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Are there still social barriers to women's rugby?

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For a long time, rugby union was reserved for men in France. The French rugby union federation only opened its doors to women in 1989. Twenty years later, we asked ourselves how and when women start playing rugby and if there are still social barriers to their practice. In order to answer this, we interviewed 15 persons who belong to the world of French rugby and almost 200 female players. The results show that people around the players are reserved, mainly for fear of the physical risk, the injuries they associate with rugby and, to a lesser extent, because they are afraid of a social risk that they may become more masculine. Our results also underline the fact that actors of the French rugby sphere do not seem to be afraid of the physical risk but that they have the perception of a social risk.

Introduction

In 1969, the French Minister for Sports, Colonel Crespin, said that 'rugby is inappropriate for girls or women for obvious psychological reasons. It is dangerous, both physically and morally. That is why I urge you not to help women's rugby'.¹ In France, the feminization of rugby thus occurred late. According to Hargreaves, 'there is a historical basis for the idea that there should be "feminine appropriate" sports and "masculine appropriate" sports'² and rugby is not 'feminine appropriate'. It is only in 1989, some 20 years ago, that the French rugby union federation underwent a revolution in opening its doors to women. By way of comparison, the French Football Federation recognized women's football in 1979 and the French Boxing Federation did the same in 1985.

Nowadays, the rugby union federation is one of the French sports federations that still have very few women members: 12,500, or 3% of its total membership, distributed in three divisions. This figure is small compared to the number of male players (340,000 members spread over 11 different levels of competition) but the number of female members has steadily increased since France hosted the 2007 rugby union World Cup (a 35% increase). As Howe wrote, the number of women members is increasing but the proportion they represent overall is not changing.³ The late inclusion of women in the federation has not helped to legitimate their practice of rugby union.

However, sportswomen now represent a third of all club members in France. The numbers vary widely depending on the sport: for the 2008/2009 season, the French Football Federation, which has the most affiliated members, registered 60,000 women, who only represent 3.1% of its total membership, while the French Judo Federation registered 150,000 women, or 27.5%. Gymnastics is the most 'feminine' sport, with women forming 80% of its 245,000 members.⁴

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Women's access to participation in sports has evolved in France, and sports federations have opened up to women at different paces. Women's sports have had an eventful history composed of rejections, struggles, prejudice and then slow recognition. For a long time, men had a stronghold on the sports sphere and women were kept out of sports.⁵ The chaotic history of how women got into sports and how they were accepted as sportswomen in their own right can obviously be compared to the way women's status in society has evolved. How late women take up a sport, for instance, can explain the place they occupy in society and their current level of commitment compared to men. In France, the 1970s and 1980s saw more and more women getting involved in sports and physical activities; Clément even called this period the golden age of sports feminization.⁶ However, according to Travaillot, 'this statement must be strongly qualified if one is only interested in adult women because they devote less time than men to sports or other activities and most of them choose activities in order to stay in shape'.⁷

As far as rugby is concerned, it is said to be a masculine sport in which women 'transgress the dominant representations of athletic women widely publicized and systematically reinforced by the media'. Mennesson and Clément consider football and rugby to be 'the two European 'large field' team sports (. . .) which symbolize the values of manliness'.⁸ In reality, these are actually the two sports that get the most media coverage in France, but while football is the most important sports federation in terms of membership, rugby comes in eighth position.

We think those differences in participation rates may be explained by the perceptions of two kinds of risk: one being social – the risk of appearing masculine or not feminine – and the other one physical – the risk of getting injured, the physical risk being linked to masculinity.

Theoretical framework

Among the barriers likely to hinder women's participation, our approach lies mainly in the perception of the risks this sport can result in: we are particularly concerned with the perception of the physical and social risks.

Because we are interested in the impediments to women's rugby, we wondered if there would be differences between the players' circle and French rugby's actors who may not perceive this sport in quite the same way as the players themselves. We wanted to investigate whether the players' circle and French rugby's actors consider that women endanger themselves by playing rugby because unlike the players, they regard this sport as risky for women.

The difficulty of this kind of topic is linked to the fact that risk, in sports, is mainly subjective and individual; according to Beck, risk is a product of the mind.⁹ Risk and danger are two concepts that complement each other and the relationship between these can be clarified by the fact that risk is a way of considering and representing danger to oneself.¹⁰ In order to overcome this difficulty, we chose to look into both the players' feelings and the so-called objective risk they expose themselves to, i.e. injuries, by comparing them to men's. Lastly, we will try to decipher some social interactions the players' involvement in rugby generates with close friends and family, as well as French rugby actors. Our goal is (1) to determine whether women have the impression that they behave dangerously; (2) to understand if they get injured more often than men; (3) lastly, to study how they are perceived by those close to them, i.e. the degree of risk-taking they project (or do not project), and the perception of danger their involvement generates in their family or among people involved in the federation.

At first, this research seemed necessary to us because we did not know a lot about the population of first division rugby female players in France. Gathering data allowed us to understand who female rugby players are and more precisely, how they are, primarily, the product of a habitus. Mauss explains the social nature of a habitus by its variation with 'societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestige'.¹¹ According to him, in the social nature of a habitus, one can find physical techniques and the influence of the collective and individual practical reason.

