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Secular-religious self-improvement:

Muslim women's kickboxing in the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In the Netherlands young Muslim women have increasingly begun to join women-only kickboxing gyms. Dutch public discourse has taken notice, treating this phenomenon as a surprising development. The general assumption, in the Netherlands and in western Europe more broadly, is that women's sport is a form of secular, feminist empowerment; Muslim women's participation thus exemplifies the incongruence of Islam with the modern, secular nation-state. Contesting this view, I show that young Muslim women who kickbox establish agentive selves by playing with gender norms, challenging expectations, and living out their religious subjectivities. Moreover, they disrupt western European parameters of secularity and religiosity. Their cloistered athletic activity is liberating, but not as expected and understood by mainstream public opinion. They approach their sport not as a quest for cultural integration or emancipation from their Muslim communities, but as a way of intertwining religious and secular forms of self-improvement. [*sport, embodiment, gender grouping, secularism, Islam, the Netherlands*]

The first time I delivered a punch to someone's face, Zaynab was on the receiving end.¹ I was in a gym located on the second floor of an old office building on the outskirts of The Hague. There, I trained with mostly Muslim Moroccan-Dutch women in a "women-only" kickboxing class. We gathered three times a week, between the 6 p.m. children's and the 8 p.m. men's sessions. Zaynab lived just five minutes' walking distance from the gym, but some of us came from adjoining neighborhoods, and others traveled 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 15 minutes were reserved for sparring: practicing a fight without intending to hurt one's opponent too much. Nazira, the young mother with whom I had partnered for the first 45 minutes, decided, as usual, to look for another sparring partner. Her sparring does not include punching in the face, which, she believed, violates Islamic standards of behavior. She walked to the other side of the gym to join the other students who thought the same or who lacked sufficient 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 raise 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 who agreed to spar with face punching allowed. The three of us took turns sparring in one-minute rounds.

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"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I mumbled through my mouth guard. We had barely started the fight, but when my glove touched Zaynab's nose, I felt my heartbeat throughout my entire body. "Whoa!" Zaynab exclaimed, taking a step back. Then she showed her distinctive grin, and I remembered that this was 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 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. Moving faster, she advanced and 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, winked at me, and said, "Don't worry. Next time I'll get your pretty face."²

In this short fight, Zaynab and I, like all the other women kickboxing in our gym, negotiated how to play the game and determined what kickboxing meant for us. We navigated belonging and nonbelonging within this group of women, our respective ethnic and religious communities, and Dutch and European society. This theme of belonging and self-realization is often examined in the dominant scholarship on Muslim women in general and North African diasporas in Europe, yet the scholarship focuses exclusively on the veil and Muslim piety (Amir-Moazami 2011; Bracke and Fadil 2012; Moors 2009; Scott 2010). Such myopia can allow for essentialized, limited understandings of Muslim women's lives. By contrast, my focus on young Muslim women's engagement in sports enables me to think about different forms of self-improvement. Their involvement in sports is a modality of everyday practices that sheds new light on the dynamics of secular and religious sensibilities.

In the Netherlands, girls and young women are increasingly active in kickboxing (Elling, Schootemeijer, and Van Den Dool 2017).³ While some girls and women join mixed-gender sessions, gender-grouped training has lowered the threshold for many women and girls to engage in martial arts. With a teacher's instruction and interactions among peers, the women learn how to punch, kick, and spar.⁴ Women-only kickboxing classes are offered by kickboxing clubs known for their competitive fighters, including the gym owners and their trainers. The trainers' expertise shapes how the space nurtures skills and a lifelong passion for the sport.

Dutch media and research reports often celebrate Muslim women's participation in sports as a sign that they are now "empowering" themselves and are "integrating" in Dutch society. Feminists use the term *empowerment* in different ways; it can be understood broadly as "anything

that makes women's lives better" (Connell 2010, 171), or specifically as a process in which women develop a feminist consciousness that evolves through agentic and internally motivated acts against collective oppression (Collins 2009). From the perspective that gender embodiment is always embedded in practices of power (Davis 1997), increasing physical power can have empowering effects for an individual. In the Netherlands, the English term *empowerment* is mostly used in policies and media reports on minoritized communities; the implication is that they—in contrast to white communities and white women—lack power. Those who do this type of reporting tend to emphasize the barriers that these women and girls overcome to participate in sports, and society in general (Rana 2017). This emphasis owes largely to the implicit juxtaposition between Muslim women's presumed submission and Western women's agency, as well as between religion and sport. In many ways, the Western (white) imagination of the Muslim woman has often been that of physical weakness, submission, and lack of agency. As with 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). Various policy programs have championed sports, and kickboxing, as a tool for equipping Muslim women with the physical skill and power to protect and empower themselves. Thanks to a governmental stimulus package, called *Tijd voor Vechtsport* (Time for Fighting Sports), 90 martial arts associations attracted 13,500 new members (NISB, n.d.). Elling, Wisse, and Berk (2010) found that most of these were immigrant girls and boys, as well as ethnic-majority boys, who tend to engage in combat sports (see also Rana 2014). The implication is that Muslim women lack something that, through modern secular intervention, they can acquire. Although combat sports and self-defense training reportedly have an empowering effect on young women in terms of physical strength and self-confidence (Hollander 2018; McCaughey 1997; Speidel 2014), it is problematic to frame kickboxing as empowerment and integration specifically for Muslim women. It presupposes a submissive, backward, underdeveloped group of people who need to be transformed into secular, modern individuals. The juxtaposition of the secular, modern feminist woman to the religious, conservative, and backward woman cannot help us make sense of how secularity and religion articulate in everyday practices.

