

**GIRLS, YOUNG WOMEN AND SPORT IN NORWAY:
A CASE OF SPORTING CONVERGENCE AMID FAVOURABLE SOCIO-
ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES**

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ABSTRACT

Based primarily on quantitative data from the Norwegian Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway) study of *Mosjon, Friluftsliv og Kulturaktiviteter* (Vaage, 2009) this paper explores sports participation among females – and girls and young women, in particular – in Norway in the early years of the 21st century. In line with Coalter's (2012) observation that sport can be considered epiphenomenal, the paper argues that the comparatively high levels and marked increases in sports participation among young women are likely to have a great deal to do with their socio-economic status and, in particular, the diminishing gender gap over the past two decades. In short, the paper argues that trends in sports participation between 1997 and 2007 suggest that while young women in Norway may not be self-described feminists they are heirs to the culture fostered by second-wave feminism: they have taken advantage of growing up in a country where standards of living are particularly high and at a time of greater equality between the sexes in order, among other things, to exploit the sporting opportunities increasingly available to them. In terms of the policy implications, the most salient lesson to be learned from the Norwegian situation – by

countries keen to promote sports participation among girls and young women – is that instead of individually-oriented approaches, sports policies need first and foremost to adopt society-level perspectives that address socio-economic gender disparities.

Key words: gender, Norway, policy, participation, socio-economic, sport

INTRODUCTION

The gendered character of sport – in terms of participation (rates, frequency, forms and venues) and experiences (meanings and motivations, for example) – has been amply demonstrated over the last half a century or more. Although they have lessened, sex differences tend to be wider in sport than in any other area of leisure and can be stark. Males, whether young or old, tend to participate in sport in greater numbers, more frequently, for longer periods and in more competitive and combative forms. As well as being less likely to devote themselves to sports than their male counterparts, females remain more likely to drop out of sport sooner and in greater numbers. Differences in participation between the sexes, coupled with the manner in which sport is said to inculcate, perpetuate and celebrate a type of physical, competitive, even aggressive masculine identity has led to its depiction as a ‘male preserve’ (Malcolm, 2008).

The historical gendering of sports participation notwithstanding, there have been some marked changes in females’ relationships with sport in recent decades alongside the undoubted continuities. Females in the developed world are now playing far more sport than previous generations and have been closing the gap on males (see, for example, Sabo and Veliz, 2008). In addition to their increased rates of participation, females now tend to take part in a wider array of sports than hitherto, including those stereotypically associated

with males and masculinity. While over-represented in body-management-type activities – especially those concerned with ‘appearance’ and ‘embodiment’ (Fasting and Sands, 2009) – girls and young women are increasingly involved in sporting activities once associated almost entirely with males, such as football, martial arts and outdoor and adventurous activities (OAA). Their rapidly growing involvement in football, in particular, is illustrative of a trend towards greater involvement among girls and young women in traditionally male-dominated activities, including games. Despite an increasing number of studies demonstrating a narrowing in sex differences in sports participation over recent decades, gendered patterns persist throughout the developed world and the ‘gender gap’ remains far from uniform across sports. All-in-all, the fluid and changing character of females’ engagement with sport has resulted in more nuanced understandings of their sports participation than the simple mantra ‘boys do more’.

Against this backdrop, the paper utilizes data from the Norwegian Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway) study of *Mosjon, Friluftsliv og Kulturaktiviteter* [Exercise, Outdoor Life and Cultural Activities] (Vaage, 2009)¹, supplemented by *Norsk Monitor* (Synovate, 2009)², in order to explore the sports participation of females in general and girls (6-15 years) and young women (16-19 years) in particular in Norway. Nowhere have the changes in females’ sports participation been more apparent than in Scandinavian and Nordic countries such as Norway. Similar to its regional Scandinavian (Denmark and Sweden) and Nordic (Finland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands) neighbours (European Commission, 2010;

¹ The Statistics Norway study (Vaage, 2009) consisted of four cross-sectional and nationally representative surveys, conducted in 1997, 2001, 2004 and 2007, with 3,248 (1997), 3,250 (2001), 3,226 (2004) and 3,056 (2007) responses from 16-79 year olds. In 1997, 2001 and 2007 a sample of children¹ aged 6-15 years was also included. More detailed methodological information can be found in Vaage (2009) and Rørvik (2008).

² *Norsk Monitor* consisted of a series of large biannual surveys of people aged 15 years and above over the period 1985-2011. The sample size increased from 2,200 in 1985 to approximately 4,000 in recent surveys.

van Bottenburg, Rijnen and Sterkenburg, 2005)³, Norway boasts particularly high levels of sports participation (Breivik and Sand, 2011; Dalen, 2013), especially among girls and young women. Indeed, young Norwegians (both males and females) can be described as the quintessential sporting omnivores.

In this paper we seek to contribute to a fuller understanding of the relationship between females and sport by exploring just what makes Norway so successful in terms of sports participation among girls and young women in particular. Identifying the actual (rather than the assumed) participatory patterns and trends is a necessary prerequisite to any attempt to understand the underlying ‘causes’ of those patterns and trends – particularly when they appear, as we will argue, transformative in character. In placing sports participation patterns and trends in the context of wider political, social and economic developments in Norway we seek to contribute to understanding the ‘salutary lessons’ that the specifically Nordic and/or Scandinavian sporting experiences (Bairner, 2012, p.734) might offer. Explaining the high recorded levels of sports participation in Norway may throw light on whether it is realistic for other countries, such as the UK, to aspire to such levels of participation. In the first instance, however, we need to place females’ participation in the context of overall sporting trends and patterns in Norway.

SPORTING TRENDS IN NORWAY

The Statistics Norway (Vaage, 2009) study upon which this analysis is primarily based investigated Norwegian’s leisure lives with sport, exercise and outdoor recreation as central themes. Before we explore the trends in detail, however, it is important to insert a caveat.

³ In their Special Eurobarometer 334 report, the European Commission observes that: “Overall, citizens of *the Nordic countries take sport the most seriously*, with Sweden (72%), Finland (72%) and Denmark (64%) all outstripping the EU average of 40% for people exercising ‘regularly’ or ‘with some regularity’ (once a week or more)” (European Commission, 2010:10; emphasis in the original). Because it is not a member of the EU, Norway does not feature in the Eurobarometer studies.