Considering the fact that at an equivalent level, women play the same kind of rugby as men, we then looked at their physical injuries, knowing that injuries have been construed as 'social constructions of masculine identity'.¹² This research only looked into physical injuries, not pain – to Howe, 'injury can be understood as a breakdown in the structure of the body, which may affect its function, whereas pain is the marker of an injury'¹³ – or marks on the body. We think that one of the most accurate indicators we have at our disposal to evaluate the risk linked to involvement in a specific sport is the occurrence of physical injuries, and more precisely, accident claims from club practice. Contrary to accepted wisdom, rugby union is less harmful, when adjusted to the number of players, than cycling or horse-riding.¹⁴ For example, the French Rugby Federation reported 16,000 accidents involving physical injuries for 250,000 members in 2007. This bodily harm indicator, or objective risk,¹⁵ as calculated by the number of reported accidents, contains some bias, in particular because not all injuries are reported, but these are the only official statistics that exist and the bias exists for all sports. Giulianotti speaks of positivistic models 'understand[ing] risks as objective phenomena that are scientifically measurable and calculable'.¹⁶ This positivistic model is necessary because it gives some statistical explanations but as Giulianotti writes, it 'is not sufficient because risk must be understood with reference to cultural contexts, including group identities'.¹⁷ That is why our research focused on a group of female rugby players and on the cultural context in which they live, by examining the reactions of their circle (family members and federation personnel). In other words, we chose to 'take into consideration [their] place in the social world'.¹⁸

Finally, because rugby players are thus exposed to the judgment of others (entourage, rugby actors), who themselves are closely linked to a reference framework made up of some of society's common and dominant beliefs,¹⁹ we also investigated other social barriers (than those we already mentioned regarding physical risk) likely to hinder women's access to rugby. In order to do so, we looked at 'the involvement they have in their own face and the face of others (. . .) that is supported by judgments'.²⁰ By face, Goffman means 'the positive social value a person actually claims through a course of action and that others suppose he/she adapted in the course of interactions'.²¹ The opinion of the players' circle regarding the fact that they play rugby makes it possible to determine what female players learnt from their interactions with others.²² The representations and perceptions concerning rugby come from analyses linked to the social logic and highlight, for instance, the fact that rugby shatters femininity's ideals: 'the belief (in western societies) is that women are precious, ornamental and fragile, inexpert and unsuitable for all that demands the use of muscular force (. . .) or involves a physical risk'.²³ Messner specifies that 'sport, in its present (violent) forms, tends to support male dominance not simply through the exclusion or marginalization of females, but through the association of males and maleness with valued skills and dominance versus submission; in equating force and aggression with physical strength, domination, and power, modern sports naturalized the equation of maleness with violence, thus lending support and legitimisation to patriarchy'.²⁴ Lastly, even though physical clashes are regulated, some behaviour observed on rugby fields makes it look like a violent and thus risky sport. It is true that

taken out of context, some rugby behaviour is considered violent.²⁵ This idea is taken up by Coakley and Pike: 'rugby players would be arrested for behaviour they define as normal during their games'.²⁶

Howe said that 'rugby is a sport where a high degree of physical contact is part and parcel of participation and the injury rate is often high',²⁷ which is more disturbing when the player is a woman. This is the reason why, beyond the social logic, which is on the outside of the activity, we propose to develop ties with the activity by setting out its 'internal logic'.²⁸ We thus aim at defining this sporting activity from the 'inside', i.e. its specificity: the motor skills it requires. We will discover that the perceptions of rugby (social logic, external logic) we mentioned earlier do not correspond, *de facto*, to the activity's real logic (internal logic). The interactionist perspective in which we situate ourselves goes 'deeply into the strict and specific study of motor activity'.²⁹ This helps us affirm that even if rugby and boxing are often grouped together in the same sports category (contact sports), their internal logics have almost nothing in common. We consider that unlike in combat sports (boxing, judo, martial arts . . .), in rugby 'the target at stake never is the adversary's body. That is why the player who intentionally harms an opponent is severely punished, sometimes even expelled from the match'.³⁰ This is not the case for boxers, for instance, whose main objective is the complete opposite. By Goffman's standards, rugby is not a fatal situation because the body is not at stake, the stakes being purely problematic: 'Attacking another player (. . .) in rugby is strongly penalised in the game's rules in order to clearly show that the stakes should be expressed in the score and not on the body'.³¹ The definition of rugby as a combat sport and not as a team sport harms women's participation because it greatly emphasizes physical and social risks. As a matter of fact, putting things in perspective outside of the activity, through the projection of its internal logic in the social world and not only the sports world anymore, shows that sports in which body contact is central remain 'unacceptable' sports for women, i.e. sports that are still widely regarded as 'non female appropriate' (. . .). Such sports (. . .) emphasise combinations of power, strength, aggressiveness and speed'.³² This fear about 'masculine' sports is linked to the fear that women may become more masculine by playing rugby.

