



Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

JASMIJN RANA, 2022, *Punching Back: Gender, Religion, and Belonging in Women-Only Kickboxing*, New York: Berghahn Books, 180 pp., ISBN 9781800736900

Keywords: Anthropology of Sport; Gender; Anthropology of Islam; Belonging; Europe

In *Punching Back: Gender, Religion, and Belonging in Women-Only Kickboxing*, Jasmijn Rana presents a compelling exploration of how the growing participation of Muslim women in sports offers fresh perspectives on their lives and identities in contemporary Europe. Focusing on women-only kickboxing classes in the Hague, Rana challenges dominant theories on learning, belonging, and secularity by showing how these ostensibly secular spaces become arenas where personal self-improvement intersects with religious commitments. By taking the religious pursuits of the participants seriously, Rana disrupts reductive narratives that portray Muslim women as either oppressed by tradition or empowered only through secular practices. Situated at the intersection of anthropology of sport, anthropology of Islam, and gender studies, Rana's ethnographic work conducted between 2011 and 2013 reveals how young Moroccan-Dutch women use kickboxing to reimagine and negotiate their gendered and religious identities. Her analysis critiques racialized narratives and integration discourses, demonstrating how Muslim women's agency in sports transcends simplistic binaries while remaining embedded in broader social structures.

The ethnography is set in two gyms located in the Hague Southwest. Both gyms offer women-only classes, although they differ in the extent to which they enforce the concept of "women-only". One gym predominantly serves Turkish women, while the other is largely frequented by Moroccan women, offering a comparative lens through which Rana investigates themes of gender, religion, and ethnoracial minorities. These spaces are emblematic of broader societal dynamics in the Netherlands – a country that often perceives itself as a homogeneous, secular, and modern nation, yet one where racialized minorities, specifically Muslim communities, face persistent scrutiny. Through her focus on women-only kickboxing classes, Rana reveals the ways in which racialized

narratives about young Muslim women are reproduced and resisted within Dutch society. This ethnographic study is grounded in the broader societal context of the Netherlands, where government sports programs in *probleemwijken* (disadvantaged neighborhoods) are often promoted as tools for integration. However, Rana critiques these initiatives for being deeply racialized and gendered, portraying young Moroccan men as violent and undisciplined and Muslim women as oppressed victims requiring empowerment. Through her detailed ethnography and critique of top-down approaches, Rana bridges experiences at these gyms with debates on policy, integration, and societal belonging.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by introducing the neighborhoods of The Hague Southwest, known for their high concentration of kickboxing gyms, and contextualizes the rise of women-only kickboxing within the broader societal framework of Dutch integration policies. Rana critiques the role of sports as a mechanism for producing disciplined citizens, arguing that the “integration-through-sports” model reinforces existing power imbalances of race and gender. While such policies ostensibly promote inclusivity and participation, they often function to discipline Muslim youth in ways that reproduce racialized and gendered inequalities. Rana asserts that sports create a “vicious circle” for Muslim women, where inclusion is conditional upon conformity to hegemonic secular norms.

The second chapter delves into the embodied processes through which young women and girls become kickboxers, examining how skills are developed differently across gyms and contexts. Through ethnographic insights, Rana explores how enskillment – learning kickboxing techniques – goes beyond athletic proficiency to cultivate a collective sense of belonging and identity. The chapter demonstrates how kickboxer identities are shaped by training methods, pain, endurance, and sparring, creating a sociability that transcends traditional athlete identities. Rana argues that the ways in which kickboxer identities are crafted vary by gym, generation, and gender, illustrating how these identities reflect broader structures of belonging within Dutch society. Kickboxing provides young women a space to differentiate themselves from non-athletes and reimagine their position within intersecting gender, racial, and religious dynamics.