Almost all studies of participation have one weakness – the tendency to rely upon self-reported data. Self-reported data is problematic for several reasons: (i) the difficulty of recall – especially when it involves remembering relatively less structured recreational activities (when exploring gender differences this can be exacerbated by the likelihood that males and females may perceive differing amounts of time and intensity as appropriate thresholds for participation, let alone ‘exercise’ – see footnote 7); (ii) the likely impact on recall of social desirability (that is, the tendency for people to over-estimate involvement in activities likely to be viewed positively by wider society – such as sports participation – and under-report behaviours that may be viewed negatively – such as smoking); and (iii) the difficulties obtaining the rich, nuanced data necessary to represent accurately the often complex character of participation. Although sports participation data may, as a consequence, be ‘somewhat conservative’ while providing ‘little evidence about the intensity and quality of the activity’ (Coalter, 1999: 25), the use of *repeated* cross-sectional – utilizing similar data collection instruments – does enable the identification and exploration of trends over time – the main concern of this paper.

Rates and frequency of participation

Among other things, the Statistics Norway study revealed that participation in sport⁴ (referred to as ‘physical activity to train or exercise’ in the report but amounting to sport, broadly defined) in Norway increased among youth⁵ and adults, 16-79 years, in general and females and 16-19 year olds in particular during the decade 1997-2007. Of particular note

⁴ Throughout the rest of the paper, sport, exercise, physical activity and physically active recreation will be subsumed under the label ‘sport’. That said, where the various reports and studies cited in the paper make use of the term ‘exercise’ we tend to replicate that term faithfully.

⁵ In line with the age groups utilized in the Statistics Norway (Vaage, 2009) study, the term children (including boys and girls) will be used to refer to ages 6-15, young people (including young men and young women) or youth will be used for 16-19 year olds, and adults (including women and men) for 20 years of age and older. It is worth noting, however, that the threshold employed by *Norsk Monitor* for young people and adults is one year earlier at age 15.

was a shift towards higher proportions participating more frequently. In short, more Norwegians were playing more sport more often. In 2007, the relatively large and increased majority at the active or ‘regular’ – three to four times per week or almost daily – (42%⁶) participant pole stood in marked contrast to the declining and relatively small proportions to be found at the rarely (7%)/never (8%) ‘inactive’ end of the continuum.

The skewed – towards higher rates and more frequent bouts of participation – pattern of participation was especially pronounced among young and adult women (16-79 years). This represented a shift in the period covered by the Statistics Norway studies. In 2001, for example, women were more likely than men ‘never’ to participate and less likely to participate three times a week or more. This changed between 2001 and 2007. As Figure 1 indicates, by 2007, smaller proportions of 16-79 year old females than males were at the seldom or never end of the participatory continuum (i.e. ‘never taking part’, ‘less than once a month’ or ‘one to two times per month’). Furthermore, a larger proportion of women than men had taken part on a weekly and more frequent basis. Women, in other words, were the more ‘regular’ – three to four times per week or almost daily – participants.⁷ The most marked increases in participation over the decade 1997-2007 were, indeed, among those who exercised ‘a lot’ and females were prominent in this group. Interestingly, *Norsk Monitor* data (Dalen, 2013; Synovate, 2009) suggests that this transformation had been underway since as early as 1985. Utilizing *Norsk Monitor* data, Fasting and Sand (2009) note that in 2007, 78% of women and 71% of men aged 15 years and over took part in ‘sport and physical activity’ at least once each week and these figures reflected increases of

⁶ The figure of 42% reflects an upward trend (28% in 2001, 39% in 2004, 42% in 2007): an increase of 14 percentage points in 6 years.

⁷ It is worth noting, however, Fasting and Sand’s (2009) observation that while women tend to be more active than men in terms of rates of participation they have not tended to spend as much time actually participating as men: for example, more women than men use between half an hour and an hour for a workout, while more men than women exercise an hour at a time or more.

22% among females and 11% among males in the two decades since 1985. Taken together, the two main large-scale studies of Norwegian sports participation (Dalen, 2013; Synovate, 2009; Vaage, 2009) indicate that towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century sex differences in sports participation had *reversed* – Norwegian females had overtaken males as the more regular participants while males had become the group most likely to participate infrequently. Indeed, the most recent *Norsk Monitor* data reveals that while almost half as many more adult Norwegian males (16-79 years) were participating in sport regularly (three times per week or more) in 2011 (37%) compared with 1985 (26%), the proportions of adult women had almost doubled from 23% to 42% (Dalen, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, one corollary of their increased prevalence among the higher rates of participation has been a decrease in the proportion of females at the inactive end of the spectrum. More specifically, the proportions of Norwegian women taking part less than once per year declined substantially – from 37% in 1985 to 14% in 2012 – whereas those of men declined from 26% to 16% (Dalen, 2013). This contrasts with elsewhere in Europe where, according to Van Tuyckom and Scheerder (2010), the Eurobarometer 2005 study (n=26,688) indicated that while approximately 60% of adults had participated in sport-related physical activity during a seven-day period, women were among ‘particular sub-groups of non-sportive citizens’ within the European Union.

[Insert Figure 1 about here](#)

The situation among girls and young women in Norway appeared an exaggerated version of that of adult females. *Norsk Monitor* revealed that while sports participation was slightly higher among males in most younger age groups, the differences between the sexes in rates

of participation steadily diminished between 1985 and 2009, such that by 2009 there were no major differences between boys and girls. Fluctuating sex-related differences during childhood notwithstanding, the Statistics Norway data revealed that, in 2007, by the time they approached upper secondary school (15 years of age), the levels of participation among the sexes had converged (see Table 1). Although 13-15 year old boys were almost twice as likely as girls to participate on an almost daily basis (25% boys: 14% girls), girls were more likely to take part 3-4 times each week (27%: 34%). When aggregated, similar proportions of girls (48%) and boys (52%) participated regularly in sport (three to four times each week or more). Thus, the convergence between Norwegian boys and girls involved not simply rates of participation but also bouts or frequency.

Insert Table 1 about here

It is worth noting, at this point, that the trend towards increased participation among young people and adults has also been apparent across the developed (and, occasionally, the developing) world since the 1970s. Increases in participation (over various time periods) have, for example, been reported in Australia (Dollman *et al.*, 2005); Belgium (Telama *et al.*, 2002; Scheerder, Taks, Vanreusel and Renson, 2005); Canada (Clark, 2008); England (Roberts, 1996; Sport England, 2003); Finland (Borodulin *et al.*, 2008; Koska, 2005; Laakso *et al.*, 2008); Flanders (Borgers *et al.*, 2013); Germany (Brettschneider and Sacks, 1996) Iceland (Eiðsdóttir *et al.*, 2008); Ireland (Fahey, Delaney and Gannon, 2005); Portugal (Seabra, 2007); Spain (Puig, 1996); USA (Caine, 2010) as well as various European countries (Samdal *et al.*, 2006; van Bottenburg *et al.*, 2005). While, as Coalter (2012) observes, all countries recording high levels of sports participation, by definition, also record high levels of female participation, they have not tended to do so to the same

extent as Nordic and Scandinavian countries, such as Norway. Nor, for that matter, has Norway experienced the kind of increased polarization that has often accompanied participation growth in many countries: those already taking part have been doing more while, at the same time, many of the previous non-participants have begun to participate.

