# The Triple Gender Task of Women in Men-Dominated Fields

## INTRODUCTION

A large body of literature has discussed and evaluated the double bind women face in work settings. Women, this literature shows, have to actively show competence and communality, or else they may suffer from a backlash that ranges from discrimination in hiring and promotion to sexual harassment. In this paper, I use a combination of theoretical and empirical materials to argue two things. First, I argue that we can reframe the double bind in terms of "gendered tasks." In order to gain legitimacy in a men-dominated settings, women need to show that they are "man enough" to be trusted with the job that await them. Their first gender task is to *prove their masculinity*. In order to avoid backlash, women must show that they care about others and are communal; their second gender task is to *prove their femininity*.

Second, I argue that women in men-dominated fields actually have a third gender task. Because their masculinity can actually threaten men's own sense of manliness, women in these fields have to *nurture men's own perception of their manliness*. In order to be accepted as a member of a community in which she is an outsider by virtue of her sex categorization, a woman in a male-dominated field has to actively reaffirm and reconstruct the difference between her and the men she interacts with, and soothe the male egos she bruises by her mastery of masculinity.

Women will likely always be outsiders in men's circles, owing to the unavoidability of sexual categorization (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Because I reject essentialist or socialized versions of gender, my focus is on task-based interactions in mixed-gender settings where gender is highly salient for two reasons: because the task is characterized as typically or traditionally masculine, and because women are a very visible minority. My empirical basis consists of feminist texts on boxing, and of my own experience with sparring – practice fighting – in two different boxing gyms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance attributed by scholars to the act of sex categorization and its connection to the activation of gender stereotypes and the (re)production of gender inequality is relatively recent. In a 1977 paper, Goffman wrote about the impacts of sex-typical socialization and institutional arrangements in the reproduction of gender roles and gender hierarchy. The mere recognition of gender was seen to lead to the enactment of gender-typical scenarios for interaction. Kessler and McKenna (1978) uncovered the peculiarity of sex categorization, and discussed its omnipresence in and importance for social interactions. West and Zimmerman (1987) made explicit the gender work required by social actors, in contrast to the social science literature for which gender was made to appear effortless, internalized and merely expressing true, natural selves. They termed this work the "doing" of gender, the enactment of gender-stereotypical guidelines for appropriate masculine and feminine in interactions.

The contents of these stereotypes has been widely discussed, and can be grossly boiled down to agency for men, versus communality for women. In the words of Heiman (2001), men are "characterized as aggressive, forceful, independent, and decisive, whereas women are characterized as kind, helpful, sympathetic, and concerned about others" (Heilman, 2001, 658). Beyond being merely descriptive of what men and women *are*, these stereotypes also work as behavioral prescriptions: what men and women should *do*. Violation of descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes has been shown to bear costs for both men (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2009) and women (for a review, see Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Hegemonic gender beliefs have been argued (Ridgeway, 1997) and shown (Correll, 2004) to work as self-fulfilling prophecy: the contents of culturally-defined and reinforced gender stereotypes shape behavior in interactions, but also one's appraisal of performance and

competence. Gender stereotypes have similarly been connected to power in interactions (Glick & Fiske, 1999), conversational behavior (Aries, 1996; Kollack, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985), social influence (Carli & Eagly, 1999), the glass ceiling for women in corporations (Heilman, 2001), and the glass escalator for men in women-dominated fields (Williams, 1992). Continuing patterns of inequality in the labor force, despite individual-level changes in attitude among women and men, and structural attempts at correcting gender inequality have also been explained in connection to interactions and gender stereotypes (Ridgeway, 1997), and gender beliefs have been argued to lie at the core of an over-determined system that reproduces inequality at the micro, meso and macro levels (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

I define the triple gender task of women in men-dominated fields as a combination of the necessity for women to (1) prove their masculinity, (2) prove their femininity, and (3) nurture men's own perception of their "manliness." In order to be able to make sense of my argument, one has to share the following understanding of gender. *First*, one has to see gender as something that is learned and done (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Glick & Fiske, 1999; Goffman, 1977; West & Zimmerman, 1987), rather than a fundamental or essential property of sexed individuals.

