Abstract: The article provides information concerning empirical research named “Report on mountaineering in Spain: an approximation from the perspective of gender”, conducted with public funds provided by the Secretary General of Education at the Ministry of Science and Education. The objective of this paper is to detail the obtained outcomes using a qualitative methodology. The results reveal the persistence of a gender identity, which is by nature very sexist (chauvinistic) between mountaineers in Spain. Also, it demonstrates how this gender identity determines the opportunities people have to partake in mountaineering, such as making a career out of this sport and the conduct between mountaineers, which is dependent on one’s gender.

Keywords: mountaineering, sociology of sport, perspective of gender, Spain.

Introduction

Different investigations have demonstrated that the gender variable has a determining influence on the social structure of sport (Harrison, Lee & Belcher, 1999; Dunning, 1999; Puig & Soler, 2004; Ottogalli-Mozzacavallo, 2004). From this literature, we should emphasize two essential pieces of evidence. To begin with, in comparison to men there are fewer women who partake in sports in general. Second, the manner of relating to the sporting world is very different between men and women. This situation leads to the conclusion that, in order to comprehend in social scientific terms the different behaviours and attitudes in relation to the practise of sport, a gender perspective needs to be introduced.

In Spain, the mountaineering situation is not immune to these differences, and therefore its analysis should be conducted taking into account this variable (Moscoso, 2003, 2004). The number of women practising mountain sports is relatively low, in contrast to the number of men, in spite of the lively process of democratization in sport. According to the latest survey of sporting habits of the Spanish population (CIS, 2005), 64% of the practitioners of mountaineering are men and 36% women. The number of women that occupy executive positions in sporting clubs and federations (12% of the total) and who receive aid for high performance (38% of the total) is also lower, according to data from the Superior Council of Sport of Spain (CSD, 2006). Mountaineering females also find themselves adversely affected in many other aspects, such as recognition of their sporting successes and the conciliation between their
sporting activity and occupational, domestic and family responsibilities, although it is not easy to quantify this situation.

The article provides information based on empirical research named “Report on Mountaineering in Spain: An Approximation from the Perspective of Gender”, conducted with public funds provided by the Secretary General of Education at the Ministry of Science and Education. The main aim of this empirical research is to analyse the behaviour of the mountaineers in Spain (their motivations, habits of sporting, sporting career, recognition of merits…) from the perspective of gender. More specifically, this research is focused on studying how gender relationships amongst mountaineers are established. This analysis helps to reach a general view of gender relationships for the whole of the Spanish society.

Methods
The methodology of the study makes use of different techniques of social investigation: document analysis, exploitation of secondary data, application of a Delphi questionnaire and execution of group-interviews. Here, it is focused exclusively on the analysis of the information obtained through qualitative fieldwork (group-interviews). Eight group-interviews were conducted in different regions of Spain (Catalonia, Aragon, Madrid and Andalusia), in which 52 persons participated. The profile of the interviewees was the following: men (50%) and women (50%); amateur and high performance athletes in different disciplines of mountaineering (hiking, rock climbing and mountain climbing) (50%), professionals (mountain guides and adventure company proprietors) (25%), and agents of mountaineering clubs and federations (25%).

Results
A dual identity: gender and sporting identity
In Spain, a person’s gender constitutes a variable that carries very important weight in the field of mountaineering, as much in the practise of sport as in its management and professionalization. Gender identity is determined by sex: “he” (men) and “she” (women). Nonetheless, in the obtained discourse from the qualitative fieldwork, the coexistence of another identity is observed, the sporting (mountaineering) identity, which is not characterized by gender, which is common to men and women.

Despite this common sporting identity, gender determines some distinctive characteristics between men and women in mountaineering:

Male mountaineers distinguish themselves from female mountaineers by possessing greater physical aptitudes for the practise of mountain sports, by having a greater tolerance of pain at their disposal, and by demonstrating a greater involvement in matters relative to sport management (in sporting clubs and federations). At the same time, they characterize female mountaineers as being very masculine, as possessing inferior physical aptitudes (by being weaker), and a scarce capacity for self-sacrifice, as prioritizing or awarding greater importance to family rather than to this sport, and seldom involving themselves in the management of sporting clubs and federations.
For their part, female mountaineers see themselves – and distinguish themselves from the men – as persons with great self-esteem (with charisma, confident of themselves), with a great capacity for learning, as more caring, as being effectively less concerned with matters relative to sport management, and whose greater worth in the field of mountaineering is identified by their capacity for mental performance and their talent for self-organization. Likewise, these women view mountaineers of a masculine gender in many cases as individuals with a weak personality, with greater physical strength, but with more concern for their self-image (the opinion of others matters more to them, they are more hedonistic), and with a greater attitude of protagonism, be it in the practise of sport, management, and/or professionalization.

The mountaineering identity, as has been stated, is the same for men and women. Both genders identify themselves with an area (the mountain in its distinct forms), a sport (mountaineering, also in its diverse kinds and styles), and a culture that unifies the entire collective (mountaineering culture, a lifestyle based on values associated with contact with nature, personal development, rough experiences, excursions and human relations).