As an experiential ethnographer (Thangaraj 2015; Wacquant 2004), I trained extensively at two gyms in The Hague from 2012 to 2013, focusing on ethnographic apprenticeship (Downey 2005; Palsson 1994). Drawing on my immersive fieldwork at one of these gyms, which offered Muslim-oriented women-only training, I show that, through their gendered agency, young Muslim women who kickbox disrupt western European parameters of secularity and religiosity. Their secluded, recreational activity is

liberating, but not in the ways outlined by government-sponsored women-empowerment programs or as reported in the media. They approach the sport not as a quest for cultural integration or emancipation from their Muslim communities, but as a way of practicing both religious and secular forms of self-realization.

The mutuality of the secular and the religious

Muslims in contemporary Europe have been subjected to state interventions in which the regulation of race-ethnicity (integration) overlaps that of religion (secularism) (De Koning 2020). In this context, 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, 837). Current secularist discourses in Europe stress that “we” have to defend our liberal freedoms and secular way of living, and protect it from those that do not share our secular values. These discourses lean on public debates on Islam that cast Muslim practices as a danger to the European self.⁵ Muslim men are racialized as violent, dangerous, and radicalized in the United States (Bayoumi 2015; Garner and Selod 2015) and Europe (De Koning 2020; Korteweg 2017). Muslim women, meanwhile, are racialized as passive dupes and the powerless victims of Muslim male tyranny. They are, in short, “the Muslim-woman” (Abu-Lughod 2016), who must be saved from her culture, religion, and men.

Both popular and scholarly discourses on Muslim women’s agency often focus on resistance to social norms. But there is an alternative way of thinking about agency, as proposed in Mahmood’s (2005) seminal work on the participants in Egypt’s Islamic revival movement and their embodied means of subject formation. This reconceptualization of agency “uncouples the notion of self-realization from that of autonomous will” (Mahmood 2005, 14). Religious observation, in this view, is an expression of agency. In the case of Muslim women, adhering to religious and social norms in their everyday lives allows them to cultivate piety. 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 Asad (1986) and Mahmood (2005), and highlighting the cultivation of piety (as active self-realization), scholars of Muslims in Europe have countered simplistic, homogenizing discourses in studies of minorities and migration (Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003; Fadil 2008; Fernando 2010; Jacobsen 2011).

Several studies have challenged secular assumptions about the contradictory nature of choice and obligation, freedom and authority, and many scholars have focused their attention on the secular as an embodied mode of living (Bakker Kellog 2015; Mahmood 2005; Scott 2010). Ap-

proaching the secular “through its shadows” (Asad 2003, 16), however, has led many scholars to study the formation of religious subjectivity at religious sites, such as mosques. The gym, in contrast, qualifies as a secular space of modern self-fashioning (Guttmann 1988; Hirschkind 2011). Such “nonreligious” spaces embody secularity through a variety of physical practices. A women-only gym that specifically welcomes Muslim women contests the status quo of secularity. In what follows, I show that young Muslim women combine pious and secular sensibilities through women-only sports, and I reveal the intersection of women’s religious, ethnic, and gendered subjectivities with 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.

Immigrant integration and secular sports

Historically, sports have been a key site for producing citizenship. Since their emergence as separate and regularized types of activity in the mid-19th century, sports have been associated with nationalist projects of integration and citizenship. At the root of the historical development of organized sports is discipline, thanks in large part to the 19th-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, 447). For many nation-states, amateur and professional sports still provide means 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 (Alter 1992; Buford 1993; see also Brownell 1995). This idea extends across western Europe, from France (Silverstein 2000) to Germany (Braun and Nobis 2011), Denmark (Pfister 2011), the United Kingdom (Coaffee 2008), and the Netherlands (Elling, Wisse, and Berk 2010; Vermeulen and Verweel 2009). In recent years, European nation-states have increasingly promoted 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 providing opportunities for physical, psychological, and organizational self-development, sports are valued as a means of socio-integration. Sports thus often become the centerpiece of state policies aimed at “immigrant integration,” which discursively produce immigrants as racialized subjects (De Koning 2020; Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018). Such efforts at immigrant integration are 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.

Mainstream Dutch society continues to categorize Muslim minorities in the Netherlands as the ultimate Other. Most of these people, who are of Moroccan or Turkish descent, are pigeonholed as "forever foreigners" who cannot assimilate into the Dutch way of life. Over the years, the official terms have changed from "guest workers" (*gastarbeiders*) to ethnic minorities (*etnische minderheden*), and from "allochthone" (*allochtoon*) and "new Dutch" (*nieuwe Nederlander*) to people "with a migrant background" (*met een migratieachtergrond*). Yet the same imaginary differentiations continue to structure the politics of belonging and the boundaries between "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis 2006), perpetuating the culturalization of Dutch citizenship (Ghorashi 2017). In this context, the development of "cultural racism" has been observed across Europe (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Lentin and Titley 2011; Silverstein 2000; Vertovec 2011). The "culturalist turn," marking the categorical shift in focus from ethnicity to that of culture and religion, includes a strong aversion to Islam. In the Netherlands the rise of this form of cultural racism, often termed anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia, is sustained by the seeming timelessness of unmarked secular whiteness and the spotlight on Muslim Dutch Moroccans as bodies out of place (Douglas 2005; Thangaraj 2015).