Forms of participation

In terms of the kinds or forms of sports Norwegians engage with there have been several noteworthy developments. The big increases in participation between 1997 and 2007 occurred in lifestyle sports (across all age categories between 16 and 79 years); that is to say, those activities that tend to be more recreational in nature or, put another way, non- or, at least, less competitive (than, for example, ‘traditional’ team sports), flexible, informal, individual or small group activities, that sometimes incorporate a health and fitness or adventurous orientation (Coalter, 1996, 1999). Such lifestyle sports include walking (which nearly doubled among adults aged 16-79 from, 48% to 87%, when “fast walking” was included⁸), weight training (up by half, from 24% to 36%), jogging (up by about one-third, from 34% to 45%), and cross-country skiing (up by more than a quarter, from 38% to 51%). While trends in forms of participation over the decade up to 2007 are by no means clear-cut, it is apparent that within the particular mix of conventional and lifestyle sports adopted by young people, the latter had become a good deal more prominent in participatory profiles – both individually and collectively – in 2007 than they had been only a decade earlier.

⁸ In 2001, the descriptor was “organized walking”. However, in 2004 and 2007 the term employed was “rask tur”, in order to include “fast walking” as well as all walking trips. In other words, what might be termed the ordinary “organized walking” category was enlarged to incorporate the kind of “fast walking”, such as “Nordic walking”, that had become a popular form of walking exercise in recent years. The more recent category, “fast walking”, also grew between 2004 and 2007 from 81% to 87%.

In Norway, the largest increases in lifestyle sports occurred among 16-19 year olds – especially in cross-country skiing (from 52% in 2004 to 59% in 2007); fast walking (60%: 72%) and ‘strength training’ (63%: 72%). While 6-15 year olds were the most active in those lifestyle sports that amounted to recreational versions of conventional sports – such as cycling, swimming and cross-country skiing – older young people, 16-19 years, on the other hand, were the ones most likely to use gyms and health clubs⁹. In this regard, it was noteworthy that fitness-type activities were an area of substantial growth generally in Norway during the decade 1997-2007 among young people as a whole and girls and young women in particular. In 2007, Norwegian girls, 6-15 years, were especially well-represented (at least once in the past 12 months during free time) in those health and fitness activities typically associated with bodily appearance (see Fasting and Sand, 2009), such as ‘strength training’ (41%: 43% boys, 39% girls) and ‘aerobics, gymnastics and fitness’ (31%: 25% boys, 38% girls) but also dance (35%: 21% boys, 49% girls). In line with gendered perceptions of appropriate physical identities, more females than males emphasized health and ‘appearance’ as a primary reason for participation (Fasting and Sand, 2009).

At the same time, however, girls (6-15 years) were also strongly represented (at least once in the past 12 months) in other, individualized, more recreational, lifestyle sports – beyond those seemingly directly associated with body-image/appearance activities – such as swimming (83%: 82% boys, 84% girls), cycling (87%: 90% boys, 85% girls) and horse-riding (24%: 12% boys, 36% girls). In addition, girls were also participating in the newer lifestyle sports, such as skateboarding/rollerblading (36%: 39% boys, 33% girls). Indeed,

⁹ According to Seippel, Strandbu and Aaboen Sletten (2011), participation in what is variously termed weight, strength or health and fitness training, among older teenagers, has increased alongside the substantial growth in commercial fitness centres.

part of the explanation for the marked growth in participation in lifestyle sports appears to be their appeal among girls and young women in particular, as well as the young more generally. Once again, the picture painted by the Statistics Norway (Vaage, 2009) study is mirrored in the findings from *Norsk Monitor*: females and males provided similar ‘lifestyle’ related explanations for participation.

The evident popularity of lifestyle sports among females notwithstanding, Norwegian girls and young women are also represented in the more conventional (often club-based) sports – such as handball, football and basketball – stereotypically associated with boys and men. Indeed, the iconic Norwegian team game, handball, has it seems become predominantly a girls’ and young women’s activity in Norway: the 32% of 6-15 year old Norwegians who participated in handball (at least once in the past 12 months), in 2007, comprised 26% boys and 37% girls (compared with 66% overall “primarily through sports clubs”, made up of 57% boys and 72% girls). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, young men in the 16-19 age group were the ones most likely to be active in soccer, golf and hockey as well as strength training. Nonetheless, as elsewhere in the world (European Commission, 2010; van Bottenburg, Rijnen, and Sterkenburg, 2005), Norwegian girls have also become increasingly prominent in these sports. Indeed, football has become the largest female sport in Norway – with over 100,000 girls and women active (Fasting and Sand, 2009). The 71% of 6-15 year old Norwegians who took part in football at least once in 2007 consisted of 82% boys and 60% girls (this compared with 55% of 6-15 year olds – 59% boys and 49% girls – “primarily through sports clubs”). The seeming convergence between young men and women in team sports (such as handball and football) in Norway may be partly explained by the fact that as some games have become more popular among females (e.g. football), overall the

popularity of ‘traditional’ games (such as handball) as well as relatively ‘modern’ games (such as basketball and volleyball) has diminished among young males (see below).

Venues for participation

At this juncture it is worth remembering that in Norway, like many Nordic countries, team-based sports tend to revolve around the highly institutionalized sports club system – within which young people and males have traditionally formed the largest groups (Fasting and Sand, 2009): “about 70-80% of all children are members of sports clubs during their childhood” (Hovden, 2012, p.287). While it is 6-8 year olds who are particularly likely to be affiliated to sports clubs (Vaage, 2009), 13-15 year olds, on the other hand, tend to be far more likely to engage in activities without being affiliated to any sports club or team. The evident shift away from sports clubs and team sports among many Norwegian youngsters during their teenagers years notwithstanding, a substantial minority of youth continued to participate in sport through sports clubs: almost half (44%) of 16-19 year olds and just under one-third of 20-24 year olds (29%) in 2007 (Vaage, 2009).