Gender identity is a result of patriarchal domination. In our study we were particularly interested to know the reasons that explain gender identity in the practise of mountaineering. In the interviews we were able to verify that the key element of the differentiation of individuals is “sex”. Such as indicated by those interviewed:

It’s because that’s it, that the concept of gender is a manner of differentiating. That each one of us has some characteristics (...). I think that gender comes defined by sex, masculine sex and feminine sex, and all that it implies characteristics, qualities and attitudes (...)

(Group Interview; mountain climbing woman, 30 years of age; Jaen, July 2006).

The construction of the gender identity of persons by sex is important, as it now determines the existence of a system of attitudes, behaviours, and values distinctive for men and women – motivated by the production of social representations different from each other –, from which a social stratification has been put into place, which is why women live at a disadvantage in the face of men, that is to say, where men exercise their influence (or dominance) over women.¹

In our study we were able to corroborate this situation. We had the opportunity to observe the existence of a patriarchal type structure (and “male chauvinist”) among Spanish mountaineers, a situation that is observed perfectly in the following excerpt from the interviews:

¹ This opinion can be found in Bourdieu (2001): “The order of things is not a natural order that nothing can be done about, but instead is a mental construction, a vision of the world where men satisfy their network of domination. A vision that women themselves, and those victimized have assumed, unconsciously accepting their inferiority.”
W: A few days ago, on a trip to climb the Naranjo de Bulnes, one of the guys told me, “Don’t worry, on the route that we’ll take you won’t have a problem because when you’ll climb with the rope fastened, you won’t get scared.” And I told him, “Hey, you are the one that is assuming I am going to climb up the route as the second in line along the rope, well I plan on leading the way.” A: Rare are the men that trust enough (in women) to scale with us, in spite of our experience (...) and nonetheless, if a guy with less experience goes up the mountain, the other guys don’t have any trouble climbing with him. I think that the problem is that there is a lot of chauvinism amongst mountaineers (Group Interview: Women of different ages, athletes; Barcelona, May 2006).

It is not exclusively men who contribute to the production of this structure, women themselves who have acquired the characteristic values of this type of social organization also contribute through the mechanisms of socialization (family, school, peer groups, mass media outlets). And this, like the interviewees understand, determines unequal gender relations and, specifically, the lesser presence of women in the field of mountaineering.

In the field of mountain sports, the dominance of men over women is manifested through two clear strategies that are found to be interrelated. The first one is hindering the presence of women in the practise, management, and professionalization of sport, the second one is distributing the sporting roles unequally, according to sex. These strategies will be explained in detail in the following.

Hindering the presence of women in the practice, management and professionalization of sport

One of the ways in which male mountaineers attempt to impede the presence of women in the field of mountain sports is to resort to the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, which in turn produce aesthetic and sexual ideals, something that in the latest instance intends to produce social distinction. In the discourses extracted from the interviews, this distinction is materialized in the unequal assessment that the feminine stereotype has in respect to the masculine; femininity would be associated with debility and delicacy and masculinity with strength and protection. As such, the feminine stereotype would be relegated to the masculine, which depends on this. As the idea exists that the practise of mountaineering requires the aptitude of physical and mental qualities such as physical strength, capacity for self-sacrifice and family independence that are characterized by the masculine stereotype, it therefore directly excludes women from the practise of mountaineering.

Another method that male mountaineers employ to prevent women from the practice of mountaineering is concealing their sporting success. With the concealment of sporting successes, the intention is to favour the maintenance of the privileges of men
before those of women, including the discouragement of potential female mountaineers from undertaking thoughts of engaging in this activity.

Unequal distribution of the sporting roles

Another way in which this type of patriarchal structure is expressed in the field of mountaineering is through the unequal distribution of tasks according to the gender of athletes. Through this distribution of roles, men exercise their dominating influence over women, and in this way female mountaineers carry out the less pleasant tasks for the practice of this sport (always climb after men, purchase food for the excursion to the mountain, reserve the weekend pass for the mountain lodging, etc.), and that most definitely determines the limits and opportunities of sporting development among women. The following commentary, made by the participant of an interview, illustrates well this situation:

I was going to compare it to like if you saw a couple inside a car. He usually drives, right? It's as if the responsibility seems to come from the school of thought that dictates that the man drives and handles the situation, and she takes care of the duties of the co-pilot. And on the mountain it's the same, right? He has more responsibility, although he has no idea, and she expects that from him, although she is more capable. Like that, for example, he drives, carries the rope, the climbing material (…) she makes the lodging reservation, buys the food, secures her husband on the rope (…) (Group Interview; man, athlete and professional; Huesca, May 2006).