While we disapprove of the unique label 'combat sport', like Dunning and Maguire, we do not deny the importance of body contact in rugby: rugby is a team combat sport. Consequently, it seems much more astute to us to compare women's rugby to other team sports like ice hockey, considering that 'the prohibition of intentional body checking is the centrepiece of an effort to construct women's hockey as an alternative to the men's game'.³³

Carrying out this analysis about women's rugby union in France is all the more important that there are very few sociological studies on the topic.³⁴ Recently, two books devoted to it presented the biographies of about 20 female national team players.³⁵ Other older works about male rugby players' mothers or wives are better known. Considering that at equivalent levels, rugby rules are the same in the women's and men's games (contrary to ice hockey, for example, which has been studied by Theberge: 'The rules of the game in men's and women's hockey are substantially the same, with the exception that women's hockey prohibits intentional body checking'³⁶) and that rugby is not a mixed-sex sport, is it really more dangerous or riskier when played by women? This is the main question we will answer. More specifically, we ask three questions: do women have the impression of putting themselves in danger when playing rugby; are there characteristics of their practice that are more dangerous than men's; what is the opinion of the player's circle regarding the fact that they play rugby.

Our argument is illustrated by the presentation and discussion of the results of 197 questionnaires filled out by French first division female players and 15 interviews of employees or volunteers with the French rugby federation. The following section presents the methodology we chose to answer our questions, our main results, the number and type of injuries players must deal with, as well as the opinions of people close to them and of people involved in rugby.

Methodology

The research methods used to obtain the data were based upon a quantitative and qualitative analysis of questionnaires filled out by female rugby players who play in the French first division, and upon 15 semi-directive interviews of French rugby union federation employees and volunteers (managers, presidents, coaches, etc.) who all play or have played rugby.

The quantitative approach consisted of 78 questions (60 of them closed and 18 open) in which several themes were touched upon: players were asked if some people had advised them to play rugby or not to and if so, who and why; if they had ever stopped playing rugby, why, at what age and for how long; if they had ever been injured, where and how long they had stopped playing as a result. As we will see in the results' analysis, these questions are indirectly linked to the issue of risk and also allow us to count the injuries and understand, in the eyes of the players, what the people in the players' circle think of their engagement in rugby. In other words, it will help us understand if some specific barriers (physical and/or social) can be brought out. The questionnaire was presented to first division team coaches during a meeting at the French federation. The coaches read the survey beforehand and then agreed to facilitate its delivery by distributing and collecting the questionnaires before sending those back. The questions converge to produce a picture of how and under what conditions women become involved in rugby. The objective of our investigation through questionnaires was to uncover the intervention of social factors that individuals are not consciously aware of, in order to understand the complex outcome of social constraints and individuals' strategies, be they conscious or not. This type of investigation's ambition is to explain what the actors do by what they are and not by what they say they do. The data we gathered were submitted to a statistical analysis by the use of cross-sorting operations.

The questionnaires were distributed to potential national team players (20% played or had played for the French national team), since they all play in the French first division that consists of Top 8 (composed of eight teams) and Elite 2 (composed of 16 clubs). All eight Top 8 teams and seven of the Elite 2 clubs participated in this survey. Fifty-four per cent of the players who filled out the questionnaire play in Elite 1 (Top 8) and 46% in Elite 2. The questionnaires were sent to each team's head coach, who read the cover letter explaining the goals of the research in the changing room. The anonymous questionnaires, which had been filled out, were then put inside an envelope that the head coach sent to the researcher. We are aware of the fact that the coaches' involvement could constitute a bias by putting some pressure on the players to complete the survey. We tried to minimize this inevitable bias as much as possible while maintaining our goal of conducting a nationwide survey. A total of 197 usable questionnaires were collected, each club having sent between 1 and 26 completed questionnaires. The sample represents over a third of the first division players at the time (2008).

The semi-directive interviews were carried out with 15 people involved in the Federation, 11 of them male and 4 female ($n = 15$). The selection was not limited to a few

officials; these persons were selected empirically because of their important personal information. Their status varies: they include male and female amateur players, technical and administrative directors, presidents, referees, former players, team coaches and managers. All of them are current or former affiliated members, and all of them are involved with the French federation as volunteers or employees (Table 1).

Access to the interviewees was direct, by making an appointment at their workplace by the phone. The decision to proceed by carrying out interviews was particularly adapted to analyzing the meaning the interviewees invest in their participation in sports and in events that they actively witnessed. The topic of women's rugby was one of many themes that were touched upon. They were provided with a guide on the interview topics: (1) their opinion on the evolution of rugby-related activities in France and other countries; (2) the changes they had witnessed concerning the notions of amateurism and professionalism; (3) their point of view regarding women's rugby and their style of play; (4) media coverage of rugby, the spectacle of rugby and the new, emerging ways to play the game. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Through a thematic analysis, the textual analysis identifies statements that describe female rugby players. The identification of themes shows that physical characteristics, behaviour in the field and the kind of rugby played were often mentioned and compared to men's. Those descriptions are one of the seven discursive strategy categories used by MacKay and Dallaire in media coverage of sportswomen that focus on gender as a framing device: that of emphasizing female stereotypes.³⁷ The other discursive strategy categories defined by MacKay and Dallaire by compiling descriptions provided by Wensing and Bruce,³⁸ as well as Donnelly, MacNeill and Knight,³⁹ are gender marking, establishing heterosexuality, infantilizing women, non-sports related aspects, comparisons with men's performance and ambivalence. All quotes from the interviews and surveys have been translated from French into English.