It is worthy of note that within the sports clubs scene the gender dimension of the participatory picture becomes a little opaque¹⁰. Nonetheless, females constituted almost 40% of the *active* membership base of organized sports clubs in 2007 (Fasting and Sand,

¹⁰ In this regard, it is important to note Fasting and Sand’s (2009) caveat that club membership data in Norway has a built-in anomaly – associated with the nature of membership of sports organizations and associations that come under the umbrella of the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) – i.e. there are two types of membership statistics: number of memberships and number of *active* members. The first refers to anyone who has paid their membership fees, including passive as well as active club members. Thus, a single individual with membership of several sports clubs can be counted repeatedly in membership figures while someone active in several sports under one membership in one club is only counted once. Both statistics are problematic when it comes to establishing sex-related patterns of club membership because males are more likely than females to be members of several sports teams as well as clubs and, therefore, more likely to be over-represented in club membership data distorting the relative differences between males and females. Thus, there may well be a large skew in many sports club figures caused by a large number of women participating in relatively few sports (Fasting and Sand, 2009).

2009). Indeed, it seems that females have become more involved in sports clubs. Fasting and Sand (2009) note that between 2005 and 2007 nearly 18,000 more girls/women joined a sports club while the numbers of boys and men joining dwindled by several hundred. The biggest increases were found among girls aged 6-12 years, while the largest decline was among boys aged 13-19 years. Recent data¹¹ confirms the trend towards proportionately more young females than males joining sports clubs. In 2011, there were 7,894 sports clubs affiliated to NIF (The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sport) compared with 7,136 a decade earlier – representing 11% growth over the 10-year period. Thus, in the decade between 2001 and 2011, overall membership of sports clubs rose by 25% (1,430,597 in 2001 to 1,791,297 in 2011). In 2011, approximately 35% of Norwegians were members of sports clubs. Unsurprisingly, children and young people were strongly represented among the figures. Around 30% of sports club members in 2011 were 0-12 year olds (including similar numbers of boys – 289,917 – and girls – 240,661). A further 18% (187, 875 males, 139,443 females) 13-19 year olds and the remaining 52% (933,401) aged 20 years and older (595,024 males and 338,377 females). Evidently, males are more likely than females to remain in sports clubs from childhood through youth and into adulthood. Nevertheless, the biggest membership growth occurred among females. While sports club membership among 0-12 year olds grew by around 35% (from 214,268 in 2001 to 289,917 in 2011). Membership among 0-12 year old girls grew by just under 49% (from 162,050 to 240,661) during the same period. A similar contrast was apparent among the 13-19 year group with a growth in sports club memberships among 13-19 year old males of 24% (151,983 to 187,875) between 2001 and 2011 compared with 33% (105,199 to 139,443) among 13-19 year old females. (Statistics Norway, 2014; based on NIF data).

All-in-all, it is readily apparent that the differences between the sexes in organized sports

¹¹ The figures do not show the total number of people taking part in organised sports, only sports club memberships. As indicated in footnote 10, it is also important to keep in mind that membership figures can camouflage just how often members are active sports participants within their clubs (Seippel *et al.*, 2011).

participation (including club-based sport) has diminished over time (Walseth & Strandbu, forthcoming).

Alongside gender differences in sports clubs themselves, there also tend to be large differences in the ratio of males and females across the sporting federations and associations in Norway. For example, of the 90% of females who constituted the Norwegian Skating Association, a majority (70%) were active in the short course form with only a minority (32%) active in the 'long runs' (Fasting and Sand, 2009). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, within the Norwegian American Football and Cheerleading Association, women made up 1% of those involved in football and 97% of those involved in cheerleading. The largest increases in the numbers of active female members were in football, equestrian and skiing associations. All told, those sports associations with the highest proportions of female membership (see Table 2) reflect the mixed character of girls and women's sports participation. Of the 40 different sporting forms represented in *Norsk Monitor*, more women than men participated in only seven of these – gymnastics/jazz ballet/aerobics/freestyle, dance, figure skating/speed skating, handball, swimming, gymnastics/rhythmic gymnastics, hiking in the woods (Fasting and Sand, 2009) – that is to say, the mix of 'body management'/health and fitness, sporting (both team and aesthetic) and OAAs, in particular, identified as driving participatory trends among females in Norway.

As well as being dominant in lifestyle sports and increasingly prominent in conventional games, girls (6-15 years) have become increasingly well-represented in OAA sports such as cross-country skiing (82%: 84% boys, 80% girls, at least once during 2007), alpine and Telemark skiing and snowboarding (54%: 58% boys, 50% girls). Indeed, in the 16-19 year

age group participation among young women was higher (at least once during the past 12 months in free time) in some OAAs, such as cross-country skiing (59%: 55% males, 64% females) and alpine and Telemark skiing and snowboarding (52%: 47% males, 59% females).¹²

All-in-all, it is readily apparent that Norwegian girls and young women are nowadays found in pretty much all branches of sport – from conventional club-based sports through lifestyle sports to OAAs – such that we can talk of convergence between the sexes in forms of participation in Norway as well as rates and frequency of participation and, to some extent, venues.

MAKING SENSE OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION AMONG GIRLS AND WOMEN IN NORWAY

Thus far we have explored recent developments in sports participation among females in Norway in general and girls and young women in particular. Among other things, we have noted the marked increases in levels and varieties of participation among females that point to a closing of the gap between the sexes in sporting terms. In what follows we seek to make sense of this transformation. Before doing so, however, we need to insert a caveat. Theorising is inevitably speculative (Roberts, 2009b). While we cannot speak straightforwardly of causation when trying to explain females' sports participation in Norway, we can and do endeavour to develop a plausible explanation for the patterns observed by grounding our theorising in the available evidence. This takes the form of co-existing social processes, including diminishing gender gaps in economic participation and rewards, education, and political and social empowerment and the likely corresponding

¹² That said, it remains the case snowboarding remains more male dominated than alpine and Telemark skiing.

developments in (sporting) self-efficacy among Norwegian females. Against this backdrop, we suggest that developments in Norway in relation to female sports participation are likely to be most plausibly explained in terms of the general and the particular; in other words, those things that tend to be more general and prominent aspects of sports participation world-wide – such as the effects of social class and gender – and those that are (more-or-less) particular to Norway and other Nordic countries to varying degrees – such as the ‘cultural traction’ of sport and the norms for civic engagement. In some instances the two will overlap where the general processes have a particular and/or peculiar Norwegian dimension, as in the case of both class and gender.

Gender and class in Norway

With regard to gender and class, the co-existence of increased sports participation among Norwegian females since the 1990s, and the improved position of Norwegian women in socio-economic terms apparent in a variety of indices, is particularly striking. The *Global Gender Gap Index* (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi, 2012), for example, benchmarks national gender gaps against four criteria: economic participation and opportunity (salaries, participation and highly-skilled employment); education (access to basic and higher levels of education); political empowerment (representation in decision-making structures); and, health and survival (life expectancy and sex ratio). It is designed to measure “how equitably the available income, resources and opportunities are distributed among women and men” (p.19) and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups, as well as over time. The *Index* reveals that, in 2012, the Nordic countries of Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden occupied the top four positions – having done so each year since 2006, occasionally changing positions within the top four. It is noteworthy, however, that Norway’s annual ranking has been second only to Finland in

terms of consistency across the four measures over time: economic (4th in 2012), education (1st), political (3rd) and health (94th). The upshot is that, while no country has yet achieved complete gender equality, all of the Nordic countries (with the exception of Denmark) “have closed over 80% of the gender gap” (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p.18).