As Modest and De Koning (2016) argue, this is part of an "anxious politics" in which Europe is imagined as a racially and culturally homogeneous space, one that is threatened by the intrusion of "newcomers," both immigrants and refugees. In this discourse, the ordinary, iconic figure of "the Moroccan youth" (De Koning and Vollebergh 2019) meets his female counterpart, the *Muslima* (Muslim woman), who is characterized in hegemonic discourse as oppressed and lacking autonomy (Moors 2018). The mainstream Dutch liberal society assumes a dichotomy between the secular/modern, on the one hand, and the religious/backward, on the other, and this way of thinking is usually implicit. But sometimes it is explicitly expressed, as when, in 2016, Edith Schippers, the former Dutch minister of health, welfare, and sports delivered the prestigious Van Schoo lecture, which is published annually by Elsevier. In the lecture, entitled "The Paradox of Freedom," Schippers (2016) claimed that Muslim girls living in "certain" neighborhoods in The Hague were vulnerable and, because of social pressure, were not truly free to wear whatever they wanted and choose their partners. In making this argument, she continued the longstanding othering of youth with migrant and Muslim backgrounds in Dutch society, pigeonholing them as foreigners living in opposition to the Dutch way of life. Schippers

assumed her audience would agree that Muslim women hold a subordinate position and lack agency. In questioning "whether they are really free," she juxtaposed Muslim women to non-Muslim women, whose choices she could not imagine as autonomous. Her assumption was that while white Dutch women's emancipation is complete, it is incomplete for Muslim or migrant women. This reflects a secular, liberal understanding of Muslims, one that is dominant in the Netherlands.

The neighborhoods that Schippers alluded to are working class. It is these neighborhoods that are home to kickboxing gyms (whereas in the middle- and upper-class white neighborhoods, one finds hockey fields, tennis courts, and running tracks). The way Schippers addressed "certain neighborhoods" is part of a larger discourse in which geographic units come to symbolize immigrant populations, crime, and deprivation. It is the neighborhood, and the neighborhood resident, that became the locus for integrationist and secularist policies, and particularly for policies of "integration through sports." At the same time, young Muslim women embrace the neighborhood as the space where they can realize self-improvement through practicing sports.

Self-realization through sports

When I met Zaynab, she was a high school student, a practicing Muslim, and a novice kickboxer. Zaynab described her decision to participate in kickboxing as individual and intrinsically motivated. Her older sister had practiced taekwondo for years, and Zaynab saw how it changed her. "I saw she was getting fitter, you know, a slim body. Her body, but also her ways changed positively. I wanted that too, but I also wanted something for myself, something that would be mine alone." Like other young Muslim Dutch women, she said she took up kickboxing because she wanted to have a recreational activity and to work on her self. At the gym, there were always about 20 women, each with her own desires and ambitions, but all having an interest in becoming better kickboxers and finding our "best selves."

An 18-year-old competitive kickboxer, Alia, oversaw our training as well as that of the children. Her life revolved entirely around kickboxing. Her paternal grandfather, born in a small Berber town in northern Morocco, was one of the first labor migrants in the Netherlands in the late 1960s. He brought his sons over when they were still very young. As far back as Alia remembered, her father always worked in a factory. He married Alia's mother, who was from the same village and came to the Netherlands when she was 18. Alia was born and raised in the same neighborhood where she still lived with her parents and four siblings. Most of her extended family members lived in the same area. The elementary school that she attended was just across the street from her house, as was the community center that she visited in

her teenage years. When Alia was 14 years old, she decided to participate in sports. She often watched her brother play soccer and started to like the sport too. When she found out the football club had a girls' team, she asked her father if she could join. Her father would not allow it because he thought soccer was for boys. He asked her to choose a sport more suitable for girls. "They couldn't tell me what was more appropriate, and I didn't know. When you just search the Internet for 'girls' sports The Hague,' you get options for field hockey, track, and even beach volleyball. Can you imagine me doing that? Can you imagine my father being OK with that?" Alia explained that these sports associations were far from where she lived and required that she wear revealing attire. Browsing online, she found a nearby kickboxing gym. She decided to go there for a free trial of the women-only session, and she immediately found it inspiring:

I didn't want to lose weight. I didn't want to fight in the ring. I wasn't there because I wanted to be tough. I didn't think about it being a boys' sport or not. I wasn't thinking about anything. But still, something inside me urged me to practice every Tuesday and Thursday, and I continued all my life. I wonder why I liked it. I didn't like it! I got beat up every time. But from the first training I watched, it spoke to me, it attracted me. My heart shines there [*Mijn hart straalt daar*].

Alia's emphasis on her ineffable, intrinsic motivations was reiterated by many of her students, such as the 16- and 17-year-old cousins Raja and Amina. They did not live in or near the neighborhood where the gym was located and traveled quite a distance to get there twice a week. "Kickboxing is everything for us," Raja explained. "That is why we come all the way here. There is really nothing at all in our part of town! If we want to practice sports, we have to come all the way here." Amina said, "And we are also the only Moroccans there." Raja followed up, "Yes, and there is no kickboxing, so that's why." Amina and Raja traveled to this gym to practice the sport of their choice in a space that is exclusively for women. They also referred to their Moroccan backgrounds when describing their decision to travel 45 minutes—long by Dutch standards—to The Hague Southwest to kickbox. For decades, kickboxing has been a popular sport among Moroccan-Dutch youth, especially young men. Its popularity is reflected in the history of national and international Moroccan-Dutch professional fighters and champions, such as Badr Hari, Mousid Akhamrane, Amina Negadi, and Soumia Abalhaya. For Raja and Amina, women-only kickboxing offers a space for cultivating a particular Moroccan and Muslim sporting identity.

