematic indeed. I started out in maybe eight or nine different places, then I just came in touch with the woman I call Hanan in my book and she organised girls’ football in the Schilderswijk. And what I found interesting there was that it was completely separate from all the other initiatives that I saw. There are many NGOs and community centres, organisations from municipalities, the KNVB [Dutch Football Federation], that organised street football. But she did it completely separate from all these organisations, so I found it intriguing, like why and how does it work? And there were hundreds of girls every week there playing football, so that’s how I kind of ended up doing the bulk of the research in this area. While I was doubting for a long time to focus on the Schilderswijk, I thought this was the only place where I saw such a bottom-up initiative from people from the neighbourhood and the community itself that organised this.

**Elsa:** So it’s interesting to me, the difference between the two sports. What’s your view on this?

**Kathrine:** I think what is different for football is that it is a sport that is seen as basically by and for everyone, except for Muslim girls. So apparently they really lag behind in their sports participation, they're not members of sports clubs in the Netherlands. That's kind of the dominant story that you hear all the time among policymakers, but also by researchers. So participation in football, then, for them becomes really this idea of now you fully belong to this society. So in a way it's also related to emancipation. I think the participation of boys is more taken for granted, like that's just what they do, they just play football. That's just part of their life and it's less problematised than with kickboxing. But there are certain dynamics about behaviours, like you also saw with the World Cup in relation to Morocco, what is considered normal behaviour or behaviour that's done by everyone is for them framed in relation to ethnic, cultural, religious backgrounds and for others not.

**Jasmijn:** I have the feeling that with the difference between boys and girls, when boys do sports, it's just a hobby. When women or girls do sports, it's emancipation, right?

**Kathrine:** Yeah, it's not because you like it.

**Jasmijn:** It cannot be just because you like it, right? Even while we ask girls, "why do you do kickboxing or football" that is the answer I get.

**Elsa:** I see different levels of discourses. So the discourse from the community from which these girls are in, and the projection of this Dutch national predicament, right?

**Jasmijn:** I think it does matter that football is considered a national sport, right? We, "the Dutch," are good at football, right? And kickboxing is internationally seen as a Dutch sport because we have a lot of Dutch champions but we don't take pride in it as we do in football.

**Kathrine:** It is also more considered a migrant sport in the Netherlands, isn't it?

**Jasmijn:** But if you look at the last 50 years and the Dutch champions we've had, they're both white and non-white. I mean, we don't see kickboxing as a national sport, which is partly due to the connotations of violence, but also because of the relation to the underworld, right? Media and politics focus a lot on the criminal activities happening at the kickboxing matches. So it is not embraced as a national sport.

**Elsa:** Both sports then have such different national discourses surrounding them.

**Kathrine:** What also matters is the way the sport is organised. Football is organised along these sport clubs for decades, and the Dutch see themselves as very proud of having this great sports infrastructure: there's a sports club around the corner and everyone can become a member. And it's a way to participate in society and your parents need to become volunteers, and help at the club, et cetera. That also makes it very hard for people to see the problems with that, but a colleague of mine just published a report on criminal infiltration in football clubs, so there's also something going on, although maybe not in the same way as with kickboxing. Kickboxers don't participate in the governance structure of sports in the Netherlands because the sport is different, this also impacts the national image.

**Jasmijn:** Yes, we have the "Royal" Dutch Football Association.

**Kathrine:** Of which you could also doubt its role with corruption in the football governing bodies, look at Qatar for example. But then it's white collar crime.

**Jasmijn:** Right, and there are many "national" kickboxing associations but they all have different rules and matches and so on. So the fabric of how Dutch sports work is another way of looking at integration:

with many, you have to become a member. But one of the reasons kickboxing schools are so popular is simply because it is a private enterprise. And this then makes it possible to say for example, there are no men allowed in our gym. And this is different with swimming, where there are currently debates within municipalities about segregated swimming, which then would supposedly prohibit integration. But this is more feasible in kickboxing.

**Elsa:** But talking about these private spaces and gender, how does it work within research in public playgrounds?

**Kathrine:** This discussion is actually ridiculous in many ways, because almost all sports are already segregated. There's a women's football competition and a men's football competition. So gender segregation is the standard in most sports. This competition in The Hague that I studied, they started out as only for girls. Because yeah, actually you know this is something that attracts many women to playing sports: sporting without the eyes of men on you, it's not necessarily related to religion. However, throughout the years, it kind of evolved into a more mixed competition because girls were taking their neighbours and their brothers, but the name always stayed "girls' football." Because as soon as they label it as football only, then it becomes this mainstream football which is seen as masculine. There were also boys who said yeah, I go to the girls' football. Yeah, so keeping the name was important so that the girls could stay in charge, they stayed the majority and this space was then very different from the "normal" football which was a boys' space. But then I spoke to some people of the municipality who still said that they had problems with this initiative because they saw it as girls who wanted to be segregated, and who did not want to play with boys because of their religion. Even though those people themselves sometimes also said they preferred to play with only women, but then the reason was "different" and not because of religious differences. So this segregation is really mediated by gender, religion and race.