In educational terms, “All Nordic countries reached 99-100% literacy for both sexes several decades ago and display gender parity at both primary and secondary level” (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p.19). Indeed, at the tertiary level, in addition to very high levels of enrolment for both women and men, the gender gap has been reversed and “women now make up the majority of the high-skilled workforce”: in Norway (like Sweden and Iceland) there are over 1.5 women for every man enrolled in tertiary education. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that while the class and sex origins of Norwegians still impact to varying degrees upon their life chances – in terms of inter-generational mobility – Norway continues to experience higher relative mobility rates compared to other Western countries (Chan, Birkelund, Aas and Wiberg, 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2012). Put another way, the significance of ascribed statuses has diminished as that of achieved statuses has increased markedly.

Despite the fact that few countries have succeeded in “maximizing the [economic] returns” from closing the gender gap in education, the Nordic countries remain leaders in this area (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012). Labour force participation rates therein are among the highest in the world, while salary gaps between men and women are among the lowest. Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden occupy the top four global positions among the highest income groups for women (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012). It is noteworthy that during roughly the same period (1999-2007) as Statistics Norway charted substantial increases in sports

participation (1997-2007), average monthly earnings in Norway increased by approximately 50% (from 23,176 Norwegian Kroner [NOK] per month in 1999 – roughly £2,317 – to 33,394NOK per month in 2007 – roughly £3,339) (Statistics Norway, 2011). Indeed, the average monthly pay of men and women increased by similar proportions: from 24,393NOK to 35,035NOK for men and from 20,788NOK to 30,306NOK for women. Not only are the average monthly earnings in Norway almost 50% higher than the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average (30,465USD compared with 22,387USD), three-quarters (75%) of Norwegians aged 15 to 64 (77% of men and 73% of women) are in paid employment, well above the OECD average of 66% (OECD, 2012). While Norwegian women’s pay tended, as in all developed countries, to be lower than that of Norwegian men, there had been greater convergence by 2007 (with women earning 86.5% that of men) in Norway than pretty-much anywhere else beyond the Nordic countries (Statistics Norway, 2011). The apparent rise in economic *inequalities* in these countries in the 1980s and 1990s notwithstanding, “income distribution remains more equitable in Norway than in most other countries” and, more significantly perhaps, “levels of economic inequality in Norway are relatively compressed” (Chan *et al.*, 2010).

In addition to possessing the economic wherewithal for sports participation, Norwegians also experience better employment conditions in relation to ‘free’ or ‘spare’ time. On average, in 2012, Norwegians worked 1,414 hours a year – considerably less than most people in the OECD (1,749 hours). Consequently, only 3% (4% of men and 1% of women) of Norwegians in paid employment work ‘very long hours’ – much lower than the OECD average of 9% (OECD, 2012). Thus, as well as becoming better paid and more economically independent, women are better placed (relative to previous generations and, for that matter, women elsewhere) to perform the ‘double-shift’ of returning home (from

paid employment) to undertake domestic duties, including facilitating and servicing their children's (including their daughters') sports participation.

In terms of empowerment generally, and in the workplace in particular, Nordic women are said to “have abundant opportunities to rise to positions of leadership” (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p.19). Governments such as Norway's appear to have successfully introduced initiatives promoting women's leadership: since 2008, for example, “publicly listed companies [in Norway] have been required to have 40% of each sex on their boards” (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p.20). Nordic countries were also among the first to enfranchise women (Finland in 1906, Norway in 1913, Iceland and Denmark in 1915 and Sweden in 1919) and in Norway, Sweden and Denmark in the 1970s political parties introduced voluntary gender quotas “resulting in high numbers of female representatives over the years” (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012, p.20). As a consequence, Nordic countries such as Norway have some of the highest percentages of women in parliament in the world. Interestingly, a similar process occurred with women in Norwegian sports organizations (Fasting and Sand, 2009). Hovden (2012, p.290) notes the impact from the 1970s onwards of “a strong, extensive and active women's movement” including many also advocating “for women's advancement in sports”. This was evidently part of the second-wave feminist movement that became increasingly prominent and effective in many countries across the developed world at that time.

It is noteworthy, however, that empowerment of females has not been straightforward even in Norway. Despite the fact that the proportion of women employed in management and professional occupations has risen to roughly the same level as men, women continue to be under-represented in positions of power, particularly within (traditional) sports clubs

(Fasting and Sands, 2009). In her study of “The gendering of leadership discourses in Norwegian sports organizations”, Hovden (2010, p.189) observed that “Female leadership is scarce in sport” in Norway, as well as internationally. Thus, while Scandinavian countries such as Norway “are seen around the world as champions of gender equality”, the wider picture can be “full of contradictions” (p.287). Focusing on Norwegian sports organizations, Hovden noted that although “Norway has never had sex-segregated sports organizations” (p.289) their leadership structures have historically been and remain male-dominated, with less than one in five presidents (18%) of Norwegian sports organizations and less than one in ten elite sports coaches being women. Contrary to the picture emerging elsewhere in Norwegian society, then, it appears that in sports organizations and elite sport in particular women’s presence “in the most prestigious and powerful positions represents the exception rather than the norm” (p.289). Nevertheless – due in part to the Norwegian gender ‘quota’ regulation (1987) which remains “unique among the European sports organizations” (Hovden, 2012, p.297) – in boardroom positions among the national sports federations the picture is far closer to equality with women accounting for over a third (37%) of board members.

