

“Women’s Sport is Not a Real Sport”: Negative Stereotypes about Sportswomen and the Experience of Gender Inequality in Handball in Croatia

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of the study was to determine how often young handball players encountered negative stereotypes towards sportswomen. In addition, we examined whether young sportswomen who were differentially exposed to those stereotypes differed in their perception of gender inequality regarding training conditions and sporting achievement appraisal of boys and girls in their sports clubs. The study involved 522 handball players (289 boys and 233 girls) whose ages ranged from 14 to 17 years ($M = 14.75$; $SD = 0.96$). The results showed that 94.5 % of boys and 95.6 % of girls who participated in the study have heard negative stereotypes towards sportswomen and/or the sports in which they participate. Young sportswomen were more often exposed to the attitudes according to which sports activities are not suitable for girls ($U = 28188,00$, $p < 0,05$) as well as to the attitudes implying that women’s sports are not attractive ($U = 28111,00$, $p < 0,05$). Furthermore, girls who were more often exposed to negative stereotypes towards sportswomen more frequently reported that boys and girls in their club trained in unequal conditions ($U = 3551,000$, $p < 0,001$) and that their sports achievements were not valued equally ($U = 3353,500$, $p < 0,001$). The obtained results indicate the need to undertake measures to combat the negative stereotypes towards sportswomen and enable equal training conditions and equal sports achievements evaluation for boys and girls who participate in sports.

Key words: sport, gender stereotypes, gender inequality, Croatia

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INTRODUCTION

Participation in sports may bring numerous physical and psychosocial benefits for young sportspersons, girls and boys alike (Bailey, 2006; Eime et al., 2013; Hills, King & Armstrong, 2007). Sporting activities improve health-related fitness in adolescents (Beets & Pitetti, 2005); they have a relevant role in overweight and obesity prevention (Ring-Dimitriou et al., 2019); and their association with active lifestyle in adulthood is well evidenced (Kjønniksen, Anderssen & Wold, 2009). Young men and women who regularly participate in physical activities and/or in organized sporting activities obtain higher scores on quality-of-life, self-esteem and emotional well-being scales, show reduced symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety symptoms, and more rarely report on suicidal tendencies (Bailey, 2006; McMahon et al., 2017; Rakovac et al., 2013; Taliaferro et al., 2008). Apart from its positive effects on personal level, sport has a high potential to generate positive effects on societal level because it is founded upon a specific system of values that promotes intercultural dialogue, equality, mutual respect and individual improvement, regardless of the level of abilities and skills, gender, skin colour, language, religion, political beliefs, nationality and national heritage, sexual orientation, educational level or social status (European Commission, 2007).

Although positive effects of sporting activities have been determined in adolescents of both sexes, research in this area systematically indicate that girls and women of all age categories are less physically active and that they are rarely engaged in sporting activities (Inchley et al., 2020; Jurakić & Pedišić, 2012). In an effort to better understand the psychosocial mechanisms that lead to less involvement in and more frequent withdrawal from sports among girls, it is important to keep in mind that, in the context of gender equality, sport often does not support the principles of Olympism on which it is based (Rayburn et al., 2015). In accordance with the research findings indicating that the realization of the positive potential of sport largely depends upon the social values and other relevant characteristics of a broader society (e.g., Bartoluci & Baršić, 2020; Pfister, 2010), the authors in this area emphasize the importance of studying social factors that are related to less frequent participation in and more frequent withdrawal from sports among girls, which includes exposure to negative stereotypes about sportswomen and the experience of gender inequality and discrimination in sports (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014; Jones & Greer, 2011; Rayburn et al., 2015).

Stereotypes represent a set of beliefs about personal characteristics, personality traits and behaviours that are attributed to all members of a certain group (Leyens, Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1994). Typical stereotypes about sportswomen underestimate their physical abilities and skills, which negatively affects their motivation to participate in sporting activities as well as social acceptance of girls and women who are engaged in sports (Chalabaev et al., 2013; Kauer & Krane, 2006). Sports-

women who participate in sports of a less pronounced aesthetic component or in sports traditionally considered as "masculine" are more often declared "tomboyish" and unfeminine (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Rayburn et al., 2015). As a result, some young girls experience a conflict between the need to meet social norms related to gender-appropriate behaviours and the desire to participate in sporting activities (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002), which is especially noticeable among sportswomen who participate in team sports (Rayburn et al., 2015).

