

EDUCATIONAL AND INFORMATIVE



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CHAPTER 1

THE CONCEPT OF GENDER, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY, ROLE, AND STEREOTYPES

The concept of gender is one of the most debated topics in social and human sciences, as it represents a fundamental category for understanding how societies function and the power dynamics that develop within them. Often confused with the concept of biological sex, gender is actually a social construct that goes beyond an individual's physical and anatomical characteristics. It refers to the set of expectations, behaviors, and roles attributed to a person based on the sex assigned at birth.

This distinction between sex and gender is crucial because it helps to understand that many of the differences attributed to men and women do not stem from innate biological traits but rather from social norms that have solidified over time. The scholar John Money was among the first to clearly differentiate the two concepts in the 1950s, highlighting how gender is shaped by cultural and educational factors. In the following decades, numerous researchers further explored this distinction, including Ann Oakley (1972), who emphasized how gender is learned through the process of socialization and varies depending on historical and geographical contexts. The idea that gender is a social construction was developed in the 1970s by feminist studies and later expanded upon by gender studies and queer theory. Judith Butler, in her influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990), argued that gender is not a stable and fixed identity but rather a set of performative acts repeated over time. According to this perspective, gender is a product of social and cultural interaction rather than an intrinsic

characteristic of an individual. Butler critiques the notion that there is a "natural" way of being a man or a woman and asserts that gender is continuously constructed through language, behaviors, and social expectations.

Beyond theoretical studies, numerous empirical researches have demonstrated how gender norms influence people's lives from early childhood. According to a UNESCO study (2020), children receive different encouragements based on their gender from their first years in school: boys are more often encouraged to explore technical and scientific activities, while girls are encouraged to develop relational and caregiving skills. These conditioning factors directly impact educational and career choices, as well as participation in sports and career opportunities in the field. The social construction of gender is not a static phenomenon; rather, it changes over time. For example, while women were excluded from most sports competitions in the 19th century, today, more and more female athletes are achieving significant milestones in disciplines that were once considered exclusively male. However, gender equality has not yet been fully achieved, as shown by data on lower visibility and reduced funding for women's sports compared to men's sports (European Commission, 2018). Another fundamental aspect to consider is that gender is not limited to a simple binary opposition between male and female. Many cultures around the world have long recognized the existence of non-binary or fluid gender identities. For instance, in some Indigenous communities of North America, the concept of *Two-Spirit* has existed for centuries, referring to individuals who embody both masculine and feminine traits. Similarly, in India, the hijra community is recognized as a third gender with a long historical and cultural tradition.

In this context, the current debate focuses on the need to recognize and respect the diversity of gender identities, particularly in public policies and sports institutions. The inclusion of transgender and non-binary athletes in competitions has sparked numerous discussions and has led many international federations to revise their regulations to balance competitive fairness with human rights.

Understanding gender as a social construct is therefore essential for deconstructing stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive society. This approach does not mean denying the biological differences between sexes but rather recognizing that many existing inequalities stem from cultural factors rather than natural predispositions. Sports, as a highly visible and influential field, represent one of the key battlegrounds for overcoming stereotypes and promoting a fairer model of gender participation and representation.

1.1 Gender and Social Construction

The concept of gender emerged in the 1950s and 1960s within the fields of psychiatry and social sciences, thanks to the pioneering work of scholars such as John Money and Robert Stoller. They distinguished between sex, understood as the set of an individual's biological characteristics, and gender, which represents the social and cultural identification of a person within the traditional categories of male and female. This distinction paved the way for more in-depth studies on how gender is constructed and internalized throughout a person's life.

Gender expectations become particularly evident from childhood through education, school, and the media. According to Sandra Bem's studies (1981), gender socialization begins in the early years of life, when children are exposed to differentiated behavioral models. Girls are often encouraged to develop caregiving and cooperative skills, while boys are stimulated towards competition and leadership. This pattern was also confirmed by Connell (2002), who analyzed the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," referring to the way society rewards behaviors considered typically masculine while relegating feminine traits to a subordinate position.

According to UNESCO data (2020), gender stereotypes influence children's academic performance and educational choices. Girls are often encouraged to pursue humanities disciplines, while boys are steered toward STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). These dynamics are also reflected in the world of sports, where disciplines considered "masculine" receive greater investments and visibility. These socialization processes do not only manifest through formal education but also in daily behaviors and childhood play. Research conducted by Thorne (1993) has shown that, from an early age, children internalize gender norms through peer interactions, developing habits and behavioral models that reinforce gender segregation. In group play, for instance, physical and competitive activities are more frequently associated with boys, while symbolic play and caregiving activities are encouraged among girls. This social construction of gender is not a static phenomenon but is subject to continuous transformations based on cultural changes and historical dynamics. For example, while in the 19th century, the idea of a woman practicing sports like soccer or boxing was unthinkable, today, there are professional women's leagues in many disciplines once considered exclusively male. However, the gender gap persists, and women in sports continue to

receive less recognition and funding than men. According to a report by the European Parliament (2022), only 30% of professional athletes in Europe are women, and media coverage of women's sporting events remains significantly lower than that of men's sports.