The caveat regarding women in senior positions in sporting organizations notwithstanding, the *Global Gender Gap Index*, the *OECD Economic Survey* for Norway and the *Statistical Yearbook of Norway* all point towards the same conclusion: Norway performs exceptionally well against a variety of measures of socio-economic well-being. This is reflected in its position in the top three most prosperous countries (along with Denmark and Finland) in the *Legatum Prosperity Index*¹³ for 2010 (cited in Coalter, 2012) as well as

¹³ The Legatum Prosperity Index is an annual ranking of 110 countries developed by the Legatum Institute, a privately funded think tank. Based on 79 variables, it includes a number which are likely to be conducive to sports participation such as economic fundamentals, health, social capital, education, safety and security, personal freedom and democratic institutions.

among the best placed countries in the OECD (2012) *Better Life Index*. In addition, Norway was ranked the highest in the United Nations' (UN) annual *Human Development Index*¹⁴ (HDI) for 2012 (UN, 2012). Increases in employment (including part-time¹⁵ employment of the kind typically engaged in by very many Norwegian youth, female as well as male) alongside greater equality in pay and conditions and the so-called 'work-life' balance and a general shift in the power-balances between males and females towards the latter (illustrated, perhaps, by a more equal division of housework in younger age-cohorts [Atlantic Wire, 2013]) have increased the economic independence of young and adult women (among other things, delaying marriage and child-bearing), with the concomitant benefits for their leisure lifestyles. It seems reasonable to posit, therefore, that such developments are likely to have had an impact on the general outlook and self-efficacy of girls and young women as well as their mothers while, more specifically, facilitating not only parents' own involvement in sport (with the concomitant role-modelling effects) but also that of their off-spring (both female and male); put another way, the female parental role-model for children (and girls especially) in Norway is increasingly likely to be a (paid) working, sporty mother.

All told, it seems highly likely that the growth of sports participation in Norway during the last decade of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century (from a high base in relation to many other non-Nordic countries) owes a good deal to socio-economic circumstances and the changes, not to say, transformation in the circumstances of women and by extension, girls and young women – in particular, the substantial increases in

¹⁴ The HDI represents the UN rankings of human progress and measures development by combining income and other basic indicators of progress such as life expectancy and years of schooling (UN, 2012).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that countries, such as Norway, that boast a high proportion of women in employment also tend to have a high share of women working part-time. In this regard, there remain far more women than men working part-time in Norway. Nevertheless, the trend is downwards: fewer women worked part-time in Norway in 2010 than a decade earlier (48% compared with 43%). (Statistics Norway, 2010: 12)

income across all age groups and both sexes alongside favourable conditions for economic and social independence and status as well as social mobility among women. It seems equally plausible that improvements in the general socio-economic conditions for Norwegians, and Norwegian females in particular, have both created and reinforced already favourable aspects of the Norwegian situation for sports participation – not least of which are the cultural traction of sport in Nordic countries such as Norway, the strong norms towards civic engagement, the centrality of the family to Norwegian life and the shift towards lifestyle and adventurous sports. It is worth saying a little more about each of these.

The cultural traction of sport in Norway and the norm for civic engagement (in sports clubs)

Perhaps the most striking particularity of the Norwegian situation is the enormous ‘cultural traction’ (Roberts, 2013) of sport and physical recreation in Norway. Cultural traction refers to the rootedness of sport in what sociologists might call the ‘group habitus’ or ‘natural attitude’; in other words, those aspects of physical culture deeply embedded in the daily practices of individuals and groups in particular societies and nations – the habits acquired (via socialization) by Norwegians as a consequence of growing up and living in a culture within which sport is so common-place and highly-valued. An example of the centrality of physical recreation as a whole to Norwegian culture is the way in which ‘friluftsliv’ (literally translated as ‘free or open air living’ but more generally and colloquially taken to mean outdoor life and activities) is viewed as an important aspect of ‘the Norwegian cultural legacy’ and the Norwegian identity (Visit Norway, 2011a, 2011b). Rather than being a singular activity, friluftsliv has always been constituted of a relatively broad spectrum of outdoor pursuits, ranging from more-or-less common-place recreational

activities (such as walking, cross-country skiing and cycling) through what are commonly referred to as ‘adventure’ activities (mountain-biking, skiing, climbing and mountaineering and kayaking, for example) to simply living or ‘being’ in the outdoors (camping, fishing, horse-riding, ‘berry and mushroom trips’ and so forth). The cultural significance of friluftsliv notwithstanding, a more tangible example of the significance attached to sport in Norway comes, perhaps, in the form of the emphasis placed on the role of the sports club and involvement in and with clubs by Norwegians of all ages.

In this regard, another feature of Norwegian society (and, to varying degrees, other Nordic countries) is the normative character of civic engagement. Sport in general and sports clubs in particular evidently benefit from – as well as neatly illustrate – the expectation that adults (especially parents) will become involved in civil organizations; particularly when they have children attending institutions such as schools and sports clubs. Indeed, involvement in voluntary sports clubs often appears a rite of passage for many Norwegians, whether as sports participants or, of equal importance, as volunteers. Characteristic of sports clubs in Norway is the assumption that membership involves duties: that members not only pay dues but will also play a full and active part in the day-to-day activities of the club (for example, parents adopting voluntary positions as managers and coaches). Thus, sports clubs remain important social institutions in Nordic countries, not least in the popular imagination. Although times are evidently changing as the growth of sports participation occurs increasingly beyond sports clubs, they remain a prominent feature of many children’s as well as their parents’ lives. Many Norwegian parents are centrally involved in the team-based sports club scene in Norway and spend a large amount of time facilitating their children’s involvement in sport as well as coaching, organizing and administrating activities (Toftegaard Støckel *et al.*, 2010). That said, gender roles retain an

element of stereotypicality on the sports club scene: men did more voluntary work in sports clubs in 2009 than women (32% versus 26%); more men than women are involved with administration and instruction in Norwegian sport clubs; and females are disproportionately engaged in ‘dugnad’¹⁶ (including stereotypically domestic roles such as cleaning and cooking). All that said women as well as men increased their involvement in instructional roles in sport clubs between 1997 and 2007.

Remnants of stereotypical gendering in the sports club scene notwithstanding, overall women in Norway are both active in sport themselves as well as in facilitating their children’s sports participation. In addition, it is necessary to keep in mind Coalter’s (2012) observation – based on van Bottenburg *et al.*’s (2005) study of sports participation in the European Union – that “while sports clubs are important social institutions in several Scandinavian countries [specifically, Denmark, Finland and Sweden], the high levels of sports participation are not achieved via organized sport. This is especially so for women, who are much less likely to take part in competitive and organized sport – reflecting the Europe-wide growth”. Indeed, the fact that data on sport organizations shows that females constitute a minority among coaches, leaders, and presidents in individual sports federation might be interpreted as indicating that these roles may be far less significant in determining sports participation (among anyone, let alone girls and women) than advocates would like to think and that sports clubs and their associations may be far less significant in driving up participation than the more informal lifestyle sports and, for that matter, parental encouragement.

¹⁶ According to Wikipedia (2014), “Dugnad is a Norwegian term for voluntary work done together with other people ... the word was voted as the Norwegian word of the year 2004 in the TV programme *Typisk Norsk* ... The Norwegian word “Dugnadsånd” is translatable to the spirit of will to work together for a better community. Many Norwegians will describe this as a typical Norwegian thing to have.”