*Second*, masculinity and femininity have to be seen as decoupled from the "essential" manifestation of maleness and femaleness respectively. The sex category of individuals (male, female) is not perfectly correlated with their enactment of masculinity or femininity. I see gender as decoupled from "biological sex," and this decoupling is visible through a range of behaviors that include degendering (Pascoe, 2007), drag (Butler, 1999 [1990]), female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998; Messerschmidt, 2004) and male femininity (Halberstam, 1998). Defined as

such, masculinity is *not* something that is the sole domain of biological males, just like femininity is *not* the exclusive domain of biological females. In the words of Schippers (2007):

> Instead of possessing or having masculinity, individuals move through and produce masculinity by engaging in masculine practices. In this way, masculinity is an identifiable set of practices that occur across space and over time and are taken up and enacted collectively by groups, communities, and societies (Schippers, 2007, 86).

Masculinities, be they hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, or marginalized, hold different meanings over time and across space (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). They are neither fixed nor immutable, yet are easily recognized (Halberstam, 1998). The same can be said of femininity, which can be defined as a socio-historically dependent set of practices that support or challenge the current gender order.

*Third*, because the effects of the decoupling of gender and sex category ultimately rest on others' perceptions of one's sex category (Kessler & McKenna, 1978), interactions are key to gender and to the performance of masculinity and femininity. The (perhaps preconscious) complicity of men and women in the reproduction of the gender order has been highlighted often in the feminist literature (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Goffman, 1977; Ridgeway, 1997; Schippers, 2007), and is critical to my understanding of the triple gender task.

## THE TRIPLE GENDER TASK

Once gender is seen as something that is done, decoupled from sex categorization, and enacted in interactions, it is possible to understand women's triple gender task in men-dominated fields. The dilemma women face in most work settings has been called the "double bind": if they choose to act "manly" and enact stereotypically masculine behavior, they will be seen as violating the prescription of niceness for women. Yet if they choose to act "womanly" and enact stereotypically feminine behavior, they run the risk of being seen as incompetent. Either route seems to lead to undesirable outcomes. Seen in terms of the enactment of gender-typical

stereotypes, the double bind can be reframed in terms of gendered tasks. The need for women to display competence and agency becomes the gendered task of proving masculinity. The descriptive and prescriptive norms that posit women as communal and holds them accountable to this type of behavior becomes the gendered task of proving femininity.

I suggest that there exists a third gender task for women in men-dominated fields, which arises out of the cultural inappropriateness of the emasculation of men by women. Women who perform masculinity better than men are a challenge to men's sense of manliness, if they are not totally emasculating. In the feminist sports literature, this possibility of women's emasculation of men through athletic performance has been connected to the downplaying of women's performance, and the constant redefinition of standards in ways that favor men's performances over women's (Bryson, 1990; Hall, 1988, 1990). Women who are potentially emasculating to the men around them must accomplish a third gender task to avoid backlash: they must preserve men's sense of manliness through a combination of nurturing behavior and gender boundary maintenance.

The literature on female masculinity – here the enactment by women of masculinity, or the second gender task – highlights how high the stakes are for women who "trespass" into male territory without an invitation. "Masculinity without men" (Halberstam, 1998) doesn't go unnoticed and may trigger a backlash that ranges from discrimination to sexual harassment to outright violence. Halberstam (1998) documents the dangers that female to male (FTM) transexuals face when they trespass into the "male territory" of men's bathrooms (p. 25). The threat of physical violence FTM and butch women face consistently and the violent retributions faced by homosexuals or feminine men, especially as teenagers (Pascoe, 2007), shows the extent to which the current gender order is enforced. My triple gender task frameworks is an attempt at

theorizing the way women who enact high levels of masculinity may be able to get away with it, without necessarily rupturing the gender status quo.

## WOMEN, BOXING, AND GENDER DYNAMICS

Sport is a highly gender-segregated social institution. Most of the history of women and sport throughout the late 19th century and through the 20th century has been one of struggle for inclusion and participation (Welch, 2004). It is only in the second half of the century that the discourse about equal resources took hold, and got legal status with Title IX. As of 2009, there exist very few sports where men and women compete together or against one another, and every Olympic sport is gender-segregated.

Boxing, macho sport *par excellence* (Oates, 1987), is one of the few sports where men and women cohabit and train together. Given the small number of women athletes, this gender blend is mostly borne out of necessity for women to find training partners. The acceptance of women in boxing gyms is a very recent innovation, and is not widespread internationally. Recent research on boxing still documents men-only gyms, in the United States and abroad (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 1995, 1998, 2004; Woodward, 2004). Before turning to my own ethnographic data, I review two sets of literature: first, the literature on men boxers which mentions women; second, the literature on women boxers in mixed-gender gyms on the other.