Another aspect to consider is the influence of technology and new media in shaping gender identities. With the advent of social networks and digital platforms, gender representation has taken on new forms, often reinforcing but also challenging traditional stereotypes. Some recent studies (Gill, 2007) have highlighted how images presented by digital media can contribute both to perpetuating rigid gender roles and to promoting more fluid and diverse models. In this context, the concept of *gender mainstreaming*, introduced by the United Nations in the 1990s, represents a concrete attempt to integrate gender perspectives into all public policies, including those related to sports. The goal is to promote greater equity and ensure that opportunities are not influenced by gender stereotypes or discrimination. Understanding gender as a social construct is therefore essential for deconstructing stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive society. This approach does not mean denying biological differences between sexes but rather recognizing that many existing inequalities stem from cultural factors rather than natural predispositions. Sports, as a highly visible and influential field, represent one of the key battlegrounds for overcoming stereotypes and promoting a fairer model of gender participation and representation.

1.2 Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Gender identity refers to an individual's perception of themselves in terms of gender. It may align with the sex assigned at birth (as in the case of cisgender people) or differ from it (as happens with transgender and non-binary individuals). According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2015), gender identity is a fundamental aspect of individual development and can emerge at a very early age, between 2 and 4 years old. This awareness strengthens over time through personal experiences and social influences, leading individuals to identify with a specific gender or to recognize themselves outside the traditional categories of male and female.

Gender identity is closely linked to the concept of gender expression, which refers to how an individual communicates their gender through clothing, body language, hairstyle, and other aesthetic and behavioral elements. While it is often assumed that gender expression should align with the sex assigned at birth, many cultures have historically recognized and accepted gender identities beyond the traditional binary framework. For example, in some Indigenous communities of North America, the *Two-Spirit* identity exists, referring to individuals who embody both masculine and feminine traits and have historically held significant social and spiritual roles. Alongside gender identity, sexual orientation refers to emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction toward other people. The main categories of sexual orientation include heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality. However, Alfred Kinsey's research (1948) introduced the concept of a continuum in sexual orientation, demonstrating that sexual attractions and behaviors are not strictly binary but can exist along a fluid spectrum.

Over the years, numerous studies have highlighted the impact of society on the acceptance of gender identity and sexual orientation. According to the ILGA-Europe report (2021), levels of discrimination vary significantly depending on cultural and political contexts, with some countries implementing progressive legislation for the legal recognition of transgender and non-binary people, while others maintain restrictive and discriminatory policies. In the world of sports, issues related to gender identity and sexual orientation have also become subjects of debate. The inclusion of transgender athletes in competitions has led many international sports federations to redefine their regulations. For example, the International Olympic Committee published new guidelines in 2021, removing arbitrary limits on testosterone levels and urging federations to evaluate cases individually based on scientific evidence and principles of fairness and inclusion. Another important issue is the discrimination LGBTQ+ athletes may face in sports environments. According to research by Outsport (2019), 54% of LGBTQ+ individuals have experienced discrimination or exclusion while participating in sports, leading to negative effects on psychological well-being and active participation in athletics. This issue is further exacerbated by the lack of role models: openly LGBTQ+ athletes remain a minority, and their visibility is often hindered by social pressures and fears of professional repercussions.

To combat these forms of discrimination, many sports organizations and associations are promoting awareness and training initiatives. Campaigns such as *Rainbow Laces* in the United Kingdom and *Play with Pride* in the United States aim to create more inclusive sports environments, encouraging respect for gender diversity and sexual orientation.

Gender identity and sexual orientation are not merely individual concepts but social issues that deeply influence the structure of opportunities and personal experiences. Understanding and valuing this diversity is essential to fostering a more equitable environment, not only in sports but in all aspects of social life.

1.3 Gender Roles and Their Implications

Gender roles refer to the set of social norms and expectations that define which behaviors, activities, and personality traits are considered appropriate for men and women. These roles are deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of a society and can vary significantly over time and across different regions. For example, while in some cultures the female role has historically been associated with the domestic sphere and family care, in others, women have held leadership and power positions in political and religious domains. In the context of sports, gender roles have profoundly influenced people's participation in various disciplines. Sports such as football (soccer), rugby, and weightlifting have historically been considered masculine, while artistic gymnastics, dance, and synchronized swimming have been associated with femininity. According to a European Parliament report (2022), women represent only 30% of professional athletes in Europe, despite the growing interest in women's sports. This gender division in sports is not accidental but rather the result of a long and complex historical process. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, women were strongly discouraged from participating in sports, often based on pseudoscientific justifications that physical activity could compromise their fertility or their so-called "natural" fragility. The modern Olympic Games, founded by Pierre de

Coubertin in 1896, initially excluded women, and it was only in 1900 that they were allowed to compete in disciplines deemed more "appropriate," such as tennis and golf. It was not until 2012 that all participating countries included at least one woman in their Olympic delegations.