The first of the two authors was a rugby player at the time of the research. This facilitated access because high-level federation executives knew she had played in the French first division. It also made the questionnaire easier to accept for coaches and

Table 1. Details of the interviews.

Interview	Occupation	Gender
1	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Woman
2	International referee	Man
3	International female player	Woman
4	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Man
5	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Man
6	Television rugby commentator	Man
7	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Man
8	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Man
9	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Man
10	Employee of the French Rugby Union	Woman
11	Newspaper journalist	Man
12	Amateur player	Man
13	National team rugby player	Man
14	Amateur female player	Woman
15	Professional player	Man
15 interviews	Amateurs and professional players, referees, employees, journalists, managers, etc.	4 women, 11 men

Note: We cannot give more details for the "Employees of the French Rugby Union" because if we do so, they could easily be identified. Indeed, there is only one employee for each of these high profile jobs.

players. However, this advantage might have constituted a bias during the interviews, especially when questions regarding women's rugby were asked. It is difficult to gauge how the participants' answers may have been affected by the fact that the interviewer was a player. However, elaborating the interview guide and analyzing the interviews with the second author, who has never played rugby, made it possible to minimize this bias. Caution should be exercised when considering the interviewed population. Indeed, it constitutes a restricted sample and its answers thus cannot be generalized, even though they may provide leads for future research.

Results and discussion

We will present a summary of the sample (how and when women start to play rugby) and we will then discuss how playing rugby is perceived to be 'risky' for women on both physical and social levels.

How and when do women start to play rugby?

Half of the players had previously played for another rugby club (21% in first division, 10% in second and 14% in third division). Our sample had been involved in physical activities and sports since a very early age: two-thirds of them had taken up a sport before they were 12 (9 on average), the majority at a competitive level (75%). On the other hand, they had started playing rugby late. On average, they did so when they were 20, with answers varying from 3 to 35. Chu et al. had found similar results about the players from New Zealand's national team: 'The majority of the Black Ferns started playing rugby as adults'.⁴⁰ Previous sports varied, handball being the most-cited sport (42 instances), followed by track and field, swimming, tennis, basketball and gymnastics, which were all equally represented. As Mennesson found, 'the entry of women into the world of boxing depends on (...) the inculcation of a competitive sporting ethos during the primary stage of socialization'. But our sample did not confirm her second necessary but insufficient condition, i.e. 'involvement in traditionally masculine games and sports during childhood'.⁴¹ Indeed, not all the sports cited by the players are traditionally masculine. We also note a difference with female ice hockey players, who 'all began playing hockey as children'.⁴² We also came to conclusions that differ from Louveau and Davaisse's, who wrote that for women to succeed in a 'masculine' sports activity, they should learn beforehand how to simulate behaviours through activities like dancing: 'It is certainly not chance if women who want to go into boxing, wrestling, football or rugby first took up parodical or folk-related activities whose representations suggest more simulation than authenticity (most often despite them). It is not easy to know how to behave in activities which fully belong to the other [gender]'s identity'.⁴³ On the contrary, these are activities that women in our sample would not like to take up: dancing is the most-cited undesirable activity (51 times), followed by football, basketball, gymnastics, swimming and golf.

Two-thirds of the players started playing rugby when they were older than 16. This is in marked contrast to the French federation's statistics for men: more than two-thirds start playing rugby before they turn 16.⁴⁴ Moreover, more than half of the players had started playing at the highest level. Only 21% had previously played in a second division team and 31% in third division. Male players generally first play competitive rugby in a club (77%) or at university (18%). Female players come to rugby through school or university (34%), friends (25%) or family (23%).

The typical first division player is a 25-year-old single woman who attended three years of post-secondary education. The youngest player is 16, the oldest 40, with 66% of the players being between the ages of 21 and 30. Sixty-six per cent of them are single, 30% have a partner, 3% are married and 1% is divorced. As far as rugby is concerned, the interviewed women are very committed: they train five hours per week on average, while living 40 km from their rugby club on average. Our sample contained more forwards (60%) than backs.

Physical risks of playing rugby

We asked women about their main motives for playing rugby through a closed question, which required them to tick up to three answers among the following choices: competition, team spirit, outdoor activity, learning new skills, physical exercise, risk, club life, aesthetic aspect and other. The main reasons they cited for playing rugby were team spirit, competition and physical exercise. Only seven players in our sample cited risk, which means that it is not an idea that attracts most players (Table 2).

We used Guilianotti's definition of risk in this questionnaire: 'voluntary risk-taking as an embodied experience is understood as a pleasuring process'.⁴⁵ Our results can be explained by the type of sport rugby is and by the level of the players. First, rugby is not the kind of sport that is qualified as an 'extreme leisure' or risk-taking sport, like parachuting. Second, as Luc Collard has shown, 'in a given sport, our perception of risk is inversely proportional to the skill we have for it. The more expert you are at it, the less the sport seems perilous. The more incompetent you are, the less the sport you discover seems safe'.⁴⁶ By risk, we mean the sensation of taking a risk or trying to feel one has put oneself in danger. This concept is different from that studied by Pike and Maguire, who investigated the risk of getting injured, the pain caused by sports participation and the risky attitudes of sportsmen and sportswomen who continue to play while being injured.⁴⁷ The women polled did not start playing rugby because they like taking risks. This does not mean that rugby is not dangerous for them, but rather that they are not motivated to play by an attraction to risk. We can draw a parallel to Goffman citing Hemingway on the topic of bullfighters, in the sense that female rugby players know that they can be injured, 'knew all these things coldly and completely', but do not feel that they have a 'regular appointment with death' to face each day'.⁴⁸ We next asked ourselves if being a woman had a direct consequence on the degree of danger generated by playing rugby, i.e. is women's rugby more dangerous, or riskier, than men's?