When the practice of this sport is conducted between spouses or committed couples, the woman finds herself tied to difficulties of another kind: in addition to carrying out traditional roles (domestic, reproductive and occupational), a fourth role is applied to her (the sporting). This obligation to deal with those different roles takes away opportunities to practise mountaineering, or at least the ambition to pursue more serious sporting objectives. This is especially apparent when the mountaineering woman becomes pregnant, since it is normally her who renounces or unfavourably alters her sporting habits. Take as an example the following intercession of a participant of one of the interviews conducted:

For example, another friend of ours has totally abandoned rock climbing. Since she gave birth to her son, she has not gone out climbing. Nevertheless, her husband has not for one moment stopped doing it. To me that seems totally unfair. I, for example, have been pregnant and have not been able to do absolutely any rock climbing whatsoever. Afterwards, I had the baby and still couldn’t. And now I’ll have to attend to my children for a long time. And surely my husband will go climbing more times (Group Interview; men and women of different ages and profiles; Huesca, May 2006).
In other words, this unequal distribution of roles based on sex that differentiates one gender from the other in the field of mountaineering influences the sporting routes of those who practise it.

**Conclusions**

The social construction of a gender identity (unequal) in the field of mountain sports contributes to the reproduction of the structure of patriarchal dominance. The explanation lies in the intent of men to continue benefitting from a series of social advantages that they have had historically owing to their masculine gender status in this field. For example, the distribution of existing public financing for the practice of this sport (excursions, high performance, training, professionalization) amongst a smaller number of people, enjoyment of the social prestige that traditionally emerges from the practice of these sports (conceived by their extreme roughness and, precisely because of it, inadvisable for women); or control of decisions in the field of sporting clubs and federations. In this sense, it can be talked about “gender corporatism”, that in this case will be “masculine corporatism in the field of mountain sports”.

The practice of mountain sports was associated in the past with the idea of masculinity, for which this argument has always been referenced in order to distance women from this activity, labeling women who entertained thoughts of practicing it as masculine (or even lesbians), as López-Marugán writes:

> A little over a century ago, women began to make their mark in the world of mountaineering. Today, they are more and more the ones who practise everything from skiing to mountain climbing, progressing from recreational climbing and large climbing walls. Nevertheless, up until the end of the last century they were prohibited from doing physical exercise; venturing into the mountains was more than suspicious and to fasten themselves to a rope in order to climb in the company of men was symptomatic of lesbianism. To those that succeeded in overcoming these prejudices, there remained a long road for them to travel, between the hounding of public opinion, the incomprehension of their families, and what was worse, the criticism of some climbers (López-Marugán, 2001, 15).

Fortunately, in recent years mountaineering, like other sports and other aspects of life, has become more democratized, emerging with somewhat more homogeneous and open social conventions. Regardless, there still exist obstacles that hold mountaineers anchored in the past, living with the burden that carries the weight of gender social conventions for the individual liberties of men and women (above all, those of women) and, therefore, for the achieving of equitable levels of opportunities for personal development.

For all of that, the struggle should continue in the way that women reach greater heights of empowerment in the field of sport, because the approaching equilibrium of power between gender roles (by which was the social camp) could contribute to reach-
ing greater levels of democracy in our societies, dignifying the integrity of all human beings. This is the motive for which it becomes necessary to integrate feminist perspectives into the framework of social organization, because these perspectives allow us to see the world from the point of view of women, in a critical and activist way, with the aspiration to construct better worlds for themselves and for all human beings in general. The ultimate objective of feminist theories and perspectives is to do away with the invisibility of women.

Fruits of the integration of said perspectives in this field that worry us are, for example, programmes that attempt to palliate the inequalities of power in gender relations, such as the Spanish initiative “Plan of Action and Development for Women in Catalonia (2005-2007)”, conceived by the government of Catalonia through the Catalan Institute for Women that considers among its objectives “feminizing sport” (objective 3.8.) and “placing a value on feminine sport” (objective 3.9). Other European examples are: the initiative, “Project Filles” in France, “GEDE” (Grup d’Estudi Dona i Esport) in Spain, “East Manchester (NCD)” and “Project NACRO East Manchester” in Germany, and “Mondiali Antirrazisti” and “Galileo Femminile” in Italy.

Within this framework that we have just finished drawing up is where the interest of our investigation is found. Here, our starting point is the conviction that mountain sports offer a privileged setting for the analysis of social and cultural change (González-Fernández, 2004; Moscoso & González-Fernández, 2004), something that could serve in reaching a positive understanding about the way gender relations are constructed in present Spanish society, even further from the practise of mountaineering. Such as some authors share:

Approaching the study of sports in nature from the point of view of the feminine population, far from constituting themselves in a very specific and sectorial perspective, signifies relocating the problem in the framework of a sensibility, a feminine one (as much from a biological as a cultural field), that will provide us with a coherent and progressive reading (Canales, Lagardera & Perich, 1995, 142).

In this sense, we should say that social science applied to sport has an enormous responsibility, if since traditionally sport has been a marginalized issue in the field of scientific investigation (Dunning, 1999), the study of gender relations in sport has experienced an even greater degree of marginalization. Thus, let us be confident that studies such as ours aid in improving the living conditions of both men and women, through proposals issued from their results.

References


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