This evolution demonstrates how gender roles in sports have changed over time but also highlights the persistence of inequalities. For instance, a UNESCO study (2021) found that in sports media, female athletes receive significantly less coverage than their male counterparts, with attention often focused on their physical appearance rather than their athletic performance. Additionally, many women's sports receive less funding and sponsorships, making it more difficult for female athletes to build sustainable professional careers. Beyond media and economic aspects, gender roles also affect dynamics within teams and sports organizations. Coaches and sports executives tend to be predominantly male, which can limit female representation and the creation of more inclusive environments. According to a report by the Women's Sports Foundation (2020), only 25% of coaches for women's teams in U.S. universities are women, while the percentage is even lower for men's teams. Another relevant aspect concerns the perception of athletic abilities. Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes often lead to the assumption that men are naturally stronger and faster than women, without considering physiological differences and training opportunities. In reality, athletic performance depends on multiple factors, including access to resources, the quality of training, and social support. Recent studies have shown that in some endurance disciplines, such as open water swimming and ultramarathons, women can compete on equal footing with or even outperform men, challenging established biases (Hunter et al., 2020). In the sports world,

overcoming gender role stereotypes requires inclusion policies and concrete actions to ensure equal opportunities. For example, FIFA has introduced regulations to guarantee pay equity between men's and women's football, while many federations are working to increase female representation in leadership positions.

Gender roles, therefore, are not just a theoretical issue but have tangible implications for the lives and careers of athletes. Overcoming these barriers requires a collective effort from institutions, media, businesses, and sports communities to create a fairer and more inclusive environment, where every individual can express their full potential without being constrained by gender-based expectations.

Conclusion

The concept of gender, in all its complexity and multidimensionality, cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between male and female. As we have seen, gender is the result of a social construction process that develops through education, cultural norms, media, and institutions. Its influence extends to all areas of life, from individual development to social relationships, from the workplace to sports participation. Sports, in particular, represent one of the most emblematic fields where gender stereotypes are manifested and perpetuated. The historical segregation of sports disciplines, disparities in opportunities and funding, and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles demonstrate how the path toward gender equality is still long. However, in recent decades, significant progress has been made thanks to the efforts of athletes, activists, and institutions that have

challenged existing norms and promoted a fairer and more inclusive approach. Gender studies and research in the social sciences have highlighted that overcoming the barriers imposed by gender roles is essential not only to ensure equal opportunities but also to build fairer societies that embrace diversity. Deconstructing stereotypes, promoting equal representation, and ensuring inclusive policies are essential steps to guarantee that every individual can fully express their potential without being limited by arbitrary social constraints.

Addressing gender issues in the sports context means recognizing the value of inclusion and diversity while promoting policies and practices that give everyone, regardless of gender, the opportunity to participate and compete on equal terms. Breaking down gender barriers in sports is not just a matter of social justice but also an opportunity to enrich the sports experience itself, valuing talent and abilities beyond rigid and outdated categorizations. In the following chapters, we will delve deeper into the evolution of gender studies, European policies on equality, and the role of sports institutions in addressing inequalities, providing practical tools to promote a fairer and more inclusive sports culture.

CHAPTER 2

GENDER STUDIES FROM THE 1970s TO TODAY

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary field that officially emerged in the 1970s within the realms of social sciences, philosophy, history, and psychology. This field of research developed with the goal of analyzing gender not merely as a biological difference between men and women but as a social construct influenced by cultural, political, and economic norms. The focus on gender stereotypes, inequalities, and discrimination has led to the emergence of a vast academic literature that has challenged power structures and opened new perspectives for understanding identities, roles, and social dynamics. Over the years, gender studies have influenced numerous fields, including education, law, politics, and, of course, sports.

2.1 The Origins and Influence of Feminism on the Birth of Gender Studies

Gender studies have their roots in the feminist movements of the second half of the 20th century, particularly in the so-called "second wave" of feminism, which took place between the 1960s and 1980s. While the first wave focused primarily on women's civil and political rights, such as voting rights and access to education, the second wave expanded the scope of analysis, challenging gender norms, patriarchy, and the distribution of power in society. Authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, with her renowned work *The Second Sex* (1949), had a tremendous influence on subsequent studies. De Beauvoir famously stated that "one is not born a

woman, but rather becomes one," emphasizing that gender is not a natural condition but the result of a social construction process. This concept provided a fundamental theoretical basis for future gender studies, pushing researchers to investigate how society shapes the identities and roles of men and women. During the 1970s and 1980s, key figures such as Betty Friedan, bell hooks, and Adrienne Rich further expanded feminist thought, incorporating an intersectional perspective that considered not only gender but also race, social class, and sexuality as crucial factors in shaping individual and collective experiences. Intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), allowed for a better understanding of how different forms of discrimination overlap and intertwine, creating unique experiences for women belonging to socially marginalized groups. For example, a Black woman may face discrimination both due to sexism and racism, experiencing two forms of oppression that reinforce each other. This approach led gender studies beyond the simple male-female dichotomy, embracing a broader and more complex vision of power relations. Meanwhile, feminist studies also influenced public policy, leading to the introduction of mechanisms such as *gender mainstreaming*, a concept officially adopted by the European Union in the 1990s to integrate gender perspectives into all government policies and decision-making processes. This approach contributed to promoting equity initiatives, such as gender quotas in parliaments and corporate boards, as well as gender equality education programs in schools.