In class, Alia emphasized that her kickboxing career was her one real desire, but that she would make other plans as well because not everyone's dreams come true. Indeed, careers in sports are notoriously short for all athletes, given how physically intense most sports are, and such careers

are scarce and uncertain for women. It is almost impossible to earn a living as a professional athlete as a female kickboxer. Thus, although Alia thoroughly enjoyed teaching kickboxing to women and children and was determined to get everything out of her kickboxing pursuit, she nonetheless enrolled in vocational training for general administrative work. The first time she invited me to her home, Alia showed me her trophies, displayed on the shelf above her desk together with some pictures of her fighting. One fight she lost; another was undecided. She won the remaining 11 fights. When I asked her what else she wanted to achieve in kickboxing, she had big dreams and concrete plans for her career in the sport:

You know, my dreams are to win an A-fight, become a top-level fighter, win titles, and everything. I want to beat everyone in my weight category. Bring it on! But I plan to become a B-fighter because I don't want to aim too high. But then again, I know that once I am a B-fighter, I will want to become an A-fighter! That is how it goes. I have big dreams, but I know I can only improve myself so much every time. If I just follow the plan, listen to the coach, then step-by-step I will achieve my goals. Eventually . . . hopefully . . . I will fulfill my dreams. Inshallah.

In kickboxing the trainer decides when students are ready to enter the ring and which class they compete in. There are unwritten rules about how many C-fights one must compete in to become a B-fighter, but in the end, the trainer is the judge of each student's skills. Becoming the highest-level A-fighter involves years of training, winning many fights, maintaining a good relationship with the trainer, and the will of God.

These women's narratives of choosing kickboxing echo modern, secular sensibilities that are now common in sport and recreation discourses. Zaynab, unlike Alia, is uninterested in a kickboxing career. Instead, she understands kickboxing as a way to have fun and get fit. This is the case for most participants: kickboxing is a form of recreation that enables them to tap into discourses of physical, mental, and social self-improvement. But whether they kickbox as a hobby or as a career pursuit, they understand and reproduce sport as a site for self-realization by evoking narratives of making choices for themselves, taking control of their lives, and overcoming personal problems. Their accounts also reveal how discourses about ethnicity shape their trajectories.

The choice to kickbox is not common in the Netherlands, but it is popular among young Moroccan-Dutch men and women. Sports in the Netherlands, as in other places, are highly racialized and classed. Many other popular sports in the Netherlands, such as field hockey and tennis, have failed to increase mass participation in ethnic minority communities (with the notable exception of

football/soccer). But combat sports have proved successful in this regard (Carrington 2013; Sterkenburg and Knoppers 2004). Kickboxing is appealing because neighborhood facilities and low membership fees lower the threshold to participate, and because kickboxing has status as a tough, working-class Moroccan sport.⁶ Moreover, local and national governments have deployed it to attract migrant youths, hoping they will integrate and participate in society (Rana 2014).

The young women kickboxers at this gym liked that they contested the stereotypes of the subordinated and oppressed Muslim woman, proclaiming that they were already powerful, strong, and tough. As Zaynab once said, "Look, we Moroccans apparently need to defend ourselves. It is partly true and partly nonsense. Maybe it is not such a bad idea for women to know how to fight. But in the end, it is mainly for fun. We just do it because we like it. And maybe that's enough?" In a society where violence against women and street harassment occurs, and girls and young women are educated to be careful, Zaynab understands why kickboxing can be more than just a recreational activity. This gym does not promote kickboxing as a form of self-defense, but in general, women's involvement in martial arts carries within it a history of a gendered meaning of "self-defense," which relates to the association between fighting and masculinity. Zaynab steers away from the common view of kickboxing, according to which women use it as a tool of empowerment. When young women decide to fight, she argues, it can just as well be for recreational purposes.

Meryem, a highly motivated 14-year-old, goes a step further in her narrative, boldly and enthusiastically presenting herself as the bully, instead of the victim. More than once she told me that she convinced her parents that kickboxing would be good for her not as a way to learn self-defense or to empower herself, but as a means of channeling her aggression:

Look, at school, everybody has a problem with me. I don't know why, but there is something about me that they don't like. And sometimes I get really mad with people who pick on me, and then I tend to become aggressive and start fighting. Like one time, there was this guy, and he made fun of me and I was so mad. So I dragged him out of the classroom and wanted to push his head in the toilet or smack his head against it. But the teacher was fast enough to prevent me from doing that . . . I don't want to get in trouble, you know. So, I had to find another way to deal with this aggression, and I began kickboxing. Luckily, my parents understand now and agree with me. And they see now that this is me, you know. This is who I am.