### "OTHERED" WOMEN IN THE BOXING LITERATURE

Pronger (1990) wrote that "[t]he athletic world of power, speed, and pain is an expression of the masculine ideals of our culture," (Pronger, 1990, 3), and that as such, gay athletes and women threaten "real" men's masculinity. In the empirical sports literature, women are often "othered." While doing research in a Northern England men-only boxing gym in the late 1990s, Kath Woodward found that these boxers saw women's boxing as dangerous, unnatural and

unacceptable (Woodward, 2004, 5). It may be because, as she writes, “[m]asculinity as enacted at the gym is embodied and involves strong investment in and identification with traditional masculinity, as distinguished from femininity which is construed as its psychic opposite” (p. 21). In that light, men boxers have a vested interest in not letting women participate in the trade, for they fundamentally question their own traditional masculinity.

In 1992, Wacquant wrote that “[t]he [boxing] gym culture is a *quintessentially masculine space* (emphasis in original) into which the trespassing of females is tolerated only as long as it remains incidental” (Wacquant 1992, p. 234, cited by Lafferty and McKay, 2004). His extremely popular ethnography of a Chicago boxing gym (Wacquant, 2004) has been heavily criticized for leaving women voiceless, depriving them of agency, and presenting them as mere spectacle (Geurts, 2005), and for ignoring the increasing prominence of women boxers (Heiskanen, 2004). In fact, the women he describes are sexual objects, docile wives and mothers playing a “stroking function” (Lafferty & McKay, 2004) for the men in their lives. Wacquant (2005) rejected the validity of these criticisms, claiming that he was describing the women as he encountered them, and that women boxers were absent at the time of his study, conducted in the late 80s, early 90s.

Famed writer Joyce Carol Oates, a well-known and much-read boxing aficionado, provocatively noted that boxing excludes women just like childbirth excludes men, and that:

> In any case, raw aggression is thought to be the peculiar province of men, as nurturing is the peculiar province of women. (The female boxer violates this stereotype and cannot be taken seriously – she is parody, she is cartoon, she is monstrous. Had she an ideology, she is likely to be a feminist.)” (Oates 1987, 73).

WOMEN’S BOXING

As noted by Heiskanen (2004), “even if Latino fighters from across the Americas dominate the worldwide occupational numbers today, and women boxers gain increasing prominence in its everyday culture, both of these groups are glaringly absent from academic

examinations of the sport" (p. 10). Women have been boxing and fighting in the United States for over a century (Hargreaves, 1997), but the first fully sanctioned boxing fight among women didn't happen until 1993 (Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006), and the first studies of women in boxing had to wait until the late 1990s.

Hargreaves' (1997) history of women's boxing and overview of the different images associated with women pugilists has highlighted the precarious space women boxers inhabit, at the intersection of sexual fetish, strength, femininity and sporting ability. She writes:

> Blood, bruises, cuts and concussion, which accompany boxing's intrinsic aggression, violence and danger, are popularly considered to be legitimate and even 'natural' for men (Messner, 1992: 67), but absolutely at odds with the essence of femininity. Boxing, as Wacquant (1995: 90) argues, is deeply gendered, embodying and exemplifying 'a definite form of masculinity: plebeian, heterosexual and heroic' (Hargreaves, 1997, 35).

"At first glance," then, according to Hargreaves, women boxers' embodiment of this form of masculinity "blurs traditional male and female images, identities and alliances, and thus the character of the sport. Yet as she argues, the popular appeal of "non-combat boxing" among upper-middle-class women threatens the seriousness with which women who box are taken, while conventional images of femininity are preferred by "promoters and boxers alike" (45).

Lafferty and McKay's (2004) insightful ethnography of an Australian boxing gym has shown the gendered structures of power in terms of access to club resources, belief in "natural bodily differences between men and women" which construct muscular women as "deviant" (p. 261-2), and a discourse of controlled aggression that women frame as "passion" rather than "aggression" to avoid being seen as "aggro," or unnaturally aggressive… for a woman. The head coach in that gym expressed a protective paternal relation to the women in his gym when he said: "If they [women] do want to box at least I know I'll look after 'em properly and I'll do the right thing by 'em, so at least they're looked after, while I've got 'em" (Lafferty and McKay, 263). To take care of the women, he "avoided placing [them] in the ring with less experienced men for

fear they might not control their punches" (ibidem, 263). Men boxers confessed to acting different in the ring with women boxers, and that regardless of the woman's skill level. Meanwhile, women repeated the rhetoric according to which they should be placed in the ring only with experienced men to avoid those who are aggressive, can't control themselves, and / or could potentially hurt them. Finally, women expressed the need to be feminine, to do the "typical things, like doing your hair or putting your make-up on" (ibidem, 266).