Another central aspect in the development of gender studies was the debate on women's representation in the media. Scholars such as Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), introduced the concept of the *male gaze*, highlighting how women are often represented in media from a male perspective

that objectifies them and relegates them to subordinate roles. This type of analysis had direct implications in sports, where female athletes are frequently portrayed more for their physical appearance than for their athletic achievements, reinforcing limiting stereotypes. In recent decades, feminist theories and gender studies have continued to evolve, with the emergence of postmodern feminism and new digital technologies that have expanded the ways in which gender is discussed and analyzed. Movements such as *MeToo*, which emerged in 2017, have brought issues related to sexism, gender-based violence, and the need for deep structural changes in institutions back to the center of public debate. The influence of gender studies has thus extended far beyond the academic world, shaping laws, social policies, and cultural movements. In the field of sports, this has led to the revision of regulations and the adoption of inclusion policies aimed at ensuring greater equity between male and female athletes, reducing gender discrimination, and increasing opportunities for all.

2.2 The Birth of Queer Theory and the Expansion of Gender Studies

In the 1990s, gender studies underwent a further evolution with the emergence of *queer theory*, a field of research that questioned the rigidity of gender and sexuality categories. Scholars such as Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not a fixed reality but rather a set of repeated acts and behaviors that construct and reinforce specific identities. According to Butler, gender is a social phenomenon shaped by cultural and linguistic practices that are learned and reproduced over time.

Queer theory challenges the essentialist view of gender, which sees it as an innate and immutable characteristic, instead proposing a more fluid and dynamic model. This approach has had a significant impact on gender studies, pushing research beyond the traditional male-female dichotomy to include a broader range of gender identities and sexual orientations. Michel Foucault, in his work *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1976), was another key reference for queer theory, analyzing how power and discourse shape the construction of sexual identities. Foucault highlighted how sexuality has historically been regulated through social, religious, and scientific institutions that have imposed rigid and limiting norms. His analysis paved the way for a critique of disciplinary practices that exclude or marginalize individuals who do not conform to heteronormative models. The contributions of queer theory have not been confined to academia but have had significant political and social repercussions. They have influenced debates on LGBTQ+ rights and have increased awareness of the need for inclusive policies for transgender and non-binary individuals. In the legal field, the growing recognition of non-conforming gender identities has led many countries to revise their laws regarding gender recognition, marriage equality, and protection against discrimination.

Another fundamental aspect of queer theory is its application in media and popular culture analysis. Scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jack Halberstam have examined how gender and sexuality are represented in films, literature, and mass cultural products. Through this critical lens, queer theory has helped expose dominant heterosexual norms and promote more inclusive and diverse narratives. In the sports context, queer theory has raised questions about gender categories in competitions. Traditionally, sports have been organized according to a rigid binary division

between men and women, but this structure is increasingly being challenged by transgender and non-binary athletes who demand recognition and respect for their identities. The participation of transgender athletes in competitions has sparked intense debate, leading many sports federations to revise their regulations to ensure greater inclusivity. In particular, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) updated its guidelines in 2021 to allow transgender athletes to compete without necessarily undergoing surgical interventions, instead basing eligibility on principles of fairness and inclusion. This change represents a significant step forward in the fight against discrimination in sports, but the debate remains open and continues to be analyzed by scholars and activists.

Finally, queer theory has contributed to a redefinition of masculinity and femininity in sports. It has challenged the notion that strength, endurance, and competitiveness are inherently masculine qualities and has promoted a more nuanced view of athletic abilities. This has led to greater acceptance of gender diversity in sports and the creation of more inclusive spaces for all athletes, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

2.3 Gender Studies and Their Impact on Sports

Gender studies have had a significant impact on the world of sports, highlighting the disparities in treatment between men and women and the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to the binary gender system. For decades, sports have been considered a predominantly male domain, with roles and opportunities heavily influenced by gender stereotypes. However,

thanks to academic research and civil rights movements, recent years have seen substantial progress toward greater equity and inclusion. One of the main contributions of gender studies in the sports sector has been the demonstration that gender disparities do not stem from insurmountable biological differences but rather from social and cultural structures that limit opportunities for female athletes. Research conducted by institutions such as UNESCO and the European Parliament has shown that women in sports receive less media visibility, lower funding, and reduced support compared to their male counterparts. According to a European Commission report (2022), only 4% of global sports coverage is dedicated to women's sports, while men's sports continue to dominate the media and commercial landscape. Another key issue emerging from gender studies concerns access to sports for young girls. The lack of role models, combined with a culture that still associates certain disciplines with masculinity, discourages many girls from engaging in sports. Recent studies have shown that dropout rates among adolescent girls are significantly higher than those of their male peers, often due to social pressures, lack of family support, and discrimination. In response to this issue, many international organizations have launched programs to promote gender equality in sports, encouraging female participation across all disciplines.