At first, Meryem's parents thought it was an inappropriate sport for girls, but they eventually agreed that it would be good for their daughter. She claimed to be more re-

laxed now that she practiced kickboxing, especially right after a heavy training session. Meryem did not need kickboxing for self-defense or empowerment. Her narrative reveals that the dichotomies of powerful/powerless and attacking/defending are not necessarily male/female and secular/Muslim. Instead, kickboxing helped Meryem with her aggression and with developing "who she is." Her narrative explicitly opposes the mainstream discourse that stereotypes the submissive, subordinate Muslima. Meryem embraced the opposite of the stereotype and identified with power, aggression, and violence.

For many young women, the gym allowed them to experiment with their peers in various practices of self-fashioning. These included losing weight, increasing strength, and gaining self-confidence and power, all of which shaped the notions of self and belonging in women-only kickboxing. Their athleticism—like women's participation in sports more broadly—was imbued with notions of modern self-improvement, which can take a variety of forms. Participating in sports in general, to become a better version of oneself, has become a symbol of status and belonging. The practice influences how people perceive themselves and feel about how society perceives them. The specificities of this gym, where women-only training sessions specifically cater to Muslim women, demonstrate that modern self-fashioning through sports does not stand in opposition to religious self-improvement.

Religious sensibilities in a secular space

The building that houses the kickboxing gym is also used for a range of other purposes, including church meetings, a knitting club, a garage, and childcare services. Kickboxing takes place in the evenings and on weekends in one of the larger halls, which has been refurbished as a gym. The former office building was not designed for sports, and the gym was not designed for gender-separated training sessions. The dressing rooms, one for women and one for men, are located downstairs. The students are supposed to change into their sports attire before they walk through a long, cold hallway and up a flight of stairs to reach the gym. Because the dressing room is located so far away from the training hall, many girls get dressed at home, before coming to the gym. They just remove their coats right before training. One hour before the women's training begins, there is usually a training session for children aged six to 12. During these training sessions, men are often present in the gym, as several fathers pick up their children or watch them train. By the time the children's group has finished its training and the kids and parents have left the room, many women and girls have already put on their boxing gloves and shin guards.

When I trained there, Salima, the gym owner's sister, was the keeper of the women-only space. She made sure all

the boys and men, including her brother, who led the children's training, had left the room in time for the women-only session to start. To be sure that no men would enter the room, Salima would hang a notice on the door that featured a prohibition sign, along with the words "For Ladies Only!" (*Alleen Voor Dames!*). Below the sign she would place an extra handwritten note: "No Men Allowed!" (*Mannen Niet Toegestaan!*). All the veiled women would wait until the men had left the room and Salima had closed the door before taking off their headscarves. Many nonveiled women also waited until this moment to get dressed.

The Muslim women who came to this gym considered the setting *halal*, since it was constructed as such by Salima and her brother. They made sure the gym was exclusively available for women. They closed the door, blinded the windows, and forbade music when training was in session. The absence of music is a prerequisite for Muslims who believe that most kinds of contemporary music are *haram* (Otterbeck 2008). Promotional material for these training sessions included a *halal* stamp like the ones used to certify that food products were prepared according to Islamic standards. Although there is no certification for *halal* sports, the stamp highlights the Muslim character of the kickboxing classes. By reframing the gym as *halal*, the organizers challenged the secularity of the kickboxing gym. Many young women explained that the gender-separated and religiously mindful arrangement enabled them to engage in sports in a way that would not interfere with their pursuit of being pious, Muslim women. Sara, a 21-year-old law student, explained her decision to come to this gym:

I was at another gym before, but they couldn't guarantee a women-only space. Most of the time, we had a female trainer. But when she got sick, one of the male fighters would replace her because they couldn't find another woman. And in the beginning, that was all fine with me. I didn't care much. Most girls there are quite young and didn't care much. But at one point, I became more serious, and working out with a man in the same room was just not an option anymore. This was for me the reason to find a gym that takes Islam more seriously.

For Sara, women-only kickboxing was part of her pious pursuit. To become a better Muslima, she considered gender separation a must. Likewise, Márcia, a young woman who was born in Brazil and adopted by Dutch parents, abandoned flamenco dancing and started kickboxing when she converted to Islam, in order "to have a hobby that suits my religion better" (*een hobby die beter bij mijn religie past*). The gendered seclusion of the training space, together with the fact that most participants, including the trainers, are Muslim, can lead prospective Muslim members to see how kickboxing can be fashioned into a more suitable recreational sport than others.

This women-only kickboxing setting not only allowed religious sensibilities but cultivated them. As Sara explained, for Muslim women who want to cultivate a pious self, it is better to choose women-only kickboxing over other (gender-mixed) sports. Since 2009, when The Hague's public swimming pools banned gender-separated swimming, Muslim women's separated activities have been overtly politicized. Policies have been directed to encourage Muslim women to participate in sports, partly because doing so is thought to help them in their social-cultural integration into Dutch society. But concerns arose when their participation deviated from the norm of gender-mixed swimming (Wisse 2009). Right-wing politicians voiced fears of Islamization, and in response, city councils called for public sports facilities to serve as meeting places. Separated swimming for (Muslim) men and women did not meet the council's requirement that everyone could meet at the same time. Some private kickboxing gyms in The Hague followed this same line of argument and offered only gender-mixed training. By targeting Muslim women in particular and attracting a group of pious kickboxers, the gym where I conducted fieldwork confronted Dutch secularity, which requires that religion be as invisible as possible in social life (Bakker Kellogg 2015). As opposed to public sporting facilities, this kickboxing gym was privately held, allowing the presumed secular space to be imbued with religious sensibilities.