Boyle, Millington and Vertinsky (2006) take issue with different aspects of the representation of Maggie, the woman pugilist in Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*, a popular Hollywood movie. They use Halberstam's (1998) "female masculinity" and argue that several elements in the movie go against Maggie's enactment of masculinity without men. For one, they see Maggie as dominated by her coach Frankie (Eastwood) from the onset. Early on, he tells her: "If I take you on, you don't say anything. You don't question me. You don't ask why. You don't say a thing except maybe, 'Yes Frankie.' And I'm going to try to forget that you're a girl" (Boyle et al., 2006, 106). Secondly, they see her disablement as a means to "contain her initially powerful identity, sustaining cultural anxieties about women's participation in boxing based upon overly pronounced anxieties about the danger of injury and death to women (much more so than men)" (ibidem, 101). They note how socially isolated from other women she is, and how her "whiteness and slenderness contribute to the acceptability of her strong body and performance, sustaining long-held Eurocentric notions of beauty and normative body types" (ibidem, 104), against "Blue Bear," the black woman-beast who disables her.

## SPARRING, IN CONTEXT

Sparring, or practice fighting, is a key element of boxing training. It is where the long hours of work come to the test. Unlike most other components of training such as bag work and

mitts work, the speed and intensity of which are controlled only by the martial artist, sparring puts you against an actual opponent who may or may not have the same goals, experience, talent, size, speed, strength or aggression as you. Holding experience constant, our gendered assumptions, as well as the locally hegemonic masculinity, would have men as more competitive, more naturally talented, bigger, faster, stronger and more aggressive than women. Consequently, one would assume that women aren't as good fighters as men, and that putting men against women in a fight or merely for sparring would be at women's disadvantage.

In reality, the gender divide is not so clear, especially in boxing gyms, where men and women ranging from 100 to over 200 pounds, five-feet to six-and-a-half feet tall come together to train and learn to fight. Clearly, some women are bigger, stronger, faster, and more aggressive than some men. Over the course of my four years of training in martial arts, I sparred in four different locations: a karate dojo, a muay thai club, and in two different boxing gyms, which I call 'the Gym' and 'Home.' I collected systematic ethnographic data daily when at the Gym, and continued data collection, albeit in less-regimented form, after I transferred gyms and joined Home. These four settings varied along different dimensions: in terms of the race, class, gender balance of its members, and in terms of leadership styles, organization, and maintenance. Given space limits, I restrict myself here to my two boxing gyms – for which I have ethnographic data – and to gender-related elements, such as clothing, gender ratio, the framing of sparring, etc.

*The Gym*. In the Gym, where I trained five times a week for five months, men wore shorts and t-shirts, while women wore spandex outfits. The ratio of men to women was fluctuated daily, but was on average 6 to 1. Boxing posters plastered every wall, but none of them featured women. Women typically were there to do a boxing-style workout rather than box competitively, as was remarked of women in boxing gyms elsewhere (Hargreaves, 1997;

Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Only two women (including myself) were actually fighters, while many of the men fell in either the fighting category (six or seven men, 106 to 201+ pounds), or what I have come to call the 'hopeful' category: men waiting to be okayed by the head coach (Coach) as potential fighters (more than ten).

Julia, the other female fighter, was a good looking, thirty-year-old petite woman, and she led one of the evening classes as boot-camp style instructor. Adam, a good looking fighter in his early twenties, tall and very muscular, led the other evening class. The gender ratio changed between those two classes, with more women attending Adam's later classes, and I often being the only woman in Julia's class, at six o'clock.