Gender studies have also raised critical questions regarding the regulation of transgender and non-binary athletes' participation in competitions. Traditionally, sports competitions have been organized according to a strict binary division between men and women, excluding those who do not fit into these categories. However, the growing recognition of non-binary and transgender gender identities has led many international sports federations to revise their policies. In 2021, the International Olympic Committee

(IOC) updated its guidelines, stating that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for all sports and that each federation must develop inclusive regulations based on principles of fairness and respect for human rights. The challenges related to the inclusion of transgender individuals in sports remain a subject of global debate. On one hand, there are arguments supporting the need to ensure equal opportunities for all athletes, regardless of their gender identity. On the other hand, some critics argue that competitions should be based on biological criteria to maintain fairness among participants. Gender studies have helped dismantle many discriminatory arguments, demonstrating that sports performance depends on numerous factors, including training, nutrition, and available resources, rather than exclusively on innate physical differences.

Another fundamental aspect of the impact of gender studies on sports is the growing attention to language and media representation of athletes. Historically, women in sports have often been described more for their physical appearance than for their athletic abilities, with disproportionate attention to details such as clothing or personal life. Gender studies have contributed to raising awareness among journalists and industry professionals about the need for fair and respectful representation of female athletes, emphasizing their sporting achievements rather than unrelated aspects. Finally, gender studies have promoted the development of inclusion and diversity policies within sports institutions. Today, many international federations and national organizations are adopting strategies to ensure greater gender equity in leadership and decision-making roles. However, the path toward full equality is still long and requires continuous commitment from institutions, sports organizations, and the media. The impact of gender studies on sports has led to significant changes, but many challenges

remain. The fight for gender equality in sports is far from over, and it will be crucial to continue monitoring progress, promoting new research, and developing effective strategies to ensure fair and inclusive access to all sports disciplines.

2.4 The Future of Gender Studies: New Perspectives and Challenges

Although gender studies have already brought profound changes to society, they continue to evolve and face new challenges. Gender dynamics are constantly shifting, and current research aims to explore not only the persistent inequalities between men and women but also issues related to fluid and non-binary gender identities, intersections with other forms of discrimination, and the impact of digital technologies on the construction of gender identities. One of the most debated topics concerns the future of gender inclusion in institutions and public policies. While many countries have introduced laws to protect gender equality, structural discrimination persists in various fields, including the labor market, education, and sports. New research focuses on analyzing the most effective measures to reduce the gender pay gap, promote greater female representation in leadership roles, and ensure that inclusion policies are effectively implemented and monitored. In the sports sector, the future of gender studies intersects with ongoing discussions about the participation of transgender and intersex athletes in competitions. Sports regulations are still evolving and often vary from federation to federation, creating an inconsistent regulatory framework. The International Olympic Committee has recently adopted a more inclusive approach, but the need to balance fairness and inclusion remains an open challenge. Future research will focus on

developing parameters that ensure the rights of all athletes are respected while avoiding discrimination or unfair advantages in competitions.

Another emerging aspect is the impact of digital technologies on gender issues. Social media, video games, and streaming platforms are redefining how gender is represented and perceived. On the one hand, these tools have provided greater visibility to gender-related issues and created safe spaces for LGBTQ+ communities. On the other hand, new technologies have also exacerbated phenomena such as online sexism, cyberbullying, and misinformation about gender issues. Future studies will analyze these dynamics and develop strategies to combat digital discrimination while promoting a more ethical use of technology. Intersectionality will remain a key concept in the future of gender studies. Analyzing the interconnections between gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and disability is essential for developing effective inclusion policies. Research is increasingly shifting toward a global approach, considering the diverse experiences of individuals based on their cultural and geopolitical contexts. International organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union are investing in research projects and awareness programs to address gender inequalities on a global scale.

Finally, the future of gender studies will see a stronger collaboration between academia and institutions, with a focus on the practical application of theoretical frameworks. The goal will be to transform acquired knowledge into concrete tools for social change through legislative reforms, educational programs, and awareness initiatives in the media and sports.

In conclusion, gender studies will continue to play a central role in shaping the future of modern societies. While many battles have been won, significant challenges remain that require ongoing commitment to ensure a fairer and more inclusive future for all individuals, regardless of their gender or identity.

Conclusion

Gender studies have profoundly redefined the way we understand identity, power relations, and social inequalities. Since their emergence in the 1970s, these studies have contributed to dismantling stereotypes and oppressive structures, promoting a more fluid and inclusive vision of gender and sexual identities. One of their greatest contributions has been to demonstrate that gender is not an immutable biological fact but rather a social and cultural construct that varies over time and across historical contexts. By analyzing gender norms, inequalities, and exclusion mechanisms, gender studies have provided both theoretical and practical tools to promote equality in various fields, including education, labor, politics, and sports. Despite the progress made, numerous challenges remain. The fight for gender equality is still hindered by cultural, political, and economic barriers that limit opportunities for women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The ongoing battles for civil rights, pay equity, and the recognition of non-binary gender identities highlight that the debate on gender's role in society is more relevant than ever. In the world of sports, gender studies have raised awareness of the discrimination faced by female athletes and transgender athletes, yet many unresolved issues persist. The regulation of transgender athletes' participation, the reduction of the gender gap in funding and media coverage of

women's sports, and the fight against gender stereotypes in athletic disciplines all require further research and concrete action.

