



Routledge Research in Sport, Culture and Society

SPORT, IDENTITY AND INCLUSION IN EUROPE

**THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ
PEOPLE IN SPORT**

Edited by
Ilse Hartmann-Tews



Sport, Identity and Inclusion in Europe

This book explores and critically assesses the challenges and experiences of LGBTQ people within sport in Europe. It presents cutting-edge research data and insights from across the continent, with a focus on sport policy, sport systems, and issues around anti-discrimination and inclusion.

The book introduces the theoretical and methodological foundations of research into LGBTQ people in sport and then presents in-depth comparative surveys of systems and experiences in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the UK, and Spain. A final section considers the effectiveness of policy in this area and motives for participation, and looks ahead at future directions in research, policy, and practice.

Tracing the frontiers of our understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ people in contemporary Europe, this is fascinating reading for anybody with an interest in the sociology of sport, sport policy, LGBTQI studies, gender and sexuality studies, or cultural studies.

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Lesbianism in sport

The heteronormative challenge

Susanna Soler-Prat, Anna Vilanova, Judith Solanas, Daniel Martos-Garcia, and Wenceslao García-Puchades

Introduction

Research on gender and sexuality in sport has identified that, while there are many similarities between LGBTIQ+ groups, the experiences of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans, intersexuals and queer people also vary considerably. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge that LGBTIQ+ people in sport are not “a” homogeneous group, as well as “women” and “lesbian” in sport are diverse (Brackenridge et al., 2008).

By focusing on lesbian women, we attempt to recognise the differences that exist among the experiences of lesbian and gay people, so that the experiences of lesbians are not a mirror of their gay counterparts. According to Squires and Sparkes (1996), it is necessary to use specific language to avoid the invisibility of lesbian women and the sexism they experience. Concerning the terminology in this writing on sexuality, the terms “lesbians” and “lesbianism” are used for analytic and dissemination purposes. This way, despite of using the mainstream concept, we are aware of a more fluid, changeable, hybrid, multiple, and contextual notion of gender and sexual orientation, and its social constructionist character instead of expressions of essentialist identities (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Caudwell, 2006; Elling & Janssens, 2009; Squires & Sparkes, 1996).

This chapter is divided into the following sections. The first section gives an overview of the research on lesbianism and sport in Europe published in English. The second section examines the main international studies on lesbianism, focusing on the incidence of heteronormativity and homonegativism in women’s sport. The third section presents the role of sport as a “safe” zone for the construction of lesbian women’s identities, and the last section explores significant data related to sport participation and the experiences of lesbian women.

An overview of the research on lesbianism and sport in Europe

According to Brackenridge et al. (2008), Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020), and Landi et al. (2020), lesbian women are the most commonly studied population

among the LGBTBIQ+ group in PE and sport worldwide. To illustrate this, Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020) conducted a scoping review including 56 empirical articles focusing on organised sport contexts in peer-reviewed journal articles written in English published between 1997 and October 2018. Specifically, of the 56 research studies, 16 were in Europe, and of these, 13 included women (8 studies included only women, and 5 studies included women among other groups). Elsewhere, Landi et al. (2020) conducted a systematic analysis of LGBTQ scholarship, including 26 studies which examined the experiences of LGBTQ people in PE in 2018 in English language. Of these 26 studies, 19 included lesbian women (73.08%), 7 gay men (26.92%), 6 participants who were identified as queer (23.08%), 4 as bisexual individuals (15.38%), and 1 as a transgender person (3.85%). Moreover, since sexual diversity in sport was first addressed by feminism, it is not surprising that the research literature in this field was mainly on women (Brackenridge et al., 2008) and done by women.

According to the previously cited reviews, there are more than 30 documents published in English from the 1990s onwards that address the situation of lesbian women in sport and PE in Europe. The first English paper focusing on lesbianism in sport and PE was a study conducted in Germany by Birgit Palzkill (1990) on professional female athletes. Since this first study, a growing number of authors have increasingly published studies in several countries as Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and UK (including studies with other English-speaking countries) (see Table 13.1). We are aware that some relevant material in other languages will have been missed and new sources are available or in press. Nonetheless, we hope that the sources provided are a good representation of the field, and the collection provides the platform to have an idea about the research in Europe on lesbianism and sport.