**Jasmijn:** So Kathrine, I really like in your book how you use the word religionisation. That's exactly what is happening, right? For the girls, in your case, not in my case, it is not about religion. But people frame it in religious terms, they religionise their football practices. Which is then intertwined with racialisation.

**Kathrine:** And the interesting thing is, there was also a boys competition which started up after the girls competition and they were not problematised. So then somehow when boys are segregating, it's seen as normal in relation to sports. There were also other people from the municipality who said, "yeah, no, we don't have any problems with girls and boys being separate, because the level is different and their bodies are different. They are separate human beings and for that reason we think it's good that they play segregated sports." And then these girls were telling me, you know, we want to play against boys because we can show that we are better. So both views from the municipality are problematic, and in the end not facilitating what the girls actually wanted to do.

**Jasmijn:** So I was actually also struggling with identifying the group I research: are they just girls, Muslim girls, Moroccan or Muslim, should I use the terms they use? I studied two gyms. Especially one gym was very much a religious space. They use the halal stamp to say look, we're really a halal gym for example, and they actually made space for religious conversations and for going to the mosque together, and things like that. At the same time, I do think that they counter that same process of religionisation. Not by saying: "look, we just like kickboxing" but saying, "so what? We are good Muslim women and we are kickboxers and we combine it, we don't have to separate one from the other."

**Kathrine:** Another difference between our projects is the way in which age may impact sports practice. I think my research participants were slightly younger, around twelve years old. And the moment that they start thinking more about what religion means for them: how do they

want to integrate, you know, religious convictions in their daily life, is maybe around sixteen or seventeen. My research was set up in a way in which I could follow those developments.

**Jasmijn:** No, absolutely, and I think for me that was really a difference between the two gyms, one was much younger oriented. That changed everything, basically.

**Kathrine:** It is a moment that people start thinking about their identity and experimenting, and sport researchers also told me that this is an age that many people actually stop playing sports. So again, it is not just about religion but also about life changes.

**Elsa:** As you followed your interlocutors in these changes, did you also encounter stories of sexual identity and queerness?

**Kathrine:** Yeah, I think what I heard a lot was that actually the separation or gender dichotomy between boys and girls was still very strong. Although they tried to integrate it in playing football, I think because of this age at which you develop your identity, your sexual identity, there was in the talks that I had a lot of emphasis, “yeah, but I also want to be with the girls amongst ourselves, because then we can chat freely about the boys.” This space was also created by the organisers, so there were also spaces and moments that girls were amongst themselves and no boys were allowed. And I also saw quite the reproduction of the heteronormative way of organising, so when boys were playing against the girls and that kind of thing, then it was also very much about attraction: do you like that boy? In a way, what these girls told me was that there was a safe space where they could experiment with these kinds of feelings and ideas for them. Which was much safer than other spaces, like schools. Schools are much more regulated. Therefore football was also a space to experiment with these relations.

**Jasmijn:** So in my case it was literally separated so those relationships did not happen, but there was indeed a safe space to talk about it,

especially like the locker rooms. That's the moment that people talk about love, relationships, sex. I think that was very important, but also very heteronormative and, and you might sort of assume that because it's kickboxing, which transgresses a boundary of heteronormativity in a way. You might say well, they're playing with ideas of masculinity, for example, at the same time they go against it as well, right? So that you see they play with a female form of masculinity, as Halberstam would call it. And at the same time, because masculinity is associated with lesbianism, tomboyism, queerness, they counter it in their clothing. So they could say, maybe I'm masculine, but I'm still a girly girl, right? Or they would be very tough in the gym and then make sure to wear layers of makeup before they leave the gym. Queerness would be looked down upon.

**Elsa:** Do they have to wrestle with it because of the way the sport is perceived?

**Jasmijn:** Yeah, exactly. So they legitimise their presence there by being feminine right, by emphasising a sort of hyper-femininity.

**Kathrine:** That is what you see in much literature.

**Jasmijn:** To legitimise their presence by highlighting femininity, to not be a threat to masculinity.

**Kathrine:** What I found interesting is that at the beginning you mentioned this idea, that for girls this participation in kickboxing was seen as emancipation, and for boys as a way to regulate their aggression. The girls' football project that I studied also drew on that discourse in the way that they introduced boys to this competition was also to teach boys how to behave with girls. That they should not be treated as sexual objects or whatever.