Looking ahead, gender studies will continue to be a crucial reference point for inclusion policies and cultural transformations. As society evolves and new technologies emerge, the field of gender studies will expand further, addressing new challenges such as sexism in digital media, algorithmic discrimination, and the role of artificial intelligence in perpetuating gender stereotypes. It is essential that the discussion on these issues does not remain confined to the academic sphere but is translated into concrete actions at institutional and social levels. Educating new generations on gender equality, ensuring fairer workplaces and educational environments, and promoting inclusive policies in sports are just some of the objectives that must be pursued in the coming years. Ultimately, gender studies represent a dynamic and continuously evolving research field capable of profoundly influencing our lives and social structures. Their significance lies not only in critiquing existing inequalities but also in providing concrete tools to build a fairer, more equitable, and inclusive world for everyone.

CHAPTER 3

EUROPEAN POLICIES ON GENDER EQUALITY AND THE GENDER GAP IN EUROPE

In recent decades, the European Union has implemented a series of policies aimed at promoting gender equality across all sectors of society, including sports. Gender disparities in sports manifest in various ways: from lower female participation in competitive activities to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, as well as the limited media visibility of women's sports. This chapter will explore the main European policies on gender equality, analyzing the measures adopted to reduce the gender gap in sports and the challenges that still need to be addressed.

3.1 The Main European Policies on Gender Equality

The European Union has long recognized the importance of promoting gender equality as a fundamental principle. As early as the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the principle of equal pay between men and women was established, but it was through the evolution of European directives that more effective policies were developed. Over the years, gender equality has become a priority for European institutions, with an integrated approach aimed at eliminating inequalities in all areas, from sports to the labor market and political representation. European strategies are based on key principles such as *gender mainstreaming*, which integrates a gender perspective into all policies and decision-making processes, and legislative measures designed to combat discrimination.

Some of the main regulatory instruments include:

- Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025: An EU action plan aimed at reducing the gender gap in economic, political, and social spheres. This strategy identifies key areas of intervention, including the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated sectors, the prevention of gender-based violence, and the elimination of the gender pay gap.
- European Charter for Women's Sport (EWS): Promoted by the European Parliament, this charter aims to improve opportunities for women in sports by increasing financial support and ensuring greater inclusion. It serves as a key document for adopting more equitable and inclusive sports policies, with a focus on training, leadership, and representation.
- Gender Equality Action Plan in Sport (2022-2025): An initiative encouraging sports federations to implement equity policies and monitor progress through specific indicators. This plan includes dedicated funding for projects that promote female participation and measures to incentivize the involvement of women in leadership roles within sports organizations.
- Directive 2006/54/EC: Related to equal treatment between men and women in employment and work, also applicable to the sports sector. This directive has been crucial in ensuring that women in sports have access to the same rights, opportunities, and salaries as their male

counterparts.

- EU Strategy for LGBTQI+ Rights 2020-2025: This strategy aims to protect and promote the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals, including those related to sports participation and the fight against discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. The inclusion of transgender and non-binary individuals in sports competitions remains a highly debated issue, and the EU is working to ensure greater equity in access to sports for all.

Beyond these regulations, the European Union actively collaborates with international organizations such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the International Olympic Committee to develop common policies that enhance gender equality in sports. The Council of Europe, in particular, has adopted specific recommendations to encourage women's participation at all levels of sports activities, from athletes to coaches and federation leaders. The European Commission funds numerous projects through the Erasmus+ Sport program, supporting initiatives that promote gender equality and combat discrimination in sports activities. These projects include educational programs to raise awareness among coaches and sports managers about gender issues and initiatives aimed at encouraging girls to pursue careers in sports, challenging the stereotypes that still limit their opportunities. Furthermore, the recent approval of the Paris Declaration on Gender Equality in Sport represents another significant step forward. Signed by numerous EU member states, this declaration reaffirms the commitment to eliminating all forms of discrimination and actively promoting gender equality policies in sports. Key measures proposed include increasing funding for women's sports,

promoting inclusive leadership policies, and adopting guidelines to improve the representation of female athletes in the media.

Despite these important advances, challenges remain. The implementation of European gender equality policies varies significantly among member states, with some countries adopting strong reforms while others struggle to implement effective measures. For this reason, the EU continues to closely monitor progress, promoting the adoption of best practices and encouraging the exchange of experiences between countries. European policies for gender equality in sports are therefore a crucial element in building a fairer and more inclusive system. The path toward equality is still long, but with continuous institutional commitment and collaboration with key stakeholders in the sports sector, it is possible to reduce the gender gap and ensure equal opportunities for all athletes, regardless of gender.

3.2 The gender gap in sports in Europe: data and analysis

Despite regulatory progress, the gender gap in sports remains a significant issue. Data collected by the European Commission and organizations such as UNESCO show that:

- Women represent only 37% of registered athletes in European sports federations.
- Female presence in sports governance roles is below 20%.
- Media coverage of women's sports events is less than 10% compared to men's.
- The pay gap between male and female athletes is still

significant, with some disciplines showing differences exceeding 50%.