In the background of the traditional gender stereotypes is a notion that women are more delicate, fragile, and sensitive than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002) what implies that women possess characteristics opposite to traits such as aggressiveness and competitiveness, which are considered important prerequisites for significant sports achievements (Ross & Shinew, 2008; Wellard, 2002). Sports that are considered "masculine" are described as challenging, aggressive, and fast-paced activities that require high levels of strength and endurance (Koivula, 2001), which contributes to the stereotype that some sports are too demanding, too difficult, or too harsh for girls. Expressions such as "You run/throw like a girl" imply that sports performance of girls and women is, as a rule, conspicuously poor, so those expressions are often used to insult and belittle participants in sports activities (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). In contrast, in the context of complimenting girls' athletic prowess, it is not uncommon to hear that female athletes display masculine traits (McCallister, Blinde & Phillips, 2003; Ross & Shinew, 2008). The belief that sports activities are predominantly intended for the male part of the population is often established at a very young age. In accordance with the mentioned, research results show that when responding to the task of drawing a person engaged in sports, the majority of boys and girls drew a male person (Colley, Berman & Van Millingen, 2005).

The lower frequency of media coverage of women in sports as well as the specific way in which sportswomen are portrayed in the media, significantly contribute to the formation and maintenance of the stereotype according to which sport is neither an activity intended nor appropriate for girls (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Kane, LaVoi & Fink, 2013; Trolan, 2013). A study conducted by the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality in Croatia demonstrated a significant imbalance in the representation of male and female athletes in Croatian media (Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova, 2013). The study results showed that over a three-month period, 94% of sports news on the nine most visited internet portals in the country featured male athletes, while only 6% featured female athletes (Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova, 2013). It was also determined that, within those few media reports about women in sports, sportswomen were often portrayed in a sexist manner, i.e., in a way that diverted the reader's attention from sports achievements to their physical attributes. Gender-biased expectations related to the quality of sports performance which, contrary to the actual differences, favour boys, were

also found among physical education teachers (Chalabaev et al., 2009) who play an important role in children's decisions to enter the sports system. All the mentioned considered, it is not surprising that girls underestimate their own sports skills and abilities (Biddle et al., 2011) and are less motivated to participate in sports (Knisel et al., 2009).

According to *expectancy-value model* (Eccles, 1983), the behaviour of individuals can be explained on the basis of *expectations of success*, i.e., on the perceived probability of achieving success in a certain activity and the *subjective value of the activity*, which combines the degree to which it is important for a person to perform an activity well (achievement value), intrinsic motivation for performing the activity (intrinsic value) and the perception of the degree to which a certain activity is useful for achieving personal goals (utilitarian value). According to the same author, the expectation of success and the subjective value of an activity are formed under the influence of gender roles, gender stereotypes related to a certain activity, beliefs of significant others (e.g., parents and teachers) and are based on one's own experience in that activity (Eccles, 1983). Previous research showed that girls attribute less subjective value to sports and self-perceive themselves less competent in sports activities than boys (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), in which gender identity (Guillet et al., 2006) and gender appropriateness of sports (Schmalz & Davison, 2006) largely determine the perception of one's own abilities and the subjective value of a particular sport. In accordance with the basic assumption of expectancy-value model (Eccles, 1983), the results of the mentioned research indicate that the internalization of gender stereotypes affects the self-concept of one's own abilities and, consequently, their behaviour. However, Schmader, Johns and Forbes (2008) point out that the internalization of stereotypes does not need to occur – the very presence of stereotypes in a social environment can affect the opinion, motivation, and behaviour of members of a stereotyped group. In other words, the activation of negative stereotypes can impair the quality of sports performance even in female athletes who are successful and feel competent in their sport (Chalabaev et al., 2008), thereby starting a vicious circle that contributes to the maintenance and reinforcement of existing stereotypes. Furthermore, the research results of Hively and El-Alayli (2014) show that, in a task that required a high degree of concentration, female athletes' performance was worse if before performing the task they had learned that gender differences were found in earlier executions of the same task. The authors explain the obtained results in the context of the so-called *stereotype threat*, i.e., by a phenomenon that manifests itself in a poorer performance by members of a stereotyped group when they become aware of the existing negative stereotypes (Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). Stereotype threat, which can be triggered by a casual negative comment about female athletes, can impair the quality of sports performance through various mechanisms, including an increase in motivation to avoid failure, an increase in stress

and anxiety, a decrease in working memory capacity, and by directing the focus of attention on suppressing negative thoughts and emotions at the expense of sports performance (Schmader, Johns & Forbes, 2008).

The results of a qualitative research (Rayburn et al., 2015), in which female athletes from various sports answered questions about the characteristics of gender stereotypes and their experience of gender discrimination in sports, indicated that stereotypes related to girls' sports performance significantly violated the dignity of female athletes. In addition, most of the female athletes who participated in the study believed that men's sports receive more recognition, and a quarter of the participants did not believe in the possibility of establishing gender equality in sports. In another qualitative study with female athletes participating in boxing, it was determined that professional female boxers were significantly exposed to negative stereotypes, harassment and discrimination during their training sessions and sports competitions (Halbert, 1997), which indicated the far-reaching negative consequences of the attitude claiming certain sports activities are intended exclusively for men.

