

Skirting the Issue

Women Boxers' Bodies in a Time of Hysterisis

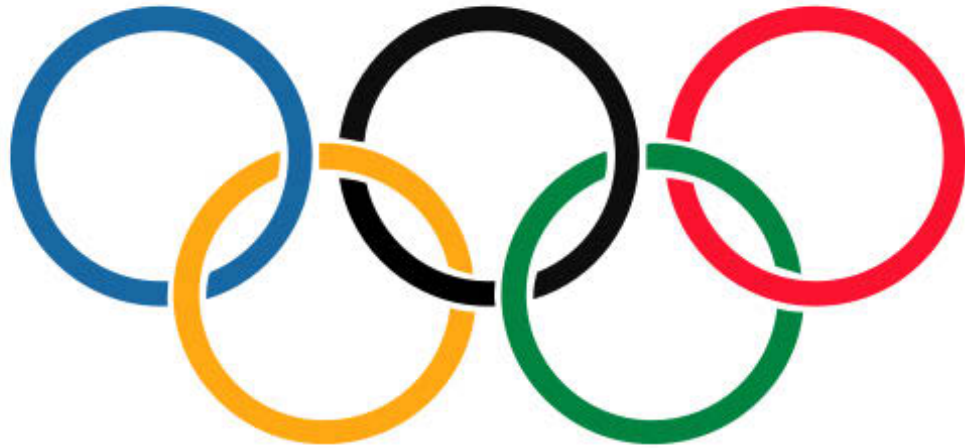
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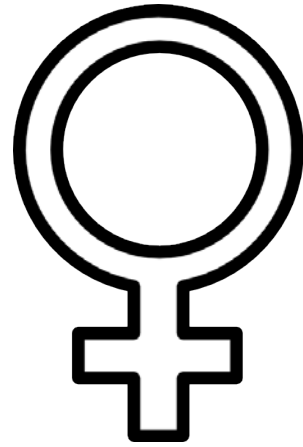
August 13, 2009



INTERNATIONAL
OLYMPIC
COMMITTEE

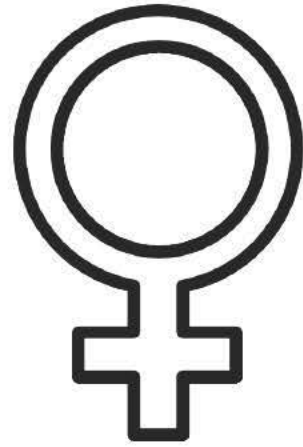






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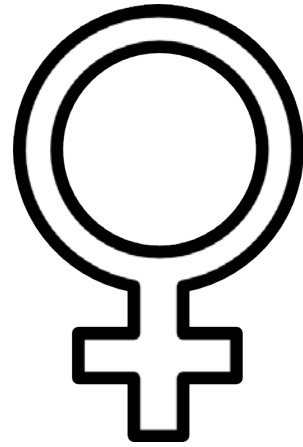
51kg, 60kg and 75kg



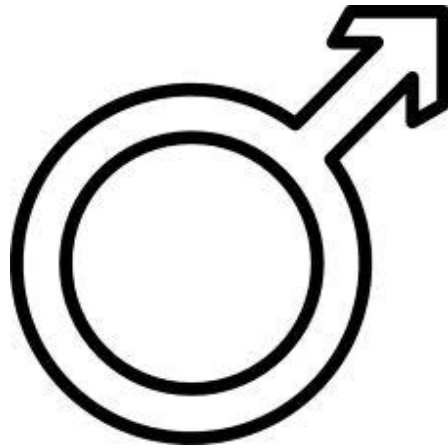
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**International
Boxing Association**



International
Boxing Association

4 World Championships

Women's boxing legitimated

September 18, 2010



**International
Boxing Association**

‘Invited’ women boxers to wear
skirts at the
5th World Championships in
Barbados



International
Boxing Association



**International
Boxing Association**

14 / 40 athletes wore the skirts

11 stated fear of retaliation

Rumors suggested skirts may become compulsory.

In an interview, AIBA's President said that the push to have women wear skirts was driven by the need to help viewers distinguish women boxers from men and to make women boxers more elegant.

The issue received little press coverage until Elizabeth Plank, a Canadian-born amateur boxer studying in London, brought to life a petition on Change.org asking AIBA to ‘play fair’ and not ‘ask female boxers to wear skirts.’