Table 2. The main reasons women cited for playing rugby (three possible answers).

Motivations	(%)
Team spirit	93.4
Competition	75.6
Physical exercise	67.5
Club life	19.3
Outdoor activity	11.2
Learning new skills	10.7
Aesthetic aspect	5.1
Risk	3.6
Other	7.1

Table 3. Reasons why women stopped playing rugby at some point (one answer).

Reasons	(%)
Injuries	31
Pregnancy	15
No team near their home	15
Play another sport	14
Not enough time for academic or professional reasons	13
Other	12

When asked if they had ever been injured, two-thirds of the players answered that they had. But only one-third of the women answered yes to the question, ‘Have you stopped playing rugby at some point?’ And when asked through an open question why they had stopped playing, they cited reasons including injuries (31%), pregnancy (15%), the fact that there was no team near their home (15%), that they wanted to play another sport (14%) and that they had not enough time because of academic or professional reasons (13%).

These figures relate to injuries serious enough to cause an interruption of play, among other things. Even if two-thirds of the players had been injured, only about one-sixth (one-third of 31% of the whole sample) actually stopped playing because of injuries. This may be explained by the fact that sportswomen ‘prioritize sports participation above physical well-being’,⁴⁹ and thus play while they are injured.⁵⁰ For Coakley and Pike, this is due to norms ‘that encourage them to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of their team and their sport’.⁵¹ While there exist studies about female rugby players’ injuries in the USA,⁵² as well as in England,⁵³ we did not find any statistical data about them in France. We thus could only compare our questionnaire data on injuries to the data available on those sustained by male rugby players. The French rugby union league (Ligue Nationale de Rugby) carried out an analysis of the different types of injuries within the first division, Top 14, in 2006.⁵⁴ By comparing these results with our findings for women, we noticed a very similar distribution in the types of injuries sustained.

We therefore cannot isolate any gender specificity on this point. Nonetheless, questions remain concerning the number and duration of injuries and thus their seriousness. We also tried to determine whether the number of injuries depended upon the position played by cross-checking the number of injuries and the position played. It seems that there is no significant difference between forwards and backs in terms of the number of injuries for women, whereas the study conducted by the French rugby union league about men revealed that 60% of injuries concerned forwards and 40% involved backs. We noticed that the number of injuries increases with the number of hours of training and the level of play.

Table 4. Types of injury sustained by professional male rugby players (Top 14) and first division female players.

Types of injury	Men (%)	Women (%)
Lower limb	60	63
Upper limb	35	30
Trunk and head traumas	5	8

In the absence of similar studies about men's rugby, we asked ourselves if there were factors specific to women's rugby that could heighten the risk of injury.

Choosing to start playing in a first division team can be explained by the same reasons cited for choosing a club. When asked what the most important reason for choosing their club was through a single choice closed question, players said they were influenced most frequently by the club's proximity (31%) and by the fact that they may know women who were already members (30%). The training hours, the atmosphere and the level of play are factors that have little influence on them. To summarize, despite having been involved in sports from an early age, players generally start playing rugby late but quickly reach a high level. This does not seem to be a French specificity.⁵⁵

The high prevalence of injuries (i.e. two-thirds said they had been injured) might not encourage one to take up rugby, but we have no concrete elements at our disposal that could lead us to affirm that women's rugby is more dangerous than men's. This is why we went on to investigate why women's reluctance to play rugby persists, and whether it comes from people close to them (family members or friends), or more generally from various people involved in the rugby sphere in France.

Social risks of playing rugby

As Chu et al. found, we also find that the influence of family in terms of socialization is important.⁵⁶ The players in our sample most often cite family (44%) as the source of their connection to rugby, fathers being prominent. But while Chu et al. found that female friends were the predominant influence in encouraging them, our results show that friends come second (18%).

We also asked players what the people around them thought of their involvement in rugby. Their answers constitute an inventory of what they retained from their social environment's reactions. We asked the players 'who advised them to play rugby' or 'advised them not to' through four questions and for each question, 'why' in the form of an open question. The results show that until the age of 16, the involvement of a family member in rugby favours taking up the activity. But in 80% of cases, it is also the family (and more precisely mothers and grandparents, as players wrote in answer to an open question) who stand out as those who most often advise against playing rugby. When asked if they had been advised to play rugby or not to, half of them said that they were advised not to. Two-thirds of the players reported concerns related to the fear of injuries, the injunction being to 'take care'⁵⁷: 'afraid of getting injured', 'afraid of contact', 'afraid for myself', 'too dangerous', 'too violent', 'blows', 'danger'. Pringle found out the same from interviews conducted with men: 'females would be more susceptible to rugby injuries in comparison to men: this concern correspondingly acted to limit their support of female rugby'⁵⁸. The other third of our sample wrote that they were told 'rugby is not a sport for women'. Even when rugby is not the first sport the players have taken up, their family's involvement in this sport (most often their fathers', or brothers') is the main source of influence (44%) although half of the players' mothers are opposed to their involvement in the game. They refer to physical risks linked to the game's dangerousness (fear of injuries) and to 'social' risks stemming from a woman playing a sport said to be masculine. Without always directly relating their fear to the question of the representation of femininity, people seem to find it more difficult to accept injuries when the body is a woman's rather than a man's: 'the social construction of sports injuries is tied to the reproduction of masculine force'.⁵⁹ Injuries are an objective measure of 'riskiness' and are, at the same time, linked to cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity.