Previous research shows that stereotypes play an important role in shaping and maintaining social inequalities because they offer explanations based on stable, dispositional characteristics of members of a certain group, thus making them seemingly justified and inevitable (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Accordingly, gender differences in sporting activities participation have for a long time been attributed to different interests of boys and girls, which were considered to be determined predominantly by biological differences between them (Chalabaev et al., 2013). However, recently, more and more authors express their conviction that gender differences in sport participation are socially conditioned and emphasize the importance of studying the specific social influences to which young female athletes, especially those involved in sports whose characteristics do not support the conventional features of femininity, are exposed (Bevan et al., 2020; Chalabaev et al., 2013). Bearing in mind the short- and long-term positive health effects of engaging in sports during adolescence (Alfano et al., 2002; Hills et al., 2007; Eime et al., 2013; Jewett et al., 2014) as well as the negative health effects of insufficient physical activity (Hills et al., 2007; Rodriguez-Ayllon et al., 2019), the lower level of involvement of girls in sports activities and their more frequent withdrawal from it – which are partly conditioned by negative stereotypes towards female athletes (Boiché et al., 2014) – may consequently lead to gender inequalities in the health status of women and men of different age groups (Chalabaev et al., 2013).

Handball is one of the most popular sports in Croatia and many boys and girls are engaged in it (Središnji državni ured za šport//Central State Office for Sports, 2019). The research of gender stereotypes and gender inequality in handball can contribute to a better understanding of the specific psychosocial factors to which

girls who do “masculine” sports in Croatia are exposed (Guillet et al., 2006). From a practical point of view, the results of the research can serve as a basis for creating campaigns aimed at combating gender stereotypes and gender discrimination in sports.

Based on everything mentioned, the aim of the study was to determine the extent to which young male and female handball players in Croatia are exposed to negative stereotypes towards sportswomen, and to examine whether female handball players who are exposed to different levels of negative stereotypes differ in their experience of gender inequality in the form of different training conditions and different evaluations of the sporting achievements of young men and women who train in the same sports club.

METHODS

Participants

To be able to compete for their club at the county, regional or national level, boys and girls who practice handball in the Republic of Croatia must be registered and licensed by the Croatian Handball Federation. National regional leagues – organized for young handball players – are open to all clubs, and the best clubs from the aforementioned leagues compete in the finals of the Croatian Championship. Participants in the research were 289 boys and 233 girls who competed in the 2019 finals for the title of the Croatian Champion. Their age ranged from 14 to 17 years ($M=14.75$; $SD=0.96$). The majority of participants started to practise handball at the eight years of age ($M=8.55$; $SD=1.97$) and at the time of the research their average training experience was about six years ($M=6.30$; $SD=2.12$). All the participants were active handball competitors; out of 522 participants, 80% played handball at the national and 20% at the international level.

Participants came from five regional handball leagues for young players: there were 74 (14.2%) athletes of both genders from Region 1 (Karlovačka, Primorsko-goranska, Ličko-senjska and Istarska County); 179 (34.3%) handballers from Region 2 (Zagrebačka, Krapinsko-zagorska, Sisačko-moslavačka County and the City of Zagreb); 125 (23.9%) players from Region 3 (Zadarska, Šibensko-kninska, Splitsko-dalmatinska and Dubrovačko-neretvanska County); 45 (8.6%) young athletes from Region 4 (Virovitičko-podravska, Požeško-slavonska, Brodsko-posavska, Osječko-baranjska and Vukovarsko-srijemska County); and 95 (18.2%) participants from Region 5 (Varaždinska, Koprivničko-križevačka, Bjelovarsko-bilogorska and Međimurska County). Four research participants (0.8%) did not answer that question.

Research procedures

The survey was organized during the final tournaments of the Croatian Handball Championships for cadets and younger cadets of both genders. Participants filled in the questionnaire using the paper-pencil method in rooms adapted to the needs of the research. On average, it took participants 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Two weeks prior to the date of survey, young athletes' parents were informed in writing about the research goals and procedures. Participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary. Research participants signed an informed consent form to participate in the research. It was emphasized in the consent they signed that they could withdraw from participation at any time and without any explanation. After completing the questionnaire, the lead researcher of the study was available to answer questions related to the research topic. The research procedure was carried out in accordance with the Code of Ethics for Research with Children (Ajduković & Kolesarić, 2003). The design and implementation of the research were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Croatian Psychological Chamber (on 15th March 2019).