The majority of studies are qualitative, except the studies from Elling and Janssens (2009) and Denison and Kitchen (2015), and the research published from the Erasmus+ Outsport project (Braumüller et al., 2020; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; Menzel et al., 2019). On the one hand, quantitative studies specifically analyse lesbian women's sport participation and experiences of homophobia in different contexts including traditional and organised sports, leisure activities, or LGBTQ sport contexts. On the other hand, qualitative studies enable researchers to obtain deeper insight by understanding the experiences of women in different contexts, such as PE teachers or PETE (Physical Education Teachers Education), coaches, or elite athletes of several sports, among which football stands out.

Heteronormativity and homonegativity in women's sport

The literature describes widespread heteronormativity, homonegativity, and homophobia¹ in the western sporting cultures of female and male from the 1980s to the present day. However, they operate differently for women and men (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Griffin, 1992, 1998; Kokkonen, 2019; Lenskyj, 1990, 2013). As Helen

Table 13.1 Research on PE and sport in Europe including lesbian women as part of LGBTQ persons (in English)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Publications</i>
Finland	On sport participants in competitive and recreational sports: Kokkonen (2019)
France	On women football players: Mennesson and Clement (2003)
Germany	On professional lesbian athletes in various sports: Palzkill (1990)
Italy	On athletes in various sports: Pistella et al. (2020)
Netherlands	On recreational athletes: Elling et al. (2003), Elling and Janssens (2009), Hekma (1998)
Norway	On athletes in several sports: Eng (2006, 2008), Kolnes (1995) On football players and coaches: Skogvang and Fasting (2013)
Spain	On lesbian football players: Ribalta and Pujadas (2020)
UK	On lesbian PE teachers or PETE students: Clarke (1996, 1998), Edwards et al. (2016), Flintoff (1994, 2000), Sparkes (1994), Squires and Sparkes (1996) On athletes in several sports: Anderson and Bullingham (2015), Caudwell (1999, 2003, 2007), Denison and Kitchen (2015), in UK and Ireland among other non-European countries; Drury (2011), Shire et al. (2000) On lesbian sport coaches: Norman (2012, 2013)
Various European countries	On LGTBQ (non)sport participants: Menzel et al. (2019), Braumüller et al. (2020), Hartmann-Tews et al. (2021)

Lenskyj states “it is inappropriate to treat gay male athletes and lesbian athletes as two sides of the same coin” (2013, p. 141).

Elsewhere, as revealed by Pronger (1990, p. xi), heteronormativity in sport implies different frames for lesbian or bisexual women and gay or bisexual men: “women athletes are often expected to be lesbians; men athletes are seldom expected to be gay”. As a result, according to the heterosexual canons, women are suspected of being lesbian simply by participating in sport regardless of their sexual orientation (Caudwell, 1999; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Kolnes, 1995; Krane, 1997; Lenskyj, 2013). Furthermore, this is especially present in sports considered masculine, like football in Europe (Anderson et al., 2016; Caudwell, 1999, 2003, 2007; Cox & Thompson, 2001; Eng, 2006, 2008; Griffin, 1992, 1998; Kolnes, 1995; Larsson et al., 2011; Lenskyj, 2013; Mennesson & Clément, 2003; Scraton et al., 1999; Skogvang & Fasting, 2013).

Despite the changes in western society at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, research shows that negative stereotypes associated with the lesbian identity are a concern for lesbian and straight women. In the same way as the label of gay for men is taken as an insult, the lesbian label is taken as an insult and maintains its power to intimidate (Griffin, 1998, p. 87).

This way, heteronormativity², homonegativity, and homophobia are clearly used to control women's behaviour (Lenskyj, 2013), and "the lesbian stigma contributes to the gendered nature of sport and the continued marginalization of women" (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009, p. 290). Consequently, the lesbian label is feared by women participating in sport (Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Caudwell, 1999; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; Lenskyj, 2013; Scraton et al., 1999; Skogvang & Fasting, 2013). As a result, whereas lesbian women in sport and PE might try to pass as heterosexual, heterosexual women might try to disassociate themselves from lesbian teammates and the lesbian stereotype (Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Caudwell, 1999, 2003; Clarke, 1996, 1998; Cox & Thompson, 2001; Krane, 1997; Scraton et al., 1999; Squires & Sparkes, 1996).

Therefore, in order to limit controversy about their participation, to get public support, and to distance themselves from being socially perceived as lesbian, women in sport often hyperfeminise themselves and try to "prove" their heterosexuality (Eng, 2006; Griffin, 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Kolnes, 1995; Lenskyj, 1990, 2003). Elsewhere, the evasion of lesbian stigma through the promotion of femininity and heterosexuality has been articulated by Griffin (1998) as "apologetic", and it works to maintain the traditional gender roles.