Coach was the gatekeeper, allowing only certain individuals the *privilege* to spar, thus creating a hierarchy among people in his gym between those who were thought worthy of sparring, and those who were not. Sparring in the Gym was thus highly regulated, and only happened in pre-approved pairs. Since we were only two women, I was initially paired up with Julia for sparring. I soon realized that our sparring situation was less than ideal: we were always the last ones in line for sparring, which meant I had often worked out for three hours before we could get in the ring. Furthermore, she lacked aggressiveness, and I felt like a pitiless abuser when working with her, next to whom I felt like a monster (fieldnotes, 13 August 08).

I therefore sought out other sparring partners, and found Adam and Mark. I first teased Adam about sparring on my twenty-third visit to the gym:

> After class, as I'm waiting for Pat, working in front of the mirror, he walks by. I ask:
> E. "When?"
> M. "When what?"
> E. "When are we sparring?"
> M. "I can spar you right now with my eyes closed and one arm tied behind my back if you like."
> E. "Very kind." I am smiling, very amused. I stay a few more moments in front of the mirror, as he goes back to teaching his 7pm class, and then rush to my bag to write his comment down, laughing. (Fieldnotes, 24 July 08)

His body size – sixty pounds heavier than I, four inches taller – guaranteed his domination over me. His humor reaffirmed it: eyes closed, arm tied, he'd still "win." Yet he was a novice with fewer than ten fights and had a lot to prove in the world of boxing. We did end up sparring a few weeks later, when Coach was away on a trip and could not object. In my fieldnotes, I wrote of our first session:

> I alternate 1-2s, shots to the body, some that get to his face. He probably doesn't notice much that I am "hitting" him, but he does say "nice" a few times, or "good." I'm chasing him, hitting him in the stomach. He taps my headgear a few times, from above. It is more annoying than anything else. Once he hits a little harder, and apologizes for it. I feel like letting him know that I've been hit harder. Instead I keep this to myself (8 Aug 08).

When the final bell rang after our four rounds, we hugged and said thanks. Upon re-reading my fieldnotes, I noticed how the tone of our interactions, from mid-July to August 8, was one of flirtation: a lot of joking, a lot of smiling and teasing, and he eventually asked for my phone number, in case I wanted to "wrestle" him (9 October 08).

Mark, my third sparring "partner," was a light heavyweight (178 lbs) who stood at five feet eleven and decided to turn professional in the fall of 2008. He was a football player in college, and told me he dropped out because he partied and fought too much (16 May 09). In my notes I wrote that working with him in the ring felt different from working with Adam, although I noted that I didn't know why it felt so different (7 October 08). Mark never openly flirted with me, was always encouraging, and we kept in touch after I left the Gym.

When I suggested to Coach that I could spar one of the guys who was closer to my size and skill level, he told me that he didn't think the guy was ready (echoing the coach in Lafferty and McKay, 2004), and that I was being "unreasonable" with my pressing demands (6 October 09). If not for Adam or Mark, I did not become close to any of the men boxers in the gym, while the hopefuls and I were very friendly. In the ring at the Gym, then, I never worked with a man who was fewer than forty pounds heavier than I, or with a woman my size.

*Home*. At Home gym, gender was extremely salient. Home had lots of posters on the walls, but also pictures of athletes, men and women, current and past. One poster was of a mock Rosie the Riveter, with strong biceps, red boxing gloves and head gear, saying: 'We can do it.' Something that looked like a shrine was erected to three times world champion Laura, with pictures, newspaper articles, and other artifacts. Over my six-and-a-half-month stay there, the head coach (Dad) told me many times that the best athletes he had ever had were women. I felt instantaneously welcome at Home, even if I was almost always the only woman boxer, with a gender ratio ranging from 10:1 to 25:1. A few middle-aged women visited Home on a regular basis, but I rarely interacted with them about boxing. We typically talked about Dad, the weather, or did other small talk.

Consciously and unconsciously, I developed a set of strategies to cope with the fact that I was their 'token' woman fighter, and also the only white fighter there: I smiled, laughed and self-derogated a lot, I asked my fellow gym mates about their private lives, supported them through rough times (loss of a grandmother, breakups, weight loss, etc.), made sure to voice out my seriousness about boxing, forced myself never to complain, etc. The atmosphere lent itself well to this type of behavior, for it really felt like a home to a variegated community. I was an outlier on many dimensions – the only white, the only woman, the only college graduate, the slimmest, the oldest active fighter, etc. –, yet I was accepted as a serious boxer, someone with skill, dedication, and who had a positive effect on the work climate at Home, as I was told during a dinner my coaches and training buddies arranged for me (11 March 2009) and the day before I left for the summer (19 May 2009).