Chapter 3 examines the intersection of femininity, masculinity, and empowerment in women-only kickboxing settings. It explores how young women navigate gender norms through practices such as self-defense, aesthetic concerns, and gym sociability. Rana highlights how kickboxing becomes

a space for crafting new gender subjectivities that, while empowering, often maintain an “apologetic” stance toward male dominance. The chapter argues that women-only kickboxing appropriates traditional narratives of empowerment by blending them with motivations rooted in sociability and personal aesthetics rather than competitive achievement. These dynamics reflect broader social norms and hegemonic power structures, illustrating how kickboxing enables young women to construct gendered self-realizations that balance physical strength with societal expectations of femininity.

Chapter 4 focuses on the interplay between piety and gendered self-realization in women-only kickboxing. By exploring practices such as gender separation, sartorial choices, and romantic relationships, Rana reveals how women integrate their religious and athletic aspirations. The chapter argues that women-only kickboxing is a secular means for realizing piety, challenging stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive or disempowered. Instead, it shows how kickboxing serves as a catalyst for heightened religious observance for some women, blending secular practices with religious ambitions. Rana further argues that the practice is neither purely resistant nor submissive to male authority or Western feminist ideals but represents a complex negotiation of religious and secular sensibilities. This negotiation demonstrates the agency of young Muslim women in redefining pious practices through sports.

The last chapter presents a detailed case study of Alia to illustrate the intersection of race, religion, and gender in the pursuit of a kickboxing career. Through Alia’s story, Rana examines the challenges faced by women navigating expectations from family, friends, and society while striving for success in a male-dominated sport. The chapter argues that gendered subjectivities in kickboxing are shaped in relation to male counterparts, highlighting the complexities of racialized and gendered dynamics in competitive sports. Alia’s humility, piety, and blend of femininity and masculinity reflect broader societal pressures and reveal how Muslim women’s pursuit of kickboxing careers embodies both resistance and conformity to existing social hierarchies. This chapter underscores the multifaceted nature of negotiating inclusion within layered structures of Dutch society.

The book concludes by revisiting the themes of gendered self-realization and belonging arguing that kickboxing serves as both an emancipatory practice and a reinforcement of heteronormative and racialized norms. Rana critiques traditional feminist and integration discourses that

essentialize Muslim women, showing how the practice of kickboxing challenges stereotypes of passivity and secularism without detaching participants from their religious aspirations. Women-only kickboxing emerges as a space where young women negotiate gendered, racialized, and religious subjectivities while navigating the temporal dimensions of their lives, such as expectations of marriage and adulthood. Rana ultimately argues that kickboxing provides a unique avenue for Muslim women to reimagine their identities, blending secular and pious sensibilities in ways that transcend dominant narratives of integration and empowerment. This nuanced exploration highlights the agentic power of submission to religion within the framework of sports, revealing how Muslim women carve out spaces of belonging within a nation that continues to view them through a racialized lens.

One of the key strengths of *Punching Back* lies in its remarkable ethnographic depth, offering rich, nuanced accounts of Muslim women's experiences in the context of women-only kickboxing gyms in The Hague. Rana's detailed and empathetic engagement with her interlocutors brings to life the complexities of their identities and choices, showcasing the intersection of gender, religion, and race. This intersectional lens is a significant contribution to understanding how Muslim women navigate societal expectations, power imbalances, and personal aspirations. By challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes about Muslim women as either submissive victims of their religion or emancipated only through secularism, Rana offers a refreshing counterpoint to both mainstream and academic discourses. The book makes a vital contribution to anthropology, broadening the scope of the anthropology of sports by demonstrating how combat sports intersect with issues of piety, gender, and integration, and enriching the anthropology of Islam by focusing on the embodied practices and secular-religious negotiations of Muslim women. In doing so, Rana effectively bridges these fields, illustrating the transformative potential of interdisciplinary scholarship in capturing the lived realities of marginalized communities.

Eilis Lanclus holds a Phd in Social and Cultural Anthropology from KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research is situated at the intersection of anthropology of sports, sensory ethnography, and endurance, with a particular focus on the embodied and emplaced practices and experiences of running and walking.



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