Another key point is that despite the great gains achieved by female athletes in sport since the final decade of the 20th century, and the increasing acceptance of women's bodies being muscular, the apologetic behaviour is still present by presenting femininity, appearing heterosexual and apologising for aggressive sporting related behaviour (Kolnes, 1995; Lenskyj, 2013). Female elite athletes, for example, receive the message "that they may participate in elite sport, but only as long as it does not weaken their heterosexual attractiveness" (Kolnes, 1995, p. 73).

Furthermore, female athletes who challenge the norms of femininity by playing competitive team sport not only tend to hyperfeminise themselves, but they can also expose homonegativity as a way to avoid suspicion regarding their sexuality (Anderson et al., 2016; Cox & Thompson, 2001; Lenskyj, 2003; Shire et al., 2000). In this context, lesbian women in sport and PE experience double discrimination based on their gender in a male privilege environment and for being lesbians (Lenskyj, 2003; Norman, 2012, 2013). In this case, there is an intersection of discrimination based on two social categories: gender and sexual orientation. Thus, they face systematic oppression when participating in sport and experience overt and covert forms of discrimination including silence, denial, apology, promotion of heterosexual image, attacks on lesbians, and preference for a male coach (Griffin, 1998).

Considering the negative stereotypes associated with the lesbian label and the fear of being discriminated (against) if they came out, lesbian athletes keep silent and conceal their sexual orientation. This was echoed in most studies about lesbians in organised sports within which lesbian athletes are silent about their sexual orientation to avoid prejudice (Caudwell, 1999; Eng, 2006, 2008; Hekma, 1998; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; Krane, 1997; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) and

in PE contexts (Fitzpatrick & Enright, 2017; Flintoff, 1994, 2000; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996).

Meanwhile, Anderson et al. (2016) suggest that “the lack of openly lesbian athletes in England is because the assumed prevalence of lesbians in team sports adds an extra burden to them . . . this extra burden comes in the form of guilt by association” (p. 56), which led to some female athletes experiencing homophobia, that is, the fear of being perceived as lesbian. In turn “athletes may stay closeted to protect their teammates being labelled a lesbian” (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 56). Elsewhere, this has also been related to the lack of openly lesbian women in professional sport. In addition, lesbian athletes fear that the sport will lose its social value, or that they might miss sponsorship opportunities because of the lesbian label in sport.

In addition, Eng (2006) in Norway highlights the fact that the coming out of some female elite soccer players pressures other lesbians in soccer not to come out to avoid to “pollute” (p. 22) this sport.

This can either be understood as a form of denial, or it might also be viewed as a survival strategy to compete without homosexual suspicion and the discrimination that comes with it (Lenskyj, 1990). Either way, on a social level, the silence and denial of lesbianism in sport allow stereotypes and discrimination to continue unopposed (Krane & Barber, 2003). On the organisational level, the negative environment for lesbians can also have a negative impact on the sports organisation (Brackenridge et al., 2008). On the personal level, lesbian stigma and homophobia in women’s sport has potential negative repercussions to nearly all women in sport and PE, within which they experience excessive burden and negative psychological, physical, and professional outcomes (Brackenridge et al., 2008).

The internalisation of the stigma may discourage the coming out process, and can implicate the concealing of their sexual orientation by being unable to affirm their identities, and may represent one of the main factors contributing to the “don’t ask, don’t tell culture” (Pistella et al., 2020). Furthermore, this can negatively impact one’s performance (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) as well as the professional development of coaches (Norman, 2012, 2013) or PE teachers (Clarke, 1996, 1998; Edwards et al., 2016; Flintoff, 1994, 2000; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996).

Taking the complexity of heteronormativity and sport context into consideration, Griffin’s (1998) taxonomy of climates for lesbian women is especially useful. Griffin indicates that lesbian women can find three types of climate: hostile, conditionally tolerant, and open and inclusive (see Table 13.2).

According to Brackenridge et al. (2008), responding strategies of LGBTQ people to the different climates of homonegativity include: resistance through personal challenge; accommodation through denial (“passing” and adopting “apologetics”) or compartmentalising one’s life; and appropriation by “deliberately celebrating their minority status” (p. 36), although it is not always successful and places women in an oppressive framework.