My sparring partners at Home were mostly men. In my first months, I sparred a range of men, mostly heavier than I, but also a man about my height and size, Javier. All these men were

instructed to 'tap-box me:' to go light and work on their defense. Each of them separately told me that I hit hard (e.g. fieldnotes, 17 March 09; 26 March 09), and one even said I would "destroy" the girls I would fight (17 April 09). One of my more regular partners was Sebastian, a very fast, nervous, lanky sixteen-year-old. We sparred for the first time in the presence of Dad, while Emilio, Sebastian's main coach and my occasional coach, was away. I wrote about the encounter:

> Sebastian and I worked on jabs. He is much faster than I, and I couldn't see the punches coming. It was interesting. I still managed to hit him a few times. Eloy then asked us to go with both hands. We did. I flipped Sebastian's eyelid once. After our four rounds, Eloy said: "That's it!" Both Sebastian and I answered: "That's it?" We laughed, got undressed, and I thanked Sebastian. He told me at the end that I hit him solid (26 March 09).

Once Emilio was back from his travels, I asked him whether I could spar with Sebastian, without mentioning that we had sparred before. He agreed, and instructed Sebastian to tap-box me. Seen that he could not punch to defend himself, Sebastian did poorly that time. I felt horrible for beating up a sixteen-year-old boy so badly, so after our rounds together I went to him, feeling compelled to tell him that he had done well, what I thought his strengths were, and highlighting how he would have done better if he had been allowed to hit me. The second time we sparred under Emilio's guidance, it was even worst. He got entangled in the ropes a few times as I almost punched him out of the ring. After two rounds, I went to Emilio and complained that this was useless: I was getting tired, doing stupid things, and not working at all on defense. He instructed Sebastian to tap-box, but it was too late: he wasn't there psychologically, had a distressed look on his face, and Dad later told me it was a sad sight, me in the ring with Sebastian (19 May 09).

Another of my sparring partners at Home was Javier. At five-feet-nine and 130 pounds, he is lighter than I, with skinny legs and long, wiry arms. He aspires to become a professional boxer, and has sparred over the years with Laura (the world champion), Alessandra (a professional boxer), and Marisol (a newcomer). Once, as we were driving back from sparring,

Dad told me that both Laura and Alessandra used to get mad at Javier. They wanted him to "really" box. But these guys are stronger than the women are, you know, he added. I asked, curious: Were they really stronger than Laura? He remained silent (18 April 09).

Over the months I spent at the Home gym, I sparred Javier maybe five times. As my skills improved, however, he started to get hit more and more, while I succeeded at avoiding more and more of his tap punches. Once, as I sparred him, he got visibly upset and started punching more in return, a detail I didn't fail to share with Emilio. He also mentioned that I hit hard (17 March 09). After every sparring bout, we would hug, I would thank him, tell him how much I appreciate to be able to work with him (14 May 09). Deep down, I felt guilty.

I only had three women as partners during my six-month stay at Home: Monica, an amateur with a lot of experience and fighting at 119 pounds; Alessandra, a professional boxer also fighting at 119; and Marisol, a five-feet-six Latina weighing at 165 pounds and with very little experience. In total, however, my time sparring with these women represented about fifteen rounds (45 minutes) over a four-and-a-half-month period. In other words, sparring women was negligible in a workout schedule of close to twenty hours a week.

## Discussion

Through extended vignettes about the gender dynamics of sparring in two boxing gyms, I have tried to make clear how I, as a woman boxer, was accomplishing my triple gender task in men-dominated environments. Firstly, I was proving my masculinity: showing aggressive, dominant, pitiless behavior, punching men who left relatively defenseless as they were not allowed to hit back. Secondly, I was proving my femininity through communal behavior, laughter, clothing (I started wearing pink when I started boxing) and other woman-typical bodily maintenance (I let my hair grow and started wearing eyeliner). Thirdly, and more significantly, I

was nurturing the egos of men I sparred with in at least two different ways. On the one hand, I was forced to accept that they be victimized and not reply back with full force / skill, therefore implicitly supporting the 'fact' of men's greater strength. On the other hand, I did some ego stroking, as when I laughed at Adam's jokes, went out of my way to ease Sebastian's shaken sense of competence, and through the countless little gestures such as hugs, helping out with gear, vocal support, self-diminution and gender talk that I enact semi-self-consciously on a daily basis, aware of the gross violation of gender-appropriate behavior that constitutes boxing.