We thus confirmed what Mennesson noted in her book – ‘mothers do not encourage girls to get involved in competitive sports (. . .) they show reserve, at least at the beginning, regarding sports considered to be “masculine”’,⁶⁰ which may be also explained by the difficulty, for mothers, to define or correctly perceive rugby. Their poor knowledge of rugby can lead to a mistaken interpretation of the spectacle it presents. As Beck wrote, ‘the category of risk opens up a world within and beyond the clear distinction between knowledge and non-knowing’.⁶¹ Although the rules of rugby make it a team sport and not a combat sport for players,⁶² many mothers, who do not know better, take matches out of context and judge them according to the norms of everyday life.⁶³ One of the players wrote that her mother advised her not to play rugby ‘because she was afraid she might get hurt playing this violent game; my mom never even saw a rugby match’. If they knew the game better, they would advise more strongly against playing forward than back. But we observed no correlation between the family’s opinion and the position played. It is more complicated to understand the position of fathers who play rugby and thus know the game. As a matter of fact, when players say their father had an influence on their joining a club, it seems that this family connection, more precisely this ‘paternal connection’,⁶⁴ is more akin to imitation than to a real exchange on the topic. It seems fathers neither openly advise their daughters to play rugby nor advise them not to. In fact, they are not among the persons cited by the players in answer to the question about who had advised them to play rugby or advised them not to. The reactions of the players’ entourage – ‘rugby is a men’s game’, ‘rugby is not a feminine sport’, ‘rugby is not a sport for women’ – show that the involvement of women in a so-called masculine sport disrupts the sports system and more generally the social system, as well as its ‘fundamental code’, that is the code within which social interactions and thus gender codes, among others, are elaborated.⁶⁵

The same rules but a different game with greater social risks

People involved in the federation seem to be willing to attribute a specific rugby identity to female players. We were able to identify two recurring elements: some of the interviewees affirmed that women’s rugby is not played in the same style or spirit, whereas others affirmed that female players should not play the same way as men. And yet, because at equivalent levels women play with the same rules as their male counterparts, it seems difficult for women and men not to play the same kind of rugby, contrary to women’s ice hockey, which has different rules from men’s.

With regard to the type of rugby played, we picked out the following remarks: ‘It does not seem to be the same style of play to me at all. (. . .) It is very different. It is not the same spirit at all. There is no confrontation; it is only based upon evasive, lateral actions. Every time I watch a match on television or highlights, I see girls running along the touchline, they always go sideways, never forward’ (Interview 2); ‘The game is much clearer, a lot smoother and more beautiful’ (Interview 4); ‘Women’s rugby reminds us of old-style rugby in which there were more gaps, when there was space, but with a real physical commitment’ (Interview 8). This last interviewee was the only one who added that ‘one should not think women play without committing themselves physically and without contact. Sometimes, it gets really fierce’. Like Hargreaves, we noticed that people involved in the federation consider that rugby ‘should not become for women what it has been for men: a display of aggression, a proof of toughness’.⁶⁶

The interviewees also stressed that women need to play differently from men, with femininity, because they fear that women may become more masculine in a world in which ‘the female athletic body is still primarily valued for its aesthetic and expressive

activities'.⁶⁷ 'I want them to keep this specificity of being graceful and natural. What would bother me the most would be if they did sheer weight-lifting in order to become more like men' (Interview 4); 'They have an ability to think about the game differently from boys, in a manner which is characteristically feminine and which makes some room for intelligence' (Interview 9). This sentence is very close to what Pringle found by interviewing men about women's rugby. Speaking about one of them, named Kahu, Pringle wrote: 'Kahu further suggested that women appear to play a smarter game of rugby in comparison to men'.⁶⁸ Some interviewees specified that women should not imitate men's rugby: 'Women must choose the rugby they want to play. They should not try and play like men, they need to find their specificity. It is true that it is not the same morphology, not the same attitude or mentality that boys have with regard to physical confrontation, this sort of aggressiveness, so to speak – I prefer the word fighting spirit – that one finds with boys, it is not quite the same' (Interview 5).