INSTRUMENTS

(1) Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes Questionnaire

The *Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes Questionnaire* was constructed for the purposes of this research. The questionnaire consists of a total of six items, and the participants were asked to estimate, on a scale of four degrees (0 – never, 1 – rarely, 2 – sometimes, 3 – often), how often they had heard each of the listed statements in their milieu. The applied components model of factor analysis with the Guttman-Kaiser criterion extracted two significant principal components that together explained 71.66% of variance – the first principal component explained 52.31% ($\lambda=3.14$) and the second 19.34% ($\lambda=1.16$) of the variance of questionnaire items. The oblimin rotation with the Kaiser's normalisation determined two factors. One factor embraced three items whose contents indicated that sport was not intended for girls ("Girls are too sensitive to be successful in sports."; "Certain sports are too difficult for girls."; "Certain sports are too rough for girls."), whereas the items grouped on the other factor referred to lower attractiveness or a lower value of women's sport ("Performance of women's teams is boring."; "Women's sport does not have its own audience."; "Women's sport is not a 'real' sport."). The communalities of the items ranged from 0.56 to 0.84. Parallel projections of items predominantly saturating a particular factor ranged from 0.71 to 0.93 for the

first and from 0.70 to 0.91 for the second factor, whereas parallel projections of the items on the non-dominant factor were of considerably lower absolute values, ranging from 0.03 to 0.24. Based on the established factor structure it was proposed to compute the participants' scores on the subscales *Sport is not intended for girls* and *Women's sport is not attractive* as arithmetic means of scores on the items predominantly saturating the respective factor. The total result on the *Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes Questionnaire* was computed as an arithmetic mean of answers on all the questionnaire items, where a higher value indicated a more frequent exposure to stereotypes. As for the sample of girls, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales *Sport is not intended for girls* and *Women's sport is not attractive*, and for the total result were 0.87, 0.72 and 0.83, respectively. For the sample of boys, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales *Sport is not intended for girls* and *Women's sport is not attractive*, and for the total result were 0.82, 0.72 and 0.78, respectively.

(2) Perception of Gender (In)Equality in Sport Questionnaire

The female participants also filled in the *Perception of Gender (In)Equality in Sport Questionnaire* which was also constructed for the purposes of this research. The questionnaire consists of six items aimed at investigating the perception of equality between female and male athletes in the context of training work conditions and in the context of sports achievement appraisal. Female participants were asked to mark on a five-point scale (from 1 – *I completely disagree* to 5 – *I completely agree*) to which extent they do or do not agree with the statements on equality between female and male athletes in their handball clubs. The applied components model of factor analysis with the Guttman-Kaiser criterion extracted two significant principal components that together explained 69.79% of variance – the first principal component explained 52.91% ($\lambda=3.17$) and the second 16.88% ($\lambda=1.01$) of the variance of the *Perception of Gender (In)Equality in Sport Questionnaire* items. The oblimin rotation with the Kaiser's normalisation confirmed the two theoretically assumed factors. As expected, the items referring to training work conditions ("Girls have equally good training work conditions as boys."; "Girls have equally quality equipment as boys."; "Girls have their practice scheduled at equally good times as boys") were grouped on one factor, whereas the other factor contained items referring to sport achievements appraisal ("Girls' sports achievements are equally valued as boys' achievements."; "For the same sports achievements women's and men's teams receive the same awards."; "Competitions of women's and men's teams are equally represented in media."). The communalities of items ranged from 0.66 to 0.74. Parallel projections of the items that predominantly saturated the first factor ranged from 0.82 to 0.87 and parallel projections of the items saturating predominantly the second factor ranged from 0.64 to 0.91. Parallel projections of the items

on the non-dominant factor ranged from 0.00 to 0.29. Based on the established factor structure it was proposed to compute the participants' scores on the subscales *Training work conditions* and *Sports achievements appraisal* as arithmetic means of scores on the items predominantly saturating the respective factor. The total result on the *Perception of Gender (In)Equality in Sport Questionnaire* was computed as an arithmetic mean of answers on all the questionnaire items, where a lower value denoted a higher degree of gender inequality. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the subscale *Training work conditions* was 0.73, whereas it was 0.76 for the subscale *Sports achievements appraisal*. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.80 for the total result on the *Perception of Gender (In)Equality in Sport Questionnaire*.

The results of the analyses revealed that the *Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes Questionnaire* and *Perception of Gender (In)Equality in Sports Questionnaire* had satisfactory metric characteristics, so it was justified to use them in this and future research.

In addition, the participants answered a series of questions about their demographic characteristics and characteristics of their sports experience (when they started to practice handball, for how long they have been playing handball, and at which competition level they participated).