This behavior, however, doesn't seem to happen in a vacuum. At the Home gym, unlike at the Gym, I was allowed to spar with men roughly my size. The instructions they were given to tap-box me, however, reproduced the sparring conditions of the Gym. They all agreed that I hit hard and work well, often cheering me on or applauding after I had done a round of shadow boxing (e.g. fieldnotes, 23 April 09). Clearly, I was doing a good job at enacting the masculine boxer. As such, I believe that the prescription for men to tap-box women, which is often couched as a benevolent sexism meant to protect women against men's strength, serves to preserve their sense of their own masculinity: just like Adam teased he would have an easy time sparring me with an arm behind his back and his eyes closed, the men who tap-box and play defense are handicapped, thus providing me (the woman!) with an absolute advantage that can always be brought up to minimize my performance against theirs and reaffirm their potential dominance in a "real" fight. My point here meets the argument made by authors who have discussed how benevolent sexism to diminish women's capabilities (Glick & Fiske, 1999; Goffman, 1977).

The third gender task, enacted in combination with self-protective mechanisms by men (letting me spar only heavyweights at the Gym, not allowing men to hit me at Home), reinforces the gender status quo, yet enables women to continue to enact female masculinity. Men and

women, then, are complicit in the prevention of men's definite emasculation by women. But they are also complicit in the underperforming of women at the same task that prompted the protective mechanisms. By not allowing me to develop all the skills I need to be a good boxer, both offense and defense, this strategizing undermined my performance relative to men boxers in my gym (who could claim unchallenged that they would win if they were allowed to hit back), and relative to women who have women training partners and learn the full set of skills.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that women in these fields have a triple gender task: they have to prove their masculinity, their femininity, and protect the masculinity of the men they interact with. I have reframed the double bind in terms of gender task to show the dynamic character of what are conceived as masculine and feminine traits. Through an extended overview of the dynamics of sparring with men, I have shown the extent to which the triple task is a semi-self-conscious attempt to avoid backlash and the emasculation of men by a woman – me –, but also exposed the internal dynamics of men's interactions with women as they protect themselves against emasculation by a woman.

While discussing my research with other women in men-dominated fields, it became clear that it may apply across fields (including robotics, graffiti arts, etc.). However, I was faced in my discussions with women fighters by the way there may be varying degrees of applicability based on how threatening the woman looks. A blonde, very feminine mixed martial artist who weights short of a hundred pounds at five feet four told me that she didn't feel the need to protect men's egos, nor did a five-feet-tall, 160 pound mixed martial artist with a giggling laugh. A more tomboyish boxer, national champion fighting at 119 pounds, immediately related to my triple gender task framework. Because of my low body fat percentage (they called me "la flaca" – the

skinny one – at Home), my height and my muscularity, I am more likely to threaten men's masculinities than the two first women mentioned here; the tomboy national champion may also pose some level of threat to men's masculinities.

Certainly, more research is necessary to understand all the intricacies of the gender tasks I propose. Experimental designs could help refine our understanding of the triple gender task of women in men-dominated fields. By focusing on tasks that are stereotypically masculine, and having women confederates who perform at very high levels of the task in majority-men groups, and by changing the nature of the task (physical, intellectual) and changing the bodily appearance of the women who perform the task, we could disentangle between the different effects. If women confederates are not aware that we are looking for their responses to their own dominance in a man-typical task, we could test the third gender task, how it varies across context and based on the woman's visible characteristics.

Another aspect to evaluate would be the importance of intimacy on these types of behaviors. Do men and women act differently when they know one another, yet the woman out-performs the men? An experiment with repeated interactions, or using pre-acquainted groups as subjects, with the task designed as team work, could provide exploratory answers.

Women in men-dominated fields today, like those of yesterday, are boundary breakers and have the potential to reshape assumptions about what is typically masculine. When they "trespass" in men territory, they do so because they want to be true to themselves, regardless of stereotypes. What the third gender task I identified here suggests is that there may be yet another set of mechanisms that protect the gender status quo. On the one hand, men seem to activate some protective mechanisms that undermine women's threat to their masculinity, while downplaying their performance. On the other, when women who perform masculinity well

actively work not to bruise men's ego, they reinforce the essentialist view of women as caring, communal, and may limit their own performance.

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