The interview responses also highlight the fear that the players' femininity is compromised.⁶⁹ Two of the interviewees broached the topic of sexual orientation⁷⁰ – 'they are all dykes' (Interview 2) – and of their physical appearance – 'people think only fat women play rugby' (Interview 12). Howe had put forward this duality: 'On the one hand, the femininity and sexuality of the female player is brought into question due to the assumption that aggressive physical behaviour is masculine. On the other hand, women are seen in a negative light because their physical skill is not as developed as it is in men'.⁷¹ The resistance to the involvement of women in a sport is all the more important in rugby since the players' behaviour (on the rugby field in this case) run counter to femininity's 'natural' expressions.⁷²

When Howe, studying women's rugby, embodiment and sexuality, speaks of a 'two-fold stigma' about the players who are viewed on one hand as unfeminine and on the other as homosexual,⁷³ we also found that female players are in a 'double bind situation'⁷⁴ in which if they act like women, they seem incompetent and inadequate to play rugby, and if they act like men they risk losing the attributes of femininity. Yet, our research shows that these players care a lot more about the pleasure they derive from the game itself (team spirit, competition, physical exercise) than about its aesthetic aspect (Table 2), which is similar to previous research.⁷⁵ They are interested in rugby's logic, which is the same for men and women. Still, the spectacle presented by women's rugby surprises and disturbs, and not just because of the physical injuries likely to be inflicted upon women's bodies: female rugby players break the social contract's rules.

Conclusion

This research allowed us to complete an initial study of female rugby players in France's first division. From this starting point, we intend to conduct in-depth research into the world of women's rugby through interviews.

Like Howe, we found that 'external barriers to participation, which hinder women (in South Wales) from playing rugby, are largely social'.⁷⁶ Similar elements have been found in research about French women's football⁷⁷ and the Black Ferns: some of the players considered the fact that they played a male game as a 'challenge in terms of having to break down barriers with respect to what women can do in the wider context'.⁷⁸

It seems that one of the barriers is linked to the fact that most of the players' entourage and the people involved in French rugby think that female rugby players put themselves in danger, both on a physical and social level. Despite some specifically feminine factors that could heighten the risk of injury, our research's results do not make it possible to claim

that women's rugby is physically more dangerous than men's. The players themselves do not associate their sport with risk. This danger is felt by their circle and French rugby's actors as physically and socially risky, where risk is a way of considering and representing danger to oneself.⁷⁹ We therefore conclude that it is not only the physical risks associated with rugby that lead to reservations and even barriers but also the game itself, the fact that it is played by women and thus the image it projects in society: a masculine sport. This perception of rugby as a risky sport by the players' circle and French rugby's actors can be linked to the fact that 'risk is the modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences of human action'.⁸⁰ Saying that rugby is a risky game for women may be a way to control them socially, or at least to soften the disruption of the traditional hierarchy between genders.⁸¹

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Notes

- ¹ Crespin, *Circulaire du Secrétariat d'Etat à l'Education Physique et aux Sports Adressé aux Préfets*, 1–20.
- ² Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 291.
- ³ Howe, 'Women's Rugby', 77.
- ⁴ Bouffin, 'Les Licences et les Clubs des Fédérations Sportives Agréées en 2006', 2–3.
- ⁵ Terret, 'Jeux et Sports dans l'Histoire', 272.
- ⁶ Clément, 'Pratiques Corporelles Féminines, Différenciation Sexuelle et Gestion de la Mixité en EPS (1945–1980)', 213–26.
- ⁷ Travaillot, 'Les Années 1960 et 1970: "Âge d'Or de la Féminisation du Sport?"', 107.
- ⁸ Mennesson and Clément, 'Homosociability and Homosexuality', 312.
- ⁹ Beck, *Risk Society*, 1–260.
- ¹⁰ Joffe, 'Risk: From Perception', 55–73.
- ¹¹ Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 368–9.
- ¹² Messner, 'When Bodies are Weapons', 203–20; Messner, *Power at Play*, 1–240; Young, White, and McTeer, 'Body Talk', 175–94; Young and White, 'Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury', 45–61; Howe, *Sport, Professionalism and Pain*, 1–240.
- ¹³ Howe, 'An Ethnography of Pain', 290–94.
- ¹⁴ Collard, *Sports, Enjeux et Accidents*, 124.
- ¹⁵ Collard, *Sports, Enjeux et Accidents*, 125.
- ¹⁶ Giulianotti, 'Risk and Sport', 541.
- ¹⁷ Giulianotti, 'Risk and Sport', 547.
- ¹⁸ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 7.
- ¹⁹ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 193.
- ²⁰ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 6.
- ²¹ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 9.
- ²² Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 1–270.
- ²³ Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, 67.
- ²⁴ Messner, *Power at Play*, 205.
- ²⁵ Augustin and Garrigou, *Le Rugby Démêlé, Essai sur les Associations Sportives, le Pouvoir et les Notables*, 1–359.
- ²⁶ Coakley and Pike, *Sports in Society*, 174.
- ²⁷ Howe, 'An Ethnography of Pain', 290–94.
- ²⁸ Parlebas, *Jeux, Sports et Société: Lexique de Praxéologie Motrice*, 1–469; Parlebas, 'Modelling in Games', 11–45.
- ²⁹ Bouet et al., 'The Situation of Sport', 27.
- ³⁰ Parlebas, *Jeux, Sports et Société: Lexique de Praxéologie Motrice*, 172–3.
- ³¹ Collard, *Sports, Enjeux et Accidents*, 101.