RESULTS

The data were statistically processed by the R (ver. 4.0) and SPSS (ver. 25) programs.

Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes

The analysis of data distribution revealed that on all subscales data distributions deviated significantly from the normal distribution, therefore non-parametric statistical methods were used for further data analysis. As expected, the results of the study showed that there were significant differences between male and female participants in terms of exposure to negative stereotypes about female athletes. Specifically, young female athletes reported being more frequently exposed to the belief that sports are not meant for girls and that women's sports are less attractive (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive indicators and the analysis of gender differences across subscales of the *Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes Questionnaire*

	Boys			Girls			Mann-Whitney U-test	z-value
	Mdn	R _{min-max}	Mrang	Mdn	R _{min-max}	Mrang		
Sport is not intended for girls	1,33	0 - 3	241,31	1,67	0 - 3	273,94	28188,00	-2,500*
Women's sport is not attractive	0,67	0 - 3	240,90	1,00	0 - 3	272,24	28111,00	-2,421*

* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$

It was established that 94.5% of male and 95.6% of female handball players had encountered some of the mentioned forms of negative stereotypes about female athletes. A detailed analysis of the degree to which young male and female athletes were exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes is presented in Table 2. Most frequently the participants were faced with the attitude that certain sports are too rough for girls. Such a statement was heard by 87.4% male players and 84.5% female handballers. Further, most participants heard that some sports were too difficult for girls (81.9% of boys and 82.3% of girls) and that girls were too sensitive to be successful in sports (61.8% of boys and 65.1% of girls). Attitudes indicating that performances of women's teams are boring were heard by 62.6% of boys and 58.9% of girls, and a significant number of the boys (47.2%) and girls (58.6%) heard that women's sport did not have its own audience. Half of the girls and more than 40% of boys reported hearing the belief that women's sport was not a *real, genuine* sport.

To execute an overall comparison between boys and girls with regard to the frequency of their exposure to different forms of stereotypes about female athletes, a nonparametric multivariate analysis of variance (multivariate equivalent of Mann-Whitney U the test) was performed (Oja, 2010). R package "MNM" (Nordhausen, Mottonen, & Oja, 2018) was used for the analysis. The nonparametric multivariate analysis of variance did not identify any significant differences between boys and girls in the total exposure to various forms of stereotypes about female athletes (Hotelling's $Q^2 = 107.05$, $p = 0.686$). The analysis of differences in the frequency of exposure to a particular negative stereotype about female athletes showed that young female athletes heard the claim: *Girls are too sensitive to be successful in sports* significantly more often. Compared to male athletes, young female athletes in their environment more often heard comments suggesting that women's sport did not have its own audience and that it was not a *real, genuine*

sport. Boys and girls alike are exposed to stereotypes that some sports are too difficult or too rough for girls as well as to the attitude that women's team performances are boring (Table 2).

Table 2. Exposure to negative stereotypes about female athletes and women's sport

Answer to the question: How often have you heard the following claim?	Boys % (n)					Girls % (n)					Mann-Whitney U-test	z-value
	Mdn (R _{min-max})	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Mdn (R _{min-max})	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often		
Girls are too sensitive to be successful in sports.	1,00 (0-3)	38,2 (109)	34,7 (99)	23,9 (68)	3,2 (9)	1,00 (0-3)	34,9 (81)	19,8 (46)	25,0 (58)	20,3 (47)	27195.00	-3.634***
Certain sports are too difficult for girls.	2,00 (0-3)	18,1 (52)	23,7 (68)	35,2 (101)	23,0 (66)	2,00 (0-3)	17,7 (41)	20,7 (48)	32,8 (76)	28,9 (67)	31414.00	-1.149
Certain sports are too rough for girls.	2,00 (0-3)	12,6 (36)	22,1 (63)	38,9 (111)	26,3 (75)	2,00 (0-3)	15,5 (36)	15,1 (35)	35,3 (82)	34,1 (79)	30888.00	-1.346
Performances of women's teams are boring.	1,00 (0-3)	37,4 (107)	28,0 (80)	18,5 (53)	16,1 (46)	1,00 (0-3)	41,1 (95)	25,5 (59)	18,6 (43)	14,7 (34)	31878.00	-.717
Women's sport does not have its own audience.	0,00 (0-3)	52,8 (149)	26,6 (75)	14,9 (42)	5,7 (16)	1,00 (0-3)	41,4 (96)	21,6 (50)	17,7 (41)	19,4 (45)	26572.00	-3.925**
Women's sport is not "a real" sport.	0,00 (0-3)	59,4 (170)	24,5 (70)	11,5 (33)	4,5 (13)	0,50 (0-3)	50,0 (115)	25,7 (59)	14,8 (34)	9,6 (22)	29040.00	-2.536*

* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$ *** $p < 0,001$

Perception of gender inequality in relation to the level of exposure to negative stereotypes about sportswomen

Furthermore, we examined whether the girls who were exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes to different degrees differed in their experience of gender inequality in their sports club with regard to the training work conditions and evaluation of the sports achievement of young handball players. To get an answer to that question, we divided the female athletes into two groups according to their total score achieved on the *Exposure to Negative Stereotypes about Female Athletes Questionnaire*. The first group (the lower-exposure group) included girls who had never heard negative stereotypes about sportswomen or heard them rarely (value of the total score < 2.00), while the second group (the higher-exposure group) included girls who had heard negative stereotypes about sportswomen occasionally or often (total score value > 2.00). The analysis of differences in the experience of gender inequality between these two groups is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive indicators and the analysis of differences in the perception of gender equality among young female handballers who were exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes to various degrees

	Low exposure to stereotypes				High exposure to stereotypes				Mann-Whitney U-test	z-value
	N	Mdn	$R_{min-max}$	Mrang	N	Mdn	$R_{min-max}$	Mrang		
Training work conditions	163	4,33	1,00 – 5,00	121,21	61	3,67	1,67 – 5,00	89,21	3551,00	-3,321 ***
Sports achievements evaluations	161	3,33	1,00 – 5,00	120,17	60	2,83	1,00 – 5,00	86,39	3353,50	-3,508 ***
Total result	161	3,67	1,33 – 5,00	121,03	60	3,25	1,50 – 5,00	84,09	3215,50	-3,826 ***

*** $p \leq 0,001$

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the girls who were exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes to a higher degree reported on unequal status of girls and boys in their common handball club significantly more often.

DISCUSSION

Quantitative research of the degree to which young men and women engaged in "masculine" sports are exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes, and examination of differences in the experience of gender inequality in sports depending on the degree of exposure to negative stereotypes, is the first research of this type in Croatia. The obtained results show that young sportsmen and sportswomen are frequently exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes. Further, girls who are more often exposed to negative stereotypes toward sportswomen more often state that boys and girls in their club do not practise under equal work conditions and that the success of male and female athletes in their club is valued differently. In the last ten years, a series of global measures, taken with the aim of greater inclusion of girls in sports, led to a significant increase in the number of female athletes (European Commission, 2014). Proponents of equal opportunities for the inclusion of boys and girls in sports activities hoped that the increase in the number of female athletes would be accompanied by a change in the social perception of girls and women in sports (Ross & Shinew, 2008). However, empirical findings show that optimistic predictions did not come true (McCallister et al., 2003; Rayburn et al., 2015; Scheadler & Wagstaff, 2018), which is also confirmed by the results of our research.

As expected, female athletes significantly more frequently encounter the stereotype implying that sport is not an activity intended for girls and the stereotype that women's sport is not attractive. Although stereotypical claims are more often addressed to girls, athletes of both sexes are exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes, which is evidenced by the fact that 94.5% of male participants and 95.6% of female participants encountered negative stereotypes of this type. Young athletes of both sexes are most often exposed to stereotypes according to which some sports are too rough or too difficult for girls. The obtained results are consistent with empirical findings indicating that stereotypes about male and female sports are deeply rooted in contemporary society (Koivula, 2001; Pfister, 2010). Previous research has shown that the internalization of the attitude that certain sports activities are intended for strong boys (e.g., football, basketball, baseball) and the others are intended for fragile girls (e.g., rope jumping, ballet, rhythmic and artistic gymnastics) occurs already in lower grades of elementary school (McCallister et al., 2003). Given that handball belongs to the category of rougher, the so-called "manly" sports, it seems justified to assume that some young female handball players, who are frequently exposed to these stereotypes, experience a conflict between the desire to participate in sports and the desire to be accepted by their peers, which is addressed in literature as one of the gender-specific reasons why girls give up sports more often (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). Thus, in the conclusion of the research on the reasons why teenage girls'

interest in sports drops sharply in adolescence, the authors emphasize the importance of taking measures with the aim of changing the perception that girls who engage in sports activities are not feminine and not “cool” (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010).