The young women in this gym informally shared religious information and practices in what might otherwise be presumed to be a secular space. In terms of wardrobe, they normalized modesty, wearing leggings under shorts and wearing tops that did not show cleavage. Students helped each other when they accidentally showed bare skin on their backs, bellies, or chest by tucking in shirts or pulling them up. Meanwhile, religious knowledge and norms spread in the gym and followed the kickboxers home, something about which the kickboxers half hopefully teased each other. One day, I asked Salima to reschedule an interview I had planned with her so that I could go to the mosque with another kickboxer to witness a friend's conversion. She looked at me and then at another pupil, Marieke, and reacted, "Wow, everybody infects each other here! It is astonishing what's happening here." Marieke responded laughingly, "It is contagious. It seems like it is contagious!" What Marieke and Salima jokingly called the "infection" of Islam demonstrates how becoming a better Muslima is an endeavor that is not just existential but constituted by communal practices. This is in line with how sports scholars have understood gyms and sports associations as communities of practice, and athletes as constituted by their practices (Downey 2008; Light and Kirk 2001). Similarly, this women-only gym demonstrates that a community of pious Muslim women can form in a setting, as well as through a practice, that is not inherently religious.

Before and after class, conversations often revolved around how to follow a stricter, better, more pious path in practicing Islam. Fatima, for example, who recently divorced, contemplated how she was changing her ways to lead a more pious life. "And I am willing to be even stricter, if it's for a good man," she said. "With clothing and all, for example. I'm already more, like, more into studying Islam than I used to be." When we discussed my lack of religious practice, many young women, such as Salma, encouraged me to start praying:

It's just like kickboxing, basically. You just have to start. When you start praying, for example, you will feel like a Muslim again. You will feel the connection with God. And when you have that feeling, it becomes a part of what you are, and you want to practice more. You just have to do it. If you can show up for kickboxing training so many days a week, you can also do *salat* [prayer].

Salma not only urged me to start practicing Islam but also explained how bodily practice constitutes Muslim becoming. My identifying as a Muslim, Salma said, made me "one of us." If I followed her instructions and observed *salat*, I might feel what they already saw in me, that is, the potential to strengthen my Muslimness. In comparing the practice of sports and that of religion, Salma evoked a process of self-cultivation, which has been theorized by Mahmood (2001, 2005), Fernando (2010), and others. As these spiritual conversations unfolded in a nonreligious space, the women took a similar approach to the process of self-realization through sports and through prayer. Sports are secular practices to the extent that they have been constructed as nonreligious. But the actual embodiment of such seemingly dichotomous sensibilities demonstrates that the categories are not fixed.

In negotiating piety while learning to kickbox, these Muslim women constructed subjectivities that deviated from discourses on integration and empowerment through sports. Their practice of kickboxing contested discourses that seek to keep adherence to Islamic norms in opposition to Western assumptions about sports and martial arts. Furthermore, the kickboxers' embrace of this combat sport constructed subject positions that undermined the stereotype of the submissive, disempowered Muslim-woman, without detaching the women from their religious aspirations. The women-only setting provided a space for young women and girls to experiment with modest dressing, overtly spiritual deliberations, and forming friendships based on religion. Kickboxing aspirations intertwined with desires to be good Muslim girls. While traditional paradigms of integration and empowerment assume that religiously minded women are submissive and lack power, kickboxers in women-only sessions did not resist their religion. Their

agentic power lay in their submission to religion through sports practice.

Gendered temporalities

The process of becoming a better Muslim is lifelong (Kloos 2018), and it has distinct phases. Most of the women were in their late teens and early 20s, and their age played a significant role in determining the role of kickboxing in their lives. In the young women's transitions from youth to adulthood, kickboxing could become pivotal in how they negotiated religiosity. Both the men and women I talked to considered kickboxing a possible career pursuit for men, but merely a pastime for young women. Moreover, the young women often embraced the masculinity associated with the sport as a playful negotiation of gender expectations. As Alia's quote earlier demonstrates, the other sports popular among women in The Hague, such as field hockey, beach volleyball, and running, are characterized by a hegemonic femininity, bare skin, and physical movement in outdoor spaces. In contrast, kickboxing takes place indoors and has less strict clothing regulations. Thus, although its masculinity gives it a rough edge, its setting provides a way out of stereotypical forms of femininity that are often part of recreational sports. For them, kickboxing extended youth by postponing expectations about adult femininities.

Alia, who started competing internationally in kickboxing events at the age of 16, had to begin negotiating how kickboxing would affect her future relationships when she reached 18. She fantasized about getting married after she found the right husband. She told me she did not want to wait too long, but did not want to get married just yet because she was too young. She thought 21 to 23 would be the right age. More to the point, she wanted to achieve some of her kickboxing ambitions before getting married. Once married, she explained, she would stop fighting competitively. Her future husband would probably not want her to train with men, and neither would she. When I asked her if she did not think it would be a waste of her talent and passion, she replied, "It is what it is."

Alia responded similarly when others asked her when she would stop fighting and "get serious." Family members, friends, and even strangers asked her this question, in which getting serious sometimes referred to veiling, while other times it meant studying or marrying. It always implied that she was reaching an age to quit fighting. Alia never discussed why she wanted to fight competitively or why she declined to wear a headscarf. Instead, she responded to such questions politely in a way that met questioners' expectations. She simply said, "One day, inshallah." The answer implied that what her future held was up to God; it was also a polite way of not answering while avoiding a discussion.