The centrality of parents and family

There is considerable evidence that parental and family support is strongly correlated with girls' and young women's involvement in sport and sport-related physical activity (see, for example, Biddle, Gorely and Stensel, 2004; Saelens and Kerr, 2008; Wheeler and Green, 2014), not only in the form of 'modelling' participation but also in terms of facilitation: for example, transportation to and from sports locations – something which is particularly positively related to girls' participation (Saelens and Kerr, 2008) – and spectating. As intimated above, in Norway, parental involvement in their children's sporting lives is made more likely by favourable socio-economic conditions; for example, the ways in which Nordic countries “have made it possible for parents to combine work and family, resulting in high female employment participation rates, more shared participation in childcare, more equitable distribution of labour at home, [and] better work-life balance for both women and men” (Hausmann *et al.*, 2012: 20). Policies in these countries include mandatory paternal leave in combination with maternity leave, “generous federally mandated parental leave benefits provided by a combination of social insurance funds and employers, tax incentives and post-maternity re-entry [to work] programmes.” (p.20)

The family appears a significant variable in sports participation; not least because, as Birchwood, Roberts and Pollock's (2008) study of the South Caucasus revealed, appropriate sports socialization (from an early age) in the family may enable participation to endure and withstand later socio-economic constraints. Birchwood *et al.* (2008) suggest, for example, that young women are no more likely to be forced out of sport by marriage and parenthood and other such life events in young adulthood than young males. The crucial issue seems to be whether or not they have developed sporting habituses in their

early lives and, in Norway, girls and young women seem more likely to develop sporting habituses which more closely resemble those of their male counterparts. This transformation is also partly attributable to the growth of lifestyle sports.

Lifestyle sports as a driver for female participation

Lifestyle sports have been a significant driver for the increases in participation witnessed across the developed world in recent decades, especially among females (Coalter, 2012). Thus, the significant increases in the proportions of girls and young women participating in sport worldwide appear intertwined with the increased centrality of lifestyle sports and, in particular, the growing demand for the more exercise-oriented and body-management activities (Fridberg, 2010). This appears equally true in Norway – a significant dimension of the substantial growth in participation in Norway among females has, indeed, been the increasing popularity of lifestyle sports.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have charted and explored developments in sports participation in general in Norway in recent years and among females in particular. By way of conclusion, the first thing to note is that the Norwegian situation appears to run counter to a number of the taken-for-granted assumptions about females' participation in sport globally. One such assumption is that sport remains heavily gendered both ideologically and in participatory terms. Among other things, we have noted not only significant growth among females in participation but also convergence between the sexes in rates, frequency and, increasingly, forms.

In exploring the ‘causes’ of the Norwegian situation we have pointed to a body of circumstantial evidence that lends support to Coalter’s (2012) claim that sport is best considered as epiphenomenal: “a secondary set of social practices [largely] dependent on and reflecting more fundamental *structures, values* and *processes*” (emphasis added). In Norway, in particular, economic (the workplace and welfare systems, for example) and social (such as the family and sports clubs) structures and social processes (education, for instance) appear to reflect more egalitarian social values. Consequently, socio-economic conditions seem likely to go a long way to explaining not only the growth in sports participation in Norway in recent decades but also the particular increases among females. While this is, of course, true across the developed world, the difference in Norway appears to be that the relatively more equal socio-economic conditions are associated with the aforementioned trend towards convergence between the sexes.

All that said, sports participation is multi-dimensional and the ‘causal’ explanation is likely, therefore, to be multi-factorial. Although class and gender-*related* (rather than simply class and gender-*based*), sports participation will not be socio-economically predetermined – the cultural traction of sport, is likely to be an important part of the mix of propitious circumstances for sports participation generally and among Norwegian females in particular.

For some commentators, some of the ‘freedoms’ that young women in countries such as Norway now possess in their leisure lives amount to “an illusion of progress” wherein “young women remain locked into new forms of old dependencies and anxieties” (Flintoff, 2009: 2). This may or may not be true in other areas of their leisure but in the case of sport it is difficult to reconcile this argument with the evidence – in Norway, at least – that

males' and females' sports participation have to a large extent converged. As Roberts (2009a) might say, although girls and young women may not view themselves as feminists they are evidently heirs to the culture fostered by second-wave feminism. Indeed, it may be that they not only want to become economically and socially independent, they want to engage in sport *as* girls and young women. It remains to be seen whether young women in Norway "are often forced to live a 'split life', particularly once they reach puberty, balancing the need to conform to the norms of heterosexual femininity with those required to be physically active" (Flintoff, 2009, p.7). Whether or not young Norwegian women perceive their heterosexual identities as compromised by or incongruent with sports participation is an open question in need of empirical study.

Regardless of whether equity leads to identical outcomes (such as identical proportions of males and females participating in and organizing/administrating each and every sport in Norway), "The historical shift into a post-industrial age has changed gender roles and divisions" (Roberts, 2012, p.71). Conditions are different in Norway, in other words – particularly in the early decades of the 21st century. If the changes witnessed in Norwegian society, in general, and Norwegian sport, in particular, are too limited and too slow is a matter of perspective. For feminists they may be. The domain assumption among some feminist sociologists of sport – that young women remain subjugated by and through their sporting experiences – can only remain as orthodoxy as long as it is plausible in the face of the available evidence. Whether such a view would be shared by the young women involved in sport themselves remains to be established, however. It also remains to be established if the kinds of transformation in sports participation outlined in this paper are, in fact, a long way from gender parity and whether girls and women remain 'othered', still needing to redefine themselves instead of continuing to internalize more or less

conventional sexual and feminized identities promulgated if not imposed by men. Either way, in Norway many women appear to have taken the first and most fundamental step by making themselves economically and socially independent of men – a development seemingly fundamental to greater self-efficacy. This has resulted in a generation of women who want/expect the freedom to live their lives (including their leisure and sporting lives) as they see fit. In this respect the orthodox view in sociology appears to have permeated the political, economic and social fabric of Norwegian society: that is to say, “all the differences in the social roles of men and women are socially constructed gender differences capable of being reconstructed” (Roberts, 2012, p.66) by judicious laws, regulation and investment. This domain assumption in sociology remains plausible in the face of the compelling evidence regarding sports participation in Norway.