**Jasmijn:** The same premise.

**Kathrine:** Yes, and this was also sometimes explicitly related to ethnicity like yeah, this is a Moroccan problem, so we need to “teach these boys.” I found that this was the most difficult part of my data, how to work with this narrative that also was quite strong in their own discourse. Yeah, I don’t know really. There was also an issue with WhatsApp groups in which especially Moroccan Dutch girls were kind of victimised. I also write at some point in my book that growing up in such a neighbourhood and being stigmatised, with so many social problems also in terms of socioeconomic class, that also makes that this is not necessarily ethnicity related, but it is a common kind of social issue. And this is also what my project aimed to address. Because I also heard this about other “white” neighbourhoods that have a lower social-economic status.

**Elsa:** So yes, how do you then see yourself in this project, in relation to the issue of solidarity?

**Kathrine:** So Jasmijn, did you get any questions from participants or from the kickbox schools like “Ok, why should I participate in your research? What’s in it for me?”

**Jasmijn:** So yes, the professional kickboxers and the gym owners were happy with it, they did understand the importance of these stories. At the same time, these stories are very much not for them, because for them it’s very normal, but it’s for everyone else who doesn’t know these stories, so.. I always like to remember that at one point I organized this exhibition with drawings of kickboxers at Imagine IC see and we actually made the newspaper with this exhibition on kickboxer stories. And I showed it to the guy at the kiosk I was buying the newspaper from, and he was like “is this news?!” He was Moroccan, probably everyone in his family does kickboxing or he has a lot of kickboxers around him. For him it is not an important story, but actually it’s sort of the mainstream Dutch society that doesn’t know about this and that’s why it was newsworthy in that way, so these stories are from them, but not for them. Which is an interesting, like, political dilemma for me, I guess. They don’t gain much from it.

**Kathrine:** It is a difficult question to what extent this is enough for actually asking much of their time and knowledge to participate in the research. I don't have an answer myself, but this is what I think about a lot. How long do we need people to tell their stories to other audiences? Because these audiences simply don't want to listen for decades already, so yeah.

**Jasmijn:** Especially like my new research on Muslim women in running. It's much more about embodiment and experience. So if it is less about the nation-state, such as in the kickboxing research, that's something else than the sports and policy discourses that I've been engaging with so much. But I do think about women's voices. I do think we need those voices in anthropology, in Dutch media, or research. Although they find their voice and maybe do not care about their voices being heard in Dutch media, I do [laughs]. Yeah, so in that case I do think that telling these stories, I wouldn't call it activist, but I do think it's an important intervention both in sports research but also in the anthropology of Islam. So solidarity might work in a different way.

**Kathrine:** What we both share is that our primary kind of goal is to share these stories and that this community is kind of our first ethical consideration when it's about questions of what do I write, where and when and all that? It needs to be for them, not individually, but as a group where we see that there is work to be done.

**Elsa:** And maybe the way you write, it is so different from the way it's been written so far, which is already adding new layers.

**Jasmijn:** Absolutely, absolutely.

**Kathrine:** I don't know how people respond to your research, but when I give a presentation and I share stories of girls who play football, then there's always usually a white woman who raises her hand and asks me: but do parents allow these girls to play football by themselves? [laughs] So this stereotype is still a big issue to us all, and to Muslim girls.

**Jasmijn:** Or for the people that religionise them. The way that Kathrine and I have been working alongside each other. We've never seen each other as competitors, I think. And we've been to some of the same conferences about sports and space, for example, and doing research in the same neighbourhood, which makes our books are very similar.

**Kathrine:** [laughs] I always nod in agreement while reading your work!

**Elsa:** Yes! I also constantly think why do we have to be pitched against each other like, all this time that women are pitched against each other to benefit from the power, like men basically. Why should we always try to think of things as a competition?

**Jasmijn:** That's why it would be great to read the two books together. Although we share the same demographics, neighbourhoods, and the Dutch debates, I don't see it as amplifying voices on the same issue. Yes, the books are very similar, but it would be wonderful if people read the books together and actually see how they differ and how they add to each other.

**Kathrine:** So actually, in a Master's course I teach, my students read an article of both of us, also to teach how qualitative and ethnographic research works: that your own positionality and research focus, and just the slightest difference, might give you different parts of the story.

**Jasmijn:** Yes, that's a very wonderful idea.

To learn more about the supposedly similar yet distinct research projects of Kathrine and Jasmijn, either reading it comparatively or complementary side by side, their monographs are now available:

Jasmijn Rana's *Punching Back: Gender, Religion and Belonging in Women-Only Kickboxing* can be purchased via Berghahn Books.

Kathrine van den Bogert's *Street Football, Gender and Muslim Youth in the Netherlands: Girls Who Kick Back* is available via Bloomsbury Open Access. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350205079>