

ESRC Seminar Series: More of the same is not enough: New directions in ageing and physical activity

**”Old bats flying against the wind!”**

Dr Josefin Eman

Monday 13th April presentation

”I am an old bat swimming against the stream”. These are the words of a 70 year old female athlete. But in real life bats seldom swim, so I have named this talk ”Old bats flying against the wind” which very much summarizes the core of my research on sports and women in later life.

Hello everyone.My name is Josefin Eman and I have studied both men and women involved with Master sports. The women and the stories they narrated were different from the men´s. In pursuing sports in old age - both men and women were faced with social, cultural and physical constraints – for instance, people in their surroundings, be they doctors, relatives or friends, had a tendency to discourage the athletes from further athletic competitive involvement saying it was age-inappropriate.

This made many of the men think about withdrawing from sports. However the women - and I rather talk about them as unified collective, because that is how many of them portrayed themselves – as members of the toughest and most unyielding group of athletes: old women athletes. They reacted differently and to explain it properly, I turn to the world of Harry Potter.

You see, in one of the Potter books we are introduced to a magical sword, the Gryffindor Sword as it happens, is basically indestructible: it cannot be destroyed by poisonous substances or physical violence – you can’t break it – it is not unaffected, but it only takes in what makes it stronger. In the midst of my research some of these women appeared to me as human Gryffindor Swords. I will present an example. One of the women, a talented cross-country skier, was at a private party and was approached by another woman who stated:

”You can be sure of one thing: my husband will never ask you to dance with him”

”Oh really, but why?” she replied.

”Because you passed him in the tracks of course!”

For some people, this sort of social exclusion might be off-putting, but the female skier did not seem to be offended or hurt – she was affected by it – but used it as fuel, she took in it in and it made a stronger athlete out of her. She explained to me:

”Clearly men are sensitive about it. But it psyches me up. It really psyches me up and I start thinking: If I have got the talent, I have to use it as well, right?”

In my research I interviewed 12 women, aged 66-84 years who practised a number of sports such as skiing, swimming, throwing sports and running.

And almost regardless of what barrier the women faced in old age within the field of sports – they pushed through it, got around it or broke it down – and that in itself seemed to make them stronger. It is their story I will share with you today.

These old athletic power-women may appear in stark contrast to non-athletic old women, especially since we have come in contact with research showing us that old women are physically active with less frequency, with lighter intensity, and for shorter periods of time than their male counterparts. The barriers keeping old women from engaging themselves with physical activities and to some extent sports are quite well explored, it has to do with everything from fear of falling, time management issues, problems with exercising alone to sexist and ageist attitudes.

But the interesting thing is, the women of my study were faced with more or less the same barriers, of not having company when practising sports, of having health problems and scarcity of time, of facing stereotypical perceptions of age and gender, but rather than growing sedentary with age they maintained and even expanded their athletic involvement. Of course, we need to recognize that these were in many respects privileged women who had means and resources, but their lives were not altogether easy and comfortable.

So how were these old women able to break down the barriers in their athletic path? They used a set of resilience strategies to enable participation in sports. For instance, to cope with feelings of loneliness in the practise of sports, which has been recognized as a barrier to exercise among other old women, many women created their own athletic context. For example, one of the skiers said:

”I was alone in doing this (skiing that is). At my age I am the only one who trains and competes in my hometown. I thought it would be fun to be a few more, so I gathered a group – and that was that. I created a group of ladies.”

This seems simple enough, but in fact the skier spent hours, days and weeks in recruiting her companions and teaching them basic skiing techniques.

Physical surroundings have been recognized as another barrier keeping middle-aged women from running and it could be a problem for the old women of my study as well – but they resolved this matter in ingenious ways. One of the runners explained that when running alongside roads, the car drivers left her little room on the roads. To resolve this situation she started running with a bouquet of tall wild-flowers during summer months, in order to ensure she had space: ”I swing it as the cars pass by to claim space”.

Long story short, the women narrated that whatever barrier was set in their way, they managed somehow to get around it.

So – is the basic lesson: if there is a will, there is a way? It is a much more complex story. These smart strategies did not come to the women out of thin air. They were completely powered through not a strong commitment to sport – that is a far too low-powered concept – but the strategies were tied to empowered female aging athletic identities. And these identities did not simply emerge in old age but were, in accordance with the life course perspective and the conceptual framework of social identity, products of the accumulated life course experiences and identity constructions processes.

But we can arrive at this conclusion: sports is a potentially empowering context for old women, and even though it would not be desirable to change one stereotype (frail old woman) to another (super-granny) we can hope that stories of these women can broaden the scope of how old women are regarded and inspire old bats everywhere to fly against the wind.

Thank you for listening.