The values promoted in the sports environment reflect traditionally masculine characteristics such as competitiveness, dominance, aggressiveness, and independence that are in contrast to the characteristics traditionally attributed to the female gender role (Ross & Shinew, 2008; Wellard, 2002). Therefore, it is not surprising that the data indicate the majority of young handball players of both genders have encountered the stereotypical uttering: girls are too sensitive to be successful in sports. Such an attitude implies that, in addition to physical predispositions, girls also possess certain psychological characteristics that prevent them from achieving a significant sports achievement. The obtained results are in accordance with the findings of research in which it was established that the belief about greater sensitivity, i.e., greater emotionality of women was often cited as one of the reasons justifying the underrepresentation of women in positions that required a high level of performance in stressful and/or demanding circumstances (Lutz, 1990). However, even though this is a widely held view, research examining gender differences in the characteristics of emotional response did not lead to unequivocal findings that would support the justification of this belief (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). Namely, the belief that women are more emotional is partly a consequence of a different way of interpreting the causes underlying the emotional reactions of men and women (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009), whereby men’s emotional reactions are more often attributed to situational factors (e.g., “He has a bad day”), while women’s emotional reactions are more often attributed to dispositional factors (e.g., “She is too emotional”). Further, it was established that the characteristics of the internal attribution of emotional reactions by observers differed significantly depending on whether a certain emotional reaction was manifested by a man or a woman. This is supported by the fact that crying in women is generally considered an indicator of weakness and helplessness, while men’s crying in a masculine environment such as competitive sports is often interpreted as a sign of strength and courage (MacArthur, 2019).

In previous research it was determined that popularity, importance, and attractiveness of a certain sport largely depends on whether its participants are young men or young women (Lebel & Danylichuk, 2009; Rayburn et al., 2015). This is confirmed by the results of our research, which show that the majority of young handball players of both sexes encountered the attitude that the sport in which women participate is boring. Compared to young men, girls are more likely to encounter comments like women’s sport does not have its specific audience, and the fact that every other young female athlete is exposed to the attitude saying women’s

sport is not a genuine sport is particularly worrying. Scheadler and Wagstaff (2018) focused on the underrepresentation of women's sports competitions in broadcast and issued warning that the way the media conveys information about the sports success of girls played an important role in shaping and maintaining negative stereotypes about female athletes. In this line, the participants in the Lebel and Danylchuk (2009) research evaluated women's sport as slower, slow-paced, and less exciting than men's sport, although it was found that the participants had minimal experience with following women's sports, which was limited to rare television broadcasts of sports competitions in which female athletes participated. Apart from a negligible media space dedicated to female athletes, the sports success of women in media reports is often subordinated to reports on their physical appearance or reports on achievements are put in the context of various events from female athletes' private lives, which diminishes the importance and undermines the value of their sports achievements (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018).

Finally, we examined whether young female handball players who were differently exposed to negative stereotypes about sportswomen differed in their perception of gender inequality between boys and girls who practiced handball in their sports clubs. Based on the research on perception of negative gender stereotypes and the experience of gender inequality in sports, Rayburn et al. (2015) conclude that in the context of high prevalence of negative stereotypes about female athletes and negative perception of women's sports activities, it is illusory to expect equal respect for boys and girls who are involved in the same sports. This is corroborated by the results of our research, which show that girls who are more frequently exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes in their environment statistically significantly more often report that male and female athletes in their club do not train under equal conditions and that their success is not valued in the same way.

Before drawing conclusions based on the obtained results, it is important to keep in mind that the research was conducted with a sample of participants engaged in a team sport, which is, in the context of gender stereotypes, considered a "masculine" sport (Guillet et al., 2006). Therefore, in future research the sample should include female and male athletes from different team and individual sports. A further methodological limitation of the paper stems from the research design used, which does not allow conclusions about the cause-and-effect relationship. A longitudinal research design in which, in the context of the motivation to participate in sports and the intention to give up sports, the association between negative stereotypes about female athletes and the experience of gender inequality in sports would be analysed at several time points would allow a better insight into the characteristics of the relationship between the studied constructs. Furthermore, with the aim of better understanding the social factors that are associated with the

motivation to participate in sports and with persistence in participating in sports activities, future research should separately examine the characteristics and frequency of negative stereotypes about female athletes within the context of various socialization agents (e.g., parents, coaches, teachers, peers, media, etc.). Finally, it is important to supplement the quantitative empirical findings with qualitative research data that would allow a more immediate insight into the specific characteristics of gender stereotypes and the experience of gender inequality among sportsmen and sportswomen in Croatia.

However, despite the methodological limitations of the conducted research, the obtained results undoubtedly point to the need for action with the aim of changing negative stereotypes about female athletes and ensuring the equal status of boys and girls participating in sports activities. Previous research has shown that negative effects of stereotypes are reduced with the presence of a positive model (McIntyre, Paulson & Lord, 2003), therefore it is important to adequately recognise and value the achievements and sporting successes of female athletes in all sports, especially in those belonging to the category of the so-called “masculine” sports, which would contribute to the relativisation of the attitude about gender-appropriate sports (Meier, 2015). The relevant ministry, sports clubs and sports associations should pay special attention to ensure that sports activities for children and adolescents take place in an atmosphere that does not support gender-based stereotypes and discrimination. Finally, print and electronic media alike that largely contribute to the formation of negative stereotypes about female athletes (Trolan, 2013) should oblige their employees more strongly to respect national legislation and international documents on the non-discriminatory way of portraying women and men in the media.