Table 13.2 Characteristics of the different types of climate for lesbian women

Hostile	In this context, lesbian sport participation is prohibited and lesbian women have numerous problems to express their sexuality, so that the silence is the survival strategy (Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 2003; Mennesson & Clement, 2003).
Conditionally tolerant	In this context, we can talk about the “glass closet”, in which women “keep their identities ‘secret’ but everyone knows who they are” (Griffin, 1998, p. 100). This is the form of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” climate. Lesbian players can be seen by those to whom they have come “out”. Nevertheless, lesbians are allowed to participate according to a set of rules which involve silencing their sexuality. Consequently, they are not allowed to speak as freely about their personal life as heterosexual women. In fact, this also reflects a covert institutional and cultural heterosexual hegemony.
Open and inclusive	In this context, women are able to express their identity freely, and in some cases, they can perceive the sporting environment as a safe zone (Ribalta & Pujadas, 2020; Scraton et al., 1999). There is scientific evidence that certain contexts are far more inclusive than others, and therefore, the experiences of LGBTQ people in sport can differ substantially (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020).

Sport as a “safe” zone for lesbian women?

In this challenging environment, scholars have examined the factors that facilitate the coming out process of lesbian women in PE and sport. Sport can notably play a crucial role in the coming out process, and some sports spaces are rather inclusive towards lesbians where they can be “out”, socialise with other lesbians and transgress traditional gender boundaries (Elling & Janssens, 2009; Ribalta & Pujadas, 2020). In fact, finding other lesbian women allows the creation of lesbian communities and supporting networks within sport, as well as the development of queer alternative spaces within mainstream sport contexts (Griffin, 1998; Kokkonen, 2019; Ribalta & Pujadas, 2020). Similarly, Elling and Janssen’s (2009) study in the Netherlands on homo/bisexual men and women found that contrary to gay men, lesbian women find “a sort of refuge in mainstream competitive (team) sports” (p. 73), where they create alternative spaces within the sport.

Elsewhere, several scholars have also explored the role of sport as a facilitator in the construction of lesbian identity (Mennesson & Clément, 2003; Ribalta & Pujadas, 2020; Riemer, 1997; Shire et al., 2000). In the case of Barcelona (Spain), football played a key role in developing lesbians’ sexual identities during Franco’s regime, where homosexuality was considered to be a socially dangerous practice. In this setting, lesbian women were able to form strong informal social networks and share their sexual affinity, participate in other activities than sports, and normalise homosexuality within the group. Significantly, sport became a safe space

where lesbian women felt invisible to the world, and could express themselves freely (Ribalta & Pujadas, 2020). Likewise, Eng (2006, 2008) found that creating queer alternative spaces was a strategy often used by female sexual minority athletes in Norway.

Meanwhile, Anderson and Bullingham (2015) found that collegiate lesbian athletes in the UK experienced little resistance coming out in sport, and felt supported by most of their teammates, yet a few reported experiencing hostility after coming out to their teammates. In the same way, lesbian athletes find it relatively easy to disrupt with traditional gender roles and be open about their sexuality (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Elling & Janssens, 2009; Skogvang & Fasting, 2013). Moreover, Anderson et al. (2016) indicate that while earlier studies only describe recreational sports climates as hostile or conditionally tolerant, they have found open and inclusive environments across a range of sports contexts throughout England. According to the authors, the number of lesbians on a team does not influence the inclusivity towards lesbian athletes, and the athletic capital is not related to one's coming out. Furthermore, they conclude that "being out of the closet was deemed being easier than being in" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 83).

Nevertheless, the lesbian or butch image of women's football in several West European countries might be a facilitator for non-heterosexual women (Hekma, 1998), and it can also be exclusionary for many women irrespective of their sexuality (Elling & Janssens, 2009). Furthermore, LGBTQ groups use inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms that may be contradictory. According to Elling and Janssens (2009), "safe" LGBTQ sport spaces may not be perceived as such by all, and therefore not suitable for non-heterosexual men and women to thrive.

Overall, lesbian women in sport and PE often have to navigate between different types of climates. For instance, while Ribalta and Pujadas's (2020) study in Spain shows the importance of the football setting in allowing women to express themselves as lesbians and to create strong social networks, Boronat's (2021) study describes the homophobic attitude of the women's national football-team coach for nearly three decades. As stated by Anderson et al. (2016), while the acceptance among teammates may have increased, the sporting administrators and organisations are steadily changing. Along similar lines, Caudwell (1999) argues that the sports context does not offer that kind of "refugee" for all women. As Eng (2006) stated "neither all female athletes, nor all lesbian athletes would be able to (or would want to) enter such a counter-site of deviation based on masculine discourses within the sports context" (p. 17). Therefore, the inclusion of lesbian women in sport is still an illusion in many sporting contexts (Mann & Krane, 2018).