The policy implications

In policy terms, Van Tuyckom, Van de Velde and Bracke’s (2012) study of ‘country-context’ in relation to gender and leisure time physical inactivity in Europe revealed that national gender-based (in)equalities have implications for the way in which men and women construct their individual (and household) lifestyles, including their sporting lifestyles. They observed that, “Removing inequality between men’s and women’s participation in leisure time activities will thus require far more than simply European-wide mass media campaigns aimed at convincing women to become physically active in their leisure time” (p.452). If there are any lessons to be learned from the Norwegian situation by countries keen to promote sports participation among girls and young women then, to adapt Van Tuyckom *et al.*’s conclusion, the most salient is that instead of individually-oriented approaches, sports policy needs first and foremost to adopt society-level perspectives in addressing socio-economic gender disparities. In this regard, recent developments in

Norway chime with Klosterman and Nagel's (2012, p.2) observation that in Germany "current trends in sport are a consequence of changes in society" of which changes at the individual level may be a direct and/or indirect consequence. Legislation and initiatives that have resulted in young women becoming more economically and socially independent appear to have reinforced the egalitarian culture of Scandinavian countries, such as Norway (Skille, 2011). The upshot appears to have been that "Skills and values once considered masculine are no longer perceived to be in conflict with general gender scripts for young women. The public are not perturbed by girls' participation in sports. Indeed, women's sports participation is noted as a prudent negotiation and expansion of gender scripts" (Walseth & Strandbu, forthcoming).

So, might developments in countries such as Norway throw light on whether it is realistic for other countries, such as the UK, to aspire to such levels of participation? It might be that Norway is prototypical: in other words, a country in which examples of a process/relationship are seen in their nascent or most advanced form – in effect serving to test out processes that may be replicated or learned from in other countries if, but only if, they are able to replicate the socio-economic conditions and cultural traction of sport. It is said that when Philip II (359-336bc), King of Macedon, sent a message to the Spartans saying "If I enter Laconia [the region in which Sparta was located], I will raze Sparta to the ground", the Spartans responded with the characteristically laconic, "If"! This paper lends support for the argument that developing the sports participation of females in countries such as the UK – to levels comparable with their male counterparts, let alone females in the Nordic countries – may only be possible *if* governments adopt policies aimed at achieving more egalitarian socio-economic conditions. In many cases, however, this remains a rather big "if"!

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Figure 1 2007

The frequency of doing sport and physical activity in their spare time to train or exercise, by gender. 16-79 years. 2007. Percentage. Based on Vaage (2009).

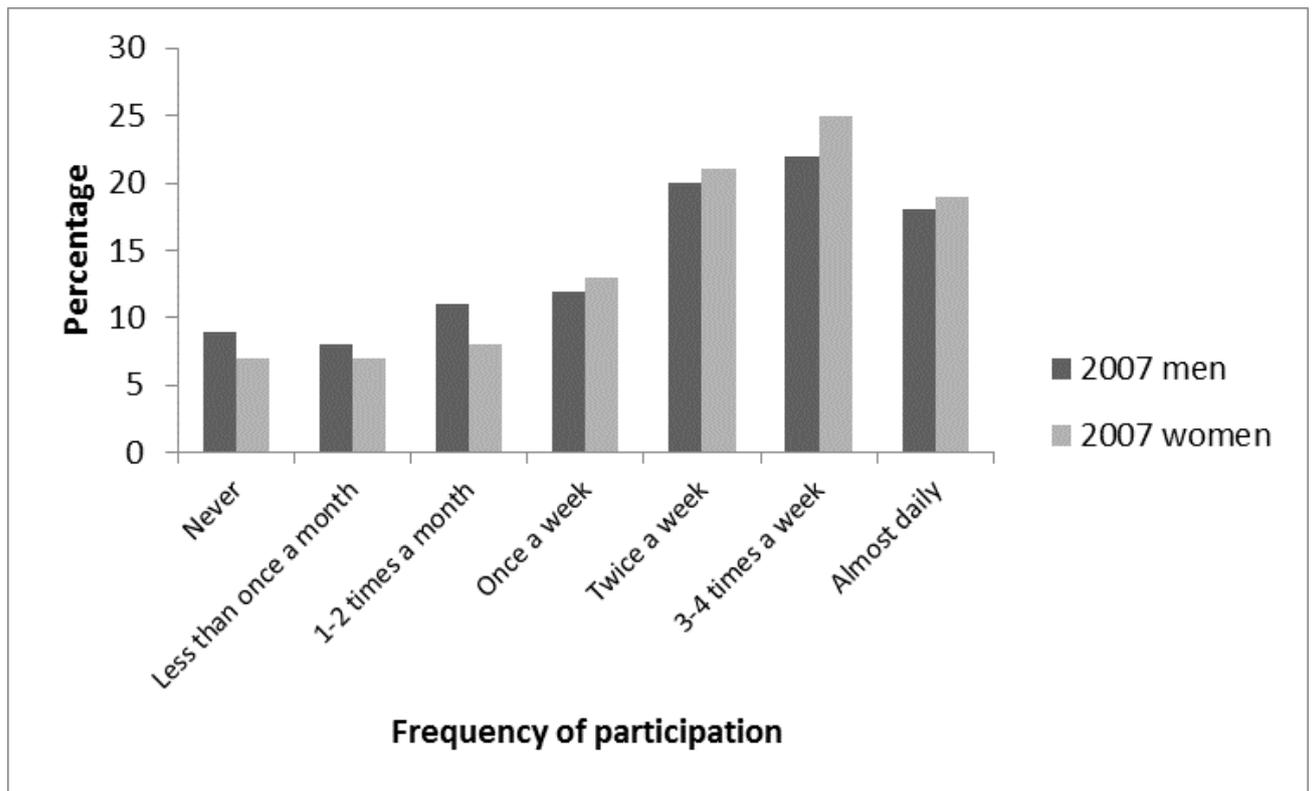


Table 1

The *frequency* of doing physical activity in their spare time to train or exercise, by gender and age. 6-15 years. 2007. Percentage. Based on Vaage (2009).

	never	less than month	1-2x per month	1x per week	2x per week	3-4x per week	about daily
Boys 6-8yrs	17	6	5	25	30	15	2
Girls 6-8yrs	10	4	6	36	30	13	2
Boys 9-12yrs	5	2	2	15	32	32	12
Girls 9-12yrs	6	4	6	18	32	28	6
Boys 13-15yrs	3	4	6[13]	13	20[33]	27	25[52%]
Girls 13-15yrs	4	6	4[14]	9	29[38]	34	14[48%]

Table 2

The proportions of females in various Norwegian sports organisations in 2007
(based on Norsk Monitor, 2007; cited in Fasting and Sand, 2009)

Norwegian Equestrian Federation	88% female members
Norway Dance Association	75%
Norway Gymnastics Federation	74%
Norwegian Handball Federation	69%
Norwegian Volleyball Federation	52%
Norwegian Skating Association	51%
Norway Swimming Federation	51%
Norway American Football and Cheerleading Association	51%