In maneuvering between various expectations, Alia's narrative reflects a common path for young adults striving to become mature Muslims (Amir-Moazami 2010; De Koning 2008; Janson 2017). Alia later moved away from the playful women-only setting to the more serious mixed-gender space at another gym. There, she held on to the notion that kickboxing, especially fighting in the ring, is not for adult women. Almost every woman and girl with whom I spoke felt that they would have to stop fighting in the ring after marriage. Once they were married, recreational women-only training became a solution even for those who were once serious about it to kickbox again.

A year later, Alia revised her thoughts on stopping kickboxing after marriage. She now believed that she deserved a man who would not keep her from her kickboxing ambitions. "Wouldn't it be strange," she said, "if my parents were fine with me pursuing a kickboxing career, and a man would have different expectations for me? I see that now." She explained that she understood how important it is to make one's own decisions and how that is part of "becoming your best self." She imagined she would stop kickboxing around the age of 23 or when a suitable marriage partner appeared in her life. But it would be her own decision. Until that time, kickboxing would be serious business. She would continue to extend her youth and pursue her kickboxing aspirations. In practice, she might stop after marriage, but in theory her narrative now "fit into the game of secularism" (Hirschkind 2011, 643).

Instead of using the trope of empowerment to explain their participation in kickboxing, young women and girls like Alia embraced the sport's masculinity: the pain, the tough attitude, and the style. Dominant notions of masculine identities both within and beyond the sporting context have been traditionally born out of and compounded by images of strength, aggression, and muscularity obtained in and through sport. "Modern sport," according to Messner (1990, 205), "naturalized the equation of maleness with violence," which makes combat sports even more masculine than other sports. There persists the "violent-thus-masculine" character of boxing, kickboxing, and other combat sports and martial arts.⁷ The capacity for physical violence is perceived as the ultimate difference in power between men's and women's bodies (McCaughy 1997). By choosing kickboxing over sports that one considers more feminine or gender-neutral, young women perform an alternative iteration of femininity through fighting (Channon and Phipps 2017), one that requires a distinct negotiation of sexual and gendered subjectivities.

The temporal aspect of this negotiation is striking. "Cycles of a woman's life," argues Sehlkoglou (2021, 218) in her work on women's sport in Istanbul, "including fertility and menstrual cycles, impose specific temporal forces on her body." Even the anticipation of the changing body effects sport participation, as shown in the kickboxing prac-

tices of teenagers and young adults. Adolescent girls are pressured into more rigid forms of femininity by the life course, in which maturing is defined according to gender demarcations. Alia, for example, received subtle and not-so-subtle signs that her playfulness had been accepted in her youth, but that it would be impossible for a (heterosexual) "tomboy" to carry her kickboxing-infused female masculinity with her into adulthood (Halberstam 1998). In contrast to women, men with athletic aptitude often do not have to worry about their (hetero-)sexuality (Thangaraj 2015). For many young kickboxers, the transition from childhood to adulthood is a transition from tomboy to a respectable, "hetero-sexy" (Samie 2013) Muslim woman. Becoming more serious often demands a visible change in young women's lives, dictating the gendered temporalities of their pursuits. Motivations to fight competitively are often cast as the dreams of youth. In this kickboxing realm, men and women understand female fighting as part of a playful youth. Perhaps the kickboxers in this women-only gym have found a way to overcome the realization that becoming an adult means growing into the limitations that make a girl a woman.

The road to adulthood is paved with desires, motivations, and aspirations that cannot be captured by the binary terms of resistance and subordination (Fernando 2010; Mahmood 2001; Sehlkoglou 2021). Alia eventually quit kickboxing. She presented this decision, and her decision to fight in the first place, as her own. This reflects a modality of agency in which secular disposition is intrinsically related to religious dispositions.

Conclusion: Belonging through self-improvement

Young Muslim women in the Netherlands negotiate and reshape their gender subjectivities through the sporting culture of kickboxing. For these young women, kickboxing is an act of constructing identity and belonging, one in which gender, ethnicity, and religion intersect. Against a discursive backdrop of assumed subordination and a decade's worth of governmental integration-through-sport programs (Rana 2014), sports are understood as a catalyst for turning ethnic minorities into respectable citizens. Muslim women's participation in kickboxing can be "empowering," but contrary to popular belief, not because it forces otherwise religion-bound people to engage in secular and thus civic practice. Instead of becoming less religious, Muslim women in kickboxing break with the stereotype of "the Muslimwoman" who lacks agency, a stereotype that perpetuates the notion that disconnecting from Islam is empowering. Within women-only kickboxing, young women and girls work through the dominant stereotypes of them as submissive, passive, and powerless. The site of the kickboxing gym provides a space to perform alternative femininities that counter a hegemonic white femininity

and simultaneously enables a pious femininity. With their sport participation, they practice a form of cultural citizenship within the national fabric while claiming belonging in the minoritized group of (Moroccan-Dutch) Muslims.

Most studies on religious knowledge and pious selves are based on religious communities and focus on religious practices. Getting to know these young women in a place that was not entirely religious clarified several aspects of these Muslims' subjectivities for me. For these women, gender-separated kickboxing and sartorial practices are secular ways of realizing piety. These connections might seem contradictory to mainstream Dutch opinion and might not have been anticipated by governmental policies and sport organizers. The women themselves and their Muslim peers recognize their engagement in kickboxing as transgressive: fighting sports are considered masculine and youthful, and competitive fighting can be understood as contradicting Islamic norms. At the same time, they applaud the separation of genders at the gym. Thus, women-only kickboxing is neither a complete act of resistance nor an instance of submission to male authority, Islamic institutional standards, or Western feminist discourses.