The causes of this disparity are multiple, ranging from cultural stereotypes to reduced funding for women's sports. The perception that certain sports are "male" or "female" continues to influence access opportunities for female athletes, limiting their professional growth. Beyond general data, it is important to analyze the situation in specific sports disciplines. For example, in team sports such as football, volleyball, and basketball, men's teams receive significantly greater financial support than their female counterparts. UEFA, for instance, has recently increased funding for women's football, but the gap with men's football remains enormous: the men's Champions League awards up to €2 billion in prize money, whereas the women's Champions League stops at around €24 million. Another relevant statistic concerns women's presence in leadership roles. According to a study by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), less than 10% of European sports federations have a female president. Additionally, only 14% of high-level team coaches are women, a figure that demonstrates how difficult it is for women to access leadership positions in sports. The gender gap also affects career opportunities after competitive sports. Many former female athletes struggle to enter the field of sports management, as key positions are often assigned to former male athletes. The lack of training programs and support for women aspiring to managerial careers in sports further sustains the gender imbalance. Another crucial factor is the media representation of women's sports. According to a report by the Women's Sport Trust, women's competitions receive less than 4% of total sports media coverage in Europe. Additionally, when women's sports are covered, media attention often focuses more on athletes' physical appearance than on their performance. This

narrative contributes to reinforcing harmful stereotypes and reduces the appeal of women's sports for sponsors and investors.

Despite these obstacles, there are positive signs. Events such as the Women's Football World Cup and the Olympics have recorded a significant increase in audience numbers and media coverage in recent years, demonstrating that public interest in women's sports exists when properly promoted. However, for the gender gap to be truly reduced, structural policies are needed to promote equal access, increase media visibility, and ensure greater economic support for female athletes. The EU and international sports organizations are working to address these disparities, but achieving concrete change requires constant commitment and action from governments, federations, media, and sponsors.

3.3 Strategies to Reduce the Gender Gap in Sports

To address the issue of gender disparity in sports, European institutions, sports federations, and non-governmental organizations have developed targeted strategies that operate on multiple levels: from promoting access to sports for girls to increasing female representation in leadership roles, and improving media coverage of women's sports events. One of the first steps to reducing the gender gap in sports is ensuring adequate financial support for female athletes and women's teams. The EU, through programs such as Erasmus+ Sport, has allocated funds to encourage women's participation in sports and support initiatives aimed at improving visibility and opportunities for female athletes. Many national governments have adopted similar policies, but funding distribution often remains unbalanced in favor of men's sports.

A positive example is the Women's Sports Equity Plan, adopted in France in 2021, which provides for a gradual increase in funding for the women's sector and incentives for companies that sponsor women's teams and athletes. In Spain, the Women's Sports Law introduced measures to ensure better working conditions and fairer contracts for professional female athletes. Another effective tool to ensure gender equality is the introduction of gender quotas in decision-making roles within sports federations and organizing committees. In countries such as Sweden, Norway, and France, legal requirements have been introduced to ensure a minimum female representation of 40% on the boards of major sports federations. At the international level, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has launched a program to increase female representation in Olympic organizing committees and the boards of affiliated federations. This type of measure helps rebalance decision-making power and breaks down barriers that prevent women from accessing leadership roles in sports.

Cultural Perception and Awareness Campaigns

The cultural perception of women's sports plays a crucial role in its growth and acceptance. Many awareness campaigns have proven effective in challenging gender stereotypes and promoting positive role models of successful female athletes.

Examples of successful campaigns include:

→ "This Girl Can" (United Kingdom) – An initiative launched by the British government to encourage women of all ages to practice sports, breaking down prejudices related to physical appearance and performance.

→ "Women in Sport" (European Commission) – A project aimed at

improving media representation of female athletes and stimulating cultural change in the media.

→ "Equal Play, Equal Pay" – Campaigns promoted by professional female footballers to demand equal pay compared to male colleagues, with support from organizations such as FIFPro and UEFA.

Enhancing Media Coverage of Women's Sports

Another key factor in reducing the gender gap is ensuring greater media coverage of women's sports events. Currently, less than 10% of sports broadcasts feature women's sports, with direct consequences on the popularity of the disciplines and sponsorship investments.

To counter this trend, several initiatives have been launched to improve the visibility of female athletes. For example, the European Union has proposed the adoption of media guidelines to encourage a balanced portrayal of women's sports.

Additional strategies include:

- Agreements with television networks, such as those signed in Germany and the Netherlands, to ensure the broadcast of women's sports events on national channels during prime time.
- Development of dedicated digital platforms, such as DAZN Women's Football, an exclusive channel for broadcasting women's football matches.

Closing the Leadership Gap in Sports

To bridge the gender gap in sports leadership, training and mentoring programs have been launched to support women aspiring to become coaches, referees, or sports executives.

Examples of good practices include:

- UEFA's "Women in Leadership" initiative
- UNESCO's "She Leads" program

At the national level, many countries are introducing incentives to encourage women's entry into technical and managerial roles, including:

- Scholarships for training courses
- Support measures to help women balance sports careers with family life

These initiatives represent significant steps toward reducing the gender gap in sports, but continuous efforts are needed to ensure lasting and structural change.

3.4 Future challenges and prospects

Despite the progress made in promoting gender equality in sports, many challenges persist, requiring targeted solutions and a constant commitment from institutions, sports federations, and civil society. The cultural change necessary to eliminate the gender gap in sports is a long and complex process that must be addressed through a systemic and multidisciplinary approach.