- ³² Dunning and Maguire, 'Process-Sociological Notes', 309.
- ³³ Theberge, *Higher Goals*, 17.
- ³⁴ Vincent, 'Le Rugby Féminin: un Rugby à part Entière ou un Monde Entièrement à Part', 151–74; Joncheray, 'Les Joueuses de Rugby de Première Division, une Elite qui s'affirme', 4–5; Joncheray, 'Joueuses de Rugby: des Représentations à la Réalité', 42–5.
- ³⁵ Chubilleau, *La Grande Histoire du Rugby au Féminin*, 239; Corti and Pinilla, *Des Filles en Ovalie: 40 ans d'Histoire*, 1–232.
- ³⁶ Theberge, *Higher Goals*, 17.
- ³⁷ MacKay and Dallaire, 'Campus Newspaper Coverage', 25–40.
- ³⁸ Wensing and Bruce, 'Bending the Rules', 387–96.
- ³⁹ Donnelly, MacNeill, and Knight, 'Enough, Already!'
- ⁴⁰ Chu et al., 'The Black Ferns', 112.
- ⁴¹ Mennesson, "'Hard" Women', 31.
- ⁴² Theberge, *Higher Goals*, 4.
- ⁴³ Louveau and Davisse, *Sport, Ecole et Société, la Différence des Sexes*, 119.
- ⁴⁴ Couloumet, *Les Licenciés de la Fédération Française de Rugby*, 26.
- ⁴⁵ Guilianotti, 'Risk and Sport', 544.
- ⁴⁶ Collard, *Sports, Enjeux et Accidents*, 28.
- ⁴⁷ Pike and Maguire, 'Injury in Women's Sport', 243.
- ⁴⁸ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 214–5; Hemingway, *The Dangerous Summer*, 75–6.
- ⁴⁹ Pike, 'Doctors just say', 201.
- ⁵⁰ Sabo, 'Pigskin, Patriarchy and Pain', 24–5; Nixon, 'A Social Network', 127–35.
- ⁵¹ Coakley and Pike, *Sports in Society*, 53.
- ⁵² Levy et al., 'Knee Injuries', 360–62; Wetzler et al., 'A Retrospective Study', 454–8; Sankey et al., 'The Epidemiology', 2415–24.
- ⁵³ Brooks et al., 757–66; Dallalana et al., 'The Epidemiology', 818–30.
- ⁵⁴ Medirugby, *Le Journal Medical de la Federation Française de Rugby*, 2.
- ⁵⁵ Chu et al., 'The Black Ferns', 111–22.
- ⁵⁶ Chu et al., 'The Black Ferns', 113.
- ⁵⁷ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 175.
- ⁵⁸ Pringle, 'The Stronger Women', 9.
- ⁵⁹ Young and White, *Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury: The experiences of Elite Women Athletes*, 45–61.
- ⁶⁰ Mennesson, *Etre une Femme dans le Monde des Hommes. Socialisation Sportive et Construction du Genre*, 78.
- ⁶¹ Beck, *World at Risk*, 5.
- ⁶² Parlebas, *Jeux, Sports et Société: Lexique de Praxéologie Motrice*, 1–469.
- ⁶³ Augustin and Garrigou, *Le Rugby Démêlé, Essai sur les Associations Sportives, le Pouvoir et les Notables*, 1–359.
- ⁶⁴ Louveau, *Talons Aiguilles et Crampons Alu. Les Femmes dans les Sports de Tradition Masculine*, 1–260; Mennesson, Les 'Formes Identitaires Sexuées des Femmes Investies dans des Sports "Masculins"', 63–90; Penin 'L'Amour du Risque. Modes d'Engagements Féminins dans les Pratiques Sportives à Risque', 195–207; Travert and Soto, 'Une Passion Féminine pour une Pratique Masculine: le Football', 85–95.
- ⁶⁵ Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, 41.
- ⁶⁶ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 292.
- ⁶⁷ Mennesson, "'Hard" Women', 21–2.
- ⁶⁸ Pringle, 'The Stronger Women', 10.
- ⁶⁹ Dunning and Maguire, 'Process-Sociological Notes', 314.
- ⁷⁰ Howe, 'Women's Rugby', 77–92; Scraton et al., 'It's still man's game?', 99–111.
- ⁷¹ Howe, 'Women's Rugby', 82.
- ⁷² Goffman, *La ritualisation de la fémininité*, 50.
- ⁷³ Howe, 'Women's Rugby', 80.
- ⁷⁴ Bourdieu, *La Domination Masculine*, 74.
- ⁷⁵ Chu, 'The Black Ferns', 111–22; Mennesson, "'Hard" Women', 21–33; Theberge, 'Gender, Sport and construction', 1–182; Wright and Clarke, 'Sport, Media and Construction', 227–43; Young and White, 'Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury', 45–61.
- ⁷⁶ Howe, 'Women's Rugby', 87.

- ⁷⁷ Prudhomme-Poncet, Identité du Sport dit “Féminin” à travers l'exemple du Football, 176.
⁷⁸ Chu et al., ‘The Black Ferns’, 117.
⁷⁹ Joffe, ‘Risk: From Perception’, 55–73.
⁸⁰ Beck, *World Risk Society*, 3.
⁸¹ Goffman, La ritualisation de la fémininité, 38.

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