Many individual decisions—such as to attend a women-only or a gender-mixed space, to wear clothes that cover the body to a certain degree, and to quit kickboxing—may be determined by one's faith as well as by comfort, aesthetics, and societal norms. The concepts of personal autonomy, equality, freedom, and self-realization have historically been framed as secular, modern counterparts to Islamic submission, unfreedom, and traditionalism. Young Muslim women kickboxers engage in self-improvement by participating in a sport. The mutuality of secular and religious self-improvement seems to create a sense of belonging that counters the stereotypes that the young women are subjected to. Improving both body and mind can be oriented toward the secular as well as the religious. Both have been researched in secular and religious spaces, but the cultivation of religious subjectivities within a practice considered secular—that is, recreational sports—gives new insights into the phenomenology of self-improvement. The relational experience of being in that space together with peers informs the modalities of self-cultivation. While the secular liberal understanding of self-realization most often characterizes it as an individual and autonomous process, Muslim women-only kickboxing demonstrates that it is both an individual and a relational endeavor. Women work on their "selves" in group interactions with their peers. This results in a kickboxing practice and identity that are about having fun, getting fit, and being pious. As a specific community of practice, they show us how individual ambitions and group efforts are entangled with self-improvement.

Relatedly, the spatialization of halal practice in the gym shows how the secular and the religious cannot be eas-

ily divided, but that they are in fact intertwined in everyday practices. Deciding whether to listen to music during training, informally and nonverbally agreeing on sartorial norms, and inspiring one another to strive to become better Muslims—all this exemplified the negotiation of what is deemed permissible in Islam among likeminded practitioners, with similar religious backgrounds and outlooks on life, in this particular space of the gym. The kickboxing gym is situated within a specific neighborhood and within the minority-majority city of The Hague, allowing for a halal modality of what is considered a secular practice. Ethnicity, religion, and gender intersect in the formation and execution of the halal environment. Women-only kickboxing is a neighborhood sport, but Muslim girls from other areas eagerly join the "Moroccan" neighborhoods to join their peers.

In these cases the specificity of the gendered experience of kickboxing reveals the temporal dimensions of women's processes of self-improvement. Self-improvement through sports is embedded in expectations of women. Striving to "become more serious" or to delay becoming more serious considers the changing body, the future of marriage, childbirth, and adult life in general, and how this comes with gendered expectations of appropriate behavior. This shows a particular temporalization of gendered experience. The timing of the women's training sessions, taking place between the 6 p.m. class for children and 8 p.m. men's session, amplifies women's liminal position in kickboxing. The expectations of women are bound by the temporalized currents of their life: their adolescent kickboxing practice is youthful play, which most often fails to result in a kickboxing career, but instead creates a kickboxing practice that focuses on health, fitness, and fun.

The popularity of kickboxing among Muslim women in the Netherlands, as in other European countries, is an important social change for women that breaks stereotypes of submissiveness on the one hand, and of secularity on the other. Religious self-cultivation takes place in unexpected moments, and its rationale transcends sport practice as such. Secularism organizes the interplay of self-cultivation, spatialization, and temporalization, but it simultaneously encounters limits. Young Muslim women in the Netherlands approach kickboxing as secular-religious self-improvement and unsettle the nation-state's parameters of secularism and integration.

Notes

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1. The names of the kickboxers in this article are all pseudonyms, except for those of international champions, who have not been part of this study. Their full names are given.

2. All quotes are my translations from Dutch.
3. Kickboxing by Dutch citizens from the ages of 12 to 34 increased from 0.3 percent in 2001–4 to 1 percent in 2013–15. Men and boys are still overrepresented in martial arts, but this statistic is changing in the age category of 12 to 18. From 2001 to 2004, boys were twice as likely to engage in martial arts as girls (0.6 vs. 0.3 percent). The ratio was nearly the same from 2013 to 2015 (1.4 vs. 1.3 percent; Elling, Schootemeijer, and Van Den Dool 2017).
4. *Kickboxing* is an umbrella term for contact sports that involve kicking and punching. “Dutch kickboxing,” the style that is generally practiced in the Netherlands, developed from boxing, muay thai, and karate (Coenen and De Ruiter 2012; Harinck 1988). For the sake of simplicity, in this article I use the term *kickboxing*. Some of the gyms I have studied also refer to their practice as muay thai, Thai boxing, or all three interchangeably. There is a thin line between the different techniques in these sports, but the use of knees and elbows is the main source of difference. Several trainers told me that their style of kickboxing is further influenced by taekwondo.
5. Various scholars have examined this topic in the Netherlands (Douwes and De Koning 2005; Sunier 2010; Van Der Veer 2006) and in Europe (Bracke 2012; El-Tayeb 2011; Ewing 2008; Moors 2009b).
6. Heiskanen (2012) alludes to the historical “ethnic” roots of combat sports as one reason for this appeal, but I have not found any evidence of this relationship in my research. In fact, anecdotal observations suggest that the traditional elements of Thai boxing are reduced in competition and training every year.
7. The violent-thus-masculine character of combat sports suffuses many studies (e.g., Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; Wacquant 2004).

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