One of the main obstacles to gender equality in sports is the persistence of gender stereotypes, which influence the perception and participation of women in sports from childhood. Many sports are still perceived as either "male" or "female," limiting opportunities for girls and discouraging their participation in disciplines considered more "physical" or "competitive." A significant example is football: despite the growing popularity of women's football, many clubs and youth academies continue to primarily invest in the men's sector, leaving women's teams with fewer resources and growth opportunities. To overcome this gap, it is essential to work on school and sports education, promoting positive role models and breaking down cultural barriers that limit girls' choices. The gap in financial resources allocated to women's sports compared to men's sports represents another major issue. Many women's sports receive significantly less funding than their male counterparts, negatively impacting infrastructure, athletes' salaries, and the quality of technical and athletic training.

According to a European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) report, the budget allocated to women's sports in major European professional leagues is, on average, 60% lower than that of men's sports. This disparity is also reflected in sponsorship contracts, prize money for competitions, and career opportunities for professional female athletes. To close this gap, measures are needed to encourage investment in women's sports, including salary equity requirements and support policies for federations that promote gender equality. Despite the increase in female participation in sports, leadership and technical positions continue to be dominated by men. Currently, less than 20% of sports executives in Europe are women, and the percentage of female coaches in professional teams is even lower.

To address this issue, it is necessary to promote specialized training programs for women aspiring to leadership roles in sports, as well as introduce policies that encourage balanced representation on the boards of sports federations. The adoption of gender quotas, which has already been successfully tested in some European countries, could be an effective strategy to accelerate gender equity in decision-making roles. Another emerging challenge concerns the inclusion of transgender and non-binary athletes in sports competitions. In recent years, various federations have introduced regulations to govern the participation of transgender athletes, but the issue remains highly controversial and is often addressed with discriminatory regulations. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has recently updated its guidelines on the participation of transgender athletes, promoting an approach based on equity and inclusion. However, many international federations, such as World Athletics and FINA, have adopted restrictive regulations that limit the participation of transgender women in women's competitions. The debate remains open and requires further scientific studies and inclusive policies to ensure fair competition for all athletes. The underrepresentation of women's sports in the media is another significant barrier to gender equality. The lack of media coverage reduces sponsorship opportunities for female athletes and limits access for new generations of girls who could find inspiration in female sports role models. To overcome this barrier, European institutions are promoting media guidelines to ensure fair coverage of women's sports events. Additionally, the rise of specialized streaming platforms, such as DAZN Women's Football, is helping to increase visibility for women's competitions and create new opportunities for female athletes.

Looking to the future, it is crucial that gender equity policies in sports become an integral part of sports development strategies at

the local, national, and international levels. Institutions must collaborate with federations, businesses, and media to create a fairer and more sustainable ecosystem, where women have the same opportunities for success as men.

Future prospects include:

- Greater incentives for investment in women's sports, with dedicated funds and tax benefits for sponsors supporting female athletes.

- Reforms in salary policies, ensuring equal pay for professional male and female athletes.

- Introduction of educational programs in schools, raising awareness from childhood about gender equality in sports.

- Collaborations between institutions and media, to ensure a fairer representation of women's sports and female athletes.

The path to full gender equality in sports is still long, but through joint efforts and profound cultural change, it is possible to create a future where sports are truly accessible to everyone, regardless of gender or identity.

Conclusion

The gender gap in sports remains a significant challenge at both the European and global levels, despite regulatory progress and awareness initiatives. The analysis of European policies, strategies implemented, and persistent issues demonstrates that gender equality in sports cannot be achieved without a joint and continuous commitment from institutions, sports federations, and civil society. The measures adopted so far have contributed to

improving women's participation in sports, but the path toward true equity is still long. The disparities in funding, media visibility, and career opportunities for female athletes show that change must be structural and involve all levels of the sports system. The implementation of gender quotas in leadership roles, increased funding for women's disciplines, and the promotion of positive role models in the media are just some of the necessary actions to accelerate the equity process. Another crucial aspect is the fight against gender stereotypes that influence sports education from childhood. Schools and sports academies must play an active role in promoting an inclusive and bias-free environment, where boys and girls can freely choose the sport they wish to practice without cultural conditioning. At the same time, the growing focus on the inclusion of transgender and non-binary athletes shows how the concept of gender in sports is evolving, requiring new regulations that ensure fairness and respect for all identities. The debate on these topics will continue to grow in the coming years and will require an approach based on scientific data and human rights. Future prospects depend on the effective implementation of gender equality policies and the willingness to transform sports into a truly inclusive and fair environment. The active involvement of governments, sports organizations, businesses, and the media will be crucial in ensuring lasting change. Increased funding, the adoption of fairer policies, and greater media visibility for women's sports will be key to achieving a future where men and women have equal opportunities in the sports sector. Ultimately, gender equality in sports is not just a matter of social justice but also an opportunity to enhance talent and improve the sports sector as a whole. Investing in gender equity means creating a more competitive, healthy, and sustainable environment for future generations of athletes, strengthening the value of sports as a tool for inclusion, growth, and social development.

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