In the light of the diversity of situations and environments, we have gathered the results of the main studies analysing the sports participation and the prevalence of homonegativity on lesbian women in Europe.

Sport participation and experiences of lesbian women

As previously noted, as a result of the different demands for heteronormativity in male and female sporting contexts, the sport participation levels and the experiences of lesbian women and gay men in sport are different and strongly gendered (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Elling & Janssens, 2009; Kokkonen, 2019). This can be seen in quantitative studies about LGBTQ people in Europe (Elling & Janssens, 2009; Menzel et al., 2019), and internationally (Denison & Kitchen, 2015), which have found remarkable differences in participation rates between gay/bisexual men and lesbian/bisexual women. As it is described in this book, gay men are more hesitant to participate than lesbian women.

Moreover, no significant differences were found among heterosexual and homo/bisexual women regarding sport participation or motivations for engaging in sport in the study of Elling and Janssens (2009) in the Netherlands. Thus, as opposed to men, the sport participation patterns among women were not structured by their sexual orientation.

However, the study in the Netherlands found remarkable differences between homo/bisexual identified men and women with regard to their experiences with hostile comments, jokes, and/or discrimination related to homosexuality: 15% of gay athletes and 6% of lesbian athletes experienced this kind of homonegativity. In contrast, the European Outssport study indicates that there are no significant differences between gay men and lesbian women with regard to witnessing homo-/transnegative language in their sports, nor to feeling offended by it or negative experiences made in their sports 12 months prior to the survey (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021).

In addition, Kokkonen (2019) in Finland stated that the relationship between harassment and psychological ill-being was not statistically significant for the female sport participants of the study unlike male. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that lesbian women – as athletes, coaches, administrators, physical educators, or fans – live and play without any difficulties. As we have already indicated, heteronormativity and the gender norm operate as a constraint in women's and men's sport differently.

Concluding comments

The overview on studies carried out on lesbians in sports and PE shows that in the LGBTIQ+ and sport research in Europe, lesbian women are the most commonly studied population with more than 30 documents published in English from the 1990s.

According to the research, the different groups included in the LGBTIQ+ acronym share certain common aspects, such as that these groups have a historical experience of social repression because of homo- and transnegativity. However, the prevailing heteronormativity operates differently for women and men, as men who participate in sports are assumed to be heterosexual, while women are assumed

to be lesbian. Then, while lesbian women share certain commonalities with other LGBTIQ+ groups, they also have unique needs, which should be put at the heart of research studies and the design of policy and practice, in order to ensure safe and inclusive sporting environments. The lesbian stigma is a concern for lesbian and straight women and it contributes to the control of women and the gendered nature of sport. As a result, lesbian women face systematic discrimination and oppression when participating in sport and PE, and they may experience different levels of overt and covert forms of discrimination, depending on the type of climate they found. Then, as women and as lesbian, they face double discrimination in sport and PE: sexism and homonegativity (Caudwell, 2006; Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 2003).

However, there is a multiplicity of situations, and sport can operate as a reliable space in which they can be “out”, socialise with other lesbian women, and transgress traditional gender boundaries as well. Sport can be a sort of refuge or a safe zone where lesbian women felt that they can express themselves freely.

Finally, the data suggested that lesbian women’s participation in sport and their experiences differ with regard to diverse contexts, climates, and lesbian identities.

With all this, this topic requires more research that explores how cultural, social, and economic differences influence their experiences. An intersectional analysis is required to further consider social class, race/ethnicity, or cultural background among other identities (Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 2003). Regarding PE, there are only few studies and more research is needed in describing and interpreting the day-to-day experiences of lesbian teachers (Clarke, 1998; Edwards et al., 2016; Squires & Sparks, 1996).

Given that the number of “out” athletes and coaches are now higher than ever before (Krane, 2018), this comprehensive review draws attention to the importance of policymakers and all actors (coaches and coach educators, athletes, sport administrators, sport-leaders, referees, sport psychology consultants, physicians, etc.) in making a commitment to promoting gender equality, reducing heteronormativity and homonegativity in women’s sport, and creating a more inclusive sporting environment.

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Notes

- 1 The literature reviewed uses different concepts. In this chapter, the concepts used by the authors are maintained.
- 2 According to Lenskyj (2013), this concept “encompasses both homophobia and heterosexism, that is, active prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities, as well as the implicit ideological assumptions that shape societal attitudes and practices” (p. 139).

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