Linos Bitterling

Besides texts based on academic research, the guest editors of this special issue of Discover Society found it important to also include a contribution based on social work with urban youth. Linos Bitterling, the founder of Boxgirls Berlin e.V. — a sports club in Berlin — discusses how their organisation strives to create a gender-inclusive, supportive environment for minoritised youth.

Boxgirls Berlin e.V. is a sports club founded in 2005. It emerged from a project called Mädchen stärken (Empowering Girls) funded by the Deutsche Kinder- und Jugendstiftung (German Children and Youth Foundation). At the beginning we were a small group, but we have since grown substantially (now counting 190 members and around another 60 girls* participating in workshops and school-programs) and expanded our activities beyond boxing trainings for girls* and young women* (the asterisk is a reminder that when we speak of girls and women we mean all girls and women: those who are cis- and transgendered as well as gender-nonconforming).

Despite gender inclusivity that manifests itself through trainings for women* and girls*, queers, FLTI (Frauen Lesben Trans- und Intersexgeschlechtliche Personen, or: Female, Lesbians, Trans, and Intersex people) as well as all-genders trainings, we decided to stick to the original name Boxgirls for two main reasons. First, despite some recent positive developments, boxing remains a male-dominated sport and we want to make sure that girls* and young women* feel directly addressed and that their involvement is reflected in our club’s name. Second, we think the name scares off cis-gendered boys and men who hold sexist attitudes towards girls* and women*.

We are committed to queer feminist work in our daily trainings, but also in the activities we engage in outside the gym, in schools and in public space. We strive to offer a safe space for those who experience sexism and gendered violence often linked with experiences of racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and xenophobia. While there are many after-school activities, including sports clubs across Berlin, most of them are unaffordable for low-income families. We work mostly in Kreuzberg and Neukölln, districts with sizable migrant and historically working-class populations, but we are now also branching out. As a result of gentrification, many young people we would like to reach are being displaced from the centrally located Kreuzberg and Neukölln to the city’s outskirts. As it may be difficult for them to come all the way to a gym in Kreuzberg, we are now trying to set up activities where they live. They need places where they can spend time freely, where they can be with each other outside school and family structures. Kreuzberg and Neukölln remain important for us not only because of their accessibility by public transport, but also because of the still detectable (even if increasingly threatened) atmosphere of inclusivity. Many of our members and coaches are racially and sexually minoritised individuals, often with migration or refugee history, who do not feel safe just...
Fighting for the right to fight: a report from a boxing club in Berlin...

anywhere in the city. They do feel safe(r) in Kreuzberg and Neukölln. The safe space we try to create in the gym is embedded in an inclusive space of particular neighbourhoods.

We currently have three main projects: My Body, My Choice; No Borders; and Queer Kids.

**My Body, My Choice** offers regulars trainings for girls* and women* as well as special projects for girls* at local schools where we discuss young people’s experiences of sexism and racism and help them find the most suitable ways to feel empowered, with focus on boxing as a tool for empowerment. We also offer boxing classes in youth clubs, organize a strong representation at public protests against gendered violence (including the famous One Billion Rising), and stage interventions in urban spaces coded heteromasculine. One of our main goals in this project is to raise awareness: to prevent gendered and racial violence in schools and youth clubs and to help those who experience sexism and racism. Within this project we are also working closely with boxing gyms for girls* and women* in Khayelitsha/Cape Town and Nairobi.

**No Borders** is a project that was developed in reaction to the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. We didn’t like the media framing of it as a natural catastrophe and the representation of newcomers as faceless masses. We wanted to set a counterpoint and respond to the real needs of the people rather than their media representations and so we opened our doors to everyone who wanted to train with us. With the support from the Integration durch Sport (Integration through Sport) initiative we were able to offer free membership to refugees and asylum seekers and offer trainings not only in our gym, but also in the refugee camps. We also invited interested newcomers to become coaches in our club and offer boxing training themselves. Our main aim was to create some sort of normalcy and distraction through sport for those who have experienced traumatic events, suffered from survivor’s trauma, and continued to experience traumatic situations and inhumane conditions on arrival in Berlin. The project was never geared exclusively at refugees, it’s always been and remains an initiative offered to people from various backgrounds, including refugees (most of those who have joined us are young cis-gendered men), aimed at collapsing boundaries and creating a safe space where people can develop a sense of belonging. Beyond boxing training, we have also been offering counselling to newcomers on how to find work, vocational training, and education.

Within the **Queer Boxing** project, besides boxing, kickboxing, and Thai boxing classes for queer adults, we recently started boxing training for kids aged 7 to 11 – a small, but enthusiastic and quick learning group.

Our gym in Kreuzberg’s Bergmannstrasse is named after the Sinto-German boxer **Johann Trollmann** (1907-1944) who was stripped of his championship titles by the Nazis and eventually sent to a concentration camp where he was beaten to death. While Boxgirls Berlin e.V. was not the original initiator of the renaming of the historical gym after Trollmann, we enthusiastically accepted this intervention and remain in touch with Trollmann’s family members. Trollmann’s life story, summarized in German and English on a commemorative plaque outside our gym gate, is a constant reminder of the necessity to actively counter all types of discrimination – a sentiment that is inscribed in our club’s statute and reflected in our daily activities. We fight discrimination by creating spaces where those directly affected by racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia can feel safe and comfortable. We also try to minimise the risk of discrimination in our own trainings and workshops through careful and respectful engagement with each other as well as making sure that our own organizational structures – the board, the coaches, the workshop leaders – remain inclusive. We are also increasingly visible in Berlin and our strong anti-discrimination stance receives more attention and recognition in the process.

We work a lot with teenage girls* and the challenge they find most pressing and difficult to navigate is self-determination. They feel that the choice of their place and role in society is limited by a lot of different factors, especially sexism prevalent in advertising, popular culture, schools, families, and also among their peers. Another factor they repeatedly name is violence such as social media mobbing, but also emotional and physical violence at school and at home. All this is difficult to address and to handle, they need to feel empowered to find a way out of these sexist structures. And this takes a lot of work, a lot of training.

Boxing is still a male-dominated sport, in media and in sport clubs alike. Breaking with the traditional gender representation in boxing already helps girls* question patriarchal gender norms. Girls* and women* who box fight for their right to fight. They fight in the ring and outside the ring. What they learn in the ring translates to their daily lives. They learn how to respond to the obstacles they face by avoiding, blocking, or reacting – the basic moves in boxing. And they also get stronger physically and mentally. In boxing, you have to be active. You have to actively go for your goals and take on those challenges. Over the years we have observed that once a young person feels empowered through boxing training, it has a positive effect not only on them, but also their peers and families. So, it’s not just those who practice boxing who get stronger, but their communities get stronger too – it’s a ripple effect. As champion boxer and Boxgirls Berlin e.V. alumna **Zeina Nassar** says: ‘you have to fight to make changes in society’.

*As told to Agata Lisiak*
Linos Bitterling is a social worker and the founding member and project leader of Boxgirls Berlin e.V. Boxgirls Berlin e.V. is currently funded by the Berlin Senate within the framework of Senatsverwaltung für Gesundheit, Pflege und Gleichstellung, Abteilung Frauen und Gleichstellung.

Image by Peter Van Heesen.

The articles in this special issue of Discover Society were written and are based on research conducted before the COVID-19 outbreak, and thus do not engage with the new lived realities of urban youth in a global pandemic. Yet we hope and believe that the discussions presented here will continue to be relevant in rethinking urban futures in the years to come.
The opinions expressed in the items published here are those of the authors and not Discover Society.