Polarized

Skirts?
No problem.



Skirts?
Outrageous!



Display the
'gender
appropriate'
image



Comfort



Comparatively
insignificant



Negative impact
on performance



Undermine
athletes'
legitimacy



Outdated view of
femininity



Money,
i.e.
Sex Sells



Why are there such polarized views on women's boxing among boxing **insiders**?

It may be true that men and women boxers look similar when in full gear.



Why do we care?

If we are fans of boxing, why do we
need to know whether we are
watching men or women?

Several of Bourdieu's concepts help understand the skirt issue.

Field

A relatively autonomous structured space defined by a network of relations among social agents.

An arena of struggle defined by rules, stakes and power relations.

Habitus

A system of dispositions developed through experience which serve to define an agent's perception and behavior in a **field** and lead to predictable regularities.

Development of a **gendered habitus** is the result of an internalization of external social practices that position women as different from and dominated by men (Bourdieu 2001).

Gender is a key determinant of an individual's cultural and symbolic capital and thus a major factor in someone's position in a field, particularly when it is guided by a gendered **doxa**.

Doxa

A set of pre-reflexive, shared but unquestioned opinions and perceptions that determine the ‘natural’ practice and attitudes (i.e. the shared **habitus**) of those in the **field** (Deer 2008: 120).

Boxing's masculine, misogynistic and homophobic **doxa** defines the way **field** and habitus interact to shape practices and hierarchies.

Up until very recently, gender determined
someone's ability to box.

Women were perceived to have no pugilistic capital (Wacquant 2004), were often discriminated against, harassed, ignored (Paradis 2012).

This *doxa*, however, has been under threat.

Women were 'forced in.'

1994

USA Boxing forced by the Supreme Court to allow women to box among amateur ranks.

2009

IOC allowed women to box at the Olympics.

In a **stable field**, **field** structures, **habitus** and **doxa** align. Social agents feel like ‘fish in water’ as the world makes sense; they know how to play the game, who are the powerful individuals and where they themselves stand.

In a **changing field**, the **doxa** becomes uncertain. Rules aren't so clear anymore.

Doxic Crisis

When the *doxa* of a *field* and its associated beliefs and opinions are changing; when the *habitus* of social agents is undergoing redefinition.

Hysteresis

Refers to the lag between changes in the **field** structures and change in the **habitus** of agents in the field.

Social agents go through **hysteresis** when their **habitus** has been fitted to a **field** structure that does not exist anymore (Bourdieu 1977).

According to Bourdieu, times of **hysteresis** are times when people are most likely to get sanctioned for acting out of place (Bourdieu 1977).

What do we make of AIBA's skirts, then?

In short: the skirts skirt broader issues.

Female athlete as contested terrain, her body
a site where social anxieties about the
gender order are projected (Messner 1988).

Female boxer is also a contested terrain, her body a site where anxieties about both the gender order and the future of the sport are projected.

Female boxers threaten a gender order where women are the weaker, demure sex: submissive, passive, nurturing and in need of protection.

That they would be undistinguishable from male boxers threatens the idea that men are inherently better, tougher, more muscular and more athletic.

AIBA, a powerful agent in the field of amateur boxing, is navigating a doxic change that has profound consequences on the perception of the sport as a dominant, aggressive male preserve.

Either the mythology of boxing has to be revisited, or the mythology of womanhood has to be revisited.

Neither is all that appealing.

AIBA is suffering from **hysteresis**. Its habitus is not fully in sync with the new field structures that have made women into legitimate athletes.

February 20, 2012

Plank declared victory.

> 53,000 signatures

March 3, 2012



**International
Boxing Association**

Subdued announcement on its website

Although a fight was won by women athletes,
the war is far from over.

Boxing is still experiencing a doxic crisis.

A new doxa – a new symbolic order – that fully welcomes women has yet to set in.

Different, contradictory **habitus** still coexist
in boxing. They will keep fighting.

Yet with every punch, whether they wear
a skirt or not, women boxers are
changing the world.

Redefining what it means to be a woman.

Redefining what a woman looks like.



Paradis, E. (Forthcoming) “Skirting the Issue: Women boxers, liminality and change.” in hunter, Smith and emerald (Eds.) *Fields of Physical Culture: Encounters with and beyond Pierre Bourdieu.*

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