CONCLUSION

According to the authors' knowledge, this is the first study in which the degree of exposure to negative stereotypes about female athletes and the characteristics of the relationship between the perception of gender stereotypes and the experience of gender inequality in sports was determined with a sample of young athletes of both genders from all over Croatia. The scientific contribution of the work is manifested primarily in a better understanding of the specific psychosocial factors to which girls who are involved in traditionally “male” sports in Croatia are exposed. The results of the research show that the vast majority of young handball players of both genders encountered negative stereotypes about female athletes. As expected, young female athletes are significantly more frequently exposed to the attitude according to which sport is neither an activity intended nor appropriate for them and to the attitude implying that women's sport is not attractive. Moreover, the girls

who were more often exposed to negative stereotypes towards sportswomen more frequently reported that boys and girls in their club do not have equal training work conditions and that their sports achievements are not valued in the same way. In other words, although participation in sports is very important for their physical and mental health (Eime et al., 2013; Hills, King & Armstrong, 2007), the social environment does not provide adequate support for girls to participate in sports activities. Moreover, the results of the present research show that a significant number of girls are engaged in sports despite being exposed to negative stereotypes about female athletes and despite the fact that boys and girls in their sports club do not have an equal status.

The most recent data from the system for monitoring the health behaviours of children and adolescents (Inchley et al., 2020) show that the prevalence of physical inactivity among adolescent girls in Croatia is as high as 87%. The most common explanations for the extremely high prevalence of inactivity in that group are the onset of puberty, lack of interest in sports activities, and sports selection because of which only the best individuals remain in the sports system (Jurakić & Pedišić, 2012). However, the results obtained in our research show that the trend of more rare participation in and more frequent withdrawal from sports among girls should be observed also in the context of negative gender stereotypes and experiences of gender inequality in sports. Concurrently, within the framework of public health campaigns carried out with the aim of increasing the level of physical activity among girls, special attention should be paid to combating gender stereotypes and gender discrimination in sports. Also, given that stereotypes related to sports are internalised at an early age in life (Colley et al., 2005), within the framework of public health campaigns it is important to promote the right of children to choose different sports activities and to actively encourage the development of an attitude according to which sports are equally intended for boys and girls.

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“Ženski sport nije pravi sport”: negativni stereotipi prema sportašicama i doživljaj rodne neravnopravnosti u rukometu u Hrvatskoj

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SAŽETAK

Osnovni cilj istraživanja bio je utvrditi koliko se često mladi rukometaši i rukometašice susreću s negativnim stereotipima prema sportašicama. Osim spomenutoga, ispitali smo razlikuju li se sportašice koje su u različitom stupnju izložene negativnim stereotipima u doživljaju rodne neravnopravnosti koja se očituje u nejednakim uvjetima treniranja i nejednakom načinu vrednovanja sportskih postignuća mladića i djevojaka koji treniraju u njihovom sportskom klubu. U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 522 rukometaša/ica (289 mladića i 233 djevojaka) čiji se raspon dobi kretao od 14 do 17 godina ($M=14,75$; $SD=0,96$). Prema dobivenim rezultatima, s negativnim se stereotipima prema sportašicama i/ili sportu u kojem sudjeluju djevojke susrelo 94,5% mladića i 95,6% djevojaka. Mlade su sportašice češće izložene stavu prema kojem sport nije aktivnost namijenjena djevojkama ($U=28188,00$, $p<0,05$), odnosno stavu koji podrazumijeva da sport u kojem sudjeluju žene nije atraktivan ($U=28111,00$, $p<0,05$). Djevojke koje se češće susreću s negativnim stereotipima prema sportašicama statistički značajno češće navode da sportaši i sportašice u njihovom klubu ne treniraju u jednakim uvjetima ($U=3551,000$, $p<0,001$) te da se njihovi sportski uspjesi ne vrednuju na isti način ($U=3353,500$, $p<0,001$). Dobiveni rezultati upućuju na potrebu za poduzimanjem mjera s ciljem suzbijanja negativnih stereotipa prema sportašicama te omogućavanja jednakih uvjeta treniranja i vrednovanja sportskih rezultata sportaša i sportašica.

Ključne riječi: sport, rodni stereotipi, rodna nejednakost, Hrvatska